

Penguin Films and the Environment: The Triumph of *Happy Feet* and the Trouble with *March of the Penguins*

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In *March of the Penguins* (2005), narrator Morgan Freeman asserts, “They’re [penguins] not that different from us, really.” Recent popular culture has seen the penguin as a prevalent subject in various entertainment and nature films. To some degree, our culture’s fascination with the penguin is paradoxical. Penguins walk upright, interact in large groups, and share intimate moments with mates; thus, it is easy for audiences to form a connection between our own human traits with that of penguins. At the same time, penguins are exotic; they reside in arctic landscapes of extensive proportions. While the popular wildlife film *March of the Penguins* informs about emperor penguins and appeals to human emotion, it does little to advocate for the continuation of penguins as a species. Currently, penguins around the globe face threats of climate change and overfishing, which *March of the Penguins* ignores. *Happy Feet* (2006), an animated film inspired by *March of the Penguins*, dares to take an environmental stance; it follows an outcast penguin searching for the cause of negative changes in his environment. *Happy Feet* does more to bring awareness to global warming and the penguins’ plight than *March of the Penguins*, as the film depicts the problematic presence of humans, emotionally influences a young demographic, and encourages viewers to think progressively.

The absence of humans on screen in *March of the Penguins* is a trademark of classic “blue chip” wildlife films. In the reading “Penguins are good to think with: wildlife films, the imaginary shaping of nature, and environmental politics,” Luis Vivanco explains the characteristics of a “blue chip” film: “These conventions include a didactic stance involving the use of paternalistic and disembodied male voice narration...situating the viewer as observer, not interpreter; a narrative style that emphasizes natural cycles...and decontextualized visions of sublime nature devoid of humans.”¹ In deciding to make no comment on the connection between humans and the environmental plight of penguins, *March of the Penguins* is problematic; the

film suggests that penguins exist in a land separate from our own, thus unharmed by the outside world. Meanwhile, something external affects the penguins' lives in *Happy Feet*: humans. Humans (which the characters perceive to be alien beings) deplete the fish supply and cause pollution in the area. After being exiled from his community, the film's protagonist, Mumble, ventures into the sea to find the source of the fish famine. Mumble comes to the conclusion that humans are taking the food supply after he discovers a fishing vessel upheaving nets full of fish. In an avalanche sequence earlier in the film, an excavator gets plunged into the water and pollutes the area with spilled fuel. Additionally, the penguin guru character, Lovelace, is a victim of pollution; he has a plastic six-pack ring wrapped around his neck (which he refers to as his "sacred talisman"). By referencing overfishing and pollution, *Happy Feet* conveys the message that humans do indeed cause a negative impact on penguins' environment. *March of the Penguins* reports to its audience that the only challenges penguins face are predators and natural death, while ignoring the impact of climate change on the environment.

Being an animated film, children make up the target demographic of *Happy Feet*. Young audiences are impressionable, which gives the film the ability to emotionally influence and even motivate children with what they see on screen. While the penguins in *March of the Penguins* appear adorable and exhibit emotions of love, *Happy Feet* appeals to the pathos of its young viewers in a more direct way. In a reading titled "The Trouble with *Bambi*: Walt Disney's *Bambi* and the American Vision of Nature," author Ralph H. Lutts writes: "Nature, symbolized by Disney's infant Bambi, an infant with endearing human qualities, becomes something fragile and vulnerable."² Similar to Bambi in the film *Bambi*, the penguins in *Happy Feet* are animated with human qualities that are familiar and charming to young viewers. This is a clear appeal to anthropomorphism, which is the act of "ascribing human attributes to nonhuman beings."³ When

Mumble is trapped in the zoo and yells to the uninterested humans “You’re stealing our fish!”, the audience can sympathize with his frustration. Children become conscious of the environmental issues of overfishing and pollution portrayed in the film, as it is a major plot point that affects the lovable characters on screen. *Happy Feet* is not an educational movie, yet it inspires children to consider how humans treat the environment.

When it comes to progressive ideas, *March of the Penguins* is largely traditional in what it decides to portray. In fact, the scientific community argued if the film is dangerous in its normative depiction of penguins: “One side declared both the film and its advocates as dangerously misleading, even “bird-brained”, because they simplify the complexities of penguin behavior (including same-sex relationships and stealing and abandonment of offspring).”⁴ At the same time, *March of the Penguins* appears traditional in its environmental views, as it purposely avoids presenting an environmental message. Not only does *Happy Feet* reference dilemmas such as pollution and overfishing, but it offers a solution to overfishing. After witnessing clips of the dancing penguins, humans debate over the meaning of their behavior and interpret it is a sign to stop fishing in the area. A human politician towards the end of the film yells, “bang up the sign, no fishing!”, indicating the end of the plight within the film. While this is obviously not a realistic scenario, the film does encourage viewers to consider progressive solutions to the penguins’ problem and generates further interest around penguins. This claim is evident through the cultural phenomenon referred to as the “*Happy Feet* effect”, in which, “...the proliferating number of animated penguins on screen in the past five years have also contributed to contemporary viewers’ knowledge of geography and environmental problems, even making connections with environmental activism (some calling it the “*Happy Feet* effect”).”⁵

By portraying the existence of humans, emotionally influencing young viewers, and encouraging the audience to think about progressive solutions, *Happy Feet* does more to raise awareness on issues surrounding penguins and the environment than *March of the Penguins*. Although the objective of *March of the Penguins* is not to promote environmental consciousness, it squanders its valuable platform as a blockbuster film by ignoring the plights faced by the penguins it idealizes. If there is one thing that both *Happy Feet* and *March of the Penguins* do well, it is that they compel audiences to reflect on our own human nature; how we view our purpose in the world, and how we interact with our surroundings and each other.

End Notes

1. Luis Vivanco, “penguins are good to think with: wildlife films, the imaginary shaping of nature, and environmental politics” in *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monali, and Sean Cubbitt (New York: Routledge, 2013), 111

2. Ralph Lutts, "The Trouble With Bambi: Disney's *Bambi* and the American Vision of Nature," *Forest & Conservation History* 36, no. 4 (1992), 169

3. Luis Vivanco, “penguins are good to think with: wildlife films, the imaginary shaping of nature, and environmental politics” in *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monali, and Sean Cubbitt (New York: Routledge, 2013), 117

4. Luis Vivanco, “penguins are good to think with: wildlife films, the imaginary shaping of nature, and environmental politics” in *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monali, and Sean Cubbitt (New York: Routledge, 2013), 119

5. Luis Vivanco, “penguins are good to think with: wildlife films, the imaginary shaping of nature, and environmental politics” in *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monali, and Sean Cubbitt (New York: Routledge, 2013), 123

March of the Penguins (Jacquet, 2005)

Happy Feet (Miller, 2006)

Works Cited

1. Luis Vivanco, “penguins are good to think with: wildlife films, the imaginary shaping of nature, and environmental politics” in *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice*, ed. Stephen Rust, Salma Monali, and Sean Cubbitt (New York: Routledge, 2013), 111

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- March of the Penguins* (Jacquet, 2005) *Happy Feet* (Miller, 2006)