



Mitman, Gregg. *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film*. U of Washington P, 2009.

Gregg Mitman's *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film* grapples with the seemingly omnipresent question, can people ever 'get to the real thing' of nature? Mitman approaches this question by looking at the ways in which the filmic lens provides ideological lenses, both artistic and scientific, to the masses. The primary premise of the book lies in Mitman's assertion that nature films reveal Americans' persistent desire to "get back to nature" yet remain at a safe distance from it. This assertion leads into Mitman's evaluation of the ways in which nature films have been used to provide both education and entertainment to an urban audience who considers nature as a spectacle to be experienced vicariously.

Depending on the interests of the reader, Mitman's work either provides interesting insights into the theoretical interface between film and nature or delves into the intricacies of documentary directors and producers. For the ecocritic, Mitman's book gives a new angle from which to consider nature's hyperreality, for nature films simulate a reality that appears authentic but in fact involves various filters of analysis, theory, experiment, and narrative in order to stimulate the viewer's imagination. In following from Umberto Eco and Jean Beaudrillard, Mitman appropriately begins his book by looking at Disney's *Animal Kingdom* where nature is "scripted" to appear both "natural and fantastic"—ultimately exploiting nature even as it promotes its conservation (1-2). Mitman ultimately focuses on the concept of "scripted nature" throughout much of his book as he looks at both writers' and directors' struggle to avoid imparting literary affect into the realism hoped for in film. As Mitman claims, "immersed in nature through the camera lens, we depend on the naturalist-photographer to give us an experience that is pure and unadorned" (204). In contrast, Mitman comes to the conclusion that such an experience remains impossible, for although the Western aesthetic ideal hopes for a pristine, innocent nature discrete from humans—and therefore exotic, entertaining, and edifying—nature does not promise this for other regions of the world where nature provides a livelihood.

These considerations lead Mitman to conclude his book by considering the need for a global vision. Mitman looks at the ways in which national boundaries, artificially produced and enforced, prove problematic for solving modern environmental problems that know no sociopolitical boundaries. Animals follow migration patterns whether there is a state line or not. However, Mitman argues that the image of pristine nature that film so often provides only produces voyeurism rather than "any meaningful exchange because we remain at a physically and emotionally safe distance, far removed from the shared labor of animals and humans" (206). Film has offered the masses a hyperbolized image of nature where the dramatic and intimate moments remain the focus and much of the daily monotony is edited out. Although Mitman spends much of the book discussing the ways in which directors initially viewed film as an educational opportunity, drastically changing the ways in which photogenic systems of behavior can be assessed, he dedicates his epilogue to discussing the ways in which authenticity has been substituted by artifice.

Mitman's research, nuanced and satisfying, contributes to both film theory and ecocritical theory and explores the ways in which they should not be separated. Although relatively light on theory, this book provides insight and information, and it would be useful to read in correlation with more theoretical works such as William Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back To The Wrong Nature" that take a deeper look at some issues that Mitman briefly considers. That being said, Mitman takes a new approach to considering Americans' evolving interest in greater, and intimate, contact with nature.

--Stephanie Lyells, Washington State University