Shifting the Anthropocentric Paradigms Embedded in Film and Classification (Ratings) Systems that Impact Apex Species

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Abstract: Human interactions with nature reveal contradictions and misunderstandings based upon anthropocentric colonising behaviours. Cultural forms such as film and media have played a key role in creating and perpetuating negative affect towards nonhuman species, particularly apex species, shark, crocodile, bear, and snake. From early Hollywood films through to contemporary online series, these majestic species have been subjected to vilification and denigration onscreen, resulting in speciesism, subjugation and colonisation of animals, whilst simultaneously extending human 'authority' over nature and perpetuating fear – particularly of apex species. A range of hybrid genre textual examples from screen and media, from fictional (feature) and factual (documentary) film and television (docu-nature series) will illustrate these paradigms. An ongoing issue is the anthropomorphising of species onscreen. Drawing upon extensive work since 2009 with international classifications (ratings) systems, this paper will also examine the positionality of the *American Humane Association* in monitoring the role and treatment of 'animal actors' in film; developing a compelling empirical case for the necessity for reform in classifications (ratings) systems, expanding classification Codes to include non-anthropocentric perspectives and the rights of nature with regard to nonhuman actors in public awareness. The necessity for a nuanced understanding of ontological damage to species is currently not a

classifiable theme under any existing classification (ratings) systems. An outcome of this article is the proposed development and implementation of a new classification symbol designated as 'Animal Shield'. This interdisciplinary article will be presented from the perspectives of an environmental ecologist and cultural film studies scholarship, building upon research into decolonising nature.

Introduction

Of ongoing concern are the ways in which encounters with apex nonhumans are mediated through anthropocentric lens. Cultural lenses, such as film and media, are formative in shaping the collective imagination and scientific lenses, such as taxonomies, render nonhumans without any ontological basis of existence. Such domains perpetuate the ongoing colonisation of nature in attitudes and actions. Feature films and documentaries that centralise nonhumans as characters in story arcs and as narrative devices reveal a pervasive culture of film and media bias. Through textual exegesis of specific screen examples focused upon Shark, Crocodile, Snake, and Bear, this article will examine how film and media are frequently driven by — and in turn drive fear — in humans towards nonhumans. These apex nonhumans were selected because they enable a wider consideration of representational issues. The discussion is not foreclosed to one film style or genre and will draw hybrid genre examples from fictional (feature) and factual (documentary) film and television (docu-nature series). Though rarely encountered by most humans in the course of their lives, the understanding and views for the majority of humans towards these apex nonhumans is informed by second and third hand accounts through film and media. This is a critical area of concern, as screen content is known to shape public debate, attitudes and affect implementation of nonhuman animal and habitat conservation policies (Hammerton and Ford; Neff).

This interdisciplinary article draws upon combined perspectives of a film and cultural studies scholar and a coastal and marine ecologist, developed through extensive empirical fieldwork. Perspectives on screen media and classification derives from work within the screen industry utilising the Australian, USA and UK classification (ratings) systems: in broadcast television as a seasonal Classification Officer, as a film Festival Director and consultant specialising in the impact of classifications (ratings) upon screen representations of diverse communities. Recognition of the necessity for moving discussions on apex species through ecological *and* ontological concerns has arisen from work as a marine ecologist, environmental consultant, commercial diver and Master SCUBA diving trainer with wide-ranging diving experience with the apex nonhumans discussed in this article. As research that centralises interdisciplinary concerns with animal, film and media studies, an aim is to contribute to critical

engagement with nonhumans in the growing area of Eco-Film Studies, to understanding Film and Media Classification (Ratings Systems) and to contribute to the field of Empirical Ecocriticism. This includes presenting one of the developments of this paper, in the recognition of the need for a new 'Animal Shield' classification symbol for use across film and media informing audiences of actual and representational harm to animals.[1]

An overarching statement that introduces the metanarrative in the textual examples that will follow is *anything that challenges humans as the apex species is vilified.* The screen texts cited within this article will demonstrate the ways that vilification takes place; that is, how sharks, crocodiles, snakes, and bears are held in lower regard by humans through negative, demeaning and damaging story arcs. The use of constructed narratives, especially in factual (documentary) films and 'nature documentaries', shape audience affect through overly dramatic portrayals instilling a sense of constant danger (Bousé), whilst frequently communicating incorrect ecological information to support the narrative.

Decolonising approaches to anthropocentrism in film and media are necessary to release apex nonhumans from the human narrative of control and domination. The use of the term decolonising accords with a range of scholars including Veracini who advocates for 'imagining its decolonisation'; Apffel-Marglin and Marglin in critical engagement of how new knowledge may be produced; also we build upon the work of decolonising nature by Val Plumwood; and the necessity for decolonisation across species, as advocated in multispecies studies Van Dooren, Kirksey and Münster. In particular, the ontological concerns of posthumanism (Sundberg) are significant to our discussion as we *address decolonisation as a process that transcends the physical* and must also account for the representational. The need for a decolonising, post-colonial approach is evident through textual exegesis of the treatment of Australian Indigenous cultures and crocodiles in a film such as *Rogue* (Greg McLean, Australia, 2007) one of the case study screen texts.

Cultural domains such as circuses, zoos and aquatic parks featuring live action from captive nonhuman animals are recognised as sites of exploitation and colonisation and have received activist attention, public outcry and scholarly responses (Peterson; Sankoff; Morin).

The situation of animals in films, television and media is as distressing (Iacona), frequently rendered invisible outside specialist groups of activists, scholars and screen industry whistle blowers. As yet, these are areas that have not received the same attention from the film-going public.

Steve Irwin as one example 'was also criticized in the media, and by industry insiders, for his willingness to interfere with wild animals in his *Crocodile Hunter* (1996-2004) series on *Animal Planet*' (Richards 4). This on-set 'interference' was to create a series of manipulated on-screen representations, a performative between human and nonhuman animals where the human was always in control, an example of colonising nature. Whilst our discussion will focus primarily upon the on-screen representations, issues of on-set treatment of nonhuman actors and their environments cannot be ignored (Iacona).

This necessitates raising issues around human attitudes, motivations and the paradoxes inherent within human behaviours towards the natural world and nonhuman species. We have previously noted that humans as a species expect that the *human right* to access all environments, *supersedes* the rights of nonhumans to their habitats, regardless of the direct and indirect impacts (Hammerton and Ford). Iacona raises the perspective that the human view of 'animals as property' enables exploitation onscreen. These perspectives provide background to this article's focus upon how these colonising attitudes extends to the *representations of nonhumans in film and media* and the pressing necessity for independent reform and urgent changes within the screen industry in relation to all animals (referred to as nonhumans throughout the discussion).

Representations of Apex Nonhumans in Film

Cinematic narratives, whether in feature films (fiction) or documentaries (factual), are frequently dramatized via staging scenes by provoking re-actions; the spatial and temporal distortion of actual events; selective editing, including compositing fragments of footage to create a particular narrative; the use of sound to heighten tension and through overlaying anthropocentric behaviour/s upon the nonhumans. Such techniques provoke affective responses in audiences. Alexa Weik von Moss (Introduction) defines these as 'our automatic visceral

response to a given film or sequence – and emotion – our cognitive awareness of such a response'. Whilst some would assert that, within the accepted cinematic conventions of film and documentary making, the creative view of the director and editor is to be expected, the ongoing portrayal of nonhumans in demeaning and damaging story arcs as the antagonist ('villain') character, whilst humans are portrayed as the victimized protagonists, perpetuates a paradigm of exploitation and ongoing disregard for animal ethics.

The screen industry actively capitalizes on and profits from fear/protection mechanisms within the human brain (located in the amygdala) (Le Doux). The significant role that cultural forms such as cinema, television and media have played in arousing and exploiting this fear must also be recognised and addressed. Persuasive marketing is also a driver of box office for Action, Thriller and Horror genres and contributes to ever-expanding fan bases, adding to the increase in demand (Marich). There are complex questions in the ethics of cultural production and spectatorship.

Decades of negative screen content has led to a disrespect and at the extreme end of the spectrum, and unsustainable culling of apex nonhumans. This is heightened particularly if they are perceived to outcompete humans for shared resources (for example use of beaches, or forests, or food sources, such as fish). This is despite numerous apex nonhumans being at risk of extinction due anthropogenic impacts caused from loss of habitat, pollution and over-harvesting.

In contrast, when a nonhuman can be anthropomorphized in endearing ways, they may be depicted in nurturing or heroic form. Whilst these types of characterisations are rarely seen in feature films or documentaries marketed to adult audiences, these are seen in animations and films targeted towards children. An example is the depiction of a Panda (a plant-eating flagship species) used in the animated *Kung Fu Panda* trilogy to depict Po as an unlikely hero, the 'Dragon Warrior'.

As affect is a powerful motivator of action and spectator responses, the concerns for nonhumans are the harm that is caused, whether ontologically (through vilifying representations), or physically (to animal actors during screen productions). Unlike the American Humane Association which currently has primary oversight of 'animal actors'

internationally in screen productions; it is not only physical harm to animals on set that requires

oversight, but recognition that screen and media representations have *the potential to harm an entire species*. This harm includes to the nonhuman species represented onscreen. For human audiences, fear and terror is instilled through the affective experience of viewing such images.

The Role of Classification (Ratings) Systems

A very significant issue is raised around use of the word 'harm' in relation to screen media. This article addresses two specific types of 'harm': 1) harm that results onscreen to nonhumans and 2) harm that is a *consequence* of anthropocentric classification (ratings) systems.

Central to Australian and UK screen classifications are policies that focus upon anthropocentric 'harm reduction'. Currently the Australian Classification system centralises four principles in the *Code* the first two of which are that:

(a) adults should be able to read, hear, see and play what they want;

(b) minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them

(Australian Government 'Guidelines for the Classification of Films', Part 2)

This opens discussion for what constitutes 'harm' in screen texts; for example, does viewing representations of apex nonhumans engaged in fictional sensationalised predation of humans harm audiences? Can such images damage human-nonhuman relationships and the view of humans towards the natural worlds? Would only 'minors' be 'disturbed' or potentially 'harmed' by such images? Whilst a central responsibility of society is to protect 'minors from harm'; serious ethical implications for apex nonhumans in screen media become apparent within a classification *Code* that centralises and legally embeds only an anthropocentric perspective.

As researchers and as consumers of screen productions we would answer 'yes' to the above two questions and 'no' to the third, as age is no barrier to harm potentially being caused by screen images. Textual analysis of specific screen examples within this article will provide empirical evidence in support of this position: *that harm is caused*. From this, the definition of

'who' and 'what' can be harmed *must be extended to nonhumans*. *How* harm is caused to nonhumans must also be reconsidered, as this extends from the physical to the ontological. Whilst recognition of harm clearly includes physical abuse of animals on and off-set (Iacona), our consideration extends to and is focussed on the harm caused *to entire species* by misrepresentation on screen, damaging ontological perspectives towards the species. This is a form of vilification in that the onscreen representations are constructed in ways that lower the apex nonhumans in the perception of humans. This will be discussed in this article under the subheading 'Necessity for Reform in Classification (ratings) Systems'.

Lippit observed that the disclaimer sanctioned by the *American Humane Association* that states that 'no animal was harmed in the making of this film' ignores the epistemic violence to which animals are subjected (Lippit 10). This includes violating the territory of the animal (such as in documentaries) or by controlling/wrangling the animal (in feature films). The concept of 'harm' does not extend to the way the animal actors are treated off-set, nor to any of the serious representational issues and indirect impacts to species that is the focus of our research. Further, Iacona identifies that the American Humane Association provides only a framework of 'Guidelines' that require 'voluntary compliance' by film productions, that may or may not be adhered to (33). The American Humane Association is a not-for-profit organization with 'sole legal authority for monitoring the treatment of animals through a clause in the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) producer contract' (Iacona 31) and so interdependent with the screen industry for funding. This is an inadequate mechanism that does not provide actual statutory protection of animals. Iacona validly proposes amendments to existing USA laws to confer protection upon animals in screen media (42-44). This would be achieved through designating film productions as 'exhibitors' that require licences to use animals in the film and television industry. Significantly, Iacona suggests modelling these amendments upon current Australian legislation (NSW Government; Government of Victoria). But even with such legislation in place, the ontological issues remain.

Genre Hybridity — Case Study Films

Films representing sharks through negative affect to terrify audiences were produced before and have continued since *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, USA, 1975). An issue raised by these films is the involvement of dive/shark experts such as Ron and Valerie Taylor as consultants for *Jaws.* The involvement of these specialists provided credibility to the shark sequences that terrified a generation of beachgoers. The success at box office of *Jaws* provided the screen industry with the motivation to continue developing audiences for this style of film. Significantly, *Jaws* was marketed as an 'Action-Thriller' (International Movie Database 1975). This film is a prominent example of how filmmakers utilise genre expectations and cinematic tropes, previously established across a range of genres, including the horror genre, transposed onto nonhuman actors (in this case shark/s, or other apex species as the source of terror). More recent examples include the *Open Water* franchise (Chris Kentis, USA, 2003, 2006, 2017a); *The Reef* (2010) and *The Meg* (2018). This style of filmmaking is termed *genre hybridisation* (Ritzer and Schulze). Audience appetites for nature-driven horror also led to an entirely new *subgenre* emerging called 'Ecohorror' (Simpson; Rust and Soles).

The films that are the focus of this article were purposively (Cresswell) selected based upon apex nonhuman (mis)representations and are all examples of genre hybridisation, or *hybrid genres*: of Action-Adventure, Sci-Fi,Thriller, Drama, Comedy and Horror. The recognition of genre hybridity, as in the use of cinematic tropes, stereotypes and spectator genre expectations, is a form of cinematic shorthand, connecting audiences to screen texts. Mundhenke has called this an 'intercultural strategy'; a means to traverse audience cultural subjectivities in the consumption of screen texts. In the case of *Lake Placid vs Anaconda*, the film was marketed as an 'Action-Adventure-Comedy' (International Movie Database 2015).

Significantly, whilst these screen texts may focus upon narratives that position humans as vulnerable to 'attack' by apex nonhumans, in the minds of directors, producers, distributors and theatres, these films are developed and marketed as containing exciting hybrid genre narratives (Action-Adventure-Thriller), or even comedic narratives, that will thrill or amuse audiences. This raises the question of positionalities and perspectives in consideration of the

representations in these films. What Animal Studies scholars and activists may find to be repugnant behaviour towards nature and nonhumans, the screen industry deems to be box office fare.

Neff identified the film *Jaws* as being influential upon policy decisions that are detrimental to shark populations. Whilst *Jaws* is frequently cited as the feature film that provided a template/benchmark for fear-inducing narratives for subsequent films featuring fictitious shark narratives, *Jaws* follows a cinematic tradition in Hollywood of 'horror narratives' that exploit nature dating back to 1933 and the original feature film *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack, US, 1933). Feature films with apex nonhumans such as *The Meg* (Jon Turtletaub, USA, 2018) continue to utilise similar tropes as *King Kong* and *Jaws.*
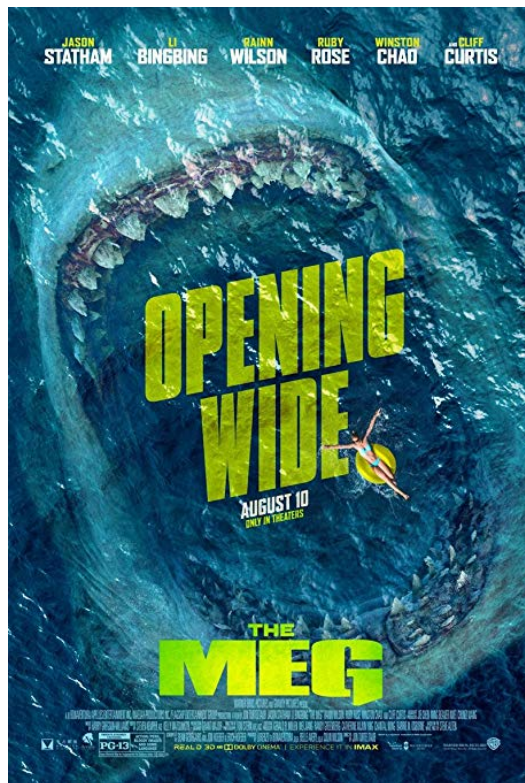

Figure 1: The Meg (Jon Turtletaub, USA, 2018), Publicity Poster. ©Apelles Entertainment, Di Bonaventura Pictures, Flagship Entertainment Group, Gravity Pictures (presents), Mayday Productions. Reproduced under Fair dealing provisions.

The Meg was screened in 2018 and despite 85 years since *King Kong* and 40 years after *Jaws*, publicity promotions for *The Meg* continue with tropes from both films – including the oversized apex nonhuman, the shark depicted at an implausible scale, in relation to a vulnerable woman (Figure 1). In each of the publicity posters for the hybrid genre case study films – *Anaconda* (Luis Llosa, Australia, 1997); *Rogue* (Greg McLean, Australia, 2007); *Black Water and Black Water: Abyss* (David Nerlich, Andrew Traucki, Australia, 2007; Andrew Traucki, 2020); *Lake Placid vs. Anaconda* (A.B. Stone, USA, 2015); *The Meg* (Jon Turtletaub, USA, 2018) – the nonhuman actor is always depicted at a scale much larger than human actors (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). This scale intensifies the fear and heightens the drama of the interaction between species. The movement of the nonhuman actors is always in forward motion – towards the audience – in threatening stances. Mouths are depicted wide open, teeth and incisors are out of proportion to bodies (often with dripping blood visible), claws are exposed, sharp and intimidating. Emotive language is used in posters such as 'gut-crunching, man eating terror', as in the publicity poster for the film *Grizzly* (William Girdler, USA, 1976), which depicts a red-eyed, colossal-sized black bear on a 'rampage'. The use of negative affect predominates throughout film promotions, including voiceovers.

With regard to Figures 1 to 6 our discussion treats the public interface, that is the poster, as a synecdoche for each film, rather than simply as a paratext with a separate (though connected) representation. This is because screen text and paratext (including marketing materials such as posters, film synopses and interviews with actors about a film) are entwined. Frequently, the marketing representations become synonymous with a film. If you were to mention the screen character *James Bond* (International Movie Database 1954-2020) to most filmgoers, the publicity poster image of a white man with a gun would come to mind. If you mention *Jaws*, it is the image of a gigantic man-eating shark. These two examples illustrate how text and paratext cannot be separated. This includes stereotyping and/or genre-typing of actors, whether human or nonhuman. Whilst it is acknowledged that publicity materials may hyperrealise aspects of a film to attract box office revenue, it is also important to recognise that film posters directly draw upon the concepts/images/scenes/characters and sequences in a film.

All the films and media cited in this article are vilifying and anti-animal conservation, with film stills, promotional posters, film trailers and DVD covers all utilising similar tropes.

Within the Australian, United Kingdom and USA classification (ratings) systems, the classification (rating) of a screen text is derived directly from the film or television series (whether fictional, such as feature films, or factual, such as documentaries). Marketing materials including posters and film trailers are then utilised to publicise the film at the official classification (rating) to intending audiences. Classification (ratings) systems have strict controls around how the official classification (rating) symbol may be displayed. The classification (rating) of each film or television series is specific to the licensing territory where the screen text is exhibited (Australian Government 'Guidelines for the Classification of Films', 'Explanatory Statement Guidelines for the Classification of Films 2012', 'Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995'; British Board of Film Classification 'Guidelines'; Classification and Ratings Administration).

The Meg was marketed as an action-adventure movie, using a hybridization of genres: Action, Horror, Sci-Fi (International Movie Database 2018). The alpha masculine leading man (Jason Statham) aimed at attracting a younger male audience. The action is intensified through the tropes of portraying the apex species at a scale much larger than humans (for example *The Meg* depicts a shark 70 feet in length). This scale heightens both fear and dramatic tension. The animal is shown mouth wide open with razor teeth hurtling towards a human (Figure 1), usually female, unsuspecting and scantily clad or naked. This raises questions around gender normativity and exactly *what* the shark/apex species is representing. Throughout this discussion we will also examine examples regarding crocodile, bear and snake. Interestingly, in an alternate publicity poster for *The Meg* (Figure 2), it is a male (Jason Statham) who is shown, but he is depicted aware of the shark, clothed and armed and swimming away.

Figure 2: The Meg (Jon Turtletaub, USA, 2018), Publicity Poster. ©Apelles Entertainment, Di Bonaventura Pictures, Flagship Entertainment Group, Gravity Pictures (presents), Mayday Productions. Reproduced under Fair dealing provisions.

This century-old colonial cinematic perspective reveals subtextual gendered and racial biases continuing in cinematic depictions with apex nonhuman films; and as far back as the early depictions in cinema such as *King Kong*, nonhumans are utilised as a violent terrorising metaphor for the fear of the 'other', including other races, raising underlying intersectional issues and also always portraying women as 'vulnerable to attack', as 'the victim'.

Whilst these first examples are from fictional feature films, the genre of 'nature documentaries' can also be productively deconstructed. Morgan Richards calls these 'wildlife docusoaps'; films that illustrate how cultural forms perpetuate speciesism, subjugation and colonisation of animals, whilst simultaneously extending human 'authority' over nature and perpetuating fear – particularly of apex nonhumans.

In one example in the documentary *Built For the Kill* (2006-), from the title, audience expectation or fear is raised that the film is about a 'killer', playing to stereotypical tropes, in this case about the featured nonhuman actor, the shark; the film is not simply about a species living in its environment, hunting and eating its natural diet. This highlights how animals – the subjects of the films – are cinematically treated as 'actors'. A useful term is 'nonhuman actors', used by Alexa Weik von Moss relation to ecocritical film studies. This term can be applied when discussing the role that apex nonhumans are given in 'films and documentaries about nature'. There is an ongoing issue of using the anthropocentric point of view (such as human protagonist/s that are 'victimised' by an apex species) and anthropomorphising the species.

As in the feature films *Jaws* and *The Meg*, audiences are subjected to images that instil fear and terror. The species is always shown with mouth wide open, as if in a consciously threatening posture towards humans, the audiences being the receivers of this image. What is not shown is that the water may have been 'chummed', a practice of luring fish and sharks and therefore staging scenes to provoke action. This is accomplished by throwing fish parts, blood and bone into the water to draw a species into the shot. When terrestrial animals are the subjects of the film, there may be use of 'tethered animals as bait to attract predators' (Richards). The camera is placed in the water, land, or air, in such a position to obtain an image of the mouth wide open, again, an angle that a human would rarely if ever see in the wild, unless in close proximity to an extremely agitated animal. Documentaries such as this only tell a single story, one narrative of an entire species; from the anthropocentric perspective that here is a killer, dangerous, to be killed, to make the world safe for human habitation.

Even when a documentary such as *Shark*, season 1, episode 1, (Steve Greenwood, Simon Blakeney, 2015) seems to show a nonhuman actor engaged in natural behaviours, the shot selection and music convey a terrifying presence to audiences. The critical issue here is the consequences to these apex nonhumans that play integral roles in ecosystems, with many currently listed as vulnerable, or threatened, or critically endangered. The perpetuation of a 'fear factor' (Hammerton and Ford) throughout cinematic texts is having a profoundly negative ecological effect on the species in question. The media colludes and financially benefits from

perpetuating fear, producing and maintaining 'terror narratives' through sensational, tabloid-style reports; using language to generate negative affect in readers. Media headlines frequently use words such as 'sharks lurk' when reporting, rather than simply acknowledging that sharks swim in the ocean (their habitat). Use of adverse language projects a terror of nature that is vilifying of apex nonhumans, perpetuating colonising attitudes and behaviours.

Apex nonhuman animals are repeatedly grouped under nouns that project negative affect with use of words on publicity posters and marketing materials such as: 'killer', 'monster', 'rogue', 'assailant' (suggesting premeditation), 'eating machines', 'beast'. Words with negative affect such as 'horror' and verbs that suggest premeditation such as 'attack' are used to create a metanarrative of *danger to humans from nonhuman animals.*

The overt message communicated is that humans are vulnerable to being terrorised by a monster that engages in lurking and lunging, even though the human is in the nonhuman animals' natural habitat. Neff and Heuter have established that 'a pattern exists in which the designation of a shark "attack" raises media attention that provokes a government response, even when the event may not be serious or governable' (Neff and Heuter 68, qtd. in Hammerton and Ford). Apex nonhuman animals such as sharks are projected cinematically on screen as if they exist outside of ethical considerations. Continuing to represent apex nonhuman animals in ways that are intended to provoke fear will inevitably drive attitudes of hatred and fear towards apex species. Fear is a potent affective force that perpetuates legitimation of species destruction, including culling and even contributing to extinctions (such as the Tasmanian Tiger).

The publicity poster for *Rogue* (Greg McLean, Australia, 2007) utilises exactly the same stereotypical tropes used in *Jaws*: that of the unsuspecting human and the oversized ravenous attacking 'maneater', this time a Crocodile. *Rogue* was theatrically released in Australia at the 'M' rating, classified as 'moderate impact' (not recommended for audiences under 15 years of age) and with the audience advisory 'Moderate Horror Violence' (Australian Classification 'Rogue', Australian Government 'Guidelines for the Classification of Films') and in the UK as '15' with the audience advisory ratings information 'Contains strong language and gore' (British

Board of Film Classification 'Rogue 2007'). The film was also classed as an 'Action, Adventure, Drama' (International Movie Database 2007a) on the film's International Database site.

Catherine Simpson and Maja Milatovic have both positioned Australian films *Rogue* (Figure 2) and *Black Water* (David Nerlich, Andrew Traucki, Australia, 2007) (Figure 5) within a broad post-colonial narrative of tourism as 'transgression'. This is into the territory of an animal and also into an area significant to Indigenous peoples, for which, the animal exacts 'retribution'. These 'revenge narrative' films are examples of the cinematic subgenre of Ecohorror (Simpson; Rust and Soles).

Figure 3: Rogue (Greg McLean, Australia, 2007), Publicity Poster, ©Dimension Films (presents),
Emu Creek Pictures, De Naray Sothcott Entertainment, Village Roadshow Pictures.
Reproduced under Fair dealing provisions.

Textual exegesis of *Rogue* highlights the use of Indigenous cultural aspects within the mise en scène; this includes the use of singing in local language, mention of the area in which the river flows as 'sacred land' with crocodile petroglyphs coming into view as the boat of tourists heads up river. The trespassing depicted in this film is not limited to physically entering the sacred area of the crocodile. There is also an ontological trespass, extending to the spiritual realm and potential serious violations of Indigenous cultural protocols, when one of the tourists spreads the ashes of a deceased person into the river clearly without the knowledge or permission from local custodians. In presenting this analysis, it is respectfully noted that in Australia (as for First Nations peoples around the world), there are specific cultural protocols around entering or accessing sacred areas, viewing sacred images and about deceased persons. These cultural protocols extend to recording and exhibiting Indigenous cultural materials, including images and voices of deceased persons (Janke; Special Broadcasting Service 'I.3.1 Indigenous Australians' 2-3, 'Protocol and Guidelines for the Production of Film and Television on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities'.).

Films focussing upon a retribution narrative do not diminish the harm that is caused through such representations; fear is instilled about nature and about the nonhumans. In the opening scenes in *Rogue* 'curiosity' style cabinets are seen at the local store filled with preserved animals; photos of large crocodiles and newspaper clippings of a young boy 'eaten' by a crocodile establish crocodiles as a local species that is both 'dangerous' and feared. Photos of large crocodiles slaughtered also adorn the walls as trophies (the preceding shots suggesting 'justification'). River cruises take tourists into the scenic gorge, the crocodiles' natural habitat and territory. The story arc of tourists heading upriver into a sacred crocodile area reinscribes the colonial narrative of entering and occupying Indigenous country without permission.

Whilst these films could then function and be read as cautionary tales, use of phrases such as 'Welcome to the *terror*tory' in publicity materials serves to present a fear-inducing metanarrative of nature (Figure 3) that is inimical to ecological conservation. Ultimately these films do not contribute to decolonising either the cinematic space, or the minds of spectators. This observation then calls to account whether these formulaic story arcs of tourists 'transgressing' into an animal's territory can be read as 'eco post-colonial' (Simpson), or simply

follow well-signposted narrative tropes to lead the audience into a situation of viewing nature in colonial terms, that is, as a site of enduring terror. In *Rogue*, the crocodile is killed by a white man. The character of an American tourist 'saves' the day. After he enters the cave and kills the crocodile, music is utilised to create a redeeming soundscape. The human characters then exit the subterranean realm, towards a sun lit blue sky. The end scene depicts a white man wading through wetland 'swamps' carrying the unconscious body of the female tour guide Kate (Radha Mitchell).

The message is conveyed: man has triumphed over nature. This domination is extended to both nature (depicted in the form of the crocodile that has been killed) and to woman (in the form of the unconscious body of the female tour guide). The tokenistic use of Indigenous images and sound in this film lead to a conclusion that *Rogue* is simply representing white human control of the natural world. Killing a species in its own realm is the ultimate act of colonisation.

The publicity poster for the film *Lake Placid vs. Anaconda* (A.B. Stone, USA, 2015) (Figure 3) highlights a range of cogent questions around representation. The partial body of a scantily clad white woman is depicted being devoured by a giant anaconda that is coiled around a giant crocodile, suggesting that snakes present even greater terror than crocodiles. Disturbingly, this film is classed as Action-Adventure-Comedy (International Movie Database 2015c). Whilst an image like this may appear so trope-driven as to be comical, what is comedic about violence towards the female body? This is an example of a film utilising a range of tropes from 1950s B-Grade cinema and from the Horror genre (noting this film was not marketed as a horror film). This film is one in a lucrative franchise of seven films derived from the 1999 *Lake Placid* (1999). B-Grade films depicting gigantism and mutations in nature were initially produced against the background of the post-World War II years.

In Figure 4, the depiction of the woman being consumed by a snake encodes subtextual sexual metaphors. There are also metatextual issues of the perpetual degradation of reptiles, which originated within monotheistic religious domination perspectives over nature and the continuing issues of colonisation and race in white cultures around the world, including America, where this film is situated.

Figure 4: Lake Placid vs. Anaconda (A.B. Stone, USA, 2015), Publicity Poster, ©Curmudgeon Films, Syfy (in association with), UFO Films. Reproduced under Fair dealing provisions.

In the feature film *Black Water* (David Nerlich, Andrew Traucki, Australia, 2007) use of the phrase 'Based on true events' in publicity materials (Figure 5) enhances the affect. This film received theatrical release in Australia classified at the higher MA15+ rating 'considered unsuitable for persons under 15 years of age it is a legally restricted category'. The DVD release was tagged with an audience advisory of 'Strong Violence' (Australian Classification 'Black Water'). *Black Water* was released for theatre screenings in the UK at the '15' rating, with the audience advisory 'Contains strong language, threat and bloody injury' (British Board of Film Classification 'Black Water 2007'). As in the publicity poster for *Lake Placid vs Anaconda*

(Figure 3), the subjects of the terror are white women. *Black Water* sensationalizes accounts of crocodile-human 'incidents' in the Northern Territory and is classed as an Action-Adventure-Drama (International Movie Database 2007c). In discussion of the films use of the term 'incidents' (as a substitute for 'attacks') follows use of the term in relation to sharks (Neff).

Figure 5: Black Water (David Nerlich, Andrew Traucki, Australia, 2007), Publicity Poster, ©The Australian Film Commission (presents), Territorial Film Developments (TFD) (presents), Prodigy Movies. Reproduced under Fair dealing provisions.

In the film *Venom* (Piers Haggard, UK, 1981) the equivalent tropes are used with the snake from the horror genre, such as, the fluorescent eyes of the snake staring towards audiences, recalling vampire and werewolf films. This directly demonstrates how the sub-genre of eco-horror emerged. This not only terrifies audiences, but also conveys further misinformation about apex nonhumans: that nature is not natural. The earlier film *Anaconda* (Luis Llosa, Australia, 1997) utilises the cinematic gaze of terror (from a snake) directed at audiences (Figure 6).

The publicity poster for *Anaconda* (Figure 6) raises issues identified by Laura Mulvey around the construction of the 'gaze' in cinema in relation to spectators. Initially conceived from the point of view of the male spectator (and the male director's point of view), the camera becomes a surrogate for the male gaze at the female body displayed on screen. In *Anaconda* the gaze is dramatically utilised, with the audience subjected to a malevolent gaze from a snake, appearing to be concealed in the shadows. Use of the apex nonhumans in the position generally accorded to the male gaze communicates subtextual information to spectators. An image such as this engenders fear of nature, in the form of snakes. This also perpetuates masculinist traditions associated with vilification of serpents that originated within monotheistic religions. As noted previously, this form of vilification occurs because the screen representations are constructed in ways that lower the nonhuman animal in the estimation of humans; in this case, representing the serpent as a malevolent source of danger, to be avoided, or killed. This film was marketed with the genre expectations of 'Action, Adventure, Horror' (International Movie Database 1997).
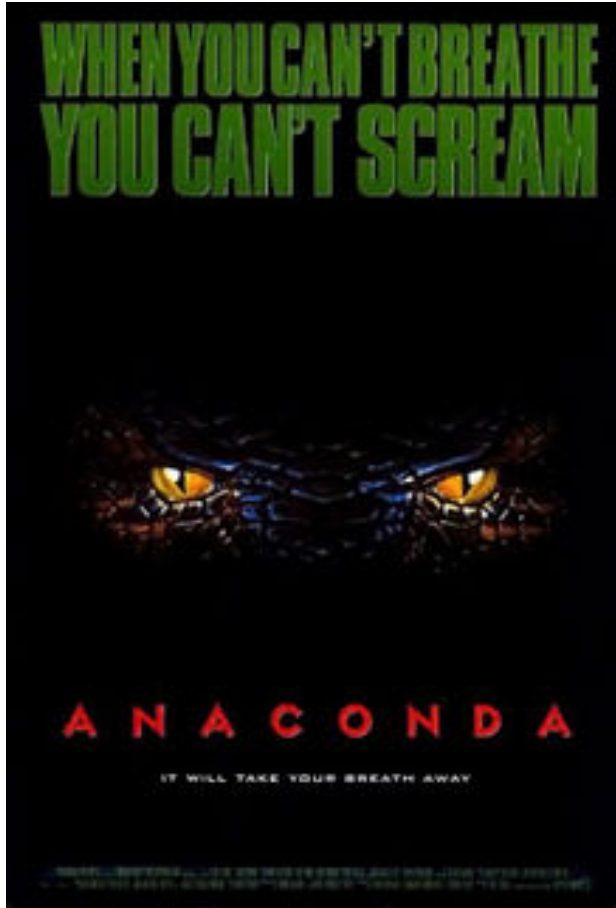
Figure 6: Anaconda (Luis Llosa, Australia, 1997), Publicity Poster, ©Cinema Line Film Corporation, Columbia Pictures, Iguana Producciones, Middle Fork Productions, Skylight Cinema Foto Art, St. Tropez Films. Reproduced under Fair dealing provisions.

The use of animals in films raises questions of the ethics of *the representation of nonhumans*, specifically the ontological treatment of 'animal actors'. When cinematic representations of a species are constantly as 'dangerous to humans', how does that affect human attitudes towards that species and to other animals and ecosystems? Questions of affect are cogently raised in *Ecocritical Film Studies*: 'How do these films influence our emotions while seeing them and after seeing them, and how do they generate meanings? How do they affect our relationship to the human and more-than-human world…?' (Weik von Mossner 1).

Through textual exegesis of the case study films from the perspectives of cultural/screen studies and ecology, it is clear that the ways nonhuman animals are represented on screen hinders and alters our understanding of nonhuman species. They encourage humans to treat nonhumans species less ethically. All these textual examples highlight how fear is visually and textually perpetuated across cultural forms and has been part of aggregating negative affect towards the nonhuman world.

Representation of apex nonhuman animals needs to be brought in line with the same ethical considerations that are applied to humans. Ethical issues with animal documentary films have been raised in the literature, for example by Richards (4) who cites 'Jeffrey Boswall, a producer at the BBC Natural History Unit (NHU), from 1957 to 1987, laid out two rules for ethical wildlife documentary production: 'though shalt not deceive the audience' and 'thou shalt not harm the animals' ('Animal Stars: The Use of Animals in Film and Television' 208) and later advocated for 'the use of onscreen disclaimers' (Boswall 'Wildlife Film Ethics: Time for Screen Disclaimers'). Smaill has also identified a 'green wave' of 'wildlife films' that 'play to and enable an ecological imaginary that has gained momentum in the popular consciousness in the wake of the environmental movement (66). Films such as this include *The End of the Line* (Rupert Murray, UK, 2009) and *The Cove* (Louie Psihoyos, USA, 2009).

Films need to avoid the human gaze of speciesism and commodification of nonhuman animals. At the very least, film-makers working across genres and styles that utilise live-action with nonhumans, including feature films, short films, music videos and documentaries, need to be made aware of stereotypical representations and the tropes that vilify and damage the relationship between humans and nonhumans.

There needs to be a rethinking of the way in which affect is utilised on screen (whether in shot selection, styling, narration scripts, audio, visual effects), to avoid the overuse of affect and human emotion overlaying and dominating apex nonhuman encounters. An ecologically refined approach needs to be implemented. This would include stipulating that documentaries utilise accurate and honest narrations when describing and showing species; for example, instead of adding human experiences and emotions to lure audiences into the story, simply say 'we do

not know – more research needs to be conducted or research has shown…' This is to avoid situations that are frequently observed onscreen, where in the absence of knowledge about a species, a narration script will simply overlay human emotions in the case of charismatic fauna, or utilise negative affect when the subjects are apex species that are perceived to be vicious or a threat to humans.

For Films to be Part of the Solution

- Representations of nonhuman actors must not perpetuate ontological harm.

- Guidelines around representation to avoid use of negative affect (fear, terror) need to be in place within the screen industry, with particular care in representation of apex nonhumans that are listed as threatened and/or vulnerable.

- Nonhuman actors are unable to provide consent to participate in film, rendering them involuntary performers. This places the responsibility upon humans to treat the nonhuman species ethically.

- Invasive filming techniques that disrupt or modify natural behaviours should be banned.

- Culturally respectful ontological awareness of the agency of nonhuman animals must be imbued.

Necessity for Reform in Classifications (Ratings) Systems

This research has identified two potential solutions:

1. Through development and implementation of an accreditation system, similar to existing international classification (ratings) systems, that applies a newly developed specific classification (rating) to screen and media that clearly identifies whether a film or television series adheres to ecological ethical principles and policies in respect of nonhumans.

2. Expanding classification *Codes* and *Guidelines* to include non-anthropocentric perspectives and the rights of nature with regard to nonhuman actors in public awareness.

Both approaches require reform to existing classifications (ratings) systems, shifting perspectives embedded in classifications away from the anthropocentric focus on what/how cultural products cause harm to humans, to address the profound *harm to nature* and specifically, as discussed throughout this article, to apex species and more broadly, to all species that are consistently vilified, denigrated and rendered without rights to their environments and habitats in onscreen and off screen worlds.

1. Proposing a New Classification (rating) Symbol to protect Nonhuman Species: *Animal Shield.*

This new classification (rating) symbol would follow internationally recognised conventions for use of colours, using 'green' to denote the lowest level of impact, to 'red' for the strongest level of impact. Since 1925, the American Humane Association has led important work and swift intervention on behalf of animals in film. The need for humane intervention on behalf of working animals in film was first raised in 1925: 'When allegations of cruelty against movie animals first cropped up in 1925, American Humane established a committee to investigate and advocate on the animals' behalf presenting a report at its 1925 annual meeting' (American Humane Association). This developed into a regulated program accepted by the film industry and included within screen industry contracts since 1980 (Iacona 31). This system is based around providing 'Certified Animal Safety Representatives' working with what they term 'animal actors' during film shoots. Unlike the existing American Humane Association system and logo, we are proposing that a twenty first century ratings system must take into account not only the physical 'harm' that nonhuman actors may be subjected to during filming, but also the ontological issues of representation that have the potential to harm entire species.

This could be addressed through development and implementation of a set of *Guidelines* for nonhuman actors that could sit beside and fit within existing classifications (ratings) systems

and be accompanied with the use of a clearly designed classification (rating) logo on films. This rating would be applied to all screen productions in a two-stage process of accreditation:

1. during the production phases, and

2. during the exhibition/sales/box office stage when classifications signs are added to films just prior to exhibition/release; at this stage the proposed new 'Animal Shield' classification (ratings) symbol would be applied to all publicity and promotional materials, such as posters, film trailers, DVD covers, to guide audiences/consumers at the box office/exhibition/sale cycle of the screen texts.

This could function similarly to existing film classifications (ratings) signs and provide a clearly identifiable rating to producers about the ecological status of their productions, 'green' to produce, 'red' where there are stereotypical, misrepresentational, or damaging narratives and then to consumers and audiences, to identify whether there are damaging, or misleading/terrifying narratives, or animals have been harmed during productions.

As two comparative examples, films cited in this article *Rogue* and *Black Water* are both Australian productions released in 2007. Each film was separately classified and was rated similarly, at the 'M' classification (a 15 year age rating), but with a higher MA15+ applied to *Black Water* on DVD release in Australia. During discussion of each of these films, the audience advisory utilised by classifications was cited. Whilst 'moderate impact' (not recommended for audiences under 15 years of age was applied to *Rogue* in Australia (Australian Classification 'Rogue', Australian Government 'Guidelines for the Classification of Films'), in the UK the wording 'Contains strong language and gore' (British Board of Film Classification 'Rogue 2007') was applied. *Black Water* was classified in Australia as containing 'Strong Violence' (Australian Classification 'Black Water', Australian Government 'Guidelines for the Classification of Films') and as a film that 'Contains strong language, threat and bloody injury' (British Board of Film Classification 'Black Water 2007') in the UK.

In both of these instances the use of the proposed Red Animal Shield logo on the publicity materials would clearly alert audiences to the damaging/terrifying narratives the films contain. In an age

of fast access to information, consumers are more likely to recognise a clearly coloured logo than stand and read classifications' advisory notes.

During fieldwork research between 2013-2016 (Ford, *Trans New Wave Cinema*) filmmakers were interviewed with specific questions, including about classifications (ratings) processes in their countries (Australia, USA). Significantly, only one filmmaker was aware of the role that classifications (ratings) systems played in screen production and exhibition. If filmmakers are unaware of what classifications (ratings) systems are about, how are consumers/audiences meant to understand what classifications processes and ratings logos mean? Whilst the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) has 'conducted nationwide surveys since the 1970s' and produced statistics that in 2016 showed audiences 'have heard' about the 'ratings system' (94%) and the 'ratings system descriptors' (99%) (that is, the classification symbols and wording used to describe these), between 75%-85% of these same surveyed parents (defined as 'adults with children in the household') find these useful (Film Ratings). The choice of question wording and target group is critical in qualitative research (Creswell). Regrettably, these surveys leave out wide demographics; adults *without* children in the household being the first group of potential film consumers that may be likely to view higher impact films such as *Rogue* or *Black Water* not being surveyed at all. These surveys underscore the necessity for a nuanced understanding of ontological damage to species currently not a classifiable theme under any existing ratings system. This is an area that the proposed 'Animal Shield' could address.

The work of the *American Humane Association* is frequently not visible to public/audiences beyond the disclaimer at the end of film credits, concealing the very real issues that may have been encountered by nonhuman actors during production (Lippitt; Iacona). Significantly, the America Humane Association *does not address representational issues*:

> The purpose of American Humane's film and TV monitoring is to safeguard animals on-set, regardless of whether the scene being portrayed conveys an animal-friendly message. The objective of our monitoring work is the welfare of the live animals used in film production, and to that end, we refrain from commenting on content. *If we refused to monitor a film because we did not agree with its message, we would risk there being no protection at all for the animals involved.*

(Italics added, www.americanhumane.org/fact-sheet/no-animals-were-harmed/. Accessed 24 May 2019).

This highlights that urgent reform is required. These are areas that the ratings we are proposing would also address, through impact tests that assessed the physical and representational issues around nonhuman participation onscreen. Impact tests are already utilised within classification (ratings) *Guidelines* at the time of film sale/exhibition to assess the impact of classifiable elements and themes within screen texts and so advise audiences of content, from 'very mild' (PG) to very strong' (R18+) in the Australian system with regard to anthropocentric issues onscreen (focused upon language, violence, drugs, nudity, sex).

What we are suggesting is that a new series of impact tests that utilise the proposed 'Animal Shield' ratings logo are applied at both the production stage and at the exhibition stage, when nonhuman species are the subjects of a film. The tests could utilise a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches such as the following:

- What is the species subjected to? (for example: behaviour modification, intimidation, violence on screen or offscreen — actual and/or in representations, coercion/drugging of animals)

- What ecological impacts is the species indirectly subjected too?

- Intensified oversight when threatened, vulnerable species are the focus of productions and ensure that there are:

  1) No misleading representations — fear mongering, use of vilifying or misleading language

  2) No chumming or use of food for behaviour modification

  3) No anthropomorphic overlay

Film industry policies must clearly state that any of nonhuman species, in any form of media, must be treated ethically. This would include in all screen texts with live action sequences, documentaries, feature films, music videos, commercials.

2. Amending Classification *Guidelines* to include Nonhuman Species

In Australia, the *Commonwealth Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995* ('the Act'), contains the *National Classification Code* ('the Code'):

> The Code
>
> Under the Code, classification decisions are to give effect, as far as possible, to the following principles:
>
> (a) adults should be able to read, hear, see and play what they want;
>
> (b) minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them;
>
> (c) everyone should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material that they find offensive;
>
> (d) the need to take account of community concerns about:
>
>> (i) depictions that condone or incite violence, particularly sexual violence;
>>
>> and
>>
>> (ii) the portrayal of persons in a demeaning manner.
>>
>> (Australian Government 'Guidelines for the Classification of Films', Part 2).

The proposed intervention here on behalf of the rights of nature, is that point (d) of the *Code* is expanded to include a non-anthropocentric perspective. This could be accomplished within the statement (d) 'there is need to take account of community concerns about:', through adding a new point (iii) '*depictions that condone or incite violence against animals*' (use of the term 'animals' here is to be broadly construed as inclusive of all nonhuman species). Such a change in the *Code* would provide legislative protection within the Australian Classification system, clearing identifying 'the need to take account of community concerns about' the use and representation of nonhumans onscreen. Whilst this would require legislative change (as

Classifications is a legal Act in Australia, statutory in nature and legally enforced) and a unanimous agreement by all States to amend the *Code* or *Guidelines* (Australian Government 'Review of Australian classification regulation' 8), this would reflect changing community 'concerns' about the environment and nature, particularly in the wake of environmental crises, such as bushfires, which in the Australian summer of 2019-20 claimed the lives of an estimated one billion animals.

Of significance to the proposals in this article is that the Australian Classification (ratings) system is currently under review (Australian Government 'Review of Australian classification regulation). Awareness of the necessity to modernise classifications legislation and processes is apparent when considering that the *Guidelines* for classifying films were last reviewed in 2002, prior to online streaming services becoming widely accessible. The influx of Subscription Video On Demand (SVOD) screen productions (including Netflix, Amazon Prime, Stan), has led to an immense quantity of productions now requiring classification prior to exhibition, beyond the scope of the Classification Board. This has led to Netflix being granted permission to self-classify screen content in Australia using what is called the Netflix Classification 'tool', which is an algorithm, with Netflix classification decisions monitored by the Department of Communication and the Arts (Australian Government 'Review of Australian classification regulation' 20). With the successful implementation of this 'tool', a technological template is now available that could be expanded and replicated nationally and internationally as a transnational classification (ratings) interface.

Conclusion

This article has identified endemic issues with the representation of apex nonhuman animals in hybrid genre films and television series and also with the American Humane Society approach, which does not consider issues of representation of nonhumans onscreen, or the ontological consequences to entire species. The alternative approach advocated by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), advocates for immediate elimination of all use of animals in screen productions and places the onus upon the end-user (that is the audience) to become the

advocate, to walk out of a film, complain, or ask for a refund, or write to local papers (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals). Technological innovations (including animation, computer-generated imagery, digital fur, green screens) supersede the rationale for using live action animal actors. An issue that continues is that the PETA approach focuses on the physical. This overlooks representational issues and ontological harm that is caused, and that may continue to be caused to nonhumans, through use of technological representations. In the progression away from using nonhumans as animal actors, the reforms to classifications (ratings) systems and expanding awareness of what constitutes 'harm' to nonhumans in screen productions, provide a way forward that fits in between and augments all the existing systems. They also provide policies that can be developed and implemented by screen industry. The implementation of an Animal Shield classification (ratings) symbol would clearly alert intending audiences to issues with screen productions and empower the consumer to make the choice not to buy the ticket.

Implementation of reform in how narratives are presented onscreen and marketed to the public is urgently required. The use of a new clearly visible 'Animal Shield' rating, as proposed by our research, presents how this could be effectively implemented. This would provide a clear classification symbol to enable the public to be empowered to make informed choices about cultural forms and entertainment in a way that is not currently available. This could provide a twenty first century approach to these issues. As the American Humane Association logo does not appear until the end of a film, it does not provide consumer advice at the point of box office to intending audiences.

In particular, the use of sensational labels for species interactions between humans and nature that promote fictitious deliberate malicious intent from species towards humans must clearly be identified as 'harm-inducing' and labelled with consumer warning signs, similar to the way in which other products which humans consume and use are now labelled to identify as harmful and toxic.

Whilst reform of an entrenched, powerful and profitable industry in respect to nonhumans may appear overwhelming, increasingly advocacy and awareness of nonhumans is

being raised from within the screen industry by celebrities-as-activists, including Charlize Theron; Eva Mendes; Ellen Degeneres; Forest Whitaker; Joaquin Phoenix; Keanu Reeves.

This article is offered to promote discussion and provide recognition of ontological issues in screen representations that are generally not considered, as well as proposing ways to move forward. Educating the public about the harm that is being caused to nonhumans from film and media is required. Reform to classification systems is needed. Decolonising attitudes starts with each one of us; learning to understand ecosystems and the necessity for human acceptance of personal responsibility in interactions with nature is foundational to change. We can choose to create cultural forms that do not denigrate nonhumans and as audiences we also can choose which screen productions to view. Box office is the powerful force for productions. In the interim, audiences can turn away from supporting vilifying films and media and the screen industry will receive this message. Use of a clearly identifiable ratings logo such as Animal Shield on screen texts as suggested by this article would provide consumers with the opportunity to make informed decisions about where their money is spent in the short term and over a longer period, lead to change.

Note

[1] As a background note, one of the authors (Dr Akkadia Ford) has been working with classifications (ratings) systems in Australia, UK and USA since 2009 within the screen industry and scholarly work and from this, has been able to identify that existing classifications (ratings) systems have a human focus when the existing classifiable elements/themes and issues of concern within *Guidelines* are considered (such as language, nudity, violence, drugs, sex). This identifies that there is a gap in the existing ratings systems and processes in clearly identifying themes/issues with nonhuman species. Whilst individual classifications officers may make use of non-publically available submenus to identify issues with animals, there is currently not an international standard symbol that is used to clearly identify these issues to intending audiences/viewers.

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