

# Amorous Anthropomorphism, Marine Conservation and the Wonder of Wildlife Film in Isabella Rossellini's *Green Porno*

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**Sarah Wade**

**University of East Anglia**

**Abstract:** *Green Porno* is a series of short films in which Isabella Rossellini explores the reproductive lives of creatures whose lifeworlds are vastly different from humans'. In series three, Rossellini comically performs sea creature sex to draw attention to the threats they face from human activities like overfishing. Through *Green Porno*, Rossellini claimed that she wanted to evoke a sense of wonder to compel viewers to protect wildlife. Recognizing wonder's widely acknowledged ethical and compassion-inducing potential, as well as its prevalence as an affect mobilized by wildlife film and television shows, this article situates *Green Porno* within the wildlife film genre. I argue that the series acknowledges, parodies and critiques the wonder-inducing 'pornographic' (Lorimer) and anthropomorphic tendencies of wildlife film through a crafted aesthetic and camp performances to encourage viewers to reconsider their relationships with marine wildlife, or at least with wildlife on screen, at this time of ecological crisis.

**Keywords:** Anthropomorphism, Eco Porn, *Green Porno*, Isabella Rossellini, Jean Painlevé, Marine Conservation, Performance, Wildlife Film, Wonder

## Sexy Beasts and Saving Wildlife

It is a well-worn slogan that ‘sex sells’, but can it save species? At a time when the anthropogenic threats facing wildlife are numerous, and species are disappearing from the wild at an increasingly accelerating rate, the actress and model Isabella Rossellini’s *Green Porno* (2008-2009) short films suggest this very possibility. Wearing well-crafted yet comical costumes made from colourful lycra and cardboard, in these films Rossellini performs the reproductive acts of various kinds of wildlife such as insects, fish, marine invertebrates and marine mammals, whose physiology is far from human and whose sexual behaviours appear to be particularly curious from a human perspective. As the series of *Green Porno* progress, the ecological imperative of the films becomes increasingly explicit. Series three is entitled *Bon Appétit!* and tackles the detrimental effects that human activities have on the lives and habitats of marine wildlife, particularly overfishing. After Rossellini has performed the sex acts of sea creatures, the marine biologist Claudio Campagna appears on screen to inform viewers about the threats they face at human hands. In the episode *Anchovy* Rossellini is shown dressed as a fish. She ‘swims’ amongst a shoal of puppets and uses human-centric language to describe anchovy mass spawning events as ‘orgies’. The film ends with Campagna explaining that anchovies are overfished, impacting the food chains of other wildlife. In *Shrimp*, Rossellini performs a comic strip tease in which she transitions from male to female shrimp. After mating, Rossellini-as-shrimp is captured in a net along with various paper marine creatures and Campagna informs viewers that fishing for shrimp produces large quantities of wasted by-catch. The last film in the series is longer and features footage of live elephant seals, a puppet show and an animation. Rather than performing elephant seal sex, Rossellini resides on the shoreline with Campagna observing this wildlife in action. The film closes by highlighting the perils faced by these seals as a result of human activities, including fishing and dumping rubbish.

The Sundance channel commissioned *Green Porno* in 2007 as part of its commitment to produce and screen ecologically orientated programming via television’s first dedicated environmental slot known as ‘The Green’ (Mitman 213, Sinwell 122).<sup>1</sup> The series was initially designed for the fourth screen to be viewed online on mobile devices and was written, produced, starred-in and co-directed by Rossellini who, along with co-director Jody Shapiro,

titled the series to serve as ‘clickbait’ to drive traffic to the films by taking advantage of those browsing for pornography online (Magnet 124; Peterson 429, 433; Sinwell 118-119, 125). When the series launched, it became a viral sensation and by 2010 it had been viewed online four million times (Sinwell 120). The novelty appeal of *Green Porno* therefore proved popular and an accompanying publication and DVD was released in 2009, two spin-off series exploring the courtship rituals and maternal instincts of wildlife were made in its wake (*Seduce Me* (2010) and *Mammas* (2013)), and a *Green Porno* stage show toured internationally from 2013.

Initially appearing to be bizarre web-based curiosities, on closer viewing *Green Porno*’s educational and entertaining screen-based format readily invites links to wildlife film, parodying many conventions of the genre. The series defies typical tropes of so-called ‘blue chip’ wildlife film and television programming by presenting viewers with a ‘handmade aesthetic’ and a humorous tone, which through its playful approach and overt artificiality contravenes the genre’s usual reverent presentation of an ‘untouched’ natural world (Seymour 74-75). Despite this visual and performative irreverence, series three of *Green Porno* has serious ecological intent, exhibiting what the environmental humanities scholar Nicole Seymour (2018) has termed ‘bad environmentalism’. Here, the playful, the absurd, the frivolous and the camp provide alternatives to the sensibilities more typically activated through environmentalism, which Seymour lists as including guilt, shame, seriousness and wonder (4-5). Yet in series three of *Green Porno*, wonder is integral, rather than oppositional, to a light-hearted approach to ecology (Seymour 106).

Through *Green Porno*, Rossellini claimed that she wanted ‘to give people a sense of wonder about the natural world [...] to make them fall in love with it and want to protect it’ (Rossellini qtd. in Bohannon 1620). Considering Rossellini’s aim, it is notable that in recent years a number of scholars have argued that a sense of wonder can generate ethical and compassionate responses towards others (Bennett; Endt-Jones 179; Irigaray; Kruger; La Caze, *The Encounter*; La Caze, *Wonder and Generosity*). For the political theorist Jane Bennett, moments of enchantment, or what she describes as ‘wonder-at-the-world’, can induce a generous disposition where one feels compelled to act in the interest of other lifeforms (32, 156). Wonder here becomes a mobilizing force for prompting action (Vasalou 20-21). However,

wonder also provides strategic possibilities for engaging viewers in marine wildlife conservation concerns specifically.

Promoting the protection of marine wildlife can pose challenges. The radically different physiology and lifeworlds (*umwelten*) of sea creatures can make it hard for humans to relate to them, which has typically impacted the ways relationships with these creatures are configured and the degree to which marine wildlife is treated with respect and a sense of responsibility. For instance, the animal rights philosopher Peter Singer noted that there exists ‘no humane slaughter requirement’ for fish caught in the wild, nor in many cases for fish that are farmed (*The Guardian*). Yet it is well known that even Singer himself once used sea creatures to determine the line where rights to nonhuman animals should be curtailed, positioning it ‘somewhere between a shrimp and an oyster’, since he believed that their experiences of pain could not be confirmed (174). The welfare and protection of ocean life is therefore arguably harder to promote than it is for the cuddly charismatic species that have been traditionally favoured by wildlife conservation campaigns. Wonder can hold out promise in this regard.

The feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray’s work on wonder is significant in this context since she argued that wonder can serve as an ethical basis for encountering the ‘other’ (74). Exploring wonder’s role in encounters of sexual difference, Irigaray wrote about how wonder is ‘[t]he point of passage between two closed worlds, two definite universes, two space-times [...] two others’, and concluded that ‘[w]onder must be the advent or the event of the other’, that which is ‘*not yet assimilated*’ (75). For this reason, Irigaray’s observations can equally apply to the differences between humans and sea creatures, where encounters take place across different environments, bodies, and lifeworlds and where knowledge of the subjective experiences of these creatures remains elusive. A sense of difference in such encounters is maintained, *not yet assimilated*. Irigaray used wonder as framed by René Descartes who positioned it as ‘the first of all the passions’ (350), to argue that wonder precedes judgement since it occurs before all other responses and therefore permits for non-hierarchical relations with the other. In Irigaray’s terms, encounters with otherness can lead to wonder, which provides the foundation for ethical encounters. This offers promise for the ecological aim of *Green Porno*, whereby Rossellini hoped to promote a sense of responsibility towards marine wildlife. The far from human ways of being

and acting in the world that Rossellini performs in *Green Porno* present the sort of difference that Irigaray claimed can lead to wonder.

However, Irigaray's view of wonder might be criticized in this context for exoticizing the 'other' (La Caze citing Iris Marion Young, *The Encounter* 10, 14) and assuming a heteronormative position that reinforces binaries (and therefore also maintains distance between humans and nonhumans). Descartes' understanding of wonder also poses problems here since he refused to conceive of nonhuman animals as thinking, feeling beings and furthermore claimed that being awestruck might immobilize the beholder (354), negating the political and ethical possibilities that Irigaray argues for and making this a somewhat problematic reference point in the context of films developed to inspire a sense of responsibility towards wildlife. Yet this article reveals how Rossellini counters each of these criticisms in turn by attributing pleasure and suffering to nonhuman animals when enacting the desires and deaths of marine wildlife, throwing the heteronormative conventions of wildlife film into question by queering the borders between sex and species, and negating wonder's exoticizing tendencies through a strategic form of anthropomorphism. To this end, *Green Porno* is discussed in relation to the awesome 'pornographic' tendencies of wildlife film (Lorimer), the marvellous anthropomorphism of the films of Jean Painlevé, an enchanting crafted aesthetic and a camp mode of performance that disrupts the expectations of watching wildlife on screen to call forth the 'sharp novelty' (Parsons 85) that can catalyse a sense of wonder.

### **Awe and 'Pornographic' Wildlife Film**

Wonder has long been associated with putting nonhuman animals on display, from the 'unicorn horns', 'basilisks' and birds of paradise found in the early modern *wunderkammer* that evoked wonder and a desire to know (Daston and Park 260-261, 267), to the spectacular natural history displays of the modern museum which sought to enthrall and instruct visitors in equal measure (Louson 26-31). Wildlife film, as another display media, similarly exploits wonder to educate, entertain (Louson 34) and also to induce a desire to care. That *Green Porno* readily references this genre is therefore significant. Many critical analyses of nonhuman animals in film, and even the

famed wildlife film and television pioneer Sir David Attenborough, have observed that wildlife films have the capacity to affect the emotions of viewers, encouraging them to become more likely to act towards the protection of wildlife (Bousé 30-31, 91; Economides 173; Lorimer 119; Seymour 83). Wonder is one of the prevailing modes of affect that is both mobilized by and expected of the genre to the extent that it is even carefully cultivated. The literature scholar and eco-critic Louise Economides claimed that the BBC's *Planet Earth* (2006) series stimulated wonder through spectacular footage that appeared to be more concerned with 'producing heart-stopping awe' than with being didactic (173, 175). Furthermore, the literary and cultural studies academic Graham Huggan characterized wildlife films as 'a form of armchair tourism' driven by 'the commodified demand for wonder' (9), suggesting that viewers are primed to actively seek this affect out. *Green Porno* is cognizant of this tendency of wildlife films and television shows to foster wonder in viewers, referencing this in a knowing way. A tongue-in-cheek survey was even conducted amongst the scientists invited to the premiere of series three to assess the role and efficacy of wonder in *Green Porno*. The series scored an average of 4.3 out of 5 in response to the question 'How well does *Green Porno* fulfill its mission of inspiring "a sense of wonder" about the natural world?' and 3.6 out of 5 in response to 'How well do you think a "sense of wonder" can actually translate to environmental protection or conservation?' (Bohannon 1620).

The mass media's spectacularization of wildlife through the presentation of dramatic narratives, awe-inspiring cinematic effects and cutting-edge technologies has become so ubiquitous and even expected in wildlife film that it has been suggested audiences risk becoming immune to their wonder-inducing effects, being less attuned to the natural world and even 'alienated' from it as a result (Bousé 8). Here, the capacity of wonder as an ethically and ecologically motivating force becomes diluted through familiarity and as viewers become distanced from the wildlife with whom they share the world. Yet *Green Porno* resists this tendency, retaining and recuperating the ethical potential of wonder through various visual and performative strategies to promote the protection of marine wildlife and foster kinship with other species.

Launching in 2008, *Green Porno*'s sexy subject matter and overtly ecological content reflected broader trends emerging in wildlife film and television in the first decade of the new millennium. The series followed shows such as the National Geographic channel's *Wild Sex* (2005) and the Fox feature-length *When Animals Attract* (2004), which were aired at a time when an increasing number of natural history channels competed for viewers and attempted to hold their attention through the spectacle of nonhuman animal sex (Chris, *Watching Wildlife* 138-139; Mitman 210-211). *Green Porno* was also made after the BBC's *Blue Planet* (2001) television series and was hot on the heels of the award-winning documentary *Sharkwater* (2006), which examined the threats facing sharks as a result of human activity, principally through shark finning. While explicitly environmental content has historically been considered a turn-off for viewers due to the 'doom and despair' content (Mitman 213-214, Rust 234), *Sharkwater* combined spectacular footage of sharks in their habitat with graphic imagery of shark deaths to mobilize a shark protection agenda. The film contributed to shifting attitudes towards sharks, notable through the surge in shark protection initiatives established after its release. *Blue Planet*, on the other hand, enchanted viewers with nine episodes exploring the wonders of the deep and presented explicitly ecological content about overfishing in the separate *Blue Planet: Deep Trouble* (2001) documentary. *Green Porno* reflects this latter model, with the overfishing agenda presented in the final series and the ecological content delivered by Campagna at the end of each episode. As such, *Green Porno* was distinctly a product of its time, surfacing when ecological issues were being addressed head on in wildlife film and television shows and when viewers were being seduced by narratives of sex and death in wildlife programming (Cottle 93). Yet this combination of sex and conservation in wildlife film also has a history, as revealed by Ben Dibley and Gay Hawkins in their analysis of the ABC's *Dancing Orpheus* (1962) which features the mating display of the lyrebird followed by scenes recognizing the creature's protected status (755). So, while *Green Porno* may have been strange in style, it was familiar in content, reflecting both recent trends and historical tropes of wildlife film and television programming in a knowing way.

In fact, *Green Porno* evokes a specific category of wildlife film that the environmental geographer Jamie Lorimer classified as 'awe' when assessing the different affects such films

could elicit (130-133). If 'awe' is taken in the sense of feeling wonderstruck, then harnessing this 'awesome' tendency of wildlife film is clearly a strategic move given the widely acknowledged ethical potential of wonder and Rossellini's desire to promote marine wildlife protection through these films. According to Lorimer, wildlife films falling into this category 'evoke the overwhelming [...] alterity of nature to provoke admiration' and focus on presenting 'alien ecologies, unfamiliar anatomies, and inhuman behaviors' (131-132). *Green Porno* focuses on just this kind of wildlife. In series three alone viewers are shown how shrimp change sex before they shed their shells to mate, how anchovies reproduce through mass spawning events and how female elephant seals can stall their pregnancies.

According to Lorimer, in the category of 'awe' the behaviour of wildlife is exaggerated to produce thrilling footage and is marked by a tendency 'to drift toward the pornographic', in which viewers 'are presented with an improbable feast of [...] exotic animals, which are forever fighting, fucking, eating, migrating, and dying for their impatient channel-surfing audiences' (132). The wildlife filmmaker and scholar Derek Bousé also observed this 'pornographic' impulse, equating kill scenes in wildlife films to 'the obligatory "cum-shot"' (43) in X-rated adult films, arguing that both act as markers of authenticity and provide the filmic climax sought out by viewers (182). *Green Porno* reflects this trend, similarly equating the awesome 'pornographic' qualities of wildlife film with pornography's 'principle of maximum visibility' (Williams 49) in a humorous and deliberate way: viewers are presented with close-ups of penetration performed by puppetry or appendages attached to costumes (*Squid*) and even a Silly-String 'money shot' (*Anchovy*), before these creatures meet their death at human hands. In this way *Green Porno* provides an alternative to the eco porno fiction that pervades 'blue chip' wildlife films, in which nonhuman animal sex is frequently romanticized, sanitized and where anything relating to pleasure, the bodily or the abject is often overlooked or simply ignored (Chris, *Watching Wildlife* 132). Instead, Rossellini presents the sex lives of sea creatures in an unabashed way, responding exuberantly to the novelist Lydia Millet's (2004) concern that eco porn's 'soft aesthetic produces soft results', as well as providing a new mode of environmentalism that visually has 'the guts to assault us with the ugly effects of our own appetites' (34-35). The old



adage 'sex sells' is reconfigured through *Green Porno* to present the possibility that the spectacle of nonhuman animal sex on screen can save species.

The life and death events that viewers seek out in wildlife films have been carefully edited, artificially simulated and 'elaborately crafted' to meet demand (Dibley and Hawkins, 754). *Green Porno* visually acknowledges this reality through handmade sets and over-exaggerated performances. Each episode of series three begins with Rossellini standing in a cardboard kitchen set. The crop of the shot and the design of the kitchen recalls the feminist performance artist Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) in which the artist worked her way through the alphabet demonstrating various kitchen utensils in action using brisk, overwrought movements to convey her frustration at the repressed status of women. *Green Porno* evokes the aesthetic of this work to underline its drive towards environmental change and ecological responsibility, shifting the focus from women's liberation to a kind of 'animal liberation' instead (Singer). In the episode *Squid*, Rossellini is shown frying paper-engineered squid in a pan. 'Yum! Fried calamari, my favourite!' she exclaims. Then a serious expression falls across her face and she looks directly into the camera to address the viewer. 'If I were a calamari', she says thoughtfully, 'I would be a squid and everyone would want to eat me'. In the scenes that follow Rossellini describes the physiology and behaviours of squid, including how these creatures expel black ink to evade predation, possess three hearts and communicate via bioluminescence. Then Isabella Rossellini performs squid sex. Embracing a fabric squid with the limp tentacles dangling from her costume, Rossellini describes how these creatures 'give the most passionate twenty-arm embrace' when they mate. Concluding her performance of squid sex by enacting the role of the male, Rossellini's cephalopod 'arm' inserts gelatinous orange balloons of 'sperm' into the body of the fabric female squid and she closes the scene with a mock-flirtatious smile.<sup>2</sup>

After having 'mated', Rossellini explains how squid live in the deep sea, but that they vertically migrate at night. Suddenly, sinister and discordant music sounds. The film cuts to a cardboard fishing boat sailing on a blue and green paper sea. Rossellini-as-squid appears attached to a hook and screams as she is pulled out of the water. The screen slowly dissolves to film footage of an actual fishing boat hauling in its cephalopod catch. Then the film cuts back to Rossellini in the kitchen, who, returning from her reveries of becoming-squid-becoming-male-

becoming-captured, stands as her human female self and breaks her gaze with the paper calamari to address the viewer. 'I lost my appetite', she concedes, then asks, 'what to do?' At this point, the film transitions to Claudio Campagna who demonstrates the unsustainable way squid are fished off the coast of South America, leaving viewers in no doubt about the extent of human exploitation of marine wildlife.

Each episode of *Green Porno* harnesses the awe-inducing 'pornographic' tendencies of wildlife film in which sex and death prevail as captured in *Squid*. However many episodes of *Green Porno* also parody the heteronormativity of the sex historically presented in wildlife films, as well as the convention of the traditional family unit that has frequently served as the narrative *modus operandi* across the genre (Chris, *Watching Wildlife* 126, 156-158). For instance, Rossellini often uses the terminology 'husband' and 'wife' to refer to the far from human creatures represented in her films, yet challenges the limits of a monogamous familial anthropomorphism when it comes to understanding nonhuman animal lifeways. In *Elephant Seal* Rossellini refers to a male as a '6,000lb husband' and presents viewers with the polygynous structure of elephant seal society, in which males preside over large harems of females. In addition, Rossellini disrupts the traditional gender-normative and heteronormative tropes of the wildlife film genre through her gender-bending performances, enacting creatures that are female, male, asexual or various permutations of hermaphrodite and theatrically slipping seamlessly between sex, gender and species, such as when she played the role of the male in *Squid* and transitioned from a male to female crustacean in 'Shrimp'. Rossellini highlights the astounding variation in reproductive strategies, gender and sex found amongst wildlife. This variety is something that the environmental humanities scholar Stacy Alaimo has suggested 'explodes our sense of being able to make sense of it all' in 'epiphanic moments of wonder' (67) and that the biologist Bruce Bagemihl claimed is 'capable of inspiring our deepest feelings of wonder' (6). As a result, Rossellini's films evoke wonder in a way that enacts a politics of diversity that is as inclusive as it is 'green'.

## Critical Anthropomorphism and the Marvellous Films of Jean Painlevé

Rossellini has noted her debt to early French cinema, pointing to the filmmaker Georges Méliès as a key influence (Rossellini qtd. in Peterson 434). This reference point seems apt considering the crafted aesthetic, puppetry and hyperbolic performances in *Green Porno* which readily recall the films of Méliès (Zipes 40). One of the reasons given for the bold and relatively stark appearance of Rossellini's films, in addition to their short length, was that they were developed to be viewed online and on mobile devices. However, Rossellini's interest in the films of Méliès suggests that the reason for adopting this styling was more knowing, rather than a mere necessity demanded of the small-screen medium. *Green Porno*'s simple DIY aesthetic, limited plot lines and Rossellini's continual breaking of the fourth wall to address the viewer refer back to the early history of film, evoking what the film historian Tom Gunning called 'the cinema of attractions', in which film draws attention to its own visibility and is 'willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator' (64). Rossellini's filmic curiosities return to the techniques of early cinema to jolt viewers into an active, rather than passive mode of looking, mobilizing the kind of 'thoughtful vision' that has been tied to wonder (Kruger 74).

Yet, *Green Porno*'s nod to early cinema is furthered through its evident links to the films of Jean Painlevé (O'Driscoll 628), which similarly interrogate the wonder-inducing alterity of sea creatures in a comic and anthropomorphic way and entangle science and storytelling, spectacle and didacticism via the format of film. From 1927 onwards Painlevé made a series of surreal yet scientific films about various marine wildlife, often alongside his partner Geneviève Hamon. Painlevé's work has frequently been described in terms of wonder, as 'filmic marvels' and 'odd fossils from film history's cabinet of curiosities' presenting 'wonderful and alien' settings and 'astonishing worlds' that instil 'unease and wonder in equal parts' (McDougall xiv; Rugoff 49, 57; Lorimer 133; Hayward 40). These responses stemmed from Painlevé's choice to present far from human marine wildlife as well as the marvellous tendencies of these films, which echoed the concerns of the surrealists. Painlevé's associations with surrealism have been well documented. He contributed essays to *Surréalisme* in 1924, his photographs were included in *Documents* in 1929 and a starfish from his aquarium appeared in Man Ray's film *L'Étoile de Mer*

(1928) (Fretz 47, 48-49). Sea creatures were a popular subject matter amongst the surrealists, who were fascinated by the mysteries of the deep (Elias 5) and the marvellous capacity of many of the ocean's inhabitants to metamorphose, thereby transgressing categories. Painlevé's hybrid practice blurred the boundaries of art and science, nature and artifice, rendering encounters with familiar species strange and full of wonder thanks to the mediating technology of film. Magnification along with changes in scale, temporality and carefully constructed underwater studio sets facilitated a 'metamorphosis of vision', which enabled viewers to see marine creatures in novel and unexpected ways (Cahill, 110; Fretz 54). Painlevé shared the surrealists' interests in creatures that blurred boundaries or defied expectation. In *L'Hippocampe* (1934), Painlevé presented footage of a male seahorse giving birth, turning human understanding of childbirth and normative gender models on their head. In *Acéra ou le Bal des Sorcières* (1972) he presented viewers with species functioning sexually as both male and female, engaged in what the curator and critic Ralph Rugoff has rather amusingly described as the underwater spectacle of 'a mollusk ménage à trois' (55).

Painlevé's films were abundantly anthropomorphic (Cahill 93-158; Fretz 55; Gibbs 47; Rugoff 50-51). Painlevé and Hamon's *The Love Life of the Octopus* (1965) is a case in point. The film's tantalizing title is already rife with anthropomorphism. Viewers wait for the 'love life' of this octopus to unfold. Anthropomorphism also figures frequently in the film's narration. As the male octopus approaches the female the voiceover describes their encounter, making assumptions about the emotions experienced by these creatures: the male 'violently grabs hold of a female', but 'she's not particularly happy about it'. The mating act is explained and like the squid in Rossellini's film, the footage shows how these cephalopods reproduce by the male inserting a package of sperm into the female with a specially adapted 'arm'. The film's off-beat humour is captured in a piece of dialogue where the narrator quips that 'there's no official favourite position' for octopus sex, providing a comic mode of delivery that *Green Porno* shares.

Painlevé focused on exactly the sort of far from human wildlife that Rossellini performs in *Green Porno*, offering the possibility for evoking wonder on Irigaray's terms. Yet as a result of the anthropomorphic tenor of these films, viewers are impelled to recognize human qualities in this 'alien' aquatic life, reading human emotions into the behaviours of these sea creatures and

even recognizing physical affinities with the human body. For instance, Rugoff observed how it is the octopus's eyelid that appears to be strikingly mammalian in this film (50). This simultaneous recognition of difference and similarity introduces an uncanny slippage between humans and nonhuman animals (Peterson 430), blurring boundaries in a way that contributed to the marvellous quality of Painlevé's films. *Green Porno* creates a similar slippage. When acting out the lives of sea creatures Rossellini clearly retains the appearance of a human female in costume. She speaks from the perspectives of various nonhuman animals but uses human language to describe their experiences. For instance, in *Shrimp*, Rossellini's naked 'shrimp' body is furnished with comical schematic markers of a nude woman with human breasts and genitals painted onto her crustacean costume. Furthermore, when captured in a net she cries 'we shrimp are fished by the millions', identifying herself as one amongst the 'we' of the species.

Performing nonhuman animals in this way is almost hyperbolic in its anthropomorphism. Yet it is through recourse to anthropomorphism that Rossellini is able to render this marine wildlife closer to humans and therefore easier to relate to, empathize with, and as a result, extend compassion towards. This tactic is enhanced through the childlike appearance of *Green Porno*'s paper and puppet protagonists, which renders sea creatures cute so that they might benefit from care and compassion induced by cuddly charisma – something that the small, slimy and scaly creatures of the sea are often perceived to lack. While anthropomorphism might be criticized for being reductive and failing to take nonhuman animals into account on their own terms, Rossellini exhibits a form of 'critical anthropomorphism' as defined by the animal studies scholar Kari Weil, in which 'we open ourselves to touch and to be touched by others as fellow subjects and may imagine their pain, pleasure, and need in anthropomorphic terms, but stop short of believing that we can know their experience' (31). When Rossellini performs as a squid caught on a fishing hook, one might empathize, but without assuming a conclusive understanding of the experience from the squid's perspective. This is because Rossellini has already revealed the completely different lifeworld inhabited by this creature, which possesses three hearts and communicates through bioluminescence.

Anthropomorphism is here neither reductive towards wildlife, nor should it reduce the capacity for wonder if it retains respect for and recognition of difference, making it a strategic tool in pursuit of raising awareness about marine wildlife conservation in *Green Porno*.

### Playful Wonder: Green Porno's Camp Nature

The handmade aesthetic and camp performances in *Green Porno* are a strategic move on Rossellini's part, since they combine to draw closer attention to the lives and plights of the small sea creatures who have historically fallen outside the realm of care and ecological action. As Louise Economides has observed, 'more obviously mediated sources of wonder', such as Rossellini's stylized and exaggerated sea creatures, can highlight 'natural wonders that would otherwise remain invisible, heightening rather than diminishing our appreciation of what is truly astonishing therein' (155). *Green Porno*'s paper-engineered sculptures, puppets and handmade costumes make no claims to realism. Instead, they become striking through their 'botched' and playful forms, which renders the animals '*abrasively visible*' (Baker 55-56, 62) and draws attention to species that might ordinarily escape notice. The craft involved in producing these sculptural creatures in *Green Porno* similarly commands attention. They have been described as 'a wonder of detailed paperwork' (Chris, *Subjunctive Desires* 130), demonstrating admiration at their construction and evoking what the anthropologist Alfred Gell called *the enchantment of technology* – 'the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form' (468). In Gell's terms, the familiar paper craft form only enhances the sense of wonder felt in the face of such expertly handmade objects, since viewers are readily able to imagine the challenges involved in making them (470). As a result, the simple sets and production techniques in *Green Porno* may be in stark contrast to the technological innovations in contemporary wildlife films and television shows, but they retain the capacity to evoke wonder in this way.

That Rossellini's exaggerated performances of sea creature sex are as camp as they are comic is also significant. It has been observed that films with an overtly ecological message do not always do well at the box office, since viewers become 'tired of seeing stories of environmental doom and despair' (Mitman 213) and do not appreciate 'preachy' references to the current ecological state of play (Rust 234). Yet, the historian Gregg Mitman has suggested that audiences are more

receptive to this sort of messaging as long as it is presented in a way that is also fun (215). *Green Porno* takes heed of this, deploying a playful, camp approach to diffuse the risk of any ‘moral indignation’ (Sontag 290) associated with environmental didacticism via the format of film, attempting to engage viewers with ecological issues in an enjoyable way. Susan Sontag observed that ‘[o]ne is drawn to Camp when one realizes that “sincerity” is not enough’ (288) and claimed that such a sensibility ‘converts the serious into the frivolous’ (276). It is exactly this approach that Rossellini takes in *Green Porno*. At a time when marine wildlife conservation is particularly urgent, Rossellini adopts a comic, camp approach. She deploys this brand of over-the-top humour to make an ecological point in a playful way, invoking Sontag’s ‘new standard’ of artificial theatricality through her exaggerated performances of sea creature sex to draw stark attention to the issue of overfishing (288). The combination of humour, sex and wildlife conservation in *Green Porno* invites comparison with the artists Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle’s light-hearted and activist orientated *Sexecology*, which recognizes the human destruction of the Earth and tries instead to treat it ‘with kindness, respect and affection’ using a playful and memorable sexual strategy, which sees them ‘make love with the Earth’ (Stephens and Sprinkle). Here pleasure rather than peril is activated as an ecologically motivating force, something that *Green Porno*’s camp nature shares.

Through her gender-and-species-bending performances of sea creatures and their reproductive acts, Rossellini queers the borders between gender and species but also between entertainment and education, art and environmental activism (Sinwell 128-132). *Green Porno* ‘perverts’ the familiar format of wildlife film and television (Seymour 77, 107), rendering it strange to evoke the ‘arresting sense of uniqueness’ that can lead to a sense of wonder (Greenblatt 20).

Furthermore, the fluid identity performed by Rossellini, together with the boundary blurring tendencies of these films enact the sort of dynamic, free-flowing ‘crossings’ that Jane Bennett suggests can result in a sense of ‘wonder-at-the-world’ (17, 32), with the pleasure of this experience leading to ‘presumptive generosity toward the animals [...] within one’s field of encounter’ (30). Of course, there is always a danger that viewers do not get past the humour of Rossellini’s films, but at the very least they present the possibility of capturing and holding a viewer’s attention through a hilarious and unexpected brand of ‘celebrity conservationism’ (Huggan 13) as well as their sensational subject matter. While any environmental action arising from this approach is difficult to establish, *Green Porno* certainly disrupts the expectations of

watching wildlife on screen. The series engages viewers with ecological issues in a wildly entertaining way, exploiting the pornographic and anthropomorphic tendencies of wildlife film to evoke a sense of wonder and induce a desire to care. At the same time, *Green Porno* offers a critique of these tendencies, revealing the wonder and compassion-inducing mechanisms at work in wildlife film in absurd and hyperbolic ways in order to draw attention to the inherent anthropocentrism of such an approach when it comes to relating to nonhuman others. As such, *Green Porno*'s experimental and somewhat eccentric ecology provides an unexpected visual encounter through which viewers might be challenged to reconfigure their relationships with marine wildlife, or at least with wildlife on screen, at a time of environmental crisis.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The films are available as a DVD to accompany the publication *Green Porno: A Book and Short Films* by Isabella Rossellini (2009) published by harperstudio.

<sup>2</sup> All dialogue taken from the author's transcription of *Green Porno*.



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