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The Marine World: Its Misrepresentation in Popular Depictions

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Part 1: You're not on Earth Anymore.

You are not on earth anymore when you are 100ft under the sea. Well, you are, obviously I'm not saying you are in some new plane of existence as you sink down below the surface of the ocean, but you may as well be. You are entirely helpless, and you really shouldn't be there at all, a fact that almost never leaves your mind for the entire duration of your dive. Without the nearly 70 pounds of gear strapped to every extremity on your body, you would be dead, and then you really would be in an entirely different plane of existence. And it's different than you imagined. Different than you've seen growing up on TV. Jacques Cousteau, Disney, and Planet Earth made it loud, bright, they projected stories upon it, and anthropomorphized it. Now you don't have their multi-million-dollar marketing experts whispering in your ear, projecting a story of the underwater world that will sell. It's just you. Breathing loudly, the bubbles from your regulator framing your view every few seconds. You're a stranger in an alien world that is different in reality than it ever was in nature documentaries. Your relationship to this underwater planet has been modulated by the perceptions that have already been put in place about these ecosystems.

I was extremely fortunate to have the opportunity this spring to travel to Andros Island in the Bahamas as part of my senior research project. I was there for 31 days getting scuba certified and exploring every aspect of the third largest fringing barrier reef in the world, a fitting adventure for someone about to graduate with a degree in Marine Biology. Even more fitting when you consider that the latter half of this degree was obtained through a computer screen. This was a chance to see the marine world, to experience it in a way I never had before. It was different though from how I had pieced it together in my mind. Even with my extensive snorkeling experience and summers spent at a cabin on the coast, this was an entirely new experience.

Part 2: Stranger in This Ecosystem.

First and foremost, you are a stranger in the underwater environment. This becomes readily apparent as you dawn your 70 some pounds of gear to begin the descent. There's something about carrying a canister of air on your back that will serve as your only source of that vital resource that really makes you think hmm maybe I'm not meant to be here. And if you weren't totally convinced that you're out of your element well hey, try putting on this skintight space suit. Not on board still? Here, take these giant silicon shoes (flippers), a floaty vest so you don't sink into the abyss*, and goggles that make you look like a beetle. Yeah, you're a stranger. You also look strange. Fancy that.

This "strangeness" modulates how we perceive the underwater world by putting us in a realm separate from it. We struggle to even be in this world and that struggle taints our understanding of it and works its way into our perceptions of marine ecosystems. It's difficult to understand a world we don't even feel like we are a part of ourselves. The strangeness seems to say, "you don't even belong here so how could you ever begin to understand." Early documentaries about the ocean play on this strangeness to entrance and intrigue audiences.

The Water Planet, an episode for Jacques Cousteau's TV show, The Underwater World of Jacques Cousteau was filmed in 1968. The striking thing about this episode in a TV show about the Ocean is that it spends most of the time talking about the crew. In fact, there are almost no scenes that

*Fun Fact: This "floaty vest" is called a BCD or a buoyancy control device and at one point mine stopped working and I began to sink into this above-mentioned abyss. Luckily, I calmly began flailing like a lunatic until my dive partner grabbed me and inflated her BCD enough for the both of us to return to the surface.

don't have a human in them somewhere. It is full of clips of divers in and around corals, swimming with seals, and even shows them filming some of the shots for the show, complete with massive spotlights they used to lure fish out of their hiding spots. The narrator talks extensively about the crew's diving gear and about how difficult it is to maintain. They discuss the importance of checking every piece of gear because if you slip up or something doesn't work, it's over for you. The reason they focus so much on the human aspect is because in the early days of diving and undersea exploration, the coolest part was being down there at all. It was not about the strange fish and marine mammals, it was about humans, strangers to the undersea, and how we had conquered a brand-new ecosystem that is so inhospitable to us. The entirety of this episode of the show plays around the "stranger to the ecosystem" narrative of the ocean. It shows the millions of people that the underwater world is not one they belong in. That the most important and noteworthy thing about being undersea is just the being there. Who cares what else lives below the surface and why bother worrying about it. You overcame the struggles of traveling below the waves and for that, you deserve a gold star.

This "stranger" dialogue carries through in other early marine documentaries like *The Living Sea* (1995). Despite toting itself as a nature documentary, *The Living Sea* shows very little "nature" at all. The documentary depicts scenes of surfers braving huge waves, the coast guard learning how to rescue people in massive swells, and all kinds of boats sailing and shipping goods here and there. Like Cousteau's documentary, all these scenes are of humans being out on the ocean and how amazingly skilled we are at it, but there is no discussion of marine environment and the organisms within it until we cross the half-way mark for the documentary. When the documentary does finally decide to step away from this human-centric look at the ocean, it does so only to play further upon the "stranger to the ecosystem" narrative. In our first glimpse at marine organisms, the film depicts submarines diving below the surface to explore the depths. The pilot tells us that they will "find species never before seen by anyone." The pilot further explains how little we know about the ocean and the organisms that live there which, while true, is meant to drive this "stranger" narrative further and make the submarine scene all the more exciting by harping upon how out of place it is.

These early documentaries of Jacques Cousteau and *The Living Sea* were more interested in the man's place alongside the ocean than they were with the animals of the marine ecosystem. They are actually more human documentaries than they are nature documentaries. In almost every scene you see humans fishing or boating and when they do venture below the surface, there are almost always divers in frame, keeping that human subject close by. This is why the stranger to the ocean narrative is so important to the early documentaries about the marine world. Driving this strangeness and out of place narrative makes it all the more exciting when you see humans in each shot. Humans in places where they aren't meant to be. This excited and entertains which, after all, is the purpose of many of these documentaries in the first place. But it has unintended side effects. It modulates our perception of the underwater environment and makes it like the most important part of the undersea world is just that we have the ability and the technology to explore it.

Part 3: Deceiving your Senses.

Since its release in 2019, nearly 25 million people have watched Netflix's take on the marine world, *Our Planet*. With a massive barrier to the marine world already in place (breathing underwater), these Pop culture interpretations become the first, and for many, the only window into marine life that they ever experience. This is troubling because these documentaries, while admittedly beautiful, are not meant to be true-to-life depictions of the marine realm. They are meant to entertain, to amuse. Like Barnum and Bailey's Circus or a Kanye West concert, they mean to draw attention and keep people watching for the entirety of the performance. As such, these documentaries take many liberties in the name of entertainment. Depicting marine life as it truly exists is less important than depicting marine life as a grand spectacle.

The first con that Netflix employs is a deception of everyone's favorite tool, the eyes. It's not your fault that you can be deceived in this way, humans have evolved to rely heavily upon their eyes and believe almost everything that passes through these light absorbing hunks of tissue and electricity. So, if companies can find ways to trick your eyes, the rest of the body often comes along for the ride.

Netflix's episode, *Coastal Seas* from the series *Our Planet* (2019) takes advantage of that fact. The show is filmed in stunning quality, having some of the brightest colors I have ever seen in any documentary or any TV show for that matter. Colors that, would not actually show up in these depths in the ocean since most of the light required to make them is absorbed at shallower depths. Netflix uses clever editing to enhance the colors and draw you in.

Netflix deceives your eyes in other ways too. Every scene is a grand amalgamation of hundreds of fish of all different species. They fill the screen in each shot making the reef seem bustling and full of life from edge to edge. This isn't the case. At least not on the scale they describe. The reef is like a forest. There are busy patches where important food resources are or where there are ample places to hide from predators. But there are emptier patches too where there are not those food resources or where predators are more prevalent. When you see this for yourself, when I saw this for myself, it was startling. Where are all the fish you wonder? Is the reef dying? Is it unhealthy? The answer is no, it's not, all your life you have just only been showing depictions of reefs that make them seem like they are bursting at the seams with life from edge to edge.

Now that your eyes are thoroughly bamboozled let's throw your ears for a loop too. Disney will help. In Disney's *Oceans* (2010) narratives are as important as they are in any Disney movie. Even though this Documentary is meant to depict real life, Disney cannot help but impose story lines and human actions upon the "characters" in it. Almost every animal in the show is given a gender, they are he or she despite the fact that there is almost no way to tell without far more work than the cameramen of the show were hopefully required to do. The animals are also given human qualities and their behaviors are described as human behaviors. The mantis shrimp who is digging a burrow where it will live most of its life is described as "taking out the trash" and the groupers that have symbiotic relationships with smaller fish who eat the algae and parasites on them are "patient customers." While this may seem cute, it is actually reducing complex animal behaviors to anthropocentric explanations. Something that can lead to long term misunderstanding of these animals.

There is one especially deceptive scene that depicts many hundreds of crabs, who have most likely congregated to reproduce though this is not the narrative Disney drives. Instead, the narrator

informs you that the crabs have come to “face off against each other”. The musical score is filled with bugles and drums meant to sound like armies going into battle as the crabs clamor over each other. This is an incredible deception of the ears. Not only does Disney use erroneous storytelling to try to push a certain narrative, but they also use emotional music and scores to enforce that narrative even more.

This style of depicting nature, inflecting human actions, and understanding upon the behavior of non-human beings, is called anthropomorphized nature. It is a strategy Disney has pioneered since they first began making nature documentaries with their True-Life Adventure Series in the 1950s. These were the very first nature documentaries ever shown to the American public and Disney found that by giving the animals in it names and human attributes, the American public resonated with the films and they began to show huge returns in the box office.

Part 4: And It All Matters, Why?

A typical dive lasts right around 40 minutes depending on how hard you swim and how deep you are. This essay probably took you about half that time to read depending on how fast you read and how many times you chuckled at my fantastic jokes. But now that you’ve reached the end you wonder okay Ryan, great, the ocean is difficult to explore and I am a stranger in that ecosystem not to mention, my whole life I have been deceived by Pop-culture works that just want to depict the ocean in ways fit for mass consumption, so what am I meant to do with this information and does it even matter?

Well first off, yes, of course it matters. Pushing and encouraging this stranger in the ecosystem dialogue diverts focus away from undersea life and the incredible things about the undersea ecosystem. It means that when we are down there, the focus is on humans and our achievements not on understanding undersea life. Strangeness and apathy towards the subject of that strangeness also makes protecting our oceans, learning about our oceans, and encouraging others to do the same all that much harder.

So how about instead of this “stranger” narrative consider this instead. We are new neighbors, just moved from somewhere far away. We don’t fully understand the inner workings of the neighborhood quiet yet, but we are working hard to and if we push ourselves hard enough, we will be able to in time. Fight to keep understanding and to keep learning all that you can about the oceans and do not be discouraged by how different and difficult it can be at times to understand.

“And what of the deception of our eyes and ears?” I hear you ask from the back of the room, “Why do those matter?” Anthropomorphizing animals and explaining away their complex behaviors in simple human-centric ways can lead to long-term misunderstanding of these animals. So does the use of music, bright colors, and presenting only the richest portions of the reef as the norm. All these deceptions work together to create false understandings in people’s minds about the ocean and how it works. This misunderstanding can harm ecosystems as people who hold incorrect views of how the ocean works rise to places where they can affect them. To give an example using our mantis shrimp friend from above, a company that harvests oceanic sand for use in aquariums may believe or, more importantly, may be able to convince the public to believe they are helping the mantis shrimp by sucking all the sand from the sea floor if the habitat building behavior exhibited by mantis shrimp digging in the sand has been explained away as “taking out the trash.”

And don't feel badly for falling into these clever traps, for believing in these narratives and allowing yourself to be swept along with the story, I was too. I was a stranger in that ecosystem. I swam amongst the fish and the corals and I felt that I did not belong. As I was down there, trying to understand the inner workings of the ocean world, I was subconsciously being influenced by the many marine documentaries I've seen over the years. The stories they told, the relationships and behaviors they pushed, they were all in my head somewhere and I had to grapple with each and every one.

This story I'm telling you about my experiences as a diver, the things I saw and felt and heard, it is no less a story than Disney's or Netflix's or Cousteau's or The Living Sea's. It is different though. It's less doctored, less focused on entertainment, more on information. I gain nothing if you love my depiction, there are not thousands of dollars streaming into my bank account as a result (quite the opposite actually) and I lose nothing if you hate it (besides a touch of pride in what I've done). I am not attempting to depict the ocean as anything besides what it is because I gain nothing by doing so and I think that in fact, it does more harm than good. Does this fact make my depiction more valid or truer? I'd like to think so.

As for what to do about these popular depictions, Well, I ask that you do what I now do. When you watch these documentaries, consider how they are meant to deceive you. Think about how they play off the stranger in a new environment narrative to draw you in and make the ocean world seem alien and bizarre. Think about the deception of your eyes and ears that companies like Netflix and Disney use to entertain rather than to inform.

And, if you are ever so lucky as I was and are given the chance to see this underwater world for yourself, take it. I promise you will not regret it.