



Watching Wildlife

Cynthia Chris

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You and me baby ain't nothin' but mammals So let's do it like they do on the Discovery Channel. —Bloodhound Gang It has never been easier for Americans to observe wild and exotic animals from the comfort and safety of their couches. Several cable channels—Animal Planet, the Discovery Channel, the National Geographic Channel—provide around-the-clock wildlife programming while the traditional networks regularly broadcast animal documentaries, late-night appearances by zoologists and their animal charges, and sensationalistic specials about animals attacking hapless humans. Though the ubiquity of animals on television is new, the genre of the wildlife documentary is as old as cinema itself. In *Watching Wildlife*, Cynthia Chris traces the history of the wildlife genre from its origins in precinematic, colonial visual culture to its contemporary status as flagship programming on global television and explores evolving beliefs about, and attitudes toward, animal subjects. Nature programming and films are consistently presented as real and unmediated reflections of nature. But in Chris's analysis of specific shows (Mutual of Omaha's *Wild Kingdom* and cable television's *Crocodile Hunter*) and film and television history (the colonial cinema, the launch of Animal Planet), she points out how—particularly in the genre's preoccupation with mating and the favoritism bestowed on certain species—documentary images of animals are and always have been about prevailing ideologies about human gender, sexuality, and race. Ultimately, Chris's sweeping and cogent account of the wildlife documentary incorporates this frequently overlooked genre into broader debates about media globalization, human-animal relations, and popular scientific discourse. Cynthia Chris is assistant professor of media culture at the City University of New York's College of Staten Island.

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