

Animal Magic

Millions of viewers are tuning in to David Attenborough's *Trials Of life*. **Fred Steward** considers how the wildlife series has responded to the green movement

The exquisite detail of an ejaculating giant clam accompanied by the hushed tones of David Attenborough marked an appropriate start to his third nature super-series *Trials Of Life*. Through the tv screen's window on the natural world the combination of superb film technique with a human interest storyline has proved to be a winning formula.

Since the astonishing success of *Life On Earth* in 1979, nature programmes consistently pull in top viewing ratings. Regular series such as *Survival*, and specials such as *Flight Of The Condor* and *Kingdom Of The Ice Bear* bring ravishingly beautiful images of nature into our living rooms.

The tv trilogy of Attenborough's view of nature and the mushrooming of the modern natural history programme has spanned more than a decade. The same period has seen the emergence of the green movement with its own distinctive view of nature. This too has been reflected in television. Environmental programmes have been a distinct area focused on the critical exposure of damage to the natural world.

From investigative journalism to philosophical discussion, green television has expanded separately over the same period. What is the relationship between these genres? Do they complement or conflict with each other? The wildlife programme may have contributed to the new popular status of nature or possibly attenuated the awfulness of environmental destruction through its glossy images. The green programme may have stimulated interest in the beauties of nature or perhaps fostered obsessions with ugly images of technological and indus-

trial development.

Attenborough's style of natural history tv is firmly rooted in the consensual scientific style. A shared pleasure in the beauties of nature is combined with authoritative, uncontroversial commentary. In itself it represented a major step from the early human-centred animal programmes in which interaction between the tv presenter and the animal world was the focus. Attenborough's early *Zoo Quest* series, Armand and Michaela Dennis' *On Safari*, and Hans and Lotte Hass' *Diving To Adventure* all relied heavily on the 'thrill of the chase'. A visible human mediator was seen as a necessary stimulus to the viewers engagement with nature.

Life On Earth changed this emphasis. While retaining a knowledgeable and enthusiastic individual as commentator and guide, the viewer was now enticed into a secret world of nature untouched by human hand. It combined the broad scientific canvas of evolutionary theory with the stunning detail delivered by a new generation of technically expert camera crews.

The strengths of the Attenborough genre are the apparent directness of the relationship of the viewer to unspoiled nature, the unashamed evocation of an aesthetic and emotional appeal, the universality of the grand narrative of nature. There can be little doubt that it has played a key role in the heightening of public consciousness about the importance and beauty of the natural world. Without such a popular vision it is doubtful that the negative scenarios of the green movement would have had such impact.

Although the camera crews have displayed the customary competitive machismo to boldly go where none have gone before, there can be no question of their passion and respect for the natural world. Their unrivalled knowledge of vital habitats has been a major source of information about new threats to their survival and has contributed to the growing political concern worldwide.

Ironically the supernaturalism of the modern wildlife film relies on a battery of artificial devices, high-speed cameras and time-lapse photography, radio-controlled airborne filming and laboratory simulation. David Attenborough has been the first to acknowledge that it is a very 'unnatural history'. While modern film-makers have rejected the grosser abuses such as the notorious case of lemmings being driven over a cliff edge to fit the script required, the closeness to nature of the current art rests on an elaborate, if principled, human intervention.

While this seems to be a legitimate part of the film-makers craft there have been a number of criticisms levelled at the genre. These all reflect, to differing degrees, the new awareness of nature arising from the growth of green politics. At one rather abstract extreme is the view that the very forms of representation themselves in their manipulation of time and their search for a pleasing aesthetic impose a scientised model of the world.

More concretely there is a concern that the picture presented in the natural history programme bears no relation to a normal individual's likely experience of nature. At best this could lead to disappointment and unfulfilled expectation. At

worst, concern over the threats to nature could be ameliorated by the comfort induced by a cosy picture-book world. This seems an irresolvable dilemma. On balance it is surely better to evoke pleasure and excitement over the beauty of the natural world than to confine oneself to an overearnest realism. Without such passions it is difficult to believe anyone could be stirred into the type of action needed to avert its destruction.

A more substantive criticism concerns the 'human interest' storyline deemed necessary for high audience ratings. Sex and violence are two of these which have both revealed classic moments from nature. Who could forget the endearing scenes of giant tortoises struggling to copulate or the beauty and savagery of the tiger's kill. But they have also tended to become routinised cliches in the nature programmes's repertoire. It is in this regard that the new Attenborough series is most disappointing.

In the two previous series there was a counterpoint between anthropomorphic titillation and the grand scientific themes. In *Trials Of Life*, the analogies with human behaviour have become the central theme around which everything is orchestrated.

Another criticism levelled at the nature programme is that it refuses to overtly acknowledge the environmental threats to the wonders that it portrays. This also poses a dilemma. To entice the viewers into an intimate vision of the beauties of nature and then to confront them with the full horror of their destruction is not necessarily courageous, it may even be foolhardy. An overzealous stance may repel the sensitive watcher as much as attract them. Maybe people are capable of working the connection out for themselves.

The film-makers have adopted different paths. Some have increasingly referred to the pressures on the habitat portrayed. For films on the rainforests it is almost embarrassing not to. Others



Attenborough under attack from thousands of Christmas Island crabs

have seen such references as more appropriate to the explicitly environmental rather than natural history programme irrespective of their own views on the subject.

The 'environmental' or 'green' programme has had to deal with the opposite problem. It has developed as a distinct genre in which doom and gloom initially tended to dominate. The exposure of the negative threat has remained the driving force. Initially the heavy hand of

the exhaustive *End Of The Planet* survey tended to predominate. With the growth of popular audiences more subtlety has been developed to cater for wider tastes than the hard core of converted.

Echoing the wider political context, the 1980s saw the movement of the green programme from the margins to the mainstream. Instead of remaining confined to a specialist slot its concerns entered other strands of programming. Investigative pro-

grammes such as *World In Action* looked at radiation hazards and the political heavy weights like *Panorama* tackled energy issues.

The technology fetishism in *Tomorrows World* began to make space for reports on global warming. 'Nature' introduced the specialist news/comment format to the environmental area fronted by mainstream presenter Michael Buerk. Programmes in lifestyle and leisure slots also began to absorb green

themes on topics from cooking to gardening.

This transition has widened audiences from a small band of visionaries and depressives to a wider group of concerned viewers. Yet they have rarely approached anything like the audiences of the natural history programme. This might explain their livelier evolution and more creative adaptation to the new green environment than has actually been shown by the wildlife spectacular.

There are two characteristics of the green genre which differ markedly from the traditional natural history format. These challenge in particular the role of science exemplified by Attenborough. Commitment has replaced detachment, contestation supplants authority. These new principles have yet to fully permeate the barrier between the two tv compartments. Botanic Man Bellamy represents some of the features of the potential transition. He has developed a different style in which environmental commitment is proudly prominent. Yet the basic structure of the nature programme remains relatively undisturbed.

If there is one feature that has changed it has been the explicit reintroduction of the human mediator. *Reefwatch* and *Badgerwatch* have revived the human patrol communicating with base camp format introduced between Heinz Sielman and Peter Scott in their woodpecker watch of 1955. Attenborough's new series often casts him in active relationship to the animals themselves.

Ironically *Trials Of Life* reveals an aspect of the format which unintentionally echoes a fundamental green theme of the finiteness of nature. *Life On Earth* brought a dazzling array of new images to the screen based on the myriad technical advances of the 1970s. Its message was of infinite diversity and variety. In 1990 the images of shiny treefrogs, of sharp-toothed bats appear more familiar. The overriding impression is of limits: both to this tradition of filmmaking and to nature itself. ●

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Ken Worpole discovers new rage jazz

Boiling Billy

Billy Jenkins prefers to call his kind of jazz, 'New Rage'. The caterwauling, frenzied and often surprisingly lyrical music he and The Voice Of God Collective creates is a parodic – verging on the outright aggressive – response to blandness or over-intellectualism in jazz.

Although 1991 will see the 10th anniversary of the band's formation, it is only in the last couple of years that Jenkins and his changing ensemble have been recognised as one of the most important and original voices in the new wave of British and European jazz.

Two new LPs – *Jazz Cafe Concerts Vol 1&2* – give some impression of the enthusiasm and excitement which the band generates live. Jenkins, playing electric guitar, leads the band in the style of a speeded up Tommy Cooper. A Jenkins set is marked by a series of apparent false starts, missed cues, incomprehensible musical allusions and physical mayhem.

In performance glove puppets get thrown across the stage, soloists upbraided or further encouraged with shouts and grins, sheet music goes flying, spectacles and instruments get mislaid, and throwaway remarks are hurled at the audience. Sometimes the band seems to be playing different numbers. The whole act is a mixture of burlesque pit orchestra, avant-garde rock group and free-form jazz ensemble. Yet it is impossible not to be mesmerised by the sheer audacity and passion of the music actually played.

There is a serious side to this apparently chaotic melange. For Jenkins' music – carefully written and orchestrated in advance – engages consistently with the forms, melodic traditions and instrumentation of 'the popular' in ways which Mike Westbrook, particularly, opened up within the jazz tradition in Britain. Since then the Grand Union Orchestra, Happy End and the Big Red Band have carried the torch.

This engagement with popu-

lar idioms is not surprising given Billy Jenkins' background: little formal musical education, playing in a pub band at 14 doing cover numbers of Slade songs, supporting Billy Idol, touring with Ginger Baker, founder (and only?) member of Rock Against Rock, session musician on *Jim'll Fix It*, dance band stand-in and latterly prolific composer of serious jazz albums.

He is currently working on a series of compositions which attempt to respond to the traumatic transport disasters of 1987/1988 – Lockerbie, Kings Cross, Zeebrugge – using a new instrumentation for him: cello and two 'crap' pianos. What he wishes to evoke, he says, is both the haunting melodic seriousness of the cello with the lost illusions or broken dreams represented by a pair of slightly out of tune lounge bar pianos.

He will not hear a word said against the sentimental power of the popular tea dance orchestra, bandbox or sing-a-long tradition. A serious composer needs all the available material to hand. A particular sensibility is involved here, that combines high seriousness with a sense of the absurd and banal. Music for transitional times?

Yet there is an even more powerful reason for celebrating the Collective's success in making the improvisational and free-form popular beyond the conventional jazz coterie. This has to do with one of the great unresolved dilemmas of radical aesthetics arising from the long-standing break between a modernising and liberating politics and a modernist avant-garde cultural tradition.

For a brief while – particularly with Russian constructivism – revolutionary politics was synonymous with revolutionary aesthetics. Stalinism killed that stone dead. In its wake, naturalism, socialist realism and agit-prop have often in their turn produced a dour, reductionist and text-bound attitude to art and life rather than one of energy, vigour, eclecticism and occasional joy. Hence



Billy Jenkins: Moving jazz in new directions

the disastrous separation between radical culture and popular culture, the one overly serious and programmatic, the other at times deriving most of its impetus and energy from interest rates and capital returns.

Re-connecting the radical and the popular remains a key cultural project. The current jazz revival offers real hope in that direction.

Jenkins' music recalls a particular attempt to link jazz with radical or popular musical traditions that has rarely been explored in contemporary jazz exegesis. In the early 1960s, Günther Schuller, composer, critic but also member of the Gil Evans big band on the seminal Miles Davies albums, *Porgy & Bess* and *Sketches Of Spain* argued for a 'Third Stream' in jazz, combining the instrumentation and improvisational elements of jazz with more orchestral and compositional elements of the classical and modernist repertoire.

At the time he was referring to jazz composers such as John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet, George Russell and Don Ellis among others. A side-current of jazz, attempting to borrow from European, Latin Dance, folk

songs, political programmes, has continued since then, particularly in the work of Carla Bley, Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra and Mike Westbrook's Brass Band, among others.

Jenkins is also radical in that he eschews the support of the conventional recording, marketing and distribution arms of the big companies. A prolific composer and recording musician, he has produced 10 LPs or cassettes in the last eight years, all on his own label, the flamboyant *Voice Of The People* records. He is currently planning the next 12 LPs. Sameness has nothing to do with it. Every album so far tries something different and all have a fizzing and dazzling quality of their own. Jenkins and his spirited band have in a relatively short space of time blown open doors in all directions – live performance, low-budget, high-quality recording, self-distribution and an articulated commitment to 'music not money'.

Traditionally, jazz guitarists have spent most of their time in the rhythm section 'cooking': keeping the rhythm, flavouring the melody with arpeggios, accidentals and grace notes, holding the lid down. Billy Jenkins boils. ●