Introduction

‘They are a race apart. Common sense is a commodity they have little use for. They are attracted by the grandiose and the irrational. Sometimes the consequences are ludicrous.’ – Michaela Denis, Leopard in my Lap (1955).

Africa has been described as the most exciting continent on the planet. Elspeth Huxley, one of Kenya’s most prolific writers, wrote ‘Kenya must be the most photographed country in the world’. With a history of over a hundred years of such a variety of safari visitors arriving to experience and photograph the country’s immense variety of attractions, it would be hard to contradict her.

This book is intended to tell the story of wildlife films in East Africa through the twentieth century. Photographers with cumbersome stills cameras arrived in the country late in the nineteenth century, but it has usually been accepted that the first moving film in Kenya was made in 1909 by Cherry Kearton, a Yorkshireman, who together with his brother Richard, pioneered the filming of birds in Britain. Cherry was asked to join Theodore Roosevelt briefly on his epic safari for the Smithsonian Museum in 1909, to record part of his expedition on film. This became Roosevelt in Africa and TR in Africa and was shown in New York and London cinemas after the event. However, there were certainly other people with movie cameras in Kenya in 1909, so I am not entirely convinced that Kearton was really the first.

The definition of wildlife films is open to interpretation. The twentieth century saw an interesting series of transformations. In the early years photographic safaris and organised mass-tourism did not exist, and most films of the time covered hunting safaris or ‘expeditions’. These commenced shortly after the railway reached Nairobi at the turn of the century. The source of the Nile had long since been found, but there were still people in search of adventure on a lesser scale, who
wanted to explore for themselves the mysteries of the ‘dark continent’. Much remained unknown of Africa’s interior. There were enticing places, people, animals and plants all waiting to be ‘discovered’. To many people, ‘wildlife’ is a term that covers animals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and insects. However, ‘nature’ is but part of the entire complicated inter-connected system of life on this planet that embraces every arm of natural science – from evolution through palaeontology to climate change – so I will refer to ‘nature films’ as well as ‘wildlife films’.

The activities of the few pioneer filmmakers, such as Cherry Kearton and the unlikely American couple Martin and Osa Johnson, were interrupted by two world wars, but many hundreds of films were made nonetheless. The Johnsons spent years at a time travelling and filming in Africa, but did not complete that many films. *Simba* in 1928 and *Congorilla* in 1932 are perhaps the best known. The Johnsons’ films usually featured Osa (apparently) shooting a rhino, elephant or lion with a rifle after it had been induced to charge, while Martin rolled the camera. Their footage of people is cringingly patronising, but they were pioneers in their own way, and therefore part of this history. They were also responsible for bringing the world’s attention to one of Kenya’s most beautiful places – Mount Marsabit. The Johnsons set up camp on the shores of the lake they called ‘Lake Paradise’ and stayed there for four years.

Others have been written about before – Carl Akeley, Paul Rainey, Paul Hoefler for instance. But there were more – William Boyce and George Lawrence in their balloon, Pop Binks, and Charles Cottar all contributed in some way. As well as reading their own books, I have delved into the records of the old professional hunters and safari operators. After all, none of the early film makers would have got out of Nairobi without an ‘outfitter’. These people may not have been particularly literate, but at least they knew where they were going, and they knew more about the wildlife and the people. In this way, the ‘Kenya point of view’ is revealed.
If the human race indeed originated in East Africa, so too did a special breed of filmmaker. In my mind, five outstanding filmmakers (three of them still very much alive and living in Kenya) who all started filming more than fifty years ago, set the standard for the nature films that are being made today. The fact that they lived here permanently meant that they had more time to devote to filming – many of their films were put together over a period of several years. Not only did they have more time to film, but they also had more time to study their subjects, and it is patently obvious that the best wildlife films are made by people who understand the creatures they are filming. An extremely thorough and intimate knowledge of nature is essential. Joseph Delmont, in a book called *Wild Animals on the Films* published in 1925, wrote ‘A nature film must be true to nature. Let it be entertaining by all means, and further it is a great advantage if it is also instructive, which does not mean that it need be tedious’.

I intend to cover all the major films that have been made in Kenya, and to include many of the thousands of filmmakers who have worked here. In order to trace the way in which these films have grown and developed, it is necessary to understand the various stages the genre has been through to reach where we are today. In the process, we shall see what makes a great film.

Africa’s animals appeared in all the early silent ‘expedition’ films, and were shown in (mostly American) movie theatres, being introduced by the filmmakers who recounted their experiences in much the same way as lecturers make PowerPoint presentations today. When sound came in the late 1920s, the films changed and became ‘adventure’ feature films. The animals were still there, but there were actors and a story, however dubious – for instance in *Trader Horn* in 1931. This film was credited as being the most influential film to date in bringing the ‘real’ Africa to the screens. This trend continued after the Second World War. Into the early 1950s there was a sudden burst of Hollywood films featuring animals, professional hunters, and beautiful women – such as *Mogambo*, *King Solomon’s Mines*, *Where No Vultures Fly*, and *Hatari*. All the big stars of the time came to Kenya – Ava Gardner,
Elsa Martinelli, Clark Gable, Stewart Grainger, Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne, Frank Sinatra and many others.

The 1950s was a major turning point. Television had come into being, and such programmes as *Filming Wild Animals* followed by *On Safari* with Armand and Michaela Denis offered a totally new way of watching wildlife. The couple set the bar at a new level. Their programme was very soon followed by David Attenborough’s *Zoo Quest*. Now we were seeing wildlife for what it was, with no intrepid adventurers or romantic heroes in sight. Since then the wildlife film has grown and matured, camera design has changed beyond recognition, and people with passion have continued to amaze us with images that truly show nature at its best. It may have been a long time coming, but it was an interesting journey.

It will soon become clear that I am passionate about nature films. Having worked in this field for more than twenty years, I have also amassed a huge archive. My collection consists of approximately 14,000 hours of nature films, and I have watched all of them. There are some truly great films, wonderful films, good films, mediocre films and, sadly, some films that should never have been made at all. It seems to me that there is a problem here, and that the blame lies with two groups of people, one being led by the other. Whether it is possible to turn things around remains to be seen.

Interspersed in the narrative is what I hope will be read as no more than a delicate thread of my own life, principally relating to this broad spectrum of nature, people, films and Kenya, the country where I was born and raised, and in which I have lived forty years of my adult life, the last twenty-two of which spent looking after filmmakers. I hope this will not appear intrusive.