



UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA PRESS
JOURNALS • DIGITAL PUBLISHING

Review: [untitled]

Author(s): Tom O'Brien

Reviewed work(s):

Never Cry Wolf by Carroll Ballard ; Lewis Allen ; Jack Couffer ; Joseph Strick

Source: *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Spring, 1984), pp. 29-32

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3697196>

Accessed: 26/02/2009 02:20

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucal>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Film Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

as I can see, but those light shows were remarkable.

At the time when Cinema 16 was developing, were you travelling in Europe a lot?

Not at the beginning. Later on I travelled to film festivals. Or, I would go to Paris and London to meet film-makers, producers, distributors. As time went by, I brought in more and more films from abroad. I remember Agnes Varda asking me if I wanted to distribute *Opera Mouffe*, one of her shorts. In those days she hadn't made features yet. I dealt with Franju in Paris, and got *Blood of the Beasts*. I dealt with Argus Films, which was a fascinating commercial outfit that made hundreds of shorts and also features, many of great interest.

Oh, let me tell you a story. There were supposed to be some fabulous student films being made in Poland, at this famous film school. People told me about them, or maybe I had read something somewhere. I sat down and wrote a letter to the director of the school, with whom I subsequently became good friends, asking if we could get these films here, and sure enough we got them. (I had to

learn about the "diplomatic pouch," and about the censorship involved when you import films.) And what were these films? They were by someone unknown, a student—Roman Polanski! The very first things he did in 35mm: *Two Men and a Wardrobe*, *The Fat and the Thin*, five or six titles. Also, I was in correspondence with Makavejev when he was making little student films in Yugoslavia, but I could never get them out. I had all kinds of contacts with Japan, too—Oshima when he first started. So Cinema 16 was an international enterprise. In retrospect I sometimes wonder what would have happened if we had had the editorial and press support Karen Cooper has now at Film Forum. In those days the *New York Times* not only had no policy of reviewing independent films, they had a critic who was an active, hostile opponent of the independent cinema: Bosley Crowther, a very powerful and ignorant man. I'd invite him to every show, but he wouldn't come. Even without that kind of support we had 7,000 members. Imagine what could have happened if we'd had it!

Reviews

NEVER CRY WOLF

Director: Carroll Ballard. Screenplay: Curtis Hanson and Sam Hamm and Richard Kletler, based on the book by Farley Mowat. Producers: Lewis Allen, Jack Couffer, Joseph Strick. Photography: Hiro Narita. Music: Mark Isham. Buena Vista Distributing Co.

Carroll Ballard's *Never Cry Wolf* goes his earlier film, *The Black Stallion*, one better. Again Ballard's obsession with pure images of animal energy in wilderness settings produces scenes of unforgettable physical beauty and adventure excitement. But *Never Cry Wolf* plots a tougher, less sentimental encounter than *The Black Stallion*: not boy meets horse, but man meets *canis lupus*. As a result, *Never Cry Wolf* is less charming, but far more powerful.

In part, the new power derives from Ballard's source, the environmental classic of the same title by Farley Mowat, one of the most widely read nature writers in the world today. In *Never Cry Wolf*, first published in

1962, Mowat detailed his assignment as a young biologist sent to the Arctic by the Canadian government to prove that wolves were decimating caribou herds. Instead, Mowat found his "target" wolves immensely likeable, and far from the northern "jaws" of popular caricature. *Never Cry Wolf* was thus the first of many studies rehabilitating the wolf and, at times, stimulating repeal of anti-predator legislation and classification of wolves as endangered species.

Ballard follows Mowat's book quite faithfully, but makes two key changes, one weak, the other magnificent. First, Ballard alters the frame, the episodes before and after the encounter with the wolves, to make an oversensational, misanthropic statement about the world of man. On the other hand, Ballard considerably deepens the story of *one* man, the biologist, here renamed Tyler and superbly played by Charles Martin Smith. Tyler doesn't

just encounter wolves; he encounters the primitive in his self, in nature, in the *cosmos*. It is a tribute to Ballard's cinematography that such a word is not too big to describe the mood *Never Cry Wolf* evokes. In the barren Yukon of lunar tundra and outcrop rock where *Never Cry Wolf* was shot, Ballard has found the perfect vehicle to use his stark, vivid style for decidedly spiritual ends.

Before *The Black Stallion*, Ballard had made other movies centered around animals—the Academy Award documentary nominee *Harvest and Pigs* in 1967; and *The Perils of Priscilla* (a cat) and *Rodeo*, a documentary on a bull rider, in 1969. But *Never Cry Wolf* is not an animal movie or a straight factual record of a human dealing with animals. As Ballard said in an interview, "The film is not about wolves, but about change inside a man."

Nevertheless, *Never Cry Wolf* is an excellent study of the species, rivaling *Death of a Legend*, the Canadian National Film Board documentary that first took on the big bad wolf stereotype on screen. As in the documentary, Ballard's wolves come across without anthropomorphizing sentimentality; they are tough, rugged, and unapologetically carnivore. "The worst thing for wolves," Ballard says, "is for people to regard them as cute, or as suitable for pets." In this regard, *Never Cry Wolf* belies its Disney label.

On the other hand, true to Mowat's findings, Ballard shows wolves as a gregarious species, loyal mates for life, playful with their young and clan. Rather than destroying caribou herds, they are seen as harmless to local ecology, surviving mostly on mice, which they catch by trapping above ground and instantaneously pouncing on with adept leaps. The lightest moment in the film occurs when Tyler—like Mowat, attempting to prove a big mammal can survive on a diet of rodents—adopts the wolf menu. This clear vision of the human carnivore, however, is somewhat spoiled by shots of surviving mice scurrying away in cutesy-comic terror.

It was not easy to film the wolf segments, since Ballard had to rely on tame animals raised in captivity. According to Mowat, who worked as a consultant for the film, these wolves certainly look genuine, and in any case it would be impossible to shoot the movie with

wild wolves, who would run away from any human presence. But the tame wolves were not the perfect answer. Despite the many animal trainers on location, the wolves took their own sweet time—at play, in puppy tomfoolery, or simply in howling, which would not be done on cue and which therefore added considerably to the production schedule. A classic scene in Mowat's account involves a comic competition between him and the lead male, or Alpha wolf, in staking out territory in traditional canine "fireplug" fashion. The star wolf, Polchak, had to be encouraged to raise his leg at the right time for several weeks, until he finally did the trick fifty times in one hour.

The violent scenes in the movie involved further problems. Appropriately, Ballard could not use the wolves for a fantasy chase sequence early in the film, where Tyler dreams the animals are savagely attacking him. "There was no way to get wolves to do that," Ballard says, and police dogs had to be hired. The wolves did respond to the presence of caribou, however, to create a spectacular climactic sequence—proving, as Mowat asserted, they can only catch the sick members of the herds.

But then getting the caribou to cooperate was a tricky process. Ballard had to rely on semi-domestic herds left to graze on high pasture by the Eskimos who claim to "own" them and who in fact harvest their antlers every few years for sale to Korean businessmen as aphrodisiacs. After negotiating with the Eskimos and holding off the Koreans, Ballard had to locate and film the caribou, no easy matter. "The point is that you can't just sneak up on caribou," Ballard says. "They make their living *not* being sneaked up on." Once cornered, the herd moved "like an amoeba," Ballard says, and at one point almost ran off a cliff like lemmings.

Fortunately the human actors involved in *Never Cry Wolf* were dedicated and committed—Charles Martin Smith, formerly featured in *American Grafitti*, and two Inuit Eskimos who had never acted before. Smith is excellent in the voice-over narration, most of which he wrote himself, and in filling the many silences in the movie with facial expression registering his growing regard for the wolves. His portrayal of Tyler's growth from bumbling greenhorn to wilderness protector

apparently provoked a deep identification with the role: he now calls himself Farley Smith, and the author, with whom Smith established a close personal friendship while on location, now calls himself Charles Martin Mowat.

Smith also established a close rapport with the Eskimo playing Ootek, a kind of spiritual godfather who adopts Tyler and instructs him in the ways of the North. The "actor" is Zachary Ittimangnaq, and if he reminds viewers of *Little Big Man*'s Chief Dan George or the Soviet Wild Man, Dersu Uzala, it is probably because he is their real-life incarnation. According to Ballard, Ootek is a "professional Eskimo," who has preserved the ancient lifestyle of the Inuit, and, until his acting role, lived entirely off the land. Ittimangnaq plays Ootek with silent authority, acting—if it is acting—with gesture and expression to initiate Tyler into the mysteries of a primeval world.

With both Ittimangnaq and the other Eskimo amateur, Samson Jorah, Ballard did not write a script, but jotted down on cardboard the general nature of a scene, outlined what he wanted them to discuss, and then began shooting. For a scene in which both Smith and Jorah are observing wolves and discussing why Eskimos hunt them, Ballard wrote down "family—money—snowmobiles." Jorah talks of these as motives for killing wolves, but claims that he would never shoot the wolves that Tyler is studying. Then, with a wide-toothed smile, Jorah adds improvisationally, "But I'd like to." The line is economical, chilling, and entirely native American.

Ittimangnaq's wife in real life plays herself in the movie, and adds a similar key line when the two Eskimo males relate to Tyler the myth of Amorak, the wolf spirit. According to the myth, the God of the Sky once saw that human hunters were killing too many of the "big fat caribou." So he called Amorak, the spirit of the wolf, and told him to instruct his children to hunt the sick animals only; accordingly, the wolves restricted their hunting and the herds recovered. According to Ootek, Amorak is no dormant spirit but seizes the heart of many who come to the Arctic to make them love the wolf. Then his wife adds to Tyler, "Maybe he has eaten your heart too." The scene is, of course, a cliché: around an archetypal campfire, the acolyte is taught the tribe's



NEVER CRY WOLF

sacred truths. But the woman's grizzled, weather-beaten face—and a smile halfway between an elf's and one of the weird sisters—renews the cliché and gives the scene authenticity and power.

The chief actors in *Never Cry Wolf* are space and silence. Drawing on their power, Ballard extends the style he applied to the Sardinian scenes in the first half of *The Black Stallion*, dealing now with an even more savage landscape and more wordless communication between man and animal. According to Ballard, there is "a magic power in a movie frame to concentrate attention and focus the mind," and in *Never Cry Wolf* he tries to use that limiting but intensifying power to the utmost. Here, with the aid of director of photography Hiro Narita, Ballard has attempted to create a kind of pure style, with so much footage of snow, water, rock and sky that our attention is reduced, concentrated down to *elemental* things, the raw material of life on earth. The visual style is complemented by the verbal: with thin surface action, minimal dialogue, and a poetically understated voice-over narration, Ballard has gone a long way to making a silent talkie.

Ballard wants to use this silence to make his viewers hear again. In his view, the sounds which clutter our lives in cities—sirens, construction booms, air conditioners—have created "a world inside our head, an abstract world, and most of our existence is lived inside that abstraction." The loving absorption of his cinematography in stark, vivid natural imagery and of his sound track in silence testifies to his belief that movies should somehow empty an audience of its crowded mindset. His style in *Never Cry Wolf*, in short, attempts to mirror the cleansing process his hero Tyler undergoes on his Yukon quest.

One scene in particular confirms Ballard's

skill with silence. After some initial difficulties acclimatizing, Tyler walks across a frozen lake in midspring, gun in hand—still seeking wolves in accordance with his government's aggressive, hostile outlook. As he tramps across the snow, the sound track is bare, but for the crunch of his shoes and a sudden curious echoing noise. Tyler stops and listens with ears perked. Ballard cuts to a rabbit on a bank by the lake, then cuts back to Tyler taking another step; again he hears the low echo, and again Ballard cuts to the hare. Then, with sudden explosive roar, Tyler falls through the ice, which had been weakening so ominously under him. Once under—after getting his backpack and rifle off—he can't find the hole he fell through, and struggles desperately for a way up. Ballard again cuts to the rabbit eyeing it all dumbly. The only human sound in the scene—a symbolic immersion and baptism into a beautiful but merciless world—is literally a last gasp.

Unfortunately, *Never Cry Wolf* does not always retain this high tone. Before the immersion scene, for example, Tyler is simply too unprepared. His naive preconceptions and absurdly inappropriate equipment are good for a few laughs, and help set the stage for the rite-de-passage he undergoes, but they are narratively untrue to Mowat and factually implausible. No one survives in the Arctic on naiveté; the region can kill casually even the well prepared without much notice, as the later lake sequence demonstrates. Ballard did not have to stress Tyler's inexperience to present the Arctic as an entirely new one.

As in *The Black Stallion*, Ballard is as weak on civilization as he is strong on nature. The end of *Never Cry Wolf*, for example, resorts to simplifications to dramatize the theme of technology versus the wilderness. Ballard sensationalizes the entry of development forces into the Arctic, transforming a drunken bush pilot from the beginning of the movie to an aggressive real estate developer and advance guard for civilization at the end. This does condense a great deal of history into a small space, but seems forced and propagandistic. The denouement involving the Eskimos is also cloudy, with Mike, the character played by Jorah, *apparently* surrendering to the civilizing forces, but without really having had time or place to do so.

These are, however, small criticisms. *Never Cry Wolf* was a difficult movie to make, taking twice as long and costing twice as much as expected; in addition to wolves and caribou, weather rarely cooperated with Ballard's plans. But he has matched the Arctic with both epic patience and epic vision. It is a minor loss that he spoils the grandeur of his effort with slapdash hokum about man's world. But perhaps this is simply the price we must pay for the genius of the rest.

—TOM O'BRIEN

DANIEL

Director: Sidney Lumet. Script: E. L. Doctorow, from his own novel. Producer: Burt Harris. Photography: Andrzej Bartkowiak. Paramount.

Daniel, to my mind the most powerful film of 1983, has received some of the year's most scornful reviews. Most of these responses have been predictable; they have also been largely irrelevant. Directed by Sidney Lumet and adapted by E. L. Doctorow from his own novel, the film has been harshly criticized for failing to tell the whole truth about Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (which it makes no pretense of doing). Many of the reviews have a curiously smug and scolding tone. *Daniel* opens at a moment when the Reagan administration has been mounting an intensive, largely successful campaign to revive the anti-Communist paranoia that took hold in the fifties. A film that recalls the dangers of that hysteria is definitely going against the grain. Although they might try to deny it, mainstream movie critics have almost always reflected rather than defied the prevailing political mood in the country, and this film clearly makes them uncomfortable. Still, it is depressing to see them working themselves into a self-righteous lather as they accuse the film of being—God help us—soft on Communism and naive about the insidiousness of the Soviet menace. We have come full circle; the Cold War madness of the fifties is resurgent in the eighties, and that is one reason why this film is such a courageous and pertinent plea for sanity.

Although the critics have attacked the film for simplifying the political issues of the period, it is really the critics who have simplified the political attitudes of the film. In its view of the Isaacsons' radicalism, *Daniel* is far

Movie Review
Never Cry Wolf (1983)
October 14, 1983
'NEVER CRY WOLF,' ARCTIC TALE
By VINCENT CANBY
Published: October 14, 1983
The New York Times

CARROLL BALLARD'S "Never Cry Wolf," which opens today at the Gemini 2 Theater, is a perfectly decent if unexceptional screen adaptation of Farley Mowat's best-selling book about the author's life among Arctic wolves. Being virtually a one-character film, and largely a straightforward record of that character's daily observations of the ways of the wolf, the film is considerably different from the melodramatic romance of Mr. Ballard's "Black Stallion."

In the interests of fiction, Mr. Mowat's first-person narrator in the book has been transformed into a character named Tyler (Charles Martin Smith), who, like the author, is a biologist sent into the Canadian Arctic to study the habits of Arctic wolves, which were then being blamed for the wholesale slaughter of caribou. Instead of finding ruthless, savage killers, Tyler discovers that wolves, though carnivorous, live mostly on a diet of mice, mate for life and are loving fathers to their cubs.

One of the book's more controversial points is that wolves and caribou exist in a symbiotic relationship. Wolves, according to Mr. Mowat, attack only weak and sick caribou, in this way helping to insure that only the fittest caribou are around to re- create the species. In their turn, the caribou provide wolves with a certain number of tasty feasts. It is Mr. Mowat's conviction that hunters, not wolves, have been responsible for the drastic reduction in caribou herds in recent years.

"Never Cry Wolf" looks to be one of those films somewhat more exciting to make than it is to watch, which is not to say there aren't a number of good things in it. The film makers are, unfortunately, all-too-faithful to the heavily jocular tone of Mr. Mowat's book, which reminds me a lot of the sort of hearty, "little-did- I-know-but" journalism I used to eat up in Field & Stream.

In their favor, Mr. Ballard and the people who wrote the screenplay avoid contrived melodrama. As played by Mr. Smith ("American Graffiti," "More American Graffiti"), the biologist is an appealingly eccentric fellow who, at the beginning, is made to seem unbelievably incompetent for the sake of both comedy and drama.

That is, I find it difficult to accept the fact that the biologist, just after an airplane has left him in the middle of an icy wilderness, in a snowstorm, would promptly get out his typewriter and, wearing woolen gloves, attempt to type up his initial reactions. A little later, acting like a man who might get lost in Bryant Park, he goes clumping across a frozen lake and falls through the ice.

After that, the movie treats him and his adventures without condescension. Though Tyler gives names like George, Angeline and Uncle Albert to the wolves he observes, and though he attributes anthropomorphic attitudes to them, the wolves themselves remain always at a distance, most of the time ignoring the presence of the biologist who is studying them.

The humor is as wholesome as it is instructive. In one sequence, Tyler sets out to mark his territory in the same way the wolves do, by urinating on bushes and rocks on the perimeter of his land. He is amused to realize that what has taken him a half a day, plus huge quantities of tea, to do, the wolf accomplishes in less than an hour, without stopping to drink water or tea.

Much Boy Scout sort of fun is also made of Tyler's successful attempt to live on mice, in this way to prove that an animal as large as a wolf can subsist on small rodents, if enough of them are consumed. Tyler eats mice in soup, in stew and even en brochette, usually leaving the tail as the last thing to disappear down his throat. In what is perhaps an homage to earlier Walt Disney movies in which animals act like people, there is a not-super scene in which mice are shown watching Tyler as he eats an all-mouse meal, squealing their horror in ways that, I assume, we are meant to see as cute.

The only other characters in the film are Rosie (Brian Dennehy), a bush pilot who comes to represent everyone who would exploit the Arctic wilderness for private gain; Ootek (Zachary Ittimangnaq), a wise old Eskimo who teaches Tyler many wolf secrets, and Mike (Samson Jorah), a younger Eskimo who must kill wolves to support his family and send his children to school.

The scenery is often spectacularly beautiful. Mr. Smith is at his best when he is playing Tyler straight, without the comic exaggerations that suggest a small child showing off in front of adults. Perhaps the best thing about the film is that the wolves are never made to seem like strange but cuddly dogs. They look like wolves, not especially threatening but still remote and complete unto themselves.

"Never Cry Wolf," which has been rated PG ("Parental Guidance Suggested"), contains some scenes near the end when wolves are shown attacking a caribou, but the carnage is discreet.
