

Arts and Leisure: Are penguins trying to take over the world or just pop culture?

by James Hebert

Penguins are exploding.

Although not literally. That happened in a 1970 Monty Python sketch but is not known to occur in nature.

CHILL FACTOR - Are penguins trying to take over the world, or just pop culture? CNS Photo by Sony Pictures.

Instead, the small, flightless birds are invading pop culture with a chilling precision. They are taking no prisoners, if only because their lack of opposable thumbs makes it difficult to manipulate a Taser.

The latest evidence: "Surf's Up," an animated movie that documents how penguins invented and perfected the sport of surfing.

Penguins didn't invent surfing, Frankie Avalon did, but the audacious assertion is typical of the way these power-madimps have co-opted vast swaths of the entertainment landscape.

The birds' plan for world domination burst into view last year with the Oscar and box-office triumph of the documentary "March of the Penguins." This year, it was the turn of the cartoon musical "Happy Feet" to snag an Academy Award and score box-office loot for the penguins and their human underlords.

The penguin presence has been obvious in lots of other forms as well, from computer games to TV shows to comic strips. In many of these, the birds, no matter what type - Adelies or emperors, chinstraps or macaronis - are fussed over as lovable, cuddly and life-affirming, like Buddha reincarnated as a Beanie Baby.

Or like something even more appealing to human sensibilities: ourselves.

"I think a lot of people say, 'Here's an animal that looks not like a bird, but almost like a small person,' " points out Lauren DuBois, assistant curator of birds at SeaWorld, which happens to be a partner with Sony in marketing "Surf's Up."

Not every perspective on these residents of the Antarctic and other parts south is warm and fuzzy, though. Penguins are, in a word, polarizing, and there's not a lot of gray area in human reaction to them. Just black and white.

"Surf's Up" may show the creatures mostly as heroes - enlightened souls who reach out to other bird species in a kind of pan-avian group hug.

But the thin ice of penguin reverence breaks through to a sea of suspicion and mistrust in movies like "Madagascar, which casts a quartet of penguins as spies (at least in their own minds).

From "Batman" comes Penguin, the superhero's archenemy. And in "Farce of the Penguins" - a movie spoof described by many critics as "going straight to video" - the animals are depicted as lascivious, foul-mouthed cretins.

So utterly diabolical are these birds that they compel writer-director Bob Saget to write dialogue in which one penguin announces, "I'm tired of the club scene," and another responds, "So are the baby seals!"

The ultimate expression of Antarctic angst comes in "The Wrong Trousers," a 1993 cartoon short starring the incomparable Wallace and Gromit. In that film, a penguin posing as a rooster moves into the duo's home, then forces Wallace to help him in a jewel heist.

The work is reportedly based on a true story, although one not involving a recidivist penguin, a dog who is an electronics whiz, a pair of computerized pants, a gunbattle on a toy train or any individuals made primarily of clay.

For the guitarist, singer and songwriter Billy Thompson, penguin reality hit home 15 years ago when he was bitten by Elvis.

At the time, Thompson and his band were in the Penguin Encounter enclosure at SeaWorld, doing a photo shoot for the cover of their 1992 album "Coat of Many Colors."

Maybe it was their clothes, maybe it was their music, or maybe it was the fact that Thompson and Co. had the nerve to name themselves the Mighty Penguins.

But something inflamed the suspicious mind of a penguin named for the King of Rock.

"They're real territorial," Thompson says. "So Elvis took a shot at me - he tagged me in the thigh."

We can give Elvis the benefit of the doubt; it's possible he only wanted to give Thompson the cold shoulder, then realized penguins don't have shoulders.

But there's still something ominous in the way the penguin takeover of pop culture has seemed so well-orchestrated. And it might go to the cold, cold heart of what these animals are all about.

"They're found in very large colonies, so really we become part of their colony," says DuBois. "That's how we're able to interact with them."

You read that right: Apparently, we're being colonized by penguins - just as once predicted on the Web site WarOfThePenguins.com, which is now suspiciously inactive.

To paraphrase Bob Marley: Waddle you do when they come for you?

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Hollywood on ice: A look at penguins in the movies

"March of the Penguins" (2005): The doc that walked (or waddled) the walk, winning an Oscar.

"Happy Feet" (2006): Dance phenom Savion Glover developed moves for this animated flick about a tap-happy penguin, another Oscar-winner.

"Madagascar" (2005): Four penguins are hapless spooks in this wildlife-centered cartoon.

"Farce of the Penguins" (2006): Bob Saget's straight-to-DVD sex spoof (!) of the "March" phenom.

"The Pebble and the Penguin" (1995): Martin Short voices a love-struck penguin in yet another cartoon movie.

"Batman Returns" (1992): Danny DeVito's character was not an actual penguin, though he was raised by them.

"Mary Poppins" (1964): Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke dance with penguin waiters.

"Billy Madison" (1995): Adam Sandler hallucinates a giant, heckling penguin (a.k.a. "movie critic?")

"Penguin Pool Murder" (1932): A body is found in an aquarium's penguin tank, though the penguins know nothing about it. Or do they?

"Sudden Death" (1995): A terrorist plot is unfolding in the home arena of the Pittsburgh Penguins hockey team, though the Penguins know nothing about it. Or do they?

Rob Machado: Champion surfer, hairstyle icon, Hollywood upstart.

Friend to poultry.

"Let's not forget there's a chicken in this movie, too," the San Diego County native son is saying, when an interview about the film "Surf's Up" starts to turn too penguin-centric. "He's pretty awesome."

Leave it to Machado to stand up for what's right, even though the celebrated goofy-footer (that's right foot forward on the board, gremmies) would rather stand up for what's left.

Like, say, the left-peeling wave at his favorite home break, Seaside Reef. Or the screaming, epic left at Pipeline in Hawaii, where Machado won the Monster Energy Pro contest last year and the illustrious Pipe Masters in 2000.

Machado has his own character in "Surf's Up." He's definitely not the chicken.

He is, however - in the considered analysis of surf observers over the past 20 years or so - pretty awesome.

From at least age 12, when he won his division of the U.S. amateur championships, Machado was the Mouse that roared through contest after contest. "Mouse" being the slender surfer's childhood nickname.

During the 90s and into this decade, Machado regularly placed among the top surfers in the world, his famously crazy hair waving like a freak flag as he dazzled in competitions all over the globe.

The hair is also a prominent feature of his character in "Surf's Up," a cartoon movie in which he essentially plays himself - though as a contest commentator instead of a surfer.

He is voice-cast alongside his pal and fellow surf legend Kelly Slater, plus X-Games host Sal Masekela.

"I think even before we knew the story line, just the idea of being involved with an animated movie" got the trio stoked, Machado says, on the phone from a publicity gig in Hawaii. "And having your own character? A penguin? It was like, Are you kidding me? This is going to be insane!"

The hair might not quite do justice to the real deal - as Machado says, "How do you give a penguin an Afro? What line do you take on that one? I have no idea."

But one aspect of "Surf's Up" does seem to strike a chord with Machado. The movie centers on Cody Maverick, an ambitious penguin surfer who worships a fallen legend of the waves known as Big Z. It turns out that Z, vexed by contest pressure, faked his own death and dropped out of sight.

Not that there's been quite that much drama to Machado's recent history, but he did retire from the world tour, after an injury and a series of other events that had him rethinking his relationship to the whole pro scene.

So Machado understands in some ways "the struggle that Z went through. He was the man, and then all of a sudden he was kind of getting passed by. He decided to just disappear. It's great, you know? It's awesome.

"The bummer was that he just went into hiding and stopped surfing. But it was cool how it took a young kid (Cody) to pull him back out and get him back in the water."

For Machado, one huge benefit of taking a step back from the contest world is that it's a reminder of how he got there in the first place.

"It's like rediscovering why you love surfing," Machado says. "And why you started surfing."

On tour, he says, "there are those days when you come down to the beach at a contest, you look at the ocean, and you're thinking, 'There's no way I would ever paddle out right now.'

"And some guy gives you a jersey and tells you you have to go out and compete. It's a hard thing, to override your mental state of just being totally over it, to, 'OK, I'm gonna go out there and just do it.'"

"So, not being on tour, all of a sudden it opens up all these doors of excitement, you know? Try this and try that, see where it goes."

What he's trying at the moment is movies, and while Machado has no immediate plans to go Hollywood, he didn't hesitate to sign up for "Surf's Up" when he heard about it.

"I was into it totally from day one," he says. "I have kids, so I've seen just about every animated movie that exists. You just embrace it.

"And some of the first (animation) they showed us, with the surfing and the ocean and water textures - we were just like, 'Wow, these guys are on it. They're really dialed in. This stuff looks incredible.'"

Machado appreciated that the filmmakers wanted to get it right - or as "right" as a movie can be that features birds on boards. When it comes to surfing, Hollywood has done much worse.

"They really took our opinions to heart," he says. "It was cool to say, 'Hey, whoa, rewind this. See that right there? That's not good.' And they'd fix it.

"So when you watch the animation of surfing, you never really see anything that you're just like, 'Wow, that's a total blow-it.' Like the guy in the movie 'North Shore' who takes off goofy-foot, and then he's a regular-foot. Or he's at Backdoor, then he's at Sunset or whatever."

Although "Surf's Up" might seem a latecomer to the penguin party, a waddling wannabe, Machado says the idea actually was in place before "March of the Penguins" and "Happy Feet" made it cool to get cold.

"It took a long time," he says. "It's been in the works for a couple of years. I can't remember when we did our first voice-overs and even saw our first animation.

"So you can imagine, it was way before all these other penguin movies came out. Once you're already halfway down the street, and you find out about these other movies, you're like, Oh well."

Machado is also mapping out the future of the foundation and the surf contest that bear his name.

The Rob Machado Foundation has been geared toward getting musical instruments into the hands of local school kids, but Machado hopes to add an environmental mission to its work.

His popular annual surf contest in San Diego County had gotten perhaps a bit too big, Machado says, and it failed to go off last year after running into bureaucratic hurdles. He hopes to resurrect it in September, although it's probably "going to be toned down - maybe a one-day event just for kids."

Meanwhile, his mind blissfully far from any thoughts of competition, Machado just keeps surfing. No dude with a jersey in sight.

"I surfed Waikiki last night," he reports. "It was like knee-high - just going off. In Hawaii. Trunks. Can't complain." © Copley News Service

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