I find that lately when I'm at the movies with my kids I'm more hopeful than usual about the possibility that human beings might be moving toward a better relationship with the other living creatures in our world. *Ratatouille* is the most recent movie that makes me think Hollywood can help inspire Americans to improve our ecological sensibilities. It's a feeling I've had over the last few years, while watching *Chicken Run*, *A Bug's Life*, *Finding Nemo*, *Antz*, *Madagascar*, and *Happy Feet*, among others. In a culture that generally treats animals as subservient, these movies represent their characters with an integrity that invites viewers to value them as other creatures. With Remy's help, Linguini achieves a triumph that he couldn't have accomplished with the rat's collaboration.

And Remy, too, accomplishes something that no rat could have done with or without human help. Ecologically, this message is more than just important; it is the central truth, and one that our culture is pretty good at sublimating in a fantasy that * Homo sapiens* reigns over all the dumb creatures played beneath us on a Grand Chain of Being.

The food that Linguini and Remy offer up is so good precisely because the creative forces behind it are not the same of human-white-male-French chefs who churned out platè after platè in the past. The hegemonic tradition is stale and exhausted, and can be recharged only by a multicultural infusion of the previously marginalized subcultures—it's the usual postmodern/postcolonial mantle, except Remy expands the concept of diversity to include animals.

The cooking scenes are especially dazzling. Hiding under Linguini's toque, Remy pulls the young man's hair to direct his hand movements, generating a choreographic tour de force with knives swirling, mussels flying through the air, herbs and spices wafting into soups, wines and sauces courting sumptuously across the screen. The exotic bounty reflects the transcendent of the collaboration.

Both Linguini and Remy are initially reluctant to acknowledge to the other members of their own species how important this enterprise is to them, and how much they need the other, but when they finally do it is a glorious epiphany. Animals and people interact in ways that would until recently have been proscribed by our anthropocentric prejudices. Of all animals, rats are depicted as smart, sympathetic, engaging creatures who—as long as they wash their little paws before cooking—are perfectly congruous with high culture and haute cuisine. The bond of trust and friendship between a man and a rat forcefully deconstruct our conventional dominionist model toward animals.

At the end of the movie, all's right with the world as a direct consequence of the ecologically inspired affiliation between man and rat. Linguini's restaurant, or bistro, as it de- stroyed, a bitter critic is redeemed, and Paris enjoys a new level of gourmet ecstasy. In a different style from Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* but with a similar point, *Ratatouille* promotes our need to take seriously the claims and the virtues of the world beyond ourselves. On our own, we will stagnate (just as Gusteau's restaurant had for years) To save ourselves, to move forward, we need to look at life as a joint enterprise. We need to revise our misconception that the rest of the world exists simply for our benefit, and define our presumptions, hubristic fantasies that we stand above the rest of nature.

Animals in the past were domesticated, inarticulate, blase; crows: stuttering pigs, bumbling around half-clothed, nas- sic: silly coyotes getting creamed by ants around every turn; two-dimension- al panoplia of loons, daffy seagulls and buffaloes, as offensive as its own way to the animal subject as *Amos 'n Andy* was to African-Americans.

Today's breed of animal characters are well rounded, sympathetic, individu- alized, sophisticated. They are drawn and conceived with a keen sensitivity to their habitats. Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse zipped around in planes, trains, and automobiles, not to mention the occasional submarine or hot-air balloon, but contemporary animated animals ac- tually inhabit nature. Sure, Remy enters into the mainstream human world, but it's important that his native milieu (sewers, attics, garbage dumps) is estab- lished first. The oceans are *Finding Nemo*, the green leafy meadows in *A Bug's Life*, the glasiers in *Happy Feet* all ex- hibit a devout attention to habitat, which crowns one of the most danger- ous aspects of how we culture tradi- tionally represents animals, alienating them from their contexts. Such detach- ment erroneously implies that we can have, and frame, and experience, these animals in ways that are comfortable to us, while their habitats (which we de-crate mercilessly) are expendable, irre- vert.

These movies address a range of ecological challenges. *Chicken Run* depicts birds in the desperate throes of agri- business, awaiting the dark moment when they are to become chicken pies. The injustice of factory farming is con-veyed from the chickens' point of view, by their sense of a better life outside the compound and their clear passionate desire for such a life. Banding together with determination and intelligence, they learn to fly so they can escape from the greedy, cruel humans. *Happy Feet* por- trays people's damage to animals and their habitats, and animals' consequent suffering. The penguins are experienc- ing famine as a result of overfishing, and our pollution is drifiting down all the way to Antarctica. Mumble, the hero, informs people that we need to attend to what the animals have to "say" and treat them better. That movie ends, ide- alistically, with an array of international governments resolving to reform their ecological exploitation.

*Bee Movie*, a DreamWorks produc- tion scheduled to open in November, seems like a movie in the same mold. Like *Happy Feet*, it focuses on people's heedless plundering of the animals' world. A bee, like Remy, has aspirations beyond the conventional. "Shocked to discover that the humans have been stealing and eating the bees' honey for centuries!" he surr.

Moviemakers are entitled to a laugh. But they'll be animated, once again, to question their broader sense of entitle-

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