

ANIMALS ON FILM: THE ETHICS OF THE HUMAN GAZE

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“No animals were harmed in the making of this essay.”

That may seem like a trivial claim. It’s probably not even true, considering the habitat damage caused by emissions from the electricity plant whose engines power the computer I used to compile these ideas. But if I can have the benefit of the doubt, I’d like to suggest that simply writing about other animals *may* engage them in a way that leaves them none the worse off for the encounter. And this harm-neutral encounter is an improvement over the usual state of affairs. Our imperious presence, our industrial infrastructure, our social networks, and our cultural activities encroach upon the safety and integrity of other species.¹

People imprison and torture animals in factory farms and research laboratories. We displace them as our cities and suburbs expand. We poison them as we dump toxins into their food-ways (and then, with ecological tunnel-vision, we overfish these poisoned waters for fetishized

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aquatic delicacies). We commodify them in the “pet” industry. But even when we take a break from such active physical assaults, we are prone to engage with animals in ways that hurt their spirits and impinge upon their welfare. The consequence of most human-animal encounters is the expression of harm via pathways of power.

Nonetheless, for decades, the American movie industry has taken the initiative to assert and verify the converse: that is, many films carry a disclaimer in the credits stating, “No animals were harmed in the making of this movie.” It’s a pleasant thought, so common that we may not even notice it or think about how and why animals might have been harmed in the making of a film. (And given the extent to which our culture is virtually built upon animals’ lives and deaths, this claim of “no harm” seems more than a little ironic.) The certification comes from the American Humane Association’s (AHA) Film and Television Unit, which sponsors animal safety monitors on film sets to ensure adherence to its guidelines for the treatment of animal actors.²

The AHA³ began monitoring the safety of animals after the 1939 film *Jesse James* provoked an outcry when a horse was forced to leap to his or her death from the top of a cliff.⁴ The AHA now reviews scripts during pre-production and enjoys unlimited access to a movie set during filming that involves animals. The phrase “No animals were harmed in the making of this movie,” first used in Paul Newman’s *Fat Boy and Little Man* (1989), has since become a registered trademark.⁵

Why care about the film industry when relatively speaking the numbers of animals directly involved seem negligible relative to the vast numbers consumed through the meat, dairy, and other industries? Two reasons: one, the well-being of every animal counts. The fact that animals are so commonly generalized, even by the term “animals” when its use reifies the ontology of animals solely as to how they relate to humans, compels attention to every individual. Second, film and other electronic image media project the human psyche: they hold and promulgate modern human values, agendas, and norms. Films are dream and reality-makers.

Some films, not many, are deemed questionable or unacceptable, having failed to meet AHA standards. Here are a few examples of what a film might do to get an unacceptable rating: In *Cannibal Holocaust* (1979), a documentary team journeys to a South American jungle to search for cannibals. During the making of this film, an opossum was

slit with a knife; the shell was ripped off a turtle; and a monkey was scalped.⁶ *Apocalypse Now* (1979) was found unacceptable because a water buffalo was hacked to pieces. In *Vampire's Kiss* (1989), star Nicolas Cage admitted in print that he ate two live cockroaches during the filming, earning that movie an unacceptable rating.⁷ There are no legal or film industry consequences of an unacceptable rating, though the AHA does publicize its negative findings in the hopes of inspiring an audience boycott.

AHA acknowledges that its seal of approval may appear in movies with scenes that seem to convey an attitude that "cruelty to animals is okay." Their purpose, they explain, is

to safeguard animals on-set, regardless of whether the scene being portrayed conveys an animal-friendly message. The objective of our monitoring work is the welfare of the live animals used in film production, and to that end, we refrain from commenting on content. If we refused to monitor a film because we did not agree with its message, we would risk there being no protection at all for the animals involved.⁸

Indeed, some approved movies contain extremely violent scenes with animals. The Humane Association website explains: "Filming techniques, controlled stunts, special effects and post-production editing can make complicated battle scenes appear realistic without injuring animals or human performers. . . . Animals used in filmed entertainment are well-trained to perform specific stunts (such as falling down on cue), and the rest of the illusion is created by the filmmakers."⁹ So even AHA assurance that no animals were harmed does not protect against a rhetoric of violence and cannot guarantee an ethically ideal expression of visual media relationships between humans and animals.

Given this campaign to monitor animal welfare in the film industry, one might reasonably assume that there is a proclivity to harm animals in the movies, a proclivity for audiences to watch the harming of animals. But why might filmmakers want to harm animals in the first place? And, more broadly, what do audiences want to see when they are looking at animals in films?

DIFFICULTIES SEEING ANIMALS CLEARLY

Animals in visual culture¹⁰ are often disguised in some way—costumed, or masked, or distorted, or disfigured. Mockery of animals is another common trope, as is decontextualization: displacing animals from their natural habitats, contexts, and lives, and reconfiguring them as players in a purely anthropocentric narrative—from *King Kong* to *Curious George*, from the *Beethoven* dog films to *Seabiscuit*, Hollywood traffics in spectacles of such “fish out of water.”¹¹ Mockery and decontextualization function as disguises because they prevent us from seeing the authentic animal beneath the cultural frippery. Animals are disguised perhaps because the authentic animal would be too depressing, or too scary, or too boring, for the viewer to endure.

There is a continuum of integrity, or respect, that audiences and cultural creators accord to animals in visual culture. At the bottom end of this continuum, there are dancing bears, piano-playing chickens, rabbits being pulled out of hats, chimps in human clothing on parade, “stupid pet tricks,”¹² elephants with paintbrushes taped to their trunks in ecotourist camps, and so forth. That is: animals doing silly things for the audience’s amusement—things they don’t usually do, and have no reason to do.¹³ Perhaps viewers are so engrossed in these vaudevillean farces because they are ashamed to look animals in the eye, ashamed to confront what we have done to them. We don’t like to think much about wild, natural animals, because we have just about extinguished wildness and nature. We prefer our animals framed, domesticated, dressed up for our spectacles.

Even further down the spectrum at this endpoint of the continuum are “crush films”: amateur sadistic/fetishistic pseudo-pornographic footage of erotically-costumed women stepping on insects, mice, cats, crushing them in stiletto heels. *Smush*, by Jeff Vilencia (1993), one of the best-known in the genre, is an eight-minute long film depicting a woman in high heels and also barefoot crushing dozens of earthworms.¹⁴ “Among the many obscure and bizarre sects of fetishism,” writes Jeremy Biles in “I, Insect, or Bataille and the Crush Freaks,”

few remain so perplexing or so underexamined as that of the “crush freaks.” At the cutting edge of the edgy world of sexual fetishistic practices, the crush freaks are notorious for their enthusiasm for witnessing the crushing death of insects and other,

usually invertebrate, animals, such as arachnids, crustaceans, and worms. More specifically, crush freaks are sexually aroused by the sight of an insect exploded beneath the pressure of a human foot—usually, but not necessarily, a relatively large and beautiful female foot. . . . The crush freak typically fantasizes identification with the insect as he or she masturbates, and savors the sense of sudden, explosive mutilation attendant upon the sight of the pedal extrusions. Jeff “The Bug” Vilencia, the foremost spokesperson for crush enthusiasts, describes his ecstasy thus: “At the point of orgasm, in my mind all of my guts are being squished out. My eyeballs are popping out, my brain comes shooting out the top of my head, all my blood squirts everywhere . . . What a release, that imagery really gets me off! Seeing that foot coming down on me, coming into my stomach and pressing all that weight on to me till I burst! Wow!”¹⁵

At the extreme, a crush film represents one possibility, one disturbing example of how some people look at and perceive animals in visual culture. The capacity for extreme violence toward animals lurks even in our media appetites and fantasies, and perhaps the literal harm enacted upon animals in crush films is not so fundamentally different from the figurative harm visited upon so many other animals in visual culture as they are “crushed” by being rendered *inauthentic*.

Most harm meted out to animals in movies is not this obvious. The fact that so many animals are denatured, enmeshed, and victimized in so many diverse media—while at the same time we are facing mass extinction of species around the globe—raises deep psychological and ethical concerns. Is this obsession with having animals demeaned in film and television and youtube a type of compensation for all the animals that aren’t there any more in reality? A filmclip of an animal, a drawing of an animal, a parody of an animal, a meme of an animal, seems to be more important than the real living animal: the actual creature is displaced by a caricatured and objectified entity.

Visual culture increasingly blocks out the world beyond-people: the world outside, the world of forests and fields and water and fish and squirrels. Billboards get bigger and brighter, more profuse, more electronic and dynamic, obfuscating more of the landscape. Cyberspace becomes more addictive, more compulsory, luring our gaze away from nature. Computers and HDTVs and iPods and digital cameras and DVRs and GPSs and cell phones, with their little green and red lights

and chimes and vibrations that are *always on*, consume more and more energy, generating more of the toxic garbage that endangers habitats and decimates animal communities.

All these beeping, blinking, omnipresent media supplant a simple, direct, meaningful engagement with the natural world and its creatures. In a textbook example of hegemony, the dominant media reinforce their own power at the expense of our connection to the world beyond the screens. A panoply of *monitors* (as the screens are called, with a darkly accidental Foucauldian/Orwellian irony) fill our homes and offices, monitoring our attention to the infinite realms of digital content accessible via these portals, and screening out the corresponding diminution outside: undigitized creatures haplessly holding on for dear life at the margins of this brave new world. The simulacrum-animals—that is, the animals on parade, animals in disguise, animals in visual culture—proliferate *ad infinitum*, *ad absurdum*; and in doing so, they usurp much of the space we might have allocated in our minds to the consciousness of real, living animals.

THE HUMAN GAZE

In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Laura Mulvey defines what she called the male gaze. She argues that the viewer at the movies is in a masculine position (and quite possibly a voyeur or a fetishist as well), deriving visual pleasure from a dominant, sadistic perspective. The object on the screen is the object of desire—paradigmatically, the objectified woman. Viewers are encouraged to identify with the protagonist, who is usually male; and female characters are there simply “to-be-looked-at.” She writes: “The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly.”¹⁶

The gaze directed at animals in visual culture keenly parallels Mulvey’s formulation of the male gaze. Call it, instead of the male gaze, the *human gaze*; and replace woman with “animal.” Carol Adams associates the oppression/consumption/disembodiment of women and that of animals.¹⁷ She and other ecofeminists have shown how the exploitation of women and the exploitation of animals occur along similar pathways. It’s a smooth extrapolation to reconfigure Mulvey’s male gaze (upon the filmed female object) as a human gaze (upon the

filmed animal object). Mulvey describes “The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man,”¹⁸ and I simply transpose this to characterize the image of the animal as passive raw material for the active gaze of the human.

The phenomenon of looking at animals in visual culture is predicated upon the assumption that the viewer is human and the object is animal. (This is perhaps not a particularly profound observation in and of itself, but, thanks to Mulvey’s work, we realize the political import of this construction.) The practice of consuming visual culture embodies an unbridled omniscient lust ensuring the visual object’s absolute subalternity. The animal is rendered vulnerable, free for the taking, in whatever way the human viewer chooses: the process metaphorically reiterates what is enacted literally in the culture of carnivorous agribusiness.

Feminist critiques showed how women, under the male gaze, were profusely objectified, essentialized: two-dimensionally caricatured into a good girl/bad girl dichotomy (angel/whore).¹⁹ Nonhuman animals, too, are cast in this mode. In the movies the angels (the good animals) are pets and helpers, adulating their human keepers: Lassie; Flipper; Old Yeller; Sounder; Elsa; Rin Tin Tin; Francis the Talking Mule.²⁰ The whores are monstrous others, animals who earn our scorn (but still serve a purpose, calling out to our basest drives and allowing us to satiate these drives by hating, or destroying these creatures). Think of King Kong; the shark in *Jaws*; Ben the rat in *Willard*; Orca, the killer whale; Alfred Hitchcock’s birds.

This kind of objectification is dangerous, not only because it is outmoded from a scientific and social perspective, but more fundamentally because it is reductionist. It circumscribes animals’ existence in relation to the human gaze, appraising them only in terms of their usefulness or threat (to us). Such a perspective confounds an ecologically ethical ideology, in which all members of an ecosystem are interdependent and no single species is inherently privileged above any other.

The animals we gaze upon in film, on the internet, in advertisements, are prized for their “cuteness”—in a way that is feminized, and derogatorily so: cute animals are like dumb blondes (note the parallelism between the male gaze and the human gaze). Animals are celebrated for their subservience, their entertainment value,

and the extent to which they affirm an anthropocentric ethos (the unassailable conviction that it's all about us). House cats, dogs, pleasantly furry sheep, and symbolic creatures like the American Bald Eagle rank highly in this cultural economy; pigeons, carp, cockroaches, starlings, and feral cats do less well. The human gazer prizes exoticism in visual cultural representations of other animals, but in a mode (as zoos and aquariums have trained audiences to expect) of profound displacement from their habitat.

While we may pay lip service to the independence and rights of animals in visual culture (as in films like *Born Free* and *Free Willy*),²¹ this is all bounded by our own desires and emotions. The point of their freedom is our vicarious experience of our own sense of freedom, which we celebrate by bestowing (on our own terms) a modicum of freedom upon them. Audiences may try to tap into and connect with animal otherness, as in the old *Tarzan* movies, and more recently, in films like *Whale Rider*, *Horse Whisperer*, *Dances with Wolves*, and *Grizzly Man*, though still we're much more interested in ourselves than in them; such interaction is really just another way of harvesting something from the animal object.

Note the titles of all these movies: all purport to offer (and in some ways do offer) intricate portrayals of human sensitivity to animals. They all, at first impression, seem to highlight animals. And while there are indeed animals in them all, in each case what might have first seemed like an animal reference actually turns out to be a human being: Timothy Treadwell is the Grizzly Man in Werner Herzog's odd documentary; Kevin Costner's character is given the name "Dances with Wolves" as he becomes enchanted with animals and Native American culture; a 12-year-old Maori girl is the whale rider.²² These characters develop alongside animals, but they are still ultimately very much human identities. The human beings trump actors of other species, who are merely supporting cast, swimming or galloping in the background. When people look at animals, what we see most clearly with the human gaze, is, unsurprisingly, ourselves. Laura Mulvey makes a similar point about the objectified woman: "What counts is what the heroine provokes," she writes. "In herself the woman has not the slightest importance."²³

VISUAL COLONIZATION IS NOT LIMITED TO FILM

In visual advertising, the human gaze reveals an explicit commodification of the animal, but it's really just a more blatant iteration of all the other animals we look at. Morris the Cat, Charlie the Tuna, Joe Camel, the MGM Lion, Toucan Sam, the Energizer Bunny, the Budweiser Clydesdales—all these animal images are designed to advance consumer culture, to co-opt a perverse sense of biophilia (our connection to nature; our need for nature)²⁴ in order to encourage us to do things that don't really help animals in any way, or help us understand animals, or help us understand our relation to them. The animals are merely props, and as we pimp them in the discourse of advertising, they are hoist with their own petard. . . . victims of their own animality. Charlie adorns the outside of the StarKist tuna fish can, eagerly inviting you to eat him; smiling pigs on the sides of barbeque joints pose happily, without a touch of resentment, for customers about to order up a plate of ribs. These animals are figuratively devoured by the human gaze as an anticipation of their subsequent literal consumption.

Indeed, we are deluged with images of animals in visual culture that do not call out to our higher ecological consciousness. Instead, these images affirm received ideas: animals are ubiquitous, interesting and engaging under the right circumstances (and we must coordinate these circumstances ourselves, as we do in all these movies and ads). Animals would not naturally serve our purposes; left to their own devices, they would not pose a very strong claim on the human gaze.

This human gaze has been trained on animals in visual culture for a very long time: in 1877, Eadweard Muybridge produced a photograph for California Governor and railroad tycoon Leland Stanford showing his racehorse in the midst of a gallop. Stanford had wanted to know if all four of a horse's hooves left the ground during a gallop, and commissioned Muybridge to find the answer.²⁵ Using a series of 24 stereoscopic cameras, Muybridge photographed a horse in fast motion, taking pictures at one thousandth of a second and producing a locomotion sequence known as "The Horse in Motion." Muybridge did this sort of thing with many other animals, too: his subjects included a buffalo, a lion, an ostrich, an elephant, and people as well. Many of the animals he photographed came from the Philadelphia Zoo.

Muybridge invented the “zoopraxiscope,” a lantern that projected images in rapid succession onto a screen from photographs printed on a rotating glass disc, producing the illusion of moving pictures. It was the germ of modern cinematography. Muybridge was, in my opinion, the first modern artist who actualized our obsession with the movement of animals, but, I think, he did even more than this: he represented not just their physical animation, but also the metaphysical life, the spirit of the animal. He imported all this—their movement, their spirit, their lives—from nature, into our world: into culture. To satisfy our questions about animals and satiate our appetites for watching their speed, their grace, their power; to answer our idle queries (do all four hooves leave the ground at once?²⁶) as well as our more profound wonderment, Muybridge’s work set us on the path of looking at animals, creating new technologies to “capture” their animality, and then reproducing and projecting this.

Muybridge created the ability and fanned the desire for people to look at animals in visual culture. Post-Muybridge, audiences came to think of animals differently than they did pre-Muybridge: animals were now animated, “alive,” moving, in visual cultural representations, rather than static. Their movement could be observed (and enjoyed) without the necessary proximity of the actual animal; thus, it could be enjoyed more conveniently, and in greater numbers. The Muybridge-animal might outlast the literal animal: indeed, in many ways, one might come to regard such images of animals as more potent and more fascinating than the mere animals themselves. Muybridge serves as a keen example of how culture shapes and influences people’s perception of other animals: the understanding of animals, certainly, but also, I would cynically suggest, the misunderstanding of animals. As we capture their motion on film, that somehow supplants the reality of their motion, and so while we “have” it, I think we also lose it, to some extent. Before Muybridge, people had to look at the actual animal to see it move, to see it alive: afterwards, not. That is on some level a loss of our understanding and appreciation of an animal. And, I must note, Muybridge would have not qualified for the Humane Association’s seal of approval: animals *were* harmed in the making of his visual displays. Derek Bousé in *Wildlife Films* describes how Muybridge arranged for a Philadelphia zoo tiger to be set loose on an old buffalo so that the photographer could record one of his motion studies of an actual killing;

Bousé calls this the beginning of a tradition in wildlife films of “kill scenes” that serve as a “guarantor of authenticity.”²⁷

More than 130 years after Muybridge’s zoopraxiscopic technology, we are lately looking at more and more animals—as there is more porn on the web, there is more animal porn; as YouTube proliferates, there are more amateur videos of animals; as branding increases, so do branded animals; as cable television expands, we get more channels such as the Discovery Channel and Animal Planet (with shows like “When Animals Attack”; “The Pet Psychic”; “Animal Cops”; “World’s Ugliest Dog”; and “Crocodile Hunter.”)²⁸ Animal Planet claims, perversely and oxymoronically, to be programming “reality tv” about animals. But “reality” and “television” are contradictions in terms. Animal Planet facilitates and expands our consumption of animals (culturally and otherwise), but it does not bring the people who look at animals any closer to the reality of these animals. Traditionally, watching animals on film is considered to be good, wholesome family fun: highbrow entertainment and/or education; I wish to problematize that.

I concede that it is possible for visual media to teach us about animals—a documentarian, or even a mainstream feature filmmaker, may spend years gathering footage that insightfully depicts, with ecological accuracy and sensitivity, the lives of animals. Such films (some examples of which I discuss below) go to where the animals live and look at them in their own habitats, which is much preferable to chimps on parade and painting elephants.

But these nature films often impose a human narrative, a human cultural aesthetic, upon animals. The films may be flat-out faked: there’s a rich tradition of nature-film fakery. But even when there’s no explicit attempt to deceive, still, they may mislead or miseducate viewers by making animals seem too accessible, too easily present, which distorts the reality that most animals live away from us, hidden from us. Their reclusiveness is self-protective, and our intrusion, even via the mediation of a documentary film crew, may breach an important barrier between ourselves and many other animals. For example, Luc Jacquet’s *March of the Penguins* (2005), about the Emperor penguins’ annual journey to their breeding ground, and Jacques Perrin’s *Winged Migration* (2001), a stunning account of birds’ global journeys, are two beautiful and eloquent films about the lives of animals who live far from the world that most of us inhabit. As captivating as I found both these films for

the detailed and richly ecological education they offered as they immersed viewers in the extreme Antarctic/atmospheric habitats that are all but inaccessible to people, still, I wonder if it is right for us to see such lives: if somehow, the human gaze, in any form, however carefully exercised, may be fated to impose our power over the animals, leaving them, thus, powerless.

Millions of people have seen these films, crossover blockbuster hits. Does this testify to our increasing interest and concern for other animals, or does it mean that we've dragged these creatures down to the level of mass entertainment, which is inherently anti-ecological and anti-animal because of the hegemonies of consumption culture in Western industrial society?

In *Green Cultural Studies*, Jhan Hochman warns that a nature film may render viewers "separate and superior to film-nature even as it brings them into proximity. Nature becomes, then, prop(erty) and commodity."²⁹ As physics teaches us, the act of observation changes the phenomenon being observed. (The "observer effect" holds that instruments, by their nature, alter the state of what they measure. The psychological concept of "reactivity," similarly, suggests that subjects change their behavior when they are aware of being observed.) And as Foucault theorized, vision facilitates a power that the seer exercises over the seen. We call these films "Luc Jacquet's *March of the Penguins*" and "Jacques Perrin's *Winged Migration*" – the fact of human ownership and control over these animal images is completely inescapable. To restate the obvious, people make these films (and, people make money from making these films); people watch these films. Where, in this nexus, does the animal come in? Do the animals profit in any way from this interaction, from the human gaze? Can they? Should they? Even if no animals were harmed in the making of these movies, is that the best we can hope for? Were any animals *helped* in the making of these movies?

In *Watching Wildlife*, Cynthia Chris writes, "The wildlife film and television genre comprises not only a body of knowledges but also an institution for their containment and display, similar to those institutions that Michel Foucault described as heterotopias, which through their collection of normally unrelated objects, life forms, or representations expose visitors to worlds beyond their own reach." Heterotopias are real places, places that do exist—in contrast to utopias, which are idealized and unreal. A heterotopia might be a botanical

garden, for example, or a zoo, or a theatre, or cinema. But “the knowledge within the heterotopia,” Chris writes, is “selected, framed, edited, and interpreted, according to an array of social forces and cultural contests over meaning”—and these places are “absolutely different from all the sites they reflect and speak about.”³⁰ Turning on the television any day,

one might flit from views of sharks off the coast of southern Africa to polar bears in Manitoba, rattlesnakes in Florida, crocodiles in Queensland, and pandas . . . in Sichuan Province. The images of animals and their habitats, natural or artificial, found through television, are representations of real places and the creatures that live there, but they are “absolutely different” from those real sites and their inhabitants, constructed as they are by conventions of representation . . . the economics of the film and television industries, and geopolitical conditions concerning the state of the environment.³¹

Anyone who has watched the wide array of nature films, television shows, and documentaries knows how many different styles and ideologies may be invoked to depict the animals that are framed within by human technology and human cultural prejudices. In *Reel Wildlife: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film*, Gregg Mitman characterizes a range of representations and misrepresentations of filmed animals. Disney’s “True-Life Adventures” from the late 1940s was a prominent series that established many of the conventions for decades to come, which he calls, “a genre of sugar-coated educational nature films.”³² And even today, in our supposedly more enlightened and more ecologically-attuned times, still, the *Wild Discovery* series, from the Discovery Channel—has a “penchant for tacking happy endings onto tales of ecological disaster” (xiv).

Along the lines of how Cynthia Chris invokes Foucauldian heterotopias, Mitman explains that in many nature films, “fabrication made the line separating artifice from authenticity difficult to discern.” He detects an inherent tension, a contradiction embodied in nature films: they “reveal much about the yearnings of Americans to be both close to nature and yet distinctly apart.”³³ This gets at the crux of the problem, which I would identify as an ethical aporia: the problem of perspective, of positioning, of self-awareness. We don’t know where we are in relation to other animals; we don’t really know where we want

to be, where we should be, in this relationship, which results in a fundamental inability even to formulate, much less resolve, the ethical dilemmas concerning our coexistence with other animals. Many other anthrozoologists have expressed variations on this key contradiction, this conundrum, that Mitman explains so succinctly here. We want to be in two mutually exclusive kinds of relationships at the same time (close to nature, and apart from it); how, then, can we hope to act ethically, if ethical reasoning is predicated upon knowing the precise actual truth, the single accurate reality, of where we are, who we are, at the moment we conduct our ethical deliberations?

Deep within the bowels of capitalism, Hollywood productions look at animals in ways that are inflected by the economics of the mainstream film industry. In *Green Screen*, which examines nature in Hollywood films, David Ingram argues that the kinds of realism and environmentalist aesthetics that might best convey the stories of animals authentically and informatively are at odds with the genres and aesthetics we should expect from Hollywood.

Ingram identifies many pervasive Hollywood tropes that a mainstream animal movie will be likely to embrace—such as the circle of life, the cult of pristine nature, man's domination over nature, the action plot (which may resist a perceived sense of passivity in nature), ecological Indians and the myth of primal purity, the imperial narrative, profoundly anthropomorphized animals, the therapeutic tendency toward environmental concerns—offering numerous examples of how animal images are transmogrified to fit the Hollywood mold.

For example, in Michael Apted's *Gorillas in the Mist* (1998), the biopic about Dian Fossey's work with mountain gorillas in East Africa, Ingram compares the gorillas as Fossey describes them in her book—practicing “infanticide, masturbation, incest, fellatio and cannibalism”—to the animals in the movie who are “idealized figures possessing the redemptive innocence typical of the Hollywood wild animal movies.”³⁴ The portrait of the human being (played by Sigourney Weaver), too, is “highly selective of the biographical and historical evidence available on Fossey's life and work.”³⁵

In the Hollywood film industry, Ingram writes, “environmental sensibilities are always likely to be moderated by its vested interest in promoting commodity consumption as a social good”;³⁶ these films

avoid questioning the central place that consumerism enjoys in American society.

AVATAR: A CURRENT CASE STUDY IN ANIMAL IMAGES

The recent blockbuster hit *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) has raised anew the question of how audiences view animals on film, and especially how changing technologies might inflect the cinematographic animal. The issue came to the forefront in January, 2010, when People for the Ethical Treatment for Animals (PETA) honored *Avatar* with a Proggy (signifying “progress” in the animal rights cause) Award for Outstanding Feature Film. PETA cited the film’s “inspiring message. . . which stresses the interconnectedness of nature and the importance of treating all living beings, no matter how ‘strange’ or ‘alien,’ with respect and dignity.” The organization highlighted “the movie’s stunning special effects, which beautifully illustrate how unnecessary it is to subject animals to the stress of a film production”; PETA Senior Vice President Lisa Lange stated, “We hope viewers will come away from *Avatar* with a new way of looking at the world around them and the way we treat our fellow earthlings.”³⁷

In response, the AHA issued a statement of demurral in a press release titled: “Think “No Animals Were Harmed”® in the Making of *Avatar*? You’re Right. Think No Animals Were Used in the Making of *Avatar*? You’re Wrong.” They dispelled the presumption that computer-generated imagery (CGI) meant that actual animals were not involved in the filming. In fact, for the depiction of the six-legged horse-like creatures featured in the film, “motion capture technology” demanded the use of horses. People, too, were animated with the assistance of captures: actors wore body suits that enabled computerized motion sensors to provide a template for gestures, movement, and expressions.

But animals need to be “captured” differently because of their body shapes, fur and other characteristics. To prepare the animals for having their motion data recorded, trainers shaved small areas of fur or hair where the movements would be recorded, such as near joints and on the face. Velcro pads were attached to the shaved spots with a nontoxic, nonirritating silicone adhesive. White light-reflective balls were placed onto the Velcro to capture the motion data onto the computer. . . . Throughout the film, horses are seen outdoors standing or being ridden at a walk, canter

or gallop. We also see people mounting, dismounting and falling off horses. These scenes were all filmed inside the capture studio. Horses were given ample room to start and stop running. . . . For scenes in which horses appear to be near fire, trainers cued them to “dance” or act skittish or afraid—the horses were not actually agitated nor were they ever near fire.³⁸

While AHA monitored these activities, still, they felt compelled to announce that real animals, if not harmed, were nevertheless used in the film production. Although it might be nice to imagine that CGI potentially obviates the demand for animals in films, this is not the case; it merely induces audiences—and even PETA—to presume, erroneously, that the industry can transcend their historical record of animal use (and sometimes abuse).

The message of *Avatar* has received mixed responses from animal-concerned audiences. On a very basic level, such viewers are inclined to applaud its moral that all nature is connected and people should not destroy habitats for profit. But the PETA blog also recorded some more critical resistance. Several commentators objected to what they judged as the hypocrisy that while the film’s protagonists, the Na’vi humanoids, conveyed an ecological sensitivity toward habitat preservation, at the same time they engaged in the domination and consumption of animals, aggressively controlling the will of flying creatures and killing other animals for food in a brutal hunting scene. As one blogger wrote,

Jake’s avatar and Neytiri shoot an arrow through an animal’s larynx, finishing him off with a knife to the throat. (Just because they say “it was a clean death,” add some mumbo jumbo prayers right after, acting as if they did it out of “respect to animals,” doesn’t make it any less cruel and unnecessary.) The Na’vi do not mentally “become one” with the creatures they plug their organic USB in, they literally brainwash them. I say this because if there were actually some kind of symbiosis involved the animal would have its say. And it doesn’t. It just blindly follows everything “the rider” tells it to do.³⁹

And Stephanie Ernst, writing on an animal rights website, convincingly argues that the film suggests “humans have the right and the duty to dominate, ‘tame,’ and make use of animals—that nonhuman animals are resources and tools.”⁴⁰ Ernst is especially offended by Jake’s

interaction with the pterodactyl-like animals, which she finds “chillingly reminiscent of a rape scene.” The Na’vi protagonist Neytiri, tells Jake that to become a complete warrior in her culture (as he aspires to do) he must choose one of these “ikran” as his own.

He will know the ikran he is meant to bond with on sight—and he will know that the ikran chooses him too *if the ikran fights back and tries to kill him* (“no means yes” and “she’ll fight you, but you know she really wants it,” anyone?). It is Jake’s duty, while the animal fights him off, to “bond” with the animal by overpowering him, tying him up, climbing on top of him, and *inserting a part of his body into the body of the animal* while his victim desperately fights him off. Once he has done that, once he has successfully dominated the animal and physically inserted himself into his conquest, the ikran is defeated; the ikran goes still and quiet, and Jake wins. “That’s right—you’re mine!” Jake boasts. The animal has been successfully dominated, his will and spirit broken—and the defeated being now belongs to Jake. . . . This was not a scenario in which each party sought out the other, for mutual benefit. The being in power dominated/raped the “lesser” being while the victim fought him off—and that we (and Jake) were essentially told, “if your victim fights you off, it means he wants it” was beyond sickening for me. It far too closely parallels the “you know you want it” mindset and words of real-world rapists.⁴¹

Ernst’s response suggests that the human gaze, and the male gaze that lies beneath it, retain an enduring and haunting resonance, however much filmmakers try to transcend it (or, perhaps, simply pretend to attempt such a transcendence). In *Avatar*, as in all films, the presence of other animals—even in treatments that might seem ecologically enlightened on the surface—invites a critical and skeptical analysis as to whether the filmmaking industry and its audiences are truly becoming more concerned about ecosystemic speciesist inequities, or are merely reiterating the same old anthropocentric prejudices under the cover of a flashy new veneer.

Audiences should be cautious about assuming that the extravagant technological novelties embodied in the film’s computer animation and *visual* three-dimensionality accompany a comparable advance in its *ethical* dimensionality. If ecologically and independently

sophisticated representation of animal presence may be metaphorically envisioned as the third dimension, then *Avatar* remains mired in the same old flat, two-dimensional rut that has afflicted animals in visual culture. Ever since Muybridge and his zoopraxiscope began the tradition of creating and diffusing novel ways of looking at animals, the human gaze(r) has become more and more voracious, more and more pleased at its own omnipowerful intrusion into the world of animals (“the wilderness,” or “nature,” or “the jungle”: however we construe what is ultimately just a backdrop, a set, a tableau, for the dazzling human action that takes place in the foreground). And we need to be more careful than ever before, as we appraise the ramifications of our citizenship in this brave new world of visual culture, when a feel-good eco-parable that has become the world’s most profitable film ever masks, at its heart, the ideology of the rapist.

KINDER WAYS OF LOOKING AT ANIMALS

Why are we looking at animals? What sort of contact zones (between human and other animals) do visual media create? How are we seeing these creatures we have “captured” on film? (The implications of this “capture” are not just metaphorical.) What are the consequences of the ways people look at and think about animals in visual culture? How *aren’t* we looking at animals in visual culture? How *might* we look at them more intelligently, more fairly?

Is it unrealistic to hope that visual culture might help us more accurately locate and situate ourselves in relation to other animals (rendering a truer vision of our place, and their place, and our actual conditions of coexistence)? What should we do with these animals once we’ve gotten them in our clear, accurate, ethical sight-lines? Or, if “what should we do with them?” sounds too paternalistic, then instead, how shall we behave towards them? I won’t answer that question in much depth here, though certainly many others have done so eloquently. For now, I simply suggest that what we *should* do is treat animals better than we have done, and our visual cultural representations of animals significantly affect, positively or negatively, people’s propensity either to revise and improve our patterns of behavior, or, on the other hand, to continue along the path of the status quo with our piercing human gaze of speciesism, encroachment, and imperial dominance.

Why look at animals? This enduring question was, of course, raised in John Berger's famous 1977 essay. It's a good question . . . an important question, a simple, basic question, and though Berger launched into fascinating rambles about all the dysfunctional and improper ways in which people looked at animals, I don't think he ever resolved his basic initial query. He concludes by noting that because of increasing urban/industrial development and the disappearance of animals from people's lives, any meaningful gaze that there might once have been between people and other animals "has been extinguished," and we as a species have "at last been isolated."⁴² So now we're not looking at animals, he posits; but that does not negate the relevance of nonetheless pursuing the question (even if it is "only philosophical"): why look at animals?

It's a question I've been wrestling with, or perhaps dancing around, throughout this essay. I believe it is definitely a question we should be asking, but perhaps (as Berger seems to have found) it's a question we can't answer. Indeed, there is a tradition of unanswered and unanswerable questions people ask about animals. From Thomas Nagel: "What is it like to be a bat?" From Jeremy Bentham: "Can they suffer?" From Jacques Derrida: "And say the animal responded?" From Michel de Montaigne: "When I play with my cat, who knows whether she is not amusing herself with me more than I with her?" From the comic pages: "Why did the chicken cross the road?" And to carry this meditation a step further, if indeed we cannot answer the question "why look at animals in visual culture?" does that imply, on some ethical level, that we should therefore stop looking at them in visual culture? If we cannot clearly explain and defend our gaze, does it then behoove us to stop looking at other animals? I don't know—that's another unanswerable question.

Let me put forth a related but not identical question: Why look at animals in nature? Here I'm talking about real animals, in real, actual, spatial proximity (as opposed to looking at animals through the mediation of visual culture). The naturalist Richard Conniff describes the pleasures and importance of watching real animals. In "The Consolation of Animals" he writes that looking at animals is what "makes me almost sane. These encounters with the lords of life . . . pull me up out of the pettiness and stupidity of my workaday life. . . . Watching

animals fills some larger . . . appetite in much the way that reading poetry does, or listening to music.”⁴³

This may be no more than a subjective matter of taste and temperament, but I believe that what Conniff describes here embodies an admirable sensibility that involves meaningful and equitable interaction with other species. Though of course this is an overgeneralization, I’d suggest that a visual cultural experience of animals is prone to be lazier and more voyeuristic than what Conniff describes. The difference, the deficiency in looking at animals in visual culture as compared to really looking at real animals, stems from the basic fact that the viewers at the movies or surfing the net are not in real proximity to the animal, not out in animal habitats, but rather, comfortably ensconced, isolated, in their own world. And animals don’t fit well into this world.

I believe that our perceptions of animals in visual culture, as mediated by the artifices of our culture, cannot be as accurate, as authentic, as precise as when we’re looking at real animals. In visual culture, animals are edited, framed, commodified, and somehow reduced. As Akira Lippit writes in *Electric Animal*, “Technology and . . . cinema came to determine a vast mausoleum for animal being.”⁴⁴

On the other hand, though, remember my contention that when a person and another animal come into contact, the other animal almost always ends up the worse for this encounter; perhaps that argues *against* looking at real animals and in favor of cultural mediation—the protective distancing (from the animal’s perspective) of the human viewer.

I would like to consider, briefly, two recent independent animal documentaries that eschew the cinematic mainstream: *The Lord God Bird* (George Butler, 2008) and *Silent Roar: Searching for the Snow Leopard* (Hugh Miles and Mitchell Kelly, 2007). These films elucidate an interestingly unconventional relationship between the human viewer and the animal subject. Both these films explicitly recount how hard it is to find the animals they seek. Butler’s film is about the ivory-billed woodpecker, colloquially known as the Lord God Bird because according to legend those who see it spontaneously cry out, “Lord God! What was that?” The bird may or may not be extinct: reliable, confirmed sightings have not been made for decades, though some people featured in this film believe they have seen the elusive bird more recently.

The Lord God Bird wonderfully frustrates its viewers, because it's about an animal that we may not be able to see, that we have quite likely eradicated from the earth (if not completely, then pretty nearly). We wait hopefully to see it throughout the film, and perhaps we do, in a brief blurry and disputed clip, but we certainly don't get a good, clear, satisfying look at it. This teaches us a lesson that I find vital: we are not omnipotent emperors who can look at any animal whenever we choose. Despite the absence of the animal in its title, this film intensely conveys a sense of the bird: its history and ecology, its legendary resonance. Butler shows that we can think richly about an animal without necessitating its literal appearance in our line of sight. The "human gaze" as a trope is troubled, subverted, in this film.

Silent Roar, too, is about an animal that's very difficult to see, the large Himalayan cat that inhabits the mountains just below the peak of Mount Everest. The cinematographers strenuously try to capture the snow leopards on film—and finally, with stealthy remote sensor-activated cameras, they get a few short and fuzzy shots of the leopards. But mostly, in this film as in *The Lord God Bird*, we *don't* see the animals we have come to see, and once again, we're tempted to affirm the ethical proposition that we are not meant to see this animal. Its world is mutually exclusive with our own. Snow leopards live too far away from us, too high; their habitats are too remote; the journey that the film takes to approach them reinforces their distance from us.

And though this may annoy audiences of animal-lookers who have come to expect that they *can* see any animal they want to, still, the film lets us down easily. *Silent Roar*—the title itself is a nice paradox: we expect to *hear* a "roar," but it's withdrawn from us, *silenced*, at the same time it's offered. *Silent Roar* depicts people trying as hard as they can to see snow leopards, with all the possible technology available, and the keenest sense of adventure, but still, as they fail, we may come to terms with the insight that perhaps we simply can't see everything that's out there in the world. And *Silent Roar* still leaves audiences with a very beautiful and memorable film about the region, the place, through which snow leopards sometimes move (just not when most of us can see).

I endorse encounters like these in visual media: experiences that don't flatter our omnivisual fantasies, but instead suggest what we are *not* meant to see, and explain why. In the world of art, a growing canon

of painting, sculpture, photography, and other performative works reinforce this retreat from the anthropocentric omniscience that has traditionally characterized the human gaze. In the vanguard of this (counter-)movement are artists like Britta Jaschinski, Sue Coe, Olly & Suzi, Mark Dion, and Joseph Beuys all of whom Steve Baker discusses in *The Postmodern Animal*. These artists resist a traditional sentimentality toward other animals, in favor of a more nuanced engagement with them, a more ecologically informed and reasoned interaction. As Baker puts it, they are forging “new models of the human and the animal”⁴⁵ in the service of “an imaginative reassessment of the role of animals in human thought,”⁴⁶ which includes a postmodern skepticism about “culture’s means of constructing and classifying the animal in order to make it meaningful to the human.”⁴⁷ These artists aspire to a holistic ecological sensibility that rejects the conventional Cartesian dualism we have constructed to define our relationship with the animal. They realize that the future of the human “is so intimately and creatively bound up with that of the animal” that “the classic dualism of human and animal is not so much erased as *rendered uninteresting* as a way of thinking about being in the world.”⁴⁸

We may call these visual cultural texts postmodern, or posthuman, to indicate a transcendence over the hubristic ethos that humanity has indulged in for so many centuries. That unsustainable ethos, however, will not carry us forward for many more generations. We cannot rely upon the profusion of new media technology to generate what we need to see when we look at the world around us, and at the other species who share this world with us. We need to seek out new, less harmful, ways of looking at animals.

NOTES

1. The first-person plural pronoun here denotes humanity as a whole, and more specifically, the populations of the world’s overdeveloped consumer cultures. And of course, it includes me as well.

2. <http://www.americanhumane.org/protecting-animals/programs/no-animals-were-harmed/> accessed on January 25, 2010.

3. The AHA is separate from the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). See http://www.hsus.org/about_us/accomplishments/the_people_who_have_shaped_the_hsus/

[fred myers cofounder of the hsus.html](#) (accessed January 25, 2010) for an account of how the HSUS split off from the AHA in 1954, after a bitter dispute about what the HSUS faction considered insufficient activism on the part of the AHA.

4. http://www.aarp.org/aarp/broadcast/aarp_radio/movies_for_grownups_pastshows/articles/animal_actors.html accessed on January 29, 2010.

5. <http://www.americanhumane.org/protecting-animals/programs/no-animals-were-harmed/> accessed on October 5, 2009. The citation of Newman's film (about the development of the atomic bombs in the Manhattan Project) as the first one to receive this rating is discussed at http://findarticles.com/p/news-articles/charleston-daily-mail/mi_8044/is_20060320/animal-rights-groups-pushing-real/ai_n46262135/ accessed January 25, 2010.

6. <http://www.ahafilm.info/movies/moviereviews.phtml?fid=7193> accessed on January 25, 2010.

7. <http://www.americanhumane.org/protecting-animals/programs/no-animals-were-harmed/movie-rating-system-old.html> accessed on October 5, 2009.

8. <http://www.americanhumane.org/faqs.html> accessed on October 5, 2009.

9. <http://www.americanhumane.org/faqs.html> accessed on October 5, 2009.

10. The field of “visual culture” is an increasingly prominent academic focus that draws upon anthropology, cultural studies, art history, and various other cognate fields. It addresses the range of visual imagery (film, television, graphics, comics, new media, high and popular/public art, and so forth) that is becoming ever more ubiquitous as our cultural experiences become more resplendently illustrated. While some fear that visual culture threatens to overwrite textual culture, others (including myself) believe the two realms of media can coexist.

11. *King Kong* (Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack, 1933; Peter Jackson, 2005); *Curious George* (Matthew O’Callahan, 2006); *Beethoven* (Brian Levant, 1992; five sequels); *Seabiscuit* (Gary Ross, 2003).

12. A long-running regular feature on CBS’s *Late Show with David Letterman*; Google the term to see a plethora of illustrations.

13. I discuss such odd encounters with animals in more detail in an essay with the self-explanatory title, "Americans Do Weird Things With Animals," *Animal Encounters*, eds. Manuela Rossini and Tom Tyler (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 73-96.

14. See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0136536/> accessed on January 29, 2010.

15. Jeremy Biles, "I, Insect, or Bataille and the Crush Freaks," *Janus Head* (7.1, 115-131), 116-17.

16. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* (16.3, 6-18), 11.

17. Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 39-62; G.A. Bradshaw, B. Smuts, D. Durham, in press. "Open Door Policy: The necessary relinquishment of humanity's "right to sight", in R. Acampora, ed. *Metamorphoses of the Zoo: Animal Encounter After Noah* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers).

18. Mulvey, p. 17.

19. See, e.g., Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

20. *Lassie Come Home* (MGM, 1943) was followed by six other feature MGM films through 1951, and a CBS television series, *Lassie*, from 1954-73, starring a collie. *Flipper* (NBC, 1964-67) starred a series of bottlenose dolphins, trained by Richard O'Barry (who recently starred in the documentary *The Cove*, 2009, in which he explains that he sees his activist campaign against dolphin slaughters as a kind of atonement for his work on the television series). Robert Stevenson's 1957 film *Old Yeller* is about a mixed-breed dog, based on Fred Gipson's 1956 novel. *Sounder*, a 1970 novel by William H. Armstrong adapted into a 1972 film by Martin Ritt, features a mixed-breed dog as the title character. Elsa is a lion cub who stars in *Born Free*, a 1966 film by James Hill (with two sequels) based on the books by Joy Adamson. Rin Tin Tin was the name given to several German Shepherds who starred in a series of Warner Brothers movies (often credited with saving the studio from bankruptcy) in the 1920s and 1930s. Francis the Talking Mule starred in the film *Francis* (1950) and six sequels through that decade.

21. *Free Willy* (Simon Wincer, 1993) tells of a boy's attempts to free an orca whale from captivity in a theme park.

22. *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005); *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990); *Whale Rider* (Niki Caro, 2002).

23. Mulvey (quoting Budd Boetticher), p. 11.

24. E. O. Wilson explains this term that he coined in *Biophilia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984): "we are human in good part because of the particular way we affiliate with other organisms. They are the matrix in which the human mind originated and is permanently rooted," p. 139.

25. Mitchell Leslie, "The Man Who Stopped Time," *Stanford Magazine* (May/June 2001), accessed online January 25 2010 at <http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2001/mayjun/features/muybridge.html>.

26. In fact, they do.

27. Derek Bousé, *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), pp. 42-3.

28. See schedules and programming notes at <http://animal.discovery.com/> (accessed 29 January 2010).

29. Jhan Hochman, *Green Cultural Studies: Nature in Film, Novel, and Theory* (Moscow, Id.: University of Idaho Press, 1998), p. 3.

30. Cynthia Chris, *Watching Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. xi.

31. Chris, p. xii.

32. Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 3.

33. Mitman, p. 4.

34. David Ingram, *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), pp. 135-6.

35. Ingram, p. 132.

36. Ingram, p. 181.

37. http://inmovies.ca/Home/ContentPosting?newsitemid=dishinformation.ca%2F2010%2F01%2F21%2Fpeta-awards-avator%2F&feedname=DISHMOVIE_NEWS&show=False&number=0&showbyline=False&subtitle=&detect=&abc=abc&date=False accessed Feb. 17, 2010.

38. <http://www.americanhumane.org/about-us/newsroom/news-releases/10-avator-animals.html> accessed Feb. 17, 2010.

39. Posted by Sebastian Verdikt, January 22, 2010. http://blog.peta.org/archives/2010/01/james_cameron_avatar.php accessed Feb. 17, 2010.

40. Stephanie Ernst, "Domination and Rape in Avatar: This Is "Respect" for Animals?" On "Animal Rights and AntiOppression" website, <http://challengeoppression.com/2010/02/16/domination-and-rape-in-avatar-this-is-respect-for-animals/> accessed Feb. 20, 2010.

41. <http://challengeoppression.com/2010/02/16/domination-and-rape-in-avatar-this-is-respect-for-animals/> accessed Feb. 20, 2010.

42. John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?", in *About Looking* (New York, Pantheon, 1980), p. 28.

43. Richard Conniff, "The Consolation of Animals," <http://happydays.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/05/27/the-consolation-of-animals/> accessed on October 5, 2009.

44. Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 187.

45. Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 165.

46. Baker, inside cover.

47. Baker, p. 9.

48. Baker, p. 17.