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## Animals, images, anthropocentrism

Barbara Creed & Maarten Reesink

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### Abstract

Anthropocentrism is central to the nature of discourse across all disciplines, from science to philosophy and the arts. We argue that anthropocentrism has become particularly marked in modernity despite the avowal by some theorists that modernity signified a radical break with traditional approaches. A powerful strategy, invoked by such discourses, and designed to cement the anthropocentric perspective, is that of contradiction. Media theorists and scholars working in the broader field of (human) animal studies have begun to unravel and demystify such discourses, questioning the nature of these contradictory perspectives and the anthropocentric point of view at work in visual texts. This is particularly evident in the current work of contemporary theorists who are researching the representation of animals in media texts. For it is the figure of the animal, as represented in visual discourses, from film to photography and new media, that offers a powerful challenge to the dominant anthropocentric worldview.

**Keywords:** (human) animal studies, animal images, animals, anthropocentrism, images, modernity

Animals are everywhere, yet nowhere. We live in a time of periodic outbreaks of global panic concerning the possibility of a bird flu epidemic. Also, we are absorbed by stories of the birth of the latest zoo baby, such as the polar bear Knut who became a media celebrity. Zoos invite the public to participate in national competitions to find the perfect name for new arrivals. The nightly news deluges us with distressing images of massive ‘clearances’ of farm animals in Europe or Asia as a result of a sudden outbreak of an infectious disease that might threaten human lives. Then, in countries such as Australia, we witness shocking television exposes, fol-

lowed by a public outcry, of the brutal torture and killing of sheep and cattle sent to overseas abattoirs in the live export trade. As a result of one such event, in 2011, the Australian trade was suspended temporarily. The acclaimed documentary, *Project Nim* (James Marsh, 2011), which details the life of a ‘talking’ chimpanzee, led to public debate about the rights of all sentient beings. Nim, who was raised as a newborn in a human family, was taught 200 words in sign language, thus enabling him to communicate with his surrogate family members – prior to being sent to an experimental laboratory. Fear of drawing media scrutiny resulted in the authorities releasing Nim into an animal sanctuary.

The global box office hit *Babe* (Chris Noonan, 1995), a feature film about a pig determined to escape the butcher’s axe, was such a hit that the sales of bacon and sausages fell worldwide. In 2008, a freeway surveillance video camera in Santiago, Chile, captured the scene of a dog dragging another injured dog across a busy highway, maneuvering around the speeding cars, and waiting protectively with its distressed companion until a highway crew arrived. The footage of the dog’s bravery became one of the most viewed clips on the Internet on the day of its release. The global success of wildlife documentaries, television series about exotic animals, the latest hit from American or Japanese animation studios starring animals in the leading roles, detailed episodes of the lives of charismatic zoo animals – all of these stories appear to fascinate and capture large media audiences, sometimes even more than the outcome of a thrilling football game or the latest drama in a popular soap opera. On 20 April 2015, for the first time in history, two animals, both chimpanzees, were temporarily granted recognition as legal persons under United States law. The chimpanzees are being held at Stony Brook University for experimentation. The final outcome of their status is pending.

Animals have become prominent protagonists in our everyday lives, brought to us via the ubiquitous media platforms of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the mediascape animals are everywhere present, yet by contrast, in the daily reality of urban life, animals and multispecies of all kinds are increasingly absent. What is the origin of this intense and global human interest in our non-human ‘fellow travellers’, particularly at a time when we are witnessing the greatest extinction of species in recorded history (a massive global tragedy for which we are responsible)? Actual animals are disappearing as our interest intensifies. Living in cities, we surround ourselves with digital creatures varying from robots and cyborgs to, in the words of Donna Haraway, a growing diversity of bio-technologically generated ‘naturecultures’, which should not be ignored or dismissed but understood.<sup>1</sup>

In our lived and imagined relationships with nonhuman animals the media play a crucial role. Throughout its history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the present, the media – particularly film – has revealed an intense interest in the representation of nonhuman animals. These cover a range of formats including documentary and fiction films, the horror genre, art and avant-garde cinema, games, animation, and children’s films. Moving image technologies, including the Internet, have helped to shape the way in which we see all forms of nonhuman animal life, including both our actual and imagined relationships with animals. As with representations of all marginalised groups, from women to the disabled and people of colour, media portrayals of nonhuman animals can vary from presenting a prejudiced and stereotyped view to a more radical and objective one. Many media portrayals also represent animals as a lower form of life and lacking in sentience, as if this were a natural state of being. How and why do some media represent nonhuman animals as ‘other’? To what extent are animals given a voice in media texts? How do we experience the animal gaze? To what extent is the animal *itself* present in film? How do we understand animal agency in film? What does the animal count for?

## 1 Representation & contradiction

Contradiction lies at the heart of media representations of and responses to nonhuman animals and other creatures. We watch a range of programs about animals on our media screens, sometimes according them great significance, yet in reality we give animals little if any rights. We single out some animals, such as domestic pets, for special and privileged treatment, while relegating other animals to lives of pain and misery in factory farms or scientific laboratories. Through the philosophy of human exceptionalism we try to distance ourselves from animals, yet we absorb them into our bodies and lives in a variety of complex and intimate ways: we live with animals, eat animals, wear them, look at them, paint and write about them, mourn them, even bury our dead animals in pet cemeteries with plaques that lament their loss. How do we explain our contradictory relationship with nonhuman animals?

French philosopher Louis Althusser contended that contradiction is at the heart of the way in which ideology works. He argued that individuals do not live apart from ideology, which is a system of ideas, but that ideology is part of their lived relations – that is, it constitutes the way individuals live their lives in relation to others and to the social structures. Hence

it is possible for individuals to believe that they do not oppress animals because they are not aware of the ways in which they might participate in such oppression. In the second wave of feminism, film theorists argued that women who lived in a patriarchal society yet claimed to be equal to men were living in a state of contradiction. Feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Claire Johnston, and Pam Cook argued that the patriarchal symbolic order represented women in film and media as marginalised figures, without a voice or agency, through the strategies of contradiction, objectification, stereotyping, and lack. Women were given neither a voice nor a destiny of their own choosing. Female protagonists existed only in terms of what they signified for the male or what they represented in terms of male fantasy and desire.

Many of these strategies are the same as those employed in the representation of animals within an anthropocentric discourse – particularly the representation of human and nonhuman animals as totally separate entities. In *The Open*, Giorgio Agamben argues that the human has produced itself as separate from the nonhuman animal by what he terms ‘the anthropological machine’ of Western thought.<sup>2</sup> The privileged place of the human has been strategically produced or created. The media constitutes a major discourse in this process. It is only by demystifying anthropocentric representations of animals that we might come to understand what animals mean to us, how we represent them in our imaginary and symbolic lives, and why we have drawn on philosophy and science to deny our own identity as animals. As Alexandre Kojève writes, man only exists by ‘negating himself as an animal’.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, we will be better placed to think about the animal itself. How might we employ media strategies and forms to break down animal stereotyping and to represent nonhuman animals from a non-anthropocentric perspective? In his critique of humanism, Cary Wolfe argues that the classic divisions between self and other, mind and body, human and animal, are central to humanist forms of thinking; he argues for a radical approach, a new posthumanist theory as a way of better understanding the place of human and nonhuman animals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Contemporary thinking in the arts, philosophy, science, film, and media studies is increasingly questioning the right of human beings to continue to see animals only from an anthropocentric perspective. A major reason for this shift has been the findings of scientists, biologists, and neurophysiologists concerning the sentience of animals, the shared attributes of human and nonhuman animals, and the crucial inter-relatedness of all forms of life. In response to these findings philosophers, ethicists, and

animal scholars argue for the importance of developing an ethics that respects the rights of nonhuman animals to live out their lives free from abuse or cruelty. The documentary form has generated a number of powerful films that set out to explore the way in which different societies treat animals. It is disturbing to note that despite a general belief in the progress made by humanity since industrialisation combined it with great technological and scientific achievements, the plight of nonhuman animals could not be more desperate. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is witnessing not only mass exterminations of species but also the greatest loss of animal habitats, the development of the world's most inhumane animal farming and slaughterhouse procedures, and the continuation of inhuman animal experimentation procedures in the name of scientific progress. Documentary films such as *Blood of the Beasts* (Georges Franju, 1949), *Primate* (Frederick Wiseman, 1974), *Zoo* (Wiseman, 1993), *Project Nim*, *Blackfish* (Gabriela Cowperthwaite, 2013), *The Cove* (Louie Psihoyos, 2009), and *The Ghosts in Our Machine* (Liz Marshall 2013) explore our treatment of animals and the question of animals and ethics and the limits of documentary realism.

In an early and definitive article 'Why Look at Animals?' (1980), John Berger points to the changing relationship between humans and animals with the advent of modernity and capitalism, arguing that animal imagery stands in for a lost relationship with animals that was once direct and unmediated. Berger celebrates a pastoral society in which animals, farmed and feral, and what we would now label as 'companion animals', constitute an integral part of the daily lives of humans. It is interesting to see that for many wealthy urbanites today the pastoral has become a new, or rather, renewed ideal, albeit in the form of a 'second house' in the countryside, which is 'closer to nature'. Although various scholars now find Berger's nostalgic viewpoint problematic, his early intervention into the representation of animals in film and media remains important and has been highly productive in terms of the critical debate and discussion his article has generated. One area of Berger's critique that has garnered criticism is his thought that a mediated view of animals always remains a second-hand experience. This is not only because the medium of film directly stimulates our 'primate' senses (sight being the dominant one), but particularly because film, by definition, gives us a framed view, and therefore a restricted one. His critics argue that film as a medium also exploits its technological possibilities to expand our vision and offer us insights into the lives of nonhuman animals that we as humans could not experience in a natural, unmediated way – think, for example, of the use of time-lapse filming to speed up or slow down actions and movements, particularly evident in the

work of the video artist Bill Viola in *I Don't Know What It Is That I Am Like* (1986).

In *Picturing the Beast*, Steve Baker explores another way in which the media and popular culture together have reduced our experience of animals through the representation and circulation of certain kinds of images. In our daily urbanised lives we have become estranged from animals in general; the animals we still do live with, intimately and in large numbers, are very specific animals – that is, ‘pets’, which some would argue have become ‘humanised animals’. These factors have contributed to the emergence of what Jack Zipes calls our ‘Walt Disney consciousness’ – a concept Baker refers to and explores.<sup>4</sup> In *Picturing The Beast* he argues that in popular culture we prefer animal imagery in which the animals are small, hairy, silly, funny, cute – in short, stereotyped and trivialised. This applies not just to the well-known Disney figures but also to ‘animals’ on post-cards, advertisements, wrapping paper, stickers, fridge magnets, and so on. Animals are everywhere – but they have become empty signifiers. One of the most obvious but nevertheless compelling criticisms that might be made of this material is that it is altogether *too much as ease with itself*, because it neither acknowledges nor addresses its own animal content.<sup>5</sup>

## 2 Animals, images, and postmodernity

The question of the animal, or as Derrida put it, the ‘massively unavoidable’ question of the animal, constitutes a crucial area for film theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Many key works have been written, yet so much more about the animal remains unexplored. Animals, insects, in fact all species, pose a new and complex area of research in relation to questions of image, the gaze, ethics, illusion, surveillance, and the spectral. What kind of ethical conditions might be applied in the context of representing animals in film and media? Various scholars argue that the nature of the human/animal relationship changed profoundly with the advent of modernity, leading to an unparalleled othering of non-domestic animals. How and why does modernity define the animal as humanity’s ‘other’? What is the limit between human and animal? How might postmodern films about non-human creatures critique the master discourse of anthropocentrism? How do we live ethically alongside nonhuman species in the age of the Anthropocene?<sup>7</sup>

Cary Wolfe in *Animal Rites* raises the question of speciesism and its use to justify violence against nonhuman others. He examines the ways in

which the discourse of animality intersects with those of race, sexuality, and colonialism. Wolfe argues that speciesism

suggests (like its models racism, sexism, and so on) not only a logical or linguistic structure that marginalizes and objectifies the other solely based on species, but also a whole network of material practices that reproduce that logic as a materialized *institution* and rely on it for legitimation.<sup>8</sup>

The proposal that being human is not sufficient reason to grant human beings greater moral rights than other species, including the right to sacrifice nonhuman animals to meet human needs, remains highly controversial. Other theorists raise questions about the nature of representation in postmodernity. In *Animals in Film*, Jonathan Burt argues that film has altered the way in which we actually see animals and how we conceptualise them. Akira Lippit states that

modernity can be defined by the disappearance of wildlife from humanity's habitat and by the reappearance of the same in humanity's reflections on itself: in philosophy, psychoanalysis and technological media such as the telephone, film, and radio.<sup>9</sup>

In Lippit's view, the presence of the animal persists 'spectrally'. Derrida turns the equation around and states that we should not just question why we look at animals, but should also experience ourselves as seen by them, as existing within their world of vision. This proposition offers an important challenge for film and media scholars investigating the nature of the gaze in relation both to human and animal.

Andre Bazin, who was deeply interested in the cinema's power to record irreversible and final moments such as death, appeared to find the representation on film of actual death (human and animal) an 'obscurity'.<sup>10</sup> Vivian Sobchack in discussing the death of a rabbit in *La Règle du jeu* (Jean Renoir, 1939) argues that the animal's actual death 'ruptures and interrogates the boundaries (and license) of fictional representation and has a "ferocious reality" that the character's death does not ....'<sup>11</sup> These qualifications and distinctions ask us to think in new ways about the ethics of filming death – new ways which arise from bringing the animal fully into discussions about film and media.

Of course, images of animal (as with human) suffering and dying have always generated a range of contradictory emotions – from the *Electrocution of an Elephant*, directed by Thomas Edison in 1903, to the hunting films



that attracted large numbers of spectators to the theaters in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the latter leading to fierce debates about the ethics of poaching and trophy hunting by mostly western tourists and amateur shooters. In his fiction film *White Hunter Black Heart* (1990), Clint Eastwood explores the ethics of big game hunting and its relationship to masculinity and racism. Jonathan Burt has argued that the free and open, or restricted availability, of this kind of imagery which reflects the dominant morality of the time constitutes a crucial resource. This imagery also has the potential to make more people acutely and emotionally aware of animal suffering:

[i]n the light of the extensive use of photography and film in animal politics we can assume that the visual image is as significant to the history of these debates as the ideas and texts from which historians more usually derive them [...] In fact, the actual power of this imagery derives from a much longer term concern over public codes concerning what should and should not be seen.<sup>12</sup>

### 3 Animals, identity, and morality

The question in the title of John Berger's article we started with, 'Why Look at Animals?', problematises the nature of images and the screen spectator relationship. If the dictum that 'words do matter' is true, in our contemporary culture, which is dominated by audiovisual media, images do matter even more. The audiovisual representation of nonhuman animals can help us to learn more about various aspects of the lives of animals, from the daily rhythms of animal life in the wild to the torturous existence of caged hens in battery farms or sows confined to pig stalls in factory farms. These images have the power to challenge us to think about the way in which we treat and relate to nonhuman animals in an ethical sense. Steve Baker rightly states in *Picturing the Beast* that theorists and writers have a responsibility to critique representational strategies in film and other media in the interests of social justice.

[I]f the ongoing project of modifying cultural representations of the animal can in any way help to work against the contemptuous attitudes and painful practices to which animals are still too often subjected, then admitting to a proprietary interest will be a small price to pay.<sup>13</sup>

Anat Pick argues in *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in*

*Literature and Film* (2011) that we need a new kind of ethics, one which is not based on the restrictive ethics of a secular liberal morality.

A creaturely ethics, on the other hand, does not depend on fulfilling any preliminary criteria of subjectivity and personhood. Its source lies in the recognition of the materiality and vulnerability of all living bodies, whether human or not, and in the absolute primacy of obligations over rights.<sup>14</sup>

Scientists and philosophers have begun to dismantle traditional barriers which argued for the separate identities of human and nonhuman animals. Increasingly, evidence emerges that demonstrates Charles Darwin's thesis that human and nonhuman animals share the same emotions, and that those emotions evolved in human and animal alike. Some animals have also demonstrated their ability to experience and show empathy and altruism toward their own and members of other species.<sup>15</sup> These findings have important implications for the usefulness of concepts such as anthropomorphism in analysing spectator responses to the part played by animals in film. If the difference between human and nonhuman animals is one of degree, not kind, then the concept of anthropomorphism needs to be rethought, as the latter's premise is that there are *essential* differences between human and nonhuman animals. What does it mean to identify with an animal on screen, or to confer intentionality on an animal in a fictional narrative such as Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966) in contrast to documentaries such as *Project Nim* or *Blackfish*?

The essays in this special section engage with these questions from various perspectives and in a range of media formats including film, photography, video, and Internet games. The authors do not speak from a single perspective regarding the representation of animals or the screen/animal/spectator relationship. However, all speak from an anti-anthropocentric position, and all seek to find new modes of thinking about the ways in which animals are represented in terms of the image, spectatorship, narrative, and point of view. A central focus and target for some of the best critical writing in the field is the concept of anthropocentrism (its centrality in philosophical discourse as well as its limitations). Reinterpreting animal imagery from the new perspective of contemporary animal studies is both challenging and difficult. Traditional approaches, which relied predominantly on an anthropocentric view, have become inadequate. Burt describes animals as a 'rupture in the field of representation'.<sup>16</sup> The nature of the representation of animals in the media has a great deal to offer our own understanding of human/animal relationships. The articles in this special section explore this relationship in new, complex, and exciting ways.

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## Notes

1. See Haraway 2003 for an explication of this complex topic. See also Haraway 2008.
2. Agamben 2004, pp. 33-38.
3. Kojève 1969, p. 232.
4. Baker 2001, p. 25.
5. Baker 2001 p. xxi.
6. Derrida 2012, p. 106.
7. The Anthropocene refers to the proposal that the age in which we are living is the first age in which human activity has been the single major factor that has influenced changes in the climate and the environment. Scientists have proposed that we rename this geological period the Anthropocene. A pronouncement will be made in 2017 about whether this will become the official name of this period. See Human Animal Research Network Editorial Collective 2015.
8. Wolfe 2003, p. 101.
9. Lippit 2000, pp. 2-3.
10. Bazin 2003 (orig. in 1958), p. 31.
11. Sobchack 2004, p. 274.
12. Burt 2002, p. 168.
13. Baker 2001, p. 232.
14. Pick 2011, p. 193.
15. Bartal & Decety & Mason 2011.
16. Burt 2002, p. 11.

