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Issue Introduction: Reexamining Visual Media to Uncover Nonhuman Animal Erasure

Amber E. George

There have been several recent rereleases of animated and live-action Disney films that use computer-generated images (CGI) to represent the lives of nonhuman animals. Disney has made some effort to represent nonhumans in liberating, humane, and realistic ways as can be seen in *Dumbo* (2019). As a live-action remake, *Dumbo* continues the original story of an entertainment circus elephant named Jumbo Junior, who has unusually large ears that cause humans to tease and taunt him to the point of ostracization (George, 2012). Director Tim Burton wised up to the idea that glamorizing circus cruelty in a children's film is unacceptable. Thus, in the *Dumbo* remake, Jumbo Junior and his mother are freed from circus exploitation to live among their own kind in a type of haven elsewhere (Greenspan, 2019). However, facts remain that plenty of real elephants and other animals continue to suffer in circuses, zoos, and other institutions including on television and movie sets that exploit nonhumans for profit and entertainment (Englar, 2019).

There are more films on Disney's re-making docket that include *Jumanji*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Lion King*, and *Aladdin* that leverage CGI technology to portray realistic nonhuman animals instead of forcing real animals to suffer on sets or behind the scenes (Englar, 2019). The films are said to support thoughtful messages about animal rights and, in many cases, have cast members who promote empowering messages about animals in their press conferences (Englar, 2019). Thus, there has been some movement toward promoting CAS principles to implement real social change for nonhuman animals in media representation. However, we still must contend with outdated media that floods our viewing history and deserves critical analysis.

The essay in this issue entitled "The Filmic Slaughterhouse" written by David Gould explores a thoughtful analysis of how modern cinematic culture has placed nonhuman animals in a situation of absence so that it is largely impossible to understand their lives and, more importantly, their deaths. The essay explores the death scenes of nonhuman animals in media

ranging from Disney's *The Lion King* to *Old Yeller*. Specifically, Gould explores how animal death has been erased from view both on and off the cinematic screen. As a result of unrecognizing animals in both life and death, humans who consume the slaughterhouse animal or the animal on the screen, remain locked in perpetuating animal suffering.

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The Filmic Slaughterhouse

David Gould¹

¹University of Leeds, Leeds, West Yorkshire, England

Abstract

Although some animals are killed in other places, millions of animals are killed in slaughterhouses every day. Animals are brought in alive but certainly do not *live* there. The sole purpose of the slaughterhouse is to kill animals. The slaughterhouse isolates the moment of death, both in terms of practice and location, and so too is the depiction of animal death in film. Animal killing is literally *removed* from public life. This analysis examines a collection of films that portray animal death in ways that remove the moment of death from the direct view of the audience. Many filmmakers use a cinematic technique that adheres to the following formula: an animal appears on screen alive, there is a cut away, and when the animal reappears on screen again it is dead. This small, and often overlooked, technique in filmmaking coincides with how nonhuman animals move from visibility to invisibility both on and off screen. Just as animal slaughter moved from urban areas to distant rural areas inside windowless buildings, so too has the cinema moved from showing real animal death to now rarely showing when an animal passes from life into death. This analysis deals with some of the following questions: In what way does visual media reflect the structures of society, with regard to the absence of animal death in day-to-day life? In a world in which billions of animals are killed every year, why are the consumers of those animals unable to watch even simulated animal death? What is the relationship between the removal of animal slaughter from public life and what it means for an animal to die? This article contends that it is only through an exploration of the interconnectivity between representation and reality, and form and content, that such questions can be answered.

Keywords: *slaughterhouse, cinema, John Berger, Jonathan Burt, animal-sign, labor, anthropomorphism, capitalism, vision*

Despite the infamously traumatic nonhuman animal death scenes in films such as *Watership Down* (Rosen, 1978), *The Lion King* (Hahn, Minkoff & Allers, 1994), and *Old Yeller* (Anderson & Stevenson, 1957), combined with the slaughter of millions of nonhuman animals every week, one could be forgiven for asking if nonhuman animals die. (I shall henceforth refer to “nonhuman animals” as “animals” unless required for the sake for clarity). Of course, from that fact that animals are, both in reality and on the screen, alive *and then* dead, one can confidently know that an animal has in fact died. But for the vast majority of people, this knowledge does not come from an encounter with *dying* as such. An animal is alive, and then dead; but the passing from life into death takes place out of sight. There is no doubt that in the films listed above, and other films to be examined later in this essay, filmmakers dramatize the subject of death in their work. And there is no doubt that there are a very small number of people who deal directly with animal death. The issue at hand is of a precise nature: the creation of death as a moment and the removal of that moment from the view of the audience and the consumer. This analysis will show how contemporary animal killing informs, and is informed by, our distance from both real animals and what John Berger (1978) calls “animal-signs.” The way that animal slaughter takes place on the margins of society, performed by marginalized groups, makes the exclusion of animal death on screen the most literal aspect of the depiction of animals. How a cow becomes beef and a pig becomes pork, is a process that passes through the same peripheral blind spot that the animals on screen go through when they pass from character to corpse.

This analysis expands upon John Berger’s essay *Why Look at Animals?* (1980) to show the intricate relationships between human and nonhuman animals. The most vocal critic of Berger’s essay is Jonathan Burt. Using Burt’s (2002, 2005) work alongside *Why Look at Animals?*, I hope to demonstrate the strength of Berger’s essay and its relevance today. Burt’s strange optimism and lack of care in applying his critical insights to his own work reveals the way that capitalism cannot be detached from the animal question. By weighing up the “pros and cons” of contemporary human and nonhuman animal relations, Burt disregards the underlying structures that link his pros with his cons. Despite his failure to offer a sound critique of Berger, Burt does provide some key insights into the role of animals in film. These insights will strengthen Berger’s argument and expand on some of his claims. This analysis shows how, through modern capitalism and the

expansive nature of the division of labor, animals are now marginalized to such a degree that animal-signs bear almost no *direct* resemblance to the way that animals now live. Pigs are one such example. Globally, around one billion pigs are killed each year, with the vast majority spending their lives in factories as far from possible from the public gaze (Sayers, 2016, p. 373). Yet, the ways that pigs are depicted in films and television shows, such as *Babe* (Miller, Miller, Mitchell, & Noonan, 1995), *Peppa Pig* (Astley & Baker, 2004), and *The Muppet Show* (Casson & Harris, 1976), bear absolutely no *direct* resemblance to the lives of actual pigs. As agriculture has expanded and become much more refined, pigs have been denied any life that is not directly beneficial to human consumption. So too with pigs as animal-signs being stripped of anything pig-like in order to be used completely instrumentally. Once the relationship between the way that animals are killed and the way that they are used in film narratives about death has been explored, this essay concludes by examining how the perpetual marginalization of animals and animal death influences human ideas about nature.

The Animal-Sign

Berger opens his essay *Why Look at Animals?* by claiming that nonhuman animals entered into human life as messengers. What makes animals recognizable as messengers is that both humans and animals “are born, are sentient and are mortal” (Berger, 1980, p. 2). Animals look at humans, just as humans look at animals. Animals look at humans from across an abyss, and so too humans look at animals from across a similar, but non-identical, abyss. The difference between humans and animals is the way that animals fix their stare from across the abyss, while humans bridge the abyss with language (Berger, 1980, p. 3). An immediate difficulty arises in such a claim. Berger appears to be assuming that animals do not possess the capacity for language. But Berger would not be alone in his position. Marx argued that the distinction between humans and animals is that humans *produce* their means of subsistence. As humans produce their means of subsistence, they simultaneously and necessarily produce social bonds and culture, but most importantly, they produce language (Marx & Engels, 2010, pp. 35-36). Jacques Lacan also distinguished between humans and animals based on language. Lacan argued that although animals might *appear* to use a language of sorts, he maintained, in a properly Cartesian manner, that

animals merely react, rather than respond, to external stimuli, and that their language is nothing more than prewired behavior (Derrida, 2003, pp. 123-125). Along with Marx and Lacan, the history of European philosophy, anthropology, and linguistics is fraught with arguments insisting that language is the defining feature of humanity (DeMello, 2012, p. 365). Johnathan Burt explicitly accuses Berger of being a part of this tradition, but as a thinker who is especially anthropocentric. Burt argues that language in Berger's work is a tool for *confirmation* rather than mutual understanding. Humans are confirmed by language, something that animals cannot do. The bridge over the abyss is exclusively human. The idea that language might be thought of as a form of mutual understanding is not even considered by Berger (Burt, 2005, p. 207).

Burt's optimism spills out in almost all of his arguments against Berger, most of which are addressed throughout the essay. The clearest evidence of this is the way that he does precisely what he accuses Berger of doing. Burt's insistence for a painfully thorough deconstruction of almost every word in the opening lines of *Why Look at Animals?*, and his flippant remarks about how Berger's essay depicts a "working ideal," are forgotten when he places "mutual understanding" as the normative, binary opposition to what he thinks Berger is doing with language (Burt, 2005, pp. 206-208). Burt seems to inject optimism into the notion of human and animal language without providing concrete examples. Berger notes the way that animals and humans lack a "common language" (Berger, 1980, p. 4). Berger has a very specific idea in mind when referring to human language; "words [are] not mere signals, but signifiers of something other than themselves" (Berger, 1980, p. 7). Decades of research has thoroughly concluded that a wide range of nonhuman animals possess the capacity for language. Dogs, for example, can understand the connection between as many as two-hundred specific words and their corresponding objects, as well as comprehending specific commands. Parrots can use upwards of a hundred words in the right context and the correct tense. Bonobos can use language to discuss their feelings (DeMello, 2012, pp. 366-367). The topic of nonhuman animal language requires much more debate and elaboration, in particular, the role of gesture, as discussed by thinkers such as Donna Haraway (Haraway, 2008, pp. 3-42), Paul Patton (Patton, 2003, pp. 83-99), and Emilie Genty (Genty and Byne 2009, 287-301). For this essay, suffice to say that Berger does not deny that animals have language, but examines the distinctively human use of "animal-

signs for charting the experience of the world” (Berger, 1980, p. 9). The claim that human language has certain particularities is not problematic. Across the range of animal species that can fly, from wasps to geese to bats, there exists a multitude of distinct ways of flying. To distinguish, observe, and examine each mode of flight is not an activity that necessarily requires any hierarchy of value. The same is true for any other activity such as swimming, reproducing, or fighting. The problem is not whether nonhuman animals have language, but rather, *which* nonhuman animals have language and what is distinctive about each kind of nonhuman animal language. I agree with Berger in his claim that one particular aspect of human language is the use of animal-signs or symbols to denote *immaterial or abstract* things, specifically in the creation of analogies, metaphors, myths, and stories.

Berger provides numerous examples of human cultures using animal-signs to tell stories. The animal-sign is a representation of a nonhuman animal that ranges from cave paintings to Disney characters. The appearance of animal-signs in every known culture across human history demonstrates the intimate relationship that humans and animals have shared. In the past, the use of animal-signs in storytelling was not *solely* for instrumental purposes, such as hunting and warning of predators. Across cultures animals have been both worshiped and utilized: “A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant (...) is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an *and* not by a *but*” (Berger, 1980, p. 5). This dualistic relationship is embodied in the animal-sign. The relationship between the animal-sign and animals is one in which the animal-sign unavoidably fails to fully encapsulate any animal. But the animal-sign also contains meaning beyond any animal. For example, throughout history foxes has been consistently represented as sneaky, deceitful, intelligent, and cunning (Badke, 2011). The denouncement of all such descriptions of foxes as anthropomorphic is a modern, mechanistic, solipsistic understanding of animals. The accusation that one is anthropomorphizing animals is also a claim to know the nature of humans. But this knowledge finds its genesis in the scientific tests conducted on *animals* in which an animal is isolated from the rest of the world. A concrete example would be the way that the results of Ivan Pavlov’s experiments on the saliva production of dogs are used to understand human behavior (Russell, 2009, pp. 55-57). The concept of humans is as imprisoned as the animals who find themselves subjects of these artificial tests (Berger, 1980, p. 12; DeMello, 2012, pp. 357-359). Until the

19th century, so-called anthropomorphisms were an expression of the close proximity of animal and human life (Berger, 1980, p. 9). The way that foxes move and stalk their prey has been represented with striking consistency since the earliest known accounts of foxes (Badke, 2011). There is something necessarily *real* about foxes in their representations. The discovery of cave paintings in France dating back 30,000 years found that people used fire against the contours of caves, playing with moving lights and shadows, to create a kind of animation to their animal-signs. The animations were not a testament to the bare fact that animals move, but a representation of the specific movements of actual animals. Even to the modern eye the paintings bare a remarkable resemblance to the actual animals (Nelson & Herzog, 2010)

Despite their accuracy, animal-signs cannot encapsulate animals entirely. The materiality of animals, their texture, smell, and sound, is lost when they appear on the wall of a cave or a television screen. But the animal-sign also expresses more than just an animal. The animal-sign expresses human worship, ritual, and culture. Animal-signs not only change in their style and composition, but in their *meaning*. For example, in ancient Mesopotamia foxes delivered the God of air, Enlil, from the underworld (Sax, 2001, p. 117). In ancient China the story '*Jenshih, the Lady Fox*' tells the story of a shape-shifting fox who falls in love with a human (Sax, 2001, p. 121). Today, the pro-hunting lobby have their own myth about foxes, even at times referring to them as the "Red Devil" (Lyndsay-Smith, 2011). These differences are represented in each culture's depiction of foxes. These myths emerged from real social relations, and the animal-sign expresses this social relation. In short, the truth content of the animal-sign is found both in its accurate representation of animals *and* the culture, myth, and worship that surrounds it.

Animal Liberation From the Animal-Sign

Burt takes issue with the above reading of animal-signs. He links the practice of storytelling through animal-signs to the practice of animal sacrifice. He insists that the move from the use of animal-signs, which was bound up in animal sacrifice, to the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified in semiotic theory, has been one of liberation for the animal. The pet, for example, is an animal that can now live alongside humans without the dominating practices that turned it into an animal-sign through

sacrifice (Burt, 2005, p. 210). The irony, according to Burt, is that the past configurations of the animal-sign that Berger so painfully longs for, are tied up with animal cruelty. Again, Burt's optimism blinds him to the material reality of animals today. Burt uses the phrase "negative outlook" to dismiss analyses that fail to equally weigh up the "pros and cons" of the situation (Burt, 2005, pp. 213-214). Far from romanticizing the past or lamenting a loss of a much more intimate relationship between humans and animals, and far from claiming that real animals no longer play a part in the constitution of animal-signs, I think that the truth content of animal-signs persists. The truth today, however, is the instrumentalization and marginalization of animals. Berger argues that every tradition that mediates the relationships between human and nonhuman animals has been broken. From the 18th century to modern capitalist society, animals have been forcibly excluded from much of everyday life (Berger, 1980, p. 1). The relationship is not non-existent, but rather, the relationship is one that is deeply mediated by broken traditions.

Burt's understanding of the pet comes from such an intense focus on the individual animal that the bigger picture, namely that animal's history, is missed. For example, in *Animals in Film*, Burt's two-hundred-page book on contemporary animals, the word "capitalism" is mentioned only once, and is done so only as a way of dismissing Berger as a pessimist (Burt, 2002, p. 26). This also leads Burt to overlook the painful irony of his book title. *Animals in Film* never mentions the fact that gelatin is essential in the making of film (Vergauwen, 2003, pp. 13-14); animals are *literally* in film. Burt seems pleased with this conclusion that a pet, as a useless animal, finds salvation in its uselessness (Burt, 2005, p. 211). I agree that the life of an individual pet *might* be free from direct abuse, but the system that created the pet, that transformed the wolf into a pug, that created pedigree dogs fraught with painful hereditary illnesses, cannot be ignored in our consideration of pets (Rooney & Sargan, 2009, pp. 10-17). Burt's conclusions about the salvation of pets demonstrate his lack of care again when applying his own critical insights. Burt argues that Berger is so reductionist and vague in his usage of the word "animal" that it loses all meaning. The word "look" also demonstrates Berger's overly simplistic analysis and his inability to think of the plurality of "looks" (Burt, 2005, p. 207). The plethora of different ways that animals find their meanings is ignored by Berger in favor of simple narrative against modernity. Despite this critique of Berger, Burt happily

throws around the word “pet” uncritically and without providing a history of the plurality of “pets.” Berger’s account is much more convincing because he presents a general structure of how the historically specific cultural practice of pet ownership came to be, without trying to reduce every pet to nothing more than a subject for his analysis. One can think through the plurality of “pets” without disregarding Berger’s analysis of the phenomena of pet ownership.

The pet is a modern invention. As an animal confined to the private home, stripped of purpose, and lacking sufficient exercise, the pet comes to resemble its owner. What the pet and its owner share is their redundancy and isolation in the modern technological world (Berger, 1980, pp. 12-13). What appears to be a continuing tradition is merely a relationship mediated by a broken tradition. Dogs chased rats, hunted, and kept guard. The relationship persists despite the material conditions that lead to the use of domestic animals has changed entirely. Dogs are no longer needed to chase rats. To complete the passage quoted earlier in this essay, the way that a peasant is fond of his pig *and* is glad to salt away its pork is “extremely difficult for the modern, urban subject to understand” (Berger, 1980, p. 5). All that remains is the owner’s desire to own a pet, regardless of what must be done to fulfill this desire (the painful life of pedigree dogs, for example). The modern, bourgeois subject supplements their existence with an animal. A pet embodies the fondness that a peasant feels towards the domestic animal, without any residue of function, purpose, or necessity. A pet is loved because it has lost its animality. There are a lot of other places that one can look for examples of animals losing their animality, such as laboratories or zoos, but I will focus on the slaughterhouse because it is the place that deals *solely* with animal death.

The Slaughterhouse

The slaughterhouse is not an anomaly in the killing of animals. Animals are killed on farms, in laboratories, and even domestically, but in the UK alone, almost one-hundred million animals are killed in slaughterhouses every month (National Statistics, 2017, p. 1; National Statistics, 2017a, p. 1). And, despite the techniques and practices of the slaughterhouse originating in Europe and America, the slaughterhouse today is found globally. The UK imports 750,000 tonnes of chicken meat every year, and the sources range from Germany to Brazil (European Union, 2010,

p. 68-73; Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, 2015, p. 16-18).

The modern slaughterhouse emerged from technological development, economic necessity, and bourgeois sensibility. In London, for example, the busy Smithfield Market held thousands of animals in the city center (Beirne, 2014, p. 51). Already animals were becoming instrumentalized, but their lives were not yet carved up. Numerous regulations were passed to control the killing of animals. At first the only thing that the laws mentioned was the need to reduce noise, smell, and the sight of blood. Writers at the time described the scent of animal slaughter entering a home as “injurious” to the owner (Beirne, 2014, p. 52). The middle classes frequently complained at the *sight* of animal cruelty, but more often than not their complaint regarded the behavior of the people beating the animals, rather than the actual suffering of the animals (Kean, 1998, p. 30). But as the popularity of pets grew, so too did the sentimental attitude towards animals bred for slaughter (Thomas, 1983, p. 117). This sentimental attitude, however, could not eclipse the idea that animals existed at the disposal of humans. People demanded meat, but also found themselves disgusted at the sight of the large-scale slaughter required to satisfy their hunger. The invention of the rail network provided the answer and has since been pivotal in the development of the modern slaughterhouse. Animals could be killed outside the city center, out of sight, and transported in. But slaughterhouses, such as the Chicago Stock Yard in America, still had to be built in urban areas. Beef begins to rot very quickly in hot rail cars and a cow can lose as much as five percent of its mass during just three hours in transit (Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 62). Slaughterhouses continued to pose similar problems as the Smithfield Market. The mass slaughter of animals is bloody, gruesome, and stinks. The close proximity of slaughterhouses to urban areas continued to discomfort those living nearby. With the improvement in refrigeration technology, urban slaughterhouses were closed (the Chicago Stockyard closed in 1971), and new ones were built as far as possible from the general population (Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 64; DeMello, 2012, p. 132). To meet the increasing demands for meat and to remove the sight of slaughter, while also keeping costs down, the divisions between animal life, animal slaughter, and animal butchery became increasingly separated.

Burt argues that such depictions of slaughterhouses are too vague and too reductionist. He argues that the move towards the slaughterhouse has been a complicated plurality of relationships which are glossed over in such

accounts. The figure quoted earlier of one-hundred million slaughtered animals per month in the UK would, no doubt, be another example of a metanarrative that reduces the plurality of animals into the singular animal. The umbrella term “animal-welfare” also reduces a myriad of different kinds of suffering and hides more than it reveals (Burt, 2002, pp. 168-172). The fashionable trick of insisting that we must focus on the particular to avoid metanarratives, inevitably falls short when thinking about animal slaughter. In his critique of Berger, Burt advocates an approach to animal studies that focuses on particular animals, but his argument fails to explain how one can think about the welfare of a hundred thousand individual birds locked in a single battery farm whereby every single one of them will be slaughtered within eight weeks. I agree with Burt that there must be nuance in any account given of animal cruelty. The history of cows, or even the histories of cows, no doubt differs from the history of turkeys. But I think that the impossibility of a delicate and specific analysis of individual acts of animal cruelty within the modern slaughterhouse should be understood as another effect of the modern slaughter industry itself, rather than a failing of those who try to write about it.

Slaughterhouses are places that farmed animals are taken to be killed. Animals live in one place and die in another. The only time that an animal sees the inside of a slaughterhouse is when it is about to be killed. Animals are brought in alive but certainly do not *live* there. The sole purpose of the slaughterhouse is to kill animals. The slaughterhouse isolates the moment of death, both in terms of practice and location. Slaughterhouses are located in rural areas away from the vast majority of the population (Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 62). Animal killing is literally *removed* from public life. The life of an animal bred for slaughter is as divided as the labor required to carve up its body. The labor is performed by unskilled workers, usually from marginalized groups (LeDuff, 2003, p. 184; DeMello, 2012, p. 140). The only contact that workers have with the animals is in the act of killing. The work is dangerous, leading to high rates of serious injury and death, as well as psychologically damaging, with many slaughterhouse workers suffering from trauma (Labatut, 2016, p. 353). Animals do not die where they lived, and are not killed by anyone who has lived alongside them. Their bodies are then carved up and processed by yet another set of workers, more often than not in another location. The point is, that even the farmer, the one who rears the animals, whether mechanistically or organically, is not present in their

death. And the slaughterhouse worker is not present for the lives of the thousands of animals that they kill. Only the slaughterhouse workers participate in the death of the animal, and do so in isolation. In America, for example, there are 150,000 workers employed in slaughterhouses (Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 64). This means that the killing of billions of animals every year is carried out by only 0.05% of the population. Animals die all around us in their billions, and yet for most of the population the closest encounter with animal death will be licking sticky animal fat from their fingers or reaching around inside the skin of a cow to find their car keys. The contemporary relationship with *real* animals, then, might be better described as one that is mediated by traditions have been *carved up* rather than broken. Animal death has been carved out of everyday life, and animal life carved up into factory lines. With this relationship in mind, I want to examine the usage of animal-signs in contemporary film to show the way death takes place out of sight.

The Contemporary Animal-Sign

The sentimentalizing of pets and the physical marginalization of farmed animals takes on a different form culturally. The clothes-wearing animals in the Beatrix Potter books are early examples of the modern animal-sign. As real animals were pushed further away, the animal-signs that they left behind could be used to tell human stories (Berger, 1980, p. 13). Animal-signs bore *some* physical resemblance to real animals, but everything else about them was distinctly human. Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894) featured talking animals as a way of teaching moral, human lessons, rather than give any insight into the lives of animals (DeMello, 2012, p. 331). Animal toys, such as the Teddy Bear, also looked more human than animal. The Teddy Bear was inspired by a 1902 cartoon in *The Washington Post* that made fun of Theodor Roosevelt for declining to kill a black bear. The only thing bear-like about the Teddy Bear was the fur. The lessons in kindness and compassion that the bear was later used in teaching were all human (Mooallem, 2014). The invention of the motion picture allowed for an expansion in this use of animal-signs. Hollowed out animal-signs began to move across cinema screens. Mickey Mouse's first appearance was working alongside several other animals as he tried to build an airplane. Nothing about him, except for a few minor signifiers, such as his ears and nose, resembled an actual mouse. The earliest attempt at synchronizing sound with animation

was the 1924 film *Come Take a Trip in My Airship*, a film composed almost exclusively of very human-like animals. The first animated dialogue was the talking dog in *My Old Kentucky Home* in 1926 (Bendazzi, 2016, p. 45). Before the dog speaks, he sits at a dinner table and plays the trombone. As the popularity of cinema grew and as technology improved, films increased in length and became storytelling mediums. The mere spectacle of a talking animal on screen was not enough to entice audiences. Filmgoers preferred to see stories about themselves. Animal-signs were ideal for such purposes and feature length films such as *King Kong* (Selznick, Cooper, & Schoedsack, 1933), *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (Disney & Cottrell et al., 1937), and *Lassie Come Home* (Marx & Wilcox, 1943), represent an explosion of animal films that continues today (DeMello, 2012, pp. 333-338).

By rethinking the role of the animal-sign contra Berger, Burt claims that animals also play a part in determining the meaning of animal-signs. Lassie, Burt argues, is a “great actor” (Burt, 2002, p. 32). When Lassie emerges from a river, he resists the urge to shake off the water. This ability to resist instinctual behavior is a testament to Lassie’s training and ability to respond to the context of the film’s narrative. This, Burt claims, is an example of acting, and demonstrates how Lassie is more like a human than a dog (Burt, 2002, p. 32). The idea that animal-signs are empty ignores the role of animal agency and the input that animals have in how they are understood. Burt accuses Berger, and any analysis such as the one given below, of conjuring up theoretical “dead ends” by blaming everything on capitalism (Burt, 2005, p. 207).

These are yet more examples of Burt refusing to look beyond the particular animal in question. In regard to the “great actor” Lassie, Burt cites a handful of cases that demonstrate the cruelty required to train animals for film (Burt, 2002, p. 133). His reference to them is, as usual, to show the progress made since those dark days. Burt is clearly wrong to assume that Berger is blaming capitalism for everything bad in the world, but he is even further from the truth in his ignorance of the role that capitalism, and the structure of society in general, plays in his examples of positive relations between human and nonhuman animals (especially in Hollywood). Burt’s insistence on avoiding a negative outlook means that he praises Lassie for his exceptional acting skills while ignoring how many animals had to be brutally slaughtered to provide the gelatin in the film, the meat to feed the cast and crew, and the leather to cover the director’s chair. In the face of Berger’s

claim about the loss of the animal, Burt's shallow treatment of the cruel training that went into making Lassie more human than animal actually supports Berger's argument. Nowhere does Burt give an account of how Lassie the dog can understand what a film is, what a storyline is, what acting is. He also does not give a useful distinction between Lassie responding to the cruel methods of animal training and Lassie responding to his inner creative impulse as an actor. The only way that Burt can begin to argue against Berger's assessment of contemporary relations between human and nonhuman animals is by isolating and abstracting single examples from the totality through which they come into existence. Animal-signs have been hollowed out because they are part of a culture that has stripped anything animal like from billions of real animals.

Animal Death in Film

I do not intend to dispute the emotional effects that the dramatization of nonhuman animal death on film might have. I want to examine a collection of films that deal with nonhuman animal death in order to show that the *moment* of death is removed from the view of the audience. *The Lion King* (Hahn, Minkoff & Allers, 1994) is one such example. Undoubtedly the famous scene in which Mufasa is thrown to his death evokes a strong emotional reaction. Mufasa is an idealized Father figure, teaching Simba valuable life lessons while also commanding respect from all those around him. The narrative intent is to persuade the audience to identify with Simba, and through Simba, feel a strong paternal connection with Mufasa. Despite the emotional build up to the death scene, along with the powerful music, the quick and exciting shots, and the deep suspense, the audience does not see Mufasa die. Mufasa falls, screaming. As he approaches the wildebeest charging below, the shot fades and focusses on Simba, wide mouthed, staring at the event that the audience is denied access to, namely, the moment of Mufasa's death. We *know* that Mufasa has died, because we later see his lifeless body. But we do not see him die.

Watership Down (Rosen, 1978) places death as a very central topic. But throughout the entire film there are only two death scenes that come close to showing the moment of death. The film culminates in a battle between the Efrafan rabbits and the protagonist group. The scene is extremely violent and bloody, but skillfully choreographed. Woundwort, the villain, enters a burrow and is confronted by Blackavar. As Blackavar lunges forwards,

Woundwort pushes him to the ground *out of shot*. Woundwort reaches down and tears open Blackavar. Then, *reappearing* on screen, Blackavar is raised in Woundwort's jaws, dead and covered in blood. The rest of the scene is littered with such techniques. When a dog is released into the fight, he grabs the rabbits in his teeth and throws them into the air, out of view of the audience. When they return, they are dead. Again, and again, the moment of death happens off screen. The film ends with the death of Hazel. After succeeding in finding a home, the film travels to the future showing Hazel as old and frail. The Black Rabbit of Death appears and persuades Hazel to join his Owlsa (spiritual world). Once assured that his family and friends will be fine, Hazel lies down peacefully and gives himself over to the Black Rabbit. His chest rises and falls for a few breaths, and then stops. His body lies still for a moment. His spirit then stands, leaves the body, and bounds freely towards the sun. The audience is reminded that in *Watership Down*, rabbits can never *really* die. Their bodies are of the earth and are a mere moment for the actual rabbit-spirit. Hazel does not die; he leaves his earthly body to join the Black Rabbit's Owlsa. This scene assures the audience that no rabbit has actually died because they have all entered back into the spirit world to live forever. I think this analysis is supported by other scenes in the film where a character appears to die but is then shown to be alive. Earlier in the film Hazel is shot by a farmer. We see him getting shot and the other characters are forced to leave him behind. But after a short musical number it is revealed that he survived. Another example of this technique is when Bigwig is caught in a snare. The film cuts to a first-person perspective of Bigwig as his eyes slowly close. In the next shot, as the others are trying to comprehend his death, he wakes and frees himself from the snare.

In Old Yeller (Anderson & Stevenson, 1957), the scene in which Travis kills Yeller is also famously traumatic. Again, I do not wish to dispute the emotional effect that this scene has. But the death of Yeller happens off screen. Travis raises his gun, and we take one last look at Yeller. The camera cuts back to Travis, and his family, before we see him pull the trigger killing Yeller. In *Bambi* (Disney & Algar et al., 1942), the death of Bambi's mother takes place out of sight, with the gunshot firing from a distance. The exclusion of animal death from the screen is not confined to films for children. In *I am Legend* (Goldsman & Lawrence, 2007), the protagonist, Dr. Robert Neville, is eventually forced to kill his companion, a dog named Samantha, after she becomes infected with a deadly virus. Samantha lies in

Neville's arms as they share their last moments together. The camera moves up, framing Neville's face as he suffocates Samantha. In *Mad Max 2* (Kennedy & Miller, 1981), a film that shows *human* death directly on screen on several occasions, the killing of Max's dog takes place out of shot.

There are, of course, exceptional cases in which films do show the moment of death. *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), *Andrei Rublev* (Ogorodnikova & Tarkovsky, 1973), and *Pink Flamingos* (Waters, 1972), for example, go far beyond *representing* animal death and show the *actual* killing of animals directly on screen. One of the first motion pictures was of animal death. The 1903 film *Electrocuting an Elephant* by Thomas Edison showed a real elephant being electrocuted to death. At the time, the general public were more fascinated by the spectacle of electricity than they were outraged at the killing of an elephant (Creed, 2014, pp. 20-21). But these examples, like the killing of animals outside of the slaughterhouse, are exceptional cases. Showing animal death directly on screen, whether representational or actual, is a practice reserved for specialist sub-genres, such as documentaries about slaughterhouses, instructional videos on slaughter, and animal rights propaganda (O'Brien, 2016, pp. 32-34). Usually when film fiction shows animal death it is met with public anger. Paul Renior's 1939 film *Rules of the Game* shows the killing of several rabbits. Shortly after the film's release, legislation was passed to prevent the harming of animals in the making of film (Creed, 2014, p. 25). Also in 1939, the film *Jesse James* showed a horse being lead off a cliff to its death. The spectacle caused an outrage that led to the American Humane Association working alongside the Hays Office to ensure that animals were not harmed in the making of films (Burt, 2002, p. 153). Animal death disappeared from the screens almost completely. The vast majority of the population see neither actual animal death, nor the representation of it through animal-signs.

Death Escapes All Signification

Vivian Sobchack argues that even when filmmakers attempt to show death directly, audiences never see the actual *moment* of death. She argues that the impossibility of representing the moment of death is brought to light in the medium of film. Film is a sequence of still images flashing across the screen. In editing the film, it becomes clear that in no single image can be identified confidently as *the* moment of death. She argues that showing death on screen demonstrates the limits of *representation* rather than the limits of

life (Sobchack, 2004, pp. 234-235). The obsession with isolating the moment between being and non-being also appears outside of film. In *Burnt Norton*, T. S. Eliot describes the “neither flesh nor fleshless” point between life and death as one that forever eludes us (Sobchack, 2004, p. 236). Freud also claimed that death could not be represented. He claimed that death was too abstract and negative to think about. Furthermore, death is inescapably bound up with time, and since the unconscious does not obey temporal laws, even unconsciously death cannot be represented (Razinsky, 2014, pp. 15-16). In the 18th and 19th century, death had become less familiar *as a part of life*, and became defined as a distinct *break* from life. Death was, in science and literature, conceived as that which occurs *after* life (Ariès, 1976, pp. 56-59). By separating life and death into two separate and distinct states, the moment separating the two became a moment of fascination.

There is some truth to the claim made by Sobchack regarding the difficulty of capturing death on film. But I think she goes too far in her assertion that “death confounds all codes” and can only be pointed towards (Sobchack, 2004, p. 233). The problem is the signification of death as *a moment*, not the representation of death as such. To point towards the moment of death continues to posit death as a moment, but merely one that we cannot see. This way of thinking resembles the techniques of the films referenced earlier. By showing the living animal, and then the dead animal, the break itself becomes the signifier of dying. The removal of the moment of death from a screen is also the *creation* of that moment in the negative form. The reason that the films listed above have a *moment* of death, one that they struggle to signify adequately, is because they create that moment in the first place. Film makers that attempt to isolate the moment of death are looking to construct a filmic slaughterhouse; a place, a moment, an isolated event in which death actually occurs. But the slaughterhouse is more than just metaphorical. By removing nonhuman animals from everyday life, the often cruel practice of animal slaughter was erased from urban areas. The unsightly act between animal and meat was abstracted from both social life and animal life. The animal-sign today expresses this relationship perfectly. The animal-sign lives on screen, as do animals in fields and battery farms, and when the time comes to die the animal-sign disappears, into the filmic slaughterhouse, only to return as a corpse. And the animal-sign, like real animals, is used solely for human purposes, to express human life (Berger, 1980, p. 13). A farmed animal is denied any life that does not benefit humans,

and the animal-sign is unable to express anything but human narratives. That lack of animality in contemporary animal-signs testifies the truth of the condition of animals today.

Conclusion

The treatment of nonhuman animals is certainly not the only place that death becomes an impossible moment, and the relationship is far from causal. The phenomena analyzed in this essay inform each other and are part of a wider cultural change. But the way that animals have been treated has massively affected the way that society is now organized, both economically and geographically, as well as how we tell stories about ourselves. One of the first motion pictures was the proto-cinematic work of Eadweard Muybridge in 1874. He sought to *capture* the movement of a horse in order to determine whether or not it completely left the ground while galloping (O'Brien, 2016, p. 45). In a similar project, Frederic Rossif said that his animal photography *captured* what had never been seen before because it remained invisible to the naked eye (Berger, 1980, p. 14). But what we know about animals in this way is an index of power over them, an index of knowledge from the arresting of life. The more we know of animals in this way, the further we are from them. To look at an animal on film is to share the look of a scientist in the lab. Stripped of their natural surroundings, animals reflect back at us our own isolated condition. Our only connection with nonhuman animals is our relation to the human stories we construct through it. The more that nonhuman animals are captured in their life and movements, the less we understand that animals look back at us from across the abyss. And, similarly, the more we know about death by isolating it as a moment, the further we are away from it.

Burt, rightly, argues that myth is something inserted into history by modernity to ensure its own status as modern. Only by showing how archaic the past is can modernity claim its own progressive tendencies. Where Burt goes wrong is that he accuses Berger of committing the same fallacy with an added sense of mourning. He accuses Berger of throwing archaic myths into the past, and then using them as a measure of how destructive modernity is proving to be. Unfortunately for Burt, his critique backfires. By shrugging off Berger's criticisms of contemporary capitalism, by shrugging off the past atrocities in the film industry, he uncritically recreates the myth of progress found in the ideology of modernity. In my analysis, I have shown how animal

death, in both representation and actuality, is abstracted down to a single, impossible point. If Berger is to be taken seriously, and if the current state of the relationship between human and nonhuman animals is to be thoroughly examined, the terms “positivity” and “negativity,” the phrase “pros and cons,” must be discarded. Lassie the acting dog is part of the same world as the millions of nameless animals killed in the darkest shadows of society. Animals and animal-signs must be thought of together, rather than as favorable and unfavorable particulars in an unconnected world.

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Book Review: *Writing for Animals: New Perspectives for Writers and Instructors to Educate and Inspire*

Ashley Nugent

Writing for Animals: New Perspectives for Writers and Instructors to Educate and Inspire, edited by John Yunker, Ashland Creek P, 2018. 211 pages. ISBN#978-1-61822-058-5. \$18.95 paper.

In *Writing for Animals* (2018), editor and contributor John Yunker makes clear that this collection of essays is more than a manual of techniques for realistically portraying animals; he hopes the reader will learn “not only the process but the responsibility of writing about animals” (p. 3). Not only does this anthology exceed its humble goal of inspiring writers and educators, it also moves toward its more grand goal of ending animal exploitation and violence. Contributors have backgrounds in creative writing, nonfiction, education, animal behavior, and animal rights law; these diverse writers share a vision of improving and advancing our relationships with other animals.

This collection of essays reminds readers that fictional work and its thoughtful creators are an invaluable source for profound truths and puzzling questions about the world, without reliance on the alienating and exclusive language of philosophy and academia. Where many theorists can veer too far into analyzing theories, these authors share ideas for creating worlds of embedded truth and situated riddles. Many of the ideas and questions posed by the authors of this collection underlie contemporary posthumanist theory, and more specifically the ideas of new materialism. New materialist authors seek to decenter the human subject, move beyond assumptions of human exceptionalism, and recognize nonhuman agency. The avowed goals of these new materialist authors are admirable and overlap in many ways with the ideas of critical animal studies, yet in practice much of the new materialist scholarship remains profoundly anthropocentric. This collection offers writing techniques for actually imagining the human as one animal among many, for narrating exceptional abilities and lives of other species, identifying moments of nonhuman agency, and exposing the limitations placed thereon by humans. This collection offers ideas for the practical embodiment of new materialist goals, and reading this will bring depth, action, and a foothold to this growing body of theory, as well as to the

established ideals of critical animal studies.

For instance in Beth Lyons' chapter called "Real Advocacy within Fantasy Worlds," she describes the way her stories changed as her ethical feelings toward nonhuman animals evolved. "Stories are powerful," (p. 133) she writes, discussing the way language, idioms, characters, and narrative can shape readers' beliefs and actions. I couldn't help but think of Donna Haraway's refrain in *Staying with the Trouble*: "it matters what stories tell stories" (2016, p. 101). Likewise one can compare Derrida's well-founded, but, perhaps, overly-teased "suspicion[ns] of the appellation 'Animal' in the singular, . . . as if the homogeneous concept THE Animal could be extended universally to all nonhuman forms of living beings" (2004, p.63) and Marybeth Holleman's simple, eloquent expression of the same idea in her chapter, "Other Nations": "a robin is not a leopard is not a shark is not a human" (p. 144). In this collection, creative writers lay bare their ideas, questions, and thoughts about the world's inhabitants and we should listen.

Writing for Animals proceeds through four sections comprised of several chapters that teach how to write using animal-themed creative writing techniques. The book begins with "Part I: Writer as Naturalist," which explores the value and practice of observation, offering examples of in-depth character analysis, thought-provoking questions, and ideas for narrating compelling nonhuman characters based on first-hand experience. Several conflicting moral issues are raised that include Joanna Lilly's inquiry into whether humans have the right to write about animals, and if so, what responsibility does the author bear? Lisa Johnson asks whether allowing victimized animal characters to serve as a conduit for an author's thoughts on realistic animal mistreatment can have a meaningful impact. Johnson concludes that the beloved title character from Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* is a "direct mouthpiece for the author Sewell, through *Black Beauty*, directly urges compassion and sensitivity about horse welfare and misuse" (p. 25). Likewise, animal behaviorist and cognitive psychologist Rosemary Lombard urges writers in "A Case for More Reality" to write about animals in authentic and accurate ways to build trust with naturalist readers. She suggests that a detailed and careful exposition of species by the author will help the writer educate and inform curious, discerning readers while simultaneously respecting animals and our intraspecies relationships.

In "Part II: The Craft of Writing about Animals" Kipp Wessel reflects on the shared evolutionary history of all animal life, prompting writers "to

remind ourselves there's less that separates than joins us" (p. 81). Meeting animals on their terms, inspired by Jacques Cousteau, Wessel promises authors "if you want to capture something wild, don't capture it at all. . . meet it where it is, on its terms (not yours)" (p. 83). Too often, when those terms are not to our liking, "storytelling has exploited human fear and misunderstanding of wild predators at their ultimate expense" writes Paula MacKay. In "Rewilding Literature: Catalyzing Compassion for Wild Predators through Creative Nonfiction," MacKay examines the ways authors can successfully foster compassion not just with koalas, but with predators. Empathy with "man-eaters" is possible and may provide us "with stories of both heroism and humility, thus helping to define our place in nature" (p. 100). That sounds plausible, but what about empathy with an animal-villain? In one of my favorite essays of the collection, "Rabies Bites: How Stephen King Made a Dog a Compelling Main Character," Hannah Sandoval analyzes the clear character arc, realistic perspective, and the stream of canine consciousness in a fascinating close reading of King's *Cujo*. In a land far away from King's suburbia, Beth Lyons, in "Real Advocacy within Fantasy World," recounts her experience as a newly-vegan fantasy author. In her writing she found herself avoiding the concept of food altogether; a main character "hadn't eaten anything. Ever. Almost 70,000 words, and the poor woman hadn't even nibbled on a crust of bread" (p. 129). Lyons wonders whether "vegan writers have a duty to present vegan options in their stories, or can they simply tell their stories and leave real-world politics alone?" (p. 130). "Stories are powerful," she concludes, and writes that "authors who might otherwise compartmentalize their activism from their writing have opportunities to be a voice for animals while giving voice to their creative vision" (p. 133, 134). Where direct action can regretfully come across as accusatory and alienating, a fictional setting with compassionate, heroic characters can help readers make lasting connections.

"Part III: Anthropomorphism" takes a strong and persuasive stance in favor of the oft maligned practice of projecting human qualities onto nonhuman animals. In "Other Nations" Marybeth Holleman grapples with the balancing act writers straddle between what is sometimes considered the "pothole" of anthropomorphism and the generally unquestioned reality of anthropocentrism, which she argues should be a much larger concern for writers (p. 148, 150). In her discussion on anthropomorphism she contrasts the Cartesian view of animals as automata with the actual lives and

experiences of animals. This opening into a discussion of Cartesian dualism is especially interesting in light of current theory and work in new materialism. Likewise In “Giving Animals a Voice: Letters from an Ashland Deer,” John Yunker extolls the freedom of creative writers versus that of the naturalist writers who are often restricted by the “phobia of being accused of anthropomorphizing animals” (p. 159). Yunker discusses how he advocated against the culling of local deer by initiating an anonymous letter-writing campaign on behalf of Ashland deer. Yunker credits the success of the creative letters, signed “*Kindly yours, an Ashland Deer,*” to humor and humanizing the deer: “The minute people begin addressing an animal the way one addresses a human, something changes in the discussion” (p. 166).

“Are You Willing?” asks Sangramithra Iyer in her essay on the way memoir, nonfiction, and animal rights literature can inspire personal change and growth. She discusses what has been called the “tyranny of obligation,” or the idea that once someone has learned something distressing they feel obligated to change their behavior. Finally, Alex Lockwood interviews the creators of *Zoomorphic* magazine, a space for writers to “share attempts to reconfigure how we perceive nonhuman animals and our entanglements with them” (p. 192). As the title of this final section suggests, “Part IV: Writers Change the World” acknowledges that the goal of *Writing for Animals* is to improve animal treatment. The idea is that literature is one of the most important tools for creating empathy and helping others imagine worlds from the perspective of another – whether that other is similarly situated or an entirely different species. As Holleman says, writers understand the “power of language to reach people on a deeper level. Art bypasses the analytical mind and aims straight for memory and imagination” (p. 143). Creative writers and non-fiction writers looking to add more life, vitality, feathers, and snouts to their work will appreciate this collection. I hope writers interested in theory, ethics, philosophy, environmental protection, and animal liberation will read this as well to help them better align their goals and practices. *Writing for Animals* is at once more vibrant and thoughtful than a simple guide to writing, yet more helpful and practical than a book on the theory.

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Author Biographies

David Gould is currently studying a Ph.D. at the University of Leeds in the School of Media and Communication. His project examines the history of the slaughterhouse in the UK and USA, as well as the history of the representation of animal death in visual media. Before studying for the Ph.D., he received his BA(Hons) from the University of Brighton in 2016 studying Philosophy, Politics, and Ethics. He completed his MA in Cultural and Critical Theory at the University of Leeds in 2017. His MA dissertation, titled *Out Come the Wolves: On the Need to Destroy Nature*, examined the historical emergence of nature and argued for a radical reapproach to environmental activism. Gould is currently an editor of the cultural studies and critical theory journal *parallax*.

Ashley Nugent is a Ph.D. student at Florida Atlantic University studying literature and literary theory with a focus on critical animal studies. A decade of constant thought and reflection on ethical veganism informs her writing and critical perspective on contemporary issues.

JCAS Editorial Objectives

The *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* is open to all scholars and activists. The journal was established to foster academic study of critical animal issues in contemporary society. While animal studies is increasingly becoming a field of importance in the academy, much work being done under this moniker takes a reformist or depoliticized approach that fails to mount a more serious critique of underlying issues of political economy and speciesist philosophy. JCAS is an interdisciplinary journal with an emphasis on animal liberation philosophy and policy issues. The journal was designed to build up the common activist's knowledge of animal liberation while at the same time appealing to academic specialists. We encourage and actively pursue a diversity of viewpoints of contributors from the frontlines of activism to academics. We have created the journal to facilitate communication between the many diverse perspectives of the animal liberation movement. Thus, we especially encourage submissions that seek to create new syntheses between differing disputing parties and to explore paradigms not currently examined.

Suggested Topics

Papers are welcomed in any area of animal liberation philosophy from any discipline, and presenters are encouraged to share theses or dissertation chapters. Since a major goal of the Institute for Critical Animal Studies is to foster philosophical, critical, and analytical thinking about animal liberation, papers that contribute to this project will be given priority (especially papers that address critical theory, political philosophy, social movement analysis, tactical analysis, feminism, activism and academia, Continental philosophy, or post-colonial perspectives). We especially encourage contributions that engage animal liberation in disciplines and debates that have received little previous attention.

Review Process

Each paper submitted is initially reviewed for general suitability for publication; suitable submissions will be read by at least two members of the journal's editorial board.

Manuscript Requirements

The manuscript should be in MS Word format and follow APA guidelines. All submissions should be double-spaced and in 12 point Times New Roman. Good quality electronic copies of all figures and tables should also be provided. All manuscripts should conform to American English grammar spelling.

As a guide, we ask that regular essays and reviews be between 2000-8000 words and have no endnotes. In exceptional circumstances, JCAS will consider

publishing extended essays. Authors should supply a brief abstract of the paper (of no more than 250 words). A brief autobiographical note should be supplied which includes full names, affiliation email address, and full contact details.

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