

## Screen animals – Introduction

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From the protocinematic sequencing of Eadweard Muybridge's horse and Etienne-Jules Marey's cat to the proliferation of animal images on video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, the ontologies and histories of animal life and the moving image are deeply interlocked. Animals are ubiquitous in moving images: early expedition film, wildlife documentaries, mainstream fiction cinema, animation, art cinema, avant-garde film. But until relatively recently, animals have been curiously absent from theorizations of the moving image, despite the prominence of contemporary debates about the nonhuman and the posthuman in related fields such as philosophy (including recent work by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, Giorgio Agamben) and literature (influentially shaped by ecocriticism over the last couple of decades). In dialogue with such debates, screen studies is now turning to address its own anthropocentric assumptions, opening up questions of vision, embodiment, time and space beyond the human. While Akira Mizuta Lippit positions cinema as a spectral archive of animals that compensates for their 'vanishing' within modernity, Anat Pick views cinema as a space of shared creatureliness, or 'zoomorphic realism', that works to destabilize any clear dividing line between species identities.<sup>1</sup> A now burgeoning interest in relations between animals and moving images,<sup>2</sup> and, beyond this, ecologies and the nonhuman in screen cultures,<sup>3</sup> points to the timeliness of this dossier.

Studies of screen cultures have something particular to contribute to the broader 'animal turn' at stake in the humanities, not only by attending to the archival and creaturely impulses identified by Lippit and Pick, but also by addressing the ethical and political issues raised by the frequent involvement of animals in moving image practices. As Jonathan Burt notes in *Animals in Film*, a particular cultural sensitivity to what happens to animals onscreen is suggested by the history of specific legislation in this area, such as the American Humane Association's disclaimer: 'no

animals were harmed during the making of this film’ – a phrase that, according to Lippit, ‘attempts to frame the picture and limit the responsibility of the film and its fictions.’<sup>4</sup> Though as Burt elaborates, ‘the fact that the animal image can so readily point beyond its significance on screen to questions about its general treatment or fate in terms of welfare, suggests that the boundaries of film art [...] cannot easily delimit the meaning of the animal within its fictions.’ The presence of the animal onscreen often confounds clear distinctions between the diegetic and the extradiegetic, introducing a ‘rupturing effect’,<sup>5</sup> a radical instability in cinema’s own acts of framing. Questions of coercion, cruelty, violence and harm become particularly urgent in such contexts. For as Pick observes, ‘when it comes to animals, power operates with the fewest of obstacles.’<sup>6</sup> And thus, Burt suggests, the animal image’s ‘vulnerability to ambiguity says a great deal about the position of the animal in our culture.’<sup>7</sup> This vulnerability to ambiguity is linked to the vulnerability of animal life itself. The ways in which animal life can be made to mean (onscreen) and put to use (offscreen) are inextricably and violently connected.

Screen cultures are deeply implicated in the instrumentalization of animal being, as evidenced by industry profits secured through animal appearances onscreen and exemplified by the box office success of stars such as Rin Tin Tin and Lassie. Though it is productive to consider the agency of animals within such performances,<sup>8</sup> films featuring animals rely on the ‘obedient body content’<sup>9</sup> of their nonhuman performers and disavow questions of biopower, animal labour and consent. Underlying this is the long history of violence and cruelty to which animals have been subjected in cinema. Thomas Edison’s *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903) enacts the execution of a circus elephant, Topsy, in order to demonstrate the deadly power of alternating current electricity, initiating a violent history of cinematic images electrified by the charge of animal death. For Nicole Shukin, ‘Edison’s electrical and cinematic execution of Topsy [...] makes visible the often overlooked fact that animal sacrifice constituted something of a founding symbolic and material gesture of early electrical and cinematic culture’.<sup>10</sup> This sacrificial economy of the animal, initiated

by early documentary cinema, extends throughout the history of fiction film too: in works such as *La Règle du jeu/The Rules of the Game* (Jean Renoir, 1939), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Weekend* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967) and *Benny's Video* (Michael Haneke, 1992), documentary animal death ushers into the space of human fiction the particular charge of the real.<sup>11</sup> These overt and visible links between animal death and film aesthetics mask a still more material yet less visible sacrificial economy at work. Pointing to the use of gelatin in the production of celluloid film stock, Shukin demonstrates that film carries the material traces of animal slaughter, through a form of rendering that enacts 'a transfer of life from animal body to technological media'<sup>12</sup> (a transfer exemplified by Topsy's onscreen electrocution). As cinema moves away from celluloid in the digital age, it distances itself from this literal link to the materiality of animal bodies, but traces of this deathly relation inevitably remain, haunting the history of film.

Such a focus on the animal lives and deaths that shape moving images has been important in redressing a tendency to figure the onscreen animal as a sign without a body or history – a tendency that underlies Lippit's otherwise groundbreaking discussion of animals in *Electric Animal*.<sup>13</sup> Following John Berger's reflections on the disappearance of animals from public life and their attendant proliferation in visual economies (zoos, toys, images),<sup>14</sup> Lippit suggests that 'the cinema developed, indeed embodied, animal traits as a gesture of mourning for the disappearing wildlife'; '[t]echnology and ultimately cinema came to determine a vast mausoleum for animal being.'<sup>15</sup> Such insights seem particularly apt and urgent in a present era of environmental disaster and species extinction. Yet, Lippit's account, Burt argues, becomes a mournful, funerary thesis that tends to spectralize the animal, reducing it to 'an overly free-floating signifier': 'The disengagement from the animal, its reduction to pure sign, *reinforces* at a conceptual level the effacement of the animal that is perceived to have taken place in reality even whilst criticizing the process'.<sup>16</sup> Lippit's mournful model enacts a further 'vanishing' of the animal, decoupling animal images from the material, lived conditions of animal being.

It is these material conditions of animal life – and their implications for a theorization of moving images – that this dossier seeks to keep in view. To the growing body of work on screen animals, the dossier contributes a particular focus on questions of violence and performance across a diverse range of moving image practices. If, as Pick's essay in the dossier proposes, 'cinema becomes one of a number of modern biopolitical apparatuses that do not only control (and process) nonhuman bodies, but constitute animals as bodies, and lives, to-be-dominated', then the dossier aims to approach this biopolitical regime – and also its potential unravelling – not as a homogeneous field of power but as articulated differently by particular screen practices. Working across surrealist science film, recycled film, natural history programming, art cinema and animated family features, the dossier explores how specific media practices and modes of address organize representations of animal life in particular ways, revealing sites of convergence and divergence. The readings offered by the dossier point variously to the extraction of scientific knowledge or 'entertainment capital'<sup>17</sup> through the orchestration of animal performance, and, frequently, the violence of such a process.

The first two essays explore constellations of violence, science and fascism around animal bodies in natural history film. Oliver Gaycken attends to Jean Painlevé's *Le Vampire* (1939–45), a film initiated by an invitation from the Institut Pasteur. *Le Vampire* has its basis in scientific inquiry, but this is not a straightforward natural history film. Shaped by a surrealist mode of address and Painlevé's antifascist politics, the film explores vampiric appetite and rabid infection as allegories for fascism. Yet Gaycken shows how the film also moves beyond any simple allegorical function: informed by Painlevé's 'anti-anthropocentric attitude toward animals' – his 'generous curiosity' – and in dialogue with a Bataillean investment in base materiality, the film affirms the bat's vampiric activities through a logic of 'textual infection'. Accompanied by Duke Ellington's score (as Painlevé puts it: 'jazz is cruel!'), the animal image functions ambiguously, beyond a univocal reading of fascism, in part to teach us – affirmatively, cruelly (in an Artaudian sense) – about heterogeneity. At the same time, the detail revealed at the end of the essay – that 'when the Institut

Pasteur was bombed, Painlevé gassed the bat used in the film in order to prevent its potential escape’ – reminds us of the hierarchies of power that cruelly structure the film.

Pick examines another estrangement of the natural history film that explores fascist ideology: *Animali Criminali* (1994), a work by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi that recycles early footage of (pseudo-)scientific experiments in which animals attack each other. The footage was retrieved by Luca Comerio in the 1920s and ‘adopted by the Italian fascists as “evidence” of life as a state of permanent struggle.’ Addressing what Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi understand as the vivisectioning impulse of their ‘analytical camera’, the essay ‘turns to what is *literal* in the ostensible allegorizing acts of fascist imagery, to the real violence that animals suffer in the process of becoming emblems of the human condition’. *Animali Criminali* makes visible the violent dimensions of the orchestration of animal combat in the early footage and its allegorical encoding. Focusing in particular on a sequence, shot by Edison, in which a man dangles a live duck into a crocodile’s mouth, Pick suggests that there is something inherently fascistic about these early natural history vignettes and Edison’s ‘authoritarian fascinations’ (the spectre of *Electrocuting an Elephant* hovers here too). While *Le Vampire*, for Gaycken, extends fascism to animals allegorically (however ambiguously), *Animali Criminali*, for Pick, extends fascism to animals *literally*, as part of a broader critical reflection on biopolitical regimes governing animal life.

Scientific constructions of life are also the focus of Brett Mills’s investigation of a recent example of popular natural history programming, *Planet Earth* (2006). Produced by the BBC’s Natural History Unit, the series cultivates a perceived ‘educational and civic value’, not least through the presence and voiceover of David Attenborough. But what legitimizes this mode of natural history programming above all, Mills argues, is its recourse to science. Scientific ‘truth-claims’ are presented by the ‘omniscient voiceover’ (privileging, for example, species identification) and further elaborated by the ‘making of’ sequences featuring the expertise of scientific researchers.

Mills contends that a reliance on scientific objectivity here recalls the ‘scientific racism’ (Stuart Hall) of ethnographic film – a logic that continues to shape the representational codes of wildlife documentaries and their ‘violence of comprehension’.<sup>18</sup> *Planet Earth* represents a hugely popular and influential example of the ‘disciplinary gaze’ identified by Pick’s essay, naturalizing speciesist hierarchies and revealing the intertwining of natural history programming and the biopolitical constitution of animal life.

The final two essays move away from ostensible natural history towards two very different modes of address: the independent art film and the popular family film. Laura McMahon examines Michelangelo Frammartino’s *Le Quattro Volte* (2010), a Pythagorean study of transmigration through human, animal, vegetal and mineral realms. Turning to the film’s animal actors – the (professional) dog and (nonprofessional) goats in particular – McMahon explores questions of animal agency and performance both within and against the film’s democratizing representation of cross-species relations. Noting Frammartino’s acknowledgment in interview that goat meat is a typical dish in the region of Calabria in which the film is set, the essay argues that animal agency onscreen is haunted by animal death offscreen. Yet *Le Quattro volte* is also read here in terms of a nonanthropocentric politics that envisages animals as something other than ‘bodies, and lives, to-be-dominated’. McMahon’s exploration of the spectacularized performance of the dog in Frammartino’s film – and the issues of agency that it raises – intersects with the focus on canine performance in Lawrence’s essay. Lawrence addresses the ‘plasmatic’ flexibility of dogs in composite images (of live action and digital animation) used by recent popular family films such as *Marmaduke* (Tom Dey, 2010). In a literal manifestation of Lippit’s thesis – the spectralization of the animal via visual technologies – bodies have become signs: in a continuation of the ‘plasmaticness’ that Eisenstein celebrated in Disney, the digital dimensions of these composite canine performances are virtual and endlessly manipulable. Yet Lawrence interprets this representational flexibility as an extension of a material history of dog breeding and subjugation, in

which dogs were ‘exploited as if they were already digital beings, and “redesigned” according to the logic of “practically infinite manipulability”.’<sup>19</sup> Lawrence thus reads materiality back into these virtual animal signs, recalling links between the ambiguity of animal images and the powerlessness of animal lives.

Certain themes thus recur in this dossier: violence, coercion, control and exploitation in particular. To demonstrate animal life – onscreen and off – as aggressively instrumentalized is nothing new, as many of the works cited above attest. But what the essays highlight are the various calibrations of such relations of power as they are shaped by specific forms of media address. If ‘science is fiction’ as Painlevé famously argued, *Le Vampire* revels in its hybrid mode of address, operating in natural historical, surrealist, antifascist and allegorical modes. Yet, as Pick suggests in her essay, Painlevé’s investment in the hallucinatory potential of scientific observation diverges from the political impetus of *Animali Criminali*: there the ‘analytical camera’, dissecting the archive, probes further, revealing ‘from inside the image, as it were [...] the conjuring ritual of cinematic and scientific experimentation.’ Science is critiqued by its archival reworking as complicit with the frenzy of animal violence that it conjures forth and purports to document objectively. In *Planet Earth*, a science-based discourse is a crucial part of the film’s popular and pedagogical appeal, as Mills suggests. Animal behaviour is framed, edited (and accompanied by an often anthropomorphizing voiceover) to conform to conventions of wildlife narrative and spectacle, while enabling a ‘violence of comprehension’. By contrast, *Le Quattro Volte*, as an independent art film, is largely unbound by concerns of narrative drive: its attentiveness to different realms of life is shaped by a nonlinear, wandering relation to cinematic time. It deploys anthropomorphism (for example, through point-of-view shots), but it does so strategically, in order to question the speciesist hierarchies naturalized by texts such as *Planet Earth*. However, the canine performance at the spectacular centre of *Le Quattro Volte* reveals that this film – and perhaps art cinema more broadly – remains shaped by the ‘entertainment capital’ provided by onscreen animals.

In *Marmaduke*, the exploitation of the malleability of digital dogs arises from commercial aims and audience expectations: the composite images of “‘perceptually realistic” dogs moving and talking like cartoon canine characters’, as Lawrence writes, are ‘much more effective dramatically – they are more appealing because more anthropomorphically expressive to suit story needs – and economically – they are less time-consuming and therefore less expensive because no longer determined by the unpredictable or intractable volition of real animals, however “well-trained”.’<sup>20</sup> While Frammartino can spend a week shooting *Le Quattro Volte*’s key scene of canine performance (albeit much to his producer’s dismay), struggling with the contingencies of live action to achieve the signature long take of art cinema’s (neo)realism, *Marmaduke*’s use of digital animation efficiently achieves a form of ‘perceptual realism’ responding to the demands of popular entertainment and high profit. Intriguingly, both examples exploit canine performance as comic spectacle. Yet while *Le Quattro Volte* frames the unpredictability of animal performance as a relinquishing of directorial control (thus extending the film’s philosophical questioning of anthropocentric power), *Marmaduke*’s digital composite bodies evacuate the contingencies of live action, indicating extreme control over the production of animal images (consonant with the film’s narrative investments in domestication, discipline and pet dog protagonists).

The dossier thus suggests that animal performance needs to be considered as a key strand within the biopolitical regime of moving images. In the early natural history footage reworked by *Animali Criminali*, the camera colludes in a fascistic theatre of violence in the name of scientific knowledge: these ‘theatrical performances’ are ‘designed to wrest from living organisms [...] the very secret of their vitality.’ In *Marmaduke*, the rendering of composite canine performances, as Lawrence argues, is continuous with an ‘aesthetic and technological regime’ of dog breeding and exploitation: *Marmaduke*’s ‘impressive “roboting”’ lays bare the bio-technological constitution of his performance, revealing the secret of his ‘vitality’. Both *Animali Criminali* and *Marmaduke* stage the reworking of archives of live animal action, with markedly different aims. Yet together these works



reveal cinema as complicit in the manufacturing of animal performance and the manipulability of animal bodies.

While these essays thus reflect on the particular vulnerability of animal life, tracing the varied ways in which '[a]nimal film imagery can highlight the making visible of violence',<sup>21</sup> they also explore a set of politically enabling possibilities, considering issues such as animal agency, the potential of anthropomorphism, and more democratic forms of representation in the theories and practices of moving images. If the semiotic instability of the onscreen animal is inextricably bound up with corporeal vulnerability (and with a history of human power over animals), then this semiotic instability also marks the possibility of remaking the meanings of animal images and lives – a remaking in which animals might assume agency, via the moving image, in processes of signification. *Le Quattro Volte*'s democratizing aesthetic suggests ways in which cinema might recast distributions of power beyond species hierarchies. And while *Animali Criminali* acts as 'a somber reminder of cinema's routine violations of animal life', as Pick argues, it 'also attends to and redeems those lives'; 'the vulnerable body resists the gaze, and refuses to yield.' Examining various techniques of framing, rendering, and recycling, these essays reveal how onscreen animals both affirm and trouble the anthropocentric conditions of moving image practices in ways that suggest a less speciesist future for screen studies. The dossier thus leaves us somewhere between Edison's 'authoritarian fascinations' and Painlevé's 'generous curiosity'.

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<sup>1</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to the studies by Lippit and Pick cited above, see, for example, Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), Derek Bousé, *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), Jonathan Burt, *Animals in Film* (London: Reaktion, 2002), Cynthia Chris, *Watching Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), Raymond Bellour, *Le Corps du cinéma: hypnoses, émotions, animalités* (Paris: P.O.L., 2009), Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), Paul Wells, *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), and Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon (eds), *Animal Life and the Moving Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> For a recent summary of the field, see Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway, 'Introduction', in Pick and Narraway (eds), *Screening Nature: Cinema Beyond the Human* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), pp. 1–18.

<sup>4</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, 'The Death of an Animal', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 56, no.1 (2002), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Burt, *Animals in Film*, pp. 11, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Burt, *Animals in Film*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> On agency and animal performance, see, for example, Susan McHugh, 'Video Dog Star: William Wegman, Aesthetic Agency, and the Animal in Experimental Video', *Society and Animals*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2001), pp. 229–251.

<sup>9</sup> Shukin, *Animal Capital*, p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150–2.

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- <sup>11</sup> On animal death in film, see Vivian Sobchack, 'Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation and Documentary', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, vol. 9, no. 4 (1983), pp. 283–300; Lippit, 'The Death of an Animal'; Michael Lawrence, 'Haneke's Stable: The Death of an Animal and the Figuration of the Human', in Brian Price and John David Rhodes (eds), *On Michael Haneke* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), pp. 63–84.
- <sup>12</sup> Shukin, *Animal Capital*, p. 104.
- <sup>13</sup> See critical engagements with Lippit's argument in Burt, *Animals in Film*, and Shukin, *Animal Capital*.
- <sup>14</sup> John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?', in *About Looking* (London, Berlin and New York: Bloomsbury, 1980), pp. 3–28.
- <sup>15</sup> Lippit, *Electric Animal*, pp. 196, 187.
- <sup>16</sup> Burt, *Animals in Film*, pp. 27, 29 (original emphasis).
- <sup>17</sup> Shukin, *Animal Capital*, p. 155.
- <sup>18</sup> Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 217; cited by Mills in this dossier.
- <sup>19</sup> Lawrence invokes Philip Rosen on the 'practically infinite manipulability of digital images'; see Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 318.
- <sup>20</sup> On 'perceptual realism', see Stephen Prince, 'True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory,' *Film Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 3 (Spring 1996), pp. 27–37; cited by Lawrence.
- <sup>21</sup> Burt, *Animals in Film*, p. 137.