

Review Section

Jonathan Burt¹ Conference *'Tiere im Film, eine Menschheitsgeschichte'*, Köln, July 2006; Cynthia Chris. *Watching Wildlife*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2006.

I understand "animal studies" to be the humanities-based study of human-nonhuman animal relations in all their many dimensions. As a field of research, it is best served by a multi-disciplinary approach. One of the problems faced by animal studies is that it is a very marginal and minor field, from which few people appear to draw when they address animal topics for the first time. This is why so often the call for papers for conference panels and journal issues that circulate on the internet always appear to be the same, and quite frequently papers on animal topics feel like a reinvention of the wheel. At the moment, animal studies is made up of a virtual and informal community of scholars addressing each other via the discursive frameworks of their particular disciplines. Ironically, the marginality and fragmentariness of the topic neatly reflects the plight of its objects of study. One solution to this would be to institutionalise animal studies a little more through things like regular conferences, an international animal studies society, or more centres of study. However, this idea has provoked fears of ghettoization, and the objection that animal studies will lose its power to challenge assumptions within individual disciplines. Implicit in these objections, which have always been made to me by American scholars, is the idea that this loose and creative academic network will lose that sense of friendly cooperation that transcends theoretical differences and prevents dogmatic rigidities. However, at the very least, animal studies needs to keep building international links as much as possible.

This intractable problem crossed my mind when I attended, for the second year running, another very high quality animal themed conference in Köln, this time on animals in film. The conference was excellently organized by three lecturers in modern history at the University of Köln: Maren Möhring, Massimo Perinelli, and Olaf Stieglitz, and took its inspiration from Lippit's (2000) provocative elision of cinema and the animal—*Das Kino ist ein Tier*.² As Lippit puts it, "cinema is like an animal; the *likeness* a form of encryption. From animal to animation, figure to force, poor ontology to pure energy, cinema may be the technological metaphor that configures mimetically, magnetically, the other world of the animal." (p. 196). The

conference featured something of a division of interest between historians and people working in film studies, as became evidenced by a running joke about whether a speaker was going to mention Deleuze or not. Norbert Finzsch's comment that historians should do more media studies and media theorists should take history more into account, seemed especially pertinent for boundary-breaking discussions of animal subject matter that constantly tracked back and forth between, for instance, questions of the indeterminacy of the animal image and historical instances of the colonial gaze in 1950s Africa, or the ambiguous relationship between animal welfare and commodification of the animal image on German television. Taking the conference as a whole, it was an important reminder that animal film imagery requires a cross-disciplinary approach.

There were four sections to the conference: cinemality, wild and exotic animals, insects, and companion and family animals. In the first session, Rolf Nohr looked at the status of Tarzan, especially through a study of his face, as raising questions about articulations of human selfhood and identity and human-animal difference. Sulgi Lie read animal figures in the films of Bresson as part of an anti-hegemonic or hierarchical system in which "humans, animals and things are rendered with the same sensual materiality." Taking his inspiration from the work of Jacques Rancière, Lie showed how underdetermining the symbolic value of animals challenged the normal hierarchies of human—animal difference. Lastly, Christiane König, analyzed Neil Jordan's *The Company of Wolves* (1984) through the filter of Deleuze and Guattari's thesis of becoming-animal as articulated in *Milles Plateaux* (1980). Inevitably, much of the discussion turned on indeterminacy both as regards the animal—the tensions between different levels of metaphoricity and the "real animal"—and the lack of resolution in the idea of becoming-animal. This highlighted a problem of circularity in such work. If one confines oneself to a reading of animal film imagery, which is almost always ambivalent, conflict ridden, and overdetermined, there needs to be at least some grounding in a working idea of how animal imagery operates in society at large, in other words outside the screen.

The second session on wild and exotic animals provoked a long discussion about the politics of animal filmmaking. Vinzenz Hediger took as his starting point Bataille's notion that "the creation of the similar and the destruction of the similar are two facets of the same activity" and described the hunting and filming connection (the camera-gun association) as foundational for the later nineteenth and twentieth century in the production of scientific knowledge about animals and the shaping of colonial cultural meanings. Johannes Paulmann looked at the wildlife documentary maker Bernhard Grzimek and attempted to show how it would be simplistic to denounce his work as

an example of the colonial gaze. Pascal Eitler looked at another filmmaker, Horst Stern, who made films about animals in Germany in the 1970s.

Stern's films were not about exotic animals but concerned practices such as riding, hunting, battery farming and animal experimentation. Both Paulmann's and Eitler's paper revealed important faultlines and paradoxes in the attempts to promote pro-animal ideas through film, whether in other countries or in one's own. For Eitler, Stern was not trying to moralise human-animal relations but was critiquing West German society's relation to nature. Stern's scientific, regulatory attitude towards reworking and improving these relations had ethical implications for animals. But it also opened the way, as Eitler put it, for a bio-political regulation that ultimately put society's relationship to nature at the centre of concern rather than the animal. The long discussion round Paulmann's work turned on whether one could locate a neutrality in Grzimek's concentration on the natural behaviour of animals and his marginalisation of the imagery of killing, eating and hunting, or whether the colonial gaze was still at work. For example, his critique of civilisation as a threat to animals was also, as one questioner implied, a critique of the development of Africa itself. The exchanges in this part of the conference illustrated not just the key importance of film's influence on conservation, from gleaning support to shaping perceptions, but also how film is symptomatic of the fact that conservation is almost always a series of inadequate trade-offs within what still appears even now to be an overall colonial-type structure.

The third session on insects was a welcome addition, given the marginal interest usually given to such creatures, which belies their extensive significance in the history of film. Dorothe Malli discussed the malign and satanic imagery of the fly and noted its importance from early cinema to documentary and feature films, linking the documentary insect image to genres of the fantastic. Petra Lange-Berndt returned us to Deleuze and Guattari with a look at the depiction of insect swarms as well as referencing Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* in which he glued the wings of moths onto celluloid.

Finally, Gudrun Löhner's study of animated health films made for the American military in World War II to educate soldiers about malaria, revealed a series of subtexts about the masculinity of military culture and an elision of tropical diseases with loose morals. In all these instances, insects set in play all manner of ideas around boundary disruption and subversion.

Swarms especially, represented a doubled notion of the mass as, on the one hand, a unity or individual with a purpose, or a collective intelligence, and, on the other hand, as an undifferentiated, decentred, mechanistic crowd. Furthermore, many levels of

self-referentiality were located in film's use of insects in a manner which echoed Lippit's elision of animal and cinema. For instance, the eyes of insects were depicted as similar to pixels; *Mothlight* integrated moths and film around their parallel desire for light; and the proliferation of film itself was likened to a swarm. It was also suggested that the treatment of insects on film should be placed in a longer historical trajectory that took account of periods when insects had positive connotations as at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Why had film come to represent insects as it did during its own particular historical moments?

The final session on companion animals highlighted the differences between film and television in the depiction of animals and asked in what ways might animals in these respective media have different effects. Olaf Stieglitz looked at 1950s American television series, especially *Lassie*, reading them as reflective of the family values of the time but also offered ways of reading them against the grain, showing how these programmes revealed a more fragile and threatened social order. Antonia Ulrich analyzed Oshima's *Max Mon Amour* about the love affair between a woman and a male chimpanzee, raising issues of zoophilia and cross species relationships as a contrast with human ones. Finally, Eva Rosenberger described a German television series which advertized dogs that needed new homes, where the animal was presented as both a love object and a commodity. In addition to these papers there were two other presentations. Akira Lippit spoke on the significance of speaking animals in Kafka and in animation, interweaving his discussion with notions of minority, both racial and linguistic. Jonathan Burt discussed representations of animal death and animal livingness as structured by the difference between the animal as a linguistic sign and as a visual image.

As can be seen from this extremely sketchy summary, which does little justice to the richness of both papers and discussion, we have still barely scratched the surface of the resource of animal films and related practices for understanding human-animal relations. In addition, this conference taken as a whole drew attention to a number of issues. First, we need to integrate ways of reading the animal image on screen with a better sense of how this imagery actually feeds into wider cultural preoccupations and its more general historical roots. Clearly the complexity and open-endedness of animal imagery is only one part of the analysis; how it operates is equally important. Second, although we have been well served by some very good animal film studies, especially of wildlife films in the anglophone world, there needs to be a more fine-tuned attention to the history of animal film making in different parts of the world paying particular attention to national similarities and differences. Third, the interplay between film, television, and related print media, needs to be more carefully

looked at. What does film do that television doesn't, and vice versa, in terms of their respective impact on public attitudes and human-animal relations?

Cynthia Chris's new book, *Watching Wildlife*, opens up a great deal of new and important material for the kinds of questions posed above. It is an extremely impressive addition to the two major extant studies of wildlife films, Derek Bousé's *Wildlife Films* (2000) and Gregg Mitman's *Reel Nature* (1999), adding much, especially with regard to changes in the structure of television in the last 30 years and film's emphasis (or troubled obsession with) animal sex. The main quality of the book lies in the way Chris weaves discussion of animal representation through her account of the history of the institutions of film and television. At times, her wry accounts of the stranger shores of animal programming such as *The Pet Psychic*, or *Wildboyz*, are extremely amusing, though the book at root treats a deeply troubling subject.

One of the main intentions of the book is to expose the ideological underpinning of wildlife film especially with regard to what she terms the heteronormative reading of animal (and human) social behaviour. Her focus is on popular films and television programmes for general audiences and the manner in which animal representation is used as a template for human self-understanding. Chris identifies the important factor in the roots of animal filmmaking not so much in the motion study photography of Muybridge and others, but in the 'conventions of precinematic visual technologies that had long been used to describe and delineate the boundaries of racial difference, sexual difference, and colonial power' (p. 1). This effectively structures the book as she traces these themes through early film makers, well known figures like Martin and Osa Johnson, and Walt Disney's revival of wildlife filmmaking from the late 1940s. Where the story becomes particularly interesting is Chris's account of what happens when this trajectory becomes entangled with the arrival of the Discovery Channel in 1985, National Geographic Television in 1995, and Animal Planet in 1996, and against the backdrop of a general reordering of television production.

The fragmentation of television audiences away from a few oligopolistic channels to smaller niche markets, and the inevitable cost cutting which led to cheaper formats such as reality shows, had important consequences for animal representation. Discovery, which placed wildlife at the centre of its brand identity, gained a number of economic advantages from the genre—'animals and plants are non-union, not entitled to residual payments, and work for nothing' (p. 86). Nature documentaries can also be rerun season after season, and wildlife footage can be archived, re-edited and recycled in a different form for entirely new shows. In this highly competitive environment the

trend towards sensationalism, and the escalation of scenes of predation and aggression in the 1990s reflected a general shift in other areas of television programming.

Chris analyzes the changing treatment of animal sex against this background, highlighting a peculiar combination of voyeurism and prurience. Her discussions of the significance of popular sociobiology, notions of monogamy, animal rape and homosexuality creates a discomfiting picture of a widespread masculine, reproduction obsessed, heterosexual ethos framing the treatment of animal sex on screen. For instance, in her discussion of *The New Chimpanzees*, a National Geographic Special aired in 1995, Chris notes how we are not likened to bonobos when it comes to their sexual behaviour even though they display many activities we would recognise as similar to our own: 'kissing, masturbating, oral-genital contact, and nonorgasmic genital stimulation; same-sex, intergenerational, and juvenile sexual activity' (p. 162). In other segments of the film, humans are likened to apes but not in this instance. 'The program avoids this strategy when such a likening would require staking a claim that homosexual behaviour is "natural" at a time that beliefs about the origins and morality of homosexuality are hotly contested by an anti-gay Christian right and determined but hardly unified gay-rights activists.' (p. 162) Taking this into consideration alongside her pointed comments about the absence of any political critique within the genre itself, Chris ultimately portrays a depressing picture of the current state of popular wildlife programming. "Televisual forms of nature have been made to fit a market that thrives on conflict that melts into happy endings, and drama that does not get mired in real-world political impasses but resolves in comfort." (p. 201)

Chris's important book and the Köln film conference indicate the fertility of ideas circulating in animal film studies but they need to be set in the context of the fact that this is still a small area of study. The number of recent books, articles, and dissertations on this topic are very few. In other words, it is a minor literature. But the importance of this work for understanding, for instance, the mechanics of animal representation, the populist politics of conservation, how a combination of ideological and commercial forces straitjacket the narratives of animal film and television, indicate that this really should be a major literature. The onus here is to take this as a starting point and think of ways in which this thinking might find a much needed impact on the filmmaking process itself, natural history programmers and filmmakers. Chris's account is far too troubling for people interested in the promotion of animal studies as a positive and creative field of study not to take up this challenge.

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Notes

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- ² I would like to thank Silke Hackenesch for all the work she put into providing such good translation services and notes for both myself and Akira Lippit.

Reference

Lippit, A. (2000). *Electric animal: Toward a rhetoric of wildlife*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.