

***Empathising With Animals:  
Non-Human Subjectivity In Documentary Film***

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## ABSTRACT

This practice-based research explains how non-human subjectivity can be suggested in documentary film and identifies film techniques that allow a spectator to empathise with an onscreen animal. It argues that a spectator cannot be *told* to feel empathy, and instead should be offered an *experience* that allows them to practise empathy whilst watching and listening. Henceforth, both theory and practice explore how audience and onscreen animal can be connected in cinema and what the requirements are for a human spectator to relate to and embody the onscreen animal and its film world.

The argument starts with the proposition that humans are not capable of fully portraying non-human subjectivity in documentary film, because any depiction will be an anthropomorphic interpretation of what that might be. However, there are films that *do* give a sense of non-human subjectivity, including those made in this research. To resolve this apparent contradiction, this study examines how the illusion of onscreen animal subjectivity is formed in the audience's minds, how the audience empathises with the animal, and how a filmmaker can construct a cinematic animal that invites empathy.

The thesis firstly offers a theoretical framework that outlines how humans have conceptualised human and non-human animals and how this has transformed over time. In describing what sharing a gaze with a non-human animal entails as per "The Animal That Therefore I Am" (Derrida, 1997) it demonstrates how dialectics help to access animal otherness. Furthermore, it argues that anthropomorphism and dialectics can be part of practices that decentralise the human subject and can put thinking such as 'becoming-animal' into action.

In order to evaluate theoretical ideas and concepts, such as animal otherness, animal subjectivity, decentralisation of the human subject, and to see how they work in practice this research includes textual analyses of three documentaries made by other directors that have non-human protagonists, as well as the production of three short films: *The View From Here* (2012, Kooij), *The Breeder* (2017, Kooij), and *Wolves From Above* (2018, Kooij); and the longer film *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij) where techniques were repeated and this film demonstrates how liminality can be visualised on screen.

These analyses demonstrate that the six techniques for suggesting animal subjectivity in documentary film and provoking empathy are: depicting animals as breaking the fourth wall; anthropomorphising animals; juxtaposing humans against non-humans; the inclusion of abstractions and defamiliarisations that render the image otherworldly or *unheimlich*; avoiding didactic voice-over to stimulate imagination; and to allow for poetic or artistic interventions, rather than attempting to suggest non-human subjectivity with strictly observational or scientific means. Ultimately, the thesis celebrates (re)imaginings of actuality on part of the authored filmmaker, as it argues that artful interventions are the most effective way to express subjectivities of human and non-human animals, and encourage feelings of connection and sharedness through cinema.

## **GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

This is an overview of key terminology used in this thesis. The definitions below are a combination of descriptions as per the Oxford Dictionary of English and the way I understand these concepts and apply them in this research.

**Actuality:** life as it occurs in lived reality.

**Animal subjectivity:** the way an animal is for itself; its subjective being.

**Animal otherness:** the difference between two animals (human and non-human) in terms of their being, which is disclosed when they share a gaze. Jacques Derrida (1997) uses the phrase animal alterity.

**Anthropocentrism:** the act of regarding humankind as the central or most important element of existence.

**Anthropomorphism:** the attribution of human characteristics or behaviour to a deity, animal, object or phenomenon.

**Atmos:** audio track that contains ambience of a space or location. It may be recorded indoors or outdoors.

**Being:** this concept is widely studied in metaphysics and described in monumental volumes; hence my description is a mere attempt.

A being is an animal that is alive. Someone's being refers to the nature of a person or the way that person is, but it stretches beyond 'character'; it includes all their attitudes, behaviours, convictions and how existing has shaped that person over time. The concept of being refers to (a collective) being alive and existing that underlies, but stretches further than the now of actuality and that of one being. This research understands 'being' as it is described in *Being and Time* (1927) by Martin Heidegger where he writes extensively about how the temporal existence of a human being in the present (what he calls a *Dasein*) relates to a vaster being, which unfolds over time and underlies the now.

**Documentary:** film form concerned with capturing and representing actuality. John Grierson (1898- 1972) famously coined the term 'documentary' and described documentary film as a "creative treatment of actuality".

**Empathy:** the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Feeling *as* another.

**Foley:** referring to the practice of adding sound recordings to a film's sound design after the shooting of a film i.e. Foley sound is recorded in a studio, not on location.

**Narration:** the way the narrative of a film is communicated and unfolds in sound and image; the film form.

**Ontic:** relating to entities in actuality and the facts about them.

**Ontology:** the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being. An animal's ontology is the (presumed) nature of that animal's being.

**Speciecism:** treating members of one species as more important; discrimination of species.

**Sympathy:** understanding between people; feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune; feeling *for* another.

**Textual analysis:** analysis of the ways in which a text produces meaning. In Film Studies a film is often referred to as a 'film text'. In a textual analysis the narration of a film is examined as well as other aspects such as style, mise en scène, use of editing, etc.

**Unheimlich:** in English the word is translated as uncanny, but, as I explain in chapter 2.3 I will use the original German word, because it bears connotations relevant to this research that the English word does not cover.

*Unheimlich* refers to the sensation that a place, situation, being or object, which is normally familiar, appears completely off and is therefore

distressing and eerie. Though the German language capitalises nouns, for ease in this thesis I will consistently use lower case and will not conjugate either.

**Zoomorphic:** a being or object purposefully or accidentally made to resemble animal form(s); representing animal forms.

## INTRODUCTION

Humans are able to imagine what it is like to be an animal of a different kind. This is evidenced in countless types of stories: myths, fables, folklore, narratives written, but also drawn, painted, and depicted in film such as animations, fiction films, and documentaries. These stories contain a number of different human-animal interactions and tensions between human and non-human species. Some of them feature non-human protagonists to address aspects of human vice and virtue. For example, the books and films *Animal Farm* (1945, written by George Orwell), *Watership Down* (1972, written by Richard Adams), *The Lion King* (1994, directed by Rogers Allers & Rob Minkoff), and *Babe* (1995, directed by Chris Noonan) portray non-human animals while the narratives concern human conduct and morality. On other occasions humans are depicted as being able to speak with other animals, as for instance in *Goldilocks* (1837, written by Robert Southey) and *The Jungle Book* (1894, written by Rudyard Kipling) where human protagonists are among non-human characters with whom they communicate on equal terms in the same language. And there are numerous examples in religious beliefs, legends, and folklore of human-animal hybrids where the human adopted a non-human power or vice versa when human abilities are attributed to non-human animals (e.g. the Centaur, Minotaur, Selkie, Faun, Mermaid, Werewolf, Sirin, Garuda). These examples all include ideas about the way other animals might feel or what they might be thinking. This is because, evidently, we humans perceive similarities between ourselves and other animal species. The examples suggest that empathy for non-human animals comes quite naturally to humans. But how is it possible that humans are able to transpose themselves to the being of other animals?

Empathising with an animal that is not human requires painting a mental picture of their subjectivity. The empathising human imagines how that animal perceives its world, how it thinks, how it feels – thus estimating what constitutes the nature of their being. This process of picturing non-human subjectivity is not necessarily conscious and can be rough and sketchy. Nonetheless, empathising with animals would not occur if humans did not assume other animals have an inner world and that it has certain parallels to their own. Yet, human and non-human animals differ fundamentally. Across animals species there are vast differences in sensory perception, dietary requirements, reproduction, and habitat that regulate how animals exist in

their worlds. It determines daily priorities, rhythms, routines, and very likely also cognition. Thus, other animals might have ways of being so different to ours that we are unable to access it with our minds. Therefore, our imagined picture and depiction of the other in film and literature is likely flawed and incomplete.

In this thesis, through both an analysis of existing literature and my own film practice, I argue that it is not possible to accurately portray non-human animal subjectivity in film; it will always be a human interpretation of what that might be. Since it is not possible to depict an animal on its own terms, depictions in film will necessarily bear traces of anthropomorphism – i.e. the practice of attributing human characteristics to non-human animals, objects, deities, or phenomena. It could, of course, be argued that film is not able to fully depict a human's subjectivity either, but this is not the focus of this thesis. Essential here is that, despite limitations in accessing and representing non-human animal subjectivity, there are films that *do* give a sense of the internal world of other animals, including my own films. Whilst watching these films, the viewer thinks they connect to the depicted animal; they are able to empathise with them. My analysis explores what this suggestion of subjectivity is and how it can be created in documentary film. In other words, I want to find out how the illusion of onscreen animal subjectivity is formed in the audience's minds, how the audience empathises with the animal, and how a filmmaker can construct a cinematic animal that invites empathy.

Documentary film bears the promise that what is depicted is true. It might seem obvious that animals in fiction have been transformed for aesthetic purposes and as a result of anthropomorphism. However, it is often overlooked that in documentary too an abundance of creative decisions are made, which might not be strictly scientifically correct or purely factual, and might veer away from an animal's actual way of being. This thesis examines such creative decisions and argues that films allowing artistic depictions of animals are better suited to suggest animal subjectivity than strictly factual portrayals that reject expressive freedom. Moreover, it demonstrates that anthropomorphism in documentary film – i.e. the reinforcement of human-like characteristics in the depiction of animals in otherwise fact-based films – helps to achieve an empathic connection between viewer and onscreen animal. Such depictions can maintain a sense of openness, mystery or the

*unheimlich* in ways that trigger the interest of the audience towards non-human animal otherness. Additionally, I argue that the limits of what is normally acceptable as 'documentary' can be extended, as depictions containing false audio and suggestive imagery can be justified if they help to suggest animal subjectivity and trigger empathy.

Through both making films and reflecting on films made by other directors I have discovered that techniques for suggesting animal subjectivity are:

- The inclusion of moments when animals are breaking the fourth wall (looking into the camera – which all my films contain);
- The depiction of animals as sufficiently other whilst retaining characteristics that appear human so that the viewer can identify with the animal (i.e. anthropomorphised animals);
- The juxtaposition of humans against non-humans (especially effective if the non-human takes up most of the screen time);
- The focus on abstractions such as geometrical shapes that render the image otherworldly or *unheimlich*;
- The avoidance of exclusively didactic voice-over;
- To allow for poetic or artistic interventions, rather than attempting to suggest non-human subjectivity with strictly observational or scientific means.

Before I clarify the function of my practice within this research and outline the development of thought on empathy, I want to address the urgency and relevance of connecting to animals in film; demonstrate how it is possible to discern different types of documentary film, and I like to explain why it is necessary to make and watch films that establish an empathic relation between viewer and depicted animal.

### **Relevance and urgency**

In chapter 1 I explain that the term 'the animal turn' was coined in 2003 (Pederson, 2014, p.13), which points to a tendency across the sciences and humanities to decentralise and restructure the human subject so that humans are positioned where they have always belonged: among animals. Animal Studies, which erupted during this animal turn, emphasises that all creatures

live in a shared world. The research field tends to have an environmentalist-political focus and there are many other related research areas that focus on more-than-human matters such as: Deep Ecology, Post-humanism, and New Materialism. Recognising that the world is an ecological system to which all living organisms belong is the start of change, which is needed because pollution, deforestation, extinction, and rising temperatures are threatening the basis of existence. Thus, in the end my research may become part of environmentalist debates, but at first my interest in empathy for onscreen animals serves an ontological purpose. In my films I want to establish a connection between human and non-human animals, because it enriches the human sense of self (as I explain below). Additionally, I aim to encourage people to consider animals outside the cinema too, both for purposes of self-enrichment as well as encouraging better consideration of the natural world.<sup>1</sup> In chapter 1 the poet and writer John Burnside (2006) is quoted who describes how science and poetry (and art more broadly) can and should work together to form a 'science of belonging'. He sees it as the duty of poetry to preserve wonderment and mystery of nature; its materiality, the fact that it exists, whereas science can analyse and explain how it works. As filmmaker I am a poet like Burnside. I want to express with film the indefinable, unknowable within nature and via this sublime beauty (both horrific and pleasing) I can give a suggestion of its mystery and animal subjectivity.

In cinema, non-human animals are regarded as a reflexive device signposting the border between human and beyond human (Ivakhiv, 2013, p. 201): this divide, in turn, is contingent upon the ability of human spectators to sense what belongs to the depicted non-human realm. Thus, in watching onscreen animals the spectator observes the boundary between human and non-human. Dogs, cats, wolves, horses, and birds do not make films and do not go to the cinema. There are reports of animals watching films and television, but this does not mean that when they see a camera they understand that the process of filming will eventually lead to a film or broadcast. Even if we would attach a camera and microphone to an animal's body and edited the recorded

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<sup>1</sup> This applies to the broader depiction of nature in my films, as evidenced when after seeing the short film *Graminoids* (2014, Demelza Kooij & Lars Koens), which depicts the movements of grass in the wind, audience members have informed us that when they go for a walk they now take time to watch such movements they previously did not observe.

material into a film, we would still not claim that the non-human animal made the film. Film is made by humans for humans. It requires a film crew to translate the experience of seeing an animal in actuality to a cinematic experience. This renders the study of animal depictions in film an analysis of *humans constructing the idea* of that animal, i.e. the cinematic animal is a man-made audiovisual concept and the same applies to non-human subjectivity.

The act of representing animals onscreen raises ethical issues, because we as humans have the responsibility to represent the animal in a way that would benefit an ecological debate or at least does not work against environmentalist progress. Furthermore, non-human animals have no means of objecting to the way they are represented, because they have no shared language to tell us about disagreements and probably have no concept of cinema. Moreover, misrepresentation of animals can lead to ecological problems, for example, if an animal is unfavourably represented as a pest it can justify culling and extermination. In parts of Australia there is a 'war on cats', because it is assumed domestic and feral cats kill native species. Scientific research, however, is inconclusive and cannot support a direct correlation for the whole of Australia between the domestic and feral cat and the extinction rate of native species. Cats have become scapegoats for wider problems resulting from Australia's colonial history (Lynn, 2015; Hillier & Byrne, 2016). As a result, the housecat needs to go on curfew and cats in the outback are destroyed. This example shows the potential impact of (mis)representation in media. However, as explained above ethics and environmental politics are not primary concerns in my research.

In this thesis I differentiate between species using the concept 'non-human animal' to indicate all animals except humans. I recognise that humans belong to what we call animals, creatures, and organisms and that an anthropocentric gaze should be avoided. However, sometimes, for ease, I will use the word 'animal' instead of the phrase 'non-human animal', and it will be clear from the context what I mean. Any terminology that draws boundaries between categories can be problematic. For example, initially I considered 'non-human animal' a good way to distinguish between humans and non-humans, but people such as Rosi Braidotti and Frans de Waal have raised their concerns, because such vocabulary defines the other animal through a lack of being human.

## **Documentary film**

This research focuses on animal depictions in documentaries – films that, as suggested above, offer an implicit promise to their audiences to *document* truthfully what they depict. The tensions between reality and representation have been explored extensively elsewhere (Stella Bruzzi, 2000; Brian Winston, 2013) and are relevant here to the extent that they can assist for the search of the most effective means for a film to suggest animal subjectivity and trigger the audience's empathy. Bill Nichols' identification of six different 'modes' of documentary is particularly useful as it can help relate particular techniques in representation with assumptions regarding veracity, and with audience reception. These modes are: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive, and performative.

Nichols' poetic mode is concerned with the aesthetics of rhythms, patterns, spatial juxtapositions, subjective impressions, and disregards continuity editing (2001, pp.102-105). The expository mode "addresses the viewer directly, with titles or voices that propose a perspective, advance an argument, or recount history" (*Ibid.*, p.105). The expository mode is associated with television documentaries and 'voice-of-god' narration that presents information about what is depicted on screen. In the observational mode the filmmaker adopts the position of an observer and records events as they occur in front of the camera (*Ibid.*, p.111). The participatory mode sounds similar to the observational mode, except that the filmmaker "participates in the lives of others", "reflects on this experience" and the viewer understands how the presence of the filmmaker(s) interjected in the lives of those who were filmed (*Ibid.*, 115). For the reflexive mode "the processes of negotiation between filmmaker and viewer become the focus" (*Ibid.*, p.125). Though this may sound similar to the participatory mode, the difference is that a reflexive documentary "asks us to see documentary for what it is: construct or representation" (*Ibid.*). And finally, the performative mode "raises questions about what is knowledge" and gives "emphasis to the subjective qualities of experience" (*Ibid.*, pp.130-131). The performative and poetic mode seem similar at first, but for the poetic mode rhythms, patterns and textures are typical, whereas the performative mode is concerned with embodied knowledge and subjective qualities of experience. In order to communicate and challenge knowledge the performative mode may use aesthetic and

formal qualities that are also present in the poetic mode, but its aim does not rest at an exploration of form.

Nichols stresses that a documentary film may contain several modes, but in most cases one is dominant (*Ibid.*, pp.99-100). As will be shown below, my work also mixes some of the modes (especially in *Wolfpark*), but my overall argument regarding the search for the most effective way to communicate animal subjectivity in documentary is to adopt techniques associated with the performative mode and avoidance of the expository mode (especially conventions such as the explanatory voice-over or the pretence of authoritative scientific objectivity). This intervention is particularly critical, because most wildlife films tend to fall in the category 'expository mode' such as *March of the Penguins* (2005, Luc Jacquet) for which the English version is narrated by Morgan Freeman. However, there are examples of wildlife film that are completely observational or only contain very minimal exposition such as *Winged Migration* (2003, Jacques Perrin, Jacques Cluzaud & Michel Debats). However, in the case of the latter, even though it may appear an observational film, staging of event was a major part and thus it might be better suited in the category of performative mode.

Overall, I call my work 'creative documentary' or 'experimental film' and I would characterise my use of sound and image 'poetic'. In the film industry further distinctions are made based on what the topic is and how it is communicated, for example: issue-based documentary, character-driven documentary, essay film, etc. Here, however, Nichols' categories will be used with the aim to explain as clearly as possible what cinematic approaches are best suited to express animal subjectivity in documentary film.

### **Empathy and sensory perception in film**

Film affects human emotion. It is not difficult to accept this claim, because all of us have found ourselves laughing, crying, or frightened in the cinema. As an audiovisual medium, film appeals to two sensory faculties: sight and hearing. Considering film as a haptic or sensuous art form seems odd at first, because there is no direct physical or material connection between screen, speakers, and audience.<sup>2</sup> However, as I will explain here, film viewing triggers physical,

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<sup>2</sup> Sound travels through the air as pressure waves. When it arrives at an ear, pressure waves move the eardrum. So there is – in a way – a form of touch involved in the experience of sound.

somatosensory responses. The discovery of ‘mirror-neurons’ and other research on empathy in relation to film viewing provide answers as to how the viewer relates to the screen and demonstrate that certain processes underlying empathy do not require conscious effort, but occur ‘spontaneously’.



Fig.1 Still from an interview with director Robert Bresson (1960, *Entretien Avec France Roche et François Chalais*, Cinépanorama).

Just as there was an ‘animal turn’ in recent philosophical thinking, one could also speak of an ‘empathic turn’. The word empathy is legacy from Robert Vischer’s doctoral thesis published in 1873 entitled *On The Optical Sense Of Form: A Contribution To Aesthetics* (Hammond & Kim, 2014, p.5). In his thesis, which was written in German, Vischer used the word *emfühlung*. The word empathy entered the English language in 1909 when Edward Titchener translated a text by Theodor Lipps that used Vischer’s concept of *emfühlung* (Darwall, 1998, p.261).<sup>3</sup> At the turn of the century, theories of *emfühlung* were

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that the idea of empathy and the mental processes underlying empathy were hitherto undiscovered or not explored. Darwall (1998) points out that other words such as sympathy and compassion were used to give an approximate description. He also demonstrates that thinkers as early as Mencius (third century BC) addressed moral dilemmas that require empathic consideration, though they did not use the word empathy (*Ibid.*, p. 261). Additionally, Hammond & Kim (2014) provide an overview as to how the concept is used in the works of David Hume, Adam Smith, Mary Shelley, the ancient Greeks, and many other writings (*Ibid.*, pp. 2-6).

used within the field of aesthetics, because “a spectator was said to appreciate a work of art empathically, by projecting his personality into it” (Downie, 1995, p.242). Karsten Stueber (2019) states that according to Lipps, in aesthetic perception we recognise “another embodied person as a minded creature” and “we appreciate another object as beautiful because empathy allows us to see it in analogy to another human body” (*Ibid.*, n.d., para. 4). Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010) propose that there is a ‘return’ to these theories of empathy, because issues in current debates remind of those of the turn of the century. The invention of the reproducible photographic image of that time (which stood in opposition to the non-reproducible image of a painting) is similar to what we are experiencing in the current digital age (*Ibid.*, p. 169). There is a loss of materiality and use of the physical body, which is replaced with theories that try to retrieve and reposition the body in the digital image. Indeed so, across the humanities and sciences there are practices and theories that stress empathy, affect, embodiment, interconnectivity, and intersubjectivity. The German word *einfühlung* more literally translates as ‘in-feeling’, which demonstrates better that empathy requires embodiment. Empathy is not a mere intellectual exercise, but involves embodiment. Thus, empathising with an onscreen character requires imagining being inside their mind and body and to imagine how they might experience their world cognitively and physically.

Studies on empathy are currently found throughout disciplines including neuroscience, philosophy, psychology, and social sciences. In 1992 so-called ‘mirror-neurons’ were discovered that gave the concept of empathy corporeal existence. In the experiment conducted by Giuseppe di Pellegrino et al. F5 motor neurons were studied and it was discovered that they responded in the exact same way when a monkey would *watch* someone perform a particular task or *do* the task itself. It was an accidental finding:

After the initial recording experiments, we incidentally observed that some experimenter’s action, such as picking up the food or placing it inside the testing box, activated a relatively large proportion of F5 neurons in the absence of any overt movement of the monkey. (Pellegrino et al., 1992, p. 176)

The F5 motor neurons were active when the body of the test-subject did not move, which means that the imitation of movement was imagined. Also note that the F5 motor neurons were activated when a monkey watched a human perform a motor task. In other words, the neurons responded despite a difference of species. These neurons are now commonly known as mirror-neurons and their discovery proved vital for theories of affect and empathy, including those in film theory.

From the perspective of these mirror-neurons, there appears no difference between seeing and doing – and herein lies, of course, the potential that this new research offers for film theory. [...] For the body of the spectator this theory implies a total wiring between the senses and the processing of information by the brain: body-brain correlation, motor-sensory control, seeing and doing (when considered from the perspective of brain activity) become one and the same. (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2010, pp. 78-79)

So, for these neurons performing motor activities is identical to viewing. This explains why film can have such impact on spectators. Not only do audiences 'live-in' to onscreen events, in a way they actually live them. This could also explain why sensory terms are used for describing film-viewing experiences. Omer Linkovski, Naama Katzin & Moti Salti (2016) provide a summary of more up-to-date research and expand that since the experiments performed on monkeys evidence for the existence of mirror-neurons is also found in humans (as well as a variety of other animals including mantis shrimp). They also remark that individuals suffering from schizophrenia and autism have a mirror-neuron deficiency (*Ibid.*, pp. 104-105). In a different research, Christiaan van der Gaag, Ruud Minderaa & Christian Keysers (2007) used film clips to examine how mirror-neurons and other parts of the brain react when test participants watched human faces displaying an array of emotions such as fear, disgust, neutral, and happy expressions. Their results demonstrate that mirror-neurons not only respond to watching someone perform distinct motor tasks (such as picking up items); they are also active in the interpretation of emotional states (but they are not the only brain components that are operational). Prior to the study of Van der Gaag et al., Elaine Hatfield,

John Cacioppo & Richard Rapson (1992) had already pronounced the idea of 'emotional contagion' for which they invented a scale to be able to measure the level of susceptibility for adopting other people's emotions. They define (primitive) emotional contagion as: "The tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person's and, consequently, to converge emotionally" (*Ibid.*, pp.153-154). The neurological study of Van der Gaag et al. (2007) could be seen as an explanation for understanding how and why this emotional contagion occurs so spontaneously and confirms that facial expressions (and their interpretation as emotions) are indeed mimicked in the brain.

In the introduction of the collected articles called *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature* (Meghan Marie Hammond & Sue Kim (Eds.), 2014) the editors state that the term empathy is diffuse. There is a noticeable resistance on their part to define and restrict it to a single definition, because this would not accommodate "the wide range of exciting work of fellow-feeling that literary scholars are doing today" (*Ibid.*, p.1). Practising empathy is to bridge and bring subjectivities together. To define it as a concept would be to restrict its potential. In the same body of work John Melillo (2014) stresses that empathy studies are preoccupied with visual stimuli. His article is an analysis of the use of voice and noise in poetry and other literary works. He poses that acoustic perception and the human body as a "filter" of multiple senses should be taken into consideration (*Ibid.*, p.61). The aforementioned Linkovski et al. (2016) conducted a study of 'mirror-touch synaesthesia' (MTS) that supports Melillo's recommendation to include a consideration of sound in empathy studies. MTS is the occurrence of somatosensory sensations in a person's body when they watch someone else being touched (as such this study goes a step further than mirror-neurons, because in the case of MTS the response is not only a measurement of brain activity, but also results in a motor response). The study showed that MTS also occurs when an action is only heard (*Ibid.*, p. 105).

Literature and film have in common that empathic connections between reader/viewer and protagonists are constructions. However, film has as its advantage that it is immediately visual and acoustic, whereas writers need to paint pictures and sounds with words. Lauren Fowler & Sally Shigley (2014) examined the difference in empathic response in test-participants when they read a play and watched the film version of the same play. The

response was measured as a comparison between the maximum and minimum corrugator supercilii muscle activity, facial electromyography, galvanic skin response, and via a self-report. Their results demonstrate that the empathic response was evidently stronger when they watched the film. Though, the self-reports communicated that participants learnt something different from each activity, therefore film viewing should not replace reading.

Although processes of identification and empathy occur spontaneously within a film viewer Carl Plantinga (2009) reminds that nevertheless “a film’s intended spectator response is guided by a film’s narration, and, more particularly, by narrative structures in relation to point of view” (*Ibid.*, pp.140-141).<sup>4</sup> He adds that this may seem obvious, but that it often lacks in analyses of spectator responses. The level and mode of engagement depends on the way the film is constructed and with this he means its cinematography, pacing, colour palette, etcetera, which in film theoretical terms is called its narration. Simple evidence for his statement is that depending on the narration a viewer can feel sympathy for a murderer or otherwise immoral character.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in order to determine how a film viewer relates to a depicted animal one must examine the way the film is constructed. Empathy is not simply established by virtue of the amiability of the onscreen animal, but it does help, and as will be explained in chapter 2.2, in some cases its amiability or ‘cuteness’ complicates the relation between viewer and animal.

Elsaesser & Hagener (2010) explain how in the film *Persona* (1966, Bergman) images of particular sensory systems trigger responses in the same register. They pose that *Persona* contains a ‘mirror motive’, which is explained as a moment when the images presented act as a reflected self (*Ibid.*, p.55). In relation to this film and others, they ask who we are looking at when an actor’s face is looking into the camera (which is called breaking the fourth wall). They suggest such moments act as a mirror; an actor is not simply looking into the camera, we as audiences are in fact looking at ourselves. Thus the body parts face and eye affect responses in the same register on behalf of the viewer: sight or looking. They trigger self-reflection and lead to an enquiry of identity. Thus in the opening of *Persona* an image of an actor’s face not only

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<sup>4</sup> Murray Smith’s *Engaging Characters* (1995) discusses empathy in similar terms. In his book he differentiates between empathy and sympathy where the latter comes in three forms: recognition, alignment, and allegiance.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Leake (2014) points to the value of empathising with inhumane or ‘difficult’ characters in literary works and examines how these characters are created.

prompts the question: “who is this character?”, but also “who am I?” or “what would I do or think in this situation?”. In my films I have used this principle in the depiction of animals and discovered that imagery of non-human animals breaking the fourth wall prompts the suggestion of an inner world and can therefore be the start of considerations about subjectivity. In addition, close-ups of other body parts, such as fur, trigger haptic responses, but especially so when a human hand is onscreen that performs the stroking action. This principle is discussed in detail in chapter 4.2 when I analyse *The Breeder* (2017, Demelza Kooij). Thus, depicting particular animal sensory faculties trigger affective responses in the same human sensory register. We feel our skin or at least we have an inclination to engage in a cuddling activity when we see fur depicted on screen. Such depictions do not give a suggestion of animal subjectivity, but these film technical devices and aesthetical focus points do help to portray the non-human animal as a ‘proper’ character as it gives the viewer tools to relate to the animal via identification and embodiment, which as established above are counterparts of empathy.

Although ample evidence suggests that brain activity associated with empathy – such as the responsiveness of mirror-neurons – occurs involuntarily in the human brain, this does not mean that any depiction of an animal provokes empathy or offers the suggestion of non-human subjectivity. The type of connection between viewer and onscreen animal and whether an onscreen animal invites empathy at all is still dependent on the audiovisual techniques a filmmaker employs to depict the animal.

### **Methodology and thesis outline**

[...] art is not the production of knowledge about things, but it creates new things-in-themselves. (Harman, 2016, p.105)

For me conducting a practice-based PhD is to follow an undetermined organic interplay whereby theory and practice inform each other. Every film has its own filmmaking process and knows its unique challenges. Therefore, in this research there was not a strict methodology that was repeated for each film. There was always an overarching theoretical framework to hold on to, but along the way it changed shape and direction. From the beginning otherness and the limits of the human experience horizon were the objects of my

research, but I explored them as the dialectics of life and death rather than questions relating to the human versus non-human. In the first year I read *Aporias* (Derrida, 1993) made the short film *The View From Here* (2012), and wrote an essay about the film *Le Quattro Volte* (2010, directed by Michelangelo Fammartino). From there the research started to change and develop. These outputs have in common that they relate to death, but also to animals and depictions of otherness. Instead of examining ways to depict death, I realised I could approach the same issues if I were to study animal otherness (i.e. how to visualise something that cannot be known and cannot be visualised on human terms – the limits of the human experience horizon). Hereafter I parted with the topic of death and focussed on human-animal relations and ecology instead. However, even when the research was concerned with depictions of death, human-animal dialectics and portrayals of the landscape were central to my practice. Therefore, the research as I present it here is a truthful representation of the order in which it was conducted and also in terms of the questions that motivated my practice and theoretical research.

My practice is situated at the centre of this research and is surrounded by literature and films that have influenced me. Sometimes I take ideas from theory, especially philosophy, to try out things in practice. Other times, during filming, I follow my instinct and make decisions because they ‘feel right’ and the reflection about their purpose comes after the act of filming. For example, whilst making *Wolfpark* (2019) I did not intend to include voice-over, but I felt I had to interview the tourists. Their voices became one of the most noticeable features of the film and now, after reading Rosi Braidotti’s literature on post-humanism and becoming-animal, understand how they help to decentralise a singular (human) viewpoint (this is explained in chapter 1.3). The relation between philosophy and my practice cannot be clarified exactly, because they are so intertwined. Broadly speaking, I approach the subject matter of my films philosophically and I reflect about my practice in philosophical terms too. For example, in *Wolfpark* ‘traversing the boundaries’ of the inside versus the outside of the wolf enclosure, between animal subjectivities (including the human), and film forms, became very important after reading *Aporias* (1997) by Jacques Derrida. My practice is not an illustration of philosophical ideas and neither are my films purely Heideggerian, Derridian, etc or follow any

theory precisely. The main aims of the combination of my practice and interpretation of theory, is to give clear practical answers as to *how to suggest animal subjectivity in documentary film* and to define ways to establish an *empathic connection between viewer and onscreen animal*. As I am both film practitioner and academic I believe the insights I offer in this thesis are more pragmatic than usually offered in (film) theories that address the depiction of animals in film. I think the straightforwardness of the tools that I have listed above can clear up complicated and abstract debates, which I will clarify in this thesis and in the conclusion. Similarly, I believe my films offer unique portrayals of animals (and their subjectivities) and help to (re)position the human self within the realm of what is animal.

The thesis consists of two components. Part A contains literature reviews and textual analyses of films made by other directors. Section B presents critical reflections on films I made as part of this practice-based research. I directed three shorts and one long film that each test out particular film techniques and film forms. For these films I took up one or more additional roles such as cinematographer, editor, sound recordist, and writer.

Chapter 1 presents an overview of theories relating to questions about what is human and what is animal. I demonstrate how species hierarchy and dialectics came into being and discuss recent fields of research such as animal studies, queer theory, and post-humanism that attempt to undo hierarchical categorisations. I explain what Derrida's concepts of the animal gaze and animal alterity entail, and how they relate to my practice and the aims of this research more broadly.

Chapter 2 examines how in the translation from actuality to story character, animals are altered for narrative purposes. Its main topics are anthropomorphism, cuteness aesthetics, and the *unheimlich*. I argue that non-didactic, artistic, open-ended depictions of animals are better suited to suggest animal subjectivity than factual depictions.

Chapter 3 contains textual analyses of three documentary films that have non-human protagonists. I examine how the narration of each film contributes to their ability to depict animal otherness, animal subjectivity, and how their aesthetics trigger empathy.

Chapter 4 marks the start of section B and contains critical reflections about three short films I made for this research. The first film *The View From*

*Here* (2012) is a documentary portrait of horse whisperer where various animals enter the frame, but it is primarily a portrait of a human being. *The Breeder* (2017) is a hybrid film that addresses cuteness aesthetics and hidden animal cruelty in breeding practices. The film combines live-action, documentary and animations. The short experimental documentary *Wolves From Above* (2018) is a single long-take filmed from above, which I describe as a meditation on a wolf pack.

Chapter 5 is a critical reflection on the long film I made for this research called *Wolfpark* (2019). The film merges all techniques I learnt during the productions of my short films. Unique to *Wolfpark* is that it moves between film forms as it contains reflexive, observational, and fully abstract scenes. As such, the film not only expresses animal subjectivities, but in its form embodies liminality.

## **LINKS TO FILMS**

You are invited to watch the films now or you can view them when I address them in section B where the links are added again. It is advised they are viewed in chronological order.

### **Short films**

*The View From Here* (Demelza Kooij, 2012, UK, 16'50")

<https://vimeo.com/46936466> Password: access2012

*The Breeder* (Demelza Kooij, 2017, USA/UK, 11'57")

<https://vimeo.com/232641076/aecf676ac6>

*Wolves From Above* (Demelza Kooij, 2018, Canada/UK, 5'40")

<https://vimeo.com/246597676/df4d6eec1b>

### **Long film**

*Wolfpark* (Demelza Kooij, 2019, Canada/UK, 53'59")

<https://vimeo.com/258618749/d283e68a5e>

## **SECTION A – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND TEXTUAL ANALYSES**

### **CHAPTER 1: Animals and humans in Western philosophy**

In this chapter I provide an overview of key moments in philosophical thought regarding human-animal relations with a particular focus on developments that shaped my filmmaking practice. First I explain how René Descartes' well-known statement *cogito ergo sum*, which marks the start of the mind-body problem, relates to the conceptualisation of the human/animal divide. From there I take leaps through history and pause mainly at Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. I explain how feminism and queer theory shaped animal studies and post-humanism, especially Rosi Braidotti who (among others) adopted Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's concept of 'becoming-animal' that marks the end of the human-animal hierarchical separation. Toward the end of the chapter I return to Derrida's ideas of the animal gaze and animal alterity and I explain how this is relevant to my practice.

Heidegger's philosophy as posed in *Being And Time* (1927) shaped how I think about lived reality and being, and the book continues to influence my practice. Among many other things, in this magnum opus he indicates how the ontic and the ontological are related. As filmmaker, I want to give a suggestion of an animal's subjective being, thus an examination of the relation between what is directly existent in the present (the ontic) and being (ontology) is fundamental. Heidegger did not regard non-human animals as beings with a sense of world or language; therefore it might seem odd to focus on him in a research about animals. Nevertheless, the legacy of his phenomenology is felt in animal studies, not in the least because of Derrida who criticised his perspective on animals (and other ideas) but also built on some of his ideas, which will become clear below. Derrida's concept of deconstruction is also important to my practice. Like him I strive to break with rigid conceptualisations through expressing the fluidity and liminality of beings and knowledge. For example, in chapter 4.1 I explain how his thought influenced my interpretation of *Le Quattro Volte* (2010, Michelangelo Frammartino) and my short film *The View From Here* (2012). Derrida describes the idea of 'animal alterity' and the 'animal gaze' in his "The Animal That Therefore I Am" (1997). Both concepts underlie this thesis and I will return to these concepts in every chapter. One of the main discoveries in my practice is the effect of

non-human animals breaking the fourth wall as a means to trigger empathy; hence the idea of an animal gaze is relevant.

I demonstrate how philosophy, and academic thought more broadly, have moved from mainly only accepting spoken and written language as reasonable and valuable, to positioning experience as crucial for meaning making. I show how over the course of centuries the non-human animal transformed from an unspeaking, soulless, even machinelike creature (Bijlsma, 2017, p.47), to a being much closer to the experiential horizon of humans. Now, as implied in the concept of becoming-animal, humans and non-human animals are seen as sharing a world, shape each other's world and ways of being. Thus, the animal changed from being external to (the concept of) humanity, to becoming a defining factor of what makes us human both conceptually and ontologically.

### **1.1) The creation of hierarchy and dialectics**

In his book *Electric Animal* (2000) author Akira Mizuta Lippit demonstrates how the various ways of thinking about animals are reflected in literature and cinema. His analysis incorporates psychoanalysis, phenomenology, and existentialism. He argues that in literature and film, animals usually function as both metaphors for otherness and as similar to human beings. In discussing thinkers such as René Descartes, Arthur Schopenhauer, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emmanuel Kant, Jacques Derrida, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud, Lippit shows how the concept of the animal went from a sort of mechanism to a living creature with its own language and world, thus entering the realm of human consciousness. A few key philosophers mentioned in *Electric Animal* will be reiterated here, because the transition in their ways of thinking are fundamental to seeing how the relation between language and onscreen emphatic engagement can be understood.

'Humans', 'animals', 'non-humans', and 'other animals' are all weighted names that sprout from times when humans were conceptualised as different from all other animals and positioned at the top of the hierarchy of beings. Arguably, this is a result of the influence of Christianity on Western philosophy, as the Bible stipulates that the world and its flora and fauna have been created *for* man – thus firmly asserting the idea of a hierarchy and thereby of distinction. This is different from shamanistic beliefs, which tend to

stress the unity of all beings. In the case of animism, even lifeless presences are included in a unifying worldview. The divide between human and non-human animal is very much a debate about consciousness. The philosophy of Descartes and the age of Enlightenment are commonly regarded as the starting point of such thought. Descartes' well-known statement *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) pronounced the separation of mind and body, of conscious thought and the supposed distractions of the physical world. Lippit writes: "Descartes argues in his 1637 Discourse on the Method that not only 'do the beasts have less reason than men, but they have no reason at all' " (Descartes In: Lippit, 2002, p.33). With this distinction arrives a long period of unbridgeable separation between what is considered a human and a (non-human) animal. Thus, in addition to hierarchical distinction with this statement we can see the start of dialectical differences. According to Descartes non-human animals do not have the capacity for (conscious) thought: "Unable to engage in genuine speech, however, animals remain, along with machines, simple mimics" (Lippit, 2002, p.33). In other words, animals may show behaviour and utter sounds that appear to be language, but this is not proper communication nor intentional. They are simply responding to each other and like machines emit automatic responses to external stimuli. As I will point out, philosophical viewpoints evolved to rely less on spoken and written language and now accept the influence of world and environment (and thus materiality and body). The bodily, unspoken connection between animal and human animal is accepted as a possibility for authentic interaction. The question whether this connection is conscious or requires consciousness, becomes less important. It is the response, which seems to be the most important factor for a genuine interaction. Spoken and written communication is not solely atop the hierarchy of communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Reason loses its dominance. *Wolfpark* (2019) establishes an empathic relation between viewer and onscreen depiction; a relation that is not in the first instant established via logic or reason, as will be discussed later.

In *Aporias* (1993) Derrida examines the concept of death. He questions whether and how it is possible to look beyond the boundaries of an anthropocentric experiential horizon; how it is possible to imagine death. I see a similar mechanism at work in considering animals, as for humans it is not possible to experience the being of an other animal. Both phenomena (i.e.

being dead and being non-human) stand outside the experience of a living human being. In chapter 4.1 Derrida's reflection about death will be used as a tool to deal with the limits of these experience horizons, and imagination is the key for bridging this gap. Lippit states that for Derrida the question of being able to envision one's own death becomes a question of perception rather than reason. "Imagination is the power that allows life to affect itself with its own re-presentation" (Derrida In: Lippit, 2002, p. 40). However, this statement also implies that self-representation is confined to its own discursive practice. Only humans can perceive and think as humans do, therefore their discourse is only understandable for humans. In short, human discourse is limited to humans (just like cinematic discourse is limited to humans). Nevertheless, non-human animals stand on the event horizon of our being – we are not them – which is precisely how they give us our sense of human self. In other words, non-human animals offer us the start of a dialectical interrogation: one that shows us the extent of our human being and with that the limits of our existence (and proximity of our deaths).

In Heidegger's philosophy the physical and immediate world of any subject (called a *Dasein*) is its primary reality. As ontic and immediate, but also existing, it constitutes the possibility for being. Heidegger asks the question whether the animal "has world" like the human has world and argues that animals are "poor in world". He writes:

We can formulate these distinctions in the following three sentences: [1.] the stone (material object) is *worldless*; [2.] the animal is *poor in world*; [3.] man is *world-forming*.  
(Heidegger, M. In: Calarco & Atterton, 2004, p.17)

To illustrate the differences he gives the example of a lizard basking in the sun on a warm stone. Heidegger acknowledges that the lizard can do this, or, at least, that we as humans can describe it as such, but he states it is impossible to know whether "the sun is accessible to it *as sun*" and "the rock *as rock*" (*Ibid.*). Mark Coeckelbergh (2011) paraphrases Heidegger's poor-in-world concept strikingly as: "an animal behaves toward objects but has no knowledge of them. It is absorbed. It cannot grasp another animal or any other being as a being" (*Ibid.*, p.202). The idea of being absorbed in a way of being also explains why the non-human animal is not able to have a sense of

otherness; they cannot experience otherness (they cannot experience 'self' and not other). There is only being. It cannot experience a dialectical relation as such either. Possibly the main reason why according to Heidegger animals are poor in world, is because they have no language for it. Lippit explains that for Heidegger "Where there is no language, there is no openness of being, nonbeing, nor absence of being" (Lippit, 2000, p.57), thus there is nothing – experience is impossible. Indeed so, Heidegger states that:

Mortals are they who can experience death as death.  
Animals cannot do so. But animals cannot speak either. The  
essential relation between death and language flashes up  
before us, but remains still unthought. (Heidegger, M. In:  
Calarco & Atterton, 2004, p.18)

Although Heidegger would most likely be averse to using this word, one could argue that this is again a question regarding consciousness. Surely, only with a conscious mind an organism is able to recognise the limits of one's existence. Matthew Calarco, a scholar whose name will return in this thesis, writes about intersections between existential and animal philosophy, and reminds (in Calarco's own words) that according to Heidegger "it is reductive to think about animals starting from a human-centered perspective and gauging this difference in terms of which human characteristics animals either lack or have" (Calarco, 2008, p.36). Heidegger may well have pointed this out, yet his question regarding being is still treated from an anthropocentric viewpoint. In a different body of work Calarco states that Heidegger holds an "uncritically Cartesian stance on animal life" and that "he is clearly anxious about any attempt to attribute language, consciousness, or selfhood to animals" (Calarco, 2004, p.24). Since humans are caught in their own discourse, it is understandable that Heidegger starts with human experience. That he does not break beyond a human-centered perspective is a hiatus in his philosophy for which he has been criticised – notably by Derrida (Calarco, 2004, p.18).

Although for Heidegger the non-human animal and human cannot have a shared existential connection and the human versus animal rift persists, the idea of 'having world' does emphasise the importance of materiality and a tangible world as the basis for conscious thought. One can see that the body and corporeality start gaining more prominence in thought,

not just in the philosophy of Heidegger. Merleau-Ponty, for example, uses the materiality of a subject's body and its relation to its environment as a starting point for understanding being and the self. Thus, acknowledging the materiality of a phenomenon, its thingness, and the physicality of spaces, caused a shift from seeing bodily experience as deceitful and unreliable (Descartes) to becoming the *starting point* for experience and reason.<sup>6</sup> As will be shown later, in *Wolfpark* the confined world of the captive wolves is an essential part of their characterisation as protagonists, which is why the concept of 'having world' or being 'poor in world' is relevant here.

Parallel to the development of accepting the material world as a precondition for authentic existence, philosophical discourse focuses on the question of abstraction and classification as produced in language. Lippit states: "The naming of animals, Hegel insists, turns them into ideals. And in the abstraction of the animal from essence to language, the animal dies" (Lippit, 2000, p. 46). And it is not just the naming of animals that is problematic. Language in general poses a risk for phenomena to become concepts that have lost reference to a real counterpart. When language is completely abstract it can become rigid and as a result ethics, morality, legislation, and truth are forced into reified unchangeable concepts, whereas they should stay open for debate. If one insists on using language as a means to describe experience there is a danger of the experience to become reified, like an ideal, completely abstract.

The Hegelian animal suffers an a priori death, a type of pre-extinction. The philosophical circle continues: the animal dies at the moment it is thrust into contact with abstraction, with language. Killed by the word, the animal enters a figurative empire (of signs) in which its death is repeated endlessly. In such transmigrations, however, death itself is circumvented: no longer a "dog" but "Dog", this creature now supersedes any incidental dying of dogs. (Lippit, 2000, p.48)

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<sup>6</sup> For the sciences, empirical knowledge (as tests and experiments) is fundamental. I am not discussing David Hume or Karl Popper here, but they are important for the discussion of the importance of experience for knowledge.

When any 'dog' becomes a mere concept 'Dog', the creature loses its individuality. In my words, when beings and objects only become references to their group or denominator, it becomes increasingly difficult to see uniqueness in a phenomenon, or beauty, or to recognise change. In my view, this affects the way a person perceives actuality. The experience of real life becomes a poor tick boxing exercise where phenomena are categorised rather than experienced. This process of reification is the death Lippit refers to in the quote. It is when the abstraction comes to stand before the actual or real phenomenon. *Wolfpark* also addresses this effect of rigid categorisation. The first and last lines of the film refer to classification and organisation. At the start we hear: "We love showing order" and at the end: "They are real wolves". Additionally, in the beginning of the film Julien Gravelle explains in voice-over that film crews who visit the park always look for stereotypical alpha male versus omega wolf behaviour, whereas in reality the hierarchy between wolves is more fluent and changeable. Yet, film crews are unable to see this as they are merely operating top-down i.e. what they learnt about 'Wolf' precedes how they experience and film 'wolf' in the park. In fact, the main aim of the film *Wolfpark* is to work against such reification of experience and to express liminalities of film form, animal beings, and concepts (how the film does this, will be discussed in section B).<sup>7</sup>

It is apparent that there is a strange impasse between language and experience. Too much reliance on language leads to a top-down, reified experience of actuality (a lurking danger for humans); too little language puts the subject in an unconscious state unable to access a lucid experience of actuality. Therefore, if one wants to create a form of cinema where the spectator relates empathetically to an onscreen animal or other phenomena, the film must contain more than voice-over that presents information didactically; it must also contain experiential or sensorial qualities. It must be open in essence and accept concepts as being in a continuous state of becoming. The film *Le Quattro Volte* (2011), which will be discussed in chapter 4.1 is an excellent example hereof and I will demonstrate how the director

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<sup>7</sup> Similar thoughts regarding the abstraction of actuality in language are present in the concepts of signifier and signified, initiated by Ferdinand de Saussure and further adopted by Louis Hjelmslev.

employed rigid linguistic or rational categories to undo their own classification.

Jean-François Lyotard captures the animal as the “primary agent of the inarticulate affect-phrase”, which makes our relation with animals “affective rather than discursive” (Lippit, 2000, p.49). The animal stands outside our language region but is, as Lippit puts it, able to “burst” into it via affective channels of communication. The affect-phrase is a type of subconscious communication. This idea bypasses the language-barrier problem, because a direct relation between human and animal is created in focusing on affect and empathy. In the final pages of *Electric Animal* Lippit concludes:

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. (Lippit, 2000, p.196)

He arrives at this thought after discussing Sergei Eisenstein who in addressing montage and other film techniques uses terminology relating to physiology and organic structures. Lippit suggests that Dziga Vertov and Eisenstein “argue for a biology of the cinema, for a cinema as organism” (*Ibid*, p.194). As Lippit continues, he connects the idea of cinema as animal to its technology and explains that in cinema there is reproduction (of sounds and images recorded in reality) that as mimetic images act as metaphors (for the real phenomena). Walter Benjamin’s widely studied *The Work Of Art In The Age Of Its Technological Reproducibility* (1936) also focuses on the ability of cinema to reproduce actuality mimetically, but I recognise a major difference. Benjamin states that: “The most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus” (Benjamin, 2008, p.37); where the apparatus stands for society, which is reproduced in the technology of film. Film narratives become a playground for humans, ways to exercise, to learn, to cope, or to get used to society. Benjamin’s appraisal of film technology lies in its ability to be political. In the case of Lippit there is not an apparent political metaphor at work. His approach is psychoanalytical rather than political. Lippit strikes a comparison between the unconscious and

the animal (animalistic drives, instinct, the Id), and the photograph or filmstrip as a technological unconscious (Lippit, 2000, p.177). The filmstrip relates to the unconscious via mimesis. In this way, the animal and technology come to stand on similar grounds, because they are both metaphors for the unconscious. Lippit offers the idea of the 'animetaphor'. Benjamin also makes the connection between mimesis and an organic faculty when he coins the idea of the 'optical unconscious', but he does not include reference to the animal or cinema as animal. He compares a sensory apparatus to technology when he strikes a comparison between the eye and the camera lens.

*The most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus. Film achieves this goal not only in terms of man's representation of himself to the camera but also in terms of his representation of his environment by means of this apparatus. [...] With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. And just as enlargement not merely clarifies what we see indistinctly "in any case," but brings to light entirely new structures of matter, slow motion not only reveals familiar aspects of movements, but discloses quite unknown aspects within them – aspects "which do not appear as the retarding of natural movements but have a curious gliding, floating character of their own"<sup>8</sup>. Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye. 'Other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. [...] It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious [...]. (Benjamin (1936); republished in 2008, original italics, p.37)*

Thus, Benjamin also creates a parallel between the camera lens or film technology and the unconscious. He distinguishes between the unconscious and the human unconscious, suggesting that the camera eye can give access to

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<sup>8</sup> Here he references *Film Als Kunst* (1932, Rudolph Arnheim).

this more fundamental or broader unconscious (the beyond-human). Cinema can open our eyes for phenomena the human eye cannot see. To me, this says that film technology extends into the (natural) world and can connect the viewer to it in ways humans cannot by themselves. This could be further extrapolated by stating that therefore the human requires (film) technology to be shown alternative consciousnesses and ways of being.

Concepts such as animetaphor and optical unconscious help to think of film equipment and cinema as an intersection between the human viewer who relates organically, mimetically, ontologically to the recorded world. Thinking of film technology as being able to reproduce reality mimetically, allows us to understand how cinema can be a place where otherness is found and empathy can be exercised. Additionally, in this subchapter I have demonstrated how the human/animal hierarchy and duality were brought into existence. In the following subchapters I will explain that current thought sees humans and non-human animals as part of the same continuum, but the idea of difference (dialectics) remains important (for my argument and in my practice) as it allows a knowing subject to distinguish the self from the other.

To think of cinema as an animal, as Lippit (2000) does, has roots in psychoanalysis, but may also be a product of developments in current thought: the eruption of animal studies and what is regarded as ‘the animal turn’.<sup>9</sup>

## **1.2) Against species hierarchy and top-down inference: the animal turn and ecocinema**

The term ‘animal turn’ points to a recent interest in non-human animals and human-animal relationships in ethics, law, anthropology, literature, and across other scholarly fields. Sarah Franklin first used the term in 2003 during a conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia (Pederson, 2014, p.13). This new area of research is concerned with what we can learn from looking *at* and looking *with* the animal rather than learning *about* the animal. The animal turn and its research field ‘Animal Studies’ focus on the human in relation to non-human animals. According to Pederson the aims and objectives can be stated as follows:

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<sup>9</sup> I return to a discussion of ‘perceiving cinema like an animal’ in chapter 3.3 after a textual analysis of *Bestiaire* (2012, Denis Côté) where I challenge the usefulness of this statement.

The 'animal turn', thus, brings along an alternative outlook on knowledge production that does not only include animals, but places them centre stage as key actors in the innumerable modes of being in, and making sense of, the world. (Pederson, 2014, p.6)

In other words, artefacts that can be regarded as being part of the animal turn work against an anthropocentric, top-down perspective by showing how animal lives are related and, in the case of human animals, how the non-human animal contributes to the formation of knowledge (apperception) and a sense of (human) self. Five years after Franklin coined the term animal turn, Matthew Calarco writes in 2008:

Animal studies, or "human-animal studies" (as it is sometimes called), comprises a wide range of disciplines within the humanities, social sciences, and biological and cognitive sciences. As I just mentioned there is no standard or widely accepted definition of the field, and its main terms and theoretical foci are still open-ended at this point. (Calarco, 2008, p.2)

He then suggests there is one thing that unites all research fields, which is that they "place questions concerning animals at the center of critical inquiry" (Calarco, 2008, p.2). This PhD research also places non-human animals at the centre of its enquiry and uses animals to make sense of the (human) world, through studying film. In 2015 Calarco publishes *Thinking Through Animals*, a book in which he evaluates and summarises decades of animal studies, traces their historical trajectory, and groups their various approaches and critical enquiries into three categories: thinking through animals via 1) identification, 2) difference, and 3) indistinction. In the first category are those who maintain that human and animal share evolutionary similarities in the sense that we all have responded to the development of the same planet, but not in the same way. This has resulted in similar traits, but these characteristics need not be identical across species. Examples of these qualities are "sentience, subjectivity, and intentionality" (Calarco, 2015, p.4). To the first category

belong Immanuel Kant, Charles Darwin, and a range of utilitarians. Theorists in the second group respect “the singularity of animals” i.e. their individual, unique characteristics or the difference between animals. They are Jacques Derrida, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and according to Calarco the main contemporary advocate is Cary Wolfe (*Ibid*, p.42). Finally, the third category “deemphasizes the importance of human uniqueness and the human-animal distinction” (*Ibid*, pp.4-5). Key names are Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Val Plumwood (*Ibid*, p.48).

It seems that the groups 1, 2, 3 are chronologically similar to steps in the historical development of animal studies more generally, because Kant (in category 1) precedes Derrida (category 2) and they come before Haraway (category 3). So, perhaps Calarco’s analysis can be regarded as a way to organise the history of animal studies into certain phases.

Derrida is placed in the category of difference, which, as I explain below, supports my reading of his *Aporias* (1993) and “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (1997). In my understanding too these works start with a firm marking of dissimilarity, which is then deconstructed and eventually resolved in showing connectedness.

The categories Calarco devised belong more strictly to the philosophy branch of animal studies, but they have been influential across academia. In relation to film studies a further wealth of works have been published and the notions of ecocinema, green films, and green festivals germinated (e.g. as discussed in Cubitt, 2005; Armatage, 2013). Its literature scrutinises how onscreen animals are used in ethical and political debates relating to the gendering of nature and animals, race, class, the use of animals and nature as dramatizing narrative elements, and how they are used as tools within legislative arguments – collectively called ‘biopolitics’, ‘ecopolitics’ or ‘bioethics’ (e.g. Molloy, 2013; Rust, 2013; Ingram, 2013). In line with the overall aim of animal studies they adopt a diffuse, non-hierarchical perspective as seen in *Ecocinema Theory And Practice* (Rust et al., 2013) and *Ecomedia: Key Issues* (Rust et al., 2015), which “shift beyond national discourses and focus on broader post-national ecocritical issues” (Chu, 2017, n.d., para 1.). Chu (2016) traces the term ecocinema back to 1966 when Roger C. Anderson published *Ecocinema: A Plan for Preserving Nature* where “he proposes to film all living

organisms in the world and show them in theatres with simulated conditions that resemble natural environments, as a way of preserving nature” (Chu, 2016, p.11). Chu adds that Anderson’s idea was a sarcastic critique rather than actual proposal; it was Anderson’s response to witnessing the growing detachment between people and their physical world. Additionally, there are works that examine film form and narration, for example, whether flora and fauna can be narrative bearing protagonists (e.g. Lefebvre, 2006), but very often publications that address aesthetics of wildlife and nature films want to see how those film works toward a political endeavour i.e. films depicting nature and wildlife cannot seem to escape (human) politics, even if exposing policies and economic systems are not their primary objectives. For example, in the discussion of *Bovines* (2011, Emmanuel Gras) in chapter 3.2, Laura McMahon (2015b) is referenced. She questions whether the slow pacing of *Bovines* and its tendency to fetishize idyllic imagery of nature and grazing, forfeits its potential to lay bare and call to action.

In his book *Reel Nature: America’s Romance with Wildlife on Film* Gregg Mitman (1999) shows in which ways fantasies about animals defect their portrayals on screen, but also how their romanticized depictions influence real-life encounters. He strikes a comparison between shooting a film (about animals) and hunting animals. He further describes how Walt Disney’s theme park Animal Kingdom, which opened in 1998 – and whilst being positioned in the Florida desert resembles an African savannah – was to be “at once both natural and fantastic” (*Ibid.*, p.2). Animals in animation film, but also in documentary and fiction have been fetishized and made to what humans want them to be. In other words, animals in (and outside) cinema are appropriated for human goals. Mitman’s analogy between shooting film and shooting animals uncovers this problem very compellingly. It could be further added that the thrill of hunting translates itself well to the spectacle-driven content and fast-paced editing of wildlife films as addressed by Derek Bousé (2000) (who will reappear in chapter 2.3).

Moreover, portrayals of ecosystems and animals in film extend to debates about sustainable consumption, vegetarianism, and veganism (e.g. Fudge, 2002); in particular how depictions of animals as either relatable anthropomorphised creatures versus objectified commodities without agency, promote or work against the notion that they are food for humans (e.g. McMahon, 2015c; Parkinson, 2019a). It has also been pointed out how

depictions of animals in popular media resulted in an increase of purchasing those animals as pets (e.g. Molloy 2016; Parkinson 2019b). Additionally Claire Molloy/Parkinson has written about the hidden abuse of animal stars, such as the numerous famous chimpanzees in fiction films, as well as the misleading reports in news media when these animals have been 'retired' after biting incidents, whereas in fact they were moved to zoos or shot dead (Molloy, 2012).

Evidently, the study of animals and ecology in film is concerned with understanding how film worlds and actuality are related, both conceptually and film as an entity that affects the material world.

The reason why Derrida is so often referenced in animal studies (including animal studies in relation to film theory) is because of his "The Animal That Therefore I Am" (1997), which was originally presented as a conference seminar in 1997 and printed as an essay in 2002. It takes as its starting point the embarrassment Derrida feels when stood naked in front of his cat. At first glance it may seem a silly starting point for deep philosophical thought, and made me smile, but it does present the issue at stake. The very fact that one would feel ashamed underlines the dissimilarity as well as the connectedness with the other animal. It is an analysis of connection and distance, but nevertheless a shared basis. He asks what it means to be with a cat, standing in front of a cat, and what it means when you say that it looks back. At a certain point Derrida adopts Heideggeresque language such as "being-after-it", "being-close-to-it", "being-alongside-it" (*Ibid.*, p.380). Is it perhaps a way to criticise Heidegger by showing that his philosophy and language – which is used for conceptualising the question of being *human* – works for addressing animal being too? It also has a Kantian flavour as Derrida suggests that his being 'follows' that of the cat, suggesting that there is a certain sense of it already being there, a kind of *a priori being of the cat* to which Derrida can subject himself or link his own being. Thus, the being of the cat is not created because Derrida looks at the cat and must conclude it exists. Rather, the being of the cat precedes Derrida's gaze. Then he says something striking:

And from the vantage of this being-there-before-me it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also – something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this

calculated forgetting itself – it can look at me. It has its point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other, and nothing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbour than these moments when I see myself seen naked under the gaze of a cat. (Derrida, 1997, p.380)

The observation that a non-human animal can choose whether it will be seen by another animal; that it can hide from the human (gaze); that it exists when we do not look at it; that it thus has will and choice of its own, certainly gives the animal agency. It presents a strong case for advocating that an animal (or at least this cat) has a sense of itself and the other. In the quote above he speaks of ‘absolute alterity’; not only is the cat’s alterity captured in this moment, a more fundamental suggestion of absolute otherness is suggested in the exchange. This become clearer as Derrida continues and speaks of a ‘bottomless gaze’:

What does this bottomless gaze offer to my sight? What does it “say” to me, demonstrating quite simply the naked truth of every gaze, given that that truth *allows me to see and be seen* through the eyes of the other, in the *seeing* and not just *seen* eyes of the other? (Derrida, 1997, p.381, original italics)

The word ‘looking’ is charged, because it implies seeing with one’s eyes, but also points to a bigger ‘beholding’ and it is not simply a one-directional looking at, but from the moment the looking is initiated it works in multiple directions (toward the cat, from the cat to Derrida, and from otherness that precedes any subjective direction). Thus seeing, experiencing, reflection or ‘practising phenomenology’ are all part of the exchange described by Derrida. He focuses on the eyes and eyesight, but I am convinced he would agree that a blind person could undergo the same process if they would hear the cat is near to them and would understand their cat acknowledges their presence. To me, it is about undergoing a deep reflective experience in which you come to realise that your gaze is not the primary or only way of being and that it is not a looking at the animal from atop, but that you are interlocked and realise that

being (with each other) precedes your subjectivity. In a way, Derrida describes how sharing the gaze with his cat allows for a deconstruction of anthropocentrism. While an animal gaze can be established with eyes shut, for my films the fact that the viewer is seeing animals with their eyes and make eye-contact is important (see section B). As for a 'bottomless gaze', this should not be understood as an *a priori* entity or place that exists somewhere. It is the realisation that the current direction of looking is one of infinite possibilities; that order is embedded in chaos and that the shared gaze is one of many engagements with otherness. Thus the bottomlessness of a gaze gives an experiencing subject a hint of what absolute otherness might be. Furthermore, as I understand Derrida, only an encounter with a non-human animal other can achieve this sensation of bottomlessness. Standing face-to-face with a human will not establish such a profound dualism. The difference between seer and seen should be felt clearly.

The word 'animal' is problematic for Derrida for many reasons, most fundamentally because it is a human invention. Furthermore, we have only given ourselves this name recently and when we speak of animals we tend not to include humans in this category. He questions who corresponds and responds to the word. Derrida offers that it should come before I (*Ibid.*, p.400 and p.418). Thus, it would seem that an animal gaze is not a non-human gaze; it is a gaze we share. Connected in this gaze we can find the subjectivity of the seer (ourselves) and the seen (the other). Though, the alterity of the other animal cannot be 'known' as such. In this gaze we can sense the distance (between human and cat) and within this gap both our alterities are exposed. In my opinion, this works the same in film. The animal otherness and the animal's subjectivity are expressed as a territory that feels unfamiliar, mysterious (more about this in chapter 2.3).

I find it important to stress that Derrida starts with difference (dialectics), because this gives concepts and phenomena the possibility of deconstruction. Just as there is no nakedness to be felt when an animal is always naked, one cannot deconstruct or speak of otherness if they are identical *a priori*. Difference allows for a conscious perception of the other, and the self. Difference allows for identifying *with*. Thus, if sufficiently deconstructed and questioned, dissimilarity can lead to a sense of belonging and togetherness. Demarcations are important or at least not necessarily harmful or false as

some queer theories would like to stress (discussed in the next subchapter), as long as they are not rigid.

Perhaps the main necessity for humans to look at non-human animals is for humans to see and remember that our human vantage point is not absolute. The other creature shows that humans are not the centre of the world. It confronts us with another way of being, time, and space. Even though this other(ed) perspective is not always (immediately) accessible, it still offers us an alternate possibility. Nietzsche alerted the same in 1873, but puts it comically, sarcastically (a gnat is a flying insect, like a mosquito):

But if we could communicate with the gnat, we would learn that he likewise flies through the air with the same solemnity, that he feels the flying centre of universe within himself. (Nietzsche, 1873/1998, p.116)

Humans generally regard insects as unpleasant creatures, annoyances. It is not a coincidence that Nietzsche compares humans to a mosquito. This is his fight against anthropocentric self-righteousness, against (by-)products of the Enlightenment, which to him was the Age of fanciful, self-indulgent quests for truth. It is interesting that he chooses an animal perspective to make his point.

The influential “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?” (1974) written by Nagel is specifically targeted to upset physical theories of mind, and more broadly, science as the bearer of truth and absolute knowledge. Nagel opposes the reductionist view of behaviourists who try to understand – or rather bypass – subjective experience by reducing it to chemical processes. Nagel pleads for the value of consciousness and subjectivity. Even if we would know everything there is to know about bats: their physiology, how bats use sonar, how they fly, where they fly, where they sleep, etcetera; we would still not know what it is like to be a bat. In the end this text is not about bats, it is about language, knowledge, and experience.

In his “A Science Of Belonging: Poetry As Ecology” (2006) poet and writer John Burnside ushers for a preservation of mystery in a similar way as Nagel, and at the same time Burnside acknowledges the value of science. He says that science explores how things function, but poetry is needed to celebrate that it exists and is able to preserve the wonderment and mystery of

phenomena. He compares poetry and science, but his argument can be applied to artistic (poetic) depictions of animals in film versus factual (scientific) portrayals:

It would be too simple to say that the work of science is to investigate how things are in the world, and the work of poetry is to remind us of this separate mystery – the fact of a world, the sense of wonder that anything exists at all – but it would not be entirely mistaken. At the same time, it would be absurd to suggest that the scientist is always a scientist, the poet always a poet: we all have to deal with *how* and the *that*. Knowing the *how*, and celebrating the *that*, it seems to me, is the basis of meaning dwelling: what interests me about ecology and poetry is that together they make up a science of belonging [...]. (Burnside, 2006, p.92)

This idea of ‘mystery’ will be picked up again in chapter 2.3 where I demonstrate how it can give a suggestion of animal subjectivity.

Yet another person who is often mentioned in relation to animal studies and explored ‘looking’ at animals and at art is John Berger. He is known for the series *Ways of Seeing* (1972) that was adapted to a book and the book *Why Look At Animals?* (2009). The former is a practical exercise in learning how to look at art. In case of the latter, ‘looking’ could be understood as ‘consider’ or ‘care about’. Thus the title could be paraphrased as “Why Care About Animals?” The book is a collection of short stories about animals from various years with the earliest title dating 1980. It answers the question by immersing the reader, through sharing the author’s experiences with animals and showing the wonderment of animals. It does not give a definitive, logical answer to the question of its title. He will be mentioned again in chapter 3.1.

To summarise, the animal turn points to a change of perception across disciplines. Animal studies urge us to avoid hierarchical thinking and offer ways of perceiving humans as already being part of the animal world – primarily, first and foremost. Instead of top-down inference, animal studies offer examples of horizontalist thinking.

### **1.3) Dispersion: queer theory, post-humanism, and becoming-animal**

*The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) by Donna Haraway also takes the relation with a pet as a starting point for philosophical enquiry. Her experience of living with dogs: the love, and the friendship she enjoyed with them form the basis for a political manifesto about otherness, difference, acceptance, and togetherness across animal species. Not only Haraway, but feminism as a whole is important for animal studies as it deals with (undoing) dialectical boundaries, minorities, identity, and otherness. For example, Judith Butler's philosophy pleads against binary systems and gender specificity in *Gender Trouble* (1990). In film theory, Laura Mulvey is widely known for coining the term 'the male gaze'. In her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1973) she explains how film is subjected to and therefore reproduces power systems pre-existing in society. In her own words the essay "takes as starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle" (Mulvey, 1973, p. 57). Unless other images, other ways of seeing would be included in film, it would keep on reinforcing a patriarchal structure. More recently Karen Barad (2007) calls for an understanding of intra-action; that agency is not negated from within the human subject, but that we should think of the world as in the process of a constant becoming and that all matter (including animals) contributes to this motion. Processes do not occur because of singular events determined by simple cause and effect, but consist of movements that occur simultaneously and are dynamic. I understand it as droplets falling unto a water surface, causing multiple ripples that eventually resonate with one another and influence each other. In light of Barad's thinking, 'matter' and 'thought' are the same and therefore concepts should also be considered to be material. Braidotti also calls for a radical reorganisation of the human versus world dichotomy. In a series of works "Animals, Anomalies, and Inorganic Others" (2009), *The Posthuman* (2013), and "A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities" (2018) she theorises and conceptualises the posthumanities. She perceives a shift in theoretical thought that can be called 'becoming-animal'. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call becoming-animal into existence and describe continuums and continuity, various states of 'becoming' (Bruns, 2007, p.703). It is their term that became so influential. Braidotti describes it as:

[...] a process of redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared world, a territorial space. It expresses multiple ecologies of belonging, while it transforms one's sensorial and perceptual coordinates, to acknowledge the collectiveness and outward direction of what we call the self. (Braidotti, 2009, p.530)

Braidotti calls to let go of dialectics that define the human in opposition to something else. Instead, the posthuman subject should be relational and embodied, embedded, and affective. We should not see the mind versus body and nature versus culture as opposites, but part of a continuum. Relatability should be seen as 'medianaturecultural' and 'humananimal transversal bonding' (Braidotti, 2018, p.22). Rather than a knowing subject that looks at something, it becomes part of a process. She calls it a "bioegalitarian turn", which encourages "to relate to animals as animals ourselves" (Braidotti, 2009, p.526). The notion of 'becoming' indicates that everything is constantly changing and that there is no fixated truth that can be known and defined. The particular word 'becoming', however, could be deceptive, as it could be read as bearing the presumption that there is an end goal; that there will be a point in the future when 'something' is better approximated. The word is legacy from Heidegger who also does not envision a particular end goal. Like the infamous statement of Heraclitus (who lived circa 535-475 BC) "We step and do not step into the same rivers, we are and we are not" (Heraclitus, cited in: Barnes, 1987, p.70.), 'becoming' refers to being in a state of perpetual movement where no moment in time is the same as the previous.<sup>10</sup> For Heidegger past and future collapse in the present and in that way 'the now' is constantly becoming. Adding the word 'animal' after becoming, perhaps, is a good way to address what yet needs to happen in humanities and society more broadly. We still need to become animal, it is happening, and essentially we are already, but we need to learn how to become animals again or learn to forget that we have called ourselves human. Thus we have to let go of hierarchical thinking, our anthropocentric gaze, and knowledge such as taxonomies that are used to classify species.

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<sup>10</sup> And therefore one cannot state that something 'is'.

Rossini (2014) asks “Is animal to human as female is to male?”. Indeed there are similarities in answering this question especially regarding otherness and equal rights. However, the primary reason why feminism and queer theory are mentioned in a thesis about animals is because of the suggestions for decentralising singular perspectives as presented in these theories and to show how it has influenced animal studies.

#### **1.4) Decentralisation of the human subject, animal subjectivity and animal gaze in relation to my practice**

In my practice I implement various techniques and aesthetic devices to avoid dictating a single viewpoint. In film, a viewpoint can be communicated through its visuals (who is depicted, how are we looking at them or whether we are seeing with them) or, and especially in the case of documentary film, an opinion or vantage point is often expressed with voice as a ‘voice-of-god’ narrator or a presenter. When my films contain voice or voice-over, it is never one voice and the voices do not promote the same viewpoint (i.e. they offer contrasting viewpoints). This is especially evident in *Wolfpark* (2019) where the voices are those of many tourists of different ages, genders, and in various languages; the voice of one of the animal keepers (Julien), the voice of the owner who leads the tourists around the wolf enclosure (Gilles), there are wolf voices, that of children (onscreen and offscreen), and each offer a unique perspective. When my voice is heard, as in *The View From Here* (2012), it is for the purpose of asking questions. I do not provide answers and I do not communicate any specific information or beliefs. I also play with film form: I move between types of narration as can be seen in *The Breeder* (2017) and *Wolfpark*, which further emphasises the idea that there is not one way of approaching a subject. Thus, to a great extent my practice is an embodiment of ideas put forward in animal studies and post-humanism with the advantage that the viewer does not exclusively read about it, nor is told about it, but is offered opportunities to experience and practice such ideas whilst listening and watching.

This idea of decentralising a singular perspective is an act against hierarchical thinking. Yet, I want to stress that I do not work against dialectics, as I am convinced that an enquiry about or empathising with (non-human) animal subjectivity starts with the realisation that there is a difference; between the looking subject and what or whom the subject is looking at. Thus,

the triad addressed to Hegel – the process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis – must occur before (a Derridian) deconstruction can occur.<sup>11</sup> Difference between beings (as dialectical opposites), whilst acknowledging that you are both present and sharing a space, is a starting point for empathic considerations. Dialectics can be part of horizontalist thought, but they should not become rigid. The restructuring of attachment and connection to a shared world, as contained in Braidotti’s explanation of the concept of becoming-animal, can only occur when one firmly realises that we belong to multiple ecologies and are in a constant flux. In my practice I use dialectics to make my argument as I often position the viewer against the onscreen animal, and contained within a single frame or between frames there are dialectics too as species are juxtaposed. Examples hereof will be discussed in detail in chapters 3, 4, and 5 when I provide textual analyses of films made by other directors and my own films.

To conclude, over the course of centuries non-human animals went from creatures considered wholly unconnected and distinct from humans to instigators for human political, ethical, and ontological reflections. Human and non-human animals inhabit the same world and there are similarities in their sensory perception. Therefore, there is ontological proximity, which is a fundamental starting point for seeing likeness across species and thereby ground for connection and communication. Whether this interaction means the same for both species has become irrelevant. A driving force for current post-humanist thought about the interconnectedness of animals is the shift from rational thought to accepting bodily perception and experience as a valid starting point for the production and falsification of knowledge. The human measure is no longer an accepted standard to verify a non-human’s state of mind (Andrews, 2015, In: Herman, 2018, p.28).

As a filmmaker, my primary target are humans and to establish a connection between animal species my practice still begins with an understanding of the human subject (and film technology). Connecting a

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<sup>11</sup> Gustav Mueller (1958) explored where Hegel first coined this famous triad. Using various sources (including Hermann Glockner’s *Hegel Lexicon* from 1935) he explains that Hegel does not mention it in such short terms anywhere in all Hegel’s works. Hegel was even confronted with this “triplicity” and called it a “lifeless schema” and a “mere shadow”. In other words, it is too simplified to account for exactly what Hegel intended it to be (*Ibid.*, pp.411-412).

human audience and onscreen animal requires specific film techniques that should appeal to human viewers. A cinema screen is flat and only gives the suggestion of a 3D space. The onscreen world does not really exist. Filmmakers construct films in such a way that the illusion is 'perfect', i.e. that the viewer does not question the filmworld. However, as established above one of the grounds for engagement with animals is the sharing of physical space and corporeal confrontation. In film there is no physical space that viewer and onscreen animal can share and therefore no 'each other', strictly speaking. Though if the filmworld is sufficiently believable, audiences can 'feel-into' and embody onscreen actions, and in watching them feel as if they have performed or lived that situation. One of the most powerful ways to create empathic engagement is through anthropomorphism.

## **CHAPTER 2: Animal transformations in storytelling: anthropomorphism, cuteness, and the *unheimlich* as engagement principles**

This chapter examines how in the translation from actuality to story character, animals are altered to make them interpretable or engaging for a narrative. These alterations are aesthetic devices that might not necessarily characterise the animal or they exaggerate certain aspects of the animal. The analysis starts with an examination of anthropomorphism in written and film narratives. I demonstrate that anthropomorphism can be justified if used in accordance with certain limitations. Then, I challenge this approval of anthropomorphism in chapter 2.2 when I show that humans have a tendency to misread animal behaviour when animal appearances are similar to human expressions and when animals look cute. Finally, after identifying these misinterpretation accidents, in chapter 2.3 I discuss documentaries where filmmakers have consciously integrated false or suggestive animal behaviour for the purpose of a particular interpretation on part of the viewer. I discuss the inclusion of false sound in *Zoo Quest* (1954-1963, BBC) deliberate anthropomorphism in the film *Microcosmos* (1996, Claude Nuridsany & Marie Pérennou) and the work of Jean Painlevé, as well as the role of *unheimliches* portrayals of animals in preserving animal alterity. I argue that films (and literature), which avoid dictating unfalsifiable knowledge *about* animals and refrain from offering descriptions of *what* is seen in the image, stimulate imagination and as a result more effectively create a ground for empathy. Therefore, I conclude that depictions of animals that allow for artistic interventions are better suited to suggest animal subjectivity and empathy than portrayals controlled by presenting verifiable or scientific facts.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the chapter is about the kinds of transformations of animal behaviour and their physical appearance (in sound and image) that occur when they are portrayed as characters in documentary film; about which alterations are appropriate and why storytellers are justified to use anthropomorphism and other techniques that invite empathy to create a particular reading of a written or film text. In my own film practice I need to employ film technical devices when I construct onscreen animals, therefore it is necessary to examine how far it is appropriate to make creative interventions and to identify which storytelling techniques are best suited for

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<sup>12</sup> Think back to Nagel's "What Is It Like To Be A Bat?" (1974) targeted to upset science as the bearer of truth and absolute knowledge.

suggesting animal subjectivity. In section B I indicate all instances where I have anthropomorphised and suggested animal alterity in order to generate a particular reading of my films.

### **2.1) Better and worse anthropomorphism**

In June 2018, the British Council held a nature-writing seminar in Munich, Germany. In one of the sessions Robert MacFarlane, author and reader at Cambridge University, hosted an interview with fellow nature and travel writer, memoirist, and children's author Horatio Clare. At the end of the conversation the discussion is opened to the audience and someone asks Clare what he learnt from writing for children. He answers:

[...] We find it difficult to relate to children without animals. When you take animals out of parent-child interaction – it's a hole, isn't it? How do we understand who we are in relation to anything? We instinctively know. The child identifies with the wolf pup. At some level we are intimately, entirely connected. (Clare, H. In: *Nature Writing* [British Council Germany Youtube] Session from the British Council Nature Writing Seminar 2018)

The majority of animals in children's stories are anthropomorphic. They often speak in human language with each other, have human feelings, frequently wear clothes, use human tools, and have human desires. One wonders why these stories are not told with exclusively human characters. As Clare states, there is something between human and animal that allows us to connect instinctively. Does this intimacy and prompt empathy work via mimesis, the recognition of shared qualities such as sentience, the fact that we share the same world, or perhaps because we have similar senses with which we experience the world? If physical similarity is a ground for connectedness, i.e. how similar an animal looks compared to a human or human behaviour, are some animals in books and film more relatable than others? Furthermore, is this speciesism the same for books and film? Clare speaks of animals in children's stories with compassion and sees the good in these anthropomorphised creatures, because it gives parents an incentive to teach their children about the world. However, in Animal Studies this is not a widely

accepted standpoint, because anthropomorphic depictions of animals are deemed anthropocentric. According to posthumanist thought animals should no longer be “the signifying system that props up humans’ self-projections and moral aspirations”, rather they should be “approached literally, as entities framed by code systems of their own” (Braidotti, 2009, p.528). In this chapter I challenge the notion that anthropomorphism should always be ‘bad’ and offer that anthropomorphism should not be defined as an absolute principle, but that it is better to see it as a continuum.

Sam Cadman (2016) examines post-humanist theory in relation to depictions of animals in fictional stories and offers a typological spectrum that takes levels of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism into consideration. He identifies relative anthropocentrism, linguistic anthropomorphism, and impossible fiction (*Ibid*, p.163). Like many theorists in the posthumanist tradition or animal studies, Cadman’s analysis starts with Derrida. He states that for Derrida “literary creations in the guise of animals are implicated in humanism’s erasure of true animal alterity” (*Ibid*, p.164). In other words, the otherness of the animal, what makes the animal a non-human animal is veiled in the act of transforming it into a human literary work. Notably, when Cadman summarises Derrida, he uses the phrase “true animal alterity”, which postulates the idea that there is a truth or a reality that is the animal’s own, which is inaccessible to prose. This would mean that the only way to preserve some of this alterity is to avoid dictating truths, and to remain open and undisclosed. Thus, otherness and difference must be a key aspect of the depiction. In chapter 1 it was explained that in “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (1997) Derrida speaks of “absolute alterity”, the animal is “wholly other” (*Ibid.*, p.380). Using the word absolute rather than true avoids any morality claims, which in the rift between the two species (human and cat) do not play any part. There is only an absolute and total distance, one that is ‘beyond good and evil’, beyond discourse.

Cadman claims that depending on the species a human is able to estimate an animal’s subjectivity and that we can distinguish between subjectivities (2016, p.165). As I understand it, a human is able to judge types of otherness and is able to evaluate the degree of otherness (the distance between human and non-human, i.e. how ‘othered’ it is). He further states that whoever fictionalises the animal must treat the process the same as in the

creation of a human fictional character. Authors have to be aware of their own language craft as well as the political status of the animal, and use their imagination (*Ibid.*). According to Cadman fictionalisations create “worse” animals when they emphasise the human-animal dualism and “better” fictional animals when the depictions do not marginalise the animal species and do not reinforce the centrality of human existence (*Ibid*, p.168). Thus, anthropocentrism is on a continuum or sliding scale; it is not absolute. One can promote it more strongly in certain fictional forms than in others.

Cadman discusses Crist (2000) who proposes that the phenomenon of anthropomorphism is a result of the nature of language. She points to Darwin who writes about the singing of birds as if their singing entails the same meaning and is done for the same reason as human singing. Since the word singing is used to describe the sound that birds make, an immediate semblance between humans and birds is generated, but this “semantic kinship” (Cadman, 2016, p.170) is misleading. The motivation for our singing differs to that of birds, or at least we cannot assume it is identical. Similarly, when a text asks us to imagine being a particular animal or to embody it, the very act of embodying is anthropocentric and results in anthropomorphism. The act of describing animals in human language and invitations to identify with the animal, which is linguistic anthropomorphism, is necessarily an anthropocentric exercise.

Furthermore, Cadman proposes the concept of “impossible fiction” to explain why and how certain narratives are more prone to make anthropocentrism “worse”. He calls readers to consider the level of impossibility concerning a fictional animal character. He pleads for this as a means to gauge to what extent that animal’s potential has been removed and to what extent the animal’s subjectivity requires human consciousness (anthropocentric thought). Readers should estimate how impossible the fictional narrative is. If an animal exerts behaviour that is overtly humanised, it is an impossible fictional narrative. In Cadman’s view, such narratives are better off when told with human characters as it depletes the non-human animal of its subjective, individual potential.

Let’s make this practical. What does this mean for narratives? What are we as storytellers permitted to do? An example of impossible fiction would be verbal communication between human and non-human animal where both parties speak human language. The level of impossible fiction would be high in

such stories, because in real-life animals do not reply in human language. Pretending that they do veils part of their animal potential. In Clare's children's stories such as *Aubrey and the Terrible Yoot* (2015) a human child speaks a kind of telepathy with the animals. The human talks and listens, but the animal does not reply in spoken human language. Rather the 'mute' language of the animal appears in the human head, as if spoken, but the lips of the animal do not move. Adults who happen to witness this exchange, see a boy talking to and intently looking at the animal. The animals look back and exert behaviour that is realistic in terms of the animals' biology, but at times would be fairly unusual to do in proximity of a human or 'for' a human (for example a heron delivering fish by coughing it up in front of Aubrey). The boy's mode of communication with the animals is similar to what I would call *listening in*, which I do in my own practice. When I film, I do speak to animals and I do get responses back, just not uttered in human verbal language. I address the animal in my own human language (Dutch), because I have the feeling that when I speak it my body language and tone communicate an essence and honesty that many animals can comprehend, one way or another.<sup>13</sup> Writing about it requires imagining an animal's being and embodying its worldliness, and then understanding how one's writing craft affects the reader. Are our practices examples of 'better' anthropomorphism? Of course, in my case it further depends on how I translate my 'listening in' to an onscreen experience, which will become clear in the next chapters.

To compare with other authors, Cadman's advocacy for individual animal subjectivity in fiction stories also promotes the 'difference' principle as identified by Calarco (2015). Cadman (2016) claims that indifference, to treat fictional animals as metonymic replacements of humans, leads to worse anthropocentrism. It results in uncritical assumptions about animals, whereas we should keep the distance in tact and allow the reader to imagine the otherness of the animal, whilst being aware of our predisposition.

The hypothetical impossibility level of an animal in written works of fiction and animation film is boundless, as it is easier to make an elephant fly in a written or drawn story than in a documentary or fiction film (though CGI has

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<sup>13</sup> This might sound mystical, but it is an actual part of my filmmaking practice when working with animals. When *The View From Here* (2012) is discussed in section B I explain where I had been 'listening in'. Sometimes my 'listening in' is quiet and mute, other times I speak or sing.

made this achievable). In addition to this technical difference, documentary film is also bound by ethical restrictions of representation and believability of certain actions. For these reasons the impossibility level in documentaries quickly reaches a limit. In animation it is evident that the viewer is watching a mediated creature, but in documentary the visual representation is more immediate and mimesis is more direct. For the viewer an animal in documentary film is the real animal. However, works of documentary are also (re)constructions and fabrications of reality; during its production many creative decisions are made. Factual television programmes about real animal lives, supposedly, share only factual, correct, unbiased information. However, often audiences do not fully realise situations and animal characters are fabricated. On occasion these false reconstructions could lead to biased portrayals or persistent stigmas.<sup>14</sup> Thus, following Cadman, for written works strongly fictional, fantastical narratives are most problematic. However, this research claims that for film anthropomorphism is especially damaging when it occurs subtly without giving audiences an incentive for critical assessment.

## **2.2) Bad audiovisual anthropomorphism: false likenesses and cuteness aesthetics**

Anthropomorphism; pet owners perform it all the time. They attribute human sentiments to the behaviour and facial expressions of their cats, dogs, rabbits, yes even fish and lizards when they say that their pet feels guilty, angry, sad, or embarrassed. Anthropomorphism is a useful tool to make sense of the world. It is a way for us to connect to the animals near us, a way to find a language that makes sense for us and allows us to interpret animal behaviour. We cannot be sure whether a dog really feels embarrassed, but calling it embarrassment 'works'. Unfortunately, humans are easily fooled. YouTube is riddled with clips of animals that are supposedly smiling or laughing.

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<sup>14</sup> In *Mondo Cane* (1962, Gualtiero Jacopetti, Franco Prosperi, Paolo Cavara) the directors abuse the viewer's emotional response to animal harm and ignorance about animal biology. Audiences did not realise they watched a documentary that deliberately presents wrong information.



Fig.2 A collection of 'smiling' animals.

When we see a cat or dog 'smile' it seems justified to call it a smile. We know this animal. We know what they want. They live with us and exert behaviour in response to our calls and gestures. The animal communicates with us when they are hungry, want to go out, are scared, excited, etc. We are so often correct in judging their needs that when they exert facial expressions and other behaviour that looks human we are quick to assume that we can interpret those expressions too, immediately, without thinking about the differences and uniqueness of both species. However, consider the smiling animals above. For the cat and the dog we find it difficult to accept that the animals are not smiling, because these pets are part of our family households. They are like us. However, when you look at the fish, the lizard and the owl one must admit that we are perhaps attributing human sentiments to an image. Those fish, the owl, and that lizard simply look like this. The parrotfish opens its mouth to reveal teeth that happen to look human. The owl might be yawning. The lizard smells the air with its tongue. They are not smiling. This is an innocent example, but in some cases such anthropomorphism can be harmful for the animal or the human. Dogs that 'smile' with their teeth exposed do not feel at ease. If you get too close, you may get bitten. When a dog rolls on its back, feet up, it performs submissive behaviour and often likes a stroke – but not always. A similar type of behaviour is exhibited when the dog feels threatened, and again a bite may be near. Other times misinterpretation harms the animal. The slow loris has sharp teeth that are clipped before they are sold as a pet. YouTube shows us videos of these furry

animals who raise their arms, because they 'enjoy being tickled'.



Fig.3 A slow loris raising its arms.

In fact, the International Animal Rescue explains that this animal is in great distress:

Lorises are the only venomous primate and this venom is secreted from a gland on the inside of their elbow. Lorises raise their arms and mix the venom with saliva before biting their victim. The bite is extremely painful and the venom can bring on anaphylactic shock and even death in humans. This slow loris is not putting its arms up to ask for more, it is terrified and trying to defend itself! (*The Truth About Sonya And Kinako* (n.d.) retrieved from International Animal Rescue website)

Therefore, behaviour that in visual appearance is similar to that of humans may not have their roots in the same sentiment. This poses problems for Cadman's (2016) suggestion that humans are able to make fair judgement about the subjectivity of the animal. Clearly, it goes wrong sometimes. Therefore, the filmmaker who wants to preserve 'true animal alterity' must be aware of the particular openness it creates in cinema, because certain open-ended depictions may lead to naïve responses.

What contributes greatly to the appeal of the slow loris are its cute characteristics; a soft furry body, round face, big eyes, and its clumsy slowness. To us, it seems a rather vulnerable creature, in need of support. It is overwhelmingly cute. In 1943 Lorenz formulated a list of physical features that trigger an immediate affective response in the beholder:

The aspects of cuteness that he identified and schematized, namely “a relatively large head, predominance of the brain capsule, large and low-lying eyes, bulging cheek region, short and thick extremities, a springy elastic contingency, and clumsy movement” would, Lorenz claimed, trigger an involuntary desire to nurture in adults. (Lorenz, *Studies* 154-162, In: Dale et al., 2017, p.3)

It is not a coincidence that the cute characteristics identified above are found in human babies. Looking cute is a good survival mechanism when you are not yet able to look after yourself. The cute appearance of a baby: their big heads, big eyes, and chubby physique trigger a care response in human adults. Not only babies and cute animals trigger this response, we go soft and floppy around any cute stimuli, animate or inanimate. Cute objects appear all around us; in the media, household objects, commercial advertising, the workplace, etc. Allison Page (2017, In: Dale et al., 2017) demonstrates that cute stimuli in modern society can be regarded as a coping mechanism. Most interestingly, it is even argued that the appeal of cute characteristics may have led to the way homo sapiens behave and look today: we have ‘self-domesticated’ homo sapiens to retain cute characteristics (Dale, 2017, p.49). Thus, there is something immediate and irresistible about things and beings that look cute. Joshua Paul Dale argues that expressions of cuteness “whether they emanate from animals, objects, or people, comprise a form of agency: namely, an appeal aimed at disarming aggression and promoting sociality” (*Ibid*, p.37). It is suggested that cuteness “may be best understood as an appeal, – intentional or unconscious, made by an animal – or human-like entity – that seeks to trigger a particular affective response (Dale et al., 2017, p.4).

To summarise, although making an animal look cute in film may lead to an immediate and very powerful affective relationship between viewer and onscreen animal, it also creates a lazy viewer. The title of Elizabeth Legge’s

article (In: Dale et al., 2017) captures it well as ‘awe’ that turns to ‘awww’. It does not create the type of engagement that this research wishes to capture, as it does not inspire the viewer to question their own humanness or animality – it is quite the opposite, because naïve response may result in false assumptions.

In conclusion we can assert that a filmmaker needs to be knowledgeable about animal behaviour as certain communicative expressions seem identical across species, but aim to elicit completely dissimilar types of responses. The empathy we might feel for an onscreen animal and the affective behaviour we elicit in response to that animal may be based on false premises. It is the result of directly projecting the human self onto the animal other. It is a similar effect as when animals in film are anthropomorphised; because in both cases the viewer or ‘seer’ misreads the (depicted) animal and this may affect the way the human interacts with the animal in actuality. Therefore, for depictions in film it is the filmmaker’s responsibility to be aware about animal behaviour and it is their responsibility to gauge how a viewer interprets the particular onscreen construction and to weigh their reaction against what the filmmaker thinks is an appropriate response in relation to that onscreen animal. Here, the usefulness or appropriateness of a depiction depends on the discourse of a particular time and how audiences read a film text. A filmmaker should be aware about the way their viewer reads their film craft, as it is the filmmaker’s responsibility to ensure that the film communicates the filmmaker’s intention and does not unwantedly trigger naïve responses, as is the case with cuteness aesthetics. In the next chapter I discuss cases where filmmakers have deliberately used anthropomorphism or implemented false information for particular purposes.

### **2.3) Connecting audience and onscreen animal: dutiful anthropomorphism, effective lies, the *unheimlich*, and why poetic depictions are better suited to trigger empathy than scientific or expository documentaries**

In this subchapter I return to the idea that film is made by humans for humans and that for this reason depictions of animals should be interpretable for humans. Thus, onscreen animals are not depicted on their own terms, but are made intelligible for human audiences. This means that a film should provide

human viewers sufficient tools to decipher and relate to the animal. I argue that it is justified to include 'lies' and other suggestive information if they result in animal depictions that spark empathy and/or provide an alternative perspective to ecological arguments. To preserve animal alterity and to suggest animal subjectivity, the animal should be depicted in a way that stirs the viewer's imagination. I argue that a 'telling about' narrative as often found in wildlife films is not effective for creating an emphatic relation between viewer and onscreen animal, because it does not push the viewer to imagine the animal's subjectivity. Therefore, in this chapter I show ways in which filmmakers have attempted to connect onscreen animal and spectator. I demonstrate how illusions of animal subjectivity are constructed and argue that suggestive impressions are better suited to trigger empathic considerations than 'expository mode' documentaries and factual television programmes.

First, I look at BBC's *Zoo Quest* and *Planet Earth* to demonstrate that even factual television documentaries include suggestive and unscientific information. The particular focus in this section is sound design. I want to show this, because it evidences that wildlife television programmes and film are not purely factual, but use artistic means to communicate information. I want to show for which purposes and in which cases these artistic tools are used. The name 'factual television' suggests that information in these films is unbiased and objective. They present accurate scientific information. Yet, they implement tools to entice the audience and connect viewer to screen. Of course, onscreen depictions will always contain a certain degree of bias, because film inevitably adopts a subjective disposition. However, this does not mean that one should be complacent about presenting false or distorted information. Where to draw the line? When are filmmakers allowed to skew reality in favour of audience engagement and when is it their (ethical) duty to construct a depiction closest to reality – to be as scientifically accurate as possible?

Then, I turn to Georgina Evans (2015) who discusses the film *Microcosmos* (1996, Claude Nuridsany & Marie Pérennou) where it was the filmmakers' challenge to make insects likable for audience and they did this through deliberate anthropomorphism. It is noteworthy that the directors of this film are scientists who recognised that in order to connect viewer to insect it was better to part with providing scientific information and to use

artistic means to trigger empathy. Alongside this article I discuss James Leo Cahill (2013) who focuses on the work of Jean Painlevé and analyses it in relation to the concept of the *unheimlich*, which I connect to anthropomorphism. Cahill explains that Painlevé saw it as his *duty* to commit anthropomorphism.

Finally, I will conclude that documentaries containing artful depictions of animals are better suited to trigger empathy than exclusively expository, scientific or factual documentaries. In other words, one cannot be told to practise empathy in film. It has to be suggested and demonstrated so that the viewer can enter an experience wherein they exercise empathy whilst watching the film.

From 1954–1963 the BBC broadcasted a wildlife television series called *Zoo Quest* presented by David Attenborough. A short clip from 1956 is now available on BBC Earth's YouTube channel under the title "*Young David Attenborough Looks for an Orangutan*". It shows Attenborough and local people looking up at trees where orangutans are swaying. All humans are gesturing with their hands: "look up!" Then we see the faint silhouettes of orangutans. The programme was recorded on film, which means that the crew had to carry film reels into the jungle and were limited in terms of filming minutes they could record (about ten minutes per reel). Nowadays, images are recorded digitally on memory cards, which are very small and can carry many hours of footage. Another difference between now and then is the way sound is recorded. Listening to this clip, I think no location sound was recorded at all. Ambient sound and the sounds of insects are most likely taken from a sound library. The rest of the sounds are made by Foley artists in a sound recording studio who closely watched the video and create artificial sounds that aim to imitate the original ones in order to accompany the actions on screen. When we see Attenborough and the local man cutting branches with a machete, this sound would have been recorded in a studio after the film was edited.

Just after Attenborough and the local man have spotted a “great furry red form in the trees” we hear the sound of an orangutan. Or at least, that is what we assume since this sound is edited together with the image of an orangutan. However, it does not sound convincingly orangutan.

Fig.4 Still from BBC Zoo Quest on Youtube with the caption “Does that orangutan sound more ape or pig to you? Tell us in the comments below.”



I do think this is the sound of an ape, specifically that of a human ape. Foley artists, sound designers, or perhaps even Attenborough himself – for example when he came to the studio to record the voice-over – have created this snorting sound. It does not sound distinctively orangutan or pig to me. It sounds human. Later Attenborough describes the sound as ‘screaming’, which they may have done in real life, but the snorting sound edited into the video certainly could not be described as such. In any case, a false sound was used for these orangutans. It is likely that viewers at the time did not spot this incongruence, because information about animals was not as readily available as it is now and because the voice-over lets us believe it is the real sound. The programme makers knew they could get away with it, but why would they be in favour of adding a false sound rather than no sound at all? I think, because the relation between audience and screen was their main priority. They wanted to connect audience to the onscreen event: the discovery of the orangutan. The false orangutan voice creates the illusion of being-there. Sounds in film (non-musical sounds) are fundamental for establishing a

sensorial connection between viewer and film. Character engagement or character alignment between orangutan and human is established via this sound. Without the false sound the orangutan stays external, high above the ground. The sound makes the animal appear nearer and also gives it an acoustic texture. It brings the orangutan within closer empathetic reach of the human spectator.

The practice of adding Foley sound still exists and is a vital part of film and television productions, particularly for fiction and animation. In the case of documentary film the practice of adding Foley sound has diminished, partly because it is much easier to bring sound equipment to any location and thus it is possible to record sound in situ. However, the fact that location sound recording is now practically more achievable for shoots in challenging circumstances should not necessarily have to lead to a decline in post-production sound techniques such as Foley. Sounds are specific; I mean that they – like images – carry with them their own textural qualities and sensorial associations. As a director I do not want just any sound for my film. I am trying to construct a particular atmosphere, which can be constructed with Foley and other sound design techniques. The particular sounds I choose (or my sound designer) give the film its atmospheric texture. So, why has Foley been in decline for documentary film? Unfortunately, another reason for the decline of Foley sound is the overall neglect of sound recording and sound design as an art form. There is an unjust overemphasis on image quality and telling story with images. Film is not 50% image and 50% sound; film is an audiovisual medium where both extend to and affect the other (more about this interplay in section B).

Another example of 'false audio' in wildlife programmes often added to engage the viewer are sounds that accompany time-lapses (unless the real atmosphere sound of the recording has also been fast-forwarded), and sounds that the human ear would not be able to detect such as the sound of ants walking or a fly washing itself. Films such as *Microcosmos* (1996, Nuridsany & Pérennou) and close-up footage of insects or other small animals in series like BBC's *Planet Earth I* (2006), *Planet Earth II* (2016), *Blue Planet I* (2001), *Blue Planet II* (2017), and *Life* (2009) contain wonderful sounds we would not be able to detect with human hearing. My favourite examples are audio samples

accompanying time-lapses of growing plants. They are examples of 'false audio', because those sounds are imagined; they are not the actual recordings, but soundscapes designed to fit the onscreen movements and textures. They result in a hyperreal experience of the plant (or insect) world that in a strange way feels quite close, within proximity of human understanding, because we can experience the worldliness of those plants (and animals) through sound textures. We can 'feel' the moist forest bed as the leaves slightly bend under the tiny legs of for example a beetle, because we have walked on a forest bed ourselves, possibly even barefoot, and recognise the crispy wet sound. Sound is our 'way in' to embodying onscreen worlds. Thus sound design is fundamental for the creation of an onscreen (animal) character and the connection between viewer and the animal. Though sounds may be 'false' or 'unreal', with which I mean that they are not true to how humans would experience them in actuality, they may help the viewer to empathise with the filmworld and the animal depicted.<sup>15</sup>

In her article "A Cut or Dissolve: insects and identification in *Microcosmos*" Evans (2015) offers a textual analysis of *Microcosmos* (1996) in relation to writings by Callois, Brakhage, and interviews with the directors of the film Nuridsany and Pérennou. She explains that the filmmakers were explicit about their goal: to make insects – which have little semblance to humans and cannot be easily be presented as pleasant, because they lack cuddly features or recognisable facial expressions – likeable for humans. They did not want to educate the viewer, but wanted to engage the viewer into the world of insects. They succeeded. Evans further notes that the film presents "astonishing forms of likeness" between human and insect and that it keeps the viewer asking "what, exactly, resembles what, through what lens and with what significance?" (*Ibid.*, p.110). Indeed so, the film shows insects leading their everyday lives, which in many cases is very similar to the daily businesses of humans such as getting up and washing oneself, having 'bad luck' in the case of a poor dung beetle whose treasure gets stuck on a thorn, falling in love, fighting, etc. At other instances the depiction is sublimely gorgeous and

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<sup>15</sup> In the following link sound recordist Chris Watson is in conversation with David Attenborough who worked with each other on multiple BBC projects. Attenborough explains why sound recordings were so important to him and tells about sound editing tricks he implemented in his career as BBC producer.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixNM4EM-XgA&list=WL&index=10&t=0s>

engages the viewer by showing sheer beauty whilst withholding what is shown exactly. This is especially true for the final scene where we see a golden, fluffy dot on a liquid surface. It is unclear what we are looking at and the sound design does not give away clues either. The dot grows out of the water into what seems a silvery goddess. Then, when it is dry, it flies off and we realise that we have not witnessed the birth of a fairy, but of one of the most annoying creatures on earth: the mosquito. In these two ways: a) similarity between species and b) via compelling beauty, the film plays with audience expectations and preconceptions humans have toward insects.



Fig.5 Birth of a fairy goddess in *Microcosmos* (1996, Nuridsany & Pérennou). Or is it a mosquito?

The mesmerising resemblance to human behaviour and depictions of overwhelming beauty establishes the relation between viewer and screen, but it also does something else. Evans suggests that the film moves beyond anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, *because* it is unclear what the similarity between species signals. In showing likenesses between human and insect with uncertain significance, the film carries a certain level of openness, a likeness that is undisclosed. But, what do viewers gain in experiencing this? Evans examines the same issue when she asks about the significance of the resemblance. What does it mean that these creatures, which are obviously unlike humans, seem so similar to us in this film? Perhaps the question is not so much what it means, but what it *does*. I think it pushes the viewer to question what is human and what is not. Seeing similarity in a species so

foreign feels odd. Perhaps we can call the feeling and process at work in this film the *unheimlich*. Before we continue with Evans' analysis of *Microcosmos*, this would be a suitable moment to turn to Cahill (2013) who discusses Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* and Lacan's *en mal d'homme* or *d'hommestiques* in relation to another French wildlife filmmaker: Jean Painlevé (to clarify, Cahill does not mention *Microcosmos*). According to Cahill, Lacan uses *en mal d'homme* and *d'hommestiques* as synonyms and explains that these concepts can be understood as animal representations, which are saturated with 'humanness' to the point of sickness (*mal-être*). Thus, it is an animal understood from within human understanding – contaminated to its core with Man. Cahill states: "Humans perpetuate home-sickness through their compulsion to domesticate and familiarise animals" (*Ibid*, p.74). Perhaps we can rephrase it as a compulsion to anthropomorphise and reinforce an anthropocentric gaze. Freud's concept of the *unheimlich* is often merely translated as uncanny. However, my understanding of the German word carries more complexities. It fuses homeliness and familiarity with the realisation that something is totally off. There is a fear so deep that one's existence is shaken to its roots. It occurs when you are, for example, dreaming that you enter your home where you normally feel at peace, and the house that you are entering is no doubt your house, but you sense that something is wrong. There is something frighteningly different and distant about this place you know so well. Following this understanding of the word *unheimlich*, it would be possible to call the effect of *Microcosmos unheimlich*, because we as human viewers are asked to reconsider what we, with certainty, consider human (except that the film is quite upbeat and happy, rather than eerie or dark). Our human body is the house we know so well, but this film demands to make it the house of a different being too. Cahill also insists on using the word *unheimlich*, instead of the common translation uncanny, and offers a similar explanation of the concept, then adds:

[...] what haunts and disturbs a house, what makes a home unhomely, are the unconscious conflicts of people who enter and inhabit it. The confusion as to whether sources of anxiety emanate from within or without, from the psyche or the physical environment, from presence or projection, and

the discomfoting sense of the existence of an internal alien  
Other, produce the haunted homme. (Cahill, 2013, p.75)

Cahill uses the word *unheimlich* in relation to the onscreen marine worlds of Painlevé that are constructed in a way so that humans can embody it i.e. in my words these depictions of alien marine life are anthropomorphised, they are “d’hommetique-ated”, filled with “*mal d’homme*”, and feel *unheimlich*, because they appear familiar. The depictions of insects in *Microcosmos* could also be said to stimulate a feeling of the *unheimlich*, because they are at once similar and strange, or rather – strange *because* they are portrayed as similar. When a dog makes a grimace that looks like smiling, we are incline to read this as an actual smile, an expression of satisfaction, because dogs are closer to our human ontology. They feel more familiar. We think: “Of course a dog is able to laugh! Why wouldn’t a dog be able to laugh?” But, when an insect smiles we smirk in ridicule, because we know it is probably not smiling. “Insects don’t smile!” Insect and human are so far removed from each other in terms of their ontology that even when they display behaviour that is visually similar, we still cannot accept that this would come from the same motivational root. If they are depicted as displaying equivalent behaviour, a dialectical mechanism is activated that pushes the viewer to think about the characteristics of both species: what is insect, what is human, and if they appear similar – what does that signify about either species?

Portraying creatures as if they are exhibiting human behaviour and have human sentiments, is that not misrepresentation? Are we allowed to this as filmmakers? It seems that different rules apply to different kinds of animals. Insects are far away from human worldliness and therefore misrepresentation is not as frowned upon as is the case with mammals. A viewer does not really mind if the ant colony was filmed on location in Africa or in a studio. However, this is different for polar bears, which are mammals – like us. Evans (2015) gives the example of BBC’s *Frozen Planet* series (2011) that famously showed the births of polar bear cubs, which, as turned out after broadcast, were filmed in a Dutch zoo and caused outrage among viewers who realised they were fooled (Evans, 2015, p.109). Filmmakers know they ‘fool’ viewers a lot. Actions that were filmed over several days are edited together into a flowing piece spanning a few minutes. The onscreen world gives the suggestion of

wholeness, but the reality of an event as it happened in actuality is different. Events on screen are not like events in real life. They are constructed. Evans quotes Attenborough who said in response to the scandal “Come on, we’re making movies” (*Ibid.*, p.110).

In addition to the use of false sound, suggestive edits, deceptive open-ended likenesses, there is also the ‘false’ depiction of time and event. Bousé (2000) reminds us that wildlife programmes mainly focus on spectacle. They show big events such as the hunt, the killing, a great migration, etc– therein misrepresenting the lives of animals. For example, predator animals such as lions are inactive for the majority of the time. Should one want to represent time spent as action relative to rest, it would result in a large amount of screen time where ‘nothing happens’. Bousé explains that excitement or wonderment is not only found in fast or big action. Alan Clark and Robert May (2002, In: Herman, 2018, p.7) have also pointed to a form of discrimination or favouritism, which they call a taxonomic bias in conservationist discourse. They analysed wildlife films and found that animals in the following categories or combinations thereof are favoured above animals that do not have these traits: furriness, big eyes, impressive movement, colourfulness, and the animal’s proximity to human contact.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, even animals in factual film and television are subjected to bias, discrimination, and misrepresentation, of course, due to the film techniques that are used to portray them, but also in selecting the type of behaviour and action that is shown on screen, the choice of animals, and their particular traits. The animal in factual wildlife film is an anthropocentric and anthropomorphic creature. This should not have to be a problem, however, the word factual has the pretence that the information is scientifically accurate and presents unbiased information, whereas this need not be the case. Onscreen animals are constructions that are not factual, unfalsifiable depictions of reality. They resemble what we think the animal is, they are human imaginations of what we think their animalness entails.

Evans (2015) explores the enigmatic enchantment viewers have for the insects in *Microcosmos*. The coincidental resemblance creates a suggestion of insect subjectivity that is comprehensible and thus accessible for the human viewer. Following after thinker Caillois she uses the word myth to indicate

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<sup>16</sup> Also note that some of these features relate to cuteness.

how this place of suggested insect subjectivity might be called. She explains that directors Nuridsany and Pérennou use the term 'poetic drama' rather than 'documentary' to avoid prescriptive associations with wildlife documentary and to allow for visual resemblances that are open-ended, full of myth and imagination. Note that using words like 'myth' and 'enchantment' imply that there is still a certain distance or unknown territory is felt, or to speak in the classification system of Calarco (2015): a difference. Evans concludes her article by reiterating Brakhage and says that *Microcosmos* "examines human visual realities by indicating others" (*Ibid*, p.199). She also states that the film is a "(admittedly very gentle) assault on the self-assurance of cinema spectators" (*Ibid*, p.198). So, we can conclude that this film asserts its argument via a dialectical process from a human gaze to an imagined animal gaze or other reality, which then sheds a new light on – or challenges without explicit imposition – human certainties.

Myth and wonderment imply feelings of belonging that are strengthened in the realisation that there is also a vast difference. Perhaps it could be compared to an encounter with the sublime, which can be described as an overwhelming sensation of beauty, grandeur, of smallness in the face of vastness, of belonging and interconnectedness, the realisation that you as tiny subject in some way belong to an infinite magnitude. Myth, wonderment, and sublime experiences are more positive concepts than *unheimlich*. Although the sublime carries with it a sense of fear (as a result of perceiving your smallness in the face of vastness) the resulting sentiment is positive, because it connects the subject with its environment, whereas the *unheimlich* disjoints and isolates the subject. Being in a state of feeling *unheimlich* makes the subject feel alone, whereas wonderment stimulates feelings of love and belonging. Thus the answer to the question: is portraying creatures as if they are exhibiting human behaviour and have human sentiments a form of misrepresentation – is no, not necessarily. Though, one must ensure that a certain animal alterity is preserved and one way of achieving this is by preserving a sense of wonderment and mystery.

A key trope of wildlife film is voice-over, which follows conventions of expository documentary as per the classifications of Nichols (2001). David Attenborough is known worldwide as narrator and presenter, and it could be argued that 'his' way of making wildlife programmes has become the standard

format. However, not all filmmakers choose to support a telling 'about' animals. Painlevé as well as Nuridsany & Pérennou were reluctant to include voice. Except from a few lines at the start, *Microcosmos* is without voice-over. This, as Evans explains, is because the directors "found that the commentary disabled the direct address to the imagination that they wanted to prioritise" (Evans, 2015, p.113). This statement implies that including voice diminishes the capacity to observe. Agreed, when one is told how to perceive something, it is very unlikely that the viewer will resist the command of the voice and will keep an undisclosed attitude. Cahill (2013) explains that wildlife filmmaker Jean Painlevé reluctantly added a voice track to his films. It was deemed necessary as film with voice tracks granted a greater commercial success. Reviews praised the combination of scientific rigour and photogenic elements combined with what Cahill calls the oneiric quality of his short wildlife films (Cahill, 2015, pp.77-78). He states that "Painlevé declared the voice was 'in contradiction with the photographic image' " and also "truly an irritant" and that "by definition the voice is made to be understood... it is thus incompatible with all the plastic, deformable, and imaginative visuals that represent the photographic art" (Painlevé 1929; 1930, In: Cahill, 2013, p.79). Cahill later refers to this as "taming of the wild potential of images" (Cahill, 2013, p.80). I agree that dedicative voice-over as contained in mainstream wildlife life can be restrictive. However, voice-track can aid in the preservation, even creation, of an open-ended and enigmatic portrayals of phenomena (including animals and landscape) as Lars Koens and I have demonstrated in our analysis of voice-over in the documentaries of Peter Mettler (Koens, L. & Kooij, D. 2018). But, Painlevé and Nuridsany & Pérennou are referring to a particular type of voice, typical of the wildlife film genre. Evans (2015) states that Caillois has much in common with Nuridsany and Pérennou, sharing a wish "to articulate the coincidence of science and enchantment, and all three at times articulate this encounter in terms of myth" (Evans, 2015, p.111). Painlevé advocates for a similar endeavour, but could be said to capture the creation of myth as posed by Evans as deliberate anthropomorphism:

We have the duty to commit anthropomorphism. If not, we would be incapable of appreciating any element around us.  
(Painlevé 1928, In: Cahill, 2013, p.82)

For Painlevé anthropomorphism is a way to engage the viewer. Plus, this statement could be interpreted in a more profound way, as it could suggest that anthropomorphism in and *out* of the cinema is the (only) way humans can appreciate or relate to the world they inhabit. I would agree, as surely our human gaze is all we have in order to make sense of our world. Cahill explains that for Painlevé one's perspective is both a blinder that restricts vision as well as that which makes comprehension possible. Cahill adds that the "radically indifferent mechanical eye of the camera" (*Ibid*, p.81) helps to unblind the human, which is a statement that sounds similar to Benjamin's observation that the film camera is an apparatus that cuts into reality like a surgeon making an incision.

Thus, Painlevé states that there is a duty to commit anthropomorphism. It is an understandable statement, even more so when one remembers that in his time marine life was not widely studied nor made widely available to the public (it still is mysterious). For people to understand and to relate to the images he had to present it in a way viewers could relate to it. At times title cards draw the audience in, sometimes a voice, but most often he establishes this with images that are similar to paintings and biblical narratives (in my view). For example, in the image below a baby sea horse is depicted as it moves 'across the sky' as if it is an angel, its shape almost human.



Fig.6 Stills from *The Seahorse* (1934, Painlevé).

Cahill explains that Painlevé (and co-creator Hamon) strove for scientific verisimilitude. Filmmaker Painlevé understood that anthropomorphism is a means to allow a viewer to connect to an onscreen world that is wholly different, and that it is the filmmaker's responsibility to balance scientific accuracy against artistic merit.

Recently several art projects have attempted to depict the natural world in sound and imagery. They visualise or make something audible that human perception cannot witness. These works are seen as artistic expressions of science and scientific discovery. For example, we can 'hear plants grow', hear them 'sing', or hear how they 'play a synth'. However, all that happens is that a device records fluctuations in electric currents and translates those into a sound or soundscape. Similarly, studio Marshmallow Laser Feast created a VR experience that lets you see a forest like an insect would (<https://vimeo.com/140057053>). One could perhaps argue that in such projects science and myth come together. Indeed, people who see, listen or experience these projects are clearly excited and express admiration. However, the danger of such art projects is that audiences are inclined to think that they are truly witnessing the world as that animal or actually 'hear' the plant. Plants do not have vocal chords; they do not sing. Although I am hesitant to regard such artistic scientific expressions of the natural world as being a form of art or fully scientific, the film *Microcosmos* contains a similar moment I am fond of. The viewer follows a bee that flies over a field of poppies when suddenly the spectator is confronted with a bee's eye-perspective that demonstrates a grid of coloured hexagons. It is an abstraction wholly different from human perception that the viewer accepts as a representation of insect perception. It is a tool for us to imagine what it could be like to fly over this field of flowers as a bee. We know that this is not a 'real' bee's view, but it pushes us to imagine how a bee might experience its world. Perhaps my irritation in relation to the singing plants projects and the VR experiences lie in the danger of creating a lazy viewer, as is the danger with cuteness aesthetics.

In this chapter I have argued that the preservation of mystery or enigmatic openness requires implementing audiovisual anthropomorphism or other film technical devices such as compelling cinematography or sound effects that help to engage the viewer and suggest animal otherness. Anthropomorphism is not simply good or bad; it depends on the particular application. Anthropomorphism can actually help in the act of imagining animal otherness. It is up to the filmmaker to ensure the viewer's imagination is stimulated in order to embody the natural world, in line with the filmmaker's integrity, but

they should be knowledgeable about the natural world they are representing and create an experience that engages the spectator.

In conclusion, why are artistic depictions of animals better suited to trigger empathy than scientific or factual film? It is because they tend to give a suggestion of a world that is Other, but nevertheless accessible to a human viewer. Film can do this by deliberately anthropomorphising animals, make them appear *unheimlich*, and suggest an enigmatic, mythical otherness that the viewer can embody as they watch the film. Scientific or factual films are usually very beautifully filmed and can engage the viewer through sublime pictures and communicating interesting information. However, the viewer is addressed on intellect and logic, which may work as a façade rather than a portal or imagining an animal's inner world. Thus, films that avoid dictating knowledge *about* animals and refrain from offering descriptions of *what* is seen in the image, stimulate imagination and therefore the next step: empathy –which requires imagining an animal other and animal subjectivity – is likelier to occur.

In the upcoming chapter I provide close textual analyses of films that portray animal otherness and give the viewer incentives for imagining animal subjectivity.

### **CHAPTER 3: Expressions of non-human subjectivity in three documentary films**

In this chapter three documentary films are analysed that express non-human subjectivity in different ways and spark empathic considerations to varying degrees. For each film I discuss how aesthetics and film techniques contribute to the construction of non-human subjectivity and how this affects the way the films prompt empathy for the depicted animals. These three films have been selected, because they contain non-human protagonists, but as will become clear, a non-human lead character is not sufficient for establishing empathy – it depends on the narration of a film. Therefore, I examine *how* the non-human protagonists are portrayed and how this affects empathy. These films were important examples for the construction of animal depictions in my own films. Hence, at the end of this chapter I will indicate how certain film techniques have influenced my practice.

The first documentary film, *Nénette* (2010, Nicolas Philibert), is about an orangutan in captivity where the viewer adopts the exact same viewpoint as visitors of the zoo. As a result of this singular and exclusively human gaze, the ape called Nénette appears almost wholly Other. Yet, the film contains moments where glimpses of Nénette's character are revealed. In my analysis I discuss why those moments effectively give a sense of her subjectivity and why these moments spark empathy.

The second film *Bovines* (2011, Emmanuel Gras) portrays day-to-day cow-life and successfully depicts cow otherness. The viewer stands among a herd of cows on a hilly pasture and feels the weather, the passing of time, and some dramatised moments where cows are taken away for slaughter. I explain how long-takes in *Bovines* suggest veracity and a sense of spending time with and 'being with' the cows. Yet, I also argue that the cows in *Bovines* stay wholly Other. It is a good film to indicate the difference between animal otherness and animal subjectivity, as it does give a suggestion of cow otherness, but little incentive to consider their internal world, their subjectivity. The film contains a few dramatic moments, but in these scenes the connection between viewer and cattle is emotional and sympathetic rather than empathic. In other words, the viewer feels for the cows, but the film does not quite give an incentive to transpose the spectator to the being of the cows. I explain that the cows are not really contrasted against humans, which is why

an analogy between human and cattle does not occur. As explained in the previous chapter, in order for an animal depiction to suggest animal subjectivity a degree of the *unheimlich* and mystery is required. Thus, the cows in *Bovines* are not sufficiently defamiliarised and therefore do not spark considerations of their subjectivity.

Thirdly, *Bestiaire* (2012, Denis Côté) suggests forms of non-human otherness and subjectivity, which, thanks to the use of enigmatic and *unheimliches* portrayals of animals, long-takes, and animals breaking the fourth wall, spark empathy between viewer and depicted animals. The animals in *Bestiaire* are depicted in a seemingly authentic manner, as they do not appear anthropomorphised or transformed to fit a preconceived human gaze. I explain how their portrayal as enigmatic animals opens up a contemplation of animal being that is rich and triggers empathy.

### **3.1) *Nénette* (2010, Nicolas Philibert)**

The zoo, like the cinema, is a space designed with exhibition in mind. (Lawrence & Lury, 2016, p.1)

The feature-length documentary *Nénette* (2010, Nicolas Philibert) is named after its main protagonist: a female orangutan in a zoo. The opening credits are accompanied by the sound of a lonely clarinet that silences when the image fades in. In stillness we see a close-up of Nénette's inspecting eyes. When she moves, we hear nothing. We notice some smudges on a glass that separates her from the camera lens. The echoing sounds of human voices slowly increase in volume. We realise we are not inside Nénette's enclosure. We stand among the visitors in front of a glass wall behind which Nénette lives. We hear the beeps and snaps of photo cameras; people who whisper to her, talk to her, and talk to each other *about* Nénette. There is no direct interaction between human and orangutan. Though the audio track almost exclusively consists of human voice, the only time we see evidence of humans is when they are reflected in the glass of Nénette's enclosure. For the portrayal of Nénette the exact opposite approach is taken: we never hear her, we only see her. The camera is fully fixated on her, from start to finish. This (deliberately) singular, rigid perspective results in a lack of variety of shots, accentuated by a lack of colour and variation in her enclosure. There are a few

moments when the free outside world is reflected in the window of her cell. This juxtaposition (seeing the outside world on the surface of a construction that keeps an animal locked inside) emphasises the utterly artificial situation of Nénette. Though the visitors and caretakers speak with deep love and care for the animal, it is a dire portrait of an orangutan in captivity. The perspective the visitor has of the ape is similar as the way an audience views a film in cinema. The glass barrier between Nénette and visitors is similar to the screen dividing audiences and 'the world behind the screen'. The glass and the screen are a window to another realm and both are created with exhibition in mind.

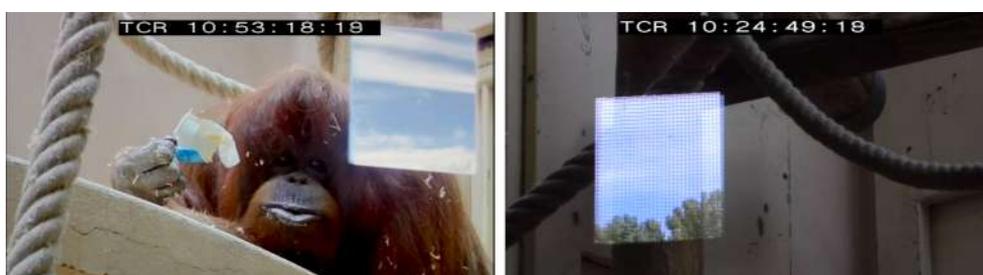


Fig.7 Stills from *Nénette* (2010, Philibert). The outside world is reflected in the glass wall of her cage.

When the film is finished, we learnt about Nénette via the words of the visitors. It is not a film about Nénette. It is a film about people looking at Nénette. The film demonstrates who we as humans are in the face of looking at an animal. Whichever way we may describe the nature of embodied affect in this film, it is clear that the film exposes human nature rather than the nature of this orangutan – except for the ending, which, for me, reveals part of Nénette's personality. The final shot is a long take of Nénette who enters a spot prepared with several bottles of tea and a cup of yoghurt. What is so telling about this scene is the care with which she opens the bottles and the yoghurt. We see her personal habits, her peculiarities. It is clear she has been presented with this feast before. She is visibly excited. She moves faster. She eats her yoghurt like I would: she pulls the aluminium sheet from the plastic cup and licks yoghurt that sticks on it, she then turns to what it is inside the cup. Her ape physique is similar to that of humans and establishes an instant affinity between her and us, but in this closing shot it is her behaviour in particular that is relatable. We witness a peculiarity, something she likes: she carefully pours some tea in her yoghurt and then drinks the mixture from the

cup, carefully, showing perfect dexterity and fine motor control of her lip and mouth muscles. She then spills some tea and quickly retracts her hands and a foot: like a human would. Then, the shot cuts to black – it seems a strange ending, at first. It makes you wonder why this would be the last thing we need to see. It is clear that the director felt Nénette should have the final ‘say’ in the film (in this closing shot we still do not hear her, we only see her). He could not finish the film with human voices. The director must have felt too that this particular shot revealed something true and personal: this is Nénette. We are seeing *her* in this final moment.

In the introduction for their book *Animal Life & The Moving Image* (2015) editors Laura McMahon and Michael Lawrence also mention the opening and closing shots of this film, and provide detail about the content of the visitors’ conversations about Nénette. They also notice the silence in the opening sequence and a general lack of sounds coming from the other side of the glass: “We never hear any sounds from Nénette and the other orangutans” (*Ibid*, p. 3), but the authors do not specify that the audio track of the film contains no sound from Nénette’s side *at all* – not of the apes, but also not of rustling of hay or any other sound that may align us with life on the other side of the glass. As is established in chapter 2.3, sound contributes to the sensory appreciation and reading of a film text. I am convinced Philibert purposefully did not include audio from the other side of the glass in order to emphasise the rift between visitor/viewer and ape. We are not allowed to feel her nearby. She has to feel far away, because this contributes to the portrayal of her confinement. The film is not a celebration of zoo life. McMahon and Lawrence capture this strikingly as: “Nénette is held captive – by the zoo, by the cinema and by the gaze” (*Ibid*, p.2). They point to her “apparent apathy” and “lack of curiosity” (*Ibid*, p.4), which is perhaps one of the reasons the film does not really connect us to her.

The ape is not anthropomorphised, yet there are moments when we can connect to her (this is most effective when she is active, for example when playing with a cardigan and the closing shot with yoghurt and tea). Even though human voices provide ways for the viewer to ‘understand’ her and learn about Nénette, on the whole the voices reveal more about human nature than orangutan nature. McMahon and Lawrence partly disagree on this matter as they state:

Yet, beyond the anthropomorphic logic of such comments [of the visitors], Nénette's specificity is also emphasised in visual, material terms. The film's tactile engagement with Nénette's body in the opening shots described above inaugurates a mode of embodied encounter with this particular orang-utan, rather than orang-utans in general, or animals in general. (McMahon & Lawrence, 2015, p. 5)

This quote contains two propositions: the first is that they suggest 'a mode of embodied encounter' is established in the film, and the second is that we meet an individual orangutan rather than a generic animal. I agree with their latter statement: we get to know a person rather than any orangutan. However, apart from a few moments little sensorial incentive is provided to establish 'an embodied encounter'. The animal is left Other, different, and distant. The sentiments that align us with her are that of boredom and sadness, which result in feelings of guilt. We feel for her. That said, there are moments, especially when tourists stop talking, when we observe her and feel that we may be part of a private moment: a moment that is *hers*. However, since we know a glass separates us prevents us from 'being with' her and from experiencing time and her living space with her. We are looking *at* her. This is further emphasised by the fact that she does not look into the camera, so she does not look at us (the film viewers). She does not 'know' a film is being made, rendering her as an Other animal, rather than a human or animal close to human consciousness.<sup>17</sup> McMahon and Lawrence (2015) also note that "the direction of her gaze is ambiguous" (*Ibid*, p.1) and connect it to John Berger's observation in *Why Look At Animals?* that in a zoo we can encounter a trait in animals generally regarded uniquely human, which is indifference. Thus, contrary to me, they say that the spectator connects with Nénette and recognises her indifferent attitude precisely because of a lack of interaction between her and us. Thus, according to them, Nénette's indifference establishes a connection. For me, this connection is a combination of sympathy and a bit of empathy, because we can indeed transpose ourselves to

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<sup>17</sup> I do not think non-human animals have a concept of cinema. However, as will become clear when I discuss *The View From Here* (2012), *The Breeder* (2017), *Wolves From Above* (2018), and *Wolfpark* (2019) in my practice I actively seek out moments when animals look into the camera and break the fourth wall in order to create a relation between onscreen animal and film spectator.

her situation and imagine what it must feel like to be her. However, the ambiguity of her gaze and lack of sound from her side of the glass prevents us from sharing a space with her – and thus the viewer does not have a sense of being with her and sharing time with her. Due to this distance the film is not wholly successful in establishing empathy. For these reasons the film remains at looking at Nénette. When the human voices recede, the film is more successful in triggering contemplation about her situation, because it is no longer a ‘telling about’. Viewers can observe and think for themselves, rather than being told what to consider. Few sensorial clues are relayed to us that may trigger embodied affect. Instead, a more cognitive relation is established via voice-overs. Emotions of sadness allow us to feel for her and with her, but this is an anthropocentric projection – guilt about zoo animals – rather than an alignment of Being or an attempt to establish a portrayal of animal alterity.

As mentioned in discussing *Microcosmos* (1996, Nuridsany & Pérennou) certain species trigger a more immediate affective response than others. Mammals look more similar and therefore seem closer to us humans than insects. In addition, mammal behaviour is more readily recognisable to fellow mammals even though this closeness is often a result of projection (as explained in the chapter about cuteness aesthetics). I have called this feeling of sameness ‘ontological nearness’. The mammal way of being and their worldliness are more similar to mammals than the world of insects. Since Nénette is an ape, as are the visitors and film viewers, there is less demand on the skills of a filmmaker to turn the ape that is Nénette into recognisable and likable creatures for us fellow apes. Director Philibert also noticed this:

It wouldn't be the same if I had filmed a cow. We do not identify with a cow or with a spider. But Nénette is at same time both close and mysterious. (Nicolas Philibert In: McMahon & Lawrence, 2015, p.4)

Philibert uses the word mysterious. In the chapter about *Microcosmos* it was posed that a sense of mystery is required for preserving animal alterity i.e. preserving something of the animal's own (whether or not it is illusionary). Furthermore, this mystery is most effective (uncanny) when there is an ontological overlap. Thus, an uncanny mystery can only be effectuated when the Other is somehow also same. It is difficult, though not impossible to make

a cow appear similar to humans, to make it feel close and uncanny, yet allowing for it to be a cow.

### 3.2) *Bovines* (2011, Emmanuel Gras)

The film *Bovines: Ou La Vraie Vie Des Vaches – Or the true life of cows* (2011, Emmanuel Gras) or in short *Bovines*, is about cows. It is a non-anthropomorphic depiction of a cow life on a hilly pasture. Its approach is that of visual anthropology. With great care 'bovine culture' (under human care) is recorded: grazing, ruminating grass, cleaning each other, collecting under a tree waiting for a storm to pass over, how they use their tongue to reach a branch and shake it to get fruit from an apple tree, the annoyance of having lots of little flies around one's eyes, giving birth, etc. Close sound recordings of chewing, thunder, exhaling, the cold sound of rattling metal bars in trucks, and buzzing of insects emphasise the effort it takes to be a cow, they provide a sensory incentive to align with the cow and allow us to empathise with what the cow might be experiencing.



Fig.8 Stills from *Bovines* (2011, Gras). On the left the back of a cow giving birth. On the right cows seeking shelter from the rain under a tree.



Fig.9 Stills from *Bovines* (2011, Gras). Moments when cow-life is not so bad.

The first direct evidence of humans occurs as an audio recording of a child at 00:23:35. The first image is at 00:23:46. Some of the animals have just given

birth and a vet is checking on the health of mothers and newborns. For a little while the camera follows the behaviour of a toddler who chases after the cows holding a stick in the air. The child breaks the fourth wall for a moment, then the image fades to black and we are back with the cows on a windy day. Some cows are persuaded to enter a truck and taken away from the pasture.

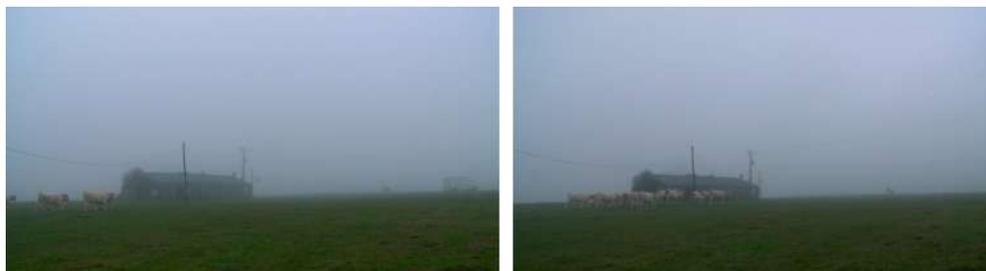


Fig.10 Stills from *Bovines* (2011, Gras). A truck with a cargo of cows takes off. The remaining herd follow after the truck.

As the truck leaves, cows that remain on the pasture moo loudly and follow after the truck in protest, so it seems. The cows are at their loudest here and it is a dramatic moment, which is largely the result of sound design in combination with the extreme wide shot featuring a lonesome, misty landscape with a small truck, a farm, and a group of cows. Further in the film humans do make appearances, but no human becomes a fully-fledged film character; the individuality of humans is irrelevant. Cows are also treated that way; the herd stays a group. There is a moment when we get to know an individual calf that stays behind and runs away from the group. However, since no features distinguish this individual from the other youngsters in the group, as soon as this calf is reunited with the herd it dissolves into the crowd.<sup>18</sup> The film ends shortly after a large section of the herd has been taken away; we presume for slaughter. It is a dramatic moment, a story told with loud protests on part of the remaining cows. Soon after this departure the soundtrack gets very quiet, which emphasises or symbolises the absence of abducted animals. The last shot is an extreme close up of a cow chewing grass; we see its eye and the texture of its hair. The image cuts to black when the animal holds still and breathes. Director Gras probably did not want to end on

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<sup>18</sup> Precisely for this reason in *Le Quattro Volte* a newborn goat is given a rope around its snout so that the viewer is able to identify it as the same individual in different camera shots.

the topic of animal slaughter, but rather wanted to send the viewer home with an image depicting life.

*Bovines* does not anthropomorphise, nevertheless depicts identifiable drama. The film is not so much a protest against cow breeding practices; this drama is simply part of that trade. It is not dramatized with music. Perhaps in post-production the mooing of cows has been increased in volume or perhaps some cow voices have been layered to make them appear louder and their protest uttered by a larger group, however to the viewer it seems that we are listening to the authentic sounds of the cows. The film gives the sense that we are watching actuality as it occurs in daily life. The film successfully allows cows to remain cows, yet allows us to experience their daily life. In other words, it preserves animal alterity. However, the cows are not ontologically near and a sense of uncanny proximity is absent. Cow drama is experienced with a sense of detachment. This is because the film either does not establish a direct relation between onscreen animal and viewer (for example, by allowing the animals to break the fourth wall) and the film does not have a human protagonist or other human vessel in the film that allows us to access the onscreen animal. The cows are not compared to humans, thus the (dialectical) difference between 'us and them' is not fully visible.

McMahon (2015b) examines how in *Bovines* cinematic time and the pace of animal life are displayed in concurrence. She observes that the depiction of 'bovine time' is markedly different from human time and in refraining from spectacle and narrative there is a "non-anthropocentric reworking of what Deleuze discerns in the cinema of the time-image: 'a new race of characters was stirring, kind of mutant: they saw rather than acted, they were seers' " (*Ibid.*). According to her the film employs what in Deleuzian terms are 'opsigns' and 'sonsigns' of which examples are "a cow mooing; a calf being born; ripple of rain on a puddle – without coercing them into a narrative logic of cause and effect" and she notes that "the film amplifies sounds of mooing, chomping, and breathing, emphasising bovine sonsigns that serve no particular expository purpose". Following their identification as opsigns and sonsigns, these moments are then neither part of the viewer's gaze or a POV of the cows. They float somewhere in between. Indeed so, these moments might not serve an expository objective, however, I do think they serve the purpose of creating a sensorial connection between spectator and onscreen animal and

it releases the potential for an empathic reading of bovine life. The original French title translates as 'Or The Real Life Of Cows', which also supports the idea that the aim of the film is to give a *sense of* cow-life i.e. it wants to immerse the viewer in experiencing cow existence. Though the title also contains a double meaning, a sarcastic undertone I will come back to.

As she does in an earlier article that will be discussed below (in relation to the film *Bestiaire*), following Bazin McMahon explains that durational shots increase veracity, grounding in a place; or in my words a 'being there with'. I agree with her, but want to stress that the duration of the long take by itself does not establish an immersive grounding in the film world. Sound is what allows the spectator to fully immerse the visible film space. Sound directs the eye, affects the body, and shows what and how to read in the film image. Simply imagine a long take with and without sound. The long take with sound is more immersive; sound waves surround the viewing subject, the onscreen world becomes easier to embody. Without sound recordings (which McMahon does observe) the durational shots in *Bovines* have little effect. Sound makes the long shot, sensorial – not duration itself. Thus, the combination of soundscape and duration has an impact on the level of veracity, the grounding of a film space, and the potential of a shot to provoke empathy.

In relation to duration, McMahon further argues that the use of time in *Bovines* results in a form of becoming-animal, because animal bodies (that of viewer and onscreen animal) are becoming dispersed.

Following the logic of becoming-animal, these relations do not proceed directly through an identificatory logic of 'resemblance' or 'analogy'. Rather, the bodies of film and viewer become endowed with shifting speeds, entering a 'zone of indetermination' whereby becoming-animal is only one part of a broader affective assemblage that exceeds speciesist arrangements. (McMahon, 2015b)

One of the points McMahon makes in this statement is that in *Bovines* there is no longer a process of resemblance or analogy at work. However, I do think that a human viewer will remain aware of their own 'human-animalness' whilst watching a film in the cinema, therefore no matter how dispersed and

communal the time and space of depicted animal and human viewer become, there will remain the opposition or comparison between human viewer and depicted onscreen animal. To clarify once more, the term becoming-animal does not refer to becoming a particular depicted animal, but it refers to the process of the human to shed its human superiority and to enter a way of thinking and being where we are all able to share and become dispersed together in a particular world or space. With regards to the sharing of space: film is very successful in creating the illusion of a film world that is shared between viewer and the depicted, but it will never be the same as standing together in actuality. Only a real-life encounter can unite the human and non-human in a shared space that might properly disperse and merge their beings. Though, I am convinced that film is able to teach a human this process of dispersion (of becoming-animal) and that such depictions in film might make it easier for the human subject to exercise it in actuality should they be presented with the opportunity.<sup>19</sup>

McMahon further notes there is a lack of animal agency in *Bovines*. Though, she also mentions “*Bovines* elaborates a set of diegetic and spectatorial relations between time and perception that reach beyond ‘automatic or simple animal existence’ “. Therefore, some kind of ‘bovine consciousness’ is suggested that might give them a form of authority or agency in the film, albeit it is also shown the cows cannot change their way of life despite the potential presence of internal, mental processes. McMahon seems to criticise the film, because it portrays cattle as ‘seers’ rather than ‘agents’, which in my view is intentional. The cows cannot be portrayed as agents of their doomed fate (becoming beef); they are not to be blamed for it. They are portrayed as seers rather than agents, so that the political message of the film becomes stronger, because in this way the film portrays them as in need of help. McMahon’s article proceeds to explain how *Bovines’* slow pacing might have a negative impact on the political potential of the film. Unlike films such as *Blackfish* (2013, Gabriela Cowperthwaite), *Bovines* is not very well known and in addition to a limited marketing budget which reduces its potential reach and impact, its film form does not adopt the language of an activist

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<sup>19</sup> For the short film *Graminoids* (2014, Demelza Kooij & Lars Koens) this was our aim: to show the viewer how they might be able to experience the beauty of a mundane and ordinary life form – grass – and to become part of its landscape. I will also explain how in *Wolves From Above* (2018) sound design supports the feeling of sharing a space or narrative.

campaign. What *Bovines* addresses is subtly suggested and its main political aim is to give a sense of true cow life – to open our eyes (and ears) to a different way of being in the world. However, there is also a sarcasm hidden in this title. In McMahon's words: "for beef cows, this 'true life' constitutes more than just grazing in a field – it also involves the experience of being separated from the herd and killed in a slaughterhouse". *Bovines* is political "as a form of aesthetic resistance", but McMahon also argues that the film has a tendency to fetishize idyllic imagery of nature and grazing, thereby forfeiting its potential to lay bare and call to action.

### **3.3) *Bestiaire* (2012, Denis Côté)**

*Bestiaire* is also about animals in captivity and it shows how animals are held and prepared for various forms of human entertainment (alive or dead) i.e. the film shows how animals are appropriated. The documentary presents three narratives. It opens with a class of students who are drawing stuffed animals (not so much a life-drawing class, but a similar exercise nevertheless). Then it explores the grounds in and outside a zoo deprived of humans except for the animal keepers. The third narrative depicts how animals are being prepared as taxidermy props, which is where the film makes a full circle as here all conceptual connections between the narratives are linked. Though, after the taxidermy scene the film cuts back to zoo life, but this time it is teemed with visitors and marks the end of the film.

The film starts with a group of people, individually framed in close-ups, who are intently looking at something (but not toward the camera). The framing is similar to the opening of *Nénette*, except that *Bestiaire* starts with the depiction of human apes. Then we hear the sound of pencils scratching paper and the shots get wider. The first image of a non-human animal is seen as a close-up of a pencil drawing on a piece of paper. This is followed by a medium shot that includes the same drawing and above the paper the horns of the 'real' animal are sticking out. The viewer does not fully realise the animal is dead until a close-up of the deer's eyes is shown. The drawing class scene ends with a total shot of the students gathered around the stiff, lifeless deer. The image cuts to black, it shows the film title, and hereafter we are transposed to a winter landscape to spend time with various animals. The film is characterised by long takes that are either close-ups of animal faces or wide shots that focus on body movements. It is an unusual collection of animals:

buffalos, llama, and horses. For about a minute (00:07:46-00:08:42), in a medium shot, we stand face to face with a buffalo. The shot gives the viewer the feeling that the animal acknowledges a presence (us – a fellow living being), which is standing with the animal. The buffalo neither flees nor is curious to explore the camera (crew). In this shot there is no barrier between camera (thus viewer) and the animal. The type of lens that is used suggests that the crew actually stood very close (so they did not use a long lens or zoom lens).

The next shot shows a llama that inspects and follows something that is off-screen. It gives the viewer the idea that the crew has spent some time with the llama, because otherwise there would be more interaction between llama and lens, but instead the llama leaves us alone and is curious about something else off-screen. Paradoxically, in this way, the disinterested attitude of the llama contributes to a sense of togetherness. This is because the llama ‘feels at ease with us’, as opposed to whatever or whoever is making the llama pace up and down the fence. We feel the animal has accepted our presence, *because* it leaves us alone. We are one of the animals. Though, I think that in both shots the film crew left their camera alone whilst it was recording. In other words, there is no one behind the camera. What the llama is probably inspecting is the film crew walking up and down the fence. I am assuming this, because there is a lack of interest in the camera and the llamas do not look at the camera (at some point a second one appears). This is different for the shot at 00:16:09 where a rhebok gazes directly into the camera and there is a hide-and-seek type of interplay.



Fig.11 Still from *Bestiaire* (2012, Côté).

From my personal filming experience I have noticed that animals will only ignore equipment when you are not there, or, when you have spent a long time with them (hours on end, which I have done with the foxes that roam Bristol). In your absence they may first sniff equipment and grab it (or run away with it) or push it for inspection, but shortly they will leave it alone. The audience of course does not notice an absence of crew behind the camera, because the crew are not shown in this film (it is not a reflexive film). Therefore the crew do not exist. The absolute *absence of crew* behind the camera (absent both in terms of the narrative depicted as well as during the moment of filming) triggers a particular type of animal interaction with the camera: an indifferent or 'relaxed attitude', which I associate with acceptance. The viewer interprets this relaxed attitude as the result of an interaction between filmed animal and a human *presence*. This assumed presence is what enables the viewer to align their gaze with. In other words, in *Bestiaire* we as film viewers assume a human gaze that we adopt – not knowing there were no humans in the moment of filming to begin with.

Because the animals in *Bestiaire* seem to acknowledge the presence of another living being behind the camera (though there might not have been anyone behind the camera), the onscreen animals seem 'to know' something. Of course, this is projection, but it is important to understand how this was effectuated, because I want to establish a similar type of relation between viewer and onscreen animal in my films and it is very similar to *Wolves From Above* (2018, Demelza Kooij). I also want to give the viewer the sense that they are spending time with an animal that acknowledges the viewer's presence, because in my opinion this is how a powerful empathic relation can be established. We are more inclined to feel empathy for another when we know our fondness and care for the other is returned or at least noticed. Of course, the cinema screen does not work in both directions (we see the animals on the screen, but they do not actually look back), nevertheless we can speak of proximity to certain characters or feeling distanced to others. In *Bestiaire* animals seem 'closer' to the spectator than the animals in *Bovines*. I think this is for the simple reason that in *Bestiaire* the animals interact with the camera and they look directly at the camera, or how we read this: they look directly at the viewer. This gives us the feeling the animals are interacting with *us*.

After the outdoor scene we enter a world of metal barriers and concrete walls. We see various exotic animals in their enclosures e.g. zebras,

water buffalos, and rheboks. They make no vocal sounds. The sound track is a haunting composition of rattling metal and hooves frantically bashing against metal enclosure doors and floors. Their hooves slide over the ground; they fall against the door causing loud bangs. It is an overwhelming composition of offensively loud and crude sounds. The camera often fixates on their legs and hooves. As a result of these odd, counterintuitive framings it is as if the camera has forgotten it was supposed to conform to a human gaze. For example, there is a shot that only shows the very tips of an animal's horns, but overemphasises the side of a door or a gate lock. The viewer gets to see insufficient detail of the animal to be able to identify it or identify with it. It is as if the cinematographer did not know what it was filming, as if it had no prior knowledge of the shapes it was filming, whether they are animals parts or objects. As a result of long shot durations and these counterintuitive framings – the latter in my view promote a non-human perspective and shatter an anthropocentric gaze – the viewer gets the sense of being with the animals. The cinematography feels odd and non-human, therefore more in tune with whatever the onscreen animal might be experiencing. The viewer is not sure what is happening in this claustrophobic loud scene and the animals' jerky behaviour suggests they are enduring the same predicament. One thing is certain in this disorientating space: it is a nightmarish place utterly different from the animals' normal habitats. This unpleasant part of the film ends with an ostrich that playfully inspects the camera.

The film depicts zoo staff at work and from here onwards we often see the animals through the fences of enclosures i.e. there is a barrier between viewer and onscreen animal. The long takes of animals looking into the camera are replaced with shots where the zookeepers are looking at the animal. United in the same frame, in these shots, human and non-human animals stand in opposition to each other. These moments are filmed in wide or medium shots where we can see both species clearly. The main filmed act is that of 'looking at'. Usually the non-human animal goes about its normal business. Zookeeper and captive animal are not locked in a mutual gaze. It is the human who performs the act of looking. Thus the viewer is looking at the zookeeper, who is looking at a non-human animal that does not look back. Therefore, the gaze falls dead at the non-human animal. Despite their physical nearness in the frame, there is an immense ontological distance between the

human and other animal. These moments are rather *unheimlich* and in my view there are three reasons for this.

Firstly, the duration of such shots oddly emphasises the motionlessness and quietness of the zookeepers. It seems unnatural that a human would spend so much time looking at another animal without saying a word or attempting any social interaction and barely moving. The zookeepers are simply stood there staring at the animal, at a distance. Those who are familiar with Côté's work know that in other films he has staged humans in a similar way. For example, in *Que Ta Joie Demeure* (2014) factory workers sit or stand motionless whilst their machinery clatters and races among them. I think that these shots in *Bestiaire* are also deliberately and carefully constructed. The cinematographic framing makes the humans look awkward and a bit helpless. A second important contributing element is that the onscreen humans do not speak. Therefore we are unable to relate to them via spoken language. Thirdly, the viewer knows that the humans in the film are actively sustaining the deprived, cold, and artificial lives of these animals. We feel disdain for the humans and this too results in a looking 'at' the human rather than 'with' the human. The viewer does not want to align with the humans in this film. It would feel morally unjust. All these factors contribute to a characterisation of the human as other and strange, but because they are no doubt human they remain familiar and they are thus rendered *unheimlich*.

This second part ends with a still shot of a hyena in a cage. Once again we are not sure what is happening, but suddenly one of the cage walls moves and pushes the hyena to one side. It is squeezed and pushed tightly so that it cannot move. This is when humans come to inspect it, perhaps to see whether it is pregnant or maybe to see whether an old wound has healed. It is again an odd situation that in terms of empathy aligns us with the non-human animal. The humans are portrayed as alien beings that for reasons unclear to us have a concerned interest in the caged animals, but at the same time put the animals in situations that do not suggest that the humans are particularly caring (i.e. confining them to small cages) and do not suggest empathic awareness.

For the next scene, which is about the lives and daily business of the taxidermists, the first shot shows two pictures of skimpily dressed women. Then we see how the skins, feathers, bodies and skulls of animals are being prepared and sculpted. It is a fairly straightforward scene that records the

process of taxidermy. To me, it is no coincidence that this scene would appear after so many living animals have been presented to the viewer. It makes taxidermy appear somewhat useless and sad, though the viewer can tell the filmmakers got along well with these people and as a result the film refrains from judgement. In a subtle way, this scene does rhetorically ask: why would someone want to kill an animal for taxidermy when it was so beautiful alive? Toward the end of the film, at 00:56:00 a staff member gets dressed and puts on the zoo mascot costume, which is an unrecognisable cartoonesque animal, possibly a chipmunk. Perhaps Côté suggests the fluffy toy mascot could be seen as a (pleasanter) form of taxidermy?

In the final scene of the film we are once again transfixed on zoo animals, except now we also hear and see zoo visitors. Moments that display human forms of entertainment or organisation are ridiculed, for example, we see a family on the back of an elephant where everyone looks out of place and somewhat bored, including the elephant. In addition, for quite some time we stare at the rows and rows of cars that are queuing to enter the park. It stresses the artificiality of the animal park and the triviality of human organisation. The final shot is an extreme wide shot of an elephant that walks away, slowly, to an undisclosed destiny.

McMahon (2014) explains that for director Côté's the question "Is it possible to film an animal for what it is: an animal?" was fundamental (Côté, 2012 In: McMahon, 2014, p.207). On the whole she praises its success to give a sense of animal spatio-temporality and ontology, but, following Jonathan Burt (2002) who writes about animals in film more broadly, notes that in trying to depict animals as animals, the film demonstrates "that the animal figure comes closest to resembling the technology that produces it" (Burt, 2002, In McMahon, 2014, p.207) and thereby is not so successful in depicting animals as they are. So instead of perceiving animal being, we are watching technological and cinematic being. Yet McMahon also states:

In this fantasy of clairvoyant communication set up by *Bestiaire*, what is celebrated is the telepathic charge of the animal look conveyed to us by cinema (and, conversely, the hypnotic vitalism of cinema transmitted via the animal look) [...]. (McMahon, 2014, p.207)

In this statement she seems to conflate cinematic being and the look of the animal. What might the 'telepathic charge of the animal look' be? Is this perceived telepathy a projection? Are we simply projecting what we think animal being might be – as provided by the specific technology that was used to make this film and the projection facilities of the cinema? According to me, yes what we find in the look of the animal is a projection. McMahon reiterates Lippit's statement that 'cinema is like an animal' and also points to others such as Bazin (1955) and Daney (2003) who have either stated that animals in film reveal what is cinema, or how cinematic time and animal spatio-temporality are ontologically associated.

I want to challenge the notion of perceiving 'cinema like an animal' as stated by Lippit (2000, p.196). Is this concept not the result of an inductive fallacy? Cinema and animal both relate to the subconscious, the *unheimlich*, and mimesis, however the fact that they share a few characteristics does not make them similar. Furthermore, what do we gain in creating this analogy? What do we learn about either? Does the perception of 'cinema like an animal' improve our concept of cinema or animal? In my opinion it does not. It is perhaps a poetic thought that may appeal to some. However, I think that this poetic analogy creates an unnecessary linkage that clutters both the concept of cinema and troubles the question of what is animal. Though, I am convinced it is important to understand what a cinematic animal is, because studying its construction pushes us to think how the cinematic animal differs from an animal in actuality and by understanding how cinematic animals are constructed we learn how cinema works. In the first chapter it was stated that Vertov and Eisenstein see cinema as organism, which to me is a more useful thought. This analogy is less hierarchical, not speciecist, more inclusive, and more open-ended. It could suggest that cinema is alive, grows, (re)produces, and is in a state of becoming.

Toward the end of her article McMahon returns to film techniques such as cinematography and editing and suggests that *Bestiaire* teaches the viewer to watch human animals in the same fashion as non-human animals. I wrote that the peculiar cinematographic compositions look as if the camera sometimes forgets it is human. McMahon also notices the odd framings and notes:

[...] the film's editing and construction of visual patterns between and across shots that function zoomorphically, encouraging a mode of species indeterminacy that dovetails with the film's exploration of perception and worldhood across species lines. (McMahon, 2014, p.212)

McMahon explains how important the long takes in *Bestiaire* are for world-forming. It was established that the long take effectuates a kind of spatio-temporal integrity, which I have described as 'being with the animals'. To be able to 'be' or 'stand' with an onscreen animal certainly relates to the potential of images paired with sound design to suggest the depicted animal has a world and its own way of being that is probably different, but relatable. In the final sentences McMahon states that the "film's attentiveness to the meaningful gestures and responses of nonhuman beings allows for other perceptual worlds to flicker – momentarily, yet suggestively – into view" (*Ibid.*, p.213). Her choice of the words "yet suggestively" is noteworthy, because it means that she does not see a perfect analogy between cinema and animal. After all, the ontology of animals in *Bestiaire* is suggested. What we perceive as animal ontology is an illusion resulting from cinema's capacity to give a sense of being or its ability to suggest 'something' undisclosed. *Bestiaire* shows ontology of cinema rather than an animal's ontology.

#### **3.4) Concluding words: comparing the three films and their influence on my practice**

These three films influenced my practice, as they all demonstrate in different ways that a documentary does not need a (singular) human protagonist(s) and voice-over to make an argument or make a narrative intelligible. An audience is able to follow and construct a storyline in their minds based on visuals and sounds that are not in the first instance semantic, didactic or convey information verbally. *Nénette* (2010, Philibert) demonstrates how a film with a single non-human protagonist could be constructed. *Bovines* (2011, Gras) is a portrait of a group of animals, cows, which was relevant for making *Wolves From Above* (2018, Kooij) and *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij). And *Bestiaire* (2012, Côté) was influential in showing how abstract images and compelling sound design could glue a viewer to the screen and suggest animal subjectivity and how breaking the fourth wall can trigger empathy. In this subconclusion I

will discuss how each film suggests or fails to suggest animal otherness, animal subjectivity, or invites empathy, and I will identify five ways in which a viewer connects to onscreen depictions of animals and the onscreen cinematic space more broadly.

*Bestiaire* successfully provokes the sense that the viewer is with the various zoo animals, invites to empathise with these animals, whilst leaving them other. Alike the film *Nénette*, in *Bestiaire* human sounds and images are used to compare the non-human with the human to show what is animal-other and what is human. However, in *Bestiaire* both the non-human and the human are other. The portrayal of humans evokes a sense of the *unheimlich*. The viewer is confronted with the idea that humans are animals just as all animals are. Thus, in *Bestiaire* the human zookeepers are zoomorphic. Unlike the insects in *Microscosmos*, in *Bestiaire* no animal is anthropomorphised.

*Bestiaire* successfully creates the illusion that the viewer is 'with the animals' and the spectator is also invited to imagine what the animal might be thinking or feeling. In *Bestiaire* empathy is provoked when the animals are breaking the fourth wall (they look into the camera) or acknowledge the camera other ways. Perhaps the very act of looking into the camera could be regarded as a form of anthropomorphism. When humans look into the camera we can assume that the human knows a viewer will be 'looking back' at some point. Thus, when a human protagonist looks into the camera the viewer is in a way addressed – though indirectly and interrupted in time. Yet the viewer does not recognise this interruption as a disrupted gaze, but instead accepts the illusion of a shared 'being looked at' and 'looking at' (which as established in the introduction allows for a returning of the gaze and acts as a mirror between the minds of the spectator and the depicted). When non-human animals break the fourth wall, the viewer accepts the same illusion – of being looked at – which reinforces the feeling of sharing space and mind. Non-human animals are technically not breaking the fourth wall; they are looking into a certain direction and the camera stands in their same line of sight. If portraying animals as breaking the fourth wall is a form of anthropomorphism, then we can begin to carve out a first principle for an empathic relation:

- Anthropomorphism as created in the breaking the fourth wall is a successful mechanism for establishing an empathic connection between human viewer and onscreen animal.

We can perhaps conclude that for a non-human animal to appear *unheimlich* it must appear somewhat human and thus a level of anthropomorphism is necessary. This would make sense, as was established that the *unheimlich* is closely associated with home and homeliness, therefore it is not surprising that anthropomorphic depictions of animals would more easily provoke a sense of the uncanny (because in such cases the human viewer is closer to what they recognise as their 'home'). Thus secondly, depending on its film context and the particular depiction:

- Portrayals of animals that are *unheimlich* may also contribute to an empathic relation between viewer and onscreen animal.

In *Nénette* the relation between viewer and onscreen animal only preserves a 'looking at' viewpoint. Two factors contribute to this perspective: 1) there is a noticeable, glass barrier between viewer and Nénette 2) we do not hear any sounds from the other side of this barrier. Despite lengthy shots that carefully lay bare her daily routine, there is little sensorial incentive that aligns viewer with onscreen animal. In *Bestiaire*, the spectator does have access to the acoustic world of the onscreen animals, which allows the viewer to be in the same space as the depicted animal. Even though the camera perspective often adopts a 'looking at' perspective (i.e. the lens faces the animal that in certain shots looks back, but not always) the combination of sound and image also results in a 'looking with' the animal. Together, viewer and onscreen animal, share the same space. Lengthy shot durations give viewers a sense of being there, because time, sound, and perspective are not interrupted.<sup>20</sup>

In chapter 2.3 it was explained that Bousé (2000) criticises popular

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<sup>20</sup> Continuity editing hides the fact that time and action are (most likely) not continuous. Footage is edited in such a way that the viewer does not notice the cuts. Therefore, continuity editing also gives the suggestion of uninterrupted time. However, in case of the long take it is not a suggestion or illusion, because time and space are really not interrupted and this contributes to the veracity and sense of wholeness it provokes.

wildlife and animal documentaries for overemphasising event action and quick cuts that suggest speed. *Bestiaire* has long takes and little event action and thus seems the type of film that Bousé would support, as would *Bovines* and *Nénette*, which also have rather long takes that fixate on non-human characters. Though, all these films display animals in captivity that are moderately used to human presence – or simply do not have enough space to escape. In the wild it would be difficult (though not impossible) to be so close to an animal for such long takes. It would take time and patience (and as a result the production budget would increase considerably).

In *Bovines* the viewer also shares the same acoustic space as the cows, but the film is less successful in effectuating the feeling that we may have spent time *together* (we merely stand with them, but are not acknowledged as a presence) or that we may have seen a glimpse of the animal's being. The film lacks a sense of undisclosed mystery that suggests an internal 'cow-world' and therefore it is difficult to feel empathy. The animals are wholly other and despite dramatized moments that provoke compassion (e.g. when their cow-friend is taken away for slaughter) it is difficult to 'feel into' the animals. Thus the third requirement for an empathic relation might be:

- A sense of mystery or undisclosedness may spark curiosity for the animal and therefore aids empathic alignment.

Fourthly, to connect viewer and the filmworld of the onscreen animal:

- Audio allows us to connect to space of the animal and the animal itself.

And finally:

- When a film gives a sense of animal alterity it might not necessarily suggest animal subjectivity. Thus, films can give a sense of animal otherness without sparking empathy.

In the second section B, I will analyse my own film practice and in detail demonstrate where these techniques have been employed. I will explain that I

discovered the effect of anthropomorphism as created in breaking the fourth wall in making *The View From Here* (2012). Seeing *Bestiaire* (2012) further confirmed its effectiveness and hereafter I actively made it part of my practice, culminating in *Wolves From Above* (2018) and *Wolfpark* (2019) where it is one of the most used techniques to construct empathy. All my films contain moments where the onscreen animal is enigmatic (and sometimes they are enigmatic throughout the whole film) and I have attempted to create a sense of otherness that suggests an inner animal being. Anthropomorphic depictions, as in making the animals appear human, are employed in *The Breeder* (2017) where animals are depicted watching TV, enjoying cuddles, licking beer, etc. On the whole the only form of anthropomorphism I employ is when animals are breaking the fourth wall. This is because I am trying to preserve animal alterity – the otherness that is the being’s own (which in cinema is an illusion).

## **SECTION B – CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON PERSONAL FILM PRACTICE**

### **CHAPTER 4: Critical Reflection On Three Short Films**

In this chapter I provide an account of the production process of each short film, a textual analysis, and indicate what my findings are i.e. what I have learnt about the depiction of animal subjectivity and the construction of empathy whilst making the films. These productions complement the theoretical framework and analysis of the three films analysed in chapter 3, as I was able to test observations I made in literature and the films of that chapter. I further developed these findings in the final production *Wolfpark* (2019), which will be discussed in chapter 5.

#### **4.1) *The View From Here* (Demelza Kooij, 2012, UK, 16'50'')**

Access to the film: <https://vimeo.com/46936466> Password: access2012

Synopsis and list of screenings:

<http://demelzakooij.com/film/theviewfromhere/>

#### **Background to the production**

*The View From Here* is the first film experiment that was conducted as part of the PhD. When it was made the PhD research was not exclusively focussed on empathy and non-human subjectivity. The representation of otherness and the study of connecting to other beings were studied in a more abstract manner, as the study of phenomena that lie outwith human existence and experience, and how the invisible could be made visible. I was studying depictions of animals and death in film simultaneously, as I perceived the same challenge in their representation.

The main character in *The View From Here* is Peter Neilson, who is able to remember his past lives and can often see that of other beings too. The film paints a picture of his daily landscape and the role animals play in his life. Peter claims that animals can take on different animal forms in different lives, but his own previous lives have all been human. The film is an exploration of his relation with life, death, and animals. My main challenge was to somehow visualise imperceptible worlds such as past lives or alternative realities and subjective experiences of non-human animals. Three sources were studied whilst making this film: the film *Le Quattro Volte* (2010, Michelangelo

Frammartino), the conference proceedings that resulted in the book *Aporias* (Derrida, 1993), and the idea of ontic versus ontological as posed by Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927). Below I will provide a textual analysis of my film and explain how these sources have shaped the film and how the film contributes to discussions of these critical contexts. I will also indicate what I have discovered during the making of the film in relation to depicting animal subjectivity and how this influenced the filmmaking process of subsequent films.

During the intake telephone call with Peter Nelson in the autumn of 2011 we were trying to agree on a date to meet for the first time. He mentioned he could not make a certain day, because he was going to have his horse put down. I asked why this was necessary, how it would happen, and whether I could film it. I had been reading *Aporias* (Derrida, 1993), which deals with perceiving across the experiential horizon of life – toward death – and I saw a parallel between this experiential limit and the (in)ability of humans to perceive beyond their anthropocentric existence. In other words, just like it is impossible to know death or ‘be dead’ as a living person, it is impossible for a human to be a non-human or to know the being of non-human animal. In agreeing to film Peter Neilson’s unusual relation with life and death as well as being witness to the euthanasia of his horse, I could tackle the discussion of the limits of experiential horizons in two ways: life versus death and human versus non-human.

During the production I realised I did not agree with Peter Neilson’s convictions about life and death. Although belief in reincarnation is common in certain parts of the world, I thought his particular viewpoints were fantastical. Nevertheless, I continued with the project, because I found sufficient merit in the various topics relating to his lifestyle that I wanted to explore and express. I wanted to paint a portrait of Peter Neilson that did not criticise his beliefs, yet the viewer should also feel that the filmmaker was not in agreement with the character’s viewpoints. It is not my place to critique people’s beliefs and this was also not the point of the film, hence I wanted to stay open-minded. This was an ethical challenge that I feel was handled well, which is supported by the fact that Peter Neilson appreciated the way he was portrayed and agreed to sign the release forms after I had shown him footage

of himself and his dead horse. It is common practice to ask documentary subjects to sign release forms directly after filming (and sometimes before filming is completed!), however, considering the sensitive nature of filmed events (shooting a horse) I wanted to ensure that he understood what the film was going to reveal about him and his lifestyle. Therefore, out of respect and to avoid dispute, I asked him to sign the release form after he had seen a cut that included graphic detail of the killing.

### **Textual analysis and discussion**

The film opens with a wide shot of a lonely, white horse atop a hill against a backdrop of a heavy-looking low cloud. The voice-over dialogue does not address the visuals, but instead discloses that the male human speaker believes a person never dies. The juxtaposition of spoken content and visuals forebodes what is to come: somehow death or eternal life and this horse are connected.

The opening contains a series of shots of a bucolic landscape and a variety of scales: wide shots of the farm, close-ups of a horse ducking away, ants, a seed, and then medium shots indoors with a man drinking tea or coffee who subsequently sets off to see his horses, which climaxes with an extreme wide shot of the man and two horses atop a hill. The vantage point is not limited to human animals, as the montage shows the interconnectedness of landscape, animals, and this man's position therein. All shots are rather dark and sombre. It does not set the tone for a happy film. After this opening, in the first scene, we see how Peter Neilson connects to a spirit that has been bothering the brown horse. In silence we watch Peter who moves like a dancer or conductor and redirects an invisible entity toward the sky. There is a cut to a close-up of the horse's eye, which briefly stresses the presence and sentience of this animal.

The second scene depicts Peter's day-to-day business on the farm. Slowly, the presence of a film crew is suggested. The first incentive for this is when Peter leaves the frame, the camera follows his movements, and then in close-up we meet the eyes of a black horse that breaks the fourth wall and sniffs towards us for inspection. It walks away. Peter re-enters and says with sarcasm in his voice: "You're having fun aren't you?". The direct address of both horse and human give way to a reflexive scene in which the sound recordist and myself (as director and cinematographer) talk with Peter about

his previous lives. He also speaks of a horse that had been a dolphin and a dog that was a red squirrel. Up to now, the purpose of all content presented is to show who Peter is, what his lifestyle involves, and what his beliefs are. The tone is quirky and fun, with a subtle eerie undertone. The following sequences build toward the killing of the horse and the tone steadily becomes more serious. It starts with a dreamy montage of flies filmed out of focus and in close-up that culminates in a wide shot of the same lonely white horse as seen in the opening of the film, except now she is closer and is framed with golden light.



Fig.12 Stills from *The View From Here* (2012, Kooij). Montage of close-ups of 'golden flies' followed by a wide-shot with horse and the same insects as tiny golden specs. The horse turns its head to inspect who is watching.

There is something magical, but also odd about this shot – it is an omen, either good or bad. I think four factors contribute to its foreboding aura: shot duration, silence, beauty, and very importantly the horse is aware it is being viewed, stays in position, and looks back. The reason why the horse looks toward the camera and does not bolt is because I was talking and singing to the animal. I had discovered in a previous film production about urban wildlife that animals become 'suspicious' when you are quiet (I reckon because you are acting as a predator). As I sing or talk, I closely watch the animal and 'listen' to its body movement. I am also hyper aware of my own presence as it might occur to that animal. This *listening in* is a very focussed form of empathy.

In the next scene Peter tells a story of an injured deer that he killed. As he tells the story in explicit detail, a three-legged deer looks into the camera as if it hears what Peter is saying. The deer screams quietly – seemingly in response to the story or because its leg hurts. Of course, neither is the case. The animal is not bleeding and not in need of a merciful death. The viewer might think that it is screaming out of pain, but this is only suggested via the story and perhaps because it hops awkwardly afterward.



Fig.13 Still from *The View From Here* (2012, Kooij). A three-legged deer looks into the camera.

The anecdote is another prelude to what is to come. Its content demonstrates that the protagonist once killed an animal (out of compassion). The positioning of this story within the narrative arc of the film is important: it comes after the shot with golden light and before an onscreen death has occurred. Indirectly, it gives a motivation for the killing of the horse and indeed so, Peter wanted to euthanize the horse because she was old and he did not want her to endure another cold winter. Without the story of the deer, the act of killing the horse is unmotivated and occurs even more sudden. Therefore, I needed to include this story. However, I did not want to show it as a talking-head testimony, because it would not have the poetic aesthetic as the rest of the film. But, I did not have footage of an injured deer to fit with the story either. I found the imagery of the deer on YouTube and contacted the uploader to ask for the original uncompressed file and for signing a release form. The footage was slowed down in post-production to give the image more weight and to literally present a different time (the story happened in the past).

A rooster cries. With a broken voice Peter tells the cinematographer to go inside the stable. Inside we see the back of the white horse. When she turns her head to inspect who has entered, we only see her face as a shadow on the wall. The horse is becoming a liminal creature, half present. The gaze is indirect.



Fig.14 Still from *The View From Here* (2012, Kooij). The horse's face as a shadow on the wall.

In the following shots Peter is grooming the horse whilst crying. There is a close-up of the horse's head that looks directly at the viewer with big dark eyes. Then we see an injured ant, followed by a shot of an ant that carries an injured or dead ant away.



Fig.15 Still from *The View From Here* (2012, Kooij). A montage connecting the horse to an ill ant that is carried off.

In a fast-paced montage we see Peter who puts the horse in a trailer, they drive off, briefly we are inside the car with barking dogs, we are outside again, and then we see how someone else walks away with the white horse whilst Peter is inside the horse trailer, crying. The horse is almost out of sight when the cinematographer runs after the horse and the man whilst the camera is rolling. When we catch up with them the horse is on the ground, then sways sideways, moves up, and just when it jumps back on its feet we hear the gunshot – a cold, whimsical sound. The image cuts to black. Then there is absolute silence (which is highly uncommon in films – there is usually some sound on a sound track such as room tone or other atmos, but here absolutely no sound was on the timeline).



Fig.16 Stills from *The View From Here* (2012, Kooij). The killing is shown in reverse.

The killing is shown in reverse and is slowed down. It may seem unethical act to add effects to the act of killing or to make death aesthetically interesting. Seeing the dying horse in real-time and without the reverse felt very cold and empty. In addition, in real-time when you see the man pointing the gun at the horse's head a feeling of disdain occurs, which makes you want to look away. A short film by Edison called *The Electrocutation Of An Elephant* (1903) is a registration of exactly what the title suggests. It is an utterly unpleasant watch and the execution seems pointless (other than demonstrating the power of the new invention: electricity). The elephant is stood in the centre of the frame and soon smoke erupts from its body. The elephant gets stiff and falls to the ground. The promise of witnessing a slow, painful, and real death did not make me want to watch the full clip. The only reason I watched it is because it relates to my research practice. I decided it would be better to show the killing of the horse in reverse, because this way it is not immediately clear what is happening. This keeps the viewer tied to the screen and only after the gunshot is heard one realises that they had been watching a dying horse. To me, the experience felt richer and in that way more respectful to the animal. Though, I did feel uncertain about such a stylistic intervention. Also whilst editing I watched *Walkabout* (1971, Nicolas Roeg), which contains a montage where animals die and collapse, which are also shown in reverse. For me this confirmed that making death somewhat more 'spectacular' does not have to

mean that it becomes disrespectful. I decided to allow for absolute silence to reflect the nothingness of death. Any added sound would have given it reference to a physical space either diegetic or abstract, but nevertheless a space that is present, physical, and belonging to a world. Therefore no sound at all fitted with what I wanted to express. For a moment the film is without image and without sound.

After the killing, only the image reappears. In silence we see a close-up of the horse's head on the ground. In the second shot we see half of the horse and it seems someone or something is pulling it, because it makes jerky movements. Sound fades up. We hear voices in the distance, birds, generic countryside sounds. Then the camera tilts up to reveal that no one is making the horse move – these are spasms. The movements are so strong it looks as if the horse is running.



Fig.17 Stills from *The View From Here* (2012, Kooij). Spasms after being shot down.

In retrospect I regret this scene is so short. The horse was making contractions for a long time or at least much longer than I expected. I have ample footage of these spasms. At some point I felt uncertain as to whether the horse was really dead. However, the man had tapped the horse's eyes to see whether there was a reflex – there wasn't, so the horse was not alive. I think I could have communicated this uncertainty about 'being dead' better. However, I was hesitant to show more of these spasms, as I feared I might turn it into a spectacle.

In the conclusion of the film we see Peter standing in the hills with his arms raised toward the sky and crying. In this part of the film the disparity between filmmaker and subject is most pronounced. Peter explains what he sees. He speaks about a herd of animal spirits in the sky. The film cuts to a wide-angle POV shot where we see Peter and cloudy white sky. My camera does not see any spirits and the dogs around him do not respond to any ghosts either. Yet, I remain respectful to Peter by including voice-over in which he says that he and other people like him can see what my camera and I cannot

see. It gives a voice to his viewpoint, but also communicates that I was not able to share his vision.

*Le Quattro Volte* (2010, Frammartino) served as a source of inspiration both visually and conceptually. It deals with themes that are difficult to visualise such as being, time, and death. In my view *Le Quattro Volte* reaches beyond ontic representations of being, time, death and allows the viewer to relate empathically to non-human organisms. The film addresses and embodies the permeability and fluidity of knowledge and concepts. Its cinematography plays with graphic matches, scale, and resemblances in movement and shape to show that human, plant, mineral, and animal are all beings that are similar and intimately related. The film is without spoken language; thus it is the use of cinematography and sound design that creates the embodied affect and offers a form of deconstruction of categories. Through reading Heidegger's understanding of the ontic and ontological as posed in *Being and Time* (1927), I was able to articulate why it is difficult to depict themes such as death. These phenomena struggle to be captured as they cannot be reduced to a single object nor fitted within one frame. It is possible to film a clock, but you will not be filming time. Similarly you could film a living person, but it would not cover the full extent of being. If you would film a corpse you would be filming a dead creature, but not death itself. Ontic can be understood as things that are immediate and ready at hand, whereas ontology is the study of "being in general - embracing such matters as the nature of existence and the categorical structure of reality" (Lowe 1995, p. 670-671). This distinction poses a challenge for artists who want to convey ontological themes, because artists only have the ontic at hand.

*Le Quattro Volte* is a fiction film that depicts life in a village in Calabria, Italy whereby the viewer experiences the life and deaths of 1) a shepherd (i.e. a human) 2) a goat 3) a tree and 4) charcoal. The film can be perceived as either having one protagonist that changes substance or one could observe multiple protagonists who precede each other. Frammartino was inspired by animism and Pythagorean ideas about the nature of Man (Frammartino 2010, n.d.). According to Pythagorean thought Man has to know himself as four categories: as a mineral, a plant, an animal, and as a rational being (Frammartino 2010, n.d.). No element in the film is principal: trees, people, animals, ants, the wind - everything is equally important to the narrative. The

Pythagorean stages are not hierarchical – to understand oneself as a mineral is as important as understanding oneself as an animal. In providing an analysis of the cinematography I explain how Frammartino ‘dissolves’ categories of knowledge and I will indicate how his cinematography influenced *The View From Here*.

Throughout *Le Quattro Volte* characteristics that define specific phenomena or beings are challenged. For example, the macrocosmos of the village and the people who live in the village are filmed in such a way that they become microcosmos, whereas the microcosmos of ants becomes a macrocosmos. The human miniature world of the Calabrian village is created by capturing the town, its rural surroundings, and the villagers in extreme wide shots. As a result, we see wide landscapes with very small people; sometimes humans are only specks on the screen. These extreme wide-shots of human beings are juxtaposed against close-ups of ants, bark, and crushed charcoal. As a result it is difficult to tell the difference between proximity and distance. In the interview accompanying the DVD of *Le Quattro Volte* Frammartino explains he wanted to show the semblance between the wrinkled face of the shepherd and bark (2010, n.d.). In both cases an ant crawls over the surface. Further on in the film men climb the tree that stands upright in the village. It is filmed from such a great distance that the men become almost as tiny as the ants were earlier in the film.



Fig.18 Stills from *Le Quattro Volte* (2010, Frammartino).

The ant is filmed nearby, but the man is filmed from a great distance, yet visually the result is the same - they are moving tiny specks. In *The View From Here* I also tried to blur the distinction between human and non-human and have taken direct inspiration from this (see below) and other ways Frammartino creates parallels between humans and non-humans.



Fig.19 Stills from *The View From Here* (2012, Kooij). Ants, human, and horses have the same onscreen size.

Frammartino blurs the lines between human and non-human in other ways too. Unless there is a clear difference in size or colour humans find it difficult to distinguish specific individuals within a group of animals and we could not tell the difference between one herd of cows and another. For us, it could be the same group of cows twice (see my discussion of *Bovines* where we only recognize an individual when it is isolated from the herd).<sup>21</sup> In *Le Quattro Volte* human beings are filmed as if they are a herd of non-human animals. Thus Frammartino actively conceals human specificity and replaces it with the way we usually perceive non-human animals. It is both a critique and a clever tool that utilises our categorical thinking (which steers our perception) to then dissolve our tendency to categorise.



Fig.20 Stills from *Le Quattro Volte* (2010, Frammartino). The left picture displays a herd of goats in formation and the picture on the right contains a group of people. The similarity in shape is striking.

Apart from one human protagonist (the shepherd) people are filmed from an elevated perspective just like we normally do when looking down at insects and other small animals. By choosing this angle, human beings appear as one

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<sup>21</sup> This blindness to individuals in animals groups is dependent on the type of animal. We find it easier to discern individuals in groups of cats and dogs. Thus animal discrimination is species specific.

group wherein individuals cannot be distinguished. Human beings look as one species, just like we tend to perceive herds of other animals. Since the director combined these images into a single film, human beings, goats, and ants come to resemble one another.

This observation is further enhanced as human traits are attributed to certain goats. Halfway in the film we see a goat looking up. In the next shot we see clouds passing by. The clouds are filmed looking straight up. It implies that we are seeing it from the goat's point of view. As I read the film, Frammartino actively employs anthropomorphism to suggest animal sentience and anthropomorphising their behaviour gives the animal agency.

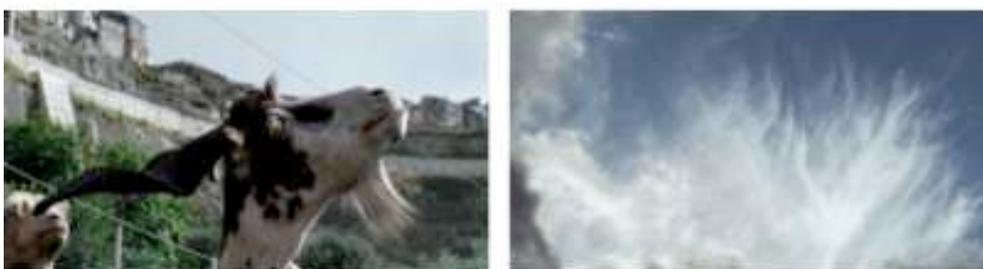


Fig.21 Stills from *Le Quattro Volte* (2010, Frammartino). Giving agency to a goat by suggesting it looks up at the clouds passing by.

Thus, in *Le Quattro Volte* we find an example of 'better anthropomorphism' – it has been employed to connect viewer to animal and to give a sense of their being. The individuality of human beings is rendered superfluous (they become an unspecified crowd), but specificity of goats is unlocked by presenting certain goats as individuals. The montage technique as demonstrated in figure 21 is known as the Kuleshov effect (after Lev Kuleshov who lived 1899-1970), which was also used on several occasions in *The View From Here*. For example, in figure 15 I demonstrate how the horse and an injured ant are related (though I was not trying to suggest the horse is seeing the ants). In addition, in the opening of *The View From Here* when the main protagonist sets off I have added a close-up of a snail to indicate that in the moment of walking more-than-human events are occurring simultaneously and to show that the space the human occupies is shared with other beings i.e. the space knows different ecologies. I do not expect the viewer to make all these inferences consciously, however, as multiple scales and the presence of more than just human creatures are depicted I am convinced it makes the filmworld feel richer and more spacious.



Fig.22 Stills from *The View From Here* (2012, Kooij). Cutting from a man indoors, to a snail outdoors, to a man walking outside. The interconnectedness of spaces and animals is fabricated, as the snail was recorded at an entirely different location next to my house many weeks later. By adding them in a sequence they become part of the same space and share the narrative.

McMahon (2015) calls the linking of animals through narrative and formal parallels “Frammartino’s ‘horizontalist’ aesthetics” (*Ibid.*, p.108). In her article she explains why animals in *Le Quattro Volte* are active agents. To make her argument she also points to the likenesses in shapes, textures, movements and conflation of human and non-human narrative traits. In her analysis she takes after Jane Bennett’s reading of Bruno Latour’s “figure of the actant ‘as a source of action that can be either human or non-human’ ” (Bennett, 2010 In: McMahon, 2015, p.108). McMahon explains that Bennett expands on this idea by offering a form of non-human agency “that encompasses both intentional and nonintentional effects” (McMahon, 2015, p.108). Traditionally agency is only attributed to active subjects i.e. humans, but as *Le Quattro Volte* places all organisms on equal footing they all become agents. She points to the use of anthropomorphism and also states that this film does not “reduce nonhuman difference to human sameness” and that “by drawing our attention to patterns across human and nonhuman realms *Le Quattro Volte*’s anthropomorphic impulse seems expansive rather than reductive, as it works to uncover commonalities across species lines” (McMahon, 2015, p.110). McMahon describes how animal agency works in terms of the way the narrative is constructed (through its democratising horizontalist depiction of organisms). Additionally, because animals such as goats, snails, and ants are not directable Frammartino was “at the mercy of what happens” and thus “these scenes bear within them documentary traces of animal agency” (*Ibid.*, p.111). And finally, the film contains an 8-minute long take where a dog is the main protagonist and carries out many actions that drive the narrative (culminating in a car crash). The dog was trained to perform these actions, but – McMahon explains – the dog was in control during this scene and is thus an active agent.

McMahon's article was published in 2015, whereas *The View From Here* had its first screening in 2012. For the making of the film I had already put the ideas I perceived in *Le Quattro Volte* into action. It was a reassurance to read that McMahon's article was in agreement with my interpretation. We do not have the same starting point, as she focuses more on Bennett, Pick, and Latour whereas my starting points were Heidegger's ontic and ontological in *Being and Time* (1927) and the impossibility of perceiving beyond an experiential horizon as posed by Derrida in *Aporias* (1993). In *Aporias* (1993) Derrida considers how it would be possible to cross the borders of the human experiential horizon or what he calls the "limits of truth" (*Ibid*, p.1). The central topic of this discussion is death. He advocates a way of thinking that embraces 'not knowing where to go' (Derrida 1993, p.12) for it equals living a borderless existence. If one would accept this way of thinking, fixated habits and reified perspectives would be renewed constantly. The liminality of concepts would be preserved and space would be given for richer experience. In my view *Le Quattro Volte* is an excellent example of how these ideas might be put into practice cinematically. I would even argue that in this way the film is an educational experience: a non text-based embodiment of Derrida's *Aporias*.<sup>22</sup> Through multi-scale and multi-species narration Frammartino presents similarities between species between species and matter. As a result, rigid boundaries between humans/animals, small/large, and close/distant vanish as characters transform into different species and substances. The audience focus is placed on the border of categories whereby an alternative to strict categorising and classifying is put into action. This liminality of concepts encourages viewers to reconsider their opinions and habitual ways of thinking about organisms and nature-culture.

Rather than calling it a 'horizontalist aesthetic' in my view *Le Quattro Volte* 'dissolves categories'. I have provided an analysis of the visual aesthetics of the film, but should clarify that although the overwhelming beauty of shots in *Le Quattro Volte* suggest its primary concern is aesthetic appeal, in my view the primary purpose of the cinematography is firmly rooted in semiotics. It uses linguistic knowledge schemes i.e. categorical thinking such as 'this is a goat' to demonstrate concepts are reified and should be permeable.

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<sup>22</sup> I understand it was not Frammartino's aim to illustrate Derrida's philosophy.

For my personal practice analysing the visual language of *Le Quattro Volte* and copying it in certain places was crucially important. I learnt how to choreograph and plan shots, understand how groups of shots can communicate complex ideas without needing any explanatory prose, and that adding multiple scales and species results in a horizontal, more democratic, and ecological reading of a film. Both *Le Quattro Volte* and *The View From Here* show that in order for the viewer to connect to a non-human animal some form of human presence is required. Beyond *Le Quattro Volte*, through making *The View From Here* I discovered the impact of animals looking into the camera. Without the connection between myself behind the camera and the white horse staring at me these shots would not have had their foreboding aura and I learnt that breaking the fourth wall was a powerful tool to trigger empathy for an onscreen animal. And finally, seeing the film with audiences showed me how difficult it is to construct a non-human character. Even though the viewer sees the same white horse on many occasions, not everyone understood that they were looking at the same horse. This is mainly because its coat is sometimes dirtier than other times. So, for the construction of a particular, individual non-human protagonist very clear and consistent visual cues have to be provided.

#### **4.2) *The Breeder* (Demelza Kooij, 2017, USA/UK, 11'57'')**

Access to the film: <https://vimeo.com/232641076/aecf676ac6>

Link to synopsis, review, blog post, and list of screenings:

<http://demelzakooij.com/film/thebreeder/>

#### **Background to the production**

*The Breeder* is a hybrid film, which means that as a film form it stands between fiction and documentary. *The Breeder* consists of interviews with scholars, found footage of animals, animation, and life-action. It tells the story of a scientist turned animal breeder who uses genetic modification to make customised pets. But, the animals she creates are severely disabled, which is misinterpreted by costumers (and herself) as irresistibly cute. The film is a commentary on past and current breeding practices. It addresses the fact that breeding pedigree pets to retain certain aesthetic requirements – specifically ‘cute aesthetics’ – has made them severely disabled. Image Science Films New York and Labocine commissioned the film for their anthology feature film

*Mosaic* (2017). I wrote the story for *The Breeder*, which screenwriter Chris Lindsay turned into a screenplay that we developed together through discussion and rewrites. I also edited the film and recorded the interviews. It won the scientist award at Imagine Science Films Abu Dhabi and played at other science and animal-related film events such as International Science Festival Nijmegen 2018 where ~400 visitors came for the museum night.

The film has its origins in things I do for leisure: I make drawings of animals that are crossings between species and I frequently watch unusual animal narratives on YouTube. My pen stroke is rounded and my style cartoonish, but the resulting images are dark, nightmarish and uncanny. With regard to the animal videos, I was embarrassed and shocked when realised I was particularly drawn to videos of animals with deformities. I wanted to find out why videos of three and two-legged cats and dogs, animals in wheelchairs, and animals with other health complications fascinated me more than videos with animals that contained all their body parts and did not have health complications. As it turned out, my love for deformed animals is not uncommon. It is the result of subconscious mechanisms relating to the desire to care for and nurture (parental drives, which I have explained in chapter 2.2). The yearn to care for others is beautiful, but, as the film explains, in the case of animal breeding it has resulted in serious health deficits that go unnoticed, because pet owners are blinded by animals' cute appearances.

The project did not start out as an activist endeavour, but in the end there is a strong sense that the film serves this purpose. Though I feel pleased I have made a work that addresses a problem in society, as a filmmaker I wish the film had been less preoccupied with narrative and making an argument. If I had to make the film again I would focus almost exclusively on the imagery of animals (documentary and animation) and cut documentary voice-over and fiction dialogue to a minimum. There would be more time devoted to footage of animals being petted extensively and animals staring into the camera, which would also contain more Foley sound. This way the overall experience would be more eerie and visceral, and it would be a better reflection and exploration of my personal fascination with watching such animal videos. Though, the reason why I did not pull the project into this direction is because

it was a commission and the contract stipulated that certain requirements had to be fulfilled.<sup>23</sup>

The documentary footage of animals was sourced online. I made video recommendations to the assistant producer who then contacted uploaders for the original source file and any other footage they had of their animal. This found footage was graded to black-and-white so that videos were more uniform. For some of the footage effects were added and videos were slowed down a bit to make it gentler and dreamier.

### **Textual analysis and discussion**

There is much to discuss in relation to this film, because it contains so many different film forms each with specific aims and challenges. For purposes of this PhD research I would like to explain how I have attempted to construct an empathic relation between viewer and animals, which I have done by focussing on eyes, blinking, depicting touch, adding Foley sound, selecting footage of animals looking toward the camera, and creating bridges between documentary footage and animations.<sup>24</sup>

The film opens with footage of a dog on wheels that drives toward us. As it looks around it also looks toward the camera. The voice-over (Dr Clare Fisher, La Trobe University Melbourne<sup>25</sup>) explains that in animal shelters and rescue groups they have encountered people fighting over animals with physical and mental health complications.

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<sup>23</sup> One of the requirements was to engage with and to include a scientist's research.

<sup>24</sup> For a critical assessment of cuteness aesthetics I redirect to chapter 2.2.

<sup>25</sup> I interviewed her at a conference in Adelaide of the Australasian Animal Studies Association (AASA) where I presented a paper.



Fig.23 Still from *The Breeder* (2017, Kooij). A dog on wheels opens the film.

To establish a relation between viewer and onscreen world sounds were added to the dog's wheels, passing cars in the background, and when the camera zooms in there is a subtle swoosh. Without these sounds the image is a mere layer or a flat screen, but with sound the viewer is able to embody it better. The addition of footsteps would have pushed this even further, however, I felt this would clutter the experience too much. For this scene I wanted the viewer to be able to hear the voice-over clearly.

In the first fiction scene we meet the scientist-breeder and app designer. The app designer is disappointed there are no baby animals in the lab. The breeder explains that birthmothers and offspring live a 'normal life' off-site with normal families in order to ensure healthy and happy baby animals. After this light-hearted introduction, in an equally innocent manner, they play with an app that allows customers to design their own pets: "front legs only, hind legs, or no legs at all!" says the app designer, joyfully. The fiction scenes contain dialogue, but do not explicitly refer to what the film wants to address. Its cute aesthetics in terms of adorable-looking animals and innocent acting style lure the viewer along a path that is sweetly sugar-coated, but in essence is horrifying. In other words, I (ab)use the passive response to cuteness

aesthetics to address unethical actions and behaviour that may sprout from an uncritical attitude toward cute-looking phenomena.

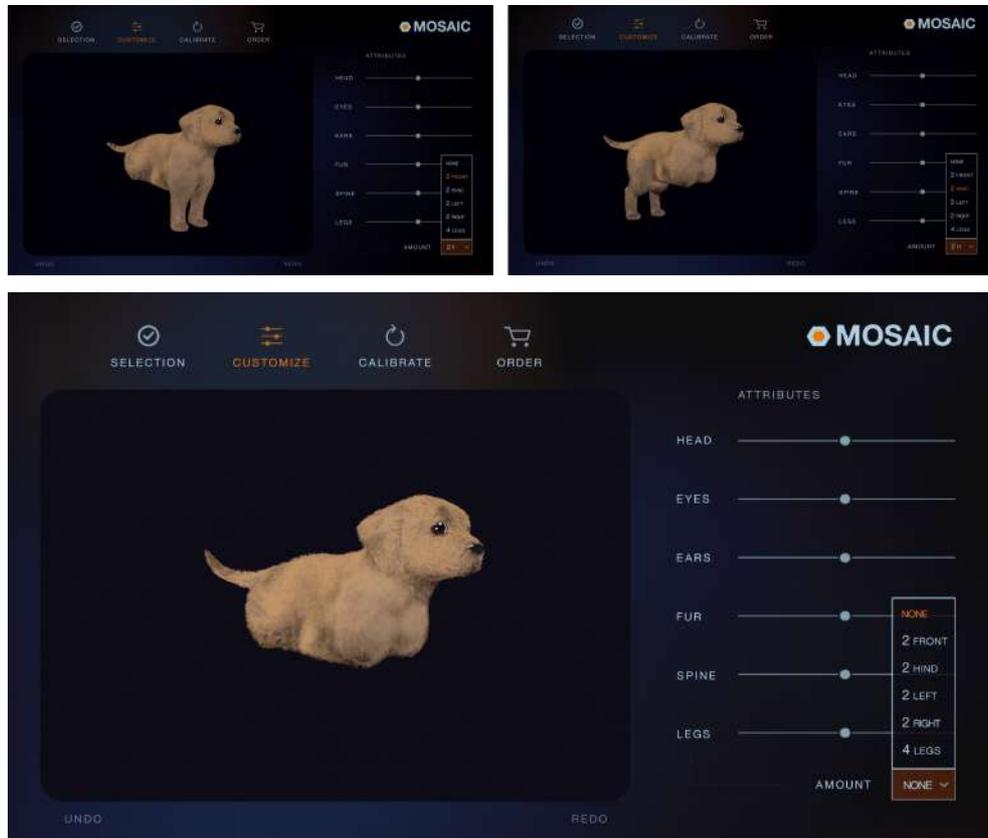


Fig.24 Stills from *The Breeder* (2017, Kooij). The app designer and breeder test an app that allows costumers to choose the amount of legs of their pet. The word 'play' was deliberately added to their dialogue to emphasise innocence. The large image displays a legless 'deskdog'.

With animator Pepijn Schroeijers I discussed how we could make animals in the animations livelier. He suggested blinking. Indeed so, even if the entire animal body is still, eye-movement and blinking brings the animal to life. I also asked him to animate the dog so that the animal would keep eye contact with 'the camera'. I instructed sound designer Dr Lars Koens to add a sound to its blinking to further emphasise the eyes. Lars then added the same sounds to the documentary animals when they blinked. This way we could draw a parallel between both worlds: the animations seemed alive and the documentary animals became more mechanical, which fits with the narrative as it suggests that the scientist-breeder made the documentary animals (they are a scientific invention, a form of technology). In addition to similarity in sounds, animating a disability of which we had secured documentary footage

allowed us bridge between documentary and animated world. Therefore, during the production we had to wait with making the animations until we had secured documentary footage.

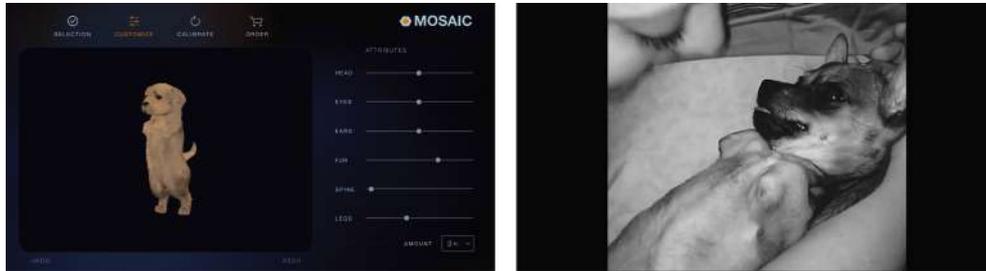


Fig.25 Stills from *The Breeder* (2017, Kooij). On the left an animated dog missing its front legs and on the right documentary footage of the same disability.

The animator and I built the animations in Blender (they are not simply dropped-in readymade models) and made them look as cute as possible, thereby loosely following Konrad Lorenz identifiers for juvenile characteristics, but mainly trusting our own instincts. All animated animals look as if they are about to beg for attention – their expression somewhere in-between guilt, sadness, and innocence. For the menu options in the animated app (furriness, eye size, etc) we ensured it would allow for the creation of all cute characteristics. I designed the concept for the app and the menu options myself and they were an integral part of the story I proposed for Imagine Science Films, which also included ideas such as a legless ‘deskdog’.

Thus far the disabilities presented in the film seem a grave exaggeration and it is hard to believe people in the future would actually produce such animals. Then, the voice-overs explain that disabled pets are already living with us and are actively bred to retain hurtful physical features of which the pug dog is the best-known example.

There is a loud bang, which makes the app designer shoot up; his iPad falls on the floor and the app glitches. It produces a bizarre animal constructed of several different animal species. The app designer sees a business opportunity for the scientist-breeder: “You would sell a million of these.” In the conclusion of the film the voice of Dr Joyce Goggin (University of Amsterdam) delivers the final line: “If things make money or if things please us, we can overlook tremendous oceans of cruelty for what we want”.

One of my favourite videos, which I was adamant had to be part of the film, is the long take of the floppy-eared pit-bull with short spine syndrome and an underbite. I like this video so much, because the dog looks cute (I think), but there is also a clear sense that there is something wrong about his shape. The footage is shaky, so we asked the owners to reshoot it. However, all new takes did not have the same uncanny feel to it, because the dog did not interact with the camera in the same way. Therefore, I edited with the old take. Once again, why I think this shot is impactful and establishes a connection between viewer and onscreen animal is because the animal knows it is being watched, looks at the camera and interacts with it.



Fig.26 Still from *The Breeder* (2017, Kooij). A dog with short spine syndrome and an underbite.

In addition to videos in which animals make eye contact with the camera, I was looking for footage where animals are being touched. Cuteness aesthetics explain why people love and might even prefer animals with deformities, but this alone does not explain why certain *videos* of these animals have an impact. Through introspection I realised that the videos I enjoyed most contain a human that hugs or strokes the animal. I suspect that the hormone, which is released when people stroke their pet (oxytocin), is also released when you watch someone else stroke a pet in a video. Furthermore, whilst watching films like *Mechanical Love* (2007, Phie Ambo), which is about empathic relations between humans and robots, I noticed that in seeing hands

touch something onscreen it becomes easier to imagine how it might feel to touch whoever or whatever is being touched. In other words, seeing hands touch onscreen gives an incentive for embodiment and this in turn allows the viewer to empathise with the person who is petting the animal. Thus, as I experience such videos and films, at first it does not stimulate empathy for the animal, but for the person touching the animal. Thereafter, and especially if the animal's eyes are visible, you can start to imagine what it might feel like for the pet animal. The chapter about 'cinema as skin and touch' in Elseasser & Hagener's *Film Theory: An Introduction Through The Senses* (2010) confirms my hypothesis. In the introduction of this thesis I write that the authors suggest that images of particular sensory systems trigger responses in the same register. I give the example that imagery of the eyes may trigger (self-)reflection. Similarly, seeing someone being touched onscreen triggers a physical response in the viewer. Though these thoughts might appear speculative, they underlie creative decision-making for the *The Breeder* and are the reasons why the film includes frequent footage of human hands touching pets whilst the animals look into the camera.



Fig.27 Stills from *The Breeder* (2017, Kooij). Pets being stroked. The images on the right contain my hand.

Making *The Breeder* reconfirmed the importance of eye contact as means to create an empathic relation between viewer and onscreen animal. In addition, I included footage where human hands are visible, which I have added as a means to promote embodiment, but also to show scale. Some animals are very small, which makes them cute. However, their size is only visible when there is a scale reference and the human hands serve this function. In addition to confirming and testing some of my hypothesis in relation to the creation of onscreen empathy, *The Breeder* was a lesson in working with a medium-sized production team (16 crew members, 2 interviewees, 5 YouTubers, and 6 lab-workers), collaborating with a writer, directing animation, and to edit a hybrid film with multiple narrative strands. Finally, it showed me that a sensory film

might be more effective as a film form for encouraging empathy, because it demands a relation between viewer and film that is not primarily appealing to reason and cognitive interpretation (which *The Breeder* is to a great extent). Therefore, for the next short experiment *Wolves From Above* (2018), I wanted to create a sensory experience without narrative that connects wolf and viewer intimately.

#### **4.3) *Wolves From Above* (Demelza Kooij, 2018, Canada/UK, 5'40'')**

Access to the film: <https://vimeo.com/246597676/df4d6eec1b>

Full screening list and videos:

<http://demelzakooij.com/film/wolvesfromabove/>

#### **Background to the production**

*Wolves From Above* appears deceitfully simple; it is a wolf pack filmed from the air in a single long take (5'40''). However, many hours of filming went into making this piece. I was waiting for particular behaviours, geometric patterns, and rhythms to collide. The incentive for flying a drone above the enclosures was the realisation wolves tend to use the same routes, which carves out lines in the grass. I wanted to capture the resulting geometric shapes. I was also waiting for wolf behaviour that seemed choreographed – patterns in their behaviour that seemed too perfect, too good to be true, as if unreal. Initially this drone footage would be part of *Wolfpark*. However, as I was ploughing through hours of drone material I came across these five minutes and forty seconds, which contained a clear beginning, middle and ending as well as the geometric patterns and wolf interactions I was looking for. Thus the film had a structure and a clear purpose, which I will clarify below. For these reasons, I decided to release it as a short film – and also to gauge interest for *Wolfpark*.

The film won the Jury Award at the 57<sup>th</sup> Ann Arbor Film Festival (USA) in 2019 and screened at many international film festivals and museums of modern art worldwide including M HKA (Belgium), MMoCA (USA), and Festival du Nouveau Cinéma (Canada) where it played in competition. It was on display at the 18<sup>th</sup> Wro Media Art Biennale in Poland from May until December 2019 where it is displayed as a floor piece on my request. At Alchemy Film & Arts in Scotland it was commissioned as a ceiling projection with an area where visitors could lie down and look up at the wolves, which were looking down at

the people below. In the textual analysis I will explain how the latter affected my perception about *Wolves From Above* and its future screening potential.



Fig.28 *Wolves From Above* (2018, Kooij) projected onto the ground at the Four Domes Pavilion in Wroclaw, Poland during the 18<sup>th</sup> Wro Media Art Biennale. The museum night attracted approximately 2000 visitors.

### **Textual analysis and discussion**

The film opens with a view on a piece of land with grass and some trees at the fringes of the frame. As the camera descends wolves appear from the right side of the frame and look up whilst they walk toward the centre. Camera movements such as rotations and going down are accompanied by a bassy sound that suggests this is the sound of the machine inspecting the wolves. Most wolves follow the carved out patterns in the grass. At 0'58" a wolf sneezes and at 1'03" the wolf next to it sneezes. It is a cute sound and it is relatable, because us humans sneeze too. It might also make one wonder what caused the sneezing. The wolves seem at ease; some leave the frame, others enter. At 1'57" two wolves are waiting for something, there is a sense they know they are being watched, and then they turn their heads around and back – their movements in exact unison. Throughout the video we hear their movements: the weight of their paws on the grass as they walk and jump, wet sounds of licking and teeth clattering, grunting and growling. These are sounds one would not expect from such a distance. It makes the wolves appear closer than they are. The camera lowers, the wolves look up more frequently and their interactions get more nervous. As we get closer the ravens get louder, their screams heighten the tension. The mechanical

humming sounds of cars or airplanes in the distance give the film a slight artificial atmosphere. Is this film recorded in the wild? From 3'53" the wolf on the lower half of the frame looks up and up. The camera gets closer, but the wolf stays where it is as if it is letting itself being watched and filmed. The surrounding wolves notice the viewer too. At 4'19" we are really close. A greyish wolf looks up at us and growls quietly. One wolf runs into the frame and jumps up toward the camera. All wolves see us now, but also continue with their own business whilst keeping an eye on us. There are a final few gazes as the camera slowly pulls up, the wolves leave the frame, and we are where the film began – on a plain field of grass.

The way the drone is used in *Wolves From Above* is atypical. Usually, drone shots are edited into films as establishing shots and flyovers. However, I wanted to conceal the fact that we were using a drone and offer the viewer a new, different, and other perspective – a form of aerial photography they would not immediately be able to identify. Making the image look foreign and other, I anticipated, would spur the viewer's curiosity and would invite them to inspect the image better (and thus look at the wolves more attentively). For these reasons, I had instructed drone operator Joris Cottin to fly the drone up and stay still for at least three minutes. This way it would mimic a crane, but the viewer would not have seen a crane shot from such a height and not facing straight down either. However, Joris did not hold the drone still for at least three minutes in this take. I had spoken at length with him about geometric shapes and patterns, which is why he rotates the camera sometimes, because he is reframing to a composition with stronger geometric patterns. Though initially I was annoyed to have so much movement in the clip, the drone movements make the wolves curious and this is the reason why the wolves keep looking up. Plus, when the camera goes down, tension is built. And finally, the camera movements allowed me to add mechanical bass sounds, which also makes the video more otherworldly.



Fig.29 Stills from *Wolves From Above* (2018, Kooij). The bodies of wolves form lines, trapezoids, and circular shapes.

I previously tested the idea of defamiliarising nature through displaying its geometry in an earlier film called *Graminoids* (2014, Demelza Kooij & Lars Koens, UK, 6'18'') for which I was co-director, cinematographer, and editor. This film – dubbed by us as a ‘portrait of grass waving in the wind’ – is a sensorial experience that takes a very common plant (grass) and presents it as an extraordinary entity.

*Graminoids* (2014, Kooij & Koens, UK): <https://vimeo.com/87170970>

Password: graminoids2014

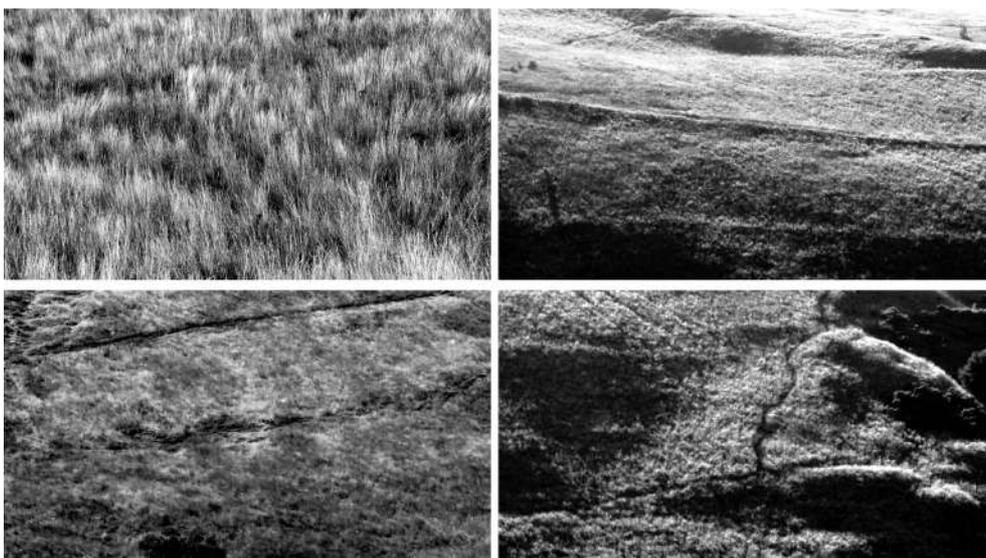


Fig.30 Stills from *Graminoids* (2014, Kooij & Koens) displaying lines and abstracted shapes in grass. Filmed in Holyrood Park, Edinburgh, UK.

As cinematographer I had focussed on lines in the grass and how this worked with and against the direction of wind and movement of clouds that fell as dark shadows on the grass. As editor I had to sequence the images so that they would have a sense of journey, which was a challenge since the film contains no story, no voice-over, and no characters. To give a sense of journey progression, I started with imagery in which grass is clearly recognisable as grass and shots are medium-wide or close-up. From there the shots get much wider and the compositions more abstract (the soundscape also goes from real to abstract, as it starts with the sound of wind, which gets increasingly electronic). In *Graminoids* the effect of this ‘abstraction’ could also be understood as ‘defamiliarisation’, which is a formalist technique associated with early Russian constructivist photography and filmmaking (in Russian: Ostranenie – острaнение). According to Vlada Petrić it entails the “depiction of a familiar environment in an unusual way, thus provoking the viewer to experience an unconventional perception of the world” (Petrić, 1987, p.10). Therefore, it could be said that the otherworldliness, mystery, and making a picture *unheimlich* as discussed in chapter 2.3, could be created through what is called defamiliarisation.

The sense of journey or structure established in *Wolves From Above* is thanks to the mirroring of beginning and ending. At the start the drone lowers and the wolves enter the frame and at the end the wolves leave the frame and the camera pulls up. Though one could barely call it a narrative, *Wolves From Above* is not a random couple of minutes of drone material; there is a particular and logical form to it.

With *Wolves From Above* it was my aim to present ‘a new wolf’, a way of depicting the animal that is not previously seen in wildlife filmmaking. The unusual way of using a drone, a focus on geometry, and also the duration of the shot help to present a visually other wolf – a defamiliarised wolf. Except, the wolf is not different from wolves one sees in ‘daily life’, because seeing wolves regularly does not happen to very many of us. The wolves in my film are different from wolves in wildlife documentaries. In chapter 2.3 it was explained that Bousé (2000) claims wildlife film contains an overemphasis on spectacle such as the hunt and imagery is edited very fast. In *Wolves From Above* neither is the case. In addition to defamiliarisation in image, the sound

design of the film is uncommon. Normally drone shots are accompanied by music. The reason for this is that drones are very noisy and therefore it is impossible to record sync audio with the image. I recorded the atmos and close sound recordings for the film on the same location as where the images were taken. Sound designer Dr Lars Koens then edited this audio to the movements of the wolves. He also recorded additional Foley sound for the footsteps of the wolves. The original sound recording contained the humming of cars in the distance, which I really liked. Normally a sound recordist would (probably) wait until the cars are gone so that they would have a clean audio recording, but I thought it added a sense of mystery. Lars also liked the texture of this sound and edited all instances together where the hum was most prominent and layered it. So, the sound of the film seems 'natural', but is actually a reconstruction and reimagining of the acoustics of that space. The close Foley and location sound recordings make the wolves appear closer than they are. This closeness is also one of the main contributing factors of establishing empathy between viewer and wolf.

I hope that with *Wolves From Above* I encourage people to consider what the animals might be doing and thinking. And because they look at us, we are acknowledged as a presence and become part of their world. In this sense the film is not a looking *at* the wolf, because we are also *with* the wolves. Though, the form of empathy established does remain somewhat detached, which, I think, is simply due to the visual distance. For *Wolfpark* I wanted to get the viewer as close to the wolves as possible. The floor projection at the 18<sup>th</sup> Media Art Biennale in Poland does solve the issue of distance, because the projection is directly at the viewers' feet. Interestingly, when children entered the space they immediately went down on hands and feet and played with the wolves. They caressed the animals and were careful not to step on them. Thus, as a floor projection the film does succeed in bringing the viewer very close to the animal.

To summarise, with *Wolves From Above* I have put into action what I learnt in previous film projects regarding breaking the fourth wall, absence of dialogue, geometry, duration, and it indeed demonstrates that a more sensorial approach to filmmaking (as opposed to narrative) is effective in establishing empathy between viewer and onscreen animal.

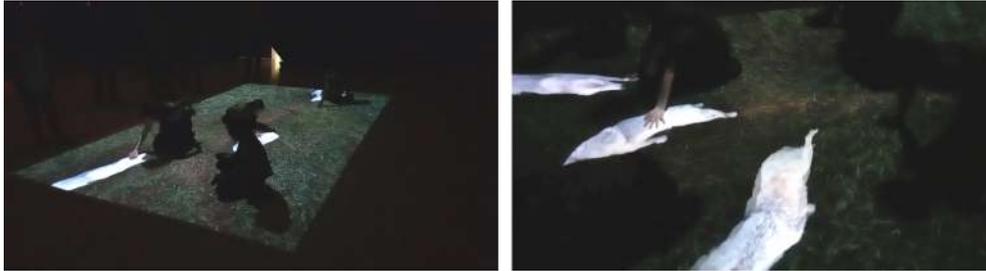


Fig.31 Children playing with the *Wolves From Above* (2018, Kooij) floor projection at the 18<sup>th</sup> Wro Media Art Biennale from May to December 2019 in Wroclaw, Poland.



Fig.32 *Wolves From Above* (2018, Kooij) ceiling projection at Alchemy Film & Arts in Hawick, Scotland, 16-29 November 2019.

## **CHAPTER 5: Critical Reflection on *Wolfpark* (2019, Canada/UK, 53'59")**

Access to the film: <https://vimeo.com/258618749/d283e68a5e>

### **5.1) Production and textual analysis of *Wolfpark***

For the creation of the long-form film *Wolfpark* (2019) I employed all techniques gathered during the textual analyses of other documentaries and the production of my own short films. Unique to *Wolfpark* is an evident play with documentary modes. In *The View From Here* (2012) I also move from observational, reflexive to more experimental sections, but no scene is ever fully abstract or 'poetic'. In the analysis below I explain that I move between various modes to show the materiality of film and to suggest liminalities of inside and outside, what is real and imagined, borders of concepts, and between forms of being. Therefore, it can be seen as a practical exploration of what Derrida does in his *Aporias* (1993) except what he does in words I do with audiovisual means and I offer a ground to experience various types of otherness that without the film would still lie outside our experiential horizon.

#### **Background to the production**

*Wolfpark* is the result of several trips, filmed over five years to a remote village in Québec, Canada called Girardville where the wolf park 'Aventuraid' is located. I found the place in 2014 when Creative Scotland funded my trip to see *Graminoids* play in competition at Festival du Nouveau Cinéma in Montréal. My Canadian producer Lucy Tremblay suggested I should go on a recce to this park. We were going to make a film about dogs and I wanted to start at its origins: the wolf. The park is unique, because it allows visitors to enter the enclosure for so-called 'contact activities' where you can touch and interact with the wolves. Along the way I parted with 'the dog film' and focussed exclusively on the interaction between wolves and wolf park visitors. What captured my interest were the responses of the visitors who could not accept the wolves as 'real wolves'. The wolves in the park did not meet their expectations, which were based on fairy tales and the way wolves normally appear in wildlife film. In addition to being director, I was second camera, sound recordist, and editor.

The film is an experimental portrait where the viewer is immersed in the environment of the wolf park and becomes witness of activities such as

feeding or the delivery of new wolves; they see how visitors are guided inside the enclosure, and the film includes wolf behaviour filmed during day and night. Initially I tried to find ways to film the wolves without having the fence cutting through each shot. It was not feasible to plan for extensive filming hours behind the fence (with the wolves), because it is only possible to enter with the owner for about 40 minutes at a time and we had to pay for each time. To overcome this problem we filmed with a high crane and drone that went over the fence and slim lenses that almost fitted through the openings in the fence. After such attempts to make the fence barrier disappear, I realised that the fence is the facilitator of visitor and wolf interaction. In addition, the fence made it possible to film the wolves, as in the wild a wolf would normally shy away from people or only interact briefly. This is why I accepted the presence of the fence within the frame and it became a central feature of the film. Like the glass wall in *Nénette* (2010, Philibert), the fence in *Wolfpark* is a portal to the wolves and a type of 'screen interface' that makes interaction possible. The fence is both barrier and gateway. The concepts of inside and outside and traversing the boundary became the main theme of the film. Like *Le Quattro Volte* (2010, Frammartino), I wanted to move between categories and concepts to show how they are connected, but can also be broken. As for the wolf, this animal is an ephemeral being that exists with us as a creature of flesh and blood (both feared and loved) and as a mythical being – a kind of symbol for the past that reminds us of our 'lost wild nature'. Being both alive in the present whilst calling to a lost past, the animal too is exemplary of borders and boundlessness. With the film I want to show the liminality of human and wolf animal being and of film form. This is why in every way the film traverses boundaries: between the subjectivities of species and across film forms. With *Wolfpark* I hope to have created a way for the viewer to experience the worlds of human and wolf, their differences and shared likenesses.

In the textual analysis below I describe the film scene-by-scene and explain what conceptual purpose they serve in relation to the narrative arc of the film (if applicable for that scene) and how it gives an incentive for empathy and expresses animal subjectivity. I will also compare *Wolfpark* to films of other directors as discussed above and my own short films.

### Textual analysis and discussion

*Wolfpark* opens with a top-down view on tiny creatures that look like bacteria as seen through a microscope. The sound of their footsteps gives the wolves some weight; tiny wolf-worms glide across the screen.

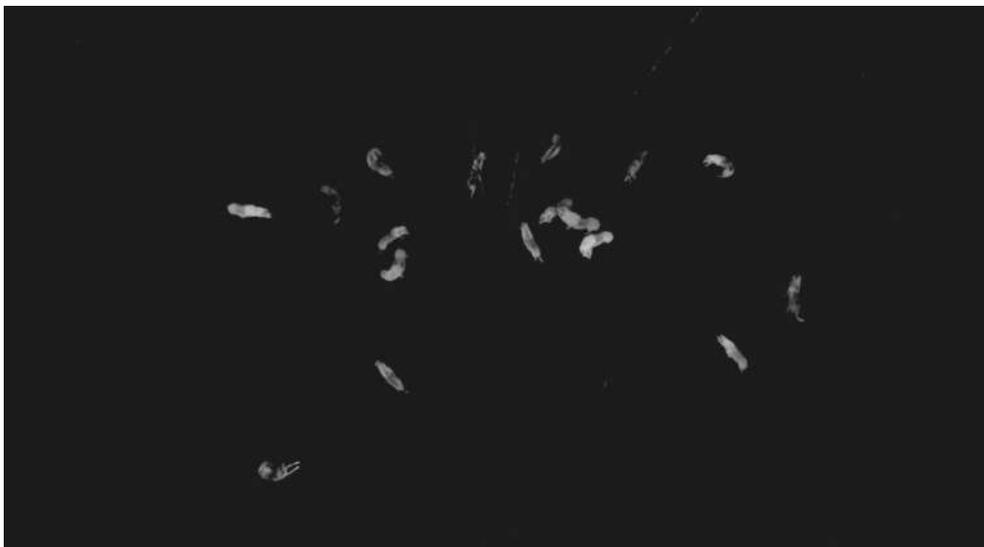


Fig.33 Still from the opening sequence of *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij).

Wolf steps echo in a wide, empty dark space. The clean black surface of the screen is felt. The last wolf strides off the screen and we are lifted up from the ground and float upwards in a forest. The image cuts to a snoring, sleeping wolf. Sound and image are ‘natural’ i.e. the film is no longer experimental or abstract; we are now in a real space, but only briefly. After this shot it is revealed that the animals live in enclosures. The camera slowly creeps up at the wolves that inspect whoever or whatever is approaching them. Some flee, but one stays behind and looks at us. In this moment of looking at the animal and being looked at, sound becomes abstract.

In the third scene I introduce the main human voice over, which is preceded by a long take of a car filmed from above that meanders along a road at night. The first sentence of voice-over is: “We love showing order”. The viewer knows that the speaker is referring to humans. Then the voice says: “And so all people who come to film the wolves really want to show the dominant and submissive wolf”. The voice refers to the process of filmmaking and indicates that film crews usually do something that does not please this person. Apparently there is more to wolves than the story of the dominant versus submissive wolf. Since these are the opening sentences, clearly, this

film is going to do something different and will not fall into that trap. After the voice is introduced two human figures appear: father and son. We see how they interact with the wolf behind the fence. For some time the camera stays focused on the human pair, but then pans to the wolf that looks at the camera, the crew, and the father and son. In this moment the human voices recede and we shift from a 'looking-with-the-humans-at-the-wolf' to a 'looking-with-the-wolf-at-the-humans' who are in front of and behind the camera.



Fig.34 Stills from *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij). Shifting from a human perspective to 'looking with the wolf'.

When the image cuts to a wide shot of the dad and his boy, the voice-over continues: "Nowadays we still like to film types of interaction that in our eyes represent something strong. However, wolves can have interactions that mean nothing to us, but a lot to them". This text suggests that the film will show things that might not immediately make sense for the viewer, but it does for the wolf. It also implies that therefore one should keep watching even though the viewer might not immediately get what is happening. This scene ends at about 1/5 of the film. At this moment I have introduced all information necessary for the viewer to be able to enjoy the rest of the film. I have 'explained' everything: I have communicated with the viewer that this is an experimental film that crosses film forms (because we have seen abstract imagery and moments of observational footage); that the subjects of the film are wolves and how humans perceive them; that it contains voice-over; human characters, and I have introduced its conceptual context.

The image cuts to a total shot of the boy asleep in bed. Slowly, shrieking sounds and imagery of wolves fade up. It suggests the boy is dreaming about these animals. They are portrayed as mysterious creatures of the night. A wolf drinks water and suddenly looks off screen – it sees something. Abruptly, the image cuts to daytime footage with a view on an open field with a wolf in its centre that looks up at the camera. For approximately four minutes we watch two long takes that concentrate on

wolves displaying wolf behaviour. We do not know what it means exactly and there is no voice telling us what is happening either. Because the voice had said that wolves may portray behaviour that means nothing to us, but a lot to them, the viewer can infer that these long takes are an exercise in practising the skill of intently watching the wolves and gauging what it might mean to them. Like *Wolves From Above* (2018, Kooij) the shot duration and close sound recordings immerse the viewer in the onscreen space. The viewer is spending time with the animals. Unfortunately, the drone moves too much in these shots and this makes it unclear what the subjectivity of the camera is. If the shots would have been still it could have been a simple registration or a kind of giant ominous eye. But here the camera movements suggest that someone is operating the camera and thus the experience of the viewer is mediated via this extra person. *Wolves From Above* also contained camera movement, but its perspective and movements are more rigid and the wolves interact more with the camera. In *Wolves From Above* (2018) connection between viewer and wolves is more direct. I do think that the long takes in *Wolfpark* invite the viewer to consider the subjectivity of the wolves, but it is a voyeuristic perspective rather than an immersion into their world.

In the next shot the camera circles directly above the fence. The wolf below gets up and walks away. When it has left the frame the camera keeps rotating and soon it is unclear what is inside or outside the fence. The voice-over discusses whether wolves know they are inside an enclosure and whether they dream about escaping.



Fig.35 Still from *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij). The camera is circling directly above the enclosure.

The topic of being locked inside, freedom, and territory is picked up again in the next scene, which shows the feeding ritual. It is an observational scene filmed in a single, long take. The camera waits by the gate and we see how the animal keepers enter the enclosure with buckets of meat. They leave the gate open. After some time the camera follows after one of the keepers and traverses the boundary of the fence. We stand inside the enclosure. The wolves could just walk out, but they keep their distance. The voice says he is quite sure that if he would open the gate the wolves would go out, but would also return quickly because the sense of territory is important to wolves.

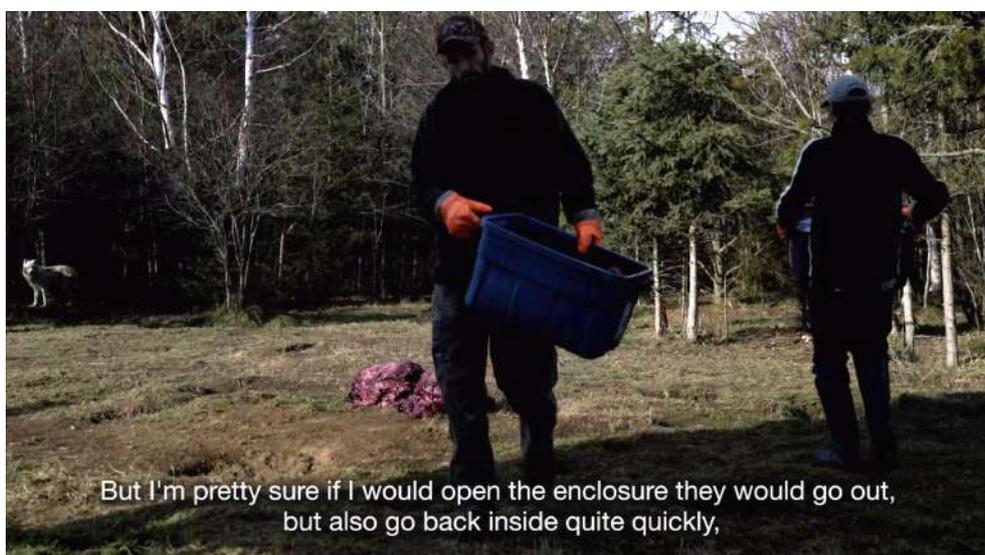


Fig.36 Still from *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij). Wolves receive their food in readymade parcels.

The action that unfolds in the scene certainly confirms his words, because the wolves stay put. There is no attempt at escaping. It is a strange scene for various reasons. The readymade square meat parcels look rather artificial; the wolves are not displaying stereotypical behaviour, because they do not run toward the meat nor fight over it; they do not attack the humans, and they do not escape. As a result of these unexpected events or lack thereof, there is a sense of the *unheimlich* in this scene.

The following scene is an experimental section where the viewer is whooshing along the fence with a wolf. Except for the drone shots that introduce and close the scene, the entire sequence is made of only two shots that I repeat over and over, but with different in and out points so that each cut feels slightly different. I wanted to extend the time of running with the

wolf, which is why I cut back to the same footage and have slowed it down a bit. Edited with sound design and music, which contains a slow undulant cadence, it gives the sense of continuous time, as if floating in a dream. The wolf keeps making eye contact with the viewer.



Fig.37 Still from *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij). Running with a wolf.

In this scene the audience is able to practice ‘reduced listening’ if they wanted to. The latter is a term coined by Pierre Schaeffer and adopted by Michel Chion where the listener “focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning” (Chion, 1990, p.29). I deliberately selected voice sections that are ‘utterances’, and there is repetition that renders the voices ‘samples’ rather than meaningful statements. For example, there is the sentence: “I like, I like animals in general and...”, and I keep the pauses and ‘erms’ in the sequence too. Further in the film I layer human voice, so that the meaning of words becomes cluttered and difficult to retrieve.

Initially this scene ended differently. Toward the end of the shot the cinematographer (Joris Cottin) teases the wolf by stepping toward it forcefully. The wolf jumps back and growls angrily. I showed this to test audiences and they all felt a bit disappointed, because in that moment it became clear that the wolf was not running with them, but with the cameraperson. Their disappointment demonstrated that in principle the ‘running with wolf’ sequence successfully creates the illusion that the viewer is with the wolf. I did not want to break this spell; hence I cut out the teasing and added a drone shot that contained movement and wolves running. As for

the sound, certain voice-over is repeated and I cut voices short so that they are clearly noticeable as samples. I do not hide the audio cuts. In making the audio visible as audio recordings, I reveal the 'materiality' of film just like the audiovisual noise at the start of the film. Only much later in the film it will be clear what "AX32" stands for and the other voices will reappear too. Thus, with the running with wolf section I am partly coming back to the experimentation of the opening of the film and I am pre-empting the finale. Another purpose of this scene is to break with a singular human perspective. So far, only one human voice carried the film. Including multiple voices of different genders and ages makes the film more inclusive and diverse. *Wolfpark* does not contain a singular gaze. It embodies the perspectives of the animal keepers, visitors, filmmakers, wolves and shows film as film.

The following 'wolf delivery scene' is again a piece of observational documentary. I think the scene feels *unheimlich* and expresses the difference or otherness between human and wolf. A supposedly dangerous wild wolf is delivered in a box as if it is a parcel and then does not want to come out. It takes the humans a lot of effort to make the wolf leave its confined space. Humans appear in the frame and we can hear them chat in the background, but the focus and eye-line is on the heavy boxes and later on the wolf inside the box.



Fig.38 Still from *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij). New wolves are delivered to the park.

When the camera retreats we pass the barrier of the fence in reverse. The soundscape of this section consists of human voice, bird sounds, wolf sounds,

synthetic bird and wolf sounds, and Foley. Since the content of the voice-over is about seeing beyond stereotypes and breaking with expectation, sound designer Lars Koens wanted to blur the boundary between what is perceptible as real bird sound and what is artificial. The voice explains that female primatologists changed the way animals were studied, because they saw things differently. The voice also explains pack hierarchy is not rigid and he enforces this statement with a story about a wolf that transitioned from omega to alpha and back to omega wolf. In other words, this section is about classification, stereotyping, and ways of seeing. The imagery consists of drone shots showing a winter landscape with quite abstract and geometric shapes. In one shot wolves circle around each other and become a twirling ball. When the voice talks about the omega wolf that became alpha we travel above the entire length of one of the enclosures. It is a big enclosure, but a barred confinement nevertheless.

To my surprise wolves howl in daylight. The classic image of a wolf raising its snout to a full moon is a myth and a cliché. The wolves at this park tend to howl from about 4am to 10.30am and then again in the evening from 6pm to 23pm. I visited in spring, summer and autumn and we slept in a tent onsite next to the wolves. Howling hours were longest in the summer, because twilight is longer. The cries in the howling sequence are not the typical long howls one usually hears in wildlife film. I wish I had recorded the elongated melodic and melancholic howls, but I missed those of course (I only have them in audio). However, I am glad I recorded these hoarse, quite desperate howls as they seem to suggest something different. They express something about internal wolf emotions that clichéd howls do not. They give voice to a kind of wolf subjectivity. The howl of the first wolf is rather sad and then almost comical. The second wolf is hoarse and sounds in-between screeching and screaming. They are framed alone. Then I cut to the boy who appeared earlier in the film who is also alone and howls to the wolves. Filmed separately, but united in a sequence their loneliness is emphasised, but also the potential for connection. In addition, the similarities and differences between species are accentuated.

A cameo appearance of me marks the start of an experimental reflexive section where the viewer gets to meet the crew in the process of making the film. In the shot depicted below the camera is lifted up and placed on the fence that separates me from the wolves.



Fig.39 Still from *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij). Director's cameo introducing an experimental, reflexive scene and returning the gaze to the viewer.

When I look into the camera the image cuts to darkness and we see how the crew play with lighting, place insects in front of the camera and interact with each other. The crew talk about the image: "I hope it's bright enough" and "we've been filming this for ten minutes now". In this scene the viewer is neither on the side of the human looking at the wolves nor on the side of wolf subjectivity, but is in between as if on the border or 'inside' the fence that separates the two worlds. It is an intimate scene that expresses yet another form of subjectivity.



Fig.40 Stills from a reflexive scene in *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij).

At the end of this experimental and reflexive section the camera moves toward a large tent that is lit from the inside. When the camera is about to enter via the dark door, the viewer is suddenly transported to bright daylight where two girls are stood in front of the fence and look at the wolves behind it. Soon after this comes a moment (pictured below) with wolves that I think suggests an inner wolf world and demonstrates wolf sentience.



Fig.41 Stills from *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij). Two wolves have a moment together and then a third wolf joins.

In a long still take we see two wolves that intently look at something off-screen. The shot does not contain voice-over or any additional sound design. At times they move in unison, are distracted by the same smell, then both look toward the camera, and away again. Clearly there is something happening off-screen that captures their interest and there are scents that those two wolves can perceive, but the viewer cannot. After some time we hear sounds off-screen. A third wolf joins the pair and the two, again, move in unison. They also look at each other and there is a brief interaction between the two. There is a sense of togetherness between the wolves. The shot gives the viewer the feeling that the wolves ‘get’ that they are stood there as two beings. There is a sense of Self and the other.

Then, in the final eleven minutes tourists are shown for the first time. We join them for a contact activity. Some of the voice samples that had accompanied the ‘running with wolf’ sequence are reiterated, but now their full context is revealed. The sample ‘AX32’ is part of a statement that expresses surprise about the fact that the wolves have names instead of scientific indicators. Voices are cut short again and in certain cases this time layered on top of each other. As a result, the audience cannot hear the full flowing sentences, but will only pick out certain parts such as “you can be deceived”. We see how the tourists cuddle with the wolves. The camera lingers on the faces of wolves and we can see how they respond and partake in the contact activity. Just as in other scenes the camera lingers above the fence in between the two worlds of human and wolf, here answers of tourists are kept in the middle too. At first the scene is focussed on the human, but after some time we experience the contact activity with the wolves. The main French voice reappears and discusses whether these wolves are ‘real wolves’ – something which some of the tourists have questioned. The French voice concludes: “They are real wolves”. This is the final sentence of the film. The

first sentence was: “We love showing order”. Both sentences are preoccupied with labelling and organisation.

In the conclusion of the film the wolves get to sleep. We see an image of a curled up snoring wolf that looks like the image at the start. Then it cuts from daylight to night-time. In this moment I reveal that the shot at the start was treated with effects to make it look like night-time (which is called ‘day for night’). In this moment I show that the film is a construction and I point to the materiality of film again. The following shots and sounds build on this. There is a wolf dream sequence followed by close-ups of fur. Then I freeze-frame shots when the wolf is either looking into the camera or we get a view on its eyes or when the wolf has its eyes closed. In those stills we get to see a kind of subjectivity or otherness that the moving image did not provide. They also seem desperate attempts on part of the filmmaker to try and capture the essence of the wolf. The close-ups, the freeze-frames, it all seems as if the film tries to know the wolf in every possible way, but of course fails. The full extent of the creature cannot be captured. Part of its subjectivity will always remain hidden. The film ends on a last close encounter with a wolf pressed against the fence, nervously licking its nose. The wolf glances at the camera and then looks off screen.



Fig.42 Still from *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij). A final close-up encounter with a wolf.

## 5.2) Comparing *Wolfpark* to films previously discussed

*Wolfpark* contains moments of wolf otherness, wolf subjectivity and gives expression to otherness more generally (it is not limited to that of wolves). It

is an experimental film that contains performative, reflexive, observational, and poetic or experimental sections. Both its narrative and its form are liminal, thus the film has a clear relation between form and content. Like *Le Quattro Volte* (2010, Frammartino) it uses categories and associated stereotypes (e.g. what defines a wolf) to then break with preconceptions. However, I do not do it in the same way as *Le Quattro Volte*, because that film does it through similarities in visual form such as graphic matches, plus it follows a consistent style or film form. Instead, *Wolfpark* embodies multiple perspectives that include various subjectivities and several film forms or 'documentary modes'. Filmmakers and film viewers are subjected to the particular (aesthetic) discourse of their time, which carry specific semantic codes. Thus, the stylistic discourse of a given time precedes the filmmaker and the film viewer. Because my film is about different types of subjectivities and challenges reified knowledge (e.g. about pack hierarchy and what is a 'real wolf') various film forms are included in the film. This is to avoid that the film follows a particular perspective and aesthetic discourse. Though, despite the fact that I use various documentary modes, my filmmaking as a whole is of course subjected to a discourse. Nevertheless, I believe that through using various forms I communicate an attempt to free the film from any specific filmmaking technique and singular storytelling perspective.

As with *Nénette* (2010, Philibert) where the glass wall was a portal between visitor and ape, in *Wolfpark* the walls of the enclosure are both barrier and doorway between human and wolf. In contrast to *Nénette*, in *Wolfpark* the viewer journeys to both sides of the fence: we can hear audio from both sides and the viewer travels to the other side when the camera steps through the gate. As a result the wolves in *Wolfpark* feel closer than the ape in *Nénette*. Another difference with *Nénette* is the use of voice. Though in both cases the voices talk *about* the animal, in *Wolfpark* voice is not exclusively used for its ability to communicate semantic meaning (e.g. voices are layered rendering it difficult to hear individual sentences and 'utterances' are kept in the track). This results in an appreciation of human language for its acoustic textures. In doing so, I draw parallels between wolf voice (that bear no semantic meaning for us) and human voice.

*Bovines* (2011, Gras) is successful in giving an account of cow life and does so by displaying long takes that are recorded among cows and contains close sound recordings of chewing and other behaviour that allow the viewer

to feel their movements. *Wolfpark* also contains such scenes, such as the two long takes with the drone (at 00:12:55- 00:17:07) and in those scenes I also added close sound recordings. However, there are only a few moments where the viewer stands close to the wolf and in those cases most often a fence cuts through the frame. I find this frustrating, but it does successfully present the issue at stake, which is that as a human being it is not possible to be close to a wolf. In the wild a wolf would walk away from humans (or attack if it is very desperate for food, but such a confrontation is not likely). In terms of animal subjectivity I think wolves in *Wolfpark* display more character and give a better sense of an internal, subjective world than the cows in *Bovines*, which stay wholly other. In *Wolfpark* the wolves are most evidently bearers of character in the scenes with the father and son, the howling scene, the moment just before the tourists arrive, and at the end when the wolves push their fur through the fence and look at the camera. In the howling scene the types of howling give the animals their subjectivity. The viewer recognises emotion in the howls. Though this may be projection of human sentiments, it does allow the viewer to reach inside wolf emotion. This connection may be illusory, but it does not matter here. The main purpose is to give a sense of an 'internal wolf world' with their own attitudes and sentiments. For the other scenes it is the proximity of camera and wolf as well as the play with eye contact (breaking the fourth wall) that allows the viewer to get to know individual wolf characters a bit better and be 'physically' near to a wolf. These forms of nearness invite the viewer to build a picture of wolf subjectivity and this in turns helps to connect empathically to the wolves. For the moment pictured in figure 41 I think sentience is suggested, because an intimate interaction between two wolves is captured that is not interpretable for the human viewer. It is not a hunting or killing scene, nor are they playing, there is 'something' going on, but it is not exactly clear what; it is behaviour the viewer has not seen in wildlife films. The wolves, however, do know what is happening, because they respond to it in the same way. What also contributes to empathising with these wolves is the camera placement, which is at the same height and eye-line of the wolves. For the drone scene earlier in the film the camera takes a voyeuristic perspective, which creates a disparity between wolves and viewer. And finally, the camera in this still long take does not

adopt the subjectivity of a particular viewer<sup>26</sup>, instead it seems simply a recording of a moment, it is observational. Thus, animal subjectivity *can* be suggested with observational or realist footage, but it is not a requirement. I will elaborate on this discussion in the conclusion.

Animal subjectivity in *Bestiaire* (2012, Côté) is suggested through various film techniques such as long takes, odd camera placements, breaking the fourth wall, and staged compositions wherein humans and animals share the frame and stand in opposition awkwardly stressing their difference, but also sameness as animals. In *Wolfpark* many of these mechanisms have been implemented. It includes long takes that pull the audience into the film space. Furthermore, like the odd framings in *Bestiaire*, in *Wolfpark* drone shots offer a strange, foreign perspective and perhaps the close-ups of wolf fur have a similar effect as the odd compositions in *Bestiaire*. In both films human and non-human animals share the frame. However in *Bestiaire* the humans hold still and the shots are clearly constructed. The constructedness renders the image *unheimlich* and more clearly pushes the viewer to consider non-human versus human otherness. The father and son scene in *Wolfpark* is also constructed, however, the scene feels relaxed, intimate and authentic. The same applies to other sections where wolf and humans share the frame. Nevertheless, *Wolfpark* contains moments and scenes that feel *unheimlich*, but interestingly this occurs in observational scenes (in the feeding scene for example). The environment and the events that take place in the wolf park are in themselves strange and otherworldly (e.g. pre-packed cut meat that comes in square parcels, and a wolf that does not want to leave a very small box). They do not require any further aesthetic treatment to render them *unheimlich*, and a 'simple' recording of events is sufficient to suggest otherness.

Unique to *Wolfpark* are the experimental montage sequences that each express a form of wolf subjectivity, but do not attempt to be part of a singular diegetic space. I am referring to the opening where we see tiny white creatures, the 'running with wolf' sequence, and the ending with freeze-frames. Each scene provides a glimpse of 'alternate wolf reality' and each scene does so in a different way. There are some moments in *Bestiaire* that

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<sup>26</sup> Though the wolves briefly look at our general direction, thus acknowledging a viewer or camera, the shot does not put forward a particular aesthetic – it is simply a recording.

could be considered experimental sections, however, they are uniform, remain part of the diegesis, and are believable as occurring real-time in the zoo. This is different for the experimental scenes in *Wolfpark*; they are markedly different realities, but since they are united in the same film and because the film offers so many different film forms, together they fit and are convincing as being part of the wolf park (but not real-time).

### **5.3) Reflection on audience responses to *Wolfpark***

This section of the PhD thesis is a post scriptum recommendation. I was asked to show the film to range of people and reflect on their feedback.

The film was shown to a variety of people from different backgrounds and ages (youngest 14 and oldest 71). After viewing they were requested to provide a statement about what worked well, what was unclear, and whether there were sections that helped them to consider what a wolf/wolves might be thinking or what their way of being might be; whether there were any moments in the film they felt 'close' to the wolf, and if at any time they saw or felt something in relation to wolves that they had not seen or heard before. Their full reports are enclosed in the appendix. I will reflect on recurring notes of feedback here.

Everyone agrees that the running with wolf sequence is memorable and effective as a way to connect with the animal. It is interesting that terms like anthropomorphism are mentioned even though most viewers do not know the content of my PhD thesis or the specifics of my argument. The same applies to comments about observing wolves versus being in the moment. This is especially interesting as people without a filmmaking background mentioned this. Additionally sound design is frequently mentioned as a successfully executed element.

For certain sections the feedback is conflicting. Some find the dream sequence very beautiful and understand it as a way to refer to wolves in children's stories – as mythical creatures. Others find it too laboured and stylistically out of place. The same applies to the reflexive scene with the insects. I think that the start of this section puts too much emphasis on animals that are not wolves, which is confusing. If I were to cut some of the insects out and instead focus on the crew and the making of the film its purpose would be clearer.

In relation to feeling 'close' to the animals statements report that the most effective moments were: the shot of the sleeping wolf, the wolf in the crate, close-ups, and when wolves are being petted. It is mentioned that imagery of sleeping and stroking makes the wolves appear vulnerable. This is a particularly helpful statement, because vulnerability indeed dissolves a barrier between human and wild animal. It is also noted that imagery displaying the whole wolf pack is less successful as triggers for empathy, because it is difficult to read their social behaviour and the wolves appear more wolf-like. Whenever wolves appear individually onscreen it is easier to empathise, as in the case of the sleeping wolf, the wolf by the fence with the boy and the dad, and the wolf-in-box delivery. I had not conceptualised the effect of these moments in this way in relation to my own film, but thinking back to my textual analysis of *Le Quattro Volte* (2010) and *Bovines* (2012) in chapters 3.1 and 4.2 I see that I had identified a similar process. I described how in some scenes animals are separated from their group or framed alone, which allows for their individual character to stand out, and I explained how this disappears again when they are reunited with the group. Perhaps when a non-human animal is isolated from a group it does not emit behaviour and forms of language specific to its species, which might be the reason why it is easier for the viewer to anthropomorphise the animal and empathise with the animal.

The fact that these wolves are not wild was especially interesting to some people, but for others this was a disappointing surprise. Some took the perspective of the tourists in the film; that they are unsure whether these are 'real wolves' and whether their behaviour is authentic. It is mentioned that the voice-over statements in relation to freedom were captivating, because it "challenges the classic viewpoint most folk have that animals in captivity would simply like to be free". Someone else calls the level of tameness 'unsettling'. I think these are all valid and interesting statements. They are thoughts I hoped the film would trigger.

The howling scene is mentioned, precisely for reasons intended: the howling is unlike portrayals in mainstream wildlife films. For most this is a moving section, but for one person it "breaks the empathy because it reminds of their ultimate wildness and separation". I actually like that the scene has this effect

too, as one of my aims is to preserve a sense of animal alterity, which according to this statement was successfully achieved in the howling section.

In terms of applying any changes in reaction to this feedback, I particularly appreciate the recommendation that the film could be more formally austere. A diversity of film form was deliberately implemented to avoid that I would adopt a singular viewpoint or subjectivity. However, I agree that at times certain aesthetics or narratives feel too out of place, because the diversity is a little excessive. Therefore I would like to remove the dream sequence, shorten the reflexive scene (less emphasis on insects), remove the transition at 00:47:28, and include less tourist voices. I would like to add more moments of stillness where the viewer can experience the space: hear the acoustics of wind and listen to how the various animal sounds echo in the landscape. Personally I particularly like the stillness and sound-image relation of the drone sequence 00:28:01-00:31:14, which has a combination of real bird, wolf, and atmos sounds, as well as artificial sounds made with a synthesizer. To add moments like this would create more uniformity across the film and as a result would appear more stripped-down or 'austere'. And finally, but this is not mentioned in the feedback, as explained in chapter 5.1 I think the subjectivity of the drone sequence 00:11:48-00:15:46 is unclear, because the camera moves too much. I would like to reshoot this.

In conclusion I can state that on the whole the construction of scenes and implementation of film techniques was effective. Most useful for me were statements about aesthetics and narration, especially when viewers felt certain sequences or shots did not engage and pulled them away from the film world. I will take their critique into consideration for making a different cut. However, the feedback is not always uniform. For some people particular depictions work better in terms of triggering empathy and disclosing subjectivity than others, and there is even disagreement about some scenes. If I implement the changes as described above, the scenes that were cause for contradictory feedback will be addressed. Overall, the film was successful for testing out how subjectivity and empathy might be triggered with film and the feedback confirms that the anticipated effects of film technical devices as positioned in the introduction indeed work.

## **CHAPTER 6: Conclusions And Outlook**

The aims of this research are to define how non-human animal subjectivity can be constructed in documentary film and to identify film techniques that allow a spectator to empathise with a non-human onscreen animal. Through both making films and reflecting on films made by other directors, as well as studying literature I have discovered that techniques for suggesting animal subjectivity in documentary film and provoking empathy are:

1. The inclusion of moments when animals are breaking the fourth wall
2. Anthropomorphising animals
3. The juxtaposition of humans against non-humans
4. The inclusion of abstractions and defamiliarisations that render the image otherworldly or *unheimlich*
5. Avoiding didactic voice-over
6. To allow for poetic or artistic interventions, rather than attempting to suggest non-human subjectivity with strictly observational or scientific means

In this conclusion I will discuss these points one-by-one making reference to my practice, that of other directors, and theory. I will clarify where practices may challenge and enrich theory or where they are in agreement. In the introduction it was explained that a human would only empathise with an animal (and object or phenomenon) if it bears the suggestion of an inner world i.e. that the animal has its own subjectivity. However, in the introduction I also pointed out that suggestions of animal subjectivity in documentary film are illusions. Nevertheless, certain depictions of animal subjectivity in documentary film are interpreted as authentic or 'real' on part of the viewer, therefore in this conclusion I would also like to define what the illusory nature of animal subjectivity in documentary film entails. And finally, to conclude I will share how conducting this research is useful for scholarly practices including filmmaking, and for myself.

### **1. Breaking the fourth wall**

The potential of non-human animals breaking the fourth wall as a means to establish an empathic connection between viewer and onscreen animal first occurred to me when I made *The View From Here* (2012). It was when I filmed

the white horse in *The View From Here*, which would eventually be killed, that the horse's gaze suddenly struck and shocked me. I met the horse's gaze through the viewfinder of my camera. In other words, I did not look at the horse in actuality, but on the small LCD screen of my camera. Nevertheless, I felt as if the horse was looking at me. I realised that a viewer in the cinema could undergo a similar interaction with the horse, because they would be looking at a screen too – a much bigger one. In the cinema, it appears as if the horse is looking into the cinema space and at the viewer. In doing so, the viewer is able to enter a dialectical interaction as described by Derrida in “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (1997) discussed in chapter 1.2. When an animal breaks the fourth wall in documentary film, the viewer is able to share a gaze and in this ‘exchange’ the alterities of seer and seen are disclosed; in this experience the seer becomes aware of the othernesses of both species, their subjective differences, both also their similarities as animals that both exist and share a world.

In addition to suggesting animal otherness, breaking the fourth wall is a powerful mechanism for effectuating empathy. Why it has this effect could be explained with reference to Elseasser & Hagener (2010) who describe that when a viewer looks at the eyes of a (human) character it prompts questions about the inner worlds of the protagonist and that of the spectator (“who is this character?” and “who am I”). Though, not every gaze is equally powerful; it depends on whose eyes are looking back. There has to be a form of recognition. As explained in chapter 2.2 about cuteness aesthetics, humans have a tendency to align and identify with behaviours and appearances that look similar to that of humans. Empathy would only occur if the other animal contains the promise of an internal world. Therefore, animals with which a gaze can be shared must have physical and/or behavioural features similar to that of the human seer.<sup>27</sup> Animals can be made to look like humans with the use of anthropomorphism (discussed below) as seen in *Microcosmos* (insects have little visible physical and behavioural overlap with humans). Or the animal itself has traits similar to that of humans e.g. mammals such as wolves and horses have big eyes comparable to human eyes (they are a lot more similar than those of reptiles and insects). The human recognises these

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<sup>27</sup> Though as explained in chapter 1.2 there should also be a difference between seer and seen. The gaze Derrida describes is between two different animals, not between humans.

parallels and they bear the promise of a similar way being, which allows the human seer to look *with* the animal by 'feeling-into' its point of view and embodying its world. If the other animal is too dissimilar, it will remain at a looking *at*. This leads to the second technique that helps to effectuate empathy, which is to anthropomorphise animals.

I repeated the practice of animals breaking the fourth wall in *The Breeder* (2017), *Wolves From Above* (2018) and actively sought out similar opportunities for *Wolfpark*, as can be seen at the start of the film where the camera creeps up at the wolves, in the father and son scene, and at the end where the freeze frames appear.

## **2. The function of anthropomorphism**

Cadman (2016) posed that anthropomorphism is not simply good or bad and its applications should be seen as part of a continuum ranging from worse to better anthropomorphism. The better use of anthropomorphism is when the depictions do not marginalise an animal and do not reinforce the centrality of human existence. Thus, as long as anthropomorphism benefits the non-human animal its practice is justified. Similarly, filmmaker Painlevé even contested that he saw it as his duty to commit anthropomorphism, because he considered it the way people make sense of their world. This statement can be extrapolated by stating that when spectators need to make sense of the film world, anthropomorphism is the means by which they can do this. In other words, anthropomorphism allows spectators to understand and access the non-human animal (or object, deities and phenomena). The cows in *Bovines* (2011, Gras) are not anthropomorphised and this is one of the reasons the cows remain wholly other and empathy is absent and is therefore yet another argument in favour of anthropomorphism.

If portraying animals as breaking the fourth wall is a form of anthropomorphism then I use anthropomorphism extensively in my films. I propose this is indeed an act of anthropomorphism, because the animals do not actually look into the camera as such. The human spectator misinterprets this behaviour as 'looking into the camera' (which humans can do, because they have a concept of camera and cinema) and in some cases it even appears as if the animal is looking at the viewer (thus effectuating a gaze). However, only on a few other occasions I conflate human and non-human behaviour.

*The Breeder* (2017) possibly makes most extensive use of depictions of animals that in form or behaviour appear human, such as a dog watching television and being caressed and cared for like a human baby. However, I do not think any of the animal depictions in this short film establish an empathic connection between viewer and onscreen animal. In *The Breeder* are many ways in which the viewer can embody the animals (as explained, through depicting touching the animals and a focus on their eyes and blinking), but I reckon the viewer *feels for* the animal i.e. with sympathy, not empathy. I think the voice-overs in this film play a part in its inability to trigger empathy, which I will discuss below. For films such as *Microcosmos* (1997, Nuridsany & Pérennou) and the films of Painlevé anthropomorphism allows the spectator to embody unfamiliar worlds and in doing so decentralises a human-centered worldview.

### **3. Juxtaposition of humans against non-humans**

Placing humans and non-human together in a frame discloses differences between species (such as size, behaviour and the fact that they are different animals) and at the same time – depending on the particular depiction – shows that both are animals. It gives the human viewer an incentive for a comparison of species and the start of a dialectical enquiry. In other words, it is an active act of creating dualisms, however, in the films I have discussed they do not result in a reinforcement of species hierarchy, but actually help to establish horizontalist thinking and challenge anthropocentric assumptions regarding the animals depicted. In chapter 1.2 I argued that species hierarchy should be avoided, but that dialectical oppositions are part of my practice and are not ‘bad’, because they allow for deconstruction of reified concepts and to show that knowledge is not absolute. This may sound lavish, but films such as *Le Quattro Volte* (2010, Frammartino) and I hope *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij) are evidence that film is able to do exactly that: to undo rigid knowledge (systems), to deconstruct, disclose, and to invite the viewer to experience alternative ways of being. Furthermore, in *Bestiaire* (2011, Côté) where this technique is very noticeable as a staged event, the human appears unfamiliar and *unheimlich*. Thus not only can this technique help to place human and non-human at equal footing as animals, it can undo the human from its humanness and display it as an othered animal.

#### **4. The function of abstraction, defamiliarisation, and the *unheimlich***

Like anthropomorphism, the act of making animals and their environments appear *unheimlich*, can be used to create similarities between humans and other animals. It was explained that the German word *unheimlich* carries connotations of a home that feels wrong. Thus, portrayals of situations and to make animals appear uncannily familiar (homely but other) can help the spectator to relate to the onscreen animal. How this works was explained in chapter 2.3 in relation to the film *Microcosmos* (1997, Nuridsany & Pérennou) where it was stated that a sense of mystery or undisclosedness may spark curiosity for the animal and therefore aids empathic alignment.

Abstraction and defamiliarisation of animals and/or situations can also refocus the viewer's attention and help to see the animal 'anew'. In the act of watching the viewer cannot rely on previous knowledge about the animal (because what is presented in the abstraction does not match or live up to the assumption) and as a result is encouraged to shed top-down inference. To put it in the words of film director Robert Bresson (pictured in the introduction): it helps the viewer to "feel a film before understanding it". *Wolves From Above* (2018, Kooij) and *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij) are good examples hereof, as they show wolves from unusual perspectives (e.g. filmed from the sky or unusually close-up), highlight geometric patterns in their behaviour that seem choreographed, contain close sound recordings whilst the viewpoint is detached, and they depict strange situations (such as wolf in a box that does not want to come out, and wolves interacting and communicating quietly), which results in the portrayal of a wolf dissimilar to depictions of wolves commonly seen in wildlife films.

These techniques encourage identification and character alignment, but they do not necessarily lead to empathic considerations. The latter depends on the specifics of the depiction.

#### **5. Avoidance of didactic voice-over**

This research demonstrates that documentary films refraining from expert voice-over that communicates factual or scientific information are best suited to suggest animal subjectivity and to invite empathy. A spectator cannot be told to feel empathy, they should be offered an *experience* that allows them to practice empathy whilst watching and listening. I argue that a telling *about* the animal reinforces a looking *at* perspective. Koens & Kooij (2018) demonstrate

that certain uses of voice-over can be poetic and encourage the viewer to consider the subjectivities of characters and perspectives. Thus, voice-over as a technique does not have to be avoided, but its use should not remain at merely communicating verifiable facts and a perspective that reinforces anthropocentric projection and perception. The recommendation to avoid didactic voice-over when attempting to depict animal subjectivity relates to the final point, which is the plea for artistic and poetic interpretations associated with the performative and poetic mode.

## **6. How poetic or artistic depictions can suggest non-human subjectivity**

As categorised by Nichols (2001, p.111) films belonging to the observational mode give the viewer the sensation that what unfolds onscreen is a document captured without interference on part of the crew and therefore appears 'real'. Despite its ability to communicate a 'truthful' document of actuality, I discovered this documentary mode is not a prerequisite for communicating animal otherness and animal subjectivity (but it is possible as I point out below).

The films *Bestiaire* (2012, Côté), *Microcosmos* (1997, Nuridsany & Pérennou), and *Wolfpark* (2019, Kooij) all contain sections that could be called 'poetic', 'performative' or 'experimental' and they are effective as a means to establish animal otherness, subjectivity and they trigger empathy. Moreover, the sections I am referring to (and thus effectively depict animal subjectivity) are not merely 'observational'. Therefore, the realness as captured in observational films is not exclusively necessary to establish a sense of authentic or 'real' animal subjectivity. Artful, experimental, and poetic scenes help to let the viewer *imagine* what animal subjectivity *might be*. Films that are strictly observational fail to communicate animal subjectivity, but if there are other techniques at play too, e.g. when the animal appears *unheimlich* or breaks the fourth wall, it can help viewers relate more to the animals.

*Bovines* and *Wolfpark* both contain observational scenes and both display animal otherness, but only for *Wolfpark* animal subjectivity is suggested. This is because the events unfolding in *Bovines* are not *unheimlich*. The cows are wholly other and remain 'just cows'. To my surprise, what I would call the more 'observational scenes' in *Wolfpark* give a sense of wolf subjectivity and even wolf sentience, which are: the feeding scene, the wolf delivery, and the moment of interaction just before the tourists arrive. I think

that in these scenes, the viewer is aligned with the wolves thanks to the camera placements and they display unusual behaviour and situations. Thus, although the style might be interpreted as observational there is in fact defamiliarisation in these scenes.

Moreover, the expository mode, which is associated with wildlife documentary, is the least suitable to express animal subjectivity. When a viewer is told how to perceive an image they are not required to use their imagination. It is the reason why Painlevé, Nuridsany and Pérennou did not want voice-over in their films (Painlevé reluctantly did agree to do so). The expository mode is very effective to communicate information about the animal and such films contain (often very beautiful) visuals to evidence certain statements, however, in addition to the fact that didactic voice-over stops imagination, following Burnside (2006) scientific information about a phenomenon is only one side of the coin. For a 'science of belonging' the beauty of the fact that it exists should go hand-in-hand with information about how it exists (as communicated in science). Though, I do want to stress that wildlife documentaries often successfully depict and celebrate the fact that nature exists; the grandeur of nature is captured in all BBC wildlife films and series. They are a feast to watch. Yet, such portrayals are often not effective for establishing empathy. They tend to remain at sympathy and the world depicted is so overwhelmingly beautiful that it seems (too) far away from everyday reality and therefore does not really help with establishing a sense of shared belonging and they do not (in most cases) suggest animal subjectivity.

### **The nature of animal subjectivity in documentary film**

In my research I discovered that documentaries depicting animal otherness do not necessarily also give an adequate suggestion of animal subjectivity and that as a result empathy may remain absent. Through making films and studying Derrida (1997) I realised that animal otherness is a broader, more general concept than animal subjectivity. Only in the case of animal subjectivity the seer recognises (imagines) that the other animal has a self – its own subjectivity. When animal subjectivity is depicted, a suggestion of that animal's character is revealed as it would (potentially) appear to that animal – it is a subjectivity that is the animal's own.

In the introduction it was posed that it is not possible to accurately portray non-human animal subjectivity in film, because it will always be a human interpretation of what that might be. Yet, this thesis contains textual analyses of films that do give a suggestion of such. But if a film cannot actually depict animal alterity, what then is depicted in those films that give a sense of this form of otherness? I argue that the suggestion, which the viewer perceives as animal subjectivity, is the suggestion of mystery; it is the capacity of film to imply, disclose and reveal 'something other'. If this is used in a narrative with animals, it can be employed to suggest animal alterity, animal subjectivity, and with the tools listed above to establish an empathic connection between viewer and onscreen animal.

Although illusion underlies its effect, this research demonstrates that documentary film is an excellent medium and art form for connecting human and non-human animals. Documentaries are able to suggest animal subjectivity and can be a place where empathising with non-human animals can be exercised. This is particularly exciting for filmmakers who want to put ideas such as becoming-animal into action and demonstrate ways to decentralise the human subject – ideas that appear in Animal Studies, Posthumanism, Deep Ecology, and New Materialism. As a filmmaker, and especially one who engages with sound and image poetically, it is encouraging to be able to firmly state that artful depictions are most effective for depicting animal subjectivity and establishing an empathic connection between viewer and onscreen animal. And perhaps most importantly, my research demonstrates that a filmmaker's authored vision – our subjective interpretation and depiction of the world as it occurs to us and how we (re)imagine it on screen and in sound – is to be celebrated and should more frequently be seen in wildlife film and other documentary film forms. It is through artful interventions that subjectivities of human and non-human animals can be expressed and feelings of connection and sharedness can be encouraged and practised in cinema.

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## **APPENDIX: reactions after viewing *Wolfpark***

The film was shown to a variety of people from different backgrounds and ages. They were requested to answer the following questions, but certain people preferred to respond more freely.

1. What worked well for you: moments that lingered after viewing, sections that drew your attention in particular, and would you be able to explain why?
2. Was anything unclear, jarring, missing, or perhaps too lengthy or too fast?
3. My PhD is about empathising with animals in film. Therefore, it would be helpful to hear from you which scene(s) or moment(s) were especially successful in making you consider what a wolf/wolves might be thinking or what their way of being might be. Was there any moment in the film you felt 'close' to the wolf; did you ever feel you saw something about a wolf you hadn't seen or hear before?

### **1. Duncan**

I loved the film. Absolutely stunning.

1. Loads of moments. The opening aerial shot at night lingers, in fact all of the aerial shots were beautiful, the snow one is memorable too. I liked the section that repeats itself and plays with sound design where the dog is chasing the camera around the fence perimeter. All of the more experimental sections that play with sound and images like at the end and the bit with the insects - They really work well and stand out for me. The sound design was just brilliantly fused with the picture at points, really helps bring the thing to the next level.

The wolf in the crate with the guy leaning on it was a great moment too. I'm not exactly sure on a deeper level why I liked all these moments, I suppose at some points like the aerial shots you get the feeling you are watching wolves when they don't know they're being watched which is interesting

2. No. Really well paced I think. Felt about right length wise, not too long or short. I don't think any moments felt jarring as the sound design helps

reassure the audience that the editing decisions are deliberate and confident. Nothing stands out as something I'd change as it's all done so confidently.

3. Towards the last 10/15mins of the film, when there are slightly more close-ups and the wolves being played with I felt closer to the animals and empathising with them. Seeing them sleeping also makes you feel for them as they appear vulnerable when asleep. Also the shot of the wolf in the crate I mentioned earlier I felt kind of sorry for the wolf in his little box, he looked afraid to leave. I liked the VO line about filming animals and how most people look for human characteristics from the guy earlier in the film. All of the VO was pretty well selected I have to say.

The film definitely gives you a different perspective on wolves, as most of the stuff I'd seen about them in nature docs look at them in the wild, so they're more traditional viewpoints on them. This was arguably more interesting as they animals are in captivity, which makes it slightly more interesting as there's another layer to it. Like when the guy mentions if the door was open they'd probably leave the area, but then probably come back as they're territorial. I liked that, challenges the classic viewpoint most folk have that the animals that are in captivity would simply like to be free.

## **2. Nikolas**

1. I liked the drone shots and watching the white wolf run was enjoyable and memorable. The wolves' tameness and their beautiful howling will stick with me.

2. I thought the start might've been too long and I did not understand the dialogue, even in English.

3. I think it is impossible to empathise with an animal unless you are one. However, I felt close to the wolves and thought about their feelings both when the camera was physically close to their face, of course, but definitely when they were being very friendly and being petted.

### **3. Mark**

1. The aerial footage. The night drone shots at the beginning because it gradually moved to clarity. Also the tracking shot of the wolf running by the fence, because it (also) broke away from reportage and was formally interesting.

2. The sleeping child composite was a bit unclear: was it dreaming about wolves? Also the style was different from the rest. Also the focus on the caterpillars and insects seemed out of place - it was not focused enough to integrate with the rest. Overall, it felt too drawn out.

3. The surprise is the tameness of the wolves, which invites the sense of being close to them. This is brought from the start when the child touches the wolf, and then when the group of tourists go and play with the wolf. You feel empathy when it is illustrated by characters playing with the wolf. The sleeping wolf also invites empathy because it is passive. The closing shot breaks the empathy, because you become conscious it is an animal. The howling of the wolves breaks the empathy because it reminds their ultimate wildness and separation.

### **4. Lydia**

1. The running wolf is a highpoint - and clearly you make good use of it with the repeated shots. It works well and gives an otherworldly feel. The drone shots also create some kind of similar magic - they are beautiful and they stay with you. I actually like the way you end it with the wolves sort-of-reminding us their woleness, which was pretty compromised during most of the film.

2. I feel that the film should probably be shorter and formally more austere, and perhaps more on the experimental direction you took with the repetition of the running wolf. Keep drones, running and key interactions. I agree with Mark that the shots of the caterpillars seemed out of place. If you want to make the film longer, I think you need to develop human characters - you also need to try to find a more consistent approach to the style.

3. If empathy is projecting thoughts/feelings into the wolves' minds (not necessarily liking them), there are a number of points when I caught myself

wondering, rather than feeling safe about knowing. You feel you know when they are relaxed and petted, because they clearly enjoy it - so this is a part of the film when you feel you empathise. I find the howling sequence (especially with the white wolf) quite funny and almost pathetic - fortunately (for my need to confirm wolf stereotypes) the other wolf has more wolviness to it.. The gazes certainly invite the question of 'what are they thinking', but mostly leave you perplexed. And again (confirming also what they voice over says) the way they act when the drone catches them play is unclear about whether it is a play or what. The wolves tameness is rather unsettling, as you do not know how far to trust it - and to what extent it actually 'compromises' the wolves' wolviness.

## **5. Zoë**

I was really moved. There is a feeling of expectation with the wolves staring, like 'what do you want?' Later when they are being hugged and petted like dogs, this take a new dimension, maybe they are staring because they want to know "Are you coming in?", but I still don't really know. Maybe they are asking "why don't you let me out?"

My favourite moments were:

- The wolf running along the fence and the repeated sequence with the staring wolf in the background.
- The howling. I just had never heard so much howling, and so different.

The shots from the sky were also hard to watch - knowing that their world has corners, asking what they are if they are not wolves because they can't hunt and they are not dogs because they are not domesticated. What are we doing to them? Why?

I don't really know whether I found moments too lengthy.

## **6. Beatrijs**

Watching the opening shot is like a watching to petri dish with bacteria crawling, swimming randomly around or like glowing worms in the dark. Super beautiful.

The comments in the beginning by the voice over about human expectations of power relations in the pack echo through the rest of the film; what am I watching? What do I expect to see? Also the question "do wolves dream?" remains in my head when watching. What draws them to the fences? And do they hear drone-noises when they look up into the camera? I feel a bit sad at the end; seeing those people interpreting the wolves behaviour, and those endless fences. What is going on up there in the far north of Canada?

## **7. Nico**

Question: where is the wolf park located, what place, which country?

Overall conclusion: beautiful and artistic film shots.

- The sound editing is fabulous and gives an higher dimension to the film.
- The slowly flowing pace of the film hypnotises and makes you mesmerise on what lies beneath what you are actually seeing and hearing.
- The French voice-over explains in minute 5 the quintessence of the whole movie: "people try to recognise the dominant and submissive wolves in the pack to justify human behaviour. But the role pattern of the pack is not rigid. There are strong interactions that mean nothing to us but a lot to them". This does not help to empathize with the wolves because it emphasizes that there are two worlds: 'us and them'.
- In minute 10 there is a lovely shot of an interaction between a big white wolf and a sweet little boy sticking his fingers through the wired fence. I want to shout out loud and warn the kid: "look out for your fingers it is a ferocious wild animal who loves little boys, just as in little red riding hood". But nothing precarious happens and the father is not anxious at all. So you start thinking: "Is a wolf a night beast because all the scenes take place in the half dark. So the wolf must have very light sensitive eyes. Then why does the wolf seek contact with the boy, whilst the boy is flashing his torchlight into the eyes of the wolf. Perhaps the wolf thinks man is useful, man provides meat and drink, better not snap off the boy's fat delicious fingers right now".
- Then the great disillusion dawns upon us in shot minute 18. The wolves are not in their natural habitat and are not behaving as they would in the wild. They are given heaps of meat to feed on. They don't appear wild and hungry. They don't fight to get the best of the food. You begin to think perhaps they aren't even hungry.

- In minute 20 there is a long shot of a wolf running along the fence. How elegantly the repetitive shots of the movements are nailed down. There is also a long shot of the fence separating us from the wolf pack: their world and our world.
- Minute 23 shows the wolves from above and we are back where the film started now knowing that we have been looking at completely domesticated animals. This point would be a nice and natural end of the film, but then you would miss the introduction of two new wolves into the wolf park. You think: "will they be rejected or accepted into the pack". And you would miss the mysterious howling wolves minute 31. The boy imitates the howling but has not the foggiest idea what that howling means. The wolves on the other hand howl so intense that it is obvious that it has archaic meaning from the prehistory of their species. Seeing and hearing this powerful haunting primeval sound evoking reverence and oneness with nature we must hope that the boy stands on the safe side of the fence.
- In minute 34 I liked the cameo, but in minute 35 I was confused about the long take of the night moth. I don't think this take has anything to do with the wolf park and the essence of the film.
- Minute 40 was a disappointment. The wolves- there must be something left in them of the wild animal - curl on their backs to be stroked by the fat assed tourists!! Gone is the illusion of identifying with the soul of a real wild animal. This is the behaviour of a tame, domesticated lap dog creature spoilt by man and who has forgotten its roots completely.

### **8. Matt & Maxine**

First of all, it was great to get this glimpse into the life of a wolf with no anthropomorphism as we usually see when animals are portrayed. I loved the opening footage but the feeling does seem to sadden as we see how small the enclosure is and how sedate and civilised the wolves are. Wolves are, in particular, expected to be this wild, roaming creature, so to see them chasing cars like dogs chase paperboys is a little sad and disheartening. We also expected to see them go crazy at feeding time but again, they seem to have lost their bite somewhat. Made us think about how man will have first tamed wolves and then begun breeding into dogs as we now know them.

1. Suspense of no wolf howls until that moment when it all kicks off, very dramatic - had almost forgotten the quintessential facet of a wolf is howling so this late introduction made a great impact

Tracking shot of wolf running alongside car. Felt bad for wolf like it clearly had too little space - seemed like a classic caged animal with dreams of escape  
Wolves seemingly playing up to drone camera - I wonder how truly wild wolves would behave? Had they been filmed like this before or were they just at ease because there were trusted humans in the area?

End cut from light to dark and shift in mood that came with that - nice way of bringing us back to that great intro shot of the snoring wolf. Was nice to see the wolf at ease and not being interfered with by humans

Wolf prisoners at end of film - felt pity and concern that these wolves are just a tourist attraction and not given the freedoms they clearly desire

2. Jarring:

- The bug filming section
- Wobbly footage near end
- Odd focus while wolf was drinking from bathtub
- Repetition of the boy saying AX32 was confusing
- Feeding footage. Would have expected to see and hear feeding rather than following the truck

3. The footage of the wolf's eyes, in the scene with the small boy at night time in the beginning, can't help but wonder what it was thinking, the shifting of the eyes, can it see itself in the lens, is it going to bite the child's hand?! At this point we did not know the wolf was tame, our only clue was the fence. Why do they howl, are they mad, sad having a chat, what are they saying to one another?

## **9. Elias**

The opening of the film is for is very well executed. The wolves look like small cells that we can observe in a microscope. I find it fascinating and it puts the viewer in an "observing" mode that is needed for the rest of the film. And suddenly we come back to something very human, we hear a snoring noise.. and we have the first surprise: wolves snore like us!

The scene with the kid is a good way to immediately challenge the idea of the “dangerous wolf”. We are in this very scary environment, a black night, a cold fence, wolves howling, a lamp torch as the only light source ... but it comes out as a very cute interaction between a son, his father and a pack of wolves.

The “boy is dreaming” scene is for me the one that I had the most problem with. And the reason is that the boy never wakes up. The fact that he dreams about the wolves, that I really like. But when we arrive at the drone shot of the three wolves in bright daylight, I couldn’t figure out if it was still the boy dreaming or not. I thought, as viewer, that I was put in the shoes of an outside “observer”. It got me confused in which or whose shoes I was, as a viewer.

The drone topshot turning over the entirety of the fence, for me, is the shot that summarizes the entire film. I cannot write everything I learned about wolves; it is too extensive. Last, but not least, this film won’t be the same without the brilliant work of the sound designer Lars Koens. I really love how it darkly illuminates the film.

## **10. Sally**

1. The introduction works really well for me - it is both beautiful and intriguing. The sound that accompanies the wolves’ rapid movement reminds me of hearing heavy, muted rain (or even faraway firecrackers) outside whilst you’re sleeping in your car in the garage. It also reminds me of watching a piece of modern dance - the sound of bare feet against the floor. None of which has anything to do with wolves.

2. ~10:00 I think the section between the boy sleeping to the wolves in daylight is too long. I love the superimposed wolves, and the growling (and the moment the wolf stops drinking), but think would benefit from much tighter edit. 47:22 I don’t get this transition

3. ~04:11 I caught myself ascribing both curiosity and courage to the wolf that stayed behind as the other one ran away. Traits I admire in humans. This is also one of the moments I think about when I think about the film (and so this doubles up as an answer to question one!)

## 11. Federico

- My favourite section was the 'dream sequence'. The still shot of the boy sleeping, fading into shaking, handheld footage of the wolves sort of created a space in which, for me, the oneiric or interior idea of the wolf resonated with images you actually captured, distorting them or amplifying them. Which I think is in line with what you want to explore.
- In general the night scenes were the most impactful. The boy and the father sitting by the fence and caressing the wolf also felt like a very organic and intimate experience of the issues you want to explore.
- The idea of exploring and discovering this place that we know little of is the strongest allure in the first half, and I think it really works, because you also flesh it out by having driving shots as sections that both somewhat drive the exploratory narrative but also where you can introduce information (at least that's how it feels to me!).
- Hard for me to dissect this one as I saw it so much earlier than everything else but the shot of the wolf running around the fence and reacting with the camera is a very strong proof of concept, as well as the drone shots of the wolves reacting to the drone.
- I really like the camping and messing around section - it's an interesting moment of subjective experience of the space. I think it really helps diversifying the tone.
- I think once things get a bit more real and touristy the 'intrigue' drops a little. I know you want to explore how you these wolves are made into something non-threatening though, and it works to that extent, but I still feel like, when you continue work on this, the film would really benefit from a visceral, dramatic scene or event that creates some sort of turning point in your exploration. I think there's something to be said about the possibility of using an animatronic wolf in some way, as we were saying. After all, that is a filmmaking technology, and your interest of how these interact with our 'making of the wolf' is certainly a very interesting point worth exploring and that people seem to be interested in!
- I really like the shakey footage at the end, as well as the day to night change and the fur through the fence. I find the VO in the earlier section maybe a bit too much, with the final lines about whether these are wolves or not and whether they need new denomination etc. to be the strongest, alongside the kid saying 'they're bad in the books'. Other than that, the other lines didn't

really stay with me. Personally I would probably get rid of everything, put the kids line in the petting scene and make it sound like it's sync sound, roll back the music and focus on the creepiness of the petting, then have the final lines broken up and spaced out for emphasis over some of the more experimental footage - but this is just me!

## **12. Laurence**

The shot that stands out for me is the one with wolves in the dark following the boy dreaming. I like how the edit is such that the wolves are imagined, i.e. part of a dream. This sort of materialised imagination of wolves within a film that challenges our preconceptions of wolves is a clever construction, because it emphasises the difference between us and wolves on the more subconscious level of dreaming. They are made to feel alien, yet they are as close as a dream. I find this a powerful aesthetic moment.

The film often shows wolves that are used to humans or humans with a camera. Hence, the parts where we are confronted with wolves, which are less used to humans contribute in this regard, because it shows how diverse wolves are. Notable in this regard is the scene where a new wolf is introduced. The behavioural difference of this wolf with for example the wolf at night by the fence with the dad and his son signifies huge differences between their characters and raises the question of how quickly the wolves can adjust to human presence and interaction.

Whenever we see a pack of wolves, we can see how much they are aware of each other, and the camera, but more each other. Whenever the camera is framing a single wolf, I feel more connected, even the wolf that is just introduced to the park, appearing uncomfortable and unwilling to come out of the box, because they are recognisable emotions; or at least, we can project human emotions like anxiety or shyness. I think I don't relate so much to the wolf when it's part of a pack, because I don't understand their behaviour very well and can't identify with that sort of intense, social interaction.

That said, I do think this shifting focus of the camera between single and pack forms an interesting dynamic that contributes to both in the sense that we try

to see the individual in the pack, even when individuality is perhaps not meaningful terminology for them.

I had not seen nor heard wolves like this. The difference with typical wildlife / nature documentaries is very striking as they usually focus on hunting strategies. The howling from the single, enclosed wolf towards the end of the film is very different from what I thought of as a howling wolf sound and almost sounds like a human baby. The way the heavy tourist at the end lies down and starts petting a wolf (following the other guy on screen, which I find interesting copying behaviour) is also remarkable and quite opposite from what you'd expect, given the reputation of the hungry, dangerous wolf.

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