

***Regarding Life: Animals and the Documentary Movie Image,*  
Belinda Smail, (2016), New York: Suny Press, 190 pp., \$85  
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Book Review

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*Regarding Life: Animals and the Documentary Moving Image* by Belinda Smaill brings together research from the burgeoning area of Animal Studies with that of Film Studies to look at the 'green-wave' (10) within documentary cinema. The aim of the book is to illuminate how this new wave of 'eco-docs' structures 'knowledge of animals and the relations between humans' inside cinema (3). Smaill claims that it is through cinema that 'animal life and embodiment' can be conceived of 'in ways that challenge the anthropocentric web spun to capture the meaning of the animal' (11). In turn this has implications that stretch outside the medium's auditory-ocular boundaries and sets out to show how animals are part of a process of dominance in 'human systems of power' (11).

Smaill demonstrates how nonfiction film can decentre the anthropocentric lens with three themes. The first of Smaill's themes is to show how the nonhuman is represented phenomenologically in cinema, focusing on how cinema has the capacity to invoke the Husserlian notion of a 'lifeworld or lebenswelt' that engages the viewer in 'life and its otherness' (17). The viewer is encouraged to participate in the lifeworlds of animals through the cinematic technique of the long take which is utilised in the films *Raw Herring* (Hetty Naaijkens-Retel Helmrich and Leonard Retel Helmrich 2013), *Sweetgrass* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor, 2009), *Los Herederos* (Eugenio Polgovsky, 2008). Long takes, Smaill claims, unite the human and animal in a shared lifeworld through the camera's ability to unify the nonhuman and human in 'spatiotemporal form' (36) thus alerting 'viewers anew to the materiality of animals and lifeworlds in which humans and animals exist in close proximity' (41). Outlined

notably in *Sweetgrass*, the camera shows a cowboy going into a herd of sheep with his horse and slowly with the swirling dust of the plains, the distance of the camera, animals and human become indecipherable, merging in their shared surroundings. Smaill compares the 'human lifeworlds' shown in *Raw Herring*, *Sweetgrass*, *Los Herederos*, to 'less affirmative' (42) ones shown in *Our Daily Bread* (Nikolaus Geyrhalter, 2005) and *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel, 2012). The lifeworlds here show human and nonhuman equally subjugated and therefore both become products of biopower:

There is little to discern the fishermen from the fish – both appear without agency or hope, taking the documentaries much further toward critiquing industrial systems that situate life, animal, and human, as an object of power (42).

The second theme that is tackled is that of 'the wild animal other positioned historically by narratives of science and the Anthropocene' (11). Drawing on Derrida's reading of the archive; that in the process of recording what is being archived is actually being altered as 'the status of the object or event, produces as much as it records... in the case of recording of endangered life, an archive of wildlife imagery creates stasis, mummifying the animals it represents' (74). Smaill states that *Being Caribou* (Leanne Allison and Diana Wilson, 2004), avoids mummifying the animals through leaving the representation of the caribou open, celebrating its animal otherness. *Being Caribou* counters traditional ethnographic films that would 'foreclose on the possible future of the herd by reducing the animals to a performance of decline' (86). Instead the film attempts to show the animals in all their complexity, which fluctuates between 'presenting the caribou as objects of scientific knowledge and as enigmatic, beyond rational accounts' (86). *Arctic Tale* (Adam Ravetch and Sarah Robertson, 2007) is then contrasted to *Being Caribou* as an example of a film that reduces nonhuman complexity. This is exemplified when a mother polar bear has to drive her cub away because she cannot provide for both of them. The moment in the film imports a human narrative of pathos onto the animals therefore rendering them akin to fiction characters, a move that trivialises the animals while ignoring the glaring issue, due the geographical location, of climate change; *Arctic Tale* displaces 'responsibility for the more crucial human story – the reasons for and actions to mitigate pending environmental catastrophe in the Arctic' (91-2). Smaill states that this transfer of human issues on to the animal reduces the agency of the animal and attenuates the 'distinctiveness of animal embodiment', while also negating engagement with a serious issue (95).

Chapter five continues to illustrate how documentaries position the nonhuman in ways that are detrimental to understanding nonhuman materiality, whilst simultaneously offering glimpses of understanding animal embodiment. Smaill focuses first on the blue-chip documentary *Frozen Planet* (Ray Dal, 2011) that combines 'masculine sensibility of mastery, exploration and empire' (108), with authoritative high definition images of landscape and animals to provide a message of "'old ecology," aligning it with a mid-twentieth-century conception of biological science that emphasised balance, equilibrium and renewal' (109). Juxtaposed against the big money production of the blue-chip wildlife documentary is the avant-garde documentary. Smaill uses the film essay *Encounters at the End of the World* (Werner Herzog, 2007) to provide an antithesis to *Frozen Planet*. The film challenges notions of modernity that are perpetuated through Attenborough's retelling of Antarctic that takes

the continent as a 'scientific certainty' mastered by the moving image (122). Instead Herzog chooses to present the Antarctic as 'amorphous and metaphysical, offering questions and critiques about human and animal life' (122).

Smaill's third theme looks at how digital moving image technology has the ability to capture 'a changing worldview concerning human/nonhuman agency' (127). *Regarding Life* takes *Grizzly Man* (Werner Herzog, 2005) as an 'epochal example' of making an unconventional wildlife documentary that doesn't take animals as its object of study but rather 'how "human nature" might be manifest at the scene of an encounter with the natural world' and in so doing show the 'limits' of what is human and so complicate and elaborate what is nonhuman (132). The film for Smaill demonstrates the finite boundaries of what is human and the overlooked 'unpredictable natural world' that are brought together through the productive encounter of digital audio-visual technologies that have the ability to destabilise 'the centrality of human knowledge and embodiment' (134).

Smaill's book is a readable and thorough account of the rise of animal narratives and representations in documentary film. The book brings to bare considerations from the 'animal turn' and sits within an area of scholarship that Akira Lippit has termed as 'the field of animal moving image studies' (2015 xiii). *Regarding Life* can be regarded as existing in this nascent field of scholarship. Sharing a space with similar thinkers like Barbara Creed, better known for her work on psychoanalysis and feminism in film studies, who examines animal death in particular making good use of Vivian Sobchack's concept of the 'extracinematic' moment of animal death that extends beyond the screen. Smaill phenomenological analysis of the long take would sit beside Anat Pick who in *Creaturely Poetics* makes the case of a shared embodiedness of human and animal that is captured by cinema. Lippit details how the animal goes further than sharing the human cinematic and creates the cinematic in his theory of the electric animal. While others like Burt raise the question of how the animal is treated and situated by the technology of the cinema. For a good overview of animal film studies readers are directed to Lawrence and McMahon edited volume *Animal Life: The Moving Image*, which brings together some considered and details scholarship that are expound on some of the films that Smaill uses, particularly *Grizzly Man*, while elaborating further on concepts such as becoming, *umwelt*, and nonhuman performativity.

While Smaill makes an invigorating and lively case for using thinkers, like Haraway, Foucault, Jacob von Uexküll, Derrida, from outside of film studies she does not always put them to an exacting use. For example, the second chapter is bookended with Haraway's concept of 'becoming with', while Husserl's concept of *lebenswelt* is explicated on with a discussion of Foucault's concept of biopower; these are intended to work alongside established film theorists Kracauer, Bazin, Daney and Cowie. The chapter presents ideas that broadly unsettle stabilised notions of environments of animals and humans share on and off screen. However, the central engagement of the chapter with how cinema can function to question human exceptionalism and emphasise animal embodiment through the cinematic technique of the long take is on occasion diluted.<sup>1</sup> A preoccupation with theory can at times decentre the core ideas of this book which has in its essence the practical ambition of raising awareness for the nonhuman figure in documentary.

Conversely the breadth of the intellectual ground covered in the book through drawing on such a wide and diverse number of theorists allows the reader multiple access points. *Regarding Life* not only makes an erudite addition to the branch 'animal moving image studies' but demarcates a new territory within that in focusing specifically on nonhuman representation in documentary. Small discussions on the borders that define the human and nonhuman and the transmission between them are a welcome contribution to the necessary questioning of the centrality of anthropocentric narratives and their relevance and connection to nonhuman life, while highlighting cinema's capacity to question and hold to account 'human systems of power' (11).

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> An essay that focuses on the cinematic long take and with reference to the figure of the animal in cinema that draws on Deleuze and Guattari's idea of "becoming-animal" see Laura McMahon "Cinematic slowness, political paralysis? Animal life in 'Bovines', with Deleuze and Guattari".

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