

The Ecopoetics of Cinema: Ethics and Aesthetics Beyond the Human

אקופואטיקה וקולנוע: אתיקה ואסתטיקה מעבר לאנושי

The recent “environmental” and “animal turn” in Film Studies forges new ways of understanding cinema in post-anthropocentric terms. Can film convey a nonhuman perspective? What is the link between moving image technology and humans’ evolving relationship to the natural world? How does the discourse of humanism determine cinematic representation and the critical practices of the discipline of Film Studies?

Building on existing approaches to film (such as cinematic realism, film’s industrial context, and film as a tool for social change), we explore film not simply as representing the world in image and sound, but as *part of the world*: film as an environmental practice in its own right and as a vehicle for addressing—even transforming—our relationship to ourselves and our fellow creatures.

Our focus will be on the act of looking at, and constructing, “the animal” and the natural world in film. We begin with the historical role of animals in the development of the cinematic medium and continue to films that place the nonhuman world at their center. Along the way, we will debate cinema’s own carbon footprint and its role as an instrument for reflection and advocacy in an age of ecological crisis.

Session 1. Why look at animals? Animals and the emergence of cinema

Screening (selected shorts):

Electrocuting an Elephant (Thomas Edison, 1903)

Archive footage of the last Thylacine (1932), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vqCCI1ZF7o>

Christmas Eve (Pathé, 1908)

Mme. Babyllas Loves Animals (Alfred Machin, 1911)

Baby’s Dinner (Lumière, 1895), *Boat Leaving the Port* (Lumière, 1895), *Workers Leaving the Factory* (Lumière, 1895).

Chen Sheinberg, *Convulsion* (1998)

Essential reading:

John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” in *About Looking*, London: Bloomsbury, 2009.

Nicole Shukin, “Telemobility: Telecommunication’s Animal Currency,” in *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, pp. 131-179.

Additional reading:

“‘Sparks Would Fly’: Electricity and the Spectacle of Animality,” in *Animalities: Literary and Cultural Studies Beyond the Human*.” Michael Lundblad, ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Dai Vaughan, “Let There be Lumière,” in *For Documentary: Twelve Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Jonathan Burt, ‘The Illumination of the Animal Kingdom: The Role of Light and Electricity in Animal Representation’, <http://www.animalsandsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/burt.pdf>

Akira Mizuta Lippit, excerpt from *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Cinematic Image,” “The Myth of Total Cinema,” in *What is Cinema?* Volume 1. Hugh Gray, trans. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Jennifer Fay, “Seeing/Loving Animals: André Bazin’s Posthumanism,” *Journal of Visual Culture*; 7.41 (2008), pp. 41-64.

Session 2. Vision unbound: intimacy, privacy, technology

Screening

Leviathan (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel, 2012)

Bear 71 (Leanne Alison, Jeremy Mendes, 2012)

Essential reading

Selmin Kara and Alanna Thain, “Sonic ethnographies *Leviathan* and New Materialisms in Documentary,” *Music and Sound in Nonfiction Film: Real Listening*, Holly Rogers, ed. New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 180-193.

Anat Pick, “Why Not Look at Animals?” *NECSUS* (2015), <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/why-not-look-at-animals/>

Additional reading:

Brett Mills, on animal privacy, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/apr/29/wildlife-films-infringe-privacy>; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cif-green/2010/apr/30/animals-privacy-wildlife-ethical>

Session 3. Unnatural Histories (Part 1)

Screening:

Cane Toads: The Conquest (Mark Lewis, 2010)

Essential reading:

Morgan Richards, “Cane Toads: Animality and Ecology in Mark Lewis's documentaries,” in *Rethinking Invasion Ecologies from the Environmental Humanities*, Jodi Frawley and Iain McCalman, eds. New York: Routledge, 2014.

Scott Macdonald, “Toward an Eco-cinema,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 11.2, 2004, pp. 107-132.

Additional reading:

Catherine Simpson. “Tales of Toad Terror and Tenacity: What Cane Critters Can Teach Us.” *Australian Humanities Review* 57 (2014), pp. 81-100.

Rust and Monani, ‘Introduction: cuts to dissolves—defining and situating ecocinema studies’, *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Derek Bousé, *Wildlife Films*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 139-149.

Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009.

Cynthia Chris, *Watching Wildlife*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Session 4. Unnatural Histories (Part 2)

Screening:

Grizzly Man (Werner Herzog, 2005)

Essential reading:

Thomas Austin, "...To Leave the Confines of His Humanness," in *Rethinking Documentary*, pp. 51-66.

Dominic Pettman, "Bear Life: Tracing an Opening in *Grizzly Man*," in *Human Error: Species-Being and Media Machines*, pp.37-59.

Additional reading:

Brad Prager, *The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth* (Columbia University Press, 2007).

Session 5. Institutional animals (Part 1)

Screening

Nénette (Nicolas Philibert, 2010)

Essential reading:

Barbara Creed, "Nénette: Film theory, animals, and boredom," *NECSUS*, <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/nenette-film-theory-animals-and-boredom/>

Matthew Calarco, "Identity, Difference, Indistinction" *The New Centennial Review* 11.2 (2011), pp. 41-60.

Session 6. Institutional animals (Part 2)

Screening:

Primate (Frederick Wiseman, 1974)

Essential reading:

Thomas W. Benson, "The Rhetorical Structure of Frederick Wiseman's *Primate*" *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 71.2 (1985), pp. 204-217.

Anat Pick, "Scientific Surrealism in Georges Franju and Frederick Wiseman," in *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Session 7. Documentary beyond the human

Screening:

Our Daily Bread ((Nikolaus Geyrhalt, 2006)

Blackfish (Gabriela Cowperthwaite, 2013)

Essential reading:

Helen Hughes, *Green Documentary*, “The Contemplative Response,” pp. 43-82.

Timothy Pachirat, “Hidden in Plain Sight” and, “A Politics of Sight,” in *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Nadia Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2011 (excerpt).

Additional reading:

Our Daily Bread online resources:

<http://www.ourdailybread.at/jart/projects/utb/website.jart?rel=en&content-id=1130864824950>

Carrie Packwood Freeman and Scott Tulloch, “‘Was Blind but Now I See’: Animal Liberation Documentaries’ Deconstruction of Barriers to Witnessing Injustice,” in *Screening Nature: Cinema Beyond the Human*. Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway, eds. Berghahn, 2013

Session 8. The war against animals**Screening:**

The Ghosts in Our Machine (Liz Marshall, 2013)

Neozoon Collective, <http://www.neozoon.org/>

Essential reading:

Dinesh Wadiwel, ‘The War Against Animals: Domination, Law and Sovereignty’, *Griffith Law Review* 18.2 (2009), pp. 283-297.

Judith Butler, excerpts from *Precarious Life* (2004); *Frames of War* (2009).

Chloe Taylor, “The Precarious Lives of Animals: Butler, Coetzee, and Animal Ethics” *Philosophy Today* 52.1 (2008), pp. 60-72.

Anat Pick,
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