

# Animal Deaths on Screen

## Film and Ethics

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### ABSTRACT

*Do animals understand death? How does the cinema represent death? The concept of death has played a crucial role in anthropocentric discussions of the representation of human/animal relationships in cultural practices. This paper will explore the representation of animals and death in the cinema from its beginnings to the present in relation to questions of ethics, and the cinematic representation of human/animal intersubjectivity. It will argue that while some individual filmmakers have attempted to represent animal death ethically, this topic remains largely unexamined in theoretical writings on the cinema. This paper will suggest that the spectator frequently seeks ways to displace fears about the death process onto the animal and images of animal death. Finally, I will argue that the space created between spectator and the image of actual animal death on screen is an ethical space that gives rise to a creaturely gaze with the potential to break down boundaries, and to affirm communicability between human and non-human animals in a non-anthropocentric context.*

*Keywords:* Animals, death, cruelty, film, documentary, creaturely, gaze, vulnerability, ethics, anthropocentrism, emotions.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In his essay on bullfighting, *Death Every Afternoon*, the influential French film theorist André Bazin says: “For every creature, death is the unique moment par excellence” ([1958] 2003, 30). Alone among the arts, film has the power not only to capture the moment of death, but also to replay that moment continuously. This is Bazin’s “eternal dead – again of the cinema” ([1958] 2003, 31). For Bazin recording the actual death of human and animal on screen is an “obscenity”. Vivien Sobchack analyses the cultural taboo on the representation of death in her 1984 article on death and the

documentary film. She argues that the representation of an actual death – human and animal – raises important ethical issues. Such death signifies a “ferocious reality” ([1958] 2003, 247). Anat Pick, in *Creaturely Poetics* (2011) explores the shared embodiedness and vulnerability of all creatures, human and animal. It is precisely because animals are so powerless that they should be treated ethically.

Throughout the history of the cinema, a number of landmark films have addressed the topic of death, ethics and the animal. Although rarely analysed in any depth, the most famous film from the early history of the cinema to record an actual death is Thomas Edison’s *Electrocuting an Elephant* made in 1903. This one-minute actuality filmed the public electrocution of Topsy, an elephant from Luna Park, Coney Island, who was accused of killing three handlers over a three-year period. Topsy was deemed guilty of criminal acts and executed as if she were a person. Another landmark film, which raises questions about the ethics of representing animal deaths on screen, is Georges Franju’s documentary, *Le Sang des Bêtes* (*Blood of the Beasts*, 1949). This is a chilling and strangely poetic account of the slaughter of animals at abattoirs, which are located inconspicuously in the outer districts of Paris. In 1985 Peter Greenaway released his new film, *A Zed and Two Noughts*, or *ZOO*, in which he set out to complicate the human and animal relationship through an examination of evolution, death and decomposition and the way in which these forces impact on all living beings. In an interview, Greenaway said one of the film’s central visual sources was an ape who lived in the Rotterdam zoo and possessed only one leg. He said his film explored “without judgment, man’s persistently dubious relationship with animals” (Espejo 2006, 3). Werner Herzog’s *Grizzly Man*, a feature documentary, presents the story of Timothy Treadwell, a young man who spent thirteen summers living alongside wild grizzly bears in an Alaskan nature reserve. In the end Treadwell, and his partner, are killed and devoured by one of the bears. Hunters later shoot the grizzly in their search for human remains. Throughout Treadwell identifies passionately with the bears, telling the viewer that he would die for them. He would no doubt have been horrified to know that one of his grizzlies was killed-despite the fact it was the bear that killed him and his partner. Herzog’s film presents a fascinating study of the finitude shared by human and animal. Other notable films which explore the theme of death and the animal include Robert Bresson’s *Au hasard Balhazar* (1966), Vittorio De Sica’s *Umberto D* (1952), John Huston’s *The Misfits* (1961), Frederick Wiseman’s *Meat* (1976), Clint Eastwood’s *White Hunter Black Heart* (1990) and Daniel Nettheim’s *The Hunter* (2011).

The concept of death has played a crucial role in anthropocentric discussions of the representation of human/animal relationships in cultural practices. Philosophers have argued throughout the centuries that it is man's unique knowledge of his own death that separates him from the animals. In his discussion of Heidegger's attempt to distinguish between human and animal death, Matthew Calarco writes that in "contrast, animals (as instances of the kind of beings that merely have life but have no relation to finitude) never properly die or demise; they can only perish" (2008, 17). In assessing the traditional view, Akira Lippit argues:

A paradox surrounds animal death. Since animals are denied access to the faculties of language, they remain incapable of reflection, which is bound by finitude and carries with it an awareness of death. Undying animals, simply expire, transpire, shift their *animus* to other animal bodies. (2002, 125)

It is not true that animals do not have an awareness of death. Elephants, for instance, engage in rituals of mourning over their dead as well as burial ceremonies (Moussaieff and McCarthy 1995, 95-6). Some creatures, such as the Virginia opossum and various snakes, beetles and spiders will feign death when presented with a threat. What does it mean to say that animals do not comprehend death? What role do the emotions (as distinct from intellectual reflection) play in sensing/anticipating/experiencing death? If we agree with Charles Darwin that the emotions evolved in human and animal alike, and that animals share many emotions expressed by humans including fear, distress and grief, why wouldn't animals have an understanding of death? What are the implications of this for the representation of the death of animals in film? Should there also be restrictions on the filming of the actual death of animals? What is the responsibility of the filmmaker to the animal in a post-Darwinian, post-humanist age? What is the role of ethics in this mediated engagement between the filmmaker, the spectator and the animal on the screen?

This paper will argue that the space created between spectator and the image of actual animal death on screen is an ethical space that gives rise to a "creaturely" gaze with the potential to break down boundaries, to affirm communicability, between human and non-human animals<sup>1</sup>. The creaturely gaze, however, does not necessarily involve only an exchange of looks; it also encompasses the tactile by appealing to the viewer's awareness of, and sensitivity towards, bodily engagement. The creaturely gaze

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of a "creaturely" gaze draws on Anat Pick's theory of the shared embodiedness of humans and animals and on Laura U. Mark's concept of "haptic visuality", which acts like a sense of touch in that it releases memories associated with smell, touch and taste. See Pick 2011 and Marks 2000.

does not erect a barrier between the spectator and the object of the look. It is evoked particularly in response to images of dead and dying beings and in knowledge of the shared finitude of all beings.

## 2. "ELECTROCUTING AN ELEPHANT" (EDISON, 1903)

In the early days of cinema, the public expressed a strong interest in the potential power of film to capture the moment of death in actualities and fictional narratives. As a result, the "execution film" flourished. One of the first examples was Edison's 1895 *Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*, which created an illusion of beheading. Viewers could watch the film through the kinoscope. Spectators were fascinated by the new medium and its capabilities. Could film capture the fleeting moment and the permanent event, could it capture anything and everything – even the moment of death? According to Mary Ann Doane this came down to a question of representability – "the *representability* of the ephemeral, of the archivability of presence" (2002, 24-5).

The first actualities<sup>2</sup> set out to capture the real, fixing the present moment in time. The popular demand to see death on screen led to the filmed reenactments of other executions including *Beheading a Chinese Prisoner* (Lubin, 1900) and *Execution of Czolgosz* (1901). In 1903 as mentioned above Thomas Edison shot a sixty-second actualité, *Electrocuting an Elephant*. The film is historically significant for a number of reasons: it was the first film of a live execution of an animal; it led to a public debate about humane versus cruel attitudes to animals; and it once again reinforced the important role played by animals in the history of the cinema in terms of both technology and subject matter. As Jonathan Burt explains:

However, by constantly raising the profile of the animal body and saturating visual culture with all forms of animal imagery, film locates questions of the place of the animal in modernity at the junction where technology and issues of the treatment of animals meet. (2002, 87)

A four-ton African elephant, Topsy performed throughout the United States for over twenty eight years. She spent the last years of her life at the zoo on Coney Island. Topsy had become increasingly aggressive; killing

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<sup>2</sup> Actuality films, also called actualités or réalités, were the first films ever made, a form of primitive documentary which were 17 metres long and which, when cranked through a movie projector, ran for approximately 50 seconds.

three trainers. When the last of her trainers, noted for his cruelty, tried to feed her a lighted cigarette she crushed him. The tabloids made much of Topsy's electrocution and over 1,500 people paid to watch the event, which took place at Luna Park, Coney Island. Apparently, Topsy's popularity with the public increased as a result of these deaths. Lisa Cartwright points out that "an uncontrollable, man-killing beast was a much more exciting attraction than a docile anima" (1995, 17).

At first officials discussed the possibility of hanging Topsy. Other elephants had been hanged before and were hanged after Topsy's execution. In Europe from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, animals were frequently charged with crimes against people, given a lawyer and tried in court. In his book, *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*, Evans describes nearly two hundred animal trials, including those of horses, pigs, bulls, cows, sheep and dogs. Many were charged with criminal damage and frequently sent into exile, others with killing a human being for which they were executed by hanging. In Topsy's case, however, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals protested. Thomas Edison intervened in the debate and offered to carry out an electrocution. This was considered preferable to hanging as execution by electrocution had been used on humans since 1890 and had proven very reliable. Luna Park commissioned Edison to construct an assemblage, which would be suitable for the electrocution of such a large creature. Edison's main intention was to discredit a new form of electricity – George Westinghouse's alternating current – which challenged his own form, the direct current. Topsy was tied between two posts and wooden sandals with copper electrodes were attached to her feet and a copper wire run to Edison's electric light plant. A 6,600 volt of electricity was discharged into her body.

The film commences as Topsy is led towards the camera by a trainer. Crowds of onlookers fill the background. At first Topsy stands alone, but is later tied to a post. We next see a distressed Topsy, wearing the execution apparatus. She faces the camera her right foot restlessly pawing the ground; suddenly we see smoke rise from her feet and gradually envelop her body. She pitches forward to the left of screen. After 10 seconds the smoke clears. Topsy lies on the ground, her body jerking for up to another eighteen seconds. She then becomes still. The spectator has a direct and unmediated view of Topsy. She has been put on display as if a sideshow attraction. The question of whether or not she should have the right to die in privacy is not raised.

In her discussion of death in documentary cinema, Sobchack argues that death "confounds all codes" of representation.

That is, we do not ever “see” death on the screen nor understand its visible stasis or contours. Instead, we see the activity and remains of the event of *dying*. Whereas being can be visibly represented in its inscription of intentional behavior (the “having of being” animated concretely in action that is articulated in a visible world), nonbeing is not visible. It lies over the threshold of visibility and representation. (2004, 233)

All that the film viewers can see are activities associated with the act of dying. Topsy’s fall, her bodily twitches, the sudden transformation of her moving body into a stilled one – these events make her death *seemingly* visible but the exact moment of death itself cannot be seen, only registered as having taken place. Sobchack argues that in our “highly technologized culture [...] death has come to be inscribed and understood as an objective ‘technical phenomenon’ of the body rather than as a subjective lived-body experience” (2004, 234). The electrocution of Topsy is clearly part of this new technical phenomenon of death; it is not only recorded on film but her mode of death is affected by a new invention of the modern period. For Topsy herself, death is, in Sobchack’s words, “a subjective lived-body experience” (Sobchack 2004, 234).

In her study of medicine’s visual culture, *Screening the Body*, Lisa Cartwright writes that Edison’s film both “documents the moment of the elephant’s death” and also “public fascination with scientific technology” and its power “to determine the course of life and death in living beings, even those as physically and symbolically powerful as the elephant” (1995, 18).

*Electrocuting an Elephant* reveals a public fascination with execution, and that this fascination was part of a broader scientific fascination with the instrumentation of life and death. Audiences took “scientific” pleasure in the sight of death – a pleasure that involved witnessing the precise moment of death and studying the moment on film again and again. (Cartwright 1995, 42)

In his essay, *Cut: Execution, Editing, and Instant Death*, Scott Combs explores the development of “amateur execution ‘theory’” in the late nineteenth century (2008, 31). Prior to the invention of moving film, scientists had begun to experiment with electrical current to determine the exact amount of charge needed to kill instantly. Experiments were carried out on dogs, horses, cats and an orangutan, many of which died agonising deaths. In case Topsy did not die instantly, she was fed carrots laced with 460 grams of potassium cyanide, which would have resulted in a painful and prolonged death. Topsy’s public execution was designed to fulfill the human desire to experience death first-hand. The crowd at Coney Island was there because they wanted to see Topsy punished as well as witness the power of the electrical current to kill a large animal instantaneously.

Mary Ann Doane refers to a report from *The New York World* of January 5, which stated, “fifteen hundred persons looked on in breathless excitement” (2002, 145).

Topsy, however, was not an anonymous figure – an animal without a history and identity. Rather she was a figure with whom spectators could readily identify. She had achieved a degree of fame during her period of life-long servitude entertaining circus audiences. She was famous for balancing her huge body on a small bicycle and riding it in the circus. She also had a name. It is also worth noting, however, that the name “Topsy” both endowed her with a personable identity but also transformed her into a potentially dangerous beast. Doane points out “Topsy’s name ineluctably reverberates with the racial politics of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as well as with the colonialist aspirations distilled in the representational repertoire of the circus” (2002, 152). Lisa Cartwright writes: “At Luna Park, the elephants were also used in stagings of ‘exotic’ cultures. In turning a docile and compliant animal into a violent beast, Topsy became the object of displaced Western anxieties about resistance to colonial authority” (1995, 18). Topsy’s death therefore carried a significant representational burden in that Topsy signified many things – tamed jungle animal, beloved circus performer, dangerous monster, and colonised other. Those who felt a bond with Topsy and who fought to save her life would not have watched Edison’s film without experiencing a sense of deep loss, without extending to Topsy a creaturely empathetic gaze. Even today many of those who by chance come across *Electrocuting an Elephant* on YouTube do not depart unscathed – as witnessed by the numerous tributes posted to Topsy on the Internet<sup>3</sup>. In 1944 when Luna Park burned down, the conflagration became known as “Topsy’s Revenge”. In 2003 the Coney Island Museum erected a memorial to Topsy. More recently, artist Sue Coe collaborated with scholar Kim Stallwood, to create a series of works dedicated to Topsy. One entitled *Thomas Edison Kills Topsy the Elephant to Promote the Electric Chair* (2007) depicts Topsy chained to posts surrounded by a crowd, which has gathered to watch her execution. This series draws on an artist’s creaturely recognition of Topsy’s vulnerability and her horrific death<sup>4</sup>.

In his essay, *Death Every Afternoon*, Bazin analyses his response to Pierre Braunberger’s documentary *Bullfight* (1951). Bazin discusses the

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<sup>3</sup> In recent years, most likely because of the posting of *Electrocuting an Elephant* on the Internet, Topsy has become a popular culture icon. Sections of Edison’s film have been incorporated into at least 5 films, and there are references to Topsy in 3 music videos, 3 songs, 2 novels, several poems and a play.

<sup>4</sup> Coe and Stallwood, *Thomas Edison Kills Topsy the Elephant to Promote the Electric Chair*. This and other Sue Coe works can be viewed on Google Images.

power of the cinema to capture the moment of death – for human and animal. For Bazin, this is the moment in which something changes fatally and irreversibly. “The representation of a real death is also an obscenity, no longer a moral one, as in love, but metaphysical” (Bazin 2003, 30). Bazin was particularly interested in the power of film to represent the finality and irreversible nature of changes such as death. Well known for his love of animals, Bazin regarded the death of an animal and the death of a human being as of the same moral order. “For every creature, death is the unique moment par excellence [...]. Death is nothing but one moment after another, but it is the last” (2003, 30). In discussing the power of film to repeat endlessly the actual images of a human or animal creature dying, or being killed, by repeated screenings (even by screening the film backwards and then forwards) Bazin used the phrase “ontological obscenity” (2003, 31). “Thanks to film, nowadays we can desecrate and show at will the only one of our possessions that is temporarily inalienable: dead without a requiem, the eternal dead – again of the cinema” (Bazin 2003, 31).

Bazin also drew an important distinction between the experience of spectators at the actual bullfight and spectators watching a film of the bullfight in the cinema.

I have never been to a bullfight, and it would be ridiculous of me to claim that the film lets me feel the same emotions, but I do claim that it gives me its essential quality, its metaphysical kernel: death. The tragic ballet of the bullfight turns around the presence and permanent possibility of death (that of the animal and the man). That is what makes the ring into something more than a theatre stage: death is played on it. [...] Death is surely one of those rare events that justifies the term [...] *cinematic specificity*. (2003, 29-30)

In Bazin’s view the power of the moving image to capture the moment of death (although not death itself) gives clear meaning to the concept of “cinematic specificity”. This far outweighs the power of photography. How would a photograph “give us back the essence of the spectacle, the mystical triad of animal, man, and crowd?” (2003, 29). The cinema’s power to capture the “essential quality” of the ritual, its “metaphysical kernel”, also suggests that watching the death of the bulls (or the bullfighter) enables the viewer to come close to death – closer than any other art form allows. This proximity to death might also offer an escape. Rather than accept the fact of his/her own death as unknowable, (some) cinema spectators are given the opportunity to displace their own fears onto the animal other. Death is an event that human and animal experience alike, although it could be argued that the human imagination has endowed human death with spiritual and poetic significance precisely in order to draw a boundary between human and animal death. The former is supposedly meaningful: the latter

is not. In the end, however, death attests to what Derrida describes as “the finitude that we share with animals” (2002, 396).

### 3. “BLOOD OF BEASTS” (1949)

Georges Franju’s *Le Sang des Bêtes* (1949), a documentary about the daily workings of a slaughterhouse is almost impossible to watch. This is because Franju carefully positions us as “witnesses” to the gruesome and often brutal daily practices involved in the killing of animals for human consumption. Although the animals are killed professionally, the film stands as a testament to human cruelty – its horrors however cannot compare to the cruelty, including acts of sadism, revealed in contemporary footage shot in secret by animal activists in many slaughterhouses around the world today<sup>5</sup>.

*Le Sang des Bêtes* has engendered controversy and a range of conflicting interpretations. It could be argued, on the one hand, that the film presents a powerful record of the actual practices of the slaughterhouse in an objective, lyrical style. The animal butchers at the slaughterhouse are simply doing what is expected. The question of ethics is not relevant. Franju himself presents this interpretation in the scene in which the narrator recites Baudelaire’s lines “I shall strike you without anger and without hate, like a butcher”. Anat Pick refers to this statement and asks: “What is this violence that kills without hatred and without emotions?” (2001, 139). On the other hand, it could be argued that Franju’s film directly raises issues about whether or not the killing of animals is ethical. This Franju claims was his actual intention. In order to elicit the spectator’s sympathy, prior to the scenes of slaughter, Franju uses the figure of a white cart horse. The ageing cart horse trustingly lets itself be led through the streets and into the yard of the slaughterhouse. The horse stands quietly in the darkened courtyard, its white coat almost translucent in the light. Then suddenly, a man delivers a blow to its forehead with a Behr-gun. A loud crack fills the space as the horse, killed by the blow, falls to the ground. Workers cut the animal’s throat. Its’ front legs jerk as a knife slices open its neck and mouth. Blood spills on the ground. The horse is dragged away by a hind

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<sup>5</sup> There are also now many short video films of animal cruelty in abattoirs that have been posted on the Internet. In Australia there has been a public outcry in response to the televised screenings of documentaries, filmed secretly in abattoirs in Indonesia, Egypt and Israel as well as Australia, which revealed shocking acts of sadism towards animals. In response, one Australian company, which stated that it was appalled, has now installed cameras so that it can monitor its workers.

leg as if it now counted for nothing. For a moment, however, it seems to look through black eye sockets straight at the camera and the viewer. The narrator states dispassionately: “The bleeding process ends with the horse being hoisted by cable. It is immediately lowered for skinning. Air pumped under the hide, loosens the skin”. The alignment of the matter-of-fact commentary with the shocking scenes of animal death reinforces the horror. Adam Lowenstein also comments on this. “The horror of Franju’s film is truly brutal, as it chronicles the activities of Paris slaughterhouses (chiefly in La Villette) in unflinching, transfixed clinical detail” (1998, 39).

This scene depicts a terrible betrayal of the vulnerable animal. Unaware of its fate the horse makes no attempt to break free. It walks alongside its human “companion” just as it has always done. Graphic scenes of killing, skinning and dismemberment of other animals in the slaughterhouse follow the death of the horse as man and beast fight each other amidst blood and excrement. After watching the killing of the white horse, every other death now appears also like a betrayal. Steel spikes are sent through the skulls of cows, calves have their throats cut, sheep are dismembered, their legs, still kicking, arranged in stacks. Sensing danger, smelling blood, hearing the cries of other doomed creatures, these animals fight for their lives. Yet as Pick notes, there is also something “muted” about these scenes, which Franju connects with images from everyday life in the world outside the abattoir.

Violence, in short, is simultaneously surprising and utterly mundane: this type of violence is not merely the city’s subterranean flipside or dark unconscious; it is the very paradigm of civilized urban modernity. What is disquieting here is not so much the goriness of slaughter as the shock of its banality – its extreme yet wholly quotidian occurrence. (2001, 134)

In his book, *Franju*, Durgant writes of the director’s oeuvre:

The films themselves confirm Franju’s reiterated claim that his interest is in the victim, whether it’s a white horse in a slaughterhouse, a salmon with the hook tearing at its mouth, a war criminal with shrapnel-twisted lips, or a mental patient staring at the wall. (1968, 31)

Durgant argues that Franju is aware of his own sadism (“no-one has no sadism in his unconsciousness”) and the sadism of others but that he cannot be accused of “relishing” it (1968, 31). Franju intercuts scenes from the slaughterhouse with images from the nearby city, making it clear that the two domains are closely intertwined. Ignorance is no excuse for citizens who might wish to divest themselves of any moral responsibility for the suffering of the animals that is happening so close to their own homes.

Durgant refers to the abattoirs as “the heart of the atrocious”. He quotes Henri Agel: “The ordering of the dismemberments takes on an almost ritual

character, the stunned horse falls in a curtsy, while the killers, bathed in vapours of blood, seem to officiate [...]” (1968, 34). It is possible that documentary films about actual animal death enable the spectator to explore the meaning and horror of death vicariously through the animal. The animal suffers on behalf of the human. This is not just because of what Derrida refers to in *Eating Well: an Interview* as the “carno-phallogocentrism” of the human order (1991, 113) and its seemingly insatiable desire to eat the other, but also because of human anxiety about death – its unknowability and capriciousness.

The belief that animals are vulnerable sentient beings, raises the crucial question of ethical viewing in relation to the representation of actual death on screen. Sobchack’s proposition concerning the representation of real death on screen is of particular relevance to this discussion. She writes: “Before the nonfictional screen event of an unsimulated death, the very act of looking at the film is ethically charged, and this act is itself an object of ethical judgment” (2004, 244). Sobchack makes it clear that she is referring to the filmmaker and spectator both of whom are “ethically implicated in their relations with the viewed event” (2004, 244). “Thus, responsibility for the representation of death by means of the inscribed vision of cinema lies with both filmmaker and spectator – and in the ethical relationship constituted between the vision of each” (2004, 244).

This is particularly so, given the normal taboo on visually recording an actual death on screen. The response of the viewer is important. Sobchack asks:

Do we shrink in our seats or lean forward towards the screen? Do we cover our eyes or peek through our fingers? Do we stare at the vision before us or watch from the corners of our eyes? Do we sit there deciding to act on what we’ve seen once we’re outside of the theater, or do we shrink a bit, knowing we will do nothing but watch what is presently before us? (2004, 244)

Sobchack discusses the example of the actual shooting of a rabbit in Jean Renoir’s fiction film *Rules of the Game* (1939). She concludes that this “ruptures and interrogates the boundaries (and license) of fictional representation”. Quoting a phrase from critic Amos Vogel, she states that the image of the animal’s death, as with all images of death, has a “ferocious reality” (2004, 247). Sobchack refers to the legislation introduced in the period after the making of Renoir’s film, which forbids the harming of animals in the making of fiction films. Sobchack recognises this as an important development; however she does not pursue the implications of her argument about the ethical space of documentary films which depict actual animal deaths.

#### 4. THE CREATURELY GAZE

What then are the ethical implications for making and viewing documentary films such as *Electrocution of an Elephant* and Franju's *Blood of the Beasts*? Clearly, many spectators find it difficult if not impossible to watch the slaughter of the animals. Jane Giles writes of Franju's film: "Viewable only through spread fingers or a hailstorm of tears, it defies the very act of looking" (1999, 3). Here Sobchack's notion of ethical viewing, if revised, has much to offer. In her conclusion, Sobchack focuses on the ethical behaviour and responsibilities of the filmmaker and film spectator. Sobchack is referring only to the filming of the actual death of a human subject, which she states is "normatively regarded as forbidden" (2004, 249). She writes that if the filmmaker is to record an actual death then he or she must provide an inscription which indicates that he or she was in no way party to the actual death and that viewing the death is not more important than preventing it. In short, the filmmaker must make it clear that "the representation of a particular death is somehow *more socially important* than the death of the individual who suffers it" (Sobchack 2004, 249).

In my view this proposition is equally applicable to the representation of animal deaths on screen. There are many forms of looking in the cinema<sup>6</sup> but the gaze, which is crucial in this discussion, is the one which most strongly establishes a connection between the human spectator and the animal on the screen. This gaze is best described as the creaturely gaze in that the word "creaturely" emphasises the shared relations between human and animal, as Anat Pick argues, and in so doing undermines the conventional anthropocentric bias of the gaze. As discussed earlier a creaturely gaze affirms communicability between human and non-human animals. It speaks to the viewer's familiarity with, and sensitivity towards, bodily engagement – thus bringing into the relationship the animal body covered variously in fur, hair, wool, feathers, scales, skin. In watching the white horse in Franju's *Blood of the Beasts* we do not exchange looks, the horse is not filmed in such a way that it can return our gaze – rather we are aware of its large, ghost-like body, and its white hair smeared with blood. We feel the horse's bodily distress. Laura U. Marks's concept of "haptic visuality" is relevant here. In her study of intercultural cinema, Marks argues that film has the power to represent "embodied perception" (2000, 145). Her thesis offers a new way of thinking about the screen-viewer relationship, invoking the idea of cinema as skin – material and tactile – which I would

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the various forms of the gaze, which ranges from sadistic to masochistic, see Mulvey 2009; Elsaesser and Hagener 2009.

argue has clear implications for the way in which we view animals on film. The creaturely gaze draws on a range of senses – not just sight. It is first and foremost an ethical gaze.

## 5. “AU HASARD BALTHAZAR” (1966)

A number of filmmakers have explored animal death in fictional narratives, which offer a different challenge from the representation of actual death in the documentary. *Au hasard Balthazar* (French for “By chance Balthazar”) directed by Robert Bresson, offers a complex study of shared human and animal suffering, which encompasses the theme of animal death. The film director Jean-Luc Godard said of the film: “A dreadful vision of the world and the evil in it” (Pipolo 2010, 204). It tells the story of Marie, a young farm girl, and her donkey, Balthazar, whom she has raised from infancy when he was first taken from his mother. The narrative follows their lives, which mirror each other in relation to their respective abuse, mistreatment and suffering at the hands of others. Julian Murphet argues that the scenes of the donkey’s suffering, ending with his death in the shepherd’s field, remind us continually through “the visible traces of a real animal’s pain, of what must finally resist symbolization altogether: the Real of human history and its violent social contradictions [...]” (2008, 109). The film ends with the death of Balthazar, which some critics have described as a scene of martyrdom. They have noted the film’s religious imagery and Christian allegory: Balthazar’s name is that of one of the wise men who bore witness to the birth of Christ; Marie baptizes him in a whimsical night time scene; he suffers beatings, starvation and torture; and he is described as a saint. Not all, however, agree that the film is religious. “It therefore seems to me mistaken to regard *Au hasard Balthazar* as a religious allegory, with the donkey as the innocent Christ figure. Although the film contains much allegorical paraphernalia, Balthazar does not stand in for anything or anyone. He is quite literally the embodiment of creaturely suffering” (Pick 2011, 190).

Throughout the narrative Bresson quietly depicts Balthazar’s sufferings, brief moments of pleasure, and exploitation at the hands of his human tormentors – all the time making it clear that Balthazar’s masters will never recognize his pain or grant him the right to live a life free from hunger, cruelty, deprivation and hard labour. The animal is sacrificed to satisfy human needs, but the human refuses or is unable to recognise the creature’s contribution to society. To do so, is to come too close to the animal, to question notions of what it is to be human, to undermine the carefully constructed boundary between human and the animal which is central to

the anthropocentric world view. Marie's mother breaks the taboo. In a scene towards the end of the film she pronounces Balthazar a "saint".

As with all of his films, Bresson insisted that his actors, including Balthazar, express as little as possible in terms of emotion, movement, gesture and sounds. Balthazar carries out various tasks before the camera, but his "performance" remains throughout impenetrable. Although we see him subjected to cruel treatment, he gives no indication of what he is feeling – apart from an occasional plaintive cry. The spectator feels empathy for Balthazar, revealing that he or she can interact with Balthazar on the screen as with a human actor. In John Maxwell Coetzee's novel, *Elizabeth Costello*, the eponymous heroine states that:

There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination [...]. If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed [such as a character in a James Joyce novel] then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life. (Coetzee 2004, 80)

Because film uses specific aesthetic devices such as point of view filming, the subjective camera, voice over and music to encourage audience identification with its characters, it is not difficult to think one's way into the lives and deaths of otherwise unknown characters in film whether human or animal.

Balthazar's death is one of the most remarkable scenes of animal death – of any death – in the history of the cinema. In the final scene, Balthazar, who is being used to smuggle contraband goods across the border between France and Spain, is accidentally shot by Marie's sadistic lover, Gérard, who is one of his main tormentors. Fittingly, there are no human figures in the landscape: only nature, the sheep and the dying Balthazar. Bresson focuses on Balthazar's death as both meaningful and meaningless. Pipolo states that "In having only the sheep bear witness to Balthazar's death and returning him to his animal nature, Bresson underlines the distance between the Christian message and the world's indifference" (2010, 206). Bresson's film demonstrates the power of the cinema, and the workings of the creaturely gaze, to present a narrative of animal suffering and death in an empathetic manner. Balthazar lives a bare life which Bresson also compares to Marie's tragic existence – both suffer in a pitiless universe in which the downtrodden are equally exploited, regardless of whether they are human or animal. Derrida explores the implications of animal vulnerability. He argues that "mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals [...] the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish" (2002, 396).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Film has changed the way we might think about the representability of death – human and animal. In her analysis of the early execution film, such as *Electrocuting an Elephant* Doane discusses the meaning of death.

Perhaps death functions as a kind of cinematic Ur-event because it appears as the zero degree of meaning, its evacuation. With death we are suddenly confronted with the pure event, pure contingency, what ought to be inaccessible to representation [...]. (2002, 164)

Peter Greenaway's fictional narrative, *A Zed and Two Noughts*, offers a disturbing study of the common physical fate and shared mortality of all beings – human and animal – in that we all must die, our bodies decomposing in an earthly process that is an inescapable part of the evolutionary cycle. One of the main characters, a doctor, films, frame by frame, the decomposition of many dead creatures: prawns, fish, a crocodile, zebra and finally himself and his twin brother. There is no relief in Greenaway's film for the viewer who might hope to displace the cycle of death and decay onto the animal. Lawrence L. Langer argues it is the body in the modern era that signifies "the universal dilemma of dealing with one's 'creatureliness' – of living critically and self – consciously while so vulnerable to the physical cruelties of men, nature, and science" (1978, 63).

Various directors have explored the significance of ethics and the death of animals in hunting films. In *White Hunter Black Heart* (1990) Clint Eastwood, who is both the director and the main protagonist, Wilson, argues that it is not just a crime against nature to kill such a majestic animal for sport, it is a "sin". Despite this, he still desperately wants to shoot the big "tusker". When he finally has the bull elephant in his sights, the creature runs straight towards him, halts, paws the ground and bellows directly at Wilson. The elephant towers over him, his massive tusks poised. Overwhelmed, Wilson stares in amazement. Realising finally the ignoble nature of his pursuit, he is unable to pull the trigger. The protagonist of Daniel Nettheim's *The Hunter* (2011) has similar desires. Played by Willem Dafoe, the hunter finally catches a glimpse of his prey – the last Thylacine. In an earlier scene, he thinks to himself: "I wonder if she is the last one – hunting and killing – waiting to die". He has been camping out in the Tasmanian wilderness, through the seasons, determined to hunt her down. It is winter. One night the animal presents herself at the opening of the cave where he is sleeping. A shadowy figure, she slips away into the darkness. He races after her, but when she stands still and stares back at him he is unable to shoot – momentarily. She seems to shimmer in the snow and the moonlight,

a mythical unattainable phantasm. The two exchange looks, which he recognises all too late is a creaturely gaze. Then in a strange gesture she stands her ground, refusing to flee from him. The moment after he shoots her, he races across the snow to where she lies. He reaches out hesitantly to touch her furry body. Overcome by the horror of what he has done, he kneels before her body weeping. In the tradition of *White Hunter Black Heart*, *The Hunter* presents a chilling critique of a culture that fails to understand that the vulnerability of all animals should be valued and not used as a justification for murder.

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