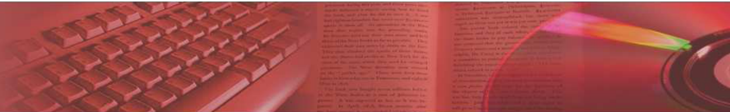
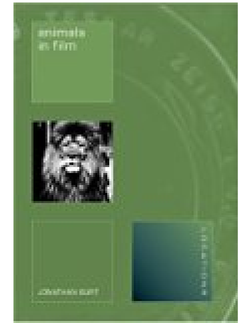


Jonathan Burt. *Animals in Film, Vol. 1.* London: Reaktion Books, 2002. 232 pp. $16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86189-131-0.



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The Animal Image in Film: More Powerful than Meets the Eye

The Animal Image in Film: More Powerful than Meets the Eye

Burt begins with what seems at first a straightforward question of obvious relevance to anyone involved with NILAS: How is it that the animal image has come to carry both aesthetic and ethical power on the screen? The history of the tangled relationship among human filmmakers–whether of documentaries, short subjects, or feature films–their technical skills, their artistry, and animals is fascinating. We learn that audiences are more affected aesthetically, emotionally, and ethically by what they see than perhaps we had assumed. Burt calls human "vision ... the most impressionable and effective sense" (p. 138).

Although this has obvious implications for anyone concerned with the rights and welfare of animals, few scholarly studies have been devoted to the power of the animal image in film or, for that matter, in other forms of art. Even literary scholars have paid far too little attention to the pervasive presence of animals in every genre of literature. Thus, Burt's contribution is important and groundbreaking, raising numerous questions as food for thought for future researchers and critics.

Burt sees the current absence of scholarly attention to the animal in film as "willful blindness." However it is explained, the disparity between the frequent appearances of animals in art and the infrequent comments on those appearances in criticism needs explanation, since it accounts in part for what Burt calls the "curious status" of animals in film: "At one level they are of considerable significance and the object of detailed attention, and yet in other ways they are often marginalized in relation to the main frame of human interest" (p. 82). Particularly in feature films, animal imagery is "ever present," yet it is human concerns that absorb critical attention. Burt is less sure which absorbs the attention of audiences, however. The presence of animals in a film narrative unquestionably captures audience attention.

The question is what role animal presence plays in a given film. The answer, according to Burt, lies, in part, in the filmmaker's own attitude toward animals and the point being made by including animals in the film. If they are accepted as central to the plot and theme, treated as subject rather than object, and presented as complex characters in and of themselves, they are likely to raise an audience's awareness of the need for animal welfare and rights. However, if they are used as merely interesting background objects that at best lend verisimilitude to the setting and, at worst, make the film pretty or amusing, they are likely, instead, to reinforce the ambiguous status the animal now occupies. At least in the United Kingdom and the United States, audiences are likely to possess what Burt calls "cultural oversensitivity to the treatment of animals in film" which he feels plays ambiguously against "the daily dependence of our culture" on animal exploitation.

To illustrate this ambiguity, Burt devotes considerable discussion to films such as Mexican director Alejandro Inarritu's *Amores Perros* (2002), in which organized dog fighting serves as the core of the plot, but is also

used symbolically to support the theme. Despite carefully worded assurances that all fights were faked, the film caused outrage when it was released. Rather than interpreting the images as simply images, as they undoubtedly would if the violence involved human actors, audiences seemed unable to separate fiction from reality. Perhaps that is why public outrage so seldom translates into meaningful change in how our culture actually treats animals.

Such ambiguity is less often a problem in the history of the role played by the animal in the development of film technology, to which Burt devotes much attention. But it is absolutely critical to what is to my mind his more important query about "the unresolvable dialectic between humane and cruel attitudes toward animals that governs their history in modern culture" (p. 85). This dialectic is at work in every film genre in which animals appear, from footage intended for scientific observation to that devoted to sheer entertainment. It includes questions about how animals are manipulated on film (caught in the wild with or without entrapment, trained, or coerced). It stretches into discussion of the relationship between camera and gun, photographer and hunter, and, of course, extends to the ever more complex relationship between man and animal.

According to Burt two complex issues converge here–the degree to which the animal in the so-called scientific documentary is fictionalized by the filmmaker and the degree to which the animal in story is felt to be not fictional, but real, by audiences. Burt believes both perceptual errors occur with frequency because both filmmaker and audience are ruled by what he sees as the prevailing paradox of our cultural response to the animal–the dialectic between humane and cruel attitudes.

This dialectic also may explain why films so often are used "to make points about animal welfare," a tradition Burt dates back to the RSPCA's 1914 *Black Beauty*-esque film about the treatment of old infirm horses being taken to the knacker's and slaughtered. Yet PETA and Frederick Wiseman documentaries seem not to affect attitudes as effectively as do films such as *Free Willy* (1993) or the earlier British film to which Burt devotes much of his prologue, *Gone to Earth* (1950; released in the United States in the same year as *The Wild Heart*).

Perhaps less familiar to American than to British audiences, *Gone to Earth* is based on Mary Webb's classic novel of the same name. An acknowledged champion of both women's and animal rights, Webb focused her story on the woman Hazel who has left her husband for the local squire. But it is her pet fox who is the imagistic and thematic heart of the novel and film. The woman's name, Hazel, suggests her earth-relatedness; the fox's earthiness can be taken for granted. Hazel and the fox become conflated in the minds of the villagers (and audience), each seen simultaneously, as Burt explains it, as "object[s] of desire and ... object[s] of disgust–both half-tame and half-wild"–both, in other words, pet and vermin. In Britain at least, the fox is also "the focus of a long-running social conflict over issues of cruelty" between those who champion and those who oppose fox hunting.

The shared tragic fates of the two characters, human and animal, intentionally arouse emotional responses in reader and viewer that make Burt's point that "the line between art and 'propaganda' can be very fine indeed" (p. 10). As he concludes in his prologue:

"Animal imagery does not merely reflect animal-human relations and the position of animals in human culture, but is also used to change them. Indeed, it is this transformational aspect that reveals broader cultural tensions and anxieties about our current treatment of animals and why it is never easy to characterize animal films as merely optimistic or pessimistic, escapist or engaged." (p. 15)

Indeed, there is much more to the animal image than meets the eye!

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