



Luma and Gunda Stare Back: Integrating Non-human Perspectives in The Ecofeminist Documentary



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PHOTO: Screenshot of Cow (2022) BBC Films, by Andrea Arnold.

Abstract

Documentaries about non-human animals abound, but how many of these films are truly attempting to narrate their perspective? Both blue-chip ‘nature’ documentaries narrated by David Attenborough and animal rights advocacy documentaries have an anthropocentric approach: either the non-human animal is turned into a spectacle for the human gaze, or into a helpless “victim in need for human mercy and rescue” (Freeman & Tulloch 2013, 6). The aim of this paper is to make a case for the potentiality of the documentary form as a means to find new, interspeciesist ways of representing non-human animal subjectivities. It also investigates some of the methodologies used to explore the possibility of integrating the non-human animal perspective in documentary. To do so, this paper looks into examples of recent documentaries *Gunda* (Kossakovsky 2020) and *Cow* (Arnold 2021), suggesting that these films are able to put critical ecofeminist thought into practice. Moreover, this paper argues that methods such as those invested in sensory ethnography can be useful to let the non-human animal ‘speak’ for him or herself, in line with the ecofeminist aim of exposing the underlying power structure resulting in all forms of oppression. Furthermore, this paper explores Anat Pick’s notion of vegan cinema (2018).



Keywords

Critical Ecofeminism, sensory ethnography, non-human animal perspective, critical animal and media studies, documentary portrayal, vegan cinema

1. Introduction

The documentary is a powerful medium to raise awareness of situations that are far from us as a spectator. Documentaries are able to convey realities unknown to us and to narrate them in such sense that we can get a hold of new perspectives—perspectives belonging often to a ‘significant other’, in the extensive sense used by Donna Haraway (Haraway 2003).

In an attempt to deconstruct the inherent power structure which gives the documentarian a privileged position as opposed to the subject left vulnerable, participatory methods have been more and more integrated in ethnographic documentaries. However, what if the subject of the film is not just a significant other from a different culture, but from a different species? In what ways do today’s documentarians strive to include the non-human animal’s perspective within their films? In this paper, I will investigate some of the methods that have been applied in films with non-human animal protagonists by filmmakers with an interspeciesist stance willing to move away from an anthropocentric gaze to represent reality. To do so, I will start by briefly outlining the problematics inherent in hegemonic representation of non-human animals in blue-chip documentaries. Subsequently, I will look into examples of recent documentaries *Gunda* (Kossakovsky 2020) and *Cow* (Arnold 2021), which I deem to be aligned with critical ecofeminism. Also, I will touch upon form, arguing that methods such as those invested in sensory ethnography can be useful to let the non-human animal ‘speak’ for him or herself. Moreover, I will explore Anat Pick’s notion of vegan cinema (2018).

2. Hegemonic representation of non-human animals in documentary

Before exploring new ecofeminist tendencies in non-human animal representation, it is useful to outline what the traditional paradigm looks like in terms of representation of non-human animals in documentary. In this sense, narrated BBC blue-chip documentaries by David Attenborough on free living non-human animals are ubiquitous and naturally jump to mind as the mainstream form of non-human animal documentaries. The patriarchal heritage of the ‘wildlife’ documentary is not only obvious due to Attenborough’s narration, but even more so due to the “hyper-separation between culture and nature” (Graziano 2005, 20). Dualistic thinking is inherent in blue-chip documentaries, in which human elements often are removed from the screen, building the illusion of a natural paradise, untouched by ‘civilisation’ where, as Molloy observes, “nature appears to unfold without intervention as a dramatic and glorious narrative on the screen.” (Molloy 2011, 75). Such strict distinction between nature and culture is dangerous, as it enables exploitation (Eder as cited by Mills 2017, 88), “because the normalisation legitimises categorising other living things primarily as resources and other” (Mills 2017, 95). In this sense, ‘nature’ is once again presented to the spectator as resources for humans to consume: this time in the form of entertainment.

Indeed, dualism is responsible for the objectification of non-human animals. Malamud explores how, as happens with the racialised or sexualised

'other', the non-human 'other' is constantly reduced to a negative/positive dichotomy in audio-visual media:

This kind of objectification is dangerous [...] because it is reductionist. It circumscribes animals' existence in relation to the human gaze, appraising them only in terms of their usefulness or threat (to us). (Malamud 2010, 7)

Indeed, stereotypical anthropomorphic depictions of non-human animals proliferate in blue-chip documentaries, and Bousé warns us accordingly to see these films as "creative interpretations of nature that are more suited to the realms of art" (Bousé as cited by Molloy 2011, 82-83).

Mills notes that the social aspect often accompanying the documentary form is generally missing when it comes to nature films, and cites Paul Rotha, who states that these "fall short of documentary requirements and the creative dramatization of actuality and the expression of social analysis that are the first demand of the documentary method" (Rotha as cited by Mills 2017, 86). However, even animal rights advocacy documentaries driven by the desire to provoke social impact still have room for improvement, as they "are often anthropocentric in their mode of address" (Pick 2018, 128). In these films, non-human animals are often represented "as players in an anthropocentric narrative [...]" (Malamud 2010, 4) that "frequently portray nonhumans as victims in need of human mercy and rescue" (Freeman & Tulloch 2013, 6).

Malamud contests the educational aspect of nature films, due to its paradoxical effect on spectators. Citing Gregg Mitman, who studies nature film in USA history, he insists how the proximity to non-human animals felt in these documentaries provokes a sense of separation from the non-human world (Mitman as cited by Malamud 2010, 13). Instead of being beneficial for human's ways to relate to non-human animals, it leads to confusion:

We don't know where we are in relation to animals; we don't really know where we want to be, where we should be, in this relationship, which results in a fundamental inability even to formulate, much less resolve, the ethical dilemmas concerning our coexistence with other animals. [...] We want to be in two mutually exclusive kinds of relationships at the same time (close to nature, and apart from it). (Malamud 2010, 13-14)

3. Critical ecofeminism put into practice: Narrating non-human animal subjectivities

In response to dualistic androcentric and anthropocentric worldviews, critical ecofeminism "attempts to take up the slack left by those who focus on various symptoms rather than the causes of oppression", calling for a change in "our own perspectives and those of society from death-oriented to life-oriented" (Gruen 1994, 60-61). Scholars and writers such as Carol Adams address the connection between patriarchal and carnist culture: in her work *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2010), Adams offers a bright analysis of the correlation between the oppression of women and non-human animals, enabled by a cultural mythology that links

masculinity to the literal or metaphorical (read: sexual) consumption of meat (Adams, 2010). Hence, Lori Gruen insists that it is paramount for ecofeminism to not only “analyse the joint oppression of women and nature” but also to “address the oppression of the nonhuman animals with whom we share the planet” and to re-examine our relationship with them (Gruen 1994, 61). Furthermore, various scholars argue that critical ecofeminism is helpful in exposing the intersectionality of oppressions applied to non-human animals such as the realisation that “sexist biases do not stop at the human-animal border... female and male stereotypes [carry] over into the world of animals” (Noske as cited by Gaard 2002, 129).

However, although critical ecofeminism names and analyses the various “systems of oppression (sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, speciesism, anthropocentrism or naturism, colonialism)” (Gaard 2002, 127), its largest contribution is to recognise these as symptoms of a single systemic (patriarchal) power structure. This implies a sense of interconnectedness between all individuals. Indeed, critical ecofeminism enables us to recognise that all are affected by such structure and that we all share one or more conditions, going beyond dualistic frontiers such as gender, ethnicity, species and class, with one undeniable truth on the foreground: we are all expressions of nature.

In this paper, I choose to analyse two documentaries of which none of its directors explicitly have stated to adhere to critical ecofeminist thought, but which I find two extraordinary examples of critical ecofeminism put into practice. While Victor Kossakovsky, director of *Gunda* (2020), a film about a farmed sow, speaks of the urgent need of an “empathy revolution” (Kossakovsky as cited by Aftab 2021), and Andrea Arnold, director of *Cow* (2021), a slice of life of a dairy cow called Luma, addresses the desire “to show a non-human consciousness” (Arnold as cited by Hattenstone 2022), what makes their films strikingly ecofeminist is in my opinion their choice of subject. In fact, both films focus on a farmed female non-human animal, attempting to elicit not just feelings of compassion and empathy throughout methods which will be addressed later, but also of connection and recognition between human and non-human animals. Accordingly, critical ecofeminism is a useful framework to recognise patriarchal oppression beyond species. The theory of intersectionality makes it all the more evident that the non-human animal who is female suffers oppression which is directly linked to her species as well as to her gender. Moreover, if critical ecofeminism aims to expose the bigger picture of underlying power structures, the very choice of a documentary protagonist in which various oppressions converge such as is the case with a farmed, female non-human animal, is in my opinion a political act of not only addressing speciesism, but also sexism and classism. For these reasons, I suggest that both films could be recognised as ecofeminist documentaries.

When looking specifically at sexism and speciesism as singular oppressions, it is remarkable that in audio-visual media, women and non-human animals tend to receive a similar ‘othering’ treatment. Several scholars draw on Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze (1975) to parallel it to the gaze we have

on non-human animals (Mulvey as cited by Malamud 2010; Pick 2018; Mills 2017). Transposing Mulvey's theory of women as objects subjected to a 'to-be-looked-at-ness', Malamud applies it to non-human animals: just as the male gaze devours the woman on screen, so does the human gaze devour the non-human animal (Malamud 2010, 7). Accordingly, the other way around, Adams speaks of "metaphoric sexual butchering" of women, recurring in cinema (Adams 2010, 88). In this line, Anat Pick states that "looking in the cinema is inextricably linked to acts of powered consumption" (Pick 2018, 126). Her notion of 'vegan cinema' is a response to mainstream 'carnist' cinema:

The analogy between looking and eating connects culinary with visual habits. Can we eat without destroying? Look without appropriating? Enjoy without acquiring? Veganism and film share some common problems. What I am calling 'vegan cinema' conjoins looking and eating by construing the notion of the non-devouring gaze to respond positively to the above questions. (Pick 2018, 127)

Thus, in the same way that critical ecofeminism is useful to expose the underlying power structures of the oppression of both non-human animals and women, it offers solutions. How then to achieve a vegan, non-devouring cinema able to convey non-human animal subjectivities?

4. Vegan (sensory) ethnography: 'Cow' (2021) and 'Gunda' (2020)

Although film is a human medium which undoubtedly brings along inherent power differences in relation to the non-human animal, a vegan gaze is indeed possible according to Pick, and implicates the "'letting be' of the object before us". She observes that "[w]hile the devouring look yields pleasure, looking without devouring is akin to love" (Pick 2018, 128).

Documentaries *Gunda* (Kossakovsky 2020) and *Cow* (Arnold 2021) do exactly that: letting the non-human animal protagonist be in front of the camera, without forcing a narrative that is more appetible for the human spectator's eyes. In *Gunda*, the spectator follows the life of a captive sow named Gunda in a Norwegian farm, while in *Cow*, the spectator is taken on a journey into the life of a captive 'dairy cow' called Luma in an English farm. Both films challenge the human spectator to stick to the rhythm of the lives of Gunda and Luma respectively. Indeed, vegan cinema attempts to approach the world without interpretation, presenting and representing reality as far from the romantic "human gaze" as possible. Pick stresses:

Looking and eating are metaphors for the two creative dispositions: romanticism, for which the world is but the vessel of the outpouring of self, and realism that attends to the world impersonally. (Pick 2018, 130)

Vegan cinema does not allow the anthropocentric 'outpouring of the self' and urges the human spectator to take on a bystander's, realist perspective. Natasha Fijn observes how ethnographic documentaries similarly seek "a raw, less idealistic, representation of their subjects", as opposed to nature films which are

driven by a dramaturgical narrative (Fijn 2008, 306). Thus, by staying away from an anthropocentric interpretation of reality as much as possible, an ethnographic representation does the non-human subject justice. Indeed, Fijn suggests that the application of methodologies of ethnographic film in nature documentaries could be helpful to get to understand the non-human significant other better. She states:

At present, humans and animals are conveyed differently in documentaries but they could be subjected to a similar filmmaking process, a process of observational enquiry. Unlike other mediums, film is not reliant on the spoken word to convey understanding and meaning but can effectively show emotion and body language as means of communication. (Fijn 2008, 306)

This fixed distinction in treating the human and non-human animal as a subject in documentary is a flagrant expression of the dualistic thinking dominating anthropocentric culture, and a missed opportunity for cinema to enable an authentic encounter with the non-human animal 'other'. Freeman and Tulloch insist on the non-verbal communicative capacity of the audio-visual medium, which:

Offers opportunities for viewers to visually and viscerally experience nonhuman communication, usually in form of cries and struggles of protest or gazes where fright, frustration, or pain is written on their faces. (Freeman & Tulloch 2013, 9)

Various scenes depict a curious and inquisitive Gunda in respect to the camera, but even more crucial is the last scene of the film, in which Gunda desperately searches her piglets, that have been taken away from her (Kossakovsky 2020, 1:20:00). Her desperation pierces through the screen, and it is exactly at this moment that the human spectator has the opportunity to engage with the non-human animal throughout non-human animal communication: thus, the non-human animal perspective has been successfully integrated in the film. Another such example is a scene in *Cow* in which Luma directly seems to address the spectators with her unjust situation (Arnold 2021, 0:06:53).

Non-verbal communication depends on the senses. Thus, enabling the spectator to embody the experience of non-human animals must rely on sensory approaches such as sensory ethnography. In my opinion, both *Gunda* and *Cow* are films that are succeeding in this intent. Both films remind me of the sensory ethnography approach, which, as Faye Ginsburg puts it, is "[t]he documentary's break from more human-centered styles of ethnographic film" (Ginsburg 2018, 42). Sensory ethnography, a style developed at the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab, aims for a more haptic filming style that involves all the senses as opposed to privileging the visuals, as is usual. In this sense, Mills suggests the notion of 'the Anthropocene' to underline the "primacy of visual representation within the Anthropocene, which, given that for many beings sight is not the primary sense, makes explicit the anthropocentric aspect of understanding 'nature' primarily through looking" (Mills 2017, 96). Sensory ethnography represents a rupture with

anthropocentric visual hegemony, and is thus apt for conveying an interspeciesist, non-human animal's perspective. Or as Fatimah Tobing Rony states, as cited by Belinda Smaill:

Ethnographic cinema is above all a cinema of the body: the focus is on the anatomy of gestures ... and the body of the land they inhabit. (Rony as cited by Smaill 2014, 69)

In *Gunda*, the observational camera captures long shots of the non-human animal protagonist in an intimate way, yet non-devouringly. The camera aims to register neutrally, without any human commentary nor explicit judgement, both the daily events as the greatest tragedies Gunda encounters. The same goes for *Cow*, in which human spectators are invited to experience what Luma's daily life feels like. Throughout a somewhat more chaotic, yet highly pertinent filming style, the spectators are tested on their endurance: can they keep up with the repetitive rhythm of Luma's hardships? Can they stand another day with her, without becoming more and more estranged by the human world? Watching *Cow* and *Gunda* is a bit like becoming Luma and Gunda themselves, as what is often socially accepted becomes ever more absurd. Even the human-produced sounds such as the pop music played during milking time in *Cow* can be felt (read: heard), throughout a non-human animal perspective, as alien and disturbing. Although the cameras in both films never aim to adopt a literal 'point-of-view'-shot, in which the frame represents what the protagonists might be looking at, the documentaries succeed in transforming our anthropocentric perspectives. The tactile proximity reminding of the sensory ethnography approach makes both films, better said both films' protagonists, speak for themselves and get their message across.

Even the choice of representing farmed non-human animals is revolutionary. In stark contrast with the exoticised non-human animals represented in nature films, the filmmakers of *Gunda* and *Cow* turn their camera towards often forgotten non-human animals close to home. In doing so, they are already engaging in a political act, using the filmic medium to reveal the extraordinary in 'the ordinary'. The spectator is challenged to keep watching as daily life unfolds for protagonists Gunda and Luma. In line with Pick's vegan cinema, the spectator is not allowed to devour. The advocacy element is inherently present: no need for human speech to explain a non-human animal's blatant unjust situation.

5. Conclusion

Having observed only some of the tendencies in recent documentaries, aligned with critical ecofeminism, to integrate the non-human perspective, there are yet many questions left unattended, one of which I particularly would like to address here: Should we even look at non-human animals? Although the above-mentioned examples of films undoubtedly provoke an ideological rupture with anthropocentric manners of visual representation of non-human animals, this question has been raised previously by a variety of scholars, such as John Berger (1980), and remains an important one to ask.

I suggest that we must ask ourselves whether the pros outweigh the cons, that is, can films such as *Gunda* and *Cow* provoke the realisation in a spectator's mind in such way that she or he is willing to act? Can a non-human perspective of reality enlighten us in such way that more and more of us become vegan and/or recognise the speciesist culture in which we are living? If the answer on these latter questions is yes, then I dare to suggest, in my humble opinion, that non-human animals would agree to participate, if only we would have the tools to be able to ask them. If film can add non-human perspectives to a very anthropocentric hegemonic worldview, then I would personally welcome any attempt to understand their non-verbal language and let non-human animals speak to the human audience throughout non-anthropocentric documentaries. In the same line, Pick states:

Approaching animals in this way helps to produce an alternative body of knowledge on film, which recognizes, and potentially reframes, the violence done to animals within the representational logic and apparatus of cinema. (Pick 2018, 134)

These documentaries make it hard to find morally sustainable arguments for farming, and even the most skeptical human spectator is divided by cognitive dissonance. The opportunity to profoundly empathise with Luma and Gunda is present all along in these films.

The picture on the front page of this paper is an abstract glimpse of what watching films like *Gunda* and *Cow* can potentially provoke. *Gunda* and *Luma* stare back, reminding us that there are millions of individuals who are wanting to speak to us. Films like *Gunda* and *Cow* teach us that the communication breach is not because they are not speaking up: It is us being unwilling to learn to listen.



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