



## Who's the “wild” one now? The Exploitation of non-human animals as seen in the animal advocacy documentary *The Ghosts in Our Machine*



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PHOTO: Film frame of *The Ghosts in Our Machine*

## Abstract

In our consumer-driven societies, nonhuman animals (NHAs) are widely exploited and mistreated to support our consumption habits. The exploitation of NHAs has become common in numerous multibillion-dollar industries, from food to fashion, cosmetics and medicine. Yet amongst all this, NHAs have allies who advocate for their rights, sentience and life without suffering to be recognized. Nonhuman animal activists have several communication strategies at their disposal, with documentary films being one that have grown in popularity and influence. As such, the purpose of this article is to determine the effectiveness of one NHA advocacy documentary, *The Ghosts in Our Machine* (Marshall 2013), through a theoretical discussion of its audiovisual elements. The analysis finds that the documentary is an exercise of empathy and compassion, focusing on the individuality of its nonhuman animal subjects and depicting the fulfilling lives they may lead away from human exploitation. Contrasting the lives of captive NHAs being exploited in the meat, dairy and fur industries with that of a small cast of rescued individuals, *The Ghosts in Our Machine* (henceforth *Ghosts*) takes a contemplative and intimate approach to expose the viewer to the malpractices often hidden from us. The viewer is not shocked through gory images, but rather made witness to the intimacy of interspecies relations.



### Keywords:

*Nonhuman animal rights, nonhuman animal activism, exploitation of nonhuman animals, animal advocacy documentaries, theoretical analysis.*

## 1. Introduction

Human exploitation of nonhuman animals (NHAs) has become normalized as an afterthought to many people. It should go without saying that nonhuman animals are sentient (Animal Ethics 2021) and have agency (Hribal 2020); possessing a desire to live without suffering. But in truth, too many of us continue to turn a blind eye or fall into cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). The rights of nonhuman animals are not respected by various industries spreading the chain of responsibility of their exploitation, whilst keeping the cruelty and violence away from the general public. The lack of widespread attention given to the mechanisms that inflict suffering on nonhuman animals, coupled with the estrangement between the production processes and people's values and actions, sees how the demand for NHA products is maintained and the general economy is continually ticking. However, it is not a hopeless battle given the clusters of people advocating for the rights, welfare and liberation of nonhuman animals.

There are a host of different communication strategies activists employ, to varying degrees of effectiveness, yet one strategy that has gained greater recognition is the documentary format. While there are several ways to learn about nonhuman animals and nature, the majority of us do so through television shows, documentaries and videos. The trouble with any media format is the potential distortion of the representation of subjects. Media portrayals of nonhuman animals are no exception, but how do advocacy documentaries approach the subject matter?

Advocacy documentaries seek to "examine, explore, or expose a social, cultural and/or economic issue and, in turn, to advocate (explicitly or implicitly) a perspective and/or action regarding that issue" (Corbett 2013, 129). Yet given the flexibility of styles and narratives, advocacy documentaries have increasingly become not only entertaining but "award-worthy and bankable" (Corbett 2013). One such animal advocacy documentary that epitomizes this is *The Cove* (Psihoyos 2009), which went on to win an Academy Award for best documentary feature. *The Cove* took an undercover approach to shed light on the cruel killing of dolphins in Taiji, Japan, for commercial purposes. Yes, it advocates for the killings to stop, but it does so through a narrative construction that, at times, resembles a heist film or a crime thriller. Broadly speaking, how effective are animal advocacy documentaries as an activist communication strategy? And in what ways do such documentaries challenge and subvert the conventions of more popular commercial animal and wildlife documentaries? Through a theoretical discussion, this paper will attempt to answer those questions with an audiovisual analysis of one animal advocacy documentary, *The Ghosts in Our Machine* (Marshall 2013).

## 2. The focus on the individual in *The Ghosts in Our Machine*

"Wildlife", nature and other nonhuman animal documentaries, commercial and non-commercial alike, have a problematic tendency to distort reality in the eyes of audiences. They present nature to be both stunning yet horrifying, containing the "potential chaos of nature within the thrilling but also generally romanticized visions of the wild" (Sperb 2016, 208). Or they seek to entice viewers through over-sensationalizing life in nature, especially portraying predator animals to be violent and bloodthirsty when really, they hunt every so often. Animal advocacy documentaries, on the other hand, look to undermine these conventions. They present nature as affected by humans and the problematic relations of dominance over, and exploitation of, nonhuman individuals. Advocacy documentaries draw attention to the political economy that governs nonhuman animal oppression and the cruel practices that occur in a lot of industries. *The Ghosts in Our Machine* is one such documentary. Directed by Liz Marshall, it follows Jo-Anne McArthur, a photojournalist and nonhuman animal activist, and her life's work to photograph, document and expose the often unseen exploitation of nonhuman individuals in the food, fur and research industries. The documentary makes several audiovisual and narrative choices in its approach to advocating for NHAs, some of which will be discussed below.

A prominent visual choice the filmmakers made was in the use of close-ups and extreme close-ups of nonhuman animals. This choice, to some extent, replicates McArthur's photographic language, which seeks to concentrate on the personhood of each of her subjects. In one sequence, a series of extreme close-ups on the eyes of individual nonhuman animals is followed by McArthur stating that "the eyes are so soulful". The cinematography underlines this sentiment, capturing the expressiveness of each individual nonhuman animal. To express that they should not be seen as any less valuable than human animals, they are shown to occupy the same types of frames as McArthur and other human subjects. In cinematic language, the close-up connotes intimacy and works to de-objectify the NHAs. Whereas commercial "wildlife" documentaries tend to mislead viewers with the use of telephoto zoom lens — giving the impression that it is possible to get up close and personal with free-roaming animals — *Ghosts in Our Machine* physically brings the camera close to its nonhuman subjects (albeit ones in captivity), without zooming from a distance. These shots also play out as both a figurative and literal symbolism, a commentary on how these individuals are invisible "ghosts" in our capitalist machinery but are no less there, suffering and demanding to be seen.

*Ghosts* further argues that nonhuman animals are soulful, unique individuals with agency, through a central cast of NHAs: Fanny and Sonny, a rescued cow and calf living on Farm Sanctuary in New York State; Maggie and Abbey, two purpose-bred beagles who have been adopted by a couple; Ron, a chimpanzee who spent 30 years of his life as a research subject in a laboratory; amongst other NHAs, who are named and listed in the credits before the human animals who featured in the documentary. Several of these individuals have intimate connections with McArthur, which in turn demonstrates interspecies relations and co-existence is possible without the need for one to exploit the other. In addition, the nonhuman individuals are shown to have personalities and attributes. And more importantly, their personal stories are conveyed to viewers, providing substance to their appearances thus eliciting compassion. These individuals exist on a spectrum of NHAs with certain species being more valued than others. Wildlife or "exotic animals" elicit fascination for their free-living nature and in some cases, endangered status, whilst companion animals receive the affection of humans given their domestication and ability to cohabit the modern household. But along this spectrum there are the invisible individuals whose presence large, multibillion-dollar industries continually keep in the shadows. McArthur's photography and Marshall's documentary go some way in correcting this. Their work demonstrates that although these individuals are not widely seen, their pain and suffering is no less real, and raises the question: Why should not they receive the affection reserved for free-roaming and companion animals?

### 3. An alternative approach to activism

Animal activists and liberationists are often represented by some media as violent vandals who stop at nothing to save nonhuman animals and fight for their rights. Documentaries such as *The Cove* (Psihoyos 2009), *Blackfish*

(Cowperthwaite 2013) and *Cowspiracy: The Sustainable Secret* (Andersen and Kuhn 2014) have rebutted this reputation, but it is true they still portray animal activists as individuals who do not shirk in the face of authority or popular opinion. *The Ghosts in Our Machine* takes a different approach in centering the narrative around the intricacies and struggles of McArthur's mission. By choosing to have a primary human subject, the documentary allows viewers to empathize with the cause of nonhuman animals more openly and readily. It does so by understanding that "empathy cannot be coerced or imposed, it must be nurtured" (Drew 2016, 212). And it is nurtured through employing McArthur as the emotional bridge that connects viewers to the individual NHAs, helping us to hear their stories, to see their individual virtues and, ultimately, sympathize with them. What is more, McArthur's form of activism is one that is covert rather than retaliatory, interventionist or aggressive. Her espionage-like missions, photographing captive individuals in fur farms, slaughterhouses and laboratories bring to light the disturbing hidden truths without the need of property damage or confrontations between parties of differing ideologies. Simply put, her manner of endearing herself to others (human and nonhuman alike) as well as to viewers, makes her cause easy to support.

If there is one significant challenge for animal advocacy documentaries, it is that of overwhelming viewers with too many graphic images of exploitation and cruelty which could in turn be counterproductive. It can be so because "the more transparent animal atrocities become, the more the public could become desensitized to their suffering" (Drew 2016, 204). This desensitization or "compassion fatigue", is the point which "images of suffering in fact elicit nothing but the denial and inactivity" (Aaltola 2014, 28). Although *the Ghosts in Our Machine* does portray graphic images, it is careful to balance them out with positive ones. The documentary relies on juxtaposing positive images of NHAs at the New York farm sanctuary, their adopted homes or elsewhere, with footage of captured individuals in cages or trucks. This juxtaposition is not only an exercise in interspecies empathy, but essentially illustrates the lives that nonhuman animals can lead if they are not confined to a cage, victims of suffering or condemned to slaughter. The difference seen in the individuals who have been rescued and rehabilitated from the unfortunate many who could not be saved is stark.

Marshall's documentary largely consists of original footage following segments of McArthur's life and missions/investigations she embarks on. It also incorporates her photographs from the locations shown and parts of her editing process, effectively bringing viewers through every stage of her work until the final product. This acts as a form of inclusivity and, rather than simply telling viewers to believe in the cause, it convinces them through involving them in McArthur's triumphs and downfalls. There is also the use of stock footage depicting factory farms, slaughterhouses and research laboratories, edited with voice-overs of various scholars and activists detailing the arguments on the importance of animal sentience and agency. The stock footage, intercut with voice-overs, is clever for it allows viewers to process the arguments rather than feel patronized by the presence of an expert in the frame. *Ghosts'* largely

observational style and slow pace creates an overall contemplative ambiance, one that does not overwhelm viewers but gently urges them to reflect on the issues at hand.

Perhaps one downside of *Ghosts* is that it offers no real solutions or answers to the problems it documents. Whereas documentaries such as *The Cove* (Psihoyos 2009) and *Blackfish* (Cowperthwaite 2013) “are single issue films that expose specific atrocities or injustices and excoriate particular practices (e.g., the Japanese dolphin trade, aquatic theme parks)” (Drew 2016, 207), *Ghosts* isn't. Single issue films are better suited in mobilizing viewers with a call to action, be it by boycotting products, food chains, zoos, aquaria or other means. But *Ghosts* does not possess that factor given the enormity of issues it covers. It does well to uncover the façade of the various industries that exploit nonhuman animals, yet its inability to offer meaningful solutions is understandable. No one could be faulted for attempting to address such an expansive issue, but have no specific solutions. The structural practices these industries have are so embedded and protected that it would take an unprecedented change to overhaul. What Marshall's film can offer is evidence of interspecies bonds between animals — humans and nonhumans alike. It demonstrates what empathy could look like and what lives nonhuman animals may live, if only their rights to do so are acknowledged.

#### 4. Moral shock and cognitive dissonance

If wildlife and nature documentaries idealize and sentimentalize, amongst other representations, free-roaming nonhuman animals and the natural world, advocacy documentaries in part, look to deconstruct those visions. They do so by stressing human agency and intervention into the worlds and lives of nonhuman animals; uncovering the complex structures and capitalist machineries that govern current day existence (as seen in *the Ghosts in Our Machine*). One strategy for animal advocates is addressing the “meat paradox”, the dilemma that people “enjoy eating meat but few enjoy harming or killing other sentient creatures” (Loughnan, Haslam and Bastian 2010, 156). This inconsistency of both loving animals but continually consuming animal products has been theorized as a form of “cognitive dissonance”, in which a belief and a practice are in conflict, creating an unpleasant emotional state that people are motivated to resolve (Festinger 1957). Such a development is due in part to industries — meat, dairy, fashion, cosmetics, medicine amongst others — obscuring the truth of the production process from the general public. The gap between fathoming an image of live nonhuman animals to seeing consumer products on a shelf is what keeps demand rolling. One strategy that activists use and is seen in various degrees in *Ghosts*, and to a greater extent in *The Cove* (Psihoyos 2009), is moral shock.

Moral shocks occur when “an event or situation raises such a sense of outrage in people that they become inclined toward political action, even in the absence of a network of contacts” (Jasper and Poulsen 1995, 498). That sense of outrage can be stirred in several ways, such as releasing graphic images or

exposing heinous industry practices. *The Cove* effectively does both and managed to mobilize clusters of the public to condemn and even travel to Taiji, Japan, to protest the killing of dolphins. But it does so through a problematic cultural and moral relativist lens, creating an "us" vs. "them" narrative. It is easy to denounce a culture different from one's own and whose traditions/practices are alien to oneself. *The Cove* fails to address the problematic nature of a largely "Western" culture taking a morally high ground in criticizing a people for killing and consuming dolphins when they continue to kill and consume cows, chickens and pigs. *Ghosts in Our Machine* looks to rectify this, addressing the dominant industries in the "Western world". For this it can be lauded for its efforts — so too can McArthur's work — yet it remains to be seen whether the general public or wider culture is willing to accept change. *Ghosts* only received limited or niche screenings when its expansive criticism of multiple industries demands to be seen by the many. McArthur knows firsthand that cognitive dissonance remains prevalent, having been turned down by publishing editors who claim the wider public are not ready, or perhaps unwilling to see her powerful yet disturbing photographs. Activists can only continue to advocate, even if it often seems futile, in hopes that one day, the drastic changes in human-nonhuman animal relations will occur.

## 5. Conclusion

Animal advocacy documentaries have seen a steady rise in their numbers and reputation. They are timely reminders of the effects human agency has over nonhuman animals and the cruel exploitation that occurs on so many different levels. These documentaries further solidify their value in undermining the often distorted and idealized portrayals of nonhuman animals and the natural world, seen in commercial and non-commercial "wildlife" documentaries. They also have the capacity to bring to light the rarely seen systems of exploitation that continually occur in our capitalist societies, with *The Ghosts in Our Machine* being one exemplary case study, as it follows photojournalist and animal activist Jo-Anne McArthur on her life's work to document the struggles of nonhuman individuals in the food, fur and research industries. The documentary takes a contemplative, almost meditative approach in depicting the invisible "ghosts" whose suffering is neglected. *Ghosts* uses its camera to emphasize the individuality of each nonhuman cast member, providing their names and in some instances, conveying their personal traits. The close-ups and extreme close-ups these individuals frequently occupy express the intimacy McArthur shares with them, which only strengthens the exercise of interspecies empathy the documentary seeks to achieve.

*The Ghosts in Our Machine* does not look to patronize or ostracize its viewers nor does it simply intend to shock them through graphic imagery. Instead, it asks for them to reflect on their complicity and shows them what could be; depicting the content lives nonhuman animals can live if only their rights are acknowledged. The juxtaposition of captive animals and rescued individuals is a distinct communication strategy, one that differs from simply overwhelming audiences with gory images of exploitation, but is no less

effective. By showing positive images, the filmmakers illustrate the lives we frequently rob from these individuals. *Ghosts* is a step in the right direction, whilst McArthur's work should be widely commended, and in spite of cognitive dissonance, an unwillingness to change, compassion fatigue or powerful industries keeping wraps over their cruel practices, the rights and freedom of nonhuman animals remains an uphill battle. Animal advocacy documentaries are no less valuable for trying, they only need to keep doing so, finding different approaches to convince the general public. Change is possible but it rarely comes easy.



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