

Documentary Film and Animal Modernity in *Raw Herring* and *Sweetgrass*

Belinda Smail

IN HIS FILM *GRIZZLY MAN* (2005), WERNER HERZOG EXPLORES THE EVENTS LEADING UP to the moment when Timothy Treadwell, the leading human character in the film, is killed and eaten by a bear. This incident occurs after Treadwell had spent thirteen summers living in close proximity with bears in Alaska's Katmai National Park and Reserve. While Treadwell had given names to a number of bears, it is an unfamiliar animal that takes his life. Herzog crafts the film around footage shot by Treadwell himself during his time in the park. *Grizzly Man* offers a singularly detailed account of one human's relationship with the non-human animal world, one that offers a rare and somewhat anomalous image of animals striking back, temporarily exerting dominion over humans. The more recent documentary, *Blackfish* (2013), echoes this theme, with its investigation of fatal attacks on humans by a performing killer whale in which archival images again play an important role, and invite viewer curiosity about documentary spectacle and the rationale of animal agency.

It is instructive that both of these documentaries frame wild animals in relation to modern institutions that enable human management of animal lives. In *Blackfish* this is the Seaworld marine park, the oceanic equivalent of the zoo, an arena for containing and gazing at non-domesticated animals. In *Grizzly Man* it is the national park, a geographical zone of wilderness marked out for conservation. Sueng-Hoon Jeong and Dudley Andrew note Treadwell's constant

disagreements with park management and write that his ‘holy war against the Park Service replays the symbolic distinction between nature and civilization, a distinction and a war to which animals are indifferent’ (5). It is possible, however, to read into this distinction an existential truism—though animals may appear ‘indifferent’ to human modernity, they are constantly subjected to and defined by it.

These two highly visible feature-length films punctuate a large corpus of documentary film concerned with the intersection between the human world of modernity and the world of non-human animals. They stage in exemplary form a scene of revenge, in which sudden acts of violence seem to symbolically avenge centuries of exploitation. I wish to extrapolate from this a broader potential for animal insurrection through an investigation of contemporary documentary film, identifying a terrain in which the representation of animals is becoming markedly more complex and multilayered.

In this essay I look in detail at the much-discussed *Sweetgrass* (2009) and a more recent film, *Raw Herring* (2013), two documentaries that can be viewed in the context of an expanding film culture focused on human impacts on the non-human world. These filmic examples are concerned with agriculture and fishing respectively and choose to examine life working with animals by employing the observational ‘long take’ of the camera. I wish to approach these films as representing just one aspect of a contemporary archive of non-fiction films that render relationships between humans and animals, implicitly casting this relationship against a background narrative of modernity and modernization, in particular in relation to the ethnographic gaze and the changing conditions for human labour. I position this discussion in relation to narratives that locate the animal in anthropocentric modernity and history, while asking how animal ontology and materiality might be accounted for in the non-fiction moving image.

Animal Modernity

One prevalent narrative about animals in modernity revolves around how they have become inaccessible. With the decline of feudal agrarianism and the rise of the machine age, we have less close proximity with animals. They have receded in the human imagination as they have increasingly become the raw material for commodities. In an era of factory farming, genetic manipulation and mass feedlots, living animals have receded from the daily lives of most humans. John Berger articulates this in his famous maxim that in modernity ‘animals disappear’. Berger’s story is one of transforming metaphors. For him, the fading figure of the animal is replaced by the spectacle and the sign. While Berger oscillates between discussing the treatment of *actual* animals in history and changing *metaphors* of animality, Akira Lippit, is almost wholly concerned with

the animal as an epistemological category. In his influential study of the animal in modernity, Lippit examines sites of mediation, technologies of knowledge and metaphors of modernity.

An explanatory frame, however, that focuses only on the animal as sign or epistemological object is not sufficient for understanding the range of approaches in the documentary culture I refer to, or the way cinema grapples with the material body of the animal. Necessarily modernity is a term that indicates and draws on the history of human enterprise since the enlightenment. I pose the term 'animal modernity' as a way to explore what is at stake in attending to the intersection of animals, representation and history. Lippit and Berger are not concerned with the modernity of animals, but rather with history as a form of knowledge produced by humans and concerning human actions and perspectives. Erica Fudge confronts this as an erasure, addressing the problem of writing a 'history of animals' as a methodological one, and in doing so, brings to the fore the anthropocentrism of understandings of history and modernity, in which animals are accessed only through the proliferation of human texts about them. Focusing on the written archive, Fudge notes that such texts more consistently signify the problem of the human rather than the existential reality of animals, nullifying and subordinating the material body of the animal (7). She argues for the conditional utility of the rhetorical: 'Material and rhetorical are linked in their context, and the history that recognizes this can, in turn, force a reassessment of the material through its analysis of the written record' (11). At stake for Fudge, then, is a rethinking of modernity through a focus on the non-human.

However, I wish to emphasize the performative potential of the visual in such a history, and the potential of the moving image in particular. Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman suggest a special place for images and symbolism that draw on the likeness of animals, arguing that there is an element that escapes the anthropocentrism of rhetorical or representational deployment. They refer to this as 'magnetism' and 'the active reality of animals' (12). This is a form of excess that entails the possibility for a *more than human* rendering of history that might contest anthropocentric modernity. For Daston and Mitman, this excess is the reason animals 'perform' in culture in a manner that cannot be reduced solely to human design:

Animals are not just one symbol out of many, one of the innumerable possibilities to externalize and dramatize what humans think. They are privileged, and they are performative. They do not just stand for something, as a word stands for a thing or a rhetorical trope figures something else; they do something. Even in cases of complete ventriloquism, in which thinking with animals is reduced to a blatant projection of human thoughts,

feelings and fantasies, there is some added value in the fact that the blank screen for these projections is an animal. (12)

The expressive potential of animals described in this passage exists, notably, in a lineage with the work of André Bazin. His theories of film realism offered the inverse of this position, but with similar ends: rather than the image accessing the magnetism of animals, for Bazin, embodied animals were core examples of what he described as the 'ontology of the cinematographic'. Both theorize representation and how animals convey meaning. My term 'animal modernity' brings into relief the question of how history has been rendered in humanist terms, shaping and constructing perceptions of the non-human. Following Fudge's lead, I seek to further locate animals in modernity by attending to the processes through which they have been perceived, most notably in regards to cinema. I therefore extend Bazin's focus on film realism to attend more specifically to documentary, with its ties to science and observation.

I suggest that acknowledgement of the historical, formal and narrative particularities of the documentary moving image might provoke a rethinking of the animal in history. Crucially, such an understanding relies upon grappling with the interaction between rhetorical animals, which are a projection of human desires and identity, and animal ontology and embodiment, or a sensory/epistemological experience of this, as the camera mediates it. Looking more closely at the presence of animals in documentary moving images offers the possibility of ascertaining how such images might evoke a material animal in a manner that the written word, or symbolic systems more broadly, cannot. In some respects the fiction or non-fiction status of a film is of little importance.

Archivist and film historian Jan Christopher Horak describes how little attention documentary filmmakers have historically paid to animals:

As a casual subject of moving images, animals have been present ever since Eadweard Muybridge photographed his animal locomotion series, yet within classical documentary forms, animals have seemingly remained ghettoized in the scientific and educational sphere, only intermittently the subject of mainstream theatrical experience. (460)

While animals were not the focal point of classical documentary, their presence and meaning is understated in Horak's characterization. It is possible to trace a significant epistemological relationship between the non-fiction image and animals even if, at times, animals are in the margins of the frame. As Horak notes, this extends back to Eadweard Muybridge's much-cited pre-cinema proto-animations in the 1870s that captured the movement of a galloping horse and birds in flight. The perceived veracity of the photographic image has consistently

testified ever since to both the dynamism and the otherness of animals. Animals have functioned as both the evidence of the scientific efficacy of cinematic technology and the object of popular scientific exploration, long-standing preoccupations of non-fiction and documentary film.

Science and education, both aligned with what Bill Nichols refers to as the discourses of sobriety, underpinned much documentary or non-fiction practice and became closely tied to the capacity for drama and entertainment in early cinema. These discourses informed, and made use of, representations of animals in important ways. Relevant modes of film practice expand out to include not only early actualities and topicalities but also the sub genres of ethnography, amateur naturalism, travel films, adventure films, and avant garde experimentation. Films that fall into these categories are diverse and include *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903), *Nanook of the North* (1922), *The Great White Silence* (1924), *Heia Safari* (1928), the nature experiments of prolific filmmakers Percy Smith (*The Acrobatic Fly* (1910)) and Jean Painlevé (*The Seahorse* (1934)) and the formal innovations of *The Private Life of the Gannets* (1934). With the advent of 'direct cinema' the works of Fredric Wiseman stand as pivotal works in the representation of animals in documentary (*Primate* (1974), *Meat* (1976), *Zoo* (1993)). In each of these examples the capacity for cinema to observe its animal subject in space and time is crucial.

Since this time the representation of the animal in contemporary documentary has proliferated, particularly through the expanding sub-genre of the wildlife film.¹ This has become tied into what Gregg Mitman refers to as a contemporary 'green wave' of film and television, enabled by the popular penchant for 'eco-chic' (214) that is underpinned not only by commercial imperatives but also by ethical and environmental concerns. He cites that of the '\$631 million in gross revenues earned by 275 documentaries released between 2002 and 2006, \$163.1 million came from eight wildlife documentaries' (216). Another term that has gained momentum in the popular press is 'eco-doc,' which describes a broader body of films that critique corporate dominance and investigate and advocate on issues concerning the destruction of the environment and natural resources. This movement can be couched in the even wider frame of the documentary revival that has seen, over the last two decades, the increased popularity and circulation of feature length documentary. There now exists a multilayered body of film and video that conveys an interest in the relation between human and non-human worlds. The broadest version of the green wave owes much not only to subscription television, such as *Animal Planet*, *The National Geographic Channel*

¹ See Cynthia Chris, Derek Bousé and Gregg Mitman for expansive studies that attend to this phenomenon.

and *The Discovery Channel*, but also to specialist and non-specialist film festivals, and online distribution mechanisms such as *Netflix* and *YouTube*.

There is work to be done to explore the green wave, not only its highly visible products, but also films that exist on the less visible fringe. What is called for is an approach that accounts for the aesthetic and narrative signification of animals in modernity and within traditions of documentary. This would allow for a critical account of how animals are rendered in ways that align with or depart from established forms and ideologies. It would also facilitate conclusions based in the kind of empiricism lacking in Berger's work. Films provide rich evidentiary material of both human and non-human histories and modernities, enabling a historical sensibility that can account for consistencies *and* paradoxes, ethics *and* transgressions. Such an approach might offer compelling ways of viewing and understanding new clusters of animal documentary.

These clusters include the rising number of documentaries about the instrumental rationality of the food system as animals increasingly become the object of large-scale factory farming. Films such as *King Corn* (2007), *Meat the Truth* (2008), *Food, Inc.* (2008), *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004) and *American Meat* (2013) represent agricultural practices in ways that centre on animal slaughter and meat as signifiers for crisis in the industrial food system. It also includes the large volume of examples that are concerned with the sublime of the Arctic and Antarctic wilderness such as *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), *Being Caribou* (2007), *Frozen Planet* (2011) and *The White Planet (La Planète Blanche)* (2006). Many of these films reprise the adventure narratives of early cinema, posing nature both through the lens of scientific knowledge and as a spectacle to be captured by advanced moving image technology. A growing number of documentaries about fish and fishing demonstrate how the global geopolitics of late modernity is melded with the politics of race and colonialism in ways that either revise or repeat entrenched characterizations in films such as *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004), *The Last Ocean* (2012), *End of the Line* (2007) and *The Cove* (2009). Alternatively, films such as *Mine* (2009) and *Companions to None* (2007) attend to narratives of care and companion animals and the remarkable *Bestiaire* (2012) depicts the zoo environment in a manner that challenges conceptualizations of control, power and the cinematic gaze.

While films across these broad categories do not all necessarily offer explicit messages of environmental consciousness, they play to and enable an ecological imaginary that has gained momentum in the popular consciousness in the wake of the environmental movement and growing awareness of the potential for environmental collapse. This encompasses both Scott MacDonald's view of an avant-garde eco-cinema as 'a retraining of perception, as a way of offering an

alternative to conventional media spectatorship' (109),² and a belief that popular cinema can also facilitate an ecological imaginary.

Bringing the question of 'retraining perception' to the depiction of animals, I turn now to *Sweetgrass* and *Raw Herring*, films that dwell on the audio-visual representation animals in the human worlds of agriculture and fishing respectively. These films are, I argue, concerned with a certain style evolved from documentary and ethnography, and can be situated among an international group of examples that includes feature length films such as *Elsewhere* (2000), *The Moo Man* (2012), *Leviathan* (2012), *Our Daily Bread* (2005), *La Libertad* (2001) and *Los Herederos* (2008). All of these documentaries privilege an observational style of filmmaking, following events as they occur in front of the camera and preferring long takes that capture action uninterrupted by edits

Animals, Ethnography and Long Take Cinema

Some films in the group I have outlined have already been identified as offering new directions in documentary and/or non-fiction film. Unsurprisingly, *Sweetgrass* is frequently at the heart of these pronouncements of the new. Robert Koehler identifies a contemporary movement in non-fiction that coincides with the rise of slow cinema, inaugurating a new stylistic agenda. This new non-fiction is dominated by 'agricultural activities' and populated by 'humans working on the surface of the earth' ('Agrarian' 13). Alternatively, Anna Grimshaw poses *Sweetgrass* in relation to 'the emergence of a new agenda in ethnographic filmmaking' (249) and she elaborates on observational and expressive aesthetics, noting how the film blurs the categories of 'art' and 'anthropology'. Also referencing an ethnographic frame, Anat Pick identifies a new avant-garde, one defined by 'cinema's potential for shaping another optical reality, one not centred strictly on human form, perception and identity' ('Ecovisions'). When taken together these observations suggest a body of films emerging at the intersection of anthropology, innovative cinematic endeavour and conceptualizations of animal ontology.

Ethnographic film, as observational film practice taken up within the discipline of anthropology, has a particular interest in showing and understanding the social structures in which individuals live and work. Animals have consistently been interlopers in the ethnographic endeavour, appearing alongside or as part of the human lifeworld. Popular adventure films provide the most prevalent images of animals in cinema in the silent period. On the cusp of the invention of

² Further, MacDonald views the retraining of perception as a way of also 'providing something like a garden—an "Edenic" respite from conventional consumerism—within the machine of modern life, as modern life is embodied by the apparatus of media' ('Toward an Eco-Cinema' 109).

documentary as a distinct form in the 1920s, these popular 'factual films' married drama, often heroic drama, and the veracity of non-fiction. Well-known filmmakers Merian C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack were responsible for a number of prominent examples that drew on the narrative potential of animals. These include *Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness* (1927), set in Thailand, and *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (1925), a film about nomadic livestock droving in Iran. Notably, the two went on to direct *King Kong* in 1933. These are surpassed, however, by Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), a film that brought Arctic animals into focus alongside the dramatization of Inuit life, and that has come to exemplify the ethnographic filmmaking endeavour of the early twentieth century.

Beyond the silent period, ethnographic filmmaking develops in ways that constantly blur the boundaries of empiricism and art practice, and filmmakers that have consciously pushed the limits of this boundary include David and Judith MacDougall and Robert Gardiner.³ The McDougalls' 1972 film *To Live with Herds* offers an important example in this tradition that views pastoral practices through the lens of ethnographic innovation. In the adjacent tradition of observational or direct cinema, extreme manifestations of the observational style often produce excursions into the avant-garde, engaging in the project of 'retraining perception' in the manner that MacDonald describes. In this context I draw on the term to indicate the filmic task of asking us to think anew, particularly in relation to the non-human world. These examples of the avant-garde undertake this task through focusing attention on the visible. Bill Viola's *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* (1986) is notable in this respect while Fredric Wiseman's oeuvre, most notably *Primate* (1974), *Meat* (1976) and *Zoo* (1993), offers the most sustained attention to the animal in the observational avant-garde. These documentaries locate animals and humans in institutions that, within circumscribed domains, organize social existence. Through the careful structuring and ordering of footage, these films present, by way of Wiseman's situated perspective, ethnographies about environments in which humans objectify animals in the institutions of American life.

Also exploring human worlds that are populated with animals, *Sweetgrass* and *Leviathan*, both produced by Harvard University's Sensory Ethnography Lab, are two of the most critically-acclaimed examples of observational documentary in recent years. Both films self-consciously appeal to the senses of the viewer in ways that reference phenomenological approaches. Knowledge of humans and animals is conveyed through the audiovisual qualities of the worlds represented. The synthesis of the empiricism of traditional anthropology and sensory

³ Catherine Russell persuasively makes the case for this blurring of boundaries in her study of experimental ethnography.

experience is not confined to the work of filmmakers in the Harvard group, but has been theorized more widely as a new modality in the discipline. It has developed alongside the 'species turn', often associated with the influence of Donna Haraway's work *When Species Meet*. Grimshaw describes the new ethnographic approach from the perspective of the researcher or filmmaker in the field as illustrating 'a growing interest in the senses, embodied practice, and ways of knowing that have been variously described as sensuous, existential, or phenomenological anthropology' (256). The notion of lifeworld that is the focus of Grimshaw's approach has origins in phenomenological approaches, invoking here the *Lebenswelt* theorized by Edmund Husserl. Following Husserl, the lifeworld is a way of apprehending the objective, mutually held interpretation of the world that is also perceptual and sensory.⁴ Notably, Husserl's lifeworld represents an attempt to bring together subjective experience and the shared social structures in which we live, opening the way for understanding the sensory through ethnographic practice.

In these films the observational camera lingers on the environment, the bodies of humans at work and the animals who exist alongside them, echoing Fatimah Tobing Rony's determination that 'ethnographic cinema is above all a cinema of the body: the focus is on the anatomy of gestures ... and on the body of the land they inhabit' (111). Offering a different set of concerns, films about labour contribute another dimension to the ethnographic imagination. Even though they are seldom referred to as ethnography, they nevertheless often present investigations into the subjects, bodies and meaning of working life. In the instances where humans labour on and with animals, their performative and indexical rendering can be considered as contributing to Tobing Rony's cinema of the body.

The sections that follow explore how the long take functions as a particular documentary mechanism for framing life and labour. The agrarian visions in these films should be considered not only in relation to documentary conventions and histories, but more specifically in terms of their intervention into the tradition of observational cinema. Rendering a sphere of work that poses humans in proximity with animals, these films are distinctive in their consistent use of long unedited shots. In the following section I draw on the insights offered

⁴ Husserl poses the notion of a transcendental subjectivity, and thus argues for a commonly shared perception that assumes that similar beings will experience the world in similar ways: 'The lifeworld does have, in all its relative features, a *general structure*. This general structure, to which everything that exists relatively is bound, is not itself relative. We can attend to it in its generality and, with sufficient care, fix it for once and for all in a way equally accessible for all' (139; italics in original). While Husserl's notion leaves open the possibility for any being that has the capacity for intentional consciousness to be included in this intersubjectivity, I am concerned only with the human lifeworld.

by Bazin to explore how the long take is deployed to formally engage the viewer in the vitality of the lifeworld on screen.⁵ Well suited to this task, Bazin's approaches are influenced by theories associated with existentialism and phenomenology. In this respect, lifeworld is experienced as a mode of spectatorship with the viewer asked to share in the structures of life and environments perceived by those working the oceans and the land.

Raw Herring and Sweetgrass

Raw Herring, directed by Dutch filmmakers Leonard Retel Helmrich and his sister Hetty Naaijkens-Retel Helmrich,⁶ focuses on the two remaining vessels in a once strong Dutch fleet that fished the North Sea for the traditional delicacy the *Hollandse Nieuwe* (Dutch New Herring). The opening frame shows the boat set against the horizon with a title that states: 'For centuries the Dutch fishermen are the best herring fishers of Europe. They pass their skills on from father to son. But times are changing'. This is the only point at which the filmmakers convey an informing social narrative, beyond that which is articulated in conversation by the on-screen actors. Significantly, the nature of these 'changing times' becomes clear as the film unfolds, revealing the problem of declining fish stocks and the potential demise of the herring industry. The title also indicates another issue in the film—the attention to the masculine endeavour of fishing, life on board ship and the patriarchal lineage of this traditional labour.

The structure of *Raw Herring* demonstrates a three-part narrative that consists of the search for herring, the vigorous scene of fishing and processing the fish on the ship, and the marketing of the fish on shore. The cyclical nature of this endeavour is indicated in the closing scenes as a boy tearfully farewells his father as he returns to the boat for another stint on the ocean. The first half of the film also establishes the importance of the herring fleet for the community on shore, including the families of fishermen. Both the seascapes and the lives and work of the men who fish the seas is conveyed through long takes, often in close proximity with the subject and with a camera that moves fluidly around the action. This exemplifies a hallmark of the filmmakers, who refer to this as 'single shot cinema' (Ponsoldt). The search for schools of herring occupies the first half of the film and the long takes emphasize this duration.

⁵ I recognize that my analysis has clear parallels with discussions of 'slow cinema' particularly the emphasis on the long take and the development of a Bazinian analytical frame (Flanagan, 2008). However, rather than attending to these parallels, I am more interested in an analytical frame that accounts for animals and humans together within documentary traditions. This is the reason for my focus on labour and ethnographic cinema.

⁶ The pair is known internationally for the award-winning trilogy *Eye of the Day*, *Shape of the Moon* and *Position Among the Stars*, which is shot in a similar 'long take' style to *Raw Herring*.

As the vessels move through different areas of the ocean, the location name and the coordinates appear to the side of the screen, beginning with the ship at Devils Hole in the North Sea, 56 N/0.14 E. These indicate a particular relationship between space, time and the subjectivity of the fishermen who presumably have precise knowledge of locations in the seemingly indistinguishable expanse of ocean. The captain speaks on the radio to the other Dutch boat in the vicinity, describing the search and the movements of a nearby Norwegian ship, also searching for herring. The camera lingers on the bridge, capturing the conversations over the radio. At one point the captain says into the radio: 'A few years ago there was still plenty of fish at 57 and 58 degrees but the last few years we've had to search higher up north'. His reference to the latitude location gives particular significance to the coordinates shown on the screen.

Challenging the notion that montage is the essence of cinema, Bazin emphasizes the importance of lived time and its relationship to duration. This relationship is demonstrated in *Raw Herring*, which draws attention to the waiting involved in the search for the herring. Bazin celebrates the seal hunt in *Nanook of the North* as one of the earliest examples of his views about the cinematic expression of duration:

The camera cannot see everything at once but it makes sure not to lose any part of what it chooses to see. What matters to Flaherty, confronted with Nanook hunting the seal, is the relation between Nanook and the animal; the actual length of the waiting period. Montage could suggest the time involved. Flaherty however confines himself to showing the actual waiting period; the length of the hunt is the very substance of the image, its true object. (27)

While it is notable that Bazin's example is one that includes animals and hunting, more important is the way he describes the length of hunt as the substance of the image.

Time passes and the time of the image aligns with the time of viewing to produce the experience of waiting. Malin Wahlberg describes how Bazin 'accounts for the measure of a take and the experience of gestures unfolding in real time, which is accomplished through the creative variation of change and stasis within a single *plan-séquence*' (33). Representing days on the ocean, the search for herring extends well beyond the time of the seal hunt. Multiple long takes convey this duration and while this is a compromise of Bazin's notion of temporality and objectivity within a single take, it nevertheless compellingly renders waiting and its frustrations through the detailed observation of life. It is an ethnography that places the accent on bodies, gestures and seascape, exemplifying Rony's

characterization. Time on the sea is drawn out with the slow rhythm of the movements of boats and the stasis of the captain at the radio. Shot with the sea out the window in the background he speaks into the radio: 'What shall we do, Wim? Follow those Norwegian boats? I don't know, we've got nowhere else to go. Yesterday he caught some fish to the North, at 59 degree West'. The conversation continues with a discussion about the inclement wind as the image cuts to a long shot outside, looking down on the boat from high above the bow, the horizon line a pronounced curve across the frame behind. There is movement in the frame with the boat slowly pulling up alongside its sister ship in the fleet. This shot is held for almost a minute.

At the mid-point of the film the inertia of the expedition transforms, the pace of the film shifts and, with the appearance of the fish, *Raw Herring* becomes more firmly realized as a story of labour organized around the textures and life of the non-human world. The duration of waiting has already established a tension between the fish and men on board boat. This adds to the tension between life on board boat and that on shore. The close up images of the movements of the men with ropes and pulleys, wearing bright blue and orange wet weather gear have a surreal quality. The fish eye lens skews proportion and adds to this quality. When the fish come on board in the bulging net, the camera goes beneath the waves, showing the texture of the mass of fish in the blue green water. It also looks down the line of the net as it is reeled in, offering extreme close ups of fish caught in the net, mouths gaping. The fish disappear into the hold in a silvery flow. Once the fishing begins, it is not only men and machinery that are instilled with dynamism. Human labour and animal productivity (the herring producing fish for human consumption) are part of the same sphere in which energy and life are emphasized. *Raw Herring* opens with images of birds above and below the water, at times diving into the ocean and plunging through the depths.⁷ The fish, the birds and the sea are highly stylized with extreme close ups of the animals offering remarkable texture and clarity. This kind of imagery is repeated at intervals in the film, coupling the energy of the worker and the energy of the non-human world.

John Grierson's silent film of 1929, *Drifters*, presents a conspicuously apt point of comparison for *Raw Herring* and an important antecedent in the representation of fish and fishing. Both documentaries are set in the North Sea, depicting a single fishing expedition and the search for herring. Both emphasize the iconography of fishing and a humanism that distinguishes the life of men working the sea. Made with the remit to present the working class and their experience in the context of industrializing modernity, *Drifters* was funded by the

⁷ These images are presumably shot with a Gopro camera, well known for being waterproof but also for anamorphically distorting the image slightly and accentuating contrasts of light and dark.

Empire Marketing Board film unit as part of a package of promotional material. *Raw Herring* offers a slower observational style compared with the pacing of *Drifters*, which is more poetic in structure than observational. The expressive approach in the film (for which Grierson has been much criticized)⁸ enhances the vitalist aesthetic that shapes the presentation of fish and fishermen. The frame is filled with the physical world of the fisherman: fishing nets, the rigging of the boat, the sea, birds, fish and the men's daily life on board the boat. Men and fish are set alongside one another, both constituent parts in the rhythm and movement of the film and both idealized as part of an ecology, one that marries the natural world with industry.

Raw Herring differs from Grierson's documentary in that human labour is not triumphant. Despite the lively music that accompanies the images of fishing, the film as a whole communicates that this labour and livelihood is under threat because the fish are under threat. Herring stocks have collapsed a number of times in the North Sea due to large-scale industrial fishing and other contributing factors such as changes in the ocean environment.⁹ *Raw Herring* does not explicitly address this much-documented fact, leaving it beyond the frame, but it provides an underlying rationale for the film. Rather than offer causal explanations, the film shows the paradox of the situation, exploring the expressive potential of the labour of fishing (and of the corporeality of fish) as this same activity drives fish stocks lower still. The Bazinian ideals of observation that emphasize continuity and cinematic unity are presented in a manner that corresponds with the way of life represented in *Raw Herring*—one that is characterized by tradition and a cyclical harmony. Yet, this dynamic is subtended by the multiple suggestions in the film that this world is disappearing in the face of over-fishing. If the film progresses from fish and men in contestation (a dynamic that underlies *Drifters*) towards a visual emphasis on the texture and energy of fish in the worlds of the fishermen, this is ultimately because this is a human/animal relation subject to a teleology of environmental decline.

Sweetgrass follows a handful of sheep herders, or cowboys, as they shepherd approximately 3000 sheep through the mountains for summer grazing.¹⁰ Unlike

⁸ See Brian Winston for one such critique.

⁹ See Dickey-Collas et al. for an account of the causes and management of fluctuating herring stocks.

¹⁰ There are many similarities between *Sweetgrass* and *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life*, a film of the silent period mentioned earlier. The earlier film follows the seasonal migration of the Bakhtiari, a large nomadic tribe in Iran who must move thousands of livestock across mountains for summer grazing. The film aligns with the ethnographic preference of the time to depict racialized traditionalism, isolated from modernity. Thus, there is much to suggest that with *Sweetgrass* the filmmakers seek to draw attention to the connections between these documentaries.

the Dutch film, *Sweetgrass* features no music and the speech captured in the soundtrack does less to guide the viewer through an unfolding narrative. This is not to say that sound in the film is a secondary concern. Sound is carefully designed to convey information about the sheep, the environment and the cowboys, who sing and converse with one another as well as the animals. The expedition is arduous and the conditions the men live in are basic. Lucien Castaing-Taylor, who is credited as ‘recordist’ rather than director, and producer Ilisa Barbash shot footage for the film over a period of three years. There is no explicit rationale announced in the film until the closing credits when two intertitles explain, ‘Since the late nineteenth century, Western ranchers and their hired hands have ranged animals on public lands for summer pasture. In 2003, over three months and one hundred and fifty miles, the last band of sheep trailed through Montana’s Absaroka-Beartooth mountains’. This final note retrospectively offers the film a particular significance—it has documented not simply a specific agrarian practice, but a vanishing tradition.

Barbash is a curator of visual anthropology at Harvard University’s Peabody Museum, and Castaing-Taylor is director of Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab.¹¹ There has been substantial critical interest in *Sweetgrass* and Castaing-Taylor’s later film, *Leviathan* (made in collaboration with Véréna Paravel). Scholars have aligned *Sweetgrass* with different disciplines and genre categories, referring to it as eco-cinema, sensory ethnography, avant-garde film, non-fiction and documentary.¹² Discussions of the film have focused on the style of filmmaking, the demise of the sheep run and the methods Castaing-Taylor used to capture this unique footage and audio. These factors all contribute to the film’s singularity. Yet within this, it is perhaps the subtly rendered personalities of the cowboys and their relationship with the animals in this extreme environment that draws the viewer into the film.

Sweetgrass begins with images of sheep in the snow and in sheds in Big Timber, a family owned ranch. Scenes here include lambing, docking and shearing. The sheep are eventually taken out into the hills. The story progresses through the events of the journey including pitching tents, managing the sheep in the dark, documenting a bear attack on a sheep and retrieving sheep that have strayed out on a ridge. All is set against the sublime and remote landscape. The film also captures the emotional worlds of the men—anger, humour and failing spirit are all apparent as the three-month journey grinds on. Animals in the film are not limited to sheep but include dogs, horses and bears. Throughout, the camera is

¹¹ While these films bear the stamp of the Sensory Ethnography Lab, they have, for the most part, not featured in ethnographic film festivals. The most visible forum for the films’ circulation has been art institutions, with *Leviathan* especially featuring in key exhibitions at The Whitney and the Tate Modern.

¹² See Scott MacDonald, Anna Grimshaw, Jennifer Ladino and Robert Koehler.

used in the service of the close contemplation of the sheep and their materiality, but this is particularly so in the early part of the film. While it remains focused on humanist concerns, *Sweetgrass*' consistent focus on the embodiment of animals surpasses that of *Raw Herring*.

Indeed, *Sweetgrass* exhibits a range of interconnecting concerns that constitute it as an exemplary object for the Bazinian project. These include not only phenomenology and observation, but also a particular interest in the expressive potential of animals.¹³ Animals populate a number of his essays and as Serge Daney writes, for Bazin 'the essence of cinema becomes a story about animals' (32). As I have noted, they frequently exemplify his concept of the 'ontology of the cinematographic'.¹⁴ Furthering his interest in the potential of the single take and depth of field, Bazin proposed that whenever it was possible to include two heterogeneous elements in the shot, editing should be avoided. He proclaims, for example, that in Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* the scene 'of an alligator catching a heron, photographed in a single panning shot, is admirable' (51). His repeated references to animals draw relationships between film ontologies and animal ontologies. For Bazin, what is represented on screen may engage the viewer's imagination but 'what is imaginary on the screen must have the spatial density of something real' (48) and encompassing humans and animals in the frame or in the shot achieves this realism because it maintains a photographic respect for the unity of space.

As *Sweetgrass* progresses, the long takes consistently capture multiple species—static shots in particular are composed in ways that draw the eye to the placement of animals and humans in the frame in the way advocated by Bazin. In one striking shot a dog and a sheep sit side by side against the horizon, both in profile and turned away from one another. Other shots dwell on animal movement. Once the sheep are on the road the camera often takes in groups of sheep, up to 30 or 40, standing closely together amongst trees or on a hill, the frame brimming with their shape. Other times they move as a group, streaming down roads. In these instances the film seems concerned only with movement, either incremental or flowing, the embodiment of the animals and the harmony of their form in space. More than spatial unity, these images convey the compelling sensory qualities of the environment, drawing attention to sound and image in the viewing experience.

¹³ Bazin had a keen interest in animals. As Sueng-Hoon Jeong and Dudley Andrew note, 'Although inheriting western metaphysics, including the existentialism and phenomenology that were rife in his day, he was also, since boyhood, a fanatical naturalist who lived among animals and studied their behaviour. Bazin felt the cinema capable of staring at the otherness of animals with a preternatural eye' (3).

¹⁴ Animals abound in Bazin's essay 'The Virtues and Limitations of Montage', where he explores the possibilities of anthropomorphism.

The long duration of these images provides time to study the detail of bodies and movement, aspects that attest to 'livingness,' and constitute these as representations that show the long-standing role of animals in the human world of agriculture.¹⁵ If the film dwells on the beauty of images, it does so through the long take in which the camera allows for each gesture and change in the frame to be appreciated. One morning as the sun comes up, a series of static shots establishes that the day is beginning. A long shot of a ridge is just close enough to discern a bear ambling up across the frame, the only movement visible. The next shot is a slightly closer long shot with a large group of sheep spread diagonally across the frame, some moving and others still, the grey of their bodies against the grayish green of the grass. It is accompanied by the sound of birds and sheep. In the next shot John Ahern, one of two central cowboys in the film, stands next to his tent with his horse. As he saddles the horse, he is speaking. Some of his words are inaudible but he distinctly addresses the horse: 'you got away from those sheep all night didn't you? Yeah, that's it. You got away from those damn sheep for a night. Probably a relief isn't it? Yeah?' A dog walks into shot and sits at the edge of the frame. After almost three minutes lingering on this one frame, the shot cuts to another image of sheep.

Sometimes referred to as an example of salvage ethnography, *Sweetgrass* captures a specific way of labouring with animals that, by the time the film reached audiences, had already disappeared. The agrarian life presented seems to predate the industrial revolution; rather than machines, dogs, horses and men perform almost all the labour required and the mountains show no trace of civilization. In comparison, *Raw Herring*, while conveying a strong sense of tradition, includes the capacities of modern technologies, with sonar for detecting schools of herring. In *Sweetgrass* moments that suggest the presence of modernity surprise the viewer; in this respect, *Sweetgrass* sits at the edge of the industrializing imagination. The agrarian vista is disrupted at points when men communicate with walkie talkies. One cowboy stands atop a hill and talks to his mother on a mobile phone, lamenting the work and conditions that have injured his knee and worn out his dog and horse. Perhaps the most significant revelation is the signification of change and transition that is revealed at the conclusion and

¹⁵ This is suggested by Castaing-Taylor when in an interview he states that rather than exploring the politics of land use, 'We ended up trying to be more phenomenological, you could say: evoking the lifeworld of the sheepherders as best we could, and to let that speak for itself, without any overt editorializing on our part. But not just the sheepherders—also the sheep, and especially the place itself. It's out of fashion to see nature as anything other than some secondary cultural construction, but we're all part of it, as much as city folks suppose otherwise, and throughout history humans and animals have commingled in ways that have deeply affected the kinds of beings we've become' (PBS).

that comes retrospectively to define onscreen events. It cements, for the viewer, the tension between cyclical custom and radical change.

Sweetgrass has a tone of melancholy. It also avoids idealizing the lifeworld it represents. Yet the negative sentiments expressed at a number of points by the cowboys are juxtaposed with the almost sublime images of animals and landscape. Due to this, the address of the film is characterized by ambivalence, one that engages the viewer without explicit commentary. While it is not until the end of the film that the viewer realizes it is a story of transition, it is clear that the camera is capturing a practice that is exceptional. As in the case of *Raw Herring*, the act of recording and attending to this lifeworld and labour through documentary communicates a certain respect for the men and endows the traditions with added significance. Both *Sweetgrass* and *Raw Herring* are concerned with worlds in which animals and humans are tied together in mutual industrial and environmental teleologies. Sitting beyond the worlds presented in the films is the reason for change. While in *Raw Herring* it is the collapse of fishing due to industrialization and environmental decline, the reason for the end of grazing on public land in *Sweetgrass* is equally complex and relates to a combination of factors including the rise of corporate agribusiness, the shrinking market for lamb and wool, and pressure from environmentalists.¹⁶ More concerned with the existentialism of the worlds represented, they do not convey the detail of these multifaceted ecological situations. The long take aesthetic and the construction of a lifeworld that accompanies it in these films offer a Bazinian unity of spatio-temporal form, signaling harmony in a way that mirrors the stability and the persistence of traditional fishing and agricultural practices. However, by the closing credits of the films, historical persistence has come into conflict with change and modernity.

Conclusion

Sweetgrass and *Raw Herring* are concerned with worlds in which animals and humans are tied together in mutual economic and environmental ecologies that, the films inform us, cannot continue to thrive in the contemporary world. In different ways each expresses a life of precarious labour and in this life animals and humans are wrought together. This is shown through the terms of an expressive humanism. These films bring a new awareness to animals, and animal productivity, through the way they are rendered conspicuously in human lifeworlds. They overlap with a broader movement towards experimental ethnography that Pick describes as featuring 'humanity's relationship to its nonhuman surroundings' in ways that involve 'the redrawing of the conditions of

¹⁶ Castaing-Taylor describes these factors in an interview with the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

vision that currently determine not simply how we see animals on screen, but whether we see them at all' ('Ecovisions'). The different examples I have described achieve this radically through avant-garde observation, centering animals in ways that echo histories of documentary representation. If, as I have noted, the avant-garde seeks to 'retrain perception', these films evoke, visually, the vital materiality of non-human species. They place these within human structures of experience and within the terms of human enterprise.

I have explored how the long take of the camera emphasizes the sensory qualities of environments and bodies, both human and animal. However, it is not my aim to locate these films within a framework that privileges a multispecies approach, one that reflects upon ethical and existential encounters with the animal world. Such approaches owe much to Haraway's work: her notion of 'companion species' has established a paradigm in which animals are 'world sharing' partners and her notion of a web of relations is one that explores the possibility of an 'ongoing "becoming with"' (16) companion species, entailing the destabilization of species categories.¹⁷ Rather than seeking to destabilize human exceptionalism, these films reward a reading focused on how animals, their performative and material qualities, are located aesthetically according to Bazanian interests, and how this location informs the social and historical. In this respect, my analysis has followed Fudge's call for rethinking the anthropocentrism of historical knowledge:

History and humanity are, as the humanists proclaim, coterminous, but a history can be written that does not celebrate the stability of what was, what is, and what will be. Instead history should reinterpret the documents in order to offer a new idea of the human. No longer separate, in splendid isolation, humans must be shown to be embedded within and reliant upon the natural order. (15)

It is this embeddedness that both *Sweetgrass* and *Raw Herring* gesture towards as they show animals to be bound to the human lifeworld. I contend that the activity of seeing animals can bring an additional dimension to the ways in which humanist history and contemporary modernity might be interpreted.

¹⁷ In this, my approach departs from that of Jennifer Ladino who poses the notion of a 'speciesed camera' (130), a mode of vision that privileges human perception. For Ladino, films such as *Sweetgrass* offer the possibility of subverting this gaze (through a Haraway-inspired move) in ways that entail a more ethical 'sharing of words' (131).

BELINDA SMAILL is a Senior Lecturer in Film and Screen Studies at Monash University. She is the author of *The Documentary: Politics, Emotion, Culture* (2010) and co-author of *Transnational Australian Cinema: Ethics in the Asian Diasporas* (2013). Her essays have appeared in numerous journals including *Camera Obscura*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Film Criticism* and *Feminist Media Studies*. She is currently undertaking a project on animals, the documentary moving image and modernity.

Works cited

- Bazin, André. *Qu'est-ce Que le Cinéma?* Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958-1962.
- Berger, John. 'Why Look at Animals?' *About Looking*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. 3-28.
- Bousé, Derek. *Wildlife Films*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000.
- Chris, Cynthia. *Watching Wildlife*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006.
- Daney, Serge. 'The Screen of Fantasy (Bazin and Animals).' Trans. Mark A. Cohen. *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Film*. Ed. Ivone Margulies. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. 32-41.
- Daston, Lorraine, and Gregg Mitman. 'Introduction: The How and Why of Thinking with Animals.' *Thinking With Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*. Ed. Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman. New York: Columbia UP. 1-14.
- Dickey-Collas, Mark, *et al.* 'Lessons Learned from Stock Collapse and Recovery of North Sea Herring: A Review.' *ICES Journal of Marine Science: Journal du Conseil* 67.9 (2010): 1875-1886.
- Flanagan, Matthew. 'Towards an Aesthetic of Slow in Contemporary Cinema.' *16:9* 29 (2008).
- Fudge, Erica. 'A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals.' *Representing Animals*. Ed. Nigel Rothfels. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002. 3-18.
- Grimshaw, Anna. 'The Bellweather Ewe: Recent Developments in Ethnographic Filmmaking and the Aesthetics of Anthropological Enquiry.' *Cultural Anthropology* 26.2 (2011): 247-262.
- Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008.
- Horak, Jan-Christopher. 'Wildlife Documentaries: From Classical Forms to Reality TV.' *Film History* 18.4 (2006): 459-475.
- Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Trans. David Carr. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1970.
- Jeong, Seung Hoon and Dudley Andrew. 'Grizzly Ghost: Herzog, Bazin and the Cinematic Animal.' *Screen* 49.1 (2008): 1-12.

- Kirksey, S Eben., and Stefan Helmreich. 'The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography.' *Cultural Anthropology* 25.4 (2010): 545-576.
- Koehler, Robert. 'Agrarian Utopias/Dystopias: The New Nonfiction.' *Cinema Scope* 40 (2009): 12-15.
- . 'Sweetgrass and the Future of Nonfiction Cinema.' Public Broadcasting Service. *POV: Documentaries with a Point of View*, 5 July 2011. <http://www.pbs.org/pov/sweetgrass/future_of_nonfiction_films_koehler.php>. 20 Feb. 2014.
- Ladino, Jennifer K. 'Working with Animals: Regarding Companion Species in Documentary Film.' *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*. Ed. Sean Cubitt, Salma Monani and Stephen Rust. London: Routledge: 2012.
- Lippit, Akira Mazuta. *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000.
- Lorimer, Jamie. 'Moving Image Methodologies for More-than-human Geographies.' *Cultural Geographies* 17.2 (2010): 237-258.
- MacDonald, Scott. *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn*. U of California P, 2013.
- . 'Toward an Eco-cinema.' *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11.2 (2004): 107-132.
- Mitman, Gregg. *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film*. 2nd Edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009.
- Pick, Anat. 'Ecovisions: Seeing Animals in Recent Ethnographic Film.' *Vertigo* 3.4 (2007): 33-37.
- Ponsoldt, James. 'Interview: Position Among the Stars—Director Leonard Retel Helmrich.' *Filmmaker Magazine*, 31 Jan 2011. <<http://filmmakermagazine.com/19990-%E2%80%9Cposition-among-the-stars%E2%80%9D-director-leonard-retel-helmrich/>>. 1 March 2014.
- Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). 'Interview with Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor.' *POV: Documentaries with a Point of View*, 5 July 2011. <http://www.pbs.org/pov/sweetgrass/video_interview.php#.VIT3bRDE Rf8>. 20 Feb 2014.
- Rony, Fatimah Tobing. *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996.
- Russell, Catherine. *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
- Wahlberg, Malin. *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Winston, Brian. *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited*. London: BFI Publishing, 1995.