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DO VIEWERS FEEL IT? EMPATHY FOR OTHER-THAN-HUMAN ANIMALS IN CINEMA

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Abstract

This article explores how viewers' empathic responses toward animal characters in films can be activated. Drawing on neuroscience, cognitive film theory suggests that empathy involves both the affective capacity to share emotions and the cognitive ability to understand the experiences of others. While filmmakers often employ aesthetic techniques—such as close-ups on facial expressions or subjective perspectives—to evoke empathy, the process may differ when the characters are non-human animals. This study investigates how these mechanisms function in relation to animal portrayals in cinema.

The research includes findings from two focus groups with adults who discussed empathy and non-human animals on screen based on on various films, including ***EO*** (2022), ***Babe*** (1995), ***Gunda*** (2020), and ***Lily Does Derrida*** (2010). Both anthropomorphizing and non-anthropomorphizing approaches were considered.

The article argues that while anthropomorphic representations can prompt empathetic responses, they also risk reinforcing anthropocentric interpretations. Importantly, the long-term impact on the viewer's perspective—whether it encourages recognition of interspecies difference and challenges the human-centered gaze—may be more consequential than momentary emotional alignment. The conclusion reflects on the ethical implications of animal representation in film and encourages filmmakers to consider more deliberate and ethically grounded narrative strategies inspired by animal rights thinking.

Keywords: Empathy, anthropomorphism, animal studies, film animal studies, animal characters, audience research, focus group interviews

Introduction

In the realm of cinema, the emotional connection between audiences and characters is a cornerstone of storytelling. When it comes to human characters, expressions like "I identify with him" or "she evokes sympathy in me" effortlessly flow from our lips. However, the landscape becomes considerably more intricate when contemplating the emotional engagement with non-human animal characters on screen.

The subjective experiences of animals have long been recognized as beyond the grasp of human understanding. Consequently, filmmakers often resort to anthropomorphism—the attribution of human characteristics to non-human entities—to bridge the gap and evoke emotional responses from the audience. As Adrian Ivakhiv writes in *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature:* "film shows us human or human-like subjects, beings we understand to be thrown into a world of circumstance and possibility like us" (Ivakhiv, 2013, p. 9). Therefore, anthropomorphism becomes one of the techniques of subjectification in film employed to elicit emotional engagement from viewers, including empathy and sympathy, which are considered by many to be the most popular contemporary models of emotional involvement of viewers (Tobón, 2019). Taking this into consideration, the present article delves into the captivating realm of empathy and anthropomorphism concerning non-human animal characters portrayed on screen. The fundamental question at the heart of this exploration is: Do viewers experience meaningful empathy, as opposed to fleeting sympathy, towards non-human animals depicted in movies? What filmic strategies enable or disable viewer's empathic attitudes? Moreover, does the reduction of subjectification procedures, particularly the deliberate avoidance of anthropomorphism, enhance the emotional resonance with animal characters?

This article unfolds by first introducing the concept of empathy within the cinematic realm. Subsequently, the focus shifts to the methods and presentation of results from the qualitative audience research, shedding light on the nuanced perspectives of adult viewers and their emotional connections with non-human animal characters on screen. Through this exploration, I aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding the role of empathy and anthropomorphism in shaping the emotional landscape of cinema, particularly concerning our interactions with the diverse inhabitants of the cinematic world.

Ultimately, this analysis invites us to question not only how animals are made emotionally accessible to human viewers, but also what remains obscured or distorted when cinematic language defaults to anthropocentric and anthropomorphic frameworks. By critically engaging with these representational habits, we may begin to imagine modes of storytelling that resist reducing animals to mirrors of ourselves—and instead, recognize them as subjects in their own right, within and beyond the screen. In an era marked by mass extinction, large-scale animal exploitation, and escalating ecological crisis, such reflection is not merely aesthetic, but deeply political. As a key site of cultural production, film participates in shaping dominant narratives about nonhuman life; thus, rethinking cinematic representation may contribute to broader interdisciplinary efforts to challenge speciesist logics and envision more ethical interspecies futures.

Empathy—theoretical framework

Within the domain of film theory, particularly cognitive film theory, scholars underscore that the elicitation of empathetic responses from viewers is intricately linked to two pivotal factors: 1) the affective capacity to undergo identical emotions as others, and 2) the cognitive capacity to empathize with the circumstances of others (Tobón, 2019; Ostaszewski, 2022). Notably, in mainstream cinema, the portrayal of characters' experiences relies mostly on subjectification techniques

and emotional impact, while in art mode of film practice, viewer engagement serves the purpose of meaning-making (Ostaszewski, 2022). This prompts a distinction between embodied and imaginative empathy.

Since the discovery of the mirror neuron system, we have learned about the connection between visual information and motor skills, enabling us to predict the intentions and understand the consequences of other human beings' actions (Gallese & Goldman, 1998). This phenomenon, identified as embodied simulation, holds significance in recognizing emotions on the faces of others and discerning their affective responses (Young, Khalil, Wharton, 2018). It is closely associated with affective empathy or embodied empathy, manifesting both in everyday life and in connection with film characters (Parkinson, 2018; Tobón, 2019; Ostaszewski, 2022). The affective type of empathy allows us to empathize with the character in a pre-reflective manner, among others by tracking facial reactions. On the other hand, imaginative empathy relies on the use of imagination, involving an emotional connection through understanding the character's perspective in a reflective manner (Ostaszewski, 2022). Both affective and imaginative empathy entail immersing oneself in another person's experience from their point of view. It's about understanding actions and situations, like those in short film excerpts, where grasping the context of the protagonist's circumstances can serve as the catalyst for activating empathy. Filmmakers employ various aesthetic techniques to facilitate empathy, including close-ups of the character's face, eyeline matches, shot-reverse shot sequences, the Kuleshov Effect, and subjectification methods. These techniques encompass elements such as internal focalization in syuzeth composition, optical point of view, mental imagery, flashbacks, futurospections, and auditory perspectives, all tailored to the human embodied mind and sensory experience. The questions that arise are: Does the mirror neuron theory say anything about the responses between species (human and other-than-human animals)? How does the empathy disposition translate into the realm of film representations featuring nonhuman animals?

Although mainstream film studies have historically devoted limited attention to the topic of empathy for non-human animals in cinema, this area has been receiving growing scholarly interest, particularly at the intersection of animal studies and film studies. Contributions from researchers such as Alexa Weik von Mossner, Elisa Aaltola, Anat Pick, and Claire Molloy/Parkinson have notably enriched this field. While empathy has become an increasingly important focus, sympathy—another well-established model of emotional engagement in film—has more frequently been applied to non-human animal characters. Sympathy entails "a favorable disposition and concern for her well-being, a desire that things go well for her, a tendency to take her side" (Tobón, 2019, p. 879). As Tobón (2019, p. 879) notes, "it is possible to feel sympathy for the dead, for animals of any kind, for insects or plants, or for characters with such minimal descriptions that it would seem arbitrary to attribute them much of an inner life". Fundamentally, this approach involves framing the protagonist as an individual, a person with goals worth pursuing. Importantly, sympathy extends beyond a momentary emotional response, as opposed to empathy Tobón (2019, p. 886), which in the context of non-human animals on screen has garnered attention more recently from researchers who bridge the fields of animal studies and film studies, reflecting a growing awareness of the intersection between these two areas of inquiry.

Claire Parkinson (2018) posits that simulative empathy or embodied empathy towards non-human characters in films is indeed possible. Drawing on phenomenologically informed film theory and the concept of "tactile epistemology" introduced by Laura Marks (2000), Parkinson challenges the conventional separation between the cinematic image and the viewer. She invokes the ideas of phenomenology, which highlights the significance of the materiality of bodies both on and

off the screen, emphasizing the sensual, affective experience of cinematic encounters. This perspective counters the ocularcentric detachment that traditionally prioritizes vision and visuality, contributing to the dominance of rationality, capitalist economics, and a detachment from the environment, as noted by David Ingram (2014). As Claire Parkinson (2018, p. 53) articulates, "Acknowledgement of another subjectivity recognizes the value of that being and can be significant in the establishment of empathetic relationships with nonhuman animals." The focus on subjectivity, rooted in our corporeal being, becomes evident, with a particular emphasis on the "face" as a pivotal aspect.

The concept of the "face" assumes a significant role in this exploration, resonating with Parkinson's assertion that "The face individualizes and identifies us" (2020, p. 47). Notably, some of the earliest known visual representations created by humans depict animals with striking attention to their facial features and expressions. Examples include the Paleolithic paintings in the Chauvet and Lascaux caves, where we find detailed depictions of horses, aurochs, stags, lions, and bears. The face, coupled with the gaze, serves as a conduit for establishing proximity to the "Other," granting subjectivity to the nonhuman animal. Scholars such as Jacques Derrida (2002) and Erica Fudge (2013) contend that the face and gaze facilitate two-way communication, positioning the animal as a subject of ethical consideration. David Morris (2007, p. 132) articulates this perspective, stating, "When I look at your face, I don't just see your face, I see you, your feelings, your attention, a further whole of you, shining in your face. This is also the case with other animals." Although cinematic encounters mediate communication in a unidirectional manner, and the facial expressions of animals may not always mirror our own, attentiveness to these similarities or differences—stemming from face-to-face and body-to-body encounters in both real life and film—forms the foundation for our affective responses. This attentiveness, in turn, plays a pivotal role in reshaping the dynamics of the relationship between human and non-human animals, affording the latter the status of moral subjects[1].

As previously mentioned, subjectivity in cinema is attained through various means, including the employment of subjectification techniques designed to evoke empathy in the audience, keeping in mind the distinction between superficial anthropomorphism, like that seen in Disney films, and a more critical approach (Burghardt, 2007). In the context of animal film characters, it would be easy to assume that anthropomorphizing them would be a natural process. However, for researchers aligning with the principles of critical animal studies, which I aim to represent, anthropomorphism presents an ambivalent proposition. It is not outrightly rejected; rather, it is disapproved of "when it serves only, or primarily, human interests" (Parkinson, 2020, p. 1). However, scholars within this perspective acknowledge its potential as a tool for activating empathic disposition (Parkinson, 2002, p. 5).

Parkinson (2018) introduces the concept of embodied encounters in film, highlighting the associated risks with simulative empathy induced by anthropomorphism. She uses the term "pleasurable empathy," characterizing the viewer's emotional involvement during the screening, which ceases with the closure of the film (Parkinson, 2018, p. 53). Therefore, within the framework of critical animal studies, anthropomorphism should be critically understood, prompting the question: What role can anthropomorphism play for non-human animals? Furthermore, what impact can anthropomorphism, when applied to the portrayal of nonhuman animals in a movie, have on animals beyond the screen?

1 Simultaneously, it is imperative to acknowledge that the trend of "facial expression" has been internalized by cognitive theory. Film theorist and philosopher Murray Smith (2017), for instance, references the work of American psychologist Paul Ekman, who posits the universal recognition of emotions based on facial expressions. While Ekman's contributions have found wide-ranging applications, such as in lie detection, it is essential to note that this entire tradition has faced substantial criticism on multiple occasions (see, for example, Crawford, 2021).

Preceding the discussion of qualitative research and a trial to respond to these questions, it is worth mentioning that this inquiry poses a substantial challenge. While encouraging research on affective empathy towards non-human animals exists, the inherent difficulty lies in discerning whether our responses are directed towards perceived emotions or the authentic emotional experiences expressed by the animals (Young, Khalil, Wharton, 2018). In this context, the study endeavors to explore the preconceptions of viewers when confronted with the portrayal of emotions in animals on screen.

The examination will encompass an exploration of whether viewers adhere to established codes from the human realm, endowing non-human animals with human emotions and motives for behavior, potentially diminishing their subjectivity. Additionally, the study will analyze whether viewers use anthropomorphization to describe the emotions of animals, not understood merely as a simplified mimetic code relied upon in children's animated films, but rather as a mechanism for identifying common traits and universal values in the animal kingdom. Therefore, the study employs stills of live animals followed by excerpts from various types and genres of films. Furthermore, on an imaginative plane, the research will assess whether viewers lack the requisite conceptual framework, leading them to accept the distinctions between humans and other animals without a deliberate effort to comprehend and characterize them. The study will also consider how audience responses are shaped by the diverse aesthetic and narrative treatments employed in the portrayal of animals. I will examine how the various components of an audiovisual text affect the viewers' interpretations and how they relate to the activation of empathetic disposition towards animal characters in the movie context. Last but not least, I will explore what is the relationship between audience responses to non-human entities in movies and perception of real other-than-human animals. Through these multifaceted inquiries, the article aspires to offer nuanced insights into the intricate dynamics of audiences' empathetic responses to the representation of animals in cinematic narratives.

Methods

This study presents findings from qualitative case studies. Given the limited scale of this pilot project, two focus group interviews (FGI) were undertaken. Following the FGI methodology, the study formed homogeneous groups (Lisek-Michalska, 2013; Guest, Namey and Michell, 2013; Krueger, Casey, 2015), comprising individuals of comparable ages. The participants were adults aged between 19 and 26, predominantly students of the University of Lodz, where the survey took place. This age group was selected due to its receptiveness to progressive nutrition policies and, as recent research shows, a higher level of concern about climate change and the state of the Earth than older generations (Hickman et al., 2021; Poortinga, Demski, Steentjes, 2023). The perception of these matters by young adults remains unclear, prompting the objective of this study: to investigate and analyze it.

Participants, recruited via an online system at the University of Lodz, met specific criteria: they lacked specialized knowledge in zoology or film studies (with one exception studying a film-related major) and did not belong to pro-animal organizations. These criteria were selected to achieve two objectives: 1) to reduce the influence of participants' backgrounds on the study's results, thereby minimizing knowledge-related biases, and 2) to investigate the potential capacity of the images under scrutiny to evoke empathetic responses in individuals unaffiliated with the animal rights movement.

The survey was conducted using a pre-prepared scenario and carefully selected audiovisual materials. The scenario and results were reviewed with non-participating researchers to mitigate bias. The research was conducted within a designated focus studio environment. Audio and video equipment

were utilized to record the focus groups. The first focus group centered around the exploration of the film "EO" (2022) by Jerzy Skolimowski. The film was selected due to its multiple subjectivizing approaches, acknowledged by the filmmakers as designed to shape viewers' emotional reactions (Piskadło, 2022; Mańkowski, Skolimowski, 2023). Preceding the survey, there was a screening of the film at the same location, followed by a brief questionnaire about it. Ten individuals who hadn't previously viewed the film participated in the survey. Normally, the focus groups varied in size from 4 to 12 individuals (Lisek-Michalska, 2013; Krueger, Casey, 2015). The larger group facilitated a broader range of perspectives on the film in question.

The second focus group explored the broader concept of empathy and non-human animals on screen. The selected films for analysis ranged from classics like "Babe" (1995, dir. Chris Noonan) to more contemporary pieces such as "Gunda" (2020, dir. Viktor Kossakovsky) and unconventional works like "Lily Does Derrida: A Dog's Video Essay" (2010, dir. Kathy High). I showed them also excerpts and stills from "EO," nature films and a film I edited for the exercise provided in the script. The materials presented encompassed instances of both anthropomorphizing treatments and deliberate efforts to sidestep anthropomorphism. The selection of materials aimed to investigate how different aspects of film – from still frame, through editing and drama, to various generic qualities – influence viewers' empathetic disposition.

The selection process followed the guiding principle of moving from more superficially anthropomorphic to less anthropomorphic representations. This approach was intended to explore the effects of varying degrees of anthropomorphism in shaping empathy. By incorporating both highly anthropomorphized depictions and those that consciously avoided human traits, the aim was to create a spectrum for the viewers to reflect on their emotional responses and empathetic connections.

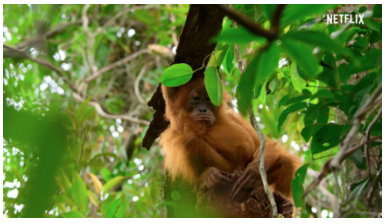
Four individuals participated in the study, with the objective of examining particular issues in greater depth. This was facilitated by individual tasks conducive to dynamic discussions within smaller groups, as well as by the discussions themselves, which, with fewer participants, enabled interviewees to articulate more intricate and comprehensive statements (Lisek-Michalska, 2013; Guest, Namey and Michell, 2013; Krueger, Casey, 2015).

Results

During the FGIs, participants engaged in two individual tasks. Notably, some respondents expressed a degree of uncertainty, suggesting that their answers occasionally stemmed more from tentative inference than from assured emotional recognition. Their responses also implied that interpretations might have been shaped by familiar cognitive schemas or socially constructed patterns.

In one task, relying solely on frames extracted from nature films, respondents were instructed to articulate their interpretations of the expressions on the animals' faces, discern the potential thoughts and emotions experienced by the animals, and provide reasoning for their assessments. The ensuing Figure 1 presents the data amassed from the survey, encapsulating the diverse perspectives and insights offered by the participants. As evident from the varied responses, interpretations of the frames exhibit a range of perspectives. The first frame featuring an ape perched in a tree elicited unanimous mentions of "boredom" from all respondents, revealing an anthropocentric viewpoint. The association of boredom with a perceived state of inactivity, indifference, and emptiness reflects a human-centric understanding. Additionally, respondents extrapolated the ape's emotions based on facial expressions resembling those of humans, such as a downturned mouth and squinted eyes commonly associated with human boredom. This suggests a form of anthropomorphism

Figure 1



Respondent 1. Boredom. His mouth is down, but he doesn't seem to feel sad either. He's lying on a branch and probably feels safe.

Respondent 2. Boredom—pursed lips, relaxed forehead posture, squinted eyes.

Respondent 3. Relax, boredom, rest (comfortable position). He can think about nothing. He can feel calm.

Respondent 4. Bored, lost in thought—looks into the distance and seems safe.

Respondent 1. Joy. His eyes are wide open, his mouth is like a smile. With its raised paws, it seems to be "celebrating" some event.

Respondent 2. Fear—paws placed in a submissive gesture, eyes wide open.

Respondent 3. Sensitivity/stimulation of the senses (raised hands, situation of being held). May feel: fear, irritation, impatience, stress (positive or negative)

Respondent 4. Feels fear and wants to defend him-/herself because these animals have a defense mechanism in the form of glands under their arms that scare away.

Happiness—people are convinced that these animals are inclined to scratch and that they want it.

Respondent 1. He seems excited with his wide-open eyes and shows his teeth as if in a smile.

Respondent 2. Vigilance—jaws slightly exposed, defensive posture, focused eyes.

Respondent 3. It's hard to tell because it's a reptile, but... observation/vigilance/curiosity (head raised, jaw open). He may be thinking about the game, the strategic situation (is this a good place?)

Respondent 4. Focused—you can see that he is ready to attack.

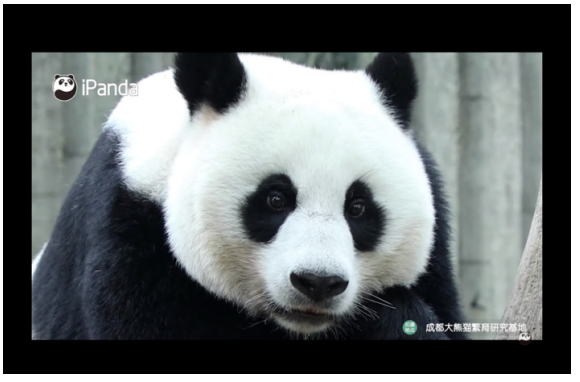
applied to the ape's emotional states. However, the inclusion of alternative descriptors like "peace, relaxation, rest, or security" indicates a nuanced interpretation, suggesting that respondents define boredom differently in humans and non-human animals, and the use of the term "boredom" may stem from a lack of a more suitable conceptual framework.

In contrast, the second frame featuring a lori yielded diverse emotional attributions, ranging from joy to sensitivity and fear. Respondents predominantly relied on interpreting the animal's facial expressions and body posture. Notably, some responses appeared influenced by participants' prior knowledge, as in the case of respondent 4 marked in green, raising the question of whether other answers were similarly shaped by pre-existing knowledge or misconceptions. The final frame highlighted the challenge of recognizing emotions in certain species, as indicated by the response marked in blue. This observation underscores the difficulty viewers may face in discerning emotions in animals, particularly when presented with ambiguous visual cues.

In summary, the recognition of animal emotions in still images is influenced by respondents' knowledge and beliefs about the species, with attention given not only to facial expressions but also to posture and surroundings. Finally—they read the emotions of animals based on the similarity of animal facial expressions and posture to that of humans. This is consistent with research showing that humans interpret animal facial expressions through cognitive mechanisms similar to those used for processing human expressions, which frequently

results in the attribution of anthropomorphic emotions, despite potential discrepancies in underlying affective states (Dacey, Coan, 2023). Since similar reactions do not always mean the same emotions, there is an interpretation of visual information according to the human mirror system, and thus anthropomorphism of animal emotions. This tendency is supported by neuroscientific evidence showing that similar brain regions are activated when interpreting human and animal emotions, suggesting a shared mechanism shaped by mirror neuron systems (Spunt, Ellsworth, Adolphs, 2017). Unlike still photography, film provides a wider array of contextual cues—such as narrative progression, setting, and character interaction—that can enhance the viewer's understanding of animal emotions and behaviours. To further investigate the audience's ability to activate the empathic disposition towards animal characters in films, the study delves into the impact of stylistic and narrative cues, particularly examining the role of film editing in shaping audience perceptions.

Figure 2



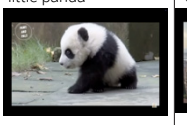
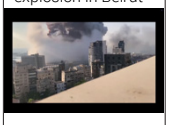
In experiment testing the impact of montage using the Kuleshov effect, I juxtaposed a brief shot of a panda's seemingly neutral facial expression (Figure 2) with a sequence of shots, including dinner scenes, a shot of a crying Syrian girl, images of leaves, laughing television presenters, a small panda, and an explosion in Beirut (Figure 3). The objective was to observe the emotions and states viewers would attribute to the panda's face in relation to a combination of shots that may be familiar or unfamiliar to the panda. The results of the study are presented in Figure 3.

The diverse array of responses is noteworthy, with viewers consistently attributing emotions and states typically associated with human characters. Notably, a film student (respondent 4) attributed the most human-like states to the panda, suggesting that viewer background may shape interpretations. While this single observation cannot decisively challenge the idea that specialized audiences, such as film scholars, are best equipped to interpret animal representations, it does point to the potential value of examining how diverse audiences engage with such portrayals.

However, when considering the Kuleshov effect itself, there were instances of doubts, non-answers, and attributions of curiosity to the panda in respondents' responses. This can be attributed to the combination of the panda's face with unfamiliar images and the absence of narrative elements. Interestingly, respondents did not consistently anthropomorphize the panda, refraining from attributing human-like emotions to her when paired with the same shots that might evoke such emotions in human characters. The recurrent attribution of "curiosity" to the panda suggests an effort by viewers to understand how the panda might feel about unfamiliar images. These findings suggest that while film editing can evoke affective empathy, its efficacy is significantly influenced by the context, narrative, and overall dramatic structure. The subsequent exploration will delve into how these dynamics unfold in films with storytelling and dramatic elements.

One of the mini-focus tasks consisted of examining the respondents' capability to recognize a character's emotions solely based on facial expressions captured within frames from Jerzy Skolimowski's film "EO". Subsequently, I presented

Figure 3

	dinner 	Syrian girl 	leaves 	TV presenters 	little panda 	explosion in Beirut 
Respondent 1	curiosity, excitement	curiosity/ sadness	focus/ interest	amusement	pride/ happiness	fear
Respondent 2	curiosity (positive) about food	curiosity	curiosity	it's the same clip (?)	determination (to move)	?
Respondent 3	curiosity	lack of understanding	—	lack of understanding	anxiety	curiosity
Respondent 4	hunger	sadness	interest	amusement	surprise	fear

the same frames to the participants, but this time as short 20-second video excerpts. I want to discuss the results from the scene in which EO witnesses the killing of animals on a farm (Figure 4).

The answers confirm that it is difficult to recognize the emotions on the character's face from the frame alone. Posing for a photo, curiosity or boredom have nothing to do with the situation the character is in. It seems that respondents answered based on the composition of the frame and the shot. The fact that we are dealing with a close-up, we can't see exactly the character's surroundings, and only his profile makes it difficult to identify emotions. At the same time, it should be noted that respondents refer to familiar visual codes, primarily from the human world. The donkey's exposed eye and the figure's close proximity to the camera evoke associations with posing for a photo and curiosity. Even in short scenes lasting only a few tens of seconds, respondents provide entirely different answers, referring to what the protagonist is experiencing. Importantly, their statements show that it is not only the composition of frame and editing that builds meaning and allows us to interpret the character's emotions in a way closer to the real state. Context and sound, or more precisely, the point of EO's hearing, also matter. Interestingly, the participants' responses include not only an attempt to read

Figure 4

FRAME	FILM EXCERPT
Respondent 3: He looks a bit like he's looking in the mirror with that: "Am I handsome?".	Respondent 1: Here he was also terrified and because of the hearing.
Respondent 1: Between total curiosity and boredom. Like he approached the frame himself, but was so bored "Oh, the man is taking my picture again".	Respondent 2: He knows who is the perpetrator of this suffering, so he has more room for action. He can kick him, for example.
	Moderator: Why did he kick him?
	Respondent 3: Out of revenge. (...) I felt as if he was unaware of what was going on and was just gaining that awareness.

the protagonist's emotions, but also his intentions, what he might think and want to do. Respondents thus attribute consciousness and agency to him.

The audience's reactions to the anthropomorphization of animals in popular cinema entertainment films were also investigated, with the example of "Babe" (1995, dir. Chris Noonan) being examined. The narrative revolves around a pig named Babe residing on a farm, harboring aspirations of becoming a dog. Anthropomorphization in the film is achieved through the attribution of human language to the animals, with characters even mimicking specific mouth movements, and their actions being motivated by human-centric values or in opposition to typical animal behaviors. During the FGI two segments from the film were presented: one excerpt from the section titled "Pork is good, tender meat," and another from the section titled "About the pig that thinks it is a dog". Subsequently, I inquired with the interviewees about the animals' experiences, the piglet's desire to become a dog, the emotions felt by Babe and other characters in the film, and the emotional responses evoked in the viewers by the provided fragments.

> **Respondent 2**: Animals are fully aware of the way things are, they are also aware of their goals, which they should pursue on the farm, and this is their task in life, they feel for it, just like these two dogs, the sheepdogs. They are humanized, there are also some aspects of consciousness, some give in to this, they accept reality, there are some rules of life that set the boundaries of the world, but there are also some that would like to get out of this circle, and this is the duck.
> **Respondent 3**: Animals are shown from this human side. Each of them has its own character, its own personality and is guided by it (...) but actually, looking at the second part especially, they don't have such a bad life. Well fact, killing one of them for dinner etc.... Well here it was shown very much so almost grotesquely, as monstrous cruelty. But as the cow said, there is a certain order of things and she was at least aware of it. On the other hand, you can see in these two fragments that these animals have their own dreams, ambitions, plans. They are from such a very human side shown. For example, a runaway duck or a pig that wants to be a dog. This is—especially in the latter case—something contrary to its nature, and yet she wants to do it.

When asked about emotions toward animals, respondent 1 says: "They succeeded, I feel a lot of sympathy and a lot of nostalgia at the same time."

The responses suggest that while there are elements of embodied empathy present, the predominant emotional reaction from the audience is sympathy towards the animal characters in the film. Anthropomorphization appears to primarily serve as a tool to engage the viewer in a fictional narrative typical of mainstream cinema. Rather than overtly challenging the existing order, it may instead reflect and reinforce it. The storyline, where Babe desires to become a dog in order to improve his quality of life and avoid being served at the Christmas table, may suggest an internalization of the farm's hierarchy. However, this desire can also be interpreted as a subtle rejection of his assigned role, especially when contrasted with other animals' apparent acceptance of the status quo. Respondents, in turn, perceived little that was inherently problematic in this arrangement, often noting that the animals did not appear to be living poorly, despite the underlying presence of death and its threat. If participants experienced any form of empathy beyond sympathy, it was the aforementioned "pleasurable empathy," a transient emotional engagement that ended with the conclusion of the screening of the specific excerpts. While the film's primary mode is entertainment, this may have shaped the nature of viewers' engagement, limiting the opportunity for deeper reflection on the anthropocentric paradigm beyond the cinematic narrative. However, there are instances of films where

anthropomorphism is employed critically to challenge anthropocentrism. One such example is the experimental film "Lily Does Derrida: A Dog's Video Essay" (2010, dir. Kathy High).

Figure 5

The film narrates the tale of Lily, a female dog with impaired vision in one eye, who was once homeless but found a caregiver (Figure 5). The video essay unfolds from Lily's perspective, serving as both an intradiegetic focalizer and narrator. Lily acknowledges the potential perception of anthropomorphism, stating, "I know, you'll think this is anthropomorphizing me..." as she engages with Jacques Derrida's essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am" and explores its concepts. The film directs attention to animals' subjectivity and interests by attributing individual emotional states, goals, and needs to Lily. During the FGI, participants were queried about their thoughts on an excerpt from this film, with specific questions probing Lily's situation and emotions.

> **Moderator**: What does the protagonist's life look like?
> **Respondent 3**: It won't look like it any time soon. I have a feeling that she already has one foot in the grave. To me she was just so poor, sad and depressed about everything, resigned.

Moderator: How does she feel?
Respondent 1: She herself said she was tired. In this excerpt it's shown as if she's waiting or doesn't know what she's waiting for. She is waiting, reconsidering. (...) Like there's a bit of an assumption shown, that the animals' kind of don't know they're dying.
Respondent 2: Her emotions are described as ones that we can objectively say that animals feel, which is that she's tired, she's sad, she doesn't have the strength to go on, she doesn't have the strength to walk, she's depressed. And she certainly feels these emotions. (...) She has an element of consciousness in her that is different from that of a human, and this is shown. (...) Such a very simplified description of these feelings of hers, but it is very convincing. There is not some kind of divagation that she wants to be someone, she has plans, long-range intentions.

Respondents highlight the objectivity of Lily's states and feelings, a reflection largely influenced by resemblance to human emotions and contemplations, such as sickness, fatigue, resignation, or contemplation of impending death. Simultaneously, participants recognize a distinction in Lily's simpler articulation of emotions and experiences, underscoring the subjectivity and individuality of the protagonist's encounters. The anthropomorphization procedure, particularly the first-person narration from an offstage voice (interestingly, a male voice), contributes to rendering Lily's situation more realistic. Significantly, interviewees, when discussing the film portrayal, extend their reflections to the broader world, engaging in abstract considerations and drawing connections to their own experiences. This is evident not only in the statements above but also in responses regarding their emotions toward the animal.

Respondent 3: This pet was believable, and I'll honestly admit that I felt a little sorry for it.
Respondent 1: Poor dog's eyes.
Respondent 2: I have a friend whose dog is also sick.

The emotional response elicited in viewers by the film excerpt is intensified by the way Lily's character is portrayed. The statement from respondent 1 attests to the impact of close-ups on Lily's face and eye. Cinematic encounter, focusing on face-to-face and body-to-body encounter, despite being unidirectional, afford the viewer the opportunity to perceive the subjectivity of the protagonist and lend credence to her psycho-physical states.

The statement made by respondent 2 pertains to the concept of "embodied knowledge" discussed by Parkinson (2018) within the framework of embodied empathy. Parkinson proposes the idea of "tactile memories," suggesting that when exposed to specific scenes, tangible, bodily, and tactile elements prompt the recollection of memories and elicit empathy. It is crucial to note that embodied knowledge is culturally conditioned. This theme is reflected in the response of one participant:

Respondent 3: I realize that this dog is suffering and this caused me a feeling of sadness and so on. While in the second video another animal died [in Babe—author's note] and I didn't feel something like that. Maybe it's because of the fact that it was a dog and there was a duck and also the issue of these roles, that the dog at least in our culture is not meant for the table and the duck is, and there I wasn't as sad about the death of this duck as here I might have been sad if the death of this dog had been shown.

In conclusion, based on the participants' expressions, it appears that empathetic emotions are directed toward Lily, manifesting notably on the affective plane. Furthermore, participants appear to engage in empathetic processes involving a reflective understanding of the protagonist's situation and an attempt to envision the animal's perspective. This

perspective, albeit distinct from the human experience, is regarded with equal gravity and consideration. The film, while anthropomorphizing the protagonist, seems more critical of anthropocentrism, highlighting the protagonist's perspective as worthy of equal gravity and consideration.[2]

I also presented the audience with a segment from Viktor Kossakovsky's documentary film "Gunda" (2020), showcasing a distinct approach to animal storytelling. The black-and-white documentary captures the daily lives of so-called farm animals, including the pig Gunda, her offspring, and her companions: two cows and a one-legged hen. The film abstains from additional sounds in the background, dialogue, voice-over, illustrative music, or an intricate narrative. The film minimizes additional sound, dialogue, voice-over, illustrative music, and intricate narrative structures, although it still employs editing choices that guide viewers' perceptions. For the duration of an hour and a half, the film unfolds as a simple observation of animals' lives. The filmmakers minimize interference in both the recording process and the subsequent construction of meanings by viewers during film reception.

The excerpt presented to respondents focused on Gunda and her offspring for several minutes. Despite the absence of explicit information, viewers effortlessly deduced the familial relationship, recognizing Gunda as the mother who nurtured and taught her offspring to eat. This interpretation is connected to the concept of "embodied knowledge" mentioned earlier. Viewers might have drawn upon their own childhood experiences or memories of observing the young of companion animals, projecting this familiarity onto Gunda's family in the film. The respondents' statements also reflect their empathetic emotions toward the portrayed animal life.

> **Respondent 1**: These little ones flew behind each other, when one got lost, there they continued to run up. And they were just looking where to run. Every now and then they would bump over some roots too. You could see that just such curiosity, and what's next there, mom moved a little, then I can continue to go there. With them it was such a fascination, curiosity. And this mom had one goal in mind.
> **Moderator**: And hers how is it?
> **Respondent 4**: It seems to me that hers is fine overall. Animals in the wild live like this, and she neither bothers nor particularly likes it, it's just the way it is.
> **Respondent 1**: I still saw such carefree in it, by the fact that there were these trees, these roots.... If there had been the same scene, only that in the homestead, there would have been sadness right away. And here such carefreeness I would call it more than aimlessness.

The above assertions resonate with a recognition of the universality of specific emotions and values, including curiosity, carefreeness, family, and motherhood, across various animal species, extending beyond Homo sapiens (Bekoff, 2007). This implies that restricting subjectification techniques, which encompass anthropomorphism, and reevaluating conventional dramatic structures while exploring alternative methods for conveying a zoocentric perspective in film could prove to be a viable approach for addressing animal-related concerns in

2 In a critical context, anthropomorphization techniques in film are also employed by pro-animal organizations, exemplified by the Open Cages Poland, whose film production has been examined before (Chuszcz, 2022). This organization is dedicated to the rights of so-called farm animals. Filmmakers associated with the organization emphasize the practice of singling out individuals from the broader group, portraying them as protagonists, providing their point of view, and incorporating a voice-over, blending documentary testimony with the traditional narrative structure typical of fictional cinema. These techniques are strategically employed to evoke empathy and prompt action. Activists contend that utilizing such strategies in film has proven effective, yielding tangible outcomes for the organization, including increased petition signatures and donations. Consequently, there exists a correlation between the empathy elicited towards animals portrayed in films and the potential for that empathy to translate into real-life action and compassion towards animals beyond the cinematic realm.

cinema. Such an approach may facilitate the activation of empathic disposition, particularly at the level of embodied empathy. It is noteworthy, however, that conflicting statements arise concerning elevated levels of empathy. Some responses from participants imply that Gunda's life is viewed as vegetative or passive, thus depriving her of her agency.

> **Moderator**: How do the animals feel? How do they live their lives?
> **Respondent 3**: It seems to me that it is more vegetation than life. The mother is focused on getting food to feed her young, and the young are focused on eating. It seems to me that this life is so pointless.
> **Respondent 2**: Yes. I think it's such a natural course of life.
> **Moderator**: But the fact that it's purposeless is a bad thing? Are there animals that have a purpose?
> **Respondent 3**: Purpose let's say. Its life just "is." It exists. She is in this world and that's it. It doesn't have any influence on what this world looks like. And this pig just is, she has cubs and the next day she might just die. And basically—I have this impression—she will be all the same.

The respondents expressed negative sentiments about Gunda's life goals, characterizing her indifference towards whether she lives or not. These interpretations were constructed based on the audience's knowledge, experiences, and perceptions, all inherently human. Simultaneously, there were perspectives suggesting that Gunda doesn't appear unhappy; instead, she simply "is." This viewpoint seems to reflect an attempt to comprehend the purposefulness of life and the needs of animals beyond the human perspective in a contemplative manner. Additionally, I cautiously posit the hypothesis that this perspective also aims to inspire contemplation on human life more broadly, aligning with Monica Bakke's (2012, p. 87-88) post-humanist zoe-aesthetics, which emphasizes the subjectivity and corporeality of life understood as *zoe*: "It becomes important to emphasize the material basis of life conceived as zoe, with the consequence of seeing the subject as always embodied and symbiotically linked to other bodies."

Lastly, but not least, interviewees appreciate this mode of portraying animals. Although the film's visual strategies—such as framing and point-of-view editing—inevitably influence the way animals are perceived, the interviewees tended to emphasize the film's rawness and apparent lack of overt mediation.

> **Respondent 2**: I liked that it's just so without commentary, there's nothing added, we can just observe these animals. You can't be in the head of the animals from any of these films, so I think that's kind of the most correct way to present the point of view. [The others nod—author's note.] But also the shots were good.
> **Respondent 3**: It seems to me that this is such a most faithful representation of what is in the animal, what is in it and what it actually is. The most raw, without interpretation of it, and man himself can interpret it in his own way without anyone's help, according to his own intelligence, sensitivity.
> **Respondent 1**: Still the very fact that it was black and white... I also like that when someone wants to show something as it is, simply, if he shoots it in black and white, he doesn't even give any color enhancement: "Oh, nice, green or sad, brown." It's black and white. I like this treatment, and I also like it in this respect, just this kind of representation of them.
> **Respondent 3**: Even more stark and natural.
> **Respondent 2**: There is an emphasis not on color, but on movement, that's the most important thing, the movement of these pigs.

I would like to highlight an additional noteworthy observation arising from the focus group interviews, derived from the analysis of results across both sessions. Some participants articulated doubts, particularly pertaining to the production processes and the welfare of animals involved in the filmmaking3.

> **Respondent 1**: I have to admit that I always, when I look at such excerpts, also from the shooting side I'm always a little nervous about it, because, for example, I know what the standards are for shooting such things, and I also know how many animals, for example, died in *The Hobbit*, where animals were not the main characters, and in this one I don't even want to imagine what it all looked like anymore. And in this movie [*Babe*—author's note], I don't even want to imagine what it all looked like anymore. And for me, it's always just in such films of this style that it's so slightly absurd that they show here in this film that they want to evoke empathy for animals. But on the other hand, on the film set, when they have to spend no one knows how much money, for example, they would rather already kill a few animals, because for them, for example, it's less expense to keep them in worse conditions. Someone is trying to evoke empathy, but on the other hand, while doing it, it is terribly selfish and terribly brutal.

> **Respondent 3**: Yes, such hypocrisy comes out.

Respondents also expressed inquiries regarding the well-being of the donkey in "EO" and sought insights into how the creators achieved specific acting effects, such as eliciting tear on the donkey's face or simulating kicks on the farm. Subsequently, this led to the activation of an empathetic disposition toward the animal actors. Of particular significance is the observation that, in contrast, human acting is typically perceived as normal, with minimal doubts and emotional reactions. As a result, the empathetic reactions of interviewees toward animal performers highlight an awareness that acting for animals represents a departure from their natural behavior. This insight aligns with Jonathan Burt's idea of the "rupturing effect of the animal image" (Burt, 2002, pp. 11–12), which suggests that the presence of animals on screen inevitably shifts viewers' attention beyond the fictional story to the real-life circumstances of animals and their welfare. In this context, imaginative empathy comes into play: viewers not only emotionally connect with the characters but also, by recognizing species differences and the ethical implications involved, strive to understand the off-screen realities of non-human animals.

Conclusion

To conclude, both the utilization of anthropomorphizing techniques and alternative methods of portraying animals on screen can elicit empathetic reactions towards non-human animal characters when applied appropriately. However, a critical question remains: what are the consequences of such portrayals? Viewing this from a critical animal studies perspective, it is important to consider that the

3 Indeed, there are striking examples of animal harm in film production, such as "The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey" (2012, P. Jackson), where poor on-set care led to the deaths of animals, and "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl" (2003, G. Verbinski), where the use of underwater explosives resulted in the mass death of fish (Stańczyk, 2019, p. 20). Furthermore, there are films in which animals are killed for purely aesthetic reasons, including "Japón" (2002, C. Reygadas), "The White Ribbon" (2009, M. Haneke), and "On Body and Soul" (2017, I. Enyedi) (Stańczyk, 2019).

employment of animal actors can often constitute a manifestation of speciesism, although the extent and nature of this speciesism may vary depending on the specific context. In cinema, as Randy Malamud (2010, p. 6) aptly terms it, referring to the theory of the male gaze by a representative of feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey, we grapple with "the human gaze":

> The object on the screen is the object of desire—paradigmatically the objectified woman. Viewers are encouraged to identify with the protagonist, who is usually male; and female characters are there simply "to-be-looked-at." (…) The gaze directed at animals in visual culture keenly parallels Mulvey's formulation of the male gaze. Call it, instead of the male gaze, the human gaze; and replace woman with "animal."

In consideration of these aspects, I contend that the real impact for non-human animals lies not in whether, at a given moment in the film, the viewer properly interprets and empathizes with the emotions of the animal protagonist in a similar manner. More important may be the lasting effect on the viewer—whether the empathetic disposition goes beyond immediate affective responses and also engages the imaginative level. Alternatively, it matters if the viewer is left with a perspective that surpasses the anthropocentric paradigm. This could entail the viewer not necessarily comprehending the character's experiences but making an effort to do so, or acknowledging the inherent differences between human and non-human species.

Acceptance of these differences and the recognition of a lack of complete understanding as a coherent feature of the animal kingdom contribute to building an empathetic and understanding community. This approach signifies humility towards the unknown and the incomprehensible. It may be helpful for film messages to be constructed thoughtfully, in line with the principles outlined in *A Farmed Animal Rights Manifesto for Film* by Stephen Marcus Finn (2023). This manifesto emphasizes the filmmakers' responsibility for shaping the discourse surrounding films, urging for a conscientious and considerate approach (Fin, 2023, p. 185):

> In a rethinking of the aesthetic (a term used by Flory 2009: 234), another kind of cinema moves under the spotlight. If the first is rooted in corporate Hollywood, the second being European with its auteurship, the third revolutionary in which political goals are expressed and the fourth in tune with women's gazes and voices (cf. Ponzanesi & Waller 2012: 5), then this will be a fifth: that of animal rights which should, at various times, be able to cater for the emotional, the educational and the entertaining, but always the ethical.

Steve Baker (2001, p. 190) writes in reference to books on animal representation: to a certain extent, "human understanding of animals is shaped by representations rather than by direct experience of them". Representations have implications for animals in the real world. Portraying animals in a specific way on screen, as opposed to depicting them differently, can influence how we think about and interact with them in reality. Filmmakers might consider exploring the potential associated with activating empathic disposition, including in the context of the similarities between humans and other animals related to experiencing emotions and expressing feelings through facial expressions and body posture. While empathy is significant, it is not the sole factor, and the challenge lies in translating on-screen empathy into real-world actions. Nevertheless, examples exist of visual storytelling that has contributed to tangible change. The photojournalistic project ***We Animals***, founded by Jo-Anne McArthur, combines aesthetics with advocacy, capturing emotionally resonant images that reveal the subjectivity of animals and are widely used by media, educators, and NGOs. Their visuals have played a key role in campaigns leading to policy shifts—such

as the Australian government's 2024 decision to ban live sheep exports, and the 2014 suspension of long-tailed macaque trade in Laos following their collaboration with Cruelty Free International4. Even if we cannot always fully translate cinematic empathy into structural change, it remains essential to reflect on how audiovisual media might contribute to or detract from efforts toward justice for non-human animals.

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4 A detailed account of these and other We Animals initiatives can be found on their website: https://weanimals.org/about/impact/.

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