

ZSÓFIA NOVÁK<sup>1</sup>

# NARRATING NONHUMANS

## Anthropomorphism and Trans-species Empathy in *Our Planet* and *Gunda*

### ABSTRACT

Resorting to “benevolent” anthropomorphism, David Attenborough’s *Our Planet* (2019) uses voiceover narration to construct a comprehensive understanding of the vulnerability of wildlife, with the intention of inspiring empathy towards the nonhuman beings pictured on-screen. As Alexa Weik von Mossner notes, “the commercialism and sentimentalism of popular films does not necessarily stop them from being effective eco-films; their affective appeal may in fact give rise to both enjoyment *and* reflection.”<sup>2</sup> Though the comfortable immersion offered by conventional wildlife television certainly has its merits, the alluring spectacle it presents, and its strategies of inquisitive inquiry and knowledge production often violently cross a boundary between human and nonhuman experiences. Dedicated to bridging that gap more cautiously, Victor Kossakovsky’s *Gunda* (2020) attempts to resist anthropocentric and

anthropomorphic tendencies by refusing to provide viewers with the storied lives of animals and doing away with a coherent narrative frame. An intriguing example of slow animal-cinema, *Gunda* may facilitate an embodied empathic engagement, and exhibits some potential at inviting more haptic modes of relating to the mediated representation of nonhuman beings. Presenting a comparative analysis of these case studies, this article looks at the filmic techniques employed by “Jungles” (a selected episode of *Our Planet*) and *Gunda* in promoting empathic engagement, and explores how the fluctuation of (anti-)anthropomorphic and (anti-)anthropocentric tendencies relates to the potential evocation of empathic responses in the audience.

KEY WORDS: anthropomorphism, empathy affect, cinema, animal

---

<sup>1</sup> Zsófia Novák is a PhD researcher at the University of Debrecen, Hungary. In her dissertation project, she explores the implications of empathy in contemporary literature and cinema, focusing on relations between nonhuman animals, human beings, and (bio)technological entities.

## INTRODUCTION

Each episode of David Attenborough’s 2019 wildlife series, *Our Planet*, opens with a close-up shot of the Moon. When Attenborough’s introductory monologue begins, accompanied by an uplifting musical theme, a distant Earth emerges on the horizon, offering the audience a glimpse “back at our own planet.”<sup>3</sup> Then, as the camera cuts to a somewhat closer view of the Earth slowly rotating around its axis, the voiceover informs us that the following episodes aim to “celebrate the natural wonders that remain,” and to “reveal what we must preserve to ensure that people and nature thrive.”<sup>4</sup> Ostensibly dedicated to addressing the devastating consequences of human exploitation of the planet, from the very first shot, *Our Planet* remains clearly embedded in an anthropocentric framework at odds with its ambitions. Its vertical dynamics imply an objectifying vantage point of looking *down* upon the Earth that is seemingly separable from the observer; while the statement of *Our Planet*’s purpose (“to reveal what *we* must do to ensure that *people and nature* thrive”), and the title itself<sup>5</sup> infer the priorities of the series. Such tensions are symptomatic of the cognitive dissonance inherent in the Anthropocene condition: in spite of overwhelming evidence confirming the manifold enmeshment of human bodies within the environment, human beings still apparently find it difficult to perceive themselves as “physically part of this no longer completely ‘natural’ world that we’ve deeply affected.”<sup>6</sup> Countering still-prevailing separatist perceptions of the natureculture continuum, Stacy Alaimo calls out as “delusional” those popular depictions of the Anthropocene that are “imagining that the human is somewhere else . . . as if . . . in a spaceship and looking down on the Earth . . . , safely above, looking at the mess we’ve created.”<sup>7</sup>

In her discussion of *Our Planet*, Gry Ulstein contends that the narrative structure of the series (specifically “Attenborough’s voiceover as first-person plural narration”) reflects an “image of humanity as the protagonist of the Anthropocene—a humanity . . . which is both (but not in equal measures) culpable for and victimized by the events depicted.”<sup>8</sup> Audiences are thus simultaneously “asked to consider their responsibility as human individuals for the localized effects of global human actions

<sup>2</sup> Alexa Weik von Mossner, “Introduction,” *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology and Film*, ed. Alexa Weik von Mossner, 1–19 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014), 2 (emphasis in original).

<sup>3</sup> *Our Planet*, episode 3, “Jungles,” directed by Huw Cordey et al., aired April 5, 2019, on Netflix, 00:41-00:46, <https://www.netflix.com/hu/title/80049832>.

<sup>4</sup> “Jungles,” 01:04-01:16.

<sup>5</sup> Gry Ulstein, *Weird Fiction in a Warming World: A Reading Strategy for the Anthropocene* (doctoral dissertation, Universiteit Ghent, 2021), 199 (emphasis added).

<sup>6</sup> Stacy Alaimo, “Our Bodies are the Anthropocene (ep. 381),” in *Green Dreamer*, podcast, MP3 audio, November 15, 2022, 46:36, <https://greendreamer.com/podcast/stacy-alaimo-deep-blue-ecologies>.

<sup>7</sup> Alaimo, n.pag.

<sup>8</sup> Ulstein, 199.

on a group of physically distant nonhumans” and “expected to be collectively shocked and saddened by the events.”<sup>9</sup> This is a “complex causal relation”<sup>10</sup> that is further complicated by the fact that “for the most part,” as Jones and her colleagues note, “habitats are depicted as extensive and pristine and wildlife populations as abundant;”<sup>11</sup> while humans—the primary source of environmental threat—are nowhere to be seen on screen, their presence only inferred via the technological mediation and occasional images of intervention into the face of the landscape.

In a similar vein, Victor Kossakovsky’s *Gunda* (2020) produces a diegetic world that is noticeably, and problematically, empty of people. Rejecting the use of voiceover and an explanatory framework in its rendering of the lives of “ordinary” farmed animals, Kossakovsky’s slow, contemplative animal film<sup>12</sup> may seem, at first glance, to embody a diametrical opposition to Attenborough’s *Our Planet* series, an exemplary mode of wildlife television that presents sentimentalised and sensationalised accounts of endangered and exotic species. However, as my analysis of these case studies suggests, the two may actually share similarities that are more significant than the differences that divide them: a recognition that raises unsettling, but timely questions about the possibilities of moving beyond anthropocentric and anthropomorphic representations of animals. Indeed, though *Gunda* putatively aims to foreground other-than-human forms of vocal and material self-expression, as I demonstrate further, the film’s perspective remains largely ocularcentric<sup>13</sup> and totalising, catering to a human gaze captivated by spectacle. Its visual language, I suggest, dominantly proves equally anthropocentric as Attenborough’s human vocal authority. This is not to say that *Our Planet* and *Gunda* are virtually the same. In my investigation, I shall be careful to attend to important distinctions between the two, mainly apparent in their tempo, narrative structure and, closely related to these, their approach to trans-species empathy.

Thus, without minimising their distinctive aspects, my point is rather that in terms of (visual) rhetoric and affective appeal, the differences between the series and the film are not necessarily *in kind* but in *degree*. Drawing from recent work by Alexa Weik von Mossner, Amy Coplan, Murray Smith and Suzanne Keen on the dynamics of empathy and narrative emotion, and relying on cognitive and phenomenological

<sup>9</sup> Ulstein, 192.

<sup>10</sup> Ulstein, 192.

<sup>11</sup> Julia P. G. Jones, Laura Thomas-Walters, Niki A. Rust, Diogo Veríssimo, “Nature documentaries and saving nature: Reflections on the new Netflix series *Our Planet*,” *People and Nature* 1, no. 4 (2019): 421.

<sup>12</sup> I provide a more detailed discussion of the generic characteristics of *Gunda* later in the article. For now, I suggest that it is an example of slow cinema since, like the experimental animal films examined by Laura McMahon, it “adopt[s] a de-dramatised, long-take aesthetic in order to probe questions of duration and eventhood.” Laura McMahon, *Animal Worlds: Film, Philosophy and Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 4.

<sup>13</sup> As Claire Parkinson explains, mediated encounters may be ocularcentric insofar as they privilege an engagement with “the visual aspects of the film experience,” and “impose [a] . . . distance between viewer and animal that encourages a form of anthropocentric anthropomorphism.” Claire Parkinson, “Animal Bodies and Embodied Visuality,” *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* 46 (2018): 52-53.

film theory, in what follows I dissect the techniques *Our Planet* and *Gunda* employ to appeal to spectators' cognitive and sensory apparatus; with a particular focus on the implications of the (lack of) human narration in the films' presentation of ecological and animal rights issues. While I consider genre traditions and conventions to be crucial in contextualising and understanding these works of cinema and television, I take my cue from Laura McMahon and "rather than viewing these films . . . through the lens of wildlife documentary-making and its associated histories and theories,"<sup>14</sup> I explore how *Gunda* and "Jungles" navigate among anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic, anthropocentric and anti-anthropocentric narrative and affective strategies.

#### CASTING NONHUMANS AS CHARACTERS: 'BENEVOLENT' ANTHROPOMORPHISM, NARRATIVISATION AND EMPATHY IN "JUNGLES"

"Jungles may look the same, but each is home to a unique cast of characters"<sup>15</sup>—declares Attenborough's voice early into "Jungles." His words are complemented by sweeping aerial footage of lush tropical forests. "Jungles," a celebrated episode of the series *Our Planet* (2019), provides an overview of the planet's remaining jungle habitats, each of its individual segments dedicated to introducing a particular rainforest. Starting out from a god's-eye-view<sup>16</sup> and initially "encourag[ing] [the audience] to take on a planetary perspective,"<sup>17</sup> the camera begins by showing stunning images of the tropical habitats from above, then descends into the midst of animal and vegetal life, obtaining a closer look at various sets of "characters" native to a particular habitat, from the Congo through the Amazon to Sumatra. Overtly resorting to the tools of fiction, and making "emotional drama . . . part of filmed nature,"<sup>18</sup> these sequences unfold like miniature narratives, in line with the traditions of wildlife cinema: viewers are educated and entertained in equal measure by the commentary that complements colourful sequences of dynamic scenes, and presents overwhelmingly anthropomorphised descriptions of flora and fauna.

As described by Adrian Ivakhiv, in the "traditional nature documentary formula . . . nature [is] largely about three things: eating, being eaten, and the stunning visual beauty of it all."<sup>19</sup> In his seminal *Reel Nature*, Gregg Mitman similarly observes that nature films "promise enlightenment and thrills simultaneously," presenting a particular blend of art, science and entertainment that "seeks to reproduce the

<sup>14</sup> McMahon, 22.

<sup>15</sup> "Jungles," 09:35-09:41.

<sup>16</sup> Anat Pick, "Three Worlds: Dwelling and Worldhood on Screen," *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human*, ed. Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway, 21-36 (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2013), 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ulstein, 200.

<sup>18</sup> Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife Film* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>19</sup> Adrian Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 210.

aesthetic qualities of pristine wilderness and to preserve the wildlife that is fast vanishing from the face of the earth.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the portrait of the natural environments presented in *Our Planet* is more about catering to viewer expectations than anything else. As demonstrated by the dazzling compositions of the series, carving out the most unusual and ‘film-compatible’ fragments from the “slow unfolding of time”<sup>21</sup> is a dominant strategy, employed in the hope of getting targeted audiences—seen as disengaged and conservative consumers—“emotionally invested in what is presented to them.”<sup>22</sup> As opposed to Ivakhiv and Mitman, Derek Bousé makes the case for separating wildlife film and television from the documentary genre, arguing that the filmmaking process of wildlife cinema “itself involves a different kind of interaction between filmmaker and subject, a different set of responsibilities on the part of the filmmaker to the subject, and ultimately very different results”<sup>23</sup> than those of documentaries. Two memorable moments included in “Jungles” (the sequence focusing on a young Philippine eagle, and the mating ritual of the Western parotia) are of particular importance to my analysis. On both occasions, the cinematography and the voiceover zoom in on wildlife behaviour, depicting events that, as Bousé puts it, “we might really have been able to see,” but typically doing so “in ways we could never see them, and in which nobody ever has seen them *directly*, including the people who film them.”<sup>24</sup> What Bousé refers to here is the “false intimacy” provided by a “heavy reliance on close-ups”<sup>25</sup> and a manipulative use of eyeline matches. This point is also made by Anat Pick, who emphasises how BBC productions tend to “satisfy the desire for an illusion of closeness with nature, and use perspective (telephoto lenses, blue chip, postproduction sound enhancement, and so on) non-reflexively to create an immersive but highly contrived experience of nature.”<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, these sequences of “Jungles” demonstrate that in spite of being “full of scientific facts,” wildlife cinema, as Bousé emphasises, has been “largely . . . freed of the responsibility of looking just like reality” and “operates according to its own codes and conventions.”<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, these episodes capture the tension between the illusion of an untouched nature presented in popular wildlife series and the “invasive filming techniques allowing filmmakers to probe, to prod, and to reveal”<sup>28</sup> it.

The Philippine eagle is first shown in the company of her parents, portrayed simultaneously as a petulant teenager and as a “toddler having a tantrum.”<sup>29</sup> Then the

<sup>20</sup> Mitman, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Derek Bousé, *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Alexa Weik von Mossner, “Emotions of Consequence? Viewing Eco-documentaries from a Cognitive Perspective,” *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology and Film*, ed. Alexa Weik von Mossner, 41-60 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014), 44.

<sup>23</sup> Bousé, *Wildlife Films*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Bousé, *Wildlife Films*, 8 (emphasis in original).

<sup>25</sup> Derek Bousé, “False intimacy: close-ups and viewer involvement in wildlife films,” *Visual Studies* 18, no. 2 (2003): 123.

<sup>26</sup> Pick, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Bousé, *Wildlife Films*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Bousé, 23.

<sup>29</sup> “Jungles,” 23:53.

scene cuts to images featuring the eagle on her own, “left” to fend for herself, as suggested by the editing and the voiceover, with Attenborough expressing what *he thinks must be* going through the bird’s mind: “It’s confusing, when your parents don’t visit as frequently as they once did. Every day she calls, but no one is paying any attention.”<sup>30</sup> As Pick observes, the “voice-of-god . . . is typical of the scope and reach of the big BBC productions”<sup>31</sup>—indeed, in “Jungles” the narrator appears to be endowed with omniscience, not only able to “interpret behaviours that might otherwise seem foreign or offensive to the cultural sensibilities of many viewers”<sup>32</sup> but creating the illusion of excessively intimate access to the animal’s interiority. Giving the viewer an impression of entering the eagle’s subjective perspective, the gestures of anthropomorphisation and narrativisation that we witness here serve to ally the audience with the animal, laying the ground for trans-species empathy, potentially evoked here as the result of several nuanced filmic strategies. In this scene, the camera focuses in close-ups on the bird’s strangely expressive features, framing her countenance from carefully selected angles so that it seems to convey despair. When she appears hesitant to set off on her first flight, point-of-view shots—mimicking the shaky effect produced by hand-held camera footage—are used to impart the bird’s vantage point. Further tension is introduced as the narrator explains: “There’s a seventy-meter drop to the forest floor. A fall would be fatal.”<sup>33</sup>

While the sight of the bird’s face and the sound of her voice, as well as the “emotive musical cues”<sup>34</sup> accompanying the narration could, in themselves, captivate viewers in a more affective, instinctual manner,<sup>35</sup> the detailed spoken commentary immediately supplements these cues with an anthropomorphic explanation of the events unfolding on-screen. Such a strategy, I suggest, illuminates how the episode (and arguably, the series as a whole) favours the “mindfeeling” version of empathy, which, according to Murray Smith, “does not serve to uncover possible new information, but to put the information that we do possess under a new description, so to speak, allowing us to *feel it ‘from the inside.’*”<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, this move (potentially motivated, might I add, by commercial considerations) undoubtedly serves to maximise the chances of viewer identification with the bird, building on the conviction that “empathy is most likely to arise—or in the case of radically unfamiliar cultural settings, can only arise—when we are furnished with extensive and detailed

<sup>30</sup> “Jungles,” 24:49-25:10.

<sup>31</sup> Pick, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Bousé, 24.

<sup>33</sup> “Jungles,” 26:15-26:26.

<sup>34</sup> Pick, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Such reactions, according to cognitive film theorist Greg M. Smith, are prominent examples of affect, “a developmental antecedent of emotion that exists at birth and that cannot be taught to respond in any other way besides its hardwired response.” Greg M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 31.

<sup>36</sup> Murray Smith, “Empathy, Expansionism, and the Extended Mind,” *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, 99–117 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 114 (emphasis added).

knowledge regarding the agent and their situation.”<sup>37</sup> Additionally, as also suggested by Alexa Weik von Mossner, the creation of a narrative frame, which purportedly allows the viewer to slip into the eagle’s mind, and offers an approximation of *what it is like* for the animal to grapple with the difficulties of growing up, invites “recipients . . . to simulate that sense or feeling in their minds . . . using their own real-world experiences as models and their own bodies as sounding boards for the simulation.”<sup>38</sup> That is, a (putative) “cognitive understanding”<sup>39</sup> of the situation, presented by the voiceover as a predicament brought about by abandonment, might allow viewers to identify imaginatively with the perceived vulnerability and loneliness of the bird. Together with the visual and aural cues—the eagle’s repeated, unanswered calls and the numerous low-angle close-up shots focusing on her ‘eyebrows’ furrowed in apparent dismay—this interpretation can potentially trigger emotional contagion, affective mimicry, and other, more embodied empathic responses. In cognitive film theorist Carl Plantinga’s understanding, such a “phenomenon of ‘catching’ others’ emotions or affective states”<sup>40</sup> may be triggered by facial feedback and affective mimicry.<sup>41</sup> Julian Hanich defines this as a pre-cognitive mimicry of an “emotion or affect expressed by someone else.”<sup>42</sup>

However, any affect<sup>43</sup>—approached here as the viewer’s “automatic, visceral response to a given film or sequence”<sup>44</sup>—that could be elicited by the images and sounds of “Jungles” is framed and channelled by the voiceover almost immediately. In this way, *Our Planet* produces and manages emotions<sup>45</sup> by narratively interpreting

<sup>37</sup> Murray Smith, 114.

<sup>38</sup> Alexa Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative* (Waterloo: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 7.

<sup>39</sup> Weik von Mossner, “Emotions,” 44.

<sup>40</sup> Carl Plantinga, “The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film,” *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, 239–55 (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 243.

<sup>41</sup> Plantinga, 242.

<sup>42</sup> Julian Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 183.

<sup>43</sup> In my discussion of these case studies, I primarily rely on conceptualisations of affect and emotion as delineated by prominent psychologists, and film scholars of both cognitive and phenomenological orientation.

<sup>44</sup> Weik von Mossner, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>45</sup> Broadly speaking, most theorists (see e.g. Plantinga (1999, 2009); Carroll (2001), Ingram (2014)) distinguish between affect, which is said to comprise predominantly unconscious, reflexive embodied responses, and emotion, which, according to Carroll, is made up of “a cognitive component, such as a belief or a thought about some person, place, or thing, real or imagined; and a feeling component (a bodily change and/or a phenomenological experience), where, additionally, the feeling state has been caused by the relevant cognitive state, such as a belief or a belief-like state.” However, it is worth noting that on many accounts, the development of affect is taken to precede emotion which, in David Ingram’s words, “includes a cognitive element *in addition to* this bodily feeling.” Noël Carroll, *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 221; David Ingram, “Emotion and Affect in Eco-films: Cognitive and Phenomenological Approaches,” *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology and Film*, ed. Alexa Weik von Mossner, 23–39 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014), 23 (emphasis added).

affects<sup>46</sup> as soon as they could potentially emerge. This may problematically efface the viewers' undigested affective reactions, since they are not given time to dwell on the somatic impressions elicited by the filmic flow, but are instead driven to focus on the narrator's explanation of the situation and, in the wake of the anthropomorphic story presented, on a "*cognitive awareness of [their affective] response[s]*."<sup>47</sup> Such a strategy, I believe, introduces an element of cognitive distance, and forecloses the potential inherent in a more instinctual kind of embodied engagement with the images and sounds of nature—what I would term affective empathy following Elisa Aaltola's conceptualisation. According to her, this form of empathic reaction "is always immediate in the automated sense" and "includes reverberation with the other" wherein "[o]ne quite simply feels something akin to [the other's] feelings . . . instead of in a detached manner perceiving or inferring."<sup>48</sup> This kind of affective relation, reliant on "merely somatic states," is often dismissed by psychologists and philosophers alike<sup>49</sup> as a "basic physiological level . . . an ephemeral and contingent affective state"<sup>50</sup> that is subordinate to more cognitively complex forms of empathic engagement. Instead, I would suggest that such instinctual resonance—"a somatic reflex which is shared," according to Assmann and Detmers, "by all *animal species*"<sup>51</sup>—constitutes an important link among human and nonhuman animal species that should be explored and attended to more carefully, as it may bring us closer to a "relationship of empathic nonunderstanding" that, according to Laura Marks, involves "learn[ing] to respect animals in their difference, as well as their commonality with humans."<sup>52</sup> In the type of wildlife television exemplified by *Our Planet*, this opportunity is overlooked. The embodied-affective dimensions of empathy (generally considered to be a faculty with both affective and cognitive elements<sup>53</sup>) seem to be manipulated and exploited only to maximise imaginative perspective-taking with nonhuman beings, while perceptual identification is foregrounded as the primary means of engagement with the mediated representation of animals.

Defined by Cahill as "the projection of human values and meanings onto animals, plants and inanimate objects,"<sup>54</sup> the anthropomorphism that underlies these narrative structures within the episode serves to represent unfamiliar wild animals

<sup>46</sup> Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, "Toward an Affective Ecocriticism: Placing Feeling in the Anthropocene," *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, ed. Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, 1–22 (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>47</sup> Weik von Mossner, "Introduction," 1 (emphasis added).

<sup>48</sup> Elisa Aaltola, "Varieties of Empathy and Moral Agency," *Topoi* 30 (2014): 243–53, 245.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Coplan and Goldie (2011).

<sup>50</sup> Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers, "Introduction," *Empathy and Its Limits*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers, 1–17 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 5.

<sup>51</sup> Assmann and Detmers, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 39.

<sup>53</sup> See e.g. Coplan (2011), Stadler (2017).

<sup>54</sup> James Leo Cahill, "Anthropomorphism and Its Vicissitudes: Reflections on Homme-sick Cinema," *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human*, ed. Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway, 73–90 (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2013), 74.



and other nonhuman beings as ‘familiar,’ creating an impression of proximity to humans. As argued by Claire Molloy, “such programmes . . . construct a relationship between viewer and animal that reduces distance and fulfils a desire to bring animals close.”<sup>55</sup> It can be argued that such ‘good-intentioned’ or ‘benevolent’ anthropomorphisation works in favour of incorporating nonhuman entities into the viewer’s empathic horizon. Yet, in spite of its use in eliciting spectator’s empathy, anthropomorphism has also been found problematic from perspectives critical of anthropocentrism, especially animal studies and critical posthumanism.<sup>56</sup> Filmmakers have often spoken in favour of enfolding nonhuman beings within human(ising) stories: Attenborough has asserted that it should be “allowed to introduce fiction into . . . natural history filmmaking.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Cahill notes that the biologist and documentarist Jean Painlevé also defended anthropomorphism as “a response to the impenetrability of animal behaviour.”<sup>58</sup> For critical posthumanism, however, “the (im)possibility of cross-species understanding” is an “epistemological concern”<sup>59</sup> that needs to be approached with more caution. In this regard, Claire Parkinson distinguishes anthropomorphism “underpinned by anthropocentric interests that sustain animal exploitation from anthropomorphism as an affective and effective means of mobilising empathy.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, though wildlife series like *Our Planet* are committed to providing an increased visibility and understanding of nonhuman lives and the dangers they face, the ways in which those lives are narratively and cinematographically constructed still often bear the marks of what Ivakhiv calls “objectivizing” visuality, amounting to “an exercise of power masquerading as knowledge.”<sup>61</sup> Combining scientifically sound educational material with anthropomorphic approaches, *Our Planet* seemingly offers a full access to nonhuman experience, cutting through the gap between human and nonhuman experientialities in a way that frequently threatens to erase irreducible differences between them and to obscure the impenetrability of animals’ internal processes.

Still, while “Jungles” abounds in “formulations that simultaneously tout and

<sup>55</sup> Claire Molloy, *Popular Media and Animals* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 83.

<sup>56</sup> Here, critical posthumanism is understood as a philosophical perspective that challenges anthropocentric hierarchies and the normative definition of the human subject; in the words of prominent theorist Francesca Ferrando, it is a “post-humanism and a post-anthropocentrism: it is ‘post’ to the concept of the human and to the historical occurrence of humanism, both based . . . on hierarchical social constructs and human-centric assumptions.” Francesca Ferrando, “Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations,” *ExistenZ* 8, no. 2 (2013): 26–32.

<sup>57</sup> David Attenborough, “How Unnatural Is TV Natural History?” *The Listener*, May 7, 1987, 12.

<sup>58</sup> Jean Painlevé, “Le Cinéma,” unpublished manuscript, held in *Fonds Jean Painlevé, Les Documents Cinématographiques*, Paris, 1930. Excerpt translated and quoted by James Cahill, 86.

<sup>59</sup> Sanna Karkulehto et al., “Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman: Striving for More Ethical Cohabitation,” *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, ed. Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 4.

<sup>60</sup> Claire Parkinson, *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2020), 5.

<sup>61</sup> Ivakhiv, 3 (emphasis in original).

tame the so-called mystery of the natural world,”<sup>62</sup> there are intermittent occasions where a sense of the uncanny—that “peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar”<sup>63</sup>—emerges on the margins, as if in resistance of the humanising framework. Ironically, such underlying ambivalence surfaces in two of the most heavily anthropomorphised scenes, depicting the Philippine eagle’s quandary and the mating dance of the Western parotia. In these sequences, the animals are “overlaid with metaphors of human characteristics,”<sup>64</sup> and their own sounds are mostly snuffed out by the accompanying soundtrack and voiceover, almost completely effacing the inherent logic of their behaviour. Introducing the birds-of-paradise, Attenborough briefly notes that “New Guinea’s animals have become truly bizarre”<sup>65</sup>—a statement that betrays a profoundly anthropocentric perspective, since the bird’s behaviour only seems nonsensical and caricaturistic within a human horizon of interpretation. But then, the narration, complemented by the light-hearted musical score, quickly proceeds to suppress and rationalise the perceived strangeness of the bird-of-paradise via a description and evaluation of his performance: “He opens with a bow. . . He has all the moves. Fancy footwork. The whirling dervish. The head plume shuffle, with spin.”<sup>66</sup> However, as the bird “morph[s] into some very un-birdlike shapes,”<sup>67</sup> the spectators’ filmic encounter with the animal may—if only for a subversive instant—turn into an uncanny experience. This sequence, I suggest, is particularly intriguing because it does not simply entail “recognising something unfamiliar as familiar or something familiar as unfamiliar,”<sup>68</sup> but rather, as Cahill puts it, “moments of sudden estrangement”<sup>69</sup> alternate with moments of recognition.

Even as the explanatory commentary and the suggestive, comical musical cues attempt to bring “[t]he outside-ness of the animal . . . into the human realm and [control and restrain] its wildness,”<sup>70</sup> viewers’ attention might wander to the contrast between the narration constructing the bird as familiar and the scene unfolding on the screen. Though the parotia is probably recognised by the majority of the audience at least as an exotic “prototype” of an animal (a bird) they are all well-acquainted with, through his movement, he intermittently manifests as absolute alterity, exhibiting behaviour we do not normally associate with birds and assuming forms that are eerily incongruous with their familiar contours. “[T]hrough editing and narration,” according to Heholt and Edmundson, this “alien” is “made comprehensible, . . .

<sup>62</sup> Pick, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Burt, “The Illumination of the Animal Kingdom: The Role of Light and Electricity in Animal Representation,” *The Animal Studies Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings*, ed. Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald, 289–301 (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 291.

<sup>65</sup> “Jungles,” 10:20–10:24.

<sup>66</sup> “Jungles,” 12:42–13:15.

<sup>67</sup> “Jungles,” 11:04–11:08.

<sup>68</sup> Ulstein, 30.

<sup>69</sup> Cahill, 83.

<sup>70</sup> Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson, “Introduction,” *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out*, ed. Ruth Heholt and Melisa Edmundson, 1–17 (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 4.

labelled, and contained,” and its “action or pointless repetition” that “may seem to us to be senseless . . . [is] moulded into [a purposeful narrative].”<sup>71</sup> Still, the viewer may potentially be captured by a sense of watching an unknown agency that, in the words of Jonathan Burt, cannot fully be “limited to a human framework.”<sup>72</sup> Such a twofold perception of the parotia as recognisable and unrecognisable, an anthropomorphised individual and a weird organism, may result, I suggest, in a lingering “doubling of experience” that demonstrates the “essential ambivalence” inherent in “Freud’s idea of the uncanny.”<sup>73</sup> As explained by Dylan Trigg, this “conjunction of ‘heimlich’ and ‘unheimlich’ does not result in a Hegelian synthesis, but instead profits from a free-floating oscillation,”<sup>74</sup> that, I suggest, may be traced through the parotia’s fluid movements. Similarly, in the scene depicting the young eagle, the narrative commentary and the curated composition of the images serve to maximise the impression of the bird’s human-like behaviour and *appearance*. However, in a few crucial instances, as the bird turns her head, her features are again revealed as ‘birdlike,’ and again, “a disturbance occurs” as the uncanny subtly emerges and cues “the sense that what has so far been thought of as inconspicuous in its being is, in fact, charged with a creeping strangeness.”<sup>75</sup>

Attenborough’s history of screen presence (here, notably, an absence) and distinctive voice—soothing, evocative, and profoundly fused together with this kind of wildlife cinema—is a crucial aspect of the film-experience. On the one hand, he possesses the credibility and authority of an expert and carries the popularity of a celebrity—thus, his “identity and experience” as narrator and producer “may also figure into the potential of ambassadorial strategic empathy.”<sup>76</sup> As explained by Suzanne Keen, “[a]ppeals for justice, recognition, and assistance often take this form,” attempting to “address] chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group, often to a specific end.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed, relying on the empathy for the eagle potentially cued earlier—which, in this case, is “used to solidify a stronger eco-activist message”<sup>78</sup>—Attenborough forebodingly notes that the bird’s survival is imperilled in the “Philippines’ fragmented forest, [where] there’s just too little prey for a supersized eagle.”<sup>79</sup> However, the consciousness-raising and mobilising potential of his vocal authority is left untapped as he continues by moving on to another “jungle whose size is still legendary;”<sup>80</sup> so the sense of doom threatening the eagle instantly gives way to a sense of wonder evoked by footage of the Amazon’s landscape. As argued by Aaltola,

<sup>71</sup> Heholt and Edmundson, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Burt, 291.

<sup>73</sup> Dylan Trigg, *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 34.

<sup>74</sup> Trigg, 34.

<sup>75</sup> Trigg, 31.

<sup>76</sup> Suzanne Keen, “Strategic Empathizing: Techniques of Bounded, Ambassadorial, and Broadcast Narrative Empathy,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 82 (2009): 477–93, 483.

<sup>77</sup> Keen, 483.

<sup>78</sup> Ulstein, 199.

<sup>79</sup> “Jungles,” 28:14–28:33.

<sup>80</sup> “Jungles,” 28:36.

when “empathy becomes entertainment”<sup>81</sup> in such a way, it may pacify rather than move audiences, “enabl[ing] moral and political passivity, for the type of discomfort often required for one to truly grasp the causes and intensities of others’ suffering, and to be stirred into questioning one’s own culturally loaded beliefs . . . is missing.”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, in this instance the series’ strategy of becoming a voice for the ‘voiceless’ and vulnerable nonhuman beings captured on screen exposes the peril of empathy being “used as proof of entitlement to speak for them, to represent or ‘name’ victims in a way that simultaneously silences them.”<sup>83</sup> Sequences like this demonstrate how the calls for attention to nonhuman suffering and endangerment are almost always immediately balanced out with scenes that delight and fascinate, providing swift relief from the “bite-sized”<sup>84</sup> empathy temporarily cued by the moving image.

#### SILENCE SPEAKS LOUDER? – ANTI-ANTHROPOMORPHIC STRATEGIES, NONHUMAN TEMPORALITY AND EMBODIED EMPATHY IN *GUNDA*

The establishing shot of Victor Kossakovsky’s *Gunda* depicts the eponymous farm pig lying half inside her pen, occupying a geometrically central position within the frame of the shot. With barely perceptible changes in camera angle, the scene goes on for four minutes, keeping focus on the sow’s head. The only movement is introduced by piglets appearing around their mother, clambering around on unstable newborn limbs. As it turns out, this is a birth scene, not shown but only implied by the labouring grunts of Gunda and the slick wetness of some piglets. As the first lengthy take gives way to an equally long and somewhat monotonous sequence featuring the squealing and suckling new-borns in close-up, the audience may be overtaken by an uncomfortable sense of proximity—and, indeed, boredom. Instead of the dynamic, riveting spectacle of conventional wildlife cinema, Kossakovsky’s work confronts the viewer with contemplative scenes unfolding at a pensive tempo, suggesting a shift towards nonhuman temporality. This cinematographic strategy stands in stark contrast with the entertaining commentary and seamless (but frequent and obvious) shifts in the filmic flow of “Jungles,” aiming at capturing and governing audience attention by “depict[ing] nature close-up, speeded-up, and set to music, with reality’s most exciting moments highlighted, and its ‘boring’ bits cut out.”<sup>85</sup> Unlike Attenborough’s oeuvre, intended to entertain viewers with a presumably superficial understanding of nature and late-capitalist crises, *Gunda* chooses to zoom in on the

<sup>81</sup> Elisa Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy: Moral Psychology and Animal Ethics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 40.

<sup>82</sup> Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 42.

<sup>83</sup> Sophie Oliver, “The Aesth-ethics of Empathy: Bakhtin and the *Return to Self* as Ethical Act,” *Empathy and Its Limits*, ed. Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 173.

<sup>84</sup> Aaltola, *Varieties of Empathy*, 42.

<sup>85</sup> Bousé, *Wildlife Films*, 3.

lives of familiar<sup>86</sup> domesticated species without interpreting their behaviour. Ostensibly, the film fits neatly into a new wave of slow animal cinema that, as described by Laura McMahan in her illuminating *Animal Worlds*, “deploy[s] particular forms of delay and temporal distension, combined with a lack of expository voiceover commentary, as a way of attending to animal worlds of sentience and perception.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, like the films discussed by McMahan, *Gunda* seems to present “a radical departure from the more usual focus on ‘charismatic species’ in wildlife programming”<sup>88</sup> and to embrace “dead time”<sup>89</sup> by “destabilis[ing] and reconfigur[ing] understandings of the ‘event’ in cinema, proposing an alternative model of eventhood.”<sup>90</sup>

At first glance, *Gunda* has considerable potential for cultivating “a renewed mode of attentiveness to the time of animals – to mundane and apparently insignificant gestures – and thus a different register of meaning and value.”<sup>91</sup> However, its crisp sounds and invasive visual language, facilitating the optical appropriation of (cute) animal bodies, together with black-and-white imagery, which occasionally leans towards an ecokitsch aesthetic, tend to undermine the possibility of a more experiential manner of viewer engagement. A scene of the piglets feeding, their snouts exploring their mother’s body for the first time, holds considerable potential for a more haptic kind of engagement.<sup>92</sup> Yet, it is foreclosed by the sharp focus and totalising gaze of the camera, especially prominent in the overhead shot of the small animals suckling. The next shot portrays the newborns fast asleep, piling on top of each other amidst small noises—an ‘aww-inspiring’ composition reminiscent of the style of Annie Leibovitz and a striking example of ecokitsch. As explained by Ralph H. Lutts, ecokitsch relies on the “reassuring sentimentality of the form,”<sup>93</sup> which “evokes pleasant emotions that are widely shared” and “appeals to the belief that all is right with the world, or that the world can be remade to this end.”<sup>94</sup> Though in an

<sup>86</sup> It must be noted, though, that the sense of familiarity regarding farm animals is becoming increasingly less evident in the global North.

<sup>87</sup> McMahan, 1.

<sup>88</sup> McMahan, 4.

<sup>89</sup> As explained by McMahan, dead time refers to “the banal, the everyday, the seemingly insubstantial” in more traditional modes of cinematic representation, which tend to refrain from portraying “events deemed to be insignificant, time in which, according to its anthropocentric focus, ‘nothing happens.’” Contrarily, the works of slow animal cinema she focuses on invite “a mode of sustained engagement with the time of animals” and ask audiences “to see these lives anew, beyond their reduction to resource and capital.” McMahan, 6.

<sup>90</sup> McMahan, 6.

<sup>91</sup> McMahan, 6.

<sup>92</sup> As opposed to “optical viscosity” that “depends on a separation between the viewing subject and the object,” a tactile viscosity or haptic looking, as proposed by Laura Marks, “is more inclined to move than to focus, more inclined to graze than to gaze,” and “tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture.” Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 162.

<sup>93</sup> Ralph H. Lutts, “Ecokitsch and the Landscapes of Our Desire,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 28, no. 2 (2021): 641–61, 642.

<sup>94</sup> Lutts, 643.

interview, Kossakovsky stated that he had opted for black-and-white imagery because he “didn’t want to seduce” the viewer by “show[ing] cute pink piglets,”<sup>95</sup> the images of the charmingly clumsy creatures snuggling each other, shot from various captivating angles are “easy on the heart, easy on the mind, and reassuring.”<sup>96</sup> Such shots, along with subsequent scenes featuring Gunda and her offspring wandering about the farm, exploring the landscape in apparent ease and freedom, effortlessly evoke a “nostalgic dream of a romanticized past, of a world in perfect psychological, social, and ecological balance” that is, according to Lutts, “an important face of ecokitsch.”<sup>97</sup>

The presence of the ecokitsch also constitutes an important parallel with *Our Planet*, which paradoxically emphasises and, at the same time, “denies complexity” by counterbalancing its commitment to providing increased visibility to issues of climate change and biodiversity loss with “rhetoric, imagery, and even mythic devices to make us feel good about the natural world and our place in it.”<sup>98</sup> Such a use of the ecokitsch, argues Lutts, “reassures us that such problems will eventually all go away and we will live in peace and harmony with nature forever.”<sup>99</sup> The sense of peace and comfort evoked by these kitschy shots is sharply countered by the following scene, in which the camera pans to a spot at some distance from the group, where feeble wheezing emerges from under some hay. Cutting to Gunda already on her feet, the camera follows the sow around in the pen as she searches for the lost piglet, eventually helping it<sup>100</sup> to the surface. In one of the few event-like instances of the film, the small animal suddenly appears trampled under its mother’s heavy hoof. Viewers are left to make sense of this scene on their own, observing it at an unnerving proximity, which is not alleviated by the distancing effects of voiceover. Preceding this disturbing event, the camera concentrates on the lone piglet struggling to stand on shaky legs as Gunda huffs and grunts above her, somewhere out-of-frame, her shadow ominously cast over her offspring. This build-up of tension (not unlike the techniques typical to horror) serves to enhance the instinctual, affective responses that spectators are likely to experience while watching this scene. The harrowing cries of the piglet and the sight of her abject wounds—not clearly visible beyond a visceral shininess under Gunda’s hoof, suggestive of the grave extent of the injury—may potentially provoke somatic empathy or embodied simulation,<sup>101</sup> a phenomenon that, according to Adriano D’Aloia, “does not entail inference of mental states or an imaginative

<sup>95</sup> Victor Kossakovsky, “A Conversation with Director Victor Kossakovsky,” *NEON – Gunda Press Notes*, September 4, 2020, <https://neon.app.box.com/s/55qpzaa0tc18ciz331ddro4tpfmesmg5/file/718983784284>.

<sup>96</sup> Lutts, 642.

<sup>97</sup> Lutts, 644.

<sup>98</sup> Lutts, 644.

<sup>99</sup> Lutts, 644.

<sup>100</sup> This is already an interpretation of Gunda’s displayed gestures: first we hear the piglet calling, then in one shot, we see Gunda digging in the hay with her snout, to be followed by an image of the piglet uncovered; and thus, due to the way in which the scene is composed, we are led to presume that we are seeing an intentional act of care.

<sup>101</sup> These terms are often used interchangeably: as Jane Stadler points out, what neuroscientists refer to as embodied simulation largely corresponds to the notion of kinaesthetic or somatic empathy used by phenomenologists. Stadler, 322.

substitution” but “is pre-logical and pre-reflexive, rooted at the sensory-motor and neurophysiological level.”<sup>102</sup> In such moments, as Ivakhiv puts it, “the shimmering texture of image and sound” may “strick[e] us and resoun[d] in us viscerally and affectively;”<sup>103</sup> since what is seen on screen is not explained via narration, and the audience is allowed to, or, in fact, compelled to remain with(in) the felt bodily states cued by the sequence.

Contrarily to “Jungles,” which primarily relies on spectators’ cognitive empathy, aided by the construction of a comprehensive understanding of the wildlife presented, *Gunda* in this instance conveys affective information that is not explicitly decoded within the filmic frame—nor is it easily digested. “Operat[ing] at or near the base of the narrative understanding,” our somatically induced empathy, in this context, has a *mindreading* function, serving “to probe and reveal more of what is or might be going on inside the agent,” since, as explained by Smith, “we have some, but very limited, knowledge of an agent in a situation.”<sup>104</sup> Pointing to the inherent interrelatedness of somatic and cognitive aspects of empathy, Smith also notes that “our imagining may be assisted by [affective] mimicry and [emotional] contagion; indeed, . . . these processes may have nudged us towards empathic imagining in the first place.”<sup>105</sup> In this case, however, in the absence of a narrative frame that would interpret the unfolding scene and suggest what the viewer is (supposed to be) feeling, the prospects of imaginative identification—that would facilitate a more cognitive engagement—are hindered by the difficulty of disentangling and processing the mixture of somatic responses and emotional states one might be experiencing. Indeed, it is fair to ask how this scene affects one’s ability to empathise with Gunda, the quasi-protagonist of the film. On the one hand, the helpless piglet’s painful squeals and the graphic (though unclear) images of her anguish are likely to provoke anxiety, disgust and anger—instinctual responses that might work against the viewer’s ability to feel with Gunda later on. Additionally, the sense of engagement may be further complicated by a somewhat voyeuristic perspective, evoking a sense of invasion as spectators are caught between the act of looking and trying to tear their gaze away from the horrific scene. On the other hand, as the camera closes in on Gunda’s face and eyes in the aftermath of the event, the piglet’s body somewhat obscured by the lighting, the camera angle and her mother’s head, we are invited to scan the sow’s countenance and gestures for some indication on whether the witnessed act was one of mercy, callousness, an accident, or none of the above. Thus, as demonstrated by this scene, *Gunda* appears to foreground the significance of somatic responses to the movie and, to some extent, implicates the viewer’s body in the meaning-making process.

The sense that “meaning, and where it is made does not have a discrete origin

<sup>102</sup> Adriano D’Aloia, “The Character’s Body and the Viewer: Cinematic Empathy and Embodied Simulation in the Film Experience,” *Embodied Cognition and Cinema*, ed. M. Coegnarts and P. Kravanja, 187–99 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015), 190–91.

<sup>103</sup> Ivakhiv, ix.

<sup>104</sup> Murray Smith, 114.

<sup>105</sup> Murray Smith, 115.

in either spectators' bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction"<sup>106</sup> is also salient in the sequence featuring some chickens emerging from a crate. When the birds venture out in apparent unease, the sense of anticipation is both palpable and contagious: close-up shots present feet placed warily onto the ground, heads cocked in the warmth of the sun, feathers ruffled by a light breeze. The impression of witnessing what seems to be a first moment of (relative) freedom is communicated not only by the birds' nervous glances and vigilant movements but also by the camera lingering on bald patches and old wounds healed improperly, tell-tale signs of a life spent in the cages of industrial animal agriculture. The chickens' exploration of their new territory is conveyed, intriguingly, through momentarily haptic imagery: the camera's focus repeatedly dissolves and resolves<sup>107</sup> as the birds' feet are intermittently shown in extreme close-ups and partial shots that emphasise their scaly texture, only to be enmeshed visually with blades of grass and loose soil in the next shot. Such "changes of focus and distance, switches between more haptic and more optical visual styles," as Marks writes, "describe the movement between a relationship of touch and a visual one."<sup>108</sup> These short instances may invite a haptic looking that "evades a distanced view, instead pulling the viewer in close," and forcing her "to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative."<sup>109</sup> However, preceding and subsequent scenes featuring the chickens undermine the potential for a "visual intimacy" that, as Parkinson suggests, may "engag[e] the viewer with 'the feel'"<sup>110</sup> of the mediated encounter. The rest of the sequences comprise images of the birds captured from behind, from among some bushes and branches, a voyeuristic and distanced perspective that reminds us that the encounter is always "between the viewer and the image of an animal."<sup>111</sup>

In a surprising parallel with Attenborough's strategies, which include, as Gouyon remarks, a heavy reliance "on storylines centred on individual 'animal stars'" (such as the Philippine eagle introduced in the previous section) in order "[t]o perform his empathetic relationship with nature,"<sup>112</sup> *Gunda* also seems to select its own 'animal stars,' including Gunda herself, as well as a half-legged chicken, who is shown at some length while she struggles to navigate the unfamiliar terrain, before being stopped by the fence she cannot get through. Whereas *Our Planet* resorts to descriptive anthropomorphisation to emphasise commonality and provide "opportunities for character identification"<sup>113</sup>—*Gunda* uses perspective and shot-reverse shot structures to invite perceptual identification with the disabled bird. Even though portraying the

<sup>106</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 67.

<sup>107</sup> Marks, *Touch*, 16.

<sup>108</sup> Marks, *Touch*, 16.

<sup>109</sup> Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 163.

<sup>110</sup> Claire Parkinson, "Animal Bodies and Embodied Visuality," 61.

<sup>111</sup> Parkinson, 53.

<sup>112</sup> Jean-Baptiste Gouyon, "Wildlife Television, Empathy and the End of the British Empire," *BBC Wildlife Documentaries in the Age of Attenborough*, ed. Jean-Baptiste Gouyon, 69–95 (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 75.

<sup>113</sup> Keen, 488.



chicken through low-angle and over-the-shoulder shots is different from the authoritative top-down gaze of “Jungles,” these shots still “creat[e] a sense of narrative.”<sup>114</sup> Similar to conventional techniques of wildlife films,<sup>115</sup> such shot sequences and editing anthropomorphise the bird, constructing her as a “character” whose perspective may be channelled. Indeed, any attempts at “oppos[ing] ocularcentric detachment”<sup>116</sup> are at least partially undone by the extremely aestheticized—and occasionally sentimental—visual compositions encountered throughout the film. These include idyllic portraits of the piglets piled on top of each other, and close-up shots of teardrops falling from the eyes of cows—the only animals within the film to overtly notice the presence of the camera tracing their motions (except for the one-legged chicken briefly looking directly into the camera).

Reminiscent of *Our Planet*’s portrayal of wildlife (particularly some orang-utans introduced towards the end of “Jungles”) the cow’s eyes “gaz[ing] into the camera . . . seem to communicate with the depths of our souls.”<sup>117</sup> As argued by Marks, in such instances “[t]he overall effect is to allow the viewer an identification with the nonhuman subjects, a [cheap and easy] way to get into their furry or feathered heads.”<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, the special effects, the dolly-mounted panoramic shots, and the spectacular aerial footage emphasise the film’s own constructedness, potentially hindering the experience of immediacy and sense of authenticity the film seeks to attain, since the naked eye of the viewer could never encounter animals in this way. Proximate shots also produce another parallel with “Jungles,” similarly full of impossible close-ups and intrusively intimate details.

Crucially, both Attenborough and Kossakovsky produce visual narratives that are meant to be pleasing for, and thereby centre the human gaze. At the same time, their diegetic worlds are noticeably—and problematically—empty of people. While humans are always already implicated in every single pixel and frame—as audience, as production-crew, or as perpetrators of nonhuman suffering—their simultaneous on-screen absence and spectral, technologically mediated “presence” secures a hierarchy in which they occupy a superior position, looking at the world presented with an “external, seemingly objective eye.”<sup>119</sup> Though such self-elision may be considered as conventional feature of both wildlife and slow animal cinema, the total erasure of human bodies from screen (even in scenes that implicitly feature an interaction between humans and nonhuman beings) is a controversial and paradoxically anthropocentric aspect. Nevertheless, it must be noted that by rejecting the use of human narration, emotional musical themes and anti-boredom dynamism, *Gunda* does, to a certain extent, foreground nonhuman animals expressing themselves in their species-specific ways: its meditative images are accompanied exclusively by the sounds of nonhuman beings. While the pigs, cows and chickens are

<sup>114</sup> Marks, *Touch*, 25.

<sup>115</sup> See e.g. Bousé (2003); Pick (2013); Marks (2002).

<sup>116</sup> Parkinson, 53.

<sup>117</sup> Marks, *Touch*, 25.

<sup>118</sup> Marks, *Touch*, 25.

<sup>119</sup> Ivakhiv, 3.

in constant tactile, material and aural communication with each other and their environment, their dialogue and their gestures remain foreign and undeciphered.

Getting intimately acquainted with Gunda and her offspring, the spectator gains a glimpse into the rhythm of their lives (seemingly lived in relative freedom of movement) and may even obtain a sense of temporality experienced differently—conveyed via a minimal amount of cuts and long takes unfolding at an almost real-time pace. As McMahon explains, “[t]he contingent wanderings of the animals” in such examples of slow animal cinema “usher in a particular kind of nonlinearity, of unregulated action” that is “exacerbated by the durational aesthetic, particularly the long take and the lack of cuts.”<sup>120</sup> Due to this, the eventual introduction of human time and its implications may feel even more devastating: at the end of the film, the flow of the pigs’ life is interrupted by the arrival of a tractor, imposing a new kind of cyclicity, that of production, which involves the processing of animals-as-commodities.

Together with that, the film’s ambient noises contain a slightly manipulative aspect: though *Gunda* was shot at several distinct locations, its episodes are pulled together by the diegetic soundscape consisting of the voices of other out-of-frame farm animals, which creates the impression that all beings appearing in the film share the same habitat. Just like in the case of wildlife cinema, “the use of sound helps mask” the lack of “continuity among shots . . . by remaining continuous,”<sup>121</sup> even if the sounds themselves, as McMahon notes, remain “untranslatable . . . [in] their simultaneous invitation and resistance to meaning.”<sup>122</sup> In conventional nature films and series like *Our Planet*, aural manipulation is taken to the extreme: as Bousé reminds us, “nearly all sound in wildlife films is added later, and much of it is fabricated by technicians in a studio using various props” as it would be impossible to record sound and images simultaneously “when using long lenses.”<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, Bousé quotes an interview with Attenborough, in which the statements made by the filmmaker are, I find, particularly revelatory of the conventional approach taken to represent other animals. As Attenborough explains, “it can be as misleading to put no sound effect on . . . If you put nothing on, then it looks as though the animal is *a mysterious thing that moves totally in silence*.”<sup>124</sup> As demonstrated by this assertion, in Attenborough’s oeuvre, the demystification of wildlife behaviour is construed as absolutely necessary for viewer enjoyment, and somehow, paradoxically, for the *truthfulness* of the show.

Spectators habituated to the kind of storied representations of nonhumans offered by traditional nature films may find it challenging to resonate with the experiences of animals that are not framed within any explicit, vocalised narrative. Yet, despite unfolding in an episodic manner, Kossakovsky’s film still has an obvious arc typical for mainstream nature documentaries—one that begins with life and ends

<sup>120</sup> McMahon, 7.

<sup>121</sup> Bousé, *Wildlife Films*, 32.

<sup>122</sup> McMahon, 7.

<sup>123</sup> Bousé, *Wildlife Films*, 32.

<sup>124</sup> Jamie James, “Art and Artifice in Wildlife Films,” *Discover*, September, 1985, 96, quoted in Bousé, *Wildlife Films*, 226–27 (emphasis added).

with death. Also, as exhibited by the composition of the final sequence, *Gunda* does not entirely do away with drama: as her offspring are herded into a box and carried away, the camera follows Gunda, searching her surroundings in apparent confusion, calling out in loud grunts as she looks at the departing truck. In this scene, the camera zooms in and out on her teats and face, horizontally tracing her as she runs about in frantic circles, sniffing the places where her piglets' smell still lingers, then ultimately disappears into her pen. These cues (particularly effective because of the established 'character history' of Gunda as mother and caretaker) overtly suggest that Gunda is in a state of shock, and perhaps grief. Similar to the struggles of the young eagle, this scene may prove especially potent at inducing the transmission of somatic sensations and affective empathy in the audience. Such resonance experienced between the viewer and the (filmic representation of the) animal subject may enable what Kathryn Gillespie calls witnessing; yet, as she aptly remarks, "[e]ven as [this] witnessing act has its promises and possibilities as a mode of political transformation," too often it is "characterized by a profound imbalance in power between 'witness' and 'witnessed.'"<sup>125</sup> Her observations are especially pertinent concerning the viewer's mediated relation to Gunda and her embodied gestures. On the one hand, the act of looking is unidirectional and often bears traces of voyeurism. On the other hand, the viewer's potential reading of Gunda's expressions as signs of her suffering from grief as a "human-like emotion" may prevent us from engaging with her by way of an "empathic nonunderstanding,"<sup>126</sup> that does not attempt to assign human meanings and contexts to penetrate the opaque complexity of animal interiority.

Ultimately, though *Gunda* is not framed by a vocal narration, and certainly approaches its subjects in a manner that differs substantially from the tempo and the narrative techniques adopted by "Jungles," to a large extent, it is based on emphasizing similarities between humans and other animals. As Kossakovsky himself remarks in an interview, he chose to remove the colour from the filmed footage because "[i]t felt to [him] like black and white makes us focus on [the animals'] soul rather than their appearance"<sup>127</sup>—a decision that was apparently motivated by an underlying intention to "[emphasise] the commonalities of our embodied experiences [and] our psychological dispositions."<sup>128</sup> Such comments made by the director, widely circulated across the online space after the release of the film,<sup>129</sup> may also be perceived as endeavours towards authorial strategic empathy—albeit a contextual version of it—which, in Keen's understanding, "points to the intentional, though not invariably

<sup>125</sup> Kathryn Gillespie, "Witnessing Animal Others: Bearing Witness, Grief, and the Political Function of Emotion," *Hypatia* 31, no. 3 (2016): 572–88, 578.

<sup>126</sup> Marks, *Touch*, 39.

<sup>127</sup> Kossakovsky, "Conversation."

<sup>128</sup> Keen, 488.

<sup>129</sup> See e.g. "A Question of Empathy: Viktor Kossakovsky on *Gunda*," *Filmmaker Magazine*, February 10, 2021, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/111265-a-question-of-empathy-viktor-kossakovsky-gunda/>; "'They killed my best friend for supper!' *Gunda*, the farmyard film that could put you off eating meat for ever," *The Guardian*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/may/21/they-killed-my-best-friend-for-supper-gunda-the-farmyard-film-that-could-put-you-off-eating-meat-for-ever>.

efficacious, work of authors to sway the feelings of their . . . audiences closer and further from the . . . subjects of representation.”<sup>130</sup> Such strategies, as Keen notes, are also frequently employed in service of “a scrupulously visible political interest”<sup>131</sup>—and indeed, in his interviews and observations framing the film, Kossakovsky is quite vocal about his veganism and animal rights activism, his utterances often explicit in their “effort to reach specific audiences to evoke fellow-feeling [and] compassion.”<sup>132</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As my exploration of these case studies illustrate, *Gunda* and “Jungles” often resort to a similar set of cinematographic strategies, thereby producing an impression of intimate familiarity with nonhuman beings through filmic and vocal (human and nonhuman) language. They both partially rely on what Suzanne Keen has termed as “authorial strategic empathizing”<sup>133</sup> in order to provoke and maintain certain moods and affective responses in audiences. Whereas “Jungles” uses voiceover narration and offers detail-rich insight into the intricacies of nonhuman lives with the intention of inspiring (a primarily cognitive version of) empathy towards the nonhuman creatures pictured on-screen, *Gunda* is exemplary of slow animal cinema that could potentially facilitate an exploration of the sensual and “affective dimensions of the mediated encounter with other species.”<sup>134</sup>

In spite of their significant differences, both productions shed light on the difficulties of attempting to navigate anthropomorphic and anthropocentric tendencies without taming or effacing the irreducible otherness of the animals represented, or invalidating their environmentally-motivated message. *Our Planet*’s toolkit of “benevolent” anthropomorphism and its strategies of inquisitive inquiry and knowledge production—unless constantly revised and reformed by evolving scientific knowledge—swiftly become obsolete as it is increasingly unable to accommodate global audiences’ changing perspectives and underestimates their willingness to appreciate animal subjectivity. On the other hand, *Gunda*, exhibits some potential of constructing the kind of “tactile epistemology”<sup>135</sup> proposed by Marks. According to Parkinson, this mode can “challeng[e] the distance privileged by ocularcentrism.”<sup>136</sup> However, *Gunda* ultimately fails to enable more haptic modes of relating to the nonhuman beings featured on-screen, since the alluring spectacle it presents enables an anthropomorphic identification and maintains a hierarchy of vision. Indeed, in many respects, *Gunda* remains embedded in the same anthropocentric networks and cinematic conventions that rule over Attenborough’s

<sup>130</sup> Keen, 478.

<sup>131</sup> Keen, 479.

<sup>132</sup> Keen, 481.

<sup>133</sup> Keen, 481.

<sup>134</sup> Parkinson, 53.

<sup>135</sup> Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 138.

<sup>136</sup> Parkinson, 53.

---

work.

As demonstrated by both case studies, in the process of ocular- and anthropocentric spectacle-production and emotion-management, empathy not only “becomes an end as well as a means”<sup>137</sup>—but, far more problematically, a means to an end. Such an exploitation and reduction of empathy to a tool for managing and manipulating spectators’ emotions is a problematic practice but, I would suggest, it is also one that could be revised by a more explicit reflection on the fact that the “footage [of films] depicting real animals is always consciously composed and artificially structured.”<sup>138</sup> Other-than-human lives are inevitably subject to the “process of mediation [which, by definition,] applies a human ‘filter.’”<sup>139</sup> Such self-reflexive anthropomorphism could potentially fulfil the ethical and subversive potential that is inherent, but left untapped in *Gunda* and “Jungles.” Developing this potential would require adopting Marks’s approach of empathic nonunderstanding—a “relationship that gives up the self’s need for constant affirmation” and “entail[s] respecting the opacity of other creatures,” thereby providing “the possibility not of identifying across a chasm but establishing communication along a continuum.”<sup>140</sup> □

---

<sup>137</sup> Murray Smith, 113.

<sup>138</sup> Mitman, 4.

<sup>139</sup> Parkinson, 53-54.

<sup>140</sup> Marks, *Touch*, 39.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 
- Aaltola, Elisa. “Varieties of Empathy and Moral Agency.” *Topoi* 30 (2014): 243–53.
  - Aaltola, Elisa. *Varieties of Empathy: Moral Psychology and Animal Ethics*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.
  - Alaimo, Stacy. “Our Bodies are the Anthropocene (ep. 381).” In *Green Dreamer*. November 15, 2022. Podcast, MP3 audio, 46:36. <https://greendreamer.com/podcast/stacy-alaimo-deep-blue-ecologies>.
  - Assmann, Aleida and Ines Detmers. “Introduction.” In *Empathy and Its Limits*, edited by Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers, 1–17. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
  - Attenborough, David. “How Unnatural Is TV Natural History?” *The Listener*, May 7, 1987.
  - Berger, John. “Why Look at Animals?” In *The Animal Studies Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings*, edited by Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald, 251–61. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
  - Bladow, Kyle and Jennifer Ladino. “Toward an Affective Ecocriticism: Placing Feeling in the Anthropocene.” In *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, edited by Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, 1–22. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018.
  - Bousé, Derek. *Wildlife Films*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.
  - Bousé, Derek. “False intimacy: close-ups and viewer involvement in wildlife films.” *Visual Studies* 18, no. 2 (2003):123–32.
  - Burt, Jonathan. “The Illumination of the Animal Kingdom: The Role of Light and Electricity in Animal Representation.” In *The Animal Studies Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings*, edited by Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald, 289–301. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
  - Carroll, Noël. *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
  - Cahill, James Leo. “Anthropomorphism and Its Vicissitudes: Reflections on *Homme-sick* Cinema.” In *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human*, edited by Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway, 73–90. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2013.
  - Coplan, Amy. “Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects.” In *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, 3–18. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
-

- 
- Coplan, Amy and Peter Goldie. Introduction to *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ix–xlvi. Edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
  - Cordey, Huw, Adam Chapman, Hugh Pearson, Sophie Lanfear, Mandi Stark and Jeff Wilson, dir. *Our Planet*. Season 1, episode 3, “Jungles.” Aired April 5, 2019, on Netflix.
  - D’Aloia, Adriano. “The Character’s Body and the Viewer: Cinematic Empathy and Embodied Simulation in the Film Experience.” In *Embodied Cognition and Cinema*, edited by M. Coegnarts and P. Kravanja, 187–99. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2015.
  - Ferrando, Francesca. “Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations.” *ExistenZ* 8, no. 2 (2013): 26–32.
  - Gillespie, Kathryn. “Witnessing Animal Others: Bearing Witness, Grief, and the Political Function of Emotion.” *Hypatia* 31, no. 3 (2016): 572–588.
  - Gouyon, Jean-Baptiste. “Wildlife Television, Empathy and the End of the British Empire.” In *BBC Wildlife Documentaries in the Age of Attenborough*, edited by Jean Baptiste Gouyon, 69–95. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
  - Hanich, Julian. *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
  - Heholt, Ruth and Melissa Edmundson. Introduction to *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out*, 1–17. Edited by Ruth Heholt and Melisa Edmundson. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
  - Ingram, David. “Emotion and Affect in Eco-films: Cognitive and Phenomenological Approaches.” In *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology and Film*, edited by Alexa Weik von Mossner, 23–39. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014.
  - Ivakhiv, Adrian. *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013.
  - James, Jamie. “Art and Artifice in Wildlife Films.” *Discover*, September 1985, 91–97.
  - Jones, Julia P. G., Laura Thomas-Walters, Niki A. Rust and Diogo Veríssimo. “Nature documentaries and saving nature: Reflections on the new Netflix series *Our Planet*.” *People and Nature* 1, no. 4 (2019): 420–25.
  - Karkulehto, Sanna, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, Karoliina Lummaa and Essi Varis. Introduction to *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and*
-

- 
- Culture*, 1–19. Edited by Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis. New York and London: Routledge, 2020.
- Keen, Suzanne. “Strategic Empathizing: Techniques of Bounded, Ambassadorial, and Broadcast Narrative Empathy.” *Dtsch Vierteljahrsschr Literaturwiss Geistesgesch* 82, (2009): 477–93.
  - Kossakovsky, Victor. “A Conversation with Director Victor Kossakovsky.” *NEON – Gunda Press Notes*, September 4, 2020, <https://neon.app.box.com/s/55qpzaa0tc18ciz331ddro4tpfmesmg5/file/718983784284>.
  - Kossakovsky, Victor, dir. *Gunda*. 2020; Artemis Rising Foundation, Empathy Arts, Fritt Ord Foundation, Hailstone Films.
  - Lutts, Ralph H. “Ecokitsch and the Landscapes of Our Desire.” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 28, no. 2 (2021): 641–61.
  - Marks, Laura U. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000.
  - Marks, Laura U. *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
  - McMahan, Laura. *Animal Worlds: Film, Philosophy and Time*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019.
  - Mitman, Gregg. *Reel Nature: America’s Romance with Wildlife Film*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999.
  - Molloy, Claire. *Popular Media and Animals*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
  - Oliver, Sophie. “The Aesth-ethics of Empathy: Bakhtin and the *Return to Self* as Ethical Act.” In *Empathy and Its Limits*, edited by Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers, 166–86. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
  - Painlevé, Jean. “Le Cinéma.” Unpublished manuscript, 1930. Held in *Fonds Jean Painlevé, Les Documents Cinématographiques*, Paris. Excerpts translated and quoted by James Cahill.
  - Parkinson, Claire. “Animal Bodies and Embodied Visuality.” *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* 46 (2018): 51–64.
  - Parkinson, Claire. *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters*. London: Routledge, 2020.
  - Pick, Anat. “Three Worlds: Dwelling and Worldhood on Screen.” In *Screening Nature: Cinema beyond the Human*, edited by Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway, 21–36. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2013.



- Plantinga, Carl. “The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film.” In *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion*, edited by Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith, 239–55. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- Royle, Nicholas. *The Uncanny*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Smith, Greg M. *Film Structure and the Emotion System*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Smith, Murray. “Empathy, Expansionism, and the Extended Mind.” In *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, 99–117. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Sobchack, Vivian. *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004.
- Stadler, Jane. “Empathy in film.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*, edited by Heidi L. Maibom, 317–26. London and New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Trigg, Dylan. *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012.
- Ulstein, Gry. *Weird Fiction in a Warming World: A Reading Strategy for the Anthropocene*. Doctoral dissertation, Universiteit Ghent, 2021.
- Weik von Mossner, Alexa. “Introduction.” In *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology and Film*, 1–19. Edited by Alexa Weik von Mossner. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014.
- Weik von Mossner, Alexa. “Emotions of Consequence? Viewing Eco-documentaries from a Cognitive Perspective.” In *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology and Film*, edited by Alexa Weik von Mossner, 41–60. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014.
- Weik von Mossner, Alexa. *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*. Waterloo: The Ohio State University Press, 2017.