

4.2. Animals in film and social media. Symptomatology of the capitalocene and Portuguese law

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A b s t r a c t

Some contemporary film production documents a (re) frame of the place, the ancient Greek *tópos*, that is entitled to non-human-animals. This change emerged as an epistemic concept in science and humanities and looks at animals as plurals in their singularity and singular in their plurality — like Derrida's (2006) *animot*. Meanwhile, Social Media disseminate a profusion of titles, including activist or scientific videos, providing crucial information that supports this latest scientific and philosophical proposals. In this research I explore this context focusing ethics and values, modes and manners, in a study case of two videos about two animals of the same species, both published on a social network on same day. However, in their extreme difference, they represent the demarcation of two opposing tendencies in today's societies and question the boundaries of the value of the "human" in "humane", for instance.

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Film studies has begun to recognize how our experiences of animals can be as definitive as they are primary, forever shaping our understanding of how other species make their ways in the world. This recognition remains, however, incomplete. As Anat Pick writes in *Screening Nature*, film studies “has focused less on animals themselves than on how animals are symbolically produced in representation. Animals remain cinema’s ‘elephant in the room’: the medium’s unacknowledged presence but also its potential for seeing the world, and animals, differently” (2013, p. 311). Movies often use animal imagery in superficial ways, to evoke a visceral experience and to underscore their own indexicality, to serve as proof of “the real.” But such proof has often come at the expense of animals, routinely violated, or threatened by violence in film (e.g. Michael Haneke’s (2005) *Hidden* and Kornél Mundruczó’s (2014) *White God*), and at the expense of our understanding of animals. Even a genre as common as the wildlife film does a poor job of transcending mainstream story structures (Bousé, 2000). Can movies move audiences to better understandings and a new engagement with animal beings?” (Pick, Castro & Porter, 2018, p. 72)

1. Introduction

Short films and feature films, whether documentaries and fiction or experimental films, are the usual object of study of film studies and other studies on film, audio-visual and cinema. However, looking at the past ten years of research on Animals and Film and Animals on Film and the possibility of film raising viewers’ awareness towards an ecological ethics and practice that includes nonhuman animals, it is important to point out the impact of the films including, and on, animals disseminated to social networks’ media audiences, which do not always fit into the most common features of the previous genres.

Two very different typologies can be identified in this broad area: those that explore animal image according to mechanistic and anthropocentric models as entertainment or artistic experimentation and those who record realities experienced by non-human animals outside these approaches. I am interested in the latter. They are captured by people who do not have a professional background in film and have not outlined contents beforehand. They use mobile phones or non-professional cameras and CCTV cameras as well sometimes. Despite their lack of training, equipment and planning, these films are widely disseminated, and sometimes go viral on social media through platforms such as Facebook from data storing on YouTube.

This type of film did not exist before the so-called Social Media Revolution. When I started my research on the subject in 2006, its relevance or influence was still to become significant. Hence, I had the opportunity to witness the steady, ever-growing increase in the dissemination of, and interest in these small videos. The growing involvement of the public, coupled with a more respectful, aware attitude towards these realities is now undeniable and seems to be inseparable from the impact of these contents. A major part of this interest is due to the fact that a significant number of these recordings include rare and relevant information on the practices of other animals in inter-species and intra-species relationships, their unbelievable abilities unknown to most viewers, their singularities and their sentience. Objectively speaking, these recordings make public characteristics and qualities denied by the Cartesian capitalist model over the past three hundred years. They are evidence as well.

Examples include animals that resist going into slaughter, in manifest attitudes of fear and some degree of awareness of what awaits them, others apparently in despair at being separated from their offspring or parents or even grateful after being rescued from exploitation. Still, specifically, ravens that solve complex puzzles, happy cows prancing on the grass, goats jumping on balanced structures (Figure 4.2.1), pigs living in familiar environments, displaying well-being, the friendship between a child and a chicken, manifesting itself in a long hug (Figure 4.2.2), a cat that saves a baby from an attack by a dog, a dog that risks its life to save another dog, buffaloes that rescue other buffaloes from the onslaught of lions or elephants who rescue their calves and recently the case of an orca that carried its dead calf for seventeen days or a narwhal that was adopted by a band of belugas (Figure 4.2.3).

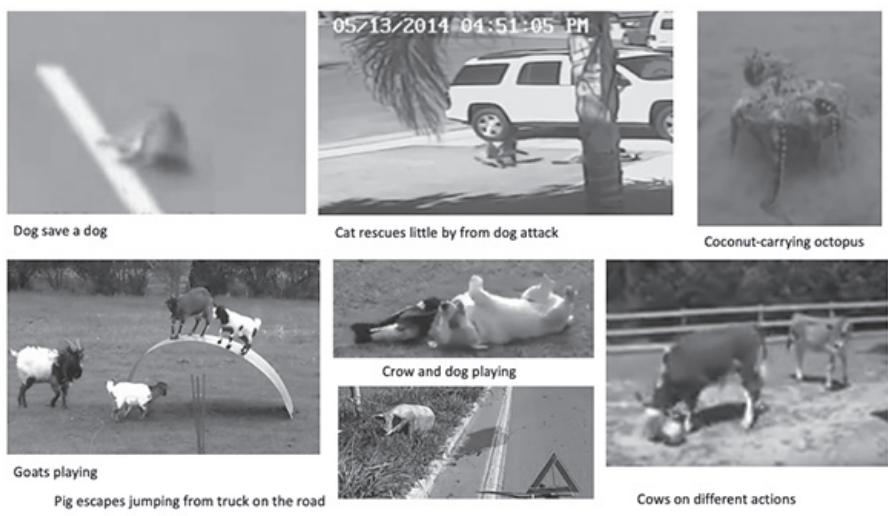


Figure 4.2.1



Figure 4.2.2 - Boy hugging chicken



Drone footage captured by the Group for Education and Research on Marine Mammals (GREMM) shows a narwhal with a group of belugas in the St. Lawrence River in July 2018. (GREMM)

Figure 4.2.3 - Narwhal with a group of belugas

Conversely, there are examples of human cruelty against other animals, which are mostly recorded inadvertently or using hidden cameras.

1.1. For the first time

The fact is that the popularisation of mobile phone cameras and the globalisation of the internet and social networks have enabled access to, and the dissemination of, previously inaccessible content. The consequences – as far as ecological awareness and animal ethics are concerned – are significant.

Some highlights are:

- For the first time in the history of Film, by posting previously inaccessible information on other animals, these informal, non-cinematographic videos (in the professional sense of the term) are a film archive containing unique, until recently unpublished, documentation;
- Access to this multiplicity of content and information has contributed to the reformulation of concepts and practices by a huge percentage of the population whose main focus is animal rights and animal sentience – albeit often regarding certain species only;
- These films are simultaneously educational, political and anthropological documentation, which is far from unusual in the History of Cinema. Nonetheless, if films with animals have had an anthropological and political meaning from an early stage, their contents have not been staged or preconceived, which is a first. The first famous film featuring an animal, for instance, “Topsy the Elephant”, is also a representation of human power over the lives of other animals. Topsy’s execution was staged by Edison as a public event (Figure 4.2.4) and was extremely convenient for his commercial interests and speaks volumes about the political and anthropological ways of society at that time. The same can be said throughout the history of cinema regarding the different uses and representation of animals. However, there was a project behind all those films which modelled their making. This is not the case in these films: there is no staging, no plot and often no previous intention whatsoever until the moment when it spontaneously becomes imperative to capture the event.

The degree of proximity to animal reality in these videos is unusual, if not unprecedented, in the History of Moving Image. It is as close to a realistic, honest film encounter with other animals as there can be. It may well be the freest from anthropocentric and economic manipulations up to now. The effect of this proximity on the public is a significant, ongoing process. Many animal protection associations are linked to social media influence in the dissemination of casual recordings on other animals, as well as the involvement of users in the actions and programmes triggered by this network. What data can be gathered from these small films as educational, political and anthropological documentation?

1.2. Case study

For my case study, I have compared two videos about two animals of the same species, both published on Facebook social network on 5 November 2017. The first, in the wake of the forest and animal devastation resulting from the fires in Portugal in October 2017, is an example of this type of record. The second is a video produced in the context of a regular posting as a Public Figure. While not corresponding to an occasional or spontaneous record, the latter provides access to an unprecedented reality and – from an anthropocentric mechanistic perspective – almost impossible to imagine. What do they portray? What do they mean and what lessons can be drawn from values, representation, habits and ways from these two videos?

The first case documents a pig farmer who keeps sows trapped in the same place twenty days after the forest fire: burnt-down cement piggeries where they



Figure 4.2.4 - Topsy the Elephant

were caught by the fire unable to escape and without any help (Figure 4.2.5).

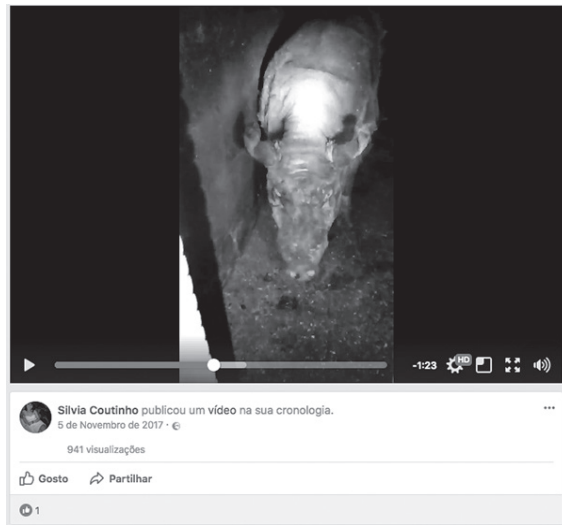


Figure 4.2.5 - Burned pigs

Several sows have burns and are trapped by crates in confined spaces. One of them “is pregnant and has extensive burns – muzzle, eyes and whatnot – and is quite possibly blind, as it bumps into things”. Still, “you only call the vet if it’s for free”. The pig farmer says that “paying is out of the question” because she “wrote them off as lost income”. According to her, “It’s a pity, the one that’s about to give birth!” She adds that “anyway, they must all be dead by now”, so “there’s no need for a vet.” Later on, the pig farmer says, feeling repugnance for the burns: “Why would I ever want the vet to come here and remove all those scabs?”

In short, twenty days after the fire, the sows have had no medical assistance and they do not even have a clean space with minimal comfort. They continue to suffer from burns in the same place and without assistance.

In the second case, Esther the Wonder Pig is lying on a living room couch (Figure 4.2. 6). Esther is fed in the mouth and cleaned with a napkin after the meal. According to the biography on her Public Figure webpage, Esther was born in 2012 and, probably due to the fact that she is a micro-pig, she was sent to a dump of a farm, from which she managed to escape.



Figure 4.2.6 - Esther the wonder pig – OMG, it´s pasta night!

When their foster family decided to adopt Esther, they were misled: they thought that it would always be a micro-pig – Esther turned out to be a tonne of work instead.

Esther's foster family say that they had the opportunity to give her the life she deserves, rather than the one that was meant for her. They wonder what kind of people they would be if they denied it to her and add that she deserves everything they can give her, just like all the other pigs they have not yet been able to rescue.

They left the small house where they used to live and opened a sanctuary farm to help animals in need.

Esther's films and photos are aimed at making their audience realise how brutal life is for these loving, intelligent, compassionate animals and influencing daily choices such as becoming a vegetarian or a vegan¹⁰².

What inferences about values and ways can be drawn from this comparison?

I) Fact 1. There is a different (diametrically opposite, even) treatment, despite:

- the same referent = subjects of the same species;
- the same historical time = events from roughly the same period of time, posted on the same day;
- the same medium and public dissemination space – the internet and Facebook.

As far as values are concerned, there is a clear distinction in the allocation of value despite the circumstances in common. What is the origin of this value distinction? Even though they belong to the same species, one is deemed as an animal destined for livestock or agro-industrial exploitation, whereas the other is a pet. In Portugal, such cases are subject to diametrically-opposed legislation as well.

Pets are protected from maltreatment by Decree-Law 69/2014, which penalises crimes against pets. According to Article 389 (Concept of pet),

- For the purposes of this Title, a pet is an animal kept by humans, in particular in their home, for their entertainment and companionship.
- The provisions of the preceding paragraph shall not apply to the use of animals for the purpose of agricultural, livestock or agro-industrial exploitation, nor to the use of animals for entertainment purposes or any other purposes deemed legal.

Thus, whereas Article 13 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union requires that the EU and its Member States pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals as sentient beings in the definition and implementation of EU policies, this obligation does not constitute a legal basis for the EU to legislate on all matters relating to animal welfare. Some issues remain within the exclusive competence of the Member States.

This means that, although the Legal Protection states that “[f]arm animals are protected by a general set of EU rules on farming as well as specific provisions on transport and slaughter / killing. Furthermore, specific additional rules exist for the keeping of laying hens, chickens for meat production, pigs and calves”, and whereas “the EU also integrates animal welfare requirements into the rules for agricultural subsidies (cross-compliance and rural development

¹⁰² The following are links to sanctuary support: www.es-thethewonderpig.com and <http://www.happilyeveresther.ca/>

programmes), as well as for organic farming”, in practice, the latter have no legal protection and are considered mere property – much like a tire, for instance – without any legal recognition of their sentient nature. This applies to horses, pigs, rabbits, goats, cows, etc.

These animals have no value as such: only a utilitarian value – a case of legalised devaluation, so to speak. The law denies the exploited subject its value as a sentient subject. This legal, institutional, state devaluation that influences and guides individual and collective human practices occurs despite a significant ethical shift in public opinion mostly in the wake of scientific and neuroethological findings in the past few decades and their dissemination, namely in social media.

Neutering is a striking example of differences in legal protection:

- in the case of pets, it must be carried out by a veterinarian using anaesthesia;
- in the case of animals exploited in livestock production, such an obligation does not exist: the operation may be carried out by an(y) employee without anaesthesia.

However, as proof of the ethics involved in this model of thought, from a social point of view, the only situation that gives rise to some criticism is the sterilisation of pets.

Hence:

Swine 2 – Pet

> Legal protection from maltreatment; recognition of sentience; intrinsic value; social valuing; empathy

Swine 1 – Farm animal

> Status of thing, property, utility value; non-recognition of sentience; no intrinsic value; social devaluation; no legal protection from maltreatment

II) Fact 2. Ways and empathy

From an empathic point of view, both videos get significant interest on Facebook. Esther the Wonder Pig gets 60m views on a public figure page regularly maintained on an international network. The other one gets 926 views of the original posting, on an individual page and on a scale based mainly on national links. Both have many “Likes” and comments – support in the case of the former and reproach and indignation in the latter. Critical reactions to animal maltreatment on Facebook – as well as the growing number of animal protection projects, associations and events – suggest that the Decree-Law does not represent the opinion of the majority of the Portuguese population, but rather the opinion of certain lobbies, in the sense of the common dictionary definition: 1. An organised attempt to influence a legislator in order to achieve a given aim or defend a certain interests; 2. A group of people seeking to influence legislators. Lobbies related to livestock, hunters’ organisations and, in general, people living off animal husbandry may influence decision-making bodies!¹⁰³

103 One egregious example is Plataforma Sociedade e Animais (Society and Animals Platform), which brings together nineteen groups. It started when political party PAN – Pessoas-Animais-Natureza (People-Animals-Nature) became visible in Portuguese civil society and these groups felt threatened by public interest in animal protection. Strategically, they have adopted a very misleading image (including the name itself), which suggests that they are a group of people interested in protecting animals when in fact it is the exact opposite: they are only interested in their own profit at the expense of animals. Like the pig farmer on the video, they are not interested in transparent legislation that lives up to the current reality, which is why they have come together to lobby. Unfortunately, MPs across part of the political divide are partial to these lobbyists: some are praised for their support to hunting, whereas others do not refrain from advertising bullfights on their social network pages – some even do it directly on institutional pages, in a seeming business-as-usual attitude behind which lies a huge conflict of interest. These people are not interested in extending the defence of the sentience of pet dogs and cats to other animals that have been proven to be sensitive, as this would include animals which they wish to continue to exploit without any ethical limits. For this reason, on the same day that Portugal approved a bill criminalising the mistreatment of pets, Belgium named a minister for animal welfare for each of its three federal states (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels). It is worth noting, in this case, the separation between those in charge of protecting animal welfare and those in charge of food production due to possible conflicts of interest between the two areas. However, in Portugal, both are under the scope of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Directorate-General for Food and Veterinary Affairs, which decides on the economic interests of animal producers and / or owners and on the rights and interests of animals – an obvious conflict of interest.

III) Fact 3. Values and comfort zone

However, whereas a post alerting to animal maltreatment can easily be acknowledged by many and give rise to indignant comments by the reading public (Figure 4.2.7), there is a lack of response – contradicting previous manifestations – to posts that deepen the same issues, delving into the legal background that allows the said mistreatment and what is behind these legal options, probably due to the conflict of interests within consumers (Figure 4.2.8). Inevitably, these legal options point to the relationship between the interests of animal exploitation and widespread consumption habits, questioning the netizens' own comfort zones.

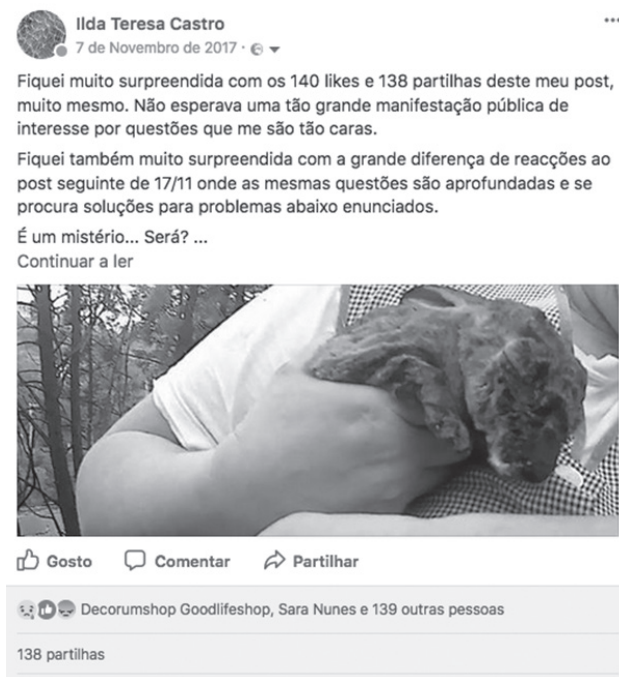


Figure 4.2.7 - Public post reaction



Figure 4.2.8 - Public post reaction related to consumers conflict of interests

2. Close

Considering Film and Film Studies on Non-human Animals, this typology can play an important role and encourage professional filmmakers to take a more honest, direct approach to other animals. With this in mind, two complementary aspects can be highlighted from these cases: the closeness to frequently non-disseminated realities testified, documented and shown by these films and their impact on raising viewer awareness towards a proactive attitude. In the heyday of audio-visual capture and dissemination, it is a priority to systematise these phenomena and realise how Film and Film Studies can integrate the qualities and effectiveness of these examples.

Regarding ethics and values, two different recent, ongoing situations can be found in this case study: despite all the differences, they are part of a transformation and shift of the paradigms that have guided the relationship between human and non-human animals in the past few centuries. In their extreme difference, they represent the demarcation of two opposing tendencies in today's societies and question the boundaries of the value of the "human" in "humane", for instance.

These films show behaviours conditioned by factors that are external to the referenced subjects and the value of these subjects for themselves (e.g. legislation, veterinary costs or financial support from the state for goods written off due to fire). However, their strong impact on social network audiences and the way they affect everyday life is part of an epistemological and historical shift in everyday values and practices: they announce new inscriptions of the human and the lifestyles of Capitalocene societies.

At a time when rare and endangered species reach tragic numbers and the short- and long-term future outcomes are a matter of concern, it is reassuring to recognise a global movement that tends to foresee and sustain the defence of the Living and which points to a broader, more accurate human awareness¹⁰⁴. Still, in view of the critical state we have reached, the length of the process and the lack of adequate legislative measures are alarming. Legislation and government bodies must definitely be quick to follow these changes and human movements, abdicating the mechanistic primacy and capitalist interests that have contributed so much to the present and impending bleak, tragic future.

It is this indispensability and urgency to do away with models of thought, production and consumption that bring calamitous public and planetary misfortune that the recent resignation of the French Minister of Ecology¹⁰⁵ has ratified. We cannot – most of us do not want to, even if many still do not know it – waste more time on behind-the-scenes moves and lobbying interests that are alien to the well-being and common interests of human and non-human alike.

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104 It is worth noting how useful technology is in this respect.

105 Nicolas Hulot, the French Minister of Ecology, resigned live on a radio show on 28 August 2018. Hulot argued that he had been faced with the French government's decision to halve the cost of hunting licenses (from €400 to €200/year), authorise hunting protected species, make concessions to the powerful hunting lobby and reverse the proposed ban on glyphosate herbicide by the Ministry of Agriculture, negotiating directly with farmers and industries instead.

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- Cows in various actions – 2:04 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6r0HSptQA>)
- Dog saves another dog after getting hit in the highway – 0:56 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTg5VGbzTq8>)
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- The interspecies internet – 20:01 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGMLhaa98GI>)
- Pig gives birth to nine piglets after jumping off truck going to slaughterhouse – 0:54 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwOGSzVsqtY>)

Pig escapes from a truck on the road – 1:14 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHK7OhT3HtA>)

Happy cows – 3:06 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kUZ1YLhIAg8>

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