

Animal Film

This short selection of animal films mixes documentary and fiction, from newsreel to science-fiction horror. The range of films illustrates the key role of animals in the history of cinema, and traces the medium's involvement in, and creative response to, other modern industries and apparatuses that similarly depend on the natural resource of animals. The emergent picture is highly ambivalent: animals have been captured on film since its inception in ways that are highly problematic. As Akira Mizuta Lippit has argued in his book *Electric Animal*, animals "electrify" the screen. But the charge of the real that the presence of screen animals delivers is all too often tied to the violence—real or imagined—committed against animals. As a mass communication tool, an economic powerhouse, and as art, cinema is complicit in the wider systematic management of animal life. And yet cinema should not be considered solely as a tool of control. It also gives rise to possibilities and potentialities of alternative relations between living beings, moments of tenderness and resistance that confound domination.

This slight program opens with a selection of early "actuality" and fiction films, and concludes with two recent animal fantasies.

Shown first is Thomas Edison's *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903), featuring the execution of Topsy, a performing elephant at Coney Island's Luna Park. Topsy was sentenced to death by electrocution for killing three men, after years of violent captivity and servitude. Edison, who played a key part in the introduction of the electric chair in the State of New York, oversaw the filming of Topsy's public execution by alternating current (AC). In the digital age, the film continues to circulate online. It remains a foundational example of the spectacle of animal death on screen. A number of other films from the early period highlight the interplay of domination and resistance that runs through the history of animal cinema. This early part of the program ends with a little known film by the Lumière brothers from 1897: *Le Chat qui joue / Cat at play*, in which a small house cat is seen playing alone, framed by a window. The film gives the impression of a cat's inner world, and, for once, forgoes the temptation to violence that is the mark of so many animal films.

The program closes with two recent fictional shorts: the BAFTA nominated *Monkey Love Experiments*, by Ainslie Henderson and Will Anderson, and Melanie Light's *The Herd*. Referencing both *Trailblazer in Space*, shown earlier in the program, and Harry Harlow's maternal

deprivation experiments on infant monkeys, *Monkey Love Experiments* is the moving story of a laboratory monkey who dreams of going to space. Director Melanie Light describes *The Herd* as a "vegan feminist horror," a graphic fantasy in the tradition of the rape-revenge cycle. In *The Herd*, a group of captive women used for their milk, escape to freedom. The film operates as an allegory of the dairy industry, rooted in the controlling of females' reproductive processes. As an animal rights filmmaker, Light kept a vegan set, stretching the idea of pro-animal film from in front of to behind the camera.

— Anat Pick

**** Some of the films contain images of violence against animals. The Herd contains images of simulated sexual violence against women ****



ELECTROCUTING AN ELEPHANT (Thomas Edison, 1903, 1', b/w, silent).

A key film in the history of animal cinema, this early actuality by Edison documents the execution of Topsy the performing elephant at Coney Island. The film showcases the basic elements of animal cinema: animal spectacle, the ambivalent power of electricity, and the cinematic apparatus.

THE DOG OUTWITS THE KIDNAPPERS (Lewin Fitzhamon, 1908, 6'50", b/w, silent)

"After the phenomenal success of *Rescued by Rover* (1905), Cecil Hepworth decided to make this sequel. His daughter Barbara Hepworth (not the sculptor) again played the baby (actually now a toddler), while the family dog, Blair, repeated his performance as Rover. Like the original, it is

a simple story—a there and back again plot—but the sight of a dog fairly convincingly driving a car loses none of its entertainment value over a century later. The emblematic shot or "curtain call" close-up of the main actors, Rover and the baby, positions them as characters who will return. Barbara, one imagines, outgrew the role, but Blair would reappear as Rover as late as 1912."—Bryony Dixon

**MADAME BABYLAS AIME LES ANIMAUX/
MME. BABYLAS LOVES ANIMALS** (Alfred Machin, 1911, 9', b/w, silent)

Machin, an under-recognized pioneer of animal film, made a series of farces featuring the Babyilas characters. This is ostensibly a comedy, in which Mme. Babyilas collects and hoards animals. The troubling treatment of domestic and wild animals in the service of comedy is undermined by the traces of animal resistance that run through the film. This is a strange mixing of cinematic pathology in the guise of lighthearted "fun," typical of the comical use of performing animals.

TRAILBLAZER IN SPACE (1961, 9'14", b/w, sound)

Ham, the first primate to reach space, rides a Mercury capsule on a suborbital flight preceding astronaut Alan Shepard. This newsreel footage celebrates the chimpanzee space program, run by the US

military, which used animals as tests subjects. The triumphalist tone of the film contrasts sharply with the disturbing use of animals by the space programs of the US and the USSR, including, of course, the dog Laika who died shortly after returning from her mission. This is a document of the Cold War era space race.

LE CHAT QUI JOUE/ CAT AT PLAY (Lumière brothers, 1897, 54", b/w, silent)

A charming actuality by the brothers Lumière of a cat absorbed in play, pictured against the transparent backdrop of a glass window. The film's separate spaces—the cat indoors, and the street outside—seem to mark the parameters of the cat's interior world.



MONKEY LOVE EXPERIMENTS (William Anderson, Ainslie Henderson, 2014, 8'40", sound)

Drawing on the chimpanzee space program and on Harry Harlow's notorious maternal deprivation experiments (renewed at the University of Wisconsin in 2012), this BAFTA nominated animation tells the story of a laboratory monkey who believes he is destined for space.



THE HERD (Melanie Light, 2014, 20'16", sound)

A group of kidnapped and trafficked women find themselves imprisoned in a squalid medical facility. Escape, on any level, is seemingly impossible as the women are condemned to a life of enforced servitude at the whims of their captors; for one reason only—their milk. In an interview, Light described the film as a “harrowing dissection of a reality within an everyday norm hidden within farms all over the world.” This hard-hitting “vegan feminist horror” calls attention to the subjugation of women across species, and was accordingly shot on a vegan set.



Total running time: approx. 57 minutes