

In Defense of Tree-Hugging

The Ambivalence of Antropomorphism and Becoming Animal

Edo Murić

Anthropomorphism has been around since the beginning of culture. Yet its implications in regards to our modern humanistic understanding of culture have never been as questioned as they are now, especially in the context of wild-life documentaries¹ and scientific objectivity. Some of the most popular films in this genre have been *Microcosmos* (1996)², *March of the Penguins* (2004)³, and BBC's opulent global warming documentary *Earth* (2007)⁴. The latter is an educational, by-the-book attempt to explain the effects of global warming on Earth's wildlife. The first two films, however, are very different in many ways.

For the famous Chicago film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Microcosmos* is "aesthetically offensive" and "philosophically dubious". According to him, it also uses an "intolerable wall-to-wall" music score by Bruno Coulais and it basically amounts to an anthropomorphic depiction of animal life.⁵ *March of the Penguins* was criticised by some scientists because it showed traces of anthropomorphism in the behaviour of royal penguins. Showing animals as being capable of love, grief and monogamy, was interpreted by some as a religious propaganda.⁶

Though Rosenbaum does not specify the details of the offensiveness of *Microcosmos*, we could discern them by looking at the aesthetic side of the film, which he criticised. Surely, it is not a nature documentary in the classical sense of the word. It is built as a series of sequences showing animal behaviour, treated by the film-makers as a musically-aesthetic phenomenon, with educational interest being of secondary importance since only a few sentences of the narrator contain basic information. The music in the film is partly comprised of pop melodies with vocals, which seems to bring the life of the animals even closer

¹ We will leave aside cartoon fable-like representations of animals, which do not profess to represent animals themselves, but rather use animals as a metaphor for human condition. Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Mouse* (1972-1991) is not a story about the victimisation of mice by cats, but a metaphor for the Holocaust.

² *Microcosmos: Le peuple de l'herbe*, D: Claude Nuridsany, Marie Pérennou, France 1996.

³ *La marche de l'empereur*, D: Luc Jacquet, France 2005.

⁴ *Earth*, D: Alastair Fothergill, Mark Linfield, UK/Germany/USA/Japan 2007.

⁵ Jonathan Rosenbaum, „Microcosmos“, *jonathanrosenbaum.com*, <http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=microcosmos>, 10. 11. 2011.

⁶ Jonathan Miller, „March of the Conservatives: Penguin Film as Political Fodder“, *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/13/science/13peng.html>, 11. 11. 2011.

to human experience. The most striking moment is surely the very last scene, which takes the viewers out of the microcosm and shows that the world of insects is just a subset of a larger world of a typical French village. Rosenbaum's additional criticism of the sound of the film⁷ may have been targeting this very scene. Namely, in the background we can hear the sound of church bells, which seem to be indicating a metaphysical relation between the world of humans and the world of animals. It may even be pointing out that nature is a blueprint, not only for a universally human, but explicitly a conservative Christian society. It is a small step from there to accusations of the film being creationist propaganda. The directors of the film, Claude Nuridsany and Marie Pérennou, declared evolutionists, certainly invoked such questions⁸ with their film *Genesis*⁹ (2004), a provocatively titled documentary about the evolution of life, told as a mythological story, narrated by an African shaman. Again, the central problem of their approach is claimed to be anthropomorphism, which is perceived not only as misleading but also as unethical towards animals themselves.

Anthropomorphism was also criticised in Werner Herzog's film *Grizzly Man*¹⁰ 2005, which documents the tragedy of Timothy Treadwell, an environmentalist who lived and over-identified with wild grizzly bears in Alaska. Getting too close to the animals resulted in him and his girlfriend being eaten by the bears. The film uses this incident to argue against naive environmentalism based on identification with animals.¹¹

But is it always that simple? Can anthropomorphism have a different political potential and how is such potential expressed in places where emancipatory political struggle is an every-day occurrence?

Representation of Animals

The problem of cultural representation of animals is directly linked to the problem of how we perceive them. Derrida has written extensively on the subject matter. According to him, the main problem is discerning if an animal, which is naked and has no sense of shame, is aware of itself. If that is the case, it means that the animal has an 'I'. In using the example of autobiographical writing, Derrida's suggestion is that the autobiographical 'I' is in general "naked and raw". His conclusion is precisely that "naked and raw" is what characterises animals. In this sense animals are in possession of 'I' by the default of always being

⁷ Rosenbaum, „Microcosmos“.

⁸ Camillo de Marco, „Darwinists or Creationists?“, *cineuropa.org*, <http://cineuropa.org/2011/nw.aspx?t=newsdetail&l=en&did=55368>, 11. 11. 2011.

⁹ *Genesis*, D: Claude Nuridsany, Marie Pérennou, France/Italy 2004.

¹⁰ *Grizzly Man*, D: Werner Herzog, USA 2005.

¹¹ Identifying with animals other than humans and identifying with the people of the Third World countries: The question is often 'What is better for them?' and/or 'What is better for us?'.

shameless and uncovered.¹² This sort of thinking opens up another side of the problem, namely the way an animal perceives us, which should not be categorically different from how they perceive other animals. [Image 1]

Deleuze characterises the moment of an animal's death, as very private and much more dignified than the moment of human death. According to him, most animals hide in such a moment.¹³ In relation to Derrida's proposition, this may signal not only an 'I' but also an awareness of animal's position among other living beings.

This leads us to the less known wild life documentary, *The Vanishing World*¹⁴ (1987), produced in socialist Yugoslavia, a few years before the break-up and subsequent war. The film, geared both to children and adults, was directed by the veteran wild-life documentary film-maker, Petar Lalović, and was his second documentary set in the national park region between the rivers of the Danube and the Drava. It is a story of a wild piglet, which is cruelly rejected by its mother, because there is no extra breast for it to suck on. The narrator clearly identifies the piglet by a common Slavic name, Gile, which is a nickname meaning 'chubby'. It is the film's first instance of anthropomorphism.

What the film shows next is extraordinary. Rejected by its own, Gile tries to 'make friends' with other animal species, be it bear cubs or badgers. Finally, the piglet manages to attach itself to a baby deer and its mother. The piglet and the fawn then stay close to each other during the course of the film. [Image 2]



Image 1 (left): *The Vanishing World*, Animal subjectivity.
Image 2 (right): *The Vanishing World*, A piglet becoming a deer.

¹² Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, New York: Fordham University Press 2008, p. 57.

¹³ Alain Beaulieu, „The Status of Animality in Deleuze's Thought“, *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*. Volume 9. Issue 1/2, Ithaka: Institute for Critical Animal Studies 2011, p. 71.

¹⁴ *Svet koji nestaje*, D: Petar Lalović, Yugoslavia 1987.

According to the film's tag-line, *The Vanishing World* is a love story. Like *Genesis*, this film does not shy away from all sorts of anthropomorphic metaphors. The second half of the film documents a river flood which destroys swathes of the natural habitat, but also kills a great number of animals – among them the mother and the father of the fawn. While the father drowns in the river, the mother's death is especially painful to watch because it is so gradual and intimate, perhaps evoking Deleuze's theory of animal dignity. She dies slowly on a river island, unable to escape the flood. On the other hand, the piglet and the fawn survive, which brings the story to a bitter, emotional conclusion. When the piglet's mother recognises it and tries to reunite with it, she gets rejected by the piglet, now accustomed to life as a deer.

How much of the film was staged is not sure, and there is no reason to believe that anything, apart from the most necessary was. The film seems more likely to be the result of a series of lucky incidents, one of them being a scene showing a wolf chasing the piglet, only to smell it and walk away without eating it. But the question the film raises puts anthropomorphism in a rather different perspective. Was the piglet perhaps in some way 'morphed' into a deer? It surely is perceived as one by the deer family. Is this morphism somehow a more natural phenomenon than anthropomorphism? But why would that be the case?

There is a very crucial parallel between *The Vanishing World* and *Genesis*. *Genesis* is a documentary which tries to explain the emerging of life on Earth. The shaman narrator at some point says that all life is based on attraction, which he deems 'love'. Similarly, *The Vanishing World* describes the attachment between two different animals as love. Another essential similarity is that both films acknowledge the phenomenon of one species becoming another. While in Lalović's film we have a piglet becoming a deer, in *Genesis* the narrator explains that all life is fluid and always becoming something else, not merely in evolutionary terms. For example, it is noted that a human embryo in early stages resembles different animals. Also, it is said that the building molecules of the narrator will one day become part of another living being.

The very last scene in the film shows the shaman getting in a boat and floating down a big river which flows into the open sea – a clear visual metaphor for becoming something else. [Image 3]



Image 3: *Genesis*, inevitability of becoming, a river becoming a sea.

Becoming Animal

According to Alan Beaulieu, the Deleuzian concept of becoming is not related to imitation (mimesis), resemblance, metaphor or adopting of a new identity. Becoming is a process of finding a “zone of proximity” between things.¹⁵ It is a spontaneous transformation, which cannot be visually perceived, is not based on free will and cannot be controlled. It is neither literal nor metaphorical. The river in the last scene of *Genesis* is in itself a good example of becoming. It is flowing, it is always there as a river, but it is constantly becoming part of the sea, as well.

Deleuze gives an example of the moment when Captain Ahab harpoons Moby Dick, which results in the line catching him around the neck and dragging him into the depths of the sea. In that instance, Ahab's actions result in him unintentionally becoming the whale he was chasing. Moby Dick's demise means his demise too. All his previous zeal in pursuing the whale was in fact a process of becoming that whale.¹⁶ Becoming animal in this instance is part of Ahab's anthropomorphic perception of the whale, attribution of human characteristics to the animal, such as seeking for revenge, for example. The reason why anthropomorphism of this kind is also ‘becoming’ is because this ‘zone of proximity’ is a two way street. This close link between anthropomorphism and becoming animal is also evident in the central method used by Rudyard Kipling in his *Jungle Book*. The feral child Mowgli becomes an animal. But the world where it takes place is a world of talking animals.

Genesis is pretty clear about this, as well. The filmmakers explain the reason for this sort of inverted anthropomorphism thusly: “*Genesis* attempts to convey to the viewer that we do have some kind of familial link with the animal kingdom (and not only to animals, but also to mountains, clouds, stars)”.¹⁷ Indeed, in the end credits of the film not only do we get all the animals listed as the cast members, but also non-living objects, such as “vitamin-C crystals”, processes and states, “the river of life of spermatozoa”, “the battle of panther-cameleons”, and so on. This shows that the filmmakers are very aware of the powerful relation between anthropomorphism and becoming animal. The final scene of the film could be pointing out that we do not have a choice but to go with the flow of becoming and, by implication, of anthropomorphising.

Like in *Microcosmos*, the anthropomorphism in *Genesis* is partly achieved through the use of highly abstract sound effects, which in some places link animal activities to everyday

¹⁵ Beaulieu, „The Status of Animality in Deleuze's Thought“, p. 74.

¹⁶ “Moby-Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!”, Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Chapter 135.

¹⁷ Scott MacDonald, „Nature's Avant-Garde. An interview with the directors of *Microcosmos*, C. Nuridsany and M. Pérennou“, *National History Magazine*, <http://naturalhistorymag.com/features/171712/nature-s-avant-garde>, p. 4.

human sounds and at some point even to human-like articulation. For example, the sounds supposedly produced by lizards and turtles sometimes sound like human sighs. But the fact that with the down-the-river scene *Genesis* is treating its own narrator as just another object of observation, is the clearest sign that the film goes even further in embracing the inevitability of becoming. [Image 4]



Image 4: *Genesis*, the narrator becoming the object of the story.

Becoming as a Political Malady

Anthropomorphic becoming is sometimes used as a political metaphor. In the case of Thai director, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and his pair of films, *Tropical Malady*¹⁸ (2004) and *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*¹⁹ (2010), we get a perfect example of how fictional becoming is treated in a politically progressive, radical way.

The latter film, winner of the 2010 Golden Palm, is set in the rural north-east of Thailand, near the border to Laos – more precisely: the village of Nabua. A man, suffering from a painful kidney disease, is close to his death. His last days he spends remembering the past, accompanied by his nephew and his sister-in-law. One evening he is visited by the spirit of his deceased wife. Also his long lost son returns, but he is now a talking, red-eyed, mythological monkey ghost.

¹⁸ *Sud pralad*, D: Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Thailand/France/Germany/Italy 2004.

¹⁹ *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat*, D: Apichatpon Weerasethakul, Thailand/UK/France/Germany/Spain/Netherlands 2010.

The setting of the film itself is politically controversial. The village of Nabua is not only a region of a porous border with Laos, a source of much of Thailand's immigration, it was also a stage of the 1965 massacre of communist sympathisers. Uncle Boonmee himself was a participant in that horrible event, which seems to account for his bad karma during the last moments of his life.

Boonmee's son explains his disappearance to his father. According to him, it was caused by his fascination for the mysterious forest monkey ghosts. While stalking and photographing them, he started learning their language and in the end literally turned into one of them. [Image 5]



Image 5: *Uncle Boonmee*, the monkey ghost.

Another moment of becoming animal happens when the narrative is interrupted by a depiction of a Buddhist legend in which a princess with a scar on her face gets to see an unblemished reflection of herself in a magic pool. A catfish appears and promises that she will regain her beauty if she enters the pool. When she does so, instead of making her scar go away, the catfish has sex with the princess. The princess then transforms into a fish. [Image 6]

In this instance, metaphorical becoming animal, in correlation with the Buddhist tradition, is presented as a way towards a non-materialistic state of being. On the other hand, becoming an animal in the case of Boonmee's son seems to have a different kind of emancipatory potential altogether. In a sequence towards the end of the film, comprised solely of still images and narrated over by Boonmee who is recalling a dream, we can see a group of young soldiers who have captured an anthropomorphic creature, which looks more like a man in a monkey suit than the monkey spirit we see before in the film. In the first photo he

is tied with a rope around his neck and seemingly mistreated. In subsequent photos, however, it seems as if the soldiers become friends with him. We see them talking, taking photos, hugging each other. Eventually, their uniforms are gone and replaced with civilian clothes. Can this be Weerasethakul creating a link between becoming animal and becoming a civilian? It certainly expresses a correlation between anthropomorphism and becoming. [Image 7]



Image 6: *Uncle Boonmee*, princess becoming a fish.



Image 7: *Uncle Boonmee*, soldiers becoming animals.

But to fully understand this episode, taking place shortly before Boonmee's ritualistic death scene, we need to take a look at *Tropical Malady*, which laid down the politically-radical basis for some of the events in *Uncle Boonmee*. The film, set in a similar village as *Uncle Boonmee*, is sharply divided in two parts. The first part portrays a romance between two young men, one a villager, the other a soldier, there to investigate a series of cattle mutilations taking place in the village. Most of the time the two young men are shown on a date, spending time together. However, one night the villager suddenly decides to go away and disappears into the woods.

In the second part of the film we are introduced to a Thai-Buddhist myth about a wild beast and the story focuses on the soldier from the previous part, who now goes into the woods in order to search for another missing villager. There he encounters a tiger shaman, played by the same actor who played the young villager in the first part of the film. The shaman starts praying on the soldier and most of the second part of the film shows the dis-oriented soldier running away from him.

The powerful final scene shows a nightly encounter between the soldier and a large tiger, a creature the tiger shaman transformed into. The scene is intense but in a way also hypnotically peaceful. The tiger does not attack the soldier, just keeps staring at him with its glowing eyes, similarly to how the monkey ghosts stare at Boonmee, during his departure to the cave. In many ways this becoming is reminiscent of the ending of *Moby Dick*, when the pursuer and the pursued become one and the same. It also brings to mind the moment from *The Vanishing World*, when the wolf spares the piglet. In socio-political circumstances of Thailand, this and the episode with the soldiers in *Uncle Boonmee* represent a powerful breach of the zone of proximity between a Thai soldier and a Thai peasant. The monkey ghosts are clearly a metaphor for the wiped out jungle-based communist guerilla. In a more general sense, it is a representation of radical attachment, of getting closer, for better or for worse, as a catalyst of socio-political transformation. Even though he is trembling, the soldier wants to be devoured by the animal: "I give you my spirit, my flesh. Every drop of blood... Sing our song. The song of happiness." This moment uncovers the simplicity of the emancipatory potential of the Deleuzian concept of becoming, and becoming animal in particular. It also shows what 'tropical malady' is meant to be – an 'illness' of radical transformation caused by animals becoming human and humans becoming animals. [Image 8]

The radicalism of Weerasethakul's films comes partially from their aesthetic side. His films constantly change genres, styles and pace. The slow static, 'artistic' scenes in many of his films are often interrupted by trashy musical numbers, usually homages to old Thai B-movies and the popular culture of his childhood. By using these stylistic and genre permutations, he joins together two cultural spheres (high and popular culture). It is yet another sort of becoming, this time conditioned by the visual style.



Image 8: *Tropical Malady*; the encounter and becoming the beast.

The resonance of his approach was especially evident when one of Weerasethakul's films was banned in 2007 by the Shinawatra government. The explanation given by the Ministry of Culture was that Thai people were “uneducated”, “not intellectuals – that is why we need ratings”. They also asserted that “Nobody goes to see films by Apichatpong” and that “Thai people want to see comedy”.²⁰ This populist paternalisation of masses, which serves the domination by the wealthy elites in a culturally disunited society, is precisely what Weerasethakul's cinema seems to be targeting.

A Dangerous Process as Potential

When a highly austere, slow moving drama is interrupted by fantasy sequences involving imaginary creatures or a flashy karaoke song, or when it abruptly changes the tone, it can initially seem inappropriate. However, it is the same kind of inappropriate which wild-life documentaries, such as *Microcosmos*, *Genesis* and *The Vanishing World* have in common, as well. They too abandon the normative constraints in order to give us sequences with pop and rock songs, unusual use of narration, an unprecedented role for the narrator, as well as, most importantly, anthropomorphism. Documentary becoming a romance, a drama becoming a musical, an animal becoming a human, and vice versa; these are the dynamics of a possibility for transformation.

²⁰ Simon Montlake, „Making the Cut“, *Time Magazine*, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1670261,00.html>, 11. 11. 2011.

Deleuze's discussion of becoming in relation to the political concept of a minority, for example, clarifies the functioning of this amorphous displacement. According to him, a minority is not necessarily a group which is numerically smaller, but a group which does not belong to the model of conformity.²¹ In fact, it has no model at all, and it has no state. It is always in a process of becoming until it is not a minority any longer. The same can be applied to the stylistic displacement, the constant becoming in the depiction of humans and animals and to anthropomorphism itself. They are not states but processes of potential emancipation which result in radical cultural displacements. In the case of Weerasethakul's films, they are, for example, a depiction of a gentle romance between a soldier and a villager, or a princess' transformation into a fish – transcendence of oppressive materiality. But they are also processes of potentially dangerous transformations – transformations into a man eating animal, and becoming animal by the way of being killed by one. The purpose of anthropomorphism in *The Vanishing World* may have been to underline and defend the dynamics of the Yugoslav multi-ethnic society in the unsteady years leading to the break-up and the war. The piglet and the fawn may have corresponded to different ethnicities mixing, becoming each other.

But how about Bambi? Is anthropomorphism always progressive, or can it also be negative or neutral? The answer is, that it can be both of these things, especially neutral, but also that such a question generally misses the point. Even the case of Timothy Treadwell, whose identification with grizzly bears got him killed, is not a definitive argument against anthropomorphism. Pointing out that anthropomorphism can be neutral, but also dangerous for humans, as we can see both in *The Grizzly Man* and in the last scene of *Tropical Malady*, is simply a tautology. But if we accept that the danger itself is what can carry the potential for change, even if that sometimes means death, as in *The Grizzly Man*, or alleged spread of religious propaganda, as in *Microcosmos* and *Genesis*, we could find a way to utilise the progressive impulses and inhibit the dangerous ones.²² This means that anthropomorphism does not always have to be reactionary and documentaries which use it as an approach to its subject matter are not necessarily misleading or a family values propaganda.²³ However,

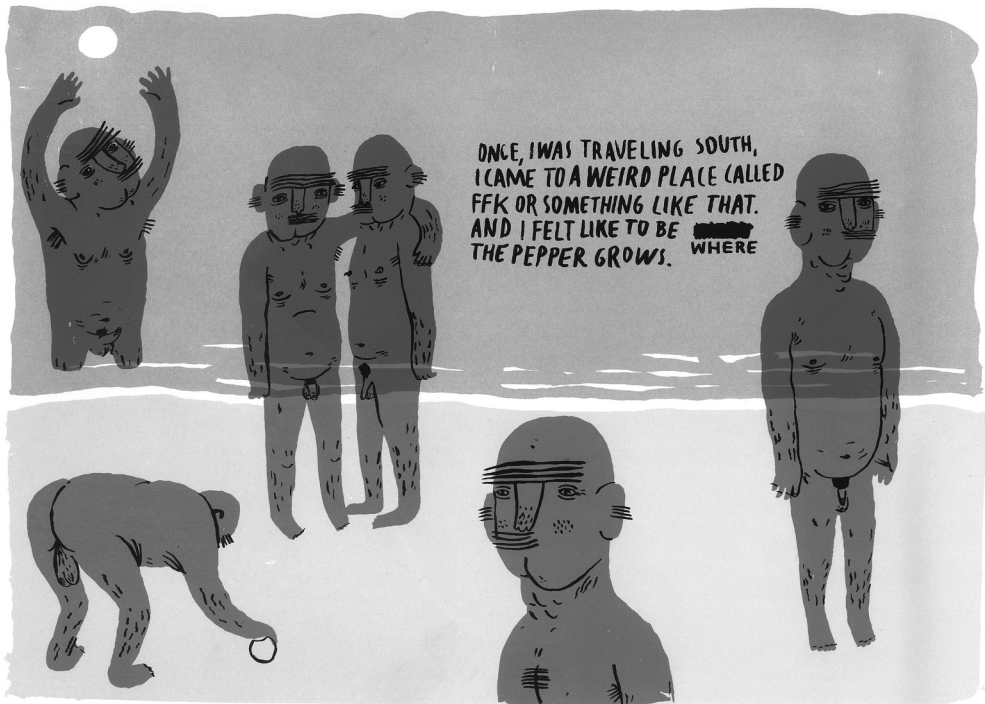
²¹ Antonio Negri, „Control and Becoming: Gilles Deleuze in Conversation With Antonio Negri“, *Generation Online*, <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpdeleuze3.htm> Spring 1990, 11. 11. 2011.

²² This is basically a parallel to the Marxist argument in support of the Arab Spring, which was the 2011 uprising of the Arab world against their dictatorial regimes. We acknowledge that a struggle for democratic change is potentially dangerous because a) it can be violent, b) because democratic elections can also bring a conservative religious party in power. But potential for danger of that kind is not an excuse against fighting for democracy. There comes a moment when the danger itself is the only potential for change.

²³ As a metaphor in the language of geopolitics this translates to 'Not all military interventions serve an imperialist agenda'.

we should be able to acknowledge this without denying that an anthropomorphic approach can also have negative effects on animals, as is generally the case with all narcissistic forms of expression.²⁴

This ambivalence is something which is recognised by Weerasethakul, unlike Herzog in *The Grizzly Man*. The tragic death of Timothy Treadwell does indeed demonstrate the power and the impact of a dangerous transgression such as the one he committed – an anthropomorphic approach to dangerous animals, leading to becoming animal and death. However, it should not be its only arbiter.



²⁴ But even narcissism is an ambivalent term, being an essential element of the mirror phase, according to psychoanalysis.