

IN THE PLACE OF THE DONKEY: THE SUBJECTIVITY OF THE NONHUMAN ANIMAL AND THE ANTI-SPECIESIST PERSPECTIVE IN *EO*

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INTRODUCTION: THE ANIMAL TURN AND ITS IMPRINT ON AUDIOVISUAL PRODUCTION

Since the beginning of this century, the academic world has resolutely taken up the challenge posed by the so-called *animal turn*. Within the transdisciplinary framework of human-animal studies, traditional conceptions of animality and human-animal relationships are being increasingly called into question. Despite the variety of approaches, a common aim can be detected in the different studies: to move away from the valuation of non-human animals as objects—the Cartesian *machina animata* devoid of cognition, emotion and consciousness—and towards an appreciation of them as subjects. As von Uexküll (2014 [1909]) pointed out many years ago, and as Yong (2022) has recently argued, recognising this subjectivity requires a consideration both of the animal's inner world (*Innenwelt*) and of their own way of expe-

riencing their surroundings (*Umwelt*), the shared, more-than-human world (Abram, 2017: 37) that they inhabit, contemplate, and help to construct—not as accessories, but as agents. The acknowledgement of the animal's subjectivity thus emerges as essential to the purpose of abandoning human exceptionality and establishing a general ontology that includes all creatures.

Audiovisual discourse analysis is one of the fields that is contributing the most to the anti-speciesist cause. Unsurprisingly, as authors who have been exploring the question point out (Burt, 2002: 15; Pick, 2011: 3 and 2015; Safit, 2014: 212; Malamud, 2017), audiovisual production can serve not only to reflect but also to help transform our relations with other animals. In order to pursue this transformation, these authors argue that it is necessary to abandon anthropocentric ways of representing nonhuman animals. Thus, the stereotypical tendency to depict them as commodities, therapeutic pets, or wild beasts that threa-

ten us (Koilybayeva, 2023: 4, 7), or conversely, as inferior beings that need our help (Freeman & Tulloch, 2013: 117) should be called into question. Similarly, as Pick suggests (2013: 177), we need to eschew the sentimental anthropomorphic caricatures that have little to do with the real animal, as well as the use of animals as mere props to reinforce human identities and stories. And finally, it is important to overcome the temptation to reduce animals to spectacular objects to be made available to the human gaze (Malamud, 2010: 7; Adams, 2010: 88).

In opposition to these voracious habits, there is a need to explore new ecologies of images. This is what vegan cinema does (Pick, 2018: 28), with its commitment to a filmmaking approach that replaces the pleasure of consumption with the love awakened by the animal that is simply allowed to be and to stand in front of the camera without being the object of a narrative that is more palatable to human eyes, as also suggested in Fijn's observational approach (2007: 306). Pick's proposal broadly aligns with the slow cinema movement advocated by McMahon (2019), which facilitates audience access to the non-human animal's world. This is a world that can unfold on the screen if it is not forced by the demanding tempo and causal, linear structures of conventional storytelling (McMahon, 2019: 8, 20). It is also worth noting, as Fijn (2007: 306) and Reijnen (2023: 7-8) suggest, that these different approaches allow for a more haptic style of filmmaking, resulting in films that prioritise the sensory over the verbal in their effort to give voice to the non-human creature.

While approaches inspired by ethnographic documentary are certainly viable, there are other proposals that engage more flexibly with dominant audiovisual conventions. Considering the corruption of the animal's naturalness that any filming process entails, Burt (2002: 165-166) points out that the ethical potential of animal imagery is not necessarily a function of its truth value. Regardless of the degree of artificiality of the re-

presentation, film can constitute a gateway to our connection with the natural world (Burt, 2002: 47) and a confirmation of the moral significance of the links between the human and the animal (Burt, 2002: 22). In other words, certain imaginative (speculative) models can point towards a horizon shared by all animals capable of transcending human exceptionality (Malamud, 2017), of changing the attitude of the audience and motivating them to take action (Finn, 2023). Such models may thus still involve the use of cinematographic conventions that elicit empathetic reactions from the audience, even though this may run the risk of producing a kind of sentimental anthropomorphism.

The contribution of audiovisual production to the defence of animal rights is not limited to theoretical reflection. In recent years, an increasing number of films have been exploring other ways of dealing with non-human animals and trying to reflect a world that is also their own. The (admittedly modest) boom in this type of film has mainly involved non-fiction works focusing on the everyday life of animals—more specifically, domesticated animals. These include the documentaries *Kedi* (Ceyda Torun, 2016), *Stray* (Elizabeth Lo, 2020), *Space Dogs* (Elsa Kremser & Levin Peter, 2020) and two titles that have garnered particular attention for the boldness of their approach and the impact they have had, particularly in academic circles: *Cow* (Andrea Arnold, 2021) and especially *Gunda* (Victor Kossakovsky, 2020). Both films have been noted for giving visibility to farm animals visible from a new perspective (Porter, 2023a) and for their contribution to an emerging trend in *ecocinema* that presents animals as socio-political subjects and encourages audiences to reflect on the hierarchies of our culture (Schultz-Figueroa, 2022). At the same time, the rhetoric of these documentaries has been associated with the principles of vegan cinema (Reijnen, 2023: 9) and the aforementioned slow cinema (Hoffmeister, 2022: 21-23), with an emphasis

on the possibilities of a filmmaking approach that replaces the word with communication through the senses.

Attempts to develop another cinematic perspective on animals have been more furtive in fiction cinema. There are fewer feature films in this category, and those that do exist are generally characterised by a lower degree of experimentation and less powerful messages than those of the documentaries cited above. Nevertheless, titles such as *Spoor* (Pokot, Agnieszka Holland & Katarzyna Adamik, 2017) and the animated film *Marona's Fantastic Tale* (*L'extraordinaire voyage de Marona*, Anca Damian, 2019) are worth mentioning, although neither of these two have attracted as much attention as *Okja* (2017), a film directed by Bong Joon-Ho, distributed by Netflix and starring Tilda Swinton, Jake Gyllenhaal and Paul Dano. The positive reception of *Okja* has aroused considerable scholarly interest in its critique of capitalist globalisation (Jin, 2019; Lee, 2020: 115-138), which researchers have associated with the different forms of oppression denounced in the film (Uzuner, 2020; Lee, 2022). Such studies have analysed its attack on the meat industry and its defence of animal rights (Imanjaya, Amelia & Meilani, 2021) and explored the kind of interspecies relationship it proposes (Oh, 2022), focusing on its cinematic representation of the animal's subjectivity (Koilybayeva, 2022).

A more recent example is veteran filmmaker Jerzy Skolimowski's *Eo* (Io, 2022), which follows the adventures of the donkey that gives the film its name. *Eo* is unique for the leading role it gives to the donkey, for its emphatic anti-speciesism and for an unorthodox technical approach that explores different ways of representing the non-human animal and its world. The relatively recent release of *Eo* explains why it has yet to be the subject of much research. Indeed, studies of the film to date seem to be limited to a few significant reviews (Coy, 2023; García Serrano, 2023; G'Sell, 2023; Porter, 2023b), an article by Couchot

(2023) that contrasts *Eo* with the anthropocentric gaze that has defined film history and an interesting contribution by Mouton (2024) that compares *Eo* to *Au hasard Balthazar* (Robert Bresson, 1966), the work that inspired the Polish director to make his film (Skolimowski, 2023).

EO IS UNIQUE FOR THE LEADING ROLE IT GIVES TO THE DONKEY, FOR ITS EMPHATIC ANTI-SPECIESISM AND FOR AN UNORTHODOX TECHNICAL APPROACH THAT EXPLORES DIFFERENT WAYS OF REPRESENTING THE NON-HUMAN ANIMAL AND ITS WORLD

Eo's distinctive features and the limited academic attention it has received make it a useful object of analysis for the purpose of exploring how it takes the animal's subjectivity as a cornerstone for the articulation of its anti-speciesist plea. To this end, this article examines the various strategies used in the film to emphasise the donkey's status as a subject, assessing how it shifts the gaze by eschewing the spectacular objectification of the donkey and portraying the protagonist's *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt*. It thus offers a textual analysis as proposed by Marzal & Tarín (2007: 46-53) to explore several key sequences, focusing on the film's narrative and expressive resources and above all considering the components of the shot, the editing and the relationship between sound and image.

IN THE EYES OF THE DONKEY: THE PROTAGONIST, HUMANS AND THE INVERSION OF THE GAZE

The most striking aspect of *Eo* is the leading role it gives to the donkey, who serves as the protagonist of a loose, episodic narrative for a unique kind of road movie that traces his journey while relegating

ting the humans he meets to the background. As much as *Eo* portrays the conflicts between people and their miseries, the film adopts the donkey's point of view and transcends the typical use of an animal as a mere cover for a story about humans. Indeed, it could even be argued that *Eo* subverts this tendency by pivoting the human presence around the central figure of the donkey and emphasising the kind of relationship that people establish with him (and/or with other animals) in numerous subplots.

Humans generally come off badly in depictions of their treatment of the animal, with the exception of just two people. One is a priest who talks to *Eo* and confesses his guilt at having eaten donkey salami while sharing the animal compartment of the van they are travelling in. The connection between the two is short-lived, however, as the donkey soon decides to continue his journey without him. The other, who is especially important, is Kasandra, his kindly companion at the circus, who treats him with affection. She is also the only character who will reappear in the film, as she visits the sanctuary where the donkey is relocated after the circus is shut down, and her image is also shown again in *Eo*'s memories.

However, most of *Eo*'s interactions with humans in the film serve the purpose of exposing different attitudes that our culture has normalised and that reflect our desire to dominate other species. The protagonist thus suffers as a beast of burden, as a victim of mistreatment, as a creature who is not allowed to roam freely but must be held captive, kept in a stable or transported like merchandise, as a therapeutic instrument for children with disabilities or as a spectacular object serving only to delight the human gaze¹. The condemnation of human behaviour even includes animal rights activists, whose protests against the use of animals in the circus have the effect of separating *Eo* from the life he enjoyed with his beloved Kasandra.

Skolimowski's scathing critique of animal protestors introduces a paradoxical element into his film. Indeed, in its effort to place us in the donkey's position, *Eo* runs the risk of committing the same error as animal rights advocates who presume to speak on behalf of the voiceless. Moreover, the specific demand of the activists depicted in *Eo* raises the question of whether the film itself—ultimately a spectacle for human eyes—may constitute a case of exploitation of an animal put on display in a manner similar to a circus performance. To address this question, it is worth considering the film's opening scene.

Eo starts with shots bathed in deep red using a colour filter and punctuated by strobe lighting, showing Kasandra's face beside the donkey, who is lying upside down, as if dead. The young woman reacts in fright as she caresses *Eo* and speaks his name. Rapid cuts, choppy editing and a gloomy musical score dominated by the low notes of the wind instruments heighten the tension. In the midst of the visual confusion we see Kasandra blowing air into *Eo*'s mouth. Seconds later, the donkey quickly turns over and stands up. At this moment, a wide shot—now free of strobe effects and red filtering—places *Eo* in the centre of the frame, illuminated by a spotlight. The next shot shows the audience applauding in the stands, revealing that we have been watching a circus act.

By combining the circus performance with cinematic effects in the opening moments of his film, Skolimowski highlights the intersection at which *Eo* is positioned and the risk he runs of turning the animal into a spectacle in his effort to take us into the world of the film's protagonist. Various scenes could be cited to confirm that the director manages to avoid this risk, but there is one scene in the middle of the film, where the donkey witnesses a football match, that perhaps best illustrates Skolimowski's intention to invert the gaze.

A horizontal pan across a pitch introduces the football match, ending with a wide shot of the benches where a group of fans are cheering on

their team. The camera zooms in to show the part of the frame where the donkey appears, standing behind the fans. A full shot of Eo looking out onto the pitch (Image 1) establishes him as the spectator of an event in which it is now the humans and their skills that are on display. But the scene is not limited to reversing the roles assigned in the opening scene; it goes further, exhibiting the acerbic humour that is peppered throughout the film. The referee signals a penalty shot, and a player prepares to take it. The image of the player approaching the ball is intercut between a couple of detail shots of Eo's hooves kicking the ground. In the second of these, we hear a loud braying, which, as the next shot shows, distracts the striker and prevents him from scoring. The fans of the winning team celebrate the donkey as the hero of the match and the scene thus ultimately invites us to recognise both Eo's status as a subject in control of the gaze and his capacity to intervene, to be an agent in a world that he does more than just observe.



Image 1

IN THE DONKEY'S SKIN: EO, NON-HUMAN ANIMALS AND NATURE

In the attempt to capture Eo's subjective experience of the world, the many instances of the protagonist observing and/or interacting with other

non-human animals are also significant. One of the most remarkable examples of this takes place in a stable where Eo observes a white horse being meticulously shampooed and groomed. In an earlier scene, while carrying out his loading duties, the protagonist sees the horse posing for a photo shoot with a human model. Apart from stressing the spectacularisation of animals, the most interesting aspect of this scene is the way it exposes the hierarchies that humans establish between species, and also how we are led to attribute the awareness of such discrimination to Eo. The grooming scene alternates between detail shots of Eo's eyes and others of the same scale showing the majestic horse being brushed. The donkey and the horse then attempt a friendly interaction, but the horse's handler trots him off while Eo watches, leaving the donkey alone in his confined space.

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At different moments, with an editing pattern also based on contrasting images—and sometimes also with the help of powerful, emotive music—we are similarly encouraged to empathise with what we see and to attribute feelings to Eo. For example, a longing for freedom is suggested in Eo's eyes when he looks out from inside the vehicle transporting him at a herd of horses galloping across a meadow, while compassion is hinted at in his gaze when he observes a crowd of pigs squealing inside a truck taking them to the slaughterhouse, and his constant braying at an aquarium full of fishes in the window of a pet shop seems empathetic.

On other occasions, Eo's reactions make it easier for us not only to attribute emotions to him, but even to identify intention and the capacity to

intervene. An example of this can be found in the scene where the donkey is taken to a place full of caged foxes. A series of quick edits show multiple exchanges of glances between Eo and the foxes. The close-ups of Eo and the detail shots of his eyes attempt to convey his emotional reaction to the sight of the electrocution of several foxes by a man who then loads their corpses onto the cart that the donkey is required to pull. Having completed his macabre task, the man hits Eo to make him move, but Eo refuses and then delivers a vengeful blow to the man's face that leaves him unconscious on the ground. The scene concludes with an extended shot of Eo's face (Image 2), which wears an unmistakably intriguing look that vests the donkey with another act of agency—breaking the fourth wall—while also compelling us to take a position on what we have just seen.



Image 2

In any case, the sequence that best serves to appreciate the relationships established between Eo and other non-human animals—and, in general, to appreciate the protagonist's connection with a natural environment—occurs just after the fleeting nocturnal visit that Kasandra pays him on the occasion of the donkey's birthday. Eo breaks through the fence that holds him back to trot along the road after the young woman, who has left on a motorbike. Frightened by a car, the

donkey changes course and wanders into the forest. Thus begins a sequence of almost ten minutes in which Eo enters the natural habitat of various wild animals, and which, although the long shadow of human influence will appear, includes no people and no spoken words.

A fisheye-lens shot of a frog drifting downstream suggests, as do similar shots elsewhere in the film, that we are seeing the world through Eo's eyes. Moreover, the shot establishes the stream as a kind of natural highway that will guide the donkey—and us—through this part of his journey. After shots of a spider spinning its web and of the donkey following the stream under the watchful gaze of an owl, we begin to hear the howling of wolves. A POV shot of Eo pushing through the branches is juxtaposed with another that shows him walking by some graves. The bluish tones of the cinematography and the ominous ambient music make their technical contributions to thematic motifs typical of the horror genre.

Eo comes to a halt and looks around. In a wide shot of the peaceful forest, the menacing laser sights of a group of hunters gradually emerge, while technological synthesiser sounds take over the soundtrack. A camera movement follows the path of a laser light on the protagonist's back until it reaches his head. We then hear a thunderous gunshot and the music suddenly stops. A detail shot of Eo's eye is accompanied by a faint, repeated braying, like a whimper. Without cuts, a camera movement crosses the stream to show the image of a wolf dying on the bank, ending with another detail shot, in this case of the wild dog's bleeding wound. In another example of the editing technique mentioned above, the juxtaposition of the image of the mortal wound with a new close-up of the donkey's eye suggests sympathy in Eo's gaze.

The protagonist flees, passing through a long tunnel full of bats. His way through the underground corridor marks the transition to another scene, far away now from his encounter with the

animals of the forest by night, which emphasises the donkey's independent experience in contact with nature. A ground-level tracking shot passes through the bushes and up to Eo, who is eating grass in a meadow. One shot shows the light of dawn bathing his back and the next offers the image of his mane moving gently in the breeze (Image 3). As at other moments, the sensory quality of the experience is highlighted through a haptic approach distinct from the logocentrism that tends to characterise film industry production. Another ground-level shot of Eo's legs, followed by one taken from behind his head with a shaky camera at shoulder height, track the donkey's movement and help us to put ourselves in his skin. These shots also constitute an example of the various occasions in *Eo* that vindicate bodily experience through the use of somatic camera techniques.

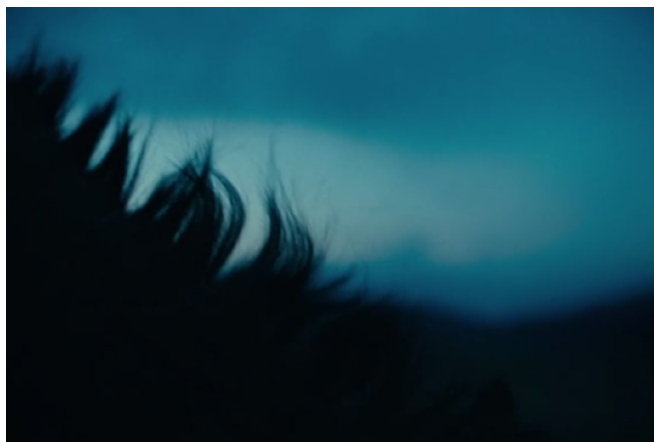


Image 3

From above, Eo looks out over a horizon tinged with the reddish tones of dawn. In the aerial shot of the forest that follows, we see the same red filtering effect we saw in the film's first images, which is maintained throughout the rest of the scene. Several wide shots taken with a drone offer a bird's eye view over the forest, followed by a shot that pierces through the trees and follows the path of the stream. A single dissonant

keyboard chord is repeated throughout the shot, increasing in intensity as the camera moves faster and faster, as if both sound and image were emulating the increasing rhythm of the water rushing down the mountain. The scene cuts abruptly to the image of windmills and an aggressive distorted guitar with a wah-wah effect begins to play. Approaching one of the windmills, the camera rotates sharply on its axis, imitating the movement of the blades it is pointing at. The sequence ends with an indirect shot of the windmill's blades, reflected in a small puddle. We hear a bird cawing, and then just when this sound ends and the keyboard chord stops, we see a bird drop dead into the water (Image 4).



Image 4

This sequence condenses certain recurring themes throughout the film. First, it individualises Eo, conveying his particular way of experiencing the environment and portraying him as the subject at the centre of his world. Second, it creates bonds of fraternity and solidarity between the different species in the face of the human threat. And finally, the animalist, anti-speciesist message is linked to—or rather, presented as part of—an environmentalist critique of the absurdities of the Anthropocene.

IN THE DONKEY'S HEART: ENTERING EO'S INNER WORLD

The film also includes sequences intended to make us share in Eo's pain and suffering, immersing us in his private world. These sequences are, in general, the most effective in fostering audience identification. One notable example is the scene showing the beating inflicted on Eo by the fans of the losing football team, who spot the donkey and decide to get out of their car to attack him. Eo tries to flee, and the chase is captured by a shaky hand-held camera that conveys the distressing nature of the situation. The fans catch the donkey and begin to strike him with their bats. The excessively unstable framing, the underexposed, blurry shots, and the frantic pace of the editing inflict a violence on the audience that runs parallel to what the donkey is experiencing. The use of a fisheye lens and the low angle of the shots prompt us more directly to empathise with Eo, who collapses to the ground and continues to be beaten. Through Eo's eyes, in a strange ground-level shot, we watch the attackers walk away. The shot lingers a few moments longer, offering us the image of the grass and a distant light.

We then cut to a new scene that interrupts the narrative, beginning with a shot similar to the one immediately preceding it, though now accompanied by some eerie synthesiser music and the same red filter effect used in the film to emphasise certain scenes. Behind the grass, we see the head of a robot staring at us with its artificial eyes. The frame widens, and the canine-shaped automaton walks until it reaches a reflective surface where it gazes intently at itself (Image 5), as if becoming aware of its own existence. The juxtaposition of the final shot of the scene that has given us the most intense sensation of Eo's suffering with the opening shot of this robot scene creates a contrast that hints at a critique of the Cartesian conception of the animal as *machina animata*. Moreover, Skolimowski's allusion here might even prompt us to



Image 5

ask why, in this post-humanist age, we seem more open to recognising the self-awareness of machines than to acknowledging the subjectivity of the creatures with whom we have shared the world since our species first emerged.

The best examples of the film's attempt to get inside Eo's mind are undoubtedly the scenes that feature the speculative device of visualising his memories, going beyond the aforementioned invitations to the audience to attribute qualities traditionally considered human to the donkey. The three moments where these recollections are depicted underscore Eo's longing for that time spent with Kasandra, particularly the first two. In both cases, the flashback is introduced after a prolonged focus on Eo's lonely and distressing situation, expressed in lingering shots of the donkey accompanied by a moving musical composition.

In the first one, four shots serve as a prelude to the flashback: a barred window dimly lighting the place where the donkey is being kept; a detail

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shot of Eo's eyes that travels down to his mouth; a wide shot showing some neon lights turning on, suggesting the tedious passage of time; and a final shot of Eo simply staring at a wall. During this shot, with an auriculation strategy suggestive of an internal voice, we hear Kasandra whisper, softly calling the donkey's name. This is followed by the only shot that encapsulates the protagonist's nostalgia, where we see Kasandra kissing and caressing Eo beside the warmth of a comforting fire (Image 6). Similarly, the second flashback further emphasises Eo's physical and emotional contact with Kasandra, showing them exchange a reciprocal gaze of the kind which, according to Burt (2002: 39), enables psychological and social contact between humans and other animals in the absence of verbal language. These scenes clearly intensify the haptic intentionality and emotional charge present throughout the film, and thus highlight the sensitive connection *Eo* seeks to establish with the audience.



Image 6

The final depiction of one of Eo's memories uses a different formula, with a pair of shots that return us to the circus performance at the beginning of the film. The intrusion of these two red-filtered shots is heightened by the addition of brief musical phrases played on a flute. In the second, we see Kasandra calling out Eo's name anxious-

ly, and immediately afterwards—no longer in the flashback—the donkey begins to trot, as if responding to his companion's call. The allusion to the circus act with its simulation of the donkey's death and resurrection indirectly foreshadows the film's final scene, which precludes the possibility of a happy ending for Eo. In this way, it sketches a kind of circle linking the beginning and the conclusion, while decrying the ceaseless cycle of exploitation to which non-human animals are subjected. In fact, shortly after the flashback, we see the donkey joining a herd of cows as they walk into a slaughterhouse. Overhead shots show the animals packed together, the erratic, nervous movements of a calf separated from the rest, and the panoptic architecture of a space designed for discipline and efficiency. The music adopts an increasingly tragic, piercing tone as Eo and his companions travel along their private corridor of death until they reach their fatal destination. A black screen accompanies the final, sharp and repetitive blows of the orchestral score, and as they end, the sound of a short electric burst abruptly ends the film.

CONCLUSIONS

Skolimowski's film makes Eo its true protagonist without resorting to the stereotypes traditionally associated with audiovisual representations of non-human animals. Although in certain scenes Eo is depicted as a spectacular accessory, faithful companion, therapeutic pet, commodity, helpless victim, or cold avenger, the film as a whole strives to present him simply as a donkey—as an individual and a subject with agency, whose prospects are nonetheless constrained by his circumstances. By adopting Eo's point of view, the film invites us to enter both his inner world (*Innenwelt*) and his subjective experience of his environment (*Umwelt*), with all the other characters made to revolve around him.

In its depiction of the donkey's contact with his surroundings, *Eo* pays special attention to the dy-

namics that arise between different species, including humans. His interaction with other non-human animals serves to open our eyes to a shared world built and inhabited by all living creatures in it, to explore alternative forms of communication and coexistence beyond human parameters, and to forge bonds of empathy and solidarity among the victims of exploitation and the speciesist hierarchies imposed by humans. As this study has shown, the condemnation of these conditions of domination is just as evident in the sequences portraying Eo's relationships with humans, who are generally depicted in a highly negative light. In this way, the film traces a kind of spiral, starting with Eo and the affective bond we establish with him, and gradually expanding to convey an animalist, anti-speciesist message that ultimately forms a fundamental part of its environmentalist critique.

This analysis has also highlighted how *Eo's* alternative message is underpinned by a technically diverse and experimental approach that is equally transgressive. Just as the protagonist takes multiple unexpected directions throughout the narrative, Skolimowski's unorthodox style explores different textures and tones with a cinematic sensibility that breaks with convention and upends our expectations. In this respect, it is worth noting the film's fragmentary nature, most clearly expressed in the episodic structure that defies conventional narrative logic. The tone of the various episodes also varies significantly, taking us from scenes marked by dark humour to others in the category of existential drama, and even at times flirting with the conventions of other genres, such as horror. These tonal shifts are undoubtedly an effective way of immersing us in Eo's state of mind as he navigates the different situations he finds himself in.

The film makes use of other devices that similarly draw us into Eo's experience. At various moments, it employs POV shots from the donkey's perspective and special lenses that suggest a gaze

different from that of humans. Similarly, the use of somatic camera techniques brings us closer to Eo's movements, emphasising the bodily nature of the cinematic image and our shared condition as *res extensa* with other animals. In other cases, long takes and the calm pacing of the editing convey Eo's boredom in captivity, or—as we saw in the scene where the protagonist wanders freely through the forest—to shift the film's rhetoric toward an observational style (akin to that found in *Gunda* or *Cow*) in which the donkey sets the tempo for a scene where nothing significant takes place in narrative terms. Beyond the specific expressive power of each of these devices, all of them combine to varying degrees with the film's sensorial (often haptic) and emotional force to explore and highlight alternative channels of communication shared across species, relegating verbal language—which underpins the logic of human exceptionalism—to the background.

Special mention should be made of another cinematic technique that brings us closer to Eo's experience, vested with the affective sensibility discussed above: the moments where the film imagines—or gives visual form to—the donkey's memories. While this device might be interpreted as a sign of anthropomorphism, the speculative imagining of Eo's memories could equally be described as yet another example of the donkey being attributed qualities that have traditionally been considered exclusive to humans. Rather than reading these attributions as anthropomorphic tics, the licence taken in such cases seem to constitute yet another layer of the film's multifaceted effort to assert the animal's subjectivity. It is important to remember, after all, that *Eo* is a work of fiction about a donkey, but made by humans for humans. And it is also worth noting that Skolimowski's film does not sidestep the problems involved in the representation (of the donkey's subjectivity), as is made evident in the animal rights protest scene discussed above—or, for that matter, as is already suggested by the title. Indeed, despite the

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evident intention to give the donkey a voice by giving the film the protagonist's name (which in turn is taken from the sound a donkey makes), the linguistic representation of braying and the act of naming itself are unavoidably human.

In short, *Eo* puts us in the donkey's place through a powerful emotional charge sustained by a rich rhetorical arsenal that nevertheless appeals to us to reflect on it. The film's self-questioning approach, the moments when the narrative is suspended, and *Eo*'s inquisitive glances at the camera invite a certain critical distance. In this way, the film as a whole encourages us to respond to what it shows us with a combination of feeling and thinking. It is up to us whether we allow ourselves to be carried away by the bleak panorama depicted, or to be moved by the spirit of criticism and by the hope that *Eo*'s memories hold, and so begin to acknowledge non-human animals as subjects and to transform our relationships with them.

NOTES

- 1 The film presents the donkey as a domestic animal which, despite being deeply integrated into everyday life (as it is in rural Poland), is particularly scorned and mistreated in popular culture. Consider, for example, the many synonyms for "donkey" in both English and Polish that are used pejoratively to describe humans. The choice of a donkey as the protagonist thus serves to underscore the state of vulnerability in which we keep animals—and, as will be discussed here, nature as a whole.

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IN THE PLACE OF THE DONKEY: THE SUBJECTIVITY OF THE NONHUMAN ANIMAL AND THE ANTI-SPECIESIST PERSPECTIVE IN *EO*

Abstract

This article investigates how the anti-speciesist message conveyed in *Eo* (Io, Jerzy Skolimowski, 2022) hinges on the assertion of the subjectivity of its donkey protagonist. Following a consideration of the "animal turn" and a discussion of its manifestations in audiovisual studies and recent film production, *Eo* is examined using the methodology of textual analysis. Attention to key sequences reveals the authentic leading role played by a non-anthropomorphic donkey who is presented as a subject with agency. The analysis also highlights the access the film provides both to the donkey's subjective way of experiencing his surroundings (*Umwelt*), including the depiction of his interaction with other species, and to his inner world (*Innenwelt*). It also explores the director's unorthodox technical approach, which places us in the donkey's point of view and connects us to him on sensory and emotional levels. The conclusions underline *Eo*'s subversive message supported by cinematography that is at once experimental and transgressive and the original alternative the film offers to the traditional depiction of non-human animals and the relationships we establish with them.

Key words

Animal Subjectivity; Antispeciesism; Film Analysis; *Eo*; Jerzy Skolimowski; Animalism.

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EN EL LUGAR DEL BURRO. LA SUBJETIVIDAD DEL ANIMAL NO HUMANO Y LA PERSPECTIVA ANTIESPECISTA EN *EO*

Resumen

El presente artículo investiga cómo el mensaje antiespecista que lanza *Eo* (Io, Jerzy Skolimowski, 2022) pivota en torno a la reivindicación de la subjetividad del burro que lo protagoniza. Tras considerar el *giro animal* y comentar sus manifestaciones en los estudios audiovisuales y en la producción cinematográfica reciente, examinamos la película guiados por la metodología del análisis textual. La atención a pasajes clave permite apreciar el protagonismo auténtico de un asno no antropomorfizado que es presentado como sujeto con agencia. Igualmente, se destaca el acceso que el film procura tanto a la manera subjetiva del burro de experimentar el mundo circundante (*Umwelt*) —incluida la plasmación de la interacción del protagonista con otras especies— como a su mundo interior (*Innenwelt*). Asimismo, valoramos la aportación de una heterodoxa propuesta formal que nos sitúa en el punto de vista del burro y nos vincula sensorial y emocionalmente. Las conclusiones subrayan cómo el mensaje subversivo de *Eo* se apoya en una experimental cinematografía paralelamente transgresora y cómo el film ofrece una original alternativa a la tradicional representación de los animales no humanos y de las relaciones que establecemos con ellos.

Palabras clave

Subjetividad animal; Antiespecismo; Análisis fílmico; *Eo*; Jerzy Skolimowski; Animalismo.

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