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# Creature Cameos:

## Filming Who or What

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'Forms and Feelings of Kinship in the Contemporary World', 27 April 2024

Panel: Creatures and Landscapes      Chair: Professor Catherine Constable

'Creature Cameos: Filming Who or What', or, to quote Derrida in *The Beast and the Sovereign*: 'What or who? Who or what? Go figure [*allez savoir*],' he teases.<sup>1</sup> And what a tease indeed, from a thinker who has remained a consistent, hospitable figure to the question of and the compassion for animals in his writing. The syntactical switch of who and what, what or who, is a decision that Derrida makes time and again across several texts but one that bears significant relevance in *The Beast and the Sovereign* or in the French «*la bête et le souverain*» as not only an address to the question of sovereignty over the animal but also of dominion over sexual difference. The feminine *la* and the masculine *le*, a grammatical couple that joins this question of who or what in Derrida's text to represent the problem of sacrifice in distinguishing between quote: 'not only...two types of living beings (animal and human) but between two sexes which, already in the title, *se font une scène*, are going at each other, are making a scene.'<sup>2</sup> What scene, we might ask, is Derrida referring to in this instance? Is it a scene of sacrifice or something as yet indiscernible, indeterminate, or perhaps secret. It is a scene, as we will hear soon, that lends itself to film or screen studies, but not necessarily in the way that we might anticipate or expect when considering these two established fields, and this is what I want to focus on today.

Before I begin to articulate who or what this scene might be, I want to turn to a well cited text in the posthumanities *When Species Meet* by Donna Haraway, and a very particular scene invoked by Haraway to further what she comes to articulate as an ethics of other-worldly spectatorship and respect. In the introduction, Haraway is keen to set herself apart from both Derrida and Deleuze in formulating her notion of 'becoming with' as the unofficial slogan of kinship practices, and in respect to the former, Haraway alights on the infamous scene from Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* involving a little cat and a bashful Derrida caught in a state of undress. Taking place in either a bedroom or bathroom, the overwhelming sense of shame that takes hold of the naked Derrida, instigated by the watchful gaze of a little feline companion that catches him in the nude, causes the philosopher to wonder

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign Volume I*, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

who he is actually following in the impulsive immediacy of this reaction or response.<sup>3</sup> ‘Ashamed of what and before whom?’ Derrida asks himself. Being nude exposes a naked truth for Derrida, if we could say such a thing, the fact that nudity is a symptom of a human metaphysical tradition which figures all animals as innocent *a priori*, as ignorant of their apparent nakedness in nature. Derrida correctly clarifies for us that, despite what a distinctly Judeo-Christian history might teach us, there is no nudity in nature as such. This scene with the little cat, however, does unveil a conundrum for Derrida, who no longer knows how to respond to the bottomless gaze of his cat or to even know quote: ‘who I am (following) or after whom I am (following)’ in the midst of myths, religions, literatures and fables that would enforce a dividing line between the who and the what.<sup>4</sup>

And it is at this point that Haraway enters the scene in *When Species Meet*, to ultimately ridicule Derrida for what she describes as a shocking lack of curiosity in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, what she describes as a failed opportunity to wonder what the cat was feeling, thinking or caring about in this moment of complete exposure. While Haraway acknowledges that Derrida avoids the facile and imperialist move to claim a perspective from the other’s point of view or to try and make an animal speak, she chastises him for not considering an alternative form of engagement with his little cat, one that would risk knowing about how we might *look back* at animals in the world.<sup>5</sup> And, perhaps key to this conference, this is where we could argue that Haraway’s ethics of other-worldly spectatorship engages with the question of film and how moving images shape both acts of looking and questions of how to return the animal gaze in ways that are respectful or *respecere*, meaning to hold in regard or in the courtesy of one’s gaze.<sup>6</sup>

‘Response and respect’ Haraway tells us, is possible only in the knotted cat’s cradle of cosmopolitical relations where actual animals and people look back at each other, sticky with the mess of their muddled histories.<sup>7</sup> To respond is to respect, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for all that constitutes the polis where and when species meet, to enter the world of becoming with the question of where who and what is ultimately at stake.<sup>8</sup> And for Haraway in *When Species Meet*, the use of Crittercams, those small camera devices that are attached to animal bodies in order to study their behaviour in the wild, is one such method of interfacing with the specific requirements of multispecies living in a human-focus world. Crittercams, as Haraway writes, are the compound film technologies that partner with animals, becoming visual organs where data scientists,

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

behaviourists and animal lovers can experience the haptic optic touch of other-worldly spectatorship.<sup>9</sup> Glued or suckered to the side of an animal, these cameras are flooded with the articulated lenses of multiple agential zoons, machinic, human and animal perspective that perform a historically situated system of hermeneutic labour and play.<sup>10</sup> Crittercam footage, Haraway tells us in *When Species Meet*, provides scenes of unknown surfaces, shifting scales, intense magnifications, and the immersive optics of lifeworlds that normally manoeuvre external to the purview of human knowledges. Thus, Crittercams, as described in this text, present us with scenes that demand respect, where the question of who or what is made agential and where our epistemological and ethical obligations to animal wellbeing becomes magnified on screen.<sup>11</sup>

However, in thinking about this relationship between the film screen and the question of who or what, I cannot help but notice an inherent contradiction in Haraway's initial thesis which ultimately causes her to fall victim to a similar accusation of incurious retrospection that she wields against Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. The irony in *When Species Meet*, which Haraway does not fully acknowledge in any great depth, is that Crittercams fundamentally never *look back* at animals. They never look back reciprocally with any of the courteous regard or respect that is so integral to her notion of 'becoming with.' Rather, Crittercams, as visual devices stuck to the side of creaturely bodies, present scenes of an animal vision in which we as humans are able to scrutinise an other-worldly perspective in an unwavering and unblinking field of vision that is actually made more dispossessed and machinelike than other forms of animal interaction. While Haraway does note that the material-semiotic exchange of Crittercams is highly asymmetrical, she fails to recognise that the literal gluing of these cameras to animal bodies does not look back to the material histories of animal suffering and its contingent role in the progression of visual culture itself.

Animals, as we know, have disproportionately suffered in the visual and material rendering of moving images in human history. As Nicole Shukin rather astutely outlines in *Animal Capital*, there are clear and definite links between first, disassembly lines of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century abattoirs, where animals are physically disassembled; second, auto assembly line of 20<sup>th</sup> century car manufacturing companies, which took inspiration from the production process of slaughterhouses; and third, the assembly line of motion picture, where animal bodies becomes a vital by-product for the manufacturing of the cinematic reel.<sup>12</sup> Photographic gelatine, that substance derived from the industrial waste from animal slaughterhouses, literally fixes the question of who or what to the historic development of moving

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<sup>9</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 249.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 261.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 263.

<sup>12</sup> Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 45.

pictures and mass imagery.<sup>13</sup> Who or what a film “is” is animal, despite the fact that it does not appear on screen as such. In other words, the material stock of film is a transfer of life from animal bodies to film technology, passing visually before our eyes without representation or notice.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Crittercams, I would argue, perform a double refusal to actually look back at animals, the first because of their literal orientation to only look forward as a pair of animal eyes and second in their material development based on the suffering of animals.

So how might we address this question of who or what, of looking back at animal bodies and the issue of human spectatorship in relation to film? Is the scene of film yet another motif for the scene of sacrifice. In how we decide between a who and a what? These questions speak to the concerns we all share, about how we can look at animals on screen and whether the cinematic apparatus ultimately bars the potential for nonhuman agency in moving images. However, rather than focusing on the relationship between film and animals through the lens of sacrifice, I prefer to consider how a poetic sensitivity to film intensifies some of the more enigmatic and indeterminate aspects of scene production and spectatorship.

In fact, taking a step back, a return to the fundamental question of ‘who or what’ appears in film is critical, in both senses of the word. As Derrida shows in several of his texts, questioning who or what, what and who, is a deliberate exercise in besmudging the binary, of smearing any prerequisite for categorisation from the start. In fact, as he hints in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, questioning who or what invites the notion of secrecy to take centre stage, of how a scene might move as stealthy as a wolf [*a pas de loup*] across our field of vision.<sup>15</sup> Secrecy, the ability to hide or to conceal oneself, even in plain sight, also suggests a power of protection or a deliberate decision to withhold information. Secrecy, rather than responding, refuses to directly engage with the desire to share a truth or knowledge, of depriving a who or what that does not need to know. Keeping secrets, in other words, is a power of keeping the other guessing.

This is who or what Derrida gestures to in *The Beast and The Sovereign*, towards a scene that moves as stealthy as a wolf into our field of vision, as a kind of introduction, discreet intrusion, completely clandestine, an entrance that does all it can to go unnoticed and uninterrupted.<sup>16</sup> Imagine, Derrida asks, how a scene might progress as stealthy as a wolf, as if it were able to approach without a noise, to arrive without warning, to proceed discreetly, invisibly, almost inaudibly and imperceptibly, until it takes its prey by surprise.<sup>17</sup> Undeniably, this presents quite a literary challenge for the frequent movie-goer, who

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<sup>13</sup> Shukin, *Animal Capital*, 91.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 104.

<sup>15</sup> Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign: Vol I*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 3.

is well-versed in the many narrative plotlines and visual motifs that arguably makes film predictable. But what would it mean to think of film as secretive, as hiding something in plain sight, of opening the possibility that moving images can both conceal and protect animal life in visual culture. How might we rethink films such as *White God*, *Cow*, *The Cove*, or *My Octopus Teacher* if we were to approach them with the view that the agential power of animal difference hides in plain sight, in the gestures, sounds and watchful gazes of those on screen that elude meaning. I am conscious that this somehow suggest that animal difference can only ever haunt film, like a spectre, but in a sense, is that not all that film is, a series of nonhuman ghosts coming back to us time and again. Thus, a secret scene of animal difference, that approaches us, stealthy as a wolf, absent like a ghost, hiding in plain sight, in multiple forms, only to catch us by surprise, without warning, when we least expect it. Questioning who or what foregrounds film as a medium that not only conceals the multiplicity of animal difference in the here and now, it also protects the possibility of future kinship in scenes-to-come. Perhaps that is a secret worth keeping.