

[Review] Benjamin Schultz-Figueroa.

*The Celluloid Specimen: Moving Image Research into Animal Life.*

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*The Celluloid Specimen* exemplifies the best of interdisciplinary research and debate incorporating film studies, media studies, and critical animal studies while also proffering some significant critiques. In-depth discussions of the films of different animals deployed by behaviourists in the early to mid-twentieth century, Robert Mearns Yerkes, Neal E. Miller and B.F. Skinner, take in historical and social contexts as well as what these films reveal about the history of research using animal bodies, what roles animals play in society, and how they are represented in film.

This volume makes an immense contribution to animal studies. As Schultz-Figueroa notes, animals in films in the scientific archive have not featured in debates, which extend to broader issues philosophical, ethical and in relation to aesthetics. Along with other historical reconsiderations of animals, Schultz-Figueroa hopes that his research can have a ‘recuperative role, one that refuses to allow Mona and her kind to recede quietly into obscurity’ (4). (Mona is a chimpanzee whose life was spent in Yerkes’ primate research laboratory, where she was subjected to behaviourist experiments.)

Behaviourism is analysed and contested in great depth. These films are regarded as case studies of ‘political texts’ which linked animal experiments with social politics. These films, their purposes, and the ways they constructed and controlled the viewers’ gaze are deeply disturbing, yet this book aims to counter-balance this, by fostering another gaze – one of empathy that is ethical, political and aesthetic. Schultz-Figueroa critiques a humanist trend in animal studies which remains in the affective realm, insisting not only that socio-historical

contexts be taken into consideration but that the concept of ‘agency’ for animals in films needs to be problematized and made more complex. He foregrounds ‘infrastructures of feeling [in which] definitions of *human* and *animal* are created and recreated ... woven into structures of feeling differently each time’ (16).

Robert Mearns Yerkes and his behaviourist theories had a profound ripple effect in North America from the 1910s starting with psychological tests for army recruits. Yerkes was a eugenicist, yet he had some appreciation of animal consciousness, even considering the ‘type’ of consciousness an animal had. Unlike comparative psychology at the time, he recognised that animals had emotions and even encouraged the potential for emotional connections between the viewer and the animal onscreen. While Yerkes wanted to foster “a feeling for the animal” (46) in other scientists, this claim rings hollow for the chimp herself in an experiment depriving a chimp mother of her newly born baby and then gauging her reaction six weeks later. The emphasis is more on the process of viewing rather than any empathy for the nonhuman. As Schultz-Figueroa acerbically observes, ‘[s]ympathy was a dominant affect in the structure of feeling of eugenics’ (50). Yerkes’ deployment of his concept of sympathy in a global eugenicist framework is chilling; power over those considered inferior could be tempered by love, but only from a patronising perspective that maintained the status quo.

Yerkes cannot be exonerated for his experiments which were tied to a political project to control human evolution, a project ‘that led to some of the most horrifying scientific crimes in American history’ (63). Much of the material in *The Celluloid Specimen* is discomfiting, even devastating: the treatment of nonhumans and of those perceived as other, behaviourist concepts, the reductive description of a lynching mob within behaviourism, yet Schultz-Figueroa writes always in measured, perceptive analyses, locating the discussions both particularly and broadly. ‘Absurd as it may seem, linking lab rats to lynch mobs was an important force in American history’ (72), he observes, with behaviourist models influential in the first half of the twentieth century. Neal E. Miller’s experiments in rodent simulations of human society were located at Yale’s Institute of Human Relations with its grandiose ideals via biological science and social sciences of how society could be controlled.

The issue of suffering of animals in research laboratories is considered specifically in a chapter entitled 'Distributed suffering'. In relation to animals in film, Schultz-Figueroa argues that celluloid specimens take suffering outwards beyond the lab through film to scientists, spectators, urban planners, urban residents via the 'affectively dense suffering of lab animals' (96). Sometimes reading about the treatment of rats by scientists like Mowrer and Calhoun, the concomitant animal vulnerabilities, the right-wing discourse, is like being trapped within a dystopia. Joyce Wieland's satirical 1968 film 'Rat Life and Diet in North America', with its humour and barbed critique of the utopian tendencies in behaviourism, is a welcome respite.

B.F. Skinner, probably one of the most well-known psychologists of the twentieth century, not only wanted his experiments to be acknowledged broadly by society, but also used film as a 'technology of control' (135). Project Pigeon, in which pigeons were taught to peck at a bomb to guide it at a target, might seem fantastical but it was an early example of weaponizing animals who are increasingly deployed in war. For Skinner, film was not evidence of connections between the human mind watching the film and the animal mind performing, but merely an example of conditioning. His radical behaviourism ridiculed theories of a 'nonmaterial mental world' (159). The meticulously detailed chapters on Skinner seem to lose sight of the celluloid specimen and there is some repetitiveness in the book – chapters open with a precis of what they will contain, for example. On the other hand, these introductions serve to usher in the reader to dense and sometimes complex discussions.

The book concludes with some cautionary notes about the imperative to reflect on our current use of celluloid specimens, along with our treatment of and attitudes to nonhuman animals. As Schultz-Figueroa acknowledges, the embodied experiences of animals involved in these filmed experiments is 'bafflingly elusive' (192) to grasp, even as we viewers respond to their long-deceased presences. Fittingly, Mona's ghost has the last word, speaking hauntingly into a future for those who will listen as she has haunted the book.