

Rendering Visible: Animals, Empathy, and Visual Truths in *The Ghosts in Our Machine* and Beyond

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Abstract: *The cultural politics of visibility are complex and contradictory when it comes to nonhuman animals. To help interrogate and unpack the challenges, this paper concentrates on documentary film, and particularly Canadian filmmaker Liz Marshall's *The Ghosts in our Machine* (2013). *Ghosts* follows the aesthetic politics of the film's primary human subject, photographer Jo-Anne McArthur, as she conducts a campaign of guerrilla espionage and compiles a vast photographic record of the largely invisible suffering inflicted on a wide range of animals. As a result, the film develops through an interwoven helix of two visual media: filmmaking and photography. The meaning of sight is a visual trope in the film that not only serves to confront the viewer with McArthur and Marshall's visual record of animal cruelty, but also as a lens that encourages viewers to recognize interspecies (in)visibilities beyond the screen and the necro-economic foundation of contemporary capitalism. I use this film as a window into the cultural politics of sight, and as a way to illuminate the challenges and possibilities of fostering interspecies empathy.*

Keywords: *Film studies; animal studies; documentary film; animals and culture; empathy*

Empathy requires visibility, metaphoric or actual. Empathy is the process of recognizing and legitimizing the experiences and feelings of another. To be able to understand and respect the perspectives of others, we must first be aware of them. When it comes to nonhuman animals, there are stark inconsistencies and contradictions in how they are both understood and treated. Many people have very close relationships with their companion animals, and our media-saturated world is replete with animal memes, animated feature films and funny videos. Yet the vast majority of animals' lives and deaths occur in factory farms, industrial slaughterhouses, and laboratories, beyond public view. This paper grapples with the cultural politics of visibility and invisibility, and considers how these dynamics relate to the material project of animal domination.

The power of sight is not lost on those who profit from interspecies harm. In the mid-late twentieth century, most slaughterhouses were moved out of urban centres and into remote rural areas (Fitzgerald). Factory farms regularly prohibit visitors and film crews, and 'ag-gag' laws in the United States seek to criminalize undercover documentation. Similarly, laboratories are kept behind very strict security. As Timothy Pachirat observes in his book *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, such sites of animal slaughter and torture require 'geographic zones of isolation and confinement' (9). Thus, not surprisingly, much animal rights activism is dedicated to shining light on such zones of confinement and isolation, going so far as to demand that CCTV cameras be placed in slaughterhouses. Such calls echo Paul McCartney's claim that if slaughterhouses had windows, everyone would be vegetarian (Dawn). The rationale is that further transparency would undoubtedly render animal slaughter more visible to the public. Yet, at the same time, researcher and slaughterhouse designer Temple Grandin has also argued for the installation of CCTV cameras; she believes that the cameras would reveal the 'humane' effectiveness of her slaughter techniques (see Pick; see also Bell). This seeming contradiction suggests that questions of visibility are not straightforward but rather can be fraught and complex.

Animal advocates use a range of strategies including photography, visual art, video and film to illuminate animals' experiences and document the carefully-concealed cruelty of extreme animal instrumentalization and exploitation. A number of documentaries have been made and due to newer technologies and viewing media, such films are reaching broader and more diverse audiences. This most recent wave of animal advocacy films expands the thresholds of visibility,

reflecting a larger political project that Pachirat calls the ‘politics of sight.’ Carrie Packwood Freeman and Scott Tulloch argue that animal rights documentaries like *The Witness* (2004), *Earthlings* (2005) and *The Cove* (2009) constitute a ‘reverse panopticon’ due to their devotion to shattering the zones of confinement that conceal animal slaughter and cruelty. Freeman and Tulloch go so far as to argue that such films represent a clear challenge to ‘the hegemony of humanism’ while promoting ‘animal rights ideology... (and) post-humanist cinema’ (112).

While the liberationist possibilities of these films are difficult to dispute, some caution should be exercised if we are to see these films as part of a broader project of transparency and counter-surveillance. Drawing from Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Pachirat asserts that the ‘politics of sight’ are currently dependent on an ever escalating cycle of shock. Yet the more transparent animal atrocities become, the more the public could become desensitized to their suffering. As a corrective, he promotes a ‘context sensitive politics of sight that recognizes the possibilities and pitfalls of organized, concerted attempts to make visible what is hidden’ (255). A crucial question extends from this tension: how might animal activist documentary film contribute to this ‘context sensitive politics of sight’ without inflating the visual economy of shock to potentially self-defeating levels?

I contend that Liz Marshall’s *The Ghosts in our Machine* (2013) offers one compelling example of a documentary that successfully navigates this tricky cultural terrain and thus offers an important contribution to the politics of sight, and the larger project of fostering interspecies empathy. *Ghosts* follows the aesthetic politics of the film’s primary human subject, Canadian photographer Jo-Anne McArthur, as she conducts a campaign of guerrilla espionage within the global animal industrial complex (Noske) and compiles a vast photographic record of the largely invisible suffering inflicted on a wide range of animals in factory farms, fur farms, abattoirs and animal testing labs. Marshall’s video camera follows McArthur on a number of these photographic missions. As a result, the film develops through an interwoven helix of two visual media: filmmaking and photography. The meaning of sight is a visual trope in the film that not only serves to confront the viewer with McArthur and Marshall’s visual record of animal cruelty, but also as a lens that encourages viewers to recognize interspecies (in)visibilities beyond the screen. Here, I use this film as a window into the cultural politics of sight, and as a way to illuminate some of the challenges and possibilities of fostering interspecies empathy.

Indeed, a critical challenge is how to engage and ignite people's empathy for the masses of animals enslaved, the literally billions of 'ghosts' to whom Marshall dedicates her film. It is a problem raised explicitly within the film by Farm Sanctuary Shelter director Susie Coston. She argues that both faces and names are integral. As the old axiom goes, the farmer must refrain from naming his/her animals because it makes their slaughter all the harder. Once we recognize the subjectivity of an animal, his or her death becomes significantly less bearable and more 'grievable' (Butler 2004), as any pet owner will attest. As Judith Butler argues in *Precarious Life* (2004) and develops further in *Frames of War* (2009), the 'grievable' lives are those that have been framed within a 'field of perceptible reality' which in turn determines how 'we formulate moral criticisms' against violations inflicted on those that are accepted as grievable. Moral revulsion and eventual political action for Butler then depends on 'a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established' (64). However, as Anat Pick observes, such 'perceptual frames' normally 'exclude the lives of animals from the field of the precarious, the grievable and the violated' (96). In this light, to subjectivize the masses of tortured animals becomes a formidable challenge, especially since, as Pick notes, '(t)he realities of mass domination of animals are unframed so as to become imperceptible' (96). *The Ghosts in Our Machine* seeks to reorganize the perceptual frames that render animal suffering imperceptible by transforming how we see this project of mass domination and destruction. Marshall's film, following McArthur's photographic model, very carefully frames the suffering of individual animals against the spectre of systemic atrocity to emphasize animal subjectivity. The result, I argue, is a 'context-sensitive' contribution to the politics of sight that directly targets apathetic and complacent acceptance of hegemonically-inscribed frames of perception.

The Sites of Sight

First, we see the eye of a horse; then a pig; next a cow. The opening shots of *Ghosts* immediately pull the viewer in through this montage of animals who seem to return our gaze. Right away we are prompted to reflect on the implications of seeing, and of being seen, within and across species, a theme developed throughout the documentary. The film follows McArthur's journey around the world and into hidden spaces as she photographs the animals we rarely see, as well as her attempts to reach a broader audience through magazine publications

and a book. Crucially, McArthur's photographic work reveals the carefully concealed perspectives and suffering of the billions of animals caught and destroyed in our economic system. She declares that she feels like a war photographer, one documenting 'an invisible war against animals.' Her guerrilla-style photographic approach places viewers into the centre of fur farms and slaughterhouses, essential components of what has been called the animal-industrial complex (Noske; Twine), in an attempt to bring economically-sanctioned forms of cruelty to the public view, and thus consciousness.

Noteworthy in McArthur's photographic work is her emphasis on the seeing animal, on what and who is seen and experienced, on animal subjectivities. Her images disrupt sanitized conceptions of animals as objectified renewable resources passing painlessly and obviously through human economic machinery. Her work highlights the sentience of these sacrificial beings as they gaze upon the suffering and deaths of other animals, while in the midst of their own duress. If animals' feelings and protests cannot be communicated through words, McArthur will capture it in their eyes. Accordingly, McArthur's photographic mission, amplified by Marshall's cinematic vision and vista, prompts viewers to confront the empathetic contradictions interwoven into human-animal relations in the western capitalist order.

Raising the public's consciousness of our culture's tacitly accepted, carefully concealed animal atrocities is indeed a Herculean task. Early in the film, McArthur meets with a group of New York magazine editors and agents who heap praise on the power of her work yet can offer no publishing commitment because print media remains a 'PG-13 world.' At the end of the film, the scene seems to repeat itself when another New York agent again fawns over her principled devotion to animals, but wonders if the world is ready to confront the gruesome truth that her photography reveals. The subtext in both conversations seems to have more to do with repressing a larger truth: the public's complicity. In both cases, the editors could be seen as reluctant but unfortunately effective guardians of mass media organs, themselves entwined with the economic 'machinery' McArthur seeks to expose.

Liz Marshall's film thus offers a platform that in a small but not insignificant way seeks to correct the informational imbalance that shuts out McArthur's message. The medium of documentary film offers a larger canvas for exploring and contextualizing interspecies dynamics, while simultaneously revealing the aesthetic and economic processes that inform (and sometimes

hinder) McArthur's visual work. At the same time, while *The Ghosts in Our Machine* documents the horrific realities of animal exploitation, it simultaneously magnifies the redemptive (and sometimes heroic) efforts being pursued to circumvent the 'machinery.' This includes substantial footage from New York's Farm Sanctuary, and the highlighting of a couple who adopt two dogs formerly subjected to experimental research. Animal sanctuaries are increasingly studied by critical animal studies scholars who value, raise certain concerns, and/or offer positive suggestions about how these spaces could play a central role in the creation of more hopeful multispecies communities (Gruen 2015, Donaldson and Kymlicka). The specifics of these debates are beyond the scope of this paper, but what is central is that sanctuaries are fundamentally different from the factory farms that increasingly dominate rural landscapes and offer glimpses of more hopeful relations. It is this hopeful possibility that Farm Sanctuary represents in Marshall's film. In this tonal oscillation between horror and hope, *The Ghosts in our Machine* offers a wistful and deliberate meditation on the dissonance that distinguishes our desire and capacity to care from the actuality of our economically inscribed consumerist practices. As viewers are taken back and forth between these two distinct arenas of human-animal relations, Marshall and McArthur each use their chosen medium to visually illustrate this cultural disjuncture, while also connecting the viewer emotionally to both the loved and the forgotten animals. They explicitly seek to reveal existing empathy, as well as to extend it.

Indeed, as she is stymied once more by the gatekeepers of commercial media, McArthur laments that people's love for and visual interest in animals seems confined to household pets and wildlife. This encapsulates the majority of animal narratives filtered through corporate media, overall. A survey of the recent cluster of animal rights documentary films demonstrates that the most commercially successful examples, *The Cove* (2009), *Project Nim* (2011) and *Blackfish* (2013) are single issue films that expose specific atrocities or injustices and excoriate particular practices (e.g., the Japanese dolphin trade, aquatic theme parks) but, arguably, do not offer broader structural critiques of the centrality of animal domination to our economy. Undoubtedly, it is easier to present isolated critiques that encourage the public to examine and even confront specific issues rather than the substantive ideological and economic structures that are all too often reliant on the blood of animals. As Pick argues, we can assess the efficacy of animal activist films by examining the 'degree to which they disclose not only the horrors that befall animals, but the contexts that make these horrors unnoticeable' (95).

It is in this light that *The Ghosts in our Machine* is somewhat distinguished from many animal activist films, most specifically those of the single issue variety. The film implicates the larger cultural and economic order in the multi-faceted ‘war against animals’ and confronts the viewer with their own complicity (active or passive) in this system of atrocity. It offers no convenient ‘one-off’ means for audiences to channel their rage or expiate their guilt (e.g. boycotting Sea World). The film asks something much greater of its audience: that they interrogate and ultimately reject the cultural imperative justifying animal domination, instrumentalization and ‘carnism’ (Joy) as resulting from both individual choices and structural patterns.

In this way, Jo-Anne McArthur’s obstacles are somewhat similar to those faced by Upton Sinclair in his struggle to get *The Jungle* published in 1906. His original manuscript focused on slaughterhouse work, but also emphasized the systematic exploitation inherent in the capitalist order itself. Central to his original vision was how the fates of the slaughtered animals and the exploited labourers were entwined. As Kathleen De Grave points out, the Chicago stockyards reflected the ruthless logic of capitalism itself, one in which the strong would figuratively and symbolically consume the weak as evidenced by the following passage excised from Sinclair’s final text, ‘the place which is here called the Jungle is not Packingtown, nor is it Chicago, nor is it Illinois, nor is it the United States – it is civilization’ (116). Yet Sinclair’s publisher refused to move forward until the novel was watered down into an indictment of the meatpacking industry specifically. Its popular reception centered on consumer anxieties about hygiene, as opposed to the misery imposed on human labourers and animals. The meatpacking industry was eventually compelled to make superficial adjustments, but its core function and the sanctified economic order remained unassailable. As De Grave observes, ‘criticizing the meatpacking industry itself was acceptable, but not criticizing capitalism in general, [thereby perpetuating the sense that] it seems to be telling the story of a local problem, not a worldwide disease’ (4). In contrast, I would suggest that Jo-Anne McArthur’s photography and by extension, Marshall’s film, refuse to isolate a specific target. The result is that the film thus helps expose how our capitalist machinery is steeped in the blood of many species and that a broader political and cultural system is at work.

The Symbolic Economy

Indeed, the title of the film calls our attention to the animal sacrifice that is required to support the current patterns and machinery of human consumption. The specifically chosen words, 'The Ghosts in our Machine,' also call out the Cartesian imperative that reduces animals to mere animated machines without the capacity to think or feel; Descartes claimed that animals 'did not act on the basis of knowledge, but merely as a result of the disposition of their organs' (140). Moreover, for Descartes, animals' inability to communicate verbally separated them from 'the stupidest' of human beings who could at least intelligibly protest their pain and discomfort. The influence of this logic on enlightenment thinking and its concomitant drive toward instrumentalism was profound and helped to justify un-anaesthetized animal vivisection well into the 20th century, among other abuses. At the same time, the title's emphasis on 'the ghosts' works to highlight the repressed animal death that fuels the machinery.

This notion resonates deeply with the cultural analysis of Nicole Shukin. In *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, Shukin argues that post-modern capitalism is deeply invested in obfuscating the system's dependency on the rendering of organic commodities; that is to say, the conversion of animal body parts into a ubiquitous array of consumable commodities. According to Shukin, this involves fetishizing victims through endless commercial representations of animals, animated and otherwise. She refers to many animal themed marketing strategies, including an ad in which an animated beaver wears a fur coat as he consults his smart phone. Such corporate strategies suggest something more than just an exploitation of the appeal of cute, accessible animals, however. These cultural processes signal a perverse return, or, perhaps more accurately, a re-alignment of the repressed animal slaughter which sees animals reincarnated into 'Disnified' avatars that will, in turn, feed the abstract consumption of the 'post-modern' infotainment economy. Consequently, this symbolic 'rendering' of animals serves as a spectral shield working to obfuscate the system's pervasive physical rendering of animals, its necro-economic foundation.

In a similar vein, *The Ghosts in Our Machine* demonstrates how the spectralized animals of the symbolic economy conveniently distort or displace our consciousness of the animals sacrificed to the physical apparatus. If people are mostly concerned with beautiful wild nature and cherished companion animal lives, while paradoxically being oblivious to the dystopic

conditions of the billions of animals bred and slaughtered annually for our use, then it is by hegemonic design. Media gatekeepers express sympathy for the animals and for Jo-Anne McArthur herself; she explains that she suffers from PTSD as a result of her repeated exposure to animal misery. Yet there is also the sense that her work constitutes a clear violation of what can be shown. McArthur and Marshall are bent on exposing the material structures and empathetic contradictions that enable it, however. Marshall and McArthur force the viewer to reflect on the economically inscribed distinctions that designate some animals as worthy of our empathy and many others as merely disposable. Given this context, it is savvy filmmaking which sees McArthur and an activist entering a fur farm with hundreds of foxes in cages in deplorable conditions. The resemblance that these animals have to beloved household dogs is glaringly apparent and undeniable. These animals are not ghosts, but their short, miserable lives and premature deaths are kept hidden behind walls and gates, and through our cultural denial we render them doubly invisible. Moreover, the foxes and mink stare into both Marshall's and McArthur's cameras and it becomes impossible to deny their sentience and subjectivity. The same is true of the curious cows who investigate Jo-Anne and her camera each time she visits Farm Sanctuary, and the enthusiastic (rescued) piglets who gorge on milk until they fall asleep, some intertwined in an affectionate pile.

By capturing the animals' gaze, Marshall confronts this culturally-ascribed absence and forces the viewer to accept their presence, fleeting though it is. Indeed, empathy does not require sameness, but rather involves a process of understanding and connectivity to bridge differences. Martha Nussbaum posits that empathy should be understood as the active 'imaginative reconstruction' of another's experience (327). Empathy can help us to reconcile the disparate processes that shape the lives of the otherwise inscrutable 'other' and see them as social actors; as sentient beings. This has multispecies relevance. As Laura Mulvey revealed many years ago in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', it is much easier to consume an object than a subject. Her argument that female actors were being fetishistically objectified in the patriarchal film economy was, of course, a commentary on spectral consumption, one that undeniably reflects the symbolic consumption of women in the larger culture. Carol J. Adams has compellingly analysed the entangled oppression of women and animals, and how similar cultural strategies are used to objectify them in tandem. The unfortunately un-ironic video for Maroon Five's *Animals* (2014), for example, reflects these oppressive cultural entanglements, as

women are animalized, and animal corpses – slabs of meat – are feminized and sexualized. This dramatizes the very processes exposed by Adams in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, a reminder that violence against animals does not occur in isolation. This is a matter of recognizing animals' subjectivity and how multispecies harm is rendered.

Seen in this intersectional light, McArthur's claim in the film that she wants to 'save the world' gains more traction, but it is one that could have been advanced more compellingly if Marshall had noted the dire environmental consequences of animal rendering, particularly industrialized agriculture and factory farming, and how these processes disproportionately affect women, working class and poor people, and indigenous communities. Brief mention of the human labourers in the animal-industrial complex who are trapped into relations of institutionalized violence would also shed light on the multispecies implications of capitalist production. Such an intersectional vision underscores Claire Jean Kim's call for 'multi-optic vision' as she explicitly challenges us to see from within various perspectives, including those of animals.

Notably, Marshall integrates various banal and normalized images of food and fashion products made from parts of formerly living animals. This impresses upon the viewer the sheer ubiquity of the animal rendering economy, to say nothing of the countless products that have more obscured animal origins. Moreover, the central emphasis on animals' gazes creates a visual platform from which they communicate. Marshall does not use the guiding, sometimes didactic influence of the voice-over narrator. She instead opts for a multiplicity of (human) voices, with McArthur's personal reflections anchoring but not overwhelming the discussion. The scenes documenting animal abuse and exploitation are mostly devoid of human commentary, apart from the occasional diegetic responses from McArthur herself as she struggles to document the suffering. There is the sense here that words could only serve to filter or displace us from the grotesquery that is more deeply registered by the visual and aural cues of animal distress. It is a bold strategy that risks alienating viewers or overpowering them by impressing the sheer scale of the collective tragedy (as opposed to a more palatable individual focus). However, in comparison to other recent animal rights documentaries, and particularly *Earthlings*, or for that matter Georges Franju's seminal *Blood of the Beasts* (1949), *Ghosts* is widely viewed as a gentle film, particularly because it counter-balances scenes of suffering with meaningful visual evidence of joy.

Visibility, Empathy and Beyond

Overall, Marshall's film is a meditation on and vehicle for emotional connectivity and what Lori Gruen (2009) calls 'empathetic engagement' more than a narrowly empirical or rational project. The aforementioned oscillation between horror and hope compels consideration of the structural contractions that dictate our affective responses to animals in a similar fashion to the 'some we love, some we hate, some we eat' processes explored by Hal Herzog and what Gary Francione has called 'moral schizophrenia.' The scenes devoted to the harmonious human/animal experience in the farm sanctuary are not intended to showcase an easy solution to animal rendering, but rather to highlight that alternative relations are not only possible, but mutually rewarding, and could help form part of the multispecies intentional communities proposed by Donaldson and Kymlicka. The camera's lingering gaze on the inviting vegan dishes enjoyed by the film's human subjects serves likewise to highlight alternatives to hegemonic social and economic dietary prescriptions. Notable, too, is that the film's human voices represent a range of perspectives on animal 'rights' and wellbeing, thereby allowing viewers to digest differing kinds of intellectual fodder. Empathy cannot be coerced or imposed, it must be nurtured.

Yet implicit to the message of *The Ghosts in our Machine* is that in addition to changed consumption, a shift in vision and social organization is required to liberate the 'ghosts' from the machinery. We are challenged, as Thom van Dooren puts it, not only to grieve for but with animals. Liz Marshall's film powerfully illuminates and magnifies the affective crusade to circumvent our empathetic contradictions. Arguably, the film, and documentary filmmaking overall, has some potential to navigate around the hegemonic processes that tempered Sinclair's *The Jungle* many decades ago, and that continue to restrict those seeking to show the truth about animals' lives and deaths today. We desperately need, as E.P. Thompson puts it, to take off the blinkers that direct our eyes to more ideologically convenient individuals, issues and perspectives. The diversification of visual methods for amplifying and extending animals' stories, including through online repositories and streaming services paid for by subscribers, not advertisers, may help tear down certain walls. What is crystal clear is that what happens beyond the lights, and to so many in the margins, matters.

Perhaps more than simple empathy, what is needed is what Lori Gruen (2015) calls entangled empathy:

a type of caring perception focused on attending to another's experience of wellbeing. [It is an] experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognize we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes and sensitivities. (3)

Indeed, visibility can contribute to empathy and even entangled empathy, yet these feelings can remain internalized, or they can be expanded further into solidarity. Kendra Coulter elucidates interspecies solidarity as 'both a path and the outline of a destination that encourages new ways of thinking and acting, individually and collectively, that are informed by empathy, support, dignity, and respect' (153). It is fitting then that the film crosses national borders, both substantively and conceptually. The result is a politic that is simultaneously context-specific, yet transcending. The animals to whom the film is dedicated are both here and there. These are individual animals, but they are not only these individual animals. We are all entangled with these ghosts.

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