

# A Cow's Eye View? Cattle Empathy and Ethics in Screen Representations of Temple Grandin<sup>i</sup>

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Claire Henry

University of Melbourne and Federation University Australia

***Abstract:** Temple Grandin has been a captivating figure for both animal and disability studies, and for filmmakers. Known for designing more humane livestock handling processes in the US cattle industry, and for her books and public speaking on autism, Grandin's celebrity then became popularly constructed through screen representations including the First Person episode 'Stairway to Heaven' (Errol Morris, 2001), the BBC's Horizon episode 'The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow' (Emma Sutton, 2006), and the HBO Films biopic Temple Grandin (Mick Jackson, 2010).*

*Grandin's biographies credit her autism with providing privileged access to bovine subjectivity and much is made of this 'cow's eye view' in narrativizing her autistic and career experiences in these film and television profiles. Using Lori Gruen's concept of 'engaged empathy' and discussion of animal well-being, I examine the ambiguous use of Grandin as an access point for understanding and responding ethically to cattle's needs and interests. Does Grandin's empathy, as constructed onscreen, open up paths to greater compassion and an improvement in the well-being of cattle, or are there mitigating factors and techniques which put the spectator at ethical ease with the existence and operations of factory farms?*

*In these retellings of Grandin's phenomenological experiences and life story, empathy or autistic affinity with cattle is tempered by humanist transcendence and well-being is narrowly defined as the minimization of fear. While empathy may be a human entry point to the psychic life of other animals, and film and television strategies can facilitate empathic access, these documentaries demonstrate that empathy also has its limits for both Grandin and the cattle headed to the slaughterhouse.*

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Temple Grandin is a fascinating figure for animal studies, and she has also captured the imagination of filmmakers and their audiences. She rose to prominence in the US cattle industry through her innovations in humane livestock handling processes (particularly in the design and auditing of cattle slaughter plants), but also became well known for her work as an autism activist through her prolific publishing, public speaking and media appearances. This combination in her life's work is a productive one to consider. In his chapter, 'Learning from Temple Grandin: Animal Studies, Disability Studies, and Who Comes after the Subject', Cary Wolfe examines how the two fields can teach each other about what comes 'after' the subject modelled in liberal humanism (127). He uses Grandin as his central example to illustrate that, 'In the wake of this "after," new lines of empathy, affinity, and respect between different forms of life, both human and nonhuman, may be realized in ways not accountable, either philosophically or ethically, by the basic coordinates of liberal humanism' (127-28). I am similarly captivated by Grandin as a case study for these types of possibilities, but in this article I examine the types of boundaries or qualifications placed around these 'new lines of empathy, affinity, and respect' in the construction of her representation on screen. I am drawn to explore why Grandin is such a compelling figure for exploring human-animal relationships and a popular film and television subject with numerous television documentary profiles – including the *First Person* episode 'Stairway to Heaven' (Errol Morris, 2001) and the BBC's *Horizon* episode 'The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow' (Emma Sutton, 2006) – and the HBO Films biopic *Temple Grandin* (Mick Jackson, 2010). Through a close analysis of these representations of Grandin, this article points to prospective models of empathy and ethics in human-cattle relations, but also points to their limitations and cinematic circumventions.

A key feature of Grandin's subjectivity (and celebrity) – foregrounded in her autobiographical books and these films – is her ability to 'think in pictures', a notion that grounds her claims of affinity with, and understanding of, cattle. She credits her autism with providing privileged access to bovine subjectivity and much is made of this 'cow's eye view' in narrativizing her autistic and career experiences. In her book (with Catherine Johnson), *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*, Grandin writes, 'Autistic people can think the way animals think. Of course, we also think the way people think – we aren't *that* different from normal humans. Autism is a kind of way station on the road from animals to humans, which puts autistic people like me in a perfect position to translate "animal

talk” into English’ (6-7). This idea lends itself well to cinema; it is an evocative concept for filmmakers to work with. This partially explains her popularity as a documentary and narrative film subject, but she also embodies a seeming contradiction for the ‘urban stranger’, a term introduced in John Berger’s ‘Why Look at Animals?’:

Animals interceded between man and their origin because they were both like and unlike man... This – maybe the first existential dualism – was reflected in the treatment of animals. They were subjected *and* worshipped, bred *and* sacrificed.

Today the vestiges of this dualism remain among those who live intimately with, and depend upon, animals. A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant, and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an *and* and not by a *but*. 4-5

Grandin is a captivating subject for the ‘urban stranger’ because her politics and life’s work encapsulate this dualism. This dualism also underpins the construction of Grandin’s otherness, an issue I will explore in detail with the films. In addition to helping us reflect on human-animal relationships, Berger’s theory may help us to understand the relationship constructed between non-autistic and autistic humans in these representations – she is regarded as sympathetic *and* strange, admired *and* abject.

Berger’s framework highlights an interesting element of Grandin’s profile: her empathic access to cattle and witnessing their suffering in slaughterhouses across America has not led to an ethical objection to killing cattle for human consumption. Instead, the biographical narratives pinpoint her early experiences of empathy and witnessing as the motivation for her drive to improve animal welfare. Her philosophy, articulated in ‘The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow’, is that because humans breed and slaughter animals for food, ‘we have a responsibility to treat the animal right and make sure they don’t suffer’. She says she is not interested in ideology; rather, ‘I’ve been trying to just make things better for cattle in the real practical sort of way’.<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of the Errol Morris documentary, Grandin says:

A lot of people don’t like to go into the slaughterhouse and see where the animals die, they don’t like to think about that. It sort of makes you look at life in a different way. I mean, I think that using animals for food is an ethical thing to do but we’ve got to do it

right. We've got to give those animals a decent life and we've got to give them a painless death. We owe the animals respect.

Here she is speaking of ethics, of respect, of not closing ones eyes to their deaths, and yet neither this stance nor her claims to affinity and understanding (her 'cow's eye view') translate to an ethical objection to factory farming or to the type of compassion typically underpinning or motivating vegetarianism and veganism. This dualism or contradiction, paired with the centrality of empathy in Grandin's story and screen representations, opens up interesting questions for both animal studies and screen studies about the purpose and limits of empathy. What does the portrayal and cultural embracing of Grandin teach us about the role of empathy in relationships between humans and grazing animals used as livestock? How and to what ends is empathy with cattle constructed and mediated onscreen, and what are its limits?

Lori Gruen notes that, 'With other animals, we are most often at some distance from their pain, distress, fear, confusion, and suffering,' and we need to develop empathetic skills and an awareness of how other animals experience the world before being able to respond ethically to their needs and interests (*Ethics and Animals* 38). Representations of Grandin's empathic perspective with cows in these films can help such viewers who are distanced from cattle and their suffering in factory farms to take these first steps to understand how cattle perceive and experience the world. Gruen's concept of 'engaged empathy' ('Attending to Nature'; *Ethics and Animals* 206) and discussion of animal well-being (*Ethics and Animals* 30-33) are useful for understanding the dualism Berger articulates, the popular interest in the figure of Grandin, her philosophy, and how she is represented onscreen. An individual is practicing 'engaged empathy' when they are 'emotionally and cognitively empathizing with another' ('Attending to Nature' 27). Gruen explains the three stages leading to this type of empathy: the spontaneous response of emotional contagion or affective resonance; 'primary' or 'personal empathy' wherein 'the empathic individual is able to connect their feelings to the reality of the individual being empathized with' ('Attending to Nature' 28); and finally, cognitive empathy, which goes beyond the mimicry of emotions or basic grasp of their state of mind and interests to engage in a 'reflective act of imagination' ('Attending to Nature' 29). The empathic access Grandin has to cattle (which she shares with other humans through her books, public speaking, and film profiles) is an example of engaged empathy, at least in its basic form. Grandin displays the first

stage of affective resonance, and the second stage of connecting feelings to the other's feelings, through the process recounted and recreated in all three screen texts, in which she is able to empathically grasp cattle's fear and sensory sensitivity because of her own experiences with autism.<sup>3</sup> Engaged empathy involves cognition as well as affect and the empathizer will 'reflectively imagine themselves in the position of the other, and then make a judgment about how the conditions that the other finds herself in may contribute to her state of mind or impact upon her interests' ('Attending to Nature' 29-30). Grandin's adoption of a 'cow's eye view' in their environment to address distressing distractions of sound, light, and objects in their path can be read as an act of reflective imagination. Through the biographical narrative common to all three screen texts, a cause-and-effect structure is created between her empathy with the cattle and her effective improvements in the cattle's environment and their experience within ranches and slaughterhouses.<sup>4</sup>

However, engaged empathy 'involves not only the process of empathizing, but critical attention to the broader conditions that undermine the well-being or flourishing of the objects of empathy and this requires moral agents to attend to things they might not have otherwise' ('Attending to Nature' 30). The success of Grandin – and the films that convey her perspective – to achieve engaged empathy with cattle depends on one's definition of cattle's well-being. Gruen notes that well-being can be measured by a subjective assessment of one's own well-being, or by objective criteria (*Ethics and Animals* 30). The latter is important in third-party determinations of well-being, particularly for promoting the well-being of animals who cannot express their subjective states in words (*Ethics and Animals* 32). The minimal objective conditions for all sentient beings, the basic conditions for functioning, include 'adequate nutrition and hydration, relative health and bodily integrity, shelter from the elements, a non-toxic living environment, freedom of movement, social engagement (for social beings), and freedom of expression in its various forms' (*Ethics and Animals* 32). In screen representations of Temple Grandin, these objective, fundamental criteria for cattle's well-being become lost in the focus on affinity through autism, which defines the level of well-being through the minimization of fear and stress. For instance, 'The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow' focuses on anxiety as a symptom of – or a product of living with – autism, and conveys (through voiceover narration and observational-style filmmaking) how scary the world can be for people who cannot read facial expression and understand the emotions behind them. Early in this documentary, Grandin

says, 'I've got the nervous system of a prey species animal,' and 'fear's my main emotion'. The minimization of fear is a primary embodied interest for Grandin (articulated in her autobiographical narrative in her books and in the film adaptation, *Temple Grandin*), which frames the understanding of cattle's well-being and becomes the rationale for particular improvements to their welfare. This definition of cattle's well-being dovetails with economic benefit, as calmer animals who move smoothly through animal handling systems increase efficiency, profit, and meat quality. To prioritize other aspects of well-being – such as the basic conditions for functioning that Gruen outlines – may not reach such convergence with factory farming productivity and economic interests, or with a popular human desire to continue eating animals and to feel that it is 'an ethical thing to do'. In the following screen analyses, I examine the ambiguous use of *Grandin as an access point for understanding and responding ethically to cattle's needs and interests. Does her empathy open up paths to greater compassion and an improvement in the well-being of cattle, or are there mitigating factors and techniques which put the spectator at ethical ease with the existence and operations of factory farms?*

**First Person episode 'Stairway to Heaven' (Errol Morris, 2001)**

Errol Morris' and Temple Grandin's projects are more aligned in 'Stairway to Heaven' than between filmmaker and subject in the BBC *Horizon* profile. Morris says of his *First Person* series: 'I'm not so much interested in describing what people do in the world as describing how people see the world' (Morris in Lyden). Grandin takes a similar interest in the way the subjects of her work see their world, as she writes in her book *Animals in Translation*: 'Why didn't the animals want to go through the chutes? When I saw cattle balking and acting scared I just naturally thought, "Well let's look at it from the animal's point of view. I've got to get in the chute and see what he's seeing"' (Grandin and Johnson 19). These goals align in a scene in 'Stairway to Heaven' in which Morris illustrates Grandin's 'cow's eye view'. It is a very stylized shot – black and white, and slow motion – that takes us through the chute at a low level in what seems to be a point-of-view shot of a cow. It then cuts to the reverse shot where we see Grandin walking crouched through the chute. Her voice-over accompanies this shot:

I can visualize myself in their body, what it'd feel like pushing up against the other cattle, what would seeing out their eyes be like. That doesn't mean I'm putting myself as a person in a cow costume. What would it be like if I actually was a cow? People that are most likely to deny animals thinking are people that think entirely in language.

Afterward there is a shot of human legs on a travelator that matches the shot of cattle legs in this sequence. This is a direct paralleling of human and cattle, a visual match that encourages deep empathic engagement of the kind that Grandin describes.

There are a number of other ways that Morris helps the spectator to *see* Grandin's 'cow's eye view'. One key technique is his invention of the Interrotron, which is a modified teleprompter that allows Morris and his interviewee to speak face-to-face while the interviewee is looking directly to camera. The direct-to-camera gaze, and framing in tight close-up, creates an intensified sense of intimacy. The opening minutes of the episode include Interrotron shots of Grandin as she explains her phenomenological experience of 'thinking in pictures'. The Interrotron technique, along with jump cuts, also helps to convey the intensity of the experience of sensory overload that Grandin then describes. Morris illustrates her metaphors with associated archival images – here images of a pinball machine – a technique analogous to the database visualization characteristic of Grandin's autism (which later finds a more sophisticated representation in the 2010 biopic, *Temple Grandin*). As Philippa Campey identifies, what occurs here is that 'Morris allows Grandin to describe and explain early on in the film her extraordinary abilities of perception and *empathy*' (my emphasis).

The significance of the Interrotron shots, particularly in contrast to the BBC's *Horizon* profile, is the power and authority they grant to Grandin. Heather Nunn writes that 'the self presented here to camera becomes a marker of integrity; the interviewee is primary guarantor of experience and knowledge' (418). What is fascinating about this sequence is that Grandin's interview is intercut with similarly framed square-on close-ups of cows' faces (figs. 1 – 2). But whether this endows them with a similar authority is another question. These shots serve to establish Grandin's affinity with cattle and shared thought processes. They also establish Grandin as a strong subject of the documentary – the 'first person' of this episode – a positioning against which it is difficult for the non-individualised cattle to compete.





*Figs. 1 – 2: 'Stairway to Heaven' (Errol Morris, 2001)*

There is another interesting scene in which Grandin and the cows are interchanged. Grandin tells the story of how she discovered that the sensation of being in a cattle squeeze chute relaxed her, because she observed that the pressure quickly calmed some of the cattle. As Grandin talks about how spending time in the squeeze chute soothed her autism-related panic attacks, Morris uses a close-up of a cow's face in the squeeze chute rather than Grandin herself. Grandin's voice-over puts into language what she and many cows apparently feel when in the squeeze chute, taking the position of translator – a role she often claims in interpreting animal behaviour. The film then conveys Grandin's experience with shots of her in her own modified human squeeze machine. Calm is filmically constructed through pared back sound, a montage of the mechanics such as the slow movement of a pulley, then a close-up of Grandin's serene face (which contrasts with the animated intensity of the Interroton interview). The production of calmness for Grandin and the cattle, epitomized by this story and emphasized through cinematic techniques in each of the screen representations, is given a central place both in terms of narrative and affect and is prioritized as a measure of well-being.

Grandin's designing of apparatus for both cattle and for herself resonates with Vinciane Despret's case studies of 'anthropo-zoo-genetic practice' (122), as Grandin and the cattle mutually produce calmer and more productive identities – the cattle moo less and are more 'productive' (defined in economic terms as 'profitable') in the handling facilities Grandin designed, while Grandin is soothed by the squeeze chute that she is introduced to by the cattle, and her affinity with cattle is framed as the basis of her productive career in animal behaviour and livestock facility design. The discovery of the squeeze chute is a central story in Grandin's

narrative, retold in each of the screen representations, which can be read as an example of 'practices that create and transform through the miracle of *attunement*' (Despret 125).

However, the reliance on empathy in both the story and the way it is conveyed onscreen affects the potential for 'becoming together', as Despret warns: 'Empathy is more like "filling up one self" than taking into account the attunement' (128).

Grandin's story, as told by Morris, also shares qualities with the companion species documentaries Jennifer Ladino examines, which portray animals as 'co-evolving agents in shared environments and collaborative projects' (131). One of Ladino's main case studies is an earlier Errol Morris' documentary, *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (1997). Ladino suggests that Morris' self-reflexive, 'distinctive docuauteur' style opens up a space to challenge the four human subjects' ideologies, such as human superiority over animals and the appropriation of animals for human purposes:

Morris's camerawork fluctuates between anthropocentric and zoomorphic views, but it never pretends to arrive at truth. Rather, by alternately accentuating both visual and narrative speciesism and turning that around to zoomorphize humans instead, he challenges and denaturalizes human attempts to objectify, simulate, and marginalize other animals. (Ladino 134)

Morris' auteurist techniques effectively refract and 'disrupt the four men's stories and invite their critique' in *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control* (Ladino 132). While 'Stairway to Heaven' uses similar techniques, such as the Interrotron, it initially maintains the centrality of Grandin's empathic claims found in her own autobiographical narratives, and the cattle do not emerge as agents or subjects in their own right. A critical space does open up when Morris asks Grandin to recite a poem about the 'stairway to heaven' ramp that she designed to aid cattle's smooth movement to slaughter. Morris' directions and questions to Grandin disrupt the intimacy and first-person authority of the Interrotron shots, and the poem, lighting, and performance have an eerie effect. The documentary suggests she is not distressed at their deaths as such; rather, she is distressed by the *idea* of death – she is therefore using cattle, and the repetition of death in the slaughterhouse, to figure out her own mode of spirituality (a suggestion similarly made in the biopic *Temple Grandin*). As with the characters in *Fast, Cheap & Out of Control*, Morris is highlighting the appropriation of animals for human purposes. Evoking the spirituality of the

slaughterhouse challenges Grandin's own narrative about empathy and foregrounds the issue of the cattle's deaths which is elided elsewhere.

Morris' film is evocative and effective in creating empathic experiences with Grandin and conveying her own empathy with the cows in slaughterhouses, and highlights that compassion for the cattle doesn't necessarily follow. As Martha Nussbaum points out when she outlines the conditions for compassion, 'Empathy is not sufficient for compassion' and 'empathy is not necessary for compassion. Often, however, it is extremely helpful' (209). Nussbaum argues that we should try to imagine the predicaments of others and also suggests that in and of itself, empathy is morally valuable since it involves a recognition of the other as a centre of experience (149). However, empathy is similarly often not enough for intersubjectivity to follow, and humans often employ distancing devices that allow us to objectify the other (Hurn 137). Both documentaries employ distancing devices such as the cows' interchangeability, their gradual disappearance, and the gap in the story when they are killed.<sup>5</sup> Despret similarly finds the concept of empathy limited as a mode of relating to other animals:

Certainly, empathy transforms the subject (the one who feels empathy) but this transformation is a very local one as long as it does not really give his object the chance to be activated as subject... While pretending to be inhabited (or locally transformed) by the other, the empathic in fact 'squats' in the other. Despret 128

The cattle are not activated as subjects by Grandin or by the documentary, so as Hurn and Despret suggest, empathy has limited potential for transformation or for developing into intersubjectivity. So what is the point of this empathetic construction in the documentary, if it is not making a case for the sentience of cattle, of understanding their experiences and their suffering, and calling for the end of factory farming? Perhaps it is only to illustrate this contradiction for the 'urban stranger' who finds it fascinating that Grandin might feel such empathy in the first place, but then also that she eats these cows that she has such empathy for. Just as Morris is 'documenting the limitations of verisimilitude' in documentary through his reflexive and dramatic devices (Campey), he is also highlighting the limitations of empathy.

**BBC's *Horizon* episode 'The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow' (Emma Sutton, 2006)**

The first words spoken in 'The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow' are Grandin's, as she demonstrates her trick of lying still inside a cattle pen and allowing cows to approach her. As the cows jerk back after a tentative approach, Grandin explains: 'See there's like two main drives, you've got fear and you've got curiosity. They're kind of curiously afraid.' The filmmakers use this demonstration with the cows to introduce Grandin herself, highlighting in a following interview snippet, 'I've got the nervous system of a prey species animal.' The host's voiceover narration takes over immediately after the title screen, framing Grandin's story in particular ways from the outset. Ralph Acampora's framework of the *'two ways of conceiving an animal: as deviantly similar, or as relatedly other, to humanity'* (Acampora 49) is useful in comparing this documentary to Morris' *First Person* profile. In 'related otherness', the other's difference is valued positively, their distinctive characteristics considered admirable in their own right; there is a focus on 'shared characteristics and possibilities rather than on marking out polarities or irreducible opposition' (49); the animal is a first-rank Other; and the mode is marked by an aesthetics of the marvellous. In contrast, in 'deviant similitude', the other is regarded as an 'irregular entity characterised by its abnormality in relation to "us" or "me"' (49); the animal is an aberrant freak or second-rate Same; and the mode is marked by an aesthetics of the monstrous. In 'The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow', the narrator speaks of Grandin's 'magical connection' with animals, here perhaps suggesting a perspective of related otherness and the magical aesthetic, but the film continues in a mode of deviant similitude, with the narrator defining autism as 'a condition that makes other people and the realm of human relationships a mysterious and sometimes frightening place', a perspective which also frames her relationship with cattle. There is less focus in this film on Grandin's connection with cattle – it is more focused on autism, and it relies on expert witnesses to talk about it. This documentary grants less authority and subjectivity to Grandin than Morris does, which is highlighted through the contrasting ways that interviews are shot.



*Figs. 3 – 6: ‘Talking head’ interviews with experts in  
‘The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow’ (Emma Sutton, 2006)*

While Grandin is captured with a handheld camera in her natural environment, the other interview subjects (medical experts on autism) are shot in a more traditional and formal style, and thereby given more authority (figs. 3 – 6). These are classic ‘talking head’ shots: the camera is static and the subjects are seated and framed in close-up. A shallow depth-of-field is used so that their faces are in sharp focus and the background is out of focus. In contrast, Grandin is shot in an observational style, capturing her natural state, the repetitions of her speech, and her anxious movement. The shots of cattle mirror the way Grandin is depicted – the jumpy movement, the ‘deer caught in lights’. This parallel is emphasized in the scene where she talks about the clothing she wears and the materials she can’t stand against her skin (fig. 7). There are many questions prompting her from behind the camera, and she is framed in a medium shot with a handheld camera. She moves about in a hallway – suggesting a liminal/uncomfortable place – and the filmmakers distance themselves in the next room, shooting her through the doorway. In comparison to the staid ‘talking heads’ interviews, Grandin’s interviews feature a greater

distance between her and the camera, they are more frequently handheld, and they capture more movement and hand gestures. It is also only in Grandin's interviews that we hear the interviewer's questions, which both prompt Grandin and also guide viewers' reactions to what she says. For example, at an airport newsagent the interviewer asks Grandin which magazines she is interested in, then if she is interested in women's magazines, and then why not. Rather than pursue a line of questioning about what Grandin *is* actually interested in, this line of questioning seeks to highlight her abnormality against the 'rest of us' human women.



*Fig. 7: 'The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow' (Emma Sutton, 2006)*

There is one short scene that attempts to recreate the sensory overload Grandin experiences through the sound mix and overexposure. However, the film relies on expert testimony to explain and validate her experiences. One of the expert interviewees says:

What Temple Grandin does so well is describe this alternate reality that many people with autism live in. Although they live in the same world as the rest of us, they

experience it in a very different way. They hear sounds differently, they see light very differently. And what Temple does is give us an insider's view of this world and how it affects people with autism on a day-to-day basis.

Grandin can pick up on the details that bother and halt cattle as they walk through corrals. A psychologist explains that this talent (for noticing detail the 'rest of us' don't) is a feature of autism. The psychologist uses this phrase 'the rest of us' three times in this short interview snippet (saying she has an ability 'the rest of us lack' and notices details or features of the environment that 'the rest of us' miss or 'the rest of us' take for granted). These interviews reveal the way the film regards Grandin as deviantly similar, characterised by her abnormality in relation to 'us'.

In the mode of deviant similitude, the other is regarded as an 'aberrant freak', and even the title of the episode – 'The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow' – points to the use of this mode. Despite his modernist use of montage and self-reflexive play, to a degree Morris' series similarly reflects tabloid culture in 'its use of the bizarre individual, the prioritization of human interest, emotion and scandalous story over fact and objectivity' as well as the 'subjects, their address to camera, the half-hour format and their tabloid titles' (Nunn 417). As a 'freak', Grandin is regarded as both deviantly similar and relatedly other – a freak 'is not an object of *simple* admiration or pity, but is a being who is considered simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive' (Grosz 56). When an interviewer asks him how he avoids being an exploiter or getting too close to a freak show, Morris replies, 'By remembering quite simply that these are people, people like you and me. And the important thing is to tell their story often in a way that they might wish to tell it themselves. That's what keeps it human. That's what keeps it interesting' (Morris in Lyden).

What does Morris mean by 'keeping it human'? What consequences does this explicit aim have for the representation of Grandin and the cows in his documentary? Morris' approach anchored in 'keeping it human' can be interpreted as a focus on related otherness rather than deviant similitude regarding Grandin and her position as both human and autistic; he 'focuses on shared characteristics and possibilities' (Acampora 49) rather than abnormality in relation to 'us'. To avoid a 'freak show', Morris takes an anthropocentric approach, flirting with (and cinematically playing with) Grandin's connection to cows but then finding an angle on her story

that highlights her connection to 'people like you and me'. Morris' conceptualisation of his relationship to his subjects could be interpreted in this context as a sign of Morris falling back on liberal humanism, and therefore not living up to the potentialities that Cary Wolfe saw in Grandin's story.

### The biopic *Temple Grandin* (Mick Jackson, 2010)

This article has focused on the construction of *documentary* and Grandin's screen persona in terms of empathy and ethics, but I will close with a few observations about the 2010 biopic *Temple Grandin*, which stars Claire Danes in the title role. Considering the limits of empathy found in the two documentaries, it is interesting to compare how a fictionalized version of Grandin's story represents her connection to cows and her claimed ability to empathize with animals. The viewer's emotional identification with Grandin is encouraged by shaping her biography into a feature film narrative – complete with made-for-television story tropes of struggle and triumph – as well as Claire Danes' strong performance as Grandin. This HBO feature stands as a calcified version of Grandin's story, which had been retold many times before. The radical possibilities of empathy that Morris's film was approaching get left further behind with each of the three films, firstly through the mode of deviant similitude, secondly through the focus on autism at the expense of (rather than in dialogue with) her relationship to animals, and finally through the biographical narrative of this made-for-television movie which emphasizes her failures and differences in terms of *human* relationships and communication. It constructs the story as one of overcoming the odds to be successful in a society of predominantly non-autistic humans, and also adds the layer of Grandin's struggle to be successful in the male-dominated cattle industry.

*Temple Grandin* is a fitting endpoint for the trajectory in her screen representations away from the focus on her remarkable empathy with cattle toward a stronger interest in the insights about autism that her story presents. Wolfe notes that Grandin's ability to 'think in pictures' is associated with two contrasting inhuman or ahuman registers – animal sensorium, and technical/mechanical registers (130-31). The biopic emphasizes the latter, the technical/mechanical register, through superimposing technical diagrams over the filmed image,



and through the rapid montages of images used to represent her database or internet search engine-type thought processes. Just as Grandin's science teacher tries to make other teachers understand, 'She's an amazing visual thinker,' the film uses various filmic devices to convey this skill to the audience. The connection to animal sensorium is illustrated in the juxtaposition of a scene in which Grandin's aunt teaches her to match human facial expressions with emotions through photographs of herself, and the scene in which Grandin instinctually runs to the cattle's squeeze chute to calm herself down when an object out of place sets off a panic attack, which suggests that Grandin has greater understanding of cattle's physical expression of affect than human facial expressions (figs. 8 – 9).



*Figs. 8 – 9: Claire Danes as Temple Grandin in Temple Grandin (Mick Jackson, 2010)*

In a similar way to how the recitation of the 'stairway to heaven' poem foregrounds the killing of cattle that is elsewhere elided in Morris' film, there are moments of excess in *Temple Grandin* that evoke the spectre of death over the film and question the killing of cattle. Early in the film, as her aunt drives young adult Grandin to her cattle ranch for the summer, Grandin pauses her incessant laughter and repetition of a quote from *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* when she sees a large group of cattle. She asks her aunt what the holding pen is and if it is where the cattle are slaughtered. Her aunt responds in the affirmative, and there is a quiet, awkward moment before the film cuts to their arrival at the ranch's gate and Grandin has returned to laughing at the same joke. Grandin asks awkward questions later too, as she is given a tour of a slaughterhouse with fellow students. 'Where did it go?' she asks, after a cow is slaughtered.

'Meat processing,' replies the man giving the tour, but Grandin becomes more agitated, 'No, where does it go? It was here and now it's meat. Where did it go?' The tour guide cannot give her a satisfactory answer, instead suggesting to her professor that Grandin consider a different line of work. Grandin repeats the question at her teacher's funeral later in the film, asking her mother, 'Do you know where they go?' Like Morris' interest in the spiritual motivation for Grandin's work, *Temple Grandin* frames Grandin's motivation as a spiritual fixation on trying to figure out where human and nonhuman animals go when they die. The return to this question throughout the film reveals a specifically human interest motivating her work in the slaughterhouse, rather than the cattle's interests ascertained through engaged empathy.

As in the documentary films, there is a brief articulation, but not an interrogation, of Grandin's politics late in the film: 'We raised them for *us*, that means we owe them some respect.' In a way, this line functions as a concluding statement, a conclusion drawn by Grandin through her experiences and one which the film too seems happy to settle on (despite its moments of excess). The biopic proves to be an even stronger example of a compromised ethics, where empathy or autistic affinity with cattle is tempered by humanist transcendence. While empathy may be a human entry point to the psychic life of other animals, these documentaries – and Grandin herself – demonstrate that empathy has its limits for both Grandin and the cattle headed to the slaughterhouse, and that the ethics of factory farming and eating beef are cinematically circumvented through the selection and representation of Grandin as their subject.

Grandin's engaged empathy has greatly improved animal welfare in American slaughterhouses but we need further engaged empathy – and a reassessment of the criteria of well-being – to serve the needs and interests of cattle and to be mindful of Gruen's warning that empathy may risk 'narcissistic projection' of our own desires and interests onto animal others: 'if we think we experience the world in the same ways, we are much more likely to engage in narcissistic projections and miss what is important and valuable to them from their point of view' ('Attending to Nature' 34). Gruen advocates for engaged empathy as a form of moral attention, and calls for the development of 'creative, compassionate, and ethical responses' to other animals (*Ethics and Animals* 206). The repeated representation and reconstruction of Grandin's empathic 'cow's eye view' is a step toward engaged empathy, but it also illustrates

some of the limitations or pitfalls of empathy, for instance, in the narrow focus on fear minimization as a measure of cattle well-being. These case studies demonstrate that film and television, whether documentary or fiction, have great potential for the creative cultivation of engaged empathy. However, they also suggest that human stories can distort or overlook fundamentals of well-being for non-human animals, and that without greater critical attention to measures of well-being and the broader system of factory farming, empathy's usefulness in responding ethically to animals is curtailed.

## Notes

<sup>2</sup> Grandin's pragmatism and focus on animal welfare is antithetical to the abolitionist perspective which argues 'against making conditions of "slavery more humane"' ('Attending to Nature' 'Attending to Nature' 33). Lori Gruen's concern with this abolitionist approach is that the laudable goal of ending animal use may be achieved at the expense of individual animals: 'Purposely looking away from particular animal suffering in the name of some abstract principle results from narrow and dichotomous thinking. It is a product of an alienation that empathetic engagement can remedy' ('Attending to Nature' 'Attending to Nature' 33).

<sup>3</sup> The strength of the emotional or affective facet over the cognitive facet of engaged empathy displayed in representations of Grandin reflects the 'empathy imbalance hypothesis of autism', which suggests that 'most people with autism have a capacity for EE [emotional empathy] that outstrips their CE [cognitive empathy] ability in a problematic way' (Smith 289). As Grandin attributes her affinity with cattle to her autism, such research on autism and empathy can provide insight into the construction of human-animal empathy in these representations. Part of the appeal of Grandin's story may be that it debunks earlier theorization of empathy deficit in autism, and it is in line with more nuanced understandings of both autism and empathy that have emerged to suggest that 'people with autism actually have a heightened capacity for basic *emotional* empathy' (Smith 273). However, the fact that Grandin's story finds a broad audience amongst non-autistic as well as autistic humans in books, film, and television, suggests that the model of empathy that her story represents has popular appeal, including for the way it frames ethical relationships with livestock animals.

<sup>4</sup> The affective resonance between Grandin and the cattle who were calmed by the squeeze chute, also led to an improvement in Grandin's quality of life, as she uses a modified squeeze chute to ease her anxiety attacks. Affective resonance more broadly has improved quality of life

for many autistic people as similar modified squeeze chutes have since become widely used in autism treatment centres.

<sup>5</sup> Grandin describes her re-design of a ramp that cattle walk up to their deaths – the ‘stairway to heaven’ of the episode’s title – with ‘their ultimate death remaining notably absent from her meticulous account’ (Nunn 422). The structure of Grandin’s and the filmmaker’s storytelling, which avoids stepping into the slaughterhouse, displays a self-consciousness about the fact that ‘A lot of people don’t like to go into the slaughterhouse’ (as Grandin says in the film), but this avoidance also has rhetorical and ethical implications. As Heather Nunn notes, ‘Death is the absent presence at the core of many of Morris’s documentaries’ (421).

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