

Faculty of Arts  
Charles University  
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

-Ms. Botagoz Koilybayeva  
-"On Animal Subjectivity in Contemporary American Film"  
-MA Thesis  
-Supervisor's Report

Brief summary of subject: The thesis "pose[s] the following question: Is it at all possible to illustrate animal subjectivity? Or rather, does film as a medium have an aesthetic, ontological and perhaps ethical capacity (or obligation) to illuminate animal subjectivity?" (6). Not only this, the thesis avows "that humans have been constructing animal subjectivity politically and culturally throughout centuries on the basis of an unavoidable gap (or a caesura as Giorgio Agamben calls it) between humanity and animality" (6). Furthermore, Ms. Koilybayeva accurately articulates how, "The thesis will provide a close analysis of three contemporary American films as three opportunities to explore nonhuman subjectivity and non-anthropocentric perspective of looking at animals" (7).

Methodology and structure: The thesis contains an introduction, four principal chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography. It combines for purposes of elucidation rigorous close reading of three target movies with sophisticated theoretical tools. It also contains some independent accounts of theoretical works.

Achievements: The thesis underscores some crucial matters, such as Jacques Derrida's thoughts on "the animal" so as to claim about it the following: "What is brilliant about Derrida's observation is that he acknowledges the shortcomings of subsuming a vast number of various nonhuman species under one umbrella term 'the animal'. Without delving into zoology and ethology, Derrida's straightforward observation penetrates the immense gulf between humanity and animality, the gulf that has been constructed by centuries of human history that reveals the shortcomings of the anthropological machine of humanism and its human-centred ontologies. Why did a naked Derrida feel shame in front of his naked cat? The possible answer could be because the cat is a living and breathing creature who is able to meet his gaze and think about/of him without or while being trapped in her own world. "To consider that animals look and look at us is to imagine that animals think (about us)", writes Weil, "which changes what it means to be human: thought can no longer be regarded as our exclusive and defining privilege"[fn.27] (12)". This is all to be noted for its perspicaciousness and salience to the document's topic area.

The thesis is also well-researched with references on the subject ranging from, among others, Kelly Oliver, Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Lévinas, Donna Haraway, David Abram, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Edmund Husserl, and Cary Wolfe. For example, Botagoz builds on and responds to a Haraway insight in this fashion, "What is insightful about Haraway's argument is her recognition of dogs as world-forming agents for themselves and for humans. Yet Haraway appears to be rather idealistic in her emphasis on emotion and the inescapability of a deep connection with animals, which appears to bear a rather anthropomorphic attitude. What

about farm animals which could also form an inescapable bond with humans but end up on their plates?” (19). The candidate also explains that “scientists seem to recognize more and more the importance of ecosystems and the role of nonhuman animals who are completely embedded in them” (20). We read too of how “the Frankfurt School theorists liken the domination of man over nature and animals to that of a plight of women” (24). Botagoz also argues that “what is interesting, thought-provoking and compassionate is a way of perceiving subjectivity as something which is relational. Humans are a part of nature, so are animals” (25). It is on such foundational bases that the candidate successfully illuminates three films and auteurs, starting with Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*. For instance we read of how “through the character of Witt, Malick shows a manifestation of the ecological self—an alternative, more compassionate worldview; a view that embraces other worlds, other beings” (30). The analysis of the foregoing movie is incisive.

Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves* also receives illuminating treatment with such observations as the following (with reference to an article by Paul Nadasny on page 46): “In indigenous cosmologies, a hunter has to earn an animal’s respect so that the latter will decide to give its life to him. For example, the Kluane peoples believe that at times animals have to be deceived and outsmarted in order to concede”. We also read of how, “Similarly to Berger’s remark on the double nature of reciprocity, Nadasny realized that hunting involves death and grace—the life of the animal is perceived as a gift; it is respected and not taken for granted” (47). In another point the candidate notes, “To paraphrase Berger, for the Lakota people buffaloes are respected *and* hunted down. Animal agency is manifested through a social act in which an animal decides to give its life to a human. The human in turn has to deserve this right by the act of mimesis, wit and respect” (55). This is very fine material.

The candidate in unit 5 of her composition engages in what she delineates as “the biopolitical order imposes a complete control over the animal body as well as its representation in [the] culture industry—this mode of control is what Giorgio Agamben calls the anthropological machine of humanism” (56). (Other than the missing “the” in the foregoing, this is well put.) An intelligent discussion of the South Korean/USA production *Okja* from South Korean director Bong Joon also receives intriguing treatment in its analysis of the aesthetics and the politics of slaughterhouses. Crucially, we read in a discussion of the content of *Okja* “that the decisions are made by those on top, those that [who] do not see the everyday cruelty and are protected from the realities of pork processing” (72).

Ms. Koilybayeva opens her last paragraph: “Whether animal subjectivity exists or not, it is, perhaps, like opening Pandora’s box and hunting through anthropocentric fallacies. For now this thesis concludes that once the animal falls under the scrutiny of the film camera, it is assigned some form of subjectivity” (76). Not only this, the candidate closes her thesis with impressive accuracy that it “has also approached a complex position of the animal in human society across centuries and heeded the historical circumstances that shaped what the animal was and has come to be” (76). This is not only true, but also accomplished with critical aplomb.

Shortcomings: As noted in the next section, the language contains some glitches. In addition, there are moments of waywardness in the investigations; however, this has as

much to do with the number of subjects and thinkers engaged as with anything else; so, that feature is part of the price of admission of the big subject area and of its wide-ranging treatment.

Formal features (e.g., language & style, referencing, bibliography, formatting, abstracts): The language could be better: e.g. “by film’s poetic cinematography” should be “by the film’s poetic cinematography” (1), “Emanuel Levinas” should be “Immanuel Levinas” (18), “According the ethos” should be “According to the ethos” (30), on p. 31 in a quote from Abram “as our ears are attend by their very structure” seems to require fine-tuning; “**Terrance**” should be “**Terrence**” (33), “the heroes least” should be “the heroes lest” (33), “by signing together” should be “by singing together” (34), from a quote on p. 52 it would seem that “treated in variety of ways” is perhaps in fact “treated in a variety of ways”, “with animal” should be “with animals.” (54), in a quote on page 71 we read “on on the kill floor” should be “on the kill floor”. The other formal aspects are very good.

Questions: A quote starts section “3.” on page 26 from the Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky, and yet there is to the best of my knowledge no information in the thesis indicating where this passage comes from; where is it located? Also, concerning general trends in animal studies research, what does the candidate see emerging on the horizon?

Conclusion: I recommend the thesis for defense and propose a preliminary grade of 1.

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