

David Vichnar, PhD
OPPONENT'S REPORT:
re "*On Animal Subjectivity in Contemporary American Film*"
by Botagoz Koilybayeva
(MA dissertation, 2022)

Addressing the ambiguous status of animal subjectivity in the cinematic medium, Ms Koilybayeva's thesis adopts a set of critical paradigms articulated in the work of poststructuralist and postmodern theory in order to come to terms with the difficulties entailed within the label itself by a critical reading of three recent American films: Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990), and a more recent Korean coproduction, Bong Joon-ho's *Okja* (2017).

Ms Koilybayeva's point of departure is the contention that "cinema can be a useful mediator between a more-than-human-world and spectators" (2), allowing them "to venture beyond the anthropocentric framework, to gesture towards a possibility that our reality as we know it encompasses multiple intelligences and a myriad of subjectivities" (3). The thesis as a whole comprises a series of theoretical and critical attempts at testing this presupposition, even if in her conclusion the author remains still tentative at best: "Whether animal subjectivity exists or not [...] 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).

Chapter 1 presents an overall introduction, foregrounding "the caesura between human and animal" and critiquing "the philosophical mechanisms deployed in order to construct 'the animal'" (8). In Chapter 2, Ms Koilybayeva is an exercise in a "phenomenological" analysis of Malick's film, emphasizing its "non-hierarchical way of portraying ontological realities of non-human beings [...] at the same level as the human ontological reality" (8). Chapter 3 explores "human perceptions of animals in oral and prehistoric cultures whose "animal personification and tribalism" offers "a different view of nonhuman animals and their relational ontologies" (9), the example under scrutiny here being Costner's opus. Finally, on the basis of a critical reading of Joon-ho's film, Chapter 4 attempts to enunciate "the logic of biopolitics and human exceptionalism and their effects on human perceptions of particularly farm animals," raising questions re "animal capital, the animal as a political subject, rendering animals as images as well as rendering animal remains" (9).

Even if bypassing a clearly articulated thesis and eschewing unambiguous conclusions, the work's 70+ pages and 4 main chapters manage to cover a lot of ground. Ms Koilybayeva's thesis is broad in its theoretical engagement as apart from such canonical authors as Agamben, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, the Frankfurt School, Haraway, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty (to name but a few), the thesis presents forays into more up-to-date animal studies theorists such as Cary Wolfe and Kelly Oliver.

The thesis argumentation is lucid and sticks to the point, and Ms Koilybayeva is apt at synthesizing or drawing parallels between concepts from widely divergent theoretical discourses. The reading of the thesis has been an informative exercise for the opponent who has gleaned a lot of fresh insight into its chief topics of concern. There are some formal flaws to the execution of Ms Koilybayeva's thesis. The supervisor's report does a competent job of enumerating some of the major typos marring her work (even though Levinas' first name should be Emmanuel, not Immanuel, as suggested therein), so these won't be rehashed here—I will merely add that "Rational" in the title of Part 1.4 should read "Rationale" (7).

There are a few methodological and argumentative shortcomings / blind spots that need to be addressed as well, which the opponent hopes to shine a light on with his following issues and questions to be addressed at the defence:

1) The discussion of Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am* manages completely to bypass his concept of the *animot*, "an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals, and rather than a double clone or a portmanteau word, a sort of monstrous hybrid, a chimera" (41). It is the opponent's conviction that had Ms Koilybayeva used this term, she would have saved herself a lot of space otherwise taken up by (re)definitions and inadequacies of the term "animal". What should be made of this omission?

2) One cannot but wonder why Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* is only quoted via its paraphrase in Glenney Boggs' article on "American Bestiality" and why it is missing from the thesis bibliography. Surely a thesis on the "more-than-human world" should take Haraway's groundbreaking work more seriously? Especially if her book is explicitly concerned with such topics as the bioethics of laboratory animals, cloning, contact zones, and the major question of how does one "become-with" (an animal) in order to "become-worldly." Again, was this a mere oversight on the candidate's part, or was there any reason for bypassing Haraway's crucial book?

3) Could the candidate expand upon her conclusion and clarify what "form" of subjectivity the animal is assigned by the camera and just how this "assignation" happens *specifically* in the cinematic medium (as opposed to literature, painting, performance, theatre, etc.)? What kinds of cognitive processes are involved in our apprehension of cinema's "movement-" and "time-images" (as per Deleuze's taxonomy, curiously missing from Ms Koilybayeva's thesis)?

4) In a thesis concerned with animal subjectivity from an "intersubjective" viewpoint, very little attention is paid to issues surrounding "human" subjectivity vis-à-vis the cinematic medium. How does the depiction of animal subjectivity escape cinema's necessary translation of reality into images and

signs? How do we deal with (bracket?) our scopophilic impulses behind any act of watching this “ultimate pervert art” as per Žižek’s famous koan?

5) Speaking of cinema as the art of the (chiefly, *male*) gaze, there is a curious moment towards the end of Ms Koilybayeva’s Chapter 2, where during the discussion of the Frankfurt School, the gender question is touched upon. Ms Koilybayeva makes the observation that women have historically-culturally been “oppressed due to their biological shortcomings” and quotes Adorno and Horkheimer to the effect that women have been treated as “an embodiment of the biological function” and “the image of nature” (24-5). Given how often in patriarchal structure BOTH women and animals have traditionally played the unenviable role of man’s “other,” what do we make of the fact that all three feature films under the thesis’ focus were directed by male directors, and centre around—perhaps with the exception of *Okja*—a decidedly *male* perspective on things? Weren’t there a number of films directed by *women* about a *female* experience of human/animal interaction to be chosen from? Directors such as Claire Denis, Kelly Reichardt, and Andrea Arnold immediately come to mind?

6) Finally, I would like to ask the candidate to cast more light on the “Rationale” behind her choice of specifically *American* films, and not only that, but major productions and box-office blockbusters. This is odd for a number of reasons, not least of which its implicit and unaddressed nationalist underpinning. Apart from the fact that *Okja* is a Korean coproduction, one wonders whether there is anything specifically “American” about these films (and if not, why insist on the adjective in the very title of the thesis)? What are we to make of the strange ahistoricism of the thesis, in which a 1990 film is discussed side-by-side with a 2017 film, esp. given that the entire discourse of animal studies (and so many of the sources quoted in the thesis) only took off in the late 90s and early 2000s? One is also regretful of the author’s narrow focus on American films given that the opening discussion of Kossakovsky’s *Gunda* remains one of the most insightful in the entire thesis...

Still, despite some of its inadequacies and inconclusiveness in argument, Ms Koilybayeva’s thesis presents a well-researched, original contribution to critical discourse on the still evolving, dynamic field of cinematic animal studies within the contemporary currents of posthumanist thought. As such, it deserves a **grade between excellent and very good**, depending upon the candidate’s ability to address the issues raised in this report at her defence.



David Vichnar, PhD
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