

A Brief Biology of the Film Animal, with Particular Regard to Rat and Bear

The only difference between film and real life, according to the American philosopher Stanley Cavell, is that what the film shows does not exist. However, since existence is not an attribute, as Kant has demonstrated in his ontological argument for the existence of God in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1), this difference carries little weight. The same applies to a film animal: there it is, before our eyes, moving, eating, procreating, etc., for as long as the footage can be projected (or for as long as the DVD can be played). At the same time, it does not really exist – at least not in the sense that you would have to feed, groom or fence it in. But since existence is not an attribute and the film animal appears very much alive in every other respect, we should not be sidetracked by the mere fact of its non-existence.

Instead, the world of film animals should be considered as a world that has its own order, its own categories, classifications and subspecies and, with that, its own taxonomy and system. Biology, as Wolfgang Lefèvre points out, is a historical discipline and those who study the history of the film animal have no reason not to conduct themselves just as a biologist would on examining a particular example. The first step would be to determine the taxonomic classification, because, as Stephen Jay Gould says on the subject of taxonomy, it is ‘the most underrated of our disciplines’ and ‘its changes through time [are] the best guide to the history of human perceptions.’ (2)

Generally speaking, the world of film animals is, in many respects, congruent with the realm of real, or non-film animals. But it has a far greater diversity of species. The current number of extant species, depending on author, is estimated anywhere between 2 and 100 million. The number of film animal species is unlimited. The world of film animals comprises reconstructions of extinct species such as dinosaurs as well as simulated species that might one day exist. Consider the giant octopus that has come ashore to dwell in the rainforest, featured in the series *The Future is Wild*, which shows how the animal world might look 200 million years from now. It also includes animals that look like a perfectly real species, but act like a completely different animal, much the way the Disney jungle comedy shows a realistic-looking elephant behaving like a trained dog. Finally, the world of film animals includes all the animals ever recorded on film in their natural habitat or in a laboratory situation, in other words species that still existed at least when the film was shot. We could also speak of reconstructed animals (dinosaurs), projected animals (rainforest-dwelling octopuses and elephants with canine behavioural traits) and archived animals (all those that existed as a real species at the time of filming).

But what kind of film animals are Rat and Bear?

‘Rat and Bear are not animals; they are people in animal costumes,’ says Peter Fischli (3). And he should know because at the time the film was shot, he was inside the Bear costume. It sounds plausible because Rat and Bear can speak and use tools. Since Jane Goodall’s groundbreaking early 1960s study of the use of tools by chimpanzees, we know that the description of man as homo faber no longer fits the bill: the ability to use tools is not the sole distinction between humans and animals (4). As for the ability to speak, it is so common among film animals – even those that are obviously not humans dressed in animal costumes, for instance animated mice – that language can also be dismissed as a means of defining Rat and Bear as non-animals.

Actually, it is probably inadvisable to accept the animal actors’ own characterisation unconditionally, just as we tend not to take at face value the statements made by artists wishing to explain their work. After all, where would that leave the critics? (5) In this case, taking the statement at face value would mean reducing the film animal to its pro-filmic reality (actors in costumes in front of the camera) and negating its filmic reality (Rat and Bear in the city, Rat and Bear in the mountains). In other words: what Fischli and Weiss do in costume while being filmed represents a different reality from what Rat and Bear do on the screen when they make their way through the city and the mountains.

One option with regard to the taxonomic classification of Rat and Bear can be discounted right from the start. Rat and Bear are not fable animals in film. Fable animals are human figures with animal masks that give them the license to say things with impunity that the author could not say himself without breaching social convention or getting into trouble with the powers that be. Rat and Bear are very much on a human scale: Rat is too big and Bear rather too small, but both are about the same size as an adult human. More importantly, they break a visual taboo. They inhabit landscapes that were the preserve of others at the time the film was made: Los Angeles belonged to Hollywood and the Swiss Alps to sentimental local-interest films and the tourist industry. In the 1980s, every self-respecting politically correct Swiss artist eschewed these landscapes with a shudder of profound abhorrence. Anyone wanting to operate in these areas had to be very smart in such a political climate. Fredi Murer reclaimed the Alps in his 1985 opus magnum "Höhenfeuer", in which he transposed the style of Japanese director Ozu Yasujiro and his cameraman Yuharu Atsuta to his native Swiss mountains. Murer’s solution was to avoid showing any mountain peaks, to favour long takes and to keep the camera more or less at knee level. That way, the Alps really don’t look anything like a setting for patriotic, sentimental cinema. Hardly anyone might notice, but it works. Rat and Bear, on the other hand, are clearly visible at all times. Whatever they do, they do in full view of all. And what they do can best be described in biological terms: Rat and Bear is their

biogeographical designation. The form, appearance and behaviour of conventional animal species are determined over thousands of evolutionary generations by environmental factors in combination with mutation and selection. Rat and Bear, by contrast, turn the process of evolution upside down; their appearance and behaviour redefine the environment. Not only do they occur in both the city and the countryside. City and country are no longer the same when they appear there. Or, to put it in the words of art and film criticism: their very presence breaks through the thick crust of time-honoured associations deposited on the urban and rural landscapes. We see them and at the same time we cannot believe our eyes. They refresh the gaze, just as the Russian Formalists of the 1920s did when they defined this as the strategic aim of art and its tactical form-finding process.

So when Rat and Bear bring taboo images back into the realm of accepted beauty, this is very much the filmic equivalent of an otherwise taboo utterance made by a fable character behind the protective mask of an animal. In this respect, they do seem to be related to fable animals. However, the Rat and Bear films do not comply with the second, crucial criterion that defines fable characters. Fables are meant to be edifying and to teach us moral lessons about human weaknesses, criteria shared with many films from Switzerland, the land of, Rousseau and Pestalozzi. Irrespective of all art philosophical talk about the autonomy of art in the modern era, films from Switzerland generally aim to have some educational side-effect. It is no coincidence that a famous scene in Alain Tanner's "Jonas

qui aura 25 ans dans l'an deux mille" is set in a school classroom. The Least Resistance and The Right Way, by contrast, do not pass the educational test. City and countryside, the corrupt and corrupting metropolis and the wholesome, unspoilt Alpine meadows are the two landscapes that shaped the thinking of Rousseau, whose distaste for corrupt Parisian society led him to the strange conclusion that man was inherently good and that a life lived in the bosom of nature was the best kind of life. But what on earth are we supposed to learn from the Rat and Bear films? How to be successful in the art world? How to survive in the Swiss Alps as a shaggy bear and an oversized rat? What do talking rats and bears in the Swiss Alps tell us about the primordial myths of their common origins in archaic rhizomes? That you shouldn't be surprised to find that grilling a sweet little domesticated piglet on the campfire and devouring every last morsel of it will make you sick? Robert Walser springs to mind here – admittedly he is also Swiss (which may be obvious from the fact that this thought occurs to him at all) – who writes in his novel "The Robber" that the novel itself is a 'commonsensical book from which nothing at all can be learned'. (6)

Fable animals have become almost extinct since the French Revolution. Lessing was the last to still believe in the edifying effect of the fable, at the height of the German Enlightenment and in the

shadow of an absolutist prince. Ever since the French Revolution, animals have no longer had the role of speaking on behalf of humans. Instead, humans are now politically active on behalf of animals. The notion of animal rights is every bit as old as that of human rights. Launched by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and regarded by some as a poking fun at the Declaration of Human Rights, the idea of animal rights soon became a thoroughly unironic postulate. The Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), for instance, a pioneer of vegetarianism, which by no mere coincidence became a mass movement in the nineteenth century, did not see it as a laughing matter at all. Today's Hollywood producers know just who they are up against when they include this disclaimer in the credits of their films: 'No animals were hurt during the shooting of this movie.' They don't want animal rights activists calling for a boycott. So it is just as well for Fischli and Weiss that we do not see Rat and Bear slaughtering the piglet in the film "The Right Way". Whatever it is they are grilling over the campfire could be a mock-up. Though it doesn't look like it.

Rat and Bear do not do for fable animals what Spielberg's "Jurassic Park" does for dinosaurs: the cinematic resurrection of an extinct species is not their *raison d'être*. Nor are they archived animals, because, as mentioned, they exist only as film characters. Though they do appear at times in a museum setting as sleeping and hovering creatures in three-dimensional form, they existed first of all – and this they have in common with Mickey Mouse – as film animals, and only as film animals. In the space of the museum, they are threshold objects, or rather, threshold creatures – living beings radiating that special magic that comes with stepping out of the world of film and moving around in the world of the spectator. We perceive them much as we once perceived, say, the figure of Mickey Mouse on a child's toothbrush: the beloved film animal has entered our own world. It delights us. We want to cuddle it - the film animal as potential friend. But this pattern doesn't apply to Rat and Bear either. For one thing, they don't have big, trusting eyes and they don't shuffle around in the landscapes as rather formless, faceless figures. You would never think of calling them Yogi Bear, Roland Rat or any other name, for that matter. So, although they do not remain speechless, they do remain nameless. Even the shark in Spielberg's "Jaws" had a name: the film crew ended up calling the remote-controlled dummy shark Bruce. (7) No such thing has been known to happen to Rat and Bear. They are always simply Rat and Bear and they always appear as a couple. As a duo, they are a unit, a couple, of the kind we find in buddy movies. More than that: they are a hendiadys, a whole expressed by two concepts, like the *en dia duoin* [hen dia duoin] of classical rhetoric.

Articulate, without being fable animals, threshold creatures without names, recognisable and yet not individual, different from one another and yet a unit: biologically speaking, Rat and Bear, it seems, are non-animals, definable only through a number of non-criteria. That starts with the wrong proportions. They have the proportions of humans, but, compared with the biologically known

dimensions of rats and bears, the human scale doesn't fit and humankind is not the measure of all things. Rat and Bear are without measure and morphologically diffuse. And that is exactly the point. It could be said that, in the form of Rat and Bear, the film animal triumphs over the historicity of life. Rat and Bear elude classification, both in biological terms and in terms of film and literary criticism. If the theory of evolution is the theory of origins, then Rat and Bear not only turn evolution upside down, they actually fall out of it. They remain without origins and without classification in the dual sense of definition and future. Pure life without history and at the same time endowed with the gift of liberating their milieu from the burden of its history. 'History,' wrote James Joyce, 'is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.' Imagine Rat and Bear as the alarm clock. (8)

Text by Vincent Hediger

1 Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) opens his *Proslogium* with the proposition that God is 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' and that this greatest being that exists in our understanding must therefore necessarily exist in reality. Kant calls this the ontological argument for the existence of God and refutes it by stating that the possibility of thinking a supreme being by no means implies its real existence. In this respect, existence is not an attribute. The possibility of thinking God proves neither his existence nor his non-existence. Similarly, the ontologically precarious status of the film animal – the fact that it appears to be present and yet is not – is no proof of its non-existence. See Sidney Norton Deane, ed. and transl., *St. Anselm, Proslogium* (Chicago, 1926), 7-8.

2 SJ Gould and Rosamond Wolff Purcell, *Illuminations – A Bestiary* (New York: Norton, 1986) 13-14.

3 Personally communicated to the author by Peter Fischli, 26 February 2009.

4 Jane Goodall, 'Tool-Using and Aimed Throwing in a Community of Free-Living Chimpanzees', in *Nature* 20, 1264 – 1266, 28 March 1964.

5 Since the Romantic era, there has been an ineffable aspect to the work of art, a silent aspect that requires interpretation and finds expression only in the critical reception of the work, which thus completes it. We shall continue in this vein, even though the question that the work poses here is one of biology and taxonomy. Critical reception, in this context, also means identification and can therefore also be used as a description for the fundamental task of the biologist.

6 'There are, to be sure,' Walser continues, 'persons who wish to extract from books guiding principles for their lives. For this sort of estimable individual I am, therefore, to my gigantic regret, not writing.' Robert Walser, *The Robber*, Susan Bernofsky, transl. (Univ. Of Nebraska Press, 2007), 5. I have every confidence in this statement because it is not the artist talking about himself, but a self-characterisation of his work.

7 Film animals usually have names. The exceptions are scientific laboratory animals and wild animals filmed in their natural habitat. These are either given no names at all or they are assigned numbers. Jane Goodall was the first primatologist to break with the tradition of numbering by giving names to the animals she studied, much to the consternation of her male colleagues.

8 James Joyces, *Ulysses*, 2:377.

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