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"I believe a cage is a cage and no one deserves to be put in one": Animal Liberation in Contemporary Film

Abstract: The paper analyses diametrically opposite portrayals of animal liberation in four contemporary films (Denis Henry Hennesly's *Bold Native* (2010); Kornél Mundruczó's *White God* (2014); Chris Renaud's *The Secret Life of Pets* (2016), and Joon-ho Bong's 2017 *Okja*). The discussion of the films' "politics of visibility" and its role in animal liberation is informed by the theoretical work being done in the field of critical animal studies (CAS). In CAS, animal liberation, also known as abolitionism, refers to the ethical and political position which rejects all kinds of human use of nonhuman animals; as such, it is at the basis of the animal rights movement and various forms of related activism, primarily the "direct action" of physically rescuing animals from factory farms and research laboratories. Dedicated to animals' liberty, abolitionism is nonetheless human-centered and is obviously treated as such in *Bold Native* and *Okja*, which both romanticize and explore the pitfalls of militant animal rights activism, while deploying the images of nonhuman animals mainly, though not exclusively, as victims. Yet the phrase "animal liberation" in this paper also refers to the state in which former pets find themselves once they are liberated from generally abusive human ownership. Former pets no longer under human supervision are either ridiculed, as exemplified by Renaud's *Flushed Pets*, or, as in *White God*, depicted as monstrous and bloodthirsty. These portrayals, it is argued, convey the danger and threat a liberated animal poses to the anthropocentric order.

Keywords: animal liberation; animal rights; animal rights activism; direct action; film.

Introduction:

Animal liberation, damaged planet and the politics of visibility

The focus of this article is on the representation of animal liberation in four contemporary films. The phrase refers, first, to the militant social justice praxis of the heavily criminalized human activists in the US, as depicted in *Okja* and *Bold Native*, and, second, to the precarious condition of the nonhuman animals, former pets, who are temporarily liberated from their human owners (*White God* and *The Secret Life*

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of *Pets*). Arguably more familiar in the first sense – and distinct from much older animal advocacy¹ – animal liberation originated as a philosophical argument in Peter Singer's 1975 classic of the same title. By now, primarily in the West, animal liberation, or abolitionism, has become the ever-slipping goal pursued through a spectrum of interventions, strategies and activism, from the push for the legal reconfiguration of animals as rights holders and citizens to the militant "direct action" depicted in some of the films under discussion.²

It is not only animal liberation strategies that have diversified significantly over the last few decades. The theories underpinning the demand to abolish all human use of nonhuman animals have moved far from Singer's utilitarianism as well. The principle of equal consideration of interests proposed in Singer's *Animal Liberation* has been supplanted by animal rights,³ care ethics,⁴ neo-Kantianism.⁵ Even Christianity⁶ and speciesism⁷ have been mobilized, counterintuitively, as support for the abolitionist cause. Yet animal liberation does not belong exclusively to philosophy and ethics, though the link is explicitly acknowledged in the first minutes of *Bold Native*, for instance, where Charlie Cranehill is seen reading Singer's book. Indeed, one of the strengths of both *Bold Native* and *Okja* is their emphasizing that, regardless of its theoretical underpinning and philosophical origin, animal liberation is primarily an anti-capitalist and anti-anthropocentric social justice movement informed by the relatively simple notion that "animals are not property, they're not ours to use. They're an end unto themselves."⁸ As neither capitalism nor anthropocentrism has been dismantled, current abolition efforts take place in the context of accelerating ecological crisis and growing animal use. The majority of nonhuman animals are slaughtered by the billions; confined; hunted down; experimented upon; widely abused in cosmetics industry; anally electrocuted on fur farms; burned in forest or bush fires; overfished in acidifying oceans; dying in the streets from exposure and starvation, or being euthanized in pounds and shelters. They are objectified, monetized, and abused as pets,

¹ The earliest European animal advocacy is associated with Pythagoras in 200 BC.

² Another way in which the goal of abolitionism is pursued is through non-militant activism, where animal rights activists (ARAs) attempt to educate the public into practicing veganism (excluding all animal products from their diets, clothing, cosmetics), by sharing links, videos and various petitions on social media, or through street activism, vigils held for the animals on their way to slaughter, the Cube of Truth, etc.

³ Tom Regan, *Animal Rights, Human Wrongs: An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2003); Gary L. Francione and Anna Charlton, *Animal Rights: The Abolitionist Approach* (Exempla Press, 2015).

⁴ Lori Gruen, *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals* (New York: Lantern Publishing & Media, 2014).

⁵ Christine M. Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁶ Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002).

⁷ Tzachi Zamir, *Ethics and the Beast: A Speciesist Argument for Animal Liberation* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁸ Dennis Henry Hennelly, *Bold Native* (Open Road Films, 2010).

too, often in the name of "love" or discipline, and implicated in the industrial abuse of other animals through the consumption of mass-produced pet food.

The mind-numbing devastation of animal life, merely outlined here, is not happening in isolation, however. In 2021, for the majority of its nonhuman, as well as the growing number of its human inhabitants, the Earth itself is a "planet of slums"⁹ housing injustice, inequality, pain, and death. Its remaining biodiversity and ecosystems are being violently destroyed in keeping with the deadly demands of "Progress, Development, Science, Technology, the Free Market, and Neoliberalism",¹⁰ including, but certainly not limited to, the demands of expanding animal agriculture. Large pools of animal waste and seemingly endless CAFOs¹¹ on the one side, and equally endless fields of monocrops picked by exploited humans and utilized as livestock feed, on the other, are just some of the facets of the damaged Earth – not necessarily the most dramatic, or the best-known ones. Yet factory farms, just like fur farms and labs conducting biomedical research and product testing on animals, are worthy of investigation not only in the context of animal liberation, which targets them specifically, but the damaged planet as well. Namely, despite the hypervisibility and presence of products derived from, and tested on, animals in everyday life, these places remain largely hidden from the general public. The very invisibility of their standard practices, and their animals and humans, is an index of the damaged Earth, especially if one bears in mind the devastating effect of animal agriculture on biodiversity and ecosystems, and its implication in social injustice such as exploitation of undocumented (im)migrant workers. It is no accident that in his study of industrialized slaughter Timothy Pachirat writes that "distance and concealment operate as mechanism of power in modern society."¹² And it is precisely distance and concealment that animal rights activism attempts to disrupt, by sharing with the public the footage and photos from the aforementioned "places of abuse", in addition to physically rescuing animals. While the technology is new, this particular strategy is, in fact, consistent with "the visual culture of animal advocacy"¹³ from the late 19th and the early 20th century, and thus also represented in some of the films under discussion. In *Okja* and *Bold Native*, for instance, viewers watch the activists making illegal¹⁴ footage of factory farming and animals experimented upon in labs. Procuring the footage and releasing it to the public, moreover, is an important plot point in both films.

⁹ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London, New York: Verso, 2006).

¹⁰ Steve Best and Anthony J. Nocella, II, "A Fire in the Belly of the Beast: The Emergence of Revolutionary Environmentalism" in *Igniting a Revolution: Voices in Defense of the Earth*, ed. Steve Best and Anthony J. Nocella, II (Oakland, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2006), 9.

¹¹ Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations.

¹² Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2012), 3.

¹³ Jennifer Keri Cronin, *Art for Animals: Visual Culture and Animal Advocacy 1870-1914* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 22.

¹⁴ Under the so-called ag-gag laws, in operation in the several US states, Australia and France, it is illegal to document what takes place on factory farms and slaughterhouses.

While the films under discussion, with the exception of *Bold Native*, are not openly activist, as both cultural practice and visual media they nonetheless participate in the complex politics of visibility, which Donna Haraway expresses as a series of questions: "In a world replete with images and representations, whom can we not see or grasp, and what are the consequences of such selective blindness ... How is visibility possible? For whom, by whom, and of whom? What remains invisible, to whom, and why?"¹⁵ On the most literal level, these four films make the invisibles of the damaged planet visible: a super-pig, the representative of all pigs slaughtered for food; a multiply-abused and traumatized stray dog; former pets; the lab and factory farm animals. In addition to forcing their largely animal-consuming viewers to face the actual lives behind "the absent referent",¹⁶ these films also shed light on the human invisibles, i.e., the human beings labelled "terrorists" for their activism, as well as, briefly, slaughterhouse workers.

Liberating Animals

In Dennis Henry Hennelly's *Bold Native* (2010), animal liberation is unambiguously represented as anti-capitalist social justice praxis. The focus of the film is on human activists, the young men and women who are both heavily criminalized and demonized by the mainstream media, yet more than willing to pay, with their own freedom, the price of freeing "those who have no voice", the caged "quiet ones". The plot is simple. The leader of the fictional animal liberation group called *Bold Native* (modelled on real-life Animal Liberation Front, or ALF),¹⁷ Charlie Cranehill, attempts to organize a series of simultaneous liberating operations in several states before he is arrested – just like real animal rights activists, he is wanted by the FBI under the Animal Enterprise Terrorist Act.¹⁸ As in *Okja*, the motivation behind the "thirty-five actions happening at the same time" is not only to liberate specific animals from factory farms and research labs, but to get the events covered by the mainstream media. The activists believe this might lead to more people being converted to their cause: "At some point, people are going to start asking why we're willing to risk everything for these animals". The film follows Charlie and his friend Sonia, another *Bold Native* member, as they go from state to state coordinating the liberating actions and

¹⁵ Monica J. Casper and Lisa Jean Moore, *Missing Bodies: The Politics of Visibility* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 24.

¹⁶ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York, London: Continuum, 2010), 66.

¹⁷ "The ALF is the name used by the global network of autonomous and anonymous cells of clandestine animal liberation activists who follow ALF guidelines and engage in direct action against animal enterprises, such as freeing animals from fur farms, or damaging property and tools used to contain or kill animals". Genevieve Johnston and Matthew S. Johnston, "'Until every cage is empty': frames of justice in the radical animal liberation movement," *Contemporary Justice Review* 23, 4 (2020): 564.

¹⁸ See John Sorenson's *Constructing Ecoterrorism: Capitalism, Speciesism and Animal Rights* (Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2016) for a detailed examination of the political and economic reasons determining the definition of ecoterrorism and the prosecution of animal rights activists.

organizing future care for the animals (unsurprisingly, “most of them are sick”). The third participant in this road trip is Karl Hansen, an organic-milk-drinking vegetarian who once designed the “Happy Chickens” campaign for the egg industry. Hansen represents the average consumer, whose presence allows Charlie to reveal the horrific facts about animal agriculture which, while familiar to every animal rights activist, are not necessarily widely known. Together with Hansen, the viewers are thus educated on the treatment of dairy cows and the origin of veal; the true meaning of “free-range” and “organic” eggs, and the manner in which the egg industry disposes of “useless” male chicks the moment they hatch. In addition to highlighting the ethical problems of lacto-ovo vegetarianism, the film, moreover, explicitly contrasts the activists’ direct actions with the futile attempts of the animal welfare lawyer, Jane Herald, to make the lives of the farmed animals more bearable. Like other aspects of *Bold Native*, Herald’s going from one food company to another and politely asking for more square inches of space per hen references real life, i.e. the much-criticized PETA campaign in the early 2000s.¹⁹ The Feral Child subplot, too, serves to acknowledge the potential for violence against humans within animal rights activism, and to distance *Bold Native* from it, just as ALF distances itself from real-life Animal Rights Militia, “a group with many members who consider it morally justifiable to inflict physical violence on those humans who exploit animals.”²⁰

Hennelly will go on to co-direct, with Casey Suchan, *The Animal People* in 2019, a documentary about the activists behind the celebrated Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty protests. *Bold Native* is similarly interested in the human beings behind direct actions, attempting and largely succeeding in romanticizing them against the media demonization; the second narrative strand of the film represents the attempt to explain and repudiate the legal framing of animal rights activism as terrorism. The time devoted to animals is much shorter, although the emotional impact of such scenes is considerable, since the animals appear mostly in footage borrowed from the existing documentaries and online sources, which are all listed in the closing credits. When the scenes of animal liberation are scripted and acted, they, too, are filmed in a documentary mode, characterized by handheld cameras and grainy black-and-white shots, and they visually cite famous ALF images (for instance, the photo of activists in ski-masks holding the rescued beagles). Reliance on the footage from the documentaries and the documentary visual style harnesses the truth claims associated with this particular filmmaking mode to convey the message that the horrific treatment of animals, unfortunately, is not the exaggeration of ARAs.

Ultimately, *Bold Native* reads as an *Introduction to ALF: theory and practice*. The nonhuman animals are rescued, talked about, documented, shared to the public, and tortured on film. Their bulging eyes full of pain and terror are emphasized in emotional wide shots early on, as is their utter helplessness in human hands, whether

¹⁹ Joan Dunayer, “Animal Rights ‘Welfarists’: An Oxymoron,” *Satya* (March, 2005), acc. on February 22, 2021.

²⁰ Luís Cordeiro-Rodrigues, “Is the Animal Liberation Front morally justified in engaging in violent and illegal activism towards animal farms?” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 9, 2 (2016): 229.

the researchers' or the activists'. As the film continues, however, both the animals and those who liberate them are revealed to be in the iron grip of capitalism and its legal framework which severely punishes human activists, and allows animal torture to continue under the name of animal welfare, or scientific research. Yet, unlike the activists, the animals are not represented as individuals. Freedom-loving²¹ Bold Native members, moreover, all end up arrested and in prison, willingly, and romantically, paying a steep price for their moral choices. In this aspect, too, *Bold Native* references the ALF creed and praxis. Namely, before receiving a ten-year sentence in 1987, ALF's founder, Ronnie Lee, stated that "[m]any more animal rights campaigners need to risk imprisonment. Going to prison in order to stop the imprisonment of animals may seem a peculiar concept, but then, their prisons are so much worse than ours."²²

Bong Joon-ho's *Okja* (2017) also features American ALF activists, yet, as opposed to Hennelly, Bong is not interested in romanticizing their self-sacrifice, but rather in exploring the pitfalls of activism based on the imperative of "reveal[ing] atrocities to the public", coupled with the explicit command to "never harm anyone, human or non-human". Depicting the ALF members as people who genuinely care about animals and the environment, Bong still satirizes attempts to revert the climate crisis through individual dietary choices²³, and demonstrates how difficult it is to combine non-violence with the "moral shock" strategies in an attempt to change the average US consumer's perspective on *who*, not *what*, they are eating. The ALF activists perform their first direct action in South Korea, spectacularly liberating the genetically-engineered super-pig *Okja*, before allowing her to be recaptured. The brief period when the animal is not in the hands of the Mirando Biotech company is used for switching the recording device in her ear, allowing the activists to obtain the footage of what really takes place in the heavily guarded Mirando labs in the US. In their first encounter, the activists' leader, Jay, pulls out a piece of bloody yellow plastic from *Okja*'s foot, while the animal is crying. Despite this gentleness, however, Jay and his team knowingly send her to her legal owner, to be confined, prodded by electric cattle prods, and to have pieces of her flesh extracted for the taste test (most of these acts are performed by a vet who is, in his own words, "an animal lover"²⁴). *Okja* is forced to mate with a boar, too, despite the fact that she is the product of extensive genetic experiments and cannot procreate. As with human beings, the forced intercourse, also recorded by the activists, is an act of sadism and torture, as evidenced by *Okja*'s screams. On the day of the Mirando parade, the expected PR and marketing triumph

²¹ This is how Charlie introduces his fellow activists in the first minutes of the film: "This is my team. The government would call them my cell. But cells are cages and we are free."

²² Keith Tester and John Walls, "The Ideology and Current Activities of the Animal Liberation Front," *Contemporary Politics* 2, 2 (1996): 90.

²³ Silver, one of the ALF activists, is literally starving himself because even a tomato has a too high carbon footprint.

²⁴ The sequence of scenes, the one where Dr Johnny extracts *Okja*'s flesh in a grey-bluish light of the underground lab, and the other which depicts the close-up of that same flesh sizzling in the pan, is shocking and nauseating, and represents the most graphic reminder that there is a life behind every piece of meat.

for the corporation, the activists release their illegally obtained footage and attempt another direct action to liberate Okja, but end up arrested and beaten by Mirando's private security, Black Chalk. (Bong does not hesitate to highlight Mirando being "on good terms with NYPD" as well.) The scene in which Jay is savagely beaten by four Black Chalk members, in slow motion, is another example of the films' complex politics of visibility: it is not only the corporate abuse of nonhuman animals that is revealed, but also the physical violence with which animal rights activists are treated, in addition to the legal one. The scene also conveys the corporation's utter disregard for both human and nonhuman life and wellbeing, despite the diametrically opposite official proclamations and PR stunts.

Okja, as already stated, exposes the difficulties inherent to the practical implementation of the ALF ideology of non-violence. When Jay, K, and Okja's guardian, a young girl called Mija, go searching for Okja in the meat-processing plant, and the activists are again captured by the security guards, Jay tells Nancy Mirando, the horrific CEO deaf to Mija's pleas, "I hold all creatures dear to my heart, but you are crying out to be an exception." Nancy is expectedly unperturbed, but Jay's civility and restraint are in marked contrast to him savagely beating K, his team member and friend, for deliberately mistranslating Mija's words so as not to "stop the mission." Jay beats K, moreover, while mechanically reciting the ALF creed which emphasizes non-violence. As opposed to *Bold Native*, *Okja*, therefore, does not attempt to distance ALF from (selective) violence against humans. But the film's greatest criticism of animal liberation activism and its assumptions (the simultaneous acknowledgement of the power of capital, also), is found in the way Okja is saved. Revealing the atrocities to the public,²⁵ and the undeniable sacrifice of the activists who are beaten, arrested, and imprisoned do not save Okja, but the gold pig that Mija uses to "buy Okja, alive" from Nancy Mirando. Having received the gold pig, and tested the gold with her teeth – despite the fact that the figurine was sliding on the literal killing floor – Nancy noticeably changes her register and instructs her assistant to "[m]ake sure our customer and her purchase get home safely." Nancy's surprising civility towards Mija, however, does not hide the fact that the language used is still the language of monetary transaction, and that Okja is still regarded as a resource to be capitalized upon: a respected client's "purchase".

As for the nonhuman animals, the film's title is the name of the genetically modified, CGI pig, whose treatment does not differ from the ordinary ones. This is especially evident near the end of the film where the viewers get a glimpse of the US slaughterhouse, the place which is carefully, *legally*, guarded from the public gaze. (The killing procedures; the loud noise and the animal sounds; the use of the bolt gun; the staff consisting mostly of Latino men, and the brutal indifference, the efficiency, and the speed at which the animals are dismembered, are in keeping with what Gail Eisnitz and Pachirat document in their studies, as well as what one witnesses in

²⁵ When the footage of Okja being abused in Mirando lab is leaked by the activists, the people participating in the parade start chanting "Save that pig!", yet Nancy Mirando's cynical perspective is correct: "If it's cheap, they'll eat it."

the documentaries such as *Earthlings* and *Dominion*).²⁶ A lover of symbolism, Bong shoots blood and animal hearts on the production line, and has tearful Mija confront the worker about to shoot Okja with a photo of her as a young child and baby Okja. The worker hesitates, but only for a moment: the scene conveys powerfully that love, while celebrated as the ultimate value in Western culture, is not extended to non-humans, or most humans, under the conditions of capitalist (food) production. (In *White God*, too, in one of the early scenes, Lili's father cuts open a cow's heart, examines it and states that it is "suitable for consumption".) Yet, as opposed to *Bold Native*, the viewers get to see the care and love which animals and humans can have for one another when placed in non-exploitative contexts. The examples include Okja saving Mija's life at the beginning of the film; the two of them sleeping together; Mija brushing Okja's teeth by crawling inside her mouth, and Okja being hand-fed her favourite persimmons. Yet neither Mija, nor her grandfather, are vegan, as they are depicted eating chicken and fish. The chicken roam free, and the fish is caught early on by Mija, with Okja's help, in a local stream. (Mija, however, returns a fish which is too young to the stream.) If there is some politics to be identified underneath Bong's satire, it is the politics of sustainability and the promotion of omnivorous diet which includes locally raised, free-roaming animals. Neither industrial production controlled by corporations interested only in profit, nor veganism is offered as the solution. Of course, from the perspective of CAS and animal rights activism, *locavorism*, because it involves killing animals, is still unacceptable.²⁷

Liberated Animals

In *The Secret Life of Pets*, liberated animals are former pets and strays. The way in which they are represented, contrasted with, and pitted against the titular pets is indicative of the film's deeply conservative stance on human-animal relations. Brushing aside myriad ethical issues of pet keeping,²⁸ the film celebrates this particular form of animal captivity, depicting the pets as spoiled and loved by their largely absent "owners", who even outsource their dogs' walks. Yet, there are also "The Flushed Pets." Bitter, angry, and betrayed by their owners, these former pets testify to the cruelty which can so easily coexist with human "love" for animals. The victimized former pets are employed to parody animal rights activists – in their very first appearance, Snowball,

²⁶ Gail A. Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment Inside the U.S. Meat Industry* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007); Shaun Monson, *Earthlings* (Nation Earth, 2005); Chris Delforce, *Dominion* (2018).

²⁷ See, for instance, Vasile Stanescu's "Crocodile Tears, Compassionate Carnivores and the Marketing of 'Happy Meat'" in *Critical Animal Studies: Thinking the Unthinkable*, ed. John Sorenson (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2014), 216–33.

²⁸ Discussed in, inter alia, Christine Overall, ed. *Pets and People: The Ethics of Our Relationships with Companion Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Jessica Pierce, *Run, Sport, Run: The Ethics of Keeping Pets* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Dinesh Wadiwel, *The War against Animals* (Leiden, Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2015), 202–20; Lori Gruen, *Ethics and Animals: An Introduction* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 155–8.

a tattooed pig,²⁹ and a chameleon liberate a pit bull from animal control truck – as well as solidify stereotypes of racial violence and aggressiveness. Snowball, the leader of the Flushed Pets who exclaims slogans like “Liberated forever, domesticated never!”, is an extremely neurotic and aggressive white rabbit who is voiced by Kevin Hart, and who, despite his whiteness, sounds unmistakably African American. The Flushed Pets are particularly violent towards pets, who they recognize by their “stench of domestication”, and they employ a huge Viper to kill such “leash lovers”. But it is the former pets’ thirst for revenge against the humans who have wronged them (the theme which *White God* takes into proper horror) that is represented as even more threatening: “We are the Flushed Pets. Thrown away by our owners, and now we’re out for revenge. It’s like a club but with more bitin’ and scratchin’”. Instead of dying broken-hearted, yearning for human love – which are the stories that regularly appear in the media, to general approval³⁰ – these animals are bent on revenge, relying on whatever small arsenal they have at their disposal, i.e. the “bitin’ and scratchin’”. And they are bloodthirsty. When Max and Duke come up with the story that they killed their owner, Snowball and the rest of the Flushed Pets are ecstatic and demand to have all the gory details. Snowball, additionally, highlights his special “soldier”, Ricky, whose excellence lies in the fact that “he was ready to kill humans on sight.” Yet, in keeping with the film’s conservative politics, Snowball forgets all about his hatred of domestication once he is picked up by a little girl. The angry revolutionary visibly melts in the girl’s hands, and transforms into a happy and cute “bunny”, sending a message that every animal’s dream is to be in the hands of a (little) human. This promotion of pet ownership as beneficent only, which is prominent throughout the film, is most explicit in the end. The closing credits celebrate the owners reuniting with their pets, while also normalizing long workdays and schooldays, not meeting the animals’ basic needs for company and stimulation, and, finally, owning an animal as the inalienable human right.

Kornél Mundruczó’s *Fehér isten* (*White God*, 2014) also raises questions about the position and treatment of pets, specifically, dogs. In animal rights activism, dogs occupy a somewhat controversial position, as they tend to be seen as privileged above all other animals, and thus not in need of advocacy. In fact, much of visual activism typically depicts a dog and a calf, or a pig, with the question “Why love one and eat the other?”, or the comment “The only difference is your perspective”. On the most literal level, *White God* dispels the myth about privileged dogs, showing them to be as abused as the farm animals, or those subjected to product testing. Framing the events within the context of the “mongrel fee” that the Hungarian state mandates and Lili’s father refuses to pay, the film also asks about the role of the state in kinship, “whether there can be kinship – and by kinship I do not mean the ‘family’ in any specific form – without the support and mediation of the state.”³¹ Needless to say, Mundruczó’s depic-

²⁹ Because the texture of pig’s skin is similar to human skin, pigs are indeed used for tattoo practice, as well as the sewing practice by surgeon trainees.

³⁰ There is a hint of that in Duke’s sad story of the owner who died and thus never came back for him.

³¹ Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2000), 5.

tion of the hatred for "a mixed-breed", who is "not a Hungarian breed" and therefore has to be "registered" and exposed to abuse, can be read as an allegory of increasing racism in contemporary Hungary. Nonetheless, the film is equally persuasive as the meditation on human-animal relationship and the violence that informs it, even when the animal in question is a pet, or, briefly, "free".

In *White God* the liberated animal is Hagen, a mixed-breed dog who, in a span of several weeks, goes from being a young girl's (Lili) beloved and loving pet to the leader of the pack of rebellious dogs who kill humans. What happens in between is continuous abuse inflicted on Hagen by various agents, beginning with the impersonal state which demands the "mongrel fee", and thus sets legal and financial boundaries to the human-nonhuman kinship. Other agents of abuse include the dog-hating nosy neighbour who falsely reports being bitten by Hagen, and Lili's father, nicknamed "Professor", who is a slaughterhouse meat inspector. Seeing his daughter and her dog only as the space for asserting his human and masculine authority, Lili's father separates Lili from Hagen the very first night they are under his roof, and later kicks Hagen from his car, in the middle of the street. Yet the dog's liberation from the abusive "Professor" does not mean the end of abuse at the hands of humans, merely that the abuse is no longer localized in one person. Hagen joins other strays on the outskirts of the city, but very soon finds himself hunted down by animal control officers. The stray dogs' apparent freedom from abusive human ownership thus equals extreme vulnerability, which is conveyed by the shots of the dogs' soulful eyes and their small bodies attempting to run away from grown men with catch poles, while yelping in pain and fear. Hagen's brief liberated state, too, is punctured by hunger, thirst, and hypervigilance. Captured under the pretence of protection and solidarity from a beggar (who recognizes that they're both "hungry dogs"), Hagen is sold into dogfighting. The animal's body is yet again the site of human domination, as he is fed protein shakes and exercised to build muscle mass. The dog, moreover, has his teeth filed into lethal sharpness; his new owner keeps him in a tiny crate, and beats him regularly, in order to increase the animal's aggressiveness. Having killed his first dog opponent, Hagen will later, in an identical manner, kill his first human, a worker in a dog pound. Ultimately, Hagen leads a pack of other street and pound dogs into a proper, bloody war against humans, in which the animals both kill and are killed by the police. The film ends with Lili and the remaining dogs lying down in the middle of the street, enjoying a moment of peace and equality, before the "beasts" are presumably gunned down.

In addition to treating literal animal liberation in the urban setting realistically, as the brief state of heightened vulnerability and exposure to violence, Mundruczó identifies the human use of dogs for profit and entertainment as the direct cause of Hagen's fantastic rebellion. The film, moreover, links the violence against dogs – free strays and owned pets alike – with the general and even more invisible violence done to other animals. For instance, in the scene where Lili's father is introduced, a chained carcass of a cow, without hooves or a head, is being skinned, and another carcass is cut open, releasing a wet mass of bowels, then cut into two with a large chainsaw. The man who organizes dog fights owns a grill; dogs in the pound waiting to be euthanized are

played Tom and Jerry cartoons, which humorously exaggerate the violence against, and between, animals for the sake of (children's) entertainment. As in *Bold Native* and *Okja*, additionally, the police are represented as the brutal keepers of the anthropocentric order, while classical music³² as the hallmark of developed civilization is revealed to be the site where male and adult authority is exercised and affirmed against teenage girls. Girlhood, too, is shown to be violently enforced and performed as the separation from the nonhuman animals and the elimination of love and compassion for them, in favor of high heels and impeccable music performance. In the end, Lili plays Franz Listz to the dogs, while throughout the film she is depicted rehearsing *Tannhäuser*, Wagner's 1845 opera which is explicitly described by one character as being about "redemption through love". The scenes in which Hagen is waking up from anaesthesia, breathing heavily and being disoriented, are juxtaposed with the scenes where Lili, separated from her beloved dog, practices Wagner's love-celebrating piece. As in *Okja*, animal hearts are commodified and consumed; fatherhood, teaching, and pet-owning are all areas of male mastery over daughters, students, and animals. The dogs' rebellion, and Lili's affinity with Hagen, are much less surprising when viewed in this context. Yet the scenes in which the camera lingers on Hagen's wild yellow eyes and bloody jaw, and the scenes where hundreds of dogs start attacking terrified men and women, filmed as proper horror, convey not only a sense of poetic justice but the danger and threat posed by a liberated animal also.

Conclusion

The four films discussed in this article represent aspects of animal liberation as both social justice praxis and lived animal experience, from a variety of conflicting ideological positions. Nonetheless, they all participate in the complex politics of visibility, making the invisibles of the damaged planet visible, while exposing the cultural and state mechanisms of their erasure. *Bold Native* and *White God* in particular ask about the limits of human-animal kinship against the legal and punitive apparatus of the state. *Okja* dramatizes the debate within the animal rights community about the effectiveness of images as tools for social and political change, specifically the "moral shock strategy" involved with releasing graphic depictions of animal abuse and slaughter into the public. Bong Joon-ho's film, moreover, sheds light on the complicated ethics of obtaining the audio and visual material of animal suffering, which is meant to be weaponized in the struggle to end said suffering. The family-friendly, deeply conservative *Secret Life of Pets* affirms the validity of animal ownership through humor: it is through humor, also, that the recognition of human injustice towards the pets is simultaneously acknowledged and defused. Of the four films, it is *Bold Native* that is the most explicit in terms of its politics and ideology. Anti-speciesist and anti-capitalist, Hennelly's film maintains the uncompromising abolitionist stance, and

³² Lili is a trumpet player; throughout the film she prepares for the concert during which the dogs' war against humans escalates.

is not only openly critical of the animal-industrial complex, like *Okja*, but is emphatically anti-welfarist as well. As examples of cultural practice, nonetheless, some of the films express the fear and distrust of a free animal. This is evident in *White God* in particular, but also in *The Secret Life of Pets*. Even *Bold Native*, for all its obvious activism on behalf of animals, cannot help but remain anthropocentric in romanticizing animal rights activists and their undeniable self-sacrifice. Together, these films ultimately testify to the traumas nonhuman and human animals are subjected to on a dying planet, within unjust and destructive economic systems and cultures that leave little room for hope.

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