

# Animal Activism On and Off Screen

Edited by Claire Parkinson and Lara  
Herring



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# Introduction

Claire Parkinson and Lara Herring

Since the early 2000s there has been a growth in films that engage with themes of animal advocacy and veganism. The film *Earthlings* (2005) was widely dubbed “the vegan-maker” and was notable for being a feature-length animal rights documentary with a celebrity narrator (Joaquin Phoenix) and music by Moby. In addition, and highly unusual for an animal rights film, *Earthlings* won awards on the film festival circuit. Prior to this, animal rights films were often low- or “no-” budget productions, usually involving undercover filming, with short run times produced predominantly by animal advocacy groups with little in the way of formal distribution routes open to them. *Earthlings* was financed by the filmmaker and, due to its subject matter, the film was rejected by 22 film festivals and struggled to get distribution. It was accepted at three film festivals and won key awards at each. Made available free for online streaming, *Earthlings* garnered significant grassroots support through word of mouth. The film’s public reach and lack of traditional distribution remains reflected in the film’s rating on the aggregate website Rotten Tomatoes, which gives the film a 92 per cent positive audience score but has no critics’ score due to a lack of reviews.

*Earthlings* marks an important moment in a history of animal advocacy filmmaking demonstrating that a feature-length animal rights film could have an extensive reach, making use of new available

technologies that disrupted the traditional routes of distribution and enabling imagery of animal abuse, cruelty and exploitation to reach new audiences. Following *Earthlings* and from 2006 onwards, the number and availability of feature-length animal advocacy films has increased substantially and, importantly, new opportunities for financing and distribution have become more readily available. Coupled with this, there is now a more sophisticated understanding of impact campaigns that accompany films and which function to suggest relevant actions that can be taken by viewers interested in the issues that the films raise. Support from grassroots organisations is often important to the success of these films, helping to build word of mouth and audience interest, while the films can be used to promote an animal advocacy group's campaigns through public screenings, interviews with key personnel and reviews. As a result, more films that are regarded as having animal rights and/or pro-vegan themes reach mainstream audiences, who are enabled to undertake some type of action in response to the issues covered in the movie. Films such as *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (2014), *The Ghosts in Our Machine* (2013), *Forks Over Knives* (2011), *Blackfish* (2013), *Vegucated* (2011), *The Game Changers* (2018) and *What the Health* (2017) have garnered awards and been cited by animal advocacy groups as important drivers in shifting public opinion and changing behaviours.

More recently, television has moved towards greater inclusion of pro-vegan content, primarily focused on cookery and lifestyle programs, an indicator that mainstream veganism remains connected to dietary choices and plant-based healthy lifestyles rather than being concerned with animal ethics. For example, promotion for the relaunch of the Plant-Based Network 3.0 reflected this emphasis, as seen in a statement on the lifestyle and entertainment network's website: "You told us what you want: More TV shows and movies on better health and a greener planet."<sup>1</sup> Factual television generally has witnessed a notable increase in vegan cooking shows and pro-vegan health and lifestyle programs, for example *Kirly-Sue's Global Kitchen*, *New Day New Chef*, *Jazzy Vegetarian*, *The Big Fat Truth*, *Dirty Vegan* and *Living on the Veg*. There have been "plant-based" episodes and challenges in

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1 Plant-Based Network, 2022.

popular competitive cookery programs such as *The Great British Bake Off* (UK), *The Great British Baking Show* (US) and *MasterChef* (UK/Australia), with plant-based chef Teresa Colaco winning *MasterChef Portugal*, and the launch of an all-vegan cast show, *Peeled* (USA). Yet, despite the mainstreaming of vegan eating practices, issues of animal ethics are more likely to be discussed in television fiction, cases in point being the BBC mockumentary *Carnage*, written and directed by comedian Simon Amstell, a 2019 episode of the animated sitcom *South Park* (“Let Them Eat Goo”) and in various episodes that feature Lisa Simpson, a character in the long-running show *The Simpsons*, who remains vegetarian in the animated sitcom after bonding with a lamb in a petting zoo. However, narratives that include a positive pro-animal rights message remain few and while the animal welfare discourse continues to populate television, especially in reality animal rescue shows, representations of animal rights activists, post-9/11, are more likely to be negative.

There are some signs of change, though, and off screen there have been an increasing number of celebrities who openly advocate on behalf of animals and veganism, lending their support to animal rights groups, charities and actions. Receiving the Best Actor award at the 2020 Academy Awards, Joaquin Phoenix used his speech to openly criticise the animal-industrial complex and endorse the Academy’s choice to serve plant-based food at one of the most important events in the film industry calendar. Phoenix is also well known for his involvement in campaigns, marches, protests and actions against animal cruelty and exploitation, as are a growing roster of other celebrities such as Pamela Anderson, Ricky Gervais, Peter Egan, Evanna Lynch, Peter Dinklage, Moby, Sadaa Sayed and Woody Harrelson, some of whom are discussed in this volume. While this suggests a new context for animal advocacy, there remain significant barriers to animal rights messages reaching mainstream audiences. The associations between animal rights, extremism and terrorism continue to shape the public discourse and media representations to such an extent that stereotypes of animal rights activists as unstable, violent and on the margins of society continue to populate on-screen fictions. Indeed, Phoenix’s speech had a mixed response from the press, with some UK and US news outlets suggesting that the actor was rambling,

had mental health problems or was simply misinformed. Such comments reflect that despite more mainstream visibility, animal rights and its connection to veganism remains marginalised in many spheres.

This book examines the relationship between animal activism and the screen industries in the 21st century, exploring three key aspects of this new context for animal rights: representations of activism on screen; activist texts and their reception; and celebrity vegans and animal advocates. Although aspects of online or digital activism are mentioned in some chapters, for reasons of focus, the volume is concerned with the overlapping screen industries of film and television. It is certainly the case that a majority of film and television that we might identify as animal activism texts are labelled as factual or documentary. An aim of this book was to ensure that we looked beyond factual media to explore what fiction can offer to our thinking about animal activism on screen. For this reason, fiction film or television is represented in each section of the book.

Across the chapters are connections between the three key strands that structure the book. Narrative, generic and aesthetic strategies and issues of audience and reception emerge as significant points of discussion in many of the chapters, which adopt a range of discursive critical and theoretical lenses through which animal activism is explored. To these ends, the volume includes chapters from leading academics in the fields of cultural studies, animal studies, critical animal studies, and film, communication, television and media studies, as well as contributions from activists and those working in the screen industries.

Mieke Roscher's chapter (Chapter 1) opens the first section on the representations of animal activism on screen. Roscher employs theories of cultural transfer to examine the representations of the animal liberation movement in English, German and American crime fiction television series between 1990 and 2010. Crime fiction has, Roscher reminds us, been central to the establishment, popularisation and normalisation of stereotypes of animal activists. Such representations emerge from a media backlash in the 1980s against animal liberation activists in the UK following a series of direct actions and the "Mars Bars hoax". Associations between animal liberationists and IRA bombers led to a new press discourse on activism that aligned animal



rights with terrorism. The American Animal Liberation Front was included in the FBI's list of domestic terrorist groups from 1992. After 9/11 and the introduction of the *USA PATRIOT Act*, the classification was reinforced, and in 2006 the introduction of the *Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act* regarded threats of violence against businesses as acts of terrorism. In Germany, the media reported on British activism, and mainstream animal welfare groups, keen to avoid any association with animal liberationists, began to make the connections between animal rights and terrorism. Crime drama on television reflected this shift in the discourse and criminalisation of animal rights, and Roscher examines in detail episodes from *The Bill* (UK), *Law & Order* (USA) and *Tatort* and *Polizeiruf 110* (Germany) to examine how the representations of activists are culturally reinterpreted.

In Chapter 2, Núria Almiron, Laura Fernández and Olatz Aranceta-Reboredo take the focus from fiction to factual media and more specifically to US-produced animal advocacy documentaries over a 20-year period. They propose that despite the prevalence of a frame where activists are depicted as being involved in risky, dangerous situations that necessitate warfare-like tactics, there are a number of other frames which are evident across the range of advocacy films that they analyse. Twenty documentaries were analysed using a series of frames, leading to the proposition that activists were portrayed across the sample as using ethical arguments, with emotional and rational arguments also figuring strongly in the films studied. The chapter also looks at the prevalence of health and environmental arguments and the use of frames such as “hero”, “convert”, “freedom fighter” and “educated” in representations of activism. By studying a range of films over a period of two decades, Almiron, Fernández and Aranceta-Reboredo are able to chart the evolution of self-representation by animal activists and the strategic and ideological changes that have taken place over time. In their discussion, they explore the development of the health and environmental focus in animal rights films and argue that the meaning of veganism has been transformed and as a result there is a decreased prevalence of “direct action” and “freedom fighter” frames being used in these films. One result is, the authors propose, that it may become easier for non-vegan audiences to identify with vegan activists.

In Chapter 3, Emily Plec returns to an exploration of the alignment of animal activists with terrorists in an examination of *The Animal People*, a 2019 documentary which covers a 15-year period, and the activism and persecution of six animal activists affiliated with Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC). Plec's focus is on the potential of the film to function as reconstitutive discourse through an analysis of the audience's perceptions of the rhetor (first persona) and the implied audience for the film (second persona). Plec argues that *The Animal People* succeeds as a film that supports free speech and animal rights. With Joaquin Phoenix as an Executive Producer, the film benefited from the actor's star power and from his receiving the Academy Award for Best Actor in 2020, shortly after the film's release. As Plec points out, Phoenix's association with the film strengthened audience perceptions of the credibility of *The Animal People*. While some of the audience will have watched the film due to Phoenix's name being attached to it, others, Plec contends, will have watched due to a pre-existing interest in veganism, animal liberation and animal rights. The second persona is intrinsically tied to the movement of an audience from a position of support to one of active engagement. This chapter explores how *The Animal People* reminds audiences of the asymmetries of power that exist between activists and corporations.

In Chapter 4, the imbalance of power between neoliberal corporate capitalism and activists is discussed through an analysis of the fantasy fiction film *Okja* (2017). Bong Joon Ho's film is a story of political resistance to corporate capitalism where the Animal Liberation Front are comic heroes with whom audiences are encouraged to identify. Made for the streaming service Netflix, it is a film that would not have been made within the Hollywood system due to its pro-animal rights and anti-corporate message. Claire Parkinson analyses the representation of animal rights activism by the fictional Animal Liberation Front (ALF) group and argues that Bong's signature use of genre-blending allows for audience identification with the position of the activists. Parkinson argues that, while there has been a focus on the importance of factual documentaries as a means to engage audiences with animal rights issues, there is a place for what she terms "advocacy fiction". The chapter examines Bong's use of anthropomorphism, fantasy and caper heist conventions as part of a "structure of sympathy"

and analyses how allegiance to the ALF position is constructed through the moral system of the text. Parkinson examines the critical and audience reception to the film and concludes with the recommendation that animal advocacy should widen its repertoire of communication strategies to include anthropomorphism, fantasy and comedy.

While the first four chapters look at representations of animal activists, the second section of the book is concerned with activist films and TV shows and their reception. Paula Arcari's chapter (Chapter 5) opens Section Two with an essay that takes up the concern over tensions between pro-vegan films that engage with the realities of the animal-industrial complex and those that frame veganism as beneficial to human health and wellbeing. The survey of 45 films covers a 15-year period, and Arcari notes that over half of those included in the study make no reference to animals as subjects. Indeed, a little over one-fifth of the documentaries do not depict animals at all and some reinforce the normalisation of eating animals through the promotion of so-called sustainable options. Representations of animal suffering and the extension of moral concern to only certain animals is, Arcari argues, problematic in that it bestows contingent rather than inherent value on animals. The chapter concludes that current trends within pro-vegan documentary filmmaking do not do enough to counter the common understanding of animals as "usable", and narrative strategies should include consistent representations of the animal-industrial complex as well as accounts of the techniques of oppression, and should emphasise the inherent value of animals.

The remaining chapters in Section Two focus on individual films, beginning with Lorena Elke Dobbie's discussion of the documentary *The Ghosts in Our Machine*, a film on which she worked and is credited as Research Consultant. This chapter takes the form of a personal account of her life as an activist and her work on the film interwoven with reflections on theorisations of haunting, its relationship to emotion, grievability and where we might find the possibility of change. Elke applies these ideas to her own analysis of *The Ghosts in Our Machine* and explains how they influenced the making of the film and her own animal rights activist journey. The chapter deals with the experience of growing up and witnessing animal deaths as a child, the impact of the work of Avery Gordon, Sara Ahmed and José Esteban

Muñoz on her thinking about social movements, bearing witness and involvement in the Toronto Save Movement, and her work on *The Ghosts in Our Machine* with filmmaker Liz Marshall. Elke's chapter considers the inclusion of imagery of animal abuse, its impact on the viewer, the choices that can be made in a film, and how such imagery is dealt with in *The Ghosts in Our Machine*. In her chapter, Elke calls for diversification in the animal rights movement, arguing that the movement reproduces gaps of experience and creates silenced presences, all of which affect marginalised communities, including nonhuman animals. This chapter offers a highly personal and in-depth account of activism, education and filmmaking.

Lara Herring's chapter (Chapter 7) turns again to fiction films and asks what they can say about animal activism when read from a critical animal studies perspective. Taking the 2012 film *Cloud Atlas* as her example, Herring explores the film's implicit critique of carnism, drawing out the connections between the animal-industrial complex and the film's broader themes of cannibalism, slavery and exploitation. Informed by the work of Carol J. Adams, Herring contends that *Cloud Atlas*'s depiction of human slavery, exploitation and liberation functions as a commentary on animal liberation and, in doing so, can be re-read as an activist text. In her analysis, Herring examines how the depiction of the lives of the "fabricant" characters mirrors those of the realities of industrially farmed animals. She identifies how the film handles species-hierarchies and the rights of one sentient being to kill another with impunity. The chapter offers a thorough and detailed analysis of the film, drawing out the parallels between the depicted slaughter of the fabricants and the operations of commercial slaughterhouses and the practices of animal liberation and activism. It traces one fabricant's journey to being recognised as an "individual" and the revolution that resulted. In the chapter's conclusion, Herring argues that fiction film offers important opportunities for multiple readings and, in doing so, films can be re-read through an activist frame.

In Chapter 8, Debra Merskin and Carrie Freeman focus on the lessons that can be learned from the "*Blackfish* effect"; *Blackfish* is a documentary film about an orca named Tilikum that mobilised action among its audiences and resulted in severe economic and reputational

damage to SeaWorld Orlando, Florida. Merskin and Freeman regard the outcomes of the film as an “animal advocacy phenomenon” and employ a critical animal and media studies lens to examine the factors that led to *Blackfish*’s success, its results, and whether there is a formula that can be drawn upon to inform future activism and filmmaking. *Blackfish* was made with a very small budget and employed fairly standard documentary conventions. What, then, Merskin and Freeman ask, made this film achieve such impact among audiences? The chapter applies accumulation theory to the *Blackfish* case study to explore the film’s cultural momentum. In this case, the authors demonstrate the effect of a message that is told consistently and corroborated across media forms and propose that the film’s success must be understood within a broader social and cultural context that takes account of the media landscape and public opinion at the time. From this analysis, Merskin and Freeman propose a series of recommendations and strategic tools for activists and filmmakers.

Chapter 9 is an interview with Liz Marshall, the award-winning filmmaker responsible for the influential *The Ghosts in Our Machine* (2012), *Midian Farm* (2018) and more recently *Meat the Future* (2020). In the interview, Marshall explains how and why she became a filmmaker and what inspired her commitment to social justice issues. The interview explores her identification as a filmmaker and an activist and the path that led to her making *The Ghosts in Our Machine*. The director reveals how she approaches filmmaking, discussing style, storytelling techniques and narrative choices and her motivations for focusing on particular stories and issues. The interview delves into the making of *Meat the Future* and offers a fascinating insight into the challenges faced, the reason behind certain directorial choices and techniques, and how Moby and Jane Goodall came to be involved in the project. Marshall offers a vital and valuable voice to the volume, giving her perspective as a filmmaker and activist.

The interview closes the second section of the book, and the third section moves to a focus on celebrity activism. Elizabeth Cherry’s chapter (Chapter 10) asks what animal activists think of celebrity activists and how the utility of celebrity support differs in different cultures. Using data from in-depth interviews and nearly three years of participant observations with activists in France and the United States,

Cherry's chapter examines the differences in media strategies and the extent to which they employ or pursue celebrity endorsement. Cherry argues that celebrities are a cultural tool that can either be deployed or not deployed to serve different purposes and bring public attention to issues. The chapter finds themes emerging from US activists, including the positive view that celebrities can make veganism "hip" and provide opportunities for the promotion of activism, but this was countered by concerns that celebrities can distract from the issue and in some situations can pose a reputational risk. French activists also thought celebrities could be used to promote animal activism and veganism but did not follow this route due to a variety of reasons including the concern that the bad behaviour of celebrities would become associated with animal rights issues. Cherry examines what the differences in activists' attitudes towards celebrities mean for their tactical "toolkits" and concludes with important insights into the question of appropriate tactics for different cultural contexts.

Brett Mills' chapter (Chapter 11) on celebrity chef activism focuses on a series of UK television "Food Fight" programs that campaigned for better animal welfare and featured Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsay. Chefs are conduits through which debates about the morality of food systems can take place, acting as cultural and political intermediaries who are influential in the construction of categories of ethical and unethical consumption. Mills' chapter examines critically the issues surrounding the campaigns, which all called for better treatment of animals used in food production but did not question their systemic exploitation, slaughter and consumption. Mills argues that the programs and campaigns offered opportunities to promote veganism as a viable option, but in preserving the anthropocentric norms of animal consumption, the advancement of animal welfare in these programs, which invited audience outrage and disgust, offered only solutions that function to soften audience anger rather than make any real material changes to the lives of animals. The chapter concludes by placing the programs in historical context and compares their utilisation of shock and disgust with the tactics of contemporary vegan chefs who promote vegan practices as an identity-based lifestyle.

In Chapter 12, Toby Miller begins with an examination of how the industrial infrastructure of Hollywood is involved in the construction of the celebrity as “activist” and the wider context of environmental damage that is wrought by the film industry and the industry’s engagement in “green” activities. The later focus of the chapter is on Pamela Anderson’s relationship with PETA, which Miller situates within an environmental theories framework. Miller argues that consumerism is at the centre of PETA’s narrative, pointing to the promotion of healthy vegan diets and cruelty-free shopping and the work that the organisation does with fast-food outlets and fashion brands. The companies that PETA endorses remain concerned with a relentless drive for profits and reputational capital that requires degrees of moral legitimacy. As a result, Miller argues, PETA is part of neoliberal promotion of consumerism and vulnerable to co-optation by the business interests it seeks to influence. The chapter examines Pam Anderson’s association with PETA and critical reception of PETA campaigns that feature the celebrity. Miller notes the longstanding critique of the racialised class structures of animal rights organisations and ecofeminist responses to the animalisation of women in advertising. Differing responses to Anderson’s PETA campaigns illustrate the struggle for meaning that exists more broadly in relation to the use of celebrity bodies for activism. It is in this space that PETA occupies, Miller argues, where polysemic campaign strategies catch women in a set of contradictory meanings.

The media reaction to Joaquin Phoenix’s Academy Awards 2020 speech is the topic of Loredana Loy’s essay, the penultimate chapter in the volume. The Oscar ceremonies have long been used as a platform for celebrities to promote causes and social issues, notably Marlon Brando’s refusal of the Best Actor Award delivered at the event by Native American activist Sacheen Littlefeather in 1973; Vanessa Redgrave’s speech in defence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in 1978; and more recently Leonardo DiCaprio’s environmental message in his 2016 acceptance speech for Best Actor. In this chapter, Loy examines how the US media used Phoenix’s speech for its news value and for its promotion of animal interests, and questions media industry personnel’s responses to its critique of speciesism. The chapter explores the wider significance of the speech in which the actor explains

that he is, by virtue of his position, obligated to be a “voice for the voiceless”. Loy’s chapter analyses the speech in detail and maps the responses from the liberal and conservative US media. Loy is interested in media ecologies, and in this case concludes that Phoenix’s speech is taken up by an ecosystem that ultimately legitimates and promotes speciesism. The chapter concludes with a call for further research to explore how liberal and conservative audiences received the speech and the reactions of animal rights groups and proposes that such research would provide useful insights for the animal rights movement.

The volume closes with Eva Haifa Giraud’s chapter, which draws on the concept of media ecologies to frame a case study of the actor James Cromwell, who is best known for the role of Farmer Hoggett in the 1995 film *Babe*. Giraud’s analysis utilises media articles, films, interviews and web-based content to trace the different but connected expressions of vegan politics that are related to Cromwell’s celebrity. The chapter explores the utility of understanding celebrity activism in media ecological terms, arguing that this provides a framework for considering the relationship between textual content and the platform of dissemination. Contextualising the analysis of Cromwell’s celebrity, the chapter provides an overview of animal biographies, more specifically those that relate to pigs. Giraud argues that *Babe* is culturally significant as a text that disrupts the normalised narrative of pigs as food animals, although they point to the limitations of the political efficacy of the text long term. Fictional portrayals may play a role in awareness-raising, but such narratives do not develop into more sophisticated narratives that critique the systems of production for fear of alienating commercial audiences. Cromwell’s celebrity activism does, Giraud argues, offer potential routes into navigating the popular terrain without sacrificing critiques of human–animal relations. Ecological approaches are, the chapter proposes, especially useful to identify how these more radical narratives can emerge.

Taken together, the chapters in this volume offer a close examination of the relationships between film and television industries and animal activism in the 21st century. Throughout the book, the authors offer valuable insights and arguments for tactics, tools, approaches and strategies that we believe have the potential to inform



## Introduction

and benefit future academic work, media production, campaigns and activism.

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