[in]Transition

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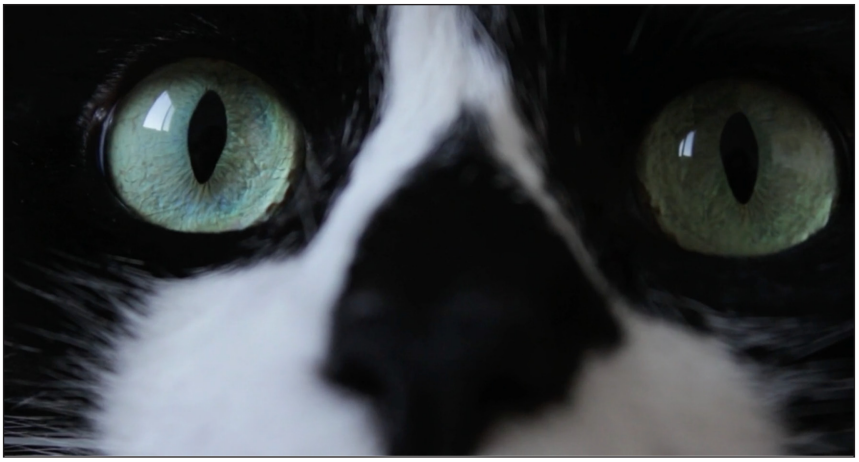
Animalaise

Bárbara Bergamaschi Novaes, ICNOVA, FCSH – NOVA- Lisbon, Portugal, bbnovaes@fcsh.unl.pt

In this film, two births of the moving image (e)merge: the early cinema and the anthropocentric perspective. Through the transcreation of Rainer Maria Rilke's "The Panther," the film depicts the act of seeing and the gaze itself. "Animalaise" embodies the malaise inherent in its title, advocating a "becoming-animal" in the spectators.



Creator's Statement

"Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
lifts, quietly—. An image enters in,
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone."

"The Panther" (1903)
Rainer Maria Rilke

Animalaise is an essay-experimental found footage film. It was developed as an offshoot of my PhD doctoral thesis. It was screened in film festivals, including film exhibitions in the Muséum national d'histoire naturelle in Paris and in the Cinemateque of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro (MAM-Rio).

The film aims to adapt Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "The Panther" into a cinematic form, focusing on co-creation rather than literal translation. Drawing from Haroldo de Campos's idea of "transliteration" poetry, the film embodies a partnership akin to Pound's "make it new" proposition, aiming for a creative co-creation under the poem's influence rather than a film "about" the poem.

The film was also inspired by the readings of J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "A Thousand Plateaus," and the studies of Amerindian perspectivism by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.

The film's production followed a deviant methodology, with no script or screenplay. It was filmed in one day, with my cats. The film is supported by archival footage that I appropriated from the film *Awakenings* (1990) and excerpts of circus images found in the Paper Print Catalog of the Library of Congress online archive, images prototypical of the era of "Cinema of Attractions," also known as "early cinema" (Gunning 1986).

This work intentionally deviates from the narrative cinema form, avoiding the causal linearity of Aristotle's *Poetics*. But I also did not intend to endeavor into a formalistic or "structural" investigation (as in P.A Sitney's definition). Even without fictional fabulation, it is possible to observe rhetoric. In the friction between the images arises a political debate between two distinct regimes of utterance. From the dialectical clash between opposites, a third latent and reflective "text" emerges. A pensive-image evokes affections without articulated language (but still language).

The film deliberately avoids sharpness or transparency. The soundtrack "Finding Rothko" by Adam Schoenberg gradually envelops the viewer in an atmosphere of dreamlike strangeness. The sound design was structured to mix musical composition with an echo of a male voice, which comes from an extradiegetic space. Its foreign words cannot be understood, in a cacophony that remains untranslatable. This phantasmatic speech communicates through babbling, in a vain attempt to establish a kind of dialogue or enunciation that never fully materializes.

I created this deliberate noise, considering the transformative force of disfigurement and inaccuracy, which opens a gap in the representation itself, finally revealing an energy that pervades all of Rilke's poetry: the desire for communicability between different species, a difficult attempt of exchange that can only establish itself through the gaze: a gaze pregnant with words.

I sought then to depict the elements present in the poem as metaphorical extensions, creating new analogous images, as part of Rilke's "visual dictionary." In this sense, the image of the feline's retina appears as a synthesis of Rilke's poem. Gradually, different disembodied eyes (of animals and humans), come loose, floating in an aqueous space in a sequence of overlays. This *mise en abîme* invites us to look at the gaze itself, coming from both the "flesh's eyes" and the "spirit's eyes."

In the poem, the movement of the pupil's expansion and constriction relates to the movement of opening and closing of the cage, as well as to the circular and obsessive movement of the panther. This denotes an imminent violence, energy dammed up in both the animal's muscles and the bars that separate the animal and the poet. This latent power generates an atmosphere of tension that permeates the entire poem.

I sought then to trace in the film a path of elements that would be like different rhymes, or "stations," of the ocular metaphor in Rilke. The poem oscillates between opening and retaining, causing a sensation of confinement and something about to emerge, which could also serve as a phenomenological meditation. Consciousness and rationality would appear as a force of repression or "cage" of the being. Both animals and humans are trapped within themselves, condemned to see only from their own perspective.

This would, finally, relate to Viveiros de Castro's central notion of Amerindian perspectivism. The Brazilian anthropologist (2007) draws attention to a common proposition in many American indigenous mythologies, primarily based in narrative, that in immemorial times animals and humans were the same being or entity (36). This presents a kind of reverse Darwinian theory of evolution, where animals are ex-humans who gradually distanced themselves from their "original" human form. The past humanity of animals, therefore, enhances a potential capacity for communication between species, a lost "common" *koiné* language.

This idea of Amerindian perspectivism sharply contrasts with Western philosophy and evolutionary theory, in which "past" animality is seen as a primitive state, surpassed by civilization and culture. This binary division between nature and culture reinforces the myth of "wild" nature and the view of animals and plants as irrational beings, available to be objectified, used, cataloged, and controlled by humans. This mindset, as we know, laid the foundation for modern zoos, colonialism, and indigenous epistemicide, while also underpinning the birth of cinema. The cinematograph was conceived not only for entertainment but also as a tool for scientific inquiry, supporting humanity's imperial quest to know, "capture," and therefore control the world (e.g., travelogues, Lumière views, Westerns, etc.).

In contrast, indigenous Amerindian myths and cultures do not view animality as something forgotten or superseded. Instead, they recognize a continuous trace of humanity in animals, an enduring potential for communication between species, beyond the limits or need of verbal or written language. In indigenous societies, the figures capable of bridging this communicative intraspecies gap would be the shamans. In Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari (1997), there is also the understanding that the artist would be a kind of "sorcerer." The writer would not write for the animals—never really becoming an actual animal or transcending itself—but rather writing by the animals; that is, being crossed by their "becoming-animal."

Thus, in an artist-sorcerer gesture, I perform in this film a perspectivist "eco-phenomenological" experiment, creating alliances of gazes where the senses (and not the sense) become the heart of language. This face-to-face interaction between species creates a new borderless territory where it is possible to coexist within other non-human orders or an "inter-being" zone of indiscernibility, which is not transcendent or spiritual, but rather material and immanent.

Furthermore, I worked with Deleuze's concept of affection-image, which occurs when there is a combination of two reflective elements: immobility and intense expressiveness. At this moment, the image can be considered "facialized"; that is, it is full of dense affectation. This intensive moment occurs when the face of the green-eyed cat stares fixedly into the camera, breaking the fourth wall. As in the gesture of Dadaist

detournement, we subvert the original meaning of the images. By placing the animals' seeing images that were not originally directed to them—since an animal is "a thing that is seen, but does not see" (Maciel 2023, 151)—we disorient the dominant human perspective, producing a reception deviation that creates an ethical short circuit.

In *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*, Brian Massumi (2017) argues that the embodied logic of animal play (such as performing hunting "scenes") is essentially analogous to language. Play, according to Massumi, is an excess—an expression of bodily enthusiasm and vitality affect that he calls the "surplus value of life" or "metacommunication" (22–25). This surplus constitutes a form of abstraction, an "aesthetic yield" and inactive pragmatics. As such, the act of play instinctively belongs to an artistic dimension and represents an aspect of culture.

In other words, Massumi asserts that animals possess culture, which precedes and transcends both written and verbal expression. Consequently, when we view early cinema images where animals are forced to "play" human games, mimic gestures and bodily movements, and wear human attire, it becomes, in my view, a depiction of colonialism in a nutshell. On displacing these images, the film reveals the violence inherent in the dominant anthropocentric perspective.

On engaging a "becoming-animal" in viewers, an experience of a political awakening can be subsumed through the animals' gaze. In this sense, to conclude, viewing "Animalaise" allows us to produce knowledge not only through rationality but also through bodily senses—a form of communication that leads to an understanding of the world grounded in experience, based on inter-corporeality and inter-animality.

Recognizing sentient beings affirms our solidarity with other physical forms and acknowledges our existence as animals among others on Earth. The film serves as a propaedeutic to the defense of animal rights and an alert to the dangers of the Anthropocene today. It aims not to provide answers but to provoke tension between gazes, embodying the malaise inherent in its title.

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Biography

Bárbara Bergamaschi Novaes is an Italian-Brazilian professor, filmmaker, and researcher, based in Lisbon. She has a PhD in Literature, Culture, and Contemporaneity from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). She holds a bachelor's degree in Social Communication and a master's degree in Performing Arts, both from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, with a period in exchange program at the Université de Paris 8–Licence en Cinema, France. Bárbara is also a film critic, a member of ABRACCINE and Fipresci (International Federation of Film Critics). Her films as cinematographer and/or director, including *Blue Animal* (2021), *House of Dolls* (2020), *Animalaise* (2019), *Being Boring* (2015), and *Gigantic* (2014), have been screened in Portugal, Brazil, India, and France. Currently, she is the Science Communication Manager at ICNOVA, a collaborating researcher and Visiting Professor at Nova University in Lisbon. www.barbarabergamaschi.com | VITAE

Review by Neel Ahuja, University of Maryland

Perhaps a melancholy condition is one that is inescapable to those of us trained as modern viewers of film. One fundamental potential of the cinema of attractions is an objectification of the animal body that accompanies its creation of wonder. But we know there are other potentials. "Animalaise" beautifully, if disturbingly, captures the possibility that the animalized affect of the image might break free from the fascistic potentials of both the anthropocentric nature of industrial, imperial capitalism out of which cinema emerges and the incessant critique of the anthropocentrism of the gaze, a modern alienation captured quite widely in the thinking of the reactionaries of the 20th and 21st centuries. What does the cat see? But also: what can it mean that the capture of the cat's retina opens a chain of resignification of the frame itself? If we read further into the ethology of the cat, we may encounter the particularities of this retinal apparatus, far more capable of fine distinction than the human eye—an evolutionary narrative grounded in hunting and survival. All of this while anyone who has lived with, interacted with, the cat knows how this refined apparatus opens into endless games and purposeful play. Hence the film beautifully layers a history of frames that signal a history of the off-frame that can never fully be captured in anthropomorphic representation.

Certainly, with the carceral metaphors of Rilke's poem, we can visualize the control of the animal for the pleasures and violences taken by some humans in relation to their

(colonized) environs. And yet the evolutionary echoes of panther-cat-ape becoming, the film layers animalized vision with the entire apparatus of colonial approaches to nature. Can the animal gaze displace the cage? The outcome is uncertain, but the malaise lies in the inability to capture the types of becomings that emerge in the dispersed glance of the animal that diffuses the modern gaze. The viewer, then, may be left with some productive questions: is the question of the animal always already overlaid with the generalized question of difference, wherein the colonial zoo, the sideshow, the circus flick always already connives to return us to a hierarchical chain of being, one where the vision of predation is highly and visibly racialized? Or are there other potentials here, as the kicks to the rear of the trainer, human or animal, might suggest? The brilliance of "Animalaise," in its short but prescient layering of gazes and frames, perhaps lies in this provocation.

Review by Celia Sainz, University of Massachusetts Amherst

"Animalaise," Bárbara Bergamaschi's evocative video essay, draws viewers into a world where language dissolves and meaning emerges from silence. It deliberately avoids using a clear, defined language, as Bergamaschi indicates in her statement. Only a few words can be heard faintly, spoken in a language difficult to understand: distorted and blurred words, pushed into the background, made unintelligible. The meaning here does not come from the spoken words but rather from the gaps they create—the inability to establish communication. It is within these gaps that the essence of the piece resides. This elliptical quality spurs an uncanny feeling in the viewer while observing the different animals in the screen, a tension between the familiar and the strange, maintaining a distance that promotes a critical stance. The piece brilliantly keeps a constant oscillation between the observer and observed, between human and nonhuman.

The lack of clear language aligns with the piece's non-linear structure. In Bergamaschi's words, meaning emerges from a "third space" which Laura Rascaroli (2014), inspired by Deleuze, refers to as an "interstice" in essay film. The disjunctive force of the images brings to the fore a new meaning. Yet, there is a conventional narrative device present: an ultimate act of revenge, which the viewer can interpret as a final plot twist. Throughout the piece, we observe animal and human figures in the circus, scenes of control and dominance. The cruelty depicted in these images starkly contrasts with her seemingly lighthearted presentation, as these circus images were originally created for entertainment. But the payback comes at the end. The previously constrained animals push back—kick back, quite literally—against the humans controlling them. A gesture of humor, of creating an upside-down scenario. A carnivalesque audiovisual motion that challenges traditional dualisms and hierarchies, as described by Bakhtin (2009). This use of playfulness as transgression is what film ecocritics such as David

Ingram push to include in the rigid affective norms of traditional environmental studies. According to Ingram (2012), "instead of risking an off-putting worthiness and political correctness, eco-film in this mode could celebrate transgressiveness, provocation, and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque" (57), a quality that videographic practice, with its already transgression of hegemonic forms of film criticism, promotes.

The lack of clear speech allows the audience not to be chained to the anthropocentric limits and boundaries of human language. Instead, a new language is proposed: one that doesn't rely on linearity, but that engages with a different kind of rhetoric, as the author states. And yet, this impossibility to see beyond ourselves is present: we can evoke different languages and perspectives, but can we ever go beyond ourselves, our subjectivity? Bergamaschi's video essay proposes the gaze as the only way to breach the gap that exists between species. The gaze of the cat and a human gaze melt with each other, interchangeably. The images start with the cat and, little by little, start merging different sets of gazes. The gaze of the cat invokes Jacques Derrida's (2008) famous essay "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," in which Derrida questions divisions between animal and human on the means of communication. The convention is that humans respond, animals only react; but the author questions how to affirm that if we don't know how animals communicate.

In the film, both human and cat eyes track, search, observe, look. They engage with the images, images that were not initially created to be engaged by either of them, as the author notices, but reappropriated as an audiovisual gesture of transgression. Similarly, the audience is invited to look at them as well, look with them: to discern the differences and the commonalities between the contrasting sets of eyes, what makes us the same and what makes us unalike. However, the film engages with an absence in Derrida's essay: what Donna Haraway (2008) criticizes as the problem of Derrida ending his curiosity (20). The French philosopher looks at the cat and wonders how it responds, but Haraway criticizes that the inquiry ends there; there is no real intention in fostering a communication with the cat. Conversely, "Animalaise" does invite us to look at the cat, and to look at the cat's gaze, wondering how the cat observes and communicates.

Expanding affective modes to promote engagement with the nonhuman and exploring cinema technology's potential to re-center the nonhuman in the foreground are core characteristics of what I propose to call *videographic ecocriticism*, both as a practice and a theoretical framework intrinsic to the ethos of video essays (Sainz, 2025). The video essay embodies these ideas by employing humor and placing the animal other at the center of its investigation. By not using a clearly defined language and constructing meaning within interstitial spaces, the piece illustrates how audiovisual language can serve as a tool to enact non-anthropocentric expression, offering an alternative to human-centered narratives.

Bergamaschi foregrounds the importance of an interspecies gaze, of engaging with one another. This is a different gaze from the distant optical gaze of mastery and control that Laura Marks (2000) points out. The different layers of images, one over the other, create a surplus on the surface, a surface full of texture and meaning. The spectator is invited to do more than see, but to almost touch the different textures of the skins: the hair of the cat, the smooth surface of the human, or even *the face of film* (Epstein in Binotto, 2017), its grain and imperfections that can be noticed from the old footage that the author reappropriates and recontextualizes. By combining creative and critical tools, video essays are useful instruments to explore the radical otherness of the nonhuman animals. Bergamaschi makes a compelling connection combining the ideas of Deleuze, Guattari, and Viveiros de Castro's concept of "Amerindian perspectivism," to argue that artists are like sorcerers, trying to bridge gaps between perspectives, the unbridgeable interspecies perspectives. The success and futility of this experiment brings more questions than answers, faces us with the impossibilities of understanding the other, and engages in ways of trying to cross those bridges. The video essay becomes a powerful device to explore these affective dimensions and to search for non-anthropocentric ways to *become with many* (Haraway, 2008: 4). Bergamaschi's video essay successfully embodies videographic ecocriticism's potential to explore a non-anthropocentric language and to push the breaking of boundaries artificially separating humans from other nonhuman animals.

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