



Of Donkeys and Men: *EO* and *Balthazar*

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This video-essay traces the thematic and aesthetic links between Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) and *EO* (2022) by Jerzy Skolimowski. Combining audiovisual techniques with insights from Susan Sontag, I explore how both films reflect on the role of violent masculinity in acts of animal cruelty, misogyny, and environmental destruction.





Creator's Statement

The film *EO* (2022) by Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski tells the story of a donkey's encounters with different owners, experiences, and environments. His journey through landscapes ranging from Poland to Italy exposes the environmental destruction caused by human activities, as well as misogyny and animal suffering based on the anthropocentric view that prioritizes human needs and desires above the well-being of the environment and other species. Skolimowski was directly inspired by Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), the French classic frequently listed in *Sight and Sound* polls of international critics. This video-essay traces the thematic and aesthetic links between these two films by using audiovisual techniques like juxtaposition and multiscreen combined with insights from Susan Sontag, an early admirer of Bresson's reflective filmmaking style. In 1964, Sontag wrote that rather than prompting viewers to feel, Bresson's art detaches and provokes critical reflection on "the meaning of confinement and liberty" (170).

In this video-essay, I show that the theme of "confinement and liberty" is best understood when we take into consideration gender norms that associate dominance and violence with masculinity. The questions that I raise can be fruitfully examined through the lens of ecofeminism. How is the domination of women connected to the domination of animals and nonhuman nature? What is the role of toxic masculinity in both forms of domination? How can cinema engender a profound reflection on these links?

This video essay explores these intersecting forms of violence in numerous audiovisual sections that are intercut with a montage of Victorian era images and key words in a photo contact sheet. Combining 19th century drawn images with a 1960s black-and-white French film set alongside a 2020s Polish adaptation produced with the advancements of digital technology serves multiple purposes. The illustrations, which are sourced to three different antiquarian sticker books, serve to name and

introduce eight interconnected thematic micro chapters (identified here in bold). This combination sheds light on the gendered dynamics of the past and offers viewers a historical throughline to the present. The late postmodern 21st century and the 19th century Victorian period, spanning the 1830s to 1900, are separated by nearly two centuries: however, there are striking connections between these eras. The art, literature, and culture of the earlier period delved into the obsessions with scientific discovery, the dark corners of the human psyche, the oppressive nature of social norms, and the “hysteria” of women. Early to late postmodern writers and filmmakers have explored these themes, as well as the disturbing aspects of consumer culture and technology.

Constraint is the title of the first micro chapter, which spotlights a Victorian illustration of a man’s hand gripping a bird. To the right, birds fly from a magician’s box, and to the left, a man stands by an adorned circus elephant. The carnival master’s **performance of power** involves deception and manipulation of the audience, while his domination over animals and women involves physical force. The **subjugation** of women is a key theme in both films, most powerfully depicted in the rape of Marie in Bresson’s masterpiece. Whether it is a scene that forces viewers to confront the often-invisible suffering inflicted upon animals or aggression towards women, the common denominator is toxic masculinity.

Confinement in both films involves imposed restrictions, limitation, and repression of feelings, behaviors, and actions of women and animals. Emotional repression is a common characteristic of toxic masculinity, which equates empathy and vulnerability with weakness. While women are often confined to servile jobs, viewers witness how animals are treated as products and raised in mass confinement. Both films question the notion of animals and women as mere resources, and they invite viewers to consider the emotional capacity of both. The contrast between the gentle nature of the animals and the cruelty inflicted upon them by adult men underscores the pervasiveness of patriarchy with its masculine gender norms that reward dominance over others. By delving into these themes, *Au Hasard Balthazar* and *EO* challenge toxic masculinity, expose the interconnectedness of all beings, and support a more just relationship between humans and the natural world.

In classifying and objectifying animals based largely on economic factors, humans have imposed **hierarchies** between species that become engrained in cultural perceptions. Due to their physical size and strength, and by extension historical use and value, horses have been perceived as superior to the donkey and therefore more worthy of care. Both films show that donkeys are abused, neglected, deprived of food, overworked, and exploited for entertainment purposes. With its multiple geographic and cultural settings, *EO* shows that such mistreatment crosses borders and causes

significant physical and psychological suffering to donkeys. However, despite the perceived superiority of horses in appearance, temperament, and abilities over donkeys, they have also been subjected to harsh conditions, as well as traumatic experiences during wars. This highlights the complex relationship between humans and animals, where perceived value can be at odds with ethical treatment.

The numerous juxtapositions in this video essay urge viewers to consider how imposed power hierarchies between and among animals and humans are so engrained in culture and language that they often go unseen. The racist and colonialist term “mulatto” describes a person of mixed race and is linked to the term “mule,” which is the offspring of a donkey and a horse. A comparison between the terms “mule” and “mulatto” highlights how the use of animal names to categorize people has functioned in the colonialist project of dehumanization and slavery. The objectification of animals has been crucial in this equation. The repetition of the rabbit image in the photo contact sheets relates to this reflection since that soft and fertile animal has often been used as a sexist metaphor for women in various contexts.

Human-imposed hierarchies of power within animal species have played a role in their **survival** or extinction. For those deemed superior, preferential access to resources like food, water, and shelter is given. This can lead to the starvation or predation of subordinate animals, especially during times of scarcity. Climate change only complicates the situation since some animals have better access to resources over others during extreme weather events. The theme of **environmental exploitation** appears most prominently in *EO*. However, images of the destructive consequences of a patriarchal worldview that equates masculinity with dominance and the capitalization on lands, women, and non-human animals run through both films. When we view the botanical illustrations and wildlife studies alongside these films, we are reminded of the 19th century Industrial Revolution and its increased burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil, and natural gas. Global warming, like violence, is part of a continuum rather than an aberration. We gain insight into the social and scientific changes that have led simultaneously to discovery, deeper understanding, and devastating destruction of human and non-human life.

When we consider the ever-increasing man-made problem of rapid climate change, we can trace additional links between toxic masculinity and the dual domination of women and animals. Like lower ranking animals, women around the world are disproportionately impacted by environmental destruction since they are primarily responsible for tasks like collecting water, gathering food, and caring for children. These challenges are compounded by unequal access to education and financial resources. In *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) and *EO* (2022), subordinate animals and women experience

chronic stress and abuse due to their lower social status. Ultimately, the precarious situation of the donkeys in both films renders their survival impossible. While the women survive, they are unable to thrive.

The final micro chapter, titled “**reflection**,” posits that the similarities between *Au Hasard Balthazar* and *EO* are as significant as their differences. The Sontag quote that opens the video, contrasting an “empathetic” and a “reflective” mode provides a framework for addressing the films’ stylistic differences. Skolimowski shows that reflective and empathetic modes are not inherently antagonistic. Bresson’s linear narrative, static camera angles, and minimalist focus involves an animal protagonist but seems to privilege the human perspective. Skolimowski’s fragmented narrative and experimental approach to lighting combines elements of surrealism to foreground the animal’s subjective experience. Divided in episodes, *EO* also depends on a compelling soundtrack by Paweł Jan Mykietyn, a Polish award-winning composer and clarinetist. The combination of cello, piano, and violin in *EO* plays an enormous role by shaping the images that we see. The rich and immersive soundscape evokes a range of intense emotional responses from fear and suspense to joy and nostalgia.

Just as there is no inherent clash between reflective and empathetic modes, there is no natural binary between genders. By contrasting the toxic masculinity of adults with the more compassionate and empathetic young women, boys and children with disabilities, Skolimowski suggests that learned gender norms, not nature, feed the damaging limitations of accepted gender identities that reduce humans to two oppositional categories (male and female). Just as individuals can experience a spectrum of emotions and critical thoughts, they can also identify with a spectrum of gender identities and the experiences related to these.

Blinders are often used on horses, especially in racing and driving, to limit their peripheral vision. The inclusion of a Victorian image of a horse with blinders in this video essay functions in two ways. It not only prompts critical thought on animal welfare, but also serves as a larger symbol of restriction and limitation. A comparative analysis of *Au Hasard Balthazar* and *EO* through a feminist lens aims to lift blinders and widen our perspective of multiple forms of injustice and the long-standing role of toxic masculinity in perpetuating them. Juxtaposition is a powerful tool that helps us identify patterns and relationships that would be difficult to achieve by studying them in isolation.

Works Cited

Sontag, Susan. “Spiritual Style in the Films of Robert Bresson.” *Essays of the 1960s & 70s* Library of America, 2013: 170–186.

Biography

Dr. Lisa DiGiovanni holds a split appointment in the departments of Modern Languages and Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Keene State College. Her interdisciplinary research centers on representations of war, dictatorial violence, and genocide in 20th–21st century Spain and Latin America. She explores how film and literature render visible the multiple traumas related to state repression and militaristic culture. In *Unsettling Nostalgia*, she traces how authors and filmmakers represent memories of the pre-dictatorial pasts in Spain and Chile, as well as the anti-fascist resistance to the military regimes of Franco (1939–1975) and Pinochet (1973–1990). Her second book, *Militarized Masculinity*, argues that until we connect the dots between masculinity, militarism, and violence, we cannot fully comprehend the causes and consequences of mass atrocity crimes.

Review by Lého Galibert-Laîné, American University of Paris

In a recent interview conducted by Claire Allouche for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Paul B. Preciado questions what it may mean for a filmmaker to exert a “non-binary gaze” on the persons they film. Noting that the camera itself is “a non-gendered dispositif, abstract, radically non-binary and non-human,” Preciado asks: how can filmmakers use that dispositif to undo binary ways of seeing and resist locking their filmed subjects into fixed identities? A line from Lisa Renee DiGiovanni’s “Of Donkeys and Men: *EO* and *Balthazar*” seems to echo this interrogation, translating this concern about the act of filming into an interrogation of reception and spectatorship. Responding to Susan Sontag’s distinction between two approaches of filmmaking—films that invite spectatorial empathy and films, like Robert Bresson’s, that favor spectatorial criticality instead—Lisa Renee DiGiovanni suggests that this idea of an “inherent clash between reflective and empathetic modes” may be another manifestation of binary thinking.

Following the thread of this analogy, the author then calls for the consideration of a “wider repertoire of behaviors” that have the potential to destabilize the “patriarchal fictions that feed toxic masculinity”. In retrospect, the entire video essay seems to work towards the constitution of this “wide repertoire” of human, animal, and camera behaviors. Divided in what the author calls “micro chapters,” each introduced with edifying and thematically relevant 19th century drawings, the video juxtaposes excerpts from Robert Bresson’s *Au hasard Balthazar* and Jerzy Skolimowski’s *EO*, comparing whether and how the two films allow us, contemporary spectators, to relate empathically and/or critically to the suffering of the two film’s animal protagonists, and of their female co-stars.

The irruption of queer theory into this videographic comparative analysis helps the author denaturalize the manifestations of toxic masculinity that both films depict; moreover, in destabilizing the firmly established idea that spectatorial emotions would be antagonistic to critical thinking, we begin to perceive what masculinist overtones are still at work within some of our commonly shared theoretical assumptions about cinema spectatorship, and therefore our practices of criticism and scholarship.

Whether Robert Bresson and Jerzy Skolimowski intended for their films to serve as paragon of ecofeminism could be debated. But I feel that it would defeat the point of this essay to close this review on remarks about the importance of context and auctorial intentionality. If this is about encouraging a “wider repertoire” of spectatorial behaviors, certainly we can find room for an ecofeminist tint on a hopefully ever-growing variegated flag of ways of watching Bresson, Skolimowski, and cinema as a whole.

Works Cited

Allouche, Claire. [Interview of Paul B. Preciado](#), *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 180 (June 2024), 77–78.

Review by Maria Pramaggiore, Appalachian State University

Lisa DiGiovanni’s technically accomplished video essay, “Of Donkeys and Men: *EO* and *Balthazar*,” draws out visual and stylistic parallels between two films concerned with the tragic lives of eponymous donkeys: Robert Bresson’s *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) and Jerzy Skolimowski’s *EO* (2022). Early in the plot of both films, young women shower affection on working donkeys who are abused, mostly by men, and ultimately abandoned to the terrible fate awaiting most nonhuman animals during the Anthropocene—whether companions, farmed animals, or wildlife species. It’s particularly compelling to watch this essay about donkey lives in the flooded Appalachian mountains (September 2024) in which mule teams are helping to bring supplies to regions inaccessible by any other means of transport.

The essay makes strong use of parallel editing and multiscreen compositions to compare human–animal affection and abuse across the two films, with several guiding questions that query the relationships between and among the domination of women, nonhuman animals, and nature. The essay asks: “What is the role of toxic masculinity in these forms of domination?”

Drawing from diverse theoretical sources that include Susan Sontag on Bresson and Judith Butler on gender, and proposing the use of an ecofeminist lens (which might be

further elaborated), the essay renders painfully visible, through the life of the laboring animal, the way that binary structures of gender and species contribute to the toxic masculine domination of women, animals, and nature; all these pathways of power are vectors of patriarchal masculinity.

The essay brilliantly deploys parallel editing and dual composition sequences, then startlingly transforms its own aesthetic with a formal eradication of binary gestures in editing and composition. A powerful multi-screen sequence reveals visually and verbally (through intertitles) that, although the discipline and rigor of the binary may please the eye, visual forms and narrative moments that undermine this implicit structure of domination are central to both films. Thus, Bresson and Skolimowski ultimately refuse to fully endorse the divisions and hierarchies that treat empathy and reflection, male and female, human and animal as polar opposites. The essay's unflinching look at scenes of great physical and emotional distress suggests that *Balthazar* and *EO* solicit reflection and empathy even as they explore the most gruesome acts of toxic masculinity.

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