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# Animating Animals: Exploring Modes of Animal Representation in Classic Animated Children's Films

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# **Animating Animals: Exploring Modes of Animal Representation in Classic Animated Children's Films**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from  
The College of William and Mary

by  
Meagan Phillips

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- I. Introduction (3)
- II. Animals as Objects (14)
- III. Animals as Food (19)
- IV. Animals as Props (26)
- V. Animals as Sidekicks (32)
- VI. Animals as Slaves (37)
- VII. Animals as Team Players (45)
- VIII. Animals as Themselves (51)
- IX. Conclusion (66)
- X. Bibliography (75)
- XI. Filmography (79)
- XII. Figures (81)

## I. INTRODUCTION

“[A]nimated characters... [are] able to carry a diversity of representational positions. At one and the same time, such characters can be beasts and humans, or neither; can prompt issues about gender, race and ethnicity, generation, and identity, or not; and can operate innocently or subversively, or as something else entirely.”

— Paul Wells, *Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture*<sup>1</sup>

“While it is certainly important to study how historical discussions about animals have reflected and expressed opinions about sensitive, tense, or otherwise difficult relationships among humans and groups of humans, it is unreasonable to dismiss all discussion of the welfare of animals as a cover for what is really a concern about humans. Is it not just as interesting - and important - to consider the ways in which humans have identified with animals as animals?”

— Kathryn Miele, “Horse Sense: Understanding the Working Horse in Victorian London”<sup>2</sup>

There are many valuable readings that can be taken from children’s animated films, and this thesis will focus specifically on readings of the representation of nonhuman animals in these films. In beginning this research, I was primarily interested in the impact they have had, and continue to have, on children’s beliefs about and empathy for nonhuman animals. Many people have cited Disney’s 1942 *Bambi* as their inspiration for taking on an anti-hunting or anti-meat-eating stance, notably including celebrities like Sir Paul McCartney, whose public embrace of vegetarianism and animal rights activism no doubt continues to inspire others in kind.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars attempt to reimagine how children might respond to animal characters - David Whitley, in his book *The Idea of Nature*

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Wells, *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Miele, “Horse Sense: Understanding the Working Horse in Victorian London,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37, no. 1 (2009): 129.

<sup>3</sup> “Former Beatle ‘inspired by *Bambi*.” *BBC News*, December 12, 2005. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4520658.stm>

*in Disney Animation: From Snow White to WALL-E*, suggests that “... children are invited to identify more fully with the figures of the animals; the animals, after all, like the dwarves, are treated like children by Snow White...”.<sup>4</sup> Other scholars, like Wells, have conducted survey/interview type research to get at the heart of how people remember first responding to these films. “Essentially, I wanted to evaluate the *actual* experience of viewing Disney films from the adult perspective which ultimately shaped and expressed the memory,” he explains, describing how his method of asking about their earliest memories of Disney films ensured that “the viewer [had] already prioritized the important aspects of his/her spectatorship, and signified how and why the Disney text has connected with the individual’s *formative* gaze as a child viewer...”.<sup>5</sup>

Both of these approaches focus on the child’s perspective, but there is another kind of reading that instead examines what the critical scholar can gain from reexamining these childhood films from a mature perspective. Miller and Rode draw attention to the importance of such a perspective by commenting on another scholar’s viewpoint: “Frances Clarke Sayers claims that Disney ‘never addressed himself to children once in his life; [his] material is made to reach an adult audience.’”<sup>6</sup> While there may be a significant difference between what messages we absorb from animated films as children and what meanings we can extract from them as adults, both readings are important if we think of the creation and

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<sup>4</sup> David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation: From Snow White to WALL-E* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 31.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 213.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Miller and Greg Rode, “The Movie You See, The Movie You Don’t: How Disney Do’s That Old Time Derision,” in *From mouse to mermaid: The politics of film, gender, and culture*, eds. Elizabeth Bell et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 96.

consumption of media as a feedback loop that can either reinforce or subvert traditional perspectives on nonhuman animals.

All too often, animals are viewed in a binary way: human, or not human. Human, or animal. When it comes to the representation of nonhuman animals in media, most scholarly analysis defaults to interpreting “the animal” as secondary to the human, choosing to reflect on how animals teach the viewer what it means to be human (or not) and perpetuating the dualistic schemes so often embraced by literature and art. Miele describes this as using animals as “surrogates for the discussion of human relationships” and calls for a recognition of “animals as animals,”<sup>7</sup> which I will later discuss in the section on *animals as themselves*. In reality, the idea of “the animal” as an identity in opposition to “the human” is an illusion for two main reasons: first, humans *are* animals, and second, “the animal” is a category that includes just as many *ideas* about animals as it does species of animals. Such a category is too broad for making useful generalizations about what animals and humans are and are not. In her historical study of the anti-vivisection movement in Edwardian England, Lansbury writes that “[t]he cause of animals was not helped when they were seen as surrogates for women, or workers... If we look at animals and see only the reflection of ourselves, we deny them the reality of their own existence. Then it becomes possible to forget their plight.”<sup>8</sup> This is equally applicable when examining themes in animated films, which must themselves be situated in their historical context.

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<sup>7</sup> Miele, “Horse Sense,” 129.

<sup>8</sup> Coral Lansbury, *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers, and Vivisection in Edwardian England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 188, quoted in Erica Fudge, “A Left Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals,” in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 7.

With this in mind, I have devised a schema for classifying nonhuman animals portrayed in animated films so that we can critically discuss how *real* animals are represented without getting entirely caught up in anthropocentric interpretations. This is not to say that anthropocentric interpretations are not important, but rather that new insights can be gained from delving into an animal-centric perspective. Erica Fudge argues that writing the history of animals is an impossibility because “we are never really looking at the animals, only ever at the representation of the animals by humans.”<sup>9</sup> I want to acknowledge and deconstruct these representations without losing sight of the fact that real animals are impacted by their portrayal in our media. Sometimes the impact tends towards the abstract, shifting perspectives without engendering direct action. A particularly moving scene, such as the rescue of the mother eagle in *The Rescuers Down Under* (Disney 1990), might encourage the viewer to feel empathy for nonhuman animals without inspiring them to go out and rescue real animals. The mischievous antics of Lucifer, Cinderella’s cat, might reinforce a viewer’s previously established dislike of cats (Disney 1950). But other times, the impact is more direct. When Pixar’s *Finding Nemo* was released (2003), sales of clownfish rose as much as 40% in spite of the film’s clear conservation messages and the fact that the entire plot of the film was centered around rescuing Nemo, a clownfish, from an aquarium tank.<sup>10</sup> While these impacts are not the focus of my thesis, I will occasionally refer to them as a reminder that my theorizing is rooted in a desire to connect human perspectives to real animal lives.

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<sup>9</sup> Fudge, “Writing the History of Animals,” in *Representing Animals*, ed. Rothfels, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Travis Andrews, “‘Finding Nemo’ wasn’t so entertaining for real clownfish. Now conservationists worry about ‘Finding Dory,’” *The Washington Post*, May 18 2016, accessed November 6, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/05/18/finding-nemo-wasnt-so-entertaining-for-real-clownfish-now-conservationists-worry-about-finding-dory/>

It is worth noting that this schema could easily be applied to nonhuman animals in other forms of media, though I have chosen to focus on examples from animated children's films. It is also important to recognize that the categories I have created are not absolute; they are fluid and overlapping, and it is often in this overlap that surprising meanings are discovered. As I discuss different ways of framing nonhuman animals and consider traditional and unconventional perspectives about them, I will continue returning to the ideas of empathy and personhood.

Regarding our perception of other animal species, it is helpful to consider the historical influence of the Great Chain of Being,<sup>11</sup> a concept derived from Greek philosophy and reinforced by Christian thought that asserts a moral hierarchy of beings with divinities at the top, humans in the middle, and animals at the bottom, just above plants and nonliving matter.<sup>12</sup> Many assumptions about nonhuman animal intelligence, consciousness, and moral value are influenced by this hierarchy and its assertion that some animals are higher than others (for example, land mammals would be superior to birds and marine life, which in turn are superior to insects). These themes are constantly recurring in contemporary animated films. Additionally, because of the enduring influence of Rene Descartes' idea of animals as natural automata, soulless "beast-machines," in Western thought, the past few centuries have witnessed a war against anthropomorphism and sentiment towards nonhuman animals in philosophy and science.<sup>13</sup> But recently, pursuits in ethology, animal cognition, and animal emotion have begun to challenge the status quo

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<sup>11</sup> See Figure 1 for a visual depiction of the Great Chain of Being.

<sup>12</sup> Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald, eds., *The Animals Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings*, (New York: Berg, 2007), 5.

<sup>13</sup> René Descartes, "From the Letters of 1646 and 1649," in *The Animals Reader*, eds. Kalof and Fitzgerald, 61.



regarding animal feeling and consciousness, finally catching up to the scorned and overlooked voices throughout history who advocated for nonhuman animal lives (whether pushing for their humane treatment, recognition or bestowal of their rights, or their total liberation). These debates over anthropomorphism's dangers and values ought to be given more weight in fields outside of science and philosophy, since our cultural perspectives on nonhuman animals inherently impact our scientific ones, and media shapes and drives culture. Anthropomorphism is nearly impossible to avoid in the medium of animation, and as many scholars recognize that Disney's films have a significant impact on American/Western culture, it is imperative that we consider how anthropomorphized animals in these animated films are shaping our cultural perspectives on real animals.

Whitley argues that anthropomorphism "enables a powerful empathy to be built up between the viewer and an archetypal image of nature as a form to which we are connected and owe allegiance,"<sup>14</sup> which brings up another important point: there is a difference between discussing nonhuman animals as individuals, and discussing them as whole species or as integral parts of an ecosystem. Concepts such as "nature" and "wilderness" are complex cultural constructs that begin to break down under scrutiny; we cannot treat them as static realities, but must understand the perspectives surrounding them just as we are striving to understand how we see nonhuman animals. William Cronon tackles this subject in his 1996 essay "The Trouble With Wilderness," exploring historical American perspectives on the environment. He writes powerfully that "For many Americans wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease,

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<sup>14</sup> Whitley, *Nature in Disney Animation*, 3.

has not fully infected the earth.”<sup>15</sup> But as Ralph Lutts argues in a critique of Disney’s 1942 *Bambi*, this view of nature as separate from humans and civilization is problematic: “The film motivates, but does not educate. It may stimulate action, but not understanding. Instead of affirming nature, it represents a flight from the natural world into a comfortable nature fantasy... it offers no hope for us poor humans to be anything other than the destroyers of the natural world.”<sup>16</sup> It is important to have a dynamic, holistic view of the relationship between humans, nonhuman animals, and our shared environment rather than isolating one element, and while my focus is primarily on human-nonhuman animal relationships, we must recognize that these are often dependent on the dominant view of nature, since wildlife (and other animals by extension) are often considered part of “nature” and/or “wilderness” and are therefore affected by common narratives of manifest destiny and conquering/civilizing/sanitizing nature.

Although a significant portion of this paper will be dedicated to film analysis, my interpretations will be anchored in the field of critical animal studies, a rapidly growing discipline that aims to address many of these issues of nonhuman animal representation that I have addressed. As a diverse field, it seeks to understand how nonhuman animals experience analogous intersectional systems of oppression discussed in interdisciplinary fields such as gender and sexuality studies, critical race theory, disability studies, posthumanism, and postcolonialism.<sup>17</sup> My animal-centric approach is intended to

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<sup>15</sup> William Cronon, “The Trouble With Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 7.

<sup>16</sup>Ralph H. Lutts, “The Trouble with Bambi: Walt Disney’s Bambi and the American Vision of Nature,” *Forest & Conservation History* 36, no. 4 (1992): 169.

<sup>17</sup> For an introduction to Critical Animal Studies, see Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald, *The Animals Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings* (New York: Berg, 2007) and Dawne McCance, *Critical Animal Studies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012); for more information on critical animal studies, see the Institute for Critical Animal

counterbalance anthropocentrism and its inherent “speciesism,” a term popularized by Peter Singer’s 1975 book *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals*. He defines speciesism as “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species,”<sup>18</sup> which he claims is “as unjustifiable as racism.”<sup>19</sup> Note that this is *not* a statement equating the ethical weight of speciesism and racism - it would be problematic to claim that one was worse or more significant than the other - but rather a statement that challenges the assumption that humans can abuse and exploit nonhuman animals simply because they are nonhuman, just as it is wrong to abuse and exploit other humans on the basis of race.

While many scholars have offered different perspectives on what may or may not qualify as grounds for inclusion in our moral community, eighteenth-century moral philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s oft-quoted question about nonhuman animals seems a good place to start: “The question is not, Can they *reason?* nor, Can they *talk?* But, Can they *suffer?*”<sup>20</sup> There is a plethora of recent scientific research providing overwhelming evidence that the answer is yes - so much so, in fact, that a new journal on animal sentience, *Animal Sentience: An Interdisciplinary Journal on Animal Feeling*, has arisen to collect all of the research in a centralized location. A recent featured theme of the journal was the sentience of fish, where various scholars were invited to respond to an article that claimed fish do not

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Studies’ website at <http://www.criticalanimalstudies.org/> and their journal at <http://journalforcriticalanimalstudies.org/>; for information on academic programs featuring critical animal studies, see Animals and Society Institute’s list of degree programs at <https://www.animalsandsociety.org/human-animal-studies/degree-programs/>.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (2nd ed.) (New York: New York Review of Books, 1990), 6.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Singer, “Animal Liberation or Animal Rights?” in Kalof and Fitzgerald (eds.), *The Animals Reader*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Jeremy Bentham, “Principles of Morals and Legislation,” in Kalof and Fitzgerald (eds.), *The Animals Reader*, 8.

feel pain.<sup>21</sup> This research is of paramount importance considering the degree to which humans are exploiting and abusing nonhuman animals today. Over fifty-six billion animals are killed by humans for food alone every year, and that's not including fish and other marine animals, whose numbers are much more difficult to calculate.<sup>22</sup> Other animals suffer for entertainment in circuses, zoos, aquariums, dog fighting, sport hunting and fishing, horse and dog racing, bullfighting, and more; still others are used to make clothing and products like furniture and home decor, and many are used for cosmetics testing, not to mention experimentation and medical research. All of these processes involve physical and emotional suffering and death, whether intended or not. Without going into the horrific details, it is important to recognize that humans are causing animals to suffer in unimaginable numbers right now all over the world, and it's happening because our cultures condone it. It is the suffering of real nonhuman animals that makes this kind of intersectional exploration of perspectives on animals so crucial.

I chose the medium of animation as my focus for this paper because it is fascinating to see what animators create with a medium that allows for boundless creativity and reimagining of reality. Some of the earliest examples of animation immediately honed in on nonhuman animals as subjects; suddenly it was possible to make animals do onscreen what people had only imagined before in anthropomorphized stories. One of my favorite early animations is Winsor McCay's *Gertie the Dinosaur* (New York: Vitagraph Studios, 1914), made with thousands of hand-drawn images. Of all of the subjects he could have chosen, he decided to bring dinosaurs to life for the first time, imagining how a long-necked dinosaur

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<sup>21</sup> *Animal Sentience: An Interdisciplinary Journal on Animal Feeling* published by the Humane Society of the United States beginning in 2016, <http://animalstudiesrepository.org/animalsent/>

<sup>22</sup> "Food," Animal Equality, accessed November 11, 2016, <http://www.animalequality.net/food>.

might move and behave (in a very dog-like fashion, it turns out). Now, we take it for granted that animation can depict anything we want; we are only limited by the boundaries of our perceptions. That's why animated films are so revealing about how we see animals; the critical viewer can question the decisions made by the animators about how to portray nonhuman animal characters and begin to see what beliefs and thought systems are at play. I am also especially sentimental about Disney animated films; whenever I was introduced to a new one, I would watch it over and over for days on end. At one point I watched *Pocahontas* so many times that the VHS tape broke. At such a young age, the idea of critical film analysis was utterly beyond me; it never occurred to me to read beneath the surface narrative or question the societal values that were incorporated into the films' messages. Now, I look back on some of my favorite films in a completely different light; the seemingly innocent celebration of wilderness, native cultures, and peaceful conflict resolution in *Pocahontas* is now overshadowed by my understanding of oppressive colonial structures, cultural appropriation, and the erasure of Native American histories and voices.

Many scholars have addressed issues of gender, sexuality, race, class, and colonialism in Disney films and other major animated films and shows, but less attention has been devoted to the representation of nature within the genre, and even less to the portrayal of nonhuman animals. As discussed before, those scholars who do examine nonhuman animals often prioritize their role as surrogates for human issues. Wells introduces the term "bestial ambivalence" to describe the way in which animated animals have shifting representations between the "pure animal" (see *animals as themselves*), the "aspirational human" (animals who present humans in a positive light), the "critical

human” (animals who cast humans in a negative light), and the “humanimal” (characters who at once represent animals *and* humans).<sup>23</sup> He asserts that “[t]his representational flux accommodates a raft of polar extremes: the irreconcilable difference of animals and its opposite, the sociocultural assimilation of animals.”<sup>24</sup> This is a useful schematic because it recognizes the ways in which animated nonhuman animal characters can perform different identities simultaneously, which is an idea that I will apply to my own animal modes. However, it still falls into the trap of orienting identity in terms of humanity/animality, as if the categories of “human” and “animal” belong in stable, distinctly defined brackets. I offer an alternative in which I consider the different ways that humans perceive and represent animals, expanding on the possible categories that might help explain why animated animals do what they do. I begin with the idea of *animals as objects*, describing how humans treat both fictional and real nonhuman animals as things rather than subjects of persons, and work my way up to the concept of *animals as themselves*, highlighting how we recognize and recreate real animal personalities and consciousness. Along the way I discuss anthropomorphism and the substitution of animals for human characters from an animal-centric rather than anthropocentric perspective, and I conclude with an assessment of how animated films shape and are shaped by our beliefs about animals, and how anthropomorphized animals do and don’t generate empathy for real animals.

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<sup>23</sup> Wells, *Animated Bestiary*, 51.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

## II. ANIMALS AS OBJECTS

Nonhuman animals in animated films are frequently relegated to the status of objects, mirroring the way many humans treat them as objects in real life. *Animals as objects* are things acted upon first, and sentient actors/actants second. Often, they are the same kinds of “objects” that we encounter in our everyday lives: fur coats and rugs, feathered hats, mounted hunting and fishing trophies, ornamental antlers and horns, cosmetics and jewelry. Most *animals as objects* are dead animals, or more specifically, animals killed by humans. However, there are a few notable exceptions where films feature nonhuman animals who have been entirely stripped of agency and made into *living* objects (again, generally at the hand of humans). It would be tempting to assume that presenting animals as objects (dead or alive) automatically reinforces the systematic, speciesist objectification of real nonhuman animals, but *animals as objects* can be surprisingly subversive, especially when presented in a world in which other animal characters are clearly narrative subjects with intrinsic moral value.<sup>25</sup>

In one iconic scene of Disney’s 1991 production *Beauty in the Beast*, Belle’s suitor Gaston sings arrogantly about his masculine virtues, emphasizing his physical strength and form while inadvertently revealing his selfish, misogynistic nature. From the beginning, the narrative of the film suggests that Gaston is the true “beast,” introducing his character with a scene in which he callously shoots a duck from the sky. This directly follows the dreamlike, idyllic scene in which Belle sings to some sheep, establishing a friendly relationship between the (good) female protagonist and (domestic) nonhuman animals;

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<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of the subversive nature of inanimate objects, see Bill Brown, *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

the duck's fall plummets the viewer into a different perspective, that of man as ruthless, compassionless (despicable) hunter with no regard for (wild) animal life. It is no coincidence that the backdrop of his later musical number features his numerous hunting trophies and a bearskin rug (with the head still attached). Whitley writes that "... the act of blasting small, feathered creatures out of the sky is presented in a form that strips it of all allure or sporting challenge, while Gaston's hunting trophies, which protrude grotesquely from every aspect of the town's interior décor, clearly constitute a mode of vulgar excess..."

<sup>26</sup> Here we see a live bird, a person/subject by extension of the earlier scene with the sheep, instantaneously transformed into an object - a hunting trophy. Whitley goes on to say that dead nature "has been thoroughly commodified" and leaves us with the sinister thought that "Gaston's wife will be another trophy".<sup>27</sup> Whitley chooses to analyze what this animal mode says about the human characters in the film, but it is equally important to think about what this means for the nonhuman animals. If the filmmakers are clearly posing Gaston as a despicable villain, his treatment of wildlife can be seen as a moral protest of their objectification. Turning his hunting trophies - dead animal objects - into sinister symbols of his predatory nature requires the viewer to feel a sense of injustice and loss in looking at them.

DreamWorks' 2001 *Shrek* features several examples of live *animals as objects*. In the opening sequence, where Shrek's ogre sensibilities are established in a rehearsal of his morning routine involving plenty of mud, he casually squeezes green goo out of a bug onto a toothbrush and proceeds to brush his teeth. There is no definitive indication that the

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<sup>26</sup> Whitley, *Nature in Disney Animation*, 47.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



(unidentifiable) insect is killed in the process, unlike the jarring moment of the duck's death in *Beauty and the Beast*; rather, the whole act is presented as a casual, everyday process in which the bug's literal insides are used for hygiene. Judging by its position in a montage of images of wholly unhygienic morning rituals, it is certainly intended to disgust the audience; however, many cosmetic products (such as red lipstick) actually contain crushed cochineal beetles, identified on the ingredients label by vague terms such as "carmine," "crimson," or "natural red."<sup>28</sup> This scene is also reminiscent of a different cosmetics application scene from Disney's 1989 *The Little Mermaid*, where Ursula the sea witch (coded as an evil drag queen sorceress)<sup>29</sup> squeezes red liquid out of a clamshell and applies it as lipstick. These two scenes highlight how *animals as objects* present different views about humans using nonhuman animals. In *Shrek* (where the underlying theme of the film is to embrace difference and celebrate diversity, especially in terms of the body), the viewer might be initially disgusted by Shrek's use of the insect's innards as toothpaste, but by the end of the film his swampy habits are seen as eccentric but loveable; therefore, the exploitation of the bug has been normalized. In *The Little Mermaid*, there is no such resolution to the use of the clam as lipstick; Ursula remains unambiguously evil (at least on the surface reading), and her cruel treatment of small sea creatures (who are portrayed as friends of the merpeople in other scenes, particularly in the "Under the Sea" musical number in which various forms of sea life sing happily and play musical instruments in accompaniment of Sebastian the crab) is not negated by character redemption. It is worth

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<sup>28</sup> "Major Colourants and Dyestuffs Mainly Produced in Horticultural Systems," Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), accessed October 21, 2016.  
<http://www.fao.org/docrep/v8879e/v8879e09.htm>

<sup>29</sup> Laura Sells, "'Where Do the Mermaids Stand?' Voice and Body in *The Little Mermaid*," in *From mouse to mermaid*, eds. Elizabeth Bell et al., 182.

noting that this critique of using nonhuman animals for cosmetics materials and product testing does not exist in a vacuum; there are many animal rights campaigns fighting to raise awareness to end these practices.<sup>30</sup>

There is another scene in *Shrek* that relies on the casual objectification of nonhuman animals in order to fit with the flow of the narrative. As Shrek and Fiona are traveling back to Farquaad's castle, romance begins to blossom; a montage of cute couple moments ensue, including one in which Shrek grabs a frog and inflates the startled amphibian's body like a balloon, tying the animal to a string as a gift for Fiona. She reciprocates by grabbing a snake and inflating the helpless reptile in the same way, and the two walk off with their animal balloons, gruesome parodies of the balloon animals you might find at a fair or circus (which are interestingly prime grounds for activities that exploit animals).<sup>31</sup> The moment is constructed as romantic and lighthearted, with absolutely no regard for the wide-eyed, presumably still-living animals whose bodies have been impossibly, painfully manipulated for human (and ogre) entertainment. While the medium of animation allows for such impossible flexibility,<sup>32</sup> there is no denying the blunt disregard for amphibian and reptilian life exhibited by forcing breath back into the bodies of these bystander animals who are unable to regain control over their bodies.

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<sup>30</sup> For more information on the history of cosmetics testing in the U.S., see "Timeline: Cosmetics Testing on Animals," *The Humane Society of the United States*, [http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/cosmetic\\_testing/timelines/timeline-cosmetics-testing-on-animals.html](http://www.humanesociety.org/issues/cosmetic_testing/timelines/timeline-cosmetics-testing-on-animals.html). For details on animal-derived ingredients, see "Animal-Derived Ingredients List," *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals*, <http://www.peta.org/living/other/animal-ingredients-list/>.

<sup>31</sup> See Figure 2.

<sup>32</sup> See Maureen Furniss's discussion of the "squash and stretch" feature of character animation and Sergei Eisenstein's concept of "plasmatics," or metamorphosis in *Art in Motion: Animation Aesthetics, Revised Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 77.

Ultimately, understanding *animals as objects* helps us determine when nonhuman animals are presented as *moral* objects. If the objectification of the animal is accepted and/or normalized in the film, the storytelling mode erases the possibility of promoting nonhuman animals as morally valuable, or as deserving of empathy. But if the objectification of the animal is contradicted and/or paralleled to the objectification of important human characters, a statement is made that brings to light unethical treatment of real animals and promotes a more compassionate response. In *The Little Mermaid*, there is a moment when the human men aboard a ship are hauling in nets of wriggling fish, all identical with expressionless wide eyes and gaping mouths. One escapes; a fisherman grabs him but is unable to keep hold of his slippery scales and gets slapped in the face with his tail, and the fish flips over the ship's railing and plops back into the sea. Interestingly, the fish now has eyebrows and a facial expression that could be recognized as sadness or regret. With a small (humanlike) sigh, the fish swims off, suddenly cheerful, plunging down into the friendly world of the merfolk. In this remarkable sequence the fish has shifted (1) from a potential food item to (2) a troublesome object to (3) a fish as itself. "The viewer is thus encouraged to empathize with the fish and to cast an estranged eye on the normal human practice of exploiting the ocean's potential as a food source," Whitley writes (41). As we will continue to see, it is this transitioning between modes - the juxtaposition of *animals as objects* with *animals as themselves* - that subversively challenges traditional views on the moral status of animals and thus justifies the use of anthropomorphism.

### III. ANIMALS AS FOOD

While there is arguably overlap between the categories of *animals as objects* and *animals as food*, I've found that food merits a category of its own because it highlights a very specific form of animal exploitation that is deeply ingrained in our culture, has specific social meanings, and is responsible for the deaths of billions of nonhuman animals each year. Different films portray different aspects of the human-eating-animal relationship depending on which time periods and cultural values the story is meant to evoke. For example, medieval-esque fairytale settings tend to feature forest hunting (often royal, ritualistic affairs), pastoral settings depict domesticated livestock animals living (and dying) in idyllic harmony with humans, and seafaring narratives focus on the supposedly endless bounty of fish and seafood. Few come close to examining modern industrial animal agriculture. *Animals as food* can be presented as actual prepared food, food in the process of being made, or potential food items. Generally, for the purpose of discussing anthropomorphism and *human* empathy towards animals, this mode is reliant on humans being the predator/consumer; however, it is interesting to discuss how nonhuman interspecies predatory relationships are portrayed in animated films, especially if a hierarchy of moral status is introduced in these encounters. As with *animals as objects*, this animal mode is most striking when in transition between or overlap with other modes. Recall again the escaped fish in *The Little Mermaid* and consider Sells' perspective on the scene: "When they [the sea creatures] venture across the boundary into the 'real world,' they risk being reduced to human food."<sup>33</sup> It is in understanding the risk of slipping from

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<sup>33</sup> Sells, "Where Do the Mermaids Stand?" in *From mouse to mermaid*, eds. Elizabeth Bell et al., 178.

one mode - the true animal - into another - the animal as food - where we begin to question what human assumptions allow both modes to exist at all.

Interestingly, Disney rarely depicts scenes of humans eating meat. Perhaps this is unsurprising, since almost all of Disney's animated features include lovable nonhuman animal characters, and serving their dead companions on a platter would destroy the harmonious illusion that humans and nonhuman animals have a pleasant, fairytale-like, non-exploitative relationship. Disney's 1963 *Sword in the Stone* provides two exceptions. Based on T. H. White's 1938 novel, the story follows young Arthur as he is apprenticed to Merlin and grows into his future role as king. In the scene where he is introduced, he is shadowing his foster brother Kay, who is the prototype for *Beauty and the Beast's* Gaston - big and brawny but arrogant and lacking in wit. Kay is hunting in the forest, and his target is a graceful doe reminiscent of Bambi's mother - so reminiscent, in fact, that the careful watcher will realize that her exact form has been borrowed from the Disney classic for this scene.<sup>34</sup> Just as Kay is preparing to release the arrow, Arthur accidentally distracts him and the arrow flies astray, saving Bambi's mother from death at the human hunter's hands. Is this Disney's apology for her abrupt and horrific death in the original film - a second shot at life? Whatever the answer, she is clearly portrayed as a potential food item, but the tension relief when she escapes indicates that she is also meant to be seen as a living being with intrinsic worth. Still, one could also argue that she is merely a plot device, since Arthur only meets Merlin (sealing his prophetic fate) because he ventures into the forest to retrieve the lost arrow. However, there could have been any number of ways for him to be lured into

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<sup>34</sup> This is not the only time that Bambi's mother has been "borrowed" for another film; her precise form has been replicated in a number of Disney films, including *The Jungle Book* (1967), *The Rescuers* (1977), and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). Her death is not revisited in any of these instances.

the forest, and since a significant part of the narrative is focused on him shapeshifting into different nonhuman animals to learn valuable lessons about life and leadership, it does not seem unreasonable to think that this moment is meant to establish empathy with real wild animals.

There is another scene in the same film also involving Kay as the hunter/consumer and *animals as food*. In this scene he is devouring bird's legs (the cooked body of the bird sits on the table in the midst of a feast next to a ham); the phrase "stuffing his face" comes to mind. He eats the flesh so voraciously and yet so carelessly, and then throws the bones to the castle dogs, who fight over them. On the gloomy stone walls of the castle hall hang mounted stag heads; this time, Bambi and his father weren't so lucky. A boar's head juts out near the door. Carcasses stripped to bleached skeletons litter the floor, possibly leftover animal bodies fed to the dogs. And an animal pelt hangs over a bench. The whole scene reeks of gluttony, more a statement of Kay's unfitness for leadership than of the ill fate of the animals. Still, Arthur, the protagonist, spends time in the body of a songbird and a squirrel; these animals are not so different from those deemed food animals in this world. To shift from seeing some animals as food to seeing others as individual persons invites uneasiness, but the lack of proximity dulls the subversive effects; we never see Arthur embodying a nonhuman animal at the same moment that that animal is being eaten or hunted by a human. The narrative does not try to break out of traditional animal "classes", either. The animals mounted on the wall are "game" animals, the animals laid out for the feast are "livestock" animals, and Arthur only transforms into wild animals that humans rarely eat (with the exception of a fish, but that scene is focused exclusively on the idea of

fish being eaten by bigger fish and other predatory animals in the aquatic ecosystem, effectively eliminating humans from this particular food chain). In fact, it seems as though the filmmakers went out of their way to avoid questioning the human-eating-animal relationships in a provocative way.

Writing about *101 Dalmatians*, Patrick D. Murphy criticizes the film for the fact that “[t]he issue of the daily commercial destruction of millions of animals, whether for food, clothing, or cosmetics testing, need never come up.”<sup>35</sup> This is an important point to consider for any film: does the narrative truly force the viewer to confront these ethical questions? In the case of *The Sword in the Stone*, the answer is no. But going back to *The Little Mermaid*, there is another sequence worth noting involving *animals as food* in which the ethics of eating animals is revisited in a way that just might make the viewer reconsider eating seafood. When Ariel is enjoying the hospitality of the humans in the seaside castle, her crab companion Sebastian is having an entirely opposite experience. Through a series of misfortunes, he ends up in the chef’s kitchen just as dinner is being prepared: stuffed crabs. It is a horrific scene; an octopus is visible in a large pot, the dead crabs on a platter are stabbed through with skewers, and the chef is chopping up fish with an ax (see Figure 3). The rest of the scene involves the impassioned chef chasing Sebastian throughout the kitchen using cooking tools as fearsome weapons; he barely escapes, leaving the chef incensed. Whitley believes that “... comic enactment of the violence performed in the preparation of food items is also potentially illuminating, since it forces us to experience more directly our own role as predators, which contemporary culture systematically

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<sup>35</sup> Patrick D. Murphy, “The Whole Wide World Was Scrubbed Clean: The Androcentric Animation of Denatured Disney,” in *From mouse to mermaid*, eds. Elizabeth Bell et al., 129.

disguises and mystifies.”<sup>36</sup> And yet it is unclear, in the end, what Ariel actually ate when the less fortunate crabs were served. Still, understanding *animals as food* - whether they are already dead and removed from the scene of their killing, or alive and resisting their fate - helps us understand how animated animals might challenge conventional ideas about who it is morally acceptable to eat.

The absence of *animals as food* is equally important to search for because it indicates an unwillingness to engage with the ethics of eating animals and conflicting ideas of how humans and nonhuman animals should ideally interact. *Animals as food* are also especially problematic in films where *all* of the characters are animals, like Disney’s *Robin Hood* (1973) and Disney’s *Zootopia* (2016). In *Robin Hood*, it would make no sense to have a kingdom in which lions, bears, foxes, and chickens coexist in a civil society if they were all eating one another; and in this particular film, the true central conflict is about (human) class oppression, not the struggle to survive as a nonhuman animal. The only food to appear in the film is an ambiguous cauldron of soup with a wrinkled carrot in it (prepared by Robin, a fox, and Little John, a bear, presumably scavenging in the forest as outlaws) and a basket of fruit in Maid Marian’s room in the castle where she talks with Lady Kluck, a hen. Of course, both foxes and bears, while known for their predatory habits, will also scavenge for fruits, berries, and other vegetation, and chickens are also omnivorous scavengers, so these foods are not necessarily against the grain of their species specific needs. However, Prince John (a lion), Sir Hiss (a snake), and the Sheriff of Nottingham (a gray wolf) are all obligate carnivores, which is interesting because they all hold positions of power but none

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<sup>36</sup> Whitley, *Nature in Disney Animation*, 44.



are seen eating in the film. This phenomenon is so widespread in animation that TV Tropes, an informal but popular wiki dedicated to cataloging common tropes from film and other media, named it “Carnivore Confusion”: “If everyone can talk, and everyone at least implicitly has the same thoughts and feelings as everyone else regardless of species, does this mean predatory creatures are forced to engage in a form of murder to eat? Or is it more like *cannibalism*?”<sup>37</sup> While there are many different ways to address this issue, Disney often seems to prefer avoiding it altogether.

*Zootopia* (Disney 2016) is another important example of a film where all of the characters are nonhuman animals living together in a civilized society like humans. In this case, the idea of predator-versus-prey is central to the plot; the audience is introduced early on to the idea that there was a historical conflict between the two groups in this fictional world, and that there is still fear of otherness and biological relapses to predation. But even with this context, no one in the film addresses what should have been the most important part of the backstory: *how* the conflict was resolved, or more specifically, how predators stopped eating other animals. When Judy, a rabbit, enters the city of Zootopia for the first time via train, a view out the window as she passes through Tundra Town reveals a glimpse of a fish market, though the idea of eating fish is never revisited elsewhere in the film. In a tweet from Jared Bush, screenwriter and co-director of the film, it is revealed that their idea was to have all obligate carnivores eat insect protein, resulting in the chain restaurant “Bug-Burga.”<sup>38</sup> Here we see insects and fish automatically demoted to a moral

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<sup>37</sup> “Carnivore Confusion,” TV Tropes, accessed October 30, 2016.  
<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CarnivoreConfusion>

<sup>38</sup> Jared Bush. Twitter post. October 27, 2015, 6:55 AM.  
<https://twitter.com/thejaredbush/status/659005573338259456>

status far below that of mammals, and the speciesist cracks in the foundations of *Zootopia* begin to show, although Bush commented on his own tweet that “in early versions of the movie they ate fish (which weren’t “evolved” and didn’t talk), but it confused the rules of the world.”<sup>39</sup>

While some films may seem to elevate the moral status of the nonhuman animal by exploring possibilities of nonhuman personhood for their featured species, Wells astutely notes that insects are often seen as separate from those easily relatable, easily anthropomorphized animals: “Though the insect seems potentially different from the animal, the conditions played out through animation often render them similar, but... insects can be mobilized in greater numbers... [and] suffer from the greater challenges of scale and human indifference.”<sup>40</sup> I would argue that the same is generally true of fish, who are perceived as so alien, so other, that many people who eat fish still consider themselves vegetarians. The fact that fish and insects were nearly entirely excluded from *Zootopia* reveals that Disney is still unprepared to tackle the idea of eating animals head on; with such profoundly anthropomorphized animals populating their fictional world, such an act would, as Bush pointed out, “confuse” the rules of not eating living, sentient beings.

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<sup>39</sup> Jared Bush. Twitter post. October 27, 2015, 6:55 AM.  
<https://twitter.com/thejaredbush/status/659005573338259456>

<sup>40</sup> Wells, *The Animated Bestiary*, 68.

#### IV. ANIMALS AS PROPS

While the boundaries between *animals as objects* and *animals as props* are bound to be fluid and overlapping, I think of *animals as props* as a more specific category in which performance is key. These animals typically wouldn't be counted as characters because they have no personal development; they simply exist, and are often used by filmmakers to set the scene or to define human (or humanesque) characters. They are meant to perform specific roles that generally play off of species stereotypes and symbolism, connotations that often developed long before the medium of animation (for example, crows and vultures as harbingers of death and doom). They are storytelling elements and narrative tools rather than story subjects; their personhood is absent or irrelevant. Whitley discusses "the uses of animals as props for staging human emotion," describing how the role of the forest animals in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) represent "an emotional stop-gap, rather than being meaningful in any substantial way in their own right."<sup>41</sup> *Animals as props* can be used to represent more than just human emotions, but the overarching idea is that as props they lose their chance at substantial meaning.

In Disney's 2009 *The Princess and the Frog*, the opening scene features the young protagonist Tiana with Charlotte, the daughter of her mother's client and presumably Tiana's friend. The children are listening to her mother read a version of the Frog Prince, but underneath the plot foreshadowing in the nursery tale is a different kind of foreshadowing, the kind that hints at the underlying tensions of class and race because Tiana is black and Charlotte is white, and Tiana's family is working class and Charlotte is

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<sup>41</sup> Whitley, *Nature in Disney Animation*, 37-38.

rich.<sup>42</sup> And not only is she rich, but spoiled, and the tiny white kitten she clutches in her hands is a symbol of her privilege, for at the end of the scene her father comes home with a puppy in his arms - another gift to entertain his daughter until she grows tired of him, like a discarded toy. But what is most interesting is how she treats the kitten with utter disregard, and how it is Tiana's mother who scolds her to "stop tormenting that poor little kitty" when she squeezes them so hard that they spring out of her grasp and cling to the ceiling, terrified (see Figure 4). Charlotte shows absolutely no remorse, giggling hysterically while the kitten crawls away with huge eyes and spiked fur. The incident passes without further comment.

This is a clear example of a nonhuman animal being used to provide context for *human* character development. The kitten's purpose in the scene was to show that Charlotte is spoiled, selfish, and careless with other beings; the kitten has no further identity or value. And perhaps the scene is meant to shed some light on Tiana's mother as well; is it significant that she, a working class black woman, is the one to recognize the unfair treatment of the kitten? Could we translate this as Tiana's mother telling Charlotte to "check her privilege," or Disney telling its privileged white audience to stop and think about their position of power and its potential abuse? Whether or not this is the case, it is interesting that the impact of this scene depends on how the viewer sees nonhuman animals (or perhaps cats specifically). Viewers who appreciate nonhuman animals as sentient beings, or who just love cats, will immediately dislike Charlotte's actions, but

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<sup>42</sup> Of course, the central conflicts of the film essentially ignore race issues altogether, indulging in the fantasy of having Tiana and Charlotte remain friends without Charlotte ever recognizing her privileges or Tiana's struggles; essentially, the film erases the racial tensions of 1920's New Orleans and trivializes the significance of the connection between race and socioeconomic class.

viewers who give little thought to nonhuman animals might not think much of it at all. This is important because it shows a case in which the use of nonhuman animal characters doesn't challenge the viewer's beliefs about nonhuman animals at all.

And generally, *animals as props* don't challenge such beliefs. There are many instances of nonhuman animals being used to enhance scenery where their status is not advanced (or compromised) in any way by their presence; the animator only adds them in to give the setting an authentic feel, like the seagulls in the various shots of New Orleans throughout *The Princess and the Frog*. Seagulls as scenery are a recurring element in many Disney films, appearing also in the opening scene of *Pocahontas* (1995), which depicts the James River upon the arrival of the European settlers at the site of the future Jamestown. Even all the way back to one of the earliest Disney animated features, *Pinocchio* (1940), seagulls were established as a marker of maritime settings, following behind the ship that took Pinocchio and the other boys to Pleasure Island. Later in the same film they become more than mere scenic props when they try to eat Jiminy Cricket; scandalized, he calls them "buzzards." Vultures (colloquially called "buzzards" in North America, though true buzzards are birds of prey, not scavengers) often serve as portents of death (or near death), such as those who follow the evil queen in Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and the ones who converge on Simba when he collapses in the desert after his exile in *The Lion King* (Disney, 1994). Crows serve a similar feature in *Bambi* (Disney, 1942), warning the other forest animals of the threat of Man in the forest by fleeing and cawing en masse.

*Animals as props* can be very ambiguous in terms of how they relate to real animals (recall Wells' idea of "bestial ambivalence"). To help clarify their impact, let's first consider what would happen if nonhuman animals were *not* used for this purpose. How would scenic introductions to the setting's central location change if nonhuman animals weren't a part of the background? The geography would remain the same, but the sense of ecosystem would be lost. Every time a nonhuman animal appears as a part of the setting with no purpose other than to complete the picture, the artist is asserting the importance of nonhuman animal life within the environment, acknowledging not only their existence but their particular presence. Of course, this becomes problematic when they are presented in the *wrong* environment. For example, if we assume that Rafiki from *The Lion King* (Disney, 1994) is a mandrill because of the distinct colors on his face (though his body type is more similar to baboons), we would find that the range of his species<sup>43</sup> should not overlap with the ranges of many of the other animals featured in the film.<sup>44</sup> *Tarzan* (Disney, 1999) also features many species who would not all be found within the same range as the mountain gorillas, such as lemurs (which are endemic to Madagascar<sup>45</sup>). But when animals are accurately represented in their habitats, their existence is by default given at the very least an ecosystemic and/or aesthetic value. At the same time, this perspective tends to lose the individual animal in favor of species identity and biological/environmental function; there is no specific crow, there are only crows. There is no individual wildebeest, merely a herd

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<sup>43</sup> J. F. Oates and T. M. Butynski, "*Mandrillus sphinx*," 2008, The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, accessed November 5, 2016, <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/12754/0>

<sup>44</sup> Josh Wilmes, "'The Lion King': Production Notes," 1994, accessed November 5, 2016, <http://www.lionking.org/text/FilmNotes.html>

<sup>45</sup> Laurie Godfrey, "Isolation and Biodiversity," PBS, accessed November 5, 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/edens/madagascar/eden.htm>

of them. This kind of representation does not support the idea of nonhuman animals as persons and instead follows more traditional environmentalist approaches.

It is especially interesting to see *animals as props* when other nonhuman animals in the same film are given full (or increased) agency; returning to the example of *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana meets extremely anthropomorphized nonhuman animals while in the body of a frog, including a musical alligator and a helpful, talkative family of fireflies. The disconnect between Tiana's interactive, complex experiences with talking animals and the interaction between Charlotte and the kitten is not immediately evident because the scenes are separated by time (both screen time and narrative time) and place, but it is unsettling to consider both at once and to realize that there was no resolution with the kitten. Even the puppy that Charlotte's father brought home to her earned a name (Stella) and made an appearance in the scene where Tiana (now a young adult) transformed into a frog, and Tiana is astonished to learn that she can hear and understand Stella talking to her. Why did the writers choose to have Tiana forge this connection with Stella instead of the kitten? Why would they introduce the kitten at all? Of course, humans are used as "props" in films in much the same way; unknown humans pass by on city streets, nameless human characters make a single appearance and fade from the viewer's consciousness without much thought. But whenever such encounters are dismissive, contemptuous, or discriminatory in any way (such as a wealthy man giving orders to a servant whose only line in a film is a "yes, sir"), a hierarchy is established in which the person on the lower rung is not really shown as a person at all. This is what happens with Charlotte's kitten: the kitten appears for a single scene with no name and no voice, experiences frankly shocking

abuse that is presented in a normalized, comical fashion, and ultimately disappears, with no establishment of personhood or moral value.



## V. ANIMALS AS SIDEKICKS

The next animal mode, *animals as sidekicks*, is almost like a deluxe version of *animals as props*, and it has many noteworthy precedents in the realm of human sidekicks. These nonhuman animal characters are more than just plot devices or scenic additions; they have basic character development, unique personalities and relationships, and occasionally their own subplots, but their stories are still secondary to those of the protagonists. Generally this setup occurs when the protagonist is human, but not always, and these animals are usually not fully anthropomorphized - in other words, they are lacking some quality that might be thought of as uniquely human.<sup>46</sup> Pocahontas's companions in Disney's 1995 film, Flit (a hummingbird) and Meeko (a raccoon), are a good example: they are both very expressive, but neither can talk. If the protagonist has a nonhuman animal sidekick, then the antagonist probably does too, and it's very likely that these sidekick characters will support their human companions, mirror them in looks or behavior, and/or engage in combat with the sidekick of their human's opposer. Essentially, they provide a comical outlet for acting out different aspects of the main conflict. In *Pocahontas*, Governor Ratcliffe's pug Percy exhibits many of the same traits as his master: concern about his appearances, appreciation of finery, a snobbish demeanor, and a huge ego that causes conflict with Pocahontas's sidekicks (whose main vices are curiosity and being in the wrong place at the wrong time). In this sense, these nonhuman animal

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<sup>46</sup> This is a topic often addressed by prominent primatologist and ethologist Frans de Waal, who pointed out in a recent talk on NPR's "The Diane Rehm Show" that every time someone proposes a unique human qualifier, scientific evidence strikes it down, showing that some nonhuman animals exhibit the same traits; common examples include theory of mind, planning ahead, self-recognition in mirrors, and tool use. From "The Diane Rehm Show," National Public Radio, May 10, 2016, <http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2016-05-10/frans-de-waal-are-we-smart-enough-to-know-how-smart-animals-are>

characters become not only mirrors of their human companions, but (problematically simplified) symbols of the British settlers and the Native Americans as separate peoples.

While *animals as sidekicks* are not as fully developed as most protagonists, they are allowed more fluidity and agency than *animals as props*. There is a moment when Meeko grabs Flit with both forepaws and holds him like a sword, jabbing him at Percy; suddenly Meeko has adopted the virtual form of a human, and Flit has become an unwilling object - a weapon (see Figure 5). But Meeko escapes by climbing into a tree before there is any contact with Percy, tossing Flit into the air as he flees. This flexible shifting between modes is facilitated by the versatility of animation as a medium; imagine the impossibility of a raccoon using a hummingbird to fence with a dog. It is interesting that in order for Meeko to gain humanlike agency in the scene, Flit must be transformed into an object; but ultimately, Meeko's foray into the human politics of swordsmanship is revealed to be a show when he escapes without landing any blows. It was all a distracting performance, a dramatic bluff, and Flit is allowed to return to his free-flying state, though he is still bound by his position as a subordinate companion of the human protagonist (and now he is arguably a rung below Meeko as well - but is it any surprise, considering he is a bird, traditionally ranked lower than mammals according to the Great Chain of Being?).<sup>47</sup>

*Animals as sidekicks* may be the stars of their own scenes, and they might even be featured in their own animated shorts released after the success of their original films, such as Disney's *Tangled Ever After* (2012), which stars Rapunzel's chameleon Pascal and Eugene's horse Maximus (originally introduced in the 2010 film *Tangled*) on a brief comical

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<sup>47</sup> See Appendix A for Didacus Valades' drawing of the great chain of being, from *Rhetorica Christiana*, 1579.

misadventure. But even though they may be in the spotlight, their stories are still secondary to the human ones, and in the case of *Tangled Ever After* the entire mini-plot is based on the two animals losing and then retrieving Rapunzel and Eugene's wedding rings; the weight of their success or failure is of primary importance to their humans, and nothing is revealed about their personal needs and desires. They only have identity in relation to humans. It is also worth emphasizing that most *animals as sidekicks* are the main source of comic amusement in their films and provide animators with an outlet for pushing the boundaries of their fictional worlds in a way that would clash with the believability of the main (human) characters. In *Tangled Ever After* Maximus (the horse) is repeatedly catapulted through the air in comic clichés, sailing around the city at impossible heights and landing with impossible force, seemingly unharmed. There is no way any of the epic ring-chase-and-recovery scene could be translated into real life because of the sheer absurdity and impossibility of it all, but it doesn't need to be because it doesn't interfere with the credibility of the main plot (the wedding of Rapunzel and Eugene).

Often, *animals as sidekicks* are allowed to act out their own animalness or species-specific behavior as a reminder of their otherness from their (superior) human counterparts. Meeko the raccoon displays many stereotypical raccoon behaviors - mischievously stealing items from John Smith, skillfully climbing among trees, and exhibiting curiosity and a desire to eat anything that can be eaten. At the same time, he *doesn't* display some of the most important characteristics of real raccoons, including interaction with other members of his own species. *Animals as sidekicks* tend to be one-of-a-kind, separated from their appropriate real-life context. Their narrative

functionality is much more dependent on their relationship with the protagonists (or antagonists). Throughout *Pocahontas*, Meeko and Percy (the governor's pug) have many antagonistic encounters that usually involve Meeko stealing something that Percy wants (for example, his bowl of cherries), Percy chasing after Meeko, and Percy ending up in a ridiculous situation that is much to his distaste (e.g. covered in mud or stuck in a hollow log). These scenes are comical, but the conflict mirrors the more serious antagonism between the settlers and the Native Americans. This type of conflict is not surprising considering the role that human sidekicks have played throughout history, often reinforcing systematic forms of oppression by relegating members of the oppressed group to the secondary sidekick role (think of the token black friend of the white male protagonist in many modern action films). It is important to recognize how these secondary roles enable dominant power structures, in this case both colonialist and speciesist.

The entire structure of the film becomes essentially problematic because the conflict between the two (human) groups is reduced to a petty squabble that can be resolved with understanding and goodwill - ultimately indicating that this was in fact the real-life resolution, rewriting history in a sanitized, oversimplified way that endorses colonialism, fetishizes native peoples, and ignores the reality that the real Pocahontas faced (the oral history of the Mattaponi tribe remembers that she was held captive by the English, raped, emotionally abused, and probably forced to convert to Christianity and marry John Rolfe; she died on an English ship, possibly from intentional poisoning)<sup>48</sup>. Most notably for the

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<sup>48</sup> Sarah J. Stebbins, "Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend," accessed October 30, 2016, <https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/pocahontas-her-life-and-legend.htm>

themes of this paper, the impact of European settlement on nonhuman animals is ignored entirely. While *Pocahontas* does show members of the Powhatan tribe spearing fish in the river, and a ham half eaten on the table in Governor Ratcliffe's quarters, the question of how human-animal relationships were manifested among Native American and European cultures is barely addressed. Meeko, Flit, and Percy bear the brunt of the burden of summarizing how two different worldviews might perceive nonhuman animals, and the takeaway message is that Europeans domesticate and manipulate animals (note that pugs are an example of a highly specialized breed where the dogs' bodies are so drastically changed by breeding that they have serious health problems) while Native Americans coexist with wild animals but also use them for food and clothing. While this is based in elements of truth, it affirms the perceived binary of domestic/wild, and as a result *Pocahontas* subtly reinforces the idea that domestic = civilized and wild = savage even as the film struggles to shatter the analogy by promoting ideas of nonviolence and acceptance. Meeko, Flit, and Percy are caught in the middle of these human issues of cultural appropriation and oppression, and their own identities as nonhuman animals recede from the foreground because of these more pressing issues.

## VI. ANIMALS AS SLAVES

Interestingly enough, *animals as sidekicks* sometimes come confusingly close to *animals as slaves*. Is Philippe, the horse Belle rides in Disney's 1991 *The Beauty and the Beast*, her faithful companion or her unwilling slave? Are Copper and Chief the canine comrades of hunter Amos Slade in Disney's 1981 *The Fox and the Hound*, or are they his dutiful servants? Many domesticated animals have literary roots that link them with themes of slavery and servitude, especially horses and dogs; some of these connotations are still evoked today in the way many humans describe and perceive themselves as "masters" or "owners" of nonhuman animals. In his discussion of animals in Victorian Britain, White describes how cart horses and lap dogs could respectively be anthropomorphized as "servants and family friends" (59); he also says of dogs that "[a]s family friends and devoted servants, [they] embodied Victorian values more fully and consistently than did any other creature," with loyalty, courage, obedience among those qualities.<sup>49</sup> The *Black Beauty* era (stemming from the book written Anna Sewell and published 1877) was a particularly important time of exploration of nonhuman animal voices, establishing the foundations for talking animals in the animated films of the future. Mangum writes that "... [i]n the literary milieu of fictive animals like Black Beauty and Beautiful Joe, animals became impossibly positioned as fully articulate subjects with a great deal to say to their human readers and listeners."<sup>50</sup> It is no coincidence that these animal

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<sup>49</sup> Paul S. White, "The Experimental Animal in Victorian Britain," in *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 68.

<sup>50</sup> Teresa Mangum, "Dog Years, Human Fears," in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 35.

narratives corresponded with a growing animal welfare/animal rights movement, nor that they evoked many parallels with anti-slavery activism and sentiment.

Now, horses and especially dogs are often elevated to personhood in animal narratives. DreamWorks' *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* (2002) features a wild mustang who communicates to the audience with narrated thoughts, but doesn't speak human languages with other horses (or humans); instead he communicates via fairly realistic horse sounds and body language. Disney's *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) and *101 Dalmatians* (1961) feature dogs as the main characters; in the former, the majority of the film is framed in canine perspective, often cutting the faces and upper bodies of humans out of the picture, and in the latter, the star characters, Pongo and Perdita, save the stolen puppies through their own agency, without requiring any assistance from their humans until the end, when it's up to Roger and Anita to find a home big enough to accommodate their new family members. Still, even celebrated species like dogs and horses take on a background role in films where humans are front and center, like in *Beauty and the Beast*. Many other animals have not achieved the same elevated status in popular media - or, if they have, it is at the cost of part of their true species identity. By this I mean that many animated representations of, say, farm animals ignore the reality of farm animal lives in order to avoid confronting the personhood of real farm animals (consider Lady Kluck in *Robin Hood*), unlike Sewell's *Black Beauty*, which directly addressed various real issues of animal welfare from a horse's point of view.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Anna Sewell and Kristen Guest. *Black Beauty: His Grooms and Companions: the Autobiography of a Horse*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.

Aardman Animations' 2000 *Chicken Run* is an exception to the rule. It's true that there is no direct comparison between the chickens and humans - the human characters in the film do not experience any hardships that relate to the challenges faced by the chickens in the coop. There are, however, comparisons to concentration camps and high security prisons throughout the film. For example, the opening scene shows the barbed wire of the compound where the chickens are imprisoned; and the hens have numbers instead of names (see Figure 6). Peter Lord, director and writer of *Chicken Run*, admits that "[w]e agonized over the question of whether chickens actually perceived themselves to be in prison or not," indicating the careful consideration that went into the presentation of the chickens and their consciousness.<sup>52</sup> The narrative of the film is centered around breaking out of the prison, seeking freedom, regaining (or gaining for the first time) autonomy; it ends with the previously pie-machine-bound chickens escaping to the countryside with no humans in sight. It seeks a resolution to the slavery of the circus animals that we will see was never resolved in *Dumbo*; it is a story of empowerment. But I wonder if the true experience of chickens in factory farms is lost because of this happy ending. While it is a mistake to assume that nonhuman animals have no autonomy or agency, that doesn't mean that they are able to resist our continuous exploitation, since humans are in a position of power. No amount of resistance on the part of the animals humans use for food could be enough to put an end to factory farming; it is up to humans to choose not to exploit animals and to dismantle the system that abuses them (and the environment, the workers, and the consumers' health). It is unlikely that this will happen unless we 1) understand the reality

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<sup>52</sup> Wells, *The Animated Bestiary*, 165.



of the helplessness of the animals that are imprisoned and killed for food, and 2) are encouraged to feel empathy for them. This is a need that animated films like *Chicken Run* could fill if only the animators chose to follow through with their explorations of the systematic oppression involved in factory farming.

Animals used for food are not the only animals who are kept in captivity and used for human purposes; the use of animals in entertainment is another crucial subcategory of *animals as slaves* that must be examined. In Disney's 1941 *Dumbo*, there is a scene where the elephants help the humans set up the circus grounds, including the big top circus tent. The accompanying song sequence is shocking in its raw, racist portrayal of the black men laboring in the overnight rain to set up all of the equipment. To start with, the black men literally do not have faces. Their identity as individuals has been completely erased. The song includes lines that make it clear that while the men are technically not slaves, their experience is essentially the same: "We work all day, we work all night / We never learned to read or write... We slave until we're almost dead... We don't know when we get our pay... Muscles achin' / Back near breaking... Grab that rope, you hairy ape!..." Calling the men "hairy apes" directly suggests that they themselves are circus animals in the worst sense. At the beginning of the scene, the elephants are shown climbing out of one of the boxcars into the rainy night. The film cuts to a shot of the workers climbing out of a similar car. Shortly after, a group of men are shown standing around a huge stake, taking turns slamming it into the ground with sledgehammers. The adult elephants are shown next, using their trunks to hold their own sledgehammers as they drive their own stake into the ground. Editing the scene to switch between the two groups in identical scenarios makes it

clear that the laboring elephants are being equated to the laboring men, working strenuously against their will in extreme, dangerous conditions without adequate compensation. What's less clear is whether the writers are trying to lower the status of the black men to the status of nonhuman animals, or raise the status of the elephants to that of humans (or perhaps to demolish the distinction entirely). I suspect there will always be this kind of ambiguity in the portrayal of anthropomorphized nonhuman animals, because the interpretation will depend on the viewer.

Going back to the question of Philippe, the horse in *The Beauty and the Beast*, we first see him being ridden by Belle's father Maurice. Philippe is uneasy in the eerie, dark forest that Maurice rides him through, supposedly taking a "shortcut," and twice the horse tries to lead him in a different direction, but Maurice insists on continuing in spite of Philippe's visible fear and discomfort (made obvious to the viewer through exaggerations of the natural signs of fear in horses combined with slight anthropomorphisms, such as expressively worried eyes). It turns out Philippe's instincts were right and the forest is full of danger - specifically, hungry, evil-looking wolves. Incidentally, wolves are historically rife with symbolism. Isenberg points out that "[f]eared and reviled as loathsome and cowardly killers at the outset of the century, they have come, by the century's end, to symbolize the possibility for holism and integrity not only in the American environment, but in American culture."<sup>53</sup> But even by 1991, when the film was released, the idea of fierce, evil fairytale wolves was too appealing to pass up, and was consistent with past renditions of wolves in Disney's animated films. In other words, these wolves can be seen as plot

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<sup>53</sup> Andrew C. Isenberg, "The Moral Ecology of Wildlife," in *Representing Animals*, ed. Nigel Rothfels (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 49.

devices, or *animals as props* - they have no character development, are single-minded non-individuals, and serve only to further the plot by driving Maurice to the Beast's castle. Later on, they intervene again to allow the Beast an opportunity to save Belle's life; they exist only to continue the human narrative. They provide an important juxtaposition with Philippe, who also drives the narrative by returning to Belle after bucking off Maurice in the forest with the wolves; while he abandoned his rider in the thick of the danger, he still loyally returned to her and led her back to the castle, showing his allegiance to her rather than Maurice. And at the climax of the film, it is Philippe who enables Belle to reach the Beast just in time to save him from death.

Is this love? Loyalty? Servitude? Or a combination of them all? It is interesting that Maurice, a man, is shown to be a poor master, forcing his horse unwillingly into danger, whereas Philippe is willing to accompany Belle, a woman, to the same source of danger, reinforcing the traditional idea that women are "closer" to animals and are by nature more sympathetic. These various potential understandings of Philippe reveal the complexity of the category *animals as slaves*. Slavery has often been justified by equating the enslaved with nonhuman animals, by dehumanizing them; the speciesist assumption here is that nonhuman animals are slave material by default. Because these ideas about animals are still ingrained in our culture, it would have been easy enough to portray Philippe as a "dumb beast," with no personality at all; but it is nearly impossible to escape anthropomorphism in the medium of animation, and he was thus given "human" attributes that should conflict with his status of servitude. While this challenges the viewer to question his status (was it wrong of Maurice to force Philippe into the dangerous woods?),

his role in the film is ultimately secondary to that of the human protagonists, and the question is never revisited, leaving his status as a slave/servant secure.

If our goal is to generate empathy among viewers for real nonhuman animals from these animated representations, framing animal characters as slaves isn't necessarily a bad idea. Juxtaposing free animals with "enslaved" animals can actually highlight the exploitation and suffering of real animals, present such treatment of animals as negative, and even suggest a preferable alternative. While no such development occurred with Philippe, something along these lines unfolds in the narrative of Disney's *The Fox and the Hound*. Copper and Chief, Amos Slade's hunting dogs, are brought up by him for the very specific purpose of assisting his hunting exploits. When Copper disobeys him, he is severely punished; when he does well on the hunting trip, he is praised and rewarded with a seat next to his master (while Chief, growing old, is relegated to the back seat). While there are glimpses of human-canine affection, and the dogs certainly seem to enjoy hunting, Slade's love for his dogs is clearly conditional on their performance as hunting aides, and Copper is not allowed to pursue his unconditional love for his friend Todd, a fox, because he is duty bound to Slade.

Slade's "tough love" style of teaching Copper is also reminiscent of many American male coming-of-age stories, adding enforced masculinity to Copper's burden. Since the heart of the story is around the unbreakable bond between Copper and Todd, and the Romeo-and-Juliet type tragedy of their feuding families keeping them apart (played out by the antagonistic interactions between Amos Slade and Widow Tweed, Todd's adoptive human mother), Copper's restrictive upbringing is likely to be interpreted in a negative

light. When Copper and Todd save each other at the end, the value of their friendship is celebrated; but the conclusion of the film is still tragic, because Copper goes back home with Amos Slade, and Todd remains in the forest, watching over him sadly from a distant hilltop. The takeaway message could either be viewed as a rejection of the status quo (the tragedy could have been avoided if they hadn't been forced apart by social norms) or an acceptance of the idea that some differences are irreconcilable. Either reading resonates with many human-specific issues, particularly interracial and gay marriages (and for the critical viewer, *The Fox and the Hound* certainly reads as a queer romance between Copper and Todd). But what does this say about real animals? One possible reading is that human interference in animal lives leads to tragedy and confusion for real animals (both domestic and wild). If Amos hadn't raised Copper as a hunting dog, or if Tweed hadn't raised Todd as a pet, things could have turned out very differently. It is telling that at the conclusion Copper reluctantly returns to his domestic servitude, while Todd remains physically free but emotionally tied to his friend. It seems to me that this reveals a yearning for the dissolution of traditional boundaries rather than an affirmation of them; either way, Copper's deference to his callous, gruff human master seems to be at the heart of both his internal and external conflicts.

## VII. ANIMALS AS TEAM PLAYERS

Many animated films seize the imagination by generating a world in which nonhuman animals can be just as, well, “human” as humans - and yet share the world with us all the same. Generally, there is a significant barrier between the humans and nonhuman animals in these films, such that they have their separate languages and/or territories and rarely interact. Sometimes, however, the plot requires interaction between the two, be it antagonistic, benevolent, or somewhere in between. It is this sense of two separate, often opposing sides - “Team Animal” and “Team Human” - that led me to label this category *animals as team players*. These film universes offer fascinating reflections on how we perceive relationships between human and nonhuman animals. Looking back through the Disney record, “Team Animal” had been making its appearance from the beginning, starting with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and the forest animals who helped the heroine embrace her life as an outcast. In *Bambi* (1942), the forest animals are similarly neighborly amongst each other and unified against the threat of “Man.” *101 Dalmatians* (1961) is an exemplary illustration of animals banding together to overcome a human villain, though not all of the humans are presented as evil. More recent examples include *Finding Nemo*<sup>54</sup> (2003) and *Ratatouille* (2007), in which the animals take center stage but humans are integral to the plot. Note that there is often significant overlap between *animals as team players* and *animals as themselves*, a category which will be discussed in depth later. For now, it is enough to say that when nonhuman animal characters are presented as real animals (themselves), the audience is encouraged to relate and

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<sup>54</sup> *Finding Nemo* was produced by Pixar Animation Studios and released by Walt Disney Pictures.

empathize with them in a more transformative way than when the characters are coded as human characters with human problems.

It is also important to think about exactly who is on “Team Animal” - a single species as in *Ratatouille*, or an entire ecosystem like in *Finding Nemo*? Focusing on a single species allows for a more in-depth exploration of an animal’s *umwelt* (in ethology, the world as it is experienced by a particular organism<sup>55</sup>); consider the moments in *Ratatouille* when Remy (a rat) closes his eyes and visualizes the aromas of different foods as complex colors, a tribute to the fact that rats have a better capacity for smell than humans.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, placing a certain species at the center invites speciesism - Remy’s world is very rat-centric; based on the dialogue of the film, he has no qualms about whipping up a foie gras or cooking a veal stomach. Films that feature inter-species interactions capture more of the complexity of animal-animal relationships and allow the spotlight to shine on many different kinds of animals - in the case of *Finding Nemo*, this includes different kinds of marine life ranging from tropical fish to sharks to sea turtles to whales - but risks building barriers to empathy by posing certain species in opposition to the protagonists; there is no room for understanding the black seadevil (a kind of anglerfish) that attacks Marlin and Dory in the black ocean depths, nor any sympathy for the mindlessly drifting jellyfish that nearly kill the two fish as they struggle on their journey.

Going back to the beginning of Disney’s animated feature films, we see that these issues of interspecies antagonism have been glossed over by treating the different animals

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<sup>55</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “umwelt,” accessed November 6, 2016, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/umwelt>

<sup>56</sup> Interestingly enough, Remy is shown to have an advanced sense of smell even among the other rats; still, this is framed as a matter of developing an innate ability rather than as a you-have-it-or-you-don’t type of trait.

in a fairly generic way. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, after the huntsman tells the princess to flee into the forest to escape the wrath of the jealous queen, Snow White is terrified of her surroundings; she sees monstrous alligator-like creatures in the shapes of tree branches and logs and evil-looking eyes following her every move. But when her terror subsides, she realizes that the eyes belong to ordinary, non-threatening forest animals - rabbits, chipmunks, deer, squirrels, songbirds and quail, raccoons, and a turtle. She apologizes to her new audience, realizing that she frightened them as much as they frightened her, and they become her guides, leading her to the dwarfs' cottage. While they can't speak her language, they seem to understand her well enough, and she them. Then follows the famous housecleaning scene in which Snow White directs the animals to assist her with her usual cleaning chores. Regardless of species identity, all of the animal helpers work together to complete these tasks; in spite of their goodwill and enthusiasm, they often get it wrong (for example, a pair of chipmunks are caught and scolded for sweeping dust under a rug, and a deer is similarly reprimanded for licking a plate instead of washing it with water and soap).

Many scholars discuss the role of domesticity, women's traditional roles, and the idea of conquering nature in this scene. Whitley points out that "Snow White's relationship with the animals... is founded on a flow of sympathy and a recognition of equivalence in their respective positions; but this does not eliminate a crucial sense of difference between the human heroine and the creatures who surround her."<sup>57</sup> It is that sense of difference that maintains their status as *nonhuman* animals, but little is done to highlight the differences

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<sup>57</sup> Whitley, *Nature in Disney Animation*, 24.



between the diverse species, and because of that, much of their individuality is lost. The main exception is the turtle - the only reptile in a group of mammals; the odd one out. In spite of his obvious differences (and the fact that most turtles have no wish to interact with mammals, though some fascinating videos have appeared on YouTube recently featuring turtles playing with cats and dogs<sup>58</sup>), he becomes a running (no pun intended) gag throughout the film as he tries to keep up with the group of forest mammals; every time he finally reaches the group, they are changing direction and moving on to the next place/scene, poking fun at the slow turtle stereotype. In contrast to Whitley's more positive reading of Snow White's team of animals, Murphy suggests that the film "... subordinates nonhuman nature to human agency... young boys may be assured that when all is right with the world, women and nature remain ready to serve them, no matter how messy they may be, since women are a domesticating and civilizing presence and nonhuman nature is a resource pool to provide beasts of burden."<sup>59</sup> Returning to the idea of *animals as slaves*, it is certainly not the norm to see "wild" forest animals engaged in such domestic tasks, so what message does it send the viewer to see such animals willingly engaging in the activities of servants? Is this perpetuating the myth that animals/slaves enjoy serving superior masters, and that in an ideal world animals would come to us willfully to take care of our own responsibilities? But not all of the nonhuman animals in the film fit into this role. There is also the evil queen's companion raven, who appears terrified of her scheming and doesn't leave the dungeon where she carries out her sorcery, and the vultures, who

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<sup>58</sup> For examples, see: "Aggressive Turtle plays ball with dog," July 12, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81720bVYf9Q>;

"Cat and turtle," March 2, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8owomtkQgg>.

<sup>59</sup> Murphy, "Androcentric Animation of Denatured Disney," in *From mouse to mermaid*, ed. Elizabeth Bell et al., 128.

eagerly watch as the queen falls to her (presumed) death. These exceptions fall into the *animals as props* category, necessarily standing out from the other animals as symbolic devices to help the viewer understand the queen's character and ultimate fate.

*Bambi* presents a very different kind of "Team Animal." While the forest animals all get along similarly in spite of species differences (and in the case of Friend Owl, in spite of predatory instincts), there is no sense of domestication or companionship with humans. Instead, humans, or "Man," are the unseen but ever lurking enemy. The characters in *Bambi* are closer to real animals (*animals as themselves*) than many animated animal characters, but they are still highly anthropomorphized on many levels, which destabilizes the outward anti-hunting, pro-animal/pro-nature narrative. In his article "The trouble with *Bambi*: Walt Disney's *Bambi* and the American vision of nature," Lutts raises the question, "Does *Bambi* actually present a terribly distorted view of animal behavior and woodland ecology?"<sup>60</sup> He goes on to explain the misrepresentations and anthropomorphisms that subtract from the film's renowned realism, details that might be missed by the majority of viewers. *Bambi* is given antlers in the spring, while real male whitetail deer don't develop antlers until later in the year; the forest animals' heads and eyes were enlarged and the muzzles reduced; predation is nonexistent. Payne criticizes the film for constructing the forest as a patriarchal society, commenting wryly that "There are no 'Great Stags' in human societies" and noting the militaristic undertones of the scene where "The young bucks are engaged in Spartan military exercise, the expression of fraternal culture... [*Bambi* is] the son who must pass muster as a new recruit and so not shame his father."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Lutts, "The Trouble with *Bambi*," 163.

<sup>61</sup> David Payne, "Bambi," in *From mouse to mermaid*, eds. Elizabeth Bell et al., 144.

With all of this in mind, the film takes shape as an enactment of the ideal (American) patriarchy, with “Man” as an abstract outer threat that the forest animals must unify against (and considering the timing of *Bambi*’s release in 1942, it isn’t difficult to take a guess at what that outer threat could be). Still, Lutts catalogs many voices claiming that *Bambi* strongly impacted them in a pro-environmental/anti-hunting way, and the film has gained a reputation for generating “The Bambi Syndrome,” now used as a derisive term for anti-hunting sentiment, which is often used as an insult to those who feel empathy for nonhuman animals.<sup>62</sup> If we return to the team animal/team human divide as presented in this film, it is clear who’s good and who’s bad. Lutts believes that “[Disney] presented nature as an earthly Eden. There is, however, no place for humans in this garden,” concluding his essay by asserting that “The film motivates, but does not educate. It may stimulate action, but not understanding... it offers no hope for us poor humans to be anything other than the destroyers of the natural world.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Payne, “Bambi,” in *From mouse to mermaid*, eds. Elizabeth Bell et al., 140.

<sup>63</sup> Lutts, “The Trouble with Bambi,” 169.

### VIII. ANIMALS AS THEMSELVES

Of all of the animal modes I discuss in this paper, this one is perhaps the most elusive, and certainly the most critical. *Animals as themselves* are first and foremost representations of real nonhuman animals, with bodies, needs, desires, and behaviors that align with those of their species identities. This mode generally entails minimal anthropomorphism and is most effective when the animals are presented in an unusually realistic manner and setting. Wells developed a similar term, “the pure animal,” in his bestial ambivalence model, defining it as “simply concerned with when the animal character is represented only through known animal traits and behaviors.”<sup>64</sup> However, “the pure animal” seems too idealistic a term; no matter how accurate an animated rendering of an animal might be, it will always be a copy, an impure imitation. For that reason, I chose the label *animals as themselves* to evoke the animator’s struggle to represent the personhood, the *umwelt* of the nonhuman animals as individuals rather than the abstract idea of purity. It is worth revisiting Fudge’s assertion that in the context of the historical, “we are never looking at the animals, only ever at the representation of animals by humans.”<sup>65</sup> We are not trying to learn about *real* animals by analyzing animated films - we are trying to learn what we *believe* about real animals. This is why representations of *animals as themselves* are so crucial - because if we look closely, we can see what the artists and writers believe define nonhuman animals and make them valuable.

Interestingly, Wells uses the human protagonist of Disney’s 1999 *Tarzan* (based on Edgar Rice Burroughs’ 1912 novel *Tarzan of the Apes*) as an example of “the pure animal.”

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<sup>64</sup> Wells, *Animated Bestiary*, 51.

<sup>65</sup> Fudge, “Writing the History of Animals,” in *Representing Animals*, ed. Rothfels, 6.

This film is an excellent case study for understanding the nuances of *animals as themselves* and the importance of anthropomorphism as a double-edged sword, eroding the realness of the animals on the one hand but encouraging empathy on the other. Raised by a family of gorillas in complete isolation from humans, Tarzan was never enculturated in a human context; Wells points to the moment when he examines a bullet casing without having any conception of its purpose as a moment of pure animality. But from then on, Wells tracks Tarzan's shift to human representations rather than returning his focus to the gorillas. If the central narrative of the film is Tarzan realizing his humanity, then the gorillas must be distinctly *nonhuman*. And yet for Tarzan to be successfully immersed in the world of the gorillas before the arrival of the humans, they must be similar enough to forge a cross-species family. This is achieved partly through recognition of actual similarities between gorillas and humans by virtue of being primates, but also through anthropomorphism, made all the more alluring because of those preexisting similitudes. "People are likely to attribute similar experiences and cognitive abilities to other animals based on... the degree of physical similarity between themselves and the species in question (e.g., primates)," Gallup et al. write,<sup>66</sup> which helps explain why the creators of *Tarzan* chose to have the gorillas speak a language that Tarzan could understand and participate in (and was even able to teach to Jane). Language attribution is one of the most common forms of anthropomorphism among animated animals (bipedalism being another star contender), but it is less common for films to address the real-life language barrier between humans and nonhuman animals in a realistic or thoughtful way.

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<sup>66</sup> Gordon G. Gallup, Jr., Lori Marino, and Timothy J. Eddy, "Anthropomorphism and the Evolution of Social Intelligence: A Comparative Approach," in *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals*, ed. Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thompson, and H. Lyn Miles (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 84.

Whitley writes favorably of avoiding language attribution to nonhuman animals, remarking that “[m]ute animals retain a greater potential for their species integrity - in particular their otherness from human beings - to be retained,”<sup>67</sup> and Wells quotes Hooks saying that “[i]nter-species communication is a fascinating challenge for animation,” asserting that having a nonhuman animal speaking a human language in front of a human “will overly challenge the audience member’s willingness to suspend [their] disbelief.”<sup>68</sup> And yet the narrative of *Tarzan* flows smoothly, perhaps bolstered by myths and documentations of cross-species adoptions, from the Roman legend of Romulus and Remus being raised by wolves to countless modern anecdotes of orphaned animals being taken in by foster mothers of different species, even if it means crossing predator/prey boundaries. Language attribution is far from the only method of anthropomorphism in the film; the gorillas in *Tarzan* have also been given more humanesque eyes and facial features (as per Disney tradition), and Terk, who grew up alongside Tarzan, leads the other young gorillas in a scene where they encounter the humans’ camp and create a musical number with the strange equipment they find there. In another memorable scene, she dresses up in Jane’s clothing to distract Kerchak, the dominant male of the group. Wearing clothing is another key form of anthropomorphism, but in this case, the clothes barely fit her and give her a chaotic but distinctly *nonhuman* look; and while she may be bipedal for most of the scene (another common form of anthropomorphism), the fact that the entire display is a performance almost negates the effect of the anthropomorphism (see Figure 7).

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<sup>67</sup> Whitley, *Nature in Disney Animation*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Ed Hooks, “Acting for Animators” (newsletter), August 2007, quoted in Wells, *Animated Bestiary*, 120-121.

Considering the gorillas as a whole, the animators went to great lengths to present them in a realistic fashion. They remain quadrupedal (except during the aforementioned scenes with Terk), knuckle-walk, and are concerned with activities that real gorillas would be concerned with - primarily feeding and resting.<sup>69</sup> At night they nested on the ground or in trees, and at one point Kala can be seen pulling leaves around her as she settles in with baby Tarzan for the night. Although little details here and there are off, the filmmakers have managed to present the gorillas as social animals that share some similarities with humans, and yet are distinctly different. In one scene, the gorillas are seen using sticks to fish for termites to eat. At the time when *Tarzan* was created, gorillas were not known to use tools for foraging in the wild.<sup>70</sup> But an article published in 2015 reveals that a juvenile female mountain gorilla used a stick to withdraw ants from a nest; she then proceeded to lick them off.<sup>71</sup> Jane Goodall reported tool use in chimpanzees as early as 1964,<sup>72</sup> and many pre-Disney Tarzan film adaptations interpreted Burroughs' "apes" to be chimpanzees, so in some ways it is not surprising that the filmmakers borrowed knowledge of different African great apes to enrich their own film. Still, as Whitley points out, "Thousands of still photographs and extensive film footage were shot during a field trip to Uganda, where gorillas could be observed in wild habitats..."<sup>73</sup> With all of this first hand knowledge (and access to the research of the times), and so much effort put into generating a realistic

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<sup>69</sup> David P. Watts, "Environmental influences on mountain gorilla time budgets," *American Journal of Primatology* 15, no. 3 (1988): 195.

<sup>70</sup> Barbara J. King, *The Dynamic Dance: Nonvocal Communication in African Great Apes* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2004), 90.

<sup>71</sup> Jean-Felix G. Kinani and Dawn Zimmerman, "Tool use for food acquisition in a wild mountain gorilla (*Gorilla beringei beringei*)," *American Journal of Primatology*, no. 77 (2015): 353.

<sup>72</sup> Jane Goodall, "Tool-using and aimed throwing in a community of free-living chimpanzees," *Nature* 201, no. 492 (1964): 1264.

<sup>73</sup> Whitley, *Nature in Disney Animation*, 122.

portrayal of the jungle and its inhabitants, why did they feel the need to merge the behavioral characteristics of multiple species? Or was it simply a mistake, a fact-checking error? And what does it mean now that although it was a “mistake” at the time based on their current knowledge, sixteen years later the mistake has been rendered the truth by a new discovery?

Ultimately, the result is that the viewer sees something that looks believable, realistic, but isn't. Misrepresentation can be just as problematic as anthropomorphism; how can the audience make accurate inferences about real nonhuman animals if key details are wrong? Maybe it matters less in films like Disney's *The Lion King* (1994), where it is clear that the animal characters are fulfilling a human storyline. But *Tarzan* is a story about the relationship between humans and nonhuman animals, between humans and nature. It reflects a desire to return to our primitive roots, while simultaneously upturning the very idea of “primitive” by showing gorillas living as an extended social group with family bonding. “... [These films] are structured so that young viewers will align themselves with the point of view of animals,” Whitley argues.<sup>74</sup> But how can that occur if the gorillas and their environment are not portrayed accurately? “We are used to perceiving culture as quintessentially human and instinctual drives as related to our animal natures. Within the narrative of *Tarzan*... the hero's culture, gestures, and responses are shaped by his relationships with the apes, whereas it is his instincts that mark him off as distinctly human.”<sup>75</sup> This reversal of human and nonhuman animal roles is paramount to the message that the film portrays, and I think in many ways, anthropomorphism *assists* in conveying that message by bringing us closer to the gorilla characters. But the aforementioned

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<sup>74</sup> Whitley, *Nature in Disney Animation*, 119.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.



misrepresentations put strain on this progress, putting up extra barriers between us and the gorillas' *umwelt*. Are they portrayed as real gorillas, or are the gorillas used with the primary goal of elevating the human narrative?

Whitley suggests that more recent films “reconceptualize the nature of communication, so that [they are] less exclusively centered on human, verbal language.”<sup>76</sup> This is essential because it allows films to provide more than just entertainment to children by introducing thought-provoking perspectives on how nonhuman animals really communicate. With this in mind, I examined the *nonverbal* communication between the gorillas throughout *Tarzan*, including facial expressions and gestures. I saw many of the behaviors described by primatologist Barbara J. King, such as a classic partial chest-beating display by Kerchak, the dominant male silverback, who rose bipedally and vocalized while pounding his chest with his hands (see Figure 8).<sup>77</sup> But Kala, the adoptive mother gorilla, cries twice in a humanized show of grief, once when her own child is killed by a leopard and later when Tarzan chooses to leave with the humans to embrace his uncovered past. However, she is also shown grieving in a different way after her child's death, moving slowly as the group moves through the forest, lagging behind and appearing lethargic and depressed. Here we see the anthropomorphism and science debate intersects with our analysis of anthropomorphism in fictional film, because traditional ethologists would dismiss the expression of grief as anthropomorphic, whereas recent research reveals strong evidence for grief in many animals, not just great apes and other nonhuman primates.<sup>78</sup> But even if the film succeeds in generating sympathetic nonhuman animal characters whose appearances and behaviors align with those of real animals, there is one

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<sup>76</sup> Whitley, *Nature in Disney Animation*, 132.

<sup>77</sup> King, *The Dynamic Dance*, 155.

<sup>78</sup> Barbara J. King, *How Animals Grieve* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

crucial element missing: socio-environmental context. Disney has once again played what Murphy calls the “Vanished Indian Syndrome” trick, or “the idea that indigenous peoples belong to history, not contemporaneity,”<sup>79</sup> portraying the jungles of Africa as a vast wilderness uninhabited by any humans. The film does not address critical environmental issues such as habitat loss and poaching that threaten real gorillas, nor does it address the impacts of colonialism on native African peoples, although it does provide a justly harsh critique of the practice of trapping gorillas for the exotic animal trade. And while the climax of the film is centered around rescuing the trapped gorillas and defeating Clayton, the cruel and greedy jungle guide/hunter, the tidy solution is the predictable white male savior trope - Tarzan saves the gorillas with the help of his human and animal friends and family, and the film ends with a romantic happily-ever-after; there is no concern that more men will come looking to trap and kill gorillas in this ending.

Of course, the mode of *animals as themselves* is rarely (if ever) perfect. The complex layers of the narrative of *Tarzan* show the gorillas constantly shifting between modes, sometimes acting more as *animals as team players* or even *animals as sidekicks*. With the intricacies of *animals as themselves* now established, it is possible to seek out instances of the mode as it appears throughout the history of animated children’s films, however fleeting those appearances might be. Sometimes the integrity of the plot requires at least a general understanding of *animals as themselves* (*Tarzan* being one good example); other times, the animal characters may primarily rely on other modes, only embodying their species identity when the filmmakers find it important. Some films that rely on the mode *animals as themselves* include Disney classics such as *Bambi* (1942), *Lady and the Tramp*

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<sup>79</sup> Murphy, “Androcentric Animation of Denatured Disney,” in *From mouse to mermaid*, ed. Elizabeth Bell et al., 135.

(1955), *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), and *The Fox and the Hound* (1981). *Chicken Run* (Aardman Animations, 2000), *Finding Nemo* (Pixar Animation Studios, 2003), and *Happy Feet* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2006) are other examples of films that depend on real animal narratives. It could even be argued that these films contain subtle if not overt messages of animal liberation, which is not a coincidence; achieving the right balance of anthropomorphism (which engenders empathy) and realistic portrayal of *animals as themselves* can help viewers make the connection between real animals and the way humans exploit and abuse them.

I've already touched on the influence of *Bambi* in the realm of the anti-hunting and conservationist movements, but it is worth briefly revisiting the importance of the animal narrative in this pivotal Disney film. The basic plot is dependent on the forest animals being understood as real animals surviving (and sometimes thriving) in their natural habitat, prey species threatened by the ultimate predator, Man. While the social structure of the forest animals is more reminiscent of patriarchal human society than of real ecosystemic relationships, there are many moments strewn throughout the film where *animals as themselves* shine through, like the moment when Bambi's mother moves agonizingly slowly into the open meadow, searching for signs of danger before she allows her son to join her. Her slow steps and alert posture are immediately recognizable as the careful motions of a real deer. But before we congratulate the filmmakers on their effort to correctly portray nonhuman animals, we must consider the cost to *real* animals that was involved in the process. Lutts reveals that "[a] pair of fawns, named Bambi and Faline of course, was shipped from Maine to Disney's California studios where they became models for his

artists...”<sup>80</sup> Was the positive impact of *Bambi’s* anti-hunting message enough to outweigh the fact that Disney had those two fawns removed from their family and their natural environment, shipped across the country in what could very well have been a traumatic journey, and used as models (objects) just to enhance the quality of the film?

Moving out of the wildlife genre, *Lady and the Tramp* explores the lives of dogs, and while it’s hard to miss the themes of class struggle underlying the narrative, the surface narrative wouldn’t work if the threats to Tramp, the free-living street dog, weren’t based in reality. Lady, a purebred American Cocker Spaniel who lives a sheltered, privileged life with her human family, lends the audience an outsider’s view into the haunting atmosphere of the local pound when she is captured and detained there temporarily. The kennels where the stray dogs mournfully await their fate are dark and dreary, filled with soulful howling. They watch as one unclaimed dog “takes the long walk,” led by a faceless human to the room in the back where death awaits. This reflects the real-life issue of kill “shelters” that take in stray animals and “euthanize” the ones who don’t get claimed or adopted. As someone who worked in an animal shelter as a young adult, this scene is especially painful for me to watch because of its reflection of reality; however, there is no tragic loss to harden the message in the film - Tramp is nearly brought to the pound in the end, but Lady’s friends rescue him, and as with *Tarzan*, the film ends happily with no sense of unrest that the pound still exists and dogs will continue being killed.

In some ways, *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* pushes the animal rights messages harder; the whole plot is driven by Cruella de Vil’s vain, dark desire to kill Dalmatian

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<sup>80</sup> Lutts, “The Trouble with Bambi,” 163.

puppies for their fur. This necessarily depends on the dogs being real dogs; however, presenting the issue as a single cruel, evil person undertaking an illegal operation to get the fur ignores the reality of the fact that most fur comes from fur farms, organized operations which are profitable because of consumer demand. Lutts' critique of *Bambi* can be applied equally well here: "[t]he film motivates, but does not educate. It may stimulate action, but not understanding."<sup>81</sup> Still, the anti-fur stance is clear throughout the film. These films may not provide direct information about the plight of real animals, but at least they build the foundations of empathy so that viewers who encounter information about real fur farms may be predisposed to take action.

Though I discussed *The Fox and the Hound* and *Chicken Run* in depth in other sections, it is worth noting here that while their surface narratives rely on understandings of real animals, both can easily be read as human narratives, something we're trained to do from an early age - beginning with anthropomorphized animals in children's books and extending to discussions of symbolism in literature courses in school. *Chicken Run* is especially reminiscent of an underground revolt, which doesn't mesh well with *animals as themselves*; while individual animals (and sometimes groups of animals) can and do resist their human oppressors, having the chickens knit, write, and build a functional aircraft substantially subtracts from the idea of the characters as real animals and instead aligns their struggle with human resistance movements. There is also the fact that Ginger, the heroine, and the other hens want to learn how to fly as a means of escape and are so out of touch with their species identity that they aren't aware that they *can't* fly (which is

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<sup>81</sup> Lutts, "The Trouble with Bambi," 169.

interesting in itself, because real chickens are capable of short flights, although perhaps this is a critique of the way modern chicken breeding has led them to be so disproportionately large that sometimes their legs collapse under them and they can't even walk). It could be that this dissonance is meant to condemn human domestication of chickens by suggesting that humans drain natural instincts out of the animals they exploit, but that seems a bit of a stretch; it is more likely that the desire to learn how to fly simply worked well as a plot device, once again prioritizing the human moral-of-the-story (in this case, familiar tropes about hard work and believing in what you want). Essentially, once the viewer looks beneath the veneer of chicken-identity, the *animals as themselves* mode begins to crumble, and the characters start looking more like humans in a feathered disguise.

*Finding Nemo* is ostensibly about fish living real fish lives, but the authenticity of the marine life is challenged at every turn by misrepresentation and anthropomorphism. From insinuating that a clownfish and a blue tang swam over twelve hundred miles (from the Great Barrier Reef to Sydney, Australia) to sharks holding AA-style vegetarian support groups to sea turtles surfing ocean currents to a pelican benevolently transporting fish from the ocean to a dentist's office, the realistic has been sacrificed for comic entertainment and the propulsion of the anthropocentric father/son rescue narrative. Still, the incredible talent and devotion of the animation team allowed viewers to experience the beauty and wonder of marine ecosystems in an accessible way. The film also explored the idea of fish as persons, and coined the phrase "fish are friends, not food!" which is now parroted by many animal rights activists. As previously mentioned, what is surprising is how many children reacted to *Finding Nemo* by asking their parents for live clownfish when Nemo and

his aquarium companions were so desperate to escape the tank to return to the ocean and regain freedom. Why is there such a disconnect between animated characters and real fish in this case? Is it because real fish appear so alien to us humans that it is more easy to disassociate them with sentient life? Or perhaps because Pixar went to great lengths to make Nemo, Marlin, and Dory marketable by giving them a cute-and-cuddly makeover? Even if the intent was to sell themed merchandise, when animals are already highly objectified within the system of consumerism, should such a carryover effect not be so surprising? Steve Baker writes that "... animation, animatronics, and animal training... help to conjure a spurious 'reality' of animal life and experience, while ordinary human knowledge of even domestic animal life becomes, it seems, more uncertain than ever."<sup>82</sup> Is all of this a result of a colossal failure on the part of our entire society to look closely and critically at the reality of nonhuman animals? This goes back to the idea that animated films and other media are cultural inputs that often recycle or reinforce already established societal perspectives (though they can be critical or subversive with the right filmmakers and the right context). Perhaps the popular, profitable films are the ones that leave viewers feeling comfortably affirmed in their previous beliefs, deterring major animation studios from looking too closely at *animals as themselves* lest they upset their audiences.

*Happy Feet*, like *Finding Nemo*, brought to life a landscape and ecosystem most humans will never experience in real life - the frozen expanses of Antarctica - addressing environmental and animal rights issues such as pollution, trash dumping and littering, the overfishing of the commercial fishing industry, and zoo ethics. However, these issues are

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<sup>82</sup> Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), xvii-xviii, quoted in Wells, *Animated Bestiary*, 49.

far from the central theme of the film. An article written at the time of its release reveals that “[s]tudio executives say that such movies aren't intended to be political screeds,” and Bruce Berman, chairman of Village Roadshow, “points out that the movie is mainly about self-discovery, not politics.”<sup>83</sup> The movie features a young emperor penguin who was accidentally dropped on the frozen ground as an egg - something that can cause the death of real penguin fetuses; in this fictional world, it has significantly different consequences. Instead of being able to sing - which is an innate talent that all “normal” penguins in this imagined world have (a talent central to their culture - by singing their “heartsong,” they are able to find a mate with a matching song) - Mumble has a terrible singing voice. Perhaps even more shameful than his singing voice is his penchant for tap dancing, which none of the other emperor penguins understand. It takes an epic penguin journey for Mumble to come to terms with his difference and become confident in himself - a familiar human narrative that appeals to anyone who has ever felt ostracized for being different.

This does nothing to inform the audience about what it really means to be a penguin, with penguin needs and desires; however, there are moments scattered through the film where Mumble’s penguin-ness comes through, such as during the time when he is captured by humans and put on display in a marine institute. The experience is clearly traumatic as he tries to communicate with the humans and the other penguins; he becomes mentally and emotionally unstable, even experiencing hallucinations as he becomes more and more exhausted and disoriented. This haunting depiction matches up with real

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<sup>83</sup> Kate Kelly, “New film ‘Happy Feet’ confronts serious issues,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 17, 2006, accessed November 16, 2016, <http://www.post-gazette.com/ae/movies/2006/11/17/New-film-Happy-Feet-confronts-serious-issues/stories/200611170209>



behaviors witnessed in animals kept at zoos, from lethargy to ceaseless pacing and other repetitive, obsessive actions. While most of the anthropomorphism in the film tarnishes the sense of *animals as themselves*, the exploration of animals in captivity zeros in on a place of significant overlap between humans and nonhuman animals - the response to being held captive against one's will. The boundaries between human and penguin have become blurred - Mumble may have anthropocentric thoughts and dreams, but because his behavior is recognizable in dispirited real-life zoo/aquarium animals, he challenges the idea that keeping animals in captivity is in their best interests.

In the end, it seems that anthropomorphism and realistic representation are needed to balance each other out if we wish to generate empathy from the audience. If the film presents nonhuman animals as something too *other* for the viewer to grasp (as often happens with insects and fish), it becomes difficult to forge the emotional connection - to experience some recognition of sameness - that is a prerequisite for compassion, sympathy, and understanding. But if the artists apply too much anthropomorphism, the nonhuman animal identity is lost under layers of humanness, and the empathy is diverted and applied to human relationships. Considering that it's in the filmmakers' best (financial) interests to provide likeable, relatable characters, it's no wonder that they tend to err on the side of anthropomorphism. It's worth noting that the scorn for anthropomorphism in science and philosophy has tainted common perceptions of nonhuman animals as well, making it that much easier for viewers to dismiss *animals as themselves* in favor of human narratives. But purposeful, accurate representation and sensitivity to animal subjectivity is essential if we consider seriously the sentience, personhood, and moral value of nonhuman animals.

As critical scholars, we could spend years of our lives unearthing hidden gems of animals represented as themselves in animated children's films, but to what end? How many subversive details would the average viewer pick up, consciously or subconsciously? Recently, I was talking to someone about the lack of overt LGBT representation in Disney films, and they pointed out that classic Disney movies are great for LGBT audiences because their underlying narratives often focus on embracing differences and unique identities. That may be the case, but as a queer consumer of media I can safely say that *representation in media matters*. It matters for people who identify as LGBT because we need people to look up to; we need to know we are normal; we need to know we are valid. And it matters for people who don't identify as LGBT because it normalizes identities that aren't familiar and promotes positive, progressive dialogue between historically oppressed groups and their oppressors. The same is true for people of color, people with disabilities, and people of different religions and nationalities. While nonhuman animals don't need to see themselves represented in media for affirmation of their identities (although I've heard humans swear their dogs are watching TV), *humans* need to see real animals represented accurately and thoughtfully if we ever want our perspectives to shift.

## IX. CONCLUSION

It would be easy, even deceptively tempting, to box all nonhuman animal characters into these constructed identities as though understanding different modes of representing is the final destination, but my goal in categorizing animals is to open up different realms of thought, not to close them off. While I have mainly focused on establishing the parameters of each animal mode, I will now show how the different modes coexist and overlap in often surprising and contradictory ways using *The Swan Princess* as a case study. Produced by Rich Animation Studios in 1994, the classic film is often mistaken as a Disney production (and the director, Richard Rich, was a former Disney writer and director). Inspired by the Russian ballet *Swan Lake* by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, the story underwent some typical “Disneyfication” in order to make it appropriate and enjoyable for younger audiences; for example, the prince and princess in the ballet die together and ascend to heaven, whereas in the film the prince defeats the evil sorcerer so that Odette can live and the two can be married. The animators also chose to include animal characters in the film, who provide interesting contrast to Odette as a swan.

Odette is not the only character in the film to transform into a nonhuman animal; Rothbart, the evil sorcerer who curses her, also has the ability to transform into a “Great Animal,” which looks like a wolf-bat-dragon-rat hybrid, a chimera composed of features of traditionally reviled animals. It is fascinating that Rothbart chooses this form to take on at will, whereas Odette cannot control her transformations, which are dictated by the cycle of the moon, but she turns into a swan, an animal historically symbolic of grace, beauty, and love. This enforces a binary sense that male animality is a source of power, while feminine

animality is meek and submissive. Human-animal transformations can be quite revealing about beliefs about nonhuman animals, and they are quite common in the realm of animation, which as a medium allows an imaginative range of possibilities for depicting the physical transition between bodily states. Maleficent transforming into a dragon in Disney's 1959 *Sleeping Beauty* is one early example, where in an upward rush of flames and black shadows she grows into a towering beast. There is the classic moment of Ariel bursting through the waves in *The Little Mermaid* after transforming from her half-human, half-fish body into a full human, gloriously taking in her first (human) breath of fresh air; the celebratory nature of the scene literally elevates being human over being a mermaid, subhuman. These moments of metamorphosis generally convey strong feelings about the change of state; in *The Swan Princess*, Odette is visibly distressed when she is forced to change back into a swan, but Rothbart eagerly embraces his own transitions.

Odette's distress at being a nonhuman animal is not difficult to understand; not only is she prevented from participating in her previously human life, her physical safety is now at risk (more so than it was before, though I would argue that being a woman also engenders a constant state of risk). There is a persistent theme of hunting throughout the film; Prince Derek, Odette's love interest, knows that she was captured by a "Great Animal" and sets about learning to be the best hunter possible so that he can rescue her. One hunting practice scene involves a game in which the men of Derek's court dress up as various animals so that he can practice shooting them with padded, chalk dusted arrows like a paintball contest. The game is lively, competitive, and comical, not focused or somber like we might expect given the circumstances. The targets are all dressed as traditionally

hunted species: an elephant, a moose, a fox, a rabbit, a duck among them. Here we have a complex representation of *animals as food* while also actually being humans - a reverse anthropomorphism that reinforces the idea of hunting being a game rather than perverse sport that nonhuman animals do not and cannot consent to, a “game” where their lives are actually on the line. Later on, Derek is out searching for the “Great Animal”; having discovered that the evil creature might be a shapeshifter, he is about to kill a mouse (who is clearly a real mouse and is exhibiting obvious signs of terror) when he becomes aware of the presence of a swan. Convinced that the swan is the “Great Animal,” he tries to shoot her with his bow and arrow, not knowing that she is truly Odette. This comes uncomfortably close to addressing issues of men behaving in predatory ways towards women, but the film escapes such a critique by having Derek learn about Odette’s curse and develop a new plan to rescue and marry her. However, Derek is not the only one trying to help - in her time spent as a swan, Odette made her own nonhuman animal friends who devotedly try to help her escape her confining curse.

Speed, a turtle, and Jean-Bob, a frog, are inhabitants of the lake by Rothbart’s castle. Odette can speak to them and understand them speaking back regardless of whether she is in swan or human state. Jean-Bob is convinced that he is a human prince trapped in the body of a frog, and he believes that a kiss from Odette would restore him to human form (a belief proven false at the conclusion of the film, when she bestows upon him a friendly kiss and no magical transformation ensues). Notably, he walks bipedally, but Speed does not; he is slow and awkward on land with a deep, drawling voice, and it is only revealed halfway through that he is an extremely fast, adept swimmer (in spite of his tortoise-like body).

Together, these two nonhuman animal companions fit as *animals as sidekicks*; they are unfailingly loyal to Odette, but little to no focus is given to their own lives and desires (except for Jean-Bob's wish to become human). There is also the uncreatively named Puffin, an Irish puffin who crash-lands by the lake where Odette is confined; she cares for his wound and he becomes devotedly loyal to her, a third sidekick to further along the plot with his comical militaristic attitude.

To demonstrate the complex transitions between animal modes that make animated animals so crucial to understand, I want to focus on one scene in particular where Odette in her swan form generates a plan to steal a map from Rothbart's castle with the help of her nonhuman friends. Set to the upbeat tune of the song "No Fear," the four animals venture into the castle while Rothbart is away but his vigilant assistant remains. Bridget is a short, elderly woman who seems to delight in causing mischief; she is also mute, which is of particular interest seeing as the nonhuman animals in the film's universe are not (though they only speak to Odette). She chases the animals at every turn, and once the animals secure the map, they devise a whispered plan for how to keep it away from her (and escape alive). The chase becomes a game of keep away in which the nonhuman animals both willingly and unwillingly become objects to achieve their goal. At one point, when Bridget has the map rolled up in her hand, she tosses Jean-Bob into the air and hits him with it as though serving a tennis ball. Perhaps because frogs are already associated with springing leaps, Jean-Bob appears very flexible and bouncy and is seemingly uninjured in the process. Before he can land and recover, Puffin (who inexplicably procured an actual tennis racquet) hits him back to Bridget so that he can retrieve the map. Shortly after, Speed takes

the rolled up map inside his shell and Bridget uses a wet mop to sweep him across the floor like a hockey puck. Then Jean-Bob and Puffin sled down a spiral staircase on his upturned belly to make their escape. The transience of *animals as objects* here is in stark comparison to the mode's appearance at the conclusion of the film; when Odette has been restored to her human form and she and Derek are finally married, her wedding dress is adorned with swan feathers - enough in number that it seems highly likely that acquiring those feathers for decoration would have required killing at least one swan. In spite of the fact that Odette spent half of the film as a swan and her close friends are nonhuman animals, once she is back in her "correct" body, animal bodies seem not to matter anymore.

With the film dancing delicately around the idea of nonhuman animals as persons, it is not surprising that there are moments when the animal characters seem aware of their nonhuman identity (and subhuman status). In an emotional moment of worry, Jean-Bob tells Puffin, "Remember! If anything happens to her, I'll have you whipped, flogged, put on the rack and then have your back legs fried in butter!" This acknowledgement of frogs' perceived status as food allows Jean-Bob to claim his frog (and French) identity, though we can assume that real frogs don't know of their food/culture relationship with humans (though it at least seems likely that they perceive us as potential predators). There is also a moment at the end of the film, after Odette gave Jean-Bob his non-magical kiss, when she asks if Speed would like a kiss too. He replies in his slow, deep voice, "Nah, I'm happy as a turtle." This offers an explanation for why Jean-Bob so desperately wants to be a human (and not just a human, but a prince) - he's *not* happy as a frog, because he understands the oppressive power dynamics between humans and nonhuman animals and desires to be in a

position of power rather than one of vulnerability. Speed, on the other hand, may feel less threatened by humanity; while humans do eat turtles, this seems less widely known in Western culture than the French delicacy of frog legs. Either way, these small moments of *animals as themselves* focus less on what it is *like* to be a nonhuman animal, but what it *means* to be one. I stress this distinction because real animals are not necessarily aware of status in relation to humans - after all, why would their view of themselves be anthropocentric? John Berger writes that “[t]he eyes of the animal when they consider a man are attentive and wary... He does not reserve a special look for man... [but] man becomes aware of himself returning the look.”<sup>84</sup> The desire of the animated animal to become human thus seems likely a product of our own anthropocentrism and a failure to recognize that *real* nonhuman animals have their own valid experiences and desires.

There are many other ways of representing nonhuman animals outside of the modes I have described that would be worth examining in greater detail; in my effort to focus on real animals, I avoided discussing mythical creatures and tried to steer away from *animals as humans* (like the animals in *Robin Hood*, *Zootopia*, and *The Lion King*, who are clearly stand-ins for humans). While both of these areas could be potentially illuminating in terms of how we think about real animals, we must be careful when stepping in those new directions. With fantasy animals, it is difficult to relate them to real animals since they are mostly drawn from literary precedents and imaginatively embellished, though they may be rooted in bodies or behaviors known in real animals. DreamWorks’ *How To Train Your Dragon* provides an example of why it is so difficult to make connections to real

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<sup>84</sup>John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?” in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 2-3.



perspectives on animals. At a glance, it would be easy to argue that the surface narrative contains an overt animal rights message. Hiccup, a young misfit Viking living on an island constantly assaulted by dragons, captures one with the intent of killing him to earn respect from his community. However, he finds himself unable to kill the defenseless creature and instead frees him from his trap. Later, he admits that “I wouldn't kill him because he looked as frightened as I was. I looked at him, and I saw myself” (see Figure 9).

After letting the dragon go free, he keeps coming back to observe him, realizing that his trap damaged the dragon's tail to the point where he was incapable of flight. He slowly gains the dragon's trust and devotes himself to fixing his wounded tail by building a new one from scratch, but the only way for the prosthetic to work is for Hiccup to ride the dragon (who he named Toothless) and control the position of the tail with a complex device. Meanwhile, the rest of his tribe expects him to kill a dragon in the training ring in front of the whole village to prove himself as a Viking warrior, but when the moment comes, he throws his weapon aside and approaches the dragon peacefully, announcing to his tribe that “[t]hey're not what we think they are. We don't have to kill them.” The plan goes horribly awry, but at the end of the film he has finally convinced the rest of the village that dragons can be friendly, faithful companions, and converted them all into dragon riders.

While this is a powerful message about reconsidering socially informed views about other living beings and advocating for a societal perspective shift to expand the moral community (something that the animal liberation movement aims to do), the validity of the message breaks down upon considering the way other nonhuman animals are treated in

the film. The only other identifiable animals take the form of food (mainly fish and fowl) or objects (the Vikings are all adorned with fur vests and horn-decorated helmets, and wooly sheep roam the pastures around the village, probably as both sources of food and clothing). Dragons, it seems, nest high on the Great Chain of Being, above all other nonhuman animals - and perhaps even at the level of humans; the anthropocentric, speciesist hierarchy of real animals remains unchallenged.

Film analysis and critical animal studies both rely on continuously asking questions, challenging assumptions and biases, and reevaluating answers, which makes it hard to draw this paper to a traditional conclusion; rather than coming up with a single clear answer to the question of how real animals are represented in animated films, I have come up with many, and in the process unearthed a complexity of overlapping representational modes that speak to the numerous perceptions we, as a society, have about nonhuman animals. While it was not the focus of my research, I also tried to convey a sense of why understanding these perspectives matters to real animals; untangling human prejudices is not merely a stimulating mental exercise, it is a necessary step towards generating dialogue between filmmakers and audiences about the ethics of representing nonhuman animals. We have seen on the one hand the “Bambi Syndrome,” the anti-hunting movement largely inspired by Disney’s *Bambi*; on the other hand, we have also seen what we might call the “Nemo Effect,” where sales of real clownfish escalated after the release of Pixar’s *Finding Nemo*.

This trend can be seen continuing today with the release of the sequel *Finding Dory* (Pixar Animation Studios 2016). Dory is a blue tang, a species that was previously unable to

be bred in captivity, but because of the projected demand for blue tangs as pets due to the release of the film, researchers worked out how to breed them in tanks for the first time.<sup>85</sup> Celebrated as a success for conservation, little thought was given to what this would mean for the individual fish, whether caught from the ocean or bred in captivity. In spite of a petition that circulated asking Disney/Pixar make a statement in the opening credits about not purchasing real blue tangs or other marine animals as pets, the producers were silent on the issue until after the film's release, when they published educational graphics about not buying fish from the ocean.<sup>86</sup> King urges her readers not to forget:

It happened when the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movies came out; at one point, 90 percent of purchased turtles were estimated to have died in the United States alone. It happened in the wake of Beverly Hills Chihuahua — and the tiny dogs paid the price when they were abandoned at high rates. It happened with Finding Nemo, when children clamored for clownfish. Some children, seeking to give their new pets freedom through the same route used by Nemo in the film, flushed their fish down the toilet.<sup>87</sup>

My thesis began the work of understanding how nonhuman animals are represented in animated films; it is now time to begin researching the direct impact these films have on real animals, and to consider how we might take responsibility for the negative consequences and encourage the positive ones.

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<sup>85</sup> Ret Talbot, "'Dory' bred in captivity for the first time," *National Geographic*, July 19, 2016, accessed November 18, 2016, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/07/wildlife-blue-tang-aquarium-trade/>

<sup>86</sup> Kelsey Bourgeois, "Tell fans to find Dory, not buy her," accessed November 18, 2016, [http://www.thepetitionsite.com/292/356/845/disney-tell-fans-to-find-dory-not-buy-her./](http://www.thepetitionsite.com/292/356/845/disney-tell-fans-to-find-dory-not-buy-her/)

<sup>87</sup> Barbara J. King, "Please, Let's Not Find Dory," *National Public Radio*, June 3, 2016, accessed November 18, 2016, [http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/06/03/480556852/please-lets-not-find-dory?utm\\_source=twitter.com&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=movies&utm\\_term=artsculture&utm\\_content=20160603](http://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2016/06/03/480556852/please-lets-not-find-dory?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=movies&utm_term=artsculture&utm_content=20160603)

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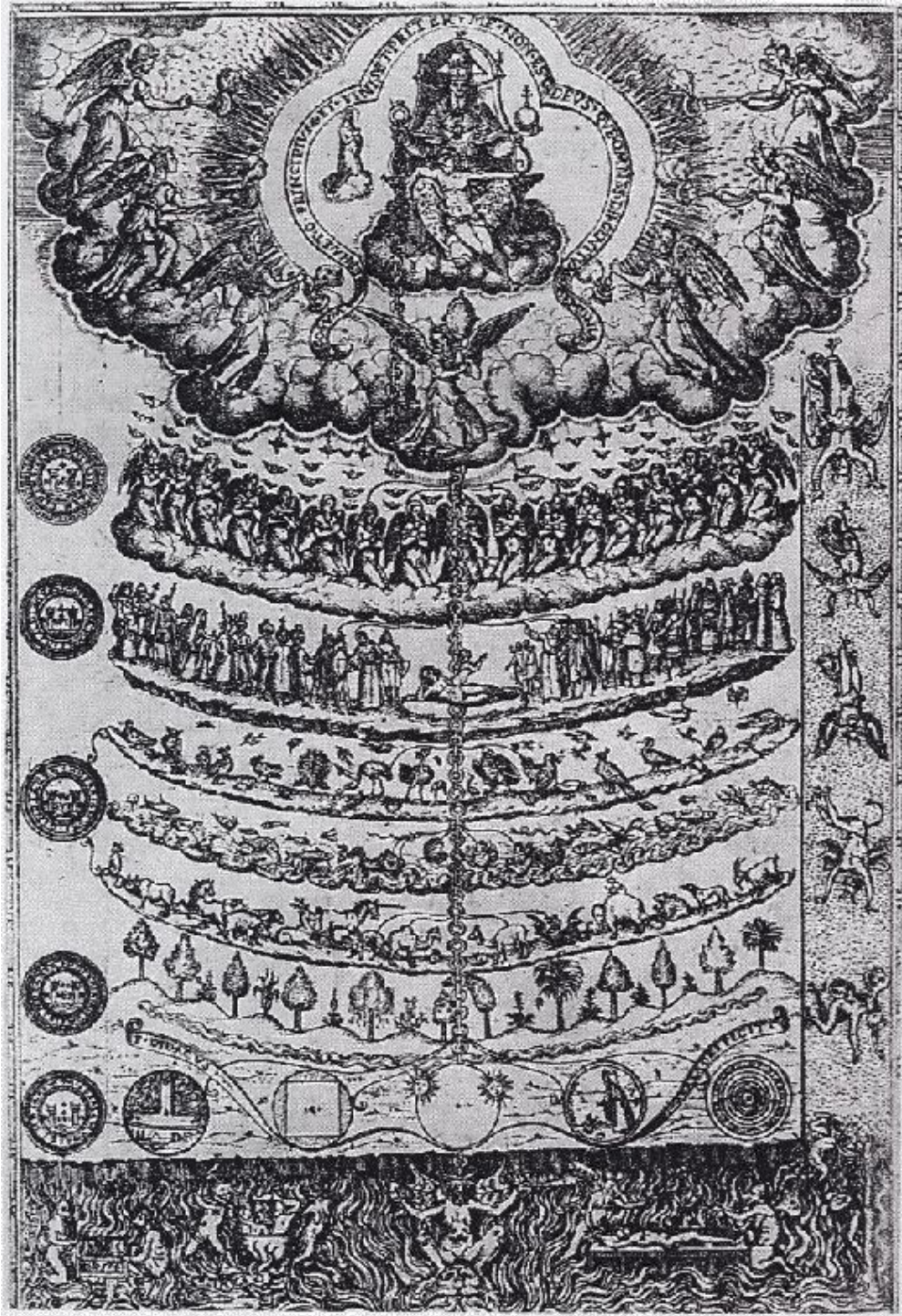
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## XII. FIGURES



**Figure 1.** Didacus Valades, drawing of the great chain of being, from *Rhetorica Christiana*, 1579. Wikimedia Commons, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_chain\\_of\\_being#/media/File:Great\\_Chain\\_of\\_Being\\_2.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_chain_of_being#/media/File:Great_Chain_of_Being_2.png) (accessed November 13, 2016).



**Figure 2.** Shrek and Fiona make live animal balloons. Screenshot from *Shrek*, directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, DreamWorks Pictures, 2001.



**Figure 3.** Sebastian the crab comes face to face with a decapitated fish head in the palace kitchen. Screenshot from *The Little Mermaid*, directed by John Musker and Howard Ashman, Walt Disney Pictures, 1989.



**Figure 4.** An unnamed kitten, terrified, clings to the ceiling after being forced into a frog hat by Charlotte. Screenshot from *The Princess and the Frog*, directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, Walt Disney Pictures, 2009.



**Figure 5.** Meeko the raccoon feigns using Flit, the hummingbird, as a sword in a fight against Percy the pug. Screenshot from *Pocahontas*, directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, Walt Disney Pictures, 1995.



**Figure 6.** The opening scene of *Chicken Run* hauntingly captures the feel of a concentration camp or high security prison when first introducing the viewer to the chicken farm. Screenshot from *Chicken Run*, directed by Peter Lord and Nick Park, Aardman Animations, 2000.



**Figure 7.** To create a diversion, Terkina (the gorilla) and Tantor (the elephant) steal human clothing, generating a comically unsuccessful disguise. Screenshot from *Tarzan*, directed by Kevin Lima and Chris Buck, Walt Disney Pictures, 1999.





**Figure 8.** Kerchak, the silverback (chief male) of the group of gorillas, performs a classic chestbeating display in front of Jane; the differences between humans and gorillas are made starkly clear in this scene. Screenshot from *Tarzan*, directed by Kevin Lima and Chris Buck, Walt Disney Pictures, 1999.



**Figure 9.** Hiccup realizes he can't kill the dragon he captured even though such an act would make him a hero to his tribe. Screenshot from *How to Train Your Dragon*, directed by Chris Sanders and Dean DeBlois, DreamWorks Animation, 2012.