

CINEMA & LIBERATIONISM

THE PRESENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE IDEOLOGIES OF LIBERATIONISM, ANTI-SPECIESISM,
AND COMPASSION FOR NONHUMAN ANIMALS IN CONTEMPORARY FILM CULTURE

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Let's start off with this short clip from *Pocahontas*:
<http://youtu.be/HvvZ1TEQRB8?t=48s> (00:48 - 1:07).

Pocahontas sings, "You think the only people who are people are the people who look and think like you," and the image is of a *bear*. This little moment is directly saying that the bear is a nonhuman person (and by lowering his gun, she condemns violence towards that nonhuman person).

How many colors are there in a **field of grass** to an infant who does not know the term '**green**'?

Now, in order to understand the significance of anti-speciesist moments like this in cinema, we should make sure we have an understanding of how discriminations like speciesism come about in the first place.

Stan Brakhage says: "How many colors are there in a field of grass to an infant who does not know the term 'green'?"

Names for colours reduce the entire part of the light spectrum that is visible to the human eye into slices, this one called "green". Words, ultimately, are reductive categorical labels used for basic verbal communication, and since it's something we don't tend to actively acknowledge and talk about like I am now, we forget that there really is no such thing as, say, "human" but only a collection of individual, nonidentical beings who are similar enough (as we have decided) to be thrown under the homogenizing umbrella term of "human" so that we can communicate a basic concept.



So a young child with particularly dark skin pigmentation may recognize that their friend has much lighter skin than theirs, but until someone teaches them to identify their friend as “white” then the child of course has no concept of racial boundaries and only sees a continuum from ivory to ebony. It’s her adult community who teach her to draw a line in the middle of that spectrum and say that all humans on one side are “white” and all the humans on the other side are “black”, even though no two individuals reductively identified by the category terms “black” or “white” have completely identical colouration, and that line in the middle is a grey area that we really can’t definitively negotiate.

The only difference is *your attitude*.



Cherished



**Confined, Exploited, Abused,
Violently Slaughtered**

Now, if your family raised you consuming products of animal exploitation, and you are now an animal liberationist (and as part of that, a vegan, as we can't demand that others release their slaves if we ourselves have slaves (which today means to pay others to use slaves to produce products for us), whether exploited for food, clothing, entertainment, or unconsenting testing), then at some point you realized that against your own intuition, your culture had taught you to be speciesist, and you figured out that that was wrong. If speciesism were genuinely inherent in us to the degree that the suffering of a being who could be classified by whatever constructed category (which already makes this problematic) didn't matter at all to us, then 1) What's the formula that makes humans, dogs, cats, and any endangered species morally valuable, but not the animals we have placed in farms and labelled as "food" animals (i.e. punch or kill one dog = "criminal" but confine and mutilate and violently exploit and kill thousands of pigs = "farmer"), and 2) Why doesn't all human society have the same standards for what animal groups matter morally (some east Asian cultures eat dogs), and 3) Why won't parents show their children footage of a factory farm or slaughterhouse? If we fundamentally don't care about a pig's suffering then why would it hurt a child to see a pig suffer?

It only doesn't hurt many adults because we've built up defense mechanisms to prevent ourselves from *witnessing* their pain even if we do watch "From Farm to Fridge" as our society has drilled into us that "this is the way it has to be".



We do not see the world by default through speciesist blinders. You and I and my dog companions and the human child in a sweatshop on the other side of the globe and the chicken next in line for the live boiler at a slaughterhouse on the east coast and the mosquito in the grass outside and the pear tree in my backyard all exist in a vast and complex biological spectrum. Does a rainbow look like we draw them as kids, with one of each of seven or eight colours lined up beside each other? Or is a rainbow a continuum? All earthlings are part of a spectrum -- we're made of the same stardust and we share DNA from our common ancestors -- and any boxes we create for linguistic labels are an entirely human construct, and constructs have to be created and taught, we aren't born with them, only with the potential to be able to learn them. You are unique, you are not identical to any other member of the homo sapiens classification of life forms. The term "human" is just a way of reducing a mass of individual beings to a group that can be linguistically communicated about.



As liberationists we realize that it doesn't matter how different someone is from us - if they suffer, as Peter Singer says, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. The homo sapiens's original, infantile, pre-social-conditioning disposition does not limit and shut off our empathetic capacities based on species classifications that we need to learn later, but is a disposition of compassion for and (at the very least a desire for non-needless-violence towards) all beings recognizably capable of suffering. If a young human child sees any animal in pain right in front of them, they try to help or they cry for help, and at the very least the concern they exhibit for the injured animal demonstrates that they have no trouble empathetically engaging with that suffering. Notably, many adult humans who see an animal in need right in front of them still have that impulse to help.

(I came across some time ago but could not find the image of a first responder at a highway accident involving a truck of young pigs on the way to slaughter -- this medic, against the rules, impulsively helped out a pig in need, despite the fact that he was on his way to be murdered.)



Which is why these fragments of anti-speciesist and liberationist ideology can be found left and right in our film culture – film being our most prominent and pervasive form of storytelling. Each little expression of nonspeciesism is a glimpse of our “true selves” (so to speak), sneaking through the repressive veneer of culturally indoctrinated speciesism.



phil royster 2010

In Pixar, humans do not have a monopoly on personhood. Obviously there is some projection going on with the toys and cars, and the animals are anthropomorphized, but the point is that Pixar refuses to allow only beings bound by the homo sapiens classification of earthlings to be people.



In Pixar's *Up* we have friendships between humans, dogs, and birds -- and friends are someones to love, not somethings to use.



In Pixar's *Finding Nemo* obviously Nemo wants to escape the confinement of the tank and get back to the ocean.

Then there's this scene, with clear liberationist sentiment:
<http://youtu.be/sUTt0LMhyas>.



In Pixar's *Ratatouille* we have this rat who wants to break the speciesist boundary line that says only humans can cook, and of course the rat (Remy) becomes friends with the human (Linguini).

Linguini is also, before befriending Remy, unable to dispose of him in the river as he was told to.

This scene speaks for itself: <http://youtu.be/4b1B30FeYOE>.



In *Bambi*, the hunter is the bad guy.

See: http://youtu.be/-eHr-9_6hCg.



Tazan has this beautiful little scene between Tarzan, as a child, and his adoptive gorilla mother, Kala, when Tarzan becomes upset that he doesn't seem to fit in with the gorilla tribe. His adoptive mother consoles him by telling him that their similarities matter more than their species differences.

Tarzan: Why am I so different?

Kala: Because you're covered with mud.

Tarzan: No! Kerchak said I don't belong in the family.

Kala: Never mind what Kerchak said. Now hold still.

Tarzan: But look at me!

Kala: I am, Tarzan. And do you know what I see? I see two eyes, like mine, and a nose, somewhere. Ah, here. Two ears, and let's see, what else?

Tarzan: Two hands?

Kala: That's right. Close your eyes. Now forget what you see. (Places his hand on his heart.) What do you feel?

Tarzan: My heart.

Kala: Come here. (Brings his head next to her heart.)

Tarzan: Your heart.

Kala: See, they're exactly the same. Kerchak just can't see that.



In *The Lady and the Tramp*, the bad guy is Animal Control.

In *The Fox and the Hound*, the bad guy is a hunter again, and these two kids are able to be "The Best of Friends" despite, as the song lyrics go, their "natural boundaries" (though as I explained earlier, boundaries are constructs and all beings exist in an evolutionary continuum).

In *The Little Mermaid*, Sebastien the crab has a terrifying encounter in a human's kitchen, and we empathize with the vulnerable crab, not the cruel human.

And *101 Dalmatians* is entirely about liberation because the plotline is about this horrible villain who wants to kill these puppies just to make a coat. (And if we care about dogs this much, the only thing preventing us from caring about any other nonhuman animal are the blinders of speciesism that our culture has built up in us.)



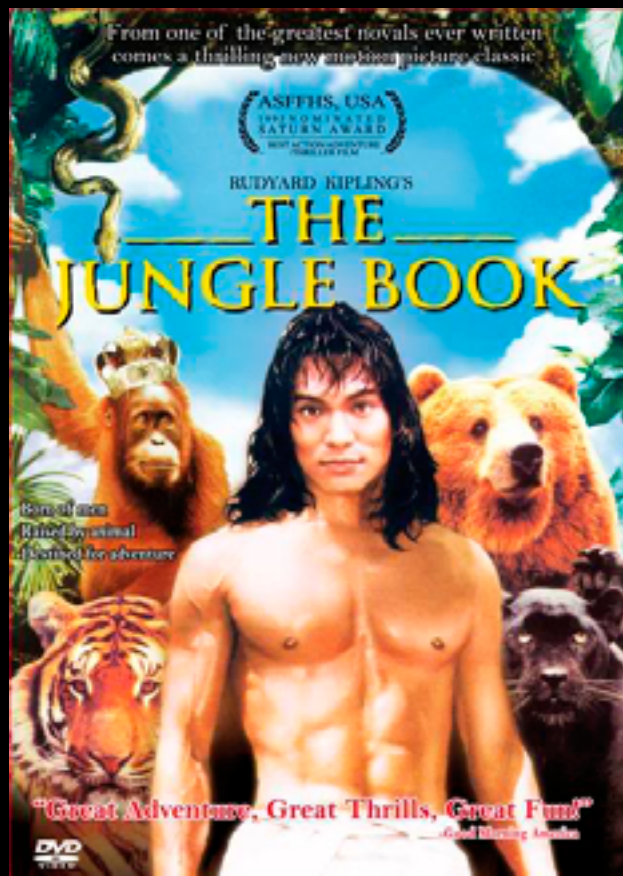
In *Brother Bear*, a young human Inuit hunter kills a bear needlessly and is punished for that; and his punishment is to become a bear to gain a bear's perspective; and in the end he decides to stay a bear rather than turn back into a human because despite the fact that he was born human and this little bear cub was born a bear, the little bear has become is adopted brother and needs him.

Spirit is about a wild mustang, and it's terrible for him when he is captured by humans, and then he is horrified to see this camp where horses are being branded and enslaved (and worse still, they don't seem to care -- they've been "broken"); and the happy ending is his freedom.

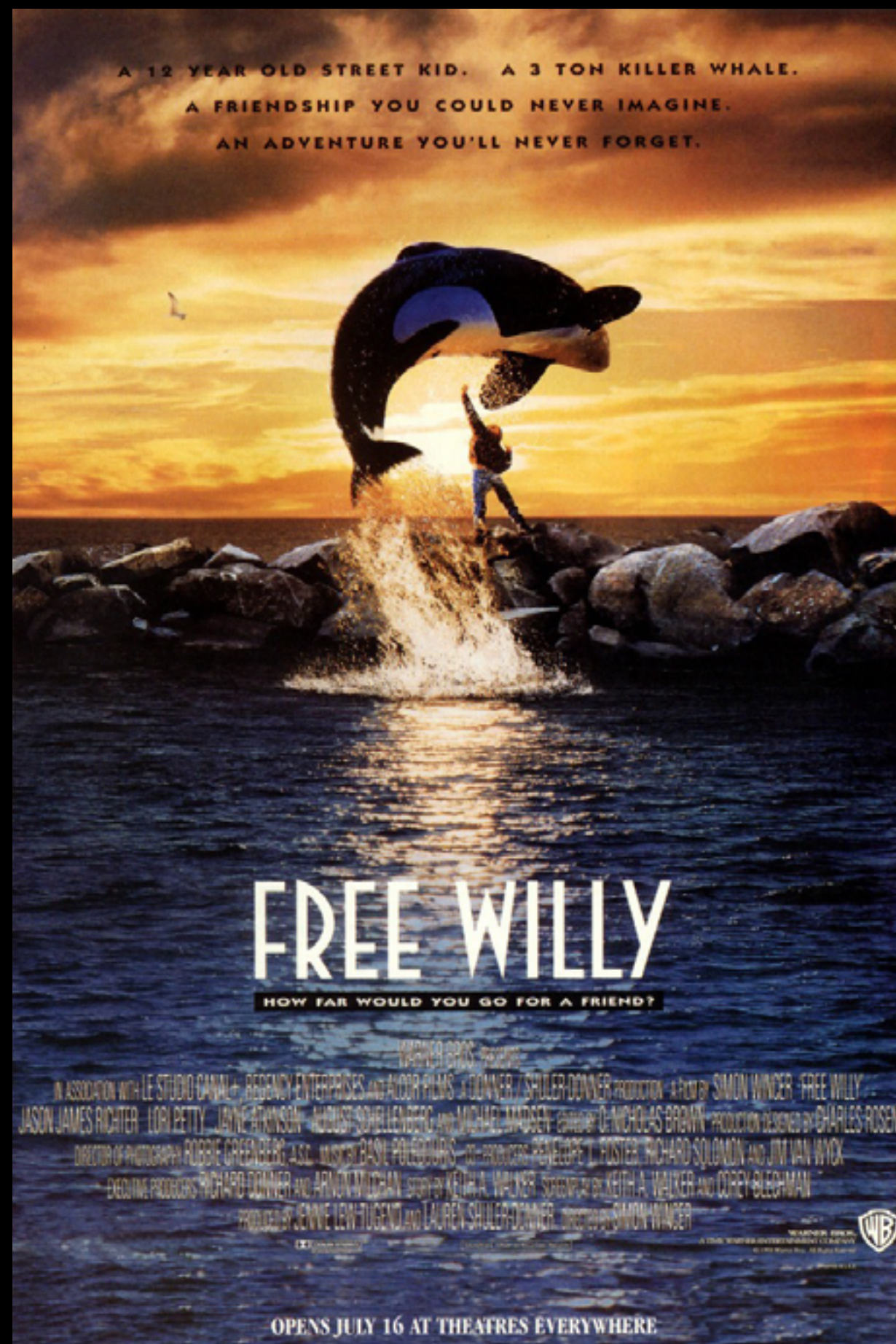


In *Aladdin*, Jasmine yearns for freedom and she symbolically releases a cage of birds: <http://youtu.be/l6V1cl6MY50>.

That analogy would not work if we did not recognize the desire of the birds to be free.



In *The Jungle Book*, not only is Mowgli's family a wolf pack and a panther and a bear, but when Baloo the bear is shot it's a tragedy (and we're all very happy to learn later that the doctor was able to save him); and there's this horrific scene in which Mowgli walks into the trophy room of a "civilized" hunter, and the cinematography and soundscape make it scary and uncomfortable to look at the decapitated heads of needlessly, greedily murdered beings on the wall; and Mowgli says that in the jungle, it is only okay to kill either "to eat or to stop from being eaten" (which is to say, it is only morally justifiable to take a life when that killing is necessary to continuing one's own life).



Just the trailer of *Free Willy* speaks volumes in and of itself:
<http://youtu.be/Y6bSTWtAo0U>.

(Though in an exemplary demonstration of cognitive dissonance, not only are there of course still many cetaceans in captivity for our entertainment (except in India!), but Keiko, the orca exploited for this film that manifests a clear desire for animal liberation, was not released until several years later. *Keiko: The Untold Story* tells his true story.)



In *Rio*, the villains are the criminals who try to capture, cage, and chain the two blue macaws in order to sell them for a profit; and the happy ending is that the birds and their friends are safe and free in a wildlife sanctuary (run by a human friend of one of the macaws).



Babe renders this little pig with personhood, so by the end we cannot objectify his body as “bacon” (as “something to eat”). He’s not just “a pig” anymore, he is a nonhuman person with a story.

In one very scary and sad scene, Babe finds the kill shed, full of tools built specifically to enact violence, and becomes very sad -- as does the audience empathizing with him.

In another scene some of the farm animals are gathered around the window of the human house, lamenting the death of their friend, a bird whose body is being eaten at the humans’ dinner table.

It is also worth noting that James Cromwell went vegan because of this film, as he recognized how incredibly dissonant it was to care for these animals who he was working with all day and then sit down to a meal of the dead (intentionally killed) bodies (and secretions) of other (violently exploited) animals.



Similarly, in *Charlotte's Web*, we develop an empathetic attachment to Wilbur the pig, and there is a scene in which he cries, repeatedly, "I don't want to die!" The happy ending is his freedom from slaughter.

There is also a song in the cartoon film adaptation of the book with anti-speciesist "We've Got Lots in Common Where it Counts" sentiment like we saw in *Tarzan*.



In one brief moment in *Despicable Me 2*, while the main character is feeling happy and is being good to all the humans he encounters as he goes through town, he also helps a family of ducks cross a busy road -- the implication being that if someone is morally good, they're not just good to human animals, they're good to all animals in need.

Of course, in a startling moment of cognitive dissonance, another scene has him roasting the (featherless and faceless (easily objectifiable)) bodies of chickens on a skewer.



Pokémon is FULL of nonspeciesist ideology.

This moment in the First Movie is exemplary of that attitude:
<http://youtu.be/eUi2XEJBf9U?t=37s>.



Big Miracle is based on a true event called “Operation Breakthrough” in which humans really cared about these whales and a major effort was made to free them from the ice because a story was told about them, and it is really, really hard to objectify someone when you know their story, as sharing their story elevated them in human minds from “whales” to the unique, individual, nonhuman persons (with a personalities!) who they are.

“Whats” don’t have stories, but “whos” do.



In *King Kong*, this beautiful giant gorilla is presented as a majestic and compassionate being, and it's an act of selfish evil when he is captured and his freedom is stripped from him for some humans' profits. Because we come to engage with him as we do with human persons in movies, his death (which is ultimately his murder) is a tragedy.

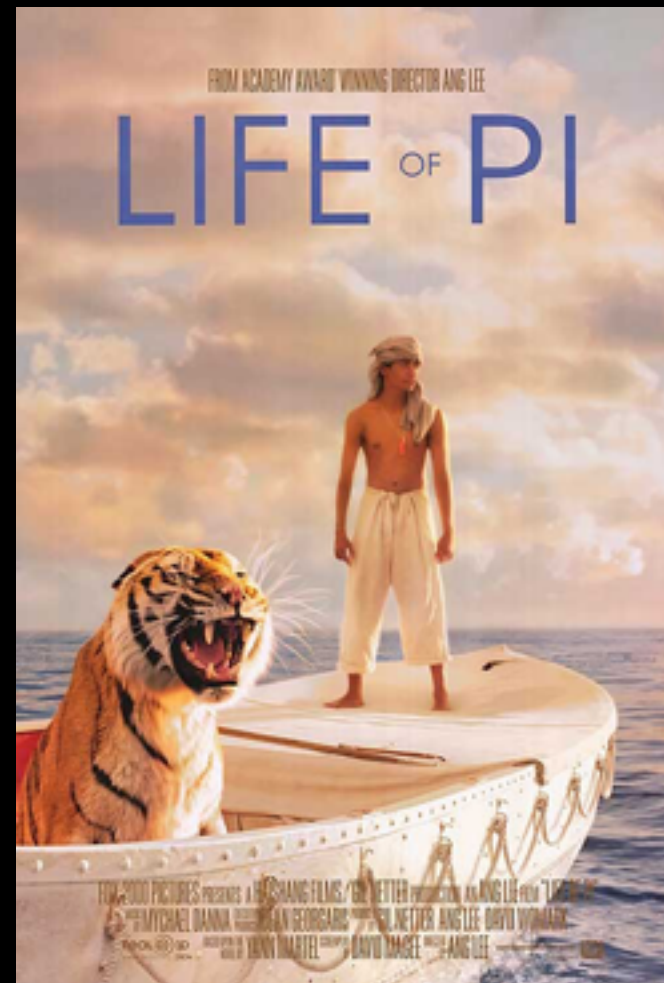


Legally Blonde 2 is a moral criticism of animal testing (for cosmetics at least) and this clip exhibits the nonspeciesist ideology of saying well, if you wouldn't let it happen to the dog companion you love at home, how could you condone anyone doing it to any other animal: <http://cli.ps/hr7M>.

And there's a liberation march in it.



Hidalgo ends -- as the story it is based in does -- with the rider using his winnings to buy and free a herd of wild mustang, and releasing Hidalgo with them.



The vegetarian characters who refuse to consume the flesh of other sentient beings in *Seven Pounds* and *Life of Pi* are depicted as morally good humans.

Two of the seven “worthy” humans in *Seven Pounds* are vegetarian, and compassion for animals is key to Pi’s development.



The Star Trek franchise is full of nonspeciesist principle, though it is largely bound to humanoids. Spock's mindmeld with a whale in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* is a notable exception to the monopoly that humanoids in the Star Trek universe have on personhood.

And these three moments demonstrate overt moralities of nonviolence and liberationism:

TNG: Riker: "We no longer enslave animals for food purposes. They do eat meat, but from replicators and not from killed animals."

ENT: T'Pol: "You humans claim to be enlightened, yet you still consume the flesh of animals."

VOY: Janeway [re: vivisection]: "What you're doing isn't self defense. It's the exploitation of another species for your own benefit. My people decided a long time ago that that was unacceptable - even in the name of scientific progress."

"FREEDOM IS THE
RIGHT OF ALL
SENTIENT BEINGS."

-OPTIMUS PRIME



In *Transformers*, leader of the Autobot good-guys Optimus Prime declares freedom the right of ALL sentient beings.

The ideology is there, it's just a matter of application.



Cloud Atlas does not have any directly nonhuman animal liberationist content, but two of the six storylines are all about liberation for a group of beings discriminated into violent exploitation, and the entire film carries the theme of breaking boundaries. Note the quote, "All boundaries are conventions, waiting to be transcended." The film is very much about seeing a rainbow as a continuous spectrum rather than as a set of reductive single-colour slices.



Lastly, *Black Beauty* (which was a personal favourite of mine as a child) is the story of a horse, whose life is sometimes one of kindness and at other times a life of cruelty, and it is told through his eyes. The end clip is a tear-jerker because we recognize his personhood: <http://youtu.be/yBJhnBDHiE0>.



It's also worth mentioning that carnivorous animals are often framed as villainous – ultimately the “sharp teeth” (the monster-ified t-rexes and raptors in *The Land Before Time*) are just doing what they need to to continue their own lives, but we almost always take the side of the prey animal and frame the carnivore as morally bad for wanting to hurt the innocent vulnerable creatures who it is our impulse to protect.

Also notice the overwhelming frequency with which kids films have animals – because human children love animals. Before the speciesist conditioning of our adulthood sets in, we care about all animals.

And notice too that almost all violence against animals portrayed in a narrative film (for audiences of any age) happens offscreen -- the violence is implied but not explicitly depicted. Look for that next time you watch *The Walking Dead*, because you only see the animal's bodies, not the act of violence that killed them (which is the same situation in our reality -- “meat” doesn't look anything like the violence that produced it). Also, interestingly, it is FAR easier for us to watch violence enacted against guilty/evil human bodies than against the bodies of innocent, vulnerable animals outside the homo sapiens classification.



So I personally think of this inherent desire to not cause unnecessary (if any) suffering in any being often when I face even the most resistant of speciesists because ultimately if they can be moved by the suffering of a human being, the only thing stopping them from caring about the suffering of any other being are the blinders that have been pushed into them by ads for leather bags and the “food” (which looks nothing like the violence that produced it) that their parents placed in front of them growing up. Suffering is suffering and our empathy does not stop at the homo sapiens boundary line any more than the anatomical attribute of two eyes does. It might be harder to empathetically engage with a fish than a chimpanzee as the difference between our faces become more distinct, but if we are capable of empathetic engagement at all and someone in front of us is suffering, we can probably see it. We just pull blinders over that ability because of the speciesist status quo that forces constant pressure on us through advertisements and, moreover, the sight of all the people around us all day every day eating coagulated mammary secretions and wearing someone else’s skin on their feet. Now I don’t think that ignorance is bliss so much as indifference is bliss, and everyone knows that challenging the status quo is painful – most especially anyone who has decided to open our eyes to and opt out of the institutionalized speciesist violence that takes more lives in the name of a superficial habit of pleasure every single minute than any of us has the mental capacity to actually conceive of as anything other than a number.



But this is just it: If speciesism can be learned, it can be forgotten. Racism and sexism have been to a very large degree forgotten in our society - no matter what racism or sexism you see, no human animal is any white male human's property any longer, and that legal property status is exactly what we are trying to abolish for all animals with the liberation movement. Those speciesist blinders were put up and they can be pulled down. Ultimately, as vegans and liberationists, we didn't learn to care about animals, we unlearned our conditioned indifference towards specific animals. (A phenomenon aided by the fact that a piece of cheese looks nothing like a baby cow screaming for his mother from his immobilizing crate before his throat is ripped open so humans can suck the milk out of his mother's nipples with lacerating machines in his place.)

Deep down, we're all this kid: <http://youtu.be/SrU03da2arE>.



In my eyes these anti-speciesist and at times clearly liberationist undercurrents in art indicate that there is a great deal of hope for every human we talk to about liberation. (Every human who isn't a psychopath at least and happily they are few and far between.) Likely, the speciesist mindset of most of the people you know already has a few holes in it – for dogs and cats, maybe for chimpanzees and other primates, for the endangered species whose habits we destroy in order to violently exploit decidedly “edible” animals, and probably for any animal in need right in front of them. So use that. They are already on the side of compassion, they already want to live cruelty-free, they're just not quite connecting the dots. So get at those holes in the wall of anthropocentric speciesism that is preventing them from recognizing the violence and suffering for which they are responsible every time they purchase an animal product (or as I like to say, “a product of animal commodification and exploitation”), and tear that barrier down.

Everyone's already a liberationist at heart. It's just up to us to find a way to show them that.

"If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration" (Peter Singer).

EXCELLENT FILMS DIRECTLY AND ENTIRELY ABOUT ANIMAL LIBERATION:

EARTHLINGS (FREE ON EARTHLINGS.COM)
BOLD NATIVE (FREE ON BOLDNATIVE.COM)

BLACKFISH (STORY OF TILIKUM)