

ANIMAL HORROR CINEMA

GENRE, HISTORY
AND CRITICISM

Edited by
KATARINA GREGERSDOTTER,
JOHAN HÖGLUND and
NICKLAS HALLÉN



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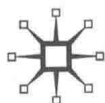
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Animal Horror Cinema

*We dedicate this volume to all animals; those harmed and
those unharmed during the making of films*

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1

Introduction

Katarina Gregersdotter, Nicklas Hållén and Johan Höglund

'Electrocuting an Elephant'

On May 28, 1902, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported that the circus elephant Topsy, or Topsy, had grabbed a man by the name of James Fielding Blount and trampled him to death in a fit of rage after having been taunted with an empty glass of whisky. Blount was a 'hanger on' at the circus and had been warned to stay away from Topsy, described by her handlers as an intemperate or 'ugly' elephant. Blount had not heeded the warning, and Topsy had 'without the slightest preliminary warning [...] raised him on high, the glass still waving in his hand, and hurled him down upon the hard earth before her [...]. Then there was a crushing, crunching noise and everything was quiet' (Anon., 1902, p. 1).

Topsy was brought to the US from Southeast Asia in 1877 and was initially marketed as the first US-born elephant. She was probably named after a slave girl in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Daly, p. 16), a character who like the elephant had been separated from her mother at an early age. This is one of many ways in which Topsy was anthropomorphised by marketing and the media. In the press reports that followed Blount's death, the elephant was even attributed distinctly human agency. After having killed Blount, Topsy was chained and her owner Emery 'stepped up to the elephant and explained to her what she had done'. Then, Emery is reported to have declared that 'she knows as well as a human being what she has done'. Indeed, an *Eagle* reporter observed that 'at 10 o'clock she was standing very quietly with every appearance of sorrow and dejection' (p. 1).

Despite the remorse recorded here by *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, the killing of Blount turned Topsy into a notoriety and, in the eyes of the public, an even uglier elephant. The fact is that her handler at the Coney

Island amusement park where she was housed had repeatedly used her to terrorise park workers and even rode Topsy into the local police station. After a number of incidents, and rumours that Topsy had killed at least three people (Anon. 2, 1903, p. 1), it was decided that Topsy must be put to death. This was cast not simply as euthanasia, but as a form of punishment. As Michael Daly has observed, 'ugly' elephants were said to "deserve" punishment, even more of the brutality that had given rise to the behaviour in the first place. They were thought to need to have the badness beaten out of them, to be taught a lesson, to be completely subjugated' (Daly, p. 65). In view of her many transgressions, Topsy thus needed to be 'executed', a word that was widely used in the newspaper reports on the incident. Consequently, she was put to death on January 4, 1903, in front of an audience of invited guests.

Two technologies, both developed by Thomas Edison, converged on the execution of Topsy. The first was electrocution. This was invented by Thomas Edison in an effort to prove that the AC current championed by George Westinghouse was more dangerous to living beings than the DC current Edison was supporting. In an attempt to illustrate the lethality of the AC current, Edison and his employee Harold P. Brown had publicly electrocuted a number of animals. Electrocution was first used on a human being in 1890, when the convicted murderer William Kemmler was put into the electric chair that Brown had invented. Thus, Topsy is not the first to be exposed to this technology; she was merely the first elephant to be successfully electrocuted.¹ What sets Topsy apart from previous similar incidents is not that her case is more brutal than many other similar cases, but the fact that her electrocution is recorded with the second technology discussed here: the moving picture. The electrocution of Topsy was filmed by Edison Studios. This early short shows Topsy standing chained to the ground and to a large steel structure, electrodes tied to her feet. She has already been fed carrots with cyanide and is trying to shake off the electrode attached to her right front leg. When the power is turned on, Topsy's body begins to shake, smoke rises from her feet and she topples over, legs stretched to breaking, dying.

As Akira Mizura Lippit observes in *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (2000) and in 'The Death of an Animal' (2002), the film of Topsy's death is placed at the foundation of a new and mediated relationship between human and animal in Western societies. Lippit's argument in *Electric Animal* is that Western epistemologies have produced the human as the antithesis of the animal. The human capacity for language, for coherent thought and reason, for suffering and for death all manifest as absences in the animal. This contrast is comforting, Lippit

argues, only for as long as there is a wilderness inhabited by animals whose very presence confirms our humanity. The problem that Lippit identifies is that this wilderness and the animals that inhabit it began to disappear from urban modern life during the nineteenth century. This disappearance coincided with the emergence of new technologies that were then used to house not the animal itself, but a form of animality that could still serve as a contrast to humanity. Thus, as Lippit observes, the animal becomes central to the emergence of cinema as a media. It is at this threshold that Topsy and 'Electrocuting an Elephant' stand.

This entire volume can be read as an exploration of animal horror cinema as a space made possible by the spatial and conceptual separation of the human and the non-human animal, which in turn prepares the ground for narratives about moments when humans and animals come face to face, or even cross the conceptual borders that separate them. An example of how animal horror cinema at the same time inscribes and breaks down this conceptual dichotomisation is the trope of human characters' transformation into animals and animals into humans. By anthropomorphizing the animal, animal horror cinema stirs up emotions and provokes reactions in the viewer. It makes it possible to understand the animal as a character in a narrative, who responds to the unfolding of events as we expect human characters to do.

Even Topsy, who was obviously not a willing actor, stands before the camera not simply as an animal but also as a being who is imagined to have consciously transgressed the boundary between right and wrong. The circus, the newspapers and the movie company all saw a possibility to commodify a story about an animal that, having been spectacularly brought into the most urbane place in the world, New York City, is no longer fully an animal. In this narrative she is a criminal who has several peoples' deaths on her conscience, who is capable of comprehending the nature and scope of her unforgivable crimes. Consequently, her 'execution' is at the same time a just punishment, a demonstration of human ingenuity and commercial entertainment.

Defining animal horror cinema

On a very basic level, animal horror cinema tells the story of how a particular animal or an animal species commits a transgression against humanity and then recounts the punishment the animal must suffer as a consequence. In this way, the horror that most animal horror cinema depicts turns on an attack on human beings by an animal. This is the case even in the many films where humans are to blame for this

attack by first violating the territory of the animal or by controlling the animal.

Many films that must be seen as central in the genre we propose to call animal horror cinema have been placed under the label of eco-horror. However, eco-horror cinema also includes movies where the relation between humans and animals plays a marginal role and where the ecosystem itself – its plants, mountains, forests, seas, and seasons – is the villain. Such films have been wittily referred to as *Nature Run Amok* (Whitehead 2012) or *Mother Nature Hates You* movies and include titles like *The Day of the Triffids* (1962) and *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* (1988). We believe the term animal horror cinema is a more useful concept than these eco-centred monikers. While many of the films discussed in this collection can be filed under eco-horror, animal horror cinema also comprises films that centre on the relation between 'human' and 'animal' as categories unrelated to their places in the ecosystem.

By animal horror cinema we mean films where the portrayed animals retains a resemblance to actual animal species. Thus, by animal horror cinema we do not refer to movies that feature an otherworldly, supernatural creature enhanced by radiation (Godzilla) or originating from outer space (the Alien). At the same time, it must be said that the line between such categories is notoriously difficult to draw, however, because animal horror cinema has always blurred the distinction between 'realist' representation and what it has been able to invent through imagination and special effects. While many animals in horror cinema have been given attributes (in particular enormous size) that real animals do not have, other filmmakers have attempted to make the animals in their films as believable and life-like as possible but have often failed, with sometimes hilarious results, because of their often limited budget for special effects.

Finally, by animal horror cinema we want to refer only to fictional horror films. From this perspective, it can be argued that while 'Electrocuting an Elephant' – the film but also the narrative that surrounds the film – exemplifies the type of narrative that animal horror cinema picks up and turns into an industry, it is not an example of an animal horror film. In other words, we do not view animal horror cinema as comprising films that depict actual human violence against animals for documentary purposes or as entertainment. By focusing on the fictional cinematic representation of human-animal relations we do not wish to ignore the fact that cinema has often exploited cruelty to animals for commercial or other reasons. Nor do we argue that films such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) and pornographic so-called crush-films do not entail a form of horror that viewers enjoy much in the

same way they enjoy horror cinema. However, we contend that the fictional element and the fact that it is a unspoken agreement between the filmmaker and the audience that the violence depicted in the film is not real is a theoretically important difference between films like *Jaws* or *Anaconda*, and films like the documentary *The Cove* (2009) and the mondo film *Faces of Death* (1978). Though fictional violence may have effects on humans' treatment of and attitude to animals, and even though the fact that the violence depicted in animal horror movies is fictional does not mean that animal actors are not harmed, there are important differences between animal horror cinema and films that explicitly depict violence against animals. For instance, the horror experienced by the viewer of *Faces of Death*, a film that showcases extensive and authentic violence against animals, has little to do with the animal as a potential threat against humans. Thus, and to reiterate, we define animal horror cinema as fictional movies where the animal seeks to challenge the predominance of the human through physical, sometimes consumptive, violence. In this way, it is the dangerous and transgressive animal that elicits suspense and fear in animal horror cinema.

Theoretical and ethical approaches to animal horror cinema

While cinematic representations of animals have been studied for decades, the focus of this volume is on the mechanisms and ideologies of horror in the relation between human and non-human animals on film. The reason why this is the first anthology of its kind might be that, with the exception of some notable classics, like *King Kong* (1933), *Jaws* (1975), and *The Birds* (1963), animal horror cinema has long been seen as a low-budget, low-quality form of entertainment that is largely disconnected from serious cultural debates. Most of the critical literature about animal horror cinema therefore either focuses on the canonical films in the genre, or is written by fans of eco-horror who argue for the overlooked quality of films that they love but that have largely been ignored by mainstream viewers and critics. However, the possible critical and theoretical inroads into animal horror cinema are convoluted and so numerous and entangled that this book only offers a basic overview of some of the clusters of theoretical problems that we, the editors, see as central to the study of the genre.

However, among the most central of these approaches is the study of how films rely on and simultaneously subvert and re-inscribe the basic conceptual separation of the human and non-human animal.