
Review: *Bestiaire*, 2012 Zeitgeist Films, directed by Denis Côté, Luís Galvão Teles

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Physiologus, one of the most popular books of the Middle Ages, was a predecessor of bestiaries. The focus of bestiaires is not on accuracy, but rather using mythical creatures to convey legends or teach moral tales (Theobald, 1928; Curley, 1979). A new incarnation of these historical texts is brought to life in *Bestiaire*, a film by Denis Côté. The mythical animals that filled the pages of the book have now been replaced by sentient beings occupying a Canadian safari park. Insight into these different ways of being is captured through the lens of the director. The lack of narration throughout this film heightens the experience for the viewers. Interactions between non-human and human animals occur around feeding and maintenance of the park, medical attention, or simple observations. Although there are scenes of a taxidermist and some artists, the majority of the time follows the animals at a Québec safari park through the changing seasons. Visitors swarm to the park in the summer, but much of the film focuses on the isolated lives of the inhabitants during the other seasons of the year. These stark contrasts force the viewers to ask: Who benefits from this park?

The film opens with art students drawing and erasing lines trying to capture the essence of a taxidermy deer staring vacantly into the distance. Perhaps the difficulty in drawing the deer is not in the students' skill, but rather their attempt to capture a sentient being devoid of any species-specific landscape. Later in the film, a sound of something banging in a dryer precedes any visual cues leaving the viewers with a sense of uneasiness about what is happening. The turning of the drum ceases and a taxidermist appears removing a lifeless bird that he meticulously positions to provide an artistic rendering for future display. The bird no

longer possesses personal agency, but is frozen in time based on human construction. Both the students and taxidermist pay great attention to representing the physical attributes of the animal, but it tells the viewers little about the lives of these once sentient beings. Côté uses this same approach to detail while filming. Viewers see torsos and faces of living horses captured in a frame, but the legs and hooves are excluded. The single horned antelope gazes into the screen seemingly separate from its entirety. There are also the sounds of vehicles in the winter approaching a barn or the fingers of animal reaching through a fence disconnected from a specific context. While viewing it, we become annoyed that the animal or the environment are not presented as a “total” picture. It forces the viewers to ask, “Why does this keep happening?” Once we ask the question the intent is revealed. This filming approach examines how humans view animals as objects rather than subjects and forces viewers to piece together this understanding through parts. The focus shifts between the observation of animals and environments to a reflection on our own behavior.

There is a surreal element to the animals captured in this film, not unlike those once depicted in medieval bestiaries. The elephant meandering through the Canadian landscape and the zebras winding through slowly moving cars as humans look at them. An implicit message by the filmmaker suggests that humans can learn about these animals. But what are they learning about an animal plucked from its natural environment? Do llamas pace fences in the wild? Do animals stare aimlessly out in space or rush to barricades when humans can be heard in the distance? Do bears stand on their hind legs catching morsels tossed to them by caretakers? The landscapes that focus on the humans are equally uncomfortable.

A male caretaker with a stocking cap embroidered with Monkeyland pushes apple slices through a chain---link fence while snow wafts down upon him, exemplifying the absurdity of these contrived environments. A scene showing lions and tigers banging against the doors of their cages cuts to a caretaker devoid of facial expression whose eyes suggest uncertainty.

She, much like the nonhuman animals in the safari park, is constrained in personal agency. The workers perform routine tasks, ensuring the animals are fed and housed in a clean (some may argue sterile) environment. Maintaining physically healthy and well---groomed animals is paramount as it ensures that visitors will come to the park. But can this type of facility meet the needs of its residents? Chimpanzees scream off camera, lions and tigers bang against the barred cages they inhabit and probably the most telling scene is a small monkey grasping what appears to be a stuffed bear for companionship and comfort during the long off---season. When the caretakers interact with their charges, the focus is on a task failing to recognize the animal as an agential actor (Wels, 2015). By this point in the film, the absurdity of these constructed interspecies interactions is overwhelming.

Another scene opens with a hyena in a crush cage, suggesting a need for medical treatment. The focus once again is not on the interaction or knowing the animals involved, but on a task to be completed. Recognizing that the hyena needs help is different than understanding it is an “I” with subjective experiences (Francione, 2000, p. 6). The vocalizations and pacing suggest anxiety from all parties. The hyena is in need of medical treatment, but the caretakers’ priority is achieving their goals in the most efficient manner. Throughout much of the film animals are treated as objects devoid of personal agency, trapped by the constructed environment. It is paradoxical that an environment created to meet the insatiable desire humans have to be in proximity to other animals becomes an “iron cage” for all (Weber, 1976, p. 181). The humans become more like prison guards preparing a jail for visitors. The animals are trotted out while spectators view them thinking they are learning about the real animals that live behind these bars. The spectators seem oblivious to this condition in their quest to feel close to a nature (DeMello, 2012).

E. O. Wilson postulated more than 30 years ago that our natural affinity for life binds us to all other living things in his biophilia hypothesis (1984). Undeniably, animals have an

interest in each other (Donaldson & Kymlicka, 2012), but this film shows how humans construct environments that make oppression more palatable to visitors under the guise of education. The contrived interactions at this zoological park force the viewers to ask very important questions: What is being learned when an animal is torn from its habitat and displaced into a foreign environment? For example, what do humans learn about elephants walking across the Canadian landscape as they gaze at them from their cars?

As Henry Beston once wrote, animals “are not brethren, they are not underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth” (1992, p. 5). *Bestiaire* is less about the animals and more about objectifying the Other for entertainment. The lion lying almost lifeless on the glass overpass or the monkey clinging to a stuff toy suggests the animals are not willful participants in this arrangement. If the motivation of this park is to promote conservation and educate visitors, which is a consistent mantra among most, the incongruent images reveal that the best answer lies in continuity. Rather than placing an animal on display in some culturally constructed landscape, protecting the environment that we share is paramount. Rather than objectification and co---existence, the answer lies in intersubjectivity where there is a respect for the independent agency of each animal (Smuts, 2001). After arranging all of the disparate parts of this film, the moral tale is revealed, “We humans big---brained, big footed, overproducing, overconsuming, and invasive mammals have for a long time acted as if we are the only animals that matter” (Bekoff, 2014, p. 3). This film, through quiet reflection and multiple perspectives, allows the viewers to contemplate our behavior and hopefully change our future actions.

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