Disgrace (2008)

Reviewed by Jacqueline Dalziell[1]

There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me.

T.S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'

Winner of the International Critics (FIPRESCI) Prize for Special Presentations at the 2008 Toronto Film Festival, *Disgrace* (2008) is a faithful adaptation of the Booker Prize-winning novel by Nobel Prize-winning author J.M. Coetzee.

Most commentary on *Disgrace,* both novel and film, relegates the presence of animals within the story to a marginal position, assumes they occupy merely symbolic, allegorical roles and represent 'The Animal' in that singular, generic sense, so well critiqued by Derrida. In interpretations of the film animals have taken a theoretical back seat to the 'real', more important actions and truths of the story, namely those centred on specific humans and what are perceived as their specifically human problems. Though *Disgrace*'s nonhuman counterparts do definitely play pedagogical roles, a well-documented canonical pattern within literature and film, their presence in the story is as significant as that of their human co-stars. *Disgrace* endeavours to highlight the mutability of categories of gender, race and sexuality inasmuch as it strives to play at the unruly edges of the human/animal tautology, disrupting those imperative and familiar markers "and/or" and the slanting solidus, that ruthlessly insist on a taxonomical distinction. I hope to present an account of *Disgrace* that takes the consequence of these animals into account, to untether them from the periphery where they currently sit, unacknowledged or undervalued, in the bulk of commentary on this piece of cinema.

---

[1] Jacqueline Dalziell is the Project Coordinator for Animal Liberation (Australia), and is in the Gender and Cultural Studies Department at Sydney University.

The plot of *Disgrace* is driven by the personal metamorphosis of David Lurie, an arrogant, libidinous professor, brilliantly played by John Malkovich. A poetry lecturer at Cape Town University, David's descent into disgrace is provoked by an affair he is having with a mixed-race student thirty years his junior. Charged with sexual harassment, he is judged by the university's disciplinary committee and indignantly refuses to repent or issue a public apology. Instead, he hands in his resignation and leaves Cape Town to visit his daughter Lucy (Jessica Haines) on her farm in a secluded area of the Eastern Cape. Lucy owns a piece of land, farming flowers and running a kennel for the guard dogs of middle-class, white South Africans, with the help of her black South African tenant Petrus (Eriq Ebouaney), who in an historically ironic twist begins encroaching on her land. Adjusting to rural life, David helps Lucy on the farm and volunteers at the local animal shelter helping Bev Shaw (Fiona Press) kill unwanted dogs. David's concerns about his daughter's safety as one of the few white farmers in the area are confirmed when three young black South African men gang rape Lucy,[2] burn David and shoot all the kennel dogs. The different ways in which both characters react to the incident characterize the development of the film, making the audience witness to the brutal collision of gender, race and animal/human relations in post-apartheid South Africa.

With the stock spheres of otherness superimposed upon each other in *Disgrace*, we see intersectionality at its most extreme junctures. Some of the risky ambivalence in this film, in relation to just how many of its comments are fully conscious, reflects the fine lines Coetzee often precariously draws in his works. How many of the complex political layers within the film are fully absorbed by the audience is ambiguous.

Plucked from the security of his academic Ivory Tower, the supposed pinnacle of rationality, along with the comfortable invisibility of animal suffering characteristic of urban living, David is forced to witness the dysphemistic reality of animal-human relations that rural life illuminates. Like Levinas, whose canine friend Bobby had

[2] Lucy employs animalizing rhetoric in recounting the experience of the rape, claiming, "I think I am in their territory. They have marked me," and "They spur each other on. That's probably why they do it together. Like dogs in a pack." The animalization of black South Africans reoccurs throughout the film.

"neither ethics nor logos…without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives", David believes animals to be purely biologically-motivated (Levinas, 2004, p.153). Bestowing little more on animals than would Kantian logic, he uses humanist terms such as "beasts", employs hunting discourse to describe his relations with women, and uses terms like "jackal boy" and "filthy swine" in reference to black South African men. When admiring a flock of ducks on her farm Lucy remarks, "They come back every year, the same three. I feel so lucky to be visited, to be the one chosen", to which David responds, "Animals are creatures of habit." At Lucy's suggestion that he volunteer at the animal clinic David proclaims, "These animal welfare people are a bit like Christians. Everyone is so cheerful and well intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging, or kick a cat." Not only is it unnerving that David declares this only days before his daughter is brutally raped, but darkly ironic that he participates in those animalizing, racist discourses that not only paved the way for apartheid rhetoric, but also perform essential roles in designating which beings are rendered killable, rapeable or disposable.[3]

On David's first day at the animal shelter he is rushed in to help steady a struggling goat onto the operating table. David nervously grabs his horns, the goat kicking and bleating, and in a rare moment, looks into his eyes and murmurs, "It's okay." For the first time in the film, an animal's face occupies a full screen shot for a couple of brief moments. In the goat we see a response, not a reaction.[4] Rarely do the faces of animals, let alone such lowly beasts as goats, grace cinema screens; rarely, in fact, do the faces of animals appear on camera when not cute and infantilized, or vicious and beastialized. Observing the goat's maggot-infested testicles, Bev Shaw identifies a terrible case of fly blow, far beyond treatment. We are invited to observe David's gaze, affected, into the goat's face, fully knowing what his future entails. Several fleeting

[3] Cary Wolfe elaborates on this process through what he terms the "symbolic economy" and the "institution of speciesism" in 'Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory'.

[4] Many philosophers have disputed the Cartesian view of animals that relegates them to the category of automata, whose addresses are simply biological reactions, not conscious responses. In 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', Derrida specifically engages with the question of animal response.

moments are shared between David's watchful eyes and shots of the goat's anxious gaze. Bev proclaims "They like to slaughter them their own way", after her pleas of euthanasia are refused by the goat's 'owner', a black South African woman.[5] David watches while the goat is hauled, dragging its hooves and bleating in pain, out of the vet clinic.

Speaking of facial expressions, for Levinas, the face-to-face relationship is where one's ontological humanity is grounded, is performed, in one's duty to be responsible to and for the other (Levinas, 2004, p.50). Faciality *is* the precursor to human citizenship, to be able to be recognizable, and thus to have others be responsive to your face, even if some faces demand more of a response than others.[6] For Levinas animals, i.e. all those species not lucky enough to be covered by that exclusive banner called 'human', did not have a face, could not *have* 'face'. Therefore, ethical responsibility from human to animal was deemed unnecessary. In 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', Derrida asks, "What does this bottomless gaze [of the animal other] offer my sight? What does it "say" to me, demonstrating quite simply the naked truth of every gaze, given that that truth *allows me to see and be seen* through the eyes of the other, in the *seeing* and not just *seen* eyes of the other?" (Derrida, 2002, p.381). This catalytic moment between David and the goat, reminiscent of Derrida's vulnerability before the gaze of a small female cat, propels David into what Deleuze and Guattari would call a "line of flight", the initial kindling of his becoming-animal, through his subsequent attribution of a Levinasian face, and thus a responsive gaze, to a being outside his human circle (Deleuze, Guattari, 1988, p.4). Prior to this moment, the animals David has had relationships with on screen have been safely euphemized; he has been digesting them. This instance marks the first in the film of David interacting with a real, living animal in a very tactile, visceral way, and sets in motion his consequent acknowledgement of nonhuman

[5] This is the first instance in the film, of which there are many, of the familiar theme of animal mistreatment perpetrated by the racialized other; a stark contrast to the care for animals displayed by the white South Africans in the film.

[6] Bruns elaborates on this Levinasian notion in her essay 'Becoming-Animal (Some Simple Ways)', stating, "The white European male face defines the apex from which humanity declines by degrees into the faces of women, children, nonwesterners, subalterns, aborigines, hominids, troglodytes, chimpanzees, pets, bats, flies" (Bruns, 2007, p.712).

subjectivity. Here the audience is invited to observe a transition in David, a becoming-animal, from a modern-day Descartes to a man who has become conscious of the porosity of his ontological boundaries.

Deleuze and Guattari develop a trajectory of the ontology of life as a continual, evolving process of becoming other, traversed by social, cultural and affective possibilities which launch us into metamorphoses; they write, “We can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things", by “a little detail that starts to swell and carries [us] off” (Deleuze, Guattari, 1988, p.292). In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari write that "To become animal is… to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1986, p.704). A departure from dominant molar identities to new affective states, "all becoming is minoritarian", so becoming-animal is synonymous with becoming-woman, becoming-colored; with becoming-subaltern (Deleuze, Guattari, 1988, p.106). In this way, a becoming is a deterritorialization, a transformation in which a subject's ontological locale is no longer stable or meaningful, but rather transitory, nomadic, transporting one to a state of de-subjectivization, a movement from a major to a minor power. Becoming-animal can be located “in that which suddenly sweeps us up and makes us become”, a mutation that renders all parties involved irreparably transformed (Deleuze, Guattari, 1988, p.279).

The onset of David's transformation begins via the destabilizing experience of the response of an other. Derrida writes, "nothing will have ever done more to make me think through this absolute alterity of the neighbor than these moments when I see myself naked under the gaze of a cat" (Derrida, 2002, p.380). In the film we observe a gradual erosion of David's privileged identity, with the constant pushing of its seams, exposing all the underlying fabric of his being as seemingly futile in the complicated cross hares of gender, race and animals in post-apartheid South Africa. Outside the realm of academia and the comparative safety of Cape Town, David encounters a world in flux, where the normal governing rules seem not to apply. His dual status as an academic and as a white man in South Africa seems to hold little weight when

even he can be needlessly burned, disfigured, robbed- treated like an animal. With his professional identity shattered, sexual pride stripped, ego and body beaten by young black South African boys, and further emasculation after his helplessness during his daughter's rape, David has gone through a process of effacement. Like Derrida is vulnerable before the gaze of a cat through nudity and philosophical aphasia, David appears vulnerable, naked, disgraced, in the literal and metaphorical faces of animals. No longer impervious to suffering, death, or the returned stare of an other, David's disgrace opens him to the possibility of a recognition of what is arguably the ultimate other, the animal. It is in this state of stripped privilege, of deterritorialization, and of disgrace, that David is able to gain an insight into those subject positions that lurk in the peripheries, in the murky shadows cast by the figure of the white male.

There are several key scenes paradigmatic of David's becoming-animal, demonstrative of his revelation of the capacity of other-than-human suffering. Shaking his head, David reprimands Lucy's black South African neighbor Petrus for tying two sheep on bare dirt, asking, "Don't you think you could tie them where they could graze?" Petrus replies, "They are for the party on Saturday, we slaughter them for the party." David returns to Lucy and states, "I don't like the way he does things, bringing the beasts home to acquaint them with the people who are going to eat them", and in the next scene we see David has untied the sheep and taken them to a pond. At Saturday's party, David is given a plate and as he peers down at it, he recognizes a piece of flesh from the sheep he was earlier caring for, and commences to nervously stare at the plate, turning it around in his hands.

Another point crucial in David's transformation is when he awakens with a bloodied head in the midst of an attack on his daughter's property. The perpetrators notice him peering out of the small bathroom window in which they have locked him, and one grabs a rifle and walks toward him. David sinks into the farthest corner, breathing heavily, listening to the sound of the nearing footsteps that he believes will bring his end. Then his body convulses at the sound of gunshots and the ensuing howls of Lucy's kennel dogs crying out in pain. Cowering next to the toilet, David moans and shakes as he watches the men shoot each dog, trapped in their cages, one by one. Several scenes later, David is digging a grave and dragging the rigor mortis ridden corpses into the earth. In the killing of Lucy's guard dogs, deterrence apparatus

ensnared within the racial politics of post-apartheid instability, David is able to see an eerie reflection in that the animals are merely surrogates for his own impending death.

Killing unwanted dogs at the animal clinic, David nervously pats their heads and watches them crumple in a heap, one injection after another. We watch him shovel each individual carcass into the incinerator, staring after the flicker of the smoldering bodies.

One day, en route to the incinerator after an afternoon of killing, he pulls over and begins to sob. Soon after, David bonds with a three-legged dog on death row. One afternoon while doing the weekly killing, he drops a load of freshly killed corpses into his truck and catches the dog whimpering at him. From the placement of the camera from behind the cage, hearing the dog pant, staring at David to behind David, staring at the dog, we share their exchange. Witness to their interaction, our position shifts between David and the dog, experiencing their reciprocal seeing and being seen. Is the dog, as Derrida states, "deep within (his) eyes, (our) primary mirror"? (Derrida, 2002, p.418). [7] They look at one another, a shared facial recognition, a reciprocal address, and then David picks him up and takes him to the kill room. Bev asks, "I thought you would save him for another week, are you giving him up?" After his solemn "Yes", the dog licks his face, while we view the needle being administered into his leg.

Following the recognition of face comes the acknowledgement of responsibility, of the need to respond, affectively, to the gaze of the other. Julia Kristeva writes, "…as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live" (Kristeva, 1982, p.3). In allowing the sheep corpses face, and in not only witnessing the dogs being violently shot during the attack but actually participating in killing dogs at the clinic, David is forced to truly appreciate what animals undergo at the hands of humans; those unsavory truths, best

[7] The full quote of Derrida's insightful comment in 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)', is "The same question then becomes whether I should show myself but in the process see myself naked (that is reflect my image in a mirror) when, concerning me, looking at me, is this living creature, this cat that can find itself caught in the same mirror? Is there animal narcissism? But cannot this cat also be, deep within her eyes, my primary mirror?" (Derrida, 2002, p.418).

kept "thrust aside" if we are to continue to live, opportunistically unaware of our human privilege. Deleuze and Guattari write, "We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body" (Deleuze, Guattari, 1988, p.257). Through David's line of flight we witness him entering into composition with the affects of an(other) body, affects he had hitherto ignored. His contact with animals seems to extend his affective capabilities, providing an opportunity for an interspecific sympathy and empathy not evident in the first half of the film. Crying in his car en route to the incinerator, dog corpses in his backseat, David actually grieves animal loss.

Grief works *through* face; through the recognition of ethical subjectivity, face is attributed. Facial recognition marks the acknowledgement of, and the capacity for death, for a death that is meaningful, and thus grieveable- the mourning more painful as animal death is not deemed worthy of grief. The significance of David's bereavement cannot be underestimated; he has elevated lowly animals into the category of beings deemed grievable, a step most humans fail to make. As Haraway notes, "…patricide and fratricide are the only real murders in the logic of humanism; everybody else to whom the law applies is covered by courtesy" (Haraway, 2008, p.79). In this way, the audience is being asked emotionally to revise ontological categories, to inquire after what makes only some, but not all, corpses elicit an affective response. We are disgraced in the face of animals, in our disavowal and complicity in what Derrida terms "the unprecedented proportions of this subjection of the animal" (Derrida, 2002, p.394).

The poignancy of some of the last lines in the film, which occur after Lucy's black South African neighbor offers to marry her for protection in exchange for her land, offer a tangible example of David's metamorphosis, of his becoming-animal, his explicit identification with nonhuman others. Paraphrasing the close of Kafka's *The Trial*, David states "Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept, to start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity. Like a dog." Lucy responds, "Yes, like a dog."

In *Disgrace* we see what happens when a gaze is returned, and observe the deterritorializing potential that crises bring in destabilizing one's identity and forcing a recognition of mortality. The affective relationships David forms with various animals throughout the film, and his ensuing transformation through minoritarian becoming, provide a sliver of hope for interspecies understanding amidst a complex, shifting social, cultural and political territory. For Critical Animal Studies, the power of *Disgrace* is located in its success in identifying the common crux from which the trajectories of sexism, racism and speciesism spring, and how the unsettling of the animal/human boundary necessitates a further unsettling of all those cultural codes that designate otherness, whether animal or not.

Though incredibly confronting viewing, *Disgrace* is a superb piece of cinema. The beautifully shot South African landscapes provide an eerie juxtaposition to the violence that unfolds and the cast perform faultlessly in what are seemingly sadistically contrived circumstances. A looming disquiet is present throughout the film, and its persistence up until the very end may leave an unsavoury taste in ones' mouth. *Disgrace* is an uncomfortable film on many fronts, though its success lies in making the audience face those bleak, abject truths most turn away from.

Bibliography

Bruns, G. (2007). Becoming-Animal (Some Simple Ways). *New Literary History 38 (4),* pp.703-720.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1988). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1986). *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1995). *What is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press.

Derrida, J. (2002). The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow). *Critical Inquiry*, *28* (2), pp.369-418.

Eliot, T. S. (1963). *Collected Poems 1909-1962.* New York: Harcourt Brace, pp.3.

Haraway, D. (2008). *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Jacobs, S. (2008). *Disgrace* [DVD]. Australia.

Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Levinas, E. (2004). The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights. In M. Calarco, & P. Atterton, Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought (pp.49-50). London