

FILM REVIEWS

To Love or Kill: Man vs. Animal (1996)

HBO, 62min¹

Reviewed by Adam Weitzenfeld²

Sometimes the best things can only be seen on T.V. Well, perhaps this is not exactly the case for those privileged enough to find a copy of the 1996 HBO documentary, *To Love or Kill: Man vs. Animal*. Written, directed, and produced by British filmmaker Antony Thomas, *To Love or Kill* is a rare gem of a documentary on human-animal relationships

Of all the documentaries on the exploitation of nonhuman animals, *To Love or Kill* is the most comprehensive and nuanced in its coverage of human-animal relationships in the English-speaking world and abroad. Strikingly different from the most popular animal rights documentaries, it does not abstract from historical, cultural, and geographic contexts. In fact, it demonstrates a sensitive appreciation of the moral complexity of human-animal relations. In his film, Thomas never attempts to settle the controversy of the contemporary exploitation of animals around the world, but daringly provokes his audience to draw its own conclusions, if one could ever settle on such life and death dilemmas. Yet, he neither lets the audience off easy nor does he feign objectivity. Thomas' narrative is quite challenging to anyone who has never questioned whether humans have a right to use animals. As emotionally challenging as it is to watch the brutal coverage of some of the most heart wrenching scenes of animal exploitation on film, Thomas' dry British wit provides cathartic relief. The deployment of the tragic and comic brings to the forefront the irony and devastation of the all but mutual human-animal relationship.

¹ While not easily available, *To Love or Kill* can be found on Youtube, with PETA, and at the University of New Brunswick through WorldCat. For immediate access see:

Nacho32's Channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/nacho32#p/u/7/Bo89eSqJ9xU>

RalphHighPoint's Channel: <http://www.youtube.com/user/ralphhighpoint#p/u/4/cHd9SmQpU9M>

² Adam Weitzenfeld can be contacted at adam.weitzenfeld@gmail.com

Every scene in *To Love or Kill* is historically and culturally situated and each performs a unique function in an impressively concise, comprehensive, and clean narrative. The film provocatively opens at the gates of the Oakwood Penitentiary for the Criminally Insane at which human as well as nonhuman animals are incarcerated. In this hospital/prison, those humans (i.e. murderers and rapists) deemed “animals” and “beasts” by society become “human(e)” again through the therapeutic effect of their relationship with nonhuman animals. Abandoned by their families, the prisoners find new meaning in their lives with their fellow prison-mates. Thomas quips:

It's startling to discover that animals have the power to calm human aggression and madness. But on reflection, why should it be...when so much else on our side of that extraordinary relationship of Man and animal is sheer madness?

While those men at the asylum are classified as *mad*, it is the supposed *reasonable* use of nonhuman animals that perhaps is more deserving of the name. Thomas' biting wit gives not an answer but the gift of a challenging riddle. Hitting home the great hypocrisy of a culture that treasures animal fables to instruct children on moral behavior, Thomas presents a montage of a choir of young children singing "Talks to the Animals" from *Dr. Dolittle* spliced with a barrage of startling and odd images of human-animal relations from later footage in the film.

After the ironic introduction, Thomas focuses on the mythological roots of Western attitudes toward animals in the book of *Genesis*, specifically the religious justification of human dominion over animal others. Among the most explicit cases of religiously sanctioned animal cruelty are the rituals of Coria, Spain where farmed animals are publicly tortured to celebrate the Saints, even Saint Francis Assisi, the patron saint of animals. In the United States, the torture of animals to death is not justified by religion, but in the name of freedom, national identity, and superiority on a canned hunting ranch in east Texas and an annual pigeon shoot in Hegins, Pennsylvania. How strange that murderers and rapists—those who are imprisoned because they are deemed so threatening to the moral order of American society—practice more respect toward animal others than those free men and women who claim to be the defenders of the American values of freedom, equality, and fraternity.

Thomas reminds his viewers of Man's kinship with animal others, evolutionarily and emotionally. Some animals are not only evolutionary kin, but human companions and helpers. For example, one paraplegic man lives with a monkey servant and a woman with multiple sclerosis has a dog as a caretaker. Both acknowledge their dependence on these animals and

express deep affection, but Thomas asks whether they've ever pondered whether they have the right to use these animals and what the animals' thoughts may be. Certainly many U.S. Americans honor some animals no less than their ancient ancestors. Take for instance a Washington Memorial day ceremony for animals killed in combat during World War I and a New York City pet cemetery. Yet, American affection for animal others can be quite absurd as in the case of a couple entrepreneurs who say they fulfill "need" by designing luxurious pet clothing and an animal healer who claims to read animal minds (a scene that provides much needed levity).

The paradoxical relation U.S. Americans have with animal others—treating some as subordinate objects and others as beloved companions—however is not universal. To make his point, Thomas travels to a city in southern China. For several minutes animal others are weighed and dismembered "as if they were vegetables." Later, in the most infamous scene in the film, a child chooses a cat—his lunch—who is subsequently beaten out of her cage, smashed over the skull, snared to a kitchen, submerged alive and conscious into a scalding tank of water, skinned, and thrown skinless into a standby tank. The cat's limbs squirm, her jaw shutting and opening as if she is trying to whisper something. American rabbi Dan Cohen-Sherbock comments:

The Chinese who eat cats and goats are logical. If they are going to eat cows and goats and sheep, then why not cats and dogs... the Chinese are consistent, it is we who are inconsistent.

Thomas supports the rabbi's position with footage of factory farms and discusses how animal others are made absent through the concealment of their deaths and the dismemberment of their bodies. Nonetheless, there are those who stop at nothing, even laying in the middle of a road to stop a delivery of sheep to slaughter. Both the activists on the street and the Rabbi reference the Holocaust, comparing Anglo-American's "desire to not really reflect on what is happening" to the willingness of Germans during WWII to turn a blind eye toward the treatment of the Jewish people.

Although many will intuit the cruel treatment of animals in the name of religious, cultural, and culinary tradition as straightforwardly wrong, there are times when human animals and animal others lives are at stake, when what constitutes "necessary" and "unnecessary," "justified" and unjustified" use is much more ambiguous. One site of moral ambiguity is a pharmaceutical laboratory in the United States where chimpanzees are used to test vaccines for HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis. Veterinarian James Mahoney, who directs the

care of the chimps, gives voice to the brutal moral ambiguous nature of his work with a sincerity that may draw sympathy even from some of the most righteous animal activists:

I happen to believe that animals have rights and I don't think we as human beings have a right to use the animals. My only way of coming to terms with it is that we have a need to use them, but I don't think we have a right.

Another site at which the confrontation between human and animal rights to life plays out is in Rajasthan, India where rats are simultaneously treated with reverence as ancestral gods and vermin who threaten human lives with pestilence and therefore must be eradicated. Thomas seems to criticize those cases when privileged people subordinate the lives of humans to animal others such as in New York City where cats are given surgeries and MRIs while one fifth of the city population is left without healthcare, and in India where the Jains care for chronically ill animals in sanctuaries while millions of homeless starve in the streets. He concludes that "because there is no clear boundary separating human and animal...whether in Dehli or New York, it seems we are incapable of fulfilling our responsibilities to both."

Having exposed a couple cases of moral ambiguity (i.e. HIV research and India) and two ironies (i.e. the kindness of murderers vs. the status quo; the treatment of pets vs. the treatment of "food" animals), Thomas highlights two more ironies at a corporately owned midwestern transgenic pig farm. First, animal others who are physiologically the closest to humans bear no great benefit, but rather an endless amount of suffering: "The pig is sometimes known as 'horizontal man,' the size and layout of its internal organs so closely resemble our own—a qualification that pigs may some day come to regret." Second, that many intuitively object to what may be the more "morally justifiable" deaths of a few animals as excessive, while the excess of animal suffering and slaughter of yet more pigs for food is unremarkably banal.

It's illogical when one considers how many hundreds of millions of pigs are reared to be eaten, but as one watches these procedures, one cannot help wondering whether we have the moral right to open up an entire new territory where human preservation requires the whole scale slaughter, of yet more pigs.

There is much at stake in the politics of animal rights, something radically beyond anything animal welfarism proposes. The sacrifice of animal others to defer the deaths of human animals is not "a straightforward issue that can be solved with a vegetarian diet, plastic shoes, or even common decency. This will be a straight moral choice between human life and animal life." Thomas concludes that it is unlikely the animal rights movement will disappear

anytime soon. On the contrary, the movement for animal rights will continue to grow in its ferocity.

Despite all my praise for *To Love or Kill*, it is deserving of some criticism. First, the film explicitly establishes a dualist framework, offering a false oppositional dichotomy: "Man vs. Animal." Animals are homogenized into a single class (as well as all humans into the androcentric class of "Man"), despite the relatively nuanced appreciation of context. The film makes it seem as though opposition between humans and animals is inevitable, especially during moments when Thomas concludes:

It seems we are incapable of fulfilling our responsibilities to both... either animals have rights, including the rights to compete with us even endanger us, or we have the right to exploit or exterminate as human need or greed dictates.

Such rhetoric, however, reveals that the "stark choices" may be less a product of material relations, but more a discourse which divides "humans" and "animals" into two opposing classes of which only one can have rights—a codified morality that is inherently oppositional and absolute. One can imagine a New York City where affordable (human) health care is universal and people can still maintain the lives of their companion animals, an Indian city where greater sanitary measures are taken (in policy, infrastructure, technology, and custom) that would make such rat hunting unnecessary, and vaccine research that does not require animal exploitation.

Second, while neither ignoring nor demonizing non-Western cultures, Thomas' representation of southern China is questionable. Indeed, by representing it as a land of necessity and superstition, he comes close to orientalizing it, treating it as the Other to the excessive and rational United States. He says "we" find their attitude "incomprehensible;" their split between human and animal is supposedly so radical that "there seems to be some element of humanity missing." On the other hand, he does universalize his criticism of this particular culture in China to all humans (i.e. "Oh, what a piece of work is Man"), and he questions his moral outrage (i.e. "is it the openness we find so disturbing?"). Though this Chinese market is disturbing, it is only because the people do not disavow what they are doing, they make no rationalizations. Still, his commentary concerning the treatment of nonhuman animals in southern China is notably more disparaging and less nuanced than when describing practices in other cultures.

Third, the film gives a simplistic account of world religions, especially Abrahamic ones. Thomas is complicit in his subscription to the authority of the human mastery interpretation of *Genesis* 1:2-3, never mentioning the increasingly popular stewardship and

vegetarian interpretations of the original human-animal relations. He seems to ignore the extensive amount of cruel practices that exist outside Western cultures in those where the differentiation between “humans” and “animals” is unimportant. Likewise, Thomas’ commentary on the Jains and the people of the rat temple of Dishnok may come across as slightly cynical. Although, it is true that this ambiguous discourse—a balance between generosity and irony—is present throughout the film.

While *To Love or Kill* may put-off some people because of its discursive oppositional framing between human and nonhuman animals, there is still good reason why everyone in the critical animal studies community should not miss this film. *To Love or Kill* does not feign objectivity, nor is it theory-for-theory’s sake; it is quite normative, even though it does not give its audience clear and self-certain answers to how human animals ought to live with animal others. The international, multiple-issue perspective of the film depicts a more comprehensive picture of animal exploitation, and never does it offer reform as a sufficient response. Though the film may not cover the intersectionality of oppressions, it does demonstrate the institutionalization of speciesism in myth, tradition, and political economy. For instance, the president of the transgenic pig corporation is heard describing the utility of his business: “The sad thing is that not only we are losing hundreds of thousands of lives, but we losing the opportunity to save money.” Thomas concludes this represents the tension between two movements: “the force of a growing moral and scientific awareness of our close relationship with the animals” and “the commercial pressure to meet our expanding human needs through the massive exploitation of animal resources.”

In summary, *To Love or Kill* is among the least dogmatic and most thoughtful, daring, and biting of animal rights documentaries, offering perhaps the greatest and most accessible prompt for a complete rethinking of contemporary human-animal relations.

References

Thomas, Antony. (1995). *To Love or Kill: Man vs. Animal*. Los Angeles, CA, Home Box Office.