

# Looking Across the Abyss: Human/Non-Human Animal

Liz Greene

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Video Essay: *Looking Across the Abyss: Human/Non-Human Animal* (2019, Liz Greene)

<https://player.vimeo.com/video/316386769>

Like Jacques Derrida, in “The Animal that therefore I am,” I came to consider the relationship between human and non-human animal subjects via my cat, Marmaduke. Observing Marmaduke whilst he looked at and listened to Carroll Ballard’s films—*The Black Stallion* (1979), *Never Cry Wolf* (1983), *Wind* (1992), *Fly Away Home* (1996), and *Duma* (2005)—it *seemed* to me that he focused more attention on Ballard’s films than the work of any other filmmaker. Ballard’s films are pre-dominantly concerned with the environment and animals, and are targeted at a child or young adult audience. Despite being a significant filmmaker, Ballard has largely been overlooked by film critics and scholars. This audiovisual essay is an attempt at addressing some of this gap in scholarship.

My broader research project is focussed on Alan Splet and Ann Kroeber’s contribution to sound

design in Ballard's films, specifically on *The Black Stallion* (1979) (for which Splet won an Academy Award) and *Never Cry Wolf* (1983). Marmaduke and I have sat together, watched, and listened to all of these feature films, for which Splet and/or Kroeber created the sound.<sup>1</sup> Marmaduke *seems* to be more interested in Splet/Kroeber/Ballard collaborations than any other wildlife films and television programmes he has been exposed to. I wondered whether this was a result of the long schedules Splet and Kroeber enjoyed in creating these sounds, or whether there was something else in the work that was drawing his attention? However, first a disclaimer: THIS IS NOT A SCIENTIFIC APPROACH. Rather, it is meant as an experimental, speculative way in to considering the human and non-human animal. I have no idea what Marmaduke is thinking about when I think he is thinking. I do not know what makes him sit up, eyes focussed towards the television or laptop, his ears pricked, rotated round, and then lowered, holding attention at certain moments, and then curling his body in when the moment of interest passes. Derrida argues,

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself.<sup>2</sup>

Derrida echoes a similar argument outlined by John Berger when he states that animal and man are “looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Berger argues that man's scrutiny of the animal further separates them. For Berger, it is within the act of observation that animal and man are less comprehensible to each other.

In the audiovisual essay, *Looking Across the Abyss: Human/Non-Human Animal*, I am interested in unpicking the position of both human and non-human animals in *The Black Stallion* and *Never Cry Wolf* and through the application of philosophy to consider these relationships in film more generally. I have put philosophy in quotation and in direct contact with the films in the videographic epigraph

mode.<sup>4</sup>

*The Black Stallion* is about a boy, Alec (Kelly Reno), and a horse, “The Black” (Cass-Olé), who nearly drown during a storm at sea. They are both shipwrecked and become marooned on a desert island. A significant portion of the film (29 minutes) is set on this remote island. This section of film contains no dialogue, but instead allows the audience to see and hear a slowly evolving relationship being forged between Alec and the Black. They are eventually rescued from the island and Alec returns home to the USA with the Black. Alec finds a horse trainer, and through the use of disguise and subterfuge manages to competitively race the horse and win, drawing from their earlier shared experiences on the island together. *Never Cry Wolf* is an adaptation of the eponymous autobiography by Farley Mowat (1963) and tells the story of Tyler (Charles Martin Smith), a government worker who is sent on a mission to uncover why the caribou are close to extinction. Tyler sets out to study the wolves, as they are deemed to be the main culprits for the disappearance of the caribou, but by the close of the film he realises the situation is more complex than he first anticipated.

*Looking Across the Abyss: Human/Non-human Animal* is divided into three parts: the first section contains a side-by-side split-screen showing two drowning scenes in *The Black Stallion* and *Never Cry Wolf*, the second section is from the shoreline in *The Black Stallion* where Alec and the Black play together, and the third and final section is from *Never Cry Wolf* when Tyler and the wolf, George, first observe each other. I chose to separate these three sections of the audiovisual essay with quotations, allowing them to signpost what is to come, or comment on what has been audioviewed. In the second and third sections I also used text to interact with the audiovisual material onscreen. This audiovisual essay allows the audioviewer an immersive space in remote environments to consider human and non-human animal relations. The philosophical writings in this audiovisual essay by Derrida, Randy Malamud, Donna J. Haraway, Friedrich Nietzsche, Berger, and Irene Gustafson, all speak to the idea

of looking, comprehension, and a sense of place in nature.<sup>5</sup>

## I. Submersive Presence

The first section of the audiovisual essay opens with a split-screen of *The Black Stallion* and *Never Cry Wolf*, showing two moments where the male protagonists fall into the sea, and have to fight for their lives whilst being looked at by animals. In *The Black Stallion*, Black is seen struggling to survive the shipwreck and looks to Alec or towards him for aid, and in *Never Cry Wolf*, an Arctic hare is an onlooker to Tyler's plight. I was interested in the similarity of these two plot points—the near drowning of the protagonists—and when I decided to cut the scenes to see how they played together in split screen I could see and hear that they were rhythmically similar, with visual movement and sonic detail that at certain moments speak to each other. The camera's point of view is mostly observational and submerged, whereas, the sound design immerses us in the peril of their predicament.

A previous split-screen experiment I created, *Velvet Elephant* (2015),<sup>6</sup> found parallel visual, aural, and rhythmic comparisons in the opening sequences of David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980) and *Blue Velvet* (1986). This method of analysis, putting films side-by-side in split-screen, can illuminate patterns in the work of a director. It is important to note, however, that the use of split-screen in *Looking Across the Abyss: Human/Non-Human Animal*, does not use audiovisual material from the beginning of the films, unlike the example of *Velvet Elephant*, which draws from Lynch's cinematic overtures.<sup>7</sup> Rather, these moments occur 16 minutes into *The Black Stallion* and 30 minutes into *Never Cry Wolf*. What distinguishes this split-screen comparison is the fact that the plot, which illustrates the relationship between man/nature and man/animal, offers another point of comparison alongside the visual, aural and rhythmic elements of the films.

Ballard repeated the same plot detail in both films of a man or boy's near drowning, but the

non-human animals respond differently, highlighting a shift in Ballard’s thinking on human and non-human animal relations. Through this audiovisual experiment, this change in Ballard’s approach was revealed to me in split-screen. Ballard and Lynch have distinct audiovisual styles and what both of these experiments indicate is the importance of the work of the sound designer, Alan Splet, as a consistent creative collaborator within their teams. What Splet achieves within the musicality of his submersive sound designs in the two films resonates across significantly different sonic environments.

Catherine Grant outlines the importance of the “roaming eye” and the “active spectatorship” that occurs in *Side-by-Side | Up-and-Down*<sup>8</sup> when we watch material in split-screen, and we can extend Grant’s argument to include a consideration of sound for film during split-screen. *Looking Across the Abyss: Human/Non-Human Animal’s* split-screen section opens with the moment both Alec and Tyler fall into the water. These two sequences from *The Black Stallion* and *Never Cry Wolf* went uncut and it was possible to allow the sound mix to play out with no changes to the volume of either film. In *The Black Stallion*, the Black looks to Alec, perhaps in desperation as his reins and ropes become caught and tangled in the machinery of the ship, and in *Never Cry Wolf*, the Arctic hare looks on, perhaps indifferently, as Tyler shoots his way out from under the ice. The hare’s look is hard to decipher—the ears stand to attention, watching and listening to Tyler’s gunfire and his gasping for breath. In this moment the audioviewer sees and hears how isolated the man is by noting that it is only a solitary hare who bears witness to his near drowning. Similarly, Alec and the Black are isolated from the rest of the ship and it is through their looks to each other and around their space, that we notice that they are dependent upon each other for survival.

These two looks, by the Black and the Arctic hare, indicate Ballard’s different approaches to storytelling in each film. *The Black Stallion* offers an idyllic, if somewhat nostalgic example of childhood freedom, which shows the kindred friendship of the Black and Alec blossoming, which deepens

through competitive horse racing. *Never Cry Wolf* offers a bleaker, more complex perspective where human and non-human animals co-exist, but gradually we learn that both man and wolf are complicit in the demise of the caribou in the Arctic region. These moments of the non-human animals looking to the humans as seen in split-screen allow us to experience a changing emphasis in Ballard's approach to filming animals and the environment. The hare's welfare is not tied up with that of Tyler, and unlike the Black and Alec, it has no vested interest or capacity to help Tyler. We can see the Arctic hare looking and listening, but we do not have any access to his thoughts.

## II. Something Else

The second section of the audiovisual essay offers a moment of reprieve from the earlier drowning scenes, underpinning the idyllic existence Alec and the Black experience along the shoreline of the desert island. They dance and play together in the water. I changed the music from this section of the film to instead use the theme track (composed by Carmine Coppola) to allow for the easier coupling of Nietzsche's words and the visual material onscreen. In a previous iteration, I attempted to edit and loop the synch music to a different text but was unsatisfied with the pacing and tone created by both. In this sequence, in a light accompaniment to the moments shared by the Black and Alec in the water, Nietzsche proposes,

A human being may well ask an animal: "Why do you not speak to me of your happiness but only stand and gaze at me?" And the animal would like to answer, and say: "The reason is I always forget what I was going to say"—but then he forgot this answer too, and stayed silent: so that the human being was left wondering.<sup>9</sup>

Nietzsche's suggestion of a conversation with an animal allows an alternative way to consider our non-comprehension of human and non-human animal relations. For Nietzsche this conversation occurs in silence. The audiovisual material from this section of *The Black Stallion* required a playful text in order to chime with the play of the boy and horse as filmed by Caleb Deschanel. Perhaps a fanciful inclusion on my part, but it would be nice to imagine that this non-conversation between the human and non-

human animal could be happening whilst we focus on their feet, legs and bodies dancing in the water.

Alec and the Black are enveloped in their play in the shallow waters. The child and horse are both

objects of the nostalgic gaze that renders them “other” or as Karen Lury suggests, as “something else”:

As performing children and animals can be categorised as equivalent—in the risk they pose to the production process, in their appeal and in the fact that they don’t act “properly”—then it may be that one function of these performers is to act as the ground for the proper performance of the adult. A “proper” performance is the conscious, intended acting of adult human actors. When we see (or believe) that adult actors are orchestrating a set of behaviours that refer directly to their status as not just “living entities” but as conscious intending subjects (as human), then their performances function not just to express fictional characters but also allow us to recognise how the humanity of the human, its performativity, produces a subjectivity that is self-conscious, coherent and legible, in contrast to the unconsciousness, incoherence and illegibility of the “something else” that is manifested by the animal and in the child.<sup>10</sup>

The Black and Alec, as animal and child, function in similar ways in *The Black Stallion*. Their presences raise questions about the “proper” consideration of a conscious adult human and his or her relationship to the environment.

### III. Secrets Addressed to Man

The third and final section of the audiovisual essay incorporates the writings of Berger from “Why Look at Animals?” into a scene in *Never Cry Wolf* in which the man, Tyler, and wolf, George, observe and study each other for the first time. *Never Cry Wolf* was made over a three-year period, from 1980 to 1983, and it coincides with the publication of Berger’s “Why Look at Animals?”. Berger’s writing marries with the audiovisual material; this section from the film offers a shot-by-shot case study of Berger’s argument. In the audiovisual essay, I let this sequence from *Never Cry Wolf* play out unaltered with Berger’s words:

The animal scrutinises him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. This is why the man can surprise the animal. Yet the animal—even if domesticated—can also surprise the man. The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension. And this is so wherever he looks. He is always looking across ignorance and fear. And so, when he is being seen by the animal, he is being seen as his

surroundings are seen by him. His recognition of this is what makes the look of the animal familiar. And yet the animal is distinct, and can never be confused with man. Thus, a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power but never coinciding with it. The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man.<sup>11</sup>

It is almost as if Berger wrote this section in response to this scene from the film, as the text synchs up with the audiovisual material, commenting directly on the looks of Tyler and George.

The audiovisual essay closes with a final quotation from Irene Gustafson: “Observation is a spatialized and temporalized activity, embedded within systems of power, but also systems of sociality.”<sup>12</sup> The human animal may scrutinise the non-human animal, but as we have seen in *The Black Stallion* and *Never Cry Wolf*, the look comes from both human and non-human animals. It *seems* to me now, that one of the questions I should have been asking myself is, what does Marmaduke think I am interested in when I sit down with him to audioview a Ballard film?

The audiovisual essay format lends itself through the application of space and time to illustrate these looks across the abyss, but also allows us to consider what is heard in remote environments. This audiovisual essay creates a space to consider philosophical reflections on human/non-human animal relations in dialogue with film through the videographic epigraph form. Ballard’s films invite such readings, allowing both the space and time to contemplate and reflect upon the systems and structures portrayed. Ballard’s films are an exemplary way to consider the relationships and tensions between human and non-human animals that have resonances for how we consider our shared sense of self in the world.



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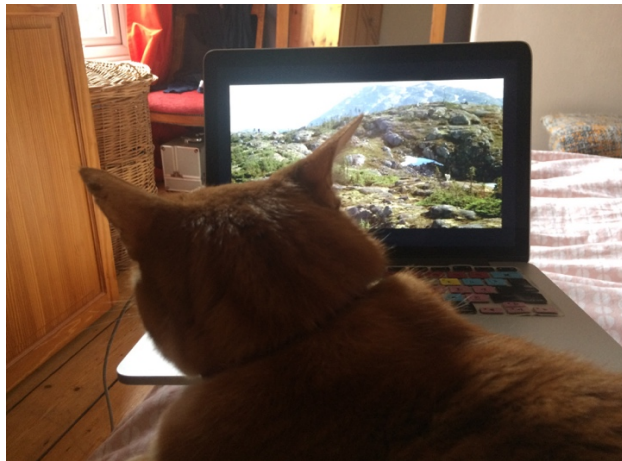
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Marmaduke, audioviewing *Never Cry Wolf*.



Marmaduke, audioviewing the wolf and the author.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Splet died in 1994, he was the pre-eminent sound designer of his generation. Kroeber, a fellow sound designer and Splet's partner has continued her collaborative work with Ballard. Kroeber has archived Splet and her sound work in the *Sound Mountain* sound effects library. Kroeber has recently released some of her animal recordings in a special library entitled "Ann's Animals." [https://shop.prosoundeffects.com/products/anns-animals-animal-sound-effects-library?utm\\_campaign=AnnsAnimals&utm\\_source=smartbar](https://shop.prosoundeffects.com/products/anns-animals-animal-sound-effects-library?utm_campaign=AnnsAnimals&utm_source=smartbar)

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, trans. David Wills. "The Animal That Therefore I am," *Critical Inquiry* 28, No. 2 (Winter 2002), 381.

<sup>3</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 5.

<sup>4</sup> The Videographic Epigraph is a form of audiovisual essay that puts academic quotation in relation to audiovisual texts and was pioneered by Catherine Grant. For more on the videographic epigraphic, see Grant, "Film studies in the groove? Rhythming perception in Carnal Locomotive" *Necsus*, 11 June 2015, <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/film-studies-in-the-groove-rhythming-perception-in-carnal-locomotive/>, Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Image*, Caboose, 2016,

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and Jason Mittell, *The Videographic Essay: Criticism in Sound and Image*, <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/videographic-essay/index>

<sup>5</sup> *Looking Across the Abyss: Human/Non-Human Animal* is limited to discussing only the various looks in cinema but I will expand on this to consider how non-human animals are heard and listen in film in a future project.

<sup>6</sup> *Velvet Elephant* (Liz Greene, 2015) <https://vimeo.com/131802926>.

<sup>7</sup> See Adam Melvin, “Renegotiating the Overture: The Use of Sound and Music in the Opening Sequences of *A Single Man* and *Shame*,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media: Integrated Soundtracks*.

<sup>8</sup> See Catherine Grant, “Side-by-Side | Up-and-Down: Comparative Videographic Approaches to Transnational Cinema,” [*#SCMS16*] 2016, <https://vimeo.com/161220866>.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60–61.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Lury, *The Child In Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Berger, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Gustafson’s words accompany the first substantial audiovisual contribution to animal studies and looking relations. See Irene Gustafson, “Facing the Subject (On Observation),” [*in*] *Transition*, 3.1, 2016, <http://mediacommons.org/intransition/2016/03/14/facing-subject-observation>