

James Leo Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.

ZOË ANNE LAKS

With proclamations of a nonhuman turn appearing with increasing frequency over the past two decades, James Leo Cahill's 2019 book *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* joins the flurry of new scholarship focused around a critical practice of de-anthropocentrism. This so-called turn, perhaps most clearly exemplified in Richard Grusin's 2015 anthology *The Nonhuman Turn*, which consolidates various streams of scholarly discourse under the umbrella term of the nonhuman, coheres through a central aim to reposition the human as nonexceptional. Another branch of such discourse, what is now often termed "critical posthumanism" (invoking *post-* in the retrospective rather than teleological sense), has sought to re-evaluate humanism since the early 1990s, and with it the assumption that the human subject should necessarily occupy the centre of philosophical thinking.

It is in this spirit that *Zoological Surrealism* takes up a reconsideration of the films of Jean Painlevé, a mid-century French filmmaker oft neglected in academic and popular discourse alike. Despite having created close to two hundred films across his career, there remains a dearth of sustained investigation into Painlevé's works—a

lack of critical attention which Cahill's new book seeks to remedy.

In a vein similar to Drew Ayers's *Vernacular Posthumanism*, also published in 2019, *Zoological Surrealism* draws out cinema's inherently revolutionary potential as a function of its inhuman (mechanical) and transhistorical (Cahill 2019b, 23) properties, in order to reorient our ways of viewing both the nonhuman and the human world. The central tenet of this book is that Painlevé's works draw on cinema's so-called Copernican vocation, "an ordinary job of the cinema" (314) to shift the human from the centre to the periphery, as Copernicus's scientific discoveries accomplished in the realm of astronomy half a millennium prior. This same destabilizing and defamiliarizing characteristic of Painlevé's work has been remarked upon in earlier scholarship. Ralph Rugoff, for one, claims that Painlevé's filmmaking is often uncanny in its "intellectual uncertainty"; as he points out, these films often render the human alien and strange within the wider landscape of "nature's bizarre marvels" (2000, 49, 50).

Cahill builds on and extends these few prior studies on Painlevé's life and filmography in a rigorous overview of the first half of Painlevé's career (1924–

1949) by investigating his and his films' relationships to contemporaneous ideological, scientific, artistic, and political movements. *Zoological Surrealism* charts Painlevé's films alongside historical and scientific developments in film, culture, and technology in the 1920s through to the 1940s, including the rise and popularity of comparative anatomy and new physics; Surrealism and early film theory; breakthroughs in film sound and underwater filmmaking; and sociopolitical movements like the "battle of the sexes," critical humanism, and imperialist rhetoric in interwar and wartime France. Relying on archival research alongside close readings of films, essays, and photographs by Painlevé and others, Cahill draws out the connections between his chosen case studies and their historical settings in order to destabilize traditionally humanist ways of understanding historical material.

The book pairs this historical materialist-based methodology with a theoretical charge, developing specific theories in each chapter that spring out of Painlevé's films. Cahill's writing style is playful and associational, and can occasionally become emotionally demanding, as his analyses directly address the suffering and violence against animals depicted in Painlevé's films in sometimes graphic terms.

The thread uniting Cahill's analyses—cinema's Copernican vocation—is a concept that builds on previous works by Cahill, in which he has extrapolated the theoretical potential of both *unheimlich* cinema (2013) as well as natural history's "estranged gaze," which each perform a similar role in rendering nature and the natural

strange through historical displacement (2019a, 153, 155).

The book's chapters are ordered both chronologically and according to common themes and rhetoric linking each set of films together. Chapter 1, "Neozoological Dramas: Comparative Anatomy by Other Means," explicates three practices that Cahill identifies in Painlevé's works which decontextualize on-screen subjects and offer new theoretically productive relationships between humans and animals. Cahill links the practice of a zoological form of Surrealism (or 'neozoology' in Painlevé's terms) with comparative anatomy, which involves a strategy of taxonomic grouping based in the logic of analogy, and with the play of scales, for instance between the microscopic and the gigantic, a practice which Cahill argues stages a provocative relationship between part and whole.

This chapter mainly discusses these concepts vis-à-vis three short films by Painlevé from 1928: *The Octopus*, *The Daphnia*, and *The Sea Urchins*, each of which reflexively draws attention to their own filmic apparatus and modes of production, a strategy which Cahill argues instills a sense of defamiliarization we might carry forward into our "habituated scales of perception" (85). Cahill offers the close-up as a formal strategy that enacts these practices in depicting "*a part apart*" (77, original emphasis), a technique which introduces internal difference within apparently self-identical animal subjects. In a way recalling Jakob von Uexküll's *Umwelt* or "soap bubbles"—which delineate animals' environments as distinct worlds containing individual scales and temporalities (2010, 69–70)—Ca-

hill argues that this aesthetic strategy offers an entry into new worlds, where magnification might reveal the potential for new ecologies and landscapes the further down you go (2019b, 82).

Chapter 2, “Metamorphoses: Crustaceans, the Coming of Sound, and Plasmatic Anthropomorphism,” delves into Cahill’s concept of plasmatic anthropomorphism, which enacts metamorphoses of human and animal through analogical thinking. The chapter aims to recuperate as theoretically productive the anthropomorphic tendencies in Painlevé’s early films, a rhetorical strategy that was especially pronounced through their sound and commentary tracks (96). This discussion follows the lead of other contemporary scholars attempting to reclaim the critical potential within the maligned concept of anthropomorphism. This trend has been on the rise in academic discourse since Daston and Mitman’s 2005 anthology *Thinking with Animals: Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*.

Cahill’s approach toward anthropomorphism focuses on its potential for anti-essentialism and transformation as a formal and theoretical praxis (137); in so doing, he builds on Sergei Eisenstein’s concept of the plasmatic, which was rooted in the fluid and mutable form of animation (96–97). The chapter chiefly applies this concept to Painlevé’s *The Hermit Crab* (1929) and *Hyas and Stenorhynchus, Marine Crustaceans* (1929) by articulating how these films challenge the boundary between animal and human, rendering the human being decentred and relative through the logic of analogy. In this way, Painlevé’s anthropomorphic analogies between animal and human

emphasize our and their “protean capacity to become otherwise” (135).

Chapter 3, “*Amour Flou: The Seahorse and the Blur of Sex*,” concerns itself with a concept Cahill terms *amour flou* (blurred love), which is based on the Surrealist idea of *amour fou* (mad love). The chapter anchors this discussion in the sexual politics of Surrealism, where love offers “a blurring of corporeal and conceptual boundaries” (160), and Cahill applies this reading to Painlevé’s *The Seahorse* (1934). The chapter argues that the film reveals the non-essential and relative nature of human gender and sex (159) by positioning humans within “a broader spectrum of behaviors” (160).

Cahill’s analysis implicitly invokes John Berger’s work on looking at animals, in which the animal always functions as the observed rather than the observer—in Berger’s words, “The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance” (1980, 16). However, Cahill offers an alternative possibility, where the ideal of *amour flou*, which can be conjured through techniques like superimpositions, allows us to stage an encounter with animals “on more commensurate terms” (2019b, 177). As Cahill details, superimpositions in *The Seahorse*, as a manifestation of *amour flou*, create points of contact between human and animal images, which “implicat[e] the spectators in the film’s on-screen erotic economy” (181), and in so doing blur human with nonhuman animal attraction.

Chapter 4, “Substitutes, Vectors, and the Circulatory Systems of Modernity: *Dr. Normet’s Serum: Experimental Treatment of a Hemorrhage in a Dog and The Vampire*,” discusses documentary surrealism by way of two films direc-

ted by Painlevé which are centrally concerned with blood: *Dr Normet's Serum* (1929) and *The Vampire* (1945). Cahill positions these films within the sociopolitical context of interwar and wartime-era colonialism and imperialism in France, where fears of contagion and doctrines of hygiene were commonplace (219, 233).

He posits that the technique of grafting extratextual footage into these films functions to introduce internal difference according to “logics of contagion” (234) and he frames vampirism as a challenge to humanity’s exceptionalism through its ability to place humans back into the food chain, rendering us the objects of animal ends and thereby “implicat[ing] humans in animality” (259). This analysis brings Painlevé’s practice of animal exploitation closer to home, as this chapter focuses on animal films with mammals (dog and bat) as opposed to crustaceans—and indeed Cahill’s key claim here is that these films depict animals as proxies or analogies for human beings according to an imperialist rhetoric.

Chapter 5, “Carnivorous Cinema: *Freshwater Assassins* and *Blood of the Beasts*,” the final chapter of *Zoological Surrealism*, theorizes a so-called carnivorous cinema, as a bodily reflection on acts of killing. Cahill admits that it may be difficult for modern viewers to appreciate the critical potential in these films, which depict the explicit deaths of their animal subjects, but throughout this discussion he strives to draw out their recuperative potential nonetheless.

Focusing on *Freshwater Assassins* (1947) and *Blood of the Beasts* (1949) (a film directed by Georges Franju,

though Painlevé wrote the commentary), Cahill positions these films within the context of postwar French colonialism and the Holocaust. In so doing, Cahill is careful to acknowledge the cost of reading these films’ animal subjects as analogues for human beings, admitting that “these readings often risk disavowing the slaughter of animals on-screen, as if the turn to historical allegory [make] the bare facts of carnivorous cultures more bearable and spectators less accountable” (290). This chapter explores these films’ temporal dimensions in a manner recalling others’ work on animal imagery, such as Paul Sheehan’s analysis of the animal image. Where Sheehan describes images of animals as fundamentally “anti-cinema,” being both contingent and existing without history (2008, 122), Cahill argues that *Freshwater Assassins* “suggests the terror of a perpetual present tense,” where violence and death coalesce into a generalized, universal image (2019b, 272).

Each chapter in *Zoological Surrealism* aims to offer a different path toward the critical reclamation of Painlevé’s oeuvre, by striving toward a holistic process of “*unthinking anthropocentrism*” (25, original emphasis). Cahill’s project in this respect is convincing in articulating how these films disrupt ideologies of human primacy, while walking a careful line between confronting these films’ part in animal exploitation and their critical potential, a problem familiar to many scholarly works on animal studies. In the book’s conclusion, Cahill frames this problem as a tension between on the one hand instrumental history, as that which belongs to the generalized and abstract, and on the other “the in-

assimilable particularity of individual experience—the history that hurts—beyond the grasp of any redemptive project” (307–08).

The core contribution this book offers lies in its historiographical perspective, as it serves to contextualize not only the teleological and anthropocentric way we typically think of history but also the historical contingency of our beliefs about the boundaries and relationship between the human and nonhuman. This overarching historiographical approach is bolstered with sustained historical materialist analysis, which grounds each theory and critical reading of Painlevé’s films in meticulously detailed descriptions of the specific historical context of their productions. The resulting theories proposed are ensconced within their individual historical positionality and are formulated through a dialectical relationship between then and now. As a result, the book leaves open questions surrounding these de-anthropocentric paradigms’ relevance to contemporary contexts. Indeed, the study makes few efforts to explicitly link these critical readings to present-day concerns, except in broad terms, regarding the general relevance of such a project to today’s “era of accelerated ecological precariousness” (25) and the dialectical relationship between past and present. Instead, the project essentially works to “activate” history (310) through this dialectic, and thereby offers the potential to craft new methods of decentring the human historically, and thus to see film, the past, and the world at large in a changed way. As Cahill sums up elsewhere, “We must learn to see our own troubled present with the eyes of

natural historians, which is also to say, through a surrealist optic” (2019a, 156).

However, if we rescale the link between Painlevé’s films and the present day, from the macro- to the micro-level, in the case of the individual theories proposed throughout *Zoological Surrealism*, the strong roots of paradigms such as *amour flou* within their sociohistorical circumstances provoke questions as to their continued power and relevance to the contemporary intellectual and social landscape. Might we invoke the concept of *amour flou* as a model to describe environmental love or machinic love today, for instance? Superimposition as a device for depicting blur-as-love offers tantalizing possibilities for reading into the Copernican vocation of modern-day filmmaking, yet the concept of *amour flou* as Cahill theorizes it remains abstracted from contemporary social concerns. Cahill offers no easy answers, leaving us with the provocative question of how and why we might apply these theories beyond outside their original historical contexts. It is thus the intersection point between history and theory which *Zoological Surrealism* occupies that offers the most challenging and provocative ideas of this book, as the two approaches stand in productive tension throughout, reverberating with deep questions concerning the relationship between theory and history more broadly.

An emotionally challenging, theoretically stimulating, and historically rigorous read, this book ultimately offers timely new perspectives on an important historical figure and the legacy of his works, and it challenges us to develop new and creative approaches

to de-anthropocentric praxis, with the overarching urge for increased care and attention to nonhuman animal life.

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