

# ANIMAL BODIES AND EMBODIED VISUALITY

*This essay explores the relationship between touching and seeing through the lens of phenomenological experience, framed by the concepts of embodied visuality, haptic and optical images. It argues for the usefulness of the approach for thinking critically about human-animal relationships and the affective mediated experience of other subjectivities. With a focus on 'touch' it uses the 2017 Netflix film Okja to consider the sensual relationship between 'subjective matter' and the onscreen animal body. It discusses the different types of touch present in Okja and the processes of identification in terms of primary engagement with the sense and sensibility of materiality.*

**Text and images by Claire Parkinson**

**D**uring a scene in the film *Okja* (2017), the image of a human character running his hand along the body of the titular super pig prompted me to recall an experience from earlier in my life. At around age thirteen, I was allowed to assist at the delivery of a litter of puppies. The mother of the litter was a rough collie – a 'Lassie' type dog- who had been running loose for more than two weeks on a playing field nearby our home. All attempts to catch her had failed until finally, heavily pregnant she was cornered by a well-meaning member of the public and she ended up, as so many other homeless dogs and cats did, at our house. Within thirty-six hours of arriving in our kitchen and being given a bed, some water and food, she began to pant heavily and shudder as her labour started. I was kept at a distance at first only able to observe quietly as she gave birth. One by one, six puppies arrived but the weeks of being homeless and whatever other traumas had been inflicted on the mother took a massive toll. Four of the six puppies, despite resuscitation efforts, never took a breath. As an assistant to these births and deaths, my job, unexpectedly, became to help to remove the bodies of the dead puppies and wrap them in newspaper. When I felt the first small body in my hands, I was immediately struck by a sense memory

connection. I was shocked that touching the dead puppy triggered a sense memory of chicken. Not live chickens but the fragmented dead bodies of chickens that I, like so many other working-class kids, habitually ate for dinner. Looking at the puppy and experiencing the feel of her cold soft body threw my previously unquestioned certainty about socially prescribed categories of 'pet' and 'food' into complete disarray. While my visual sense confirmed their species differences and despite the feel of cold damp fur instead of plucked uncooked skin, the touch of her body, the feel of plump fleshiness to my fingers reaffirmed their similitude. I cried for that puppy who I understood as an individual being, but in the moment of 'feeling' her as 'like chicken' was unable to relate the sensory experience to this chicken or that individual chicken, only 'chicken'.

This phenomenological experience stands out in my life as I *felt* it viscerally, the sensory affective jolt was prior to the cognitive process of recognition. It was from that experience that I began my transition to veganism. Later, I had to recalibrate my belief that when I held that puppy, that was the first time I had held a dead baby animal. Of course, I realised, I had held and consumed the body parts of many dead animals, the majority of whom, as

standardised animal-industrial practices dictate, would have been young when they were killed. *Okja*, a Netflix original film directed by Bong Joon-ho in which the main character is a CGI genetically modified 'super pig', reminded me of that childhood experience. That memory prompts this essay in which I explore the relationship between touching and seeing through the lens of phenomenological experience, framed by the concepts of embodied visuality, haptic and optical images. Although the focus of such an approach within film criticism has been on human embodiment, in this essay I explore its usefulness for thinking critically about human-animal relationships and the affective mediated experience of other subjectivities. With a focus on 'touch' I consider the sensual relationship between 'subjective matter' and the onscreen animal body. I have written elsewhere on the ethical issues that are raised when live animals are used for the purposes of entertainment media (see: Molloy 2011; Molloy 2012). For this reason, I focus on *Okja* and the CGI super pig character to explore how the subject-object politics of human-animal relationships are encoded in haptic and optical images. In this essay, I discuss the different types of touch present in *Okja* and the processes of identification in terms of primary engagement with 'the sense and sensibility of materiality itself' (Sobchack 2004, 65).

### **Embodied visuality**

In *Carnal Thoughts*, Vivian Sobchack writes about the embodied experience of film that, 'we do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium' (Sobchack 2004, 63). When we watch a film we shudder, our pulse increases, our skin tingles, we become aroused, we salivate, we *feel* in the presence of audiovisual imagery. A film can act as a sensuous stimulus, an experience of embodied vicarious sensation. As Sobchack observes, film viewing engages much more than our eyes yet theories of spectatorial identification from the psychoanalytic and semiotic traditions have focused on the visual aspects of the film experience. This tendency towards ocularcentrism in film theory has taken little account of the embodied subject and their multisensorial engagement. The question of how meaning is

made and its relationship to spectatorial identification has, in those traditions, been inclined to grant privilege to the visual and the rational, the eye and the mind. The messiness of the body and our embodied encounters with film are at odds with the intellectual sensibilities of much film theory with its preference for critical distance, rigour, objectivity and disdain for the crudity of emotional or sensuous excesses. With few exceptions, Sobchack writes, 'film theory has attempted ... to put the ambiguous and unruly, *subjectively* sensuous, embodied experience of going to the movies back where it "properly" – that is, *objectively* – belongs' (Sobchack 2004, 59). The sensuous, she argues, is located '*on* the screen as the semiotic effects of cinematic representation ... or *off* the screen in the spectator's phantasmatic psychic formations, cognitive processes and basic physiological reflexes that do not pose major questions of meaning' (2004, 59-60). While there is no question that they are valuable, these approaches do however struggle to take account of what happens between the materiality of bodies off-screen and the experience of 'matter' on screen.

Phenomenological approaches, by way of a contrast, can instead provide a framework that pays attention to sense experience and embodied seeing. As Laura U. Marks proposes through her theory of embodied visuality: 'Film is not grasped solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole. This view of perception implies an attitude towards the object, in this case, a film, not as something that must be analyzed and deciphered in order to deliver forth its meaning but as something that means in itself' (Marks 2000, 145). To acknowledge the bodiless of our experience of the movies requires that we must recognize the multimodal sensory capacities beyond seeing and hearing that are active in the 'lived body'. Smell, taste, touch, and proprioception, as well as vision and hearing, make the film experience meaningful. The film viewer's lived body, Sobchack argues, 'both provide and enacts a *commutative reversibility* between subjective feeling and objective knowledge, between the senses and their sense of common meaning' (2004, 61). Where our bodies respond to a film without being translated first through thought, body and image are in a reciprocal state, they are 'surfaces in contact'; an experience that prompts Sobchack to argue that we must be attentive to our

'primary engagement ... with the sense and sensibility of materiality itself' (Sobchack 2004, 65). 'We are' she contends 'subjective matter: our lived bodies sensually relate to "things" that "matter" on the screen and find them sensible in a primary, prepersonal and global way [...]' (2004, 65).

The phenomenological experience is an engagement with material subjectivity but also a diffused response that blurs the distance between image and viewer that some other traditions in film theory prefer to amplify. In Sobchack's account at least, she is 'able *both* to sense *and* to be sensible, to be *both* the subject *and* the object of tactile desire' and, she argues, all bodies in the film experience, both off screen and on screen may be part of this dynamic such that 'meaning, and where it is made does not have a discrete origin in either spectators' bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction' (Sobchack 2004). By acknowledging the reciprocity of image and body, a 'tactile epistemology' (Marks 2000) challenges the distance privileged by ocularcentrism. As David Ingram remarks in relation to eco-cinema, the primacy granted to vision and visuality is considered 'a central factor in dominant notions of both rationality and capitalist economics' that has 'produced a dangerous sense of detachment from the environment' (Ingram 2014, 26). Because phenomenology acknowledges the materiality of bodies on and off-screen and the sensual affective experience of the film encounter and in doing so opposes ocularcentric detachment, Ingram suggests that such an approach might be useful for eco-film studies. On this point, I agree with Ingram and I further propose that such an approach may be beneficial to Critical Animal Studies in that it offers a way to explore the affective dimensions of the mediated encounter with other species and the politics of embodied cultural knowledge. Acknowledgement of another subjectivity recognizes the value of that being and can be significant in the establishment of empathetic relationships with nonhuman animals. As Elisa Aaltola argues 'emotions and forms of empathy rescue us from detachment, numbness and the objectification of others and enable the sort of moral agency resistant to subjugation and violence' (Aaltola 2018, 2). Aaltola also points out that empathy takes different forms and narratives of animal lives while inviting the viewer or reader to feel empathy, might

depoliticise, dehistoricize or aestheticize animal experience and in doing so occlude their material realities and suffering. She argues instead for narratives that invite 'simulative empathy' by 'making evident the historical, cultural or political causes of, for instance, suffering' and stories that make the effort to 'contextualize the emotions of the animals' and 'highlight the solid, raw subjectivity of those animals and offer ways for the audience to better the situation' (Aaltola 2018, 45). Empathy, however, is easily managed through popular culture, the danger being that pleasurable empathy is forgotten once the narrative is over. Aaltola describes this as 'bite-size' empathy, a means by which the viewer can edit what they wish to absorb: 'It is this', Aaltola writes 'that enables moral and political passivity, for the type of discomfort often required for one to truly grasp the causes and intensities of others' suffering, and to be stirred into questioning one's own culturally loaded beliefs' (Aaltola 2018, 42). To counter this, stories should be political, they should be more than simply pleasurable, they should be willing to confront realities and give context to the lives of other animals that pay regard to their subjectivity. In addition to this though, a problem with simulative empathy and the film experience is, for Aaltola, that it 'reaffirms the notion that an abyss lies between ourselves and others' such that 'efforts to project and simulate are ultimately like throwing ropes from one prison tower to another: the ropes' she writes 'can create connections, but nonetheless the prisoners remain separated in their states of isolation' (Aaltola 2018, 48). The answer then is embodied encounters which are attentive to the subjectivity of others.

Certainly, the film encounter is not a material encounter between two lived bodies and the act of mediation precludes the dynamic engagement of intersubjectivity that might happen with direct embodied contact. Embodied visuality is a relationship between the viewer and the image of an animal. As the animal is not physically present, the process of mediation can impose an ocularcentric distance between viewer and animal that encourages a form of anthropocentric anthropomorphism; that is, the humanisation of nonhuman animals which denies their subjectivity, individual experiences and species-specific capacities (Parkinson 2018). The mediation of a nonhuman animal's experience by

film or any other cultural-technological means 'translates' that experience in whatever modality by and for humans, and is therefore always anthropomorphic (Parkinson 2018). Mediation is taken here to be a confluence of the social, institutional, political, technological, and embodied that connects the discursive and the affective and it is the mediation of nonhuman animal bodies that gives rise to their anthropomorphization. In other words, the very process of mediation applies a human 'filter' and anthropomorphism in this context is inescapable. In the case of *Okja*, there is a further layering of this anthropomorphic filter, as the character is a CGI (human) creation, a super pig without any pig materiality or authentic pig-ness. However, this anthropomorphic doubling segues into wider ethical questions. In the first place, the use of real animals for entertainment purposes is exploitative and to a large extent morally indefensible, the rationale for their use usually being an economic one which broadly contends that real animals are cheaper than their CGI equivalents. The creation of CGI creatures is, at an ethical level, at least preferable to the use of live animals and while it might mean that the animal onscreen is an anthropomorphic projection of a 'real' animal, the replacement of real animals with CGI has material benefits to the lives of individual subjects who might otherwise be exploited by and for the entertainment industries (see: Molloy 2012). Secondly, simulative empathy invited by a film narrative can be informed by previous embodied encounters with other animals. Indeed, it is by acknowledging the embodied and multisensory experience of our encounters with other animals that the viewer can recruit those sense memories in the context of embodied visuality and the film experience. As Aaltola contends, we do not have 'to have direct embodied contact with all those we empathize with. What suffices is that we have some of such contact with other animals, which we can then use as a platform on the basis of which to approach those we never encounter' (Aaltola 2018, 49). The memory of such encounters might be then invited by haptic imagery in the film experience when the 'engagement of the haptic viewer occurs not simply in psychic registers but in the sensorium' (Marks 2002, 18). This does not mean that all viewers will respond in the same way. Indeed, Marks points out that 'Haptic cinema appeals to a viewer who

perceives with all the senses. It involves thinking with your skin' (Marks 2002, 18); it is concerned with a perceiving body and visual touch.

## Touch

In *De Anima*, Aristotle writes 'something is an animal primarily because of perception. For even those who do not move or change place, but which have perception, we call animals and not merely alive. The primary form of perception which belongs to all animals is touch' (Aristotle [trans. Shields] 2016, 25). According to Aristotle, touch is necessary for animal existence while the other senses are for the sake of 'living well'. Touch is indeed shared across most species of mammals, it is the first sense to develop and in humans this occurs in the womb at around eight weeks. The pleasures of touch in species other than humans have been little investigated although humans have exploited touch as a means by which anthropocentric benchmarks can be reinforced. For instance, the mirror test, a method used to measure self-awareness involves showing a marked animal their mirrored self and judges their levels of self-recognition by whether or not they touch the mark on their bodies. Few species other than humans have been admitted to the ranks of the 'self-aware' via this mechanism where touch is established within scientific discourse as an indicator of (human) exceptionalism. There are, of course, many other ways in which touch is an exploitative action, even an act of violence perpetrated by humans upon multiple animal bodies. Touch is emphasised in Temple Grandin's writing where she discusses certain kinds of touch as having a commonality of experience shared by her and other animals, particularly cows. 'My need for touch' she explains, 'started my interest in cattle' (Grandin 2008, 252). 'Firm touch' she continues, 'has a calming effect, while a light tickle touch is likely to set off a flight reaction' (Grandin 2008, 252). Envisioning the technology of a restraint chute as an extension of her own arms and hands, Grandin explains that she could 'hold the animal gently' for slaughter. This realisation assisted Grandin in the design of chutes for feed yards and slaughter plants. For Grandin, a nuanced and shared understanding of touch in cattle is translated into a biological-technological controlling 'touch' in service to the animal-industrial complex: A means by which other sentient beings can be killed in a way that is less troubling or troublesome for

humans (and a representation of which features in *Okja*). Elsewhere, the largescale commodification of touch is evident in the various visitor and tourist attractions that give humans license to impose their touch on other animals; semi-tranquilised lions and tigers are hugged and petted, elephants ridden and dolphins and other marine mammals are subjected to human physical contact and other traumatic interactions (see: Molloy, 2011). The pleasures of these various types of multispecies touch are designed to be human-centred and little value is accorded to the embodied subjective experience of the nonhuman animal in these interactions. This inequity of pleasure is justified through the rationality of capitalistic enterprise and the anthropocentricity of anthropomorphism that pervades so many human-animal encounters.

Sobchack and Marks both place emphasis on touch in their accounts of embodied visuality. For Sobchack, her experience of *The Piano* (Campion, 1993) for example 'was a heightened instance of our common sensuous experience of the movies: the way we are in some carnal modality about to touch and be touched by the substance and texture of images' (Sobchack 2004, 82). Sobchack remarks pointedly 'Vision may be the sense most privileged in the culture and the cinema, with hearing a close second; nonetheless, I do not leave my capacity to touch or to smell or to taste at the door' (Sobcheck 2004, 64-5). 'A visual medium that appeals to the sense of touch', writes Marks, 'must be beheld by a whole body' (Marks 2002, 12). In her discussion of haptic visuality, Marks contends that 'the eyes themselves function like organs of touch' and that haptic images are those that 'do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image' (Marks 2002, 2-3). Haptic images are often those that prevent the viewer from apprehending the object and therefore make them reliant on other sense perceptions to overcome limited visual information (Marks 2002, 133). This can be due to the 'closeness' of the imagery, or a movement away from figures so that they are not represented fully. Memory is crucial in this regard and while film cannot 'stimulate the precise memories', Marks argues, haptic images 'ask memory to draw on other associations' (Marks 2002, 133). In this way, 'because haptic images locate vision in the body, they make vision more like a contact sense, such as touch or smell' (Marks 2002, 133) and so haptic

visuality makes apparent the role of the other senses in the process of seeing. Haptic perception, therefore, combines tactile, kinaesthetic and proprioceptive functions in a way that contrasts haptic visuality with optical visuality, placing both on a continuum that moves from multisensory to solely optical. This relationship is important and the shift in focus and distance between optical and haptic is one that can change the viewer's engagement with the image from visual to embodied. There is then a corresponding relationship between engagement with a film as a distanced objective view and as a multi-sensorial experience.

Tactile memories are audiovisually encoded and there is a relationship between cinematic form and politics. In this sense, although phenomenological accounts centralise the individual perceiving body and the first-person affective embodied response to encounters they are also grounded in wider social, cultural and historical contexts. Viewers may share the sensual experience of a film but their individual response will be different and based on their own memories. The 'experience of the body is informed by culture' Marks contends, 'our bodies encode history, which in turn informs how we perceive the world' (Marks 2002, 152). Phenomenology can, she continues, 'account for how the body encodes power relations somatically. It can acknowledge that embodiment is a matter of individual life-maps as well as cultural difference' (Marks 2002, 152). The senses are not prediscursive and while Marks acknowledges that much sensory experience is presymbolic, it is, she argues, cultivated at the level of the body. 'Bodily and sensory experience' she proposes is, therefore 'to a large degree informed by culture' (Marks 2002, 145). The cinematic encounter is a meeting of two sensoria; that of the viewer and the film. 'We bring our own personal and cultural organization of the senses to cinema, and cinema brings a particular organization of the senses to us, the filmmaker's own sensorium refracted through the cinematic apparatus' (Marks 2002, 153). While there is an objection to raise around the implied authorial autonomy of 'the filmmaker' in this sense, the point regarding different sensoria remains important in that spectatorship is indeed the sensory translation of cultural knowledge (Marks 2002). For this reason, when viewed outside the cultural context in which it was created, some viewers may miss multisensory experiences which will be dependent on their individual embodied knowledge.

This notion of cultural context and its relationship to the organisation of the senses is apparent in my experience of holding the dead puppy. At the moment that I experienced the tactile similarity between the bodies of two different species, my sensual confusion was informed by my cultural experience of food and more specifically of those animals who are used and normalised as food in my cultural experience. This was embodied knowledge; my embodied knowledge of how chicken 'feels' to the touch given that the bodies of chickens are culturally normalised as food. This is distinct from my processing of the event in which the social discourse that normalises the classification of dogs as 'pets' and therefore 'inedible' meant that the embodied knowledge (my recognition of the similarity of 'touch') translated the moment of sensual confusion between puppy and chicken into the recognition of chickens as subjects rather than food objects. It did not shift my understanding of the puppy from a subject to a food object – at no point did I ask why dogs are not food- and instead I questioned the legitimacy of thinking of chickens as 'chicken' the food object. In this way, it was embodied knowledge and the embodied experience of touch that led to the cognitive process of questioning how moral difference is normalised and socially constructed categories are assigned to other beings. The process was embodied, discursive and on that occasion; an act of sensory translation of cultural knowledge. I return to this early experience because it illustrates the relationship between cultural norms, embodied knowledge and identification, something that Marks discusses in relation to films that depict dogs as food.

Identification with other animals onscreen is often achieved through the use of cinematic conventions such as eyeline matches, shot-reverse shot, and point of view shots to establish agency and intentionality. Marks argues that these conventions support idealizing identifications of other animals and points out that Western outrage at images of dogs being eaten often ignores the oppression of humans who are also depicted onscreen as the consumers of dog meat. Western cultural norms that afford moral privilege to certain animals over others are prone, Marks contends, to gross inequities of moral concern that pull focus on a dog and make invisible the suffering of other

humans. Marks contends that 'the status Westerners ascribe to dogs is far higher than that they apply to certain third-world people' and by way of a reason for this she suggests that dogs are 'more conducive to projected fellow-feeling than are humans who speak an alien language, practice strange customs, and, well, eat dogs' (Marks 2002, 31). The politics of the affective discursive dynamic that Marks draws attention to is played out through all forms of media and in relation to all animals, including humans. Those who happen, through cultural norms and social discourses, to be ascribed with moral value are given forms of visibility that allow for and indeed participate in the reinforcement of cross-species identifications. The oppression and suffering of others is often in plain sight but made culturally and socially invisible through the conventions that only allow identifications with those ascribed moral privilege and social value. The inequities of this power dynamic are present in the normalised imagery of, for instance, a human eating an animal product where the sentient being whose dismembered body part is being consumed is invisible and disallowed any opportunity for viewer identification. *Okja* depicts these normalised practices and through haptic and optical imagery and onscreen interspecies sensual relationships, the film makes apparent the ambivalent subject-object identifications between humans and other animals.

### ***Okja***

Directed by Bong Joon-ho, *Okja* is a Netflix original film that had its theatrical premiere at Cannes in May 2017 followed by a Netflix release in June of the same year. It is the story of a genetically modified super pig created by the Mirando Corporation who is sent to live for ten years with a South Korean farmer and his granddaughter, Mija. Along with twenty-five other super pigs, *Okja* is part of a public relations stunt designed to soften public resistance to GM products. The campaign is spearheaded by the self-styled environmentalist CEO who wants the corporation to be seen to be addressing the global problem of world hunger. At a press conference to introduce the super pig project, CEO Lucy Mirando declares, "Our super pigs will not only be big and beautiful, they will also leave a minimal footprint on the environment,

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# okja

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Bong Joon-ho

Okja, film, promotional poster, 2017 © Plan B Entertainment

consume less feed and produce less excretions. And most importantly, they need to taste fucking good.” When the Mirando Corporation reclaim the super pigs after ten years, Mija leaves the mountains to rescue Okja and bring her back home. An Animal Liberation Front (ALF) group who are involved in action to expose the Mirando Corporation’s activities become involved in Okja’s rescue which culminates at a slaughterhouse where hundreds of super-pigs are being held in an outside penning area surrounded by electric fencing. Mija manages to negotiate Okja’s release in exchange for a solid gold pig but all the other super pigs, apart from one baby who is pushed out between the electric fence wires, are left behind to be killed. The film is a cautionary tale about corporate greed and GM foods set against the background issues of environmental crisis and global food poverty. The human characters in the film; the young girl Mija, Dr. Johnny the narcissistic tv naturalist, Animal Liberation Front activists, and the Mirando CEOs (twin sisters Lucy and Nancy), each represent one of a range of different socially constructed relationships humans have with other animals. To Mija, Okja is a companion animal (pet); to the television naturalist she is a biological object; to the ALF group Okja is a sentient morally considerable being; to Lucy and Nancy Mirando Okja is a commercial object. The onscreen alliances, although troubled and with their points of moral difference, resolve into the pet owner and animal rights advocates against the scientific-corporate might of the animal-industrial complex. As the director explained in an interview ‘Films either show animals as soulmates or else we see them in documentaries being butchered. I wanted to merge those worlds. The division makes us comfortable but the reality of that is they are the same animal’ (Gilbey 2017). The complex and contradictory relationships that humans have with other animals are offered back to viewers in a film that merges the anthropomorphic fantasies of animals as friends and companions with the brutal realities of animals as objects who are exploited, sliced apart and packaged for consumption. At one point in the film Mija’s grandfather picks up a red pencil and hastily draws horizontal and vertical lines across a photograph of Okja exclaiming “Blade! Shoulder! Loin! Spare rib! Hock! Got it? This is what will happen to her. This is Okja’s fate. Fate!” The act of visually dissecting Okja on a photogra-

phic representation foregrounds the incongruities of human-animal relationships that inform the later narrative. A family photograph swiftly transforms into a butchery plan with only a few brief pencil strokes. Okja’s ‘fate’-the normalisation of her slaughter for human consumption- described by marks on the photograph draws attention to her value as a material object, a body for dissection. In this way, the photographic representation is made uncomfortably ambiguous; both a representation of subjective matter- a living sentient being- and of a material object. In other ways, the film continually questions the contradictory nature of human relationships with other animals and makes clear that despite Mija thinking of Okja as a companion the young girl enjoys eating fish and chicken. In his attempt to pacify Mija after Okja has been taken away by the Mirando Corporation, the grandfather makes chicken stew which he says is Mija’s favourite. And, in an early scene, Mija recruits Okja to help her catch a fish for her meal later. Okja joyfully jumps into a lake displacing water and two fish so that Mija is then able to catch them easily, although she makes a point of returning the small (baby) fish back to the lake and taking only the fully grown (adult) fish. This act of ‘saving’ a baby animal is later mirrored at the end of the film when Okja rescues a super piglet from the slaughterhouse by hiding her inside her huge mouth.

The Animal Liberation Front activists, although vegans, are not exempted by the narrative from moral incongruity. Their plan to rescue Okja is a ruse to exchange the ‘black box’ that records all Okja’s bodily information and which is attached to the underside of her ear, with a recording device that will enable the ALF group to gather incriminating video footage that can be released to the public thereby exposing the despicable activities of the Mirando Corporation. The activists intend throughout the initial rescue that Okja will be returned to the Mirando Corporation, and in doing so take a somewhat utilitarian ethical position that uses Okja as a means by which public attention can be drawn to the suffering of all the GM super pigs. Dr. Johnny is represented as a conflicted character, a television naturalist and fragile ego who struggles with his identity as both an ‘animal lover’ and animal exploiter; a ‘sell out’, who engineers the forced impregnation of Okja during a brutal scene that shifts the tone of the film from anthropomorphic fantasy to cruel





**Bong Joon-ho**  
*Okja*, film, 2017 © Plan B Entertainment

reality. Meanwhile, Mirando CEO, Lucy, desperate to prove that she is unlike her psychotic father, plans to save the world from hunger and simultaneously address the environmental destruction caused by animal agriculture. However, what might be regarded as a worthy endeavour is shown as the narrative unfolds to be callous, animal cruelty, corporate greed and greenwashing.

The viewer's introduction to Okja and Mija's relationship establishes the narrative similarities to other formulaic kids-who-love-their-pet movies. Okja, a creature that is more hippo-dog hybrid than pig, emerges from a tranquil wooded landscape in the background of a medium shot of Mija as the young girl blows

plumed seeds from a pod. Okja comes into focus as she approaches Mija and announces her presence with a subdued grunt before leaning gently against the young girl. A few head movements and some additional throaty sounds are enough for Mija to understand that Okja has a large spiked seed pod stuck in her foot. Mija duly removes it, telling Okja that it won't hurt and, free from the discomfort, Okja bounds around like a puppy then rolls down the hillside and into a tree causing the fruit to fall to the ground. These early scenes establish the idyllic interspecies relationship between a child and companion animal: the beautiful setting; the ease of interspecies communications; Okja's behavioural similarities with a dog and later



Bong Joon-ho  
*Okja*, film, 2017 © Plan B Entertainment

when she hugs Mija a human-like surrogate mother; and, the comic shot of Mija patting and stroking Okja's buttock as a way to stimulate her to defecate on demand, all function to construct this as a traditional 'pet movie'. Okja's emotional capacities for happiness and fear are made clear through Mija's dialogue and reinforced through the super pig's dog-like behaviours. Her intelligence and agency are established using a conventional point of view shot to give the viewer a privileged 'first-person' perspective and an understanding of the super pig's thoughts when the narrative suddenly takes a turn early on and Okja must save Mija from falling to a certain death. In the melodramatic 'animal rescues child' scene, the point of view shot follows Okja's line of sight as she works out how to use a tree branch as a fulcrum point that will

propel Mija to safety while Okja falls to her own uncertain fate into the trees. This crude but effective cinematic convention places the viewer in Okja's position following her thinking as she works out how to save Mija. Agency and intention are bound up in the ordering and use of point of view, eyeline match and reaction shots that invite viewer identification with the super pig while the formulaic narrative of animal sacrifice out of love or loyalty for a human are played out early in the film.

The rescue scene appears at first to finish with a long shot of Mija and Okja hugging although the overtly anthropomorphic figure of Okja adopting a bipedal-type pose to give a 'motherly' embrace to Mija is undercut by the viewer's distance from the girl and pig which gives a voyeuristic feel to this sentimental

moment. Over two shots the camera withdraws to what at first feels like a respectful distance from which to observe the embrace but then pulls back a little more to allow a few branches to blur into the left of the frame and give the sense of 'peeking' from behind the foliage at their embrace. This is not, however, the final shot and the scene has not finished. It instead cuts to a short sequence of three shots that begins with a close-up of Mija gently lifting Okja's ear to whisper to her. This is not continuous action from the preceding shot and therefore the viewer is made aware that some indeterminate amount of time has passed. It is though, a continuation of intimacy between Mija and Okja but due to the shift in time and space indicated by the discontinuous action, the close-up is incongruous and disconnected from the previous long shot. Moreover, the viewer cannot hear what is said by Mija to Okja and in the absence of hearing what is happening in the shot, the image invites an alternative embodied response. The dynamic shift from a long shot of touch (the hug) which can be viewed objectively, voyeuristically and anthropomorphically to the close-up of touch (the whisper in the ear) alters the sense of intimacy between Mija and Okja. The distanced anthropomorphic optical image of interspecies touch that seems to be a suitably clichéd shot to end the scene is destabilised by the close-up haptic image that denies the viewer access to what is being said and in doing so grants privilege to the sensual experience of the whisper. In this case, the inability to 'hear' functions in the same way as a lack of visual information to invite an embodied response to the image. The visual intimacy is such that according to usual cinematic conventions the viewer *should be* close enough to hear but in being unable to do so the image engages the viewer with 'the feel' rather than 'the heard' of the whisper. The shot that follows is a close-up reaction shot in which Okja's eye moves, she blinks, her pupil dilates, and her eyebrow twitches in response to Mija whispering in her ear, all of which invites an identification with the pig rather than the human. It then cuts to another close-up of Mija holding Okja's ear, the accompanying music is gentle and lilting. The sound and image abruptly cut to the first shot of the next scene, an overhead shot of a meal. 'Tada' exclaims Mija's grandfather as he removes the lid from a pot to reveal the whole dead body

of the fish Mija and Okja caught earlier, now presented floating in a brown watery stew. The scene change is jarring; the emotional shift from interspecies embodied connection and viewer identification with another animal's subjectivity, to the shot of the fish, a food object apparently without moral value raise the question of whose body matters.

*Okja* attends to the sensual relationships that humans have with other animals, particularly those who are classified as food. The taste and touch of the super pigs feature prominently throughout the film with Okja's subjectivity being repeatedly contrasted with the bodies of animals as commodities and food objects. Haptic imagery amplifies this unstable classification of Okja as both companion and food, as subject and object. When Dr. Johnny and the film crew arrive at Okja's hilltop home, the tv naturalist's desperate need to quench his thirst is overtaken by his desire to touch Okja. The camera tracks him in a medium shot as he strides towards Okja, his attention on her head as he reaches out and runs his hands over her nose and forehead. He does not meet Okja's gaze nor does he give any indication that he acknowledges her as a sentient being, his gaze and hands continuing to move over her body despite Okja's obvious discomfort. The medium shot cuts to a close-up of Dr. Johnny's hand with short dirty fingernails slowly caressing Okja's body, the detailed texture of her thickened rough skin, each hair and follicle filling the frame. The sound of the human hand moving across Okja's body amplifies the haptic visuality of the image that invites the viewer to sense how a super pig would feel to the touch. The intimacy of the close-up and the identification with Dr. Johnny's touch being imposed on Okja is unnerving. It is a touch that is unwanted, objectionable yet sensuous, a touch that invites the viewer to feel Okja, a moment of uncanny haptic visuality that is uncomfortable because of its sensuality. Dr. Johnny runs his hands back along the skin that fills the frame but is now dissociated from Okja as a subjective being and instead only the covering of a bodily mass. The naturalist's face fills the frame as he demands to be filmed saying 'you can't fake these emotions' before pressing his nose, face and open mouth to Okja's skin in the rapture of sensual desire. The camera crew begins to film Dr. Johnny who is framed in a



Bong Joon-ho  
*Okja*, film, 2017 © Plan B Entertainment

medium shot that only allows for Okja's massive head to share the frame with him. In his piece to the camera he tells his audience that he has known Okja as data from the black box in her ear, but now 'studying her with my eyes and hands' he declares 'she amazes me even more'. A shot of Dr. Johnny staring wide-eyed at Okja's huge single pendulous teat and nipple before touching it and declaring Okja to be 'truly exceptional' serves to intensify the uncomfortably sexual tone of his interaction with her. Later in the film, the television naturalist orchestrates Okja's forced sexual encounter with an enormous male super pig, the gendered dynamics of the scene and the dialogue as well as the viewer's identification with Okja leaving little narrative space to understand this encounter as anything other than a rape. Dr. Johnny then uses a phallic shaped tubular extraction tool to take meat samples from Okja's body. Holding the implement as a pseudo-penis, Dr. Johnny tells Okja 'I'm gonna poke you in five places. I'm sorry. It's gonna hurt'. After declaring 'I'm an animal lover. Everyone knows that about me' Dr. Johnny rams the extraction implement into Okja's side. This is followed by a fast cut to an overhead shot of the meat samples taken from Okja's body sizzling on a griddle plate and being carefully sliced. Served to an older white man, a young white boy, and an older white woman, they each respond with the comments

'tasty', 'fuck yeah' and 'that was the best I've ever had. The best of the best', continuing the disconcerting sexualisation and objectification of Okja's body. In this way, the film invites viewers repeatedly to engage through visual and haptic imagery with Okja as an embodied subjectivity contrasted with Okja as 'meat', as sexualised object, as component parts to be butchered, and the bodies of other animals as food or snacks, valued only for their taste and price.

### Animal bodies

An object/subject/value nexus as it pertains to animals other than humans can be summarised generally through dualities that, dependent upon the contextualising discourse, privilege one value above another such that broadly speaking when their subjectivity is acknowledged the animal attracts moral value while the animal-as-object is primarily aligned with economic value. Although these are somewhat clumsy distinctions and of course prone to the ambiguity of cultural and social norms that 'naturalise' the instrumental relations humans have with other species, the value accorded to another being and their consequent treatment nonetheless bears a relationship to the extent to which we understand other animals as having subjectivity or as objects. *Okja* engages with these distinctions and in doing so deals with subject matter that previously was mainly confined to



Bong Joon-ho

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documentaries about animal agriculture, animal rights, and environmentalism. The film thus contextualises the animals' experiences within their historical, political and material realities in ways that might invite simulative empathy.

Representations of touch figure prominently throughout the film where interspecies touch between human and pig is intimate, sensual and sexualised. Technological touch such as the electric prods used to force the animals up the chute into the slaughterhouse, the metal stun box that clasps the super pigs tight, the captive bolt gun fired into the head of each pig, and the meat extraction tool used by Dr Johnny all function to intensify the violence of human touch at a distance. But, touch also makes us aware of the materiality of bodies and the haptic images in *Okja* invite the embodied viewer to question the complex relationships that humans have with other embodied subjectivities. In this way, phenomenological approaches to analysis make us attentive to the political where it is acknowledged that cultural knowledge is embodied. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that viewer identifications with *Okja* are invited through traditional cinematic conventions, the intentional construction of a CGI character who behaves like a dog (1), as well as through the imagery of interspecies touch that calls on viewers to engage bodily with sense memory connections. Where mediation creates ocularcentric distance, the embodied encounter with film can destabilise this although intimacy and embodied contact

with other animals is, as *Okja* illustrates complicated. Does *Okja* need to behave like a dog for viewers to readily engage with her identification? Why can't *Okja* only be a pig rather than a pig-hippo-dog hybrid? It would be preferable to acknowledge the subjectivity of another animal without that creature having to have some qualities that are easily associated with a species to which moral value is easily assigned. In other words, a pig shouldn't have to be comparable with a dog to be granted moral value in a narrative. However, I return to my recollection of the puppy and the chicken and my sensory experience of bodily similitude through which I came to recognise their moral parity. It is this that gives me pause for thought.

### **Notes**

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(1) Bong Joon-ho discusses how *Okja* was developed to have the mass, weight and movement of a hippo and the eyes and behavioural characteristics of a dog. See: Jung, 2017.

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