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CAN THE NON-HUMAN SUBALTERN SPEAK? ADDRESSING INJUSTICE THROUGH PARAKEETS, PENGUINS AND BLUE MACAWS

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ABSTRACT. ***Can the Non-Human Subaltern Speak? Addressing Injustice through Parakeets, Penguins and Blue Macaws.*** Anthropomorphic animals have formed a staple part of the human imagination across space and time, creating a liminal space that offers scope for eco-critical narratives in which anthropomorphic animals offer a counter-gaze to human activities and environmental injustice. The purpose of this study is to look at the characters of *Rio*, *Happy Feet*, and *Delhi Safari* to highlight how talking animals in each of the three animated films voice environmental concerns, and to delineate linguistic factors which regulate the dynamics of power, agency, and care. The article looks at *Delhi Safari*, which centres on the non-humans' use of the human tongue to voice their woes before human authority. At the same time, it aims to delineate human attempts to talk to birds in *Rio* and delve into the very idea of endangered animals being companion species. It seeks to shift from linguistic modes of communication to analyse the narrative and meta-narrative messages conveyed through the dancing penguins of *Happy Feet*. Finally, the article hopes to address the use and misuse of care by both humans and non-humans, look at the implicit anthropocentrism in such a depiction, and consider the possibility of a truly post-human form of environmental ethics.

Keywords: *eco-criticism, linguistic, environmental, post-humanism, post-anthropocentrism, non-human, critical animal studies, semiotic, contact zone*

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REZUMAT. ***Poate vorbi subalternul non-uman? Despre nedreptate cu ajutorul papagalilor, pinguinilor şi macau-ilor albaştri.*** Animalele antropomorfe fac parte din imaginarul uman de pretutindeni şi din toate timpurile, formând un spaţiu liminal ce oferă amplitudine naraţiunilor eco-critice în care animalele antropomorfe propun o contra-privire asupra activităţilor umane şi asupra nedreptăţii în mediul înconjurător. Scopul studiului de faţă este să analizeze personajele din *Rio, Happy feet* şi *Delhi Safari*, pentru a evidenţia modul în care animalele vorbitoare din cele trei filme de animaţie exprimă preocupări în privinţa mediului, şi pentru a contura factorii lingvistici care reglementează dinamica relaţiilor de putere, acţiune, şi grijă. Articolul discută filmul *Delhi Safari*, care se concentrează asupra vorbirii umane a personajelor non-umane pentru a da glas suferinţelor lor în faţa autorităţii umane. În acelaşi timp, lucrarea doreşte să circumscrie încercările umane de a vorbi cu păsările di *Rio* şi să ofere o incursiune în însăşi ideea de animale aflate în pericol ca fiind specii de companie. De asemenea, trece de la modurile de comunicare lingvistică la a analiza mesajele narative şi meta-narative transmise de pinguinii dansatori din *Happy Feet*. În fine, articolul doreşte să discute uzul şi abuzul grijii, atât de către oameni cât şi de către non-umani, să ofere o perspectivă asupra antropocentrismului implicit într-o astfel de prezentare, şi să ia în considerare posibilitatea unei forme cu adevărat post-umane de etică a mediului.

Cuvinte-cheie: *eco-critică, postumanism lingvistic şi de mediu, post-antropocentrism, non-uman, studii critice despre animale, semiotică, zonă de contact*

The long tradition of Eurocentric anthropo-denial has manifested in different ways across cultures: some of the most prominent examples can be found in Aristotle's hierarchy of species in his *scala naturae*, Levinas' location of animals at a secondary position to that of human beings due to their lacking a "face" (Wolfe 2003, 1-58), and Alphonso Lingis' belief that non-human animals move without a motivated end in mind (Wolfe 2003, 165-182). These ideas reflect and enforce essentialist beliefs in the inherent inferiority of non-human creatures to humans. Very few texts over the centuries have allowed the non-human subaltern to speak – to extrapolate and echo Gayatri Chakroborty Spivak's words (Spivak 2003, 42-58) – or even considered them capable of speech. The oppression of non-human animals emerges as a natural consequence of the silent or invisible roles which they occupy as the marginalized 'Other'. Perpetrated through continual denial of cognitive or linguistic agency, prominent historiographical roles or even an acknowledgement of their suffering and victimhood, these beings have often been labelled as complex machines instead of sentient beings capable of communication.

This possibility of animals being sentient has "suddenly become, in the last 30 years, a topic of great interest to biologists" (Duncan 2006, 11-19) and this is evident in the different ways in which linguistics, cognitive ethology, critical animal studies and biology defy traditionally anthropogenic ways of perceiving the world. Rather than regard animals as a separate and composite category as opposed to the human – a notion viewed as a first-degree crime against non-human creatures by Derrida (2010, 208-210) – scholarship is increasingly focussing on different biosocial attributes of non-human creatures like the apes' theory of mind, the cetaceans' communicative abilities, and the elephants' capacity for empathy. This article does not consider the possession of sentience as a prerequisite for acknowledging non-human suffering but hopes to explore how even such scientific strides fail to protect non-human animals from various instances of cruelty and abuse in contemporary times. Often, such violence can be traced to anthropocentric biases which masquerade under, misuse, or attempt to fill in the gaps left by empirical evidence regarding cognitive ethology and inter-species communication. Critical Animal Studies, rooted partly in Peter Singer's idea of animal liberation, attempts to rectify such a bias. By likening animal activism to other social rights movements, Singer remarks:

> Racists violate the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of the members of their race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. Sexists violate the principle of equality by favouring the interests of their own sex. Similarly, speciesists allow the interests of their species to override the greater interests of members of their own species. The pattern is identical in each case. (Singer 2001, 9)

The development of Human-Animal Studies saw the emergence of interdisciplinary works like *Animals and Agency* (2009); *Speaking of Animals* (2009); *Anthropocentrism* (2011); *Animals and War* (2013); *Meat Culture* (2017) and *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters* (2020). These texts offered insight into the various cultural and bio-social entanglements within which humans and non-humans are immersed, to critique the vastly unequal power differentials and consequent oppression of non-humans by human actions. Ignorance of the marginalized other's woes, and the injustice that it consequently leads to, may be corrected by a post-human counter-gaze to anthropocentrism, to offer a safe space for marginalized human beings and non-humans to have their voices heard (Ferrando 2021, 187). These minorities – by no means a homogeneous category – can represent themselves before the dominant culture to enable shifts in how the latter perceives them through historical, fictionalized, speculative or allegorical depictions of their struggles. However,

the task is made doubly difficult here: even if we want to, how do we understand and/or represent what the non-humans feel?

> And how to speak on behalf of someone who was totally deprived of causative power, or, in other words, agency; how the age of human posttraumatic events brings the idea of other victims that exist in the nonanthropocentrically understood history? (Barcz 2017, 33).

To this paradox of not-knowing, Paula Arcari suggests an alternative, of using "a degree of imagination to consider the alternate, non-materialised meanings they might attach to themselves and the practices into which they are integrated with little to no possibility of refusal" (2019, 71). This paper hopes to show how such imaginative measures of conceiving the non-human subaltern may be manifested through fictional spaces.

Using fiction to envision the non-human subaltern

Fiction attempts to negotiate the problem of representation, exemplified by the massive success of Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* in advocating for the rights of horses in England (Małecki et. al 2020, 1). Paradoxically, the horses' silence and inability to communicate their woes to their masters achieve a form of meta-narrative significance, moving readers with poignant details of Beauty's mistreatment and Ginger's death. This animal's eye view "compels the human reader into a close emotional bond with the animal as it relates the story of its difficult life" (Ratelle 2015, 10). Such animal autobiographies become increasingly relevant in the Anthropocene to highlight through fictional media, a 'nature-culture' (Haraway 2016, 125), where slaughterhouses engage in consistent anthropo-denial, where bullfighting has not yet been abolished (Saldanha 2018), and where the taste for live food is fetishized (Lee 2012).

The rise of cinema and especially animated films ensures a more efficient adoption of the animal's eye, such that the very angles and ways of looking afforded on screen become ways of manifesting (or countering) anthropocentric gaze. The effectiveness of animation, when applied to the narratives of the non-human are summarized effectively by Paul Wells:

> Though, by addressing the specificity of the language of animation, it is possible to evaluate its enunciative distinctiveness in the address of animal stories… it is possible to view animation as an approach that inevitably facilitates a representational difference, and that intrinsically interrogates orthodox positions, embedded ideology, and epistemological certainty per se. Knowledge of and about apparently specific creatures or objects or even human figures is challenged and potentially redefined. (Wells 2009, 4-5)

Animation superimposes humanized faces, dialects, languages, emotions and postures on non-human creatures, enabling human beings to empathize with the fictional plight of homeless animals in *Delhi Safari*, endangered blue macaws in *Rio,* and penguins combating depleted food sources and plastic pollution in *Happy Feet*. These narratives with anthropomorphised animals become increasingly important in the light of large-scale contemporary extinctions (Kaufman 2021).

These non-humans (both the real creatures in the wild and fictional representatives) become the epitome of subalternity who are denied power and voice. The intersectionality of animal studies and post-colonial literature may offer a positive solution to such injustice. Texts like *The Postcolonial Animal*, *Postcolonial Animalities*, *Reading the Animal in the Literature of the British Raj*, *Multispecies Modernity: Disorderly Life in Postcolonial Literature* and *Social Practices and Dynamic Non-humans* attempt to negotiate with this very idea – often to facilitate the entry of non-humans into emancipatory frameworks which had been highly anthropogenic.

This article seeks to envision how the characters of *Delhi Safari*, *Rio* and *Happy Feet* become oppressed subalterns, often living through experiences of colonial trauma brought on by anthropocentrism. The human/ non-human interactions create contact zones of conflict and consequent resolution, as the characters thwart humanistic designs to conquer their lands (*Delhi Safari*), bodies (*Rio*), and resources (*Happy Feet*) by envisioning a strong counter-gaze against their tormentors. Little scholarship exists on this non-human counter-gaze in *Happy Feet* and *Rio*, and almost none on *Delhi Safari*. This article hopes to rectify the same by delving into their common ecological motives through a post-anthropocentric lens.

It explores how such a counter-gaze manifests itself through varied communicative means – not merely by being limited to verbal speech, but also by encompassing semiotic, affective and non-expert means of communication among characters in multi-species assemblages. As such, the characters' desires to communicate meta-narratively direct attention to the plight of actual blue macaws, penguins, and other wild animals. Finally, this article hopes to show how human beings in these films are both antagonistic and benevolent, with the latter characterised by their desire to make 'oddkin' (Haraway 2016, 26) with non-human animals. The films' depiction of their story exposes the anthropocentrism present in all human languages, and even how we conceive of language, communication, and perception.

Talking to the oppressors: *Delhi Safari*

The film adopts a strong meta-narrative counter-gaze against anthropo-denial in the very first scene when the leopard cub Yuvraj (Hindi for 'prince') remarks:

> *Yeh jungle hamara ghar hain... mein apne papa ko kho chuka hu. Apne ghaar ko nahi kho sakta.* (Advani 2012)

A rough translation of the above lines conveys the young cub's woes: "This jungle is our home… I have lost my father. I cannot lose my home too." These words highlight the very theme of the film. Due to human attempts to deforest and colonize this jungle of Mumbai, Yuvraj had lost his father ('*papa*') Sultan, while he and the rest of the animals are about to lose their home ('*ghaar'*). The desperate animals are spurred on to find a feasible solution to their problems – which takes the form of a pampered pet parakeet named Alex. Due to his ability to speak in the human tongue, the animals kidnap Alex from his posh human habitation and convince him to carry their collective voice to the government. The tone of the film is strongly ecological, and often borders on the didactic, evident in the belief of Sultan's wife Begum: "*Maarne wale se bachane wale baraa hota hain*" (Advani 2012).

Loosely translated, the aforementioned statement implies that one who chooses to save their fellow beings, instead of killing them, becomes the bigger person. Such didacticism, put in the mouth of a predator whose life depends on hunting prey, serves to anthropomorphise the animal in question. Indeed, all the characters are humanized to a certain degree, as some of the central characters in the film include a gun-toting monkey, a pigeon with glasses, and a bear in a cap. The film situates these characters, not as actual animals, but attempts to capture the anthrozoological and cultural gaze on non-humans to frame them in a virtual space for pursuing eco-critical discourse. The use of such anthropomorphic animals in media has often been attacked for undermining the very message it tries to convey since they create false notions regarding non-human existences in impressionable minds (Hui 2022). However, such a stance can be countered with the very idea of speculative children's media: if children can consume and learn from superhero-centric media while recognizing the fictional nature of their existence, why can't they do so with non-human animals?

Several forms of media do use anthropomorphism and play into the anthropocentric ways of gazing at nature and non-human animals. However, is this enough evidence to dismiss anthropomorphism as an evil that we would do best without? Rather, realistic narratives with repetitive plots involving the search for food or mates may be deemed tedious, and seem only to view the world of the non-human as one driven by basic biological needs, inhabited by beings who lack in familial ties or desires for pleasure, and ultimately to tie back into anthropogenic ways of divesting animals of complexity. The use of anthropomorphism in *Delhi Safari* assists rather than deters the movie from accomplishing its aim, by not ridding the animals of alterity, but enabling us to relate to them despite vast biosocial differences. These non-human subalterns

can communicate with us meta-narratively, through the use of cinematic devices such as close-ups of the eyes with poignantly human expressions as the leopards flee the hunters, the palpable fear among the creatures as they watch the bulldozers, the hunched posture of the stammering tiger who laments the loss of his species, and so on.

The only non-human creature who is depicted as more human than animal, and consciously so, is Alex. He speaks fluent English and his interactions with the militant monkey Bajrangi (whom he calls a "backward *bandaar*") parodies the prototypical relationship of a colonizing Westerner and a native soldier. Alex serves as the epitome of the modernized man in a postcolonial India. This assumes special relevance in light of the film's portrayal of large scale deforestation and displacement of native inhabitants, which seems to re-enact the anthropocentric narrative of colonial expansion: Alex believes that he is no less than a human, evident in his use of the oppressors' language, accent, and diction. His attempts to integrate into the human beings' culture, however, are partly successful. He calls kidnapping a crime while failing to realize that the law would not consider a parrot like him a victim of kidnapping. From his privileged position as a pampered companion animal, Alex is unable to comprehend the plight of his fellow creatures in the wild, evident in his exchange with Bagga the bear:

> Bagga: You are one of us. Won't you help?
> Alex: Take a chill pill dude. This jungle is your home. I checked out of this place a long time ago. (Advani 2012)

A strong 'Self' and 'Other' dynamic is set up here, which plays out throughout the film, till Alex comes to realize a shared sense of community with his fellow non-human creatures. His initial refusal to listen to the pleas of his fellow creatures is born of a sense of mutual unintelligibility, despite sharing a linguistic commonality – a paradox that Alastair Pennycook talks about while attempting to dismantle humanistic notions of language and rationality.

Pennycook looks at the premise of linguistic thought as the model of "mutual understanding" – a "passing of encoded messages back and forth from one head to another, and doing so with a speech community with agreed norms for language use and communication" (Pennycook 2018, 92) – and seeks to destabilize it through an extension of the Lockean philosophy that words may not hold the same meaning for the speaker as they do for the one being spoken to. As such, the default nature of semiotic systems is the mutual incomprehensibility of signifiers, which is evident in the animals' continuous utterance of desperate pleas entwined with grief and fear. However, when these words reach Alex, they are divested of their meaning and emotional weight and become mere irritants. Yuvraj's insistence that he can see and speak to the spirit of his father is

dismissed as a sign of naivety, leading to the adult animals' dismissal of his concerns and emotions. This in turn leads to the formation of a gap in understanding, which is rectified at the lowest point of their journey. Their belief in Sultan's presence leads to the latter's spectral appearance before them, providing them with hope for the final leg of their journey.

This mutual unintelligibility characterizes the relationship between Alex and Bajrangi, who get off on the wrong foot with each other after the former is kidnapped by the latter. Bajrangi wants to fight the human beings and oust them from his territory and scoffs at the prospect of looking for pacifist solutions. Alex simply hopes to return to his comfortable "AC" home. As such, neither of them wants to bridge this communicative gap, despite their seeming overlap in interests. Despite Begum's insistence that the mission will fail if they keep fighting with each other, the two continue their attempts to inflict physical harm on each other. It is only at the climactic end of a thrilling montage, when the characters are stuck on a hurtling mine cart, that this conflict is finally resolved – despite Alex's insistence to leave him and save himself, Bajrangi turns back for the parrot. In the end, they both escape and apologize to each other profusely, with Alex realizing that in his anger at having stolen from his human beings' house, he has failed to realize that other human beings were stealing the wild spaces where the free-roaming fauna dwell (Advani 2012).

This very scene highlights that a default sense of mutual unintelligibility is not overcome through one common tongue but through shared experiences and mutual care. The group's run-in with a tiger, who narrates the sad history of his endangered species, strengthens their resolve – Alex realizes that their mission transcends a simple desire to simply save their jungle, to encompass the voice of all non-human animals which live their daily lives fearfully (Advani 2012). Alex is further reminded of his animality when he and his friends are stoned on the streets of Delhi, realizing that despite his former status as a pampered pet, he is no less a voiceless subaltern under the human gaze in an urban space. The animals cower under the gaze of their assailants, who, engaged in anthropo-denial, are unable to locate the counter-gaze as borne of intelligence and pain, deeming them as malevolent deterrents to morning traffic and/or unintentional natures in a planned metropolis. This counter-gaze leads Alex to pose a narrative and meta-narrative question before the Prime Minister of India and the news media, to strike an empathetic chord – how would human beings feel if their positions were reversed, and the non-humans attempted to rob them of their homes and their families?

To necessitate the formulation of such a counter-gaze, Shefali Rajamannar raises the risky proposition – can the subaltern roar? (Rajamannar 2015, 1-16) Sultan does roar, literally, at the beginning of the film, when he is chased by

gunmen – but, hopelessly outmatched and scared out of his wits, is unable to truly roar or speak in a meaningful manner before he is shot. Alex highlights the consequent trauma of Sultan's son Yuvraj, that had spurred him to gather allies and visit Delhi; in doing so, Alex blames the humans before him for this young cub's hapless condition. Alex, as such, transcends his state as the voiceless subaltern to engage in dialogue with the oppressors – an exercise of power that Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak termed to be a transaction between the oppressed and the oppressor. Such transaction exists, not only between the non-humans and humans in-universe but has meta-narrative dimensions, especially in the context of large-scale deforestation (Kumari et al. 2020, 1-18) and species extinctions (Ani 2019) in India.

Notwithstanding the dialogue (like Sultan's desire to make a "man" out of his cub) which may have been a plot to generate humour that appeals to human audiences, and several anthropomorphic representations (bees in military garb, Gujarati flamingos), the film defies Cartesian dualisms of hierarchy to envision a common space for human/non-human cohabitation. Its optimistic attempts to garner empathy for animal rights are envisioned through the cathartic passing of a bill at the end of the movie – but an essential fallacy remains. Alex's words can stir people narratively (the crowd cheer and news personnel reiterate his words), semi-meta-narratively (the news, reiterated by the personnel is broadcast throughout the nation, leading the people in-universe to acknowledge their worries) and meta-narratively. The film earned international acclaim, and its environmental message was lauded by PETA (Michelle 2013).

However, the very notion of language is imbibed with anthropocentric exceptionalism. Alex still needs to speak in the human tongue to accomplish his goals. The film regards his temporary inability to speak as a major setback, thereby enacting the anthropocentric fantasy of achieving linguistic commonality to understand the minds of non-humans. *Rio*, a film that might have partly inspired *Delhi Safari*, partially rectifies this dogma.

Non-verbal bonds with companion species: *Rio*

A memorable sequence of *Delhi Safari* is its establishment of contact zones, envisioned through the transformation of ecologically sustainable regions into urban spaces and wastelands as the musical track "*Dhadak dhadak"* plays in the background. Done to exhibit the extent of anthropocentric designs on the landscape, such contact zones are scattered throughout the film of *Rio* with a similar intent. Contact zones, to borrow Donna Haraway's words, signify how subjects are constituted through their mutual inter-relations, co-presence, interlocking practices and understandings, often within radically asymmetrical

power dynamics and hierarchies (Haraway 2016, 33). As such, a contact zone is often a region of conflict and is envisioned in the very first scene of the film where an extravagant music-and-dance sequence by the native avian fauna of Brazil is jarringly interrupted by poaching activities. Such a disruption causes the protagonist, a Spix macaw hatchling named Blue, to fall from his home in the tree, before he is captured, shipped off illegally, and, over a sequence of events, has his crate knocked out of the car in the snowy terrain of Minnesota. A young, human girl named Linda finds and adopts Blue, and the two grow up together.

The storyline takes place several years later after Blue has grown into an adult macaw that brushes his beak with toothpaste, uses toy cars to travel, and drinks hot chocolate. The film makes light humour of Blue's forced anthropomorphism through the characters around him, who deem his actions to be unnatural. However, that is hardly the stance that the film itself takes, as it instead celebrates his relationship with Linda. Living several thousand kilometres away from his natural habitat, their place of cohabitation is a contact zone of sustenance and harmony, an occurrence rarely seen elsewhere in the film. Most, if not all of the other contact zones established in the film are located near Blue's original habitat and are characterised (if only initially) by misunderstanding, conflict, and clash of opposing interests of actions.

Such conflict is not always intentional and is often even played for laughs, as seen in Tulio's failed attempts to communicate with Blue after his arrival. A renowned ornithologist who deems his speciality to be in human/avian communication, Tulio's efforts to communicate impress Linda but do not have their desired effect, as can be inferred from the short exchange below:

> Linda: Wow, you are actually communicating.
> Tulio: Yes, yes, I introduced myself and shook my tail feathers, counter-clockwise, thus deferring to his dominance.
> Blue: I did not get that at all. (Saldanha 2011)

The two forms of expert and non-expert knowledge are juxtaposed in the interactions of Tulio and Linda with their birds. Linda regards Blue as a "companion", to borrow Blue's own words, and their bond is one of co-dependability (Shreyansh 2020, 658-662). Linda is devastated after having lost Blue; despite her lack of a degree, she can understand his needs far better than Tulio can. This is evident in a hilarious scene where, despite Linda's insistence on Blue's inability to fly; Tulio throws him into the air by announcing that their "instincts always take over" (Saldanha 2011) – a gesture that leads to failure.

The difference between the approaches adopted by Linda and Tulio may be explained in terms of Paula Arcari's words:

> I therefore suggest, rather contentiously, that efforts to better understand the minds of other species in this way, however well-intentioned, are ultimately human-centric… animals would fare better if we relinquished the desire to know and understand them better, which itself can be read as another aspect of the unlimited accessibility of their lives to which humans feel entitled. We can observe when they appear well, sick, happy, afraid, anxious, and so on... Anything more, for me, raises alerts as to the human intentions behind it. (2019, 73)

The film itself does not question Tulio's intentions, and nor does it downplay his knowledge and expertise in bridging inter-species gaps (evident in the manner in which the birds at the rescue centre take an instant liking to him). Rather, the scene stresses how non-expert and affective forms of knowledge can be equally important to empirical knowledge systems while breaching communicative barriers.

Furthermore, despite his biophilic benevolence, Tulio regards them from an objective distance. Blue and Jewel are, to him, the last two remaining Spix macaws, who must be brought together to mate, so that the continuance of their species is ensured. When the birds are kidnapped, he is shaken but arguably less so by the absence of these individual birds, and more so by the absence of viable progenitors of their race. His expert knowledge fails to account for the unique differences among these birds, as he unknowing homogenises the non-human subalterns and engages in an anthropo-denial of their individuality. In doing so, he unknowingly leads to the formation of different contact zones of mutual unintelligibility, where conflicts arise and escalate due to gaps in communication, notwithstanding the presence or absence of linguistic commonality.

Enter Fernando, the orphan child who kidnaps Blue and Jewel from their enclosure, to bring them to Marcel and his gang of smugglers. The visible regret on Fernando's face, his words to Blue and Jewel ("Sorry guys; nothing personal"), his attempts to redeem himself by helping Linda and Tulio find the bird and his final outburst when accused of betrayal ("I didn't want to hurt anybody. I just needed the money") bring him out as just another inhabitant of this contact zone of conflict (Saldanha 2011). From their privileged positions of comparative wealth, neither the smugglers nor the ones invested in animal welfare can understand the socio-economic reasons which drive his actions, with the smugglers even going so far as to capitalize on it. Fernando, in some sense, is an orphan like Blue, but is at the same time deemed to be even less of a human. While the latter is rescued and enjoys human privileges in a well-to-do home, the latter has no one to look out for him. This difference brings out the very marker of humanity as one of fluidity rather than fixity, leading to the critique of humanism through a post-anthropocentric and post-linguistic lens (Ferrando 2021, 80).

This critique is evident in the very interactions between Blue and Jewel, who are divided by their place of residence, ability to fly, and most of all, an outlook toward human beings. Jewel's attempts to escape her initial enclosure suggest an unwillingness to be part of an elaborate anthropogenic gesture of saving the species, and this is well encapsulated by her words to Blue: "Did you actually think we were gonna kiss? We just met." (Saldanha 2011) While played for laughs aimed at Blue's awkwardness, the scene seems to showcase a violation of consent enacted by the human captors, as benevolent as they might be. Nor does the film take a misanthropic stance, as Blue's own experiences of living in a human habitation come in handy. Rather than being unnatural, such experiences only exhibit rather a different way of solving problems as individuals. It is Blue's very knowledge of aerodynamics and the function of fire extinguishers, which enable him to defeat the antagonistic cockatoo Nigel and the smugglers. By enabling a non-human creature, a paradigm of the mute victim to thwart anthropogenic actions, the film achieves a much-awaited cathartic effect for audiences in general and animal rights activists in particular. Blue and Jewel can convince each other of the benefits of their ways of life; as such these contact zones are not merely marked by conflict but also resolution, borne of gradual and mutual understanding of agency and need for care.

Such holds at least for the protagonists – Linda and Tulio reunite in Rio to form their bird sanctuary while adopting Fernando as their child. It is Fernando's inclusion in this family structure that highlights the necessity of regarding the voices of both human and non-human subalterns to achieve a post-humanist or post-linguistic form of environmental ethics. On the other hand, the antagonists are marked by a lack of desire to communicate or empathize, both amongst themselves as well as beyond, leading the smugglers to be imprisoned and Nigel to lose his feathers. Nigel embodies a different kind of humanistic fervour than Blue does; he intimidates the smugglers, can use chloroform to knock guards out, and is regarded as scary by humans and birds alike. He too is a companion animal, but one that uses his knowledge to capture and cage his kind. In the final struggle between Blue and Nigel, the film portrays the victory of benevolent aspects of humanity and the ability to innovate over the malevolent desire to hurt, kill or maim one's brethren. Noteworthy is the festival of Carnaval which creatures of all species look forward to. It is during this carnivalesque festival that the status quo between humans and non-human animals is broken: non-humans gain agency, and human beings dress up as non-human animals to dance, biosocial barriers are broken by species to engage in a celebration of alterity. It is during the parade, the mainstay of this festival, that Blue and Jewel, the companion animal and the wild creature, reunite after bridging their gap of mutual unintelligibility.

Rio, despite its use of anthropomorphism, achieves success in highlighting the presence of affective bonds and non-expert knowledge in navigating around the world of the non-human. Of course, this is made possible in fictional space and with the use of anthropogenic language both narratively and meta-narratively. Despite being based on actual species of endangered parrot species endemic to the Amazon, the framing of their story in the form of a romantic hero's journey allows them to exhibit characteristics that elicit empathy from human audiences, while also rooting them firmly as inhabitants of the native forests which need to be protected. It is despite the anthropomorphising nature of the film, or rather because of it that several more people know about the near-extinct Spix macaw, with most, if not all such people lacking unrealistic expectations regarding their agency. As such, audiences know that these birds' ability to thwart human assailants is a fantasy exercised on screen, while the threats of poaching and habitat loss are all too real.

More-than-human semiotic assemblages: *Happy Feet*

> *The kid saw out his school days at the back of the class, lost in his imaginings... was there any place where one small penguin without a heartsong could truly belong?* (Miller 2006)

Such is the question that the film poses through the figure of Mumble, a misfit Emperor Penguin who is born without a heart song. *Happy Feet* delves into a fictionalised culture of the Emperor Penguins, where every penguin is born with the ability to sing a 'heart song', or a song that matches and connects the hearts of two potential mates. The film challenges anthropocentrism through its attempts to establish two distinct contact zones of conflict, one interspecies and the other intra-species. To that extent, this analysis hopes to show how the film envisions a sustainable multi-species co-habitation via a post-humanist reconstruction of the very ways in which we think and conceive of language.

Travelling from the forests of India and Brazil to the ice caps of Antarctica, audiences are treated to a host of singing Emperor penguins struggling to survive the harsh Antarctic winters. This colony of penguins have human expression, anthropomorphic ways of speaking, but more importantly, a physique that seems to blend the penguin and the human, as the penguins engage in seductive mating rituals which are accompanied by song and minor body movements. This song is the 'logos' of their colony, the central meaning around which their life revolves, and an essential tool for communicating the desires of one's heart. Great singers are celebrated, while the very inability to do so is regarded as a massive anomaly. Mumble is born without the ability to sing but has a remarkable knack for tap-dancing – traits which not only cause

most of his kind to ostracize him from a very young age but also lead several to deem his existence as a bad omen responsible for the depleting food supplies. However, Mumble refuses to change and sets out to find out the aliens (the penguin lingo for 'human beings'), whom he deems responsible for the ecological devastation around them (Miller 2006).

The elders scoff at this idea and banish him, recognising their perception of reality as absolute (Pennycook 2018, 101-125) rather than being borne of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988, 575-599). This bears relevance on two levels – as anthropomorphic penguins, they enact the roles of both humans and penguins. The characters of *Happy Feet* resemble real Emperor penguins in the far South, not only through their geographical and physiological realities, but also the issues plaguing them. Struggling through depleted food sources and global climate change (Blakemore, ''Happy Feet' not so Happy'), the characters of *Happy Feet* resemble their real-world counterparts, in that they become the voiceless subalterns under colonial forces of the Anthropocene. These characters are doubly denied power, as their location in the Far South stops them from knowing the nature of their true oppressors.

How can these characters even adopt a counter-gaze when they (perhaps like actual penguins) cannot even comprehend the extent of the gaze that they should counter? For characters seeking the truth, this seems to result in a recognition of their helplessness, as in the case of Mumble, who sets out to rectify the same. Mumble challenges the gaps in the elders' perception, initiating a perceived threat to their status quo and established knowledge systems. The elders' inability to recognize these gaps leads to subsequent miscommunication.

This contact zone of intra-species conflict microcosmically reflects a human world, where the penguins' refusal to acknowledge and solve the problems at hand, parallels common humanistic arguments against anthropo-denial and climate change denial, both of which serve as major concerns in the film. Instead, the colony and especially its elders, trace the shortage of fish to the wrathful actions of a deity, who is simply angry at the existence of a dancing penguin. Notwithstanding the very ableist mindset of a society that attempts to impose homogeneity, erase alterity and dismiss disability (Mumble does not refrain from singing by choice but is truly unable to), the society of Emperor-land is entrenched in traditions. The very ideals of the school that the hatchlings attend are evident in its teacher's words ("A penguin without a heart song is hardly a penguin at all" (Miller 2006)). As such, the very term "penguin" becomes a privileged marker, akin to "human" as discussed above (Ferrando 2021, 80), which is afforded to only certain members of the species *Aptenodytes forsteri* based on their possession of specific biosocial factors.

Ironically, a society built on communication creates subalterns out of the ones who are unable to use the same means to do so. In the mind of young

Mumble, his home might just be a Foucauldian prison, where any attempt at communication is hindered by customs enforced by the old order on the new. This is evident in the response of the Elder Noah to the tap-dancing sequence in which Mumble, Gloria and the other penguins engage:

> Dissent leads to division and division leads to doom... Mumble Happy Feet, you must leave. (Miller 2006)

The dissent in question was simply the penguins finding new ways to express themselves, but in failing to understand the same, Noah forces a communicative gap that causes Mumble to leave, simply because the latter refuses to conform to meaningless normative dictates.

Furthermore, the very notion of the heartsong as a necessary prerequisite to finding mates may itself have its roots in a humanistic bias that leads us to implicitly privilege verbal and visual modes of communication as a necessary prerequisite to forming bonds. The film does espouse a similar message by having the penguin Gloria choose Mumble over the other suitors attempting to woo her, simply because the latter was able to match the rhythm of her song by tapping his feet on the ice. This film can be lauded for its attempts to move from the domain of the verbal to the symbolic, to recognize and celebrate the multi-species semiotic networks – especially in the final segment of the film (Miller 2006).

Different societies of penguins seem to prioritize the formation of community and healthy communication, for mutual sustenance, and to survive endless winters – however, such a community often extends only to those members who fit in with the norms. Ironically, it is Mumble, located at the fringes of such a society, who desires to extend these communicative channels beyond the domain of known possibility; his perception, free of the traditional biases enables him to locate the plastic rings around Lovelace's neck as choking hazards rather than talismans bestowed by mystic beings. This desire to perceive, communicate, and "talk to [the human beings]; appeal to their better nature" takes him to leap into the freezing waters to follow it to the mainland.

He is consequently washed ashore in Florida, in a scene eerily reminiscent of the several images of beached sea creatures readily available on the Internet, further reinforcing the film's environmental focus. Rescued and stuck at the Sea World, Mumble attempts to fulfil his purpose and communicate with the aliens – however, they are separated by physical and linguistic barriers. He attempts to escape from his artificially constructed prison but strikes the glass. In one long moment, the visitors' gazes are juxtaposed with that of the hapless penguin's reflected face, thereby envisioning a true counter-gaze for the first time. Mumble can look back at the oppressors, even though his initial attempts to voice the

collective woes of his fellow Antarctic fauna in “plain Penguin” (Miller 2006) fall on deaf ears.

The film showcases both sides of the linguistic divide. The camera pans to the other side of the glass, and audiences are privy to the human gaze of the visitors, which is only able to regard a squawking penguin on the ice. Mumble’s words are divested of any meaning or signification. The term ‘alien’ assumes special significance as the human visitors are not only distant and incomprehensible but, owing to their geographical location and other biosocial factors, also alienated by an inability to understand the ‘Other’. Denied an acknowledgement of counter-gaze, the Emperor penguin fails to become a Derridean cat.

Can this non-human subaltern speak? Mumble tries to, though his will steadily declines over the months. However, the tapping of a girl’s finger on the glass causes him to remember his own "happy feet". Mumble performs a small dance, striking the visitors at Sea World with a sense of wonder at this seemingly new aspect of penguin behaviour. The film, in having the aliens appreciate what Mumble’s kind was unable to, highlights the success of symbolic communication where linguistic commonality fails. Mumble is set free and sent back home, where he attempts to convince his colony to engage in a mass tap-dancing endeavour since that has been the only form of communication to which human beings have responded. There is no initial meaning invested in this dance, which becomes a truly post-linguistic and post-humanist assemblage of inter-semiotic networks (Pennycook 2018, 8). After a few brief moments of resistance, the entire colony and even the elders are brought around to Mumble’s point of view, when a helicopter arrives and lands in front of them. For a few brief moments, man and animal, invader and invaded, all engage in carnivalesque dance, a video of which is recorded and trends across the globe. This unique behaviour causes major institutions of the world to reflect on its signification, and in the end, serves its intended meaning – several fishing restrictions are passed and Mumble is accepted as a celebrated member of his society.

Mumble’s victory in solving both inter-species and intra-species conflicts through symbolic communication answers the question that I pose at the very beginning of this section – was there any place where one small penguin without a heartsong could truly belong? However, this very journey of fitting in becomes a coming-of-age hero’s journey which is anthropogenic in design. It plays upon biophilic tendencies, a desire to root for the underdog, and extreme individualism that prevails against all odds. These factors, determining the course of the journey undertaken by the talking animal heroes of *Happy Feet*, *Rio*, and *Delhi Safari*, are essentially humanistic, though they do not detract from the post-humanistic discourse of environmental justice that the films try to envision. Rather, the very idea of being human does not oppose nature as we often tend to believe; instead, this very dogma is governed by dualistic paradigms of anthropocentrism.

Through expert framing and footing, the film situates the animated characters of *Happy Feet* in a liminal space between humans and penguins, to highlight two major deterrents to environmental sustainability. The refusal of the characters, who are essentially humans in penguin skins, to work as a community that embraces conflicting ideas and methods inhibits them from locating the true source of environmental damage. Contrarily, by depicting penguins experiencing human-like emotional states, the film brings out the inherent *pathos* in the non-human's helpless counter-gaze to anthropogenic projects of ecological damage. The human/non-human hybridity is hardly limited to anthropomorphic techniques but also extends to the semi-naturalistic movement of the penguins based on actual observation of the depicted creatures, the photoreal qualities of the animation and the attention paid to eyes and expressions (Desowitz 2006). The very nature of voice-acting and the meta-narrative adoption of English (or Hindi in the case of *Delhi Safari*) by the animals would even imply that it is not the subaltern that is essentially speaking, but the centre putting words in the mouths of the marginalized.

This raises an issue that continues to problematize the notion of agency in animal autobiographies. How "auto" is this biographical account when the creatures in question do not even share a linguistic commonality with us and cannot represent themselves? How far do they go in narrating the strife faced by actual animals in our world? These penguins, like the numerous non-human creatures of Delhi Safari and Rio exist in a space of liminality between humans and non-humans. They are made to speak through human voices, through humanly designed animation to highlight ecological issues as viewed through an essentially human gaze, and mass-produced for a human audience. Additionally, the actual human beings who appear are played by live actors and are not animated, perhaps embodying a conscious choice to root them in our world, and highlight that the strife faced by Antarctic fauna is a tangible problem that must be addressed as soon as possible. As such, would not it have been better to depict the entire film in an unanimated format, including the penguins, leopard seals, and killer whales?

I hope to answer these questions in the concluding section and discuss the relevance of animated films and other eco-cinema in animal studies.

The power of animation to envision sustainable contact zones of mutual understanding

During his stay at the Sea World, Mumble sees hallucinations of his family and friends appearing before him, alluding to a common psychological disorder called zoochosis that stems from deprivation of sensory states. Studies

have even shown penguins attempt to commit suicide in the wild, though the reason behind the same is unknown and located the presence of post-traumatic stress disorder in various prey animals who had escaped predator attacks. The presence of these mental states points to the complex ontology of non-humans, which they are often unable to communicate to us, leading to a consequent anthropo-denial of linguistic or cognitive complexity. However, these non-human creatures can and do speak, and attempts have even been made, for instance, to translate the sounds of prairie dogs into English.

Such forms of communication often transcend the linguistic into the semiotic. However, we may not even be able to fully realize what it feels like to be a bat, to borrow Thomas Nagel's words (Nagel 1989, 165-180), since we lack the very sense-perceptions (Pennycook 2018, 56-71) and physiological aspects which construct a bat's reality. Similarly, scientists have regarded the potential complexity of a honeybee's dance patterns. An exchange between two foreign nationals, a mother's attempts to understand her infant's distress, a howler monkey's warning cries to his kind, a stray dog's wagging tail, and the simple moments of non-verbal understanding shared between human beings and their companion animals, all point to how there is no single way to understand, but only multimodal ways of engaging with the world of the other, with whom we co-inhabit a layered semiotic space. The protagonists of all three films constantly attempt to interpret and negotiate the signs around them, to reach a state of sustainable co-habitation.

They achieve varying degrees of success; after all, it is truly difficult to move away from anthropogenic modes of representation when the personnel involved in the creation and consumption of media are human beings (Roy 2021, 97). Furthermore, almost all the non-human animals seem to share a similar language, which is again different from the languages used by human beings. Despite the seemingly homogeneous anthropo-denial of alterity that this seems to posit, I would argue that it only serves a narrative necessity, as a cinematic device intended to frame and uphold the plight of non-human creatures before an essentially human viewership. Documentary styles of filmmaking and live-action do seem like the best choice for conveying this kind of plight, as such journalistic modes seemingly depict the non-human narrative freely, safe from human interference and supervision.

However, that too comes with its own set of fallacies. The agency of animals and the depiction of how they communicate in the wild is impacted (and often unintentionally so) by the human agency and representational politics that go into the employed framing and footing techniques. Even such documentaries are guilty of anthropomorphism, even if to a lesser degree, as noted by Luis Vivanco in 'Penguins are good to think with: Wildlife Films, the

Imaginary Shaping of Nature and Environmental Politics'. Looking at the exoticism of penguins in the contemporary popular imagination and especially in the history of documentary filmmaking, Vivanco remarks:

> The lines between animation and wildlife film are especially blurry these days, certainly in a commercial sense in which the success of animated penguins and wildlife films about them has depended on and fueled the other… the dynamism and boundary blurring we see in today's penguin films is, in important respects, characteristic of a deeper history in which genres like action-adventure, comic anthropomorphism, and environmental polemic have framed the visualization of penguins. (Vivanco, 123)

Vivanco's work highlights the use of penguins as symbols of the inhospitable Antarctic, signifiers for the brave humans seeking to film them and representatives of anthropogenic destruction of the environment. Such critique is not intended to deem documentary eco-cinema as inferior to animated films but highlights that creating a truly objective, non-anthropogenic picture of non-human agency (as we conventionally understand) might not be achievable any time soon.

Documentary filmmaking as a form of eco-cinema remains highly relevant in the discipline of animal studies, but an animated approach might work equally well, even if differently so, by highlighting the humanized expressions and emotions (in all three aforementioned films) of non-human creatures. They could be depicted as beings with whom we can form a kind of meta-narrative kinship without detracting from the biological reality and troubles of their species. In *Happy Feet*, fictional penguins talk in human languages but also go beyond this to engage in semiotic means of communication in-universe. Agentic capacity, in a truly post-human sense, exists in a more discursive space, not invested in individual subjects (Carranza, 'Agency',), but in the assemblages of human beings, penguins and their shared concern for environmental issues. Similar ideas can be located in *Delhi Safari*, *Rio*, and other animated films.

Such films open a window into the tragedy of the bullfighting ring in *Ferdinand*, offer insights into massive oceanic extinctions in *Finding Dory*, and offer cathartic relief through tropes of animals fighting back in *Open Season*. *Delhi Safari*, along with other 3D animated films like *Allahyar and the Legend of Markhor*, and to a lesser and more subtle degree, *Jumbo*, raise their voice against poaching and animal cruelty, offering their unique perspective from the Indian subcontinent. Such depictions of cruelty are often taken to an extreme in dark ecological fiction such as in *Padak*, *Watership Down*, *The Plague Dogs*, and *The Animals of Farthingwood*, often shocking audiences through their gritty storytelling.

Even stories without overt ecological intentions have managed to garner support for the wild counterparts of their non-human characters, with stories like *The Lion King* aiding the case of animals like the warthog by simply

depicting them on screen. Other narratives like *Babe* apply partially superimposed animation upon live-action scenes to hammer home their message. The animated medium allows characters to share certain characteristics of human beings (the penguins in *Happy Feet* have a religion; the birds of *Rio* perform '*samba*'; and Alex the parakeet can use the human tongue beyond simple mimetic re-use of words). However, they are denied other markers of the same, as they live in the wilderness, rarely wear clothes except to invoke humour, and are separated from human beings by various linguistic gaps.

The success of the aforementioned films posits anthropomorphic animal stories as a highly successful form of storytelling. True to the goal of eco-cinema, they manage to increase awareness about ecological issues and motivate viewers to engage in political action. Animated techniques place these humanized non-humans between absolute anthropomorphism (regarding them as little more than human beings in furry suits) and anthropo-denial (stripping them of all aspects which characterise our idea of humanity), to locate them in a liminal space, where viewers might entertain the possibility of our similarity with non-humans, to varying forms and degrees, instead of regarding the same as absolute. For instance, the inability of penguins to engage in symbolic dance in actuality does not deny the possibility that they engage in other forms of symbolic behaviour, or detract from the meta-narrative message of the film.

Such films open up a point of enquiry into the implicitly anthropocentric philosophy that often mediates our various entanglements with the natural world. Their purpose may be linked to their meta-narrative desire to establish contact zones of intelligibility and understanding to communicate and potentially look at solutions to contemporary issues plaguing the environment. The susceptibility of moral intuitions to narrative persuasion brings out the growing relevance of animal narratives, and their persuasive capabilities (Małecki et. al 2020, 2). The famous success stories of animal narratives like *Black Beauty* and *Babe*, as well as the very reviews praising *Happy Feet*, *Rio*, and *Delhi Safari* across different platforms serve as a testament to the same.

Donna Haraway takes the idea of string figures and transforms them into a metaphor that signifies the distinct ways in which human beings and non-humans remain intertwined in separate or overlapping contact zones in the Chthulucene (Haraway 2016, 9-29). These invisible strings connect humans, non-humans and objects to ideas of agency and care within a network in each film – and, I would argue, even beyond. Strings of meta-narrative communication link the three films together to espouse a common goal and link these films to this very study in my efforts to delineate a post-linguistic form of environmental ethics and multi-species justice. Finally, these strings reach beyond the screen to connect these films to audiences across the world, who can recognise similar problems in Earth's wild spaces.

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