

# Animals in Film and Television

D.B. Wilkins

Animals are entertaining. This undoubted fact has been exploited by human beings for centuries and to the commercial advantage of many people. The ways in which we have exploited both the natural and unnatural behavior of animals have varied from the straightforward exhibition of an animal in a zoo to the perversity of dog-fighting, in which animals are allowed to fight until one or other is killed or badly injured. Entertainment implies both amusement and enjoyment, and it is incredible to realize that even within our so-called advanced Western civilization there still are people who can gain enjoyment from either directly torturing and killing animals or by witnessing animals inflict pain and death upon each other. North America and most countries in Europe have rightly condemned and outlawed bear-baiting, cock-fighting, and dog-fighting. There is no doubt, though, that these last two still have their followers and that organized events take place. The vast majority of people are appalled when they read stories of illegal dog-fights taking place, but is there any real difference in principle between that and bull-fighting in Spain, fox-hunting in Europe or the use of the cinch strap on horses in rodeos in North America? Each of these is a form of entertainment or sport which depends to some degree on the infliction of pain and suffering on animals.

One justification for "sporting activities" such as hare-coursing or dog-fighting is that the animals are behaving naturally. This must be a distortion of the truth as a

fight between male dogs in the natural environment seldom ends in the death of the vanquished. Greyhounds and other similar breeds will always chase hares and will frequently kill them, but hare-coursing as a sport relies on the chase and the kill to take place before spectators. This requires an artificial staging of the event; therefore the natural factors that would control such happenings in the wild are no longer influential.

Other activities that involve animals suffering in some form or other are excused or justified by those people involved on the grounds that they are traditional. Recent advances in our ethological knowledge and an increasing public awareness of the humane issues involved have meant that one of the only arguments left in favor of a circus is that it is a traditional form of entertainment. Most hunting of animals is based on our ancestors' method of obtaining food even though the end result these days is no longer necessary as a source of nutrition.

People have always had a fascination for large, "exotic" types of animals and as a result many zoos were set up all over Europe and North America. For many years there was a great deal of money to be made from exhibiting animals, and very little regard was paid to their welfare.

With the advent of cinema and television we have come to appreciate these animals in their own environment. Some modern zoos have attempted, therefore, to reproduce a type of natural surrounding for the larger species of animal, but the compromise between providing an animal with its natural environment and still allowing it to be seen by the public is not easy to attain, and there has always been a tendency to err on the side of the public. This tendency to favor the viewing public rather than the animals has resulted in concern about the way in which animals are exploited for films and television. These are modern problems, and they come under two distinct headings.

The first is a moral one and concerns the effect of animal suffering, whether real or simulated, on the viewing public. This subject is of considerable concern to the medical profession, sociologists and also politicians because it is now accepted that violence toward humans depicted on the film or television screen can be reflected by violence in real life. Does the same consequence follow the showing of scenes depicting violence against animals? Recent studies have shown that children appear to be more disturbed by a scene showing physical damage to an animal than to a human. Apart from the psychological disturbance to a child or adult of witnessing violence toward animals, the other direct consequence could be to encourage certain people to copy what they see presented in front of them in the form of entertainment. This is not to say that any scene involving animal suffering should be automatically censored; it must depend on the way in which it is presented and the conclusions that can be drawn, either consciously or subconsciously. Although it is perhaps an oversimplification, one could follow the previously accepted approach to crime, namely that you can show a person robbing a bank, but you have to show that person being caught before the end of the film.

A film that sets out to depict the horrors of game-poaching in Africa and includes scenes where animals are killed and maimed by poachers is morally defensible on the grounds that it is designed to stimulate public outrage against poaching. Is it equally defensible, however, for the film-maker to hire poachers and then arrange for them to kill animals, in front of previously set-up cameras, in order for the film to be made? I do not believe so although some would argue that this was a borderline case.

The example above brings me to the second problem which concerns the manner in which animals are manipulated in order that scenes can be created. The use of properly trained animals and modern filming techniques - clever editing, slow motion, models, etc.- should permit a film-maker to simulate almost every conceivable type of incident. In spite of this animals are frequently misused, and the main reasons are ignorance and expediency. (Within the context of this discussion cruelty can be defined as the infliction of pain or distress on an animal for the purposes of a film. In addition, I believe that it is also unacceptable to place an animal in a situation where pain or distress is likely to be caused.)

Several recent films released in the U.S. and Europe demonstrate both the good and the bad use of animals. "Heaven's Gate" has attracted considerable publicity over allegations that horses were killed or injured in the re-creation of certain battle scenes. The film also included a realistic cock-fight. There is no doubt that the misuse of horses, in particular, was commonplace a few years ago, but the public is now less likely to tolerate such happenings, and public criticism is bad box office. For this reason alone, I believe the majority of film-makers are prepared to be extremely careful in the way in which animals are utilized. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to assess the acceptability of a particular scene. Individual welfarists and veterinarians sometimes hold contrasting opinions.

The film "Every Which Way You Can," produced and directed by Clint Eastwood, contains a scene which exemplifies the difficulties. This film received an "acceptable" rating from the American Humane Association, but its final version contained a scene in which a ferret and a snake were placed in a glass tank and allowed to fight. The reason put forward for justifying this scene was that neither animal suffered any physical damage as a result of the fight because of the precautions that were taken. The snake had been "defanged" and "milked" of its poison and in addition, its lips had been sutured together. This prevented the snake killing or damaging the ferret although there was, in my opinion, no justification for taking such steps simply to create a scene for a film. The snake, even though it is a reptile, is entitled to as much consideration as any other animal, especially when one is concerned only with entertainment. The ferret did not receive any similar attention and although unlike the mongoose, it did not have the necessary instinct or ability to kill the snake, in the course of the fight it succeeded in biting the snake.

Fortunately, in the United Kingdom there exists legislation which is little understood abroad but which prohibits the exhibition or distribution of films in the production of which suffering may have been caused to animals, wherever in the world the film was shot.

The relevant paragraph of this Act stipulates the following: "1.(1) No person shall exhibit to the public, or supply to any person for public exhibition (whether by him or by another person), any cinematograph film (whether produced in Great Britain or elsewhere) if in connection with the production of the film any scene represented in the film was organized or directed in such a way as to involve the cruel infliction of pain or terror on any animal or the cruel goading of any animal to fury."

It is therefore clear that it is not necessary under this law to have inflicted actual injury on the animal and, therefore, the scene described above had to be deleted before the film was licensed for general release in the U.K. Although this may be described as "shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted," it still provides another weapon in the fight to achieve humane treatment of animals used in films.

The use of drugs, particularly of the narcotic or tranquillizer type has become more widespread. In particular, they are being used as a means of producing a sedate or tranquil animal that is then possible to manipulate for a particular film scene. Some wild or aggressive animals can be filmed in close proximity to an actor or actress with the use of such drugs. Once again we are faced with the problem of what is permissible in the name of entertainment, and I believe that some members of the veterinary profession are at fault here. In my opinion, no drug should ever be used on an animal unless it is directly to the benefit of that animal. In other words, to administer a drug, even a tranquillizer which may have a wide safety margin, to an animal to enable it to be filmed is not justified. It is regrettable that many veterinarians will not only approve of this but also willingly become involved in such filming by helping to administer the drug and care for the animal. I say regrettable, because in the eyes of the producer or director of that film there would appear to be no moral or practical objection to such a use of animals if a veterinary surgeon was prepared to give it his or her approval.

Television has recently taken over from the cinema as the most popular form of visual entertainment and carries with it possibly even greater problems over the use of animals. There are very few live television programs, but where they do exist there is sometimes a temptation to introduce animals into the studio and to use them during the course of the program. With smaller budgets and less room for expenditure on animals, many television producers will attempt to use animals obtained from the general public rather than from animal experts. The result is that an untrained, inexperienced and quite frightened animal is placed in the strange surrounding of a television studio for the first time in its life. The resulting mental anguish, if not physical damage, must be quite extreme. It must surely be possible when filming a television program to anticipate this problem and either to use animals that are conditioned for indoor work, or within their own natural surroundings.

It is inevitable that the telling of stories or the portrayal of real life drama as depicted within the cinema or the medium of television must use animals from time to time. Because the use of animals is a means to an end and frequently only a small part of those means, there is a tendency for the manner in which these animals are used to be less than correct. Regrettably, many owners or handlers like to bask in the reflected glory when an individual animal is pushed into the spotlight in some way. Such personal ambition will frequently be allowed to override what otherwise would be an owner's or handler's normal compassion and regard for the animal in their charge. All these facts mean that there is tremendous responsibility on the part of the directors and producers of both television and film productions. Early consultation when a production is being planned with those who are going to provide the animals, those who are going to work with the animals, and experts in animal welfare, must take place.