

Humans, Cows, and Bacteria: Three Modes of Reading the Film *Bullhead*

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As Donna Haraway has been arguing throughout her work, knowledge production is a “story telling practice.”¹ Humans use stories to organize knowledge in order to understand the world and to become familiar about what at first seems foreign. But stories tend to stick to old dramaturgies and scales. They typically put humans at the center, challenging us first and foremost to understand *ourselves*. As Francois Lyotard pointed out already thirty years ago, the backside of this focus on the human is that it prevents us from taking the diversity of agencies on this planet seriously.² While science offers us plenty of *information* about non-human life and events on planetary and microscopic levels, we still grapple with how to handle this material, culturally and aesthetically, without humanizing it beyond recognition. In short: How can we grasp what is going on with our planet on micro and global levels, and with other forms of life, if the human figure is our constant filter?

In the anthology *Telemorphosis*, environmental humanities professor Timothy Clark formulates the question slightly differently. He writes: “How then can a literary or cultural critic engage with the sudden sense that most given thought about literature and culture has been taking place on the wrong scale?”³

¹ Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions. Gender, Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (London/New York: Routledge, 1989), 4. Haraway’s focus on story telling practices has pervaded most of her writings since the 1980s.

² Jean-François Lyotard, *Inhuman. Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge/Oxford: Polity Press, 1993), 1–7.

³ Timothy Clark, “Scale. Derangements of Scale,” in *Telemorphosis. Theory in the era of Climate Change*, ed. Tom Cohen (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2012), 152. Clark develops his work further in Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge. The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

For me as a literary scholar this is an important rephrasing, since it puts the spotlight on the reader and critic rather than the writer or creator. How can I, as a reader, navigate to help ablate human narcissism?⁴

Clark makes his contribution by proposing a reading of a short story by Raymond Carver that moves its scope from scale to scale. First, he reads the story, *Elephant*, on the familiar scale of the characters, then he looks at it on a national scale and in its close historical setting, and finally he reads it on a planetary scale, widening the timespan to a randomly chosen macro frame of 600 years. In that widened, earthly perspective, the story's entire ethic shows itself differently. The main issue is no longer the question of personal responsibility toward family and friends, when the main character gets tired of lending money to each and everyone. Neither is it the state of poverty and consumerism in the US—at least not restricted as a nation state problem. Rather, the story's whole infrastructure of people, cars, separate households and property owning comes across as a bizarre machine of destruction, taken for a stable and familiar reality. As Clark puts it:

Plots, characters, setting and trivia that seemed normal and harmless on the personal or national scale reappear as destructive doubles of themselves on the third scale, part of a disturbing and encroaching parallel universe, whose malign reality it is becoming impossible to deny.⁵

In this wide perspective, having or losing a car is not a private thing, since CO2 emissions is a global disorder, and the tragedy of poverty is hardly a tragedy at all in relation to an exploited earth. With its impersonal and ahuman outlook, Clark's third scale reading might seem counterintuitive and harsh, but nonetheless it does reveal a crucial drama. An earthly drama which is there, in the text, but easy to miss.

⁴ It is implicit that I here use the term "reading" in the broad sense of engaging in and digesting a cultural expression in any medium or genre.

⁵ Clark, 161.

Reading on different scales like this, and juxtaposing them to display the dilemma of conflicting interests, is obviously an experiment. It is not an experiment that claims to go beyond human logics; what is offered is not the kind of bewildering deconstruction that might in the end be needed to properly rethink hermeneutics in the Anthropocene. Still, I find the attempt important, since it has the ambition to widen our conventional mindset as critics. It trains us to see other stories besides the privileged one, thereby putting our accustomed knowledge production into perspective.

In this chapter I want to demonstrate in a slightly different way how different modes of reading might activate different kinds of awareness. In accordance with Clark, I will suggest modes that move increasingly further away from the human figure—but instead of a scaling up in time and place, I will focus on different kinds of agencies and interests, with the aim to unsettle the preconception of whose and what drama we are beholding. However, scale remains an important factor, and it will become apparent that the impersonal micro scale (which is closely conjoined with the earthly macro scale) remains the trickiest for the reader to fully do justice.

I tentatively call the three modes of reading:

- Traditional humanist reading
- Animal studies reading
- Microecological reading

By choosing these modes, I wish to acknowledge the fact that the research fields of animal-studies and ecocriticism have during the past decades challenged the humanities to read in the spirit of Clark: to look for other stories, with acute relevance in the anthropocene era, within and beyond the human framed story. Still, most readers, also within these fields, refrain from utilizing conflicting modes of reading for understanding the same story. Furthermore, there is an abiding reluctance to move too far beyond the (presumed) intention of the story's author. This kind

of tactful hesitation to interpret absences or make overinterpretations must, with this reading experiment, be abandoned.

The focus of my study is the Oscar nominated Belgian film *Bullhead* (Rundskop) from 2011, created by Michaël Roskam. This film serves as pedagogical material since it touches thematically upon the boundaries between the human, animal and microbiological realms. As soon as I start recapitulating the story, one of the three modes of reading will be activated. For the sake of homeliness, I will start in the traditional humanist mode.

The traditional humanist reading

From this interpretive perspective the film is about a farmer, Jacky, who is head of a large cattle production plant in north-eastern Belgium. Jacky is the silent, hardworking type, stuck in the mud but respected by his mates for his strong and bull-like physics, his highly productive animals and his connections to the black market. In a couple of bathroom-scenes we learn about Jacky's abuse of hormones, which is mirrored by his practice of injecting hormone and anti-biotic cocktails into his already supersized cows. 35 minutes into the film, in a terrifying flashback, we realize that Jacky suffered a bodily trauma as a boy. He was badly beaten by a mentally disabled and hyper-sexual juvenile, who decided to crush the younger boy's genitals. After his injury Jacky's parents and a doctor started treating him with hormones—along with a thick silence—in order to keep up an illusion of “normality.” For Jacky the trauma seems to have resulted in a combination of overcompensating for the feared loss of masculinity and an inability to articulate emotions other than in brutal physical ways. Typically, his rage is evoked by gay men who do not honor the kind of reproductive heterosexuality from which he is himself precluded.

Jacky's complex biography makes him shy and awkward when he meets and tries to court his childhood love again. At this point he has also become more deeply involved with the hormone mafia, trading drugs and meat and violently avoiding to be exposed by a unit of detectives. It all ends with death. Jacky

is hunted down by the police after his loved one has turned him in, and in a furious fight in the elevator he is shot by the officers.

The animal studies reading

So—if this is the traditional humanist reading, distinguishing the psychological and social pattern of a man's (mis)fortune—what, then, could an animal studies mode of reading pick up that the anthropocentric interpretation misses? It is a fact that non-human animals, and more specifically cattle, are very much present in the film. Cattle are seen cribbed at Jacky's and his neighbours' farms. They are exposed as receivers of drugs and when being handled during calving, their flesh is projected as merchandise and demonstratively subject to close-ups when grilled and consumed.

The visual mirroring between the man and the animals now calls for further analysis. I mentioned the correspondence between Jacky's bull-like body and his super-sized animals—an aspect which is highlighted in the visual marketing of the film. But the depiction acutely emphasizes the *fragility* of all these big bodies, more than their strength. These animals are exploited and confined cows rather than groomed fighting bulls. The setting is dark realism, exposing industrial commodification and bodily vulnerability.

It is not uncommon in fiction that the exposure of the harsh biopolitics of animal production is used to amplify the emotional content within the human sphere, suggesting a related hardship. Such tendencies abound in proletarian classics such as the report novel *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (1906) and the theatre play *Die heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe* by Bertolt Brecht (1931). Both of these stories are set in the horrifying Chicago Stockyards, and picture animal as well as human suffering—but leaving no question that the human class struggle is the issue (rather than the salvation of the animals).

In *Bullhead* the mirroring initially goes both ways. It is also worth noting that the mirroring does not limit itself to affirming a common victimization of cattle and human workers in the

animal industry in a general way, rather it focuses on specific points of exposure in the animals' lives (and in Jacky's life). The practices of "body building" and "reproductive sexuality," emphasized by the mirroring, are certainly at the core of the animal trauma at any breeding plant. The animal studies reader would investigate this aspect, remaining close to the animal interest.

The Belgian blue is a breed in which a certain mutation has been promoted. As a result, the animals usually have a genetical inactivation of a special growth inhibiting hormone. This means that the calves are huge and generally have to be delivered by caesarian section. This total dependence on a human scalpel at the most fragile moment of giving birth adds another component to the already prevailing human command over the reproduction of these animals, who will never be allowed to breed without the assistance of humans, nor to keep their offspring for very long.

The animal studies reader would recognize the importance of this in the story. The film *does* seem unusually engaged in and knowledgeable about the reality of the animals. The cattle and the man are both presented as hostages of the hierarchical value system that Jacques Derrida has labelled "carnophallogocentrism",⁶ in which the intelligent, meat-eating macho man is at the top while the animal lies at the bottom of the order. In the film, this matrix of domination is reinforced by economic power structures—further entangling humans and animals. The hormone trafficking plot of the film involves both Jacky and, by force, the animals, in a criminal socio-economic network. Furthermore, the mafia network has a documentary background, which encourages the viewer to reflect critically on real

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "'Eating well', or the Calculation of the Subject. Interview by Jean-Luc Nancy" [1988], in *Jacques Derrida: Points ... Interviews 1974–1994*, trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 280–284. The term "carnophallogocentrism" is an expansion of Luce Irigaray's earlier term "phallogocentrism," acknowledging that the human power over other animals—ultimately manifested in traditions of sacrifice and eating—is a fundamental aspect of the "matrix of domination" that keeps human civilization in place.

life affairs. The use of hormones in meat production, to increase growth and thereby profit, has been outlawed in the European Union since 1989 because of the hazards for the animals, when their bodies become too heavy for their organs and skeletons. Since hormones are rather easily manufactured this has resulted in an active black market.

The film demonstrates the terror of the matrix of domination in its many different angles. It is when Jacky starts sliding from his dominant position—when his masculinity softens, when he tests perfumes in his loved one's shop, speaks soft French to her instead of rough Limburgish, abandons his mafia brothers and loses his cold rationality—that is, it is when he is no longer in place at the top of the order, that he becomes every bit as “killable” as his animals had been all the time.

The problem, from the animal studies point of view, is the increasing asymmetrical nature of this mirroring. The film eventually relapses into an anthropocentric perspective. It laments the debasement of the man but not that of the animals. The animals are abandoned by the narrative and the camera at crucial points. Take for instance the scene in which Jacky is seen assisting the gloved veterinary during the delivery of a new calf by caesarian section. As soon as the cut is made, the men coil an iron chain around the calf's leg, hoisting it from the safe haven in its mother's womb into the air. The camera then zooms in on the calf, placed in a cold and empty barrow, sniffing in vain for its mother's warm body.

Draped in solemn violin tunes the scene addresses the commodification of life, the brutal deprivation of closeness and the heartbreaking adjustment to loneliness—acute realities for the calf and experiences shared to some extent by Jacky. But instead of staying a little longer with, or coming back to, the calf to confirm reciprocity, the camera turns to Jacky, reducing the animal tragedy to an amplifier of his human misfortune. This is done by showing Jacky standing alone in the following scene and then contrasting his loneliness with a shot of his brother's big family. The futurelessness of the calf becomes Jacky's futurelessness and his misery is depicted as dependent on his sad

relation to heterosexual reproduction: he will never have children of his own like his brother.

Along these same lines it is Jacky, the human, that the camera follows to his tragic end. The final scenes are all about Jacky's downfall and death. The destiny and assumed killing of the cattle he left behind takes place out of view.

The microecological reading

I will now move on to the microecological mode of reading, which would criticize both the anthropocentric and the animal studies interpretations for limiting themselves to the mammal scale and interest.

Just as the film in part appears to care for the animals, it also thematically evokes the microecological perspective, by pointing out the relation between micro-agents like hormones and antibiotics and big mammal bodies. The film makes clear that bodies are not self-sufficient entities, rather, with a phrasing from biogeographer Bruno Brown, they are "embedded in a chaotic and unpredictable molecular world."⁷ The film seems to criticize the microbiological modification of both humans and animals as biopolitical interventions powered by destructive value norms and profit seeking.

A microecological reading of the film would "follow the micro-agents"⁸ and point out how substances move around and permeate life beyond human optics and control. Via the meat eaten in the film, the human bodies receive doses of the hormones injected in the cows. When Jacky, in his desperation towards the end of the film, empties his stash of drugs in the

⁷ Bruce Brown, "Biopolitics and the Molecularization of Life," *Cultural Geographies*, no. 14 (2007): 17.

⁸ This is a consenting rephrasing of Ann-Sofie Lönngrén's "following the animal" as a human-animal studies reading method, suggesting that the researcher should follow the track of the animal (rather than the human) throughout the text and beyond it, but with an active awareness that to follow must not mean to hunt and name; instead it might mean to be seen first or just being close and curious. Ann-Sofie Lönngrén, *Following the Animal. Power, Agency, and Human-animal Transformations in Modern, Northern-European Literature* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 27–30.

sewer, it is a kind of peripeteia from a micro-perspective: this means that the substances will travel widely via the groundwater into new and other bodies and material assemblages.

Moreover, inside the cows' bodies, the injected substances—including antibiotics to prevent disease and promote extra growth—will eventually create more cases of bacterial resistance. Resistant bacteria will travel between cows and humans via touch, food, water and ground and might spread unstoppable diseases. Furthermore, the emission of methane gas from animal industries like Jacky's could be added to the micro scenario, as one of the main factors behind global warming.⁹ The micro and the macro activities thus tend to be closely entangled. The microecological drama in *Bullhead* turns out to be a drama of global relevance. Within much less than Clark's timescale of 600 years, this drama has the power to change and rearrange the forms of life with which we are familiar.

From an anthropocentric humanist perspective, resistant bacteria are the enemy, since they threaten human life. But from a microecological perspective, the eventual rearrangement of life forms might be valued differently. After all, microbes were here long before our species and have developed extremely smart and resilient forms of existence. As Myra Hird concludes after a deep dive into recent research:

Taken together, this research suggests that bacteria 'develop collective memory, use and generate common knowledge, develop group identity, recognize the identity of other colonies, learn from experience to improve themselves, and engage in group decision-making, an additional surprising social conduct that amounts to what should most appropriately be dubbed as social intelligence'.¹⁰

⁹ P. K. Thornton, "Livestock Production: Recent Trends, Future Prospects," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, no. 365 (2010), 2853–2867.

¹⁰ Myra Hird, *The Origins of Sociable Life. Evolution After Science Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 52. The quote within the quote refers to Eshel

Why, then, should bacteria not take over after us? Anti-humanists like Patricia MacCormack and Claire Colebrook accept the idea of a flourishing and diverse future earth without our species.¹¹ Many others still hope for improved co-existence. Wherever our sympathy lies, in the light of the micro and macro dramas, Jacky's singular tragedy in the film seems like a tiny cog in a huge machinery.

In addition: from this microecological perspective, we become aware of the fixation on sexual difference and sexual reproduction in human culture and art. So many fictions attract their audiences by means of a theme of love and mating. The film *Bullhead* revolves around this theme, at the same time both consolidating and interrogating the idea of "natural" sexual reproduction as the given focus of mammal scaled life. Both for Jacky and for his animals, sexuality and reproduction are central, though in disharmony, depicted as mechanisms driven by frustrated desire, greed and longing, and upheld by technology.

As Clare Colebrook has shown, the human focus on "sexual difference" is paradoxical.¹² In a way, our culturally cheered interest in sex and reproduction is what keeps our species alive, but it has also lured us to think of other issues as less interesting—as if we were autonomous as a species and able, unhindered, to continue to reproduce no matter what happens outside our mesmerizing story of love and genetic exchange. This, Colebrook reminds us, is false since the system of sexual reproduction is extremely fragile to environmental changes. Much more so than other forms of reproduction, for instance

Ben-Jacob, Israella Becker, Yoash Shapira and Herbert Levine, "Bacterial Linguistic Communication and Social Intelligence," *Trends in Microbiology* 12, no. 8 (2004), 367.

¹¹ Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman. Essays on Extinction*, vol. 1, (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing and Open Humanities Press, 2014); Patricia MacCormack, *The Ahuman Manifesto* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

¹² Claire Colebrook, "Sexual Indifference," in *Telemorphosis. Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, ed. Tom Cohen (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2012), 170.

cloning—and as Myra Hird observes: “[...] bacteria invented cloning some 3.8 billion years ago.”¹³ While we have been preoccupied with our human stories about courting and sex, the human generated climate crisis has been growing in our peripheral vision—and now we are facing the prediction that the Y-chromosome might not endure for long.¹⁴ Seen in a longer timespan, then, a changed environment might in fact slowly erase male virility—more effectively than any swarm of distressed juveniles with stones. Again: For good or bad? In a private perspective we see a myriad of personal tragedies lining up, but from the perspective of an overpopulated earth, on which a human steamroller is destroying diversity inch by inch, the drama is another.

Ransacking the readings and their relevance

Would it be possible to integrate the human subject’s private perspective and the earthly perspective in one ethics—to see the individual as part of a kind of human super-subject, with a collective super-agency and super-responsibility in the era of the Anthropocene? For instance, to see childlessness as a good deed from the part of the super-subject, and not only a private tragedy? This does not come easy.

So far, our storytelling practices in the West and North have schooled us to value “life” and “creation” in terms of anthropocentric criteria such as the survival of mankind, individual self-realization, and “personal liberal freedoms” such as the right to become a parent. With few exceptions, storytelling fiction has nurtured our sense of supersubjectivity (acting as a species/as Man) only when it comes to conquering different kinds of outer threats (like great storms, viruses or aliens), and less to cultivate an awareness of entanglements, responsibilities or a willingness to step back. Donna Haraway has labelled the fundamental heroic story, encountered in old myths, as well as in contemporary narratives including sci/fi and cli/fi, the “prick tale”:

¹³ Hird, 25.

¹⁴ Colebrook, “Sexual Indifference,” 167.

In a tragic story with only one real actor, one real world-maker, the hero, this is the Man-making tale of the hunter on a quest to kill and bring back the terrible bounty. This is the cutting, sharp, combative tale of action that defers the suffering of glutinous, earth-rotted passivity beyond bearing. All others in the prick tale are props, plot space, or prey.¹⁵

Looking at *Bullhead*, it is evident that its (porous) backbone is a kind of privatized “prick tale,” with Jacky as the hero who tries but fails to break free and fulfill himself. The further our reading withdraws from the human figure, i.e. Jacky and his fate, the less support we get from the film’s concrete narrative and visual articulations. As we have seen, the film touches on the boundaries to other agencies and scales, but asymmetry prevails. The animals are there, in sight, but the mirroring between the cows and the man weigh over until Jacky fills up the whole screen. In terms of the microecological aspect, it is not at all as elaborated as the mammal scaled dramas. In fact, its only visualization is in the form of bottles with substances for injections, in view in a few scenes. This means that the microecological reading edges the farfetched; it relies to a large extent on the reader’s own imagination and previous knowledge.

To counterbalance the “prick tale” tradition Haraway proposes acts of “re-storying,” that turn the attention away from heroic actions and toward the supposedly passive but in fact bustling “background.” Her proposal is inspired by author and theorist Ursula Le Guin, who in 1986 formulated a “Carrier bag theory of fiction.”¹⁶ Le Guin’s theory looks at storytelling in relation to the ancient (female) activity of gathering rather than hunting: a story should be a “holder” of a myriad of small things

¹⁵ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 39.

¹⁶ Ursula Le Guin, “A Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” in *Dancing at the Edge of the World. Thoughts on Words, Women and Places* (New York: Grove Press, 2018), 165–170. Editors’ note: Concerning Ursula Le Guin, see also Sune Borkfelt’s and Michael Lundblad’s chapters in this volume.

in subtle relations, rather than a journey toward a specific (heroic) goal. Le Guins novels, turning theory into practice, serve us with thick and messy story nets without a clear-cut progression from A to B. Indeed, it seems to take an experiment, in the sense of leaving narrative conventions behind, to do justice to the reality of the “mesh”¹⁷ of earthly life. In fact, other genres or art forms than the novel or the motion picture might have a better starting position, when it comes to wiring humans to micro and macro perspectives—artforms like poetry, dance, sound art or visual art. These art forms are less hooked on elements such as a main character, causal storyline and a perfect closure. They are art forms that have a historical experience of exploring materialities and abstraction, beyond the contours of the human figure, and they currently show great interest in the more-than-human sphere.

Still, as I have tried to outline with my three readings of *Bullhead*, re-storying is not only a task for creators of literature and art, but also for critics and readers when encountering any particular story. As initially stated, one of the major points of making reading experiments, combining different modes of reading, is that they bring to attention what we take for granted and what we are willing to block out—not only when reading fiction, but when reading the stories of our own everyday lives. As Timothy Clark concludes:

In sum, reading at several scales at once cannot be just the abolition of one scale in the greater claim of another but a way of enriching, singularizing and yet also creatively deranging the text through embedding it in multiple and even contradictory frames at the same time [...].¹⁸

With this kind of “deranging” readings we may come closer to a kind of truth: an acknowledgment of the frictions and ethical

¹⁷ Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2010), 29. Morton coined the word “mesh” to account for the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things on earth.

¹⁸ Clark, 163.

dilemmas that characterize being part of the entangled mesh of planetary existence.

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