

Literature and cinematic Culture in the Novel White Fang

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Jack London has been recognized as one of the most dynamic figures in American literature. London captured the popular imagination worldwide as much through his personal exploits as through his literary efforts. But it is the quality of his writings, more than his personal legend that has won him a permanent place in world literature and distinguished him as one of the most widely translated American authors. His novels are *The Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, *The Human Drift*, *On the Road*, *The Scarlet Plague*, *The Sea-Wolf* and *The Iron Heel*.

The modern and late-modern "animal story" developed alongside revolutions in the technology of visual culture. Vivian Sobchack describes these as belonging to the eras of photography, cinema, and the electronic media of television and computers, eras that roughly coincide with Fredric Jameson's history of the cultural logic of market, monopoly, and multinational capitalism. The cinema, Sobchack explains, "Made visible for the very first time not just the objective world but the very structure and process of subjective, embodied vision." (156) Viewers experienced moving pictures as the vision of an embodied subjectivity, not their own, which was making intentional visual choices as it moved through space and time. This experience, moreover, made visible the ways in which our own vision was subjective and thus, in which everyone was both viewing subject and visual object at all times. The animal of this period is a Darwinian animal; however, the historical moment of the animal as evolutionary/Darwinian subject and as cinematic subject overlapped. London's wolf-dog as negotiating these changes to the concept of modern subjectivity, of literary critical history in reading *White Fang*, despite London's canonical status as a naturalist, as cinematic. Sobchack ties the cinematic era loosely to Jameson's cultural logics of monopoly capitalism, and modernism.

Animals and cinema, Akira Mizuta Lippi notes, are historically linked. Cinema and zoological parks proliferated at the same time-simultaneous "contemporary spectacles" (12). Animal movement (often, animal deaths) were some of cinema's earliest objects. "The animal inhabits cinema through its principal mechanism, animation--to make move, live, animal.[...] The frequency of animal figures from Etienne-Jules Marey's and Edward Muybridge's pre-cinematic photographs to the animations of Winsor McKay and Walt Disney suggests an affinity between

animalist and cinema that defies, in the end, figurability" (12-13). London incorporates the evolutionary animal into the larger concerns of moving image culture.

According to Sobchack, the cinematic relies on the singular existence of the material world. It emphasizes a subject whose very coherence emerges from an embodied subjective identity. But there is, as Sobchack, puts it no-body behind electronic representation. Rather than ordering space and time, digital technology breaks up pixilated bits of information across a network of spectators and users. Sobchack describes electronic culture as so free of physical gravity that it has lost the moral gravity that comes from valuing and protecting bodies unlike cinematic representation, electronic representation by its very structure phenomenological diffuses the fleshly presence of the human body and the dimensions of that body's material world. The electronic tends to marginalize or trivialize the human body. Indeed, at this historical moment in our particular society and culture.


Mamoru Oshii's anime film *Ghost in the Shell* (which inspired the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix*) and its sequel *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* is famous for their depictions of virtual worlds networked with postmodern urban spaces and cyborg bodies. In the future worlds of these films, almost all humans have some kind of non-biological implants, and people's bodies range from nearly organic to completely inorganic and are sometimes the property of government institutions or corporations. In these and other films of his, Oshii often includes birds and dogs that seem almost incongruous particularly the dogs in the crowded postmodern landscape. The birds appear in the spaces above and among the networks, streets, skyscrapers, and air transport vehicles that seem to have taken over any natural space, appearing as the only true wildlife. This effect is highlighted in *Innocence*, where air transport is designed to look like birds and insects and the submarines to look and move like marine mammals. London's first account of the human hand makes a self-conscious narcissistic circuit, in which a man abstracts his own body to gaze at his humanity, the wolf's eye view of the hand simply lists its material functions in terms of *White Fang's* experiences. Where Henry sees the hand as metonymic, *White Fang* sees hands as almost detached from their bearers--it is as if the children carry weapons. He dislikes the hands of the man-animals rather than the man-animals themselves. The description is similar to the ways in which animals in *White Fang* catalogue each other's capacities--the difficulties of approaching a porcupine because of the way it flicks its tail, for instance.

In juxtaposing these viewing situations of the hand, London emphasizes what Sobchack describes as cinematic logic's most significant alteration to cultural consciousness: being able to see ourselves seeing through the eyes of others and apprehending oneself and others as always both viewing subjects and visible objects:

The cinema mechanically projected and made visible for the very first time not just the objective world but the very structure and process of subjective, embodied vision....The cinema, however, uniquely materialized this visual reflexivity and philosophical turning directly...objective insight into the subjective structure of vision and thus into oneself and others as always both viewing subjects and visible objects. (149)

This "objective insight into the subjective structure of vision" is also significant because, in its reliance on the visible that is, the perception of a material body, it "affirms and shows us that, sharing the materiality and the world through vision and action, we are interring subjective beings" (161).

London's new anthropomorphism is cinematic and modernizing in this sense. Unlike earlier "animal-eye views" such as Anna Sewall's *Black Beauty*, London's anthropomorphism does not emphasize the similarity of humans and animals (in Sewall's case, for didactic purposes). Rather, the point of animal subjectivity as he describes it is precisely its otherness. London uses the animal story to make objectively available as Sobchack argues cinema does the idea of the modern inter subjective. Thus, it is important to read London's essay "The Other Animals," his reply to Roosevelt's and Burroughs's charge of nature faking in *White Fang* and *The Call of the Wild*, not as simply a factual version of the novels it defends, but for what it highlights about London's novelistic version of animal reason. In this essay, London makes it clear that Burroughs's mistake about animals lies precisely in his inability to have a modern aesthetic of looking "through" as well as "at." London writes that Burroughs's inability to see what animals do as reasoning is fault of his "mediaeval" "ego." According to London, for Burroughs, the "naturalist" and the "psychologist" are utterly separate:



When Darwin concluded that animals were capable of reasoning in a rudimentary way, to him [Burroughs] affinity and kinship with the other animals is a repugnant thing.... He is too glorious a personality not to have between him and the other animals a vast and impassable gulf...view of the other animals is to be found, not in his knowledge of those other animals, but in the suggestion of his self-exalted ego" (104).

The modern view is one of decentred vision rather than that of "glorious personality." Sobchack writes that "the cinema functions mechanically to bring to visibility the reversible structure of human vision: this structure emerges in the lived body as systematically both a subject and an object, as both visual (seeing) and visible (seen)" (150). London contrasts himself to Burroughs in

almost these terms--in the examples he gives of playing with his dogs Rollo and Glen, the naturalist (who sees) must perforce join the psychologist (who can imagine that the dog sees him). In these games, the reasoning of the dogs also involves their imagining a human looking at them. Thus, they look "through" as well as "at." In his games with Rollo, the loser of the game was the one fooled. London had to be able to imagine Rollo seeing him seeing someone else. This is not to say that such tricks could not have occurred before the advent of cinema, but rather to emphasize that London understands them in this fashion. Burroughs cannot and thus, Burroughs cannot recognize animal reason or understand the aesthetics of London's novel: "Making believe that my eyes had been attracted by a moving form, I said coldly...'No, my father is not at home.' Like a shot, Rollo was out the door.... He came back sheepishly to endure the laugh and resume the game" (100). In the novel, these layers of the cinematic are what form White Fang's very self: "He was regarded as the most fearful of wild beasts, and this was borne into him through the bars of the cage. Every word, every cautious action, on the part of the men, impressed upon him his own terrible ferocity. It was so much added fuel to the flame of his fierceness. There could be but one result, and that was that his ferocity fed upon itself and increased"(229). Here again we see that London's interest is not in the animal as such. He is not interested in the animal as man or in the man as animal. If White Fang parallels the escaped convict Jim Hall, who was also soft clay molded into ferocity, the point is not merely to produce the social Darwinian beast, but also to understand the production of that beast, whether animal or human, in terms of visual culture and subjectivity.

The point of London's modern animal story is not the animal at all, and yet the animal is absolutely necessary because it represents a different subjectivity. Sobchack writes of the subject cinematic culture produces that it is not quite human: "as is the case with human beings, this cinematic subject's potential motility and experience exist as both open-ended and inextricably bound by the existential finitude and material limits of its particular vision and historical and cultural coherence, that is, its narrative" (148). To have characteristics as is the case with human beings is pointedly not to be identical with a human being. Sobchack cinematic subject reveals the human subject precisely by offering something like its case. London's animal story similarly uses evolutionary theory's proffer of the animal that is not human, but who might act as is the case with human beings, as an anthropomorphic technology for articulating the cultural logic of modern subjectivity.