

# Dolphins Who Blow Bubbles

## Anthropological Machines and Native Informants

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### Introduction: Transgressions at the Cove

In Louie Psihoyos' Oscar winning documentary *The Cove* (2009), the thermal black and white camera work of the opening credits foreshadows a scene of slaughter. Disturbingly, a line of shapes appear. Their forms are being systematically hacked by a silhouette wielding an axe. Uncannily, the curves suggest a line of bodies. The buildings and tall chimneys make it difficult to avoid the association of concentration camps. The credit sequence is macabre in its exuberance of black and white processed flesh. Gradually, the shapes begin to suggest non-human animals. The eye begins to discern the outlines of slain dolphins. These appear *en masse*.

Much of Psihoyos' film is driven by the passionately knowledgeable presence of ex-dolphin trainer, Richard (Ric) O'Barry who was famous for his dolphin training in the influential *Flipper* series (1964-1967). Afterwards, the show's five star dolphins were relegated to dolphinariums. According to O'Barry, one of them - Sally - committed suicide due to the depression and stresses of captivity. As a result, O'Barry converted to hard-core activism. The documentary exposes the capture, trafficking, incognito slaying and food packaging of dolphins in one specific place: the fishing town of Taiji, Japan. The film claims that the village has the highest rate of dolphin

slaughters. Stylistically inspired by the cinematography and 'heist team' elements of *Ocean's Eleven* (Soderbergh, 2001), Psihoyos subtextually adopts elements of a Hollywood action narrative.<sup>1</sup> While the documentary relates geographical, economic and scientific "facts", it deploys a Hollywood "protagonist-antagonist-victim" plot.<sup>2</sup> The good 'guys' (women included) launch a rescue mission to save dolphins, hopefully, in their hundreds of thousands. The protagonists must pit themselves against the antagonist, or the Japanese fishermen and fishery commissions. The heroic goal is to cinematically blow the whistle on the atrocities committed against the many dolphin species.

The task of saving and rescuing a species in the multi-billion dollar dolphinarium business presents but one aspect of the insurmountable opposition. The other is the mass slaying of the dolphins rejected for trafficking. These are brutally harpooned in a secret and bloody cove. It is this scene of horror that Psihoyos and his hit team will address, even if together they cannot achieve the "grand narrative" of the Hollywood *denouement*. Rather, the heroic triumph will be the making of the film itself. The rescue team operates like commandoes making their dawn raid over rocky impasses. HD technology covertly films the operation from floating rocks, all thanks again to Hollywood set designers, and acts of stealth and bravery in dive-gear. By the time of its theatrical release, the film's footnotes can announce certain achievements, apart from the capture of the footage and its public dissemination. There are limited victories: government mandarins get fired and the school children of Taiji will not be forced to eat dolphin meat loaded with mercury. The film's epilogues suggest that a rolling Schindler's list for dolphins is a viable activist choice.

Provocatively, my initial interpretation argues that *The Cove* plays out the "tragic triangle" plot of perpetrator-victim-rescuer with an emphasis on an ethically charged goal. In an aside, Psihoyos declares that you are either "an activist or not". One is either on the side of the liberator, however limited such successes may be or, one colludes with the perpetrator. Despite its cruder binary oppositions, *The Cove* offers a range of voices within its smart, poetic, profound and rousing strategies of bringing animals into the cinematic frame. The film does so by raising questions that ride exuberantly on Giorgio Agamben's well established work on the "anthropological ma-

chine" (*The Open: Man and Animal*, 2004). The film's capacity to swim with its dolphin "others" can allow me to read it against the grain of its American-Asian binary.

To help with this reading, I will adopt two searchlights useful for illuminating the film's colliding currents. One is Gayatri Spivak's approach in her difficult but magisterial *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999). From the outset, she announces her aim to occupy many paradoxical positions. Her aim is discover that "(im)possible perspective" of the "native informant" (1999, p. 9). According to Spivak, this informant will be well versed in the grand narratives of European philosophy and literature, without denial but with critique. The native informant can offer a voice that is sensitive to the history of colonialism.

In *The Cove*, any direct references to the history of colonialism in Asia or the shadow of World War II are absent. Yet the film does not entirely repress such voices; rather, it allows them a marginal space. When reflecting on Japan's dolphin slaughter and whaling policies, one interviewee, indigenous to the Caribbean islands, suggests that Japan is simply fed up with the West telling it what to do. After all, one of the Caribbean islands, Guadalcanal, was the World War II scene of atrocities committed by both American and Japanese soldiers.<sup>3</sup> This one-off voice offers an echo of colonial pasts.

Diving below the film's superficial construction of an American-Japanese divide leads to another site: the threshold connecting and separating humans and dolphins. Giorgio Agamben's counter-humanist "anthropological machine" (*The Open*) remains influential in helping cultural practitioners, ecologists, scientist and artists make and unmake the cat's cradle that binds human with nonhuman animals. As Agamben argues, the machine "functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human" (p. 37). As Martin Puchner points out in his illuminating article "Performing the Open" (2007), it is important to trace the connect points between Agamben's pivotal concept of the "exception" from *Homo Sacer* (1998) to *The Open's* anthropological machine. As Puchner underlines, there is a crucial overlap between the idea of the "bare life" that falls into a zone of legal exception and the animal state of human statelessness. Puchner cites sources that refer to interrogation techniques used at Abu Ghraib; prisoners were treated like dogs

(2007, p. 25).<sup>4</sup> The human is turned into an exception which, in this case, is the animal already prepped for violation.

In *The Cove*, the re-weaving of “exceptions” has a different goal. In one sequence, the tremendous “intelligence” and “self-awareness” of the dolphins is highlighted. Dolphin zoologist Dr. John Potter cites their ability to micromanage human-animal situations. Moreover, dolphins pursue sophisticated play by creating wonderful air bubbles that can be analysed semiotically. Dolphins can be ‘read’ and addressed as an animal stand-in for the native informant. As such, they can provide signs, data and discourses from their lives which, to echo Spivak, emerge from an “impossible” (non) position. With this in mind, my approach is to examine what conceptual overlaps can be forged between Spivak’s concept of the native informant and Agamben’s anthropological machine. By so doing, I aim to read *The Cove*’s creative contradictions as guiding me to a hybrid concept, that of the “animal/human informant”.

### Informants by Any Other Name

Indeed, this concept of an “animal” emerging from the native informant is already brewing between the lines of *A Critique of Post-colonial Reason* (1999), published one year after Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (1998) and three years before *The Open*. Agamben’s works are Eurocentric yet capable of dismantling their precursors. Spivak reads this tradition by making purposefully creative “mistakes”; in turn, these lead to the “name for that mark of expulsion from the name of Man” (Spivak 1999, p. 6). By “Man” read the white, western and male, individualist subject, or what I might term the hyper-anthropomorphised subject of western culture. The subject’s “expulsion” propels “Man” into another, more indefinite space. Agamben’s zones of “indeterminacy” and “exclusions” (2004, p. 37) are available to the native informant. Splicing together the differing concepts developed by Agamben and Spivak can further dissolve the animal/human binary in such a way that a different model emerges.

As an aid to deconstructing this binary, Derrida’s celebrated essay “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (2002) is a great aid. Here he criticises the restrictions of “the” before the noun animal; the definite article which deceives with its catch-all category (2002, p. 392). Indeed, Derrida even makes a rhetorical plea for embracing the

sheer heterogeneity of both animal and, by corollary, human/non-human potential in the form of “*all living things*” which too often “man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbours or his brothers”.<sup>5</sup> *The Cove* compels such recognition from the spectator by connecting the dolphin’s abilities to blow air rings with that very capacity which links us to them, namely, the self-reflective skill of recognition in the mirror. Even without underwater mirrors, the scientist-divers who blow bubbles at dolphins find that the latter return the complement. The zoological research on dolphins blowing bubbles has examined their play behaviour in cognitive terms (McCowan, Marino, Reiss, Vance, Walke, 2000). The scientific discourse includes language which refers to the bubble-producing animals as “surprised, curious or excited” (2000, p.98). The language of surprise and curiosity can apply equally well to humans at play. What puts humans and dolphins on the same plane is this emotional capacity for self-recognition. Agamben’s project in *The Open* is to make an indeterminate zone that does not surrender to anthropomorphism but to finding the thresholds which see human and nonhuman characteristics overlap. He avoids the question of emotions which *The Cove* brings to the fore.

As part of this approach, Agamben must meticulously follow Heidegger’s lectures, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929-1930). Heidegger provides the foundational concept of the “open” (*offen*). For Heidegger, it is humans who can see the open, not animals. Though Agamben spotlights Heidegger’s susceptibility to breaching the divide between humans and animals, it is through a concept of the “open” that both can meet (2004, pp. 61-62). Agamben criticises Heidegger’s “error” (2004, p. 75) or, his failure to grasp that the anthropological machine could “still produce history and destiny for a people” (*ibid*). Agamben underlines how seventy years after Heidegger the stakes are different and reveal how

...man has now reached his political *telos* and, for a humanity that has become animal again, there is nothing left but the depoliticization of human societies by means of the unconditional unfolding of the *oikonomia*, or taking on of biological life itself as the supreme political (or rather, impolitical) task (p. 76).

“*Oikonomia*” is what Aristotle referred to as those aspects of economics which structure people and resources, not the *khrematisike* of money begetting money. In the world of global markets, *oikonomia* and *khrematisike* do conflate. So what Agamben tracks as the machine turning humans into animals is the turning of animals into humans, ones either trafficked or protected (2004, p. 77). And like trafficked humans, bartered animals fall into the zone of “filthy” profits.

*The Cove* dedicates its visual and voice-over rhetoric to the task of representing trafficked dolphins as smiling slaves. The demands to jump hoops, be cuddled and be kissed by aquarium visitors leave the dolphins with calloused mouths in constant need of medication. For O’Barry, these animals discover neither joy nor play. They are turned into sweat-shop fodder. Their native environment is open sea. Dolphins are sonic creatures and especially sensitive to incarcerating sounds. The screaming and cheering of crowds adds yet more stress. Here, the anthropological machine can be read as powered by a global, capitalist system with no care for the welfare of its “workers.” The film enables the spectator to make an inevitable association between the dolphins and the plight of other humans suffering trafficking and slave labour. Psihoyos’ anthropological machine enmeshes the human with the dolphin so as to reveal how human biopolitics controls dolphins within an aggressively chrematistic context. Even hoops and bubbles are about dirty money.

To do the work of postcolonial critique would mean exposing how biopolitics would remove the distinction between animals and humans, a systemic removal that permits “lesser” humans to be positioned as abused animals. In this regard, the degraded human and the exploited human can meet around the concept of the native informant. To shed light on this ‘reading otherwise’, Spivak traces the bestial representation of the human in *Jane Eyre* (2011 / 1847) and the figurations between mythical beasts and oppressed humans in Mahasweta Devi’s “Pterodactyl, Pirtha, and Puran Sahay” (1995). Spivak is thorough in connecting the novel’s figuration of Bertha Mason as the repressed and colonised female subject, with the tropes of animality. When Agamben (2004, pp. 37-38) refers to the indeterminacies between human and animal life, that is, the overlaps and separations which make “neither” one nor the other, he argues that the “bare” life is precisely this too. Spivak’s reading of

Mason also locates something which is “neither” animal nor human but a thing which becomes the narrative’s conquered subject.

There is more at stake here than the statelessness of the native informant as a figure of less than humanised animality. The bare life that becomes the animal-human network of indefinite thresholds sutures itself between dominant western and indigenous cultures. Such suturing becomes more transformative in Devi’s novella in which an underpinning narrative figure is the mythical presence of a pterodactyl. For the western scientific mind, the creature might be a scientific anomaly. But the villagers regard the dinosaur as an omen of famine and extinction. As Spivak underlines (1999, pp. 144-145), Devi’s novella does not choose between interpretations which favour the mythical informant over western objectivism. As the narrator argues: “think if you are going forward or back...What will you finally grow in the soil, having murdered nature in the application of man-improvised substitutes (1995, pp. 156-157). The novella’s ecological message is overwhelmingly pertinent. The reference to “murdered nature” gives the native informant an ecological informing.

In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, animal studies and ecosophy are not Spivak’s focus. Yet it is her choice of case studies that help me to develop a concept of native and animal “informing”. As Agamben argues: “the non-man is produced through the humanisation of the animal: the man-ape, the *enfant sauvage* of *Homo ferus*, but also and above all, the slave, the barbarian, and the foreigner, as figures of the animal in human form” (2004, p. 37). Agamben’s Eurocentric emphases only tread on the territory of postcolonial deconstruction that is Spivak’s hallmark. Nonetheless, foreign, barbarian, colonised, ape-like or even cetacean-like, there is an indeterminate zone of bare life between the colonised animal-human and the colonising human-animal. The dolphins of *The Cove* are captured between their animality and their status as colonised species-beings, trammelled up in a zone of exception, beyond human justice yet entirely bare in its wake.

### **Bare and Self-Aware**

In his chapter on the anthropological machine, Agamben links bare life to a “state of exception” (pp. 33-38). Indeed, one of the underlying theses in *The Cove* is the notion that cetaceans and whales de-

serve exceptional treatment because of their ontological closeness to our own humanness. Agamben confronts the core concepts of 'exception' and 'bare life' by analysing how each emerges through the other. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) there is the chapter "The Ban and the Wolf" (1998, pp. 104-111) which foreshadows the animal-human thresholds in *The Open*. The myth of the werewolf emerged as that which is "neither man nor beast" but "dwells paradoxically" in both human and animal territories (1998, p.105). Bare life constitutes a liminal zone (105-106). Agamben uses the word "threshold" to define what is "neither simple natural life nor social life but bare life" (p. 106). In *The Open*, Agamben lacquers his zone of indeterminacy with negatives. Thus there is neither consolation (torture animals not humans) nor the humanist conflation of the animal with the human (give primates human rights). However, Agamben's indeterminate space lacks a place where animal others can speak back. Spivak's concept of a native informant can be a conceptual stepping stone to an animal informant which has its own set of behavioural signs.

My aim here is not to run the philosophical labyrinth of Wittgenstein's profound joke about talking lions.<sup>6</sup> My concern is *The Cove's* figuration of dolphin otherness. This hinges on how the film's human characters and the filmmaker's montage relate their different concepts of mammalian "self-awareness". Ric O'Barry tells the story of how he brought out his television so that Sally, who played Flipper, could watch her own show. O'Barry remarks that she could recognise herself and tell herself apart from co-star Susie. O'Barry is adamant in his philosophy that the dolphin's capacity to be conscious and intelligent means these smaller cetaceans should be a globally protected species.

But a more complex matter is that of communicable intelligence. Appearing in one scene and voice-over, Dr. John Potter argues that scientific evidence about dolphins' cognitive skills contributes to only one part of our understanding. It is important to participate with the dolphins in their native environment. Here, Dr. Potter's experience as the zoologist with the measuring stick turns into a "visceral" experience; he can "lock eyes" with the dolphin. Potter explains that dolphins know "how to create innovatively out of their own imagination". In these latter voice-over segments, Psihoyos' film shows exquisite shots of dolphins turning over as



they view themselves in mirrors, and with the audiovisual accompaniment of the words “create innovatively”, a dolphin blows its air bubble then swims gracefully through it. One of the team’s free drivers, Mandy-Rae Cruickshank, talks about the quality of contact between herself as a diver and the dolphin: it is one where even though “no words are spoken...on another level, there is a clear understanding”.

Dolphin-human communication requires its own semiotics, with signs which are embodied within regimes of behaviour. In *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthuman Theory* (2003), Cary Wolfe adroitly examines the philosophy and semiotics of animal behaviour. He sets out Derrida’s seminal essays on animal-human liminality. Wolfe paraphrases Derrida, explaining how for the latter, the “difference” in modes of communication between animals and humans is a matter of

*degree on a continuum of signifying processes disseminated in a field of materiality, technicity, and contingency, of which “human” “language” is but a specific, albeit highly refined instance (p. 79).*

In the above passage, there is a hint of the zone which can segue with Agamben’s sites of indeterminacy yet welcome the native informant. To recall Spivak, the native informant’s purview is the unsettling of established norms of language and epistemology.

In the Derridean sense, the native / animal informant will operate at a sight of *différance*. Wolfe turns to the work of systems theorists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Valera (*Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding*, 1992). Put plainly, animals do not conduct a linguistic exchange as we do. However, animals are engaged in a “linguistic domain” and do engage in behaviours that “constitute the basis for a language, but...are not yet identical with it (1992, p. 207). Wolfe sutures together Derrida’s sensitivity to the existence of a human-animal continuum of “linguistic” behaviours with important suggestion made by Maturana and Valera. The latter argue that there is a difference between decoding the signs manifesting from an animal’s behaviour and the behaviour itself. Thus, between the behavioural sign and the behaviour is a site of *différance*. In “Eating Well”, Derrida brings his concept into a discussion

of animals and humans (1991). Its companion concepts, namely “trace” or “iterability”, all combine to make those “possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language” and, importantly “*are themselves not only human*” (1991, pp. 116-117).<sup>7</sup> In fact, Derrida uses a curious term next to the human, that is, the “infra-human” (*ibid*) which contributes to making a space for the native, human, swimming informant.

Psihoyos has edited images of Cruickshank free diving with dolphins in such a way, that together, the human-animal group produce a beautiful underwater ballet. When she speaks about her communication with them as an “understanding” that is “without words” she is engaging with a range of physical signs. There is communication, yet that which is “said” occupies a zone of *differé-ance*. Even though there is communication, what the dolphins are actually “saying” cannot be translated but perhaps deferred to yet more movements. Between and within the sounds, the arcs, the sonar clicks and songs, the behavioural signs and the denotations and connotations emerge an astonishing range of meanings. There are a series of shots that show dolphins taking part in “language” experiments. We see them pointing at squares on cards with their noses and always responding vocally. Dr. Potter points out the anthropomorphising limitations of experiments with sign language. He emphasises that we think that dolphins should learn “signing language” from us. But what if we were to learn from their language? We could learn by listening to the animal informants themselves, and surrender to their territory of signs.

### **Conclusion: Humans Who Blow Bubbles**

Between Agamben’s concept of bare life, Spivak’s native informant and Derrida’s animal of many signs, there is an emergence of many acts of informing which can draw us humans closer to our animal others. Psihoyos’ film liberates the possibility of an animal informant whose language can meet the humans who gently enter their native territory. The one serious difficulty with *The Cove* is the opposition of Western rescue team to Asian slaying machine. There is an inevitable and strong echo of Western condescension to an indigenous practice that has existed for centuries. My response to the film is disgust at the slaughter. I want to see the dolphins freed, no trafficking and all dolphin killing stopped. I no longer eat fish un-

less it is specially farmed, as globally, sea animals need their fish. The consumption of fish by economically privileged humans needs to be radically reduced. But intellectually, I cannot ignore *The Cove's* neo-colonialist discourse. According to the film, at the IWC (International Whaling Convention), the Japanese have allegedly bought votes from Third World countries in return for development money. One white western critic describes this as prostitution. But this is a sanctimonious accusation from a participant in the very economies that historically and even now, are responsible for much of the damage done to Third World economies. There needs to be a critique of postcolonial economics and an activist agenda to address these problems. Japan is an odd case in point. It is not a Third World Country but maintains its cultural practices around dolphin killing and whaling. O'Barry meets Japanese citizens who are unaware of the degree to which their packaged fish contains dolphin meat. Nor are they aware of the mercury counts. The film allows such contradictions to bubble to the surface.

As spectators, Psihoyos' film takes us into a world of paradoxes which inevitably implicate us. If Agamben theorises a zone of indeterminacies and exceptions between animal and human, I have argued for the three terms - native, animal, human - which can find their own zones of conflict and overlap. The spectator as a humanely-natively-cetacean being can enter the film's spectacular zones of blue. But this glorious blue will turn into a horrifying, thick and almost pure red when the camera reveals the slaying of those dolphins that will not be shipped to the dolphinarium. The aerial shots of the red water and the horrible dying sounds of the creatures leave me in tears at each of my viewings. In "Eating Well", Derrida does not pull his punches when it comes to the issue of exploiting animals. He compares the contemporary carnage of animals and DNA experimentation to an act of producing new concentration camps. For him, abattoirs are camps where victims are not eliminated but reproduced for ever more extensive experimentation, torture and extermination (p. 39).

Derrida meets Agamben on the territory of the entirely de-humanised animal. The strength of Psihoyos' shocking visuality in the film's worst scene, horrifying in its bloodied simplicity, is to allow the human to identify as a native informant. She/he can then psychically fuse with the animals and discover the horrible indeter-

minacy between both. This occurs in that red zone. It is one which invites human animals to identify with a site in which all the preceding images of joy and creativity have been extinguished. The spectator's identification with the atrocity is cleverly enabled by a film which turns its anthropological machine into a corralled and miraculous ocean space. After all, one reason it is beautiful to behold a dolphin blowing rings, is that in all our hugely complex humanity, metaphorically and literally, we too need to play and to create: we are humans who blow our bubble rings.

### Endnotes

- 1 See Nerenborg, 2011. The article shares a conversation reported to have taken place between George Clooney and Louie Psihoyos at the Oscars of 2010. Psihoyos declared himself to be a fan of *Ocean's Eleven*, influenced by the heist story-line and cinematography.
- 2 For an extensive analysis of how to craft a triangular plot system see McKee, 1997.
- 3 For an extensive range of diaries revealing everything from first-hand accounts of Americans trophy-hunting for Japanese skulls and New Zealand soldiers discovering the bodies of women islanders, indigenous to the Solomon Islands, violated to death by Japanese soldiers, see Aldrich.
- 4 Details of how interrogation techniques involved torturing detainees by riding them like dogs as well as exposing them to the ferocity of dogs can be found in Jehl and Eric Schmitt.
- 5 This citation is from a different edition of the same essay and is quoted in Cary Wolf, *Animal Rites*, 2003: p. 66.
- 6 For a comprehensive analysis of the Wittgenstein question, see Chapter 2, "In the Shadow of Wittgenstein's Lion" of *Animal Rites*. See original Wittgenstein text in *The Wittgenstein Reader*, ed. Anthony Kenny.
- 7 I take my cue for this citation from *Animal Rites*, p. 73.

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