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## *Review of Farmed Animals on Film: A Manifesto for a New Ethic*

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### **Abstract**

This first-of-its-kind book is more than just an examination of the use of animals in films, but, more directly, the use of films to help animals.

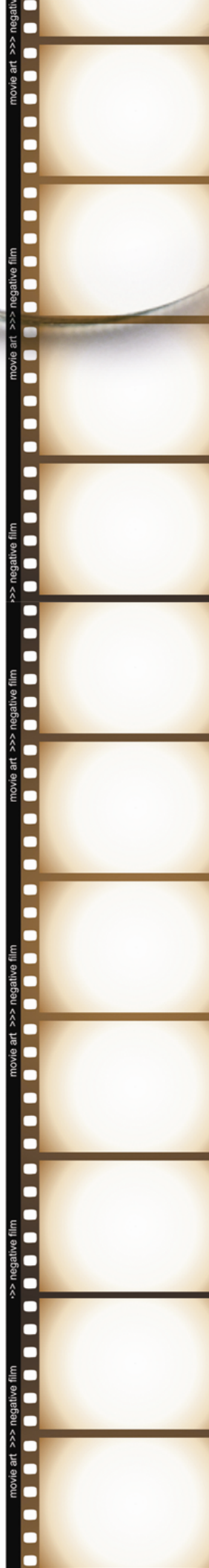
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## Review of *Farmed Animals on Film: A Manifesto for a New Ethic* Carrie Packwood Freeman

While the term “farmed animal” may harken us back to children’s tales, the book *Farmed Animals on Film: A Manifesto for a New Ethic* (2023) cannot be reduced to a study of playful juvenile fiction nor a curious exploration of the cute or pastoral terrain of pigs and cows in cinema. On the contrary, from the first paragraph, author Stephen Marcus Finn makes it clear he is studying animal rights films and advocating for filmmakers to help society see farmed animals as individuals not food commodities, noting his choice of language is intentional, saying “‘farmed’ is a verb that indicates that the animals are there under duress, their lives dictated by humans” (p. 2).

Readers will note Finn’s “critical animal and media studies” approach that is distinct from a mainstream animal welfare approach to media analysis in that it condemns instrumental use of animals as a moral crime, whether legal or not (Almiron, Cole & Freeman, 2016). He also draws upon ecofeminist and post-anthropomorphism philosophies, all outlined in chapter two for those new to these posthumanist approaches that challenge human exceptionalism.

With its examination of over 30 documentaries and narrative fiction films (live-action and animated), *Farmed Animals on Film* would serve as a comprehensive class text on the topic of film, food, and animal rights, or an instructor could just assign individual chapters, as each has

an introduction, conclusion and reference section. Film scholars will appreciate that Finn takes a humanities approach that frequently references art and literature, as he is a playwright and English professor at University of Pretoria. He also understands farmed animal issues well since he founded a farmed animal sanctuary in South Africa.

As a vegan and critical animal and media studies scholar who co-authors [animalsandmedia.org](http://animalsandmedia.org) guidelines, I appreciate Finn's uplifting of animal rights films aimed at ending animal exploitation for food. And while the focus on farmed animals may seem specific/narrow to some, consider how humans have made these domesticated animal species the most predominant land animals on the planet, diminishing and replacing wildlife and their/our habitats, and mass producing them in a systematic breeding and killing cycle by the billions that vastly outnumbers human society annually (Carrington, 2018). For most Westerners, farmed animals and the milk and egg products we take from them, still form the basis of many daily meals. Yet the procurement of these food items comes at a high cost to the individuals who were conscripted into our service against their will (and is environmentally untenable), but this forced captivity (and I would say injustice) often intentionally goes unexamined, even in higher education research. So Finn's book is comprehensive and foundational in filling the major gap in the scholarly literature in both film/media studies and in animal studies. In the second chapter,

Finn clarifies how few communication/media journals and books cover animal topics, much less farmed animals, and also how few animal journals/books discuss farmed animal in film.

For background, Finn's third chapter provides a history of cruelty on film sets and portrayed in film, as well as describing the benefits and limitations of humane filming regulations now in place. He then sets his sites in on examining animal rights film content driven by "a call for compassion" (p. 60).

In chapter four, 18 animal rights documentaries/nonfiction films are categorized by type and examined for their persuasive techniques, including direct address (you), rhetorical questions, sympathetic or hostile terms, testimonials, use of plain-folks, and bandwagon appeals. While Finn is supportive of the goal of these documentaries, he will point out animal rights opportunities missed and critique their editing and narrative choices when and where he feels it lacks persuasive appeal or cinematic expertise, as in the case of *Fowl Play* (2009) and *Behind the Mask* (2006). The documentaries he examined are from North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Russia, and include a section on home videos and farm sanctuary videos.

Regarding the latter, Finn states "Such documentaries should never be discounted. What they sometimes lack in artistry, they might well make up in commitment, in documenting the trials and tribulations as well as the joy of farmed animals" (p. 122). Examples of films he applauds

include: omnibus documentaries like *Earthlings* (2005) and *Dominion* (2018); compendium documentaries like *Meet your Meat* (2002) and *Land of Hope & Glory* (2017); single-issue documentaries like *The Cove* (2009); interviews with activists, like *Peaceable Kingdom* (2009); activists vs perpetrators, like *Death on a Factory Farm* (2009); plant-based documentaries like *Milked* (2019); and documentaries quietly following individual pigs and cows, like *Gunda* (2020) and *Cow* (2021).

He often highlights the Holocaust references in many films, which is a sensitive topic that readers and film viewers will reckon with, given that, in a speciesist society, many people may be insulted by comparisons of other animal species' atrocities to human atrocities – an important topic for thoughtful class discussions.

Finn categorizes and examines 17 animal rights narrative/fiction films for their storytelling power to promote animal liberation messages, with special emphasis on the role of the screenwriter, in chapter 5. These scripted films include live action and animated films and hail from the USA, Europe, India, Australia, and East Asia. Examples of some films he gives high accolades to include: animated antics, such as an old Betty Boop short film *Be Human* (1936), *Chicken Run* (2000), and *Ferdinand* (2017); films focusing on a quest, such as *Okja* (2017); docudramas/fictional facticities/mockumentaries, such as *Buta ga ita kyōshitsu* [*Schooldays with a Pig*] (2008), *Bold Native* (2010), and *Carnage: Swallowing the Past* (2017); 'downers' about

abused donkeys, including *Au hasard Balthazar* [Balthazar, at Random] (1966) and *Agraharathil kazhuthai* [A Donkey in a Brahmin Village] (1977); and adaptations from novels, such as *Babe* (1995). With the latter category, Finn also highlights where animal rights themes emerge in limited ways in both film versions of *Animal Farm* (1954, 1999) and *Charlotte's Web* (1972, 2006).

Finn's ending manifesto helps the book be not only descriptive in critically documenting what has been produced by filmmakers but prescriptive in recommending what should be produced (and how) to encourage rights for animals other than humans. His final chapter, a *Farmed Animal Rights Manifesto (FARM) for Film*, covers approximately 60 points, across categories such as: all-encompassing themes (eg. animal rights, nonharm, and exposure and condemnation of cruelty, even in religious practices), animal centrality, the portrayal of humans, persuasive techniques, filming, terminology, and financial issues. The 10-page manifesto offers specific filmmaker guidance as "it is considered that sympathy is not enough because a way must be shown to achieve a better life for farmed animals – for all animals" (p. 17).

Manifesto recommendations for filmmakers include focusing on individual animals and their emotions, agency, and point of view, letting us hear their actual vocalizations, and avoiding dressing them up like humans. He advises using digital tech to portray farmed animals rather

than any coercive training methods or anything disruptive to their lives and wellbeing.

Conversely, he advocates for “naming and shaming” (p. 190) of perpetrators and exposing their use of violence or weapons. He calls for thoughtful animal terminology that eschews agricultural industry euphemisms and instead uses direct species names, he/she/they but not it, and avoids calling them “nonhuman animals,” which negates them in relation to a human benchmark. The latter is a term I myself tend to use, despite its imperfections, so I think more specific replacements could be offered here beyond “other animals,” which can sometimes be too vague. I like his tenet that “animals must not be portrayed as inferior to humans. Both similarities and differences could be highlighted” (p. 193). He reminds us that vegan products should be used in filming (no leather, wool, dairy, etc.) and that films should have a solution-oriented call-to-action at the end for viewers to become part of the animal advocacy community.

Fitting with the revolutionary cinema manifestos that he profiled earlier in the chapter about how capitalistic goals can corrupt the film process and product, he states “animal rights films should not have financial profit as their main goal” (p. 194). But he acknowledges financial inequities across nations, recommending: “in striving for a more global impact, animal rights groups, movements or enterprises in richer countries should be prepared to help filmmakers in financially strapped ones” (p. 195).

In conclusion, this first-of-its-kind book is more than just an examination of the use of animals in films, but, more directly, the use of films to help animals. This normative objective is captured in Finn's citing of critical animal studies scholar Randy Malamud's (2010) position that it isn't enough to declare that no animals were harmed in the making of this film, but rather we should declare how the making of this film helped animals. That is the presumed goal of Finn's *Farmed Animal Rights Manifesto*, focused on the billions of individuals many of us consume everyday as objects but could instead start to consider as fellow subjects if more screenwriters, filmmakers, and production companies foster this moral revolution toward a healthy and equitable relationship with our animal kin.

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