

## Cinesthesia

---

Volume 10

Issue 1 *Dynamics of Power: Corruption, Co-optation, and the Collective*

Article 1

---

December 2019

### Only a Couple Animals Died During the Production of this Film

Dan Geary

Grand Valley State University, [macciomk@mail.gvsu.edu](mailto:macciomk@mail.gvsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Geary, Dan (2019) "Only a Couple Animals Died During the Production of this Film," *Cinesthesia*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cine/vol10/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Cinesthesia* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

Throughout history, animals are represented in art either as having metaphoric symbolism or obtaining humanistic qualities. Although film is the art medium of the modern era, animals are still used to portray these attributes. In the early development of the film industry, animals were used mostly as indispensable props. Vaudeville acts and circus routines, which had a Victorian attitude towards animal welfare, were captured by the early inventors of film (White 3). In the next couple decades, Westerns and historical epics began misusing horses, cattle and buffalo, which became a focal point of animal abuse and humanitarian criticism. Although the scale of animal suffering in cinema is much less in magnitude than that involved in experimentation, hunting, and intensive farming, the grey area between what is cruel to animals and what is not cruelty needs to be defined through animal welfare groups (Molloy 41). Animal cruelty has been present since the birth of film, which was addressed by animal welfare organizations that formed in order to work with the MPAA to regulate how animals were handled in the production of Hollywood films.

In 1903, Thomas Edison released his short, *Electrocuting an Elephant*, on his coin-operated kinetoscopes, which featured the execution of Topsy. Topsy was an elephant at Coney Island's Luna Park that had killed a spectator after one of Topsy's trainers tried to feed her a lit cigarette (Rabin). When the park had originally considered to hang Topsy, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), the oldest animal welfare group in America, believed it was an inhumane way of execution (Long). Edison then intervened, as he had already been experimenting using AC voltage to kill animals and wanted to gain public fear for the use of Nikola Tesla's DC currents (Long). His production company filmed the execution and used the life of an animal, with the approval of an animal welfare organization, to entertain audiences and to gain profit. "Instead of coming out to see elephants perform at the circus, audiences flocked to

newfangled touring cinema sideshows to see one die on film over and over” (Rabin). The film represents the ethical Victorian ideology of the humane treatment of animals of the time, and it shows the shift in audiences’ mindsets.

Self-regulation was an integral ideology of the early Hollywood industry. During the early 1900s, the cinema was seen only as a passing fad and government intervention was avoided to reduce censorship. There were no set rules or regulations during the production of the films nor in their content. It wasn’t in the interest of production companies to be accused of animal cruelty, since negative publicity, governmental intervention, and economic losses would be the result (White 111). However, since the film industry was not accountable to any organizations or industries, the welfare of animals was low on the list of priorities.

As early as the mid-1910s, humane organizations have been voicing concern about the treatment of animals in the motion picture industry (White 110). The American Humane Association, which formed in 1877, was more concerned with cinema’s moral influence than the physical treatment of animals, as the depictions of cruelty, even if apparent, could inspire the audience to mimic the actions (White 30). Censorship for the exhibition/post production of films, rather than the cruelty present in production, was the main call to action in the *National Humane Review*, a publication of the AHA. The primary concern was not on the welfare of the animals, but the depictions of animal cruelty that might influence or corrupt the women and children in audiences.

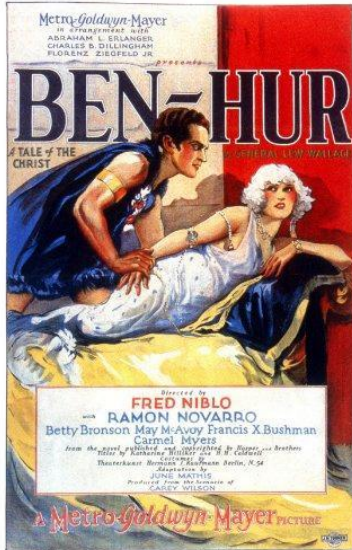
After the 1910s, the film industry moved from New York to western California, away from the powerful humane associations such as the ASPCA and the AHA (White 40). From the 1910s until 1923, the Los Angeles Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (LASPCA) and the State Humane Association of California, an umbrella organization of the AHA, started to

attempt to monitor the use of animals during the production of a film (White 40). A humane representative was only allowed on production if they were invited, so they had to work through employees on set (White 41). There were a couple of cases that were prosecuted; however, they did little to deter cruelty on production because, “[studios] do not care for fines, so long as the picture is taken, and they realize their profit, which is far greater than any fine could be” (Sprecher 166).

In 1922, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), which is known today as the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), formed to become the liaison between the film industry and audience complaints (White 110). Although they were not as influential in the industry as they would become later, the MPPDA worked with humane organizations to regulate cruelty or pass legislation to a certain extent. The American Animal Defense League (AADL) used the influence of their supporters to threaten boycotts to the MPPDA who were not opposed to improving the quality of animal welfare in production (White 50). However, films such as *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (Niblo, 1925), in which the vice president of the AADL, Rosamonde Rae Wright, was on set during production, still had tremendous animal casualties. Hundreds of horses were killed during the chariot race scenes because of the recklessness, haste, and lack of trained animal wranglers on set (Hagopian). Big budget historical epics, such as westerns and pioneer films during this period that used masses of animals to create spectacle, became littered with animal injuries and death (White 113). These films disregarded the safety of animals to gain visually exciting shots, and the MPPDA would

turn a blind eye to the casualties that would occur despite the protests from welfare groups, mostly because the MPPDA regulations were ill-enforced (White 131).

Another example of a big budget film that used the spectacle and unregulated stunt work



of animals that resulted in casualty was Thomas H. Ince's, *The Last Frontier* (1926). The film was shot on-location in Alberta, Canada, where the government intended to kill 2,000 buffalo (White 53). Ince got the rights to kill some of the buffalo for the film, but over 30 died when a stampede was caused by

inexperienced wranglers (White 114). The AADL did not protest the



government's decision to slaughter the buffalo, rather, they protested the stampede, as it would have "a demoralizing effect upon the thoughts of impressionable children" (White 114). The MPPDA also outright denied the fact that the animals had been killed, as the MPPDA secretary made the statement that no animal has ever been killed for any picture (White 57). Other animal welfare organizations continued to criticize the pioneer and western films for their continuous killing of buffalo and horses while the MPPDA continued to side with the studios.

Two films contributed to a major change in animal welfare in the Hollywood film industry, *Jesse James* (King, 1939) and *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (Curtiz, 1936). During the early to late 1930s, the Motion Picture Production code, a set of moral guidelines that the

MPPDA created that required a film to get approval before release, did not forbid cruelty to animals during production (White 132). Joseph Breen, whose job was to regulate the content of a film and enforce the Production Code, was not interested in the methods with which films were made, so the welfare of animals during a production was tolerated unless the public found out about it (White 132). However, the new MPPDA regulations stipulated allowance for humane organization representatives to appear on set where they could “go to film locations in the hopes of catching filmmakers in the act” (White 132). Because of this, humane organizations had a bit more freedom to catch animal abuse and mistreatment, which happened during the production of *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. A humane representative was on location during the production and witnessed a total of six horses die for a scene, allowing prosecution of three people on the charges of animal cruelty (White 132). Once the story had gotten out, the public’s opinion on the film did not falter, as it had become a massive success, received the MPPDA’s



seal of approval, and was nominated for Academy Awards.

However, the press coverage of the animal cruelty during the production of *The Charge of the Light Brigade* sparked a collaboration between the

MPPDA and the AHA. In 1939, when the news that two horses were blindfolded and pushed to their deaths from a 70-foot cliff during the production of *Jesse James*, the AHA created public outcry (Molloy 43). This led to an official meeting between representatives of the AHA and the MPPDA where the two resolved that Richard C. Craven, the head of the new western office for the AHA, would work closely with the MPPDA in Hollywood (White 178). This led to the creation of the Guidelines for the Safe Use of Animals in Filmed Media, in 1940, and a

certificate of authenticity, the “No Animals Were Harmed” in the end credits, that confirms an AHA representative was on location during production. Throughout the whole first year, the collaboration between the AHA and MPPDA ensured there was not a single equine death (White 211).

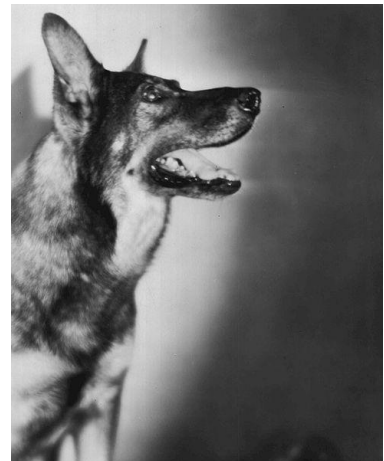
Unlike the use of multiple horses and buffalo for spectacle in westerns, pioneer, and historical epics, animal stars became an entirely humanized representation of animals in film. Animal stars were not major concerns of cruelty for welfare groups during productions. Because of the humanized qualities that the animals portrayed in their films, they became just as important as their human counterparts, signing contracts to work with specific production companies. In many ways, the star system in Hollywood protected the animals from abuse as the sheer amount of money that the animals made for the studio guaranteed good living conditions and a well-trained wrangler, who would often also be the owner of the animal, as it was in the case of Rin Tin Tin. In the silent era, humans and animals had the same acting ability, as story was told through action, expression, and gesture (Orlean). The novelty of animal stars was interesting to audiences, as the technology and formal elements of film allowed it to be one of the few art mediums that can feature an animal that can act. When Rin Tin Tin debuted on the silver screen, he became an instant success, bringing the Warner Bros. out of debt (Burt 150). There was an argument to be made that animal stars were immune to cruelty because of the expense of the replacement of a star animal, however, the problem with that is the fact that multiple animals can be used to represent the animal character (White 210). Doubles were constantly used during the production of pre-AHA films, so it is not certain that animals were unharmed. Another negative aspect of the animal star films was the audiences’ perception of the breeds that were used. For example, after Rin Tin Tin’s rise to fame, German Shepherds became

one of the top pet breeds in America, to which many of them were abandoned or brought to kennels (Molloy 9).

During World War II, the sheer amount of wartime productions flooded the market, pushing all other genres to the side. During this period, there were still some animal star films being produced, but it wasn't until the 1950s that the animal star began to regain popularity. In

the 1950s, legislation broke up studio monopolies in Hollywood, and the advent of television had begun to marginalize the box office (Molloy 45). Bonzo, played by Tamba the chimpanzee, followed in Rin Tin Tin's footsteps, drawing in massive box office revenue to help bring back profit to struggling studios.

Unlike Rin Tin Tin, chimpanzees are pseudo-humanistic and have natural humanistic qualities, such as similar facial expressions and

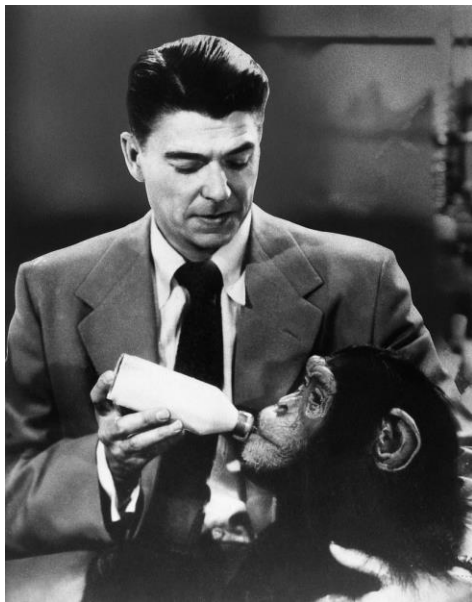


high intelligence, which allows for a stronger star personality (Molloy 58). However, even though Bonzo made \$1,000 a week for his performances, it did not protect him from casualty and expendability. Bonzo was imported from Liberia to the World Jungle Compound, a supply center of wild animals to be used in film productions, where animals such as the MGM lion were housed (Molloy 53). The trainers and conditions were questionably cruel, as it was reported that, “[The World Jungle Compound’s] trainers break and train beasts fresh from the jungle and develop acts which the owners book with circuses and carnivals” (Molloy 54). In 1951, the



original Bonzo died in a fire at the World Jungle Compound when he was trapped in a cage and suffocated from smoke. He was immediately replaced by Peggy the chimpanzee (Molloy 50).

In modern times, the AHA has been instrumental in severely reducing the amount of animal injuries and death on Hollywood film productions. Today, to gain the “No Animals Were Harmed” disclaimer in the end credits, “the AHA monitors all filming, advises production on safety issues; documents all animal action and care; and serves as an independent, professional,



objective witness to the treatment and well-being of animal actors” (Rizzo). However, there are still cases of animal cruelty happening in Hollywood that the AHA have turned a blind eye towards. In the case of Peter Jackson’s *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012), 27 animals, including sheep, goats, and horses, were reportedly killed due to housing conditions and other preventable causes (Woodward). When the incidents were brought to the attention of the AHA, an AHA official

replied saying that there was a lack of physical evidence and nothing that AHA could do since the deaths took place during a production hiatus (Baum). The only reprehension the film did receive was a modified version of the AHA end credit certificate stating: “Monitored all of the significant action. No animals were harmed during such action” (Baum). During Hollywood film productions, cutting corners for the sake of budget is common, however, such actions can result in preventable animal deaths.

Even with modern AHA officials on set, accidents can also happen that cause harm to animals. During the production of *The Life of Pi* (Lee, 2013), the Bengal tiger King nearly

drowned during a take of the film (Baum). Most of the film was shot using CGI effects, but “[King] was employed when the digital version wouldn’t suffice” (Baum). In the AHA manual of guidelines for the use of animals, it is stated that:

If, upon review of the script, American Humane Association believes there to be any dangerous animal action, American Humane Association will strongly encourage simulating the action through the use of computer-generated images (CGI), animatronics or fake animal doubles to minimize the risk of injury to animals (“No Animals Were Harmed”).

Although it was accidental that the tiger almost drowned, it does take into consideration that the AHA allowed the tiger to be in the situation that had the potential for death instead of using CGI, even if it would have been not preferred.

As technology continues to develop and CGI starts becoming indistinguishable from live action imagery, the use of real animals in films might become completely irrelevant. When animals are used for entertainment, welfare groups must use considerable resources to ensure their safety, as seen throughout the history of the AHA, ASCPA, and the AADL. These organizations have made incredible progress in preventing animal abuse in the production of Hollywood cinema. However, there is still progress to be made, as current film productions continue to place animal welfare lower on the list of priorities.

#### Work Cited

- Baum, Gary. “No Animals Were Harmed”. *Hollywood Reporter*, vol. 419, no. 43, pp. 62–78. EBSCOhost. Dec. 2013.
- Burt, Jonathan. “Animals in Film”. Reaktion Books, ProQuest Ebook Central, 2004.

- Hagopian, Kevin. "Ben Hur." *Film Notes*, New York State Writers Institute.
- Long, Tony. "Jan. 4, 1903: Edison Fries an Elephant to Prove His Point." *Wired*, Conde Nast, 4 June 2018. Web.
- Molloy, Claire. "Popular Media and Animals". Palgrave Macmillan Limited, ProQuest Ebook Central, 2011.
- "No Animals Were Harmed": Guidelines for the Safe Use of Animals in Filmed Media." *American Humane*. N.p., 2015.
- Orlean, Susan. "Rin Tin Tin: The Dog Who Charmed the World." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 15 Jan. 2012. Web.
- Rabin, Nathan. "Yes, Animals Were Harmed: 21 Films and TV Shows That Killed or Hurt Animals." *AV Film*. Film.avclub.com, 23 Aug. 2017. Web.
- Rizzo, Vincent. "Overview of Laws Concerning Animals in Film Media." *Animal Law Legal Center*. N.p., 01 Jan. 1970. Sprecher, James G. "Motion Picture Industry and Its Attendant Cruelties," *National Humane Review*, Sept. 1917.
- White, Courtney E. "'The Utmost Care, Kindness, and Consideration': The MPPDA versus Allegations of Animal Abuse, 1923–1925". *Cinema Journal*, vol. 55 no. 4, pp. 108-129. Project MUSE. 2016.
- White, Courtney E. "What Looked Like Cruelty: Animal Welfare in Hollywood, 1916-1950." University of Southern California. 2015.
- Woodward, Grace. "What Happens to Animals Used in Film and TV." *Peta2*. Peta2, 02 Mar. 2017. Web.

### **Filmography-**

- Curtiz, Michael, director. *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Warner Brothers, 1936.
- De Cordova, Fred, director. *Bedtime for Bonzo*. Universal-International, 1951.

Edison, Thomas, director. *Electrocuting an Elephant*. Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903.

Jackson, Peter, director. *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2012.

King, Henry, director. *Jesse James*. 20th Century Fox, 1939.

Lee, Ang, director. *Life of Pi*. 20th Century Fox, 2013.

Niblo, Fred, director. *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1925.

Seitz, George B, director. *The Last Frontier*. Producers Distributing Corporation, 1926.