

Creaturely Stars: Animals and Performance in Cinema

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Abstract

In 2011, Uggie the dog appeared in Hazanavicius's 2011 film, *The Artist*. This was not his first role having appeared beforehand in Lawrence's adaptation of the novel *Water for Elephants* also 2011 where he is also listed as cast, and as a skateboarding dog in an advert, amongst his many other appearances. However, the success and press coverage of the film resulted in huge acclaim for its canine star: Uggie received a special mention for his performance at the Prix Lumière Awards in France, won the Palm Dog Award at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival and the golden collar award in LA. Fans mounted a campaign to have the dog nominated for an Acting Academy Award in his own right, but he was not eligible – the award only appropriate for humans. Also, in recognition for his part, Uggie shared the prize for the best canine performance awarded by *The Seattle Times*, along with Cosmo, the canine character in *Beginners* (Mills 2010). More recently, Uggie has sunk his paws into the cement outside Grauman's Chinese theatre in LA and has 'written' an autobiography, his thoughts channelled by his owner via Wendy Holden who stated "I thought this was one Hollywood star I really wanted to write about" (*Independent* online). Thus, Uggie might be perceived as a star persona through various accolades, is accorded this status by the press and the industry, and arguably he also produces a stellar performance; indeed his 'acting' was described by critics as "the best performance, human or animal, in any film I've seen this year". Drawing on existing debates in star theory and performance studies, this essay examines Uggie as star persona in *The Artist*.

[**Keywords:** *The Artist*, Performance Theory, Star Theory]

At the outset of Michel Hazanavicius's 2011 film, *The Artist*, the central character, George Valentin (Jean Dujardin), takes a bow on stage and makes a show of introducing his dog, Jack (Uggie), to the amused and effusive applauding audience. It is at this juncture that Uggie executes a succession of tricks, such as walking on his hind legs with front legs aloft, gazing at his 'owner', begging while seated on his haunches, and finally playing dead. He remains lying down in the same position for some time, while George introduces his female human co-star. Through a succession of shots, the animal is presented as a cute and expressive character, alluring his audience while also fulfilling a narrative role. Here, Uggie isn't behaving as himself; rather he is performing a character, demonstrating individual traits which might be perceived by audiences in human terms as cleverness, loyalty, thoughtfulness, quaintness and charm. His behaviour is displayed

through a repertoire of performance signs and the presentation is perceived through a range of movements, actions and expressions despite, and also through the deployment of the film language.

Uggie has become a star in his own right and this is not only evident through his various accolades and awards, but also through his performances across a variety of films. The central concept of this essay is that, in a similar vein to human film stars, non human animals are equally significant and occupy a comparable space in the public eye - both on and off screen. It offers the model of animal as star character within the theoretical frameworks of Star Studies and Performance Studies, a notion not only evident through publicity and promotion, but also through a repertoire of legible performance signs discernible across a body of films. Using *The Artist* as a case study, the first section briefly examines the legitimacy of animal as actor and performer, and as star persona through publicity, promotion and marketing; the second part analyses Uggie's performance in *The Artist*.

Invariably, the analysis of animals has suggested that they be perceived as 'other', and non cognisant and this has precluded the examination of the animal as star. In her seminal work on child performance, Karen Lury notes that animals, in a similar vein to children, are often only perceived as performers in relation to adult presentations. Lury observes the correlation between the child actor and the animal, noting that a perception exists that neither act in the true sense of the word, and their purpose is to operate "as the ground for the proper performance of the adult" (2010: 11). Further, she argues that the adult performance is frequently perceived as producing a "subjectivity that is self-conscious, coherent and legible, in contrast to the unconsciousness, incoherence and illegibility of the 'something else' that is manifested by the animal and in the child" (Lury 2010: 11). Lury's work inverts the notion of the child as 'something else' whereby she constructs an argument that the child is capable of a transition in performance to attain, what she terms, 'humanness', an evolutionary process into an adult performance which then makes its actions appear conscious, coherent and legible.

In a similar vein, and to adopt Lury's theory, animals might also be perceived as capable of transition to attain not 'humanness', but 'animalness', or, what Anat Pick terms 'creatureliness' (2011a). In cinema, the viewer is offered a specific perspective, and therefore frequently provided an anthropomorphic treatment produced through the language of the film such as editing and cinematography.¹ However, Pick's concept reflects the collapse of human/animal binaries, thus minimising the barriers between the two in order to uncover their commonality. Her reasoning for this is derived from an ethical standpoint based on the notion that all creatures are vulnerable and face "a common embodiment and mortality [which] is primarily the condition of exposure and finitude that affects all living bodies whatever they are" (Pick 2011b). Pick argues that animals might also possess psychological traits, albeit one of psychology's narcissistic tendencies is to assume that this occurs in human mode, and she promotes an understanding of animal behaviour wrought from non linguistic communication, an ability unconfined to, yet most noticeable in primates.² Thus, although it is not possible

to know what an animal thinks or feels, for Pick it is feasible to read gestures and signs through the process of observation of animal behaviour.

Star theory offers an intervention for the study of animals onscreen. Not only has it constituted a distinctive strand of Film Studies since the 1970s and includes performance studies, but has wholly centred on humans rather than animals. Scholarly works by Richard Dyer (1979) focused on Hollywood stardom through detailed scrutiny of celebrity screen performances, and use of archival materials. Since Dyer, two alternative approaches have developed: audience engagement with stars and the industrial context of stardom (Gledhill 1991, Staiger 1992, Stacey 1994). Whether the studies are Eurocentric, Hollywood specific, Bollywood or based on an identifiable star, there has been no inclusion of animals in this large repertoire to date. While animals such as Trigger, the horse in the Roy Rogers films of the 1940s, have been perceived as stars through their various guest appearances, accolades and awards, they have not formed the subject for discussion in terms of Star theory.

Nonetheless, if the promotion, publicity, industry considerations and audience engagement is used as a theoretical framework to study the human star, so might this be applied to the non human animal. The success and press coverage of *The Artist* resulted in huge acclaim for its canine star and Uggie received a special mention for his performance at the Prix Lumière Awards in France, won the 'Palm Dog' Award at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival and the golden collar award in Los Angeles. Fans mounted a campaign to have the dog nominated for an Acting Academy Award in his own right, but he was not eligible – the award deemed appropriate only for humans. Also, in recognition for his part, Uggie shared the prize for the best canine performance awarded by *The Seattle Times*, along with Cosmo, the canine character in *Beginners* (Mills 2010). More recently, Uggie has sunk his paws into the cement outside Grauman's Chinese theatre in LA and has 'written' an autobiography, his thoughts channelled by his owner Von Muller via writer, Wendy Holden, who stated: "I thought this was one Hollywood star I really wanted to write about" (in Williams 2012). Uggie's appearance in Hazanavicius's 2011 silent film was not his first part, the dog having appeared beforehand in minor parts in films such as *What's Up Scarlett* (Caldarella 2005), and *Wassup Rockers* (Clark 2005). His major roles where he is listed as cast include *Mr Fix It* (Ferriola 2006), and Francis Lawrence's adaptation of the novel *Water for Elephants* 2011 in the role of a bitch named Queenie. He has also made numerous other appearances in television, for example as a skateboarding dog in various adverts and as a special guest on chat shows. Although Uggie has retired, arguably he is now a celebrity in his own right, a status acquired through the various tributes accorded by the press, the public and the industry.

Just as critics invariably pore over a human star's acting, minutely scrutinising their gestures and mannerisms, so animal performance might also be examined in this way. Performance is also a measure of stardom³ and although this is more problematic to address when thinking about animal presentation, it is possible to focus on this aspect across a body of films. Admittedly, we cannot know what an animal thinks or feels, or whether the performance is undertaken in a cognisant or mindful way. Nonetheless, it is legible for the spectator who perceives the animal's actions, expressions and movement

within the context of the narrative. Therefore, using close textual analysis of an animal's performance across a range of films it is feasible to focus on animal 'acting' using a similar theoretical framework to that applied to human performances. Furthermore, the trainer frames the performance for the spectator to ensure that it is perceived within the correct context, and finally the animal operates within its own socio-biological patterning to produce what is 'dog' about its performance.

As noted above, Uggie is the recipient of many accolades associated with Hollywood stardom, and he has appeared in a succession of films which, if adhering to a Star Studies' analysis, also enables a close scrutiny of elements of continuity in his performance style – a much neglected arena in this field of study.⁴ The notion that animals perform is a contested area, yet, arguably, animal behaviour and appearance onscreen must be understood in terms of what Richard Schechner (2002) alludes to as 'as' performance rather than as star exhibition, or manipulated through the film language or merely living in front of the camera. In some situations the animal's behaviour might not necessarily appear intentional or obvious, leaving only its presence onscreen, and the director's subsequent manipulation of this through the language of film, open to analysis. This is a point of entry that Brenda Austin-Smith notes, particularly in relation to the performance of the donkey in Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966). As she states, the animal "acts like a donkey ... whose performance choices are made for him by the filmmaker" (Austin-Smith 2012: 29). Furthermore she argues that the donkey's performance can be understood not necessarily as intentional, but "as a character who can be fully known by what he shows to us, having no choice but to show us all that he is ... Balthazar's twitching ears and wide eyes ... likewise credit him with curiosity and wonder, making him more than a walking symbol of suffering" (Austin-Smith 2012: 31). Consequently, according to Austin-Smith, Balthazar's performance can be understood through a form of non linguistic communication or, what Anat Pick (2011) might term, his own 'creatureliness': practices, behaviour and movement consonant with those of his own species.

That Uggie communicates non linguistically in a canine manner akin to his own genus is incontestable, yet, in connection with this genetic programming which can be read as performance, his routine is also manipulated to present supplementary significances through the process of training. Through specific guidance Uggie also produces a believable and legible performance for the spectator.

Uggie's acts in the above named films are not performed without interventions and just as the actor reads and interprets their lines of dialogue and the directions from the screenplay so does the animal – through an interpreter (the trainer). Whereas the animal does not make a choice in the same way as a human being through a thinking/discussion process, its actions invariably involve choice and negotiation. Albeit the animal's autonomy, as Austin-Smith suggests, 'shows us all that he is', its performance is also framed for us, not only through the specificity of the film language, but also by the trainer. Paul Bouissac, a scholar and academic who has written extensively on the semiotics of circus performance suggests that animal performance takes place in response to a trainer who 'frames' it as a presentation. He notes that, in terms of circus routines, by

thus manipulating both the animal's behaviour and the context of this behaviour the trainer utilizes, at the same time, two different semiotic systems. As a result, such manipulation generates for the public, and to a lesser extent for the trainer, the illusion that the relevant context is the one they perceive and that the animals share this perception of the situation that is constructed in the ring" (Bouissac 1981: 19).

In Uggie's performance, Sarah Clifford, Uggie's trainer, states that the scenes were challenging and she explains how she choreographed and 'framed' these presentations, commenting on the aforementioned sequence thus:

As a trainer, I had to be far away, tucked back behind the curtain. Jean had to work Uggie on his own while acting and hitting his own marks. It's a long scene to have a dog do multiple times and land on the same mark from multiple angles, but Uggie almost always nailed it, because we practiced [sic] the heck out of that scene. Dogs need to rehearse (we call it prep) scenes, just as actors need to memorize their lines (Clifford).

Bouissac suggests that circus presentations are a bi-lateral process and that the art of training creates an illusion akin to performance: as he contends,

[p]erforming animal acts are indeed patterned events that are two-sided. On the one hand, the trainers interact with their charges on the basis of their socio-biological competence, on the other hand they frame these interactions in particular situations relevant to the system of social interactions shared by the public for which they perform (Bouissac 1981: 19).

However, as Bouissac suggests the animal must also operate within its own innate genetic and biological determinants of survival, reproduction etc. As he maintains,

the trainer can elicit at will some segments of behavior and frame them in a situation of his/her choice, but the animal's behavior is never performed out of its own socio-biological context, which transcends the trainer's understanding of the animal's performance ...[i]n addition to the situation constructed for the audience and the one perceived and manipulated by the trainer interacting with the animals, there exists ... a situation that is experienced and negotiated by the animals within their own semiotic system, i.e., the system provided by the structure and programs of their brain" (Bouissac 1981: 23-24).

Bouissac argues that the animal must also possess a level of competence which is based on their innate genetic programming.

Towards the end of *The Artist* George is forced to sell all his possessions and live in a small apartment. In a drunken rage he sets fire to his entire film collection and, as smoke engulfs the room, the camera cuts to a close-up shot of Uggie seated in his basket. The circumstances are that Uggie must save his master by attracting outside attention. As though realising the danger, the dog races from the house and from a rear view shot, he is seen running speedily along a walkway, darting between various different startled onlookers. Halting at the side of a policeman, the dog, framed in close-up, barks while

gazing upwards; the policeman, however, remains impassive. A medium shot reveals the two side by side, the policeman expressionless and immobile, and Uggie seated, but head directed upwards and towards the man as though listening. This creates an interaction between them as, to the right of the frame, a woman observes them. At one point the policeman, becoming agitated with what appears to be the animal's strange and inexplicable behaviour, motions him to stop barking. Uggie lies down on the pavement in an act of submission. Having witnessed George's predicament, the spectator understands from this that the dog is trying to tell the policeman something, and urged by the bystander to follow, the policeman chases after the animal, finally reaching and rescuing George from the burning house. He is dragged outside and, at this point the dog nuzzles his face as though to revive his master. As the trainer explains:

We shot the fire scene over many days in a few different locations. I worked all the exterior scenes because Omar [Uggie's owner] was out of the country during that time. To get Uggie to go to the cop and really evoke that frantic energy, I had to be super exuberant and really keep my energy at a 10 at all times. We shot the pant-leg part and the play-dead part in a few pieces, and each time, I would pattern him. When he ran into the smoky house, I was inside calling him as loud as I could and squeezing squeaky toys. I grabbed him just before the cop came charging through because the smoke was so thick that he couldn't see either. It was challenging (Clifford 2012).

'Playing dead' is an act of repetitious activity that Uggie performs throughout the film and, whether undertaken in a cognisant manner or not, spectator understanding is activated through the animal's gestures and physical movements. Similarly, this act is one of submission in dogs and is a natural response. Writing in 1999, Clinton Sanders suggests that interaction between people and animals is based on communicative acts. As he suggests, the actors are aware of the "purpose of the exchange – each actor is aware of his or her definition of the situation and goals to the other" (Sanders 1999: 140). In this sequence, both 'actors' and trainer are aware of the principles behind the altercation, even though the dog cannot think logistically or in human terms. Even so, he operates with creaturely intention, objectives and targets thus aiming to gratify, and his presentation accordingly constitutes a performance.

This is shown when later, George awakens from a coma to find himself in his old home, and the dog 'alerts' him to the contents of a room by barking. In the ensuing last few moments the distraught man places a gun in his mouth, and images of his distressed face are intercut with shots of Uggie barking at his owner. However, George does not yield to suicide although he unintentionally fires a bullet to the floor. At this point, Uggie plays dead at the sound of the blast. This occurs as the animal, seated on his haunches, gazes at the camera, and twists to one side before falling to the floor where he remains inert – this indicates canine submission which also forms part of the dog's gamut of social behaviour.⁵ Thus, spectator understanding has been enabled through the set of circumstances, the problem to be overcome, the actions taken by Uggie to achieve the objective and the tactics or beats involved in the process.

If it is problematic to understand animal performance as a cognisant activity, then it is not difficult to accept the animal's presence as star through the various publicity, promotional materials and, above all, his performance. Although film language encourages an anthropomorphic reading, an understanding of Uggie's presentation is not only enabled through the film language, but also through behaviour, figure expression and movement and within his own genetic programming wrought from non linguistic communication. We can perceive signs through his gestures and his movements, both scripted and interpreted by the trainer, and non scripted, to credit him with recognisable characteristics. As Austin-Smith might argue, just because Uggie is animal, he is no less knowable.

Endnotes

¹ See also the work of Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1984) which points to the possibility of a different relationship between species – one that no longer privileges the rights of human over other forms of life, but that recognises the values and entitlements of nonhumans along with humans. In a later work entitled *When Species Meet* (2011), she calls for a mutual respect and engagement between animal and human in, what she terms, the 'usable' word – joy.

² The starting point for Pick's work is Simone Weil's posthumously published collection entitled *Gravity and Grace* (1952).

³ See Shingler 2012 and Naremore (1988). It is not viable to discern what an animal is thinking, or to know whether it performs with cognisance; nonetheless it is feasible to analyse animal performance as a legible presentation in a number of ways. James Naremore's study, *Acting in the Cinema*, raises issues concerning the relationship between stars, actors and the characters they play, thus providing a useful model for the analysis of animal performance. Naremore's work suggests that performance elements may be scrutinised through an interrogation of the ways in which performances are produced, those involved in the production of the performance, and the ways in which the performance is received. With reference to characterisation, he differentiates between the fictional character, the actor performing the character and the succession of roles, filmic properties and publicity (Naremore 1988: 158).

⁴ Martin Shingler notes the absence of the analysis of performance in much scholarly work on Star Studies. See Shingler 2012.

⁵ For further reading on animal behaviour see Vicki Hearne 1986.

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