

Armstrong, Philip. "Farming Images: Animal Rights and Agribusiness in the Field of Vision".
Extract from Chapter Five: "Farming Images".

KNOWING ANIMALS

Chapter 5

FARMING IMAGES

MEDIA CIRCUS

On the first day the protestors gather at 10 am, a block from the hotel. They carry placards and megaphones, and they wear neck-warmers that have been specially made to stretch over their heads, as part of a performance to be held for the TV cameras at the protest site. The winter sunlight doesn't raise the temperature much, so some combine the neck-warmer with a beanie, leaving only their eyes showing, like a balaclava: the effect is "very ALF," as one young woman tells her friend admiringly.

At 10.30 am, accompanied by drumbeats, the line of protestors approaches the conference venue, a top-range hotel. At eleven A.M., in a carefully choreographed moment, twelve hooded protestors spit out the plastic baby comforters they have been holding between their teeth, to coincide with the press release prepared by the organizers: "Anti-Vivisection Protestors Spit the Dummy!" At the same moment, the Coalition Against Vivisection releases a long-prepared report into animal experimentation to the gathered media, accompanied by speeches from a sympathetic scientific researcher and a well-known Green Party Member of Parliament. On the TV news that night, images of chanting protestors, hooded faces, and sound-bites from the Coalition's spokespeople are accompanied by archival images of overseas animal experiments. The cameras also show the feet of conference delegates walking back and forth inside the venue—the only shots they are permitted to take inside the meeting itself.

The rest of the week follows a schedule that is familiar, by now, from such events worldwide. On the second day a polished spokesperson for the conference organizers emerges with a prepared response for the cameras. The media are satisfied—"Scientists Answer Animal Concerns"—but the protestors have heard similar assurances before. Wednesday is a rest day for the conference-goers; however the protestors gather anyway, chanting and blaring recorded animal noises up at the hotel windows. On Thursday a dozen hooded protestors stage a blockade, sitting across train tracks. The train-ride to take delegates on a wine-tasting expedition has to be abandoned. Protestors also lie under buses, and use bicycle locks to attach themselves to the roof of the hotel as delegates are leaving. By the final day, despite a large and elaborate vigil to conclude the week's actions, the mainstream news media have lost interest, and no more stories or images from the protest are seen on national television or in the press.[1]



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VANISHING ACT

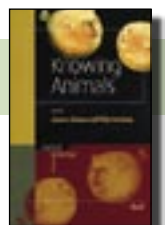
Confrontations and debates over animal experimentation have been a familiar feature of radical social action in industrialized societies for well over a century. Participants tend to draw upon rhetorical markers and strategies established during key historical instantiations, from the Old Brown Dog riots of 1907 in Battersea, London, to the flurry of animal liberation actions in the 1980s and 90s.[2] Throughout this history, though, the most powerful rhetoric has always been visual in nature: actual images, word images and the language of visibility.

One reason for animal advocates' reliance upon visual communication is that "animals cannot speak up for themselves, so the message is in greater need of visual reinforcement than, presumably, for issues of human rights" (Burt 2002, 168-9). Burt goes on to note that the most effective animal rights campaigns have always been those that achieve the most striking visual impact: his example is the campaign against foxhunting in Britain, an issue that from both sides produces an elaborate spectacularism.[3] As James Jasper suggests, visibly charismatic animals of this kind provide "condensing symbols" that are crucial to what he calls the "art of moral protest," because they bring together meanings appropriate to different levels of debate and various kinds of audience (Jasper 1997, 160-7). On the other hand, amongst those involved in the use of animals— whether in science, medicine or farming and its support industries—the development of an urban-centered commodity capitalism has demanded that images of animal suffering be removed from public visibility.

No wonder, then, that the fruits of struggles between these two sides of the animal use debate have often been attempts to regulate the power and impact of the seen and the unseen. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century legislation that emerged from early animal advocacy struggles, although ostensibly designed to improve the treatment of animals, also concentrated on limiting the visibility of their suffering: an 1857 Bill in Britain "proposed that children under fourteen should not witness killing in a slaughterhouse," later legislation included the 1876 banning of public lectures involving the demonstration of vivisection, and a 1911 law against children under sixteen witnessing the cutting up of carcasses (Burt 2002, 36-7).

These manipulations of the field of vision recall John Berger's assertion, often discussed within contemporary animal studies, that the 'real' animal, and the possibility of an authentic relation between human and animal, 'vanishes' in modern cultures as a result of capitalism, urbanization and industrialization. This vanishing is both demonstrated and effected, Berger argues, by the proliferation of certain kinds of animal images: pets, toys, zoo animals,

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storybook animals, Disney animals, all conspire to replace the animal as animal with the animal as spectacle (Berger 1971; 1977a, b and c). We might ask, then, whether the struggles between animal advocates and their opponents for control over animal imagery constitute another such disappearance of the animal via spectacle.

Inevitably, in the media-saturated cultures of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, attempts to engage in a struggle for visual representation require animal advocates to show considerable virtuosity in their dealings with the media—a virtue necessitated by the unpopularity and complexity of their message, and the slenderness or nonexistence of their resource base (Sabloff 2001, 131). The organizers of protest events will therefore tend to combine noisy marches, street theatre, blockades and lockdowns to cater for the tastes of the more radical participants. At the same time, they will also try to introduce more lasting images via news and information networks hungry for sensational conflict and spectacular stereotypes. The increasing reliance upon visual media means that, over recent decades, the release of photographic or video evidence of the animal experimentation practices occurring 'behind closed doors' has become more and more significant for anti-vivisection movements worldwide. Thus, "Alex Pacheco's secret photography of abuse of primates at the Silver Spring laboratory [was] crucial to the rise of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)," now the world's largest animal rights organization (Burt 2002, 168-9). Similarly, the impact of the animal liberation movement in Britain depends largely upon infiltrations of companies like Huntingdon Life Sciences, and the public release of photos and video footage, such as the famous sequences of researchers beating and shaking the beagle dogs that comprise their standard "mammalian preparations" (SHAC, "HLS Exposed"). Baker remarks that the primary effectiveness of such imagery lies in its ability to represent a vast imaginary unseen; he glosses the viewer's response as follows: "if this scrap of documentary evidence has been ... 'stolen' from the realm of what we are not permitted to see, how much more remains unseen?" (Baker 2001, 221).

Again, those on the opposing side of the debate are far from ignorant of the power of such imagery: as a veteran journalist told one conference of animal experimenters a few years ago,

Animals, especially their welfare, make great news stories. . . . Editors are delighted by the combination of sentiment, anthropomorphism, indignation, commonality, highly graphic horror or cuteness and often, major economic significance, that is wrapped up in many animal stories. (Johnstone, in Mellor, Fisher, and Sutherland 2000, 119)



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This kind of realization results, inevitably, in a corresponding investment in image management by those involved in animal experimentation. Jasper describes how, after initial successes by antivivisection groups targeting Cornell Medical school in Manhattan in 1987, NYU initiated a tactic that would become standard practice throughout the US: "Around the country, slick PR officials replaced scientists as spokespersons, accompanied by normal Americans (especially children) who had been helped by biomedical research" (Jasper 1997, 312-13).

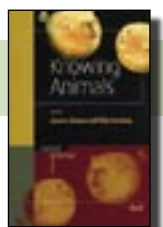
MAMMALIAN PREPARATIONS

NYU's lessons appear to have been well learnt by ANZCCART, the body hosting the conference referred to at the start of this chapter. The acronym stands for Australian and New Zealand Council for the Care of Animals in Research and Teaching—a name indicative of the kind of image-making that is this organization's primary objective. A significant proportion of each of its annual meetings addresses the public of animal industries and research in today's social climate.

During the 2003 ANZCCART Conference, then, the real struggle was over minutes on the TV news and columns in the newspapers. The conference title and theme—"Lifting the Veil: Finding Common Ground"—announced the intention of its organizers to regain the initiative over public representation of their work, and to do so by means of the language of visibility and transparency. To this end, presentations were included in the schedule that directly criticized animal experimentation, both from an ethical and a scientific viewpoint (Kedgley, in Cragg et al. 2004, 27-32; Morris, in Cragg et al. 2004, 137-44). So too was an "open session" (that is, open to registered conference delegates) during which small groups discussed various means by which "the legitimate demands of citizens for transparency" could be met (Cragg et al. 2004, 134). Eight recommendations were produced in order pursue this goal, which became the basis for the conference spokespeople's reply to the media on the second day of the conference. These strategies for increased visibility were, of course, quite carefully qualified: for example,

1. Balanced information on the value and need for animal research and testing must be made readily available to the public at all levels (particularly schools). . . . [R]eliable sources need to be established that can provide authoritative information on animal research, in a proactive fashion. (Cragg et al. 2004, 134; emphasis in original)

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The emphasis on balance, reliability and authoritativeness invokes the conventional rebuttals of anti-vivisection claims—that they are biased, irrational, inaccurate and non-authoritative—but it also suggests the delegates' sense of how much jurisdiction and initiative have been lost to the antivivisection movement.

[1] The events described here took place in the week of August 18 to 22, 2003, when delegates of several of the leading animal advocacy groups in Australasia converged in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand, to confront the meeting of ANZCCART, the Australian and New Zealand body whose main function is to organize an annual conference of scientists engaged in live animal experimentation. Participants in the protest included from radical grassroots activist groups (which coalesced for the occasion under the heading of the "Animal Rights Alliance"), the Wellington-based National Anti-Vivisection Coalition, the Animal Rights Legal Advocacy Network, and SAFE (Save Animals From Exploitation), New Zealand's largest and longest-standing animal rights group. For an insightful history and analysis of grassroots animal activism in Aotearoa New Zealand, including some background on the wider context of animal welfare and rights movements, see Beynon (2003).

[2] For discussion of the Old Brown Dog riots see Lansbury (1985) and Kean (1998); for an account of animal liberation activism in Britain during the late twentieth century, see Baker (2001); for accounts of action against animal experimentation in the United States see Jasper (1987).

[3] A comparable example from Australasia would be the campaign during the late 1990s by SAFE (Save Animals from Exploitation) against the use of exotic animals in circuses, which entailed negotiating the renunciation of this tradition by a prominent local circus, in combination with the release of two chimpanzees, Sonny and Buddy, and their relocation to the Chimfunshi Wildlife Orphanage in Zambia (SAFE 2000). This triumph coincided, not accidentally, with the apogee of SAFE's national profile, and its highest-ever levels of income and memberships. See Tanja Schwalm's chapter in this volume for further discussion of this event.



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