Film Review

Jane in the Wild City

Morgen, B. (Director). *Jane* [Motion Picture]. USA: National Geographic/Public Road Productions, 2017.

Verkerk, M. (Director). *De Wilde Stad* (*Wild Amsterdam*) [Motion Picture]. Netherlands: Dutch FilmWorks, 2018.

Although nonhuman animals have, from the very beginning, been prominent in feature films, the rise of the number of wildlife films over the past two decades is in itself an interesting phenomenon. This increase in numbers and the attention they generate not only applies to the big screen, with producers as diverse as Disney in the USA or Jacques Perrin in France, but also on our TV screens, for example, with the worldwide success of the streams of blue-chip series from the BBC, such as *Planet Earth II* (2016). The rapidly developing technology and, as a consequence, rising quality of the films, might partly explain the rising interest of the general public, as it hasn't always been that large. A significant touchstone for wildlife in the media occurred in the 1960s, when Jane Goodall was introduced to the American public by *National Geographic*; her research on chimpanzee behavior in the Gombe area in Tanzania, Africa, became an instant success and generated worldwide attention.

Jane

In the past decades, numerous films and documentaries about the life and works of Jane Goodall have been made; so, some critics wondered in advance what the new feature film by Brett Morgen, simply titled *Jane* (2017), would add to what we already know and have seen before. But reading the

unanimously positive reviews the film received after its launch, the skepticism was untimely. *Jane* is indeed a wonderful biographical film, maybe the ultimate film so far about Jane Goodall, for various reasons. The most obvious one is that Morgen had access to some so far undiscovered (or at least undisclosed) private archives of Hugo van Lawick, the Dutch wildlife photographer who was sent to Africa by the National Geographic Society to film this remarkable research project. Van Lawick fell in love with and married Jane and filmed her, the rainforest, and the apes, and himself lived and worked with Jane.

The material used for this film is new and much of it gives a highly romantic *Out of Africa* (1985) quality. But the images do much more than that, especially for the viewers who have read her biographical books *In the Shadow of Man* (2009, 1971) and *Through a Window* (2010, 1990), and are already familiar with her life story. First of all, the new images are unique and not second-rate in any way; they are beautifully shot by Van Lawick, who is famous for his mastery in wildlife filming; his extensive oeuvre offers more than enough proof of that. Moreover, for this new film, the material is skillfully edited to tell the story that, also in combination with already well-known facts and pictures, remains as compelling as ever. Therefore, the result offers a fine overview for the viewer who knows her story by heart as well as for others for whom this is their first introduction to Jane, the woman *and* the scientist.

The latter aspect, Jane the scientist who slowly develops into an advocate, is in the end the most important one. And knowing a bit about her in advance, what still surprised me when I first saw this film was the open, fearless, and almost frivolous way in which she first made physical contact with David Greybeard and the other chimpanzees whom she had observed and more or less “knew” by then, intensifying the contact by offering them bananas and other food items. This is intriguing for at least two reasons. First, one wouldn’t expect ethologists today to (inter)act with chimpanzees or any other great apes in the wild in such an (unprotected!) way anymore; in hindsight, that part of Goodall’s behavior looks incredibly innocent, on the verge of dangerous.

Second, her general attitude to and interactions with the chimpanzees, not as objects of research but as subjects, quite similar living creatures and above all not representatives of their species but individuals just like humans—all look so profoundly familiar that it is hardly imaginable today that the general attitude to animals at that time was totally different. And not only by the public at large, of course: at first Goodall was criticized (to put it mildly) by her senior scientific colleagues for her way of looking at and describing her “research objects” by giving them names, not numbers; and by describing their behavior not in objective, scientific terms but by ascribing human motives and emotions, thereby being responsible for blatant anthropomorphism, itself one of the worst offenses against the ethological standards of the time.

Most contemporary viewers will wonder what was wrong with that specific aspect of her behavior: of course, they are almost like us, of course they are all individuals, just like us. This is in itself the most telling evidence of Jane's influence on the way we look at animals; and although she wasn't the only or the first ethologist promoting this new view, she was without a doubt the most prominent and influential one—and the most brave one at that. She was an easy target as a female scientist for being too soft and not objective and detached enough, a reproof many of her (often male) successors like Frans de Waal and many others didn't have to counter anymore.

The most striking quality of *Jane* is the way in which it takes you back in time, identifying with the open-mindedness and boldness of this pioneering scientist; thus, it makes you feel how the protagonist of the story did what she did—and more than that: why it was so extraordinary then, and so influential that many of us today just see it as self-evident.

De Wilde Stad (Wild Amsterdam)

The idea that animals are individual living beings with their own points-of-view is, quite literally, the point of departure of the Dutch “wildlife” film *De Wilde Stad (The Wild City)*, in its title referring to the city of Amsterdam. The protagonist from whose (very loosely adapted) viewpoint we look around the world, and at the variety of wildlife passing by, is Abatutu, a white cypers cat who roams the city streets. The fact that a cat is given a (nonhuman) name is of course not that remarkable; we have no problem seeing our companion animals as highly individual creatures who deserve special names. Many “pet owners” also have an irresistible tendency to ascribe really uniquely human characteristics to animals, in a way not only biologists but most animal-friendly humans wouldn't approve of. Opposite to that are the animals who actually live near or in our houses and neighborhoods against our will, that we generally don't see as individuals at all but detest and give bad names as a group or species.

As far as these considerations go, the film is different in some ways. At first, it seems a traditional wildlife film, of which only the scene is a bit different: not the usual images of pristine wilderness far removed from any human interference or influences, but the ultimate human habitat created by and inhabited by growing amounts of humans. It's also inhabited by vast numbers of an astonishing variety of animals, the so-called commensals, most of them attracted by the warmth, the sources of food (or calories, i.e., energy in general), and suitable housing and breeding spaces and places. These are the animals

on whom the film (well, supposedly the cat) focuses, in a series of images that are really breathtaking.

It's difficult to say what is most impressive: the physical qualities of the moving animals or the technical capabilities of the filmmakers to record them; one cannot help but wonder how they did it. Moreover, the animals aren't excessively anthropomorphized: they are not given names (apart from Abatutu) and the voice-over names only obvious emotions (but also doesn't avoid them). Thus, the film is a perfect illustration of the generally growing interest in urban biology, by showing the city of Amsterdam as a home for a variety of species and individuals, who try to make a living as well as they can, be it alone, in competition, or in close company. It does so in an even more convincing way than the highly appraised film *Kedi* (2016, Turkey) on the cats in Istanbul, in which the visual perspectives of the cats are filled with the interviews with their human caretakers whose voice-overs tend to "interpret" the feline/filmic views.

De Wilde Stad combines multiple perspectives and makes no distinction between animals with (for humans) good and bad names: the film goes from stork to frog, from spider to mouse, from fox to coot, showing and telling about each of them as palpably as the other. For some viewers, the diversity of city inhabitants, and their proximity to our homes and lives, may come as a surprise—and if *De Wilde Stad* has one message, it is the often happy cohabitation that the stone rock environment of the city can offer to all of us if we just take care of each other, which often means inviting humans to empathize a bit more with their smaller neighbors. For that purpose, the film might even be better if it would have had *fewer* animals in it: as the time devoted to each of them is so limited, they don't become the "round characters" that we easily identify with (as we often can so well with the *too* anthropomorphized animals in Disney features).

But then again, the sheer abundance of animals who make their homes in the city has a value in its own—if only because it shows that if we spend some time, take the effort, and don't mind the prejudices against neighbors with derogatory names, *Out of Africa* (1985) is all around. Director Mark Verkerk is responsible for two wildlife feature films: *De Nieuwe Wildernis* (2013) about the Oostvaardersplassen, a small but (in)famous nature reserve in the Netherlands, and *Holland: Natuur in de Delta* (2015)—*De Wilde Stad* suggests a move away from more traditional forms, which reify human distance from nonhumans even as they seek to abolish it.

And we can expand that conclusion to apply to both films: however different they are, both show us how close we are to animals: mentally in the case of *Jane*, physically in *De Wilde Stad*. It is ironic, or maybe cynical, that lots of us living in the city far away from "the wild" need modern audiovisual media to

remind us of that close connection. But be that as it is, these two films, each in its own way, makes a meritorious effort to not only show and tell, but invites the viewer to relive that connection again.

Maarten Reesink

Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

reesink@uva.nl

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