(Species) Order in the Court


*Unlocking the Cage* and *The Dog Lover* are about how the law weighs, or fails to weigh, our allegiances to other animal beings. In the documentary *Unlocking*, an animal advocate challenges the premise that only human beings deserve freedom from unlawful imprisonment. His legal argument vexes and confuses an unsuspecting judiciary, which is far more comfortable conceiving of nonhuman beings as entitled only to freedom from cruel conditions and suffering, not beings with interests that might be impeded. The promise of *Unlocking* is that it plants an irritation in the justice system that can grow into something more. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the fictionalized *The Dog Lover*, a thinly veiled attack on the Humane Society of the United States. When field operative Sara goes undercover at a hunting dog breeding operation, she reverses her alliances, ultimately setting out to protect the breeder by exposing the HSUS as mercenary and corrupt. The cinematic court agrees and acquits the breeder at trial, contradicting the true story on which the film is based, in which a judge dismissed the case against the breeder on a search warrant technicality and the HSUS was exonerated from any wrongdoing (Hult, 2014). Both films share an interest in rewriting history, one by deceptively revising the past and one by courageously charting the future.
Unlocking the Cage

*Unlocking the Cage* mixes profile documentary with real-life courtroom drama to tell a story of persistent animal advocacy. *Unlocking* centers on Steven Wise, who takes his legal team, the Nonhuman Rights Project (NhRP), into the New York State courts to file writs of habeus corpus, which involves unlawful imprisonment, on behalf of four captive chimpanzees. Many might recognize Professor Wise from the *New York Times Magazine* cover story of Spring 2014, which asked, “Should a Chimp Be Able to Sue Its Owner?” The combination of profile and procedural is an effective one, as it creates a point of empathy while also detailing the legal struggle, neither of which would be as compelling on their own. *Unlocking* suggests that the road to animal liberation will require grit and conscientiousness; those who embrace the justice system as a source of change, as well as those who reject it, are likely to find supporting material here.

The central question of the film is “Who is a legal person?” and the unlocked cage of the title is both literal and metaphorical, in that it seems like an entirely new question for many who hear it, including judges, in the film. What first need unlocking are really “cages of the mind” as Stanley Moon calls them on a tour of the primates at the London zoo in *Bedazzled* (1967). One person who encounters the question in *Unlocking the Cage* immediately wonders if the move is to extend personhood to all nonhumans, but Professor Wise quickly limits the answer to primates, cetaceans, elephants, and other creatures who have human-like capacities that have been thoroughly documented. As the official site of the film states: “Supported by affidavits from primatologists around the world, Steve maintains that, based on scientific evidence, cognitively complex animals such as chimpanzees, whales, dolphins, and elephants have the capacity for limited personhood rights (such as bodily liberty) that would protect them from physical abuse” (*Unlocking the Cage*). Recent work by Frans de Waal and others is likely to add more species to the list of those deserving consideration as humans recognize and move beyond anthropodenial (Waal, 2016).

A pivotal scene depicts a setback for Wise, followed by a debriefing. What derailed the hearing, his team decides, is that judges framed the case in terms of animal welfare and Professor Wise failed to re-direct the discourse toward conceiving of the chimpanzees as persons. It is an error that subsequent mock trials seek to correct, and *Unlocking the Cage* ultimately builds to a more successful outcome. A telling image in the film frames Wise behind bars as he moves down a staircase in his home, suggesting that even he struggles to escape his cages, whether the justice system, his framing of the case, or something entirely different. Such images suggest a multiplicity of meanings, not the least