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Noticing More: Ways of Representing Other-Than-Human Animals in Audiovisuals on War in Ukraine

Замечая больше: способы представления
живых существ, не принадлежащих
к человеческому роду, в аудиовизуальных
материалах о войне в Украине

Абстракт

В статье анализируется, как живые существа, не принадлежащие к человеческому роду, изображаются в аудиовизуальных материалах, связанных с войной в Украине. Опираясь на исследования в области кинематографии и *animal studies*, автор описывает историческую связь между кинематографом и войной, прослеживая роль животных в вооруженных конфликтах. Посредством анализа фильмов рассматривается, как кинематографисты используют животных для передачи сообщений о войне, а также изменения в их кинематографическом изображении. Животные выступают как фоном, так и главными героями, влияя на восприятие войны зрителями. Кроме того, исследуется воздействие войны на представление животных в фильмах, поднимаются темы, такие как вынужденная миграция животных, оккупация и их нацио-

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Abstract

This article, drawing from film studies and animal studies literature, explores how other-than-human animals are depicted in audiovisual materials related to the war in Ukraine. It investigates the historical link between cinema and warfare, tracing animals' roles in armed conflicts. Through film analyses, it examines how animals are used by filmmakers to convey messages about the war. The article highlights shifts in animal cinematic portrayal. Animals are both background elements and protagonists, shaping viewers' perceptions of the war. Additionally, it explores how the war influences the portrayal of animals in film, touching on themes like animal refugees, occupation, and nationality. The article discusses animals' role in portraying war narratives and examines empowering them within Ukrainian war-related audiovisual content.

нальная принадлежность. В статье подчеркивается роль животных в формировании военных нарративов и обсуждается возможность их субъективации в аудиовизуальных произведениях, посвященных войне в Украине.

Ключевые слова: фильм *animal studies*, анализ фильмов, животные на войне, война в Украине, субъективация животных

Keywords: film animal studies, film analysis, animals at war, war in Ukraine, animal subjectivity

The goal of this article is to analyze the depictions of other-than-human animals in audiovisuals on war in Ukraine. In films about this war, animals seem to appear much more frequently than in other armed conflicts, and they play different roles than before, actively influencing the media image of the war and thus its reception. These films, mostly nonfiction, including documentaries, educational, and propaganda pieces, are being regularly released during the conflict. In this article, I consider whether representations of animals in films of the war in Ukraine are merely formal narrative elements and tools in depicting war, or if animals in these films are treated subjectively.

To answer these questions, drawing upon literature in film studies, I first investigate the historical relationship between cinema and warfare. Insights from animal studies literature are utilized to trace the role of animals in armed conflicts throughout history. Through the analysis of film examples, I aim to explore how filmmakers employ animals to convey messages about the war in Ukraine. I discuss the prevalent species of animals depicted in these films and their symbolic significance. The article attempts to identify shifts in the portrayal of animals in war films. It demonstrates that animals – consciously included – are used to represent specific political and social ideas. Lastly, delving into topics such as animal refugees, occupation, and nationality, I contemplate the emancipatory potential of representing animals in films about the war in Ukraine for animals in reality.

The starting point for my considerations is the statement by Steve Baker: “Any understanding of the animal, and of what the animal means to us, will be informed by and inseparable from our knowledge of its cultural representation. Culture shapes our reading of animals just as much as animals shape our reading of culture.”¹ Baker characterizes “the support of animal rights as a political rather than a moral undertaking,”² emphasizing the importance of the role of representations in that politics.³ The scientist uses the term “space of representation,” which he under-

¹ Steve Baker, *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 4.

² Baker, *Picturing the Beast*, 188.

³ Baker, *Picturing the Beast*, 188.

stands in the following way: “visual ‘space of representation’ described by Foucault is not just the space of an outdated Classical learning but is also, vitally, the space of contemporary popular understanding of the animal.”⁴ I aim to examine, within this broadly defined space of representation, the images of other-than-human animals from audiovisual materials on the war in Ukraine.

Before I begin, I want to acknowledge my privileged position as a researcher from Central Europe, a region not directly involved in an armed conflict. Throughout the analysis of the films, I will often draw critical conclusions, irrespective of their origin. This critique is rooted in the perspective of critical animal studies, which necessitates such researchers as myself to engage in continuous, activist examination of reality. It compels us to subject the discourses and practices entangling animals to ongoing analysis.

Cinema, War and Other-Than-Human Animals

To commence, let us delve into the historical intersection between cinema and war, exploring its multifaceted dimensions. Cinema possesses a formidable capacity to shape societal attitudes towards war across various strata. Concurrently, the phenomenon of warfare has catalyzed significant transformations within the cinematic medium. Technological advancements in warfare have rendered it increasingly reliant on film as a conduit for surveillance, documentation, and propaganda dissemination on the front lines. Moreover, filmic techniques have spurred the conceptualization of virtual war, wherein individuals engage with conflict primarily through its visual representations, rather than direct experiential encounters with the events themselves.⁵

Paul Virilio noted how images began to overshadow facts in technologically advanced warfare: “For in industrialized warfare, where the representations of events outstripped the presentation of facts, the image was starting to gain sway over the object, time over space.”⁶ This is especially relevant in today’s media landscape, where film technology has reached new heights. We can continuously follow wars on television and the internet, often flooded with images, some

⁴ Baker, *Picturing the Beast*, 21.

⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992); James Chapman, *War and Film* (Reaktion Books Ltd, 2008); Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London and New York: Verso, 1989).

⁶ Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 4.

generated by artificial intelligence, exacerbating the challenge of information verification. Referring to Jean Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Jarryd Bartle highlights this issue, particularly concerning the war in Ukraine: "[H]is [Baudrillard – author's note] words resonate as we see the spectacle of the Ukrainian invasion flood our newsfeeds with Western consumers of war porn piecing together their own purely virtual perspective on events."⁷ The medium of film, while used to construct commentary about war, is much more often used today as a tool of propaganda, a tool for shaping social and political meanings about war. At the same time, it remains a medium of memory about the war and a tool that is used to study historical memory – concerning humans, but also other-than-human animals.

The history of warfare intricately intertwines with the history of other-than-human animals.⁸ As French historian Éric Baratay writes, they were and are massively involved in armed conflicts, and to the greatest extent during World War I.⁹ Later, some of the functions for which animals were used were replaced by motorization. Horses were the most involved in the war, followed by other equines, such as donkeys and mules. These animals were employed for various logistical purposes, including transportation of supplies, weaponry, and wounded soldiers, both at the frontlines and in rear support areas. Dogs played various roles in wartime, serving as transport animals, sanitary dogs, search and rescue dogs, guard dogs, patrol dogs, and communication aids. Additionally, other animals found themselves on the frontlines, including homing pigeons used for communication, as well as cattle and pigs utilized for obtaining milk and meat. Moreover, companion animals such as dogs and cats, as well as so-called farm animals, were often lost or abandoned by their caregivers. The wartime environment also facilitated the proliferation of rodents and insects, such as rats, mice, fleas, and flies. Regrettably, certain species, including rabbits and birds, frequently became inadvertent victims of wartime circumstances, falling prey to killings by soldiers, either for accident, food or fun. As Baratay notes, the history of animals during war is little known.¹⁰ If there was any interest in it, it was mainly in material and cultural aspects, without paying

⁷ Jarryd Bartle, "The War in Ukraine: Is It Really Taking Place?" *UnHerd*, March 1, 2022, accessed February 22, 2024, <https://unherd.com/thepost/the-war-in-ukraine-is-it-really-taking-place/>.

⁸ Jilly Cooper, *Animals in War* (London: Corgi Books, 1983); Andrew Smith, *Silent Heroes: The Animals of World War I and World War II* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019); Ryan Hediger (ed.), *Animals and war: Studies of Europe and North America* (Brill, 2012).

⁹ Éric Baratay, *Zwierzęcy punkt widzenia. Inna wersja historii*, trans. Paulina Tarasewicz (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo w Podwórku, 2014); Éric Baratay, *Zwierzęta w okopach. Zapomniane historie*, trans. Barbara Brzezicka (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo w Podwórku, 2017); Éric Baratay, *Animal Biographies: Toward a History of Individuals*, trans. Peter Brown (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).

¹⁰ Baratay, *Zwierzęcy punkt widzenia*; Baratay, *Zwierzęta w okopach. Zapomniane historie*.

attention to the autonomy and needs of animals. Their feelings and suffering were ignored during the war and in the archives. Few documents address these topics.

When discussing the representations of animals in war films, it is impossible to ignore the issue of portraying suffering in cinema and visual culture. After all, suffering is an indispensable element of warfare. Much literature delves into the challenge of expressing suffering and the prohibited depiction of it, particularly in the context of the Holocaust.¹¹ This dilemma of representation also extends to other-than-human animals. Elisa Aaltola identifies four risks associated with images depicting animal suffering, including “the risk of aesthetics, the risk of perpetuating moral wrongs, the problem of privacy, and compassion fatigue.”¹² The researcher discusses these risks within the framework of animal advocacy. Moreover, the cinematic depiction of animals in war films may not necessarily aim to liberate them, but rather to shape perceptions of specific conflicts. Regardless of the purpose, these images, belonging to the space of representation, to some extent shape our understanding of human nature and the animal, and thus have consequences for animals in reality. These issues are significant because the audiovisual representation of war in Ukraine reveals shifts in the manner, rationale, and timing of animal portrayal.

Historically, animals in war films have primarily served as background elements, with filmmakers generally neglecting to delve into their narratives. Exceptions include films that chronicle the remarkable stories of individual animals that served in the military, such as *Wojtek the bear* (Figure 1). Often, these animal narratives emerge in documentaries and feature films years after the conflicts. Examples include Steven Spielberg’s *War Horse* (2011, Figure 2), depicting a horse’s experiences on the front lines of World War I, and Bartosz Konopka’s *Rabbit à la Berlin* (org. *Królik po berlińsku*, 2009, Figure 3), where the fate of rabbits symbolizes human existence during the Cold War.¹³

¹¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Zakazana reprezentacja,” *Teksty Drugie*, no. 5 (2004): 113–134.

¹² Elisa Aaltola, “Animal Suffering: Representations and the Act of Looking,” *Anthrozoös*, no. 27(1) (2014): 19–31, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175303714X13837396326297>.

¹³ An interesting, animal history-oriented reading of the film is proposed by Agata Janikowska in the article “Patrząc nie-ludzkimi oczami: przypadek *Królika po berlińsku*,” *Kwartalnik Filmowy*, no. 110 (2020): 156–171.



Figure 1.
Polish soldier with Wojtek
in Iran in 1942.



Figure 2.
Steven Spielberg's
War Horse.



Figure 3.
Bartosz Konopka's
Rabbit à la Berlin.

Other-Than-Human Animals in Audiovisuals on War in Ukraine

Moving on to the changes observed in the depiction of animals in audiovisuals related to the war in Ukraine, there are several main elements. Firstly, films are continuously produced throughout ongoing conflicts, primarily encompassing various formats such as non-fiction films, documentaries, reports, propaganda, educational materials, and amateur footage. Social media have increasingly become the principal platform for distributing these films.

Secondly, these materials depict a wide array of species, illustrating animals in various roles beyond mere combatants. While animals occasionally serve as soldiers, such as the dog named Patron, they are more frequently portrayed as victims of war, inadvertently caught in the conflict (e.g., hungry dogs and cats on city streets, a squirrel, companion animals struggling to cross borders). These representations often highlight animals as symbols of the natural world that humans seek to engage with (e.g., the squirrel). In other cases, their roles are allegorical or symbolic (e.g., rats, guinea pigs).

It must also be noted that animal representations serve dual purposes: they are utilized to convey political messages while also documenting the plight and individual stories of animals, aiming to raise awareness about their situation.

Finally, these films capture spontaneous interactions between humans and other animals, highlighting our affiliation with the interspecies community and more-

than-human world. I would like to share some examples of such audiovisuals and briefly discuss them.

Animals often appear in war coverage, although they usually play a supporting role or simply constitute the background of the story. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of narratives related to animals. What is definitely noticeable in audiovisuals regarding the war in Ukraine is the increase in footage of companion and exotic animals. These are often stories about animals saved from fire, from a shelter or zoo, or stories about animals that did not survive the war. An example of such material is the film *Ukrainian woman saves hundreds of animals during Russian invasion*.¹⁴ The film tells the title story of a woman rescuing dogs. The fate of animals is undoubtedly the primary focus of this film (Figure 4). We hear expressions of concern for animals and a call for responsibility toward them. This is because not everyone shares a similar attitude as the heroine of this film. Many animals have been abandoned to their fate. Additionally, the shelling of shelters, along with the occupation of areas by the Russians, has made it difficult for caretakers and volunteers to access the animals. Several people have died trying to deliver food to the animals or transport them to safer places. One such example is the story of 26-year-old Anastasia Yalanskaya from Kiev and two other volunteers, whose car was fired upon by the Russians. Earlier, they had likely managed to deliver food to dogs from the shelter in Bucha.¹⁵ Such stories later became an example of civic heroism in the fight for the more-than-human society of Ukraine.



Figure 4. A woman recounts the story of her companion dog, Jina, who was killed by a Russian soldier.

¹⁴ YouTube, Washington Post, *Ukrainian woman saves hundreds of animals during Russian invasion*, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgYxDQBTNDA>.

¹⁵ Marta Gostkiewicz, "Wolontariuszka zginęła z rąk Rosjan. 'Pomagała wszystkim,'" *WP Wiadomości*, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/wolontariuszka-zginela-dostarczajac-jedzenie-dla-zwierzat-6744350934895200a>.

Simultaneously, the political overtones of these films are impossible to ignore. In the reportage *Ukrainian woman saves hundreds of animals during Russian invasion*, it is repeatedly emphasized that the Russians attack defenseless animals and inflict harm upon them. Interestingly, among these films, there is no shortage of stories depicting farmers and their animals being killed by the Russians, with their farms burned down. In these materials, the fate of so-called farm animals is not questioned, but rather treated as the lost property of farmers. They are mentioned or their remains are shown alongside other lost belongings (Figure 5).¹⁶ These, along with many other films dedicated to the topic of animals, also seek to influence perceptions of war and attitudes towards the parties involved, based on their treatment of animals.



Figure 5. The remains of farm animals.

Animal Individual Characters and Heroes

There are also stories focused on individual animals, like Patron, the Ukrainian detection dog. Patron's name carries symbolic significance as it means "cartridge"

¹⁶ YouTube, CNN, *Go inside the place this farmer says even the Ukrainian military fears*, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ks5HRxA-t88>.

in Ukrainian. He is celebrated as a national hero and was honored with the Order for Courage. Numerous films have been dedicated to telling Patron's story. What particularly intrigues me, though, is how Patron is utilized as a tool to engage with the youngest citizens of Ukraine (Figure 6). His image is widely used in educational campaigns to teach children about safety, particularly regarding unexploded ordnance, fostering awareness in a way that is both accessible and non-threatening. Even more captivating is the development of an animated series on YouTube featuring Patron, further enhancing his role as both a symbol of national resilience and a means of connecting with and educating the younger generation during a time of conflict.

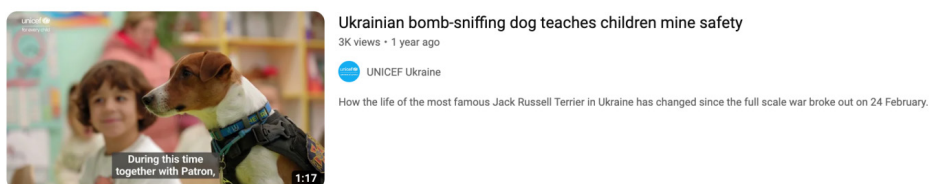


Figure 6. An example of a video that can be seen on YouTube.

In the teaser of the series *Patron the Dog*, a girl asks Wizard for Christmas to create an animation about Patron the dog (Figure 7).¹⁷ In subsequent episodes, the Patron experiences various adventures and participates in missions, and the aim of the series is to educate especially children about how they should behave in certain situations related to war reality. Importantly, Patron and other animals are anthropomorphized in the series, which is intended to facilitate perception.

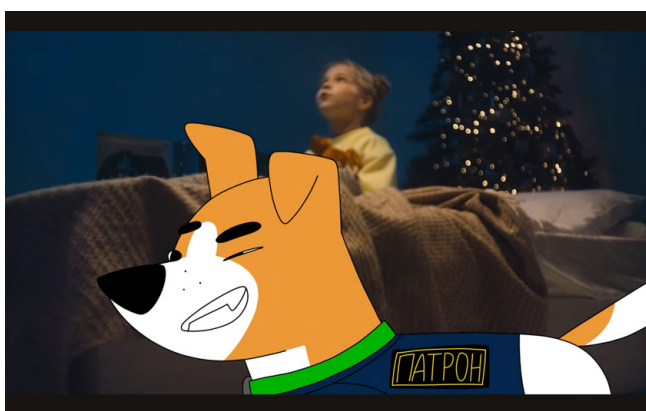


Figure 7. Frame from the series *Patron the Dog*.

¹⁷ YouTube, Patron The Dog, *Animation teaser*, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Jzs9TKo5bU>.

Such portrayals of animals and nature also aim to maintain morale and encourage action. Stories featuring characters such as Patron show that even the smallest, other-than-human citizens of Ukraine and wildlife have agency in the war against the Russians. Everyone can do something to contribute to the common good. Even the smallest action beyond the front lines supports strengthening a more-than-human civil society, which forms the basis of the identity of today's and tomorrow's Ukraine.

Similar techniques, such as giving animals names and focusing the camera on specific individuals even within a group, can be observed in other films. This approach is intended to bring animal stories closer to humans, making them more relatable and appealing to audiences. This is evident in audiovisual materials such as the one from CNBC Television titled *In Their Own Words: Family Carries Older Dog on Escape from Ukraine*.¹⁸ The report features a family fleeing from Ukraine to Poland with their elderly dog, who is a cherished member of their family. It is composed of short, moving film footage, photos and statements from the family (Figure 8). This film clearly emphasizes the call for responsibility towards companion animals. Equally important is that in this and similar stories, the issues of nationality, occupation, and the plight of refugee animals are brought to the forefront. Attention is directed toward the animals' citizenship or nationality and the challenges arising from inadequate legal provisions, which often leave animals and their families in difficult situations and can complicate border crossings. Many countries now have requirements for animals crossing borders, such as proper documentation, microchips, and vaccinations. At its core, the story depicted in the film *In Their Own Words: Family Carries Older Dog on Escape from Ukraine* is about a family composed of both humans and other-than-human animals.



Figure 8. Frame from the film *In Their Own Words: Family Carries Older Dog on Escape from Ukraine*.

¹⁸ YouTube, CNBC Television, *In Their Own Words: Family carries older dog on escape from Ukraine*, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqjCP2jABOM>.

More-Than-Human Worlds

The interplay between human and more-than-human destinies, and our shared reliance and co-shaping of reality, is poignantly illustrated in documentary films capturing unexpected encounters between people and animals. One notable example is the documentary mini-series *Swedes. Kharkiv. Scouts from 130th Kyiv Territorial Defence Battalion* [Szwedy. Odcinek 3. Pluton 130. Kijowskiego Batalionu Obrony Terytorialnej].¹⁹ In Episode 3, soldiers stationed in trenches observe a squirrel perched in a nearby tree (Figure 9). Their enthusiastic reaction underscores their inherent need for social interaction. As viewers, the presence of the animal in the distant background may initially escape our notice. However, the scene's cinematography, shot with a moving camera from the point of view of a soldier, allows us to witness the spontaneous reactions of the Ukrainians. For instance, we observe one soldier waving to the animal, while the point of hearing, the dialogue and genuine joy expressed by the characters create an affective response within us.



Figure 9. Frame from the film *Swedes. Kharkiv. Scouts from 130th Kyiv Territorial Defence Battalion*.

¹⁹ YouTube, OKOpress, Szwedy. Odcinek 3. Pluton 130. Kijowskiego Batalionu Obrony Terytorialnej. Miniserial dokumentalny, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BWp7zkgazU>. I follow Dariusz Gzyra's interpretation of this scene from his lecture series *The Non-Human Dimension of the War in Ukraine*. See: YouTube, wydawnictwoCZARNE, Pozaludzki wymiar wojny w Ukrainie – wykład Dariusza Gzyry, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nXVCL1RS6Y>; Dariusz Gzyra, podcast "Ważne nieważne," episode "Zwierzęta i wojna w Ukrainie," *Krytyka Polityczna*, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/multimedia/podcast/zwierzeta-i-wojna-w-ukrainie-gzyra/>.

This evokes a sympathetic bond with the soldiers, the other-than-human subject and the broader world it inhabits. Additionally, the soldiers' playful inquiry directed at the squirrel, questioning whether she is tired of Russians, serves to anthropomorphize the squirrel and imbue her with a sense of Ukrainian nationality. This highlights the notion that other-than-human animals are also drawn into the fabric of war, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, aligning themselves with one side or the other. Such instances underscore the complex dynamics of human-animal relationships within the context of an armed conflict, further emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings impacted by warfare. Furthermore, they perpetuate the already mentioned notion of animal nationality in the space of representation.

Lastly, documentary films featuring animals without human protagonists also contribute to our understanding of the impact of war on other-than-human beings. Often presented as amateur videos devoid of verbal commentary, these documentaries provide raw footage, such as the one depicting displaced dogs and cats queuing for food in Ukraine (Figure 10).²⁰ There is a plethora of such material, which delves not only into animals but also into the broader more-than-human world.



Figure 10. Footage sent to Storyful shows cats and dogs eating out of various feeding tubes around the city of Kramatorsk.

Sometimes, we witness spontaneous reactions of people to the surrounding reality and the damage inflicted by the Russians on the environment. Such films are created by journalists, soldiers, activists, and civilians alike. An example is the story of Sasha, the protagonist of the film by Sashko Brama for OKopress.²¹ This Ukrainian

²⁰ Storyful, Nate Mook, *Kramatorsk Volunteer Center*, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://malaysia.news.yahoo.com/video/dogs-line-food-provided-charity-171117007.html>.

²¹ YouTube, OKopress, Sashko Brama, *Sasha pozbiarał kości swojego zabitego kota, pali im codziennie świeczkę. Charków pod ostrzałem*, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAmJAL0R6f8>. Example also analyzed by Dariusz Gzyra in his lecture series *The Non-Human Dimension of the War in Ukraine*.

patriot, of Russian origin, collected the bones of his cat from his burned apartment and lights candles over them. In the video, we witness a clip recorded by Sasha as he enters the apartment. He is seen crying, shouting the name of his 13-year-old cat: “Bima! Bim! Bima, my boy! I brought you a snack, my baby. Your kingdom is heavenly, Bim! Bima, my baby!” (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Frame from the film by Saszko Brama.

The author of the video from the private zoo after the flooding in Novaya Kakhovka reacted similarly. In the footage, we witness water flooding the zoo as a woman cries, mentioning that many animals died in the flood. The video has circulated in many places on the Internet, but what is interesting is that in one version, at the beginning, you can see the finger of the person starting the original recording.²² Thus, this is a raw, firsthand recording of the video. This form of sharing audiovisual representations of the war in Ukraine on social media is popular. The poor quality of the video indicates that this representation, along with crude documentaries in general, is not solely aimed at portraying animals and their situation in the reality of war. Instead, being the result of the vivid reactions of Ukrainians, they serve as testimony and confirmation of the consequences of the total war waged by the Russians, which devastates entire ecosystems (Figure 12).²³ The hashtag #Stop-EcocideUkraine and the slogan “Ecocide has no border” have been circulated in the media, drawing attention to the environmental consequences of the destruction carried out by the Russians.

²² X, Bartłomiej Wypartowicz, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://twitter.com/WypartowiczBa/status/1665948074764582914>.

²³ Frame from the film shared among others by Volodymyr Zelenskyy: X, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://twitter.com/ZelenskyyUa/status/1665952784665964545>.



Figure 12. A bird's-eye view of the explosion at the Kakhovka dam.

Propaganda Purposes

Other-than-human animals also appear in audiovisual materials produced by Russia, but they are portrayed as subordinate only to the Russian propaganda apparatus. An example of this is the RT television station, which created an anti-European propaganda Christmas advertisement.²⁴

The visual narrative unfolds with a portrayal of a European nuclear family, comprising three members, experiencing the holiday seasons of 2021, 2022, and 2023. In 2021, the daughter receives a guinea pig, and the scene, set against the backdrop of an illuminated Christmas tree, is accompanied by *Silent Night*. Subsequently, in 2022, a technical issue with the lighting system disrupts the festive ambiance, resulting in the limited illumination of the living room by a few candles. Here, the father engineers a contraption, harnessing the kinetic energy of the rodent on a wheel to illuminate the Christmas tree. By the year 2023, *Silent Night* is absent, replaced by the somber sound of wind. The scene is marked by the stark absence of foliage on the tree, perforated windows and doors, and the family's attire of winter coats at the dining table. A pivotal moment occurs when the father retrieves

²⁴ YouTube, RT, Merry anti-Russian Christmas, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8D6WwUoXfc0>. Film also analyzed previously by Dariusz Gzyra in his lecture series *The Non-Human Dimension of the War in Ukraine*.

a bow from the soup, a remnant of the guinea pig's presence, prompting a discreet gesture of silence from the wife, symbolizing the need for discretion in front of their daughter (Figure 13). Subsequently, the father exits, his mouth covered. As *Silent Night* reverberates once more, the screen is overlaid with the caption "MERRY 'ANTI-RUSSIAN' CHRISTMAS! IF YOUR MEDIA DOESN'T TELL YOU WHERE THIS IS ALL GOING, RT IS AVAILABLE VIA VPN." Thus, at the same time, the video suggests the consequences of further boycotting the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which would entail the cutting off of resources such as gas and oil. Additionally, it draws attention to guinea pig consumption as an epitome of the potential moral degradation to which Europeans may descend. This narrative strategy reinforces the guinea pig's status as an integral family member. However, within the broader context of industrial animal farming for meat production, which is not problematized in any way, the portrayal of the guinea pig as a mere object underscores the propagandistic agenda permeating the film.



Figure 13. Frame from the film *Merry anti-Russian Christmas*.

There are also audiovisuals that, in addition to using the treatment of animals to shape political messages, are based on allegory, stereotyping, and anthropomorphism of animals. This is the case with Russian propaganda advertising as part of the #StopRussianHate campaign.²⁵ In the video, we witness a dog party where representatives of various nationalities are present with their dogs. The homeowner opens the door to another guest and asks, "And who is this?" Upon hearing the response "It's Sandy, Siberian husky," we see shocked and disgusted expressions on

²⁵ YouTube, The Telegraph, *Russia releases bizarre dog propaganda video as it calls for end to 'hate' campaign*, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4McjYfW8vNA>. Example also analyzed previously in similar way by Dariusz Gzyra in his lecture series *The Non-Human Dimension of the War in Ukraine*.

the faces of the other guests and the homeowner, who then explains that there is no place for newcomers at the party and slams the door shut in front of them. The dogs present at the party witness the scene and, despite their owners' reluctance, rush out to the Siberian husky, who becomes a victim of hate. The video makes it clear that Russians are unfairly stigmatized worldwide because of their nationality. It also conveys the message that these prejudices are solely due to biases that can be easily overcome, as demonstrated by other dogs and the caption "Boundaries are in human heads" shown in the film (Figure 14). The video also relies on the objectification of animals – while seemingly attributing greater tolerance and freedom from prejudices to dogs, it utilizes this as a promotional and propagandistic motif. The idea itself seems misguided, as noted by The Telegraph, which, in sharing the advertisement, labels it as "bizarre," but at the same time has made a contribution to instilling the concept of "nationality" to other-than-human animals.



Figure 14. Frame from the film by The Telegraph.

It is worth noting that Ukraine also utilizes animal symbolism, albeit less frequently and in a less sentimental and more conscious manner, playing on animal stereotypes. An example of this can be seen in a video posted by Ukrainian politician Oleksiy Danilov on his Twitter (now X) account.²⁶ The video strategically utilizes visual and audio contrasts to provoke fear in Russia regarding potential consequences in 2023 (Figures 15 and 16). It juxtaposes scenes of a large, brightly illuminated city adorned with Christmas decorations against dark imagery of rats

²⁶ X, Oleksiy Danilov, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://twitter.com/OleksiyDanilov/status/1609136201662857216>. I follow Dariusz Gzyra's interpretation of this video from his lecture series *The Non-Human Dimension of the War in Ukraine*.

crawling out, symbolizing pride and folly. Moreover, the audio contrast further amplifies the message's impact, initially featuring festive music before transitioning to the sound of an air raid alarm, heightening a sense of urgency and danger. In this video, rats are symbolically depicted as harbingers of defeat, misfortune, disease, and other negative outcomes, which reinforces negative stereotypes about this species.²⁷ In this context, other-than-human animals are employed solely for propaganda purposes.



Figure 15. Frame from a video posted by Oleksiy Danilov.



Figure 16. Frame from a video posted by Oleksiy Danilov.

²⁷ On rats in the cultural aspect see: Gabriela Jarzębowska, *Czystka gatunkowa. Tępienie szczurów jako praktyka kulturowa w Polsce powojennej* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2021).

Conclusions

In audiovisual depictions of the war in Ukraine, animals serve as both a narrative tool for constructing specific portrayals of the conflict, and their presence is empowering. Within Russian propaganda films, however, animals are notably marginalized, depicted in a more infantilized manner devoid of distinctiveness and agency. The subject of animal suffering and mortality remains largely unaddressed, with representations limited to sentimental storytelling and allegorical imagery that diverges from reality. In general, the theme of so-called farm-animals is omitted.

In Ukrainian cinematic portrayals, the context of total war has illuminated the intricate interdependencies between human and other-than-human realms. Acknowledgment of animal suffering and the challenges associated with abandoned animals is evident, while the narratives presented in films strive for multifaceted perspectives rather than one-sided representations. Animals are depicted as integral members of an extended, more-than-human society, reinforcing the interconnectedness between various life forms within the fabric of conflict-ridden society. Simultaneously, the construction of such narratives contributes to the broader image cultivated by Ukrainians of their society amidst war. A poignant example is encapsulated in the statement “Rescue animals to remain human” from one of the aforementioned films (Figure 17), which underscores a societal ethos rooted in solidarity, mutual support, and the defense of civilian values.²⁸ The incorporation of animal issues within this overarching narrative serves both internal mobilization purposes and external projection of a positive image to international audiences. This underscores the ongoing human-animal entanglements within the context of warfare, as highlighted by Baratay’s concept of the “human history of animals.”²⁹ These are often stories not about rescued animals, but about people saving animals, not about refugee animals, but about people taking companion animals abroad, not about dead animals, but about caregivers whose companion animals have died. However, the fact that there are so many of these stories and that, in addition to them, there are also films focusing on animals, even those recorded spontaneously or incidentally, prove the need to draw attention to the fact that war affects not only humans, but also other-than-human animals and entire environment. In these audiovisual representations lies a potent reminder of the multidimensional effects of conflict and the interconnectedness of all beings within its scope.

²⁸ YouTube, Washington Post, *Ukrainian woman saves hundreds of animals during Russian invasion*, accessed February 17, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgYxDQBTNDA>.

²⁹ Baratay, *Zwierzęcy punkt widzenia*.

The inclusion of concepts such as animal refugees, nationality, and occupation in films depicting the war in Ukraine underscores a notable shift in our perceptions of animals and their role within broader socio-political narratives. It indicates a growing recognition of history, including warfare, as a narrative encompassing all beings, not solely humans. This evolving perspective in the space of representation encourages a deeper understanding of our interconnectedness with more-than-human entities and the shared responsibility we bear for shaping the world we inhabit.



Figure 17. Frame from the film published by Washington Post.

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