15 JUNE 2021 RADBOUD UNIVERSITY

TELEVISING NATURECULTURES

HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONS IN NIGHT ON EARTH: SLEEPLESS CITIES

Bachelor of Arts, Radboud University

ALEXIA COVILLE
S1011764
ARTS AND CULTURE STUDIES

SUPERVISION:
DR. LASZLO MUNTEAN

Table of Contents

Introduction: When the Cat's Away, the Mice Will Play ?

As the first months of the pandemic went by in 2020 and many humans were confined to their homes by the Covid-19 regulations in place, increasing news reports appeared that described how "wild animals take back (the) world's empty city streets" (Agence France Presse). It appeared as a sensation that only "in a matter of weeks (not months or years), [...] non-human animals have reclaimed the habitats that were originally taken from them" (Lewis 3). It seemed that through the pandemic a rift opened that problematised our perception of urban spaces as the opposite of nature and thus demonstrated how "fragile such barricades are to begin with" (Lewis 2). At once, it seemed, the city itself was not a strictly human realm anymore but became an inclusive space that welcomed non-human animals in unexpected ways. While news and popular media framed this as a sensational revelation, theorists such as Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti have long established that in times of the Anthropocene a clear cut dichotomy between nature and culture becomes increasingly problematic. However, these insights, specifically Haraway's concept of cyborg subjects in natureculture assemblages, seem to have difficulty of being widely adopted outside the realm of science-fiction.

In times of the pandemic, many urban humans' only access to 'nature' is limited to urban parks and nature documentaries that often either tell the stories of pristine nature and far away wild creatures (so-called 'blue chip' wildlife films)[1],or advocate for environmental

[1] According to Bousé, "blue chip" wildlife film "definitions vary, but among its chief tendencies are: (1) the depiction of mega-fauna—big cats, bears, sharks, crocodiles, elephants, whales, and the like; (2) visual splendor—magnificent scenery as a background to the animals, suggesting a still-unspoiled [...] wilderness; (3) dramatic storyline—a compelling narrative, perhaps centering on a single animal [..] to capture and hold viewer attention [...]; (4) absence of science—while perhaps the weakest and most often broken of these ''rules,'' the discourse of science can entail its own narrative of research, with all its attendant technical jargon and seemingly arcane methodologies, which can shift the focus onto scientists and spoil the ''period-piece fantasy'' of pristine nature; (5) absence of politics—little or no reference to controversial issues, which are often seen as ''doom and gloom'' themes [...], although a brief statement may be included at the film's conclusion; (6)

action by emphasising human global impact on 'wild' animals, as seen for instance in *Seaspiracy (2021)*, *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet* (2020) and *Sea of Life* (2016). In this way, wildlife documentaries are sometimes taken as a substitute for 'real' nature as they seemingly grant us access to the 'natural world' of the animal kingdom. The Netflix series *Night on Earth* that has been airing on the platform since January 2020, can in many ways be classified as a blue-chip documentary as it follows global narratives 'in nature' about animal lives after dark. At first glance, the series seems to be just another highly-grossing "stunning nature documentary from the producer of *Planet Earth II"* that capitalises on highly aestheticised portrayals of sublime nature and lures viewers with the celebrity voice-over of "Emmy-winning actor Samira Wiley" (*Netflix Official*). However, in the penultimate episode of the series, *Sleepless Cities*, the series deviates from the blue-chip formula and we get a glimpse of what human-animal encounters in pre-pandemic city spaces look like. In contrast to the remainder of the series, *Sleepless Cities* centers on urban animal lives across the globe and thus engages with the (identity) politics that surround boundaries between nature and culture. Due to the episode's subject matter in the context of the series, the animals in *Sleepless Cities* appear to be liminal figures or boundary-crossers by default of being situated in urban environments. With the series being produced and released before the coronavirus pandemic hit the Western world and in this way, before "animals [took] to the streets amid lockdown" ("The Urban Wild") , an analysis of the episode can indicate how binary thinking in terms of nature and culture could prevail despite contradicting academic research.

---

absence of historical reference points— [...] suggesting that not only must nature itself appear timeless, but there should also be no clear references that would date the film or ground it in a specific time, and thus prevent future rerun sales;7) absence of people—the presence of humans may also spoil the image of a timeless realm, untouched and uncorrupted by civilization, where predator and prey still interact just as they have for aeons." (Bousé 14-15)

My thesis will thus investigate how *Sleepless Cites*' portrayal of animals in urban environments can reinforce or challenge the nature-culture dichotomy. To do this, I will devote my first chapter to contextualise the series within its genre and Western hegemonic representations of nature. In the second chapter, I will use these insights to create a cartography of *Sleepless Cities* that maps the portrayal of different types of human-animal relations situated in urban spaces. Finally, this thesis will explore the relationship between the different human-animal assemblages and the City, and thus show how urban spaces can be seen not as one end of the nature-culture continuum, but instead function as a vital space to (re)negotiate human-animal relations.

Method and Theory

To map the way in which human-animal relationships are portrayed in *Sleepless Cities*, this thesis will employ a variety of methodologies and theories that will merge film studies, animal studies and posthumanist thought. In order to dissect the portrayal of animals in the episode of *Night on Earth*, it is important to recognize that the series is entangled with multiple traditions of representation in wildlife documentaries and discourse surrounding the boundaries between animal and human.

Human-animal relations are inextricably intertwined with intra- and interspecies power dynamics that are shaped by hegemonic representations in science, conservation, art and media. My analysis will thus incorporate trans-disciplinary models of thought that emerged from the intersectional analyses of Rosi Braidotti and were expanded by Francesca Ferrando. In her seminal work *The Posthuman*, Braidotti developed a posthuman methodology for the Humanities, that aims to "create and evolve a new set of narratives about the planetary dimension of globalized humanity" (Braidotti 162). With this, the scholar

provides us with an important tool to unearth and account for the entanglements of subjects and objects that shape our world and inform our identities. My thesis will aim to stick to Braidotti's "golden rules", by creating a cartography of human-animal relations in *Sleepless Cities* that is founded on interdisciplinary research (163). In this way, I aim to "unveil[...] the power locations which structure our subject-position" and define the boundaries between nature and culture in the episode (163) .

For this reason, I will use posthuman methodology in "rhizomatic outlines" composed of visual and textual information from *Sleepless Cities* and various theorists to uncover the cinematic constructedness of human-animal representations and draw attention to alternative figurations of said relations (Braidotti 164; Ferrando 10). I will thereby engage in the posthuman endeavor to deconstruct claims to "objective knowledge and absolute truth" (Ferrando10). This will be done by identifying those claims in the genre of wildlife documentary and how they come into effect in *Sleepless Cities*. As our conception of human-animal relationships is not only influenced by visual and textual information when viewing *Sleepless Cities,* but rests on culturally constructed notions of what certain species signify and how we ought to relate to them, it is important to also methodologically include discourse analysis. By recognising the entanglement of different academic fields, I consider the perception of human-animal relations to arise from an assemblage, or "in-between", of information from visual, audio, text, historical context, film genre, media discourse, biology and conservation discourse. In working from this academically interdisciplinary starting point, I aim to reject dichotomies and essentialist "positions of illusionary intellectual comfort" (Ferrando 16), by treating different forms of knowledge in a democratic and egalitarian way. I would like to emphasise at this point that my analysis is inevitably influenced by the subject position I occupy as a white Western European (human) woman. When I use "we" or "us" in this thesis, I do so not to make generalising or essentialist

metaphysical claims, but to invite the reader to take my perspective or to play with the often dichotomous narratives that surround human-animal relations.

In Donna Haraway's seminal work *The Companion Species Manifesto*, the scholar has outlined the issues at stake in research, discourses and representations of human-animal relations that negotiate " the relation between what counts as nature and what counts as culture in Western discourse and its cousins" (27). For this reason, it is vital to firstly trace the history of ideas and representations of animals and nature in documentary film, to then be able to reflect on the way in which this historical context informs human-animal relations in *Sleepless Cities.* In this way, this thesis will also deconstruct binary thinking in nature-culture relations and propose a more cartographical view of the natureculture continuum. In the first chapter, I will thus make use of various works of film and media studies scholars, such as Bill Nichols, Adrian Ivakhiv and Cynthia Chris, to lay out the history of Western representations of nature in documentary film and discuss the role technology plays for the genre. Ivakhiv outlines how all cinematic representations of nature are a product of socio-natural relations in his book, *Ecologies of the Moving Image, Cinema, Affect, Nature* (77). By showing how the binary between 'Nature' and 'Culture' was historically constructed, Ivakhiv brings our attention to the various ways in which cinematic representations of nature are always expressive of an underlying ideology that positions the 'natural' environment as opposed to the realm of humans (culture)(78). Through this historical overview from the development of landscape painting to Modern ocularcentrism, the author argues that Western "visual traditions of representing 'Nature' suggest specific action as appropriate in relation to nature" (78)[2]. In situating *Sleepless Cities* within the epistemology of Western representations of nature-culture relations, I will show how a close analysis of *Sleepless Cities* can open up

[2] Ivakhivs discussion employs the terms nature and 'Nature',the former denoting the "categorical stand-in for the non-human and non-artificial world" in contrast to the latter being an aestheticised representation of the non-human world (Ivakhiv 77).

spaces for resistance and alternative figurations that problematise binary thinking in nature-culture assemblages.

Subsequently, I will map the different types of human-animal relationships that appear in *Sleepless Cities* by analysing the way in which the documentary frames natureculture interactions visually as well as discursively. In order to create a typology of human-animal representations in *Sleepless Cities,* I will not analyse them in a chronological or linear way, but rather group the different animal species into four types: exotic visitors, invasive residents, adorable visitors and useful residents. With this, I aim to emphasise how human-animal relationships are negotiated in and through the occupation and use of space. As all animals in *Sleepless Cities* are portrayed in relation to urban spaces, the concluding chapter of this thesis will be dedicated to examine the entanglement of the portrayal of human-animal relations and the urban environment in which these are situated. By relating the spatiality of human-animal relations to the concept of the (human) right to the city, I aim to offer a post-anthropocentric view of urban spaces that problematizes spatialised nature-culture dichotomies. To do this, I will utilise the works of the urban and cultural theorists Henri Lefebvre and Tyson E. Lewis, who think through the power dynamics that are embedded in the social production of space. By connecting the spatial dimensions of human-animal relationships in *Sleepless Cities* to Lefebvre's call for a "transformed and renewed right to urban life" (158), I will show how the episode uses the politics embedded in the production of space to challenge or reestablish the nature-culture binary. Moreover, by including Lewis' work on animal presences in (post-)pandemic cities I aim to show how Lefebvres' *Right to the city* could be expanded to include "encounters that promote and sustain environmental intimacies between human and non-human citizens" (Lewis 4). With this, I aim to problematize the way in which nature documentaries, such as *Night on Earth:*

Sleepless Cities portray human-animal relations and call upon the genre to produce new and inclusive narratives about the entanglements within the natureculture continuum.

Chapter 1: Nature in Documentary film: Between Science and Aesthetics

Since the early beginnings of the cinematic medium at the end of the 19th century, the animate animal is a central object of our fascination and marks the origin of many early so-called 'actuality films' that aimed to "reveal[...] what happens in nature that cannot otherwise be naturally observed" (Ivakhiv 200). With the emergence of documentary photography and cinema, humans utilised a new technology with which we could then record, classify and compartmentalise the world in a visual and presumably direct way. The genre of (nature) documentaries educates us about the world, they show us (distant) places and environments that we humans do not have access to and explain how the natural world 'really' works. Seemingly, this educational aspect is at the heart of the genre as it is characterised as "based on real events or circumstances, and intended primarily for instruction or record purposes" ("Documentary"). The mission of documentaries, to show and educate the viewer about the world 'as it really is' and to open up perspectives that were previously hidden or obscured by our human embodiedness, is firmly rooted in the 19th century humanist ideals of perspective and the human endeavours to explore, classify, understand and dominate the natural world (Ivakhiv 3; Sturken and Cartwright 24). As a result of Western exploration, rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, the discursive polarity between the city and the countryside, nature and culture as well as human and animal, gained traction and found artistic expression in literature as well as visual art (Crary 30-31). With this, an idealised image of (untouched) nature emerged as wild, beautiful and divine that on one hand served as contrast to artifice and urban civilisation, and on the other provided the human with a 'view' to appreciate and dominate from an (elevated) vantage point (Ivakhiv 82-84). Following Ivakhiv's argumentation, the tendency of documentary film to frame nature as a space that is 'out there', untouched and far away from the human realm, is closely

related to its origin in Romantic landscape painting, which sought to portray pastoral, 'pure' and sublime nature (Ivakhiv 80).

Through this long tradition of visual representation, it becomes evident that all cinematic representations of nature are not merely a capturing of the 'given world' around us but hold performative power. This means that wildlife documentaries are informed by a certain understanding of human-animal as well as nature-culture relations and in turn expressive of these ideologies that position the human *in relation to* nature (Chris XIV). In this way, nature and wildlife documentaries draw on aesthetic conventions that emerged from 19th century humanism and its relationship to nature. However, as the genre of documentary film often exudes a particular educational 'mission', these ideologies are empowered and can be easily mistaken for objective 'scientific' evidence about the world. This allows nature and wildlife documentaries to contribute to our conception of the natural environment and shape human desires. This includes expectations of places 'in nature', as documentaries enter what Nichols calls 'popular memory' giving us "a vivid sense of how something happened in a particular time and place" (Nichols 91). An analysis of aesthetic and narrative strategies in *Sleepless Cities* can thus reveal the "changing assumptions that people bring to nature" and shed light on broader developments within the genre of wildlife documentaries (Ivakhiv 205).

Before analysing the episode *Sleepless Cities* of Netflix' documentary series *Night on Earth* in detail, I will discuss the role of technology in the making of the series and its relation to genre conventions of nature documentary film in general. As Nichols discusses extensively in the fourth chapter of his book *An Introduction into Documentary*, documentaries employ a specific rhetoric that "represents how the filmmaker engages with the historical world itself" and "seek[s] to persuade or convince us" of the merit of a specific perspective rather than representing reality (Nichols 68-69). Following the scholars' analysis, the value of documentary film, in opposition to raw footage, "lies in how [it] give[s] visual

and audible representation to topics for which our language gives us concepts" (Nichols 99). In this way, the genre attains its performative power by depicting "historically unique moments" made up of individual shots and scenes "that locate us in a particular time and place" in order to express something about the "organisation of these elements into a larger whole" in the form of a generalised 'truth' (Nichols 101).

As I have previously argued, this is due to the 'scientific' tradition of the genre, however this effect is also in part created by the technological means that lie at the very heart of the medium: the camera. There has been considerable academic criticism of the photographic and cinematic medium, in which the assumed transparency of the camera has been problematised (Sturken and Cartwright 25). The images captured by a camera are never 'neutrally' capturing reality, but are always a result and expression of the filmmaker's artistic decisions and underlying ideologies (20). This is not only evident through the filmmaker's framing of the image (by setting up the camera in a specific location), angle, and focus but also through narrative choices that determine the chronology of shots and scenes, as well as the musical score and voice-over narration that accompany the images in the final product. Through these technological conditions and artistic decisions, the documentary actively guides the viewer's interpretation of the images on screen and in doing so influences our understanding of the subject of the documentary (Ivakhiv 194; Nichols 68; Sturken and Cartwright 26).

However, despite extensive criticism of the assumed neutrality and transparency of documentary photography and film, the medium maintains its 'objective' power through genre conventions and the strong educational implications of documentaries in general. One of these conventions that contribute to the 'scientific appearance' of wildlife documentaries is the way in which the camera is used to capture footage of 'wild' animals. For *Night on Earth,* the filmmakers used an array of cameras, inter alia extreme-light

sensitive cameras, infrared camera traps, CCTV cameras, ultraviolet light cameras and thermal imaging cameras, to capture their subjects. With the help of these cameras and filming techniques, *Night on Earth* can "for the first time in history" illuminate and capture nightly wildlife scenes for the human eye to see. In this way, the use of cameras in wildlife documentaries, such as *Night on Earth,* parallels the scientific methods with which behavioural biologists classify and study the behaviour of certain (animal) species (Ivakhiv 226). This correlation can lead to the assumption that images produced for documentaries inherently contain 'scientific truth' and thus strengthen the perceived objectivity of a documentary (Ivakhiv 226). However, as Ivakhiv states, the assumption that "an image obtained through a scientific technique can in and of itself be scientific" is incorrect, as it is only the interpretation of an image within its complete context that can lead to scientific knowledge production (226). In nature documentary films, like *Night on Earth*, this context is only partially presented as all images are ultimately used to convey a predetermined narrative goal or perspective on a particular subject (Nichols 68; Chris XIX). In this way, our understanding of all cinematic images in documentary film is guided by the temporally determined and spatially anchored combination of text and image.

Moreover, certain genre conventions of (nature) documentary film actively construct and enhance the assumed objectivity of the camera, as the camera is positioned as the sole mediator between the viewer and the subject of the cinematic gaze. As *Night on Earth* emphasises throughout the series, it is thanks to the revolutionary camera technology that we are able to see the nocturnal animals in their 'true nature' as they seemingly can, or do, not notice our technology-enabled gaze upon them. Through this rhetoric, *Night on Earth* suggests an objective or scientific portrayal of nature as it decenters the human and positions "techne [as]the only route through which we now can sense the world" (Ivakhiv 212). The constructedness of what is seen on-screen may thus be obscured, as the filmmaker does not

seem or is not seen to intervene in animal interactions and remains an 'invisible' observer to the 'spectacle of nature'. As the wildlife filmmaker traditionally remains invisible to the viewer through a removed and impersonal attitude that rests on non-intervention and 'objective' observation of natural phenomena, the viewer is led to take a similarly distant and disembodied stance.

Through these cultural assumptions about the cinematic medium and the genre of documentary, we are likely to mistake the on-screen representations of nature as 'real', 'neutral' and 'objective'. In this way, we often conceive documentaries to be a source of scientific proof or knowledge, utilising them in educational settings to broaden our horizon and letting them influence our conception of what nature is and how we ought to interact with it. For this reason, it is vital to deconstruct the way in which human-animal relationships are portrayed in Sleepless Cities, to reveal the way in which the episode contributes to the cultural perception of nature-culture boundaries.

Chapter 2: Human-Animal relationships in *Sleepless Cities*: A Cartography

Before discussing the aesthetic qualities of *Night on Earth*'s penultimate episode *Sleepless Cities,* it is important to devote some attention to the subjects that are televised in this episode. The animals that are presented to us in the fifth Episode of *Night on Earth* are tought to be part of the so-called 'urban wildlife'. At first, this concept might seem like an irreconcilable oxymoron but upon closer inspection it can also open up new possibilities for (certain) animals to (at least conceptually) transgress their animality. Generally, Urban Wildlife studies define urban wildlife as "animal communities consist[ing] of species that utilize human dominated ecosystems" and its study focuses on conservation and management issues when it comes to Human-Wildlife interactions ("Urban Wildlife Basics"). Due to the contact with humans and the environments altered and shaped by human life, these species

are distinguished from wildlife existing in pristine environments[3]. However, as Egerer and Buchholz have pointed out, not all species that come into contact with humans are traditionally considered to be urban wildlife (2256). The concept of Urban Wildlife then seems to be more complex than simply encompassing all animal species in human dominated environments, as the term conversely excludes domesticated animals, livestock and so-called 'vermin', such as cockroaches or small rodents[4]. This can also be seen in the selection of species portrayed in *Night on Earth*: elephants, vaux swifts, leopards, black bears, moose, black-bellied hamsters, possums, long-tailed macaques, diamond-backed terrapins and smooth-coated otters[5]. A brief discussion of the species that we see as urban wildlife in *Night on Earth: Sleepless Cities* will show how all of these animal species share particular qualities that lend themselves to create a specific perspective of urban wildlife and how humans ought to interact with (some of) the creatures we share our cities with.

First of all, *Sleepless Cities* centers mostly on, what animal conservation scholars call, 'flagship' species that, in a Western context, appear to be exotic, rare or worth conserving (Egerer and Buchholz 2257; Bowen-Jones and Entwistle 189). Through a focus on large mammals, such as elephants, leopards, black bears, long-tailed macaques and moose, the episode mobilises Western ideas of common wildlife film subjects, that according to Bowen-Jones and Entwistle are culturally coded as 'exotic' by virtue of being ' dangerous wild predators' or 'elusive majestic beasts' (189-190). For this reason, the viewer is already culturally conditioned to view these animals from a particular perspective when watching *Night on Earth: Sleepless Cities,* as the remainder of the series and a vast body of wildlife

---

[3] Although, in times of the Anthropocene it remains debatable whether these pristine places of 'pure nature' still exist (see Chris XX).

[4] However, the categorisation of vermin is usually dependent on locally specific material conditions, as vermin are usually those "animals that at a particular time and place compete (as for food) with humans or domestic animals" (Merriam-Webster)

[5] In order of appearance in the episode.

documentary, for instance *The Secret Life of Elephants (2009), Grizzly Man* (2005) and *Wild Africa* (2001), mostly thematise those species in the context of their wild-, mysterious- and remoteness. Therefore, *Sleepless Cities'* representation of these species in *urban* environments, stands in stark contrast to common cinematic representations of these species 'in the wild' and thus furthers their perceived 'other- and out-of-place-ness'. This tension creates a kind of voyeuristic pleasure for the (Western) viewer, as the camera 'catches the animals in the act' of transgressing naturalised boundaries between nature and culture and escape the very context of 'wilderness', that we have (cinematically) enclosed those species in.

Secondly, the smaller animals featured in *Night on Earth*: *Sleepless Cities* attract human empathy and affective engagement of the viewer as the vaux swifts, black-bellied hamsters, possums, diamond-backed terrapins and smooth-coated otters belong to those species that western humans usually regard as inferior, harmless or cute. Through the animals' culturally and cinematically constructed cuteness[6], the viewer can sympathise with the animal subjects and identifies with their 'struggle for survival' in the urban environments they inhabit. In this way, the series conveys a narrative of urban wildlife that draws on culturally constructed, preconceived notions of how the species relate to human life while also disrupting them and providing a new 'view' on the contested territory between human and animal.

As I have established in the previous sections of this paper, representations of nature in wildlife documentary film mostly oscillate between two humanist traditions: sublime nature aesthetics reminiscent of 19th century Romantic landscape painting, and investigatory

---

[6] Although some scholars, such as Konrad Lorenz and Daniel J. Kruger, have argued that this perceived cuteness ("Kindchenschema") is biologically conditioned and genetically determined, as "species with greater degrees of Kindchenschema may be more effective in eliciting human compassion and actions promoting ecological conservation" (Kruger 22).

or ‘scientific’ aesthetics rooted in humanist ideals that sought to classify and control the natural environment. By tracing how both of these aesthetic traditions inform the portrayal of animals in *Night on Earth*, it will become clear how nature-culture relations are negotiated in the episode.

The episode opens with a montage of different city skylines, drone footage and the ominous voice-over of Samira Wiley, stating “Cities - the most unnatural places on Earth” (“Sleepless Cities” 00:00:00-17). With this opening, it is made clear that the ensuing fifth episode of *Night on Earth*, titled *Sleepless Cities*, stands apart from the remainder of the series, which thematises the nocturnal activities of animals ‘in nature’. Accompanied by blaring traffic noises, Wiley’s voice-of-god narration sets the tone of the episode as she pronounces the “concrete jungles” to be particularly “hostile to wildlife” (00:17-23). With this, the introduction of the episode establishes a backdrop for the animals featured in *Sleepless Cities* that is rooted in the discursive polarity between nature and culture and in turn highlights the extraordinariness and transgressive potential of ‘urban wildlife’. After a fast paced montage of the episodes’ ‘highlights’, we are shown satellite pictures of the planet earth at night, brightly illuminated by lights of global metropoles, as Wiley announces that “we can appreciate how cities take over”, as urban environments are “the fastest growing habitat on Earth” (01:30-41). By using the word ‘habitat’ to denote globally sprawling urban development, the voice-over seemingly contradicts its initial statement of cities as distinctly opposed to nature. As the term habitat generally denotes the “natural environment in which an animal or plant usually lives” (“Habitat”), the voice-overs’ rhetoric foreshadows that the previously established dichotomy between nature and culture is more than troubled in times of the anthropocene.

In this way, the binary opposition between ‘the city’ and ‘the nature’ is destabilised and allows for a more nuanced perspective that positions urban spaces not on one side of the

binary but rather opens up the city to become a contested territory in which different human-animal relations can be (re)negotiated.

In order to not burst the scope of this paper, I will deviate from the episodes' chronology in order to group the different kinds of human-animal relationships in accordance with their culturally-constructed perception. In this way, I aim to highlight the correlation between the culturally constructed perception (discourse) of the species and the aesthetic means by which these cultural assumptions are conveyed. I will thus firstly discuss how the animals typically perceived to be 'exotic' are portrayed in the series. Subsequently, I will lay out the discursive and aesthetic means by which the 'cute' animals are portrayed. In this way I hope to create a comprehensive map that elucidates how the boundaries between human and animal are articulated through *Sleepless Cities* .

Exotic Visitors

Fig 1.: Juxtaposition of elephant (nature) and traffic (culture) in Victoria Falls ("Sleepless Cities" 03:00).

The first type of human-animal relationship we encounter in Sleepless *Cities* is located in "southern Africa"[7], where a small herd of elephants is following "in the footsteps of [their] ancestors" through the bushes ("Sleepless Cities" 01:45-55). The ensuing montage of drone footage and facial close-ups of the animals introduces the matriarch of the herd, who "knows" the herd's migratory "route by heart" (01:55-2:30). With this introduction of the elephants, the show plays on common portrayals of the species, highlighting their exceptional memory, intelligence and social structures. Although historically, the portrayal of the largest land mammal is part of a cruel visual tradition ranging from circus spectacles to Edison's *Electrocuting an Elephant* (1903), conservation efforts have reframed the scientific and cinematic discourse around the species in the second half of the 20th century (Mitman 176). Since then, common tropes of representing elephants have shifted from a focus on vulnerability and domination, to an appreciation of their aesthetic qualities, human-like 'intelligence' and social capacities (Pick 319). As populations have greatly declined as a result of sport-hunting, poaching and habitat destruction, the elusive elephants' appearance on-screen today is expressive of a different kind of spectacle, driven by the species' status as endangered (Ivakhiv 84). In a sudden contrast to the dreamy orchestral music in the background of the voice-over narration, loud traffic noises are heard as Wiley explains that "today their path is blocked" ("Sleepless Cities" 02:30-35). The viewer follows the camera's slow pan, revealing that the obstacle is "this town [that] sprung up on the elephant's migratory path" (02:38-44). In the ensuing sequence we follow the elephants as they "make their move", "slipping right through the center of town" (03:24-27; 04:22-27). The montage that accompanies the elephants' journey through the town is filled with juxtapositions of the peacefully feeding elephants on the roadside and images of car and train traffic on their path

[7] A brief investigation revealed that what *Sleepless Cities* vaguely identified as "southern Africa", in fact takes place in Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, a town famous for its access to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Mosi-oa-Tunya/Victoria Falls, the largest Waterfall on Earth (UNESCO).

(see fig.1). In this way, their 'out-of-placeness' is highlighted, as the elephants are not only juxtaposed to the city's infrastructure but also framed as a visual spectacle, carefully observed by local humans peering out of their windows. Throughout the sequence, the relationship between human and elephant is established as one of spectatorship, in which the elephants represent the object of the spectator's gaze and the human takes the position of a passive and distant observer. Whenever humans or human-made environments appear on screen the voice-over relates them to us in a passive voice. By saying, for instance, that "this town has *sprung up* [...]" instead of actively addressing the human actions or the booming wildlife and nature tourism industry that led to the formation and expansion of the town of Victoria Falls, the locus of agency is displaced from humans to the abstract urban entity (02:38-44, my emphasis). In this way, the viewer can occupy a position of a 'neutral' observer unimpacted by the complex cinematic and actual relationship between humans and elephants. This dynamic is underlined by the camerawork that despite frequent close-ups maintains an observatory distance to the animals.

Fig 2.: Moose stepping over a fence to reach a jack-o-lantern ("Sleepless Cities" 19:13).

When it comes to the moose that are televised in *Sleepless Cities*, we can see a similar portrayal. Both elephants and moose have widely been used in cinema to signify beauty, remote- and wilderness . While the elephant is more an expression of the exotic, associated with the "far away Orient", the moose occupies a different position within American culture. Through films and television series, such as *Alaska: Spirit of the Wild* (1997) or *Northern Exposure* (1990-1995), the moose has become an emblem, not only for Alaskan 'Wilderness' and nature tourism but has also been fetishized for its (culturally constructed) good-natured- and cuteness. For this reason, it is not surprising that *Sleepless Cities* taps into this tradition by representing them as harmless visitors in Anchorage, Alaska. The sequence begins by showing the city of Anchorage on the night of Halloween, when "the streets fill with goblins, ghouls, monsters and moose" ("Sleepless Cities" 18:26-50). With this, the narration positions the animals within the context of mythical creatures and the humans that disguise themselves for the holiday. The voice-over continues by informing us that the moose roam the town "for one night only", as they are "in town for a seasonal specialty"(19:00-6). The viewer then follows a montage of moose stepping with ease over garden fences to eat the jack-o-lantern displays on the front porches of Anchorage's residents (see fig. 2). Although the sequence is relatively short (in comparison to the elephants' screen time), it is packed with romanticized imagery, portraying the moose as a sensational seasonal tourist attraction of Anchorage that "vanish[es] like ghosts" once the holiday is over (19:48-20:00). Through this, the human-animal relation is reduced to a harmless and playful encounter, as the complex topic of Alaskan Wildlife protection efforts is completely obscured. Firstly, moose are not rare visitors to Anchorage but are actually residents to the surrounding area, frequently drawn to urban environments on the prospect of food ("Living With Moose"). Over the past years, this has led to some dramatic encounters between human (children) and moose as the animals can be quite aggressive when approached carelessly ("Aggressive Moose"). In addition,

according to Alaskan legislation that regulates Wildlife protection in the state, it is strictly forbidden to feed Wildlife, penalised with a fine if caught ("Living With Moose"). This means that the portrayal of moose in *Sleepless Cities* actually counters local conservation efforts by endorsing the feeding of moose as a spectacle and in turn promoting a romanticized image of the human-animal relationship at stake.

Fig 3: CCTV camera footage of black bears "stealing a meal" in Aspen, Colorado ("Sleepless Cities" 16:23- 16:27).

The last relationship between exotic urban visitors and humans I would like to highlight in this section is the one between black bears and humans, localised by *Sleepless Cities* in Aspen, Colorado. In contrast to the elephants and moose, the black bears are portrayed to occupy a more ambiguous position in relation to humans. This is in part due to the conflicting cultural assumptions that humans have about bears and the bears' predatory nature: On one hand, bears have been perceived to be dangerous wild beasts, with the trope of the 'man-eating predator' and appearing in many cinematic representations of the species, such as *Grizzly* (1976), *The Edge* (1997), or *The Revenant* (2015). On the other hand, animated movies, such as Disney's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926), *The Jungle Book* (1967) and *Brother Bear* (2003), have contributed to bears being perceived as cute, intelligent, clumsy

and adorable (Bousé 172). These two contrasting traditions in the portrayal of (black) bears both inform and complicate the human-animal relationship portrayed in *Sleepless Cities.* Which is why it can be, to some extent, set apart from the other relationships in this section on exotic visitors.

The sequence begins with footage of different CCTV cameras and the voice-over introducing the aesthetic lens through which the bears are going to be portrayed in this sequence by stating that "24-hour surveillance is revealing an astonishing array of urban intruders"("Sleepless Cities" 16:03-10). With this, a shift in perspective is introduced as the low-resolution black and white images we see on screen in this sequence stand in contrast to the sharp and colourful ones produced by lowlight cameras. Through this, the relationship between humans and bears is framed as one of surveillance and intrusion, as "wild animals are growing ever more artful at stealing a meal, timing their nighttime raids to perfection" (16:16-32). By mobilising a militarised discourse, in which black bears are "intruders" or raiding thieves, *Sleepless Cities* frames the human-animal relationship as antagonistic. This antagonism is in part also built on the anthropomorphising of the bears through their perceived similarity in mannerisms and intelligence. Therefore, we can find it amusing to see bears performing human-like actions such as pulling a garbage container or opening a fridge (see fig.3), while 'raiding' urban environments. The sequence continues with a montage of a black bear foraging through a trash container only to emerge with a big plastic bag in its mouth. Through the voice-over, the viewer is steered to appreciate the accuracy with which the bear's nose can "sniff out a midnight feast" (17:44-55). The following CCTV-style images show bears emerging from garbage containers with plastic wrapped food items, as they "gorge on the vast amount of food we throw away" (18:02-11). Although here we can see implicit references to the complexity of human-bear relationships through the visual imagery, the voice-over flattens these nuances by remaining (seemingly) oblivious to the effects of

plastic pollution on bear populations. Instead, the relationship is portrayed as rather one-dimensional, in which the bears are the thieves stealing from victimised humans. In this respect, the cinematic portrayal of the visiting black bears in Aspen, Colorado shares similarities with the human-animal relationships based on animal residency in the urban environment.

Invasive Residents

The second type of human-animal relationship in *Sleepless Cities* I would like to draw attention to, is between the resident animal species that are perceived as 'exotic' and the humans they share their (urban) territory with. In contrast to their migratory counterparts, 'exotic residents' receive a different treatment in the show in terms of aesthetics. The sequence begins with sweeping drone shots of Mumbai's city lights at night, while Wiley asserts that "killers are on the loose" ("Sleepless Cities" 10:48-57). The ensuing montage shows different scenes of Mumbai city life emphasising its crowdedness with a "population [of] 20 million", Wiley stresses here that "people are everywhere" (11:05-21). Although the city seems to be dominated by human life, "few are aware of the danger following in their shadows: leopards" (11:21-32). With this dramatic introduction, it becomes clear that the ensuing portrayal of the leopard-human relationship is of a completely different nature than the one to their aestheticised migratory counterparts.

The leopards' screen time consists mostly of CCTV camera (and in some instances low light camera trap) footage that reminds the human viewer of surveillance recordings of crime in popular and news media. With this, the technological means by which the leopards are televised, underline Wiley's statement that "this potential man-eater can operate under the radar," positioning the leopards as dangerous infiltrators (12:20-26). In this way, the animals are placed in a highly militarised discourse, being (unreasonably) anthropomorphised by

portraying their intent to be of a consciously terroristic nature. Through a cunningly edited scene that shows a group of humans crossing a path closely followed by footage of a leopard on the same path, *Sleepless Cities* visualises how the "powerful predators [are] stalking the streets" (see fig. 4). Accompanied by a looming musical score, we follow the leopards on their search for food which, in the urban environment of Mumbai, mostly consists of domesticated companion species, such as pigs or dogs. Through *Sleepless Cities*' portrayal of the leopards' hunt across Mumbai, it becomes clear that the human-animal encounter in this section is carried out as an interspecies encounter between dogs, pigs and leopards. Although the leopard is not directly attacking any humans in *Sleepless Cities*, the show suggests the danger the leopards pose by showing how Mumbai's leopards "infiltrate buildings" (15:00-07).

In this dynamic, domesticated dogs play a crucial role, as on one hand, they are inextricably entangled with human life, so as to be able to stand-in for the human perspective and "all domestic plant and animal species, subjected to human intent" (Harraway 28). On the other hand, the dog cannot be completely anthropomorphised as they "bring a kind of *indeterminate otherness* into the frame" (Sheehan et al. 122, Emphasis in original). Through this, the Western viewer is comfortably distanced, yet compelled to sympathise with the dog's fate as we see CCTV footage of it falling victim while hearing that "every year in Mumbai, more than a thousand dogs are killed by leopards" (15:15-42). As the sequence closes with a melancholic musical score and an alternation of shots that show a dog laying on a front porch, its facial expression connoting worry or concern, *Sleepless Cities* seems to relegate the 'guilt' for the killing of dogs to the Other humans that fail to care for their animal companions.

In this way, the documentary creates an implicit distinction between the Western viewers attitude of care towards domesticated dogs and the 'cruel indifference' of the Indian

Other, whose perception rests on “colonialist, ethnocentric, ahistorical attitudes toward those who do (eat” dogs, or in this case, let them “...get eaten)” (Harraway 14). The human-animal relation at stake in this section is thus more complex, as it is negotiated through intra- and interspecies power dynamics, in which the leopard represents a sublime object of fascination to the Western viewer and in relation to the human Other becomes a dangerous predator. From this perspective, the human-leopard encounter in Mumbai is thus not only a means to express territorialised human-animal relations, but also serves to reassert human intraspecies power dynamics and colonial assumptions about the non-western Other. However, we can also consider the human Other in a different light. From a Posthuman perspective the Other’s in-betweenness can also provide an alternative source of knowledge that reconfigures the relationship between humans, their companion species and urban wildlife.

Fig.4: The leopard “stalks” the oblivious Other in Mumbai, India (“Sleepless Cities” 11:36 11:40). Judging from the differing background lighting, the shots were taken several hours or even days apart.

The remainder of this section on ‘invasive residents’ is devoted to a similar relationship between urban residents and revolves around the sequence in *Sleepless Cities* that tells the story of long-tailed macaques in Lopburi, Thailand. Before delving deeper into the macaques’ representation in *Night on Earth,* it is important to account for the special relationship that has historically been cultivated between monkeys and humans. As Harraway demonstrates in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature,* the monkey has been a troublesome figure. Through our evolutionary kinship with primates, they are perceived as essentially similar to humans. Yet, humans ought to be distinguished from

primates as monkeys are reduced to "natural objects unobscured by culture, [...] showing most plainly the organic base in relation to which culture emerged" (Haraway 14). For this reason, the representation of monkeys is often anthropomorphized or serves as an analogy to legitimise certain human behaviour as 'natural'. The long-tailed macaques in *Sleepless Cities* can thus occupy an ambivalent position, as they on one hand resemble and contrast to 'civilized' human behaviour. The sequence opens with a montage of a troop of long-tailed macaques on (unnamed) temple grounds[8], as Wiley states that "some [species] are taking over [our cities]" ("Sleepless Cities" 25:27-32).

In the ensuing sequence, the resident troop of macaques is introduced as an "urban gang" that, due to the nightly illumination of the city, "can operate around the clock" (26:00-07). In this way, the monkeys' portrayal resembles that of the leopards, as both species are placed in a militarised discourse that speaks not of human-animal cohabitation but of "infiltrators" and " rioting gangs" that "invade" *our* cities. Whereas, the leopards are televised through CCTV footage, the imagery showing the macaques is more in line with common representations of vermin infestations, with low-angle shots that capture the scurrying masses approaching the camera. In contrast to the visuals that associate the monkeys with vermin, the voice-over narration clarifies that in Lopburi the macaques "get a helping hand" as "they are sacred around here" (27:05-24). Through this contrast, there is again a distinction made between the assumed Western viewer of *Night on Earth* and the resident humans of Lopburi. As the camera's perspective embodies a dichotomous Western understanding of nature-culture relations, the 'exotic' quality of "uncivilised" monkeys and those who tend to them are emphasised. In the ensuing narrative about the macaques, in which "the mob run[s] riot through the city", "taking everything and anything on offer"

[8] The Temple that is televised in *Sleepless Cities* is the 13th-century bhuddist temple Pra Prang Sam Yod in Lopburi, Thailand, today a popular tourist attraction due to the resident macaque population.

(27:35-43), the primates' behaviour are narratively turned into an analogy for human nature. By asserting that “we are not the only primates that prosper in an urban environment”, Wiley makes the monkeys-as-human analogy explicit as we see a montage of macaques nibbling on plastic food wrappings (see fig. 5). The ensuing montage of a particularly overweight individual laying lethargically on the roadside thus becomes a kind of social commentary as the voice-over explains the macaque's condition as “a life without limits comes with complications, it’s all too easy to overindulge” (27:44-56; see fig. 6). Considering Thailand's socio-economic situation, in which “nearly a third of the nation’s population lives below the very austere Thai poverty line” (Richter 92), it seems that the voice-over's implied social commentary is directed towards Western society rather than the local residents of Lopburi. In this way, the human-animal relationship portrayed in this section serves to negotiate intra-human relations between a “civilised” Western viewer and an non-Western “inferior” Other. In this dynamic, hegemonic power relations are articulated through the attitudes they hold toward the long-tailed macaques. However, the position of the non-Western Other in *Sleepless Cities* has more to offer than is shown on screen: Acknowledging Indigenous epistemology, Buddhist philosophy, and cultural and religious beliefs around Animism can offer an important source of knowledge to expose the Western humanist construction of the nature-culture binary, without falling into the trap of “Continental posthumanism, [that] appears to ignore the prior existence of Indigenous knowledge of this kind” (Bignall and Rigney 159).

Fig. 5.: Long-tailed macaques “taking everything and anything on offer” in Lopburi, Mumbai (“Sleepless Cities” 27:43).

Fig. 6.: In Lopburi “a life without limits comes with complications, it’s all too easy to overindulge” (“Sleepless Cities” 27:56).

Adorable Visitors

Fig.7: The “Moment of magic”, as swifts disappear into chimney (“Sleepless Cities” 10:33)

In accordance with the other sequences shown in the episode, the Vaux Swifts are introduced in juxtaposition to drone shots of the city of Portland, Oregeon. Through several medium long shots and close-ups, the camera focuses on how the birds move through the sky in large swarms, while the voice-over explains that the Swifts are passing through the city on their seasonal migratory route (“Sleepless Cities” 06:40- 07:16). As the urban environment lacks a sufficient amount of hollow trees to provide a resting place for the Swifts, the birds have resorted to a “surprising alternative”: an old chimney stack (07:19-38). In the ensuing narrative we follow the swifts on their quest to find a safe urban refuge for the night, however it is not the urbanness of the environment that is positioned as a threat to their endeavour. Instead, the viewer is shown close-ups of a resident hawk, patrolling the entrance of the chimney in order to catch a meal.

Subsequently, the narrative moves to a portrayal of the predator-prey relationship between the visiting Vaux Swifts and the resident Hawk. Accompanied by a dramatic musical

score, a fast-paced montage of the Swifts' "struggle for life" ensues as they try to evade the predator into the chimney. The narrative tension of the sequence is resolved as Wiley states that "one kill is a lifesaver for the rest" and we are shown a slow-motion close up of the hawk catching a Swift and taking flight (09:17-34).[9] By framing the Vaux Swifts' visit in Portland as a 'natural' encounter between resident predator and migratory prey, the human -caused destruction of the birds' natural habitat is upstaged by a spectacle of naturalized necropolitics. I invoke here Archille Mbembe's well-established concept to point at the power dynamics that influence the viewer's attitude towards the bird's death [10]. Through this, we are pushed from an empathetic stance toward a more distant and disentangled "biological gaze". According to Fox Keller, the biological gaze constitutes "the forms of looking scientists have developed to peer at, and into [...] the secrets of life", allowing the viewer to affectively remove themselves through a 'scientific' understanding of the action on screen (Fox Keller 107). The death of an individual is then explained as part of "the circle of life" that can or should not be interfered with by humans. According to Pick, this kind of narrative emerged from a long history of (wildlife documentary) cinema that aimed "to extract from bodies what the camera could and could not make visible: the secret of their [animal] vitality, revealed as the limits of vitality and the laws governing those limits" (Pick 315).

Through this 'scientific' biological gaze, the viewer finds themselves comfortably distanced from the gruesome scene of the bird being devoured and can appreciate the death of the Swift in aesthetic terms as the 'sublime' spectacle of nature. The sequence then closes by showing us "the moment of magic" as the thousands of swifts disappear into the chimney

---

[9] This ties into a common interpretation of Darwin's *Theory of Evolution* that recognises "the struggle for the means of existence, of every animal against all its congeners, and of every men against all other men" as "a law of nature" (Kropotkin XIII)

[10] Although a discussion of the televising of animal deaths and vulnerability as a means of spectacle, based on Anat Pick's *Executing Species: Animal Attractions in Thomas Edison and Douglas Gordon,* would certainly be relevant here, it would surpass the scope and purpose of this thesis.

(see fig. 7). Although there are no humans visible on-screen in this sequence, the viewer learns through the voice-over that local residents have taken the chimney out of use in order to protect the Swifts. The relationship that is established between humans and the Swifts thus rests on a conservatory narrative that positions the Swifts as inferior victims that ought to be protected by humans. However, this protection does not rest on the genuine concern for the individual birds' well-being and a reevaluation of the way in which human activities have altered the living conditions of the species, but is drawn from the aesthetic appreciation of the swarms' movements in the evening sky.

Similarly, the sequence of the episode that features diamond-backed terrapins nesting in the Hudson Bay opposite of Manhattan, mentions the destruction of the species' habitat by urban development, noise and light pollution. However, the focus of the narrative is again placed on the terrapins' 'struggle for life' against local predators, such as Racoons. The sequence does show some terrapins falling prey to car traffic, however the way in which these cinematic instances are commented on by the voice-over deflect from human responsibility. As it is disembodied "light and noise pollution" that is changing the rhythm of life ("Sleepless Cities" 32:25-35), not commercial and industrial human activities, the human-imposed threats are only addressed in an, at most, implicit way. Through this rhetoric, the episode does not prompt the viewer to question or reevaluate how we humans relate to the non-human world. Instead, an emphasis is placed on the Racoons that rob "90% percent of [the terrapin] nests" (29:47-30:01), allowing the viewer to escape the realisation that the one of the biggest threats to terrapins are, in fact, human actions, including commercial collection for food, "overexploitation, accidental mortality as bycatch in commercial Blue Crab fisheries", habitat destruction, drowning in fishing gear, and road mortality (Roosenburg et al. 2).

In this way, both migratory species that visit urban spaces are highly aestheticized, as their 'actual' life and death is reduced to an 'ecological sublime' and subordinated to the visual pleasure humans gain by gazing at them. In my opinion, this turns any conservatory message these sequences carry into an anthropocentric concern instead of advocating for an attitude of care towards the animals. A form of conservation narrative that is bound to the aesthetic qualities of the species in many ways reinforces the nature-culture binary by granting the human the biopolitical power to determine whether an animal is 'worth' living or protecting, based on human pleasure derived from looking at it.

Useful Residents

When we take a look at the resident animals that fall into the category of 'cute and harmless' beings, we can see that they are often portrayed with similar aesthetics as their migratory counterparts. However, by exposing the ideological discourses embedded in those sequences, we can explore the significance of animal-as-human analogies, as described by Ivakhiv before drawing conclusions about the portrayal of human-animal relationships in *Sleepless Cities* and their implications for the cinematic permeability of nature-culture boundaries.

As the viewer is introduced to the black-bellied hamsters that reside in a cemetery in Vienna, the voice-over reports the animals' to be useful as they are "miniature groundskeepers [...] clipping the lawn" ("Sleepless Cities" 20:55-21:10). Through this rhetoric, the hamsters are anthropomorphized and framed in a utilitarian way, as their presence in Vienna's cemetery serves a human-imposed purpose. Moreover, the voice-over narrative's "anthropomorphic associations [...] perpetuate the sense of connection" based on similarity and identification of humans with anthropomorphised hamsters (Siegel 219). Although Bousé has noted that "in the process of turning raw footage into stories that engage

audiences' emotions, some degree of moralizing of nature is almost inevitable", he has also pointed out that "the portrayal in wildlife films of animals' family and social relations" is imbued with "culturally preferred notions of masculinity, femininity, romantic love, monogamous marriage, responsible parenting, [...] moral behavior, and the sexual division of labor in marriage" (Bousé 157). This can be clearly seen in the way in which the narrative sequence mobilises a particular discourse as it relates the hamsters' behaviour to moral value judgements and human social structures.

As we follow the black-bellied hamsters in *Sleepless Cities*, we are told that the individual "clipping the lawn", does this out of duty to feed her six pups. The ensuing narrative then focuses on the female fending off a male that is awarded "full marks for persistence" by the voice-over for "ha[ving] more than food on his mind" (22:50-23:19). We follow the hamsters' pursuit through a montage of low-light cameras capturing the small creatures running around the cemetery as Wiley asserts that the female hamster's motherly duties keep her "too busy to mess around" (23:20-22). Through this use of anthropomorphised semantics, *Sleepless Cities* not only establishes a relation of similarity between humans and black-bellied hamsters but also imbues the hamsters portrayal with hegemonic Western 'family values', that relegates females to the domestic sphere, bound to childcare and nuclear family structures. Through this analogy, cultural constructs that frame femininity in correspondence with motherhood and sexual restraint are quite literally naturalised. Continuing the analogy of hamster behaviour being similar to human 'nature', the voice-over seems to endorse patterns of toxic masculinity that are aggressive and predatory, as simply 'persistent', while also legitimizing this kind of human behaviour by way of framing it as 'natural'.

Overall, the resident urban animals we perceive to be 'cute' are portrayed by *Sleepless Cities* in a very aestheticised way: highlighting their beauty through slow pans on their fur

and facial expression and emphasising their physical inferiority and limitedness, as “short legs can’t climb tall walls” and the “hamsters are trapped [in the cemetery] with nowhere to go” (24:20-37). In this way, the small animals that reside in Vienna are not only literally seperated from (living) humans by virtue of being trapped in a cemetery but are also rendered ‘harmless’ by being contained as “miniature groundskeepers” with impeccable Western ‘family values’.

Fig. 8: The black-bellied hamster female is “too busy to mess around” as she is tasked with childcare (“Sleepless Cities” 24:10).

Chapter 3: Who has the Right to which City ?

By mapping out the different types of human-animal relationships in *Sleepless Cities*, I have shown how certain relational parameters, such as the animals’ perceived cute- or exoticness impact the aesthetics and narrative structure of the species’ portrayal. Despite the contrasting portrayals and localisations, all sequences play out in urban environments. Through the animals' situatedness in urban space, the city functions not only as one end of the nature-culture binary, but in the course of each sequence, the urban presents itself as the very locus of the negotiation of nature-culture boundaries. In this way, the urban environment is more than a spectacular ‘landscape’ that arouses a “contemplative gaze triggered by slow

pans, long shots and extreme long shots" over cityscapes (Lefebvre qtd. in Ivakhiv 87). By switching between different portrayals of human-animal relations, the episode exhibits how cities function as "contact zones for naturecultural entanglements" (Haraway qtd. in Ivakhiv 244). As I have implicitly drawn out in the typology I created in the previous chapter, the way in which human-animal relations are framed in *Sleepless Cities,* correlates to how animals are perceived to interact with urban environments. The"visiting" species, either normatively perceived as 'exotic' or 'cute' , are treated as a welcome urban spectacle that is aestheticised and worthy of conservation efforts. In contrast, the portrayal of "resident" animals exposes that nature-culture boundaries are negotiated through intra- and interspecies power dynamics and the occupation and domination of territory.

In many aspects, the politics embedded in these relations can be paralleled to Lefebvre's insights on *The* (human) *Right to the City.* In his seminal work, Henri Lefebvre advocated for a reconceptualisation and rearticulation of how we think about, plan and perform the city. Moreover, he famously criticized capitalist notions embedded in city planning and problematized how nature is integrated into this logic, as the human *right to nature* confines "nature [..] into [the realm of] exchange value and commodities" (158). In *Sleepless Cities*, this dynamic is best observed in the way in which "visiting" animals are portrayed: as romanticising aesthetics and an exoticising gaze not only subordinate the animals' lives to human visual pleasure but also reduce them to a marketing token for local tourism. By framing these species as merely 'visitors' to the city, *Sleepless Cities* implicitly denies those species to become part and parcel of the urban, relegating them to what Lefebvre called "the ghetto of [human] leisure pursuits" (158). In this way, this type of human-animal relationship does not allow for encounters between human and non-human animal subjects, but positions the animal as an object of human fascination and desire.

To some extent, this also applies to the resident animal populations culturally constructed as harmless and cute, as their *Right to the City* is framed in terms of their usefulness to maintain an anthropocentric Western status quo. In the case of the black-bellied hamsters, their right to the city is not "a right to urban life" in Lefebvre's sense, as their sanitized habitat is confined to the Viennese cemetery grounds. With this, they are not part of the City, as "cemeteries are a [commonly] neglected aspect of urban morphology" and are often perceived as 'natural' spaces of leisure or sites of cultural heritage rather than being part of the City space (Kolnberger 131). Because their territory does not conflict with that of living humans, *Sleepless Cities* can establish nature-culture boundaries while framing the hamsters' ideological exploitation as purely 'natural' behaviour.

When it comes to 'exotic' resident animals in *Sleepless Cities*, the episode paints a different picture. Where animals that are culturally constructed as 'dangerous predators,' live in urban environments, the episode frames their presence as threatening or invasive on the basis of human urban territorialism. The animals' presence in the city is portrayed as a threat not only because they appear as physically dangerous to humans but because they ideologically stand for a "suspension of the capitalist functionality of space" (Lewis 2). In the case of the "rioting" macaques in Lopburi, it becomes clear that this Western image of the capitalist city is intrinsically contradicted by the attitude of the native human population in Lopburi that treat the co-dwelling macaques as a sacred and integral part of urban life. By looking beyond the Westernized representation of this sequence in *Sleepless Cities*, we can see how alternative non-Western epistemology and practice embody what, in Western academia, would today be called a Posthuman perspective. Through cultural events such as the yearly monkey buffet festival that takes place at the Phra Prang Sam Yod temple in Lopburi, human-macaque encounters are locally embraced as "the monkeys are the holy

disciples of Jao Paw Phra Kan[11] and the festival gives people the opportunity to make merit, while also increasing tourism in the area" (Chaiwat et al. 37). However, through the rather negative representation of the macaque troop in Lopburi as a rioting urban gang, *Sleepless Cities* omits the human residents' perspective by imposing a militarised discourse on the human-macaque assemblage. Moreover, by presupposing Western conceptions of space, *Sleepless Cities* neglects the specific identity, organisation and material conditions of the capital of the eponymous Thai province. In this way, the episode fails to address the perceived and lived space of Lopburi in which the human-monkey assemblage could actualize their Posthuman potential on-screen.

Although the natureculture narratives in *Night on Earth* take place on different continents, the series produces a kind of coherent "global space [...] through the melding together of actions or narratives taking place in different parts of the world" (Ivakhiv 75). Yet, when we examine how the different urban locations that are featured in *Sleepless Cities* are portrayed, it becomes clear that their portrayal is informed and framed by a particular cultural perspective. In this way, not only the portrayals of human-animal relations contain cultural constructions around naturecultures, but these constructs are also anchored in the portrayal of urban space by way of narration and cinematography.

For this reason, the way in which the different urban environments are portrayed varies drastically. Specifically, the way in which non-Western urban spaces are described in *Sleepless Cities* reveals Western (colonial) assumptions about certain places and their inhabitants. For instance, when we are first introduced to the elephants that cross through a "town that has sprung up" in "Southern Africa", we are not given any information about the

[11]"Jao Paw Phra Kan is considered as much a protector of Lopburi as the city spirits and it is believed that he provides people with the ability to punish and is the spirit of death. He is thus revered by many people in Lopburi, who believe that, by worshipping him, they generate auspiciousness and that their enemies are deterred from persecuting them" (Jeebkaew qtd. in Chaiwat 37)

city in which the narrative takes place. A brief pictorial search [12] reveals that the "town" that *Sleepless Cities* refers to, is actually the city of Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe, famous for its access to the eponymous UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the 20 most populated cities in the entire country ("Population"). *Sleepless Cities*' description (or rather lack thereof) of this important hub for tourism on the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia, is thus not only grossly reductionist but also plays into Western stereotypes about the African continent and its (human) population. As the African Studies scholar Okaka Opio Dokotum has pointed out, European Imperial- and Colonialism has historically produced and perpetuated a perspective on the continent that has "inscribed European imaginative geographies of desire and mythography to an Africa" that supported "the popular claim that Africa [...] had no history" (Dokotum 19; 13). He continues that historically, deliberate whitewashing and mystification of the continents' cultures "sought to erase all history and traces of civilisation in Africa" and produce a distinct picture of Africa as the "Dark Continent" (Dokotum 13). It is for this reason that *Sleepless Cities*' representation of Victoria Falls, as the only unnamed city that is merely given a continental ("Southern Africa") instead of a national reference, has an odd connotation of Western colonial and racist assumptions about the "Dark Continent" devoid of culture and civilisation. Especially when contrasted with other place-making descriptions in *Sleepless Cities*, for instance of Aspen, Colorado in the moose sequence. It is striking with what detail the 5000 inhabitants' town is described in terms of its culture, location and relation to the animals featured in the episode. An alternative, or cynical, reading of the omission of Victoria Falls from the episode could be that *Night on Earth*'s producers were aware of the lack of geographical education in general

[12] To do this, I took stills from *Sleepless Cities'* elephant sequence that contained some spatial references (such as street names, shopping malls, and the train station) and used them for an image-based Google search. All results pointed toward Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe being the filming location of *Sleepless Cities*' elephant sequence.

Western audiences and thought that revealing that Africa is, in fact, a continent with many diverse nations could break with the dominant (self-centered) worldview of US-Americans. However subtle, the portrayal of the city through which the elephant herd migrates, is indicative of a Western perspective of superiority and ignorance that still perpetuates a myth about Africa that justified the Antlantic Slave Trade and the oppression of people of colour.

Overall, it seems as if the permeability of nature-culture boundaries in *Night on Earth: Sleepless Cities* is highly dependent on *where* the relationship is situated. Whenever we encounter human-animal relations in the series that are structured hierarchically, with the human being a subject and the animal being an object, the nature-culture binary is reinforced through narration and the presentation of space, which predominantly happen to be located in "the West". This is the case for the black-bellied hamsters in Vienna, the vaux-swifts in Portland, the moose in Anchorage and the diamond-backed terrapins in Manhattan, as each sequence reproduces a version of an aestheticised subject-object relation. In contrast, those sequences that show nature-culture boundaries being transgressed, mostly take place in non-Western urban settings, for instance in Lopburi or Mumbai. In this way, the episode negotiates nature-culture relations through space not on a universal human referent but can be distinguished into on one hand rigid borders between the Western human and the animal and on the other, the fluid and symbiotic assemblages between non-Western humans and non-human animals. Although the latter is represented in a rather negative way in *Sleepless Cities*, I would like to argue that this precisely is where the potential for post-anthropocentric human-animal relations lies.

Although historically, Lefebvre argued from an anthropocentric point of view that sought to expand (only) the human *Right to the City*, cultural studies scholars such as Lewis have recently proposed that in times of the pandemic "we are now in a position to pose this question to non-human animal co-dwellers who have occupied the streets" (Lewis 2). It

seems as if the pandemic has brought about a qualitative shift in Western thinking about the relation between cities and nature. This could also allow for alternative figurations of human-animal relations in wildlife documentaries. However, when we look at how animals are situated in *Sleepless Cities,* it becomes clear that human-animal assemblages in urban environments are neither a novelty nor an exception and that these entanglements are often highly complex in their situated specificity. The focus of *Sleepless Cities* on "nighttime worlds" exemplified that before the pandemic "non-human [urban] co-dwellers live[d] subaltern lives, in shadows and sewers, only venturing out under the protective cloak of darkness" (Lewis 2). When looking at the dichotomous nature-culture discourse that the episodes' Western perspective portrays, we can see how *Night on Earth: Sleepless Cities* reconstructs the boundaries between nature and culture through the use and domination of territory. In this way, *Sleepless Cities'* portrayal of urban space allows for a depiction of boundary-crossing urban wildlife without calling Western constructions around the nature-culture binary into question.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, I wondered how the "returning" of animals to urban environments during the pandemic appeared as such a sensation and surprise to many humans. In order to study the ways in which we think about nature-culture relations, I investigated how *Night on Earth*: *Sleepless Cites'* portrayal of animals in urban environments can reinforce or challenge the nature-culture dichotomy. To do this, I firstly contextualised the series within its genre and Western hegemonic representations of nature. In this way, I showed that the portrayal of 'nature' is never a neutral representation of reality, but rests on Western notions of how humans ought to relate to the non-human world. Moreover, by tracing how the Romantic sublime and the aesthetics of 'scientificness' affect the portrayal

and perception of nature in documentary film, I explained how the genre propagates its claim to 'absolute truth and knowledge' despite historical and ongoing (academic) criticism of photographic truth.

In the second chapter, I have used these insights to create a cartography of *Sleepless Cities* that maps the portrayal of different types of human-animal relations situated in urban spaces. In the cartography, I distinguished between 'cute' and 'exotic' animals that can either be classified as "Visitors" or "Residents" to urban spaces. In this way, I could map the different figurations of human-animal relations in *Sleepless Cities* and how they correlate to the relationship they maintain to the city. As I have argued throughout the second and third chapter of this thesis, urban 'visitors' are usually embraced as a visual spectacle, whereas 'residents' entertain either the position of invaders or are contained into controllable areas, such as the Viennese cemetery.

Finally, the third chapter explored the relationship between the different human-animal assemblages and the City in order to expose how Western conceptions of space are embedded in the portrayal of nature-culture relations in *Sleepless Cities*. With this, I aimed to point towards ways in which urban spaces can be seen not as one end of the nature-culture continuum, but instead function as a vital space to (re)negotiate human-animal relations. By drawing on spatial and cultural theorist Henri Lefebvres' work on the *Right to the City,* I showed how non-human urban inhabitants are normatively denied a right to urban life. With this I join Tyson Lewis' call to extend this right to non-human urban inhabitants and hope to see these changing conceptions around naturecultures to enter the realm of wildlife documentary.

In order to determine how the pandemic affected Western conceptions of human-animal relationships in urban spaces and their representation, I would recommend further investigation of the genre of nature documentaries in respect to their portrayal of these

relations. A quantitative study of these portrayals could reveal how the culturally constructed boundaries between nature and culture have and will become more and more permeable.

Works Cited

Agence France-Presse. “Coronavirus: wild animals take back world’s empty city streets as people stay indoors”. *South China Morning Post*, 30 March 2020, www.scmp.com/news/world/article/3077518/coronavirus-wild-animals-take-back-worlds-empty-city-streets-people-stay. Accessed 8 June 2021.

“Aggressive Moose”*, Alaska Department of Fish and Game*, www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=livewith.aggressivemoose. Accessed 14 June 2021.

Bousé Derek. *Wildlife Films*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000.

Bowen-Jones, Evan, and Abigail Entwistle. “Identifying Appropriate Flagship Species: the Importance of Culture and Local Contexts.” *Oryx*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2002, pp. 189–195. *Researchgate*, doi:10.1017/S0030605302000261.

Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity Press, 2013.

Chaiwat, Phrakhru Palad, et al. “Conserving the Culture of Phra Prang Shrines in Thailand: The State of Ceremonial Customs in Three Thai Prang.” *Asian Culture and History*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2014. *ccsenet.org*, doi:10.5539/ach.v6n2p33.

Chris, Cynthia. *Watching Wildlife*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Crary, Jonathan. “Modernizing Vision.” *Vision and Visuality*. edited by Hal Foster, New Press, 1999, pp. 29–44.

"Documentary, adj. and n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/56332. Accessed 14 June 2021.

Egerer, Monika, and Sascha Buchholz. “Reframing Urban ‘Wildlife’ to Promote Inclusive Conservation Science and Practice.” *Biodiversity and Conservation*, vol. 30, no. 7, 2021, pp. 2255–2266. *Springer*, doi:10.1007/s10531-021-02182-y.

Ferrando, Francesca. “Towards a Posthumanist Methodology: A Statement.” *Journal of Literary Studies,* vol. 25, 2012, pp. 9-18. *ResearchGate,* www.researchgate.net/publication/270900549_Towards_a_Posthumanist_Methodology_A_Statement.

Fox Keller, Evelyn. “The Biological Gaze.” *FutureNatural: Nature, Science, Culture*, edited by George Robertson, Routledge, 1996, pp. 107–120.

“Habitat.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, Cambridge University Press, dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/habitat. Accessed 14 June 2021.

Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *The Companion Species Manifesto Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*. MTM, 2020.

Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 2015.

Ivakhiv, Adrian J. *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013.

Kolnberger, Thomas. “Cemeteries and Urban Form: a Historico-Geographical Approach.” *Urban Morphology*, 13 Feb. 2018, hdl.handle.net/10993/38441.

Kropotkin, Petr Alekseevich. *Mutual Aid: a Factor of Evolution*. Dover Publications, 2006.

Kruger, Daniel J., and Steven A. Miller. "Non-mammalian infants dependent on parental care elicit greater kindchenschema-related perceptions and motivations in humans." *Human Ethology Bulletin*, vol. 31, 2016, pp. 15-24. *Researchgate*, 10.22330/heb/311/015024.

Lefebvre, H. . *Writings on the Cities*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996.

“Living With Moose, Alaska Department of Fish and Game.” *Alaska Department of Fish and Game*, www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=livewith.moose. Accessed 14 June 2021.

Mitman, Gregg. “Pachyderm Personalities: The Media of Science, Politics, and Conservation.” *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, edited by Lorraine Datson and Gregg Mitman, Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 175–195.

“Night on Earth.” *Netflix Official Site*, 29 Jan. 2020, www.netflix.com/nl-en/title/80218938.

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana University Press, 2017.

Pick, Anat. *The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television*, edited by Michael Hauskeller et al., Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015, pp. 311–320.

“Population of Cities in Zimbabwe (2021)”, *World Population Review*, 2021, worldpopulationreview.com/countries/cities/zimbabwe.

Richter, Linda K. *The Politics of Tourism in Asia*. University of Hawaii Press, 2019.

Roosenburg, Willem, et al. “Malaclemys terrapin, Diamondback Terrapin”, *THE IUCN RED LIST OF THREATENED SPECIES*™. 10.2305/IUCN.UK.2019-1.RLTS.T12695A507698.en, 2019.

Sheehan, P., et al. “Against the Image: Herzog and the Troubling Politics of the Screen Animal.” *SubStance*, vol. 37, no. 3, 2008, pp. 117–136., doi:10.1353/sub.0.0023.

Siegel, Sarita. “Reflections on Anthropomorphism in The Disenchanted Forest.” *Thinking with Animals New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, edited by Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman, Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 196–222.

“Sleepless Cities.” *Night on Earth,* directed by Jo Harvey, voice-over performance by Smira Wiley, episode 5, Plimsoll Productions, 29. January 2020, *Netflix*, www.netflix.com/nl-en/title/80218938.

Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

“The Urban Wild: Animals Take to the Streets amid Lockdown – in Pictures.” The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 22 Apr. 2020, www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2020/apr/22/animals-roaming-streets-coronavirus-lockdown-photos.

UNESCO World Heritage Centre. “Mosi-Oa-Tunya / Victoria Falls.” *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*, whc.unesco.org/en/list/509/. Accessed 14 June 2021.

“Urban Wildlife Basics.” *The Urban Wildlife Working Group*, urbanwildlifegroup.org/urban-wildlife-information. Accessed 14 June 2021.

"Vermin." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster,

www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vermin. Accessed 14 June 2021.