

## Beyond Speciesism: Exploring the Interconnected Minds of Humans and Animals in *Charlie 777* and *The Elephant Whisperers*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the deconstruction of speciesist orders and the redefinition of human-animal affinities in the films *Charlie 777* (2021) and *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022). Both movies question anthropocentrism by illustrating nonhuman beings not as inactive subjects but as emotionally conscious individuals with inherent worth. *The Elephant Whisperers* foregrounds elephants as self-reliant beings, critiquing their historical exploitation in labor, amusement, and preservation tourism while endorsing multispecies justice and moral coexistence. The film aligns with Donna Haraway's vision of "becoming-with," demonstrating how the caretakers Bomman and Bellie construct an interdependent connection with the orphaned elephant Raghu, which transforms their own individualities. Furthermore, the documentary reviews Western preservation frameworks, supporting for indigenous ecological standpoints that accentuate reciprocity rather than control. Similarly, *Charlie 777* critiques speciesist biases by questioning societal perceptions of stray animals and disclosing the commodification of pets in the commercial breeding enterprise. Dharma's emotional transformation—from secluded, unconcerned man to a sympathetic caregiver—aligns with Peter Singer's and Tom Regan's calls for extending moral concern beyond human interests. The movie also critiques urbanization's function in displacing nonhuman lives, resounding with Timothy Morton's vision of "hyperobjects"—vast, human-driven pressures such as urban expansion that marginalize nonhuman agents while remaining invisible in human discourse. Both movies utilize digital storytelling as a device to disrupt anthropocentric prejudices, using close-ups, slow-motion sequences, and immersive soundscapes to enable empathy toward nonhuman experiences. This aligns with Cary Wolfe's statement that visual media can challenge hard-core humanist perspectives by illustrating animal subjectivity more inclusively. This paper asserts that *Charlie 777* and *The Elephant Whisperers* serve as critical interventions in current controversies regarding speciesism, conservation, and multispecies justice. By exploring these films through posthumanist, eco-critical, and animal studies frameworks, this study underscores the requirement for reconsidering legal, environmental, and urban policies to construct a more inclusive ethical paradigm in the Anthropocene.

## KEYWORDS

Speciesism, Multispecies Justice, Posthumanism, Anthropocentrism, Digital Storytelling

## 1 | INTRODUCTION: UNLEARNING THE HUMAN GAZE

In our pursuit to comprehend the complex intricacies of human intellect, we often ignore the vivid resemblances that exist between human cognition and the cognitive proficiency of animals. For centuries, speciesism has dominated human perspectives and actions toward nonhuman animals, reinforcing a hierarchical belief that positions humans at the top of the cognitive ladder. However, contemporary scientific findings and philosophical inquiries have shed light on the interconnectedness of human and animal intellects, questioning the very foundations of speciesism.

*Charlie 777* is a Kannada-language Indian movie released in 2021. It tells the story of the affinity that develops between a recluse named Dharma and his dog, Charlie, and how adopting Charlie transforms his life. Similarly, *The Elephant Whisperers*, an Indian documentary film from 2022 that won an Academy Award, depicts the bond between a couple and Raghu, an orphaned elephant placed in their care.

This paper delves into the notion of moving beyond speciesism, highlighting the growing body of evidence and perspectives that endorse the interconnectedness between human and animal cognition. By analyzing *Charlie 777* and *The Elephant Whisperers*, this study examines how these narratives challenge speciesist hierarchies and illustrate an alternative, interconnected model of human-animal relationships. Additionally, it explores how these films critique the exploitation of animals in modern society, particularly through pet breeding and habitat destruction, exposing the ethical and environmental consequences of human dominance. Furthermore, this research engages with theoretical frameworks such as Donna Haraway's notion of companion species and posthumanist critiques of anthropocentrism, demonstrating how human-animal relationships challenge traditional boundaries and foster reciprocal recognition.

## 2 | THEORIZING SPECIESISM AND HUMAN-ANIMAL BOUNDARIES

The term speciesism was first introduced by Richard Ryder in 1970. He contends that speciesists fail to expand their moral consideration to nonhuman animals, stating that they "reject the notion of elementary rights for nonhuman animals" (Ryder 5). Tom Regan and Peter Singer also depict speciesism as "bias against all other animals and toward humans" (Regan 99; Singer 6). Singer extends on this, characterizing speciesism as "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favour of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (7).

The essential arguments created against sexism and racism also apply to speciesism. As Singer inquires, "If having more intelligence does not give one person the right to use another for their own gain, then how can humans use nonhuman beings for the same purpose?" (8). By drawing resemblances between speciesism and other forms of prejudice, Singer calls into question the moral justification of human hegemony over nonhuman species.

Nonetheless, Joan Dunayer critiques these connotations as excessively restrictive, arguing that speciesism involves bias not only against nonhuman animals but also between different species. She explains, “Speciesism includes bias toward or against any number of animal species, such as bias against all nonmammals, bias against humans and other apes, bias toward primates and cetaceans, or bias toward any combination of these” (Dunayer 36). Dunayer differentiates between “old speciesism”, which depends on religious explanations for animal exploitation, and “new speciesism”, which presumes human domination more modestly and selectively (38). She critiques biblical justifications for animal domination, stating, “The Bible also endorses human enslavement and, in many cases, murder; therefore, Biblical endorsement fails as a defence of old speciesism” (40).

Speciesists often claim that human intelligence and language abilities justify human authority over animals. However, Donna Haraway calls into question this concept through her idea of “significant otherness”, which deconstructs the hierarchical boundaries between humans and other nonhuman animals (Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* 15). Haraway contends that “conventional visions of human exceptionalism and speciesism have shaped the way we view and treat other beings in the natural world” (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 3). She proponent for breaking down obstacles that distinguish humans from animals, accentuating the interconnectedness and interdependencies of all living entities (*The Companion Species Manifesto* 19).

One of Haraway’s key ideas is “companion species”, which inquires the traditional human-animal contradiction. She proclaims that humans should acknowledge themselves as co-evolving with other species, rather than assuming dominance over them (*When Species Meet* 25). This perspective aligns with a broader posthumanist analysis of anthropocentrism, suggesting that “Humans and animals do not simply coexist; they actively shape each other’s existences in complex and reciprocal ways” (*The Companion Species Manifesto* 20). By understanding and respecting the implication of human-animal associations, Haraway calls into question the hierarchical structures that strengthen speciesism, endorsing a more ethical and reciprocal multispecies coexistence.

### 3 | MOVING TOWARD A POST-SPECIESIST FUTURE

By exploring *Charlie 777* and *The Elephant Whisperers*, this paper accentuates how popular media platforms can question speciesist hierarchies and stimulate multispecies ethics. The affinities between Dharma and Charlie and the caretakers and Raghu indicate that companion species associations are founded on reciprocity rather than dominance.

These movies align with Singer’s utilitarian discussion for decreasing animal agony, Regan’s call for acknowledging animals as subjects-of-a-life, and Haraway’s notion of interspecies co-evolution. They also disclose the exploitative outcomes of pet breeding and habitat demolition, strengthening the moral and environmental necessity of reconsidering human-animal connections in the Anthropocene.

As posthumanist hypotheses propose, moving beyond speciesism needs a rudimentary transformation in human perspectives—a readiness to admit nonhuman agency, awareness, and emotional complexity. By adopting a multispecies framework, we can shift toward a destiny where humans and animals coexist in manners that are moral, just, and mutually enhancing.

#### **4 | THE ELEPHANT WHISPERER AND NONHUMAN AGENCY IN DIGITAL STORYTELLING**

In the Anthropocene, where human actions build planetary ecosystems, nonhuman life is constantly relegated to the edge of moral, political, and narrative contemplation. Prevalent discourses—whether in scientific literature, preservation guidelines, or popular media platforms—tend to craft animals either as resources for human benefit or as conceptual characters of ecological emergency (Heise 112). This anthropocentric prejudice expands to wildlife documentaries, which historically place animals as entities of human observation, strengthening speciesist orders (Derrida 11).

However, the Oscar-winning documentary *The Elephant Whisperer* (2022) proposes a profound examination of human-nonhuman affinities by recording the in-depth emotional bonds between humans and orphaned elephants in Mudumalai National Park, India. Unlike ancestral wildlife documentaries that place animals as inactive subjects of human observation, *The Elephant Whisperer* shifts the chronology, bestowing elephants' agency and emotional profundity. Through intimate cinematography, subjective storytelling, and more arrangement, the movie challenges speciesist doctrines and champions a more unbiased multispecies framework (Regan 243).

This research inquires into how *The Elephant Whisperer* devalues speciesism by offering elephants as independent beings with innate value. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's (2002) analysis of animal objectification, Tom Regan's (1983) rights-based method, Peter Singer's (1975) utilitarian morals, and Ursula Heise's (2016) idea of multispecies justice, this section explores how the documentary reshapes human perceptions of nonhuman life, calling for moral co-existence in the Anthropocene.

#### **5 | CHALLENGING SPECIESISM: ELEPHANTS AS SUBJECTS, NOT OBJECTS**

Speciesism is perceptible in *The Elephant Whisperer* through its inspection of habitat devastation and environmental destruction. The movie illustrates how anthropogenic climate change, deforestation, and urban encroachment have led to the loss of elephant habitats, compelling elephants into human territories where they are often seen as dangers rather than victims (Heise 120). The film contests this speciesist viewpoint, holding humans accountable for the banishment of wildlife rather than condemning elephants for intruding on human spaces.

In the documentary, speciesism manifests in the historical exploitation of elephants—whether for work, amusement, or conservation tourism—where their independence is frequently ignored in favour of human comfort (Singer 8). However, the film vigorously withstands speciesist portrayals by introducing elephants not as commodities or ecological aids, but as emotionally complex individuals (Regan 245).

At the same time, the film brings out the interdependence between humans and animals, illustrating Mudumalai National Park's Indigenous neighbourhoods as harmoniously coexisting with nature. These communities revere the woodland as a mother figure and exercise sustainable living, taking only what they require for survival (Dunayer 36). This stance questions Western preservation standards that usually prioritize species conservation over individual animal welfare (Heise 130).

## 6 | MUTUAL BECOMING: THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

This documentary takes spectators into the soul of an elephant camp, where woodland rangers work together to look after orphaned elephants. The movie pursues the journey of Bomman and Bellie and the youthful elephant Raghu, whose herd roamed into a village searching for water after his mother was electrocuted.

Bomman and Bellie's bond with Raghu exemplifies Donna Haraway's concept of "becoming-with", which suggests that "human and nonhuman lives are deeply entangled, shaping each other in ways that challenge the notion of isolated subjectivity" (Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* 34). Despite losing her husband to an elephant invasion, Bellie does not become aggrieved toward elephants. Instead, her fondness for Raghu transcends fear and loss, exemplifying the profound emotional interdependence between humans and nonhumans (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 25).

The documentary's close cinematography—including close-ups of elephants' gazes, mischievous interactions, and instants of mourning—compels spectators to acknowledge nonhuman subjectivity aligns with Derrida's statement, "The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it" (11). Derrida critiques Western philosophy's refusal of animal consciousness, asserting that nonhuman beings possess thought and existence that question anthropocentric explanations of subjectivity (15).

By recording the elephants' reactions to human affection—through playful motions, vocalizations, and moments of quiet companionship—the film breaks down the orthodox human-animal binary (Regan 245). It implies that elephants, like humans, experience loss, bonding, and emotional intelligence in ways that need ethical recognition (Singer 10).

## 7 | MULTISPECIES JUSTICE AND ETHICAL CO-EXISTENCE

Beyond challenging speciesism, *The Elephant Whisperer* employs multispecies justice, a moral framework that acknowledges the interconnected futures of human and nonhuman communities (Heise 125). Ursula Heise contends, "Conservation has often prioritized species survival over the well-being of individual animals, neglecting the ethical dimension of multispecies entanglements" (120).

The documentary critiques this utilitarian approach by accentuating the subjective experiences of the orphaned elephants, exhibiting their emotional agony when displaced due to deforestation. This banishment is crafted not just as an environmental emergency but as a moral injustice (128).

## 8 | DIGITAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR NONHUMAN REPRESENTATION

One of the most noteworthy characteristics of *The Elephant Whisperer* is its use of digital media platforms to endorse nonhuman standpoints. Cary Wolfe asserts that conventional humanist portrayals have long banned nonhuman mouthpieces, but "the rise of digital storytelling creates new possibilities for representing animal subjectivity" (34). By using intimate close-ups of elephants' articulations, slow-motion sequences of elephants interacting, and natural soundscapes that grasp their vocalizations, the documentary positions spectators in close proximity to nonhuman experience. This sensory immersion stimulates empathy, questioning anthropocentric prejudices that typically render animal suffering invisible (37).

## 9 | RETHINKING HUMAN-NONHUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

*The Elephant Whisperer* performs as a potent intervention in recent controversies on speciesism, conservation ethics, and multispecies justice. By repudiating traditional wildlife documentary tropes that objectify animals, the movie gives elephants agency, sentiment, and ethical importance (Regan 250). Through Derrida's commentary on animal objectification, Singer's utilitarian principles, Regan's rights-based approach, and Heise's multispecies justice framework, the documentary challenges anthropocentric portrayals and proponents for more moral human-animal associations.

Finally, *The Elephant Whisperer* calls for a revolutionary reflection of how humans perceive and interact with nonhuman life, encouraging audiences to move beyond speciesist presumptions toward a more inclusive moral paradigm during the Anthropocene.

## 10 | CHARLIE 777 AND THE POLITICS OF COMPANION SPECIES

*Charlie 777* (2021) introduces a poignant narrative that redefines human-animal associations by foregrounding the emotional and ethical significance of interspecies companionship. The film observes the portrayal of Dharma, a man initially indifferent to the suffering of nonhuman beings, and Charlie, a deserted Labrador whose presence slowly converts Dharma's worldviews. More than merely a sentimental retelling of human-animal bonding, *Charlie 777* immerses with essential discourses on speciesism, urbanization, and the moral worth of animals, championing a more inclusive ethical framework.

Through compact textual analysis and theoretical employment with Donna Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), Cary Wolfe's *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010), and the animal rights philosophies of Peter Singer (1975) and Tom Regan (1983), this research investigates how the movie inquires anthropocentric principles and reimagines human-nonhuman affinities in the Anthropocene.

## 11 | SPECIESISM AND THE POLITICS OF NONHUMAN SUBJECTIVITY

In *Charlie 777*, speciesism manifests in the way Dharma initially perceives Charlie—as an expendable disruption rather than a self-reliant being deserving of maintenance and fondness. Dharma's unwillingness to bond with Charlie contemplates broader societal norms to consider stray animals as uncharitable beings, unworthy of moral concern (Singer 21). Nonetheless, as the narrative unfolds, Dharma goes through a conversion that reverberates the ethical transformations endorsed by Singer and Regan. His thriving tenderness for Charlie makes him rethink his beliefs about nonhuman life, ultimately conceding the dog's emotional depth and moral worth (Regan 81).

The film employs myriad cinematic procedures to call into question speciesist viewpoints and highlight nonhuman subjectivity. Close-up shots of Charlie's expressive face, the instants of his seclusion, and his responses to human behaviour stress his agency and emotional complicatedness. By centring Charlie's Standpoint, the film aligns with Cary Wolfe's argument that visual media platforms can be a powerful mechanism for disrupting anthropocentric prejudices (103). Wolfe asserts that conventional humanist frameworks have long banned nonhuman standpoints, but digital media proposes new opportunities for acknowledging animals as active participants rather than inactive commodities (112).

## 12 | THE ETHICS OF PET BREEDING AND COMMODIFICATION

The movie also critiques the commodification of pets in modern civilization. Despite the profound emotional bonds between humans and their pets, pet ownership remains entangled with the alarming narrative of pet breeding and commercialization (Ritvo 127).

### 12.1 | THE DARK SIDE OF PET OWNERSHIP

Historian Harriet Ritvo (1987) calls attention to how pet culture in the 19th century correlated devotion to animals with supervision and domination (146). The movie immerses with this problem in a pivotal scene where a puppy evades a breeder's facility, disclosing the harsh situations in the pet industry. Pet breeding mirrors human power over animal lives, converting them into commodities rather than acknowledging them as conscious beings (DeMello 45).

### 12.2 | THE ETHICAL DILEMMA OF BREEDING PRACTICES

Animal behaviourist Konrad Lorenz depicts pets as "social parasites," thriving on human fondness while remaining dependent and subordinate (Lorenz 67). Likewise, Singer critiques breeding as a profit-driven procedure rather than an act of authentic consideration for animal welfare (57). He debates the assertion that breeding is indispensable for species survival, noting that "bringing a being into existence does not necessarily confer a benefit on that being" (78).

In *Charlie 777*, Charlie's deteriorating health due to coerced mating discloses the impacts of the commodification of animal life. The film's portrayal of Charlie's eventual demise from cancer strengthens DeMello's *Comprehension*: "How much do we really love our pets if we continue breeding them in ways that shorten their lifespans and reduce their quality of life?" (92).

## 13 | URBANIZATION AND THE DISPLACEMENT OF NONHUMAN LIVES

The film critiques urbanization as a power that marginalizes and displaces nonhuman lives. The Metropolis, portrayed as an unforgiving and aggressive atmosphere for Charlie, echoes the Anthropocene's ethical dilemmas—where nonhuman beings are systematically banned from human-dominated areas (Morton 34).

Timothy Morton (2013) claims that the Anthropocene is shaped by "hyperobjects"—vast, complicated phenomena like climate change and deforestation that arise from human action yet remain mostly hidden in everyday life (15). Charlie's battle for survival in a metropolitan environment operates as a microcosmic manifestation of this problem, embodying how animals are coerced to adjust to climates that were never planned for their well-being (Morton 29).

The movie thus compels spectators to rethink who has the freedom to occupy urban spaces and challenges the anthropocentric hypothesis that municipalities exist exclusively for human advantage. This commentary aligns with posthumanist perspectives that champion inclusive, multispecies metropolitan planning (Wolfe 116).

## 14 | TOWARDS A POST-SPECIESIST FUTURE

In *Charlie 777*, Dharma's conversion from an apathetic urban inhabitant to a proponent for animal welfare embodies the prospect of reconsidering human-animal affinities. The movie aligns with Singer's utilitarian call for diminishing suffering and Regan's assertion for acknowledging animals as subjects with intrinsic privileges. By portraying Charlie as an individual rather than an object, the movie calls into question speciesism and the commodification of nonhuman lives. Also, it critiques the moral negligence of urbanization, encouraging spectators to embrace a more inclusive ethical framework that recognizes the interconnectedness of all species.

As Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto* implies, interspecies affinities are co-constitutive—humans and animals shape one another's essences in ways that outshine hierarchical norms of dominance (26). *Charlie 777* epitomizes this doctrine, establishing that true companionship emerges not from ownership but from reciprocal respect and recognition.

## 15 | CONCLUSION: RETHINKING HUMAN-NONHUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

The convergence of speciesism, urbanization, conservation principles, and digital media platforms recreate an important position in shaping current human-animal associations. Both *The Elephant Whisperers* and *Charlie 777* question conventional anthropocentric worldviews, endorsing a multispecies moral framework that acknowledges nonhuman agency, emotional profundity, and ingrained worth. These movies deny speciesist orders, critique human authority over nature, and offer alternative instances of coexistence that underscore reciprocity and justice rather than exploitation and possession.

In *The Elephant Whisperers*, elephants are no longer depicted as inactive entities of human observation but as emotionally conscious beings, capable of sorrow, happiness, and companionship. The movie holds humans responsible for habitat devastation, reframing human-wildlife disputes as a manifestation of anthropogenic environmental degradation rather than an inherent animal aggression. Through Bomman and Bellie's bond with Raghu, the movie epitomizes Haraway's concept of "becoming with," demonstrating how nonhuman agents vigorously reshape human sentiments, individualities, and principles. Likewise, the documentary aligns with Heise's notion of multispecies justice, asserting that preservation efforts must prioritize individual animal interests alongside species survival. By denying Western protection frameworks that prioritize ecological metrics over moral contemplations, the film advocates indigenous norms of coexistence that enable reciprocity rather than human authority.

Similarly, *Charlie 777* critiques speciesist prejudices toward stray animals, disclosing how urbanization and pet commodification reinforce human exceptionalism. The film represents Charlie, a stray Labrador, as a self-reliant being rather than a sheer possession, calling into question societal standards that marginalize nonhuman lives in metropolitan spaces. Dharma's transformation—from an emotionally detached person to a compassionate caregiver—reflects Singer's utilitarian opinion that ethical consideration must expand beyond human welfare. Similarly, the movie accentuates the exploitative exercises of commercial pet breeding, beefing up Ritvo's and DeMello's critiques of how contemporary pet ownership is intensely entangled with human supervision and

commodification. In contrast to traditional humanist narratives that ameliorate animals to emblems or companions, *Charlie 777* introduces nonhuman agency as foremost to human moral modification, indicating how interspecies affinities disrupt hierarchical limitations.

Both movies also accentuate the function of media platforms in shifting cultural records on animal principles. By utilizing close-ups, slow-motion sequences, and immersive soundscapes, these movies foster empathy toward non-human ventures, aligning with Wolfe's opinion that digital storytelling can neutralize anthropocentric prejudices and reframe nonhuman subjectivity in the general consciousness. Besides, their international spread throughout the digital streaming platforms emphasizes the prospect of optical media to shape general discourse on preservation, animal rights, and multispecies standards.

## 16 | FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH AND ETHICAL ACTION

Given the essence of these movies in questioning human-animal hierarchies, future studies should investigate:

1. Multispecies urban planning that incorporates nonhuman contemplations into city structure.
2. Legal frameworks for animal liberties, comprising protections for stray animals and the moral ordinance of pet breeding.
3. The function of media platforms in reshaping general perceptions of nonhuman agency and endorsing animal interest.

Additional comparative introspections on nonhuman agency in international films could explore how diverse cultural portrayals challenge or strengthen speciesist doctrines. Besides, a study on indigenous preservation norms may present alternative moral frameworks for sustainable human-animal coexistence, changing direction from utilitarian preservation to mutual multispecies justice. Posthumanist inquiries into digital storytelling and its impact on disrupting anthropocentric presumptions could also exacerbate hypothetical conversations on how media platforms shape moral thinking in the Anthropocene.

Finally, as humankind grapples with environmental emergencies, biodiversity loss, and moral quandaries encircling nonhuman life, *The Elephant Whisperers* and *Charlie 777* perform essential interventions that encourage us to reconsider our affinities with nonhuman beings. These movies remind us that nonhuman lives are not peripheral to moral lessons but prominent to our shared planetary destiny. Moral human-animal coexistence, as these films recommend, mandates not only visionary concentration but also substantial action—acknowledging nonhuman agency, stimulating righteousness, and producing durable, inclusive atmospheres where humans and animals coexist.

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