

Becoming Animal – How our Relationship with Nature, connected with the Senses, has developed to where we are now. [A Film Review]

Dorit Nafshy

„As we humans are spending more and more time entranced by our artifacts, caught up in a dazzle of the digital screen, it enables us not to notice, not to feel, what’s really going on in the body’s world.“

Becoming Animal by Emma Davie and David Mettler in collaboration with the philosopher David Abram, is an ambitious cinematic expression of the comparatively young philosophical movement, predominantly situated in academic circles, which attempts to rethink the relationship of humans to their non-human, artificial environment. In this context, catchwords such as Anthropocene, New Materialism, Posthumanism, Transhumanism or Speculative Realism represent a paradigm shift in that the role of the human being in his worldly structure is questioned, as are increasingly outdated definitions of the body, the effectiveness of the things around us and their influence on our actions, as well as the shifts in the boundaries of human and technology.

As a common drive, it can be said that numerous global political phenomena and challenges require a fundamental, radical and immediate rethink, which is not limited to the development, marketing and subjugation of technological solutions. Pragmatic approaches such as green technology and conscious consumption only become effective in conjunction with a liberation from the conceptual isolation into which man has maneuvered himself as a supposedly unique and autocratic species on this planet.

Becoming Animal deals with ways out of this isolation and starts with the foundations of human self-location in the world - sensual perception, linguistic representation and technological encasement. Abram, protagonist of "New Materialism" in the face of a radically transformed sense of matter and materiality, understands perception not as a distanced view, but as an interaction between man and environment. We are part of the world which we perceive and which in turn perceives us. When we see a stone, our sense of sight is only completed by the experience of the stone. When we touch a tree, it also touches us and captures the chemical composition of our skin. Experiencing the world without being dependent on it and connected to it is impossible. The idea of distanced observation and thus physical distance from the environment is therefore an illusion that obscures physical participation in the environment and its non-human elements.

In the 1990s, Abram coined the phrase "the more-than-human world" as a way of referring to earthly nature, and has occasionally been called one of the leading contemporary philosophers to advocate a reappraisal of "animism" as a complexly nuanced and uniquely viable worldview. One which roots human cognition in the dynamic sentience of the body while affirming the ongoing entanglement of our bodily experience with the uncanny sentience of other life forms, each of which encounters the same world that we perceive yet from an outrageously different angle and perspective. As a film, *Becoming Animal* cannot, of course, bridge the gap – but it can provide thought-provoking impulses, which – and why not as a part of a larger movement – will possibly bring about a fundamental rethink.

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Dorit Nafshy, September 2019

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