

ANIMAL ADAPTATIONS: Film Adaptations of Literary Animal Characters, from the Silent Screen to Hollywood's Golden Age

POPULAR SUMMARY

Have you ever wondered how your favorite animal characters from books come to life on the big screen? Think about Lassie, White Fang, or the adventurous Buck in *The Call of the Wild*. Turning these beloved tales into movies is no small feat, especially when the stars are non-human actors. This project explores the fascinating world of adapting animal fiction into film, focusing on movies made between 1919 and 1970 (a few of the books were written earlier). While some of the novels we are looking at have won Pulitzers and some movies have been nominated for Oscars, others are considered a form of popular entertainment or are intended for a purely juvenile audience. What unites them all is the presence of major animal characters.

Adaptation studies deals with the process of turning a book into a movie, but so far scholars have not focused on adaptations of texts with animal characters. When a story moves from the page to the screen, especially a story featuring animals, everything changes. The way animals are portrayed, the kind of scenes they are involved in, and even the fact that in films we hear their sounds and see their movement changes our reception of the text. So, what happens to these animal characters during this transformation?

Our project aims to answer some intriguing questions: How do filmmakers decide which parts of an animal's story to keep and which to change and how do the limitations of working with animal actors influence such choices? How do literary techniques of depicting an animal's mind (free indirect discourse, first-person narration) translate into film techniques? Are some aesthetic categories (for example, cuteness) associated only with one of the two media? How does having a live animal (or multiple animals) on set affect the way a movie is made? And what ethical issues arise when using real animals in film production?

We are not just looking at the fun stuff—we are also digging into the serious side: the ethical issues related to the process of making movies with animals. One reason why we are looking at non-animated movies, is because it is the liveness of the actors that is key for our approach. For example, did you know that real horses died during the filming of *Jesse James* (1939), which led to the creation of the American Humane Association's label "No animals were harmed during the making of this movie." There are also many instances where the behavior of animal in the movie is meant to be read one way (e.g. the animal is happy), while an ethologist's eye can easily spot that this interpretation is incorrect (e.g. the animal is highly stressed).

This project is not just about the past; it is about understanding how we treat animals in entertainment today. Even though modern movies often use CGI, real animals are still sometimes used, and controversies can arise if they're mistreated. By looking back at Hollywood's Golden Age, we can learn how to do better now and in the future.

We are a team of experts digging into both the literature and the films, analyzing how the stories change and what that means for the animals involved. We are looking at everything from the sound of a dog's bark in a book versus in a movie to the ethical treatment of animal actors on set. This research is not just for academics. We want to share our findings with everyone—film producers, animal trainers, and even the movie-loving public. By understanding these adaptations better, we can push for more ethical treatment of animals in films and maybe even change the way stories are told.