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James Leo Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019. 395 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$112.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-5179-0215-5; \$28.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-5179-0216-2.

Review by Adam Lowenstein, University of Pittsburgh.

What is to be gained from putting Jean Painlevé under the microscope? The answer to this question offered by James Leo Cahill's exceptional study, *Zoological Surrealism*, is quite simply more than you probably ever imagined. After Cahill, Painlevé's significance for our understanding of film history, animal studies, Surrealism, and modern French scientific culture should never be doubted or minimized again. This is not to say that Painlevé, a unique combination of filmmaker, scientist, and Surrealist with a long and productive career beginning in the 1920s and extending into the 1970s, is a completely unknown figure. Two major previous studies devoted to him have provided important overviews and contexts for his work.[1] But by delving deep into Painlevé's archival materials and subjecting them to the sort of microscopic scrutiny that Painlevé himself gave to the organisms he studied and filmed, from the octopus to the seahorse to the vampire bat, Cahill presents Painlevé to us with a new richness and importance.

Zoological Surrealism is organized around the life and work of Painlevé from 1924 to 1949. Cahill focuses on these years because they coincide with transformative changes in French schools of thought attached to comparative anatomy, nonhumanist anthropology, and Surrealism—all foundational points of inspiration for Painlevé. This was also the period when Painlevé's films, most of which fall into the category of short (less than feature-length) documentaries chronicling the behavior of nonhuman animals, reached their widest audiences in France. Cahill's decision to delimit his study in this way is strategically sound. Although Painlevé continues to produce fascinating films long after 1949, *Zoological Surrealism* gives us definitive accounts of how Painlevé's cinematic project was formed and the keys to its significance, not only during the interwar and World War II period, but also today. In an era when scholarly attention has turned increasingly toward ecocriticism and the Anthropocene, Cahill's analysis of Painlevé's films as a "nonhuman cinema" that highlights film's "Copernican vocation" for "potentially revolutionary scientific discovery and anthropocentric displacement" feels very timely indeed (p. 3).

Across five chapters, *Zoological Surrealism* explores several seminal films by Painlevé, along with their historical, aesthetic, and philosophical implications. Cahill is as meticulous in his consultation of old and new scholarly thought as he is with Painlevé's own archive of written

and visual materials, so each chapter emerges as an intricate, multi-layered synthesis of biographical, theoretical, and cinematic detail. In prose that is critically sophisticated but admirably lucid (aided by a generous, skillfully selected gallery of black-and-white photographic illustrations), Cahill excavates a wide variety of interpretive lenses through which to understand these films without ever sacrificing the cinematic power of the films themselves. Even though we are exposed to just a fraction of Painlevé's filmography, we learn deeply by reading closely about each one of these remarkable films.

The first chapter focuses on *The Octopus* (1928), *The Daphnia* (1928), and *The Sea Urchins* (1928). These early films are especially instructive in terms of illustrating Painlevé's debts to the scientific discipline of comparative anatomy in which he was trained, as well as the Surrealist movement in which he participated. Cahill explains these influences, not only in his detailed analyses of the films that close the chapter, but in a preliminary discussion of Painlevé's "Neozoological Drama" (1924), an "experimental prose piece" published in the journal *Surréalisme* (p. 43). This text merges the scientific observation of the laboratory with the Surrealist aesthetics of disorientation in ways that would characterize Painlevé's work throughout his career. It is also worth noting that even at this early stage, Painlevé's access to institutions such as the Academy of Sciences, key Surrealist journals, and the popular press was enhanced by being the only child of Paul Painlevé, a well-known mathematician and politician.

Chapter two turns to several of Painlevé's films on crustaceans. *Caprella and Pantopoda* (1930), *Crabs and Shrimp* (1930), *The Hermit Crab* (1929/1931), and *Hyas and Stenorhynchus, Marine Crustaceans* (1931) are studied as documents of metamorphosis, particularly regarding Painlevé's changing relation to concepts of anthropomorphism. In one of the chapter's most exciting sections, Painlevé's friendship with the great Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein serves to connect the work of these two filmmakers around their shared investments in a "plasmatic anthropomorphism" that highlights "transformative and antifoundational potential" (p. 137). For Cahill, the promise of plasmatic anthropomorphism as developed by Painlevé and Eisenstein "intertwined evolutionary and revolutionary thinking into the utopian vision of a world in which everything was changeable" (p. 147).

The third chapter devotes itself to Painlevé's biggest commercial success, *The Seahorse* (1934). Cahill connects the film to André Breton's contemporaneous concept of *amour fou*, arguing that Painlevé's documentary "may be read as a parallel articulation of a Surrealist conception of love" (p. 160). Drawing on the seahorse's unusual reproductive behavior (it is the biological male of the species who gives birth, not the female), this chapter explores the potential challenges to conventional ideologies of gender and family embodied by the film. *The Seahorse* became a cultural phenomenon in France, as Cahill demonstrates by detailing the film's reception in the popular press and its inspiration for tie-in commodity forms such as a line of jewelry.

Chapter four focuses on Painlevé's fascination with the subject of blood, specifically how studies of blood in animal subjects provokes social, political, and even philosophical observations concerning humans. *Dr. Normet's Serum: Experimental Treatment of a Hemorrhage in a Dog* (1929), originally intended for medical professionals rather than popular audiences, documents a gruesome procedure that drains a dog of its blood, replaces it with a serum, and then brings the dog back to life. For Cahill, the film "allegorizes one of the driving fantasies of film as a technology of preservation and reanimation: the fight against the absoluteness of death by

means of a technologically realized afterlife” (p. 225). *The Vampire* (1939/1945) studies the blood-sucking vampire bat in a way that “implicates humans in animality,” particularly in relation to racially-driven discourses of contagion, colonialism, and fascism (p. 259).

The fifth and final chapter covers two Painlevé films that “clarify and expand the carnivorous dimension of social cinema,” where “the cinematic presentation of subjects that bite and eat flesh renders invisible forms of violence perceptible, concrete, and linked to a present moment...” (pp. 262-63). *Freshwater Assassins* (1947) is a feverishly paced exploration of carnivorous insects existing within a relentless cycle of eating and being eaten. Cahill notes that “the film’s attractions,” including a propulsive hot jazz score, “produce a vision of existence plagued by an insatiable appetite for destruction” (p. 272). This theme carried profound resonance in the postwar historical moment, and it haunts *Blood of the Beasts* (1949) as well.

Blood of the Beasts, a harrowing Surrealist descent into the abattoirs of Paris, is likely the Painlevé project most familiar to film historians today. But it is also an exception. It features voice-over commentary written by Painlevé, but it was directed by the extraordinary Left Bank *auteur* Georges Franju. Given that Franju would go on to direct the influential horror film, *Eyes Without a Face* (1960), most of the attention given to *Blood of the Beasts* has come from the perspective of Franju’s career.[2] So Cahill’s study of the film through Painlevé produces significant new insights, particularly related to the original commentary that Painlevé scripted but that Franju left unused. This fascinating commentary “considered carnivorous behavior from the perspectives of the animals being slaughtered” (p. 265). Cahill juxtaposes the finished film and the film that might have been in ways that highlight the remnants and the spirit of Painlevé’s original commentary in Franju’s completed film. These remnants sharpen previous interpretations of *Blood of the Beasts* as a Holocaust allegory, especially its potential for “giving voice to dead beings or inanimate things, of animating or reanimating them so that they may instruct or judge the living” (p. 307). The shocking power of *Blood of the Beasts* remains undiminished today, and Cahill teaches us that one crucial source of its impact stems from Painlevé’s long immersion in thorny relational questions regarding human and nonhuman animals, of “inhuman” yet all too human violence.

Placing *Blood of the Beasts* in the light of Painlevé’s “nonhuman cinema” is just one of several important scholarly accomplishments achieved by *Zoological Surrealism*. Cahill also contributes substantially to recent cinema and media studies research concerning Surrealism and its antecedents,[3] science,[4] and animal studies.[5] Cahill’s dedication to reading Painlevé in such uncompromising detail may sometimes puzzle those who are not already convinced of Painlevé’s significance, but this book should expand the ranks of the convinced by leaps and bounds. *Zoological Surrealism* is a major work.

NOTES

[1] Andy Masaki Bellows and Marina McDougall, with Brigitte Berg, eds., *Science is Fiction: The Films of Jean Painlevé* (San Francisco: Brico, 2000); Roxane Hamery, *Jean Painlevé, le cinéma au cœur de la vie* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008).

[2] Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 17-53; Kate Ince,

Georges Franju (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[3] Adam Lowenstein, *Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, and the Age of Digital Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Jennifer Wild, *The Parisian Avant-Garde in the Age of Cinema, 1900-1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

[4] Oliver Gaycken, *Devices of Curiosity: Early Cinema and Popular Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Scott Curtis, *The Shape of Spectatorship: Art, Science, and Early Cinema in Germany* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

[5] Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon, eds., *Animal Life and the Moving Image* (London: British Film Institute/Palgrave, 2015).

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