

Kate **Stewart**

Bristol University

Matthew **Cole**

Cardiff University

..The Conceptual Separation of Food and Animals in Childhood



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Nonhuman animals are primarily defined according to their form of relation with human beings, which broadly depends on the perceived utility of those animals to humans. These relations may be analyzed to generate typologies, membership of which circumscribes the probable fate of nonhuman animals when they enter into contact with humans. However, these judgments of utility and category membership are contingent and socially constructed, as demonstrated by cultural and historical variability in the species and individual animals assigned to particular types. This paper explores how the combination of childhood literary and film traditions relating to animals and associated promotional food tie-ins aimed at children contribute to a food socialization process whereby children learn to conceptually distance the animals they eat from those with whom they have an emotional bond or for whom they feel ethically responsible. In so doing, we develop a theoretical scheme for the differentiated positioning of animals.

Food,
Culture
&
Society

Keywords: *Babe*, children's films, children's literature, food socialization, *The Lion King*, nonhuman animals, speciesism

Introduction

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Nonhuman animals are primarily defined according to their form of relation with human beings, which broadly speaking, depends on the perceived utility of those animals to humans. These relations may be analyzed to generate typologies (Benton 1993; Cudworth 2008; Hirschman and Sanders 1997), membership of which circumscribes the probable fate of nonhuman animals when they enter into contact with humans. Examples include "wild animals," "pets," "vermin," or "food animals." However, these judgments of utility and category membership are contingent and socially constructed, as demonstrated by cultural and historical variability in the species and individual animals assigned to particular types. Animal typologies are transmitted, we argue, through the diversion of polymorphous and non-discriminatory affective forms of relation between children and other animals, into culturally defined routes. The analysis we present in this paper develops a model of an ideal type within the dominant modern Western perspective of human–nonhuman relations. While we do not claim cultural or historical universality for the thesis, it is important because it relates to the dominant paradigm.

In this paper we will come to focus on processes which can be observed across promotional food tie-in products for children, such as the Burger King

Kids' Club Meals and McDonald's Happy Meals. Tie-ins are used to promote one product using the imagery of another. The basic premise of these fast food tie-ins for children is that a group of characters from current popular children's culture are made into recognizable toys or figurines that play on children's love of the film or TV show they represent, and these toys are given away free with children-sized meals in a box consisting of a burger or nuggets, fries and a soft drink. Often, though not always, these toys and figures are representations of animals. It has been argued that children often form affective relationships with animals, spontaneously empathize with them and display a distaste or revulsion for meat when they first learn its origin (Amato and Partridge 1989; Fiddes 1991). So how is it that including a figure of a loved animal character alongside a dead piece of animal is not only tolerated but enjoyed by children?

McDonald's sells or gives away over 1.5 billion toys a year, accounting for almost one-third of all new toys given to American children (Schlosser and Wilson 2006). Marketers recognize that toys and other incentives aimed at children increase sales across a range of foodstuffs (McDermott and Angus 2004): the creation of the Burger King Kids' Club in 1990 increased sales of children's meals by 300 percent (Schlosser and Wilson 2006). As well as incentives such as toys, animals are also widely used as an advertising tool, and the largest group of products that use animals in advertisements is food and drink (Lerner and Kalof 1999). "Amid all the giveaways and the huggable mascots, it's become almost impossible to separate children's entertainment from fast food advertising" (Schlosser and Wilson 2006: 45).

Here we wish to explore how these marketing strategies *also* contribute to a food socialization process whereby children learn to conceptually distance the animals they eat from those with whom they have an emotional bond or for who they feel ethically responsible. In other words, how do children learn the difference between animals they eat and animals they love according to "normal" social practices? These processes of differentiation imply that animals are categorized in some way. In the next section of the paper, we briefly review some previous work on animal categorization, then present our own development of these approaches.

Defining Animals

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Hirschman and Sanders (cited by Lerner and Kalof 1999) identify three categories of animal in children's fiction: *utility animals*, who are objects not individuals, and refer to farmed or working animals; *wild animals*, beyond human control and representative of forces of nature; and *pets*, who are the most analogous to humans in the narratives. We would argue that all representations of nonhuman animals are in fact defined according to their

relative utility to humans. For example, the “use” of pets includes the affective functions they can fulfill in a human-dominated household, so that even though they come much closer than utility or wild animals to being treated as autonomous subjects, they only exist as such because of the quasi-subjectivity conferred on them by their human “owners.” And even this quasi-subjectivity is precarious—all pets are not universally recognized by all humans as individual subjects—it is a consequence of a particular relationship with a particular set of humans (the “owners”). The subjectivity of pets is therefore always precarious and contingent, including the risk that the human “owners” will get bored with and abandon or kill the pet, or that the pet will transgress its proper role, for instance by attacking a human, as in the case of dog attacks on humans.

Drawing on Benton’s categorization of animals, Cudworth provides a more detailed typology:

“wild” animals (in conditions of limited incorporation with humans), the use of animals as a labour force, as entertainment (e.g. recreational fishing) and edification (e.g. “wildlife” documentaries), as household companions, as symbols (often representing certain human qualities), and as food. (Cudworth 2008)

Cudworth’s approach more fully captures the view that all nonhuman animals are usually defined according to the form of relationship they have with humans. However, some important forms of relationship between human and nonhuman animals are still missing from Cudworth’s model. For instance, animals categorized as “vermin” or “pests” do not find a place in this schema. Instead of simply adding more categories to the list, we have devised a diagrammatic illustration of the way that humans tend to define all animals (see Figure 1). The advantage of this approach is that it allows us to recognize the contingency of animals’ fates in their perilous relationships with humans, to attend to the experiences of *individual* animals rather than *groups* of animals, and to conceptualize the way that the positioning of animals can shift over time. The vertical orientation of the diagram refers to the cultural visibility of different categories of animal, while the horizontal orientation refers to the extent to which animals are treated as objects (with the extreme case being as things to be treated entirely instrumentally) or subjects, with humans being the extreme case—although of course the category of “humans” is subdivided in many complex ways—not least through the “downgrading” of certain humans by association with nonhuman animals. At its worst, this process facilitates gross acts of violence against humans, as in the equation of Jews to “vermin” in the Holocaust, or of Tutsis to cockroaches in the Rwandan genocide (Adams 2006: 27–8).

It is important to point out that the areas on the figure occupied by particular animals are unstable to different extents—really each oval

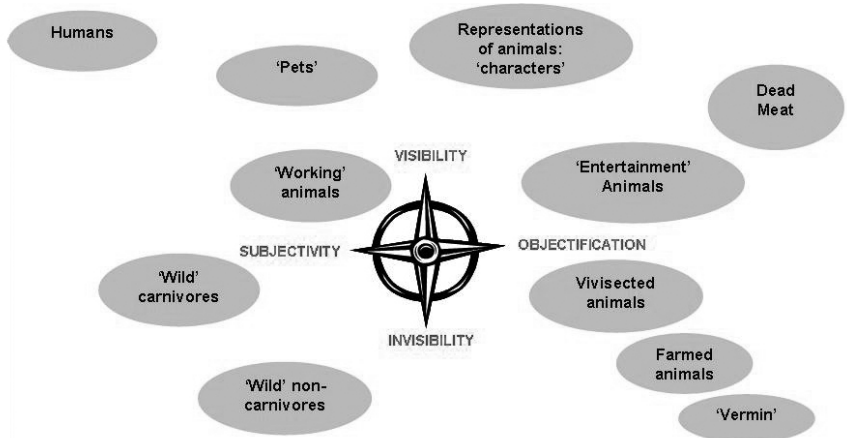


FIGURE 1: Representation of a speciesist material and discursive positioning of animals

represents an ideal type, but living animals are able to achieve greater levels of subjectivity or visibility in different circumstances, or rather have those levels of subjectivity or visibility applied to them by humans.

Locating animals towards the bottom right of the diagram relies on material and discursive practices of separation, of instrumentalization, of literally and metaphorically hiding from human view. For instance, the history of intensive animal farming has led to a progressive removal of animals from public view, though relocating farms, increasing security measures and the use of the laws of trespass to inhibit the exposure of cruel practices (Best 2004; Pollan 2006). To help us think through this, Carol Adams’ concept of the “absent referent” is very useful:

Behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of the animal whose place the meat takes. The “absent referent” is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product. The function of the absent referent is to keep “our” meat separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal, to keep the “moo” or “cluck” or “baa” away from the meat, to keep *something* from being seen as having been *someone* (Adams 2000: 14).

In other words, the absent referent prevents us recognizing objects (meat) as being the bodies of subjects (animals). As Adams (2000: 51–2) argues, animals become absent referents in three ways. First, they are literally absent through having been killed. Second, they are definitionally absent through being misnamed, not as killed animals, or the body parts thereof, but as euphemisms like “pork,” “hamburger” and so on. Third, they are metaphorically absent when meat is invoked as an expression of human

suffering, as when victims of sexual violence report, or are described as, being treated like pieces of meat. In the latter case, Adams stresses that the real fates of killed nonhuman animals are absent from the use of the metaphor to describe lived human experiences.

In promotional fast food tie-ins, meat is highly visible, but it is materially and discursively disconnected from its source. The *killed* animals are literally and definitionally absent from the box, but that definitional absence is facilitated by the intervention of an anthropomorphized animal *character*, who alone invites (which is not to say determines) the focus of affective sentiments towards “animals” for young consumers. In this way, the capacity to distinguish some animals (characters) as appropriate repositories for affect from others (killed) as misrecognized objects is encouraged. In both cases, this is a *social process* that is disarticulated from the “nature” of either the killed animals or the real animals anthropomorphized as “characters.” To illustrate the contingency, that is to say, social construction, of the different positions occupied by animals, rabbits provide a helpful example to consider. The different categorical definitions applied to rabbits by humans show the profound difference in outcome that can result for individual animals according to how they are viewed by us (Figure 2).

In this illustration we can see that the fates of individual rabbits are dependent on the ways in which they are defined by humans—the ways in which the meaning of “rabbit” is expressed. In each case, there is an evident relationship between the suffering experienced by individual rabbits and the extent to which we treat them as objects or subjects, and the extent to which the experiences of those rabbits are culturally visible. The key point for our present purposes is to stress that the socially appropriate positioning of

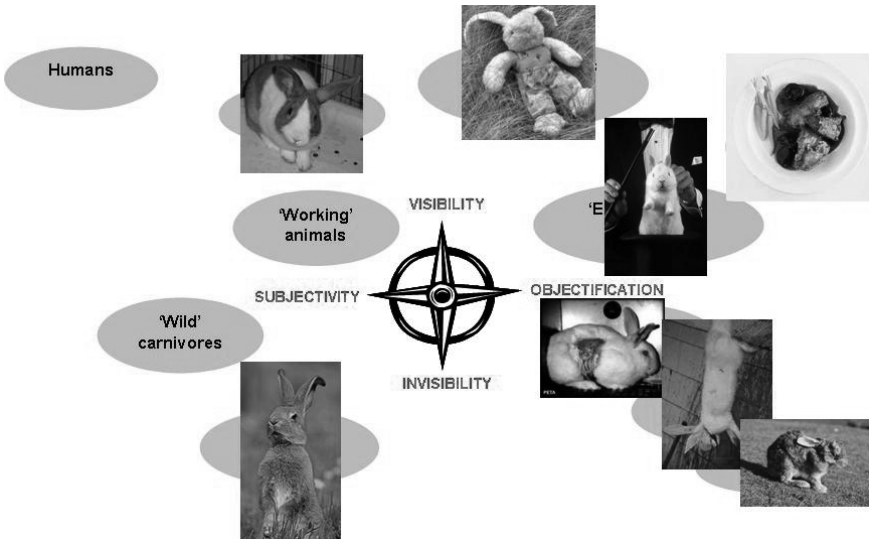


FIGURE 2: The material and discursive positioning of rabbits

rabbits is learned, and culturally reproduced. In this paper we are looking at one of the sites in which these meanings are learned in childhood. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore socialization processes in childhood: the intention is not to make claims about either children, animals or artistic intent, but to engage in a critical analysis of the cultural meanings of the products discussed.

Traditions in Children's Literature and Film Involving Animals

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According to Anderson and Henderson (2005), there appears to be a “sacredness” about children’s narratives, and animals are almost ubiquitous in children’s stories; indeed, seven of the top ten all-time best selling books in the US are about nonhuman animals (Melson 2001). The enduring emotional response to film events such as the death of Bambi’s mother suggest that although children may recognize that an event isn’t real, they are still reluctant to let go of the fantasy. Anderson and Henderson (2005) argue that there is a dissolution of the distinction between animals and humans in children’s stories. The portrayal of nonhuman animal characters with what we assume to be uniquely human qualities is commonplace in children’s fiction, with an emphasis on domesticated animals and pets, which communicates pet-keeping as the only emotionally important relationship with other animals. This is also the only important one because these “characters” achieve their subjectivity through being granted quasi-human qualities, reinforcing the view that, ultimately, only humans count as subjects. Chickens, sheep, cows and pigs are treated as replaceable commodities, which remain invisible in the stories. According to Johnson (1996), in *National Velvet*, Velvet’s love for and nurturing of the unbroken horse she becomes attached to (curiously named “The Pie”) is uncritically set against her father’s profession as a butcher.

The narrative treatment afforded pets in these stories arguably extends to the “pseudo-pet” in some instances, where a “working” animal is taken on and transformed into a pet as a result of their treatment by a human benefactor (such as Babe in *The Sheep Pig*, or Wilbur in *Charlotte’s Web*). These animals hybridize two categories—food animal and companion animal. Both Wilbur and Babe are threatened by the reassertion of their primary food animal identity in the respective narratives—their status as pets, and thereby as quasi-subjects, is unstable.

How humans, particularly adults, are portrayed also influences our attachment to the nonhuman characters. Some children’s films mix live action, animation and computer-generated images, such as *Stuart Little*, *Babe*, *Charlotte’s Web* or *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*. This makes the depiction of humans much easier—often in pure animations where the

principal characters are mostly nonhuman, the people are unconvincing and can compromise our suspension of disbelief. Where adults are successfully animated, it is very often as the classic cartoon baddie (such as Cruella de Vil in *101 Dalmatians* or Mrs Tweedy in *Chicken Run*), or an unspecified shadowy figure, not fully visualized in the film (such as the hunter in *Bambi*). Whether grotesques or faceless, the message is that the adults in these films are not like the adults in our own worlds—not like us—and it is the “non-human” animals we identify with. Deindividuating techniques also include imputing coldness or impassiveness to human villains and leaving them unnamed, which contrasts with the “warm” depictions of the animal characters with cute names who invite our sympathies. Films with live action and voiced animal characters make that separation much harder. The people are like us, and consequently the animals are harder to separate from the animals in the world around us. Both *Charlotte’s Web* and *Babe* were cited by newspapers as being responsible for decreased pork consumption among children (see for example Bolton 2006; Jones 2001; Strasser 2005), though these were transient trends rather than catalysts for enduring change in the way that the novel *Black Beauty* is thought to have contributed to the banning of the bearing rein—a painful harness used to keep the head high, which caused damage to the horse’s neck.

In Paul’s (1996) study of British children’s television, farmed¹ animals are presented as neutral or are completely absent. The farmed animals that are shown are those producing “wool” or milk, with the production of “leather” or “meat” never covered. Some narratives successfully try to persuade the reader to avoid particular acts of cruelty to animals (such as in *Black Beauty*), but this only relates to domesticated animals, typically dogs and horses. Paul argues that representations such as these convey to children that while it is wrong to harm animals, at the same time it is permissible to eat them. Both Paul’s theory and ours recognize that animals are conceptualized in simultaneous different categories. Learning this contradictory message is an important part of learning omnivory: “Every culture has a complicated set of confusing strictures, a calculus of killing, conveyed to each new generation” (Melson 2001: 185)

Children’s fiction also has a tradition of associating the loss of sympathy or empathy for animals with growing up. In many narratives, adulthood is heralded by events involving a child giving up or being separated from the animal with whom they have made a powerful bond during the course of the story, with the adult world “inevitably” and “naturally” pulling the child away from their nonhuman friends almost as a rite of passage; for example, in *My Friend Flicka*, Ken’s mourning for his horse is interpreted as the maturing of a daydreamer (Lerner and Kalof 1999), while in the *Jungle Book* film, Mowgli is tempted away from Baloo by the lithe water-carrying girl in the local village. The narratives make real the process on which we are

focusing—namely that part of socialization in childhood is learning the conceptual separation from and between animals.

Children's films are often about outcasts struggling against their circumstances—sometimes a falsely accused transgression (as in *The Lion King*), sometimes a physical abnormality (Dumbo's big ears, the pigs in both *Charlotte's Web* and *Babe* were runts), sometimes a loss of family (*Bambi*, *Jungle Book*). Sometimes, salvation rests on resignation to their "natural fate" (the "circle of life" in *The Lion King*, accepting the ongoing presence of the hunter in *Bambi*). But very often, their salvation comes from an abandonment of their natural states. While on the surface the story often seems to be about these outsiders being accepted for what they are, it is usually about them being accepted for what they are not—Babe finds acceptance not as a runt but as a sheep-pig; in *Happy Feet* the penguins are saved not for being penguins, but because they get a TV crew to see them tap dancing; in *Chicken Run*, conquering flight is the chickens' escape route from the farm. In these films, gimmicks save animals, not their animalness. The emotional attachment the audience forms is something apart from the animal's animalness. Animals are saved if they transcend their species-being, specifically, if they attain human-like qualities, or quasi-human subjectivity. This phenomenon is not limited to these few examples given here; instead it is a ubiquitous feature of the characterization of animals in children's films. "What is important is not whether children perceive *animal characters* as real, but rather their attachment response to these *characters*" (Anderson and Henderson 2005: 302—our emphasis). The key to the sustenance of this contradiction is the attachment to the character not the animal, a term that Anderson and Henderson conspicuously drop from the end of the sentence.

Advertisers and marketers have picked up on these literary traditions, as we will discuss in the context of tie-in toys below. The largest group of advertisements that feature animals are for food and drink. The animals portrayed are usually a pet (or pseudo-pet), and are normally distinct from animals in the human food chain even (perhaps especially) if the product the "pet" is advertising is an animal product.

Lerner and Kalof (1999) give the example of one mustard advert with a dog at a family picnic holding a hotdog in its mouth—an image incorporating the social cohesiveness of shared food practices (the family picnic), and the simultaneous differentiated categorization of nonhuman animals (the hotdog and the pet dog).

A Delicately Balanced Separation between Protecting and Killing

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So, it can be seen that children's literature, advertising and film all demonstrate articulations of this simultaneous differentiated categorization

of nonhuman animals. And our food practices and rituals also enter the arena to support this contradiction:

These contradictions in how we think about and relate to other animals are reflected in our rituals (where, for example, at Thanksgiving the turkey is revered as an American icon as well as a meal) and in a variety of artefacts that includes children's animal realism. (Johnson 1996: 13)

Food,
Culture
&
Society

Promotional food tie-ins can be viewed as a contemporary articulation of the incongruity of the symbolism of the Thanksgiving turkey. It sees an intersection of cultural food practices, children's fiction and folklore, and nonhuman animals.

Children's fast food tie-ins rely on the child acquiescing to the objectification of the farmed animal, reduced to food in the box though the processes of slaughter and butchery. The toy is often a representation of a pet (or pseudo-pet) or wild animal. Farmed animals, invisible and unmentioned as they are in literature and film, lay invisible and unmentioned in the meal box in burger or nugget form. The maintenance of the contradiction to both protect and eat animals relies on the two animal items in the meal box (toy and food) staying firmly in their separate categories, retaining their relative levels of subjectivity and invisibility. Transmission of this understanding of separation from and between animals can be traced through fictional narrative and its associated presentation of food and toy in a promotional tie-in. In some cases, narrative enforces and celebrates separation, with the result that promotional tie-ins can closely follow filmic representations. In other cases, the separation of humans from animals is called into question, leaving promotional tie-ins with a greater amount of ideological work to reassert that separation. In the next two sections of this paper, we consider paradigmatic instances of each tendency (that is, to emphasize or to undermine separateness and objectification), respectively, in *The Lion King* (1994) and *Babe* (1995).

CHILDREN'S FILMS THAT EMPHASIZE SEPARATION

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Disney's *The Lion King*, is an exemplar of transmitting a hierarchized view of human and nonhuman animal relations. At the heart of the film is the deployment of an ostensibly beneficent belief system: "the circle of life." The circle of life purports to unite all living creatures in a system of mutual dependence, and is expressed in this exchange between the Simba, the lion cub who will be king and Mufasa, his father:

Simba: Dad, don't we eat the antelope?

Mufasa: Yes Simba but let me explain. When we die our bodies become grass, and so we are all connected in the great circle of life.

The circle of life functions as a legitimization of meat eating for the audience in this life lesson given by Mufasa. The lions in the film are repeatedly identified as occupying the top of the food chain, a position which the human audience are implicitly invited to identify with. The circle of life then, functions as a legitimization of the rigid linear power hierarchy which governs the relations between the animals in *The Lion King*. This is expressed at various points as "the food chain," with the lion king indisputably reigning at the top of it.

Pumba (to Simba): Kid what's eating ya?

Timon (interrupting): Nothing, he's at the top of the food chain!

This also recalls human relations with food animals, and is suggestive of a peer recognition operating between the human film-makers (and anticipated audience) and carnivorous animals. Nick Fiddes (1991: 141) points out that "[w]e eat only animals which are 'natural victims,' and carnivores cannot be consumed since their relationship to others is similar to our own." As illustrated in Figure 1, "wild" carnivores tend to be privileged with a relatively high recognition of their autonomy compared with other nonhumans, and often come to symbolize valued human attributes.

As befits this kind of hierarchical worldview, lions enjoy the most complex characterizations in the film. They exhibit the greatest level of subjectivity. Identifying with the lions naturalizes meat-eating and soothes any discomfort that might be felt in relation to the fate of the herbivorous prey animals for the viewer. Other narrative devices also facilitate this careful direction of empathy towards the predators and away from the prey. Herbivorous animals in the film are not given names and do not become characters. They are typically shown as an undifferentiated mass, without autonomy, without voices, without intelligence and without distinguishing individual features. Examples include the stampeding wildebeest, who unwittingly trample Mufasa, and the parade of elephants, zebras, giraffes and antelopes who bow down to the lion king at the beginning and end of the film. Lions are never shown hunting or killing in *The Lion King* (partial exceptions to this rule are discussed below). Instead, they are disconnected from the practices of killing and butchering just as are most human meat eaters in the audience. The only animal body part recognizable as "meat" in the film is a neatly severed and unbloodied leg of a zebra. Tellingly, this is eaten by a pack of hyenas, evil characters in the film, having been given to them by the evil lion Scar.

There are two notable exceptions to the tendency of *The Lion King* to hide the realities of hunting, killing and meat eating. First, there is the killing and eating of invertebrates. Early in the narrative we hear Mufasa instructing Simba that he must “respect all the creatures,” but when Simba meets up with the outsider characters Pumba and Timon, he learns to enjoy eating “grubs and bugs.” In a deleted scene from the film, the three friends even play American football, using insects as the ball. Timon entices Simba by saying that an insect “tastes like chicken.” This phrase connects with the viewing audience—chickens are not the prey of wild lions, but by making the connection between “chicken” (assumed to be accepted and enjoyed as food by the audience) and the grubs and bugs, the film further invites identification between the viewers and Simba—they share the same tastes in (fast) food. The fate of real chickens as food, however, is absent: chickens are not depicted in the film. The word “chicken” also denies the individuality of particular animals, in that individual chickens are reduced to an undifferentiated mass of objects by the removal of the “s” to give “chicken.” This recalls the deindividuation of herbivorous prey animals in the film. As a final step to ensure the misrecognition of insects as objects, they are depicted like brightly colored fruit or sweets. Second, Nala is depicted chasing, or hunting, Pumba, but this is abandoned as soon as Pumba is recognized as a friend of Simba. At this point, Nala loses interest in eating him. Simba, the pinnacle of authority and a cipher for a human being in the film, shares with viewers the authority to define the meaning of other animals. In this case, he bestows Pumba with the subjectivity of the companion animal, and Nala recognizes his power to thus define. As in the case of the rabbits depicted in Figure 2, Pumba’s nature is irrelevant to the question of whether or not he will be treated as a friend or as food; his fate is entirely contingent on the meaning ascribed to him by Simba.

Taken as a whole, *The Lion King* depicts a rigid and immutable hierarchical pattern of social relations, and meat-eating as not only a natural, but a sacred duty to the “circle of life.” Obeisance to that duty is enforced through a discourse of destiny. A vision of the dead Mufasa appears, like a burning bush, to the adolescent Simba and intones, “you must take your place in the circle of life” and “remember who you are.” Simba’s adolescent grub and bug-eating adventure has to be curtailed at this point so that he can become king and return to the top of the food chain. Part of that destiny implicitly involves starting to eat “proper” meat instead of the infantile food represented by the brightly colored insects. The film also teaches that might makes right, as Simba ultimately wins out through violence, defeating Scar in combat. However, the killing of Scar is deferred to the evil hyenas. In an echo of the class politics of the slaughterhouse, the lower orders perform the dirty work, and they do it off-camera, out of sight.

Lion King promotional tie-ins were produced for a wide range of food products, including McDonald's Happy Meals and Burger King Kids' Club meals giving away three-dimensional replicas of the characters from the films. From this discussion of *The Lion King*, we can see how the toy Simba in the fast food box reinforces unproblematic meat-eating. Because the film invites identification with the meat-eating main characters, there is a straightforward correspondence between the cartoon representations of lions and other animals in the film and the plastic toys in Happy Meal boxes. In other words, with both film and fast food meal, children's affective sentiments can be directed towards the representation of carnivory and away from representations of prey animals in the film, and real farmed/food animals in the fast food meal. Simba toys in particular are unproblematic representations of lions for two main reasons. First, lions are not eaten as fast food. The visibility of the lion as a toy therefore does not undermine the invisibility of the animals in the bun. Second, the film representation is an animation, and the characters are quite different in appearance from real lions and other animals. So, loving Simba does not undermine or challenge how we need to feel about a real lion (or for that matter a real pig or chicken). Their difference is preserved by the medium of representation. We also do not have to confront the bloody experiences of real lion cubs as apprentice hunters and killers. The ideology transmitted by *The Lion King* is in harmony with the speciesist³ positioning of animals illustrated in Figure 1. The toy animal has relatively little conceptual work to do to maintain the distance between animal "character" as subject and farmed animal as object (meat).

In other examples, however, the visibility of the animal as a toy does threaten the invisibility of the animal as food, because of the nature of the animal in the source film, or the way in which the animal is represented. A good example is *Babe*, which in many ways offers a subversive counter-ideology to that conveyed by *The Lion King*.

CHILDREN'S FILMS THAT UNDERMINE SEPARATION

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Babe (1995) offers a radically different view of human–nonhuman animal relations to the previous example. Unlike the celebration of order and hierarchy in *The Lion King*, *Babe* presents the same phenomena as constraining, exploitative and legitimating of unjust violence. The plot of the film centers on Babe, a runt pig, and his journey from potential human food to recognition as a quasi-human family member by the end of the narrative. Babe therefore upsets our usual understanding of the meaning of pigs as farmed animals, whose experiences on farms and at slaughterhouses are generally invisible to us. This is established from the beginning of the film,

which opens with images of toys that dramatize the usual meaning of pigs as food animals, such as a pig that slides open to reveal neatly arranged sausages inside. Babe's early life in a factory farm is described as a "cruel and sunless world," and the farmers are shown only by their feet kicking the pigs or by their hands wielding canes. When Babe's mother is removed from the farm, Babe believes that she is leaving for a far off happy land, while in reality she is being trucked to slaughter. For the audience this recalls the deceit of Jews being transported to death camps during the Holocaust.

After this grim opening, most characters in the film go on to express the same oppressive consequences of the prevailing order. One example comes from Rex, the male sheepdog, who gives a speech to the other animals early in the film, in which he says, "to each creature its own destiny, and every animal in its proper place." It is telling here that the impersonal pronoun "its" is used. As is the case when we usually talk about other animals, especially farmed animals, they are not gendered. This is another technique of deindividuation. Babe is told that he should "absolutely never [be] in the house," while Ferdinand the mischievous duck is admonished in his absence: "being a duck he must behave like a duck"; "he should accept what he is and be thankful for it." Later, Fly, the female dog and Rex's partner, attempts to instruct Babe in shepherding through asserting the right to dominate the sheep. Babe is told "we are their masters," as well as to "abuse them," "insult them," "bite them," and do "whatever it takes bend them to your will." But Babe refuses Fly's claim that sheep are inferior, instead arguing that sheep are equal. Babe's ideals are borne out by the sheep's responsiveness to him: "all a nice little pig like you need do is ask," so that the message conveyed to the viewer is of the superiority of cooperative over hierarchical forms of inter-species relations.

Babe also dramatizes how the status quo defends itself from the threat represented by Babe's transgression of the "food animal" category as the human characters gradually acknowledge him as a subject. This takes two forms: violence and humor. While acts of violence and humor in *The Lion King* are accepted and celebrated for their capacity to maintain or restore a hierarchical order (such as Simba's victory in combat or Timon's food-chain jokes), they are punished in *Babe* for their role in maintaining conceptual distances between species and between individual animals. Rex, for instance, reacts to the perceived appropriation of his role as a working animal by Babe with violence, attacking Fly and biting the farmer. Similarly, the household cat defends Babe's threat to his role as companion animal with violence, by scratching Babe, and later with cruel humor, by lying to Babe that the other animals are laughing at him for "forgetting what pigs are for," namely to be eaten as human food. Human characters also resist Babe's burgeoning subjectivity through violence and humor, the former through the farmer's wife's reluctance to delay killing Babe to eat; the latter through

laughter at the idea of Babe being able to herd sheep by both the farmer's wife and the audience at the sheepdog trials at the climax of the film. The problematisation of both violent and humorous attempts to reassert the objectification of pigs in *Babe* exposes the absent referent to the audience. The cat, an unsympathetic character, reveals the absent referent directly to Babe (and thereby to the audience) as a deliberate act of cruelty: "pork they call it, or bacon, they only call them pigs when they're alive." In this scene the cat also recalls the cruel taunts of unsympathetic siblings towards their more sensitive brothers or sisters in some of the "meat insight" experiences documented by Amato and Partridge (1989). Earlier in the film, as Christmas and with it the imminent death of either Babe or one of the ducks approaches, Ferdinand the duck becomes distraught and shouts: "dinner is death" and "Christmas is carnage," again revealing the absent referent to the audience (as well as to the other nonhuman animal characters in the film).

Babe does however have limitations in its critique of hierarchical species relations. Ultimately, Babe's salvation and recognition as a subject results from his transcendence of his pig-ness and is still dependent on the way that humans regard him. With reference to Figure 1, Babe takes three routes towards greater subjectivity:

- from "food" to "working" animal as a "sheep pig";
- from "food" to "companion" animal as a household pet; and
- from "food" to "entertainment" animal at the sheepdog trials.

Notwithstanding these limitations, there is no doubt that *Babe* is a work of radical subversion compared with *The Lion King*. We can perhaps detect evidence of a subversive effect in popular reports of children going off bacon after seeing the film (Bolton 2006; Jones 2001; Strasser 2005). The pig, beginning as a farmed/food animal, becomes a sympathetic pseudo-pet, hard worker and an entertainment star in the film. The live action style of *Babe* means that the representation is obviously very like the pigs that live on farms (excepting anthropomorphic characteristics such as human speech), and his friends on the farm in the film are like the chickens, pigs and cows whose body parts lie in the fast food meal box. With all these things in mind, the representation of Babe in the fast food meal box had a much harder job than Simba and friends in preserving the invisibility of the animals' bodies alongside it. Instead of a more or less faithful copy of the cartoon *Lion King* characters, Babe and friends are represented as plush (soft) toys that are far removed from their filmic counterparts. The plush toys of the *Babe* characters are little more than soft balls, with expressionless facial features, no moveable parts and cannot be posed in any way. This contrasts with *The*

Lion King toys, which have eyes that glint and limbs that move, resulting in a degree of interactivity between the child and the toy not possible with the plush toy. This representation of the Babe characters minimized their belonging in the category of farmed/food animal. The toy, by being so unlike the character it represents, re-establishes the conceptual distance between protect-animal and eat-animal, where the film endangered it. Plush toys are also anthropomorphized in a different way—they appear more vulnerable and more infantile than the adolescent Simba. This reinforces the idea that farmed animals are in “need” of our protection (through farming them), and that the autonomy of the pig in the film is really fantasy. Arguably, the soft toy is more real than the CGI/real pig in terms of what it says about the ideologically “proper” relation of humans and pigs. The plush toys take back the subjectivity given to the animals in the film.

While *The Lion King* and *Babe* are exemplary of the opposing tendencies to reinforce, or subvert, the conceptual separation of food and animals in childhood, they are far from unique. The next section briefly reviews some other examples to indicate the ubiquity of these processes.

OTHER EXAMPLES OF CONCEPTUAL SEPARATION

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The film *101 Dalmatians* (1996), like *Babe*, was also a live action film. The dogs are real dogs, but because these characters are already in the “pet” category of animal, the toy has no work to do to separate the animal as toy from the animal as food in the meal box. Therefore, in this film example, the “replica” formula was more closely followed as with *The Lion King*. Although the toys still do not look much like real Dalmatian dogs, they are more anatomically accurate than the farmed animals in the *Babe* series, also strongly evoking the representations of the dogs in the original animated version of the film. Conversely, the film *Chicken Run* appears to resemble the subversion of conceptual separation contained in *Babe*. The film is about hens escaping a chicken farm before they are killed and transformed into food. They are represented in the film by clay animation figures, which do not look much like real hens (helping preserve the distance from, and invisibility of the utility animal in the food box), but the narrative is very powerful in that it centers on the hens avoiding ending up as food. Here, the preservation of the invisibility of the animal as food in the meal box is achieved by reducing the visibility of the animal in the toy provided. In this tie-in, and contrasting with the use of plush toys in the *Babe* tie-in, the figures are very sophisticated, combining when collected as a set to build a plane. The chicken figures literally become a machine when put together. Thus the toy prevents an increased visibility of the animal as food by reducing the emphasis of the animalness of the toy.

These processes may seem perilous, but are such resilient defenders of the invisibility of meat that they even allow room for inappropriate puns about the promotions:

“Chicken Run” is an innovative, witty movie that will appeal to Burger King customers of all ages” said Richard Taylor, vice president of marketing for Burger King...

“Chicken Run” follows a group of chickens imprisoned at Tweedy’s Egg Farm, where any chicken who doesn’t put breakfast on the table can wind up as dinner. But Ginger and her fellow flock are determined to break out before they meet a “fowl” fate. Time is running out as the greedy owner of the farm, Mrs Tweedy, finds a new way to feather her nest—by turning chickens into chicken pies. (Extract from the Burger King press release about its *Chicken Run* tie-in).

Conclusion

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In this paper, we have examined the conceptual distances between animals, fictional nonhuman characters, and the dual presence of animals in food products aimed at children (as toy and as food), and how these are preserved and perpetuated in such food products.

What the positioning of these animals and characters within Figure 1 ultimately shows is a conceptual journey from animal, through fictional narrative, to promotional toy. As illustrated in Figure 3, the toy and meat are positionally quite close, tending towards visibility and objectification. They have also both started on a journey from the same point—the farmed pig. However, the *journey* distance between the meat and the toy is protracted and the conceptual distance back from toy to meat is not only long but also against the narrative flow: the farmed pig becomes the sheep dog which is both working animal and pet, and this becomes the character “Babe,” which becomes our toy. This journey allows the consumer to “enjoy” each animal item in the product box without conceptually connecting the two, thus contributing to the socialization of the child into the “normal” eat/protect models of human–animal relations.

We have explored some of the subtle, insidious and powerful ways in which messages about culturally appropriate relationships with nonhuman animals are transmitted in childhood. This process extends to every corner of their lives, and we must be aware of and reflective about the moral messages our food behaviors convey to our children.

Delicately, precisely, carefully, within each subculture, in the country, in the city, on the farm, by the sea, the lines are drawn.

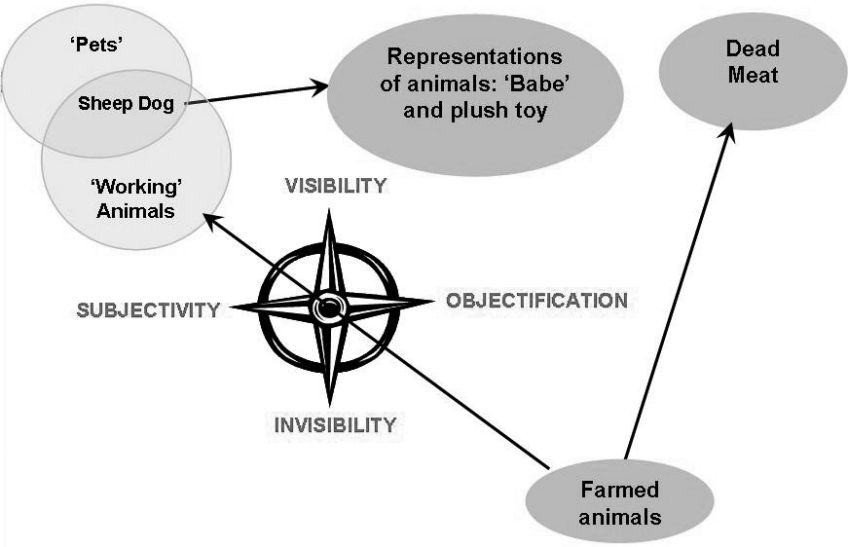


FIGURE 3: The conceptual journey separating farmed pig, from Babe, from meat product

Pests to be killed, food to be eaten, pets to be loved, are discriminated for the growing child. (Mead 1964, quoted in Melson 2001: 185)

While we have focused here on a relatively narrow range of connected processes relating to the food products marketed to children which draw on literary traditions, we have also presented a schema for the discursive positioning of animals which operates well beyond this field and allows us to reflect on the socially differentiated positioning of animals, how these are learned, and culturally reproduced.

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Notes

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- 1 In our use of the term “farmed,” in preference to “farm” animals, we follow Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson’s concerns: “Some people have objected to the term ‘farm animal’ on the grounds that these animals are not there by choice. We farm them, and so it would be more accurate to call them farmed animals—the emphasis placed on the doer, us, rather than the done to, them” (Masson 2003: 7).
- 2 Pumba and Timon are two outsider characters in the film, respectively a warthog and a meerkat, who befriend Simba after he has been tricked into leaving his home.
- 3 Speciesism is defined by Joan Dunayer (2004: 5) as “A failure, in attitude or practice, to accord any nonhuman being equal consideration and respect.” The term was coined by Richard Ryder before being popularized by Peter Singer (1975) in *Animal Liberation*.

vol. 12 :: no. 4
december 09

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