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Cinemal: The Becoming-Animal of Experimental Film, by Tessa Laird. The University of Minnesota Press, 2025, 231 pp.

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Tessa Laird's *Cinemal* is a compact yet rich exploration of what she calls the *cinemal*: the shimmering, exuberant entanglement of sound, colour, patterns, and movement in experimental film. The neologism *cinemal* is partly indebted to *animot*, Jacques Derrida's attempt to name the multiplicity of nonhuman creatures usually subsumed under the singular category of "the animal". The suffixes *-mal* and *-mot* both begin with the letter "m", contain three letters, and gesture toward plurality. At the same time, *mal* evokes "malady", suggesting illness or unease (61). Given that cinema originates from the Greek *kinēma*, meaning "movement", Laird proposes that the *cinemal* may also signify "a bad move" or a "movement-malady" (61), likening it to the restless pacing of animals in captivity.

Across its five chapters, *Cinemal* critiques Cartesian dualism, and its rigid separation of nature and culture. Following theoretical trajectories developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as Donna Haraway's concept of *naturecultures* and Aboriginal Australian situated knowledges, Laird proposes "a rewilding of aesthetic theory" by attuning to the polyphonic chorus of the more-than-human world (4). The origin of the *cinemal* lies partly in the materiality of film itself: historically, film stock was made from animal-derived gelatin. Yet Laird pushes this idea further, suggesting that the *cinemal* is not merely derived from animals but is *itself* animal (5). Like living creatures made of flesh and bone, film exhibits animalistic qualities: the vibrant spectrum of colour in the animal world mirrors the chromatic intensity of experimental cinema; the filmstrip bears the tactile traces of the physical world, including scratches and embedded hairs; and the whirring of the projector evokes the sounds of living bodies. Even the spectator, Laird argues, is a *humananimal* (3). As she writes, "filmmaker, film, and viewer are all joined together in a viral chain of contagion" (9).

The experimental films Laird analyses largely emerge from what she calls the "furry 'underbelly' of the South" (3), particularly from Aotearoa (New Zealand), Australia, parts of Latin America, and Southeast Asia. Each chapter offers close readings of experimental films—and, in one instance, a literary work, *Tender Buttons* by Gertrude Stein—to illuminate different aspects of the *cinemal*. Alongside these analyses, Laird interweaves personal reflections on her encounters with the artworks. She recounts, for example, how she watched films by the Australian pioneer filmmakers Arthur and Corinne Cantrill in the basement of their home and describes how these experiences reshaped her perception. She also reflects on her own encounters with animals, cuttlefish, a skink, a parrot, and her cat Kira, which become part of her broader effort to attune to the more-than-human sensibilities that animate experimental cinema.

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Chapter One, “Color Is an Animal,” is guided by Michael Taussig’s essay “What Color Is the Sacred?” Following Taussig’s contention that colour itself walks, Laird attunes to colour in relation to the *cinemal*. The experimental short film by the Cantrills’ autistic son, Ivor Cantrill, *Myself When 14* (1989), emerges as a key locus of the chapter. Ivor Cantrill’s film initially focuses on shadows and later colours, showing the repetitive movements of a young boy skipping toward and away from the camera (35). Laird describes this fusion of repetition and the proliferation of colour as *cinemal* (38).

To contextualise the significance of colour, Laird offers an extensive overview of colour theories, including Taussig’s colour as animal, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming-colour, and artist David Batchelor’s idea of chromophobia (27). Laird argues that “both color and animal are routinely ‘othered’ in the Western tradition” (27), an observation that forms the conceptual foundation of the *cinemal*, which embraces colour across its full range as it manifests in the natural world. For example, in the subchapter “Cephalopod Cinema”, the author describes her snorkelling experience in South Australia, surrounded by vibrant cuttlefish. Drawing on media theorists William Brown and David H. Fleming, she suggests that their shimmering colours and shape-shifting bodies function as a metaphor for cinema (39), with cuttlefish bodies perceived as living screens.

Chapter Two, “Speeds and Slowness”, turns to animal temporality, as Laird observes skinks in her garden. The incredible speed of these reptiles is juxtaposed with the short three-minute film by the Cantrills, *4000 Frames, an Eye-Opener Film* (1970), in which each frame presents a different, unrelated image (46). While the *cinemal* foregrounds colour, it also attends to “speeds, slowness, and rhythmic signatures, creating resonances in a field of more-than-human relations” (47).

Discussing another Cantrill film, *Articulated Image* (1996), Laird likens the camera’s tracking to that of an animal running through the garden. Although the film itself contains no animals, it is the “reptilian” effect that interests Laird (49). Moreover, the flickering sensation produced by the rapidly changing frames, she argues, “activates a reptilian consciousness in its viewers” (50). This entanglement of viewer, film, and animal perception is explained through Colombian filmmaker Sebastian Wiedemann’s concept of *kino-madology* (59), which describes the innate capacity of the non-human/mechanical cine-eye to render the invisible. In this sense, the cinematic apparatus has the potential to de-anthropocentrise the human gaze, as demonstrated by the Cantrills’ films and by Laird’s observations of actual skinks.

From colour and speed, Chapter Three moves into the sensory zone of smell and tactility in the aptly titled “Scratch and Sniff”. Laird juxtaposes the practice of scratch films with cats scratching the surfaces in the spaces around them. Scratch film is the process of drawing and scratching designs directly onto film. Images can be hand-painted on clear and black film leaders using paints, markers, and ink. Otherwise, images can be stencilled, etched, and even spliced directly into 16mm and 35mm film. For Laird, animal scratching evokes the human skin, which in turn echoes Laura U. Marks’s concept of the “skin of the film”.

As an example, Laird analyses Carolee Schneemann’s *Fuses* (1964–67), in which the hair of the filmmaker’s cat is embedded into the filmstrip. The cat is acknowledged not only as a presence but also as a co-author of the film (73). Here, the animal is not merely a metaphor for aesthetic or bodily effects; rather, its point of view becomes part of the cinematic experience. The camera imitates the cat’s eye through rapid shifts in movement and moments of suspension.

Chapter Four, “The Cry Insides on the Outside”, attends to the polyphony of *cinemal* soundscapes. Laird hears the *cinemal* in a dog’s bark, a wolf’s howl, the echolocation of bats, and the devastating growl of a giant otter in Ana Vaz’s *It’s Night in America* (*É Noite na America,* 2022). “The uncanny howl enacts a gut-wrenching deterritorialization, tearing a hole in the fabric of comfortable lives and comfortable worldviews” (92). In the subchapter “The Animal Leaves Only Its Cry”, the *cinemal* qualities of *It’s Night in America* are analysed through the prism of “sonic” expressions of animals (92). Laird draws connections between Taussig’s experience of being affected by the bray of a donkey and her own memories of working at a zoo as a young girl.

Vaz’s enigmatic film allows animal cries to be heard as they encroach upon human spaces in the wake of the Covid pandemic, as if reclaiming territories they once occupied. Laird painstakingly describes the soundscape of the film, which includes giant otter squeals, chitters, and shrieks (103). She focuses in particular on a scene in which a wild bush dog is brought to an animal shelter. Vaz’s intrusive camera moves extremely close to the sick animal, registering its gluey eye and trembling belly as it flutters with sickness and fear (104). “The film itself is a sick animal” (104), Laird concludes, drawing on the *-mal* in the term *cinemal*. Vaz’s film thus expresses solidarity with animals caught within the modernist dystopia of Brasília’s concrete jungle. Shot on expired 16mm film stock, the film itself appears “sick”, with its bluish tint, unsettling flicker, and disquieting animal sounds.

Finally, Chapter Five, “The Liveliness of All Things [Including the Dead]”, focuses on the “sixth sense” (112), which Laird dubs the mechanical eye of the camera capable of seeing what humans cannot and the “third eye” of the filmmaker able to pick up perceptions unavailable to the nonhuman aperture (112). These ideas are shaped by Laird’s engagement with First Peoples’ cosmologies, including the Yolŋu concept of *bir’yun*, which informs Australian anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose’s notion of shimmering—a concept central to Laird’s understanding of the *cinemal*. Shimmering occupies the porous space between life and death, where “waves of ancestral powers” circulate (18).

By weaving together animacy, animation, and animism, the chapter acknowledges the spectral animal qualities present in experimental films that embrace the life force of the more-than-human (112). For Laird, this includes not only animals and plants, but also geological structures, bodies of water, spirits, and other forms that blur the boundary between life and nonlife. The author concludes with a discussion of films by the Karrabing Film Collective, whose work is guided by the concept of “everywhen” (121), an Aboriginal Australian perspective on deep time. Challenging Western epistemologies, the collective’s films offer “a searing commentary on colonisation, poverty, state intervention, and the toxic rape of the land” (121). In *The Family and the Zombie* (2021), the collective depicts pale zombies feeding on lithium batteries for energy (121).

One challenge of the book lies in its dense web of theoretical references. A wide range of concepts is invoked throughout the text, but not always explored in their full epistemological significance. These references span critical theory and philosophy—including Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Henri Bergson, Michael Taussig, Donna Haraway, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro—as well as scholars associated with contemporary animal studies such as Akira Mizuta Lippit, Anat Pick, Laura McMahon, and Jonathan Burt. While these intellectual lineages situate *Cinemal* within a rich interdisciplinary field, their sheer number can at times make it difficult for the reader to grasp the epistemological stakes of each reference. Laird herself describes the *cinemal* as “a mongrel” (3), a hybrid concept that draws

from multiple traditions. Yet within this intricate mesh of theoretical elaborations, the central concept of the *cinemal* occasionally risks losing analytical clarity. As Laird acknowledges in the book's introduction, writing about animals may be just as impossible as writing about art (1). The book ultimately reflects both the ambition and the difficulty of the project: an attempt to theorise a phenomenon that resists stable conceptual boundaries.

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