

Animated Animal Discourse

By Randy Malamud

I FIND THAT LATELY when I'm at the movies with my kids I'm more hopeful than usual about the possibility that human beings might be moving toward a better relationship with the other living creatures in our world.

Ratatouille is the most recent movie that makes me think Hollywood can help inspire Americans to improve our ecological sensibilities. It's a feeling I've had often over the last few years, while watching *Chicken Run*, *A Bug's Life*, *Finding Nemo*, *Antz*, *Madagascar*, and *Happy Feet*, among others. In a culture that generally treats animals as subservient, these movies represent their characters with an integrity that invites viewers to value animals' rights, emotions, desires, and family and social networks.

To put it bluntly, I couldn't imagine better propaganda for my cause if I created it myself. I work in the disciplines of anthrozoology, or human-animal studies, and ecocriticism, which resituates the natural world from the margins and backdrops of our cultural expressions, decentering "man as the measure of all things" and attending to the entire range of life. I believe our ideologies and actions as a species are increasingly dangerous to other animals. Part of the problem is how we think about animals—or worse, fail to think about them at all, simply going about our business as if we were the planet's only living inhabitants.

So these films hearten me when they show that animals have stories and experiences as important and as interesting as our own. We are invited to come close, to understand that animals' lives are intermingled with our own and that our prosperity is ultimately interdependent with theirs. We're all in this together.

Ratatouille is especially radical in terms of its depiction of the human-animal relationship. Its conceit, obviously, is absurd. Remy, a rat with a gift for culinary brilliance, dreams of working in the famous Parisian restaurant that had flourished under the late great chef Auguste Gusteau. Remy was inspired by Gusteau's book, *Anyone Can Cook*. The great thing about *Ratatouille* is that "anyone" isn't limited to people.

With the assistance of a human pal, Linguini—a menial kitchen worker who initially resists but eventually cooperates—Remy fulfills his dream, and the interspecies duo collaborate in what becomes a stunningly successful enterprise. At first the rat is very much a silent partner, but eventually Linguini, determined to give his furry friend due credit, reveals Remy's role in the operation. In the end, with just a small deception necessary to fool the rodent inspectors, the heroes create a brilliantly innovative restaurant staffed by hundreds of rats.

It's a wonderful story, full of com-

plex characters (human and nonhuman), ironies, tensions, and comedy. But beyond that it has a potent allegorical kick. Remy's character has an emotional and moral depth that we rarely acknowledge in animals. Animals probably don't really have burning desires to cook in upscale restaurants, but they certainly have strong feelings about other things, whether or not we can figure out what they are, so a movie like this is a good vehicle for helping us realize the importance of attributes that people aren't inclined to notice in other species.

Ratatouille explores the limitations of the human animal, and the necessity that we work with other creatures. With Remy's help, Linguini achieves a triumph that he couldn't have accomplished without the rat's collaboration. And Remy, too, accomplishes something that no rat could have done without human help. Ecologically, this message is more than just important, it is the central truth, and one that our culture is pretty good at sublimating in a fantasy that *Homo sapiens* reigns over all the dumb creatures splayed beneath us on a Great Chain of Being.

The food that Linguini and Remy offer up is so good precisely because the creative forces behind it are not the same of human-white-male-French chefs who churned out pâté after pâté in the past. The hegemonic tradition is stale and exhausted, and can be recharged only by a multicultural infusion of the previously marginalized subalterns—it's the usual postmodern/postcolonial manifesto, except *Ratatouille* expands the concept of diversity to include animals.

The cooking scenes are especially dazzling. Hiding under Linguini's toque, Remy pulls the young man's hair to direct his hand movements, generating a choreographic tour de force with knives swirling, zucchinis flying through the air, herbs and spices wafting into soups, wines and sauces coursing sumptuously across the screen. The exotic bounty reflects the transcendence of the collaboration.

Both Linguini and Remy are initially reluctant to acknowledge to the other members of their own species how important this enterprise is to them, and how much they need the other, but when they finally do it is a glorious epiphany. Animals and people interact in ways that would until recently have been proscribed by our anthropocentric prejudices. Of all animals, rats are depicted as smart, sympathetic, engaging creatures who—as long as they wash their little paws before cooking—are perfectly congruous with high culture and haute cuisine. The bond of trust and friendship between a man and a rat forcefully deconstructs our conventional dominionist model toward animals.

At the end of the movie, all's right with the world as a direct consequence



BUENA VISTA, PHOTOFEST

Linguini and Remy in "Ratatouille"

of the ecologically inspired affiliation between man and rat. Linguini's romance flourishes, an evil chef is destroyed, a bitter critic is redeemed, and Paris enjoys a new level of gourmet ecstasy. In a different style from Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* but with a similar point, *Ratatouille* promotes our need to take seriously the claims and the virtues of the world beyond ourselves. On our own, we will stagnate (just as Gusteau's restaurant had for years). To save ourselves, to move forward, we need to look at life as a joint enterprise. We need to revise our misconception that the rest of the world exists simply for our benefit, and deflate our presumptuous, hubristic fantasies that we stand above the rest of nature.

ANIMATED ANIMALS of the past were dimwitted, inarticulate, blustery clowns: stuttering pigs bumbling around half-clothed; not-so-wily coyotes getting creamed by anvils around every turn; a two-dimensional panorama of loony, daffy sadism and buffoonery, as offensive in its own way to the animal subjects as *Amos 'n' Andy* was to African-Americans.

Today's breed of animal characters are well rounded, sympathetic, individualized, sophisticated. They are drawn and conceived with a keen sensitivity to their habitats: Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse zipped around in planes, trains, and automobiles, not to mention the occasional submarine or hot-air balloon, but contemporary animated animals actually inhabit nature. Sure, Remy enters into the mainstream human world, but it's important that his native milieu (sewers, attics, garbage dumps) is established first. The oceans in *Finding Nemo*, the green leafy meadows in *A Bug's Life*, the glaciers in *Happy Feet* all exhibit a devout attention to habitat, which counters one of the most dangerous aspects of how our culture traditionally represents animals, alienating them from their contexts. Such detachment erroneously implies that we can

"have," and frame, and experience, these animals in ways that are comfortable to us, while their habitats (which we desecrate mercilessly) are expendable, irrelevant.

These movies address a range of ecological challenges. *Chicken Run* depicts birds in the desperate throes of agribusiness, awaiting the dark moment when they are to become chicken pies. The injustice of factory farming is conveyed from the chickens' point of view, by their sense of a better life outside the compound and their clear, passionate desire for such a life. Banding together with determination and intelligence, they learn to fly so they can escape from the greedy, cruel humans. *Happy Feet* portrays people's damage to animals and their habitats, and animals' consequent suffering. The penguins are experiencing famine as a result of overfishing, and our pollution is drifting down all the way to Antarctica. Mumble, the hero, informs people that we need to attend to what the animals have to "say" and treat them better. That movie ends, idealistically, with an array of international governments resolving to reform their ecological exploitation.

Bee Movie, a DreamWorks production scheduled to open in November, seems like a movie in the same mold. Like *Happy Feet*, it focuses on people's heedless plundering of the animals' world. A bee, like Remy, has aspirations beyond the conventional. "Shocked to discover that the humans have been stealing and eating the bees' honey for centuries," he sues.

Moviegoers may be entitled to a laugh. But they'll be animated, once again, to question their broader sense of entitlement.

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