

*Flesh, Bones, and Meat: Approaching the Becoming-Cow in Julio Medem's Cows*

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**Abstract**

This paper takes as the starting point the lifelong obsession of the protagonist for the cow that further introduces an uncanny relationship of symbiosis between man, cow, and camera in Julio Medem's *Cows/Vacas* (1992). Enlightened by Deleuze's and Guattari's writings on becoming-animal in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) and *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (1981), this paper explores how moving images depict this strange entanglement between the cow and the protagonist as well as three generations of two families in a way that resonates with Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming-animal. In particular, this paper examines how cinematic devices present the human body and animal body in an intriguing and deconstructive way and how the camera continuously switches between the points of view of human, cow, and camera in *Cows*. By employing a delicate close reading of moving images, this paper argues that *Cows* exemplifies the embodiment of Deleuzo-Guattarian *becoming-animal* in cinema by virtue of cinematic devices and further presents a *becoming-vasca* (Basque) by providing an alternative beyond-human perspective to revisit Basque history and identity.

Keywords: Becoming-Animal, Deleuze, Julio Medem, *Cows/Vacas*, Basque

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## Introduction

From the Butterfly Dream in the Zhuangzi to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the tracing of becoming-animal has been ongoing in a discontinuous way in literature as well as in artworks. Nonetheless either in Zhuang Zhou's dream of becoming a butterfly or in Gregor's becoming "some kind of monstrous vermin" after waking up from uneasy dreams (Kafka, 2009, p. 29), the becoming itself is nonetheless missing in a Deleuzo-Guattarian sense, since the becoming-animal does not refer to human transforming into a real animal either in physical reality or in dreams or fantasy. As one of the most intriguing and recondite concepts in Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophy, becoming-animal usually involves real animals, but it rather highlights the becoming itself that refers to the entanglement, assemblage, or symbiosis between man and animal, which means becoming-animal is always in the middle, without beginning or end. Thus, becoming-animal cannot be presented in cinema simply by using special effects as one might conventionally assume.

In this regard, the Basque-born Spanish filmmaker Julio Medem's first full-length feature film, *Cows/Vacas* (1992), presents an uncanny and symbiotic relationship between the protagonist and cow within the film's highly naturalistic cinematography. Set in Medem's homeland, the Basque region of Spain, the narrative of *Cows* unfolds from the Carlist War and ends during the Spanish Civil War, revolving around an *aizkolari* (Basque trunk cutter), Manuel Irigibel, and the three generations of his family and his lifelong rival's. As the main character in the story, Manuel never fully recovers from his war experience of feigning to be dead by covering his face with the blood of his neighbor in order to survive, while only a cow witnesses his act of cowardice. Since then, Manuel develops his lifelong obsession with cow and spends the rest of his life drawing cows. At the end of the film, the same cow that witnessed Manuel's survival impossibly reappears after sixty years and witnesses the survival of Manuel's grandson, Peru, by virtue of a similar act of cowardice in Spanish Civil War.

Unlike conventional surrealist films that deal with the relationship between human and animal, *Cows* does not endow the cows with divinity or superpowers except for the ending scene but rather keep them as silent witnesses with eyes that seem to see through everything, which further has a strange effect on the way Manuel sees and lives his life. Such gaze is further endowed with more advanced powers when cow's vision, human vision, and camera-eye become discernible with the constant switch of points of view. This paper explores how the moving images depict the strange entanglement between the cow and the protagonist as well as three generations of two families by approaching it with Deleuzo-Guattarian becoming-animal. Meanwhile, with the focus on the gaze and point of view shots, this paper further explores how the moving images present the history of two families as well as Basque history from the Third Carlist War to the Spanish Civil War through the cow's eye, camera-eye, and human eye.

## Following the Dying Rats

*Becoming-animal* is one of the *becomings* that Deleuze and Guattari develop along with their other key concepts such as rhizome, deterritorialization, and affects. Instead of its literal meaning, *Becoming-animal* does not refer to human "becoming" a real animal or human imitating animal, or human sympathy for animal. Unlike Zhuang Zhou's butterfly dream, for Deleuze and Guattari (1987), becomings-animal are "perfectly real" (p. 238), whereas by "real" they clarify that the only reality of *becoming-animal* is the *becoming* itself, "the block of *becoming*" (p. 238), which has no term, no beginning or end. Becoming-animal is rather an

“unnatural participation” happening between man and animal, as Deleuze and Guatarri (1987) exemplify this ambiguous concept with Lord Chandos’ experience with the dying rats:

Fascinated with a “people” of dying rats, and it is in him, through him, in the interstices of his disrupted self that the “soul of the animal bares its teeth at monstrous fate”: not pity, but *unnatural participation*...It is a composition of speeds and affects involving entirely different individuals, a symbiosis; it makes the rat become a thought, a feverish thought in the man, at the same time as the man becomes a rat gnashing its teeth in its death throes. (pp. 240, 258)

By using the case of Chandos, Deleuze and Guatarri evocatively differentiate becoming-animal from man’s pity for animal or resemblance: becoming-animal is fundamentally linked with a *desubjectification*, a deconstruction of both man and animal that opens one up from the interior, thus approximating the indiscernible zone of man and animal (before being-man and being-animal). What is happening between Chandos and the dying rat is not pity but affects passing from one to another in the *desubjectification* of each of them.

In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze (2003) further exemplify becoming--animal in a more concrete way by illustrating Bacon’s paintings. According to Deleuze, Bacon is a painter of meat, while flesh and bone continuously confront each other rather than being coordinated. By quoting Bacon’s experience with the butcher shop of feeling surprised that “I [Bacon] wasn’t there instead of the animal” (Bacon, as cited in Deleuze, 2003), Deleuze further explains Bacon’s path of constituting a becoming-animal by drawing the meat, “Pity the meat! ... Every man who suffers is a piece of meat. Meat is the common zone of man and the beast, their zone of indiscernibility...the man who suffers is a beast, the beast that suffers is a man” (pp. 23, 25). For Deleuze, while Bacon constantly makes the body of his figures undergo deformations and dismantle the face, he rediscovers the meat, which reveals the “animal spirit of man” (2003, p. 20), or, as Deleuze further elaborates in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “something absolutely inhuman ... in human beings” (1987, pp. 170-171). Furthermore, such pity for the meat does not refer to the pity in general but is related to “a deep identity” between man and animal that is immediately experienced in the body at certain “extreme moment when [one felt] he or she was nothing but a beast” (Deleuze, 2003, p. 25). In other words, such pity that the meat is able to evoke is fundamentally associated with Deleuzian affects, forces, and intensities, which go beyond individual perceptions and affections. Meanwhile, the revelation of the meat is not only related to suffering but also liberation, “delightful invention, color, and acrobatics” (p. 23), in such a way *becoming-animal* distorts the body and dismantles the face, while allowing the body to re-open itself up to forces and enabling it to escape from its organism and entangle with inhuman beings, which further links to Deleuzo-Guattarian notion of the Body without Organs.

### **Pity the Meat!**

Although *Cows* also includes a considerable amount of gore footage, Medem did not follow Bacon’s path of deforming the body with animal traits, which will inevitably involve special effects so as to bring the narrative largely into the realm of surrealism. Opening with a set of brutal, explicit, and highly realistic war footage, *Cows* restrainedly relate the beginning of the story of magical realism: when the battle is lost and all his comrades are either dead or fatally shot, the protagonist Manuel, in order to escape death, feigns to be dead with the blood gushing out from the neck of his neighbor Carmelo Mendiluze, who is severally shot but yet alive. Although Carmelo dies soon afterward, Manuel has been interrogated by Carmelo’s

condemning gaze and repeatedly rants saying “I’m not dead” until Carmelo takes his last breath. Then, the next sequence explicitly presents the “desubjectification” of human bodies: the corpses of soldiers are inspected, stripped, and carried to the cart, in a way those fleshs are no different from dead animal’s flesh. The death and the brutality of war bring about the ultimate destruction of the formation of the subject, the ultimate “desubjectification.” Nonetheless, those heavy naked corpses are already dead meat, which no longer possesses the condition of becoming.

Meanwhile, as Manuel makes a restrained and painful expression because his bare leg is crushed by the cart, we confirm the fake of his own death has been successful. Then we see his body is loaded onto the cart together with the bodies of his comrades, whereas at first, we cannot distinguish his body since it is stacked with other corpses without any distinction. Nonetheless, the next sequence graphically embodies a becoming-animal in a similar way to Bacon’s paintings. When Deleuze specifies the tension between the bone and the flesh that must be achieved in order for the meat to be revealed, he describes “the body is revealed only when it ceases to be supported by the bones, when the flesh ceases to cover the bones.... In meat, the flesh seems to descend from the bones, while the bones rise up from the flesh” (2003, p. 22). Likewise, the moving images exemplify this descent (*fall [chute]*) of flesh and the rise of bones in an explicit way. We see Manuel attempting to raise his body from the corpses, struggling to raise first his arms, then his legs, which are equivalent to the bones, while the flesh, carrying all the sufferings and vulnerability of the human body, descends from them. Then, when he struggles to stretch his upper body out of the cart towards the ground, his body presents an ultimate *fall* of the flesh by hanging upside down from the cart. All the flesh falls from the bones towards the earth, while his legs, stuck in the pile of corpses, are straining to pull his bones upward (Figure 1). Then finally, his clumsy body falls to the ground from the cart, and he has to keep struggling to raise his arms in order to support the flesh to crawl forward since his crushed leg (the bones) can no longer support the body. As such, the bones and the flesh constantly confront each other and in such a way his body becomes a piece of meat. Then, in the next shot from a low-angle perspective, we see a white cow appear from nowhere, mysterious and solitary with fly-swarmed eyes. Manuel looks up into the cow’s eyes in the same way the cow is looking at him, which is not out of sympathy nor pity for himself but rather pity for meat. He looks at the cow, feels his body as meat, and feels pity for the meat because he is experiencing himself as meat.



Figure 1: Manuel’s Escape

Jo Evans (2009), inspired by Medem's talk in an interview with BBC4, points out that the scene of Manuel escaping from the cart is Medem's direct reference to Goya (Figure 2) as the representation of Manuel's "steal[ing] a new life for himself" and "symbolic rebirth as a coward" and further argues "Manuel's escape is structured as a perverse, self-ordained rebirth from the dead bodies of his Carlist comrades" (pp. 128-129). Evans's observations and reading of the scene provide us with an alternative perspective to revisit the deeper symbolic meaning of Manuel's escape and its linkage with the foundational Basque myth and the problematic Basque identity. Medem's adaptation of Goya takes advantage of cinematic devices thus making the moving images much more powerful and beyond the symbolic level. It is also worth mentioning that the first shot after the film titles consists of a long take that slowly pans from a full shot of piles of cow carcasses to a long shot of the Carlist soldiers in the trenches of Biscay preparing for the battle to a medium shot of Ilegorri, the young errand boy, talking to Carmelo about Manuel's participation in the battalion. We have no way of knowing how the cow escapes the same fate of death as his companions and how it miraculously reappears after sixty years to witness the survival of Manuel's grandson. Nonetheless, the idea of multiplicity and deconstruction of individuality is embodied here in the two sequences that echo before and after: in extreme moments, humans die like animals, losing all their corporeal recognition and becoming dead meat, while Manuel and the solitary cow witness the survival of each other.

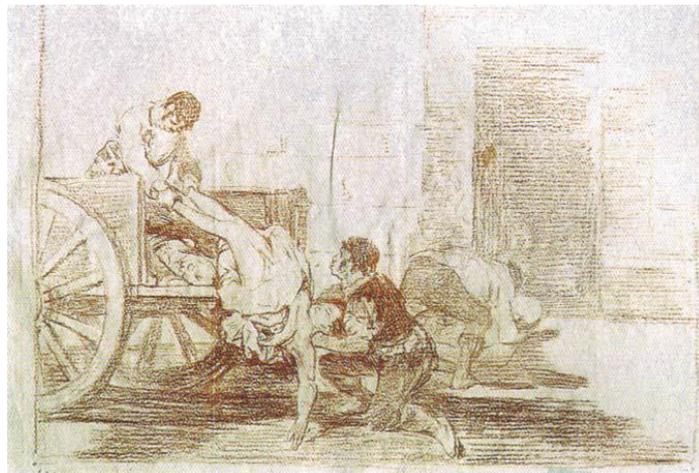


Figure 2: *Cartloads to the Cemetery: Disaster of War (1812-1815)*

"Pity the meat!" Such deep identity of Manuel and the cow is further embodied in Manuel's paintings when he becomes a gentle, eccentric amateur painter of cows. It is the meat that Manuel spends the rest of his life painting instead of those cows so that all the cows in his paintings do not physically resemble the real ones and he would draw cows when they are not even there. He paints the meat, the meat suffers, and, as a result, the cows in his paintings are always suffering, wounded, and bleeding while the cows he raises have never been wounded at all, except when he himself cuts the hooves of the dying cow when it is seriously sick.

### **The Eye of the Other**

Despite that the narrative of *Cows* is apparently to a large extent inspired by Basque myth that many elements and settings in the moving images present strong symbolic implications, the film's treatment of the strange entanglement between Manuel and cow is established on as much mythical and symbolic level as cinematic level. Medem constantly employs intriguing switches of point of view in the sequences of seeing and being seen, as if the eye becomes a black hole or a tunnel that transfers the subject to an elsewhere. In the sequence of Manuel and

the cow looking into the eyes of each other for the first time, the camera first switches from the medium shot of the cow to a medium close-up of Manuel, then to a close-up of the cow's fly-swarmed eye. Then, the camera slowly zooms into the pupil of the cow until the black screen and then zooms out from the middle to the long shot of aged Manuel painting in the field of his house thirty years later.

A more intriguing point-of-view sequence appears when Manuel welcomes the huge new cow, named Pupille, as one of the trophies of his son's victory in the woodcutting competition. We first see Manuel looks over the cow, saying, "You look pregnant, let's see what's in there." Then, from an objective point of view, we see he looks into the cow's eye while grabbing its horns. Curiously, the camera then switches to the subjective point of view of the cow in which Manuel's face gradually zooms out, becomes a crescent moon-like hole in the black screen, and flies away from the frame, while a full shot of the sun rising from the distant mountains imperceptibly fades in the black background. (Figure 3) Meanwhile, it is also intriguing to note that the sound of the cow's heartbeat and digestion can be heard intensely and strongly while the visual image switches to the subjective point of view of the cow.



Figure 3: The crescent moon and the sunrise

In Deleuze's (2003) discussion in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Bacon's figures present "the way the body escapes from itself; that is, the way it escapes from the organism.... It escapes from itself through the open mouth, though the anus or the stomach, or through the throat" (p. 50), thus constituting a body without organs (BwO) and experiencing a *becoming-animal*. Among Bacon's paintings, represented by the Screaming Popes series, while the face is dismantled, it is the mouth that becomes an indeterminate organ and opens a hole through which the body escapes from itself. Unlike its literal meaning, the Deleuzian body without organs does not refer to the absence of organs in the body but is rather "defined by the *temporary and provisional presence* of determinate organs" (Deleuze, 2003, p. 48). In other words, while the deformed body escapes from the hole that opens from the mouth, the body liberates itself from the organism, the mouth ceases to perform its determinate organic function and becomes a "temporary and transitory organ[s]" (p. 48).

Likewise, we have no way of knowing how Manuel could tell the cow is pregnant simply by looking at its face and how he could see and "hear" its interiority with his gaze. Notwithstanding, through the deliberate switch of points of view and use of sound effects, the moving images present the eye of both Manuel and the cow beyond its organic (optical)

function. When Manuel's gaze meets the cow's, the eye ceases to be an indeterminate organ: it becomes not only optical but also acoustical and haptic (in a way the sound effect is so powerful that the heartbeat of the cow is almost *touchable*.) Like Bacon's asignifying traits, the cinematic device endows the eye with the function of hearing, touching, and even foreseeing, ceasing to be assigned as a fixed organ.

Furthermore, Medem's exploration of the beyond-organic function of the eye does not stop at the gaze between man and cow. As Manuel's fascination with the non-human vision soon leads him to become obsessed with the camera, he instructs his grandson, Peru, to steal the tripod camera from the photographer who comes to take the family photo, which further allows Peru to develop his interest in photography. The introduction of the camera's vision further complicates the points of view in *Cows*. When the Irigibel family has their family photo taken for the second time, the women of the family have a curious conversation: "—Who will take the photo? —The camera itself, won't it?" (Medem, 1992)

This intriguing dialogue is reminiscent of André Bazin's discussions on the objectivity of the camera, which reproduces reality as a non-living agent and presents a non-human vision. Bazin (1967) further writes, "All the arts are based on the presence of man, only photography derives an advantage from his absence" (p. 13). Although we do not see how the camera automatically takes the photo, but only hear the shutter sound at a certain moment when we gradually see the whole family from the camera eye in a zoom shot, the moving images present how the camera problematizes the point of view of the visual image. After we see the whole Irigibel family from the viewfinder of the tripod camera, the image switches to the subjective vision of the camera that sees the eye of Peru from its interiority, which resonates with the cow's internalized vision of Manuel. As such, the camera, with its advantage of objectivity, presents its double visions: it sees simultaneously the cameraman behind the camera and the view in front of its lens, while one cannot see inside the camera as it essentially exists as a tunnel, a "hypertrophy of the eye" in Deleuze's words, which complements our way of seeing with a more advanced non-human vision.

The subsequent sequence after the shutter shot further exemplifies how the camera sees differently. First, the image quickly switches from the black screen to a full image of a close-up of the moon (Figure 4), which gradually transitions to a close-up of the death of the male praying mantis after copulation with a fade-in effect. (Figure 5) All those images are framed by the photographic lens and are supposed to be captured by Peru with that tripod camera. Then, with another switch of point of view, we are finally able to see who are behind the viewfinder in a static low-angle objective shot: Peru, a literal camera-man whose whole face is covered by the camera, Manuel, his granddaughter Cristina, and the cow. Then, as Manuel seriously repeats to his grandsons, "This is very important, watch closely...so important...This is most important...It's carrying off a snakeskin...Yes, very important. Never forget it" ((Medem, 1992), the visual image switches between the medium shot of four of them and a series of close-up shots from the circular lens of the photographic eye: that of a lizard dragging a snail, of a beetle carrying a snakeskin, and of the worm crawling over poisonous mushrooms.



Figure 4: the close-up of the moon



Figure 5: the close-up of the death of the male praying mantis after copulation

With such treatment of the camera point of view switching, all the eyes are looking in the same direction with the same scrutinizing gaze as if the characters, the camera, and the cow are sharing the same vision and see identically, while the view in the photographic lens is too detailed to be of human vision from such distance. Meanwhile, we can also note how Peru holding the camera that obscures his face curiously resembles the outline of the cow's head (Figure 6), which further implies the entanglement of the human gaze, camera eye, and cow's eye.



Figure 6: the camera-man and the cow

Far from telling a Basque story simply from the cow's, it is more likely that the moving images constantly switch points of view to achieve a non-human, beyond-human perspective, while with each gaze the eye becomes a black hole or a tunnel that transfers the subject to an elsewhere. As such, by virtue of the cinematic device, the body escapes from itself through the eye as an indeterminate organ and liberates itself from its organism, through which the body undertakes non-human becomings. Meanwhile, the intervention of the tripod camera's vision from its viewfinder raises the spectator's awareness of the camera-consciousness and the autonomy of cinematic devices themselves. As such, we travel from the human/cow vision to human/camera-eye vision to human/camera vision to an omniscient cow/camera/human/cinema vision, and yet such vision keeps varying as an ongoing entanglement of animal-human-machine without end.

### **From Becoming-*Vacas* (Cows) to Becoming-*Vasca* (Basque)**

In his discussion on the interaction between animals, machines, and postnational identity in *Cows*, Nathan E. Richardson (2004) keenly notes that cows (*vacas*) are an anagram of Basque (*vasco/a*) in Spanish, while *vacas* as the film's title also involves an "always plural, never patriarchal" implication (p. 203).<sup>1</sup> Richardson's observations further confirm the profound linkage between the cow and Basque identity that is embedded in the film. Nonetheless, spanning the decades between the two significant wars in Spain, *Cows* neither chooses to develop the narrative from a macro perspective nor turn the story into a "Basque history" in the eyes of someone. With the constant switch of point-of-view shots, *Cows* avoids any single perspective from overwhelming the film narrative. It seems that, for Medem, what is problematic is not just the Basque identity in relation with the official Spanish discourses, but also the "authorship" of Basque discourses: who has the right to tell the Basque stories, the Spanish officials? The Basque people? A third party? From whose eyes can we get closest to a "true" Basque history? From this perspective, *Cows* does not offer a solution to the long-standing controversial questions revolving around Basque identity but rather complicates it. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guatarri (1986) write about the same dilemma of the double impossibility of writing for minor nations by using the Jewish literature of Warsaw as an example:

The impossibility of not writing because national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature...The impossibility of writing other than in German is for the Prague Jews the feeling of an irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territoriality. And the impossibility of writing in German is the deterritorialization of the German population itself, an oppressive minority that speaks a language cut off from the masses, like a "paper language" or an artificial language; this is all the more true for the Jews who are simultaneously a part of this minority and excluded from it, like "gypsies who have stolen a German child from its crib." (p. 16)

For Deleuze and Guatarri, the impasse is never solely with the identity of minor nations but profoundly extends to the language of their discourse. As a result, a deterritorialized language, "a foreign language in a dominant language" has to be created (Deleuze, 1989, p. 223), hence the birth of Prague German, while it can only be a minor language for minor uses. While Deleuze and Guatarri positions minoritarian as one of the key aspects of becomings, becoming-

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<sup>1</sup> The connection between *vacas* and *vasca* should not be over-interpretation considering Medem's constant interests in playing games with names (palindromic names such as Ana and Otto) and film titles (*Room in Rome*) throughout his oeuvre.

minor keeps the subject in a permanent state of minority and at the same time endows it with deterritorialized nomadic power of continuous variation.

Likewise, the assemblage of human/cow/camera in *Cows* not only offers us a non-human, beyond-human eye to revisit the Basque history and identity, but also continuously creates an ever-changing alternative eye that allows us to see a *becoming-vasca*.

## **Conclusion**

From becoming-*vacas* to becoming-*vasca*, *Cows* negotiates the reconciliation of Manuel and the two families throughout decades as well as that of the Basque identity in a bigger framework. the assemblage of cow/human/camera involves blood, earth, and memory, while the identities of the characters, as well as that of the Basque Country, continuously float in becomings. The cinematic device reveals a deeper identity between the main character and cow through the gaze, while the eye becomes an indeterminate organ as a block hole that allows the body to escape from itself and further constitutes an assemblage of man/cow/camera, which allows the spectator to alternatively revisit the Basqueness from the eye of the Other.

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