



## ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND ITS VICISSITUDES

Reflections on *Homme*-sick Cinema

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The cinema is a marvellous apparatus for taking us outside ourselves and outside of the world in which we believe ourselves to live.

—Jean Epstein, '*Alcool et cinéma*'

### *Homme*-sick Animals

In a 1973 television broadcast, subsequently published as the text *Télévision* (1974), Jacques Lacan responds to an offscreen question from Jacques-Alain Miller about the strangeness of the word 'unconscious'. After stressing that the unconscious requires language and is proper to speaking beings alone, the psychoanalyst introduces two neologisms, '*en mal d'homme*' and '*d'hommestiques*', which he treats as synonyms. Lacan coins these terms to refer to animals, who are presumed to be outside of language, but who are nevertheless affected by the unconscious through their intimacy with humans and thus their proximity to, and haunting by, human language (Lacan 1974: 15–16). Lacan addresses these terms in a single sentence and then moves on, but their conceptual potential merits pause. *D'hommestiques*, comprised from *de* (of, for, by), *homme* (man), and *domestique* (domestic), suggests that this category of animals belongs to the domain of man and to the familiar realm of the home and the homely. The possessive *d'* demarcates a history of ontological entanglement, wherein creatures bargained, surrendered or were stripped of the perceived autonomy and freedom enjoyed in the wild – their *homme*-lessness – in order to become familiar, familiarised, homely, and enter into domestic relations. *Mal de* refers to sickness of or sickness from something, and *en mal de* means lacking, yearning for, or craving something. The phrase '*les animaux en mal d'homme*' expresses a craving for man as well as an affliction of and from man. The translation of Lacan's '*animaux en mal d'homme*' as '*homme*-sick animals' in the English version of the text supplements

the term's conceptual richness (Lacan 1987: 9). *Homme-sick*, intermingling French and English idioms, emphasises a profoundly ambivalent dialectic of desire and disease: an impossible longing to return to a sheltering origin (home), an imagined longing for the company of man (*homme*), and the very real afflictions and risks associated with this domestic arrangement (sickness).

Humans perpetuate *homme-sickness* through their compulsion to domesticate and familiarise animals. But humans also suffer from this 'animalaise'. We too are *homme-sick* animals. *Homme-sickness*'s classic symptom is anthropomorphism, or the projection of human values and meanings onto animals, plants and inanimate objects. Anthropomorphism frequently expresses a hubris borne of humanity's perceived special status as the top of the animal kingdom, above all other beasts, as well as a narcissistic desire to recognise one's reflection everywhere and in everything. In this sense, anthropomorphism supports an anthropocentric worldview that places humans at the centre of the universe. Such a perspective effectively marginalises and subjugates other forms of life. Anthropomorphism has tended towards anthropocentrism, but this is not the only possibility. The same ambivalence that structures *homme-sickness* is at work in anthropomorphism, and may produce expressions of anthropomorphism that complicate and even counter anthropocentric perspectives. The historians of science Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman take such an approach, arguing that anthropomorphism needs to be evaluated contextually. If its usage in the West over the past two centuries has tended to reinforce anthropocentrism, anthropomorphism may also be conceived in a manner that privileges the *morphos*, or transformative potential, rather than the *anthropos*, or human aspects, of the concept (2005: 6).

Sigmund Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny), his 1919 study of the unsettling intimacy of the domestic and the familiar with the wild, the unfamiliar and the strange, clarifies the shared theoretical stakes of *homme-sickness* and the vicissitudes of anthropomorphism. Freud's examination of *unheimlich* experiences – 'that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' – provides a model for thinking beyond the principle of identity: being as a self-evident, self-identical phenomenon (Freud 1953: 220). The manner in which *Das Unheimliche* traces and tracks the wildness haunting the domestic strongly resonates with *homme-sickness* and its dynamics of desire and malaise. In certain contexts, the two terms – *Unheimliche* and *homme-sickness* – can serve as translations of each other.

Freud opens *Das Unheimliche* with a multilingual etymological excursus on the shared ambivalence of the terms *heimlich* (homely,

familiar, domestic) – from the root word *Heim* (home) – and *unheimlich* (unhomely, unfamiliar, strange). The ambivalence of this set of terms is so strong that these antonyms also function as synonyms, effectively referring to the same phenomena (ibid.: 221–26). For this reason, Freud designates the prefix ‘un’ in *unheimlich* as a ‘token of repression’ symptomatic of the dis-ease born of strangely familiar and familiarly strange experiences, complicating Ernst Jentsch’s 1906 definition of the *Unheimliche* as intellectual uncertainty (ibid.: 241). Freud understands the *Unheimliche* as an epistemological crisis whose causes lie in encounters with the return of the repressed, including encounters with the very ‘fact’ of the unconscious. This is what differentiates the *Unheimliche* from other kinds of frightening or confusing experiences. From this perspective, what haunts and disturbs a house, what makes a home unhomely, are the unconscious conflicts of the people who enter and inhabit it. The confusion as to whether sources of anxiety emanate from within or without, from the psyche or the physical environment, from presence or projection, and the discomfiting sense of the existence of an internal alien Other, produce the haunted homme. The malady particular to this form of homesickness is quite literally a *mal d’homme* (a *homme*-sickness) born of and by the unconscious: the very attribute, as already suggested through Lacan, that purportedly makes the human the animal that is not one.<sup>1</sup>

One and not one. One and more than one. Samuel Weber, in his reading of Freud’s analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ and its themes of optics and castration anxiety, emphasises that the epistemological crisis of the *Unheimliche* is characterised by a threat to the phantasmatic integrity of perception and of phenomenality (1973: 1132). The incredible sights and sounds of *unheimlich* phenomena, such as the multiplication of doubles, automata and compulsive repetitions, make one doubt one’s own organs of perception. Weber argues that the indecidability characteristic of the *Unheimliche* ‘affects and infects representations, motifs, themes and situations’ in a manner similar to Walter Benjamin’s theory of allegories, which ‘always mean something other than what they are and draws their own being and substance into a vortex of signification’ (ibid.). The epistemological uncertainties and the confusion caused by the fluidity of signification – wherein something may stand for or even become something, anything, entirely different – may also ‘infect’ the perceiving subject. *Unheimlich* experiences reveal fissures in the principle of identity and its fiction of the self-identical subject. The crisis of perception sparked by the encounter with unconscious matter produces a momentary sense of dislocation of the subject.

Freud insisted that expressions of the *Unheimliche* encountered in the arts, 'that we merely picture or read about', were of a different order from the rare cases of the *Unheimliche* of empirical experience (Freud 1953: 247). Yet this distinction represses the *unheimlich* attributes of cinema, whose effects can serve to centre or displace the subject. Film's confluence of reality effects, temporal and spatial plasticity, and phantastic and fictive capacities blur Freud's aesthetic and psychoanalytic dimensions of the *Unheimliche*. The causal connection between the referent and signifier of the filmic image operates through and reinforces the principle of identity (connecting the self with a precise image), but this existential bond also alters and even threatens it through the production of doubles.

Just as film brings together and amplifies the aesthetic and experiential *Unheimliche*, it also maintains the co-presence of both aspects of the double. Referring to the temporal structure of return in the *Unheimliche*, Freud speculates that if doubles originally acted as a magical insurance against death, in an age of disenchantment they become harbingers of death and vulnerability (*ibid.*: 235–36). André Bazin, in his 1945 essay 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', which begins by placing art on the psychoanalyst's couch, refers to the double-status of photographic images as fulfilling a 'mummy complex' (a symbolic solution to the problem of death) while also having 'ghostly' (*fantomatique*) qualities capable of literally defamiliarising even the most familiar of family portraits by suffusing them with the 'troubling presence of lives halted in time and liberated from their destiny' (Bazin 2009: 3, 8, translation modified). Bazin emphasises the fact that an 'impassive mechanical device' freed from any 'anthropocentric usefulness' produces these effects, and in a manner that minimises the intervention of human agency (*ibid.*: 8, 4, 7). The impassive camera, which sustains a rigorous indifference to what it films, endows the medium with an anti-anthropocentric potential. As Bazin explains in his 1951 essay 'Theatre and Cinema II', the cinema has a centrifugal, decentring orientation, producing a radically equalising vision of the world in which 'human beings (*l'homme*) do not necessarily have preferential status over beasts or forests' (*ibid.*: 194).<sup>2</sup>

The cinema has the virtue of producing *unheimlich*, unhomely, *homme-less* perspectives, displaced from the sheltering confidence of anthropocentrism. The cinema may be an anthropomorphic machine, but this does not necessarily make it an anthropocentric machine. Narrative and documentary cinema in the West have historically tended to favour the use of anthropomorphism in service of anthropocentrism, both by using animals as fleshy puppets for human concerns and by yoking the

camera's lens to a correspondence with Cartesian space and its subsequent disciplining of human vision. But the ambivalence of cinematic anthropomorphism, like *homme-sickness* and the *Unheimliche*, prevents it from becoming too stable, static or fixed. Cinematic anthropomorphism may produce effects that go beyond the principle of identity, emphasising its plastic aspects, and the possibility of rendering the anthropological more dynamic. This is cinematograph's Copernican vocation: the capacity for anti-anthropocentric displacement.

### Cinematic *Homme-sickness*

Copernican perspectives, critical of anthropocentrism, have been marginal and even marginalised in film theory and practice, but they have not been wholly absent. The minor oeuvre of the French biological and wildlife filmmaking team Jean Painlevé (1902–1989) and Geneviève Hamon (1905–1987) engaged in a series of generative confrontations with anthropomorphism and its vicissitudes, exploring the tensions between the anthropocentric and anti-anthropocentric orientations of cinema. Painlevé and Hamon approached the symptoms of *homme-sickness* as one of the defining problems of cinema: anthropomorphism presented a challenge to be negotiated, a key aesthetic strategy to be exploited, and even a call to responsibility. These tensions surface in a particularly visible manner in the films they made during the transition to sound in France.

Between 1928 and 1930, Painlevé and Hamon produced and released eight documentaries on marine wildlife intended for popular audiences: *La Pieuvre/The Octopus* (1928), *Le Bernard l'ermite/The Hermit Crab* (1929), *La Daphnie/The Daphnia* (1929), *Hyas et Sténorinques, crustacés marins/Hyas and Stenorhynchus, Marine Crustaceans* (1929), *Les Oursins/Sea Urchins* (1929), *Caprelles et Pantopodes/Caprella and Pantopoda* (1930), *Crabes/Crabs* (1930) and *Crevettes/Shrimp* (1930). Each of these films, with the exception of *Caprella and Pantopoda* was originally released as a silent print. Painlevé rather reluctantly began to sonorise the films in 1930 with the release of *Caprella and Pantopoda*, which featured spoken commentary by Painlevé and a score conducted by Maurice Jaubert. Based upon the strength of this experiment, including public praise from Fernand Léger and Marc Chagall (*Deux Aveugles* 1930: 6), in 1931 Gaumont distributed sonorised versions of *The Hermit Crab*; *Hyas and Stenorhynchus*, *Marine Crustaceans*; and *Crabs and Shrimp* (a reedited version of the two separate films), also featuring scores conducted by Jaubert.

Painlevé described the double aim of these short films as ‘treating the morphology, the behaviour, and the development of a living being, from birth to death, from a scientific and photogenic point of view’ (Painlevé 1930a: 6). The strange charm of the films, dedicated to the lives of curious aquatic creatures, quickly earned Painlevé a reputation as one of the leading documentary filmmakers in France. (Critics frequently overlooked Hamon, who worked on all of the popular documentaries credited to Painlevé but remained out of the spotlight even after she began getting equal billing as codirector in 1960.) Reviews praised the combination of scientific rigor, photogenic elements, and surrealist humour in these films, and were quick to remark upon how their array of scientific film techniques, including microcinematography and time-lapse, slow motion and x-ray photography, produced an astonishing aesthetic surplus. In a review published in January 1929, Maurice Bourdet of *Ciné Miroir* marvelled at the oneiric quality of these documentaries, in which cinema spectatorship becomes the *mise-en-scène* of particularly unheimlich experiences: ‘In making us carefully examine these infinitesimal beings, for whom he acts as a historian, or better yet, a novelist, Jean Painlevé leads us into the domain of dreams, where, to our astonished eyes, beings and things spill beyond the limits of their forms’ (Bourdet 1929: np). The technical spectacle of these films, with their multitude of striking visual perspectives, achieves the rather surrealist goal of objectively blurring the boundaries between empirical observation and dream. Bourdet’s description of the plasticity of beings and things revealed by the cinematograph evokes a cinematic experience less determined by reassuring identification than by metamorphosis.

Painlevé and Hamon connect a critical regard for wildlife with an interest in exploring the plasticity of film as a medium and experience. The arrival of sound film production in France provoked considerable anxiety for the filmmaking team.<sup>3</sup> Sound film production posed steep economic challenges to independent filmmakers such as Painlevé and Hamon, who self-funded their films. Painlevé estimated each of his early silent films was made for under twenty thousand francs (Anon. 1933: 2).<sup>4</sup> The capital investment required to produce sound films could easily be more than four times as expensive, as was the case with their 1935 short film *L’Hippocampe/The Sea Horse*, distributed by Pathé-Natan, which cost approximately ninety thousand francs to produce (Ensault 1982: 17). In the face of such mounting expenses, financial and aesthetic independence would be increasingly difficult to maintain (Hamery 2008: 73–107). The arrival of sound film also raised aesthetic concerns regarding whether the addition of prerecorded sounds would

affect the power of the medium's visual aspects, reducing it to a form of 'canned theatre'. In the case of animal films, the addition of the human voice and standardised music considerably strengthened the possibilities for (and probability of) anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism. Painlevé fretted that sound film production would increase the domestication of their motion pictures, threatening to diminish their unhomey qualities. In this context, Painlevé engaged in a series of critical speculations on the medium, which turned with considerable frequency towards questions of the utility and disadvantages of anthropomorphism for cinematic wildlife.

At the moment of sound film's arrival Painlevé declared the voice was 'in contradiction with the photographic image' and also 'truly an irritant' (Painlevé 1929: 18; Painlevé 1930b: 3).<sup>5</sup> In 'Les Films Biologiques' (Biological Films), an essay that begins by addressing scientific cinema and ends by connecting it to avant-garde cinema, Painlevé identifies himself as a partisan of 'pure films', though he admits, such purity is more an ideal than an easily realisable goal, as one must keep audiences engaged (Painlevé 1929: 18). Part of the purity of silent cinema that Painlevé wanted to preserve was the international aspect of its visual language, which had the universalist aspirations to act as a form of popular Esperanto equally accessible to scientists and the street urchin (and why limit the universal to humans). Painlevé fretted that the wholesale embrace of the talkie carelessly 'tosses to the floor' cinema's most utopian aspect (though he joked elsewhere that the desire to see films such as the hardboiled detective serial *Bulldog Drummond* in its original idiom might inspire people to learn other languages) (Painlevé 1929: 18; Painlevé 1930b: 1).

Painlevé's insistence upon the differentiation of the explanatory function of spoken language from the evocative plasticity of photographic images derived from a desire to preserve cinema's visual immediacy. Painlevé writes: 'by definition the voice is made to be understood . . . it is thus incompatible with all the plastic, deformable, and imaginative visuals that represent photographic art' (Painlevé 1929: 18). He initially rejected the all too functional aspects of vocal expression, what his one-time collaborator Antonin Artaud described as the 'alimentary' and 'trapped beast origins' of language (Artaud 1958: 46). In the absence of an Artaudian language freed from functional utility and endowed with a wild animal gaiety, capable of producing physical shocks equal to that of the image, spoken language primarily had the normative effect of fixing images in meaning. Painlevé protested that the voice deprived the spectator of the alluring ambiguity and undigested significance of images and the freedom of engagement they solicit (Painlevé 1929: 18).

Verbal discourse, according to the uninitiated Painlevé, sacrificed the potential 'sensation of plenitude' that well-crafted silent films produce (Painlevé 1930a: 6).

In addition to taming of the wild potential of images, Painlevé expressed concern for the manner in which spoken and written language could be used to cover up faulty filmmaking or fabricate intentional falsehoods from documentary footage. In an unpublished typescript with the handwritten title 'Le Cinéma', written for a lecture shortly before recording the first set of commentaries for his films (he makes reference to this in the concluding lines), Painlevé dramatised an imaginary conversation with a theatre manager about the need to sonorise his films.<sup>6</sup>

- From now on, we can only ensure a serious run if you give us documentaries with sound.
- Nevertheless, I cannot make an octopus speak . . .
- Why not . . . ? Ah, yes. Very well, speak yourself. But do not tell the audience anything boring or difficult.
- I see: some drolleries.
- That's it, some drolleries about the octopus. Or better yet some well-matched music, something that sticks well.
- For octopus music, something a bit slimy. We'll tell the musicians not to empty their woodwind instruments . . .
- Do what you like provided that it is evocative. If need be record noise, as long as it is sound. We have not spent millions transforming our theatre in order to project silent films. (Painlevé 1930b: 1)

Painlevé rehearses familiar tropes of the struggle between artistic or intellectual integrity verses commercial appeal and entertainment value. The extract also emphasises his sense that the mounting pressures to add sound to film were frequently arbitrary and unmotivated by considerations of content or the use of the medium. The distracted attitude with which the imaginary manager suggests that if the octopus cannot be made to speak on film then the filmmaker must speak for and about it, indexes Painlevé's discomfort with pressures to engage in unfocused anthropomorphism. This point is reinforced by the manager's demand that all information and commentary be presented in a light and amusing manner: neither too serious nor too dull lest it alienate a public in which exhibitors – at least in Painlevé's account – had so little faith.

The stakes of anthropomorphism raised by Painlevé's reflections pose the vital questions 'can the subaquatic be made to speak' and how does one represent phenomena of natural history. The challenges of filming with wild animals, or even with animals familiarised with the



disturbing conditions of filmmaking, such as the presence of humans, oppressively bright and hot lights, the surfeit of noises, and the occasional use of upsetting forms of stimulation meant to spur the animals to act, require incredible discipline, dedication and patience. (The extraordinary patience and dedication of wildlife filmmakers inspired Scott MacDonald to refer to these films as a form of ‘committed’ cinema [MacDonald 2006: 18].) The passive patience and respect for contingency necessary to capture animals performing gestures of their own accord, helps preserve something of the wild in wildlife films. While Painlevé concedes that *mise-en-scène* and montage are a necessary part of zoological cinema, he is wary of the manner in which these techniques come to stand in for impatient and bad filmmaking, and the production of what he labels ‘counterfeit documentaries’ (Painlevé 1930a: 6).

He expands upon the concern for authenticity in his essay ‘*La Beauté du film documentaire, le film biologique*’ (The beauty of documentary film: the biological film):

The most well established observations collapse, the most surely organised reflexes cease to function due to the unusual lighting passing through the filters, while acts of hunger cease due to a change in milieu. One would like to find the emotional factor and control its variations even though, constantly swinging between anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism, we are incapable of understanding an animal that does not remain within the field determined by these two blinders. (Painlevé 1930a: 6)

Situated between the antipodes of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism, the activity of wildlife filmmakers is determined largely by contingency and chance, and requires incredible patience. These two poles, which Painlevé also refers to as blinders (*oeillères*), such as are placed on workhorses to restrict their field of vision, both determine and severely limit one’s perspectives and the possibilities of comprehension. The radically indifferent mechanical eye of the camera thus plays an important role in loosening the double-bind/double-blindness of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism.

Painlevé conceived of anthropomorphism as something ‘one cannot entirely cure oneself of’ (Painlevé 1929: 17). Addressing himself as much as others, he cautioned that filmmakers must ‘tickle as little as possible the anthropomorphism which sleeps within all of us’ (Painlevé 1930a: 6). Nearly six decades later, in an interview for the televised series *Jean Painlevé au fil ses films* (Jean Painlevé through his films) (Derrien and Hazera 1988), he made the rather astonishing proclamation that: ‘We commit anthropomorphism. We have the

right to commit anthropomorphism. We have the duty to commit anthropomorphism. If not, we would be incapable of appreciating any element around us'.<sup>7</sup> In the context of Painlevé and Hamon's ongoing cinematic experiments (spanning close to two hundred films over six decades), the apparent human chauvinism of the right and duty to commit anthropomorphism is tempered by their artful use of film's unheimlich, unhommely capacities. Painlevé's seemingly contradictory positions on anthropomorphism as both a problem and a responsibility converge in treating it as ontological and, in a sense, inescapable. But this ontological inescapability should not be mistaken for anything inevitable, unchangeable or ahistoric. An acceptance of the fact of anthropomorphism places critical focus on its practices and uses: it is not a matter of *if* one commits anthropomorphism, but *how* and towards what ends.

Anthropomorphism in its various guises recurs throughout Painlevé and Hamon's work. Their film *The Hermit Crab* offers a valuable case study of the ambivalent engagement with anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism in their œuvre. Hermit crabs are perhaps the most familiar creatures in Painlevé and Hamon's cinematic menagerie (with the exception of the pigeons of their 1982 film *Les Pigeons du square*). Their very names evoke a class of people (hermits) defined through their mode of dwelling in solitude; furthermore, these animals – alive or dead – were common souvenirs from summer holidays spent at the seashore. The 1931 sonorised version of *The Hermit Crab* preserves the title cards from the 1929 silent version, but adds spoken commentary by Painlevé and a score featuring musical themes from the composer Vincenzo Bellini under the direction of Maurice Jaubert. The fourteen-minute film provides an ethological depiction of hermit crabs, who, due to their soft abdomen, seek shelter in shells that have been, as the commentary explains 'abandoned by their landlords'. Painlevé and Hamon give particular attention to the manner in which crabs choose and secure their shell homes, as well as how they 'evict' other crabs from shells they find more desirable. Taking a page from the caricatures of J.J. Grandville, the film playfully examines hermit crab fashions, including shells covered in sponges and sea anemones, and depicts prolonged battles between crabs that are narrated like boxing matches. The film also includes a series of behavioural experiments, including removing a crab's eyes to demonstrate how it selects a shell using its sense of touch (a classic laboratory experiment for zoology students), provoking a 'housing crisis' (*crise du logement*) among a frantic cluster of naked crabs trying to enter a single shell, and staging a football match between crabs using a cork ball.

Despite the many ways that Painlevé and Hamon engage in anthropomorphism, nowhere in *The Hermit Crab* or any other of their films are the onscreen creatures personalised or familiarised with names. Creatures are frequently individualised, to discuss distinct behaviours or physical attributes, but the films refer to them by their species name, or by the 'social role' they are performing at the moment. In this manner, the filmmakers respect a certain distance even as one visually passes into and through the creatures via the techniques of microcinematography and vivisection.

The foregrounding of techniques of scientific cinematography helps syncope the interplay between anthropomorphic identification with the hermit crabs and moments of sudden estrangement. Early in the film, the commentary announces: 'With some magnification, one can make a monster out of this charming little animal', followed by a rapid succession of six extreme-close-up magnifications of the mandibles and eye stems of hermit crabs, which appear frightening, strange and terribly beautiful (Figure 4.1).



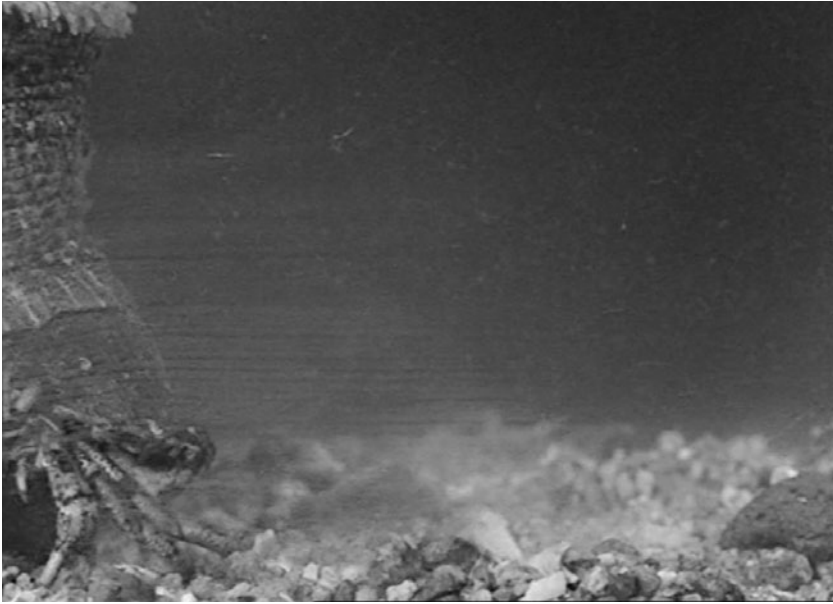
**Figure 4.1** Screen capture from *Bernard l'ermite* (Painlevé and Hamon, France, 1931): rendering the charming monstrous and the monstrous charming. © Les Documents Cinématographiques

This revealing technical demonstration, which is repeated in the film's penultimate sequence of 'lunch on the sand' in which the commentator expresses the fact that 'unexpected exquisite things can be found in the sand', has the effect of destabilising perspectives and producing momentary experiences of *dépaysement* or disorientation. The multiple identities of the crab – that of a charming little creature and a gigantic monster – produced by filmic techniques keep the film's anthropomorphism from settling too comfortably into anthropocentrism, while the dialogue emphasises the film's intentional, creative acts of morphism (*'Avec certains grossissements on fait un monster de ce charmant petit animal'*: With some magnification one can make a monster out of this charming little animal).

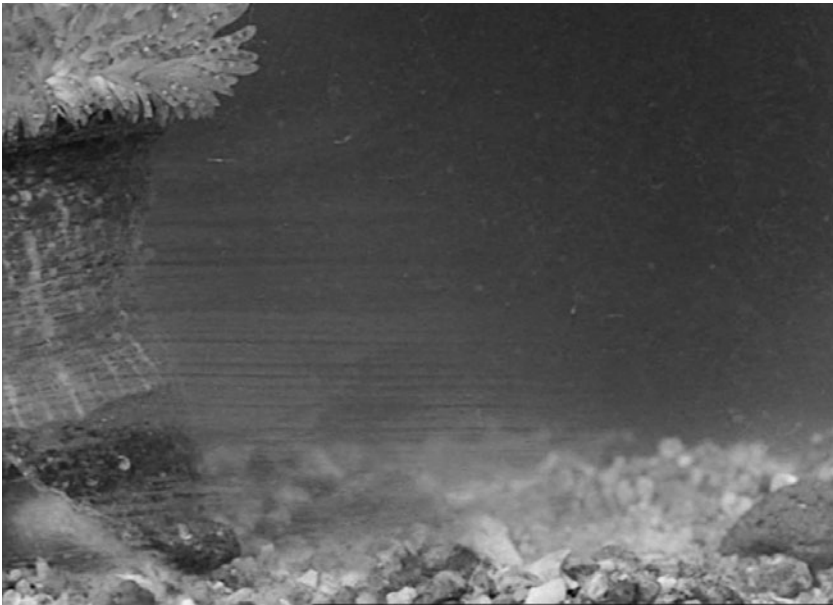
These self-critical gestures are multiplied by the film's playful critique of conventions of wildlife documentaries and the technologically assisted misinformation they often produce. In the essay 'La Beauté du film documentaire' Painlevé critiques the sloppy and even dishonest filmmaking of a production he had recently seen at a specialty cinema: *La vie au fond des mers* (Life at the Bottom of the Sea).<sup>8</sup> Painlevé complains of the bad titling – the film purportedly refers to a hermit crab as a hermit crayfish and claims it is limited to northern seas – but he is truly incensed by the film's description of the relationship between the hermit crab and sea anemone. Quoting from the film, Painlevé recollects a particularly egregious falsehood: 'The anemone loves to ride on the back of the hermit crayfish. Reaching the end, the ingrate anemone eats it' (Painlevé 1930a: 6). Painlevé and Hamon 'remake', or invent, this scenario in their own film. The sequence begins with the whimsical introduction of the sea anemone as a 'pot of flowers' that hermit crabs enjoy wearing as an accessory. The commentary explains: 'It is impossible for a sea anemone to eat the hermit crab . . . Yet this is shown in documentary films with trick photography'. Suddenly, through a Méliès-style replacement splice, the hermit crab carrying the sea anemone on its shell disappears, as if it had been sucked straight through its own the shell and into the stomach of the anemone (Figures 4.2 and 4.3).

The humorous moment serves to differentiate this film from its supposedly less rigorous competition, while also, like the creation of monsters from charming little creatures, drawing attention (and possible self-critique) to the film being projected, soliciting a bit of scepticism for the film's own truth claims.

Despite the reflexivity of *The Hermit Crab*, Painlevé published a number of apologies for the film's anthropomorphism in texts that appeared prior to the release of the sound version. These apologies register regret



**Figure 4.2** Screen capture from *Bernard l'ermite*: a hermit crab wearing a sea anemone . . . © Les Documents Cinématographiques



**Figure 4.3** . . . is 'swallowed' through trick photography. Screen capture from *Bernard l'ermite* © Les Documents Cinématographiques

for having indulged in forms of ‘unscientific’ anthropomorphism. In 1929, with reference to the original silent print, he explains that the ‘vivacity’ of the hermit crab’s behaviour ‘inspires dreaming’ and while one cannot cure oneself completely of anthropomorphism, he notes that at least he had the decency to restrict it to the football match at the end of the film – forgetting, perhaps, the numerous episodes of anthropomorphism throughout the preceding twelve minutes of the film, or, perhaps, understanding the preceding instances to be sufficiently scientific (Painlevé 1929: 17). In 1930 he explains anthropomorphism as a response to the impenetrability of animal behaviour, an opacity in part due to the blinders of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism: ‘it’s truly through the inability to delve into their reflexes that I have once used three non-objective title cards in a film on behaviour’ (Painlevé 1930a: 6). It is difficult to pin down to which three ‘non-objective title cards’ Painlevé is referring (there are certainly more than three in the film). Yet these seem to be allusions to the football match at the end of *The Hermit Crab*, as well as the experimental ‘housing crisis’ staged in the film, which he refers to in an interview as a ‘regrettable title, because it belongs more to human experience than zoological reality’: there are plenty of shells in the sea (Le Roy 1931: np).

The football match was inspired by the crabs’ response to a small cork ball introduced into the aquarium, which, according to Painlevé, ‘required this mise en scène’ (Painlevé 1929: 17). The crabs are drawn to the ball, and Painlevé speculates it may be due to the fact it resembles an enigmatic shell with no entrance: an impossible home. The theatrical set up of two goals and a sign reading ‘the decisions of the referee are final’ is undeniably absurd (Figure 4.4).

But at the same time that the film indulges in a rather goofy set gag, the shabbiness of which almost renders it an allegory of cinematic anthropomorphism, the commentary’s identifying gesture of attribution of a sense of wonder and astonishment to the crabs stands in relief with the moments of blatant sadism of the film’s earlier experiments. How can one perform acts of violence against a creature that feels wonder?

Painlevé and Hamon’s reflexive filmic anthropomorphism does nothing to justify, excuse or explain away their episodic cruelty: it reveals the contradictions of *homme-sickness* in a heightened manner, inscribing them into the very surface of the film. The title card and sequence Painlevé found most regrettable also turns out to be most revealing in this respect. The staged ‘housing crisis’ and the plight of these homeless and homesick crabs struggling to find shelter lest they become victims of their own exposure emphasises the primary concerns of



**Figure 4.4** Screen capture from *Bernard l'ermite*: hermit crab football. © Les Documents Cinématographiques

homme-sick animals and cinematic homme-sickness. The vulnerability of the homeless and at times unhommely creatures, amplified by a wild anthropomorphism, invites reflection upon a shared fragility, which extends to that of the spectator's own perspectives vis-à-vis the cinematic apparatus.

This may be *The Hermit Crab's* most striking lesson concerning cinematic homme-sickness. The fictions of anthropomorphism are not primarily a matter of the sentimental projections that humans assign to animals. The fictions of anthropomorphism are, rather, those of the self-identical, stable referent that self-satisfyingly engages in or condemns these practices. The homme-sick animals that therefore we are, tend to gravitate around and circumscribe a privileged locus in homme. But the eccentric potentials of a psychoanalysis attuned to its own wildness, and a cinematic practice open to its own unheimlich capacities, presents two techniques that help unsettle homme even in the act of producing a transcription and translation of it. To conclude, it is in this sense, this direction of cinema's potential effects that one might remember the moral of one of cinema's great explorations of displacement and exile: there's no place *like* homme. There's no place like *homme*.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

Thanks to Brigitte Berg and Les Documents Cinématographiques for access to archival materials. Unless otherwise noted, translations from French are my own.

- 1 The human as the animal that is not one suggests both humanity's perceived separation from other animals (not one: different) but also the non-identical nature of the subject (not one: plural, many, divisible) and this complication of the principle of identity.
- 2 For recent studies of Bazin's thought regarding animals see Fay (2008), Pick (2011), and Jeong (2011). For a reflection on Bazin's anti-anthropocentrism see Dalla Vacche (2011).
- 3 The commercial exploitation of sound films became a viable option beginning in 1927 with the release of *The Jazz Singer*, but French film studios and exhibition spaces held out on investing in the necessary infrastructure for sound production until 1929. On the economic and aesthetic impact of the coming of sound on avant-garde and independent filmmakers in France, see Ghali (1995: 305–317) and Abel (1988, vol. 2: 5–37).
- 4 Twenty thousand francs is approximately €10,568, £9,180 or \$14,565 (Canadian), adjusted for inflation for 2012. Painlevé left no paper trail on the expenses for his films up until *The Sea Horse* in 1935, and even afterwards documentation is scant, so his figures should be taken as approximate.
- 5 Painlevé and Hamon would come to embrace the critical possibilities of spoken commentary and increasingly adventurous musical and sound compositions, particularly in their postwar films.
- 6 The theatre manager in this scene is a parody of the producer Henri Diamant-Berger, who exhibited Painlevé's first films at his Studio Diamant cinema. In a letter dated 9 April 1930, Diamant-Berger urged Painlevé to add sound to his 'little silent films', as this was 'the only way to get them onto screens' (Diamant-Berger 1930: 1).
- 7 '*Nous faisons de l'anthropomorphisme. Nous avons le droit de faire de l'anthropomorphisme. Nous avons le devoir de faire de l'anthropomorphisme. Sinon nous ne serions pas capables d'apprécier aucun élément autour de nous*'. Painlevé says this in episode 1 of the series, with reference to his film *The Octopus* (1928).
- 8 A film with the same title played at the Vieux-Colombier from 27 March to 2 April 1925. Also, although further research is necessary, another film bearing the title *La vie au fond des mers* (Ministry of Agriculture, France, 1911) features many of the same creatures documented by Painlevé, but does not match Painlevé's description, suggesting (1) that there are several films using the same title; (2) that Painlevé accidentally conflated a number of films into one; or (3) that he is taking a bit of poetic licence and acting as an unreliable commentator.
- 9 Rushdie (2008) reads *The Wizard of Oz* as an exploration of exile, and calls for a revision of Dorothy's famous mantra as 'there's no longer any such place as home'. I thank René Thoreau Bruckner for this citation.



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