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Porous rural spaces in *Possum*

ABSTRACT

In Possum, the New Zealand rural house and forest become porous spaces into which animality seeps not as abject, but rather as part of human development. Hence, the evocative images and atmospheric sounds of Possum mingle animality with humanity in ways that contaminate our understanding of ecological hierarchies.

KEYWORDS

sound
animality
human development
New Zealand rural
porous spaces
Brad McGann

The wild atmospheric sounds of the opening of *Possum* already set the 'porous' environment in which the story will unfold. The setting remains simple and dialogues minimalistic, whereas the sounds evoke a deeper, more complex world. In his analysis of the five main properties of storytelling, Richard Raskin emphasizes that simplicity in short films is key to engaging the viewer in a deep experience of the film, leaving them space to play an active role as viewers (1998). The auditory in *Possum* thus expresses what is untold by the visual alone and sets the film space as porous, opening the realist world of humans to a wilder and fantastic rural atmosphere.

The soundtrack produces a porous space between a human and an animal-led environment. Atmospheric wind and birdsong open the film in the forest with Little Man and his father checking traps for caught animals. Once in the house, the birdsong lays discretely in the background and humanly produced sounds are reinforced: Missy's finger playing on the rim of a glass, Dad's sharp hammer on a trap, drops of water leaking from the pipes underground, the crackling fire in the chimney, Kid's deafening imitation

of animal sounds or the stark steps of the father approaching Little Man's room. They create what Raskin (1998) calls 'sound events', all triggering or predicting an event, bringing into the house the wilderness of the surrounding forest. The acute noises associated with Dad, in particular, communicate simultaneously his 'animality', his brutality and his strict and bounded 'human' nature. Sounds in *Possum* shatter the spatial borders between human beings and animals.

In the monochrome New Zealand short *Kitchen Sink* (Maclean 1989) (from the same sound designer, Chris Burt), sounds provoke a similar effect, introducing the uncanny in the realism of the film. In a domestic environment, a 'wild' hairy creature emerges, as if he had been trapped in a sewer underworld for years. As in *Possum*, the association between vivid sounds and images violent to the human eye provoke both repulsion and fascination for the other. The auditory creates a sense of suspense about *what* (or who?) is coming out of the sink, or shrieking like an animal, as Kid does. It places these films on the border between magic realism and horror by investing the domestic with wildness and animality.

Not only through sounds but also visually director Brad McGann introduces us to a porous space, blurring the boundaries separating the animal and the human world. Kid brings the forest into the house through her imagination. Kid is in the bath, behind the bars of her brother's fingers, and she dreams of escaping her human prison (Shots 35–36). A fast-moving camera transports the spectator with Kid, as a wild animal running between the trees. She imitates animal sounds so well, animals that she has never seen, that the very sounds transform her into one of the wild animal she imitates. In the film, sounds convert the house into a porous space with the adjacent forest. Animality seeps through the walls and into the characters, emphasizing the animal side of human beings.

Dad and Missy speak the voice of society, as they try to instil social conventions in Kid. However, instead of the empathy, respect and communication that humanity might convey, the two characters appear rather authoritative and forceful with Kid. In comparison to the sound of the howling wind that remains in the background and that is associated with Kid from the beginning, noises produced by Missy or Dad strike as remarkably sharp. Their steps, Dad's hammer, Missy's glass or the vase that breaks as a result of the fight between Kid and Missy, all have an acute echo that contrasts with the fluid sounds of the forest coming into the house.

Visually, exaggerated low-angle shots also introduce Dad as a distant, strict and secretive character (Shots 6, 69, 118), while some slight low angle or same angle close-ups confer upon him some 'humanity' and concern for his children who he is educating as a single father (Shots 11, 17, 41, 55, 77, 153). Yet, his humanity is not a feeling of empathy but a feeling of distress for Kid, who does not follow 'human' social rules. In contrast to her sister and brother, Kid never met their mother, and Dad and Missy took up the raising process in their own non-empathic way.

In between childhood and adulthood, Missy is an ambiguous character. She is the older sister but could be confused with the new stepmother. She makes the rules when the father is not around and, as Brad McGann explains in an interview, 'she very much is the one who rules the roost' (Raskin 1999). Not recognizing Kid as one of her family, Missy treats her younger sister in an erratic way: she plays with her like a child with a pet (Shots 87–89), and then scolds her like a stepmother, chasing her as if she was a wild animal herself

(Shots 90–111). This climatic sequence in the film puts into perspective what it means to be wild, and to be considered as a human or as an animal.

As high-angle shots invariably look down on Missy, low-angle shots frame Kid and Little Man as the most humane. Torn between two worlds, Little Man struggles to reconcile the wild instinctive world of Kid and the world that Missy represents, no less wild but bounded by conventions and rules. However, Little Man sometimes also violently embodies humans' domineering position over animals, as he strokes a possum's skin, holding it through the animal's eyeholes. This contrasts with a later scene in which Kid seems to communicate with a possum eating on a branch outside the window (Shots 137–141).

Possum introduces the idea that one is not *born* human but that one *becomes* human by learning. Becoming human does not appear here as a hierarchical evolutionary process but rather as a repression. Our understanding of 'animality' and 'humanity' are put into question. They become porous terms as the spectator cannot draw a clear-cut line between the two and cannot tell who the wildest of all characters is, Kid, Dad or Missy? Kid in fact dies like an animal, caught in one of her father's traps, while her father concludes cold-heartedly that 'it was for the best'. After the family buries her in the forest and puts a wooden cross up, as if for a pet, Little Man throws the cross away; for all the human conventions that it represents, the same ones that were oppressing Kid when she was alive. The narrator (Little Man) thus plays the role of mediator, adopting a flexible position and accepting Kid as different from what his father has taught him. At the end of the film, Little Man is actually shown as trapped in the house, constrained to a certain form of living just as Kid was, as he looks through the bars of his window that prevent the forest from coming in, or him from going out into the forest and becoming animal (Shot 175).

Brad McGann's later film *In My Father's Den* (2004) also feeds on the New Zealand imaginary of feeling isolated and alienated in a rural environment, as found in classics such as *Heavenly Creatures* (Jackson 1994) and *Top of the Lake* (Campion 2013). In *In My Father's Den*, it is the insecure feeling and isolation of one of the female characters that kills the young woman protagonist Celia. And in *Possum*, Missy's perturbed mind drives her to act as she does with Kid and attack her, which indirectly leads to Kid's death.

In My Father's Den (2004) also features a dysfunctional family with an absent mother. In both films, the father is portrayed as an authoritative secretive man, whose wildness leads to some dark events, like the suicide of the mother in McGann's later film and filicide in *Possum*. Like the abundant New Zealand fauna and flora before the introduction of foreign species such as possums, Kid lacks a protective figure. Although some early settlers introduced possums in New Zealand, they are now considered as pests to be eradicated. Like possums then, Kid is ill treated by the ones who brought her into the world.

Humanity loses its traditional meaning of empathy and respect towards others, as Dad and Missy themselves appear as 'wild' animals in front of Kid. Missy is the one provoking Kid's angry reaction and Little Man describes his father (although ambiguously) as 'the devil' (Shot 119), echoing Missy's same words to describe Kid earlier. Humanity and wilderness thus become porous notions through the soundtrack, the filming and framing of the characters. If we associate humanity with 'having empathy', then it would seem to be the case that it is Kid who appears as the most humane, albeit towards animals

rather than towards her own species. Finally, if *Possum* challenges the idea of a clear-cut border between animality and humanity, it also goes as far as to question the 'humanity' of human beings in general.

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