

EMBODIED SPECTATORSHIP

ANDREA ARNOLD'S

COW



Andrea Arnold's films are often discussed in relation to British social realism due to their focus on marginal subjects and use of realist techniques. Yet this position is contested by critics such as Clive Nwonka, who argue that her emphasis on individual lives depoliticises her work and blunts wider critiques of inequality (2014, p.220). In contrast, David Forrest contends that this poetic focus on the body and lived experience constitutes a new form of realism grounded in affect, inviting spectators to contemplate inequality through sensorial engagement with the lives of her classed protagonists (2020, p.86).

Building from Forrest's position, my research project brings *Cow* (2021) into dialogue with Arnold's fictional films to argue that her move into documentary continues her established phenomenological practice. I suggest that *Cow*, an observational documentary about a working dairy cow, extends her sensorially informed approach, making a social and political intervention not through explicit messaging but through formal and aesthetic strategies that render the exploitation and vulnerability of her marginalised, nonhuman subject felt.



01 SENSORY AFFECTIVE EXPERIENCE

Andrea Arnold **avoids conventional techniques** of the animal activist documentary - such as voiceover, text, or talking heads - that would provide **contextual information or direct political persuasion**. Instead, she immerses the spectator **sensorially** in Luma's **perceptual world**, thereby allowing **politics to be imparted phenomenologically** rather than through explanation.

This is established in the opening sequence, where a mobile, handheld camera **haptically grazes** (Marks, 2002, p. 161) in extreme close-up across Luma's body. Accompanied by the **heightened sound** of her breathing, this proximity renders her body palpable in space, drawing the spectator into an **embodied relation** with her **lived experience**.



Cow, 2021

02 MATERNAL TIME

Building on Laura McMahon's argument that **long uneventful takes** invite an attentiveness to the lived, material realities of animal life (2019, p.11). I suggest that Arnold mobilises a similar durational technique in *Cow* to render Luma's exploitation and **maternal time** palpable. Arnold allows takes to run and remain with Luma for the full duration of her cyclical and repetitive visits to the milking station and the full act of mechanical milking itself.

Like *Jeanne Dielman* peeling potatoes, the spectator is forced to endure and register the temporality and monotony of maternal **unpaid labour** in real time through their own bodies. Allowing the act play out in full becomes a formal strategy through which labour is **not simply represented but felt**.



Jeanne Dielman..., 1975



Cow, 2021

03 JUDGEMENT SHOTS

Lingering, handheld, disembodied point-of-view shots focus on the broken material body both in *Cow* and in her fictional films. I argue that these shots can be read as formally similar to what Skeggs and Wood (2012) term the **'judgement shot'** utilised in classist reality television such as *Wife Swap*, where disembodied frames of "dirt, full ashtrays, debris, unmade beds, bloated stomachs" form a visual grammar marking working-class subjects as abject and failing (2012, p.127).

I suggest that Arnold repurposes this technique, here and across her fictional work, when showing the **ruptured bodies** of her marginal subjects - both human and nonhuman. Such shots invite the spectator to sense a shared creaturely vulnerability (Pick, 2009) and to draw connections between marginalised bodies and their exposure to violence, allowing for understanding of how processes of othering - **across race, class, and nonhuman life** - intersect and enable abuses of power.



Wife Swap, 2004



Cow, 2021



Fish Tank, 2009



Wuthering Heights (2011)