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To Represent a Cow

Kristina Meiton

Dear cow! Let us present ourselves and the setting for our meeting. So, we are standing opposite one another – on a meadow, surrounded by a fence, in a small village outside Gothenburg in Sweden.



If we stretch our necks, we can see the ocean. At least I can since I am standing upright on my two legs, while you are standing on your four legs. My two additional limbs, with which I hold the camera and reach to pat you on the forehead, are called arms. For a long time humans have bred cows into different breeds, and we have decided that you are a Hereford cow. Your breeding origin is in Great Britain, but you were born here on the farm. I am of the Caucasian race, although the relevance of dividing humans into different races is contested by us humans.

I could also describe myself as a white northern European middle-aged woman. I am rather tall for a woman; my eyes are bluish and my hair grayish if I don't dye it, which I do. Your eyes are brown; you have curly hair in large brown and white patterns. Your hair seems long for that of a cow. When I touch it, the hairs feel rougher than it appears. You have a tag in your ear, a soft damp nose, a tail, and – if I may say so – quite a big head.

My occupation, how I spend my days, is making documentary films. That is why I am standing here with you in the middle of a grazing field, feeling both exhilarated and nervous.

Do you believe it is possible to create a sense of connection between us – a human and a cow? Me, I am not sure, but I do know that I need to find a different starting point, to give us a chance. Everything I have learned in my life I have learned by being a human in a society where humans put themselves above all other species. I know this is not a good start for my encounter with you.

To begin with, I discovered some things I need to unlearn:

- The idea that you enjoying your life is less valuable than me enjoying mine (this is going to be challenging).
- The idea that my language is more sophisticated than yours.
- The idea that my time is more valuable than yours
- The idea that my desire to film you is more important than your needs (perhaps the need to be alone).
- The idea that you represent all cows instead of only yourself. In other words, it matters whether I film you or one of the other cows (but how will I ever find you again?)

Standing opposite each other, I am looking at you and you are looking at me, seconds pass and we share a moment. I feel both nervous and curious. It feels like you also are a bit curious about me, but not being able to talk to you makes me worried and, after a while, disappointed that you might look back at me without interest. I am afraid that my idea that we would be able to interact in a meaningful way will be perceived as naive and not taken seriously. But how could our encounter have a chance if, at the same time as we meet, I question you.

I do hope that soon we will find that we have things in common; that we can enjoy the weather together. Perhaps we will be scared by the same sounds? Maybe we both appreciate having our hair stroked.

You and the others in the herd are the kind of cows that are not noticed very much by us, humans, probably because you are bred for slaughter and production, for us to eat and use – and not for being together with us.

In John Berger's famous essay "Why look at animals?" (Berger, 1980), he describes how humans have lost the ability to see you. He writes about the tragic costs of humanity's march toward progress and away from the natural world. He claims that this has alienated us and we have lost contact with you but also ourselves. I am wondering – have you also been alienated from us?

In response to the question, "Why look at animals?" reader in film studies, Anat Pick, asks if we even have the right to look at animals? (O'Sullivan, 2015) What kind of gaze is in place when we simply presume animals are available for us to look at? Her question made me see another shortcoming in my attempt at building a healthy relationship with you. I should have asked before I started filming if it was ok with you. I might not have understood your answer, but it might have mattered to you. Maybe this is why you left me that day. You stayed for a bit and then walked away to the other side of the meadow. Even though the grass was not greener there at all. My ignorance and my idea that your opinion was not worth asking for feels embarrassing. That said, I did feel like an intruder when I entered your group with my camera, meaning that at least in my body I sensed I was doing something questionable.

I have some doubts. When watching the film of you in the meadow, people will enjoy that you eat grass in this idyllic place with a sea view. It is a nice and comforting scene, but the way you live your life reveals very little about the lives of most other cows. Even if I succeed in portraying you as an individual, you may still be perceived as a representative of other cows and their lives. So I need to find a way to build bridges from your life to the life of other cows, where the majority stand inside cramped stalls with no possibility to ever place their noses into the dewy grass. The challenge is to find our common ground, to focus on you as the unique cow you are and not forget the system that enables the oppression to which farmed animals are subjected.

When the film is ready to be shared, it will be screened in a public space. Here, your gaze will meet the gaze of an audience. You will be at the center of attention and people will have come especially to meet you. In this context, their gaze will be different from the ones you experience at the farm.

I believe – even if only momentarily – this could change the relationship between you and the human so that another kind of conversation can take place.



While writing this text, time has passed. I am looking at a photo of you on the screen looking back at me, and I realize that I am not sure if you are still around, since life is short for a cow like you.

References

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