



A window into the machine

Liz Marshall, writer and director of the film, *The Ghosts in our Machine*, talks to Viva!'s Juliet Gellatley about her deeply poignant film and how it impacted on her own beliefs

It's difficult to get it right. Should a film about animal abuse relentlessly depict horror in order to shock its audience into change? But if it does, will anyone watch? Or should it be softened to reach a larger audience?

The Ghosts in our Machine has hit its spot-on. It is a film which elicits a whole gamut of emotions – anger, happiness, sadness, relief, hope, pathos and a burning desire to change the world. It is a haunting, beautiful, engrossing film which explores how we treat animals in the so-called civilised West, by charting the work of one very brave lady – photojournalist Jo-Anne McArthur over the course of a year.

Perhaps the hardest hitting footage is at

the start of the film. The cameras follow Jo-Anne and an anti-fur campaigner into a vision of hell. Cage after cage of racoon dogs and foxes with literally nothing to do other than go insane. Pads on their paws distorted from the wire flooring; ears bitten off but most haunting of all – the look in their eyes. It is deeply disturbing and took me back to when I was teenager crying: 'How can this happen? Why is this legal? Who would want to be a part of it?'

Jo-Anne shoots the most evocative, moving photos and she is shown talking to *Newsweek*, attempting to reach millions with her picture story. She also chooses from her incredible portfolio, photos for her book, *We Animals*.

Having firmly got your attention, the film later softens into the most vivid and beautiful footage of rescued animals at Farm Sanctuary in upstate New York, US. Much of the revulsion of what happens to animals is left to your imagination rather than portraying all the gore. Take Julia – the most delightful pig.

The sanctuary rescued her when she went into shock after being beaten with an electric cattle prod just days before giving birth. Her skin is burned and bruised but you are told her history, you don't witness it. What you do see is a beautiful, happy mother snuggling with her 16 very adorable piglets, one of which falls asleep for a second in a plate of milk.

The idea for the film and the powerhouse behind its funding and direction is film maker Liz Marshall. I met her when she flew to the UK from her Toronto base for premieres of *The Ghosts in our Machine* in major cities. She is a bright, warm, humorous woman with a deep social conscience. I asked her what inspired the name of her film?

“The ghosts are the animals that are often hidden from view. The film aims to illuminate their individual stories – and they are individual stories. Billions of animals trapped within the machines of our modern world and we use them merely as products.

“There are many surprises in the film simply because many people are not aware of how animals are used or treated behind the scenes – for entertainment, biomedical research, fur and farming. I want the film to persuade the viewer to see – I mean really see – the animals.”

Liz is well respected in Canada for her character-driven cinematic storytelling. They span issues of social and environmental justice, including the right to water; HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa; sweatshop labour; corporate-globalization; the rights of girls and women; censorship affecting writers and journalists; and war-affected children.

So why did she dedicate four years to making *Ghosts*? “I went vegan when I was about 19 but I only stayed with it for six months. It wasn’t reflected anywhere around me but vegetarianism was much easier so I grasped at that. I thought I’m helping animals, which I was but I didn’t really get it, not fully.

“I live close to Jo-Anne (McArthur), we became friends and established a connection as fellow documentarians. Her images were incredible and I didn’t know anyone else who was using their talent as a photojournalist to document animal cruelty. They invited me to see animals as individuals. Lots of us do that with dogs and cats but how many really see cows, turkeys, monkeys and dolphins as individuals?”

So what made her go vegan? “Fanny and Sonny. They became the face; the reason to stop supporting the dairy industry.”

The Ghosts in our Machine features a rescue mission by Farm Sanctuary of Fanny and Sonny who were at a dairy auction, being disposed of, for cheap meat. “Spent” by industry standards (fragile, dehydrated, sick, arthritic), and severely neglected, Fanny a dairy cow could barely stand up, and Sonny, a sickly calf was at deaths’ door.



“As consumers we can all make a difference for the ghosts, each and every day”

Jo-Anne documents the mission and Liz filmed her photographing Fanny and Sonny as they were being treated and then released. One of the most moving moments in the film is when Fanny tentatively steps on to a thick, dry straw bed for the first time and looks out to the many acres of pasture she is to be released into. From that moment, human kindness and lifelong friendships with her own species replace the suffering.

Liz recalls: “I had an overwhelming ‘aha’ moment when I went vegan. I remember it vividly. I was sitting in an airport in New York reflecting on what I was learning from making the film. All I could see, smell and feel around me were the products of cruelty: leather seats, suitcases and shoes, the smell of animal parts cooking, a woman wearing perfume tested on animals. It was a cacophony of overpowering sensations and if the film can do that – remove the blinkers – then it will achieve what I set out to do.”

I wondered why Liz is so driven to expose social injustices: “As a child I grew up with my mother who is socially conscious and an active citizen of the world. At our dinner table we were taught that many people are starving so we didn’t leave any food on our plates. We learned about haves and have nots and my mum would stop and help homeless people. She is on the path to veganism – she is my inspiration.”

Having seen the highly complementary reviews – from the *Daily Telegraph* to the *LA* and *New York Times* – how does Liz feel? “It has evoked mixed and strong reactions! People seem to either shut down or really embrace the issues. On global social media it has tended to get four stars and has been celebrated. The film challenges people. It isn’t a polemic, it is more a philosophical conversation opener about issues people don’t want to face. We are all complicit and that’s why it is OUR machine. It’s asking us to reflect the way we treat and view our fellow animals.

“Humans have cleverly categorised non-human animals into three parts: domesticated pets, wildlife and the ones we don’t like to think about: the ghosts in our machine. Why do we value wildlife and our companion animals but not the billions of animals bred and used by global industries? It is this core question that prompted me to delve deeply, to explore this subject matter. My greatest motivation is to create an eye-opening experience for audiences that can inspire consciousness. Through story, sound and picture, I hope people will see animals differently – forever.

“As consumers we can all make a difference for the ghosts, each and every day.”

THE GHOSTS IN OUR MACHINE

is available on DVD. £15.99 (+ £3.95 p&p). Full version 92 minutes; TV version 60 mins.

WE ANIMALS by Jo-Anne McArthur is £34 (+ £5.50 p&p)

Jo-Anne McArthur has drawn from over 15,000 photos to produce her book, *We Animals*. 208-page hard back, including over 100 photos – captivating and hauntingly beautiful.

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