



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Edinburgh College of Art

UOA D33

**MUSIC, DRAMA, DANCE, PERFORMING ARTS,
FILM AND SCREEN STUDIES**



RESEARCHER

Emma Davie

OUTPUT TITLE

Becoming Animal

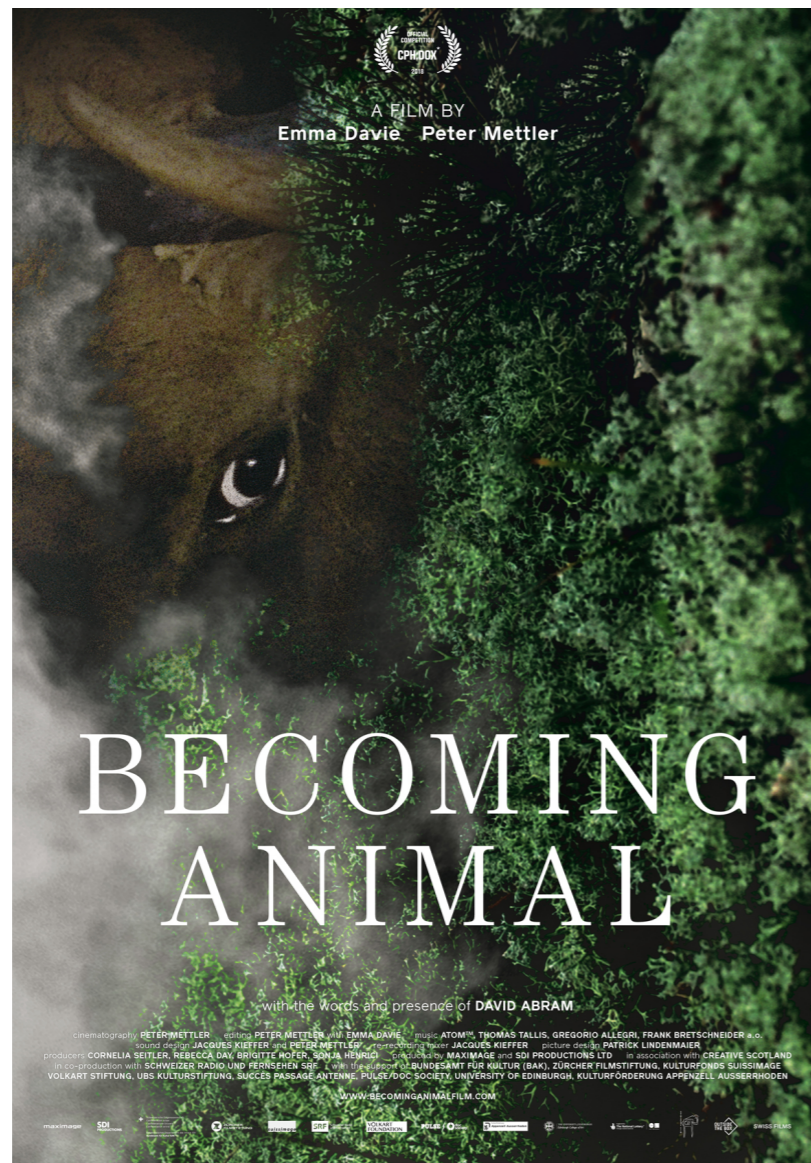
OUTPUT TYPE

Digital or Visual Media

DATE OF PREMIERE:

20 – 25 March 2018

FIG. 1
Poster for *Becoming Animal*.
Designed by Lukas Ackermann,
Switzerland 2018.



Link to output:

<https://vimeo.com/ondemand/becominganimalfilm>

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.7488/6fee4875-894f-4613-a861-59d5e46d8598>

01 / STATEMENT

Becoming Animal is a feature documentary film, co-directed by Emma Davie and Peter Mettler which set out to challenge the traditional nature documentary and its structure.

This film is set in Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming, over the course of a journey with cult writer and eco-philosopher David Abram. The documentary was filmed and edited over a 4 year period from 2014 to 2018. The aim was to find a different relationship between the viewer and 'nature' as represented on film: one which used the tools of cinema to explore the act of observation itself. The research objectives centered on the following questions:

- How can we use documentary film to go beyond an anthropocentric worldview?
- Can film give an insight into how the current environmental crisis might be rooted in a crisis of perception which has evolved over time in how we see 'nature'?
- How can the documentary essay form be combined with a more experiential, immersive aesthetic to involve an audience in a sensorial understanding of the themes of the film?

The film emerged from a rigorous process of interdisciplinary research involving collaborations across many disciplines ranging from philosophy, eco-phenomenology, to vision mixing.

It involved bringing together disciplines which describe the world in radically different ways: the literary, philosophical writing of Abram was to meet the experimental cinematography and directing style of Davie and Mettler whose work explores the immersive characteristic of cinema and its ability to re-create a haptic of sense of experience. It attempted to create a somatic experience for an audience which also included an awareness of the act of looking at representations of nature on film.

02 / RESEARCH DIMENSIONS



FIG. 2
David Abram in Grand Teton Park,
2017. Photo Emma Davie.

Becoming Animal is a feature documentary film. This essay film is a collaboration between directors Emma Davie and Peter Mettler. They set out to make a very different kind of ‘nature’ documentary, working with the ideas of eco-philosopher David Abram.

The aim was to explore how film could go beyond an anthropocentric perspective of ‘nature’ and to discover how cinema could immerse an audience in a different experience of perception which the filmmakers called ‘animal time.’

The film opened at *CPH Dox Festival* in 2018 where it was one of 12 films nominated for ‘Best Documentary’.

See Appendix A, page 14 for reviews and Appendix B, page 17 for selected festival screenings.

The theatrical trailer can be viewed at:
<https://vimeo.com/273127486>

03 / ORIGINALITY



FIG. 3
Birli, Switzerland 2017.
Photo Peter Mettler.

Nature documentaries are typically highly formatted and scripted. In recent years there has been a rise in the popularity of innovative non-fiction writing about nature, but there are few documentaries which take a more creative, explorative approach to the nature film format itself.

In *Becoming Animal* the directors wanted to find a filmic language to explore how our sensory relationship with the 'more than human' world has evolved into its current state.

For Abram, acknowledged as one of the most influential environmental thinkers (his writing described as a 'revolutionary change in our thinking toward animals, and the living land', *San Francisco Book Review*), perception is a two-way process involving a reciprocal relationship with nature. The directors wanted to expand his ideas further into cinema to find out how audio-visual sensory tools of cinema could be used to trace how the written word and technology, including film itself, has affected this reciprocity.

The film was never to be an illustration of Abram's ideas but aimed to bring a new layer of meaning to his ideas about language and the interdependence of human and non-human communication, challenging audiences to ask questions about how we see, hear and sense that which is around us. The directors were confronted with the paradox of using technology as a tool to get 'closer' to the natural world and wanted to present a nuanced, unbiased awareness of this.

FIG. 4
Grand Teton Park, 2016.
Photo Peter Mettler.



04 / RIGOUR

This collaboration was initiated by Emma Davie who proposed the idea of a film to David Abram and Peter Mettler. Abram had been approached by other directors but this was the first time he agreed to be filmed. These authors are internationally established in their areas, but combining their ideas was a challenging creative and ontological task.

Work on the film started with an explorative journey to the Grand Teton Park in which the collaborators explored how film and words could communicate an encounter with the 'more than human' world and sense also how it communicates with us. In this journey Abram was filmed sharing his ideas. Upon review of the footage, however, the directors decided against using a conventional 'talking head' approach and decided to experiment with different approaches in subsequent filming and editing.

Davie and Mettler took four months to develop the dramaturgical approach which allowed the extension of Abram's ideas into the wider discourse surrounding technology and nature. This involved editing a trailer and writing a 36-page funding proposal. Davie received a Creative Scotland 'Artist Bursary' (for £15,000) which aided the development process. Selection was highly competitive, with a 10% success rate. The bursaries panel consisted of established arts and cultural professionals from across the arts, screen and creative industries.

Over the next two years, through rigorous and lengthy application processes, peer review from committees, decision makers and experts in the international film world, a budget of £400,000 was raised.

The producer, Rebecca Day from Scottish Documentary Institute, worked with the Swiss production company Maximage as international co-producers.

Financial support came from:

- Bundesamt für Kultur (BAK), Switzerland
- Creative Scotland Project Award, UK
- Zürcher Filmstiftung, Switzerland
- Kulturfonds SUISSIMAGE, Switzerland
- Volkart Stiftung, Switzerland
- UBS Kulturstiftung, Switzerland
- Succès Passage Antenne, Switzerland
- Pulse/ DocSociety, UK
- Kulturförderung Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Switzerland
- University of Edinburgh, Scotland



FIG. 5
Image from the *Becoming Animal*
shoot in Grand Teton Park, 2017.
Photo Jordan Kawai.

Filming took place over three years at the same time of year for periods of two to three weeks at a time in the Grand Teton Park and also pick ups (detailed shots of e.g. water or a snail needed for the edit) in Switzerland and Canada. This involved a rigorous process of questioning and challenging both the presentation of Abram's ideas and investigating how the nature documentary could be filmed in a different way which might provoke a different way of seeing.

Through conveying a sense of his presence by his camera movements, Mettler's cinematography included a sense of the human eye which perceives the natural world as this was very much part of the film's discourse. This was done by ensuring that the actual mechanics of filming were present, also with a sense of him breathing or speaking quietly while filming – for example he says 'Wow' under his breath as the camera pans to a view of the Teton mountains. Other experimentation into how technology 'captured' nature, included the commissioning of the flight of a trained raven (Bran) to fly with a mini camera on its back. This resulted in a disorienting, but immersive, idea of the animal point of view.

The edit was where the most serious creative challenges were faced in terms of subverting traditional narrative approaches and was conducted in stages over a three-year period in Scotland, Switzerland and Canada. The first stage involved honing a narrative arc out of the initial conversations and filming which could then inform future filming and a collaboration with David Abram on his text. Davie completed this first stage using the filming and Abram's two books *Spell of the Sensuous* and *Becoming Animal* as source material, and then she and Mettler worked collaboratively on the edit. A rough 'assembly' edit was put in place in Switzerland before the final filming trip in the US which then produced a whole other dramaturgy which was refined and questioned over a 6 month edit period. It was a huge challenge to simplify Abram's ideas for the screen whilst not reducing them. Once the final rough cut was finished, Abram collaborated on a final narration with Davie and Mettler in Toronto in which new resolutions and questions were articulated in response to the edit.

The edit also included a collaboration with a leading sound designer, foley artist, grader and also the use of cutting edge image mixing technology, developed by Mettler over three years, to give a more technologically-driven composition in one part of the film.



FIG. 6
Yellowstone Park, 2015.
Photo Peter Mettler.

05 / SIGNIFICANCE

On the strength of the trailer and proposal, the film was invited to pitch at *CPH DOX* in Copenhagen in 2016, one of the main pitching forums for international creative documentaries.

Becoming Animal was named 'one of the 12 top international films' in development internationally and through this the film attracted international attention, including a write up in *Screen International* during development.

Becoming Animal premiered at *CPH DOX* in 2018, one of the largest documentary festivals which aims to show work beyond traditional formats. It was one of twelve films nominated for the main prize, out of 100,000 submissions and opened in the biggest cinema in Copenhagen. Seats were sold out for all five screenings at the festival.

To date it has been nominated for seven significant international awards:

- Best Feature, *CPH:DOX*, Denmark, March 2018.
- Feature Film Competition, *Documenta Madrid*, Spain, May 2018.
- Grand Prix, *Docs Against Gravity*, Warsaw, May 2018.
- Best Feature, *Bildrausch Filmfest*, Switzerland, June 2018.
- Best Feature Documentary, *Edinburgh International Film Festival*, UK, June 2018.
- A.N Stankovic Film Award Prize in *Prague Spring Festival*, Czech Republic, October 2019.
- Best Feature, *Seoul Eco Film Festival*, South Korea, May 2019.

The film has seen exposure through international festivals, cinema distribution, TV screening and online distribution, and has been described in articles and reviews published internationally, as well as in radio interviews. Sell-out screenings have generated more publicity via social media and word of mouth. At IDFA in Amsterdam, all five screenings sold out and the film was selected to be shown again as part of the Best of the Festival. At the ICA in London, it was programmed for an additional four screenings. It has also been selected by a number of courses as required viewing for students including as part of the 'Visualising Ecologies' course at Freie University, Berlin and as part of the Animalities Course at Goldsmiths, London.

Reviews (see Appendix A, page 14) acknowledge a sense of the fresh territory the film covers in terms of dialogue about the current Anthropocene era.

For a list of screenings and events programmes, see Appendices B & C, pages 17 and 19.

06 / APPENDIX

Appendix A: Reviews (selection)

(Excerpts from reviews removed)

Dominic Schmid,
Film Explorer Switzerland, March 2018.
<https://www.filmexplorer.ch/detail/becoming-animal-peter-mettler/>

Ben Nicholson,
Sight & Sound, December 2018.
<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/december-2018-issue>

Josh Slater-Williams,
Sight and Sound, July 2018.
<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/festivals/edinburgh-2018-local-heroes-new-scottish-features>

Barry Didcock,
The Herald, 24 June 2018.
<https://www.pressreader.com/uk/the-herald-on-sunday-sunday-herald-life/20180624/281582356358964>

Ellen Lande,
Modern Times Review, March 2018.
<https://www.moderntimes.review/thought-provoking-peculiar-exploration-nature/>

Nicolas Gattlen,
Pro Natura, March 2018.
<https://www.pronatura.ch/de/dokumentarfilm-becoming-animal-langsam-aber-sicher-und-bestimmt>

Steven Neish,
HeyUGuys, June 2018.
<https://www.heyuguys.com/becoming-animal-review/>

Marcel Eisener,
Saiten Magazine, 2018.

Thomas Bodmer,
Tages Anzeiger, Switzerland, October, 2018.
<https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/zueritipp/kino/die-welt-aus-der-kraehenperspektive/story/27032525>

Chloe Trayner and Matt Turner,
Sight and Sound, December 2019.
<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/unfiction/scottish-documentaries-international-co-production-boom>

Jill Glessing,
Point of View Magazine, 2018.
<http://povmagazine.com/articles/view/review-becoming-animal>

In German:

Dörthe Gromes,
Player (Germany), August 2019.
http://www.playerweb.de/kino/becoming_animal

Guido Kalberer,
Tages-Anzeiger (Germany), October, 2018.
<https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/kultur/kino/die-entfremdung-von-der-natur/story/12581475>

Brigitte Häring,
SRF (Switzerland), October 2018.
<https://www.srf.ch/kultur/film-serien/neu-im-kino-becoming-animal-lehrt-uns-die-sinne-neu>

Silvia Hallensleben,
epd film (Germany), August 2019.
<https://www.epd-film.de/filmkritiken/becoming-animal>

Esther Buss,
film-dienst (Germany), August 2019.
<https://www.filmdienst.de/film/details/583379/becoming-animal>

film-rezensionen.de (Germany). June 2018.
<https://www.film-rezensionen.de/2018/06/becoming-animal/>

For more reviews, see:

<https://www.becominganimalfilm.com/reviews>

<https://www.gmfilms.de/de/>

Appendix B: Screenings

Festivals

1–4 March 2018

True False Film Festival,
Columbia, USA.

20–25 March 2018

CPH:DOX, Copenhagen,
Denmark.

13–20 May 2018

Docs Against Gravity,
Warsaw and Wrocław,
Poland.

3–18 May 2018

Documenta, Madrid, Spain.

30 May–3 June 2018

Bildrausch Filmfestival,
Basel, Switzerland.

20 June–1 July 2018

*Edinburgh International
Film Festival*,
Edinburgh, UK.

28 June–7 July 2018

Filmfest München,
Munich, Germany.

20–26 July 2018

Doc Montevideo,
Montevideo, Uruguay.

3–11 August 2018

DokuFest, Prizren, Kosovo.

4–9 September 2018

Open City Documentary Festival,
London, UK.

22 September 2018

*Hebrides International Film
Festival*, Outer Hebrides, UK.

3–10 October 2018

*Muestra Internacional Documental
de Bogotá*, Colombia

12–19 October 2018

Imagine Science Film Festival,
New York City, USA.

24 October

Planet In Focus, Toronto,
Canada.

25–30 October 2018

*Jihlava International Documentary
Film Festival*, Czech Republic.

16–22 October 2018

Kinoatelje Film Festival,
Italy and Slovenia.

2–9 November 2018

Festival dei Popili, Florence, Italy.

5–11 November 2018

Duisburger Filmwoche, Germany.

16–20 November 2018

*Recontres Internationales du
Documentaire de Montréal*,
Canada.

14–25 November 2018

*International Documentary
Film Festival Amsterdam*,
Netherlands.

28–30 November 2018

Porto Post Doc, Portugal.

22–29 January 2019

Solothurner Filmtage,
Switzerland.

24 January–3 February 2019

Göteborg Film Festival, Sweden.

31 March–15 April 2019

Edinburgh Science Festival,
Edinburgh, UK.

22 May 2019

Human Rights Nights,
Bologna, Italy.

23–29 May 2019

Seoul Eco Film Festival,
South Korea.

23 August 2019

*Ecofest International Ecology Film
Festival*, Bucharest, Romania.

23 August 2019

ANFFIS Animal Film Festival,
Suncheon, Korea.

28 August 2019

Dhaka Doclab, Dhaka,
Bangladesh.

5 October 2019

Hot Docs Ted Rogers Cinema,
Toronto, Canada.

7 October 2019

Terra Nostra Film Festival,
France.

10 October 2019

Cork Film Festival, Cork, Ireland.

20 October 2019

Spring Festival, Prague,
Czech Republic.

27 October 2019

AGH Film Festival, Canada.

15–23 November 2019

Pixxelpoint, Slovenia.

27 January 2020

Cine Lumiere, French Institute,
London.

17 April–2 May 2020

Visions du Reel, Switzerland.

Swiss Theatrical Release

24 October 2018

RiffRaff, Zürich.

25 October 2018

Kino Rex, Bern.

26 October 2018

Cameo, Winterthur.

27 October 2018

Kinok, St.Gallen.

28 October 2018

Bourbaki, Lucerne.

1 November 2018

Stadtkino, Basel.

16 March 2019

CityClub Pully, Lausanne.

17 March 2019

Minimum, Neuchâtel.

18 March 2019

Cinéma d'Oron, d'Oron.

20 March 2019

Cinélux, Genève.

21 March 2019

La Grange, Delémont.

22 March 2019

Royal, Sainte-Croix.

15 May 2019

Cinema Ponrepo, Ponrepo.**German Theatrical Release**

23 August 2019

Die Pumpe, Kiel.

29 August 2019

Thalia, Augsburg.

29 August 2019

FSK, Berlin.

29 August 2019

Tilsiter-Lichtspiele, Berlin.

28 August– 1 September 2019

City Kino Wedding, Berlin.

29 August 2019

Cinema in Ostertor, Bremen.

29 August 2019

Sweet Sixteen-kino, Dortmund.

28 August 2019

Kino Mal she'n, Dortmund.

29 August 2019

Kino Mal seh'n,
Frankfurt am Main.

29 August 2019

Künstlerhaus, Hannover.

29 August 2019

Union, Ingolstadt.

28 August 2019

Pumpe, Kiel.

29 August 2019

Luru Kino, Leipzig.

29 August 2019

Werkstattkino, Munich.

29 August 2019

im Cinecittà, Nürnberg.

29 August 2019

Thalia, Potsdam.

29 August 2019

Cinema, Stuttgart.**UK Theatrical Release**

22 November 2018

Eden Court, Inverness.

23 November 2018

Robert Burns Centre, Dumfries.

23 November 2018

St Andrews University,
St Andrews.

24 November 2018

GFT, Glasgow.

1 December 2018

The Filmhouse, Edinburgh.

7–22 December 2018

ICA, London.

16 December 2018

Dothouse, London.

11 April 2019

Edinburgh Science Festival,
Summerhall.

4 September 2019

Plough Arts Centre, Devon.

5 November 2019

Brechin Community Cinema
Project, Brechin.

24–29 January 2020

Cine Lumiere, London.**Appendix C: Events programme**

2018 CPH Dox Festival, Copenhagen.

<https://cphdox.dk/en/doxaward2018>2018 Docs Against Gravity Festival,
Warsaw and Wrocław.<http://archiwum2018.docsag.pl/en/movies/becoming-animal-2/>

2018 Documenta, Madrid.

<https://www.documentamadrid.com/documentamadrid18/en/sections/ciclo-natura-en-vilo-competicion-fugas-de-largometraje/becoming-animal>

2018 Jihlava Docs, Czech Republic.

<https://www.ji-hlava.com/filmy/stavani-se-zviretem>2018 Edinburgh International Film Festival,
Edinburgh.https://www.edfilmfest.org.uk/2018/becoming-animal/06-21_17-15

2018 RIDM Festival, Montreal.

2019 Porto Doc Festival, Portugal.

<https://www.portopostdoc.com/home-en/festival/2018/view?id=669>**Selected highlights of discussions
and other related events****2019 Sensory Ethnography Lab Harvard
University, USA.**

Screening was followed by a discussion with David Abram and Prof. Lucien Castaing Taylor, Director of the influential Lab, known for its new approaches to visual anthropology and film.

2018 CPH:D, Copenhagen.

Anthropologists hosted a discussion at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts about the impact of the film on their discipline.

2018 Kinoteja Festival, Slovenia, Italy.

Slovenian screenings involved a special discussion with the Italian philosopher Darko Bratina about the film and in Italy the film screening was accompanied by a talk with the philosopher and ethologist Roberto Marchesini who has been involved with study of animals since the 1980s.

2018 ICA Screening, London.

London screenings included post film dialogues with environmental writer and activist James Marriot at the ICA.

2018 Curzon Screening, Bloomsbury, London.

Dr. Amy Cutler (Lecturer in Geo Humanities) at the Curzon in Bloomsbury talked about how the film challenged notions of 'narrative form, genre and nonhuman storytelling' and led the way in a new kind of 'nature' film.

2018 GFT Screening, Glasgow.

Post screening discussions with Svenja Meyerricks from the Centre of Human Ecology, Glasgow University.

2019 Cinema Sputnik, Geneva.

Post screening discussion with invited guests who include the physicist James Beacham and the writer Andre Ourednik.

2019 Prague Spring Festival, Prague.

Screening and discussion with Czech poet Ivan Hartel.

2019 Dhaka Doclab, Bangladesh.

Screening and discussions with Professor Nilotpal Majumdar from DocResi Film, India.

Appendix D: Interviews, Short Texts and Web Resources

Interviews

Interview with Phil Jandaly at *CPH:DOX*, March 2018.

<https://philjandaly.com/2018/03/27/becoming-animals-emma-davie-and-peter-mettler-discuss-their-new-documentary/>

Interview with EFE Verde / Environmental Dissemination at *Documenta Madrid*, June, 2018.

<https://www.efeverde.com/noticias/peter-mettler-cine-naturaleza-becoming-animal/>

Directors' interview for the *Becoming Animal* website, July, 2018.

https://www.becominganimalfilm.com/directors_interview

Podcast about the film for *Outside the Box*, Swiss distributon, September, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dr8nwxqNoOk>

Interview, *Aesthetica Short Film Festival*, March, 2019.

<https://www.asff.co.uk/understanding-nature/>

Related Short Texts (selected highlights)

(Excerpts removed)

CPH Dox programme, 2018.

Imagine Science Film Festival, 2018.

ICA Brochure, 2018.

Edinburgh Film Festival brochure, 2018.

Web Resources

Becoming Animal website.

<https://www.becominganimalfilm.com/film>

Peter Mettler website

<https://www.petermettler.com/becoming-animal>



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