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## Interview with Noah Gittell

By OUR HEN HOUSE

Published May 17, 2014

*Following is a transcript of an interview with **NOAH GITTELL** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 227.*

JASMIN: Going with the theme that today's show is really about film and different ways of producing film, ways that don't involve exploiting animals, we're very excited and honored to talk today to Noah Gittell. Noah Gittell is a writer on the subjects of film and politics. A regular contributor to *The Atlantic*, his work can also be seen at *Washington City Paper*, Salon, ThinkProgress, and rogerebert.com, among others. He blogs at reelchange.net. By day he is a major gifts officer and former lobbyist for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine and a doting parent to three rescued dogs.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Noah.

NOAH: Thanks. Thanks for having me.

JASMIN: We're really excited to have you. I know that you have been a freelance film critic and you've written many essays, and you also work over at PCRM. And you're here today to talk to us about this kind of new movement toward not using animals in film. This is something you've written about for various publications, including *The Atlantic*, and you also have some strong thoughts about the new film, *Noah*, which I am very eager to hear because we just saw it ourselves and I kind of want to put together my very fragmented feelings about it. So the idea of animals being used in film and replaced with the sort of CGI kind of animated animals is something that we've discussed in the past on Our Hen House. And I guess I want to start with what your overall feelings are about this, I think, new movement toward taking animals out of the picture, so to speak.

NOAH: I think it is new. And I generally try to keep my passions separate, my passion for animal rights and my passion for writing about film. But there are some cases where it's impossible because the two are completely intertwined. And I think that's what we've been seeing lately. The scrutiny over the use of animals in entertainment has definitely intensified over the last couple of years between the success and popularity of a film like *Blackfish*, which I think even I was surprised by how successful and popular that film came to be, and then the increased scrutiny over the use of animals on movie sets themselves and the sets of television shows. HBO's series, *Luck*, about horse racing, was canceled after a couple of horses died during production. There was a lot of controversy over a number of animals that died on the set of Peter Jackson's film, *The Hobbit*. And that of course led to this woman from the American Humane Association, who is ostensibly there to protect animals on sets,

quitting her position and starting a rival organization called Movie Animals Protected that is gonna do a better job of monitoring the use of animals on sets.

There's just a huge groundswell of support for better enforcement of the humane treatment of the use of animals in entertainment. And at the same time the technology is improving to the point where it may no longer be necessary at all. Between *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* and its upcoming sequel that's coming out later this year, and *Noah*, we find that directors are choosing not to use animals and to use other technologies instead. And part of this may be because they don't want the controversy, but the directors of those films have actually cited the fact that using live animals to make the film would not be in keeping with the spirit of what they're doing. And I think that's an amazing thing that should be recognized and appreciated, that between the technological innovations and this surging animal protection movement that we're a part of, this is leading to some real, actual changes for animals in entertainment. And I think it's very exciting.

MARIANN: I think all of this comes together in the movie that we were going to talk about, *Noah*, because it's clear that the director, Darren Aronofsky, has strong feelings about animals, and the movie has strong feelings about animals. So can you go a little into that about how that all comes together in *Noah*?

NOAH: Sure. Now he said that he used animals in one of his previous films, a film called *The Fountain*. And it was the first time he had ever had live animals on a set and he was really alarmed at the way that they were treated, and that kind of opened a door in his mind about this. And when he got the opportunity to make this film *Noah*, he really turned it into -- I think it's an animal rights manifesto. But I thought *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* was an animal rights manifesto too, so maybe I'm a little bit biased. But I think if you look at the film, *Noah* is depicted as a perfect being, as he is in the Bible as well. And the way the film shows his perfection and the way that he's living by God's plan is first and foremost that he doesn't eat animals. The movie clearly repeatedly makes this case. The opening scenes show an animal that has been hunted with an arrow sticking out of its torso and he comforts it as it dies, and the hunters come to him and they try to take the animal so they can eat it, and he beats them up, which I thought was pretty awesome. And his son asks him, "Why do men eat animals?" and he says, "Well, some men think that it gives them strength." So I saw that as the film touching on the protein myth a little bit.

JASMIN: Wait, can I interrupt you and say that was my single favorite moment of the movie? And his son said to him, "Why?" and he just said it like that, like, "Why?" And Mariann and I cackled in the movie theater. Like, we were like, ding ding! Cha-ching! There's the 10 million dollar question.

NOAH: Exactly. And clearly they don't need the protein 'cause Russell Crowe kicks their asses in the movie.

JASMIN: Oh my God. Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

NOAH: So he's saving the animals because they're more innocent than humans, which I think is a message we can all relate to, that they're the only ones God finds worth saving. And then there's this final sequence in the film, after the flood, in which *Noah's* daughter-in-law is monologuing about how we need to be kinder to each other and that's the lesson we should all take from this. And what does Darren Aronofsky, the director, show us while she's

giving this monologue but a montage of adorable baby animals and their mothers? And it's driving home this message of stewardship and ultimately animal protection. And it's really clear to me that in that moment this is the thesis of the film that Aronofsky is trying to show us. So we have a case where the film's form is matching its function. There were no animals used in the making of the film, no animals suffered because of this film, and the message reinforced that as well.

MARIANN: One of the things that struck me too is that I don't think this film could have been made if they were trying to use real animals. I think one of the points that this, and actually *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* makes as well, is that you can do so much more, it gives the director so much more scope in his creativity, in using animal images by using CGI. Do you agree?

NOAH: I do. I thought about that when Aronofsky announced that they weren't using animals. I thought, well, that makes sense. How would you put all these animals together in one enclosure in the first place without drugging them or something? So I think that there is a practical impact to this as well, but yeah, CGI and motion capture technology greatly expands the scope for a director in what they can do. So it's really this case of where practicality meets idealism, and the possibilities are just limitless I think.

MARIANN: Yeah, it's kind of like veganism. Like, you can do it for ethical reasons and then it turns out it's better.

NOAH: Absolutely, and we should embrace all of that. People who want to make that choice, whether they're doing it for economic reasons or something else, if it's good for the animals I'm okay with it.

JASMIN: There's also kind of the theme going on about how mankind was what ruined the perfection of animal kind. And at the end of the movie, mankind continues obviously -- I don't think I'm giving anything away by saying that. And there was kind of like the -- well, okay I guess we're gonna -- yeah, I guess there was a little bit of ambiguity there. But you wind up wondering, and I think Noah wonders, like, would we have been better had we not continued mankind?

NOAH: I'm so glad you mentioned that because the story has to stick to the Bible, I think, to some degree 'cause it's certainly being marketed to that demographic. But yeah, I had some mixed feelings about the ending. Part of me thought that, well, Noah's gonna save humanity as well at the end, and that means how many more animals are gonna suffer that wouldn't have? But that's what I found so fascinating about the film and why I connected to it as an animal activist, is that it really tackles these complicated feelings we have towards humanity, not just towards animals. Noah hates humanity before God speaks to him and asks for his help in wiping them out.

But what's interesting is what comes after the flood, 'cause that's when I think most movies would end. The hero saves his family and all the animals and that's the end of the movie. But it's at that point of the movie that it got really interesting because Noah gets another message that he's supposed to end humanity, and not just let his own family die, which is bad enough, but his daughter-in-law is pregnant, and if she gives birth to a girl he's supposed to kill the infant child so that she can't reproduce. And Noah's totally fine with this because, first of all, God told him to do it, and second of all, it kind of dovetails with his

hatred of mankind in the first place. And as an animal activist seeing all of the terrible things that people do to animals, that we do collectively as a species, I struggle with those feelings and I've had moments where I've thought, maybe the world would just be better off without people in the first place. And the film kind of takes this to the extreme where Noah goes from being a hero who saves the animals to almost looking like a murderous psychopath in our eyes who's gonna kill an infant child. And I really, I had mixed feelings about that but it kind of challenged my own belief system and asked me to look at, well, how far am I willing to go in my feelings about mankind and all the terrible things they do to animals? And I thought it was really bold for a big commercial film to kind of get into that.

JASMIN: Yeah, agreed. I thought it was also really kind of funny that he had one son -- I think it was Sam -- who sort of started to rebel and question his -- what was it?

MARIANN: Ham.

JASMIN: Ham, ironically. And he started to rebel and question his father's motives. And he sort of started to follow the leadership of somebody else, of the king. And I kind of whispered to Mariann, "When vegans have children..." I was joking. I'm gonna get hate mail for saying that. But he had like, how many kids did he have, four? And one of them winds up being this one who's like, "Hm, maybe it is better to eat animals." It's just kind of funny. It was like an inside baseball vegan humor moment.

NOAH: Sure. And he was a teenager, and I don't know, I don't have any children, but I'm sure vegan children, they rebel at some point when they're teenagers and they do the opposite of what their parents want them to do. And yeah, Ham certainly did the opposite in this case, and he had an omnivore kind of little devil in his ear speaking to him and telling him all the reasons why it's okay to eat meat. And I'm sure vegan parents have to deal with that.

MARIANN: You mentioned the market to which this movie is being marketed, or the demographic to which the movie is being marketed. And can you talk a little bit about whether you think it's reaching them, and whether you think, not only was the movie and the ending a comment on what happened, but whether it might also be a call to what should happen in the future? Maybe we've gone awry, but are there still ways to fix what we've done. Do you see it that way?

NOAH: Sure. I absolutely do. And I think the movie is being marketed to various audiences. I think when the producers of the film gave Darren Aronofsky this property, it was because of the success of his last film, *Black Swan*, which was a small movie that made a ton of money, domestically and internationally. But he's a very quirky, esoteric filmmaker. And it really is an odd choice to give him this movie, which is gonna be marketed to a Christian demographic. They released it around Easter, around the same time that *Passion of the Christ* was released and made so much money. So I think there's a tension in the film between trying to appeal to that audience and what Aronofsky's purer vision might be because he's made some very bleak films in his career, *Black Swan* and *Requiem for a Dream*, for example, which is one of the most bleak films I've ever seen in my life. And that film has no happy ending at all.

So I'm not super familiar with the far right Christian mindset that might go to see this film, but I think one way of looking at it is that Aronofsky is trying to kind of reclaim some of these

principles, the biblical principles that have been kind of sublimated and appropriated in some destructive ways for more constructive ways; the idea of dominion, for example, that Matthew Scully wrote about in his animal rights book. He's a conservative who looks at the dominion that God gives people over animals. He doesn't look at that as a reason to eat animals; he looks at that as a notion of stewardship and that it's our job to take care of them. And I think Aronofsky's trying to achieve the same thing, maybe trying to appeal to some people who do take the Bible very seriously and who think they know the Bible and asking them to look at this idea of dominion another way. And as far as the ending goes, as I told you, I have mixed feelings about it in terms of whether that ending is actually earned or not as a happy ending throughout the course of the film. But I ultimately do think it's probably preferable to have a happy ending that actually asks us to be kinder, to treat animals well, than to just wallow in misanthropy and hatred of mankind and say, "You know what? We deserve to go down with the ship." So I think it is a call to action, and I hope that the audience that this film is being marketed to hears it.

MARIANN: Yeah. I felt the same way, even though I also had mixed feelings about whether the ending was a happy one or not.

NOAH: Only vegans would feel that way.

MARIANN: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about what else is going on in the world of film and maybe -- you had mentioned *Blackfish* as being just kind of a watershed moment. And you recently wrote an article talking about watershed moments in the animal rights movement for Hollywood. And do you see anything else coming up or that we should take note of that you think has the potential to reach new audiences with these messages?

NOAH: Well, I'm very interested to see what happens with the sequel to *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, which comes out later this year. The original, as I said, to me it was an animal rights manifesto. And the moment when those chimpanzees broke free from their cages and kind of took over the city was really cathartic for me. I really got a lot out of seeing that, and in that film the abused animals were the heroes and most of the people in it were the villains. But I know that the sequel is gonna be about the war between chimpanzees and people. And I'm interested to see whether they can continue showing compassion and sympathy for the animals in that context and whether the humans will remain the villains or not. It's kind of a tough assignment that they've created for themselves. But I'm eager to see what they do with it 'cause again I thought the first film was just terrific on those issues.

JASMIN: Yeah. Let me just ask you one question before you move past the *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*. We also agree. I *loved* that movie and I thought it was such an important film for so many reasons. And we had an analysis of it on our online magazine written by Loredana Loy, and one thing that I would love your take on is the fact that they used real horses in it and all of the other animals used in it were CGI. What do you think the reason for that was, or do you have any reactions to the fact that there was clearly still animal exploitation going on?

NOAH: That's interesting. I didn't read that, but I know Loredana Loy. She's a great writer, so I'll have to check that out. I actually didn't think about the fact that real horses were used in that film. All I can say is that I think we're just not there yet with the horses. I haven't seen a film that used CGI or motion capture horses before. Maybe *Noah* did, if there were horses on the ark. They were probably shown in a wide shot but not a lot of detail. So it's possible

the technology isn't quite there for that or it's possible that we still think of horses galloping with someone on their back as not a violation of their rights as a society. But hopefully that will change down the line as the technology gets better and as we evolve to a more compassionate place.

JASMIN: Do you find it difficult to watch old movies that exploit animals, or are you able to kind of put them in a compartment in yourself in order to see the bigger picture, again, so to speak, and maybe recognize the pro-animal messages in movies that exploit animals, because it was perhaps a movie that was made well before this technology was made available?

NOAH: It is a constant tension for me between my intellectual self and my emotional self because I'm a sucker for movies that portray animals in a positive light and make them cute and funny and adorable. And I am able to compartmentalize it to some degree, partially because I write about film often from a perspective that has little to do with animal rights, so I have been able to detach myself for that kind of work. But then I look up the making of the film and I read bad things that happened to the animals. One of the best examples is when I was a kid, there was a movie called *The Adventures of Milo and Otis*.

JASMIN: Yeah.

NOAH: You know that film?

JASMIN: Of course! We must be the same age. I remember that film well.

NOAH: I love that film, and it's about a pug, a little puppy, and a cat who live on a farm, and they get separated somehow from the farm and they're just with each other in the wild trying to get back home. And I think that movie had a lot to do with why I ended up caring about animals so much, but I read later that they shot the film in Canada or something to avoid the presence of the American Humane Association. And that scene where the cat goes over the waterfall in a box, they killed something like 10 or 12 kittens, maybe, I think.

MARIANN: Oh my God. That's just horrifying.

NOAH: And I don't know if that's true or not. It could just be a rumor. It's completely horrifying. But there's that tension between what goes on to create those adorable cute images that in some ways do inspire people to care about animals. It's like the conundrum some people have with zoos, that they can be educational in teaching people, getting people up close with animals and forming a connection with them, but what you have to do to get to that point is so horrifying that for me it's a constant question and a constant struggle, something that I haven't quite resolved yet in my heart.

MARIANN: Well, let's hope that CGI just resolves it for you without you having to figure it out.

NOAH: That would be ideal, yeah. And I think we're on a path to that.

MARIANN: So you mentioned before that there's now this new organization to maybe replace American Humane. And there was that huge article in the *Hollywood Reporter* kind of blowing the whistle on American Humane. Can you talk a little bit more about that controversy and what kind of a job they have been doing?

NOAH: Sure. Well, the big problem with the American Humane Association -- well, there's a few problems. One underlying problem is that they only monitor the use of animals on the set, so especially with exotic animals that are used in film, it's the training that is really the cruel part of it. To get an exotic animal to perform involves a lot of cruelty, as anybody who's familiar with the training of circus animals will know. Further, they have several levels of endorsing a film. They can put a statement in the credits of a film that says, "No animals were harmed in the making of this film." But they can also put a statement that simply says, "An American Humane Association representative was present during the making of this film." And if you see that, well, that means an animal was harmed during the making of the film. And them giving their endorsement, even if it is a light endorsement like that, to a film in which animals are harmed, really speaks to a core problem in the mission of the organization.

So Barbara Casey, who was one of their inspectors, she quit over these perceived problems and has formed her own organization called Movie Animals Protected. And they're based in New York and I don't know if they're up and running yet, and I do know that her lawyers have advised her not to give any live interviews at the moment, 'cause I asked for one. But the presumption is that they're gonna do things differently and they're gonna do things better. And hopefully in a few years they'll be out of business themselves because we won't be using any live animals in film, but in the meantime I think that's a positive step forward.

MARIANN: Yeah, let's hope so, though as we were saying, let's hope that they're not even needed at some point and that CGI can just take over the whole business. Can you talk a little bit about other -- and taking into account the *Milo and Otis* problem that sometimes we know about what happened and sometimes we don't, and it may have been horrible. But even given that, as you say, there have been many, many movies over the past I think that have changed all of us and have led many of us to having new feelings about animals and to really starting to think about animals in a serious way and connecting to them. Can you talk about a few of your favorites?

NOAH: Sure. Well, I think the Disney movies and the Pixar movies really play an important role in that regard. Movies like *Finding Nemo*, I think, can be really, really useful for teaching children to care about an animal like fish, which most people still don't really think of as having feelings or feeling pain, which we obviously know is untrue at this point. But those Disney movies, they help children feel a connection with animals. They teach them that they have feelings and that they suffer and that they are relatable. And I think those can be incredibly useful for children. For me, there wasn't one movie that really kind of opened my eyes to that. I didn't really become vegan or vegetarian or interested in these issues till I was older in life. I was, I think, 26 or 27, and I read all the animal rights books and that kind of did it for me. Plus I met a woman who was vegan and she's now my wife, and that had a lot to do with it as well.

JASMIN: It's always -- meeting someone and falling in love is the best thing we've got going for turning people vegan.

NOAH: It completely is. And my wife is great at it. I think turning people vegan is -- I don't know if it's a skill; I think it's more of a gift, and he's got it. She did an amazing job with me, and I often think that she's wasting her time staying with me because she could be out there converting a million more vegans all over the world.

But I do think those animated films, those children's films, can play a really important role in this process. And what's interesting is that after *Blackfish* came out, the creators of the *Finding Nemo* sequel, which is gonna be called *Finding Dory*, decided to change the script because the script to the sequel had some animals ending up in a SeaWorld-like park at the end. And when the public outcry over that film surfaced and it opened their eyes to the horrible treatment of animals in those types of establishments, they decided to change the ending because they realized that's not a happy ending for those animals.

JASMIN: Well, all of that said, there are still ways that we can maintain hope about animal rights messages reaching people in movies that maybe aren't being marketed that way. And I love this article that you wrote for the Dodo that's called "Five Movies You Didn't Know Were about Animal Rights." And I'm just going to say real quick what those were: *Seven Pounds*, *12 Monkeys*, *City Slickers*, *Doc Hollywood*, and *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde*. Now, of those, I knew about *Legally Blonde 2* being an animal rights-themed movie in so many ways. But I have to rewatch these other films, which I have seen, or seen most of them anyway, from this vantage point because that's really cool. It kind of makes it more fun for us too, to watch them from this lens.

NOAH: I was kind of amazed because I had seen all of those movies, with the exception of *Legally Blonde 2*, before I was into animal issues. And I went back and when I -- just to take one example, I was really amazed by what happens at the end of *City Slickers* because I loved that movie when I was a kid and I didn't make any animal connection to it at all. But the whole crux of the movie is that this character, this urban person, he's unhappy and he's trying to do something that will bring joy back to his life. So he goes on this cattle drive with his friends, and they're driving these cattle across the country with no thought to what's gonna happen at the end to them.

So when they finally bring the cattle in after getting through some very difficult obstacles -- they get separated from their leaders, the cattle driver dies -- they bring all these cattle in and they're told, "Oh yeah, we're gonna slaughter all these animals, so thanks for bringing them to us." And they have this moment where their world gets opened up in a way that I think a lot of people like us do when we have a moment where we start to realize what animal suffering means. And in particular, there's this calf that the lead character helped birth on the cattle drive. And the night before they leave, he's standing out there looking at the animals, all the cows, and he's kind of thinking about what he's done and what's gonna happen to them, and the calf comes right up to him and he stares at the calf in the face and he looks him in the eye and he has that moment of connection that we've all had with an animal and it changes him. And he doesn't save all of the cattle, but he saves that one, and that's the thing that brings him joy again in his life, is reconnecting to his environment and reconnecting with that animal. And it was a remarkably progressive message for the early '90s when these issues weren't nearly as prominent as they are today.

And I think if we look back at some other films, we'll see the same thing, that there's some kind of hidden but really strong pro-animal messages in there.

JASMIN: Very cool. So much to think about, and we're so grateful to you for joining us today on Our Hen House and for shedding light on some of these issues. And as you mentioned that about *City Slickers*, I was a teenager then when that came out, but it all came back to me. Yes, of course! Why wasn't I thinking that way in the early '90s?!

NOAH: I think it planted a seed maybe.

MARIANN: Yeah. I think that's possible. Like, we don't realize when we're seeing these movies that they're having an effect on us, but maybe they are.

JASMIN: Yeah, who knows?

NOAH: Yeah, I think so.

JASMIN: Well, I hope that people go see *Noah*, and I know it's also gotten some very interesting media coverage. So that's been really enjoyable for us to sit back and watch and read. And again I really appreciate your taking the time to talk to us today in Our Hen House. Thank you so much for joining us, Noah.

NOAH: It was my pleasure. Thanks for the talk.

JASMIN: That was Noah Gittell. Be sure to check out some of Noah's articles, which you could find at The Atlantic. He has his own page there, [theatlantic.com/noah-gittell](http://theatlantic.com/noah-gittell), and also at [reelchange.net](http://reelchange.net).