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Les Animaux Amoureux. 2007. Directed by Laurent Charbonnier. Edited by Jean-Pierre Bailly. DVD, 81 min.

Les Animaux Amoureux (Animals in Love) is a full-length documentary by Laurent Charbonnier, who is an experienced and skilful French filmmaker already known to have realized several animal documentaries allowing him to sharpen sophisticated techniques by shooting animals at a close distance without disturbing them. The film represents an interesting overview of a topic not often tackled by scientists, that is, as the title suggests, the emotional sphere of nonhuman animals.

Since ancient times, love has represented a mysterious bond capable to combine for unknown reasons two individuals: why do we choose one particular partner instead of another? Contrary to those who want to reduce this emotion only to a reproductive goal, like the blind and selfish transmission of genes, nowadays it seems clear that the question is much more complicated than that both for human and nonhuman animals.

In this perspective, the documentary – which took two years to shoot – offers a unique reportage tacking the viewer across fifteen countries to discover how eighty animal species conveyed the art of love with its colorful rituals, cruel fights and disarming fondness. The great variety of animal species considered – from the rare New Guineas parotia and the Australian fiddler crab to the European brown frog – shot in their natural environments, constitutes an encyclopedic effort to group together different declinations of being animals and of ‘falling in love’. Therefore courtships, pregnancies and eggs to brood experienced by mammals, birds, marine animals and reptiles show us – as the voice-over says during the first scenes – that the ‘molecules of love’ are the same, both in human and nonhuman animals. In fact, since life has appeared on the evolution stage, it has created ‘ecstasies of love’ that have made gestures, body and desire languages, customs and attitudes possible, and have embraced a thousand seduction expedients, constantly perpetuated throughout the centuries.

The documentary – where no human presence appears except for the narrator’s voice at the beginning and at the end – is divided in parts that recall, in their succession, the cycle of life. The cycle starts with nonhuman

animal males caught while preparing and cleaning their plumage or their coats in prospect of the imminent encounter with females. Often, before this happens, they have to face cruel fights amongst themselves in order to decide which individual can claim to mate. The struggle of sage grouse of Ohio grasslands, Australian kangaroos, Atlantic bottlenose dolphins and African giraffes, in this sense, demonstrates that the pathway towards females is painful and uncertain. It, at the same time, deconstructs the simplistic imaginaries that consider love only an idyllic and positive feeling. The director seems to suggest that love is also boredom, silence and waiting, as shown by the two African bush lions shot during an exhausting courtship beneath the hot sun. Impressive images also present animals during pregnancy and after the birth of their cubs, like the female deer that shelters herself and her baby deer, just born, from predators hiding in the undergrowth. After the birth, the mother licks her baby and, with some small muzzle strokes – or leg strokes like the elephant mother does in another scene – invites the new life to stand up, to attain balance and to move the first steps across the world. So, the cycle regenerates and restarts, like it has always been.

It is interesting to underline the remarkable attention given to the animal aesthetic in this documentary. Nonhuman animals manage to offer us an incredible collection of different shapes, colors, melodies and graceful body movements, but it is even more interesting to point out another aspect of the animal kingdom. Charles Darwin would have suggested that the vivid tints or the melodic cries frequently answer an evolutionary process that has awarded those specimens with more probability to recognize each other as a potential good partner. For the human gaze, though, these features have also become marvelous exhibitions of animal beauty that inspire anthropopoietic processes inside human cultures. As a matter of fact, the cultural debts contracted by humans towards the animal appeal are several: Masai's dances are inspired by the courtship dances of the African crowned crane and human cosmetic practices are often referred to the multicolor animal plumages and coats. In the documentary we can see the bright feathers of male peacocks or the scarlet throat of Galapagos great frigate birds that serve the purpose of displaying a bigger size in front of females and delighting us as an animal expression of beauty. The hypnotic dance of the parotia bird – very rare to see in nature and masterfully caught by Charbonnier's camera and emphasized, almost in a metonymic way, by the astonishing soundtrack by Philip Glass – which moves its silver chest feathers and so creating a play of light and reflection in order to enthrall the female, represents an incredible example of courtship carried out with grace, beauty and harmony.

However, in a documentary titled *Animals in Love*, we have to highlight the problematic nature of an idea such as ‘to be in love’ applied to the emotional life of all living beings. Firstly, we should find a common agreement about the meaning of that concept, but being ourselves ‘victims’ of our own emotions, it is very hard to reach a shared definition about it. How can we be sure that the kind of feeling (and all the practical declinations involved) we observe between two lovers (both nonhuman and human animals) is exactly the same emotion that can be called ‘falling in love’? And if we use this term for nonhuman animals, do we not risk to cover them with our anthropomorphic projections? As we initially said, the questions are very complicated when we tackle the animal emotional sphere and, up until now, no agreement has been reached within the scientific community. In this perspective, one of the results of a documentary like *Animals in Love* is to understand that the art of loving between nonhuman animals could help us to remove the anthropocentric lens that we naturally wear while looking at the outside world. And it could lead us to discover, for example, that the idea of ‘romantic love’ – a feeling separated from the mere sexual dimension – does not exist only in the human world but also among non-human animals. The tenderness of macaque parents towards their baby or the pleasure – characteristic of many animal species like penguins – of staying together forming a stable couple for a long time after the weaning of their offspring, attest a deep relationship between individuals that cannot be reduced to simplistic visions according to which species obey only to their genes. Furthermore, these examples, taken from the documentary, underline how the deep nonhuman animal emotional sphere characterizes individuals throughout their whole life cycle passing through different parental and social bonds.

In order to understand the intense emotional life of other species, the first step is to know them better through careful observation: for this reason, *Animals in Love* is a precious mark that tries to portray a great variety of living beings shot in their natural environment and with the least possible human intrusion. A second step lies in that we should bring into question our cultural references about love and broaden our perspectives towards other animals by recognizing their ability to have rich emotional lives. In conclusion, while watching *Animals in Love* and its touching images, it seems clear that the perpetuation of the species is not the reason why love exists, but, if anything, the aim that it accomplishes. Love appears so as an inseparable mixture of science and emotions.