

From Eyes Open to Eyes Closed

*A Conversation with
Andrea Arnold*

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HUMANIMALIA 16.2 (Summer 2026)

Abstract: This interview with writer and director Andrea Arnold reflects on her documentary *Cow* (2021) in the wider context of Arnold's distinctive body of work. Although *Cow* is her only documentary so far, it engages many of Arnold's recurring themes and aesthetic sensibility. We discussed Arnold's deep attachment to animals, in life and in art, dating back to her childhood; the importance of place and environment in her filmography; and the role animals play in her imagination as beings at once vulnerable and courageously yearning for freedom. Arnold resists theorizing her own work and described filmmaking as an instinctive, forward-moving process. We spoke about the tensions in her films between tenderness and toughness, beauty and cruelty, and between the commitment to not look away and the violence that such looking invariably yields. For Arnold, *Cow* is not an exposé or an animal rights film. Still, in its unflinching depiction of dairy's repetitive cycles of calving, lactation, separation, impregnation and, eventually, death, *Cow* becomes a searing portrait of industrial animal agriculture.

Keywords: *Andrea Arnold; Cow; animal cinema; documentary; farmed animals; sentience*

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first met Andrea Arnold in 2023, two years after the release of her film *Cow*. She was kind enough to join us for a Q&A about the film at the Goldsmiths cinema in London, as part of the Animal Scales seminar series. There was a touch of nervousness all around: at the time, Arnold's attentions were elsewhere—she was completing her next film, *Bird* (2024), in preparation for its première at Cannes. Arnold arrived accompanied by a watchful Kat Mansoor, *Cow*'s producer. My own feelings about *Cow* were complicated. I had been discussing the film with students in my ecocinema classes. I've also been writing about it, but sharing my thoughts on the film with its maker was an altogether different, daunting, thing.

Animals have been a consistent presence in all of Arnold's films, but *Cow* is the first to feature an animal as the central character. Shot over four years at a commercial dairy farm in Kent, *Cow* follows Luma, a Holstein-Friesian dairy cow, from one production cycle to another: calving, lactation, and breeding, until Luma is "spent".¹ Without commentary, Arnold captures the Sisyphean rhythms of the dairy farm in minute detail.

As our conversation makes clear, Arnold's interest is first and foremost in observing individuals in environments that stifle and restrict, which place characters under pressure, and squeeze out their truths. As a matter of scale, then, *Cow* is best understood as a cinematic synecdoche: its engagement with a single cow and her child is unique, but it also reminds us of the 2.65 million cows in UK dairies, a mere fraction of the 270 million worldwide.² The film's play of scales, focusing so intimately on a single cow, raises questions about how film might convey the magnitude of industrial farming. The individual cow, her face, her voice, her direct address to the camera,

- 1 "Spent" cows are not profitable to keep alive. *Compassion in World Farming* explains that "[w]hen dairy cows become less productive or have significant health problems, they may be transported long distances to be slaughtered. This is because few slaughterhouses deal with spent dairy cows." CWIF, "Dairy Cows" <https://www.cwif.org.uk/farm-animals/cows/dairy-cows/>.
- 2 There are about 270 million dairy cows worldwide. According to DEFRA, approximately 2.65 million of them are in the UK. See Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, "UK and EU Cow Numbers", 12 June 2026 <https://ahdb.org.uk/dairy/uk-and-eu-cow-numbers>.

generate modes of identification and empathy that are central to Cow's appeal, but which crucially add to Luma's workload in the form of emotional labour.

The downscaling of the farm, from a machine that processes countless, nameless animals, to a frame for observing the single, individual cow encompasses the film's internal contradictions but also the dilemma of animal advocacy: Can the individual dairy cow carry the weight of its millions of sisters? Is Luma a representative, an extrapolator? What is our relation to the other, anonymous cows whose labour we see in the periphery of the film? These questions of scale always apply to the critique of systemic violence; they measure the power of the distinct individual against that of the crowd. They raise further questions about the uses and misuses of empathy in the face of systemic injustice. But these are also questions of cinema, whose privileging of subjectivity is both an expression of the medium's observational powers, and its liberal commitment to the dignity of the individual person and the ethics of empathy.

According to the fourteenth-century etymology of "scale", Luma is one in a "series of registering marks; marks laid down to determine distance along a line".³ In this sense, Luma is less a unique individual than one data point among millions of others that make up the animal agricultural system, whose logic and scale Dinesh Wadiwel has so compellingly written about.⁴ As a creature condemned to a highly gendered metabolic and gestational labour, Luma is irreducibly an individual — she is forced to bear and immediately lose her children, and these experiences are uniquely her own.

The peculiar status of the dairy cow differs from that of other "food animals" whose flesh is directly consumed. In the labour process of the dairy cow, explains Wadiwel, "the body is utilised as a machine for the repeated production of a product which is created by the metabolic processes of this body".⁵ This means that Luma is not simply created and killed for her flesh, but "performs a 'metabolic

3 "Scale." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/scale>.

4 See Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*.

5 Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*, 103.

labour’ [...] that uses the bodily processes of the cow to produce a continuous flow of milk”.⁶ This compounding of exploitative labour—enlisting Luma’s body itself to do the work of producing milk, and gradually destroying her in the process—is arguably intensified by being filmed. Luma’s “performance” adds another layer of metabolic labour, whose product is neither flesh nor milk, but the image.

The resulting ambivalence of *Cow* hinges on this duality, which is also an interplay of scales: in the process of revealing Luma as an autonomous and sentient being, *Cow* itself consumes her, converting every gesture, every ripple of the muscle, every vocal plea into images. More than any other film of the last decade, perhaps, *Cow* crystallizes cinema’s entanglement in systems of value-extraction from the bodies of living animals. In *Animal Capital* (2009), Nicole Shukin memorably traced the connections between the cinema and the meatpacking plant, each in its turn rendering living beings into meat, or into images.⁷ In Arnold’s film, the tensions between observation and extraction are exacerbated by the “aesthetics of contact”, the intimacy with Luma achieved through cinematographer Magda Kowalczyk’s immersive, haptic camerawork. Arnold often shoots her characters this way, up close, an approach at once deeply empathic and unsparing. It is this concoction of toughness and tenderness that underpins Arnold’s style. But with Luma, a real person, not a fictional character, a working animal on an actual dairy farm, the scales (and stakes) are immediately higher.



When Arnold, Mansoor, and I were first in conversation in April 2023, I opened with a question about *Cow*’s cinematic forebears.

“Although *Cow* feels like an integral part of your work”, I started, “it also speaks to the long tradition of films about animal agriculture and slaughter, from Georges Franju’s *Blood of the Beasts* (*Le Sang des bêtes*, 1949) to Frederick Wiseman’s *Meat* (1976), Nikolaus

6 Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*, 102.

7 Shukin, *Animal Capital*, 87–91.

Geyrhalter's *Our Daily Bread* (*Unser täglich Brot*, 2005), Viktor Kossakovsky's *Gunda* (2020), even Kelly Reichardt's *First Cow* (2019)". Did Arnold see *Cow* as belonging to, or being in dialogue with, this cinematic lineage?

Arnold said she knew of the films, of course — Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966) was another — but hadn't really watched any of them. Her reply was disarming and it pointed to the origins of *Cow* not in the annals of film history, but in Arnold's own lived experience and body of work.

I asked Arnold about the growing scholarly interest in animals and nature in her films, even before the release of *Cow*. I got the feeling that she finds it rewarding but awkward to have her art scrutinized in this way. Commentators have pointed out the setting of her films in hybrid nature-cultural "edgelands",⁸ her "post-humanist distribution of attention",⁹ and her creatureliness¹⁰ — Arnold's attentiveness to the lively vulnerability of human and nonhuman animals, especially mothers and girls.

"Whenever I have felt troubled or lost or overwhelmed with life", Arnold wrote in *The Guardian* before the film's opening screening at Cannes, "I have always sought nature. It has always grounded me and put me in touch with myself again. No one taught me this".¹¹ She goes on to describe a childhood of wild roaming in the post-industrial stretches around her north Kent council estate. "Out of this grew a deep love of insects and birds and animals and plants". In the richness of those earlier memories I trace the lyrical template of Arnold's filmmaking. And while *Cow* largely takes place within the confines of the farm — a carceral structure of gated enclosures at the centre of which is the milking carousel, woefully known as a "rotary parlour" — we are still there, in the same familiar location.

8 Paszkiewicz, "Stray Aesthetic", 11.

9 Lawrence, "Nature and the Non-Human", 178.

10 See Jacobs, "Maternal 'Creaturely' Cinema"; Parlett, "Creaturely Universe".

11 Arnold, "We Are Animals".

Arnold's attention to detail downscales the gaze: *this* cow, *this* calf, during *these* seemingly interminable, monotonous hours of labour. But the bigger picture is assembled out of the particular details. The pendulum swings between the intently observed individual and the structures that enclose and confine them is the dominant mode of Arnold's cinema. Her protagonists are nearly always the victims of circumstance, but it is within these hard frames that Arnold can better see what is unique about them. In *Cow* and elsewhere, and despite Arnold's fascination with individual characters, the presence of the material conditions of existence keeps open the films' political horizon.

When Arnold and I met again in early November 2025, she was as reluctant as ever to over-intellectualize. The conversation turned instead to the bedrock of her creative sensibilities: her deep connection to animals, whose curtailed freedoms her films so unflinchingly chart.



Anat Pick: Hello, Andrea. How are you? It's been a while since our live event at Goldsmiths. Thank you so much for agreeing to do this a second time. Rather than try to recreate our conversation then, I thought I'd ask you a few broader questions about your work, which will hopefully lead back to *Cow*.

When we first spoke, I remember you were just finishing *Bird* (2024). I think you were in post-production, and I was really looking forward to seeing what comes after *Cow*. And so, to start off, I'd like to ask if you see a connecting thread between your work overall, and, in hindsight, where *Cow* sits within your filmography.

Andrea Arnold: I find these questions hard to answer because they request that I do an overview, as if I have a plan, some career plan to do certain things—and I never do. I never look back. I never watch my films once they're done. I move on forward. As soon as I've done one, I'm moving onto the next, and all my attention and focus go on that. The rest of it fades. The films don't, obviously; they're like children, almost. I care about them, but I have a real desire to move forward, and I never reflect very much about how they fit.

AP: I understand. This is why I was a bit worried, because I think it's quite an art to ask the right questions, and I'm not very experienced at that!

AA: Well, between us, we can figure it out, can't we? I feel like what I've just said is part of who I am, and that's an answer in a way.

AP: It is, absolutely.

AA: I try hard not to analyse too much. People say, What's your theme? And I don't really know [she laughs]. I know that people find themes, and I've seen papers that people have written on my work. But I can't engage on that level. It's a very instinctive thing for me, and I feel very... Obviously, the animal, the wild, nature are massive in everything I do and something that is definitely there. But I don't make plans as: oh, right, now I'm going to do it.

I've started writing something new, and there's not a lot of nature in it. And I'm thinking, what's happening here? This is strange. I'm going to have to put some more nature in. But I try not to analyse or judge or think too heavily about it. So, I don't really know where *Cow* sits. It was something that I cared about for a very long time, and I suddenly had an idea about how to do it, and I just picked it up at that point.

There's no grand career plan whatsoever. Every time I finish a film, I have no idea where that will lead. I think I know, and then it all changes because every film is a massive growth period for me. I feel differently at the end of a film, like I've moved on in some way, and I don't know where that is going to take me.

AP: I assume the choice to shoot a documentary was a matter of necessity, because I know you said you wanted to film a life cycle, birth to death, and to be able to do that within the space of a film, you'd have to be on a farm. But I wonder, does that make a difference? Do you distinguish between documentary and fiction? Does it matter to you?

AA: With drama, I'm putting words on paper, creating something on a bit of paper before we go out and film it. Whereas with the

documentary, we just went out and filmed what was there. So, it's very different. I wouldn't say that *Cow* is a drama. It's not something that's made up. Obviously, we edited and shot it a certain way. So, you're making choices. Those choices are very deliberate. You could say that in some way you're massaging it into what you want to explore. But at the same time, I tried hard, within the constraints I gave myself, which was filming just from [among] the cows; just filming the cows. Within that, you're allowing what happens to be. So yes, there are constraints you give yourself, and within that, you're allowing, you're just seeing—well, okay, now I'm in this situation, what is there? What is going to happen? You have no idea of the future. You have no idea what's coming and what's going to happen, how things are going to end or how things are going to be the next day even.

Bird was planned. Everything we put there was brought there. With *Cow*, we just went there and there was Luma and Malu, and we filmed them as they were in whatever happened.

AP: But did it feel different to embark on a film where, yes, there's a lot that you don't know because it's just unfolding as you film it, but you *do* know how it ends. You know where it's going. You know the character is going to be killed at the end. That sounds like a difficult thing.

AA: I knew that there would be an end of that kind because that's the farming system. It's interesting that we didn't do exactly what I planned. I planned to do eyes open to eyes closed. I wanted to do the life span of an animal in the farming system, from eyes open to eyes closed. But actually, a cow's life is quite long, and nobody was willing to fund us filming for eleven, twelve years.¹² That would have taken such a long time, and on some level, that was my pure idea, and I would have liked to still have been able to do that. And the reason is, I guess, I'm always trying to do something that feels very honest. For some reason, doing it from eyes open to eyes closed felt very honest. It felt like this is the conscious lifetime of one animal, and

12 Cows can live to around twenty years. In most commercial systems, however, they are culled, on average, at six years old. See CIWF, "The Life of: Dairy Cows", 1 Sept. 2012, <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/media/5235185/the-life-of-dairy-cows.pdf>.

this is the most honest way I can portray it from when they're born to when they die. That always felt like what I needed to do, rather than a section.

I don't know why that felt the right thing to do. Maybe it was trying to be present as faithfully as I could from when they're born to when they die. So instead of filming one cow for eleven years, we did a cow and her calf. I was able to do the birth from a different perspective and then see the mother. So, in a way, I covered what I wanted to cover, but with two cows instead of one.

But on some level, I wanted it to be pure.

AP: I read that you said that one of the things you wanted to explore in *Cow* was whether farmed animals were sentient. But then, when I watch *Cow*, it's so obvious that they are. The film isn't actually setting out to prove that. It's simply a fact. The film confronts us with a full, complex person.

AA: A sentient creature...

AP: Yes, she's looking at us, and we read her facial expressions, and she's speaking straight to camera (in that early scene just after she is separated from her daughter). She's vocalizing straight to camera, and she's very articulate. It isn't difficult to figure out what she's trying to say. Do you think that there is a difference, cinematically speaking, between humans and animals? I ask because the way you shoot people and the way you shoot animals seems so egalitarian to me.

AA: I've never questioned whether animals are sentient. In my absolute being, I feel it. When you're a kid and you have dogs or you're with your cats and gerbils and hamsters and all those things that we have as children, they've always seemed very sentient to me. Every single dog and cat and animal I've known all had distinct characters and personalities.

I was amazed to read somewhere—I don't know where this came from—they've in the past said that they're not sentient. I was

staggered that there might be anybody who thinks they're not. So, I probably said that because I knew that a lot of people that might see the film might think that. And it was a way of saying, look, let's see if she's sentient or not. It doesn't take much to read that. But I didn't want to exclude anyone who thought [animals] might not be.

It's not an easy film. But I did hope that I would get people to see it who perhaps were not just animal lovers. I wanted people who didn't think about animals in that way to see it and have a reason to see it.

That's what I like to think I was trying to do, which I think is, in a way, quite hard: to see the invisible part of her. You know the bit that we can see — she's a cow and she's made of flesh and bones. But this thing that goes on inside her head, her thinking and her will and her feelings and the way she behaves and responds to her environment and other people and other cows and her daughter and her calf. To try and see if we could see that, see the invisible.

I remember when I spoke to Magda [Kowalczyk] I said, look, we mustn't get inside her head. I don't want us to imagine that we're the cow and what we can see is what she can see. We've got to watch her in her environment, watch her carefully and see how she responds to things. We're watching her, watching the world, watching her environment. How could we get inside her head? It's not possible. But it is possible to imagine what she might be feeling and thinking. So that's what I tried hard to do, see that invisible aliveness. I don't know what you want to call that, soul or consciousness, but that thing that we have.

AP: It is true that you cannot really get into anybody's head — human or not. Cinema is all about surfaces. That's why I said that I cannot easily distinguish between the way you shoot people and the way you shoot animals. The soul is there, if we want to call it that.

AA: Yeah.

AP: There is this tendency to say, let's put a GoPro camera on top of an animal and then shoot from their perspective, which never seems to come off right.

AA: Yes. I'm always thinking what we need is a little imagination to imagine what it must be like to be. That's what makes me sad... How can you know what it's like to be an octopus? It's got all kinds of skills and senses that we just don't have. I've got no clue what it's like to be an octopus, but I like to imagine what it might be like. And having an imagination about it is part of it. To have empathy, you need imagination because we can't know. I don't know what another person is thinking.

AP: Exactly, I feel the need to insist that opacity is not species dependent...

AA: Let alone [an animal]. But I can imagine.

I heard yesterday — and this really distressed me for some reason, I hear these little things, and I just feel terrible. It makes me upset now — I heard this programme on migrating birds, and they said that there are certain birds that we cage, like goldfinches, who migrate to Africa, and when they're supposed to migrate, they feed themselves up in the cages. They get all fat. I just can't bear it. They feed themselves up in the cages, and when the migration time comes, they're flying against the bars, agitated. Everything about them is wanting to migrate to Africa with all the other birds. And I'm thinking — imagine you're a bird. You've got this thing, you want to migrate, and you've fattened yourself up and you're ready to go. And then you can't get out. You can't do that thing that you were supposed to do.

AP: This is so strange because my next question is precisely about this. I don't know if you've had a chance to see Laura Staab's video essay on your films?¹³

AA: Oh, really? No one told me about that!

AP: Yes, and Staab talks about your characters as being confined.

AA: Oh, interesting.

13 MUBI, "Andrea Arnold: Birds of Her Feather," presented by Laura Staab. *YouTube*, 17 Feb. 2025, 8:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWd2pRTEbw0>.

AP: Or at least restricted by their material conditions and then finding some kind of freedom within those small spaces. And I think what comes through in the interplay between confinement and freedom in so many of your films is what you've just described with the birds in the cages. You inject so much love into these characters who are all caged in different ways. This is a clunky question, but I wonder if you have anything to say about this idea of confinement and love in *Cow*, which becomes even more intense with the use of pop music. Any thoughts about this interplay between being caged and having all these desires? And bestowing your love on the characters to afford them that measure of freedom?

AA: Yes, it's interesting. People have said that to me before. It's interesting that the migrating birds got to me so much. I really felt distressed by it. I was writing something, and it went in the writing immediately. It just ended up in there. And I feel almost pain at hearing that, because I imagine the birds and I imagine them wanting to migrate and not being able to. I feel almost a physical pain on their behalf. And then I want to go to every single cage and let them all out. So, I don't know what that means in terms of what I write about, and I don't know where it exactly comes from.

AP: Because it's Luma in *Cow*, and then *Bird* is the actual title, and the character of Bailey (Nykiya Adams) is a bit of a caged bird, but they both find ways to express themselves.

AA: It must be a deep thing because it is obviously there. But when I think about my childhood, for example, I felt I had a freedom on some level. I was out playing from very early. There must be some deeper reason that I don't fully understand, so I can't enlighten you very easily. I don't know where that comes from. I grew up in a working-class environment, and I could see that people were trapped by their circumstances a little bit. People are. And that's probably why location and environment are very important to me. I almost see them as a separate character. I feel that the environment that people live in is very important to their lives and what it means for their lives. Depending on where we're born and who to, in what situation, has a massive impact on how we grow up and

see the world. I grew up around a lot of poverty, and I can see that is very limiting for people.

AP: I remember that at the Q&A we talked about *Cow* as a film about a working-class mother in Kent.

AA: [Laughs] Yes.

AP: So, it's consistent with your other films.

AA: Yes, it's funny how I get very deeply into that without even realizing there's a connection!

AP: That's interesting. It's for a whole other interview, perhaps, but I am curious about the ability to maintain innocence as an artist and not be overwhelmed by self-consciousness and overthinking.

AA: My mission is to try not to be like that because it limits you and you get too frozen. I try to let the images come and don't judge them. I'm writing something new now and I have something that's such a strong image, and I know that if it ends up in the film in the way I imagine, it's going to be quite controversial. And yet that's where I started, and it feels very true to me. If you start judging and analysing, you wouldn't do it. A lot of people say that I'm quite brave, and I think that part of it is not feeling inhibited. When you think about what actually happens in *Bird*—I felt brave making it. I thought—*this is going to be interesting!* But it felt emotionally true, so I just kept going. I don't read my reviews, but I know that some people didn't get it. Emotionally, for me, it works, and I know it emotionally works for some other people.

AP: For what it's worth, it worked brilliantly for me. But are you referring to the so-called magic realism aspect of it?

AA: Yes. I know that some people found the magical realism a bit hard, also because I've been quite realistic in my films before. Somebody said: "it's not an Andrea Arnold film." I said, "Yes it is, because I just made it, and I can break my own rules!"

AP: I don't know. I didn't think any of them—including *Cow*—were one hundred per cent realism. There's always an added something.

AA: I felt like *Bird* was just an extension of what I've done before. You look at a dragonfly, and it's incredible. It's stranger than anything you could ever want—as alien as anything you could imagine. And if you do a closeup on a dragonfly, that is magical in itself. To me, what I was doing [in *Bird*] was an extension of that. It just took it a little bit further.

AP: I asked you about the dynamic between being caged and bursting with desire and freedom and love. And there's another tension in your work, especially in *Cow*, between being physically very close to the cows and everything that comes with that, the empathy and the intimacy. But there's also—and maybe this has something to do with the bravery you've just talked about—there's a steeliness. You're tough. There's an unsparing quality to the film, and I don't know if that's something that has occurred to you.

AA: You're not the first person to say that. My background was quite tough, and I had to be quite strong in my environment as a kid, and I saw a lot of things that were tough, too. I don't come from a polite, tidy, nice, background. People were very impulsive and spontaneous and outrageous sometimes, and quite wild. And so, I'll write things that are quite strong. My capacity for that is, I think, a bit more than a lot of people's. I grew up in a working-class world where everyone said everything, and people's emotions were out there. I'm now living in this middle-class world where no one says anything about anything. People behave very well, but are seething inside.

The cinema, especially art cinema, is pretty much a middle-class universe. Perhaps people are not used to me being unsparing because I've seen the world a little bit more. I also think it's good to show all the hues of life. There's amazing beauty and tenderness, and there's brutality and cruelty and harshness, too.

We all experience, hopefully, beauty, love and beautiful things. You can't have one without the other. You can't have God and not the devil. I feel like that's what we are as well. Capable of amazing things and

capable of immense cruelty. I don't have any problem showing both those things and feel that the good things in life are even more beautiful when you have the contrast of some of the more difficult things.

If she [Luma] had gone to the slaughterhouse, I would have gone with her. They didn't want us to do that. So that wasn't possible. But I would have gone with her, even though I know that would have been absolutely awful. I don't know what we would have shown of that. I'm not sure we could have. There would have been a way of showing that that was palatable. But I think, actually, in the end, her death was rather good. It was a better death than it could have been.

AP: Because she was the main actress, she was spared the worst of it, you mean? Most dairy cows, if they are well enough to travel, are taken to the slaughterhouse.

AA: Well, I think that the way she did die was, as a death goes, about as quick and as good as it gets. She didn't know much before that. I think there are worse scenarios.

AP: Andrea, I know that you're reluctant to talk about *Cow* in the context of animal rights, but I wonder if the film made you think differently about farmed animals.

AA: That's hard for me to talk about because I tried to make the film in a way that was fair to the farmers and complicated in its telling. It's important for the film to be received by people, to allow people to have their own relationship with it.

I can't really look at any animal now without seeing Luma. My dog reminds me of Luma because of the aliveness. Once you've found the aliveness—I mean, I hope that I always found aliveness in my dogs anyway—but even more so now, now I've known Luma, and have seen her aliveness, her consciousness, I see it in every animal that I meet and see. I can see the aliveness in all.

When I hear about the birds, I can imagine their aliveness, and this thwarted desire for life held back. So that has changed the way I look at not just farm animals, but all animals.

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