



EIN FILM VON
Emma Davie Peter Mettler

BECOMING ANIMAL

SORTIE EN SALLE
20 MARS 2018

*Peter Mettlers Bilder lassen Sie die Natur
in einer anderen Dimension erleben*

with the words and presence of DAVID ABRAM

cinematography PETER METTLER editing PETER METTLER with EMMA DAVIE music ATOM™, THOMAS TALLIS, GREGORIO ALLEGRI, FRANK BRETSCHNEIDER a.o.
sound design JACQUES KIEFFER and PETER METTLER re-recording mixer JACQUES KIEFFER picture design PATRICK LINDENMAIER
producers CORNELIA SEITLER, REBECCA DAY, BRIGITTE HOFER, SONJA HENRICI produced by MAXIMAGE and SDI PRODUCTIONS LTD in association with CREATIVE SCOTLAND
in co-production with SCHWEIZER RADIO UND FERNSEHEN SRF with the support of BUNDESAMT FÜR KULTUR (BAK), ZÜRCHER FILMSTIFTUNG, KULTURFONDS SUISSIMAGE
VOLKART STIFTUNG, UBS KULTURSTIFTUNG, SUCCÈS PASSAGE ANTENNE, PULSE/DOC SOCIETY, UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH, KULTURFÖRDERUNG APPENZEL AUSSERRHODEN

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SYNOPSIS

Collaboration inspirée entre les réalisateurs Peter Mettler (Gambling, Gods and LSD) et Emma Davie (I Am Breathing) et l'écologiste, géophilosophe radical David Abram (The Spell of the Sensuous), *Becoming Animal* est une expérience immersive. Elle nous emmène vers les confins de nos sensations, là où humains et animaux se rencontrent, là où l'on fait confiance à ses sensations pour être témoin du miracle de la nature, *Becoming Animal* est un impératif catégorique performatif : Mettler, Davie et Abram nous obligent à questionner notre essence même et à ce qu'habiter nos corps d'animaux peut vouloir dire. Laissez-vous accompagner dans un voyage immersif et surprenant.





THE FILMMAKING TEAM

EMMA DAVIE



Emma Davie's films explore innovative approaches to narrative structure and the relation between form and ethics. She has made a wide variety of documentaries for national and international broadcasters, including *I Am Breathing* (2012), which received a Scottish BAFTA for Best Director and was screened in over 50 countries, *What Age Can You Start Being An Artist?* (2004, for BBC Channel 4, shortlisted for a Grierson Award), *Gigha*, *Buying Our Island* (2002), and *Flight* (2000, BBC/Canada). She teaches at Edinburgh College of Art where she runs the post-graduate course in documentary film, and also works as an independent mentor and advisor on film projects, giving regular workshops and seminars internationally. Emma has served as a documentary programmer for the Edinburgh International Film Festival, was on the board of the European

Documentary Network, and has written widely on documentary making practice. Her interest in collaboration, explored in *Becoming Animal*, stems from a background in performance theatre: for many years she ran a performance company that specialized in immersive large-scale shows incorporating performance and film, and also collaborated with directors such as Robert Lepage, working with Peter Mettler for the first time as an actress in his film adaptation of *Tectonic Plates* (1992). Emma was educated at Oxford University where she studied English literature, and then studied theatre in Paris.

Quotes about Emma Davie's *I Am Breathing*:

«Genuinely powerful filmmaking... an intimate portrait of heartbreaking courage – a haunting and inclusive encounter with time, experience and mortality.» – Trevor Johnston, *Sight & Sound*

«Ranks among the year's most moving films.» – *The Hollywood Reporter*

PETER METTLER



Peter Mettler creates works that elude categorization, melding intuitive processes with drama, essay, and experiment. Meditations on our world rooted in personal experience, his films reflect the visions and wonder of their characters and audiences alike. His work holds a unique and influential position not only as instances of trailblazing innovation within the realm of documentary cinema, but also in new art forms where cinema and other disciplines merge. His films include *Picture of Light* (1994), *Gambling Gods & LSD* (2002), *Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands* (2009), and *The End of Time* (2012), and his collaborators include Atom Egoyan, Bruce McDonald, Robert Lepage, Michael Ondaatje, Fred Frith, Jim O'Rourke, Edward Burtynsky, and Jennifer Baichwal. Mettler also experi-

ments with live image mixing performances, recently touring a series of performances across Europe with anthropologist Jeremy Narby and musician Franz Treichler. Mettler's films have been the focus of multiple international retrospectives, including at the Toronto International Film Festival, BAFICI, Lincoln Centre NYC, Jeu de Paume Paris, Cinematheque Suisse, Planete + Doc Film Festival Warsaw, and Kinoatelje Tribute To A Vision. His awards include a Genie Award for Best Documentary from the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television, Locarno Film Festival's La Sarraz Prize, the Grand Prix and Prix du Jeune Publique prizes at Vision Du Reel, Director of Excellence Award at Yamagata Documentary Festival, and Best Film, Best Cinematography, and Best Writing at Hot Docs Film Festival. His work has been the subject of two books, *Making The Invisible Visible* (1995), and *Of This Place and Elsewhere: The Films and Photography of Peter Mettler* (2006, ed. Jerry White). In 2017, *Picture Of Light* was selected by TIFF as one of Canada's Essential 150 Canadian Films.

Quotes about Peter Mettler:

“Peter Mettler is one of the most original artists working today. Few filmmakers are as attuned to the wonders of existence, or to the sensual and perceptual possibilities of cinema.” – Dennis Lim, Lincoln Center Film Society

“Peter Mettler is an incomparable talent in Canadian cinema. The innovation and audacity of his work, his dedication to the cinematic art form, and his ability to conjure up images that remain permanently etched in one’s mind, secures his place as one of this country’s most distinguished contemporary filmmakers.” – Piers Handling, Toronto International Film Festival

DAVID ABRAM



David Abram is a cultural ecologist and geo-philosopher who lectures and teaches widely on several continents. His award-winning book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (Vintage, 1997), has become a classic of environmental literature, and its follow-up, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (Vintage, 2011) was hailed as “revolutionary” by the *Los Angeles Times*, and “daring” and “truly original” by *Science*.

Abram’s work has helped catalyze the emergence of several new disciplines, including the burgeoning field of Ecopsychology. He engages the ecological depths of the imagination, exploring the ways in which sensory perception, poetics, and wonder inform the relation between the human body and the breathing earth. His ideas are profoundly informed by the tradition of phenomenology and by his fieldwork with indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia and North America.

Quotes about David Abram’s *Becoming Animal*:

“A wild book in every sense of the word, full of stories that will leave you trembling, but even fuller of ideas that will send you out into the world with new eyes.” — Bill McKibben, author of *Earth*, and *The End of Nature*

“This book is like a prehistoric cave. If you have the nerve to enter it and you get used to the dark, you’ll discover things about storytelling which are startling, urgent and deeply true. Things each of us once knew, but forgot when we were born into the 19th and 20th centuries.

Extraordinary rediscoveries!” — John Berger, author of *Ways of Seeing* and *Why Look at Animals*

“I cannot imagine another book that so gently and so persuasively alters how we look at ourselves.” — Richard Louv, author of *The Nature Principle*

“One of the most compelling and important ecology books in decades.” — Rex Weyler, co-founder of Greenpeace International

“A truly alchemical book... Those of us who still hope for a revolutionary change in our thinking toward animals, the living land and the climate will welcome this book. Abram is an audacious thinker, a true visionary, and, really, just a damn good nature writer.” — San Francisco Book Review

“An intricately textured, deep breath of a book that blurs the boundaries between human and animal, mind and earth. Prose as lush as a moss-draped rain forest and as luminous as a high desert night... *Becoming Animal* illuminates a way forward in restoring relationship with the earth, led by our vibrant animal bodies to re-inhabit the glittering world.” — Orion





Becoming Animal

Q&A with Emma Davie and Peter Mettler

How did you develop the idea for *Becoming Animal*?

Emma had read *The Spell of the Sensuous* and *Becoming Animal* by David Abram when the books first came out, and was deeply affected by them. We had discussed the ideas, but at the time had never thought of making a film directly related to them. However, after Emma attended a workshop with David four years ago, she saw the transformative effects his words and ideas had on those who were present, and this led her to ask him if he would consider embarking on a film project as an experiment. Peter was a natural choice for a collaborator, as his work possesses a similar transformative quality. We had discussed extensively over the years of our friendship how the current ecological crisis was a crisis of perception as much as anything – this film was a way of examining some important aspects of the meaning and implications of that crisis.

How did you get David Abram to participate in the film?

When Emma attended David's workshop and asked him if he would be interested in participating on a film project, he was initially unsure about the process. He had been asked many times before to get involved in projects based on his ideas, but recognized that translating the complex ideas in his books to the medium of cinema could be challenging. Perhaps it was the fact that we made it clear from the outset we were trying to create something new – not simply illustrating his work, but improvising around the ideas and manifesting an interaction between them and the filmmaking process itself – that intrigued him. However, it was challenging for us all to bring the very distinct and disparate worlds of philosophy and filmmaking together. David's writing is very poetic and descriptive, but in the cinema it is the images and sounds that do most of the work. It was tricky for him to let go of his usual way of speaking and be economical with language. In the end, he was happy with the result, but it was a demanding process.

What is the film about?

The overall question that motivated us was how we could articulate our changing relationship with the “natural” world, and whether cinema and technology could become a vehicle for waking us up to what is around us. When we are truly in touch with our senses, how different is our relationship to the world? What is contained within this notion of “reciprocity” that David describes as existing between our senses and what we encounter? If this interconnection is so integral to our sense of being, why do we continue to separate ourselves so much from nature? What has made us lose this connection?

Of course, within this question there is already an important separation: we describe “nature” as something fundamentally apart from ourselves. This is a central paradox that we were always aware of and engaged with throughout the process of making *Becoming Animal*. Although the film is partially about our urge to exist beyond our limited notion of self and other – to claim a more expanded sense of being that connects us sensorially to everything – there is also an additional aspect that even to think this realization is to already be one step removed from the immediacy of experience. So the perennial question of how the mind both liberates and limits is also present, and film, with its endless hall of mirrors, can reflect this. We hope the film exists in a space in which the cumulative effect of David's ideas, woven into a cinematic journey, will start to create new links in the minds of the audience, resonating with their own deep questions about these themes.

What does nature mean to you?

Near the beginning of the film, Emma states in her voice-over: "Nature is a tricky word – one that separates us from it". We both wrestle with this relationship while making films, as everyone does in their own respective ways. The fact that we have created this word – nature – to indicate an environment that is conceptualized as somehow separate from ourselves seems inherently problematic. It's likely that this notion of separation is one of the reasons we are not more protective of the places and ecosystems we belong to. If we consider ourselves part of nature, and nature part of us, then we might take much better care of the worlds we inhabit.

How can filmmaking be part of this idea that human beings have lost their connection to nature?

Using image and sound recording technologies in this day and age is, of course, a fascinatingly poignant proposition. So much of our experience and knowledge now comes to us exclusively through media. It seems appropriate then to consider an approach that accepts this media as part of our evolution as well – as part of "nature." For better or worse, this is where we are at; we watch the world through our personal and cultural recordings and transmissions. We engage our devices even as we walk through forests, committing recordings to a bank of memory and displaced time.

It is a paradox to make a film about our senses and the connection to our surroundings, while also addressing how these technologies have changed our relationships to our surroundings. But that is exactly what we wanted to embrace, so that as one watches the film there is an awareness of the mediated nature of the experience of cinema itself. This is why at times you will hear the rustling, breathing animal (Peter) that holds the camera as he makes his way through the brush, and why you see the crew, cameras, and David – our "guide" – intermittently throughout. This layer provides a way to better understand what we are all going through, whether as filmmakers, tourists, or as a cultural audience.

What do you want the spectator to experience?

After a screening in South Korea last week, one of the audience members said that at the end of the film, they felt their relationship with the chair they were sitting on had changed – they felt they were more in connection with it. Others have talked of how the film made them see the colours on a fly differently, or that they had to stop in order to look at a tree and sense the movement it made. All of this seems appropriate. Any response which shifts perception and wakes us up to an awareness of being part of the natural world as opposed to separate from it – an evocation of presence, whether out in the wilderness or within the confines of the cinema – is welcome!

How did you two work together during the shooting and the editing process?

We talked a lot in advance and shared bits of David's work which especially interested us, and divided this material into themes. Rather comically, at one point during the production we tried to synchronize our notebooks. Finding strategies for being on the same page was important, but this collaboration had already started before the film began, through discussions and shared enthusiasms that developed between us over the years. Peter was the cinematographer, although both of us decided on the visual language of the film. Emma collaborated with David, and helped him edit his words. Both of us were equally involved in editing and shaping the material into its current form, which involved a long process of editorial propositions including the writing of our own bits of voiceover. Both of us, along with David, have been circling the ideas presented in the film for many years, and this chemistry of collaboration was able to bring together three varied perspectives on themes that are very important to each of us.

Sound plays an essential role in the film – how did you design the soundtrack?

The sound is comprised of sometimes subtle, realist, natural environmental soundscapes, in combination with human creations of choral and electronic compositions, all applied separately to specific scenes. Near the beginning of the film we hear elk mating calls at night, which David describes as something that "seems to really set the context, for even all of our human music making."

On one hand, we encounter the quiet of animals munching and the ambience of wilderness or rushing water, and on the other hand, the sounds of our technologies and our culture – our modern expressions of being. It was a tricky balance to find in the mix. It's surprisingly challenging to record and reproduce the subtlety of wilderness without imposing one's own creative influences. We were also considerate of





David's idea that our language has evolved from the sounds of the natural world, like the "russsshhhhhh" of water.

Why do you think *Becoming Animal* is an important film for the present day?

We hope that the film addresses in some way what we have been calling a crisis of perception, exemplified by the fact that while our culture possesses more tools and knowledge than ever before, our understanding and awareness of the world remains quite limited. It seems that, in looking into the root of our problems, it's also important to address how we actually see.

While it is important to show calamity, destruction, or injustice, it is not enough to only see these types of representations. How did we let these things happen? What has conditioned us to see the way we see, to relate to the life around us in the way we do?

It is essential to engage in opposition and find corrective measures for major problems like our relationship to the environment, but this also demands a deeper associative perception into the states of our being – especially in relation to the wider non-human world.

Empathy, awareness and reciprocity are qualities we hope *Becoming Animal* may evoke, to better understand our position as living beings in a living world.

CRÉDITS

Avec	David Abram
Réalisation	Peter Mettler Emma Davie
Production	Maximage GmbH Scottish Documentary Institute Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen
Producteurs	Cornelia Seitler Brigitte Hofer Rebecca Day Sonja Henrici
Mixage	Jacques Kieffer
Musique	Jacques Kieffer
Son	Jacques Kieffer Peter Bräker
Image	Peter Mettler Peter Mettler

Dies




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A bison is shown in profile, standing in a snowy field. The bison is dark brown and has a thick, shaggy coat. The snow is white and covers the ground. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape.

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