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# Animal Activism
## On and Off Screen

EDITED BY CLAIRE PARKINSON AND LARA HERRING

# Animal Activism On and Off Screen

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*Danielle Celermajer, Rick De Vos, Katie Woolaston & Chloë Taylor, Series Editors*

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Edited by Claire Parkinson and Lara Herring

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We acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which Sydney University Press is located, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and we pay our respects to the knowledge embedded forever within the Aboriginal Custodianship of Country.

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# "That'll do, Pig!"

## Critical potentials in celebrity-activist media ecologies

*Eva Haifa Giraud*

The final words of the 1995 film *Babe*, "That'll do, Pig, that'll do", are not only regularly referred to as one of the best cinematic closing lines of all time, but are also, reportedly, the ringtone of lead actor James Cromwell's mobile phone.[1] In the film itself, Cromwell's character, Farmer Hoggett, utters the phrase at the culmination of country sheepdog trials, in which eponymous piglet Babe not only emerges victorious in sheep-herding but – in the process – secures his transition from "livestock" to working animal. Following the trajectory of the novel from which it was adapted, Dick King-Smith's *The Sheep-Pig*, "that'll do" signifies that Babe has done "enough" to be granted a different set of rights and privileges to other members of his species.

Owing to its themes of interspecies solidarity and disruption of anthropocentric classificatory schemes, in animal studies contexts *Babe*

1 Recent references to "That'll do, Pig" as one of the finest closing lines in cinema history, for instance, include a 2018 article in the UK national newspaper *The Telegraph*, as well as entertainment websites such as *Games Radar* and *Hollywood.com*; numerous GIFs, memes and YouTube parodies also revolve around the line. In the wake of a feature on Cromwell in the *New Yorker* (Schulman 2017), Cromwell's use of the phrase as his mobile ringtone has been reported in contexts ranging from *The Internet Movie Database* to *Vulture* and *Entertainment Weekly*.

has been seen to hold complex ethical potentials.[2] My focus in this chapter, however, is not primarily on the complexities offered by the film itself, but contemporary narratives surrounding the "real life" Farmer Hoggett. Outside of *Babe*, Cromwell has a reputation less for being an individual who has to be persuaded to spare the life of a piglet and more as a vegan activist and "rabble rouser" who has faced arrest for (among other things) protesting animal experimentation and disrupting a live orca show at San Diego SeaWorld wearing a t-shirt stating "SeaWorld Sucks".[3] The mediation of Cromwell's activism is not restricted to mainstream press depictions of his involvement in direct action; over the past two decades, he has also taken a proactive role leveraging his celebrity status in support of vegan campaigns. In 2012, for instance, Cromwell narrated the 12-minute Mercy For Animals film *Farm to Fridge*, which is still circulated widely through online video-sharing platforms. In the years since, he has engaged with wide-ranging initiatives that include campaign videos and radio broadcasts for PETA and Viva and he served as Executive Producer on *Cowspiracy* (2014) as well as director Keegan Kuhn's feature-length documentary *Running for Good* (2018) about vegan marathon athlete Fiona Oakes.

Cromwell's story is deserving of particular attention in a context where environmental activism more broadly, and vegan activism specifically, has been criticised for eschewing systemic critiques of production in favour of palatable messaging about lifestyle change.[4] In contrast, as I trace throughout this chapter, Cromwell's media ecologies juxtapose well-loved imagery from children's cinema and celebrity gossip with more disruptive modes of politics, including direct-action protest as well as depictions of extreme violence towards animals. The particular relationship between these different narratives, and the varied platforms used to disseminate them, I suggest, creates visibility for media frames that actively contest existing ethical norms and practices surrounding animal agriculture; in marked contrast with more high-profile examples of celebrity veganism, which position

2 McHugh 2002, 2011; Stewart and Cole 2009; Traschel 2019.
3 Shulman 2017.
4 See Doyle 2016; Fegitz and Pirani 2018; Wrenn 2020.

“lifestyle consumption as the point of ethical intervention”.[5] In media landscapes that normalise the excesses of industrialised agriculture and in which “farmed animals are commodified and framed mostly according to economic interests”,[6] the celebrity-activist ecologies associated with Cromwell thus elucidate how more challenging narratives can gain purchase.

In developing these arguments, the chapter draws together and builds upon two bodies of work: scholarship concerned with popular or spectacular environmentalism and research engaging with the media ecologies of contemporary activism. I expand on the value of media ecological theories in more depth at the close of this chapter, but – simply put – this research has departed from a focus on how activists engage with or are represented by singular media platforms and texts, instead turning its attention to the political dynamics and discursive meanings that are created by the relationships between media. The mediation of Cromwell’s activism, for instance, cannot be understood without taking into account video-sharing platforms, social media practices by NGOs and celebrity profiles in entertainment websites, as well as the enduring legacies of *Babe* itself as it is remediated via GIFs and memes.

Before focusing on the modes of vegan praxis articulated in Cromwell’s media ecologies, I begin by setting out wider political and academic discussions of the ambivalences of spectacular environmentalisms – or spectacular veganisms – particularly narratives related to pigs. These general discussions set the stage for examining materials related to Cromwell himself, including mainstream media articles (gathered via the Nexis database), awareness-raising films, interviews and activist websites. Across these texts, I trace three distinct expressions of vegan politics – the spectacular, the shocking and the systemic – and examine the affordances of, and relationships between, these approaches in relation to Cromwell’s celebrity. Finally, I reflect on what can be gained both conceptually and politically through understanding Cromwell’s celebrity activism in media ecological terms,

5 Doyle 2016, 788.
6 Almiron, Cole and Freeman 2016, 373.

drawing attention not just to the relations between textual content but the platforms through which his politics is disseminated.

## Spectacular veganisms and alternative pig stories

While there is a well-established body of scholarship about the dynamics of alternative and activist media use, far less research has examined environmental and animal activism operating in the terrain of the popular (though these issues are gradually being redressed[7]). Questions about popular environmental protest are important in light of the rise of "spectacular environmentalisms", a term defined by Michael Goodman and colleagues as: "large-scale mediated spectacles about environmental problems" which could include such "phenomena as the Live Earth concerts, *Vanity Fair*'s Green Issues, or celebrity environmental activity".[8] As elucidated throughout Goodman and colleagues' edited collection on these themes, while high-profile, mediatised environmentalisms might hold the potential to travel beyond activist enclaves to wider publics, they are also highly ambivalent.

The term "spectacle" is designed to foreground the ambiguity of mediatised environmental politics.[9] On the one hand, this term evokes Situationist arguments that contend mass media serve as a distraction from economic inequities. At the same time, Goodman and colleagues' reference to Situationism foregrounds a lineage of activists tactically working against social norms by turning the grammar of media spectacle against itself. Culture jamming, such as subvertising or playful and performative appropriations of public space, for instance, often appropriate spectacular logics by diverting them away from profit-making ends and towards agendas for change. Framing popular environmentalisms in spectacular terms, then, points to an interplay between radical critiques of the socioeconomic and ecological status quo and a need to reconcile these critiques with limitations imposed

7 See Abidin, Brockington et al. 2020; Parkinson 2019; Seymour 2019.
8 Goodman, Littler et al. 2016, 678.
9 For elaboration, see Giraud 2019, 145.

by the popular media contexts that these critiques depend on to gain visibility. These limitations might, for instance, range from the constraining grammar of mainstream media framings of issues to the strictures imposed by algorithmic economies of visibility.[10] What is key, in such contexts, is for activists to identify opportunities to tactically appropriate spectacular logics, without going so far that they undercut their own aims.

The tensions and potentials associated with spectacular environmentalisms are equally applicable to popular veganisms. Indeed, two articles in Goodman and colleagues’ special collection focus on animal and vegan activism explicitly: Julie Doyle’s analysis of the celebrity veganism of Alicia Silverstone and Ellen DeGeneres, and Alex Lockwood’s discussion of the affective dimensions of the feature-length documentary *Cowspiracy*.[11] Both papers point to commonplace features of the media ecologies of contemporary vegan activism, such as uses of celebrity spokespeople – often mediated via a range of social media platforms – and appeals to biography and narrative as tools for engaging publics who might feel alienated by negative activist imagery. Yet for all their potential, as Doyle argues, in many cases spectacular veganisms foreground individual consumer behaviour as a site of agency and empowerment, wherein an emphasis on being “kind” in one’s *consumption* habits often overshadows wider structural critiques related to the *production* of animal products.[12] The potentials, as well as the sharp limitations, of spectacular veganisms are brought into still further relief on considering the roles of animals themselves, who have assumed increasing prominence in spectacular campaigning contexts.[13]

Animal biographies are regularly engaged with in vegan activism, where this approach has been seen as holding a more subversive role than consumer-oriented lifestyle politics by bringing the lives of animals themselves into focus.[14] From popular fictional portrayals such

10 For example, Wood 2020.
11 Doyle 2016; Lockwood 2016.
12 Doyle 2016, 778.
13 Abidin, Brockington et al. 2020, 393–4.
14 DeMello 2018.

as *Babe* to "real life" rescue animals like Esther the Wonder Pig, animals are often spotlighted in vegan campaigns in order to disrupt the cultural classification of nonhuman beings and contest categorisations such as "food animals" – along with the ethical treatment this categorisation legitimises.[15] Yet, as Claire Parkinson foregrounds, while appeals to animal subjectivity are often a powerful means of crafting alternative narratives about other species – which can do valuable political work – such narratives again carry ambivalences, which can be illustrated when turning to pigs specifically.[16] As Brett Mizelle puts it, "pigs are more than just the 18 per cent ham, 16 per cent bacon, 15 per cent loin, 12 per cent fatback, 10 per cent lard and 3 per cent each of spare rib, plate, jowl, foot and trimmings that exit the modern packing plant" and new stories are required to provide "us with ways to think about our relationships with each other on this porcine planet".[17] The difficulty is finding ways to articulate these more expansive understandings of pigs, in contexts where human–pig relations are ordinarily defined – as Mary Trachsel argues – by an "industrial 'pork story' that seeks to gain narrative control of relational norms between people and pigs".[18]

High-profile examples such as Esther the Wonder Pig help to elucidate the challenges Trachsel points to. Esther was erroneously purchased from a friend under the guise of being a micro pig, but by the time her "owners", Steve Jenkins and Derek Walter, discovered Esther would likely grow to 500 lb (227 kg) she had already become an integral part of their existing dogs' pack.[19] Rather than give her away, Jenkins and Walter turned their home into a sanctuary for Esther: who swiftly became central to an entire media ecology of her own, which includes her website, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, as well as two full-length books and a children's picture book dedicated to her journey.[20] These texts are designed to create revenue streams to

15 See Arcari 2020.
16 Parkinson 2019.
17 Mizelle 2011, 7.
18 Trachsel 2019, 1.
19 Indeed, she ultimately grew to 600 lb.
20 Giraud 2021, 96. Between writing this chapter and receiving proofs, Esther passed away on 19 October 2023, aged 11.

sustain the sanctuary and to promote veganism through questioning Esther’s status as “livestock”. The way Esther’s story has been mobilised, however, does not necessarily sit easily with wider critiques of animal agriculture. Her website does contain a section focused on the lives of industrially farmed pigs in general, and in interviews Jenkins regularly links their experiences with Esther to more far-reaching critique: “The more we discovered about what her life could have been, it seemed crazy to us that we ate animals, so we stopped.”[21] Yet, ultimately the narratives disseminated across Esther’s different media platforms promoted a relatively unified story that positioned her specialness as the wellspring of Jenkins and Walter’s individual decisions to enact lifestyle change. Esther’s status as celebrity animal, then, did not escape the tensions highlighted by Doyle wherein celebritised veganisms tend towards individualised modes of ethics.

*Babe* offers equally complex potentials. It is notable, for instance, that both Trachsel and Mizelle point to the film as an instance of an alternative narrative about human–pig relations, with *Babe*’s critical and commercial success even noted on Mizelle’s succinct historical timeline of the pig (which begins in 14,000 BC!).[22] The counter-narrative offered by *Babe* and *The Sheep-Pig* is that they disrupt the passage from – to use the title of Cromwell’s subsequent campaign – “farm to fridge”. Though Babe was originally destined to be fattened up for Christmas dinner, the plot revolves around his avoidance of this fate; central to the narrative is that Babe “hybridize[s] two categories – food animal and companion animal”, with the film’s threat hinging on the “reassertion of [his] primary food animal identity”.[23] Over the course of this narrative trajectory, the cultural logics that legitimate Babe’s status as food are exposed: such as sheepdog Fly’s justification that only “stupid” animals (such as pigs) are consumed, in contrast with “intelligent” dogs,[24] or Duchess the cat’s stance that the purpose of pigs is to be “eaten by people”.[25] These farmyard hierarchies are ultimately rejected in favour

21 Jenkins 2017.
22 Mizelle 2011, 182.
23 Stewart and Cole 2009, 463.
24 Trachsel 2019, 9.
25 McHugh 2011, 192.

of interspecies solidarity, with the film's concluding scenes seeing sheep and border collies collaborate in order to secure Babe's televised victory – and accompanying cultural recategorisation – at the sheepdog trials.

*Babe*'s significance, therefore, is as an instance of popular culture where ethical classifications that cast pigs as "livestock" are disrupted, and where the legitimation of these categories, which are ordinarily implicit, are brought to the surface and shown to be untenable. Like Esther the Wonder Pig, however, the wider political potentials of *Babe* are often obscured. Susan McHugh, for instance, points to Animals Australia's 2004 "Save Babe" campaign, which featured emotive pictures of cute piglets to deter people from animal product consumption.[26] These tactics, McHugh suggests, might illustrate the emotional "staying power" of *Babe*, but their political efficacy is limited by an individualised focus on a particular animal that neglects the film's wider messages of interspecies solidarity and the overturning of classifications that it offers.

Paralleling Doyle's observations about human celebrity veganism, then, emotive fictional portrayals and celebrity animals might play a role in awareness-raising and promote values that are "consistent with ethical veganism".[27] At the same time, the potential for these narratives to develop into systemic critiques of production are often undermined in order to ensure that popular texts do not alienate potential audiences with moralism and that high-profile figures – including celebrity animals such as Esther – maintain "viability as celebrity commodities".[28] While the alternative pig stories offered by *Babe* and Esther could be used to question pigs' wider cultural categorisation, because these narratives are oriented around the special qualities of particular animals – such as Babe's skills or Esther's personality – there is a risk of undercutting a more fundamental disruption of the "industrial 'pork' story".[29] The challenge, therefore, is finding ways to negotiate the terrain of the popular without sacrificing more radical imaginaries of what alternative human–animal relations might look

26 McHugh 2011, 186.
27 Doyle 2016, 787.
28 Doyle 2016, 788.
29 Trachsel 2019, 1.

like. As I argue below, Cromwell’s celebrity activism offers potential routes into understanding, and navigating, some of these tensions.

## Cromwell as celebrity activist

Cromwell’s representation (and indeed self-representation) is significant because it combines more spectacular expressions of celebrity veganism with shocking imagery as well as structural critique of animal agriculture. More normative expressions of celebrity veganism that focus on lifestyle and consumption, in other words, circulate alongside radical contestations of institutions associated with the “animal-industrial complex”.[30] Understanding how spectacular, shocking and structural articulations of vegan politics are entwined in Cromwell’s media ecologies, I argue, is useful in grasping how more complex ethical narratives can emerge in the context of spectacular veganisms.

### *The spectacular*

As described previously, spectacular veganisms operate on the terrain of the popular and tend to assume more palatable forms, with the risk of these approaches being that visibility comes at the expense of meaningful action. In the case of Cromwell, matters are still more complex because his celebrity persona is intimately bound up with *Babe*. Indeed, it is the relationship between fiction and non-fiction that constitutes Cromwell’s distinct brand of celebrity activism; through his own interviews, mainstream media reports of protest actions and publicity materials related to projects he has contributed to, Farmer Hoggett is a recurring reference point. What is significant about the way fiction is mobilised in these narratives is that Hoggett’s journey is used by both Cromwell himself and vegan NGOs as a framing device to render more radical expressions of vegan ethics meaningful and accessible to audiences. Still more significantly, this frame is routinely reproduced by other media sources, from mainstream press to entertainment websites.

30 Noske 1989.

In a celebrity profile in *Vice* magazine to celebrate *Babe*'s 20-year anniversary, for instance, Cromwell describes two key turning points in his biography. The first moment involved driving past animal feedlots in Texas, which prompted his decision to become vegetarian, while the second occurred during the filming of *Babe* itself:

> We had a little pig that was brought out for the last scene, during the pig contest. It had gone through the training that all the other little pigs had along the line. When that little pig was put down on that big pitch and saw the blue sky and the green grass and the sea, that pig just took off, and said, I don't want any part of this. I am out. I support that![31]

Cromwell then shifts the focus to scenes *within* the film, deliberately drawing parallels between his own transformational experiences and those of his character. In relation to one of the most well-known scenes in *Babe* – a song and dance routine to cheer up the fearful piglet after he thought Farmer Hoggett was about to slaughter him – Cromwell describes how:

> He [Hoggett] has the opportunity to readjust his point of view and learn something. Farmer Hoggett's consciousness and our consciousness – if you'll allow yourself to take the time – will arrive at the same conclusion: that we have no right to usurpation of another sentient being's destiny for our own needs and self-interests.[32]

An identical narrative of ethical transformation is deployed in other interviews:

> I love the dancing scene. It was at this moment that my character shifted from a man who would think to shoot the pig to seeing this little creature in his lap who is not only in pain but suffering.[33]

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31 Cromwell in Pearl 2015.
32 Cromwell in Pearl 2015.
33 Plus Media 2014.

Here, therefore, Cromwell’s own status as activist vegan is modulated through a popular scene, portraying his subjective ethical response as something that aligns not only with his character but with the audience’s own investment in preserving Babe’s life, as encouraged through the film’s narrative structure.

This anchoring of Cromwell’s celebrity-activist persona in relation to his character is not an isolated incident. For instance, five years later, in the wake of *Babe*’s 25-year anniversary, Cromwell foregrounds a different experience on set:

> [W]hen *Babe* came, we would work with the animals and the animals were trained and they were extraordinary. So I just watched these extraordinary animals do the things that they did – and then I would go to lunch … And so on the lunch table would be all the animals that I had just worked with. There was duck and there would be lamb. I thought, “Oh man, this is really horrible. I have to go vegan.”[34]

Again, therefore, by situating his own activist-celebrity status in relation to Farmer Hoggett, Cromwell is able to frame veganism as a logical outcome of the film’s disruption of anthropocentric classifications.

The relationship between Cromwell and Hoggett, moreover, goes beyond a brief reference point in interviews and is actively cultivated through acts of self-branding. Cromwell’s Twitter account, for instance, deliberately plays with the affinities between personal and fictional ethics, in featuring a pig snout on his bio while he promotes content related to activist causes: from his recent Animals Asia documentary on the plight of moon bears, to an appearance on a popular podcast in which he connects climate change to political corruption, and his promotion of a march for public education in Los Angeles. The same appeal to character in Cromwell’s construction of celebrity runs through publicity for *Running for Good*, which consistently celebrates both his role in *Babe* and his activism, with this frame reproduced by vegan websites promoting the film (such as *Plant Based News* and *Live Kindly*). As hinted at through these examples, fictional narratives

34 Cromwell in Abramovitch 2020.

thus play an important role in holding together Cromwell's celebrity activism with deep-reaching critiques of animal agriculture, something that comes to the fore in his awareness-raising films.

### *The shocking*

Until recently, the forms of mediated vegan politics that received most attention academically were not spectacular veganisms but shock tactics, such as exposés based on footage from sites such as industrial farms, slaughterhouses and animal laboratories.[35] These tactics are commonplace in feature-length films such as *Earthlings* (2005), as well as short campaign videos by groups such as PETA, and speak to "the popular maxim that 'if slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian'".[36] The efficacy of a politics based on "moral shocks",[37] however, has increasingly been called into question, due to fears "[s]uch radical, moralized encounters can lead to exhaustion, apathy, and even cynicism".[38]

The use of moral shocks is a core feature in many of the campaigning videos Cromwell has fronted for PETA. In a 30-second video from 2012, for example, his narration over scenes of animals being beaten describes how a pig is killed "every three seconds" in large slaughterhouses, while his closing line pleads for audiences to stop eating "sensitive, intelligent animals" such as pigs. Perhaps the most famous of Cromwell's awareness-raising films, which is frequently referred to in the mainstream media as a counterpoint to Cromwell's role in *Babe*, however, is the aforementioned *Farm to Fridge*. An archetypal shock film, the 12-minute documentary includes such graphic imagery of violence towards "livestock" animals that it is age-restricted on video-sharing platforms YouTube and Vimeo. Indeed, the film has even led to YouTube influencers producing reaction videos of themselves watching the imagery in tears and with expressions of

35 Giraud 2021, 68–73; Wrenn 2013.
36 Quinn 2020, 916.
37 Wrenn 2013.
38 Lorimer 2015, 130; see also Rasmussen 2015.

horror – which Mercy For Animals have in turn embedded in their websites alongside the original documentary.

The film’s content emphasises both the scale of industrialised agriculture (such as surplus chickens being thrown into bin bags, with a reminder that this process happens to a million male chicks a year in the US) and acts of spectacular violence towards animals (including adult pigs being hung from farm machinery and slowly strangled). As with media profiles of Cromwell, again references to *Babe* are difficult to avoid; in *Farm to Fridge*, however, these linkages are made via more implicit intertextual connections. The first section of the documentary, for example, is entitled “Pork” and includes scenes of piglets covered in scratches and sores; semi-conscious animals flung into bins and covered in flies; and live animals scalded in hair-removal tanks, with Cromwell’s voiceover offering a reminder that the average life of an industrially farmed pig is five to six months, “a fragment of their lifespan”.

In addition to Cromwell’s involvement in awareness-raising campaigns, his celebrity status has resulted in direct-action protests gaining visibility in the mainstream press; most recently, he was threatened with a class-A misdemeanour – which ordinarily carries a fine and one year in prison – for successfully disrupting laboratory experiments on golden retrievers.[39] Other widely reported campaigns include pickets against Walmart’s pork suppliers, a campaign against fast-food chain Wendy’s (which led to Cromwell being banned from the franchise) and a protest action where he presented the Governor of Utah with a pig carcass. These initiatives are aside from Cromwell’s wider environmental, labour and anti-racist activism, such as protests to preserve wetlands, anti-fracking campaigns and early membership of a defence committee for the Black Panthers. Again, *Babe* is a consistent reference point across media reports of Cromwell’s other activism: NGOs use the film to frame their actions in accessible ways as well as raising their profile, while newspapers deploy it as a frame that fits with celebrity news values.

Yet, although mainstream media articles consistently link Cromwell’s politics to *Babe*, they oscillate between using the film to

39 Cromwell in MacKenzie 2021.

make his beliefs intelligible and framing direct action an excessive response to the film. Typical examples of this shift in frames might be mentioning the ethical significance of *Babe* to Cromwell's biography, before undercutting the accessibility of this narrative by stating that he is not just vegan but "a *really hardcore* vegan" and labelling his activism a "crusade".[40] Numerous articles also make more subtle contrasts between Cromwell's "extreme" protest actions and the ostensibly more intelligible forms of empathy for nonhuman animals encouraged by *Babe*, as with the 2018 byline of a celebrity profile in UK newspaper *The Guardian*:

> The Hollywood star now has a second life as a fearless animal activist and eco warrior – and, he reveals, it all started with Babe, his film about a talking pig.[41]

For all these tensions, however, the complex relationship between celebrity and activism in Cromwell's media ecologies means that actions which directly disrupt institutions associated with the animal-industrial complex are afforded media coverage. While this coverage does certainly not embrace direct-action protest, it rarely slides into the outright negativity or incredulity that has historically been associated with popular media depictions of ethical veganism or animal activism.[42] The limitations associated with representations of Cromwell's direct action, moreover, are further ameliorated by deliberate attempts – by the actor himself and NGOs – to reframe these actions less as something grounded in an individual ethical response and instead as a structural critique of animal agriculture.

### *The structural*

Structural critiques of animal exploitation have tended to occur less in popular settings and more in the context of social movements. Such approaches shift the focus away from acts of spectacular abuse and

40 Pearl 2015, emphasis in original.
41 Brokes 2018.
42 Cole and Morgan 2011; Giraud 2019, 98–117.

towards routinised violence that occurs in the process of rendering animals as commodities, as with campaigns that engage with data and statistical evidence to discuss, for instance, the scale of animal death that occurs in industrialised agriculture, emissions it creates, and its relationship with human oppression.[43] Other approaches that activists regularly use to pose structural questions entail questioning classificatory systems that inform the treatment of particular animals. Indeed, the sense that classification underpins the differential treatment of nonhuman beings is not just a commonplace assumption in activism, but central to a number of high-profile texts such as Melanie Joy’s *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*.[44]

Resonating with Joy, Cromwell’s own journey – again articulated with the experiences of Farmer Hoggett – is regularly deployed in campaigning contexts to disrupt the classification of pigs as edible. In relation to the Wendy’s protests, for instance, newspapers reproduced verbatim Cromwell’s statement that: “he changed to a vegan diet, avoiding milk and eggs as well as meat, after ‘Babe,’ which he said shows a human recognising a pig has aspirations and hopes”.[45] Almost 20 years later, at his protests in Utah, newspapers reproduced Cromwell’s request for government officials to: “consider the plot of ‘Babe’ – where, spoiler alert, a pig is saved from being eaten and discovers his destiny in herding sheep – and apply its principles to life”,[46] while a 2017 PETA press release to promote a Cromwell-fronted anti-pork campaign was again picked up by news agencies:

> “When I made the movie *Babe*, I learned how smart and sensitive pigs are,” Cromwell says in the spot. “I developed a lot of respect for them and stopped eating them. Won’t you join me in bagging the bacon and giving ham the old heave-ho this Easter?”.[47]

43 For an overview, see Giraud 2021, 68–77.
44 Joy 2011.
45 Greenfield 2001.
46 Harkins 2018.
47 PETA 2017.

These texts' straightforward reproduction of activists' narrative framing again foregrounds the potential for celebrity activism to enable more complex structural critiques to gain wider visibility.

At the same time, there are risks in anchoring structural critiques to the classificatory challenges posed by individual animals. As Siobhan O'Sullivan underlines in *Animals, Equality and Democracy*, it is not just the case that different species are also given differential ethical treatment (i.e., that pigs can't be pets or, in the case of *Babe*, working animals), because processes of cultural categorisation cut across species lines.[48] As O'Sullivan traces through examining legislation and media framing related to hens, rabbits, horses and dogs in Australia, members of the same species are routinely categorised in very different ways and with very different consequences. For instance: "a rabbit can be an Agricultural Animal, a Companion Animal, a Research Animal and so on", and legislation that surrounds these categories varies significantly in terms of the rights and protections it affords.[49] What O'Sullivan's work foregrounds, in other words, is that the treatment of some animals as deserving of privileges which others of the same species do not possess is something that is already a routine part of everyday life. Following this logic, Babe might have disrupted his status as "livestock", but because members of the same species are routinely given a differential ethical status (i.e., some pigs are considered pets while others are food), this does not offer a more fundamental challenge to the – already contradictory – ways the category of livestock operates in different cultural contexts.

Initial audience responses to *Babe* underline this point. Although there were widespread reports of animal product reduction in the wake of the film, as Kate Stewart and Matthew Cole note, "these were transient trends rather than catalysts for enduring change".[50] What their work also elucidates is that one of the reasons for this transience is that any counter-representations about nonhuman animals are operating within the constraints of a social landscape in which tensions between affective engagements with piglets and eating pig are routinely

48 O'Sullivan 2011.
49 O'Sullivan 2011, 112.
50 Stewart and Cole 2009, 464.

smoothed over during childhood. In what she calls “the Peppa Pig paradox”, for example, Lynda Korimboccus points out that in contexts such as the UK it is commonplace for children to celebrate fictional pigs before going on to consume actual pigs.[51]

What is notable about Cromwell’s media ecologies, however, is that mainstream media reports about Cromwell’s direct action are not the only spaces where his celebrity activism is afforded visibility. An array of social media platforms are used both by NGOs and the actor himself to circulate content that shifts the focus away from individual animals and towards structural critique. *Farm to Fridge*, for instance, might gain visibility due to Cromwell’s celebrity, and begins with a focus on pigs in a nod to this context, but it soon shifts to foregrounding the routine violences enacted towards other nonhuman animals. Indeed, even in celebrity profiles, Cromwell makes explicit that his affective response to events in *Babe* was not just about feeling a personal emotional connection with individual animals, but “about what we do to each other by pigeonholing us and other people into certain categories that protect our own sense of entitlement and position and power”.[52] It is valuable, therefore, to reflect not just on the potentials and limitations of particular texts or tactics that constitute Cromwell’s media ecologies but the relationship between these media.

## Conclusion: The promise of Cromwell’s celebrity-activist media ecologies

Building on the above arguments, I conclude this chapter by offering a more in-depth reflection of how media ecological approaches can be used to draw out the hopeful political potentials of Cromwell’s activism and spectacular environmentalisms more broadly. As Emiliano Treré outlines in the book *Hybrid Media Activism*, there have been several “waves” of media ecological theory.[53] Initial uses of the term in the 60s focused on the co-constitutive relationships between technologies in a

51 Korimboccus 2020.
52 Cromwell in Pearl 2015.
53 Treré 2019, 39–41.

given media system.[54] The resurgence of media ecological thought from the late 90s, however, understood user practices, social relations and discursive formations as holding equally significant roles in shaping the dynamics of particular media environments.[55] The field in which expanded conceptions of media ecologies have proven the most fertile is at the nexus of media and social movement studies.[56] Here the recognition that media do not function in isolation has been valuable in resisting simplistic narratives that (for example) position singular social media platforms as drivers of social change. Instead, the affordances of platforms are seen as emerging through their relationship with other media used by activists – from inward-facing email lists to pamphlets – as well as modulated by the user practices that become associated with these media.[57]

The different media platforms entangled with Cromwell's activism illustrate the value of extending media ecological approaches beyond social movements, to conceptualise the equally complex dynamics of spectacular environmentalisms. Treré's *Hybrid Media Activism* already begins to hint at the potentials to apply ecological frameworks to celebrity politics, in a chapter focused on uses of digital media by Italy's Five Star movement, which was rooted in figurehead Beppe Grillo's fame. Grillo, a well-known actor and comedian in Italy during the 70s and 80s, foreshadowed tactics engaged in during Donald Trump's presidential campaigns, using digital media (such as an opinionated blog and meet-up sites to organise large public rallies) to give the impression of accessibility. The dynamic affordances of these platforms worked with populist narratives, in ways that meant – despite being part of a wealthy media elite – Grillo was able to depict himself as a man of the people, through fostering "myths of horizontality, leaderlessness, and digital democracy".[58] While Five Star is an instance of media ecologies being manipulated in support of authoritarian ends, Treré's

54 Treré and Mattoni 2016, 293.
55 Mattoni 2017, 495–6.
56 For example, Cammaerts, Mattoni and McCurdy 2013; Mercea, Ianelli and Loader 2016.
57 Feigenbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy 2013.
58 Treré 2019, 124.

analysis nonetheless illustrates the importance of analysing how media spectacle – and tactical appeals to celebrity in particular – can intersect with other aspects of media ecologies.

Cromwell’s celebrity activism, for instance, cannot be grasped purely through an analysis of texts such as *Farm to Fridge*. Instead, it is important to grasp the relationship between fictional narrative and Cromwell’s celebrity persona, and how this relationship is, in turn, utilised to unsettle classificatory schema and add dramatic weight to shocking activist films. Cromwell’s celebrity, moreover, is not only a component of these films’ narratives but something that affords these texts algorithmic visibility on video-sharing platforms. This visibility is then, in turn, taken advantage of by NGOs who embed these films in their websites, as well as the YouTube influencers who interact with them and afford further attention to critiques of animal agriculture. The uptake of Cromwell’s protest actions in the mainstream press, likewise, needs to be understood in relation to the mediation of a persona that combines the news values associated with Hollywood celebrity gossip with disruptive expressions of direct action. This is not to say that the narratives surrounding Cromwell (or indeed any expression of celebrity activism) should be treated uncritically. My aim here, though, has been less to evaluate these narratives and more to conceptualise how they work. To this end, I suggest that Cromwell’s activism illustrates how different modes of politics can unfold on different media platforms for different ends, while also being tactically brought together in ways that create mainstream visibility for narratives that are ordinarily excluded from celebrity activism.

I suggest, therefore, that the term “celebrity-activist media ecologies” offers a useful descriptor of the complex relationships between platforms, textual content and social practices that mediate contemporary vegan politics. But, more than this, ecological approaches are valuable in identifying how space for more radical narratives can emerge amidst the contradictions of spectacular politics more broadly. In foregrounding the tensions associated with spectacular environmentalisms and veganisms, I am not intending to dismiss the role of popular culture in fostering awareness and even (potentially) political change. As Chris Ingraham suggests in *Gestures of Concern*, though everyday acts of clicking, sharing and liking political

content are often dismissed as slacktivism, they can still contribute to an "affective commonwealth" with potential to foster:

> a shared sense of what it feels like to be alive at the present time … as if that feeling were a resource anyone could draw on to make sense of their worlds and to affirm more sustainable ways of being interconnected within them.[59]

Likewise, vegan consumption is often dismissed as an individualistic, neoliberal mode of politics that offers an inadequate response to collective problems; a framing that neglects the complex relationships between individual practices, consumerism and social change.[60] It is, nonetheless, important to recognise the limits of *only* focusing on consumer-oriented lifestyle ethics and identify opportunities for deep-rooted critiques of production systems to emerge alongside and work with more popular narratives.

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59 Ingraham 2020, 5.

60 Dickstein, Dutkiewicz et al. 2020; Giraud 2021, 43.

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