

GUNDA: A New Film on Animal Sentience Recalibrates Morality
From [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today/Animal Emotions](#)
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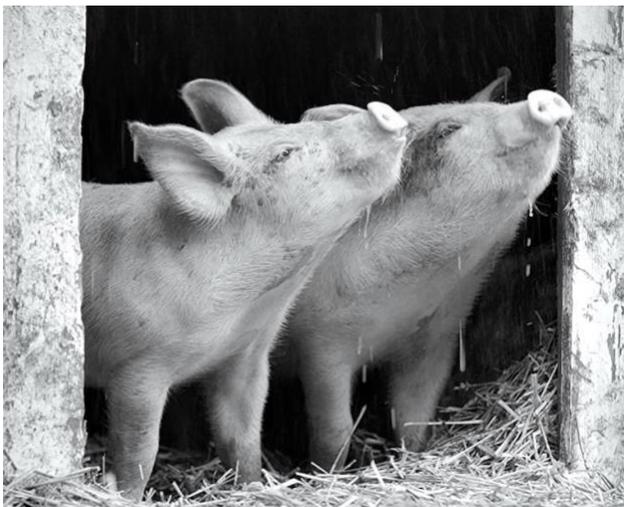
Meet a mother sow, two indigenous cows, and a one-legged chicken.

"Gunda is a mesmerizing perspective on sentience within animal species, normally—and perhaps purposely—hidden from our view. Displays of pride and reverence, amusement and bliss at a pig's inquisitive young; her [panic](#), despair and utter defeat in the face of cruel trickery, are validations of just how similarly all species react and cope with events in our respective lives. Victor Kossakovsky has crafted a visceral [meditation](#) on existence that transcends the normal barriers that separate species. It is a film of profound importance and artistry." —Joaquin Phoenix, Executive Producer¹

I recently watched an amazing film called *GUNDA* that literally moved me all over the place. I've studied animal emotions for decades and thought I'd pretty much seen all there is to see, however, *GUNDA* reopened various doors into the emotional lives of nonhuman beings and I wound up watching it over and over again. Joaquin Phoenix's brief summary says it all. The trailer and more details can be seen [here](#).

To summarize briefly, in his latest work *GUNDA*, "master filmmaker Viktor Kossakovsky reminds us that we share our planet with billions of other animals.² Through encounters with a mother sow (the eponymous Gunda), two ingenious cows, and a scene-stealing, one-legged chicken, Kossakovsky movingly recalibrates our moral universe, reminding us of the inherent value of life and the mystery of all animal consciousness, including our own." Here is some of what he had to say about his latest masterpiece in a recent interview.³

Growing up I was very much a city kid, but at the age of 4, I spent a few months in a village in the countryside, where I met my best friend Vasya. He was much younger than me—just a few weeks old when we met—but over time he became my dearest friend and the times we spent together are some of the most cherished memories from my [childhood](#). One day, when we were still young, Vasya was killed and served as pork cutlets for a New Year's Eve dinner. I was devastated and immediately became (probably) the first vegetarian kid in the Soviet Union.



As a consequence, since I became a filmmaker I have always wanted to make a film about the creatures with whom we share the earth, a film about animals as living, feeling beings in their own right. I wanted to make a film without patronizing or humanizing them, without any sentimentality, and without vegan propaganda. However, as the film I had in mind is not about dolphins, elephants, pandas or other cute animals we love to love, it was impossible to finance. I tried for almost three decades until I finally met Norwegian producer Anita Rehoff Larsen from Sant & Usant who took the risk of making it.

We were unbelievably lucky to meet Gunda in the Norwegian countryside on the very first day of our research trip. Gunda is on the screen for over half of the runtime of the final film and is an extraordinarily powerful character — you do not need an interpreter to understand her emotions and experiences. As such I decided to make this film without any captions, voice-over, or music, you just need to watch it and allow yourself to feel.

For me, the essence of cinema is showing, not telling. I do not make films if I want to tell an audience something I have no interest in prescribing an opinion. I make films if there is something I want people to see and to allow them to find their own conclusion. Documentary cinema is a great tool to show the realities of the world, to show things that we do not see by ourselves, that we do not want to see, or that we have collectively agreed that we do not see, and so we allow ourselves not to think about. With GUNDA I want people to see these animals as sentient beings and to encourage them to think about the possibility of their consciousness and selfhood. With that I feel that GUNDA is the most personal and important film I have made as a filmmaker and as a human being.

My idea is very simple: We as humans are ready to change our attitudes to our fellow beings. That might be a very [optimistic](#) perspective, but at least there are some hints as to why it might be possible. When I wrote the script, I hadn't yet read 21 Lessons for the 21st Century, the book by Yuval Harari. After reading it, however, I found some of its theses very similar to what I was trying to express.

Human attitudes do change over time, and I would like to think we can learn certain things from our experiences. For a few hundred years, it was important to establish respect for the value of human life. It took centuries to even acknowledge that all human beings deserve the same rights. Perhaps now we can take the next step and admit that every living creature has similar rights. Pigs, butterflies, elephants — all of them have the same rights to live on this planet. We shouldn't always put ourselves in the center. We can do better than that. We are not totally awful. We did eventually come to the conclusion that slavery was unjust, we have started to respect the rights of women, of people of different genders, and to me that is a sign that we are increasing our understanding of the world.

Our entire treatment of animals is based on misconception. In some countries, there are laws stating outright that animals don't suffer — it's written into the very fabric of the law.⁴ This is absurd. Everyone who is in regular contact with animals knows that they feel, they have emotions, they are conscious. We know this is the truth but have tacitly agreed to disregard our empirical knowledge. Instead we deny them their natural lives.

GUNDA, to me, has a very simple message: We can do better. I want to help people to take the first step to eliminate the act of killing from their lives. In 1900, Leo Tolstoy wrote in his essay “The First Step: An Essay on the Morals of [Diet](#),” that we will not fundamentally change our lives unless we stop killing. The fact that human beings kill each other is not so much a consequence of different ideologies but something far more atavistic. We don't merely have to accept that we shouldn't kill one another. We must realize that it is the act of killing itself, regardless of who we kill, that is terrible. Once we understand this, war will disappear. Tolstoy wrote this 120 years ago, and now would be a good time to take that to heart.

Films that show animal slaughter and explain all its gory detail also don't work. It is propaganda, and people block it out. So, I thought, let's see what the camera can do on its own. The decision to shoot in black and white was made for a similar reason. For one thing, this brings me back to the origin of cinema, to the birth of cinema. Also, depending on the circumstances, color can be overwhelming. If you see blood in color, it is too naturalistic and your [attention](#) wanders. Often, lush colors will make us focus on different things, such as the background. I didn't want to show cute pink piglets—and believe me, they are very cute indeed. I didn't want to seduce the viewer in that way. It felt to me like black and white makes us focus on their soul rather than their appearance.