

FILM/VIDEO | program notes

Field & Screen

Covenant (Michael Mercil, 2012)

There will be a panel discussion following the film

Thursday, February 7, 2012 | 7PM

Covenant

Directed by Michael Mercil. Cinematography by Nick Bontrager.

Edited by Michael Olenick. With Louise Smith.

2012, US, HD video, 43 mins.

Michael Mercil's film takes its title from a remark by the writer Verlyn Klinkenborg. Pondering the fact that human beings and farm animals have evolved together, one reliant and dependent on the other, Klinkenborg reflects on the right way to characterize such a relation of near-kinship. "We are twinned together," he writes. "The word that applies is neither bond nor contract: it is covenant." It is a writer's creed: our moral life hinges on how we choose our words, how fully we understand and own them. "Covenant" comes to us from Old French, descending from the Latin: con-venire, to come together. It means an agreement freely entered into. The same root gives us the words "convention" and "convenience." How we think about those terms will tell us something about how we take the force of conjoined freedoms.

Michael Mercil teaches in the Department of Art at The Ohio State University. For some years now, he has been making a variety of work under the rubric of The Living Culture Initiative. From 2008 to 2011, he planted and tended a patch of ground next to the Wexner Center for the Arts, looking out over the Oval, the green space at the heart of OSU's campus. That project was called *The Virtual Pasture*, and it featured—among other things—a large outdoor video screen monitoring a flock of sheep that Mercil was raising, housed at the Stratford Ecological Center, some twenty miles to the north of the campus. Once a month, the sheep were trucked down to the university to graze the (real) Virtual Pasture, to the delight of students (and others), many of whom had never come face to face with a sheep before.

Covenant grows out of *The Virtual Pasture*. Shot in HD video over some 36 months, starting in 2009, it attends to the intimacies of animals sharing space, the delicate textures that the videocam necessarily screened out. Human faces are rare. What you see most is living flesh: luminous brown feathers, milky udders swelling, a nostril twitching at the wind, aching pink-white haunches. And hands: Hands at work, making the common world of the farmyard. Daily chores that shape life in the way that breathing grains the fiber of a voice, forming words: touching, stroking, nudging, pointing.

Anchoring the film is a voiceover, a woman (Louise Smith) reading from a poem by Susan Stewart. The poem recalls a scene of instruction, something like a ritual of inheritance. Embedded in the text are a number of archaic, vaguely technical terms—fell, cod, dew-claw, hock—whose meanings are at once precise and elusive. Their precision arises from, and guides, careful observation, grounded in skills exacted in the performance of difficult and necessary labor. The poem carries the burden of tasks it cannot bear, and cannot bear to have forgotten. In passing, it references one of the episodes that, in the Western tradition, gives shape to our sense of the word "covenant." It is the scene in Genesis where JHWH, having commanded Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac on the altar, replaces the child, at the very last moment, with a ram. "A kind of swerve," Stewart writes, "like mercy—shielding us from closure."

Being a film, *Covenant* takes seriously the act of looking, implicitly weighing what sort of relationship it entails—for the filmmaker no less than for his audience. The animals whose luster illuminates the film live on family farms, a social form itself increasingly rare and vulnerable. The intimacies of the film are dependent on Mercil's being invited in, but the process of filming runs the risk of distancing and objectifying those whose proximity makes

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the film possible. "What are the ethics of the close-up?" the film seems to ask, and: "How far are we willing to trust each other?"

Freedom, Raimond Gaita suggests, in his book *The Philosopher's Dog* (2002), is constituted—not just enabled or enhanced—by a certain kind of moral attention. Where animals are concerned, freedom exists "only where there is respect for an animal's dignity in addition to concern for its welfare. Or, to put it better, it exists only when a concern for its welfare is transformed by respect for its dignity." Respect and dignity are ethical concepts, acknowledgements of the particular individuality of persons. Gaita's focus is on domestic animals, whose lives are largely subject to the claims of affection rather than utility; dogs and cats would be nowhere if we didn't admit their distinct personalities. Farm animals have their uses; in the moral economy of the farm, they have earned their place. Standards for their treatment can be set by statute. Dignity and respect, by contrast, cannot be commanded; they mark the measure of freedom in a context of mutual dependence. A covenant binds only those willing to be bound.

Rick Livingston
Associate Director, Humanities Institute
The Ohio State University

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The Panel:

Laurel Braitman is a science historian and writer currently studying the history of mental illness in nonhuman animals—from compulsive hair plucking in gorillas, to separation anxiety in dogs, to depression in dolphins and whales. Her book, *Animal Madness*, is forthcoming with Simon and Schuster.

Braitman's writing considers not only the shifting relationships between humans and other creatures but also how our understanding of other animal minds challenges ideas of ourselves as uniquely feeling beings. She has worked as a biologist and environmental conservation professional, was a 2012 TED fellow, and currently is an affiliate artist at the Headlands Center for the Arts in California.

Braitman received her BA in biology and writing from Cornell University and is completing her PhD in the history and anthropology of science at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Jeff Dickinson is farmer and executive director for the Stratford Ecological Center—a 236-acre nature preserve, certified organic farm, and education center located outside of Delaware, Ohio. Before arriving at the Stratford Center in 1990, Dickinson worked for seven years at Meadowcreek Project, a nonprofit environmental center in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. He received his PhD in entomology/soil ecology from Ohio State in 1995.

From 2009 to 2011, the Stratford Center was home to the flock of Shetland sheep whose grazing streamed live to an LED monitor located outside the Wexner Center as part of Michael Mercil's *The Virtual Pasture*.

Michael Mercil directed tonight's documentary video, *Covenant*, and is associate professor and chair of graduate studies in the Department of Art at Ohio State. In 2005—together with artist and Ohio State Professor Ann Hamilton—he began "The Living Culture Initiative" to engage "the core research framework of The Ohio State University" through a "diverse range of contemporary visual arts practices." Mercil's recent on-campus projects include *The Beanfield* (2006–08), *The Virtual Pasture* (2009–11), and *Reading the Daily News* (ongoing performance).

Following tonight's public premiere, *Covenant* will be screened February 21–24 at the Colorado Environmental Film Festival in Boulder. In March, the film is being presented as part of the Fargo Film Festival in North Dakota, near where Mercil was born and raised.