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The Parrot-Person in *Koki, Ciao* (2025): Sentimentality Without Oversimplification

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Abstract

Quenton Miller's *Koki, Ciao* (2025) is a short documentary that features a parrot as a person. In this essay, I will explore how Koki the cockatoo's status correlates with Mary Midgley's notes on "person" as a concept. According to her, the most relevant feature of a person is the "sensibility, social and emotional complexity."[1] Midgley extended this beyond the man-animal binary, which I will examine in relation to Koki, to what extent he could be considered the film's co-writer and protagonist.

Koki, Ciao may manifest some of the characteristics of sentimentality, yet it does not result in simplistic self-indulgence. It stands against the criticism levelled against sentimentalisation by philosophers such as Joseph Kupfer. To Kupfer, sentimentality is a vice because it "produces the passivity of inactivity by immersing us in our emotions."[2] By focusing on the film's style, I will argue that *Koki, Ciao* shows sensibility as a result of sentimentalisation. What is more, it does so without the oversimplicity often charged against sentimentality. The film's sentimentalisation is multi-layered due to its fractured structure. Throughout the five tableaus of photography-based editing, the film's formal strategies present Koki's personality as temporarily discontinuous. It balances both anthropomorphism and human decentralisation, yet remains emotionally engaging. Hence, the referral to Koki as a "person" helps this essay foreground how the film carries sentimental weight without becoming overly simplistic.

To give an overview of the short film, *Koki, Ciao* centres a non-human figure as the protagonist and narrator. As a screenwriter, the cockatoo shapes the film's flow with his voiceover in Croatian. Koki mainly talks about his past with Josip Broz Tito, the former leader of Yugoslavia, his ex-owner. Such a narrative corresponds with the photos

[1] Mary Midgley, "Is a Dolphin a Person?" in *Utopias, Dolphins and Computers: Problems in Philosophical Plumbing* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 94.
[2] Joseph Kupfer, "The Sentimental Self," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 4 (1996): 555, https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1996.10717467.

shown to Koki, which also prompt the fast-paced, sharp cuts in editing. However, the archival pictures span decades, which makes Koki a 67-year-old parrot. The immortal cockatoo's autobiography becomes ambiguous as his identity gets questioned. Nevertheless, the new footage shows Koki, or his impersonator, living in unfair conditions: caged in a zoo, lonely, and bothered by tourists. This way, the 11-minute-long documentary offers an emotional portrayal of the cockatoo. By incorporating historical archives, the film explores Koki's identity and raises questions about animal rights.

1. Koki as a person

In *Koki, Ciao*, the cockatoo refers to itself as a person. This happens in the second tableau called “Lesson.” Firstly, the montage of photos features a black-and-white picture of Koki, which he names “human.” Then, the visuals switch to his moving image in colour, and his voiceover says “person.” At first glance, it could look like a coincidence, a mistake. So far, Koki’s narration has been playful and, therefore, not entirely trust-inducing. However, here, the choice to name himself a “person” seems deliberate.

One reason to assign Koki the feasibility is the double emphasis. If he had said “person” just once and out of context, there may not have been that much gravity in his words. Nevertheless, he identifies himself as a “person” right after calling himself “human.” This focus is further emphasised by the two formats: photography and moving image. The concept of “person” is present in both archival footage and the film’s “real-time”; in black and white as well as in colour. Another reason is the “Lesson’s” previous montage. It displays various photos while Koki’s voice points out what they depict. He successfully identifies most of the subjects: his owner, an apple, a horse, other parrots, and himself. Thus, the editing builds up its credibility. Additionally, Koki has already demonstrated his rich vocabulary. In the first tableau, he correctly assigns words such as “agreement” or “achievement.” Again, this shows that his language choices are not accidental. After all, the tableau is a “Lesson,” which suggests its didacticism. Combining the montage’s consistency, the double mention of the concept, and Koki’s vocabulary’s credibility, the word “person” does not pass as a coincidence.

Accordingly, Mary Midgley’s writing becomes relevant when investigating the concept of the non-human person. In her chapter “Is a Dolphin a Person?” she made

the point that “person” is not restricted to “human” only.[3] Considering both the technical terms and philosophy, the word “person” is used in a wide range of contexts. For instance, legal language can refer to corporate bodies, such as cities and colleges, as “persons” too. Midgley also used examples such as the persons of the Trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit), which allude to religious contexts as well.[4] Altogether, these points show that Midgley foregrounds the term’s broad applicability.

Although this side of Midgley’s reasoning begins to steer towards relativism, that does not invalidate her point. Conversely, this relativism already exists in the English language. Hence, there is no need to restrict the use of “person” to humans only. Of course, referring to everything as a “person” in everyday language can lead to confusion. Yet, upon closer analysis, such confusion can be easily clarified. Therefore, the relativity of the concept should not prevent its further application. If some buildings are already called persons, why would an animal not be?

The concept of “person” may be examined in relation to rights. Thinking beyond human rights, a building will also have legal protection, and so will a national park. Yet Midgley analyses rights not just in the legal sense but in terms of respect.[5] Respect goes above physical qualities. It relates to dignity and independence. Then, being human is neither a sufficient nor necessary condition. To emphasise, a human slave is not treated as a person as their independence is limited. Hence, it is a question of power.

In this sense, Koki is also not treated as a person in real life. The main proof is his entrapment. As he lives in a cage from which he cannot escape, Koki is treated as a slave, too. His natural freedom is restricted by people in power—authorities, zookeepers, and visitors. They approach Koki as a thing rather than a being worthy of

[3] Midgley, “Is a Dolphin a Person?,” 88.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Midgley, “Is a Dolphin a Person?,” 90.

respect. Thus, his treatment is limited to him being “in itself” and not “for itself.”[6] Although Jean-Paul Sartre used this template to argue for existentialism, it can help illustrate Koki’s state of personhood as well. Notably, the cockatoo is not given the right to live beyond its physical condition. This physicality implies his treatment as only “in itself.” Within the human-centric world, Koki is seen as an object and is therefore exploited. In other words, the people around him refuse to recognise his being as “for itself” too. *Koki, Ciao* documents this mistreatment. Nonetheless, the way others treat Koki does not entirely determine his being.

Accordingly, Midgley seems to keep circling back to Jeremy Bentham’s idea: “The question is not, Can they talk? Nor, Can they reason? But: Can they suffer?” [7] The quote that is widely used by animal rights activists also corresponds with *Koki, Ciao*. Even though Koki proves he can speak and perhaps incoherently reason, the film also depicts his suffering.

Again, this is visible at the simple level of the cage. The film’s fourth tableau, “Devils,” concentrates on the theme of suffering. Starting with archival images, Koki guides the viewer through his entrapment. After a self-directed de-personalised statement, “this is to be locked,” Koki shows himself in a new cage and asks, “Can I go out?”. As an answer, the scene cuts to the more recent footage of Koki at the zoo. This moment is followed by a hard-to-watch sequence in which Koki tries to chip the metal barrier with his beak. Besides the still close-ups of Koki working on the fence, the tableau also includes slanted, shaky, and less focused shots of him in a state of panic. The parrot shrieks and rapidly flaps his wings. This indicates Koki’s suffering on an elementary level. To put it another way, the suffering factor shows both his status as a person and his mistreatment as one.

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[6] Jean-Paul Sartre [orig. 1943], *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Sarah Richmod (London: Routledge, 2018).
[7] Jeremy Bentham [orig. 1780], *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 144. https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/bentham1780.pdf

2. Sentimentalising Koki

Following up on Bentham's quote, the same reason that makes Koki a person also makes the film sentimental. The cockatoo's suffering is emotional and evokes an emotional response. Above all, the suffering is not just physical. Despite the cage motif analysed earlier, the movie's primary focus seems to be Koki's sentimental state of mind. Notably, "My Sadness" is the final and longest tableau of the film. It is filled with darkness and long takes as Koki processes the death of his owner, Tito. There is also more silence, and when there is not, Koki gets caught in sentimental repetition. The tableau finishes with muted archival excerpts of Tito and Koki's "good old days." Koki is not caged, and Tito is smiling and petting the parrot. Almost comically nostalgic, the ending is undoubtedly sentimental.

This emotional suffering suggests Koki's capability to form sentimental bonds with others. Significantly to Koki's personhood, Midgley claimed that "what makes creatures our fellow-beings, entitled to basic consideration, is not intellectual capacity, but emotional fellowship."[8] She argued that this sensibility is "expressed by the forming of deep, subtle and lasting relationships." This quality is expressly foregrounded in the film. Tito's name and images keep reappearing as the parrot's main sentimental concern. Even decades after Tito's death, this relationship continues to affect Koki. Consequently, this personhood interweaves with the film's sentimental features.

With attention to "My Sadness," the tableau stands out due to its sentimental shift in sound. Previously, *Koki, Ciao* entertained with a playfully fast-paced voiceover. The narration juxtaposed semi-random expressions with comic effect. In contrast, the final tableau slows down and takes on a melodramatic quality. The silence becomes sentimental as it shows his loneliness. With no one to connect with, Koki is left to exist

[8] Midgley, "Is a Dolphin a Person?," 94.

as an “in itself” in the cage for visitors. Hence, the final archival footage becomes even more sentimental in its silence. Presented as flashbacks, the excerpts show Koki and Tito playing together on a boat as the summer breeze elevates the nostalgia. Although Tito’s lips are moving, the sound is muted. Such a technique yields a sense of a precious yet fading memory. Here, this longing is tied not only to the cage-less times but to the mutual fellowship.

However, the repetitive monologue also contains sentimentality. Although such quality may seem like a disorientating modernist tool at first, it also has a coherently sentimental factor. In a recent interview, the director described Koki’s vocal performance as an “emotional memory” rather than a metaphorical style.[9] For example, it becomes easy to attribute sadness and longing to Koki’s extended sighs of “Tito.” In addition, “My Sadness” keeps asking, “Where is Tito?” after the film implies the owner has passed away. Echoing the melodramatic fashion, Koki keeps repeating the sentimentalised phrases. Since the expressions primarily refer to the parrot’s past relationship, the recurrences in “My Sadness” allude to the “emotional memory” style.

At the same time, this repetition is found in other tableaus, too. For instance, the repetition in “The Devils” may also be sentimental, but here, it serves a slightly different purpose. In particular, the sequence with the dog brings out the comical side of Koki’s narrational style. As he reacts to the photos of Tito with a poodle, the voiceover expresses straightforward jealousy in the form of reiterated swearing. Directed at a cute white poodle, the voiceover gives a rotation of curses like “rat,” “your mother’s pussy,” and “devils.” Such repetition correlates with the Bergsonian theory on comedy. For Henri Bergson, the comic could be seen in the “mechanical inelasticity.”[10] Meaning,

[9] Nikola Radić, ““If a Lion Could Speak, It Would Tell Wittgenstein to Stop with Human Exceptionalism”: An Interview with Quenton Miller,” *Senses of Cinema* 113 (2025), https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2025/interviews/if-a-lion-could-speak-it-would-tell-wittgenstein-to-stop-with-human-exceptionalism-an-interview-with-quenton-miller/.
[10] Henri Bergson, “Laughter”, in *Comedy*, ed. George Meredith and Wylie Sypher (Garden City, NY: Doubleday), 73.

there is something laughable about the rigidity or the automated reaction to life events. For example, Charlie Chaplin remains funny in *Modern Times* (1936) due to his overly mechanical physical performance. In parallel with Chaplin, Koki's repetition appears automatic and, therefore, tragically comic as well.

In turn, this comic aspect makes Koki more likeable, as the rigidity comes from his attachment to Tito. Notably, in all the photos, the poodle appears to be close to Tito. The poodle is always either on his lap, next to his feet, or participating in semi-official meetings. Meanwhile, Koki is never in the frame. Hence, the envious voiceover provokes both laughter and pity. Nonetheless, Bergson believed that "the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human."[11] He means that when one laughs at an animal, it is because they see something human in it. In the case of "The Devils," the viewer may empathise with Koki's jealousy and therefore find it funny. There may be a degree of anthropomorphism in this, yet that brings Koki not further from but closer to being a person. Once again, the cockatoo's emotional suffering is recognised as an outcome of his personhood. In other words, the comic repetition sentimentalises Koki's relationship with Tito and thus strengthens his position as a person.

In light of sentimentalisation, the comic might not possess that much depth when it gets lost in the fast-paced photo montage. Therefore, the long takes in "My Sadness" may enable the viewer to process Koki's emotional complexity better. The final shots are more focused and have fewer distractions. To illustrate, the frame of the cage at night strictly focuses on Koki, who is joined only by a rat. Even with the rat, Koki is separated by the shadows' visual blocking. This loneliness is further emphasised by the absence of a voiceover, accompanied only by the diegetic sound of chirping insects. Since this take is situated between the shots of Tito's archives, the viewer may experience the Kuleshov effect, projecting relevant emotions. Given the time to think

[11] Bergson, "Laughter," 62.

rather than interact with new information, the audience appears to be encouraged to sentimentalise Koki's longing for Tito.

Finally, it is important to note how *Koki, Ciao*'s sentimentalisation de-centres the human perspective by adopting the parrot's point of view. Some of the film is clearly stylised in a human fashion. For instance, the tableau texts appear in childish (human) writing, making the film feel more playful. At the same time, Q. Miller avoids ventriloquism. He does not modify Koki's voice nor make him deliver unnaturally structured lines. Instead, he allows the cockatoo to speak in its own unscripted language and edits the excerpts together only in post-production. This way, the film gains a non-human factor that can be felt in some of the pacing.

On the other hand, the style also does not de-personalise the parrot. For example, it differs from the technical approach in Ben Rivers' film *Now, at Last!* (2018). B. Rivers' work centres on a sloth, but does it in an almost scientific manner. It follows the sloth's feeling of time by tracking its movement with three-colour separation visuals. Hence, the *Now, at Last!* methods de-centre the human but also de-personalise the animal. Compared to Rivers, Miller's technical choices seem to foreground *Koki, Ciao*'s emotional side. The film hints at the value of sentimentalisation by making Koki more personal.

3. Layered Sentimentality

Regarding sentimentalisation, one can generally expect criticism of it. Sentimentality is often associated with melodramatic or melancholic fiction. Before the melodrama was reclaimed by feminist scholars, film history perceived it as a "low genre." In philosophical-theoretical debates, sentimentality is also not favoured due to its assumed tendency to be self-indulgent. In particular, Joseph Kupfer holds that sentimentality is excessively simplistic. He writes that it reduces complexity, makes one enjoy a distorted reality, and results in self-indulgence. Kupfer's overarching argument is that sentimentality is not only a "mild vice" but "a more serious vice than might be expected."[12] As discussed above, *Koki, Ciao* is sentimental. However, the short film does not appear to be as dangerous as Kupfer would think.

Essentially, *Koki, Ciao* is not overly simplistic because of the parrot's fractured identity. Although Koki's immortality hints at it from the beginning, the final tableau reveals the cockatoo is likely a fraud. The film displays a letter from Tito's granddaughter, which points out that the "real" Koki had fewer fingers than his impersonator. The director has also noted that he is unsure about the parrot's real identity.[13] Therefore, Koki is a multi-layered person. Such multiplicity does not match Kupfer's belief that "the sentimental ideal is emptied of tensions and complexities."[14] In the film, Koki is not presented as a flawless figure. Conversely, he is sentimentalised yet not stripped of his multidimensional personality.

To clarify, the split identity does not jeopardise Koki's position as a person. Returning to the multiplicity of the different uses of the term "person," it remains

[12] Kupfer, "The Sentimental Self," 543.
[13] Quenton Miller, Q&A from the Berlin International Film Festival, Interviewed by Nihan Sivridag, Berlin, February 19, 2025.
[14] Kupfer, "The Sentimental Self," 546.

applicable. Markedly, the word “person” primarily means a “mask” in Latin.[15] Originating from theatre, the term alludes to drama and the role the person plays in it. In relation to the film, Koki also stands as a person. He is not only a character but a multifaceted protagonist. Although he might be pretending to be Koki, this may only show his complexity.

Then, Kupfer might want to critique the film’s distortion of Koki’s image. According to him, sentimentality uses selection and distortion to restrict complexity. Thus, it simplifies. Although *Koki, Ciao* does not necessarily lie to its audience, it does delay the confirmation of Koki’s “identity theft.” As a result, the viewer may be led to form false beliefs. Nevertheless, that does not concern the question of whether Koki is a person, since there are enough sentimental details that prove he is.

This “vice” of distortion can be found across all art forms. Even though *Koki, Ciao*’s documentary mode may imply a degree of reliability, the film mirrors the parrot’s miscellaneity. Although Miller prefers to call it a literary film, *Koki, Ciao* still employs classic documentary techniques.[16] It utilises non-fictional archival footage and voiceover, which occasionally resemble the expository and poetic modes.[17] The movie contains didactic elements while also offering a fresh perspective. Hence, on paper, it appears to promise a certain level of truth. However, like in any documentary, there is always selection and distortion. As the film focuses on Koki’s story, it picks the interesting details and highlights the sentimental themes. Moreover, it maintains its complexity through its open-endedness. Similar to Orson Welles’s *F for Fake* (1973), *Koki, Ciao* plays with the formation of false realities. Instead of blindly trusting the narrator, the viewer has to approach the film’s density. The audience is kept on their

[15] Midgley, “Is a Dolphin a Person?,” 89.
[16] Radić, “If a Lion Could Speak.”
[17] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 108.

toes rather than left to observe passively. Therefore, the film stands against Kupfer's claims that sentimental art lacks complexity and leads to self-indulgence.

Significantly, *Koki, Ciao* demonstrates that the lack of sentimentality may be more simplistic than its use. Rejecting sentimentality toward animals might lead to ignorant human-centrism. In that case, it is more simplistic, as it is not a well-rounded understanding of the world. From Midgley's point of view, "notions like fear, anger, pleasure, etc., were not invented in or for an exclusively human world."[18] If sentimentality means acknowledging such notions in other animals, it expands rather than limits the perceiver's understanding.

In this sense, it may become suspicious when one decidedly guards themselves from sentimentality. Deliberate ignorance must have a motive. If one refuses to acknowledge animals' feelings, the individual may be trying to secure their dominance. To Midgley, such motives might be "no safer than sentimental ones cognitively and morally much worse."[19] In *Koki, Ciao*, this is evident in the multi-layered presentation of Tito. In contrast to his sentimental relationships with Koki and the poodle, Tito appears to be a hunting enthusiast. Such selective ignorance towards animals suggests that he used them for power. In the third tableau, the photo montage shows several animals, which Koki names as "gifts." Juxtaposed with celebrity visitors, the animals such as lions, elephants, hippos, and bears become mere tools for diplomacy. Coupled with the pictures of Tito observing taxidermy or shooting, the politician is shown treating some animals instrumentally as things "in themselves." As can be seen, Tito's sentimentality is shaky and, therefore, morally questionable.

Although Kupfer's writing does not express his interest in hunting, his approach to sentimentalisation may also be questioned in terms of simplicity and limits. His

[18] Mary Midgley, "Brutality and Sentimentality," *Philosophy* 54, no. 209 (1979): 386, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100048798.
[19] Midgley, "Brutality and Sentimentality," 387.

attitude towards sentimental art seems to come from a purely intellectual standpoint. When he writes about oversimplification, he potentially refers to the lack of intellectual stimuli. Preferring non-sentimentality, Kupfer characterises it with words such as “complexity” and “strain.”[20] Therefore, his main criterion for art may have been an intellectual challenge. Nonetheless, art offers more than an exercise. With what Midgley would call a “Fear of Feeling,” Kupfer may have limited his aesthetic analysis.[21] Sentimentality, including its selection and distortion, can be an aesthetic method for evoking feelings. With this in mind, *Koki, Ciao* achieves its non-oversimplicity through sentimentality.

[20] Kupfer, “The Sentimental Self,” 552.
[21] Midgley, “Brutality and Sentimentality,” 387.

Conclusion

To sum up, *Koki, Ciao* shows how personhood, sentimentalisation, and non-oversimplification interrelate through the lens of de-centring the human. In the film, Koki refers to himself as a person. Reacting to the concept uses' variability, there is no sufficient reason not to analyse it seriously. Therefore, Koki's position as a person can be proven by Bentham's notes on suffering and Midgley's ideas on emotional fellowships. Both philosophers' reasons for what might make an animal a person also make it a sentimental being. After all, suffering and interpersonal relationships are essentially emotional. However, *Koki, Ciao* does not oversimplify the sentiments. In contrast to Kupfer's theory, the sentimentalisation makes the film more multi-layered, as it deals with Koki's ambiguous personality. Altogether, the essay's main themes coexist as interconnected concepts in *Koki, Ciao*.

The film explores this not only thematically but also through its aesthetic means. While the jittery, repetitive narration signals Koki's fractured identity, it also demonstrates his nostalgic emotional memory. Meanwhile, the silent long takes stress his suffering and longing for fellowship. Although to a degree anthropomorphic, the film's style sentimentalises to highlight Koki's personality. After all, the parrot's point of view also de-centres the human perspective through the animal's complexity. All things considered, *Koki, Ciao* may exemplify sentimentality as an aesthetic tool that is not simplistic when it lets one examine a person.

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