
electric animal

TOWARD A RHETORIC *of* WILDLIFE

AKIRA MIZUTA LIPPIT

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Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife

AKIRA MIZUTA LIPPIT

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Introduction | Remembering Animals

. . . and already the knowing animals are
aware that we are not really at home in our
interpreted world.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE, “DUINO ELEGIES”

“EVERYWHERE ANIMALS DISAPPEAR,” writes John Berger.¹ Or perhaps, everywhere one looks one is surrounded by the absence of animals. No longer a sign of nature’s abundance, animals now inspire a sense of panic for the earth’s dwindling resources. Spectral animals recede into the shadows of human consumption and environmental destruction. With the prosperity of human civilization and global colonization, ecospheres are vanishing, species are moving toward extinction, and the environment is sinking, one is told, into a state of uninhabitability. Arguably, modernity has cost existence its diversity, has strained the earth’s capacity to maintain life. It is a cliché of modernity: human advancement always coincides with a recession of nature and its figures—wildlife, wilderness, human nature, and so forth. Modernity sustains, in the brief compass of this text, the disappearance of animals as a constant state. That is, through a curious configuration to be analyzed in what follows, animals never *entirely* vanish. Rather, they exist in a state of *perpetual vanishing*. Animals enter a new economy of being during the modern period, one that is no longer sacrificial in the traditional sense of the term but, considering modern technological media generally and the cinema more specifically, *spectral*. In supernatural terms, modernity finds animals lingering in the world *undead*.²

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the cultural and epistemological disciplines, as well as various literary and artistic practices, became preoccupied with the transmission of ideas from one body to another, one forum to another, one consciousness to another. In many disciplines, animals—the figure of the animal—played a crucial role in the articulation of new forms of communication, transmission, and exchange. With the Darwinian revolution, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the advances of the optical and technological media, animals symbolized not only new structures of thought but also the process by which those new thoughts were transported. Animals—and their capacity for instinctive, almost telepathic communication—put into question the primacy of human language and consciousness as optimal modes of communication. This investigation seeks to gauge the effects of animal discourses on select philosophical and psychoanalytic texts, the history of ideas, various creative ventures, and theses on technology of this period.

Beginning with the classical oppositions that distinguish humanity from nature, technology from being, this study argues that such polarities may be read as harboring insights into the structures of scientific thought and artistic representation. Roaming between the two extremes, animals establish a third term with its own realm of being, knowledge, and communication. Animals form an essential epistemological category.

Despite the constancy with which animals have hovered at the fringes of humanity, principally as sacrifices to maintain its limit, the notion of animal being changed dramatically during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is perhaps especially true of the modern period, which can be said to begin with late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century technological advances and conclude in the devastation of World War II. Modernity can be defined by the disappearance of wildlife

from humanity's habitat and by the reappearance of the same in humanity's reflections on itself: in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and technological media such as the telephone, film, and radio. During this period, the status of the animal itself began to change—at the very point that animals began to vanish from the empirical world. "Public zoos came into existence," Berger writes, "at the beginning of the period which was to see the disappearance of animals from daily life. The zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see them, is, in fact, a monument to their disappearance."³ In its specular, zoological world, the modern animal evolved into a lost object that could then, in turn, be mourned. A new breed of animals now surrounds the human populace—a genus of vanishing animals, whose very being is constituted by that state of disappearing. The modern animal became, to borrow Jacques Derrida's expression, "a memory of the present."⁴

Animal Phenomenology

IN SEPTEMBER 1992, researchers at Johns Hopkins diagnosed "a rare neurological illness known as paraneoplastic encephalopathy." The disease afflicted the patient's cognitive function and "was marked by a slight but very specific disruption in one category of information: she could not name or describe the physical attributes of animals."⁵ Over several months of observation, the patient could neither remember nor describe the visual appearance of animals: she could not conjure up their colors, shapes, sizes, or dimensions. She was, however, capable of describing these same attributes when they modified objects or ideas other than those of an animal nature, leading the researchers to believe that the phenomenality of animals designated—at least in this instance—an altogether unique repository of knowledge, one wholly distinct from that containing other kinds of information.

Aware of the deficiency in her knowledge, the patient actively sought to overcome it by expanding the framework of her consciousness—to suture the gaps in her knowledge by increasing her awareness of them. Sensing that her archives had been erased by the illness, the patient tried to reinscribe the attributes of animals in her memory and reproduce them later. Despite her attempts to memorize the features of animals, the patient could not recall any descriptions of specific animals without the aid of some visual cue. The damage was apparently permanent and irreversible, and her efforts only resulted in a heightened state of distress.

Although the appearance of the animal figure in this case may have been a mere contingency, its intrusion underscores the uncanny effect of animals on human thought and imagination. At once familiar and distant, animals have traditionally illuminated human existence. As David Clark notes: “If the thought of ‘the animal’ is in question, so too, inevitably, is the thought of ‘the human’ with which it has always been inextricably bound.”⁶ Paraneoplastic encephalopathy, appearing in the form of animal phenomenology, had forced the patient to accept the limits of her psyche: against the figure of the animal, she encountered the threshold of her consciousness.⁷ Unable to think beyond the limit established by the animal, the patient could only project her consciousness. The *aporia* had provided her with a view of the outside of her consciousness, a glimpse of the unknowable.

To the extent that the patient was diagnosed with a neurological disorder, the case raises fundamental questions concerning knowledge and consciousness, impelling one to view the patient’s struggle, at least in part, as brain against mind. As the medical examination progressed, the disparity between the workings of the brain and the desires of the mind came into sharper focus: the apparent inability of the mind to reach into certain areas of mnemonic, cerebral, and sensual data became increas-

ingly clearer in the brain's adamant blockage of the animal. From the standpoint of biology, the brain represents the material center of intelligent life. An animal's intelligence is frequently measured by the capacities of its brain, which exists in the body as an organ. The mind belongs exclusively to human beings and establishes the unique subjectivity of each human organism: it is an abstraction and, like the soul, cannot be found within the human anatomy. The brain regulates a number of neurological and bodily functions, whereas the mind attends to only one: consciousness. That difference, according to Johns Hopkins neuroscientist Dr. John Hart Jr., greatly affects how human beings conceive knowledge. Hart, who also supervised and analyzed the aforementioned medical case, states: "There are separate systems in the brain to deal with different categories of knowledge. . . . The brain is not necessarily built the way your mind thinks it is."⁸ In other words, while the brain works, the mind reflects: while the brain disperses knowledge (sensations, warnings, and other signals) throughout the body, the mind organizes that movement into subjectivity. Accordingly, the distinction between brain and mind rests ultimately in the question of agency: the brain possesses no agency for imagining itself as coherent, whereas the mind cannot conceive its own fragmentation, the areas beyond its reach. The longstanding dichotomy between the conceptual and biomechanical modes of cognition has influenced not only psychological and philosophical discourses on the mind but also, as this case confirms, approaches to neurobiology, psychobiology, and other sciences of the brain.

Hegel summarizes the mind's desire to usurp the function of human determination and articulates the challenge that this imposed subjectivity presents to science:

It belongs to the nature of the mind to cognize its Notion. Consequently, the summons to the Greeks of the

Delphic Apollo, *Know thyself*, does not have the meaning of a law imposed on the human mind by an alien power; on the contrary, the god who impels to self-knowledge is none other than the absolute law of mind itself. Mind is, therefore, in its every act only apprehending itself, and the aim of all genuine science is just this, that the mind shall recognize itself in everything in heaven and on earth. An out-and-out Other simply does not exist for the mind.⁹

The very attempt to situate the mind as not only the highest law of science but also one that originates from within being, as the very condition of being, which is to say as subjectivity, exposes the underlying anxiety that the mind may not, in fact, originate within being: that consciousness may rather be the effect of some profoundly alien thought—a thought of the other, in the sense elaborated in recent philosophy. In the case of paraneoplastic encephalopathy described above, the possibility of knowing oneself as a unified self—of excluding any possibility of an other—was jeopardized by the appearance of an other. The animal other, despite its erasure, made its presence known as an unknowable other, known only as unknowable to the mind.

The case itself may indicate that a third term or agent might be required to supplement the traditional mind/brain duality: something beyond the neurological/conceptual opposition, something precipitated by or resulting in the figure of the animal. It is not by accident, however, that the figure of the animal fulfills the function of such a third term: the animal is particularly suited to that task. Animals are exemplary vehicles with which to mediate between the corporeality of the brain and the ideality of the mind. Traditionally, they are held to be neither nonconscious like stones or plants, nor self-conscious like human beings. Animals, it is said, can act without reason, can

exist without language. In this sense, animal being might best be described as *unconscious*, that is, as existing somewhere other than in the manifest realms of consciousness. Animal being can be understood as determining the place of an alien thought.

Animals are linked to humanity through mythic, fabulous, allegorical, and symbolic associations, but not through the shared possession of language as such. Without language one cannot participate in the world of human beings. For the patient in question, animals inhabit a separate world within the universe of human knowledge—a world that in the case of paraneoplastic encephalopathy is susceptible to permanent displacement. Rachel Wilder describes the disorder:

Tests over a period of several months showed that she [the patient] could, for example, talk in great detail about where animals live or whether they were pets, but she could not say what they look like.

Her impairment was only verbal and only in the category of the physical attributes of animals, in which she could not correctly answer questions about size, number of legs or colors of animals. Thus she could say that celery is green, but not that a frog or turtle is green.

She could, however, accurately discuss the physical attributes of any other object, and correctly identify an animal's attributes when the information was presented visually in pictures. For example, while she could say that the color of an animal was wrong in a picture, she had trouble naming its correct color.¹⁰

Evidently, the patient was aware of discrepancies and inaccuracies in the representation of animals but could not rectify them through language. Such disruptions in the patient's discursive capacities suggest that although human beings can

readily “perceive” the existence of animals, they are not always able to translate that perception into the linguistic registers that constitute human understanding. Animals seem to necessitate some form of mediation or allegorization—some initial transposition to language—before they can be absorbed into and dispersed throughout the flow of everyday psychology. The mechanism for such conversions between the animal and verbal worlds had collapsed in the stricken subject. During her illness, the patient lost the ability to realign and integrate non-verbal animal data into the virtual world of language. From the vantage point of the animals (although, in the absence of a verifiable subjectivity, the possibility of such a vantage point must also be carefully questioned), they were now suspended in a spectral beyond; they were destined to reside in the interstice between mind and matter, unable to migrate into consciousness. The patient died without ever regaining “consciousness of animals.”

The case of paraneoplastic encephalopathy offers a useful entry point for this discussion, since it explores a phantom world that has haunted, throughout its long history, the domain of human subjectivity. Despite the distance of animal being from the human world, the uncanny proximity of animals to human beings necessarily involves them in any attempt to define a human essence. The effort to define the human being has usually required a preliminary gesture of exclusion: a rhetorical animal sacrifice. The presence of the animal must first be extinguished for the human being to appear. Although the determination of human autonomy in contrast to animality is not an especially unusual notion, the *return of the animal*, despite strenuous efforts to exclude it, is worthy of attention. The Johns Hopkins case suggests that some “unconscious” agency may be at work rigorously segregating animals from language and knowledge, and that those excluded animals

nevertheless manage to return in the guise of a profound negativity. Temple Grandin, a scientist who grew up autistic, argues that autism, which is also a neurological disorder, can sometimes compel a person to “think in pictures” like an animal. According to Grandin, the oversensitivity that accompanies autism can result in a shift from the abstraction of linguistic signs to the precision of images: “I think in pictures. Words are like a second language to me. I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head. When somebody speaks to me, his words are immediately translated into pictures.”¹¹ Grandin links this capacity to animal thought, claiming that “it is very likely that animals think in pictures and memories of smell, light, and sound patterns. In fact, my visual thinking patterns probably resemble animal thinking more closely than those of verbal thinkers.”¹² If, as Grandin suggests, the capacity to think in pictures is a feature of animal consciousness, then the paraneoplastic encephalopath may have been undergoing, like Kafka’s Gregor Samsa, a kind of metamorphosis, a becoming-animal.

The paraneoplastic encephalopath’s systemic annihilation of animal traces from her field of consciousness, although remarkable in its specificity, reveals something about the history of human self-constitution: animals have often functioned as an ambiguous excess upon whose elimination human identity consolidates itself. For example, the doctrine of “universal” love that founds the Christian community, Marc Shell explains, does not extend to animals but rather is limited to the infinitude and universality said to exist within humanity’s being. Tracing the exclusion of animals to early Christian rhetoric and its demarcation of sibling human beings from nonsibling (nonhuman) others, Shell writes: “Christians often conflated species with family. . . . so it is not surprising that the argument that we

should tolerate others' religious views because they are our kin, or 'brother,' should take sometimes the form of a claim that we should tolerate their views because they are our kind, or 'human beings.'¹³ In this vein, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno assert that Western humanist culture depends on the exclusion of animals, and that its historical progression culminates logically in the justification of mass murder. The National Socialist state, they argue, excused the elimination of Jews from the "German" populace by transforming them first into nonhuman or animal others, "to the condition of a species."¹⁴ The atrocities of World War II derive from the anthropological foundation that separates humanity from animals.

The idea of man in European history is expressed in the way in which he is distinguished from the animal. Animal irrationality is adduced as proof of human dignity. This contrast has been reiterated with such persistence and unanimity by all the predecessors of bourgeois thought —by the ancient Jews, Stoics, Fathers of the Church, and then throughout the Middle Ages down to modern times —that few ideas have taken such a hold on Western anthropology.¹⁵

As Adorno and Horkheimer insist, the idea of human superiority has been restated so frequently that it has become an unqualified truth. Although the discourse on humanity features the rhetorical exclusion of animal beings from the *Lebenswelt* of human ontology, within the broader range of epistemological disciplines and artistic practices animals have played a prominent role in the articulation of human identity.

Animality

The birth of this extreme emotion, which we designate under the name eroticism and which separates man from animals, is without doubt an essential dimension of what prehistoric research can contribute to knowledge.

—GEORGES BATAILLE, “THE TEARS OF EROS”

THE FAMOUS PAINTING from the Lascaux cave, discovered in 1940 and dating from around 13,500 B.C., depicts humanity’s entry along with the animal into the world of representation: it is, ironically, a death scene. Among the elements of the painting is a dying man wearing what appears to be a bird’s head or mask and several other dying animals. Bataille describes the scene at length:

. . . [A] man with a bird’s face, who asserts his being with an erect penis, but who is falling down. This man is lying in front of a wounded bison. The bison is about to die, but facing the man, it spills its entrails horrifically.

Something obscure, strange, sets apart this pathetic scene, to which nothing in our time can be compared. Above this fallen man, a bird drawn in a single stroke, on the end of a stick, contrives to distract our thoughts.

Further away, toward the left, a rhinoceros is moving away, but it is surely not linked to the scene where the bison and the man-bird appear, united in the face of death.

As the Abbé Breuil has suggested, the rhinoceros might be moving slowly away from the dying figure after having torn open the stomach of the bison. But clearly the composition of the image attributes the origin of the wound to the man, to the spear that the hand of the dying figure could have thrown. The rhinoceros, on the contrary, seems

independent of the principal scene, which might remain forever unexplained.¹⁶

“What can one say about this striking evocation,” Bataille asks, “buried for thousands of years in these lost, and so to speak, inaccessible depths?”¹⁷ In the end, Bataille concurs with the anthropological interpretation of that scene as one of expiation in which a shaman is seen atoning for the murder of the bison,¹⁸ adding that the Lascaux cave painting also marks the birth of “eroticism.”¹⁹ The birth of eros, the aspect of human existence that Bataille links elsewhere to mortality, entails the sacrifice of animals and an interchangeable relation between human and animal forms. The motifs of animal death, metamorphosis, and palingenesis have dominated ancient religious concepts from Greco-Roman sacrifice to Hindu reincarnation.²⁰

The killing of animals, however, is not restricted to religion. Experiments on animal bodies for the purpose of anatomical comparison and medical knowledge date back to Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) and Galen (A.D. 129–199), although the first documented vivisections did not take place until the sixteenth century.²¹ The use of animals to advance knowledge has often aroused feelings of antipathy and discomfort in the human world, and today such practices continue to unsettle the social conscience. Still, the dissection of animals for biological and medical purposes derived a considerable measure of acceptance from the paradigmatic work of Aristotle, whose projects in zoology perhaps first validated—in a nonreligious context—the enterprise of animal sacrifice. A brief glance at Aristotle’s work reveals the importance given to the study of animals, and that emphasis has been retained throughout much of the Western philosophical canon. Richard J. Bernstein speculates that “an entire history of philosophy could be written simply by tracking what philosophers have said about animals.”²²

Another classical figure, Aesop, employs animal surrogates to

expose the moral mechanisms of the human world. Aesop's fables, which are generally considered a precursor of the literary genres of fiction and pedagogical writing, rely heavily upon the satirical posturings of animals to depict various aspects of human nature.²³ In this connection, one might also note the frequent recourse to animal beings in fairy tales. As with fables, fairy tales also tend to utilize animals for editorial or allegorical purposes. Regarding the similar, that is, instructional role of animal models in the social sciences, Donna J. Haraway writes:

Animals have continued to have a special status as natural objects that can show people their origin, and therefore their pre-rational, pre-management, pre-cultural essence. That is, animals have been ominously ambiguous in their place in the doctrine of autonomy of the human and natural sciences. So, despite the claims of anthropology to be able to understand human beings solely with the concept of culture, and of sociology to need nothing but the idea of the human social group, animal societies have been extensively employed in rationalization and naturalization of the oppressive orders of domination in the human body politic. They have provided the point of union of the physiological and political for modern liberal theorists while they continue to accept the ideology of the split between nature and culture.²⁴

Through the figure of the animal, Haraway analyzes the development of gender politics and the exclusion of women (as well as aliens, cyborgs, animals, and other minority beings) on the grounds of ontology.²⁵ In the related field of sociobiology, perhaps the most significant discussions of animal and human evolution are Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). Taken together, Darwin's interventions radically altered the place occupied by animals in

the biohistory of the earth, preparing the way for Freudian psychoanalysis and Mendel's genetics.

Language

ARGUABLY THE MOST sensitive arena in which human subjectivity struggles for dominance is that of language in general, and speech in particular. Most surveys of Western philosophical thought affirm (with a few very important exceptions) the consensus that although animals undoubtedly communicate with one another, only human beings convey their subjectivity in speech. That is, human speech exceeds its function as communication and actually performs, with each utterance, the subject.²⁶

Although proponents of structuralism in linguistic and literary theory moved the emphasis of subjectivity from human speech to the "text," the logic of the subject remained intact. Derrida, the most prominent critic of the structuralist assumption that textuality—the system of semiological signs grounded in language—institutes the place of the subject, argues that the text produces an entirely other discursive site, the trace (*trait*) of an other's discourse that can never be reduced to the subject.²⁷ The figure of the animal frequently stands, for Derrida, in the place of such alterity.

The philosophy of Jacques Derrida remains, throughout this work, crucial to the discussion of animal being. Beginning with his theses on language, Derrida's deconstructions of Western metaphysics have contributed many key philosophical concepts that will be used throughout this study. In the opening remarks to his presentation at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1997, where he spoke to the subject of the "autobiographical animal," Derrida claims that although he has not addressed, in his work to date, the question of the animal as such, he has nonetheless been talking

about nothing but animals.²⁸ Inevitably, Derrida has turned his attention toward the question of the animal. Beyond his own thoughts on animal being and the metaphysical disruption it causes, Derrida has introduced the philosophemes that make an investigation of the animal as such possible. This study pursues many of Derrida's themes—*différance*, supplement, trace, frame, graft, parasite, and dissemination, to name only a few—as it tracks the figure of the animal through the terrain mapped by conceptions of language. It seeks to uncover the traces of animality that are embedded in language, arguing that the animals that Descartes vehemently censured as irrational machines or speechless “automata” nonetheless remain inextricably linked to the discourse on human language. Although lacking the capacity for human speech, animals remain essential to its constitution.²⁹

The important role of animals in the metaphysics of speech is also an antithetical one. The economy of human subjectivity and speech is restricted: only human beings are capable of speech, which, in turn, founds the human subject. Animals enter that tautology as a phantasmatic counterpoint to human language. The animal voice establishes an imaginary place of being beyond the threshold of human discourse. It is in the vehicle of speech, the “*system* of speech, or the *system* of truth,” Derrida explains, that humanity founds the transcendental principles of its own existence above and in contradistinction to that of animals.³⁰ Derrida describes the connection between language and humanism, language and the subject, and offers a line of escape from the seemingly closed economy in which those terms are bound:

The idea according to which man is the only speaking being, in its traditional form or in its Heideggerian form, seems to me at once undisplaceable and highly problematic.

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