

Animal — (within) the boundaries of culture. Some comments and questions

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This agreement concerning philosophical sense and common sense that allows one to speak blithely of the Animal in the general singular, is perhaps one of the greatest and most symptomatic idiocies (*bêtises*) of those who call themselves humans.

Jacques Derrida

The question about the culture studies' proper question

The animal¹ often appears in the thinking about culture as a liminal entity, in the face of which its specificity is defined. This boundary between the human and the animal world, that is between the world of human and non-human animals, with regard to reflection on culture, though often painted with “thick” and bold strokes, for it legitimised the consideration of the *iura gentium* and, consequently, of culture, i.e. was a justification of the existence of a separate discipline of thought with culture as its object, nevertheless has been questioned in a variety of ways and various contents have been ascribed to it. This boundary was and, in fact, is still the subject of a dispute – though not necessarily in the context of culture, but not without consequences for thinking about it – between evolutionists and creationists, sociobiologists and humanists and more or less profound environmentalists, and, finally, the most recent editions of these discussions feature primarily posthumanists and humanists, that is opponents of species-based

¹ The plural “animals” provides no protection either against the homogenisation of the variety of the animal universe.

chauvinism calling for new humanism argue with humanists looking for solutions within the traditional humanist reflection – traditional in the sense of not considering itself guilty of the sin of anthropocentrism, but often not trying to evade the accusations of legitimising human cruelty to animals through the ideas functioning within it. In the thinking about culture the animal appears not only in its liminal condition; it also has its cultural existence, existence within the boundaries of culture and cultures.

However, it is not the perspective of cultural studies that has dominated the contemporary discourse about animals. The French philosopher Luc Ferry, in one of the footnotes to *The New Ecological Order*², a book published in the early 1990s, notes that the bibliography of German and American works dealing with animal rights was over six-hundred pages long at the time, which may testify to advances being made in the “animal question”, not only when it comes to jurisprudence, but also those areas of reflection in which jurists look for justifications or from which they draw inspiration concerning draft regulations, i.e. in philosophical ethics, the humanities or social sciences. Worthy of note, especially in the case of culture scholars, is a clear disproportion between various circles in the Western culture when it comes to the level of involvement in these discussions; areas influenced by the Protestant tradition are definitely leading the way.

Animal studies, tentatively begun in the 1970s³, have since the 1990s been building up their identity in the academia and strengthening their position in non-natural science faculties. At the same time there are increasingly strong voices concerning the seemingly never-ending cruelty that animals of various species constantly experience through us, humans. These voices, full of desperation and helplessness in their attempts at rational self-justification, refer to emotions and manifest them. Elizabeth Costello, a literary protagonist and – it would prob-

² L. Ferry, *The New Ecological Order*, University of Chicago Press 1995. Ferry notes that the problem of animals stands at the centre of today's heated debates about the relations between humans and nature. As he writes in the Introduction, animals have been “reduced to simple mechanistic states, they have been denied intelligence, affectivity and even sensitivity. The theory of the animal-machine is the quintessence of what a certain contemporary ecology denounces under the name of anthropocentrism. The animal, then, is the first being one encounters in the process of decentring, which leads from the questioning of anthropocentrism to the adoption of nature as a legal subject. In passing from man to the universe, as not only deep ecology but utilitarianism requires, one passes first by the animal.” (p. XXIX). Ferry himself points to a kind of danger inextricably linked to the rhetoric of radical ecological thought. Namely, he expresses his fear that hatred of the cultural-civilisational artifice may provoke hatred of “humans as such” as antinatural beings.

³ Important works for these studies included *Animals, Men and Morals. An Enquiry into the Maltreatment of Non-humans* from 1971, edited by Stanley and Rosalind Godlovitch and John Harris; it was a review of the book that became the first statement on the matter by the utilitarianist Peter Singer, the author of *Animal Liberation*.

ably not be an exaggeration to say it – an *alter ego* of the Noble laureate John Maxwell Coetzee, confronts the rational voice of philosophy with the voice of poetry, here corresponding to Pascal's "order of the heart". Costello provocatively compares the fate of farm and lab animals to the victims of the Holocaust⁴, while Charles Patterson expresses his judgement of animal existence in Western culture through the metaphor of "eternal Treblinka". He has borrowed it from Isaac Bashevis Singer, to whose memory he dedicated a book bearing this title⁵. In 2003 PETA (People for Ethical Treatment of Animals) initiated a travelling exhibition of eight posters entitled, significantly, "Holocaust on Your Plate". The posters juxtaposed black-and-white photographs of living and dead victims of the Holocaust with those of living and dead animals in scenes from slaughterhouses and factory farms. The display aroused a lot of controversy. In Austria and Germany it became the subject of court disputes on various levels as well as discussions about the legitimacy of this kind of comparisons⁶.

The industry and laboratories exploiting the animals coexist with millions of animals lovers, who turn representatives of some animal species into their pets – they care for them, for their comfort and after their death often bury them in real or virtual cemeteries in yet another manifestation of their "nature" as *homo sepulcros*. We are facing a problem – love for animals on the one hand, and their anthropomorphic "colonisation" on the other.

The number of professed vegetarians in Western societies is increasing in a statistically significant manner, which is associated with the on-going redefinition of the relation with animals.

⁴ See J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, Princeton University Press 2001.

⁵ See Ch. Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka*, Lantern Books 2002. The book begins with a motto from Singer: "In his thoughts, Herman spoke of a eulogy for the mouse who had shared a portion of her life with him and who, because of him, had left this earth. 'What do they know – all these scholars, all these philosophers, all the leaders of the world – about such as you? They have convinced themselves that man, the worst transgressor of all the species, is the crown of creation. All other creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pelts, to be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka'".

⁶ The matter of the PETA exhibition, the course of and arguments used in court cases brought by Jewish communities against the organisers is described in detail by Mark Joel Webber. The author also raises a broader issue of rhetorical nature, namely the ethics of comparison. See M.J. Webber, *Metaphorizing the Holocaust: The Ethics of Comparison*, www.images.pa.pl. (I would like to thank Michał Matlak for pointing out this text to me). In Germany PETA won in two courts; the Federal Court did not agree to hear the appeal. In Austria PETA lost twice, but the Supreme Court revoked the ruling. Defending themselves against the accusation of using Nazi methods and equating the Jews with animals, PETA members pointed to, to use Webber's language, the synecdochal and not metaphorical nature of this comparison. This means that the organisers wanted to draw attention to the fact that both humans and animals "share the same". Their fates are similar. However, after the final analysis Webber concluded that PETA, following the principle of "the end justifies the means" had instrumentalised the Holocaust, for instance by manipulating the number of victims.

The already mentioned ideal of posthumanism, which has emerged in contemporary thought, is associated with hopes for undermining or complete erosion of species chauvinism of the humans. We could place within it Bruno Latour's proposal of networked thinking. His category of the actor-network suspends essentialising divisions into humans, objects and animals, as well as the legitimacy of a fixed and unshaken boundary between nature and culture.

Today art – often at the forefront of cultural sensibility – has begun to cooperate with biotechnological laboratories and, through bioart actions, it provokes us into revising our ideas about the boundaries and relations between the human and the non-human. Various hybrids and animals in completely new roles appear in galleries and on theatrical stages, which provokes extreme reactions⁷. Wolfgang Welsch seeks the reasons for animal aesthetics in Darwinism⁸; Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce point to animal behaviour, which – in their opinion – can be classified as ethical, because it is governed by reasons other than instinct, namely the good of other “specimens” of the species⁹. We could have the impression that we are witnessing profound revisions (definitely not yet finished), which can be seen in the deep emotional engagement of many participants in “animal” debates. In other words, using Victor Turner's category of social drama, we could say that we seem to be in the crisis stage in which what comes to the fore among various emotions is a sense of disorientation. At the same time the current order of human-animal relations, losing its regulatory power, begins to be exposed in its foundations; its arguments but also inconsistencies are becoming, at least for some, visible and provoke not only discussions but also various more or less revolutionary enterprises.

In today's discussions, the most often heard voices are those of ethicists, cognitive ethologists and politicians. A question thus arises whether the perspective of culture studies is a chance for an original, new articulation of the complex animal-human issues, or perhaps it is more of a source of grounds for the consolidation of such ways of thinking that today are being accused of legitimising species chauvinism, the harm and suffering experienced by animals in the human world. Is the price for joining this discussion self-elimination of the discourse of culture studies, of humanities? Or, on the contrary, perhaps tackling these problems is a chance of a refreshing revision of its foundations?

⁷ For more on the “animal turn” in contemporary art, see Anna Małecka's article in this issue. For analyses of bioart, see M. Bakke, *Bio-transfiguracje. Sztuka i estetyka post-humanizmu*, Poznań 2010; E. Kac, *Telepresence & Bio Art. Networking Humans*, Ann Arbor 2004; *Signs of Life. Bio Art. and Beyond*, ed. E. Kac, Cambridge, Massachusetts-London 2007.

⁸ See W. Welsch, “Aesthetics beyond the aesthetics”, [in:] *Undoing Aesthetics*, SAGE Publications Ltd 1998, pp. 78-103.

⁹ See M. Bekoff, J. Pierce, *Wild Justice. Contemporary Bioethics*, Chicago 2009.

The tragedy of the human condition

For is it not because of the myth of the exclusive dignity of human nature that nature Itself suffered its first mutilation, to be followed inevitably by other mutilations?

Claude Lévi-Strauss

One of the most spectacular 20th century attacks on the entrenched ways of thinking about the human-animal boundary came in the form of ethology studies, concerning the behaviour of both animals (in natural conditions) and humans as well as population genetics. They became the basis of another discipline – sociobiology – which, according to a large number of researchers, especially humanistically-oriented culture scholars, engaged in or, rather, engages in, for it still feels fine, various cognitive usurpations with regard to explanations of the human world, particularly culture. As we know, great opponents of sociobiology included Clifford Geertz, who openly denied sociobiological explications of culture any sense. Although Edward O. Wilson, an entomologist and founder of sociobiology, did not abandon the main sociobiological ideas, nevertheless in successive publications he softened the categorical nature of his views, making his position more subtle, for example, by means of the concept of coevolution, taking into account the cultural variable as the variable of evolutionary processes. As the physical anthropologist Tadeusz Bielicki once noted, the boundary between the human and the animal in times directly preceding the sociobiological expansion was attacked on two fronts¹⁰. In the light of ethological studies in particular it turned out that animals were more “human” than we had long thought, and also that humans were more “animal-like”, especially in their social behaviour, than we were willing to admit (let us leave aside at this point the problematic nature of the content of the “human” and the “animal”). On the other hand, altruism, which we were so proud of, seeing it as disinterested, autotelic behaviour, something characteristic of the human world, was interpreted as just a manifestation of gene strategy common to us and the animals, a strategy instrumentalising both ourselves and the animals. Bielicki argues that although humans, drawing on cultural preferences, regard as positive not only behaviour contradicting the so-called maximisation of fitness, contradicting, i.e. fatal from the point of view of biological interests, the fact that all human cultures have the same attitude, which is negative from the point of view of “gene policy” and survival of the species, makes us a species transcending its biological condition and, thus, tragic. Therefore, in Bielicki’s view, sociobiology has unintentionally provided arguments for the specificity of the human world and illegitimacy of its naturalistic explanations. Today’s disputes about sociobiology and its vision of what is human and non-human may have not so much died down, but are not the focus of attention anymore, with its advocates and opponents becoming entrenched in their positions

¹⁰ See T. Bielicki, “O pewnej osobliwości człowieka jako gatunku”, *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 1991, no. 2.

and seemingly not wanting to waste energy on trying to convince each other. Would not the figure of tragedy rather than the dignity be more desired today (though not necessarily fruitful) in analysing our relations with other species?

I find the fullest expression of what I have in mind as well as a warning against sentimentalism in Wisława Szymborska's poem *The Tarsier*, which is certainly worth quoting here:

I am a tarsier and a tarsier's son
the grandson and great-grandson of tarsiers,
a tiny creature, made up of two pupils
and whatever simply could not be left out;
miraculously saved from further alterations--
since I'm no one's idea of a treat,
my coat's too small for a fur collar,
my glands provide no bliss,
and concerts go on without my gut--
I, a tarsier,
sit living on a human fingertip.

Good morning, lord and master,
what will you give me / for not taking anything from me?
How will you reward me for your own magnanimity?
What price will you set on my priceless head
for the poses I strike to make you smile?

My good lord is gracious,
my good lord is kind.
Who else could bear such witness if there were
no creatures unworthy of death?
You yourselves, perhaps?
But what you've come to know about yourselves
will serve for a sleepless night from star to star.

And only we few who remain unstripped of fur,
untorn from bone, unplucked of soaring feathers,
esteemed in all our quills, scales, tusks, and horns,
and in whatever else that ingenious protein
has seen fit to clothe us with,
we, my lord, are your dream,
which finds you innocent for now.

I am a tarsier--the father and grandfather of tarsiers
a tiny creature, nearly half of something,
yet nonetheless a whole no less than others,
so light that twigs spring up beneath my weight
and might have lifted me to heaven long ago
if I hadn't had to fall time and again
like a stone lifted from hearts
grown oh so sentimental:
I, a tarsier,
know well how essential it is to be a tarsier.¹¹

¹¹ W. Szymborska, "Tarsier", [in:] *Poems New and Collected*, Mariner Books, 2000, pp. 98–99.

A duel between Apelles and Protogenes or on the suspending gesture of distinction

Leland de la Durantaye, in a review that was mainly about an exegesis of Giorgio Agamben's work *The Open. Man and Animal* (*L'aperto: L'uomo e l'animale*)¹², reminded the readers that its author had discovered a certain error in the critical edition of Walter Benjamin's writings, of which he wrote in another work, devoted to St. Paul's letter to the Romans. When Benjamin described a historical event and wrote about the distinction of what preceded and what followed it, he used a metaphor that no one could understand. He allegedly wrote that this distinction was like a line divided by the Apollonian incision. Agamben looked into the manuscript and it turned out that it was not about the god Apollo, but the Greek painter Apelles, who had painted a portrait of Alexander the Great. According to some accounts, Apelles became supposedly involved in a painting duel with another Greek painter, Protogenes of Rhodes. The painters competed to demonstrate who could paint a finer line. Apelles apparently won, making an "incision" with his own differently-coloured line in Protogenes' line and this "incision", by Apelles not Apollo, must have been what Benjamin had in mind, according to Agamben. Thus, the metaphor refers us to increasingly subtle divisions. Agamben treats this gesture of division he notes in Benjamin and St. Paul as an obligation for us to think about the relations between the universal and the particular, not only in the logical but also ontological and political context, and to think about it as a gesture which is not intended to blur distinctions, but without actually blurring them, it eventually undermines their legitimacy¹³. In the case of reflections on St. Paul, this concerns divisions within a historically specific human world (the Jew-Gentile, circumcised-uncircumcised...), but, as we know, Agamben also deals with the distinction between the human and the non-human. It interests him mainly in the "anthropo-centric" perspective as a distinction in man between *zoe* and *bios*, from where the trail leads to critical considerations of biopolitics and the category of "naked life". The anthropological machine (a concept borrowed from Furio Jesi), creating the boundary between the human and the animal, about which Agamben writes in *The Open*, despite its name goes slightly beyond this exclusively anthropological perspective. The reviewer of *The Open* mentioned earlier, when trying to penetrate the meaning of the title category, shows that although Agamben refers both to Martin Heidegger and Rainer Maria Rilke's famous eight Duino elegy in explaining the meaning of "the open", he proposes his own understanding of it, which is closer to the Greek category of *katargēsis*. He breaks Heidegger with Benjamin, as the reviewer put it. For Heidegger, the experience of the open is a human experience of the world, and the category of openness refers to the category of truth as in uncon-

¹² See G. Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal*, Stanford 2004.

¹³ See L. de la Durantaye, "The Suspended Substantive. On Animals and Men in Giorgio Agamben's *The Open*", *Diacritics* 2003, Summer, p. 8.

cealedness, *aletheia*. Like plants, animals, because of a lack of this openness, are in his view deprived of the world, they only have an environment stimulating them or are “poor in world”. According to Durantaye, here Heidegger is not far from Descartes and his concept of the animal, which although perfect or most perfect, is still, nevertheless, a reactive machine. In Rilke it is the animals that experience openness (which is Heidegger’s blindness), that is adherence to the world, while people closed by their distance are deprived of this experience; in the animals’ eyes they can capture only a trace of it. Agamben’s the open is neither human nor animal openness, but a *hiatus*, *katargēsis*. The *Greek-English Lexicon* tells us that *katargēsis* means “invalidate”, “abolish”, “put an end to”, “deactivate”; *katargein* — “neglect”, “make indolent”, “disturb someone in his work”, “do something without any effect”, while *katargeia* means “reduction to inactivity”.

What is abolished, suspended? The gesture of division, the operation of the anthropological machine. The question is whether its suspension is a political or other task, or a condition of the very gesture of division. In the latter case, *katargēsis* would be found in the logic of operation of the anthropological machine and this interpretation is, as I understand it, what Durantaye follows. He also cites another word needed to explore the meaning of the open, namely the French *désœuvrement*, which also refers to inoperativeness. Thus, the open is a result of katargetic activity of the including/excluding anthropological machine, stopping or suspending the dialectic movement, but also *hiatus* and its energy of unfulfilled potentiality. Is the anthropological suspended, is this its ultimate perspective? If so, for this seems to be its destination, what does it, in fact, mean? How should be interpret the sentences from *The Open* concerning the Sabbath of humans and animals? What is the cultural status of the anthropological machine and the “content” of Apelles’ incision?

The animal in culture. From sacrifice interchangeable with that of humans to collaborator. From M. Eliade’s Palaeolithic to D. Haraway’s present

Let us start from a comparison of quotes:

Man is the final product of a decision made “at the beginnings of Time”: the decision to kill in order to live. In short, the hominians outstripped their ancestors by becoming flesh-eaters... Ceaseless pursuit of animals eventually led to the creation of a unique system of relations between the hunter and the slain animal [...] the “mystical solidarity” between the hunter at his victims is revealed by the mere act of killing: the shed blood is similar in every respect to human blood [...] To kill the hunted beast or, later, the domestic animal is equivalent to a “sacrifice” in which the victims are interchangeable¹⁴.

¹⁴ M. Eliade, *History of Religious Ideas*, Volume 1. *From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries*, University Of Chicago Press 1981, p. 5.

I would like to compare this fragment of M. Eliade's *History of Religious Ideas* concerning Palaeolithic beliefs, being fully aware of the danger of comparing incomparable discourses, with some quotes from Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet*:

I suggest that it is a misstep to separate the world's beings into those who may be killed and those who may not and a misstep to pretend to live outside killing. [...] The problem is to learn to live responsibly within the multiplicitous necessity and labour of killing, so as to be in the open, in quest of the capacity to respond in relentless historical, nonteleological, mutlispecies contingency. Perhaps the commandment should read, "Though shalt not make killable". She goes on to say: Breaking the sacrificial logic that parses who is killable and who isn't might just lead to a lot more change than the practices of analogy, rights extension, denunciation and prohibition¹⁵.

Not only are these sentences taken out of their very different contexts, but they also have behind them different cognitive perspectives and interests, different ways of thinking about thinking. Yet they make us rethink the sacrificial logic, which Eliade notes (I would not like to raise the question how much projection this observation contains) in the Palaeolithic world, with Haraway and before her Derrida calling for its transgression in the contemporary world, and, in addition, they seem to make us realise that our relations with animals are defined by the operation of the anthropological machine as well as other "incisions" and "mechanisms". In the human world, animals have had the status of god, sacrifice, totem, food, tool, commodity, matter, toy... Donna Haraway believes that according the laboratory animals the status of collaborators can at least partially change their fate. What "machine" or "machines" put in motion this kaleidoscope of animal statuses, strategies of elevation and, above all, degradation? Can the perspective of "non-anthropocentric", humanistic (qualitative, casuistically sensitive) culture studies be useful in identifying them? Can animal reflection in culture studies be useful in developing a language that is non-degrading but does not necessarily resort only to the rhetoric of love and friendship?

¹⁵ D. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University Of Minnesota Press, pp. 79–82.

