

Steve Baker¹

Guest Editor's Introduction: Animals, Representation, and Reality

The field of animal studies, which this journal has fostered and promoted for almost a decade, has now begun to develop across an increasing range of academic disciplines. Initially envisaged principally as “a substantive subfield” within the social sciences and, thus, as an academic “parallel” to the animal rights movement, it was nevertheless recognized from the outset that animal studies would also benefit from some contributions from both the humanities and the natural sciences (Shapiro, 1993, pp. 1-2).

In 1997, the journal formally extended its scope “to include investigations in the humanities” (Shapiro, 1997, p. 1), thus anticipating a number of academic conferences in 1999 and 2000, which testified to the considerable growth of interest in animal topics within humanities disciplines. Julie Smith's contribution to this special theme issue assesses the significance of those conferences. And although “The Representation of Animals” is a theme that will no doubt also be of interest within the social and natural sciences, the issue reflects the particular importance of the question of “representation” in humanities disciplines

such as history, literary criticism, art history, socio-cultural anthropology, and philosophy, each of which is represented in the contributions to this issue.

The Work of Representation

Why is it, it may be asked, that representation has become such an inescapable and compelling topic in these disciplines, and what exactly is its significance in relation to the human experience of other animals? It is important to understand from the start that the term is not used here in the rather narrower sense in which it might be understood by some psychologists, for example, as little more than a product of the brain's information processing capacities.² It is used instead in a sense that is both broader and more complex, as reflected for, example, in the titles of forthcoming volumes such as *Animal Rights and the Politics of Literary Representation* (Simons, in press) or, simply, *Representing Animals* (Rothfels, in press). Books such as these acknowledge the extent to which human understanding of animals is shaped by representations rather than by direct experience of them. In the language of scientific studies and in the structure of museum and zoo displays, just as much as in the more obvious examples of art, film, literature, and the mass media, many different forms of representation are employed. In some of these instances - as Robert McKay notes in his contribution to this issue - animals may simultaneously be "represented" in the political or legal sense of having their rights or interests spoken for by animal advocates and others.

This should not be taken to suggest that the study of representations is wholly subjective or partisan. New levels of understanding can emerge from such study. To give one concise example, at last year's *Millennial Animals* conference (reviewed by Smith) a paper by Matthew Brower considered the subject of North American wildlife photography. Brower's historical perspective enabled him to show that this practice, currently regarded for the most part as "a non-intrusive, environmentally friendly activity which shows proper respect for the fragility of nature" and as "a model of non-interventionist right practice," had only a century ago been characterized as "camera hunting." It was a practice "shaped by the discourses of hunting," and the resulting photographs were spoken of "as both trophy and kill," but the particular difficulties created by the technical limitations of the camera at that time led to the camera hunter rather than the hunter with a gun coming to be regarded

as “the superior sportsman.” Brower went on to consider the practical consequences of these perceptions in, for example, the political rhetoric of President Theodore Roosevelt (Brower, 2000).

In more oblique ways, art and literature can of course also employ the particular characteristics of their medium to address perceptions of the animal. Looking back at the early photographs in her book, *Zoo* (Jaschinski, 1996), the artist Jaschinski has specifically acknowledged the understanding to which only the camera could have given her access: “I felt that I *photographed* something which I didn’t *know*. And it was almost like the camera saw it, not me,” she has stated (Malamud, 1999).³

All of Jaschinski’s work explores the consequences of representational strategies for the human understanding of animals (Baker, 2000, pp. 135-152). In her most recent series, *Wild Things*, she continues the detailed and difficult work of looking and of communicating critical knowledge in that looking. Her rhinoceros photograph (see Figure 1), for example, acknowledges the care and attention taken in Albrecht Dürer’s far earlier representation of that animal. Some of the animals in the *Wild Things* series have been photographed in zoos, others in the wild. With the erasure of background and context, this significant distinction is also erased - and with it, the dubious notion which is peddled rather too easily and too often, that the “zoo animal” is in some sense not a *real* animal.

Creative representations have also been used to address more specifically topical developments in human dealings with animals. Jo Shapcott’s sequence of “mad cow” poems and novelist Deborah Levy’s *Diary of a Steak* both constitute imaginative but ethical meditations on the spread of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in Britain during the 1990s (Shapcott, 2000; Levy, 1997). Other approaches are more direct. At the time of writing, in mid-April 2001, well over a thousand cases of foot-and-mouth disease had been identified in Britain since late February, and a massive (and highly controversial) cull of livestock was in progress in order to try to stop the spread of the disease. In response, Sue Coe’s syndicated image, *Not Fit for Human Consumption* (see Figure 2) draws on her extensive study of the biting graphic satire of earlier centuries to create this mordant commentary on the shortcomings of contemporary farming practices.

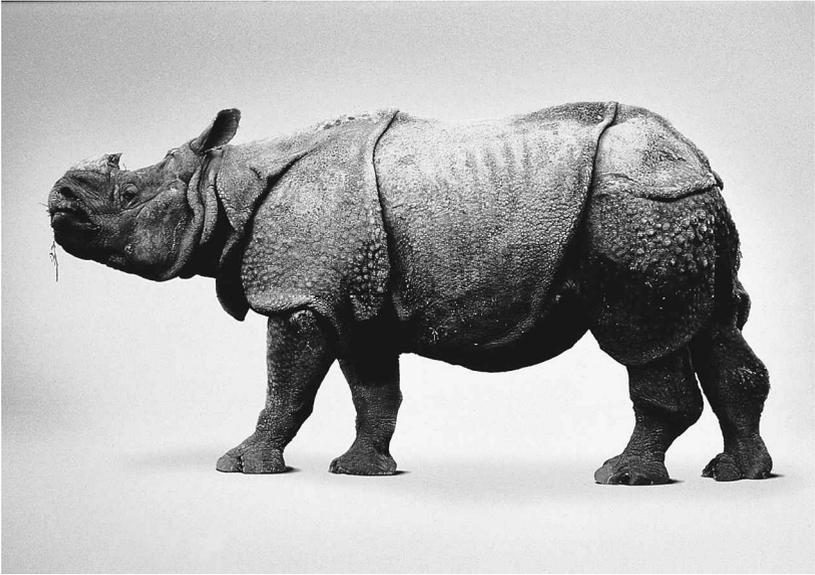


Figure 1. Britta Jaschinski, *Rhinoceros unicornis* (2000), from the series *Wild Things*.
Photo: courtesy of the artist.



Not fit for human consumption '01

Figure 2. Sue Coe: *Not Fit for Human Consumption*. 2001. Copyright © 2001 Sue Coe.
Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York

As these examples suggest, and as several of the contributors to this special theme issue also insist, representation is *never* straightforward or “transparent.” The representation, in other words, does not and cannot simply represent the “real” animal. This, as will soon become clear, is where matters start to get really heated.

Poststructuralism versus Empiricism?

In much of the material typically addressed in cultural or media studies, the assertion that the viewer or reader can never gain access to a secure reality behind the representation is the stuff of enjoyably controversial debate - though as the French theorist Jean Baudrillard found to his cost when he proposed that the Gulf War of the early 1990s *had no reality* other than as a televisual spectacle, critical tolerance of such theoretical flights of fancy has its limits (Norris, 1992). It was excesses such as Baudrillard's that served to give poststructuralism and postmodernism a (largely undeserved) reputation for being both ahistorical and politically irresponsible - a view rather widely held by those who still hold confidently to the reliability of “empirical” evidence.

It is easy enough to see how such unproductive schisms might also develop within animal studies. On the one side, animal advocates, activists, and academics who are directly concerned with the actual mistreatment of “real” living animals; on the other, a group of rather self-indulgent scholars who seem more concerned with exploring fancy theories of representation than with addressing the real plight of the represented animals. Of course, it is never as simple as that.

In a widely admired paper on “Writing the History of Animals” delivered at the *Representing Animals* conference in Milwaukee last year, Erica Fudge (in press) argued that the distinction between the historian's ability to look at animals and to look at the representation of animals by humans was a vital one. It in a sense epitomized “one of the most significant debates currently taking place within the discipline of history itself between (broadly speaking) empiricism and poststructuralism.” Her contention was that “the centrality of representation which emerges in the history of animals” - because

that history is wholly shaped by *human* documents - "places it firmly within what I am terming the poststructuralist camp." Poststructuralism's unsettling of the security and centrality of the complacent human subject opens the gates to more productive and more malleable understandings of the non-human animal, which need no longer be locked into its rhetorical role as humanity's negative "other." Fudge's challenging conclusion is that the history of animals "can only work at the expense of the human" (Fudge, in press).

Representation is not always read in these terms. John Simons's assessment of "the politics of representation" suggests that poststructuralism has itself become a "critical orthodoxy" that does not serve animals well. No matter how radical its theories, it epitomizes the academy's "increasingly hermetic withdrawal from the society with which it should be in dialogue." Regardless of whether or not individual radical academics happen to be activists, Simons (in press) laments the fact that "the nature of activism may be entirely untouched by what passes for radical thought." This is by no means an attempt to trivialize questions of representation; he in fact sees literary representation as a vital and genuinely creative means of gaining imaginative access to "non-human experience." For exactly this reason, he insists that "we cannot separate the facts of cruelty to animals from the arguments about literary criticism," but his fear is that a poststructuralist account of representation cannot properly, "engage with the questions of truth, faith, and feeling, which he sees as central to responsible human interactions with the non-human world (Simons).

These brief summaries give some sense of the complexity and the urgency of contemporary debates about the representation of animals - and indeed of the continuing vitality of those debates, as may be evident from the fact that several of the writings cited in these introductory remarks are currently still in press. Animal studies academics at all points on the spectrum between empiricism and poststructuralism often passionately believe that their own favored method is the one that will, when properly understood, be seen best to serve the interests of animals. Fudge and Simons, no matter what the methodological differences between them, happen both to have made significant use of the phrase, "a way forward" to indicate that their approaches to representation are ethically-informed and *purposeful*, addressing the liter-

ary and the political representation of animals (Fudge, 2000, p. 110; Simons, in press).

At the recent humanities conferences reviewed by Smith the debates about methodology (empiricism versus poststructuralism, modernism versus postmodernism) were generally conducted in good-natured terms and in a spirit of open exchange, but this should not disguise the fact that the different positions adopted were regarded by some as irreconcilable. The various theoretical perspectives described in Ralph Acampora's review essay in this issue give some indication of this. The case studies discussed in the main articles here certainly address the theme of the representation of animals in sufficient detail to hinder the easy adoption of methodological party lines, but in most cases - like many animal studies academics in recent years - the authors nevertheless find it necessary directly to address that most controversial rhetorical term: the "real" animal.

The "Real" Animal

It has been persuasively argued that in the postmodern world there is "a deeply felt loss of faith in our ability to represent the real" (Bertens, 1995, p. 11). Much hangs on this unfashionably *unpostmodern* question of the "real" and of what passes for knowledge of the animal in the contemporary world. A 1990 installation by the American artists Mark Dion and William Schefferine called *Survival of the Cutest (Who Gets on the Ark?)* featured a wheelbarrow chock-full of stuffed toy animals: a panda, a rabbit, an elephant, a zebra and a variety of other "charismatic megafauna." It was a more or less self-explanatory critique of the general public's preferred understanding of the natural world.

In other pieces, Dion (2000) pursues this critique more surreptitiously, using the distortions of reality created by his "very crazy taxidermist". At the center of his 1995 installation, *Ursus maritimus*, for example, is a taxidermic polar bear; the artist clearly relishes the fact that most viewers who see this imposingly "real" animal in the middle of the art gallery will be blissfully unaware that the bear is, in fact, covered with goat fur. Misleading the viewer in this way can have unexpected advantages: Jaschinski's 1998 high-contrast photograph of a gibbon, *Hylobates lar*, is one that she is quite pleased to see often

being mistaken for a frog, because viewers who read it thus are far less inclined to anthropomorphize the creature.

The critical work of representation undertaken by such artists may be more important than ever in a world where popular entertainment fabricates its own animal realities. As Jane Desmond powerfully argued at the *Representing Animals* conference in her paper on the rapid development of animatronics (the use of robotics, computer generated animation, and live puppeteers to make constructed animals move) over the past ten years, the “real” is an increasingly slippery concept:

There is a threshold of realism (constantly rising) that demands that animals *look* very “real” in order to facilitate their performance of nonrealistic emotive behaviors. These articulate bodies replicate animal movement while at the same time often falsifying it - that is, providing visions of anatomically correct pigs that sing or dogs that weep. The aesthetic goal is to have the intercutting of live, animatronic, and computer generated animals work seamlessly, so that none of the shots appears more “real” than the other, within the already fictional framework of a talking animal show. (Desmond, in press)

Contrary to the naturalism or realism of the animals in such live action films as *101 Dalmatians* (1996), *Babe: Pig in the City* (1998) and *102 Dalmatians* (2000), the credits at the end of such films include extensive lists of animal trainers for the various featured species. They give the audience at least a clue as to just what circuses these films are, even before the artifice of their animatronics is taken into account.

It is in those instances when the animal is not a singing pig, of course, that the audience is least able to gauge the status of what it is seeing. The pack of tusked, long-haired boars featured in Ridley Scott's *Hannibal* (2001) is real enough, but it is an animatronic boar who is glimpsed inflicting the damage in one of the film's gorier moments - much as, at the opposite emotional extreme, the spotless puppy, “Oddball,” in *102 Dalmatians* is also an entirely artificial creation. Such artifice is nothing new, of course, though its forms constantly change. Neither is it particularly practical to lament this. The film viewer, like the zoo visitor, is there for an *experience* and usually has little reason to care one way or the other about the living animal's role in the construction of that experience.

The Representation of Animals

Across the articles and reviews published in this special theme issue is a shared recognition that representations do have consequences for living animals. In this sense (and indeed in many others), representations do matter, and they deserve to be studied and understood. Jonathan Burt's "The Illumination of the Animal Kingdom: The Role of Light and Electricity in Animal Representation" considers the physical interaction between animals' bodies and specific developments in film, zoo display, and slaughterhouse practice in the early decades of the twentieth century. In doing so, he aims to counteract those histories that tend to reduce the animal's role to one that is "merely totemic;" instead, he shows the animal to be "a central figure in the presentation of new and 'progressive' technology" in this period. He further contends in relation to these future-oriented technologies and their associated discourses that "the seeing of the animal" by humans became a particularly complex act because animals were often given the role of "bearers of morality in the field of vision." The concealment of animal death in the slaughterhouse, and the animal's open display as "event" in the zoo and in film, lead Burt to conclude that the changing (but structurally consistent) configurations of visibility and invisibility in this period "are what determine both the nature and power of animal representation."

Susan McHugh's "Video Dog Star: William Wegman, Aesthetic Agency and the Animal in Experimental Video Art" is also concerned with the specifics of animal display in a particular historical period, in this case the late 1970s. Prior to the production of Wegman's ubiquitous large-scale Polaroid photographs of weimaraner dogs in exotic human outfits in the 1980s and 1990s, the artist had engaged in a short period of intense creative activity making low-budget videos featuring himself and his first and most famous weimaraner, Man Ray. McHugh's bold assertion is that in these videos the dog's role is, in effect, that of co-artist. Fully aware of the pitfalls of the preposterous suggestion that dogs or any other animals share contemporary human conceptions of "art," she makes her case through a detailed visual reading of Wegman's and Man Ray's playful, intuitive, trusting, and creative interaction in these short videos. In notable contrast to theoretical conceptions of what animals can or cannot do (and should or should not be made to do), she argues that these highly unusual artworks "sweep aside deadlocked questions of exploitation

or manipulation” because they briefly explore a particular kind of cross-species communication, a “pack aesthetics.” This offers, she suggests, a rare glimpse of the scope for challenging and frustrating the more familiar “anthropocentric aesthetics” that leaves the human artist in full and complacent control of the representation of animals.

Robert McKay's “Getting Close to Animals with Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar*” uses Walker's novel to consider the view - not too far removed from that of McHugh - that “human representations fail animals.” He, nevertheless, believes that the imaginative narrative strategies of the contemporary novelist can undermine the tendency of human language and other human representations to act as a barrier to the sympathetic understanding of non-human animals. Walker understands compassion, McKay suggests, as “the hard-won result of an always ongoing, genuinely engaged thought” that resists “easy moral judgements.” His assessment of the novelist's “disaffection with absolute truth in written or photographic representation, her valorization of imagination and creativity rather than ‘facts,’ and her concern to speak for animals” ends with an exploration of the unreliability of photographic evidence in this novel. The resulting rhetoric of appearance and disappearance seems to echo the complexities of the non-fictional representation of animals discussed in Burt's article. The notion of reality *is* important in relation to these unreliable representations, McKay concludes, but principally in terms of “being open to the realities of others,” including animals.

Garry Marvin's “Cultured Killers: Creating and Representing Foxhounds” is, in some senses, the most provocative of the articles in this issue. Written at a time when the British parliament has been debating the prohibition of hunting with hounds, the piece offers a detailed and timely insight into the life and purpose of this most unusual dog. But where other contributors discuss the various entanglements of representations and “realities” in and on the lives of animals, Marvin's contention is that this particular living animal *is itself a representation*. His ethnographic account of this animal's complex place in the complex performance of British foxhunting leads him to assert that “the foxhound is not simply *there*, present, in the world.” To a greater extent than many other domesticated animals, this breed “cannot be perceived, thought of, spoken about or have any meaning outside the cultural context

in which it exists and without which it would not exist at all." In a process of "continual becoming," each hound's body is "a representative of an image" in the breeder's mind, and the consequences of this can be all too real: breeders "can control the nature of the present animal by refusing its presence - they will kill it if it does not conform to their idea or ideal." Although the context could hardly be more different to that of Wegman's work with Man Ray, Marvin is concerned - like McHugh - to elaborate the particular conception of pack aesthetics that is at work here. There is no space for the individual in the "collective venture" of this pack, in which the animal's aesthetic role is to embody and to express "the possibility of performance." The animals, therefore, only become foxhounds when they behave as such, and this they can only do within the pack. More startlingly, Marvin provides some evidence that the hound "presents itself in terms of its representation," and that this process reflects the animals' having a kind of awareness of their human-constructed "foxhoundness."

Several of the themes addressed in these articles are also evident in Ralph Acampora's review essay, "Representation Cubed: Reviewing Reflections on Animal Imagery." The vexed question of the real animal once again runs through his comments. Distancing himself from the uncompromising assertion that "the notion of a 'real animal' makes no sense" because animals are "human constructions," he is skeptical of the view in two of the books under review that the anthropogenic character of representations necessarily makes them an "ethically corruptive influence on awareness of animals." Acknowledging that such representations can never be transparent, he persuasively argues for the notion of a "translucent" mediation of cognition that might "represent nature sufficiently well for us to arrive at value-laden yet non-arbitrary views of animals."

Julie Smith's review of recent academic conferences, which closes this issue, argues for a similar spirit of compromise or at least of open-mindedness. Although she reports the frustration caused by "the absence of an advocacy perspective" at some of these conferences, she also sees them as exciting evidence of the growth of animal studies within the humanities, while noting Charles Bergman's warning of the dangers of reading animals merely as "texts" produced by humans. Smith nevertheless approves the attempts in many conference papers "to replace censure with investigation, no matter

how disturbing the cultural practice." Although it seems to her that "animal studies is not going to be the site of a unilateral advocacy" for which some had hoped, she reports evidence of a tolerance for diverse opinion and "a healthy airing of the uneasiness with which modernist and postmodernist advocate-scholars view the theoretical directions of each other." It is to be hoped that something of that tolerance *and* that uneasiness will also be apparent to readers of this special theme issue on "The Representation of Animals."

* Steve Baker, University of Central Lancashire

Notes

- ¹ Correspondence should be sent to Steve Baker, Department of Historical and Critical Studies, University of Central Lancashire, Preston PR1 2HE, United Kingdom. E-mail: sbaker1@uclan.ac.uk
- ² I am grateful to Kenneth Shapiro for this observation.
- ³ Other material from this unpublished interview appears in Malamud, 2001.

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