

Animals as Symbols: John Berger, “Why Look at Animals”

- What different domains can we think of where animals are used as symbols? To what effect?
- Understanding where Berger is coming from...[hint: “this reduction of the animal...is part of the same process as that by which men have been reduced to isolated productive and consuming units” (11)]
- How were animals **marginalized** in modernity?
- From Cartesian machines to Taylorite raw materials / commodities (11)
- Berger’s critique of modern pet-keeping (12)
- ‘Hobby-horse vs. rocking horse’ (and animal imagery) (20)

“[Animals] were subjected *and* worshipped, bred *and* sacrificed...Today the vestiges of this dualism remain among those who live intimately with, and depend upon, animals. A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant, and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an *and* and not by a *but*.” (5)

“The examples are endless. Everywhere animals offered explanations” (6 – see page for some examples...) Do animals still offer explanations? The same ones as in the original myths? Different ones?

“What distinguished man from animals was the human capacity for symbolic thought...Yet the first symbols were animals.” (7)

“In the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them. And in this new solitude, anthropomorphism makes us doubly uneasy.” (9)

“The animals of the mind, instead of being dispersed, have been co-opted into other categories so that the category *animal* has lost its central importance. Mostly they have been co-opted into the *family* and into the *spectacle*.” (13) [Donald duck and Animal Planet...]

“...animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance” (14)

Grandville’s animals (on 16): “These animals are not being “borrowed” to explain people, nothing is being unmasked; on the contrary. These animals have become prisoners of a human/social situation into which they have been press-ganged. The vulture as landlord is more dreadfully rapacious than he is as a bird. The crocodiles at dinner are greedier at the table than they are in the river...[a] movement that ends with the banality of Disney.” (17)

Why does Berger say that zoos are, “in fact, a monument to the impossibility of [genuine human-animal] encounters”? Do you agree with Berger’s view that zoos radically distort our vision of the lives of animals by creating a situation in which “*you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal*”? (see 23 and 24)

Donovan Hohn, “Moby Duck, or the Synthetic Wilderness of Childhood”: It occurs to me that this is what I have been pursuing these past months, this is what I found so spellbindingly enigmatic about the image of those plastic ducks at sea—incongruity. We have built for ourselves out of this New World a giant diorama, a synthetic habitat, but travel beyond the edges or look with the eyes of a serious beachcomber, and the illusion begins to crumble.

Boria Sax, “Animals as Tradition” (Kalof): metamorphosed animals, divine animals, demonic animals, satiric animals, and political animals...“Every animal is a tradition, and together animals are a vast part of our heritage as human beings. No animal completely lacks humanity, yet no person is ever completely human. By ourselves, we people are simply balls of protoplasm. We merge with animals through magic, metaphor, or fantasy, growing their fangs and putting on their feathers. Then we become funny or tragic; we can be loved, hated, pitied, and admired. For us, animals are all the strange, beautiful, pitiable, and frightening things that they have ever been: gods, slaves, totems, sages, tricksters, devils, clowns, companions, lovers, and far more. When we contemplate the inner life of animals, myth is finally our only truth.”