

BOOK REVIEWS

Animal Encounters¹

Reviewed by Amy L. Fletcher²

Animal Encounters, edited by Tom Tyler and Manuela Rossini offers the reader six paired sets of essays on various types of Human-Animal encounters, ranging from animal consumption to laboratory experiments to zoophilia. Unlike the majority of edited volumes, the book is well-organized and thematic. The editors provide exemplary short framing discussions prior to each set of essays. Tom Tyler also contributes a thoughtful introduction that argues in favour of agonistic and productive, as opposed to antagonistic and hostile, encounters between not only animals and humans, but also between the various humans (and their associated academic disciplines) that now congregate uneasily in this relatively new, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary arena. The authors represented (ranging from the Donna Haraway to new entrants into the field) work within a variety of academic disciplines including sociology, anthropology, art history, gender studies and feminism, history, science and technology studies, philosophy, ecocriticism and environmental studies.

Because it is so comprehensive, the book also provides an excellent opportunity for a stock-take (no pun intended) of Human-Animal Studies as an approach and as, potentially, an academic discipline in its own right. So much intellectually provocative work is taking place due to this surging interest in the animal and post-

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humanism; indeed, all of the essays here zing with an energy and commitment that more tapped-out research questions (and fields) currently lack. (For example, I dutifully checked the Web to ensure that Randy Malamud survived writing “Americans Do Weird Things with Animals, or Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road.” His essay rages with an invigorating—but sometimes exhausting—polemical fury against the trivialization and exploitation of animals, sufficient to do the Berkeley Free Speech Movement proud. The field of Human-Animal Studies is clearly no place for the timid.) However, the issue of animals, and Animal Studies, within the larger institutional context of (Western) academia is by no means certain. Therefore, I approach the rest of this review as a sympathetic critic, integrating themes within the book to several concerns about the future of Anthrozoology.

As the previous paragraph demonstrates, and as Tom Tyler emphasizes in his general introduction, the issue of what to call this research domain is not yet settled, hence “Animal Studies is a meeting point where different species of researcher gather” (p. 2). For those of us interested in exploring the interstices between academic disciplines, this is wholly positive. Yet for all that University rhetoric extols the virtues of interdisciplinarity, the current funding and political environment for higher education (I write with direct reference to New Zealand and the United States, with which I am most familiar) seems nevertheless to reinforce traditional disciplines and neo-positivist methodologies. While we may each be passionately interested in the question of ‘the animal,’ how can this new approach survive—and the scholars, especially the junior ones, within it thrive—in a macro-environment that seeks increasing quantitative “returns on investment” in higher education? With the study of the humanities under a constant fiscal (and ideological) shadow, perhaps it is

premature to say good-bye to all that, rush headlong into post-humanism, and create yet another fissure within the Arts. Ideally, Human-Animal Studies is a space within which humanists of a classical stripe and post-humanists can reinvigorate social and political critique of society. Yet my fear is that we are on the verge of simply repeating the disaster that befell English Departments in the 1980s and 1990s, wherein the traditionalists and the deconstructionists waged internecine battles while outside the gates the Visigoths prepared to sack the entire city.

My next point proceeds directly from the first. On the one hand, yes, a multitude of disciplines do co-exist here; but, on the other hand, not. In general, all of the approaches represented emerge from the broader category of cultural/critical studies; beneath the various standpoints, there is also quite of a lot of agreement on basic assumptions and ethical positions. Admittedly, I say this from within political science—a discipline, to be fair, that most vehemently resisted (resists) modifying its dreams of being a neo-positivist social science. We still spend much of our time arguing over whether qualitative research has merits distinct from quantitative research, so one can imagine how threatening post-humanism might prove to be, in a general/professional sense. Still, I don't see much that is overtly political here, and it is in political debates, action, legislation and regulations that much of what most concerns us about the subordinate position of animals in society will be worked out. Of course, democratic political debate means that theory and ethics is going to collide with a multitude of positions (including downright indifference) on the question of the animal. It also means compromise.

There are exceptions to this general critique, of course. For example, Haraway's essay on animal experimentation does take us provocatively beyond the (human) perpetrator and (animal) victim narrative in her analysis of laboratory research. Likewise, Pamela Banting complicates stereotyped approaches to the post-modern study of wilderness by insisting on the corporeal and material reality of nature, flora, and fauna, arguing that 'even if our ideas of nature and wilderness are as culturally conditioned as those pertaining to any other system, nevertheless nature preceded us, exceeds us, and . . . may also succeed us' (p. 29). Both of these essays evince a genuine willingness to embrace contingency, ambiguity and disagreement, and are the more persuasive because of it. Randy Malamud, as a counterexample, is angry, and perhaps rightfully so. Still, in this forceful essay (that does make a signal contribution to the volume), he veers from righteous anger to an almost apoplectic rage that will only alienate a very large proportion of the general public (and students) that might otherwise be inclined to listen (or read). To lurch from his skilful deconstruction of Avedon's famous 1955 photograph of high-fashion model Dovima, posed with elephants, to his relentless onslaught against cute blog photographs of kittens in Pop-Tart© boxes, is to experience academic vertigo. I, too, find the (alive, adorable) kittens-in-a box photos unappealing, but suspect this has more to do with my academic high-brow taste than with some genuine link between these photographs and a larger culture of animal suffering. In other words, I think a strong argument is stretched beyond credulity, and the mere fact of people innocuously interacting with their animals becomes an almost criminal affront. Living—and writing—on the edge can be exhilarating, but whether or not it does the field any good is another question.

My last concern has to do, perhaps expectedly, with the sixth section and its focus on zoophilia. The two essays in the section on Libidinal Encounters are theoretically and intellectually challenging, and I am not suggesting that they shouldn't have been written or published. My question is whether they should have been published here. In preparing this review, I first considered whether both of these articles were parodies—sly, Sokal-style jokes on the earnest reader of postmodern proclivities. However, the norms of academic reviewing require a response to the word on the page. Ergo, while acknowledging that both of these essays are intellectual high-wires acts, I must ask, what is really the point? Are these authors seriously advocating that human-animal sexual relations need to be decriminalized and purged of their taboo-status? Or are these intended as scholarly fantasias, in which art and sexuality combine into a potent, but harmless, intellectual exercise? If the former, then perhaps we should recall that, outside of fables, any human-animal 'boundary explorations' would by definition involve humans and domesticated animals. Animals in the wild are highly unlikely to do anything other than fight or flee an approaching amorous human (and if there is evidence to the contrary, then I would strongly suspect some form of human intervention, like doping, that occurred off-camera). This then leaves us with domesticated animals and animals in zoos, which means that the multifaceted politics of the animal's subordinate status cannot be ignored. How—really, how?—could a domesticated or caged animal be said to 'willingly' concede to this form of interaction? How would we know if they did? Zoophilia pushes the concept of anthropomorphism so far, that it circles back around again to enclose the human in the center of the analysis. If these two essays represent, alternatively, intellectual exercises (of however sophisticated a stripe), then we are back to the old game of *epater le bourgeois* in postmodern drag. In a world characterized by crimes against

animals, animal abandonment, the biodiversity crisis, and a multi-billion dollar illicit global industry in the illegal trafficking of endangered species, I suggest that there are much more pressing theoretical and empirical issues to foreground now than libidinal encounters between humans and animals.

Despite my reservations about the last section, I nevertheless recommend *Animal Encounters* whole-heartedly. It manages to be both a comprehensive and an eclectic introduction to a wide range of issues and will inspire many debates within seminars and across the field. This book works well on several levels, containing much to interest the established scholar while also providing a cogent and wide-ranging survey of perspectives and arguments suitable for a graduate-level course. The book is also a major contribution to the development and exploration of post-humanism in the arts and humanities.