

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Nigel Rothfels. *Representing Animals*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. xv + 235 pp. \$49.95 (library), ISBN 978-0-253-34154-9; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21551-2.

Reviewed by Richard Kahn (Graduate School of Education, UCLA)
Published on H-Net (February, 2005)



Is That *Ivory* in That Tower? Representing the Field of Animal Studies

On April 13-15, 2000, the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee organized a conference entitled “Representing Animals.” Composed of 38 participants, 31 of whom hailed from the United States, “this conference,” according to one reviewer, “provided an opportunity to assess the direction of animal studies in the United States.”[1] With the event featuring a well-attended public lecture by Jane Goodall, in which she again demonstrated her long-standing concern and defense of nonhuman primates, the direction of U.S. animal studies at the turn of the new millennium—at least in the humanities—appeared to be one that conceived of itself as involved in a political project of animal advocacy. In contradistinction, such advocacy seemed largely to be missing from the work of a number of the other professors in attendance, at least a few of whom appeared to favor the kind of “PoMo” cultural studies approach that many in the academy deride as turgid thought.

When a young scholar at the Representing Animals conference went so far as to critique Goodall’s work as “anthropomorphic,” thereby generating a heated debate, it became clear that the state of a new liberal arts field, Animal Studies, was a contested (if burgeoning) disciplinary terrain in the United States. In 2000, a number of researchers clearly conceived of Animal Studies as akin to other counter-hegemonic disciplines like Women’s Studies.[2] In their view, Animal Studies scholars should be animal advocates, the representative voices for non-human animals in an institutional structure that both tends to exclude nonhuman animals and considers

them voiceless. Some percentage of other scholars, however, perhaps sought to partake in Animal Studies as if it were a form of literary field and/or transdisciplinary fad. In this view, humanistic inquiry into the meaning of animals could take a more stoic attitude regarding the contemporary plight of many nonhuman animals, because it was primarily concerned with mapping the varying cross-cultural histories, semantics, and aesthetics of animal images instead.

For those whose work on and with animals is self-consciously progressive and normative, such maps tend to be seen as painfully anthropocentric. Thus, one conference participant, Charles Bergman, was deeply enough moved to write an article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in which he directly addressed those scholars that he felt merely pontificated about the intricacies of animal representations, such that they were content to forget entirely about the animal presences that had helped give rise to them. According to Bergman:

“[T]he participants talked exclusively about what representations of animals mean to us. They said virtually nothing about how our representations affect the animals, or the ethical issues involved in representation. The actual animals seemed almost an embarrassment, a disturbance to the symbolic field.”[3]

It was with particular interest, then, that I began to read Nigel Rothfels’s book, *Representing Animals*, a collection of essays that resulted in large measure from the 2000 conference, of which he was co-organizer. Mirroring the conference’s review, the blurb on the book cover’s

back promotes the collection as itself “a formative moment in the emerging field of ‘animal studies.’” How would Rothfels represent the minor scandal that had been the Representing Animals conference? It is not always that a reader is privy to the internal politics behind a book’s appearance, and so my anticipation was high.

The book’s cover and the illustrations for its three parts—“Animals in History,” “The Animal Object,” and “Cultures of Animals”—were designed by artist Lisa Moline, who had also provided “a building-covering installation” for the 2000 conference with her partner Lane Hall (p. xiii). Hall and Moline “are interested in the non-sentimental depiction of nature—primarily animals and their traces—and seek to explore the boundaries between the ‘natural’ and the technological. The act of collecting, visualizing and categorizing natural specimens is often the genesis of this work.”[4] To this end, the book contains images of two dead birds, a dead rodent, and a (presumably empty) snail shell held by human hands and encircled by line graphics that suggest an aesthetic of the kind of classification one might find in a natural history museum or life sciences laboratory.

While such “non-sentimental” scientific depictions might very well have lent some advocates at the Representing Animals conference to believe that they witnessed “the treatment of animal suffering and death with chilling detachment,”[5] in the context of the debate that frames this book, Moline’s images are both ambiguous and complex. On the one hand, they directly interrogate and implicate the reader as a voyeur and thereby force a confrontation with the image of human life and animal death. Further, the cupped nature of the human hands in the pictures is just enough to evoke the posture of gentleness and so they gesture towards an ethics of care, a meaning that might transcend the patriarchal act of brutal objectification. On the other hand, one is left wondering about the ability of representations to advocate for unrepresented animals altogether. Are such representations as these, or perhaps representations *in toto*, “murderous” in their attempt to de-animate life and capture it as spectacle? Or is “life” even something to be ascribed to representation proper, as opposed to the illusion of life cast by an endless play of signifiers? In the end, then, Moline’s graphics might be as condemnatory of the life sciences as they appear to be gratuitously glorifying. They hail the viewer to engage in the process of representation, even as they appear to generate the sort of symbolic field in which Charles Bergman’s “actual animals” will never be made available for the kind of contact that Moline’s representations depict as central.

The introduction by Rothfels further demonstrates that easy answers to the questions raised previously at the Representing Animals conference will not be found in his subsequent collection. To this end, he begins with the tale of “the twenty-fifth anniversary of the opening of the film *Jaws*” (p. vii), for which the National Geographic Society had enlisted the author behind the giant shark, Peter Benchley, to narrate a new film *Great White, Deep Trouble*. As Rothfels describes, since the time of *Jaws*, Benchley has apparently undergone a self-described transformation from animal demonizer into conservationist (p. viii), and he now applauds the project of science to learn more about the real animals behind the brutal myth-making and deplors that humanity has driven such animals as the Great White to the point of extinction.

All good, but Rothfels notes that despite moralistic ecological intentions, the National Geographic Society’s representations remain basically committed to the idea of an “eating machine” (p. ix). Further, this myth is conveyed in the highly problematical fashion of being non-socially constructed, unmediated, and natural in its objectivity (p. x). Apparently a cautionary parable against those who had decried the more highly nuanced papers about animal representations at the Representing Animals conference, here Rothfels’s introduction concludes that, “The ethical dubiousness of this kind of work by ‘advocates’ for ‘wild’ animals is, of course, virtually never touched upon in the magazines, videos, and cable programs helping to create a culture in which tourists go to Africa to see the Discovery Channel live” (p. x).

With our images and knowledge of animals thusly destabilized and shown to be historically and culturally mediated, the deeper question of current scientific and academic knowledge about animals must also be questioned, he feels. More pointedly still, Rothfels offers the following thoughts about contemporary animals:

“We do not really know what we think we know about them. By this way of thinking, what Jane Goodall, for example, has learned about chimpanzees is mostly just a reflection of broader cultural preoccupations expressed in all kinds of different venues over the last four decades. In a sense, her discoveries are as much about humans as about chimpanzees, and this is a point she might happily accept, though probably for different reasons” (p. xi).

At this point, one could not be blamed for concluding that Rothfels’s collection has indeed attempted to settle the dispute between animal advocates and opposing

postmodernists by siding happily with the latter. Yet, as I will speak to shortly, Rothfels's own excellent work (also collected in this text) on the cultural politics of zoos is political ammunition enough for any animal advocate, and he himself is guided by the realization that the politics of animal representation "will be of profound importance in coming years as arguments over global climate change, disappearing and disfigured frogs, razed rainforests, hunting rights, fishing stocks, and the precedence of human needs continue to build" (p. xi). Therefore, *Representing Animals* is a text, true to its related conference, that wants to situate the problems of representing animals as cultural and historical; but as a cultural and historical artifact itself, Rothfels has assembled the book so as to be sensitive to contemporary political problems even as it undermines any definitive answers to them.

As noted, the book is organized into three parts. The first "considers ways animals have been imagined within discrete historical settings" (p. xi) and contains four essays by Erica Fudge, Kathleen Kete, Teresa Mangum, and Andrew C. Isenberg (a co-organizer with Rothfels of the *Representing Animals* conference).

Erica Fudge's "A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals" is a fitting piece with which to begin the collection. She acknowledges the importance of recent histories of animals that are directly linked to the project of animal liberation but notes that she is more interested in how other, less activist, histories of animals might perform ethical work of their own (p. 4). In Fudge's opinion, histories of animals emerge regularly now, not as a fad, but as "a development of existing debates in the discipline" and their ethical import is to generally refigure what it means to be "human"—and, likewise, animal (p. 5). Histories of animals support the poststructural view of history because such histories are necessarily representational, composed of past documents written by humans about animals, which are then doubly reinterpreted by humans (p. 6). However, even though such histories always revolve around understanding how humans in particular times and places have conceived of themselves in their relations to animals, this does not mean that history must concern itself solely with looking at animals in order to better understand human beings (p. 8). Instead, Fudge argues convincingly for "holistic history," a practice that "reads against the grain" (p. 12) in order to "assert and assess the ways in which 'human' is always a category of difference, not substance: the ways 'human' always relies upon 'animal' for its meaning" (p. 15).

Kathleen Kete is cited as one such practitioner of

"holistic history" and it is her essay, "Animals and Ideology: The Politics of Animal Protection in Europe" that follows. Here Kete is concerned with the way animal representations were used politically and ideologically in modern Europe "to mark 'in' and 'out' groups" (p. 20). Specifically, she examines the Puritan prohibition of cockfighting and cock-throwing by the English Protectorate's ordinance of 1654 and the Nazi animal protection laws of 1933. Kete interprets the first as an early modern legacy, brought forward into the twentieth century by the rising middle class, that upheld humane treatment of animals and which defined traditional behaviors towards animals as socially disruptive. The Nazi laws, by contrast, Kete feels ushered in a "new paradigm" in which the human/animal divide was elided in order to express a more fundamental hierarchy based upon race (p. 30). Though Kete provides an interesting connection of this change in paradigm to contemporary animal liberation concerns, that Boria Sax's book-length treatment of the Nazi worldview, *Animals in the Third Reich* (2002), could not be drawn upon by Kete makes for a minor drawback to this essay.

Somewhere on the border between "humane" and "holistic history" is Teresa Mangum's "Dog Years, Human Fears," in which she examines the use of "the aged autobiographical dog" as a narrator in British Victorian novels. She discusses how the era's dogs "came to be saturated in subjectivity and why that subjectivity was so often marked by association with old age and death" (p. 36). Mangum points out "that many of these narratives—and the imaginary animals who narrate—function unexpectedly as affirmations, albeit sentimental, of the value of 'secondary' creatures, or at least of their stories" (p. 44); and she concludes that "the link between animal age and animal narrator depends upon a paradox which may be a grim reminder that old age, like animal life, is a tableau that our culture prefers to see blind, silent, and bathed in sentiment" (p. 45).

Andrew C. Isenberg's "The Moral Ecology of Wildlife" closes the section on theme. Similar to Kete's essay, it portrays a twentieth-century change in paradigm between humanity and animals, examining how the American relationship to "wild" wolves shifted to become one characterized by an "emotional" and "moral" regard (pp. 48-49). Further, like Mangum, Isenberg traces the meanings inherent in literary depictions of canines, as he examines the works of Ernest Thompson Seton, Jack London, Aldo Leopold, and Nicholas Evans, demonstrating their relation to the values inherent in the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Yet, if Fudge's essay

began by proposing that humane history be surpassed by its holistic variant as part of a larger ethical project, Isenberg seems less clear about such a project's normative dimension. Sure that "representations of wildlife are inescapably expressions of human values," he feels that "what wildlife means to us, and why it must be a part of Nature are questions that have not been answered;" but, most importantly, he concludes, "there may be no final answer" (p. 60).

The second group of essays in *Representing Animals* "explores different theoretical approaches to understanding the animal object" (p. xi) and contains three essays by Steve Baker, Marcus Bullock, and Akira Mizuta Lippit.

Baker's essay, "What Does Becoming-Animal Look Like?" provides a condensed treatment of what one can also find in his book *The Postmodern Animal* (2000). Specifically, Baker investigates the way in which Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of becoming connects the figure of the animal up with the spirit of creativity (p. 68) and to the complex life practices that open up to the radical alterity that is created when human identities transform through "involution" (p. 84). If Deleuze and Guattari theorized an aesthetic politics, however, here the emphasis is upon the artist's responsibility to the animal in the creation of aesthetic events and the ontological status of human-animal representations is what haunts the piece. Still, this focus does allow Baker to critique a number of contemporary artists who are attempting to deploy radical animal imagery, and the essay is augmented by the inclusion of many pictorial examples of their work.

If, with however much trepidation, swathes of post-modernist insight have mingled with a commitment to animal advocacy throughout the book thus far, beginning with Marcus Bullock's "Watching Eyes, Seeing Dreams, Knowing Lives" some will find that the collection turns towards a version of critical literary theory that those involved in animal politics will have difficulty stomaching. Bullock's essay surveys Camus, Lawrence, Hemingway, Rilke, and the Frankfurt School, as it examines the relationship between human animals, nonhuman animals, and machines. To be fair, Bullock's conclusion that animal suffering is available to us as embodied seers, even if it is forever questionable as a representation for our rational observations (p. 118), intends to support a version of human-animal continuity that advocates themselves often draw upon as a legitimation for their practice.

Akira Mizuta Lippit's "From Wild Technology to Electric Animal" develops a theme found in Bullock's essay—that, in their difference from humans, animals are

without language (p. 120); and in his deeper interrogation of the place of machines in this opposition, Lippit's essay is well-placed. It is a difficult argument that Lippit makes, one most likely to be unpleasant to an animal advocate. It derives from the idea that because subjectivity requires language, animals are not subjects. Hence, they are not strictly capable of "being," and thus cannot die (p. 125). But animals are vanishing everywhere, thereby threatening human identities that are constituted in opposition to them as well. Therefore, the human response has been to reconstitute the animal in animated technology, as media, which has given birth to the art of cinema (p. 131).

Perhaps drawing from insights of the first two sections, the third and final section "looks at a series of contemporary settings for human representations of animals" (p. xi). It contains four essays by Garry Marvin, Jane Desmond, Susan McHugh, and Nigel Rothfels himself. Garry Marvin's "Unspeakability, Inedibility, and the Structures of Pursuit in the English Foxhunt" considers the representational drama of modern hunting in the English countryside and it seeks to provide "an anthropological ethnographic interpretation" of how historically available understandings of animals manage to interpolate the "living, embodied animals" of the hunt into a meaningful, culturally-specific sporting event (p. 139). It attends well to complexities like the "shifting balance between ideas of, and representations of, the natural and nature and culture, expressed as human concerns" (p. 153). Some, though, will be concerned that while Marvin's ethnography notes the possible immorality of foxhunting (p. 154), he remains committed to trying to understand it on foxhunters' own terms.

"Displaying Death, Animating Life: Changing Fictions of 'Liveness' from Taxidermy to Animatronics" by Jane Desmond is an ambitious piece in its chronicle of how "liveness" is created in animal display, beginning with nineteenth-century taxidermy up to contemporary robotic, computer-generated animation sequences (p. 159). Desmond concludes that the desire to represent dead animals as "real" intimates human attempts at "control over animals as both our closest interlocutors and our always non-human 'other.' The ultimate emphasis in these categories of representation is on an outer physical rendition that is persuasive of an interiority that is not animal but is rendered by and for humans" (p. 175).

Desmond divorces the act of cloning from this representational history (p. 164) and also distinguishes

pets as a “special case” because “the pet’s body references the pet’s being, while the hunter’s trophy references not only itself but the owner’s feelings about himself and about hunting” (p. 167). But this is far from clear in the next essay. Susan McHugh’s “Bitches from Brazil: Cloning and Owning Dogs through the Missyplicity Project,” examines how a dearly departed family pet—Missy, a spayed, mixed-breed—has been transformed into a cyberpunk spectacle of corporate genetics labs, advertising, an Internet site, and the ultimate clone mother of a new canine breed called “Missyplicity” (pp. 180-183). Notably, *Representing Animals* again sounds a tone in this essay that moves more outwardly in the direction of animal advocacy, as McHugh analyzes the use of “visualization technologies to foster widespread support of cloning” (p. 196) and the “privatization of biological research” (p. 195) through the conceit of owning/producing eternal house pets.

The spectacular goal of eternal animals makes for the unnerving conclusion of the book’s final essay by Nigel Rothfels, “Immersed with Animals.” In an important essay, taken in part from Rothfels’s book *Savages and Beasts* (2002), the history of the modern zoo is interrogated as a place promoting science and technology’s ability to “better ‘nature’” (p. 202), provide life-like environments “designed to transport human visitors to faraway, mysterious, and ‘wild’ places” (p. 201), and allow zoo animals to be equally “immersed” in compelling, safe, and enlightened simulations of abundant biodiversity (p. 216). Rothfels begins with an analysis of the nineteenth century’s most admired zoological garden, the London Zoo, revealing it to have been a bourgeois educational space for the public’s amusement in which they could engage fantasies of ease, feed exotic animals, enjoy lawn concerts, and escape urban contexts (pp. 206-208). Rothfels then examines the “Hagenbeck revolution” of the twentieth century, where the iron bars of animal cages disappeared and were replaced by simulated panoramas that allowed animals (and indigenous peoples) to appear to be freely roaming in “native habitats,” all made possible by “carefully hidden moats” that separated both animals and people (pp. 208-209). As Rothfels points out, the revolution was not so much in the innovative structural changes but rather in “the narratives of freedom and happiness” that inscribed new meanings onto the captive animals—in this vision, zoos are in fact improvements upon the wild, since they are places of protection and conservation (p. 216-217). Today’s hi-tech zoos of ultra-immersion and genetic cloning are just exemplary Hagenbeckian fan-

tasies, and that they continue to be built primarily for people’s amusement means that current zoos mirror the nineteenth-century zoo in some key respects, Rothfels sadly concludes (p. 219-220).

In closing, I recommend *Representing Animals* to scholars and others interested in how cultural representations of animals have influenced society and impacted actual animals. If Rothfels’s book does not settle the debate between animal advocates and their postmodern, cultural studies-oriented opponents, it has been assembled with a sense of artfulness and its purpose manages to problematize naive articulations for animal rights and welfare, while equally demonstrating (more often than not) some of the real plights that nonhuman animals face today. In the end, the book’s cohesive message that the problems of nonhuman animals are very much our problems as well should be counted as a strength and a message that all parties might break bread over.

Notes

[1]. Julie Ann Smith, “Review of Academic Conferences,” *Society and Animals: Journal of Human-Animal Studies* 9, no. 3 (2001).

[2]. Smith, “Review of Academic Conferences.”

[3]. Charles Bergman, “Making Animals Matter,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 23 March 2001, p. B15. As a side note, Bergman’s piece is ironic to the degree that, in contrapuntal fashion, he offers the story of his two-week long quasi-hunt of a jaguar in Mexico for biologically based conservation purposes. There, in Mexico, after finally treeing, tranquilizing, and subjecting the animal to all manner of scientific measurements (including being fit with a radio collar and photographed), his companions and he all made the “reverent” gesture of touching the sleeping cat—who is described in somewhat eroticized terms as possessing the “strongly muscled body” and “magnificent, spotted fur” that became the object of their “stroking.” The image of the hunted, drugged, and unconscious “presence” that Bergman extols as a fitting ethical narrative in opposition to his humanistic colleagues’ work, is thus arguably fit for a manner of critique itself.

[4]. From “About Us” at BadScience: the artwork of Hall-Moline, online at: <http://www.badscience.org/about/about.html>.

[5]. Smith, “Review of Academic Conferences.”

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-nilas>

Citation: Richard Kahn. Review of Rothfels, Nigel, *Representing Animals*. H-Net, H-Net Reviews. February, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10233>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.