



Salman Akhtar, Vamik Volkan, eds. *Cultural Zoo: Animals and the Human Mind and Its Sublimations*. Madison: International Universities Press, 2005. xvii + 291 pp. \$37.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8236-1093-8.

Reviewed by Kenneth Shapiro (co-Executive Director, Animals and Society Institute)

Published on H-Nilas (July, 2006)

“Projected” Animals: Where Have All the Animals Gone?

In this second of two edited volumes on psychoanalysis and animals,[1] the editors intend “an investigation of the role of animals in the complex and rich tapestry of human culture and its diverse institutions including religion, art, music, literature, and cinema. It traces the historical and cross-cultural aspects of the psychic [sic] bond between man [sic] and animals, elucidates the role of animals in the normal development of the human mind, and discusses the phenomenology and dynamics of the appearance of animals in human dreams” (p. xiv).

Since my critique of *Cultural Zoo* is mixed, permit me to describe my background and interests. Although not a psychoanalyst, as a clinical psychologist I have been exposed to its practice from both sides of the couch. As a researcher in phenomenology, I am familiar with philosophical, as well as empirical, critiques of psychoanalysis. For the past 25 years I have worked as an animal advocate; for the past 15 years I have edited *Society and Animals*, a journal in the field of Human-Animal Studies (HAS); and I still actively work to develop that field.

According to Ricoeur, psychoanalytic critiques of culture rest on a theory of consciousness where what you see is decidedly not what you get.[2] Freud’s understanding of human psychology is based on a radical “suspicion” of a person’s experience—perception, thought, and feeling. Psychoanalysis is an elaborate hermeneutic (theory or rules of interpretation) of the meanings of an individual’s experience of him- or herself. The meanings of what you are experiencing, what you describe as your experience, and, by extension, of the cultural products you create, are “latent” and require interpretation to reveal their true meaning. To know your real attitude toward your dog and, as well, your poem about him or her, we must, according to psychoanalysis, understand the contents and processes of the unconscious in general and your unconscious in particular.

Below are two examples from *Cultural Zoo* that concretize this application of psychoanalysis to the under-

standing of the relationships between humans and other animals.

Daniel Freeman (pp. 3-44) describes how, in the course of their normal development, children “split” their views of their mother into good and painful or bad images (p. 19). These images are later “projected” onto real and fictional animals. Armed with these unconscious images, a child perceives certain classes of animals as good (the nurturing teddy bear) or as bad (the predacious wolf). More generally, splitting and projection, processes of the unconscious, shape the child’s relationships with animals (and humans). One aspect of these relationships is the possibility of identifying with a good or bad animal in play. To give the flavor of psychoanalytic language, this playful relationship is referred to as “the mechanism of transient imaginative projective-identificatory merger” (p. 30). Psychoanalysts explain the effectiveness of role-play with puppets in child therapy in these theoretical terms.

In her study of two recent films featuring animals (*The Fly* and *Babe*), Alexis Burland (pp. 225-260) employs these and related psychoanalytic concepts. Building on the notion that films (like puppets) are a ready “receptacle for our projections” (p. 227), Burland argues that the power of a successful film lies in the fact that “the regressive and inter-subjective participation” it facilitates mobilizes “the same self-reparative and development-enhancing activities” (p. 242) as does psychoanalytic therapy. Through projection, identification, and introjection, the viewer has the opportunity to replay the themes and processes of his or her psychological development.

Both of these examples, simplified here, and many others in the volume present valuable insights into human psychology. But the question I would raise is: How much insight do they provide into the investigation of the role of animals in the construction of our culture—the express purpose of this book? Within that larger project, how much insight do they provide into our relationships

with animals?

It is important to understand that the referent of the word “animal” in psychoanalysis, as evidenced in this volume, is a symbol. Whether a client in analysis describing his or her relation to his or her dog or a culture presenting a work of art or story featuring a dog or a human relation with a dog, the primary or direct referent is not that real or fictional dog. For that particular dog is only a “stand-in” (p. 46)—a vehicle or receptacle of meaning unconsciously projected onto him or her. To understand that human-animal relation requires interpretation of the psychology of the individual human—of his or her unconscious impulses, desires, and conflicts.

As practiced by contributors of this volume, that interpretation is not dependent on an understanding of the psychology of any particular dog or dogs in general. Understanding of a human-animal relation, similarly, is limited to the study of the human side of that relation. To what extent can we understand a human-animal relation given this limitation and the broader scope of the book—the rich role of animals in human cultures?

The role of animals in human psychology is not exhausted by the *symbolic* value of the animal, whether or not that hermeneutic is limited to a psychoanalytic-based interpretation. The animal is an autonomous agent that co-constitutes the relation with the human. That dog herself has a psychology, a personality which is a function of her species-specific behavior and her developmental history, including the history of her relation to humans. Clearly, the way in which a given culture treats, “socially constructs,” or, if you will, symbolizes dogs does influence the life of the dog and, therefore, her psychology—but that is only one aspect of the multi-determination of the psychology of the dog.[3] The dog’s contribution to the nature and form of the human-animal relationship is substantial for the relation is between two subjects, two formative agents. Although unconscious projections contribute, it is that complexly determined relationship which assures that the role of the animal in the culture is rich.

In addition to the limitations attendant to the exclusive use of a psychoanalytic take, the equally exclusive treatment of animals as receptacles of human-generated symbolism is degrading to animals. In a dense semiotic analysis of animals in zoos, Stephen Spotte describes how the way in which animals in zoos are displayed trans-

forms them into images.[4] The lion of the savannah is semiotically represented by narrations on a placard, a vestigial and largely artificial presentation of the natural habitat, and a grossly reduced social organization and behavioral repertoire. The natural lion is degraded: he or she is reduced to a set of images, signs, artifacts—symbols. Similarly, in this volume there are only symbolic animals in the “cultural zoo.”

One expected to find in this volume stories about particular animals and concrete descriptions of particular human-animal relations. In their place, we have, with one or two exceptions, a thin description of an animal or human-animal relation that quickly gives way to an interpretation—a description of the animal as symbol of the “darker side” of human psychology or an occasion for the working out of a human intra-psychic conflict. The text has the structure of a pornographic movie where the storyline is a thin vehicle for the presentation of the real topic of interest—the sexy stuff of the human unconscious. Real, concrete, present animals; their interests, motivation, and psychology; their co-constitutive role in the formation of human-animal relations; and their pervasive and wonderful contribution to “the complex and rich tapestry of human culture”—all are reduced to a thin and one-dimensional storyline.

A broader and more respectful contribution from psychoanalytic scholars to our understanding of human-animal relations is possible. Emphases in contemporary psychoanalysis on empathy, the analysis of narcissism, and the unconscious as language might provide useful areas for future exploration.

Notes

[1]. The first was Salman Akhtar and Vamik D. Volkan, eds., *Mental Zoo: Animals in the Human Mind and Its Pathology* (Madison, Conn.: International Universities Press, 2004).

[2]. Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart, eds., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), pp. 213-223.

[3]. Kenneth Shapiro, “Understanding Dogs through Kinesthetic Empathy, Social Construction, and History,” *Anthrozoos* 3 (1990): pp. 184-195.

[4]. Stephen Spotte, *Zoos in Postmodernism: Signs and Simulation* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006).

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

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Kenneth Shapiro. Review of Akhtar, Salman; Volkan, Vamik, eds., *Cultural Zoo: Animals and the Human Mind and Its Sublimations*. H-Net, H-Net Reviews. July, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11972>

Copyright © 2006 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.