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TDR: The Drama Review, Volume 51, Number 1 (T 193), Spring 2007, pp. 33-48
(Article)

Published by The MIT Press



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The Animal Apparatus

From a Theory of Animal Acting to an Ethics of Animal Acts

Michael Peterson



In the attention given to the 2004 attack on Roy Horn by one of the white tigers he handled as part of the long-running “Siegfried and Roy at The Mirage” magic act in Las Vegas, one largely overlooked dimension was that both Roy and the tiger had been acting—creating for the audience the illusion of events and interactions that were fictional. Journalists, commentators, and later, Siegfried and Roy themselves, all took pains to establish that the cat, Montecore, was not himself when he attacked, that he could not have “meant” to do him harm.¹ But these accounts tellingly failed to credit the animal with its ability to habitually represent violence, to “act” dangerously. The event also briefly renewed attention to animal rights criticisms of animal acts. This essay moves from a consideration of animal acting (drawing examples from Western theatre history) toward a simple suggestion for one way of evaluating the ethics of animal acts (drawing on contemporary animal performances, including Siegfried and Roy).

1. This sentiment emerged strongly in the NBC television special “Siegfried & Roy: The Miracle” (broadcast 15 September 2004) with interviewer Maria Shriver.

Broadly speaking, the ethics of using nonhuman animals in human-made performances may be approached from two directions. The first is to construct rights inhering in animals and compare those rights with what can be known of animals' experiences of performing—"reading as an animal," so to speak. This approach is indispensable, but fraught and constrained by the limits of both ethical inquiry and animal science.

A second approach, one for which performance studies is well equipped, considers animal acts as constructions of social relations between humans and animals. This approach must begin with accounts of how humans actually use animals in performance, and does require consideration of the content produced by these relations. But behind the referential and thematic content of representations lie questions about their production; the analysis of animals as objects of performance necessitates investigating how actual animals perform. In short, the meaning of animal performance arises first from "the animal apparatus."

In general, "apparatus" theory insists on the importance of the physical, technical infrastructure, yet historicizes production practices to avoid technological determinism.² Examining the animal apparatus asks how nonhuman animals are made part of the means of theatrical production, but also how performance can produce the concepts of "animal" or "animality." How are animals made to *perform*? Collars, reins, bits, whips, food, treadmills are part of this apparatus, but so are lights, wings, and even the very concept of on- and off-stage space. "How are animals made to *mean*?" is a more difficult question, and beyond basic questions of semiosis, this involves abstractions like wildness, nature, freedom, servility, and even "the great chain of being," or the concept of the soul.

At its simplest level, however, most animal acting involves framing trained behaviors in a "non-animal narrative," through what Michael Kirby, in his influential 1972 essay "On Acting and Not-Acting," described as "matrixing." Kirby developed a continuum of acting, and his analysis of how simple behaviors and appearances can produce meaning without definite, knowable intention on part of the performer describes, without mentioning it specifically, how animal acting is presumed to work. Animal actors function either in a "symbolic matrix," in which "the performer does not act and yet his or her costume represents something or someone," or in Kirby's next phase, "received" acting: "When the matrices are strong, persistent and reinforce each other, we see an actor, no matter how ordinary the behavior" (5).

Paul Bouissac's classic *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach* (1976), while little concerned with the question of animal acting per se, approaches the meaning of circus-animal acts comprehensively, connecting animal behaviors both to the broader language of the circus and to fundamental cultural dynamics such as the presumption of human superiority. Tellingly,

2. In cinema studies, apparatus-based theory has examined the semiotic and ideological functions of technical processes; so, for example, Stephen Heath and Teresa de Lauretis, in their anthology *The Cinematic Apparatus* (1980), looked beyond the technical means of production to a system of relations among physical mechanics, social practices, and interpretive schemes. Feminist theatre studies (see Dolan 1988) developed a critique of the "theatrical apparatus" as a system of relations, in which, for example, the proscenium arch and certain traditions of female characterization might be seen as complementary aspects of the production of performance.

Figure 1. (previous page) Bartabas, founder and director of *Théâtre Zingaro*, a French troupe that presents equestrian-based art, with a hackney stallion in *Opera Equestre at Antwerp 93*, 1993. (Photo by Roz Neave)

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Bouissac, as both a semiotician and circus insider, gave substantial details of the *training* of animal performers. While elsewhere he stresses that the process of developing circus acts is less relevant to his study than reading the act as text—“In other words, the problem is largely one of decoding” (1976:19)—in his discussion of circus horse acts he gives a detailed account of how a profusion of signs exchanged between trainer and animal is gradually reduced. In the act as performed for an audience, the trainer’s cues are obscured so that the animal appears to behave intelligently and autonomously (53–57).

While offering an account of the production of the “secret” code that allows animal acts to work, Bouissac favors a symbolic reading of the resultant behavior, playing down the role that a *knowledge* of the existence of such training plays in the perceptions of the spectator. In part, even an ill-informed audience’s construction of the meaning of animal acts will draw on spectators’ knowledge of, and/or assumptions about, how those performances are produced: human audiences “read” the animal apparatus as well as the symbolic matrix. A focus on the apparatus links the second line of inquiry—into the meanings generated by the social relations between human and nonhuman animals—to the first: the basic question of the treatment of animal performers.

Recalcitrant Animal Performers and the Chains of Signification

In his 1977 essay “Why Look at Animals?” John Berger writes of zoos that “in principle, each cage is a frame around the animal inside it” (1980:21); if we are principled, we must recognize that each frame is also a cage. Yet sometimes, elements of performance that are “meant” to mean instead turn obstinate, as in the Latin *recalcitrare*, “kicking out” against meanings and their making.³ In the case of nonhuman animal performers, it is easy to romanticize this resistance. It is tempting, for example, to see the animal’s own gaze as an onstage force that ultimately utterly refuses to partake in semiosis. Of course no participant in performance, willing or unwilling, human or otherwise, has such complete control over their role in signification. But captive animals in cultural performance do offer an intensified example—not of mystical value naturalized beyond analysis, but of actors who can at times refuse, ignore, or simply remain ignorant of the languages of the stage.

“Nonhuman animal” is for many the preferred means of referring to dogs, horses, fishes, etc. The chief virtue of the term is that it attempts to remember that we humans are ourselves animals; it stresses an important sameness. It also emphasizes, however, that dogs, horses, fishes, etc., are nonhuman, that is, essentially different from us. This terminology can participate in “dehumanizing” animals, in the sense of setting them unalterably apart from us. Much human culture about nonhuman animals, including performance and especially live performing animals in anthropomorphic frames, works to “humanize” humans and “dehumanize” animals.

This agenda contains its own subversion, at least when it comes to live performance. The presence of live animals introduces a non- (or even anti-) intentional force (at least as far as human intention is understood), which lends itself both to the perception of difference and to an encounter with the “uncanny.” If live animal performance can never fully dehumanize the nonhuman animal, then semiotics can never account for it either. In short, semiotics can address much of what is “human” in performance—the intended, the “nonanimal human.” But meaning cannot tame what is wild about the signifier.

3. I first explored the possibilities of this recalcitrance in animal performance with Adrian Kear and others in the seminar “Beyond Semiotics: Theatre and Recalcitrance” at the 2000 American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) conference in New York.

Imagining Animal Actors

Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* imagines the performance of a live animal onstage. The text implies the training, rehearsal, and performance of the scene. To "exit pursued by a bear" (WT 3.3.68), all that is necessary is a bear (perhaps acquired from the bear-baiting pit near the Globe theatre, perhaps from a source not oriented toward animal violence) that will follow the particular human actor cast as Antigonus. At the appropriate moment, the animal (if there is/was one) is released offstage, obligingly moves toward the actor, and then follows that actor offstage as he flees. This direction encompasses the entirety of animal-acting theory: develop a rote behavior for the animal "actor," then frame or "matrix" that behavior so that it coincides with dramatic narrative.

A Winter's Tale also includes a device that remains characteristic in the history of animal roles in Western drama: the human protagonist glosses the actions of the animal protagonist, ensuring that the spectator understands what the animal "means." Here Shakespeare is brief, his restraint perhaps suggesting a certain confidence in the animal performer: "A savage clamor! / Well may I get aboard! This is the chase, / I am gone forever" (WT 3.3.56–58).⁴

Aphra Behn likewise imagines an animal actor. Like the bear of *A Winter's Tale*, the elephant in *Sir Patient Fancy* ([1678] 1994) needs do little more than follow a human actor. Indeed, the elephant's role is even simpler; the bear must be wild, must pursue a human, but the elephant at the end of the third act of Behn's play can be diegetically wrangled, actively managed, haltered, and led by onstage characters.

Sir Credulous Easy, the foppish suitor and resilient foil to Behn's protofeminist (and mock intellectual) Lady Knowell, has been persuaded by a mischievous rake that the way to win his love's heart is to be as ridiculous as possible. He prepares a raucous serenade, and the ninth scene of the third act "[c]hanges to the long street, a pageant of an elephant coming from the farther end with Sir Credulous on it, and several others playing on strange confused instruments" (Behn [1678] 1994:71). This "reveal," in which the painted backdrop is parted on sliding shutters, is the peak of Sir Credulous's ridiculous efforts (he sings a song in the character of an owl) and also the point at which Behn's physical dramaturgy reaches its greatest depth—the elephant appears far upstage at the heart of the stage space. Presumably the animal remains onstage until the awakened servants use household items to attack Sir Credulous and the musicians, driving them away. Behn feels no need for exposition of the elephant; intriguingly, it is not mentioned aloud, only in this stage direction. This assurance suggests the animal was either fake and therefore reliable, or so massive and already so familiar as to speak for itself in its dumbness.

It is intriguing, if not conclusive, that an elephant was famously exhibited at London's Bartholomew Fair in 1675, three years before the publication of *Sir Patient Fancy*. Among the Fair's commercial exploitations was a pamphlet published in the voice of the elephant himself: "The Elephant's Speech to the Citizens and Countrymen of England." A loose assortment of animal jokes, the text ambiguously mixes social satire with a keen empathy for the animal:

And now, my dear Brothers, I mean Thee the great Beast called the Rabble, I have only one word to thee. I know thou art as great a Beast as my self, and that our Natures are both alike; for when we are mad, we are hard to be tam'd; there is nothing will govern us but an Iron Hook thrust into my Pole, and an Iron Hook thrust into thy Nostrils; yet thou seest at other times how tame and gentle we are. And truly, Brother, take this from me, that I never finde my self better at ease, than when I am obedient to my Keepers.

4. J.H.P. Pafford (editor of the Arden edition of *A Winter's Tale*), in his note on this moment, is noncommittal on the question of whether a human or animal performer "played" the bear, but he notes that while some authorities cite "evidence that bears are bad-tempered and unreliable [...] Shakespeare may have known better about a particular bear," as suggested by the later line "they are never curst but when they are hungry" (1963:128).

One thing I had almost forgot, most worthy friends: They say, you have a Show in this Town. Pray let my Masters know, that if my service may be accepted, I shall be very ready, with their leave, to serve ye all [...]. (Anonymous 1675:7)

If the reality of Behn's elephant is uncertain, this animal center in the play is nonetheless significant. As much as any other Restoration comedy, *Sir Patient Fancy* is about disguise, deception, and mistaken identity; yet another theme is that, throughout, the characters are themselves acting on their animal passions (anger, jealousy, hunger, and sexual desire) in spite of their pretensions. Even Sir Patient Fancy's conversion from puritan to rake at the close of the play is instantaneous, a moment of discovery rather than transformation. While the point of the elephant is clearly its utter incongruity (and extravagance as colonial ornament), the simplicity of the stage directions and the animal's revelation by the opening of the uppermost set of shutters suggests that this noisiest scene in the play contains a still center in utter contradiction to the painted surface of the setting, the chained creature waiting with seeming patience until human indulgence in animality concludes.

Smaller and more thoroughly domesticated animals have allowed the Western theatre a greater range in animal drama. For example, William Barrymore's *Dog of Montargis* ([18??] 1977), while an unexceptional melodrama, displays perfectly the fundamentals of animal dramaturgy. The virtuous Captain Aubri ventures into the forest accompanied by his dog, Dragon. No animal acting is required at this point—a “task-based” performer, the dog presumably follows as commanded by the actor/character (16). Aubri and Dragon cross the stage in the forest, left to right, as the jealous villains, Macaire and Landry, spy on them. All cross behind the set (the printed direction reads “don't change till all round”) and cross again, left to right, representing a distance traveled in the forest. The villains follow Aubri off; a “clashing of swords is heard without—the Dog barks [off].” Aubri fights Landry back onto the stage and almost defeats him, but is attacked by Macaire. Aubri is again at the point of victory when Landry stabs him in the back. As they prepare to bury Aubri, Macaire describes how the dog attacked him offstage and says that he has left him tied to a tree (17). The dog is said to escape before they can return to kill it (18).

The complexities of the plot that follows are partly matched by the dog's performance, which involves, in Michael Dobson's phrase, “just about every trick which any dog in melodrama or the silent cinema or the talkies has ever exhibited since” (2000:123). Dragon jumps over a gate, rings a bell, and steals a lantern to lead the townsfolk to Aubri's body (Barrymore ([18??] 1977:20) where he is reported to lie “stretched by the cold cor[p]se of his murdered master. Neither by threats or entreaties can I induce him to quit the spot” (22). Through a chain of coincidences, Eloi, a mute boy, is accused of the murder, and, unable to explain himself, is sentenced to death. The dog's remaining business includes some offstage barking as he hounds the true villains. At the scene of execution, the real murderers are miraculously discovered. Macaire, guilt-ridden, stabs himself, but Landry attempts to flee and is caught by Dragon: there is a “desperate struggle between Landry and the Dog, who finally drags him down—they kneel, when Landry falls the second time—ring down—picture” (31).

This is the dog's real trick, the height of animal acting. Not surprisingly, the imitated action is one of violence and must have been somewhat complicated; because all pet dogs, and dog performers most of all, must be nonviolent and cooperative, the animal actor here must go against its “nature” in order to successfully set up the final tableau. That animals can be

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domesticated—made to forego violence in order to serve people—is the triumph of human culture over nature. That they can then be trained to appear violent—to attack humans—is the ironic confirmation of this subjection. Even if the animal actor engages in “play” aggression with the human actor, the dog’s rote obedience to the sequence of tricks (chase, catch, drag down) may highlight his “real” obedience at the expense of his character’s dramatic aggression. Just as when a human actor too doggedly pursues her/his blocking, obedience itself—a kind of loyal overacting—may paradoxically undermine illusion.

In all these examples, we must *imagine* recalcitrance on the part of the animal actor because no direct evidence of it exists. It is tempting to extrapolate from the sadness evident in the Bartholomew Fair elephant’s speech when he begs that his parents be brought to England, or his plea that, when he dies, “they would convey my Bones into my own native Country” (Anonymous 1675:8). Certainly it is easy to imagine Shakespeare’s bear as not acting, simply walk-ing; or Aphra Behn’s elephant as simply straining with its own gravity the airy architecture of Restoration fantasy. And the best dog actors in Barrymore’s play may still betray themselves by the very precision of their obedient recalcitrance, demonstrating through their diligent misbehavior their *nonacting*, their careful behavior.

But more active (or passive!) animal resistance to the demands of performance is in fact well documented and tellingly often takes the form of a refusal to be “wild.” Recalcitrance here manifests not its Latin root’s meaning, but entails not kicking out.

A classic case is the “wild horse of Tartary” that was an essential prop in *Mazeppa*, an exceedingly popular equestrian drama of 19th-century England, loosely inspired by Lord Byron’s 1819 poem on the topic. The most produced version, Henry M. Milner’s, debuted in 1823, but achieved its success somewhat later. The core of the complex plot is that Mazeppa, a Tartar Prince, has come by accident to live in Poland, unaware of his true identity. He falls in love with a young woman who is betrothed to a powerful Count. After some intrigue, the woman’s stern father orders Mazeppa eliminated; he is stripped and tied to a wild horse, chased offstage and out of town. The horse, of course, is a captured Tartar stallion and races for days through the wilderness. Mazeppa is almost killed, but is in the end rescued—and home at last, able to plot his revenge. The horse is dead and conveniently out of sight: “as he is crossing [...] a thunderbolt falls and strikes a fir-tree [...] which falls [...] and hides him from view” (Milner 1828–36:36).

The much-hyped draw for the play was the intricate spectacle of Mazeppa’s torture on horseback. While stagings varied widely from the printed editions of the text, the performance, not surprisingly, seems often to have made use of the basic stage cross as its fundamental unit of animal behavior. “The horse is released, and immediately rushes off [...] he presently reappears on the first range of hills, from L. to R. [...] he crosses again from R. to L.”—and so on (27). This sequence of ramps allowed the horse to appear to cover ground without scene change or treadmill and added a very real sense of danger to the performance. Dummies were sometimes substituted offstage for the human actor (Saxon 1968:182), but later stagings marketed the sense of risk: “one of the major reasons for attending performances of the play appears to have been the chance of seeing the leading actor break his neck” (190 n. 29). For a 19th-century audience, injured horses would have been a relatively more common and therefore a less interesting sight than the human in danger.

In John Howard Payne’s version (very closely derived from a popular French play but apparently never staged), the directions call for Mazeppa to be initially “dragged off the stage” by the soldiers (1940:180) and to reappear in a still more convenient manner: “Beyond the iron railing is seen Casimir [Mazeppa] fastened to the wild horse, who, violently excited, darts across the stage with the rapidity of lightning” (181). The wild animal in his script perishes when both horse and rider plunge off a cliff into a lake (in a thunderstorm): “the courser reappears on the mountain, dashes down the torrent, and disappears in the midst of the waves of the abyss” (181). As a rainbow appears, only Mazeppa resurfaces (188–89). For

both versions, an important difficulty is clearly to free the human actor from the body of the horse, which is of course ideally *not* dead. But the dramatic death of the horse perhaps speaks to the fragility of its “character” onstage. Because the basic difficulty in the production is the conflict between the wildness of the role and the obedience required of the animal actor, the symbolic yet hidden death of the horse marks the return from a real performance to a fictional one.⁵

Some accounts of *Mazeppa* speak of animals who truly seemed to act wild in their roles, inspiring real fear in the human actors (Saxon 1968:191), but it must be imagined that more commonly the horse (or horses, as sometimes the role was doubled between human- and dummy-carrying animals) was compelled to act through a combination of leading and goading. Contemporary parodies of the play abounded, and a basic joke was that the actor playing *Mazeppa* needed to urge the horse on, even as his lines pled for mercy (188–89).

This point is well made in a review of the most famous of *Mazeppa*s, Adah Isaacs Menken, who began a vogue for women in the lead role. Mark Twain wrote of the “wild” horse to which a “nude” Menken was strapped:

The monster looks round pensively upon the brilliant audience in the theatre, and seems very willing to stand still—but a lot of those Poles grab him and hold onto him, so as to be prepared for him in case he changes his mind. They are posted as to his fiery untamed nature, you know, and they give him no chance to get loose and eat up the orchestra. ([1863] 1996:208–09)

While ludicrous, the horse’s docility was nevertheless vital to making the play work at all, and while criticism and parody may deconstruct the pretense of the event, its popularity testifies to its success on another aesthetic level—seeing the animal apparatus at work. In 1851, *Punch* offered a behind-the-scenes view of *Mazeppa* in an illustration which implies a different interest on the part of the audience. It shows a rear view of the horse “swimming” the Dnieper River: a very placid animal is being pulled by a stagehand in the wings, the rope hidden by the groundrow representing the waves. The real horse and human are encircled by a fake vulture (the flying lines suspending the bird are drawn into the illustration) and the wolves pursuing *Mazeppa* (as represented by two-dimensional heads held above the waves by crouching stagehands) (in Saxon 1968:143). What this view of the mechanical apparatus suggests is that the audience (of both *Mazeppa* and *Punch*) is not interested so much in being fooled by the illusion, but instead in being present at its execution.

Animal acting, then, was achieved by **matrixing simple behavior (the horse crosses the stage); by human actors offering exposition that clarifies the dramatic content of that behavior; and, at least in some cases, by attempting to provoke real “wildness” from the animal.** But the success of the show clearly did not depend on the believability of the animal performance. There was no dramatic justification for casting a scantily clad woman in the male lead; nor were audiences overly concerned with the coherence of the acted illusion. Just as the point of the scene in the Menken performance was the real femaleness of her body, which contradicted the maleness of the character, so on some level, **animals in performance always matter first as themselves.** And while this may have been somewhat less true for period audiences more accustomed to animals in daily life and onstage, the sexualized success of

5. Lord Byron’s lines intimate *Mazeppa*’s awareness of their shared mortality in a way the stage versions do not:

They left me there in my despair,
Link’d to the dead and stiffening wretch,
Whose lifeless limbs beneath me stretch,
Relieved from that unwonted weight
From whence I could not extricate
Nor him nor me—and there we lay
The dying on the dead! ([1819] 1933:413)

Menken's *Mazeppa* surely had something to do with the juxtaposition of female human flesh with horseflesh.⁶

The Furry Middlebrow

Animals often function in Western performance as bearers of fluid, ambivalent, or reversible cultural capital. The presence of animals in performance can signal its “low” or popular appeal. The expression “dog and pony show,” for example—which is sometimes used disparagingly to refer to business meetings or academic presentations that are supplemented with fancy visual materials—draws ironically on the low status of animal performances. Intuitively, animals would seem to move cultural products down-market: “Fundamentally, performances which feature animals always have appealed to mass audiences, presumably because the rudest animal exhibitions demand only a simple emotional response” (Donaghy 1996:19–20). This is the conventional wisdom. On the other hand, animals can indicate a performance’s philosophical depth, aesthetic complexity, or simply its authenticity, as in the phrase “straight from the horse’s mouth.”⁷ The absence of animals where they are normally to be expected, as in the circus, can similarly affect the cultural hierarchy of performances. Animals can validate or move “up” from lowbrow to high those cultural productions that would otherwise be “mere” entertainment; animals can also make “art” safe because they seem to “demand only a simple emotional response.”

Figure 2. *Théâtre Zingaro's Bartabas* (riding the horse), with musicians from Rajasthan (in the background), in Chimère, 1995. (Photo by Roz Neave)



6. Nineteenth-century audiences perhaps had a matter-of-fact attitude to animal stage performers similar to the uncomplicated relations of present-day spectators to animals in film and television. For a lesbian reading of Menken's biography and stage career, see Barnes-McLain (1998), which gives only brief consideration to the animal erotics of Menken's “strip, then ride a horse” roles (70).
7. The importance to human cultures of classifying animals—of the “sociozoologic scale”—is discussed in Arluke and Sanders (1996:167–86).

Among the most celebrated performing animals today are the horses of Théâtre Zingaro. This French equestrian company relies on extensive animal training as well as rigorous theatrical rehearsal to create fantastic images of human-animal contact and collaboration. In David Williams's description,

This body of work is characterized by an aesthetic heterogeneity and the centrality of animal-performers, particularly horses; it has its roots in new circus, street theatre, impulse-based dance forms (e.g., contact), the corrida, and, above all, Spanish and Portuguese "high school" dressage forms. (2000:31)

Do these animals give the performance a high or low cultural status? From one perspective, the attention to narrative, to design elements, to consistency and seamlessness in production, and to broad cultural references can be said to indicate the need to work extra hard to win respect for an animal act. It might also be argued, however, that from a marketing standpoint, the horses make this "arty" aesthetic accessible to a broad audience. Certainly, the large audiences at Zingaro performances in the United States would suggest that both forces are at work: the animal act is "redeemed" by artistry, the "artistic" made friendly by the presence of a theatrical element—the horses—that most people can assume they will be able to comprehend and appreciate, even in an avantgarde context.

Animals also bridge the historically "low" appeal of popular entertainments and the higher-brow aspirations of contemporary tourist audiences, as is illustrated by animal performances at Sea World and like venues. Under pseudo-educational, pseudo-conservationist rationales, such as that offered by Siegfried and Roy for their use of white lions and tigers in performance, animals are cultural capital—cultural treasures, even.⁸

In some cases, the removal of animals from a "low" form can signal its cultural ambitions. Consider the Cirque du Soleil, based in Quebec but with a global reach: a circus that exists, famously, without animals. Cirque recontextualizes traditional circus skills as modernist masterpieces; more than one critic has described it as circus *gesamtkunstwerk*. Cirque du Soleil aspires to portray the human condition through loosely connected but fabulously produced vignettes.⁹

In his defense of the use of animals, circus apologist Ernest Albrecht is outraged that at one point Cirque du Soleil seemed to exploit its nonanimal performance at the expense of circuses with animal acts. The statement by Cirque founder Guy Laliberté that angers Albrecht is telling, however: "I would rather employ three artists than feed one elephant" (in Albrecht 1995:219). The opposition between animals and high art is obvious in his statement. Ultimately, however, Albrecht presents the issue of animals in the circus as one of consumer choice: "Whatever one's feelings about the place of animals in the circus, however, the importance of the New American Circus in this regard is that it has provided circus fans with a choice. One can have a circus with or without animals or, better still, both ways at once" (223). This reduction of an ethical debate to a matter of (privileged) consumer preference illustrates one role of animals in the bourgeois imagination.

Animals are constructed anthropomorphically as bourgeois subjects—or rather, the bourgeois subject is fragmented and distributed among animal surrogates. We might pursue many examples of this: the industrious beaver, proud feline, obedient dog. This is the commonsense view of anthropomorphism, and perhaps in need of further interrogation. But it also works. The dog with which I live, whom I call Mango, is large and beautiful. When she opens her eyes wide, it causes her furry brow to furrow. My pleasure in reading her face as expressive

8. This kind of valuation is illustrated negatively by the many artists who have exploited the sense of betrayal that can be generated when animal images, especially animal bodies and parts of bodies, are framed in ways that are seen as inappropriate, as Steve Baker thoroughly documents in *Postmodern Animal* (2000).

9. The 3-D Imax film Cirque du Soleil produced, for example, is called *The Journey of Man* (2000).



Figure 3. Mango. (Photo by Joseph Kerkman)

is part of the social relation formed between us: she *is*, I interpret; I command, she (mostly) obeys.¹⁰

Another aspect of this sort of projection is the prevalence of representations of animals as family members, or as having families. Indeed, one strategy some animal entertainments have followed in response to the pressure of growing animal rights sentiment is in fact to stress the “family” quality of living and working with animals.¹¹ In the words of circus artist Ivor Balding, “the emphasis is on trying to treat the animals as an integral part of the performance as opposed to simply

being props. Our efforts to make them a part of the family are just developing” (in Albrecht 1995:213). Albrecht, in a chapter clearly aimed at defending animal performances, emphasizes that animal “dignity” is not compromised by circus performance that draws on “natural” animal behavior. He cites animal behaviorist Martha Kiley-Worthington, who contends that such circus animals show no symptoms that could be interpreted as resulting from feeling compelled to behave in unnatural ways: “if the animals lost dignity this would be reflected in their behavior.” Such a loss of dignity sufficient to cause behavior change noticeable by humans would presumably require that *animals* be capable of distinguishing between dignified and undignified acts. However, Albrecht goes on to paraphrase Kiley-Worthington as saying that “when animals are represented through their costumes or actions as being in effect *inadequate* human beings, this reduces *human* respect for them and is unacceptable” (Albrecht 1995:214; emphasis added). Such remarks suggest an emerging standard that frowns upon unnatural anthropomorphism but valorizes approaches that locate animals *in their proper place* within the interspecies “family.”¹²

If lowbrow culture is fleshy, material, earthy, and direct; and if highbrow culture is characterized as ethereal, cerebral, indirectly sensuous, complex, and indirect, then the middlebrow is furry. Fur covers the flesh of animals and makes them like toys, to human eyes; it insulates otherwise dangerous corporeality in a substance humans perceive not as a body, but as a body *covering*; fur wraps supposedly dangerous carnality with a comfortable sensuousness. Stuffed inside fur, animals bridge nature and culture. Knowing their place, yet playing in it, animals link sensuality and virtue. Possessed in many cases of great skill, they are also considered free of artifice and culture, and thus join skill with presumed innocence. While they may meet imperfectly the requisites of bourgeois subjectivity, they match exactly the demands placed on the bourgeois object.

10. Sweet Mango Chutney, C.D., known as Mango, died while this essay was under revision.

11. Note the difference here between animals considered as family and the animal *familiar*, the supernatural appearance of an animal that dogs the supernatural human.

12. This is perhaps reminiscent of the historical change in Western attitudes toward children, from seeing them as miniature, failure-prone adults, to recognizing them as reliant on, yet different in kind from, their adult guardians. Which of course puts a striking twist on the construction of the fantastic themed space known as Toytown, a menagerie adjacent to the New York Hippodrome, where for a time, at the turn of the last century, parents could even leave their children in the care, more or less, of animal “babysitters” (Donaghy 1996:81).

The Materiality of Animal Signifiers

The perception of animals is not (at first) textual; animals are not “read” in performance unless considerable effort is made to *reduce* them to signs. In performance, the disturbing presence of an animal could perhaps be framed, repeated, distanced, abstracted—ideally, silhouetted—until it became one sign among many. But of course no theatre person in their right mind would do such a thing. Reduced to a sign, an animal contributes nothing to performance but expense and inconvenience.

Bouissac himself points to this in his chilling observation that the ubiquitously repeated structure of cat acts means they “have no real information value; only an accident would provide real information” (1976:106). Just

as no producer would wish an audience to forget that Menken’s “naked” Mazeppa is really a woman’s body, so the horse’s acting is not required to be absolutely convincing, but should instead provide a pretext for the animal’s presence. This is often what animal performance is selling—simply, the presence of the animal—and that sale represents fictional entertainment’s capacity to cope with the potentially destabilizing force of animal reality.

This is verified by some avantgarde attempts to exploit that force. Some performances literally take the liveness out of animals and cause them to signify first and foremost as flesh—animal stand-ins for human presence. It is perhaps the least remarked aspect of the performances of Survival Research Laboratories (SRL) that they have on several occasions made use of the bodies of recently living animals. SRL is a San Francisco-based company that for more than two decades has been staging performances with robots and remote-controlled machines, in a sort of art-world anticipation of the robot combat seen in the Comedy Central channel’s series *Battlebots*. In SRL’s work, improbable and palpably dangerous machines mash and burn each other, demolish allegorical set pieces, make very loud noises, and/or fall apart. Human performers are rarely involved, although technical operators have great significance in this work, and SRL has worked with telematic control of some of its lethal machinery, allowing off-site internet users to activate performances. In several cases in San Francisco, interaction with the police and fire authorities has been a considerable element of the performances, broadly considered.

One interpretation of this body of work that has received some support from SRL is that it represents the absurdity of war machines big and small, the pointlessness of constructing elaborate systems of destruction. In the words of founder Mark Pauline, “excess production can only have one responsible goal, to serve the unspoken needs that remain after the basic means to survive are achieved” ([1990] 1996:420). Human effigies are sometimes used, and these are often destroyed by the machines. But in some performances from both early- and middle-period SRL (which is to say both the 1980s and ’90s), animal carcasses have been included. In one piece, *Machine Sex* (1979), pigeon carcasses were fed through an enormous shredder. Chickens have garnished other machines; pigs, and in one case, a whole cow, have been incorporated. These animal pieces introduce a very different dimension to the thematics of senseless destruction: they are there to *humanize* it. What is lacking in performing machines is not human intelligence—Pauline and his collaborators are at the controls—but human flesh, and the pseudocycborg constructions that Pauline has called “organic robots” layer surrogate flesh over mechanical skeletons. At its most reductive, this reading of the “message” in Survival Research finds that war machines are absurd, and the violence they can do to (once living, now reanimated) flesh is appalling.

But there is more to it than that. This interpretation offers a kind of alibi to spectators and perhaps the creators, permitting them to take pleasure in rending, searing, and manipulating flesh with powerful machines that are in effect performative prostheses—meat puppets,

Reduced to a sign, an animal contributes nothing to performance but expense and inconvenience.

if you will.¹³ My sense of this animal-derived pleasure crystallized when I looked at SRL's own documentation of preparations for a 1997 performance in Austin, Texas, for which a whole cow was impaled and hung from an enormous tripod, to be acted upon by various performing machines (see SRL 1997). SRL's website documents the impaling of the dead cow with not just one but a series of photographs, culminating with an image of the smiling crew gathered around the cow. The link text (and file name) for this photograph is "Dinner," and while certainly that echoes the jaded relation to performance one finds among many "techies," it also reveals that Survival Research Laboratories—whatever their opinion of military-industrial capitalism—also understand the erotics of human control over animals, and the pleasure of violently playing with food.¹⁴

One alternative to both middlebrow and avantgarde projections of bourgeois subjectivity on to the animal is the materialization of the animal—the construction of the animal as resource. This is, in theory, the hunter's view of the animal and the gaze of the rodeo spectator. This performing animal seems to have a body, but no soul. Another alternative to the anthropomorphized animal is the alien animal, to which we attribute a consciousness not our own. David Williams, in a beautiful essay for the special issue of *Performance Research* on animals, argues that Bartabas, the founder, principle trainer, and (human) actor of Zingaro, stages—in his profoundly intimate encounters with animals—a joint "becoming," a collaboration between two forms of intelligence: "dances of the im/possibility of contact" (2000:38).

It is tempting to accept these claims, but one potential difficulty with constructing animal performance as an encounter with another form of consciousness is the displacement of that event from the spectator to human interlocutor. In other words, even if we accept all of Williams's claims for Bartabas's engagement with the horses of Théâtre Zingaro, even if the picture those performances offers is of the merging of two quite different intelligences, the rest of us watch such an encounter at a remove, with Bartabas as our surrogate. Such performance offers a pleasurable distanced fantasy of a cross-species encounter, rather than the philosophical or psychically unsettling challenge of an actual encounter. As described by Williams, it is still for its audience an eroticized fantasy of touching the other. Moreover, it is a fantasy of a magical *human* transcending the species barrier. So, is Zingaro's horse-actor a radical presence? Removed from the physical to the mental projection of fantasy, aren't animals once again simply ours to do with as we please?

The fantasy of animal contact is constituted through visibility. Williams's argument about Zingaro centers on the fusion of animal and human visions. His title is "The Right Horse, the Animal Eye," which may recall the nearness of the eye to the furry brow, but also emphasizes the importance to his argument of seeing difference and seeing differently. But in the theatre of animals, the fantasy of animal contact is usually just that—the fantasy of touching animals and being touched by them.

The so-called "Clever Hans" phenomenon is an important one in the critical literature on animal performance. It is named after a horse who was so perceptive he appeared to be rationally solving mathematical and other problems when in fact he was "merely" sensing his handler's unintentional and all-but-invisible body language. Clever Hans is a supremely

13. The phrase "meat puppet" is commonly used to distinguish the physical, flesh-and-blood human body from an online, networked existence. My use of it here is to suggest that Survival Research Laboratories' operators create a secondary fleshly existence that is controlled almost as a puppet or online avatar.

14. The performance in question is documented as *The Unexpected Destruction of Elaborately Engineered Artifacts: A Misguided Adventure in Risk Eradication, Happening without Known Cause, in Connection with Events that Are Not Necessarily Related*, performed 28 March 1997 at Longhorn Speedway, Austin, Texas. The photo discussed is on the SRL website at <http://www.srl.org>.

sensitive animal whose perception surpasses the human.¹⁵ Clever Hans received messages his handler did not even mean to send.

Certainly Clever Hans's invisible hyperperception offered a convenient void for anthropomorphic fantasy projection. At clear risk of self-serving optimism, perhaps humans can feel our way around visually fantasizing the animal companion. This might begin with actual human-animal contact—perhaps not of the profundity attributed to Bartabas's saintly engagement with horses, but in companionship with whatever animals are at hand. Through interrogating our ways of seeing, humans may change our feelings about animals. If “pets” could become defamiliarized, unnatural, the family animal might become the alien animal familiar. And what about our own clever *hands*? In direct contact with animals, could our hands perhaps feel beyond their image, the fur with which we cover them? In connecting our bodies to startling, newly strange animal bodies—as Bartabas achieves for himself, if not for Zingaro's audiences—perhaps our incredible sensitivity could receive a message that the animal does not know it sends. In plainer terms, we don't have to “know” an animal's soul, mind, or “point of view” in order to feel or hear our ethical relation to it. Animals should trouble us, or we should not “have” them.

I propose that any ethics of animal performance should include the question of whether the animal presence stabilizes the identity of the bourgeois human spectator or troubles it.



Do we use the animal to become more human, or less so? This is only an ethics of animal performance, but it is one that can be developed using established critical practices. For example, Suzanne Laba Cataldi offers a serious but flawed critique of the use of performing bears in the Moscow Circus; flawed because it relies on a construction of animal dignity that is more sophisticated than that of circus apologists such as Albrecht, but nonetheless dependent on a problematic construction of “proper” roles for animals and humans, putting everyone in place:

Wild animals are belittled, rather than dignified, as a result of their circus performances because they are viewed and treated as (or reduced to) something less or something other than what they are. [...] Costumed bears are “cute” and “funny”—“funny” human beings and “funny” bears—which decreases the likelihood that they will be taken seriously as the creatures they (really) are. It is literally laugh-able—with the bears dressed up and behaving in such a “silly” manner—to think of them as our “equals” and entitled to the same respect. The whole idea of animal rights becomes amusing in this context, is made to seem ridiculous. (2002:117–18)

The critical edge of Cataldi's argument lies not in her ultimately essentialist construction of animal dignity, but in her reading of the meaning of the acts for humans. She can critique the ethics of these performances—read them for or on behalf of animals—without reading them “as” an animal.

Clearly, I risk substituting my own fantasy of contact for the wishful thinking represented by “transcendent” interspecies performance. I risk constructing a mutual materiality no less suspect than Williams's mutual visibility. Yet something about the presence of animals in performance surely retains a critical edge, which should in turn inform our understanding of the ethics of animal acts.

What, finally, is the work we ask animal actors to do for us? A clue can be found in Aleksandra Wolska's article, “Rabbits, Machines, and the Ontology of Performance,” chronicling her interactions with performers Quinn Bauriedel and Geoff Sobelle and a rabbit the humans called Steve. The performance under discussion is *MACHINES MACHINES...*,

15. David Williams (2000) offers a superb summary and critique of the historical case of Clever Hans and the mechanistic behaviorism that underwrites the “solving” of his case.



Figure 4. Gabriel Quinn Bauriedel and Geoff Sobelle of *Antique Mécanique* in *MACHINES MACHINES....*, presented at the Philadelphia Fringe Festival, 2002. (Photo by Lars Jan)

presented at the 2002 Philadelphia Fringe Festival by the company *Antique Mécanique*. Wolska offers, as a metaphor for performance itself, the image of a machine run by a rabbit:

Applied to the theatre, the metaphor of a Rube Goldberg machine run by a rabbit counters the paradigm of performance as disappearance. The rabbit and the machine replace the notion of theatrical ephemerality with the notion that performance reveals the ongoing drama of everyday techne. (2005:93)

Extrapolating from this shift in attention from disappearance to becoming, perhaps perform-

ing animals labor to draw us back to the materiality of performance, away from a view of the animal as “resource”—whether economically exploited or existentially reassuring. Instead, animal performers may create an insistent oscillation between the irrefutably familiar, and the inscrutable and uncanny.

Critical, recalcitrant animal performance, and perhaps ethical animal acts, would, in other words, be understood as *historical*. We cannot (yet?) know the animal “soul,” if there is one. We can know that we do not know it. Art that universalizes one cultural concept of animality is dissatisfying, and to reduce the animal to “the oppressed” is more so. So can’t we decide, then, for or against the weight that the beast bears for *us*? Even if we can’t make ethical decisions based upon an understanding of animals’ own conceptualizations of dignity, or know their will—which is not to say that humane treatment requires such knowledge—we can decide what to do with them in part by questioning our own will. Ethical animal acts require human humility, doubt, and generosity, not mystification of the animal actor.

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