

## MEET ANIMAL MEAT

UPPSALA UNIVERSITY (21<sup>ST</sup>-23<sup>RD</sup> MAY 2009)

**Organised by the HumAnimal Studies Group as part of the GenNa programme at the Centre for Gender Studies, Uppsala University**

**Reviewer: Rebekah Fox**

The international 'Meet Animal Meet' conference was held at the Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University on 21-23<sup>rd</sup> May 2009. With over 65 participants the conference aimed to bring together academics, artists and activists from a wide range of disciplines to examine the embodied and corporeal nature of human-animal encounters. Informed by feminist investigations of embodiment, the meeting aimed to raise issues of how we understand our bodily relations to other animals and how carnal modes of incorporation, intimacy and inhabitation are forged between various 'HumAnimals' in everyday structures of power and relationality.

Whether through food practices, performances, infections, bodily modifications, organ transplantations, sexualities or other modes of incorporation, humans and animals embody one another on a daily basis. The papers presented reflected this wide range of human-animal interactions and the attention to the corporealities of 'meat' was carried through in the excellent conference food prepared by vegan chef Sara Rudenmo. Keynote speakers were Carol Adams and Judith Halberstam, followed by a panel discussion comprised of eight scholars from the Uppsala University 'Humanimal' group. Days two and three saw thirty presentations in two parallel sessions, of which only one half can be fully covered in this report. In addition to organised sessions, contemporary visual art work on human-animal relations was displayed in the lobby during the conference, with a video installation '*Licking Dogs*' by Angela Bartram and a mixed media display '*Visualising Creaturehood*' in gouache, acrylic, ink and pencil by Robin Ward.

### **Day 1**

#### **Keynote Lecture: Carol J Adams '*The Sexual Politics of Meat*'**

Expanding upon ideas originally put forward in her famous 1990 book of the same title, Carol Adams argued for the joint discrimination of animals and women. Using an updated version of her now famous slideshow of images taken from United States popular culture, she showed the ways in which women are represented as meat (breasts, legs) and conversely animals are represented as women, justifying their joint oppression. This so-called 'pornography of meat'

sexualises animals and animalises women for consumption by a largely male audience. From diner logos showing female pigs wearing lipstick, to human female legs disappearing into a meat grinder on the cover of *Hustler* magazine, both women and animal are treated as ‘consumable objects’, thus justifying both the slaughter of animals and sexual exploitation of women. The implicit violence hidden in these images can be seen as what Adams calls the ‘absent referent’ - the death of the animal that transforms it into ‘meat’. Building upon such arguments Adams called for a feminist vegan standpoint that opposes such oppression both in visual imagery and acts of violence perpetrated against humans and non-humans on a daily basis. The talk provided a striking introduction to the conference theme, and showed the numerous ways in which the boundaries between human and animal are crossed and embody one another in everyday culture and practice, whilst Adams herself provided a key example of links between academia and activism in the field of animal studies.

### **Keynote Lecture: Judith Halberstam ‘Animating Animals’**

Addressing the question of animal studies from a different perspective, the second keynote lecture by Judith Halberstam also considered representations of animals within visual culture, this time in the case of animated films. Animals have long been used in children’s stories, films and fairytales to represent human norms and morals, seen as providing a palatable way of teaching children the ‘correct’ values of society. Such stories are often based around a narrative of heteronormative romantic love, with Halberstam using the voiceover to the box office hit *March of the Penguins*, as well as numerous animated Disney films, as an example of this. However Halberstam argues that in recent years certain films have broken this mould and can be looked to to challenge the anthropocentrism and heteronormativity of human society, thus critiquing not only human representations of animals (for example the heterosexual love and survival narrative of *March of the Penguins*) but also societal values. By reintroducing the real life / material life stories of real animals, as for example in the film *Bee Movie*, it is obvious that animals display a complex range of social, sexual and gender behaviour that does not conform to human stereotypes. Halberstam argues that children’s films provide an excellent means to challenge normative views, as children already live in more collective worlds that do not rely on the heterosexual narrative of a conventional love story. Thus we can look to films such as *Bee Movie* (where bees live in a large collective society and ties are based on friendship rather than love, interspecies relationships are formed and there is even the introduction of a ‘Drag Queen Bee’) to ‘queer’ the non-human and simultaneously question human preconceptions. By looking to real animal societies for inspiration, films can challenge anthropocentric world views and reveal the ways in which animal behaviours already exceed human norms and expectations, embodying radical ways of thinking about both human and non-human worlds.

## **HumAnimal Panel**

Here eight members of the Uppsala University ‘Humanimal’ group (Tora Holmberg, Helena Pedersen, Mans Andersson, Hillevi Ganetz, Malin Ah-King, Eva Hayward, Par Segerdahl and Rebekah Fox) briefly presented their own work and thoughts on the impact of animal studies within their various disciplines, ranging from sociology, to biology, education, cultural studies, art, philosophy and geography. This was followed by a lively discussion around animal studies in general and specific questions in relation to the theme of ‘Meet Animal Meat’. Of particular interest seemed to be the relationship between academia and activism and the connections and controversies between them, which was an important theme throughout the conference. Participants also questioned the decision to serve entirely vegan food at the meeting, which raised interesting questions around animal studies, ethics and human-animal embodiment. Following the panel discussion the event then moved to the conference dinner and reception in a nearby university ‘nation’, providing great opportunities for further debate and networking.

## **Day 2**

### **Session 1: Animal agencies**

In this session three geographers: Alice Hovorka, Anna Krzywoszynska and Thom Sullivan addressed the question of animal agencies from varying perspectives, revealing the numerous ways in which non-human actor’s influence everyday human activities and lives. In the first paper ‘*Exploring animal agency within the urban landscape*’ Alice Hovorka aimed to re-imagine urban theory to include human-non-human relations, with particular reference to the case of chickens in Greater Gaborone, Botswana. She argued that chickens as a social group have become inextricably bound up with structures and processes of urbanisation, shaping possibilities for how the city looks, how the city functions and how human dwellers experience city life. The economic and social importance of chickens in Botswana has increased dramatically over the past decade as a result of national diversification and food self-sufficiency efforts, bringing numerous benefits to city dwellers in terms of income generation, social status and food security. However despite the chicken’s role in interspecies urban relationships, she argues that their agency is ultimately limited by the hierarchical, anthropocentric system of consumption and control that often ends in their slaughter for human consumption, raising further questions of animal welfare and positionality.

The second paper ‘*Partial knowing, partial control – the role of yeast in practices of organic wine-making*’ by Anna Krzywoszynska turned to a form of agency even less recognised than that of chickens, namely yeast. Focusing upon practices of organic wine making in Italy, Krzywoszynska discussed the issue of embodiment in the creation of knowledge about living organisms. Yeast is a lively organism with sometimes unexpected agency that can only be

partially known through abstract scientific study, with much of the yeast-winemaker relationship relying on embodied senses and intimate knowledge's. Invisible to the naked eye, yeast can only be known by the results of its actions, the smells, sounds and substances it produces. The relationship is one of partial control with yeast often producing unexpected effects and exercising its own agencies in the winemaking process, raising questions of the controllability of creatures that transform and elude our grasp.

The third paper in this session '*The animal that says here I am, or here we are: a walking guide across species and through perceptual spaces*' also focused upon embodied knowledge's of non-human animals, with Thom Sullivan discussing relationships between blind or partially sighted humans and their guide dogs. Walking with a guide dog means being with a sensitive and responsive animal, opening up to a source of meaningful and active sensation to which neither would otherwise have access. The embodied relationship offers an opportunity to think about the mixing of sense perceptions and spatial knowledge's, through which the guide dog and partner find themselves and make their way. The relationship is an intimate and everyday one, which raises questions of agency, power and control in human-non-human relations, transgressing boundaries of sensations and forming unique and multiple understandings of relational lives.

## **Session 2: Inter/species/sectionality**

The second session that I attended focused upon issues of intersectionality in the joint oppression of animals and human's and tried to provide a means of re-imagining the world from a more inclusive viewpoint. The third paper then moved to the idea of 'interspecies' and hybridity, where boundaries between human / animal, self / other collapse, bringing to the foreground questions of the uncanny.

In the first paper '*How did we get here? Non human animal exploitation and human oppression*' Nekeisha Alexis-Baker examined the intersections between speciesism, racism and sexism. Speaking from her own positionality as a black vegan woman, she asked how we managed to get to a position where violence against non-human animals could be systematized around the world and how the ideology that non-human animals are suitable, or even destined for, exploitation bleeds into human relationships. Using examples of slavery and sexual exploitation she argued that our low view of nonhuman animals manifests itself in violence and oppression of marginalised groups who are associated with such animals and tried to re-imagine an alternative.

Following nicely on from this, Richard Twine considered feminist veganism as a potentially radical way of embodying posthumanist intersectionality in his paper '*Embodying posthumanist intersectionality and resisting transhumanist 'enhancement' through feminist veganism*'. Firstly Twine considered feminist responses to biotechnology that cross species boundaries in reproductive, genetic and meat sciences, contradicting an assumption of separation of the

medical (human/ cultural) and agricultural (non-human/natural) spheres. Such connections far pre-date the emergence of biotechnologies, but have been further embedded by them. Whilst the goals of such projects may be to ‘enhance’ human bodies or further control animal bodies for human gain, such ‘transhumanist’ bodies may not be entirely anti-ethical to feminist perspectives in any simplistic way. Twine then moved on to talk about intersectionality from an eco-feminist perspective, suggesting the addition of the categories nature and animality to the mainstream feminist notions of power usually entrenched in ideas of race, gender and class. Finally he considered how such understandings could be enacted to act for the non-human politically, suggesting feminist veganism as one possibility for embodying an eco-feminist viewpoint.

The third paper in the session was rather different in focus, moving away from questions of intersectionality and oppression to look at possibilities for opening up new forms of understanding through the notions of ‘inter-species’ and human-animal hybrids. Based upon her own artistic practice using mixed-media, Robin Ward talked about *‘Visualising the Creaturehood: The Uncanny, Queering, Haunting’*. Ward’s paintings invoke various creaturely bodies in concert with spatial dislocation, attempting to visualise hybridity, transgress boundaries and morph between the human and the animal. She suggested that where physic boundaries collapse – the supernatural gap between self and other might be negotiated through fragile threads of empathy and a willingness to be smitten by the strange.

### **Session 3: Companions**

The afternoon session focused upon human relations with companion animals from both a contemporary and historical perspective. In the first paper *‘Why I do what I do: The world of Dachshund rescue’* Jill Rowe discussed her own ethnographic work in a dog rescue shelter and the motivations behind her own and other volunteers involvement in Dachshund rescue. Animal rescue often involves grass-roots movements on a small scale, involving volunteers in the helping of individual animals to recover from abuse, neglect or simple failure to ‘fit in’ to human households. In US culture animals are all too often treated as a commodity and animal rescue movements speak for individual non-humans against the system, providing those involved with personal satisfaction and multiple forms of human-non-human bonds as they rehabilitate and rehome dogs. Such practices have been greatly aided in recent years by the advent of the internet which allows like-minded individuals to connect on rescue issues across a diverse geographical area.

In the second paper *‘Incorporating animals in the home: Intimacy and vitality in cross-species relationships’* Rebekah Fox discussed the embodied nature of human-companion animal relationships. For many people in the Western world pets are their closest form of contact with animal world, based upon relationships of embodied intimacy and physical contact which

transgress social / species boundaries. Living closely with animals on an everyday basis requires a recognition of their vitality and 'difference' which can disrupt human understandings of behaviour / hygiene and involve complex relationships of love, guilt, responsibility and control. More controversial forms of incorporation and embodiment are found in practices of pedigree breeding and showing, where animal bodies are shaped to human desires through careful management of reproductive and gene technologies. In such ways non-humans are shaped to represent particular social, cultural, national and class identities, literally embodying particular idealisations of human aesthetics and control.

The third paper '*The cat and her woman: gendered interpolations of species relations*' by Erika Cudworth and Maria Tamboukou examined relationships between companion animals and a particular human – namely Welsh artist Gwen John and her various cats. Gwen lived in Paris at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and kept many cats, often wandering the streets with them at night and painting numerous pictures of them. Through detailed study of John's letters, written to an imaginary friend 'Julie' (but actually intended for her lover Rodin) Cudworth and Tamboukou paint a complex picture of the ways in which intra-human differences, particularly of gender, map onto our relationships with other animals. John's desire to understand the feline and her engagement with cats, and the practices of her life, particularly outside the confines of the domestic, contributes to her Othering, but is also suggestive of alternated ways of being. Her letters about her cats shatter many of our certainties about gendered roles, transgress conceptual boundaries between humans and animals and raise ethical questions about how we communicate with the others.

#### **Session 4: Un/ethical ecologies**

The final session of the day concentrated on ethics in relation to animals, firstly to the issue of bestiality and secondly the notion of animal 'rights'. In the first paper '*A Dangerous Border: Representations of Bestiality and the Ethical Implications of Rejecting the Human-Animal Boundary*' Robert McKay asked what would be the implications for sexual relations between humans and animals if the species barrier were to be removed. Whilst this would undoubtedly bring benefits in terms of critical freedom and ethical enfranchisement for animals, it would also seem to licence certain behaviours and practices such as bestiality which rely upon the secure human-animal border for their policing. Using artistically sympathetic representations of interspecies sexuality, taken from novels by Angela Carter and Peter Goldsworthy and art house film *Zoo* by Robinson Devor, McKay asked what the ethical implications are for moral acceptance of such practices and how such relationships can be understood and managed without notions of species essentialism.

The second paper '*Some manners to define the right holding animal, and the one that is right*' by Fredrik Karlsson turned to the issue of animal rights and how this might be defined. Drawing upon theorists such as Tom Regan and Andrew Linzey, Karlsson suggested that animal rights is

characteristically defined by properties of moral relevance or particular mental or spiritual properties. However he argues that the function of rights is to grant exposed beings protection from more powerful and potentially aggressive entities, counteracting asymmetries in physical powers by providing moral or legal powers. Thus he suggests it is presumptuous to associate the right holding animal with any particular attributes but instead this should be defined by the property of potentially being exposed in a relation of asymmetrical physical power.

### **Day 3**

#### **Session 5: Carnal Cultures**

The final day of the conference began with a session focusing on literary and artistic understanding of the human-animal relationship. Firstly Rikke Hansen of Tate Britain discussed the skin border in her paper *'Travelling skins: Hides, furs and other animal surfaces in art'*. Traditionally taxidermy has pushed forward the idea that animals are their skin. Separation of skin from animal after death transforms the flesh into meat and the skin is left to carry forward the animal's 'animalness'. By contrast human skin is often seen as inseparable from the dead body and does not travel beyond it. Such differences are not inherent but actively produced through processes of exposure and display. This almost pathological attention to skin can be seen as a testament to the unfinished formation of human subjects who, in order to confirm the coherency of their own subjecthood must continually reaffirm their 'skin borders'. Contemporary artists have begun to use animal skins in their work to try and subvert, challenge or trouble the workings of the 'anthropological machine'. Using examples such as Andrea Roes automata constructed from animal skin and motors and the manipulation of living animal skins such as Eduardo Kacs 'GFP Bunny', Hansen argues that these represent an artistic preoccupation with the appearance and construction of animality in contemporary society.

In the second paper Ann-Sofie Lonngren discussed *'Changing subjects: literary transformations from human to animal in the 20<sup>th</sup> century'*. Human beings changing into animals has been an ongoing theme in Western Literature for thousands of years and continued during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Using examples taken from both international and Swedish literature, such as Selma Lagerlof's 'En Herrgardssagen' (1899) where Gunnar Hede is transformed into a billy goat and P.O.Enqvist's 'Kaptan Nemos Bibliotek' (1993) in which the hero is transformed into a horse, Lonngren discusses what separates the human from the animal in these transformations? What aspects of the literary character changes when s/he transforms into an animal and how does this change happen? What is the relationship between body and mind in this process? Finally she draws comparisons between these transformations to see if there are any striking similarities / differences between different texts written in different temporal, historical or geographical circumstances.

The third paper turned once again to visual arts, in which Bryndis Snaebjornsdottir explored the complicated and duplicitous relationships to animals in contemporary western culture in her paper *'Between you and me: Adjustments of thinking at the margins of culture'*. Based upon her own visual practice, specifically a project relating to human attitudes towards seals in a remote part of north Iceland, the research focuses upon a video of the seal swimming in an estuary, overlaid by the voice of a young farmer discussing his reappraisal of his relationship with the land in order to meet different demands for consumption and a growing environmental consciousness. The animal is apparently oblivious to the human observer as the camera oscillates between the hiding place and the perennially scrutinized animal. The research investigates the multiplicities of human attitudes towards animals through a series of interviews with people who have had contact with the seal in variety of ways, for example hunting, consuming, caring and observing, in an attempt to separate the many representations of the animal from the 'living' animal.

### **Session 6: Panel Discussion:**

#### **We have never been human: Feminist Post-humanism and the Zoontological**

The final session of the conference took a slightly different format in a panel discussion on feminist post-humanism, led by Cecilia Asberg and Jami Weinstein. Building upon Donna Haraway's claim the 'we have never been human', the panel aimed to deconstruct the notion of an autonomous human subject constructed against the background of a singular 'animal', long entrenched in Western Enlightenment thought. Asberg began by exploring the notion of 'post-humanism' from various theoretical perspectives, including Donna Haraway, Francis Fukiyama and Catherine Hayles, as well as her own experiences of working in a laboratory with fruit flies, in which she became involved in particular types of human-animal understandings and relationships which turned her attention to the notion of the 'post-human'. Feminist post-humanist theorists have identified not only the 'one-other' logic inherent in the animal-human distinction, but also other products of humanism including biological determinism, the epistemic authority of scientism and a number of other binaries such as nature-culture, mind-body, active-passive, artificial-natural. Given that humans are entangled in a complex web of relationships with animals, technology and the environment, feminists must take account of these to create more comprehensive ontological theories that explore the intersections between feminism and animality. Weinstein then moved on to examine the work of various feminist philosophers' in aiming not only to de-centre the human, but also the nature of the universal human subject itself. As there are multiple types of humanity and femininity, there are also multiple forms of animality and relationships between these, which can be conceptualized in a variety of ways. Thinking with these notions of multiplicity and difference enable new perspectives on post-humanism and nature of feminism itself.

The panel provided an excellent closing point to the conference, examining many of the key issues underlying the previous three days papers and overall the conference was a great success, raising interesting issues and opportunities for ongoing conversations and developments in the field of animal studies as a whole. The aim of bringing together art, academia and activism provided lively discussions (and at times disagreements) highlighting the multiple ways in which animals (and their study) are conceptualised within various ethical, theoretical, economic and political standpoints. Hopefully these are discussions that will continue in the future.