

Jody Berland: *Virtual Menageries. Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures*. MIT Press, 2019.

If you had ever wondered, why the internet is crowded with cats, Jody Berland's book, *Virtual Menageries – Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures*, is something for you to read. In her multidisciplinary approach Berland creatively combines critical animal studies, media studies and postcolonial studies to illuminate, how animal imagery functions as a mean of communication and exchange in the global digital network. Through the analysis of these digital animal messengers, Berland scrutinises how the human-animal relations have been developed from the colonial histories to the era of Anthropocene.

The book starts with a comprehensive theoretical backgrounding (introduction and chapter 1) where Berland grounds her idea of animal bodies as messengers of human interests. She points out that animals do not populate our digital world by accident: The other than human animals are all around in our cultures of communication because they are an essential part of the way the human species creates and understands its

VIRTUAL MENAGERIES

Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures

JODY BERLAND



own meaning and purpose. As she states, "the animal's presence matters" (3), and makes a notion that the human species tend to supplement its own existence with two nonhuman entities – animal and machine – which both come together in our digital environments.

Berland uses two main concepts to develop her ideas of digital animal agency – mediation and menagerie. Drawing on McLuhan's theories of medium as a message, Berland argues that animals work as mediators of various social relations. Doing so, animals and animal images are not just immutable symbols carrying a prede-

termined message, but they are dynamically entangled material actors creating their own part within the very process of human communication.

The other concept Berland is working with, is an idea of menagerie; a collection of wild and exotic animals that articulates its collector's power and dominion over nature and faraway lands which these captivated animals once inhabited. Menagerie is a place where animals become representatives of power structures by losing their connections to their natural habitats. Working with this idea, Berland shows how the environment where animals appear becomes almost as meaningful as the animal itself, and as Berland shows, digital platform and global communication networks are the places where the animals, tame and wild, are resettled.

Berland's conceptualisation of virtual menagerie is appealing, but what really makes Berland's book interesting is the way how she grounds her arguments with the robust handling of human-animal histories. Berland makes profound work to introduce the reader with the gloomy history of captivated or otherwise oppressed animals as a manifestation of power. This approach is extremely helpful to illuminate the intersectional nature of human-animal question; humans have used and violated other animals to oppress other humans, and by oppressing other humans also animals are often vio-

lated. Especially interesting are the chapter 2 and 3 where Berland dives deep into the colonial history of giraffe and beaver. Using the rich analysis of human-animal history as her tool, Berland manages to illuminate that animal images, even in our internet era, carry the burden of history with them. To fully understand what each animal mediates, it is crucial to understand the history we share with them.

And then, the cat. It feels almost obvious that an animal that has become a metonym for being online, is one of Berland's examples she dedicates a full chapter for. The cat, that once was a god and was later on seen as a companion of witches, artists or otherwise independent personalities, has become the invasive species of the virtual world. Berland makes an interesting point, that unlike other digital animals, cat tends to be a universal icon that is not specific to any continent or bioregion and is, indeed, popular across languages, genders, and ethnicities. As Berland points out, cat is a perfect icon for the neoliberal economy as it is mobile and agreeable, yet still able to hold its unpredictable nature; all attributes that make it a great tool for exchange of ideas.

The chapter of cats underlines well how animal images and their function does not follow the same logic as their genealogies differ. The historically and culturally constructed idea of a certain animal species effects the way the

iconography of them works even today. The pictures of domesticated pets and wild animals function differently in virtual world. What is interesting is that imagery of wild, rare animals seems to be under control of corporations and nations, that makes them and their messages almost tame, whereas pictures of domestic animals may surprise us, as they attribute certain kind of freedom in the hands of individuals or minor groups.

In the final chapter Berland leaves the visual culture to enter the realm of audio. Doing so, she makes an important point of how certain animals are culturally understood not through their bodies but their voices. Most often we become aware of the presence of birds by hearing them to sing, and voices of birds are a part of our understanding of natural landscapes. However, as Berland shows us, the birdsong has left its natural environment and resettled in wellness industry where one may purchase relaxing soundscapes mixed of natural sounds such as chirps of various birds. As consumers we have become able to download birdsong to our headphones with affordable prices to be listened during a rush-hour commute through crowded city. At the same time the natural environments of many songbirds are getting more and more quiet and some of the singers have fell silent forever. By pointing out that the anthropogenic biodiversity collapse is threatening the very birds

we are so eager to listen to from our Ear-Pods to release stress, Berland is giving a gloomy glimpse of our possible futures. In these futures digitalized voices of extinct birds have become virtual ghosts of Anthropocene. With this final chapter Berland really succeeds to point out how our digital culture is deeply entangled to the way we exploit other species and destroy their natural habitats.

In the conclusion chapter Berland makes a totally new opening by bringing digital monsters, Pokémon, on the stage. Non-human others, cute and exotic monsters, are now digital natives, but still represent the very original idea of menagerie – they are collected, they are used to mediate the power of their human master, and they become a part of the capital system of profit making. The synthesis Berland makes in her conclusive chapter is thought provoking and almost one of the best argued part of the book. She points out how both – the menagerie and monster – appear in the process of tearing something apart. Animal collections consist of species that are taken away from their natural homes, whereas monsters are other kinds of hybrids; human made creatures rearranged off body parts and cultural attributes of various species. Poignantly Berland is also asking where actually are the monsters in real-world by depicting hybrid creatures of our era: marine mammals and birds found dead filled with plastic.

Through her book Berland does a great job by bringing together complex histories of human-animal relations, postcolonial critique and analysis of global communication in digital platforms. Berland manages well to communicate her ideas and the results are most interesting. By mediology of the animal, Berland illuminates in detail how the colonial pasts are linked to our Anthropocenic present.

However, because the subject is huge in scale, the analysis of usage of digital animals is not as tight as it could be, especially if compared with the piety Berland illuminates the cultural and political history of chosen animal species. Berland's implied reader is certainly much more knowledgeable of internet cultures

than history, and the book may demand some extra effort for a reader whose academic background is somewhere else than in media studies.

However, Berland's book is a wonderful opening to dive deeper in the digitalized human-animal cultures and should find its way to the bookshelves or digital databases of scholars at least from the fields of media studies, critical animal studies, postcolonial studies, or environmental humanities.

MARIIA NISKAVAARA
Helsingin yliopisto
mariia.niskavaara@gmail.com