

Humanity: “Animal” (Dis)Figurations and the Shaping of Human Institutions

It was as a comment on *human* nature that the concept of ‘animality’ was devised.

--Keith Thomas, Man and the Natural World

I do not myself know what animals dream of.

--Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams

No animal confirms man, either positively or negatively.

--John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?”

“Why look at animals?” John Berger asked twenty-five years ago. Whether as instruments of agricultural production; sources of food, clothing, and other raw materials; subjects of scientific inquiry and medical experimentation; or as objects of veneration, terror, or affection, non-human animals have long been central to the development and self-understanding of human culture ... yet until recently cultural historians have little studied the place of “the animal” in human experience. This course aims to engage recent conversations among historians, artists, writers, philosophers, scientists, anthropologists, legal scholars, and others that have rephrased Berger’s question to ask not simply why but how and from what vantage we can look at the history of animals within the history of human culture.

Drawing from a variety of idiomatic representations of animals—religious, philosophical, literary, legal, biomedical, visual—we will explore how the animal, as both fact and figure, has functioned in the conceptualization, construction, and practice of (mostly western) human institutions. Among those institutions, inevitably, will be our own, the academy that has organized the disciplines through which the animal is seen, understood, and deployed. For to look at animals is necessarily both to employ and to exceed each of the disciplinary perspectives that define modern intellectual culture, forcing us at once to adopt ever-shifting interdisciplinary positions and to interrogate the propriety of disciplinarity per se as an instrument for understanding both ourselves and our ‘others.’

Each section is organized around a figuration of the animal through which a key element of “the human” can be considered as an historical, philosophical, and social construct. A ‘focalizing’ or orienting text (or cluster of texts), drawn from literature, philosophy, myth, or some other imaginative domain, will provide the initiating touchstone for each section’s topic; orbiting these focalizing texts will be works drawn from relevant spheres of cultural expression that provide alternative, and usually conflicting, perspectives on the featured topic.

Requirements: •Occasional 1-2 pp. position papers.

- A midterm based on journal entries composed on a regular basis from class to class.
- A longer, final paper (10-12 pp.) written in the form of a response to arguments made by Coetzee’s character, Elizabeth Costello, in his lecture-novella The Lives of Animals, as per the essays appended to The Lives of Animals by various scholars, researchers, and writers. The essay may, as per these published models, take any of numerous forms, but must display both wide-ranging familiarity with the course’s core materials and a coherent line of argumentation.

Course Topics

(Readings cited here are representative & may be altered slightly.)

Scapegoat ... Constructing the Sacred

Old and New Testaments: selections
Kafka, "Leopards in the Temple"
Demme, The Silence of the Lambs
Bataille, Theory of Religion (selections)
Mauss, "Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function"
Girard, "The Sacrificial Crisis"

Beast ... Constructing Value

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics (selections)
Kant, Lecture on Ethics (selections)
Singer, "All Animals Are Equal"
Francis, "Some Animals are More Equal than Others"
Crane, "A Dark Brown Dog"
Monette, "Puck"

Creature ... Constructing the Aesthetic

Flaubert, "A Simple Heart"
Cortázar, "Axolotl"
Berger, "Why Look at Animals?"
Marc, "How Does a Horse See the World?"
Atwood, Surfacing

Specimen ... Constructing Knowledge

Wells, The Island of Doctor Moreau
Rollin, "US Laws Relevant to Animals Research"
Haraway, "FemaleMan© Meets OncoMouse™"
Disney, "Your Friend the Rat"

Brute ... Constructing Identity

Montaigne, "An Apology for Raymond Sebond"
Descartes, Letter to Henry Moore
Darwin, The Descent of Man (selections)
Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"
Fish Tales: Melville, Hemingway, Steinbeck
Wilson, "Seeing Eye"

Pet ... Constructing the Family

Mann, "Tobias Mindernick"
Kessler, "How to Touch a Bleeding Dog"
Noonan, Babe
Disney, Old Yeller
Cixous, "Shared at Dawn"
Shell, "The Family Pet"

Meat ... Constructing Pleasure

Dahl, "Pig"
Agee, "A Mother's Tale"
Coe, Industrial Strength Meat
The American Meat Institute, "The Story of Meat"
Diamond, "Eating Meat and Eating People"
George, "The Moral Relevance of Being an Omnivore"

Vermin ... Constructing Community

Wyatt, "Whoso List to Hunt"
Dillard, "The Deer at Providencia"
Faulkner, "The Bear"
Bassani, The Heron
Deleuze & Guattari, "Becoming-Animal"

Game ... Constructing the Wild

Salter, Bambi
London, Call of the Wild
Faulkner, The Bear
Shepard, "Wildness and Wilderness"

Carcass ... Constructing Rights

Coetzee, The Lives of Animals
Horkheimer & Adorno, "Man and Animal"
Levinas, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights"
Fudge, "Knowing Animals and the Law"
LeGuin, "Buffalo Gals, Won't You Come Out Tonight"
Mansfield, "The Fly"

Course enrollment is limited to 30 students.