CHAPTER FIVE

RITUAL, REASON AND ANIMALS

Gavin Kendall

Introduction

There is a strong and understandable tendency to understand human-animal relations in the modern West in terms of ‘rationalistic’ models. Largely under the influence of a Kantian reading of Max Weber’s work, our society can be understood as having become increasingly rationalized and ‘disenchanted’: this, in truth, would fit many social theorists’ basic conception of the modern condition. In this reading, while our society reaps the many benefits of increased rationalization—the triumph of reason and the associated ascent of science and technology lead to innumerable benefits—a certain sterility accompanies this progressive movement: the charismatic and magical (as well as the cruel and the wild) has been forced to give place to the rational-legal, the orderly and the docile. A celebrated version of such a reading of modernity—although not explicitly dealing with animals and their relations with humans—can be found in Michel Foucault’s work, for example, where rationalization and sterile docility go hand in hand throughout a new type of society characterized by the emergence and centrality of large institutions.

Under such an analysis, animals are no longer seen as wondrous or magical, but instead are mostly made visible—or even made invisible, which, strangely, amounts to much the same thing—to humans through the circuits of the most depressingly modernized institutions of our age: factory farms, laboratories, zoos, circuses. So, to such typically dystopian accounts of what happens to a society ruled by reason (see, for example, Lasch 1995), we must add the awful fate of many animals. We must, of course, admit that this view is finessed in the literature. So, for example, Philo and Wilbert (2000) suggest that this rationalization of human-animal relations is played out differently in the various spaces and zones of the world (the city is the zone
for pets, the countryside for livestock, and the wilderness for more exotic animals). Michael (2006, 124) is right to point out that these zones are far from fixed, and that they become hybridized and transgressed: hybridized, for example, when exotic animals can be seen in the urban spaces of the zoo, and transgressed because animals tend to travel into spaces where they do not ‘belong’. Nonetheless, the rationalization of our relationship with and understanding of animals seems a reasonable hypothesis. We can take the example of the use of animals for food: humans in the West are mostly spared the unpleasantness of killing the animals they eat, and rarely have to see food products that betray any hint of a living past. The markers of life and sentience (eyes, mouths, skin, fur, hooves) are made to disappear in the slaughterhouses, those macabre halls where the science of killing as much as possible as quickly as possible has been perfected. Accordingly, humans can have a purely economic and gustatory relationship with a piece of packaged animal flesh, a ‘cold’ interaction to replace the ‘hot’ experience of catching, killing and butchering in the ‘wild’. Or we can take the example of the zoo: the exotic animals—in the wild, perhaps dangerous and difficult to see—are rendered safe and permanently on display. Even though the zoo is slowly being transformed from a voyeuristic space to a space for the preservation of endangered species, nonetheless the clear boredom in the faces of the primates induces a feeling of guilt in all but the most hard-hearted of visitors. Again, the ‘hot’ experience of a fleeting glimpse of these animals in their natural environment is replaced by the ‘cold’ inspection of the zoological gaze (Franklin 1999).

This characterization of modernity as a rational, but also highly managed and sterile environment that provides the ground for ‘cold’ relationships between humans and animals is given further weight when a contrast is made with the pre-modern world and the non-Western worlds in which animals and humans might, perhaps, have much closer and ‘hotter’ connections. Two short examples of human-animal relations in these other worlds outside the West will advance our case.

*The Hot Relations of ‘Other’ Worlds: Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and the Balinese Cockfight*

Walter Burkert’s (1983) *Homo Necans* gives an account of Ancient Greek culture, arguing both for the ubiquity of rituals in public life