Review Section

A Primer on Visual Animals

Randy Malamud


Despite its brevity, or perhaps because of it, An Introduction to Animals in Visual Culture is an ambitious book. Written by Randy Malamud, Professor of English who is also one of the foremost experts on the cultural meaning of zoos, IAVC promises to survey a broad terrain in its 176 pages. It leaves the impression not so much of being untrue but of being partial. After an Introduction, the six content chapters are Famous Animals, Photographic Animals, Film Animals, Pornographic Animals, Zoo Animals, and Weird Animals. The method of venturing into each area is an overview of guiding questions or issues accompanied by the study of select cases that provide more depth. IAVC largely fulfills its ambitions, but the result is less of a state-of-the-art survey that should be evaluated on the basis of its exhaustiveness and more of a primer that should be judged by how many readers it inspires to venture further into the field.

The guiding idea of IAVC is explicit in the opening chapter, Introduction: Framed Animals, with the dual meanings of framing in art and framing in crime intended. The crime in this case is being born nonhuman; the punishment is assimilation into human culture. According to IAVC, human beings and their mass culture are out of tune with nature, a state of affairs lauded by humans via expressing our transcendence of nature and our natural limits. As we outwardly immerse ourselves in culture and abandon nature, however, we inwardly despise the natural aspects of ourselves. Malamud (2012) identifies this dislocation as central to our relationship with animals; we despise them for failing to transcend nature and now “an animal’s cultural context supplants its natural context” (p. 7) in the human imagination. The results approach the
apocalyptic, as Malamud locates this development in postmodernism, globalization, and human colonization of the earth—an earth plagued by climate change and unprecedented mass extinctions. Visual culture that depicts animals, according to *IAVC*, largely exists to express human domination, a point that is aptly illustrated in the chapter on Famous Animals.

The outstanding chapter in *IAVC* is the one on zoos, as might be expected from Malamud, who has published a great deal on the subject. The chapter on photography offers a good overview, but it suggests a vast untapped literature, as does the chapter on animals in pornography, which is also intriguing as a self-study in testing the integrity of one’s sensibilities in the pursuit of a disturbing subject. The chapter on Weird Animals offers ample evidence that humans do strange things with and to animals that both exploit and deny a connection to nature, a connection that human beings simultaneously envy and deplore; it gives the overwhelming impression that human beings will not comprehend nonhuman existence as long as we fail to comprehend our own.

The most disappointing chapter is the one on Film Animals. Some of the best work on animals in film is absent, particularly the brief but indispensable *Animals in Film* (2002) by Jonathan Burt. Instead, *IAVC* advocates gaze theory, which was modified by its initial proponents in feminist film theory and later abandoned in favor of more psychologically real and nuanced models of viewer engagement that allow for the possibility of escaping the male gaze. The recommendation of gaze theory to evade the male gaze by hiring women who can create a more egalitarian representation of gender suggests a highly unlikely parallel scenario with animals.

If women making movies is the path to less sexist representations, are nonhumans making movies the path to less speciesist representations? Ultimately, the analogy would seem to break down because animals don’t watch movies and women do. *IAVC* does some work to rehabilitate gaze theory and it fits the metaphor of “framing” animals explicated in the introduction, but shouldn’t we adopt an approach that does more to allow that films may express nonhuman interests and perspectives even if the films are produced by human beings? Gaze theory seems provocative, but it impoverishes inquiry because it treads very close to the conclusion that the only ethical way to represent animals would be to not represent them at all.

One may be forgiven for drawing the conclusion that *IAVC* recommends that human beings abandon (nearly) all efforts to represent our nonhuman companions and compatriots. Throughout my reading of *IAVC*, I sensed the implication that Malamud would love for readers to prove him wrong (or, of course, for the world to change radically how it views and treats animals). His study of animals in visual culture paints an overwhelmingly unsettling picture...