

[Review] Austin McQuinn.

*Becoming Audible: Sounding Animality in Performance.*

Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021. 200 pp.

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In *Becoming Audible*, Austin McQuinn leads us through a buzzing network of animals, humans, scenes, objects, and posthumanities concepts, curating an omnivorous art and music festival between two covers. McQuinn, a visual artist as well as a writer and academic, explores human-animal assemblages and creaturely representations in a broad range of creative output, from music to performance art to literature. Forcefully rejecting anthropocentrism, he argues that ‘sound worlds are shared worlds and always have been – between epochs, between bodies, between species’ (2). In turn, McQuinn seems to insist, those interspecies sound worlds are shared between creative fields. The book itself feels like a posthuman assemblage in the process of emerging, as alive and teeming as the genre-melting creative works discussed in detail.

McQuinn is an inquisitive tour guide, stopping longer here, shorter there, meandering and then letting the works breathe on their own terms. In his lovely preface, he paints a picture of himself as a particular human animal in a habitat, surrounded by other creatures:

In the field opposite the house where I live, on a very rural mountain slope in Tipperary, Ireland, a bull is complaining loudly. Bawling and howling, he wants company other than the other male cattle he is forced to herd with. This too will go on all day ... Some of the cattle join in. A dog barks back. A pheasant croaks on the lane. I am silent and listening, working, writing this. (xi)

The roots of McQuinn's affinity with animals are agricultural: 'In my school friends' farmyards I witnessed many births, many deaths' (xi). He states his long-nurtured interest clearly and simply: 'animals have always occupied my life and work as themselves and also as symbols or metaphors – of otherness, of fear, of outsidership, of intimacies, of creatureliness, of ambiguity' (x). The lucidity and intimacy of this preface surface now and again throughout the rest of the book with sentences in the first person. These first-hand narratives seem particularly apt at painting the human as just another creature in the multispecies mesh.

The book's title is a play on Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming-animal'.<sup>1</sup> For readers who are familiar with these authors, the 'Audible' contains an echo of its 'Animal' forebear, and this allusive layering spells out McQuinn's subject (*Audible Animals*). The title gives the somewhat misleading impression that the book will contribute strictly to the sound studies canon; however, McQuinn's analysis of animality in performance ranges far beyond the aural and audible. In the later chapters especially, animals are also visualized, theatricalized, written about, and dreamed up.

The chapters of *Becoming Audible* are each named for a different kind of 'becoming': 'Becoming Audible' (Chapter One), 'Becoming Acoustic,' (Chapter Two), 'Becoming Botched' (Chapter Three), 'Becoming Canine' (Chapter Four), 'Becoming Lingual' (Chapter Five) and 'Becoming Resonant' (Chapter Six). Some focus on animal genera, some on more abstract concepts such as acousmatics, resonance, and neo-shamanism. McQuinn is an erudite and thoughtful critic of art and music across the centuries – his examples zigzag from Heidegger to 'paleoperformance' to Messiaen to Shakespeare to 21st-century installation art (his experience as a practicing artist comes through in his close acquaintance with lived, acted arts communities in Europe). And what does the varied and colourful use of animality *do* in all of these examples of performance? For many artists, McQuinn argues, symbolic animals attend to a desire for timelessness. Interestingly, rather than embodying the irrational and unpredictable, they evoke 'a territory as reliable and consistent as the land itself' (17). As with a nightingale recorded and broadcast by the BBC during WWII, animals also become 'object[s] of nostalgia' or 'agent[s] of

memory' (14). In all cases, McQuinn hopes, the use of animal characters in art helps to chip away at an Enlightenment-era understanding of the human as static, autonomous, and superior. He insists that animal presences theorize 'human identity as a series of transformations played out across the vast scale of evolutionary time rather than the static discrete forms authorized by divine creation' (115).

Many would argue that the Anthropocene is a result of centuries of human exceptionalism, defined in part by a lack of empathy for other species. To combat the reality of the Anthropocene, it would follow, we must adopt an increased awareness of our interdependence with those other species. Just as importantly, combating it might involve breaking down the universal human that is implicated in the very concept of the Anthropocene – indeed, not all humans are responsible for the anthropocentrism that has gotten us where we find ourselves today. For McQuinn, the nuanced human/animal assemblages represented in the diverse art he portrays collectively help to tease out the complex relations between humans and our environment; which is backdrop and which is foreground? Which is universal and which particular?

One of the monograph's most engaging themes – that of animals' ability to inspire humility and awe in humans – is developed in Chapter Four, which centres on canine actors in theatre and performance art. The chapter deals with Alexander Raskatov's 2010 opera *A Dog's Heart* (based on a 1925 novella by Mikhail Bulgakov) before focusing on the canine character of Crab in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (ca. 1590). McQuinn describes the popularity of theatrical dogs in Shakespeare's time, writing, 'By the time Crab wanders onto a piazza in *Verona*, the persona, and indeed dramatic duty, of the onstage dog was well established and well sought after – not for the skill of its performance but for the total absence of one' (90). This *absence* of performance, McQuinn argues, is also the source of rare vitality in human performance, and it is here that the animal's difference shines through: 'In Crab, Shakespeare's canine actor is made to do nothing but must be something exquisitely spectacular for its audience – that is, to be really, convincingly alive, which in itself is so desirable and so difficult in any performance context' (94).

The challenge, for humans, of being ‘convincingly alive’ recalled for me German literature scholar Eric Santner’s book about what he calls ‘creaturely life’. In it, he explains that in the work of Walter Benjamin, ‘human beings are not just creatures among other creatures but are in some sense *more creaturely* than other creatures by virtue of an excess that is produced in the space of the political and that, paradoxically, accounts for their “humanity”’ (26). Santner cites Rilke, who praises animals’ ‘freedom’ and access to what he calls ‘das Offene’, or ‘The Open’.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in *Becoming Audible*, McQuinn writes that ‘With Shakespeare, the universal human, in all its situations, ultimately becomes a creature without the capacity to become an animal’ (92). The animal’s status as performer, therefore, is worthy of admiration, awe, and even imitation.

In his introduction, while describing the logic and aesthetic of entanglement, McQuinn speaks of ‘relations that are often messy or murky, but always vital’ (1). Yet he would do well to look for complexity in some of the terms he uses most often – ‘animal’, ‘human’, ‘performance’, ‘creaturely’ – the last of which he seems to use simply to mean ‘animalian’. A missed opportunity is the work that might have been done by unpacking this prismatic word, as scholars throughout the humanities have begun to do.<sup>3</sup>

McQuinn might also have attended throughout the book to the darker side of animals’ ability to break down the universal and exalted human. He might have addressed the ways in which, as Donna Haraway has observed, ‘animality and nature have been integral to the production of racial difference’<sup>4</sup> and, I would argue, to the production of difference at large. Many of the works of art McQuinn discusses themselves deal with human precarity: in the work *Radio Shaman*, Marcus Coates’s performance art addresses the problem of Nigerian sex workers at the edge of a Norwegian city (63); Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Hairy Ape* tells the story of a working-class zoo employee whose physical appearance ‘is specified as “Neanderthal”’ (114); artist Alice Maher references the tongue as ‘the ... silenced speech organ of women’s voices’ (122). Yet McQuinn hurries past these examples of animals as symbols of precarity and as technologies through which to exaggerate narratives of human difference. Instead, he is interested in animals as “paragon[s] of liminality” in all senses’ (115). For him, as for Deleuze,

border-crossing and inter-species liminality have mostly promising and radical potential. They are strictly positive forms of deterritorialization.

More compellingly, McQuinn and some of the creators he mentions celebrate nonhumans not as static objects but as constant flux, and as indifferent (neither praising nor condemning) towards human life. Animals are never what we want them to be, and that is precisely what makes them alive and gives them agency: ‘what I may wish to hear is something timeless and universal, whereas in fact I am hearing a sound that is constantly changing and evolving alongside our own human cultural voices’ (19). Mirroring the preface in lyricism, the coda is an excerpt of Derek Mahon’s poem ‘Songs of Praise’. After describing a scene of hymn-singing in a seaside village church, Mahon takes us into the dark waters themselves: ‘Outside, the hymn dies among the rocks and dunes. / Conflicting rhythms of the incurious sea, / Not even contemptuous of these tiny tunes, / Take over where our thin ascriptions fail. / Down there in the silence of the laboratory, / Trombone dispatches of the beleaguered whale’ (154). For Mahon, humanity shrinks away against a broader, deeper backdrop, and the animal represents this diminution, this disappearance. In this sense, for Mahon as for McQuinn, the animal is perhaps no less a symbol than before. She is still instilled with human desire; only now, the human desire is to become smaller, to disappear, and to let the animal speak for herself.

With its interest in in-betweenness, performance, and flux, *Becoming Audible* is an enlightening read for animal studies enthusiasts from a wide range of humanities backgrounds – literature, theatre, performance art, visual art, music – and indeed speaks to the extent to which the humanities disciplines are becoming part of one large posthuman conversation. While there is room for more discussion of nuance in the history of symbolic animals, McQuinn makes a strong case for the value of an animal turn for human societies at large.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*. Éditions de Minuit, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Rilke writes: Only *our* eyes are turned / backward, and surround plant, animal, child / like traps, as they emerge into their freedom.... / We know what is really out there only from / the animal's gaze; for we take the very young / child and force it around, so that it sees / objects – not the Open, which is so / deep in animals' faces. Quoted in Santner, Eric. *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*. University of Chicago Press, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Santner, for example, studies the nuanced meanings of the word in the writings of Rilke, Benjamin, and Sebald. Peter Vermeulen and Virginia Richter argue for its usage as an alternative to 'animal' and help to elucidate its meaning in describing humans. Christopher Lloyd, too, uses it in discussions of literature by Jesmyn Ward to disintegrate a concept of universal humanity, showing how certain humans have been rendered more 'creaturely' than others.

<sup>4</sup> Haraway 1989, quoted in Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.