

Animal Death, edited by Jay Johnston and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2013.

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This confronting and intelligently edited collection of essays on the theme of animal death raises crucial questions about non-human animals. Do non-human animals have a sense of consciousness, experience emotional lives and possess an awareness of their own impending deaths? These questions are informed by ideas that many human subjects value as unique to their own species – in fact, some would argue it is these things that separate out humans from non-human animals. Others would argue that this is an arrogant and groundless view, but even if true, it does not offer a justification for denying animals the right to live out their own lives, on their own terms. Although the essays are focused on the theme of animal death, many return with unnerving regularity to a parallel, sometimes implied, theme: the question of the human. What is the human? Why does the human subject seek to define itself as unique species on the basis that humanity has a special relationship to death? Why does the human animal believe it has the right to take the lives of non-human animals for its own profit and advancement?

The subject of animal death is not easy; it confronts the reader with uncomfortable issues of human egotism, greed, cruelty and indifference. ‘The sheer scale of animal death,’ the editors point out, is ‘mind-boggling’, making this ‘a tough subject to face’ but one that is ‘at the heart of human-animal relations and human-animal studies scholarship’ (xiii). The future of species is not one that the human subject can ignore, as Deborah Bird Rose argues in the opening essay. ‘As we are now within the sixth mass extinction event on earth, and as we are its cause, we are howling into, and from, an extremely complicated place: the shadow of the

Anthropocene (1). If we continue with human behaviours that exacerbate global warming, leading to further destruction of the environment, instead of trying to live alongside other species, allowing them to make their own unique contribution to the life of planetary ecosystems, then the future of the planet looks bleak indeed. Rose refers to the philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas' argument that there are two sides to ethics which she states as 'the entanglements that bring forth subjectivity, and the refusal to justify or ignore the sufferings of others' (10–11). Respect for the life of all creatures, and the refusal to ignore their sufferings, are principles crucial to the planet's survival. These ideals inform many of the chapters.

The various essays explore animal death from a range of perspectives from Chloë Taylor's confronting discussion of respect for the animal dead to Peta Tait's equally confronting analysis of her own viewing the 'Animal inside out' exhibition of plastinated corpses at London's Museum of Natural History. The collection also covers a wide range of topics. There are essays on historic pet cemeteries; the death of the lower order of creatures such as insects and yeasts; the history of donkey burials; the radical power of visual images in showing the cruelty of battery farming; horse sacrifice in funerary celebrations; veterinary practices of animal euthanasia; biopower and animal death at the zoo; the invisibility of animals marked for death; the anti-vivisection movement; the deaths of huskies in Arctic Greenland; and furry souls and otherkin. In addition there are key chapters on animals deaths in specific texts such as: George Ioannides complex discussion of the classic film, *Sirius Remembered*; Melissa Boyde's perceptive analysis of the novels and films of *Wake in Fright* and *Red Dog*; and Carol Freeman's compelling discussion of *The Hunter*, a film about extinction and the Tasmanian 'tiger'. The chapters are all absorbing – for the depth of knowledge displayed and the originality of the arguments presented on the theme of animal deaths. No creature is too small or insignificant to be passed over.

In his sustained attack on humanism and human systems evident throughout his writings, George Bataille once described the spider and the earthworm as examples of the thing that has 'no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere' (31). It is significant that Bataille also saw formlessness as that which brings down meaning and systems in the world. In its discussion

of creatures both large and small, even the most insignificant, *Animal Death* draws attention to the ethical importance of extending significance to every possible kind of death. All creatures and their unique biosystems are entangled one with the other – human and nonhuman. Fiona Probyn-Rapsey makes this argument effectively in her nuanced discussion of the way in which human society whitens out, or renders invisible, the animals that are marked out for death such as broiler chickens and the white lab rat. However, when the countless deaths of such animals are considered through a non-humanist ethical lens it is possible to see that Bataille’s ‘squashed’ of the world are entitled to rights of their own. Focusing questions of life and death on the most insignificant of living creatures has the effect of challenging anthropocentric ways of thinking at its roots.

What marks many of these essays is their responsiveness to the social and cultural exchanges that distinguish the history of human animal relationships. Hilda Kean’s essay on historic animal cemeteries in Paris, London and New York makes the important point that when we bury our human companions we tend to write formal messages of loss on the gravestones, but when we bury our animal companions we feel much freer to express sorrow and grief. She writes that these emotional responses to dead animals further undermine the belief in an inviolate human-animal boundary. Recent research reveals that animals, from elephants to dolphins, mourn the loss of their own kind. Referring to the work of Julie Ann Smith on rabbits, Kean notes that these creatures are not exempt and that ‘rabbits eventually come to understand that their partners are dead by grooming or lying by them’ (37).

George Ioannides’s perceptive essay on Stan Brakhage’s film, *Sirius Remembered* (1959), questions the nature of visual representation in relation to animal death. Here Brakhage films the actual decomposition of his dead dog, Sirius, over a number of seasons. Ioannides offers a critique of John Berger and Akira Lippit’s view that film and other visual media mourn the loss of animal life in the real while offering a spectral substitute, or absent referent, of the disappearing world. ‘Is the dead animal on screen, therefore, to be understood as spectral, a phantasm, captured on film and enshrined in loops of movement?’ (103–04). The film’s focus on the physicality of the animal leaves no doubt of its materiality, that the image does not signify

a phantasmic but an actual scene of death and decomposition. Ioannides argues instead that Sirius's death, and the 'filmic image of animal death is a form of rupture in the field of visual representation'. It is difficult to imagine that a filmmaker might be able similarly to film the decomposition of a human figure, of someone who was once a beloved companion. The influential film theorist, Vivien Sobchack, has discussed the cultural taboo on the representation of death in the documentary film. In her view the representation of an actual death – human and animal – raises important ethical issues because such a death signifies a "ferocious reality" (247). She writes that 'we do not ever "see" death on the screen nor understand its visible stasis or contours. Instead, we see the activity and remains of the event of *dying*' (233). *Sirius Remembered* documents the material event of dying while the film's title emphasises that the film itself is also a testimony to a living Sirius and to the fact that all life is both fragile and precious.

Matthew Chrulew's essay on the idea of life and death in the zoo draws on Michel Foucault's concept of biopower to reveal the ways in which zoos organise death by utilising discourses of knowledge and power in their management of animals. Chrulew focuses his discussion on the work of Heini Hediger, a Swiss zoo director who, in the mid-twentieth century, exerted a crucial influence on zoo practices. In particular he introduced the new idea that 'death due to behaviour' was a key cause of animal death. By this he meant not death due to disease but 'death that resulted from the animal's behavior and actions, from their psychological perceptions of their simulated environments' (226). Hediger's insight into animal death, brought about through causes such as this, led him to draw up what Chrulew describes as 'a remarkable table cataloguing the "background" to the different types of causes of death' that fell under this new category. These included 'Disturbance reactions' such as refusal to eat, self-mutilation and the abandoning of offspring. Chrulew's findings and discussion of Hediger's work in relation to biopower are extremely important for any discussion of animal death. They bring to the fore the crucial role played by the emotional responses of animals to their captivity, including the fact that some zoo animals have brought about their own deaths.

All of the essays in this volume offer an important and scholarly contribution to the field. The essays that I have specifically referred to in this review set the tone for the equally challenging essays that form the entirety of the book. The final essay, Jay Johnston's discussion of 'furry souls', collapses the so-called boundary between human and animal from a fascinating perspective that recalls the centuries-old debate about whether or not animals have souls and go to heaven. Many of the essays enter relatively uncharted territory, offering the reader new insights into this difficult area. Taken as a whole, *Animal Death* offers an example of some of the best recent scholarship in human animal studies.

Reference list

Bataille, Georges. 'Formless.' *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Ed. Allan Stoekl. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

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