

At the Zoo: *Looking at Animals in Modern Literature and Culture*

“Something tells me it’s all happening at the zoo...”

—Paul Simon



Gerry Winogrand, *Untitled* (1969), Gelatin silver print, New York, MoMA

Bulletin Description

This is an interdisciplinary, discussion-based course focusing on the motif of animal exhibition and encounter in a modern urbanized context as depicted in German, European and American literature, cinema, philosophy, journalism, and the visual arts. Taking the zoo as the paradigmatic site for human–animal encounters in the modern, urban society, this class will examine the ways in which the relationship between humans and other animals has been conceived, represented and challenged from a variety of perspectives. The key questions which we will seek to address in this course are: How do animals and humans look at each other in the modern world, and how have artists, writers, and critics sought to represent the relationship to animals in their work? Students will read and discuss literary, philosophical and cultural-historical texts in addition to watching a number of films all dealing in one way or another with what philosopher Jacques Derrida has called “the question of the animal”. The class will serve as an introduction to the emerging field of animal studies while allowing students develop their critical reading and writing skills through regular response postings and discussion on the class blog and in class. An excursion to the Bronx Zoo will provide a “hands-on” counterpart to the theoretical and artistic material. Readings include works by: Kafka, Rilke, Hagenbeck, Musil, Uexküll, Pirandello, Hemingway, and others. All readings will be in English but students are encouraged to read in the original wherever possible. There are no prerequisites.

Role of the Course in the Departmental Curriculum

This class will be listed under Comp.Lit.–German and will count as an Elective (3 pts.) toward a major in both German and Comparative Literature (ICLS). It will build on and develop the critical reading and writing skills which students will have acquired in the Core Curriculum as well as in the Introduction to German Literature and Introduction to Comparative Literature and Society. The class will also serve as an introduction to the key issues and methodologies of critical animal studies, a dynamic new interdisciplinary field in the humanities and social sciences currently not represented in any of the courses offered at Columbia. Students interested in any aspect of human–animal relations in literature and art are encouraged to take this class. More generally, this class is open and will be of interest to any students majoring in or simply curious about modern German, Italian, and American literature and culture, anthropology, history, continental philosophy, art history and architecture, and film studies.

Course Description and Objectives

At the Zoo: Looking at Animals in Modern Literature and Culture is an interdisciplinary, discussion-based course focusing on the motif of animal exhibition and encounter in a modern urbanized context as depicted in German, European, and American literature, cinema, philosophy, journalism, and the arts. The primary locus of such encounters is the modern zoological garden, which emerged in the mid 19th century, at a time which, in the wake of mass urbanization and the impact of Darwin’s theory of evolution, also saw the rise of the animal welfare movement, vegetarianism, as well as a massive increase in domestic pet-keeping. In other words, the relationship between humans and animals was in this period becoming problematic in unprecedented ways and this is often reflected most powerfully and insightfully in the works of writers, poets, and visual artists of the time.

We will begin by examining a body of core texts by German-speaking modernist authors, coupled with texts relating to the so-called “Hagenbeck revolution” in zoo design at the start of the twentieth century in Germany. We will then expand our scope to encompass a wide variety of critical and aesthetic discourses on the zoo and on the relationship between humans and other animals in the modern world, right up to current media and academic debates surrounding the function and status of zoos today. An excursion to the Bronx Zoo in week three will offer students an opportunity to compare their literary and critical readings to the reality of a modern zoo, and students will be required to write a short meditation on their own experience of the animal gaze in the light of the texts they have read in class. We will be reading texts of many different types, including poetry, prose fiction, history, philosophy, and journalism in addition to viewing a number of films, both fictional and documentary, all of which deal centrally with the figure of the animal in modern Western culture. The advantage of this thematic approach is that students will be exposed to a large number of critical discourses directly or indirectly related to the topic (e.g. post-colonial studies, art history, etc.), and will be encouraged to pursue specific interests further in the final research paper.

The class will meet three times a week for six weeks and is divided roughly into two halves: the first half will lay the foundation with basic literary, historical, and philosophical texts, while the second half, which also includes three film screenings, will look at more specific motifs or themes within the topic with the aim of applying the insights, questions, and ideas prompted by the readings in the first half to those in the second. Students will be required to give two presentations, one in each half, on a particular text or topic of their choosing. In addition,

there will be weekly response posts on the class blog. Students will also be asked to comment on their classmates' blog-posts over the course of the week. This should be thought of as an informal forum for ideas, comments, thoughts, and questions, which will then be taken up in class and may develop into topics for the final research paper. Toward the end of the class, there will be a research paper workshop, in which students present their ideas for the final paper and receive feedback from their classmates and the instructor.

Texts

Photocopies of shorter texts, excerpts, and critical essays will be posted on CourseWorks or handed out in class. In addition, the following books will be available for purchase at **Book Culture** (536 West 112th St.). Please purchase the editions I have ordered, to ensure that pagination and any additional materials will be the same.

- Eric Ames. *Carl Hagenbeck's Empire of Entertainments*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 2008
J.M. Coetzee. *The Lives of Animals*. Ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1999
Jacques Derrida. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham UP, 2008
Luigi Pirandello. *Shoot!: The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator*. Trans. C. K. Scott-Moncrieff. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005
Jakob von Uexküll. *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*. Trans. Joseph D. O'Neil. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010

Requirements

Attendance: It is absolutely essential that students come to class prepared and ready to participate in discussion. This is a short, fast-paced term and there will be no time to make up late or missed work. Many of the texts we are reading are quite short, but they are all dense and complex and you will likely need to read them more than once or even twice. Attendance at all film screenings and the excursion to the Bronx Zoo are also mandatory.

Online Discussion: Students are required to post 300-500 word responses on the course blog once per week (by 8pm Sunday). Regular (twice-weekly minimum) contributions to the blog via comments / responses to classmates' posts. This should be seen as an informal discussion between sessions.

Presentations: Students will each give two 10-15 minute presentations, one on a specific text on the syllabus, and another (in week 5) in which they present ideas for the final paper and discuss them with the class as a whole.

Final Paper: A research paper of 10-12 pages on a topic developed out of the course materials (to be cleared with me in office hours as well as discussed with the class (see above)). These are due on the Sunday after the last day of classes. No extensions.

Grading

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| 1. Attendance & Participation (incl. excursion and film screenings). | 20% |
| 2. Weekly response postings on class blog and participation in online discussion. | 20% |
| 3. 2 Presentations (10-15 mins). | 30% |
| 4. Final research paper (10-12 pages). | 30% |

Course Schedule

I. Looking at Animals

In this first section, we will examine different ways authors and critics have conceived of and represented the animal gaze and the experience of looking at and being looked at by animals. We will read accounts of zoo history and design, and we will round off this section with an excursion to the Bronx Zoo, where students will have an opportunity to compare theory to practice before posting their impressions and comments on the class blog.

Monday **Introduction**

5/23 Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Panther"
Julio Cortázar, "Axolotl"

Wednesday John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" (1980)
5/25 Randy Malamud, "Zoo Spectatorship"

Recommended:

Jonathan Burt, "John Berger's 'Why Look at Animals': A Close Reading"
W.J.T. Mitchell, "Looking at Animals Looking"
Dale Jamieson, "Against Zoos"

Thursday Eric Ames, *Carl Hagenbeck's Empire of Entertainments*, 141–197
5/26 Melissa Greene, "No Rms, Jungle Vu," *Atlantic Monthly* (Dec. 1987)
Texts pertaining to the Central Park Zoo Escape Hoax of 1874

Recommended:

Kathleen Kete, "Animals and Human Empire," *A Cultural History of Animals*, 5:1–24
Hoage & Deiss, eds. *New Worlds, New Animals: From Menagerie to Zoological Park in the Nineteenth Century*, 3–85
Radio Lab, season 3, episode 3: "Zoos" < <http://www.radiolab.org/2007/jun/04/> >

Monday Memorial Day—No class (rescheduled for Friday June 3rd)
5/30

II. Animals Look at Us

In this section we will start by reading Jacques Derrida's *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, in many ways a foundational text for the discipline of animal studies. We will then move on to a number of scientific and literary attempts at an inter-subjective, non-anthropocentric engagement with the animal Other. We will conclude the section with a discussion of J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*, an enormously rich text which foregrounds the ethical debates surrounding humans and nonhumans in contemporary philosophical and social discourse.

- Wednesday Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), 1–52
6/1 **Recommended:**
 Lorraine Daston, "Intelligences: Angelic, Animal, Human," *Thinking with Animals*, eds. 37–58
 Marjorie Garber, "Heavy Petting," *Human, All too Human*, Diana Fuss, ed. 11–36
- Thursday Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "A Letter," *Selected Prose*, 129–141
6/2 Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" (1873)
 Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (Chapter 1)
Recommended:
 Deleuze & Guattari, "Becoming-Animal," *Animal Philosophy*, 87–110
- Friday **Excursion:** Bronx Zoo
6/3
- Monday Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, 1–135
6/6 Franz Kafka, "Investigations of a Dog" (1922)
Recommended:
 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, 1–62
- Wednesday Rainer Maria Rilke, "An Encounter" (1907), 8th *Duino Elegy* (1922), *Mitsou* (1922)
6/8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, sec. 1 (1874)
- Thursday Thomas Mann, "A Man and His Dog," (1919)
6/9
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III. Primate Week

Moving into the second half of the semester, we will consider examples of apes challenging or even transgressing the social, linguistic, emotional boundaries of the human–animal divide. In doing so, we will have an opportunity to recapitulate the philosophical, aesthetic, and historical issues covered in the first three weeks of the course. This section also includes the first of the three film screenings which will provide an additional dimension to the course material.

- Monday Wilhelm Hauff, "The Young Englishman" (1826)
6/13 Edgar Allen Poe, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841)
 Djuna Barnes, "The Girl and the Gorilla" (1914)
 Robert Musil, "Monkey Island" (1912)
Recommended:
 Stephanie Rowe, "No Human Hand?" *Animals and Agency*, 107–127

Film screening: *Nénette*, Nicolas Philibert, dir. (2010)

Wednesday Discussion of *Nénette*
6/15 Franz Kafka, *A Report for an Academy* (1917)

Thursday J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*
6/16
Recommended:
Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy," *Partial Answers* 1.2 (2003): 1–26

IV. "That's Entertainment!" — (Re)presenting Animal Death

This section revolves around the figure of animal death as a factor in human sport and entertainment. The texts under consideration all blend fiction and documentary elements to varying degrees, as well as each representing a different medium or genre. This will give students an opportunity to evaluate and discuss the issues at stake in the performance and representation of animal death as spectacle.

Monday Luigi Pirandello, *Shoot!* (1915)
6/20 **Final paper proposals due**

Film screening: *King Kong*, Cooper & Schoedsack, dirs. (1933)

Wednesday Pirandello *cont'd*
6/22 Discussion of *King Kong*
Akira Mizuta Lippit, "The Death of an Animal" (2002)

Thursday George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant" (1936)
6/23 Alexander Kluge, *Execution of an Elephant* (2000)

Recommended:
Nigel Rothfels, "Why Look at Elephants?" *Worldviews* 9.2 (2005): 166–183

V. Out of the Cage — Into the Wild

In this final section, we will watch and discuss German director Werner Herzog's 2005 documentary *Grizzly Man*, which unites many of the most important elements from the semester's other readings and films, such as the animal gaze, voyeurism, spectacle, anthropomorphism, boundary-crossing, and death. The concluding discussion will be a chance to tie up loose ends and reflect on major (or minor) issues that emerged over the course of the semester.

Monday Research paper workshop
6/27

Film screening: *Grizzly Man*, Werner Herzog, dir. (2005)

Wednesday Discussion of *Grizzly Man*

6/29

Recommended:

Paul Sheehan, "Against the Image: Herzog and the Troubling Politics of the Screen Animal,"
SubStance 37.3 (2008): 117–136

Brad Prager, *The Cinema of Werner Herzog: Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth*, 1–19; 82–118.

Thursday Concluding discussion

6/30

Sunday: Final papers due
