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Animals as Online Resources for Human Storytelling

Between Exploitation and Anthrozoological Empowerment

SUMMARY

The paper deals with online representations of animals and examines the extent to which the digital age, with its media and specific characteristics, influences the representation of animals. The text introduces the basic questions of human animal studies, using Randy Malamud's virtual animal concept to scrutinise online representations of animals in social media. Based on Spivak's concept of subalternity, online-animals are discussed as subaltern representations, that are instrumentalised in human story telling: as an economic resource, as a projection surface for individual life writing and identity creation and as a means of social networking. Yet social media are also discussed as a space in which anthrozoological empowerment can take place. Based on Kari Weil's concept of the contact zone, the virtual animal

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is discussed as a space of possibilities for a posthuman language that, with the help of digital possibilities of representation, unsettles anthropocentric hegemony.

Keywords
human-animal studies, cultural animal studies, social media, human-animal life-writing, anthrozoological empowerment, posthumanity

> They must note how the staging of the world in representation – its scene of writing, its *Darstellung* – dissimulates […] agents of power – *Vertretung*.[1]

In her famous 1988 essay titled "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the main theorists of the postcolonial theory beside Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha, criticises the epistemic power of European intellectuals to constitute the colonial subject as the Other.[2] In doing so, she provides a lasting reflection of the ambivalent process that – explicitly with reference to Spivak – has been made the subject of this volume again and again: life writing in the name of someone else. With regard to the representation of the Global South as the Other in the narratives of the Global North, she critically argues that:

> Outside (though not completely so) the circuit of the *international* division of labor, there are people whose consciousness we cannot grasp if we close off our benevolence by constructing a homogeneous Other referring only to our own place in the seat of the Same or the Self.[3]

Spivak shows the process of Othering in the postcolonial context referring to Indian women, who are to be understood as subaltern because their voice is absent from postcolonial and patriarchal representation. This article undertakes to apply Spivak's concept of subalternity to human-animal studies in the digital age and ask to what extent the mechanisms of Othering discussed by Spivak can be transferred to the relationship between humans and non-human animals.

Spivak's text appears to be still relevant and up-to-date for research into the latest forms of life writing, especially in the relatively young medium of social media. Therefore, the keywords *Darstellung* and *Vertretung* connected with the agents of power mentioned by Spivak in the preceding quote lead to the central questions of this paper, concerning the way in which animals function as online resources for human storytelling and whether the same criticism Spivak addresses to the Global North also applies to influencers who turn their animals into petfleuncers. A good example of this is the Pomeranian

[1] G. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak", in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory. A Reader*, eds P. Williams, L. Chrisman (New York 1994), 74.
[2] Ibid., 76.
[3] Ibid., 84.

Jiffpom with 9.2 m Instagram followers, whose owner earns about 35.000 euros with one post.[4] Other questions refer to the possibility of identifying animals as subaltern and applying to them what Spivak said about the subaltern woman, whose speech is not heard, not because she is silent, but because her voice "is outside the hegemonic logos and without auctoritas?"[5] If this is true, the question remains how the voices of animals can be made audible and how anthrozoological empowerment can be established. Furthermore, it is worth analyzing if the supposed anthrozoological empowerment of animals as a form of hegemonic representation of the subaltern remains a benevolent construction of the animal as the Other and thus, as in the quote above, only refers "to our own place in the seat of the Same or the Self."

To answer these questions, this paper examines brief case studies of animal representations in social media. Taking the phenomenon of the petfluencer as a starting point, it is interesting to examine online animals as subaltern resources for human life writing. It is impossible for this article to go into the enormous extent of obvious violence against animals on the internet, but at least it is worth pointing out that the danger and damage to animal health also applies to petfleuncers and is denounced by animal protection organizations.[6] The paper attempts to answer the question whether, in addition to the instrumentalisation and exploitation of animals as a commercial and social resource, emancipatory empowerment is made possible through online representation. Using further examples of online animals in social media platforms can be used to address the question if the online existence, the visibility of animals in social media (which is, in principle, not self-determined, but created by humans) can have also a positive impact on the real animals behind their virtual representations. Social media as mass media and at the same time as a powerful medium of multidirectional communication "combine peer and media effects and thereby represent a powerful motivator of behavior […]" and have greater and faster influence than traditional media.[7] Therefore if an animal species is threatened by humans, is it possible that its representation in social media, its visibility in the digital public discourse may ensure its survival?

The article puts forward a thesis that animal life writing in social media is fundamentally ambivalent. It oscillates between exploitation and empowerment and is, in fact, comparable to Othering processes that occur in postcolonial and patriarchal contexts. The hegemonic mechanisms that

[4] *Companion Life*, "New data reveals the highest earning dog-fluencers in 2023 – with Instagram taking top spot over TikTok," https://www.companionlife.co.uk/new-data-reveals-the-highest-earning-dog-fluencers-in-2023-with-instagram-taking-top-spot-over-tiktok/ (accessed 8 November 2023).

[5] Sabine Hark, "Die Vermessung des Schweigens – oder: Was heißt sprechen? Dimensionen epistemischer Gewalt," in *Dominanzkultur reloaded. Neue Texte zu gesellschaftlichen Machtverhältnissen und ihren Wechselwirkungen*, eds. Iman Attia, Swantja Köbsell, Nivedity Prasad (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015), 287.

[6] See among others: https://www.peta.org/media/news-releases/influencer-animal-abuse-prompts-peta-appeal-to-platforms/

[7] Megan A. Moreno, Jonathan D. D'Angelo, "Digital Media Theory. From One-Way to Multidirectional Communication," in *Handbook of Visual Communication. Theory, Methods and Media*, eds. Sheree Josephson, James Kelly, Ken Smith (New York: Routledge 2020), 324.

construct subalternity can be transferred very well to the representation of animals (in social media), as Shapiro and Copeland wrote in their preface to the 2005 issue of the journal *Society & Animals*:

> As feminist, critical theory has discovered both the gross and subtle ways in which fiction has undermined the status of women, we expect to find that authors typically treat nonhuman animals in ways that are reductive and disrespectful of them. In part, this emerging literary theory, then, will consist of cataloguing and deconstructing those reductive moves. […] However, a full-blown, animal-based, interpretative theory should examine the status of the use of nonhuman animals as symbols. Is this symbolic use, "figurative appropriation" (Malamud, 2003, pp. 4–5) or ideational exploitation (Scholtmeijer, 2000, p. 380) and, therefore, necessarily reductive or disrespectful? Is it at least anthropocentric, and is it not grist for this critical theory? What are the alternatives to a symbolic role in particular and reductive roles in general? […] "We lack a language at present in which we can think about and represent animals to ourselves as animals in ways that are not metaphorical" (Fudge, 2002, p. 12). Yes, but that overstates the case. We all have some knowledge of the life of a nonhuman animal and – Nagel (1974) notwithstanding – some ability to empathize with the world-as-experienced by that animal.[8]

Shapiro and Copeland emphasise fiction as an engine of storytelling, which makes literature not only a space of (inauthentic) representation, but also an ideal space for imagination. In fiction, we can empathise with other beings, discover and perceive new realities, different from our ones, because "[o]nly literature is capable of letting us go deep into the life of another being, understand their reasons, share their emotions and experience their fate."[9] Olga Tokarczuk speaks about this power of fiction in her Nobel lecture, which can be read as a programme of ecocriticism. In her lecture, she outlines the concept of the tender narrator (*czuły narrator*) as the possibility of creating "a new story that's universal, comprehensive, all-inclusive, rooted in nature, full of contexts and at the same time understandable."[10]

This poses a question about how to tell stories in the medium of social media sensitively so as not to fall into the trap of representing animals in inauthentic narratives and exploiting them for our individual and collective purposes and values.

While Tokarczuk imagines literature as a unique laboratory to close up to posthuman narration and to overcome anthropocentric representations of animals, Randy Malamud, one of the main theorists in early cultural animal studies, takes a pessimistic look at anthropocentric practices of representing animals. In his article titled "Poetic Animals and Animal

[8] Kenneth Shapiro, Marion Copeland, "Toward a Critical Theory of Animal Issues in Fiction," *Society & Animals*, no. 13/4 (2002): 343.

[9] Olga Tokarczuk, "The tender narrator," https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/ (accessed 7 December 2019).

[10] Ibid.

Souls" (1998), he refers to David Weiss, who wrote in 1990 that "[…] even in Paradise Adam's naming of the creatures is connected with his birthright of dominion over them. […] The danger is this: to name is to cage; to preserve is to kill."[11]

In *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture* (2012) Malamud analyses the representation of animals in visual culture and highlights the anthropocentric agency critically again:

> With increasing rapacity, people are changing the conditions of life for every other species of animal. We are squeezing them out of their habitats, often because we are repurposing those habitats for living space or agriculture, timber harvesting or highways. And it is not only the animals' habitats but also the animals themselves whose "value" as resources makes them increasingly vulnerable to human control and commodification. The process of exercising this control, as I examine it here, involves people's framing of animals in visual culture. Just as we have come to prefer that so many other aspects of our lives should be transposed into visual culture, so, too, do we come to expect that animals should "live" in this realm, in this cultural context, which means displacing and transplanting them from their natural contexts.[12]

While Malamud's approach is, with good reason, characterised by a rather essentialist perspective on the divergence between humans/culture and animals/nature,[13] this article undertakes to crumble this binarity. With the help of Shapiro and Copeland, it will attempt to consider the space of fiction and virtuality as a possibility for empowerment since narration creates illegibility and visibility, which can be the first step towards emancipation (as e.g. the feminist theory has proven for the representation of women in literature). It seems particularly interesting to analyse their advice that every storytelling about someone other than oneself represents an abstraction and so to speak a construction of the Other. Therefore, if we, in general, imagine ourselves in other people's shoes, why not in those of animals, too? And could especially the digital age, with all its different types of media, its worldwide availability and easy access to information, or benefits of digitalisation in the field of animal research (to name only a few aspects of the digital age concerning the questions discussed here) be used to find a language "in which we can think about and represent animals to ourselves as animals in ways that are not metaphorical?"[14] Or at least less metaphorical, because

[11] David Weiss, "Refusing to name the animals," *Gettysburg Review*, no. 3 (1990): 238.

[12] Randy Malamud, *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2.

[13] The human-made border between animals and non-human animals serves human hegemony and is used to justify the domination and exploitation of animals for human needs. This view constitutes the core issue of animal ethics that address and fight the exploitation of animals. Likewise, zoological and ethological research with representatives, such as Volker Sommer or Marc Bekoff, has been able to show that this limit is merely a cultural setting without provable validity.

[14] Erica Fudge, *Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 12.

the digital animal in particular might be a way to create a representation that is less anthropocentric than the literary animal, because in digitality there are more ways to express than using human language? Can sound and video recordings, body cams and wildlife cameras produce images that replenish and also challenge and alter animal representations that are so far determined by the hegemony of language based human narration?

The questions raised here are well known in the discourse of cultural animal studies and human-animal studies which this paper refers to on the basis of some of the early canonical texts from the Anglo-American discourse.[15] The answers provided here are merely insights into this heterogeneous discourse, which was only introduced briefly. Likewise, the question of media is touched here rudimentary, but with the goal to create an interdisciplinary approach to the topic that is, first of all, able to supplement the central themes of life writing from the perspective of cultural animal studies and human-animal studies in the digital age.

The virtual animal as anthrozoological contact zone

Narratives and pictures of animals have been present across all times and cultures, e.g. in poems, legends, fairy tales, surreal novels, etc. Animals appear in different roles ranging from objects to anthropomorphised subjects, from symbols to individuals. With the advent of the digital age, narratives and pictures of animals have appeared in the new media. With reference to Randy Malamud, this article aims to discuss these online animals as virtual animals, which constitute new forms of representation. The paper focuses on the virtual animal as an online animal in order to underline the social media aspect based on Web 2.0 tools and to highlight the general digital nature of online representations, as described by Megan A. Moreno and Jonathan D. D'Angelo in their essay "Digital Media Theory. From One-Way to Multidirectional Communication":

> Digital media are digital and often have the characteristics of being manipulated, networkable, dense, compressible, and interactive. The emergence of new, digital technologies "signals a potentially radical shift of who is in control of information, experience and resources".[16]

Due to Randy Malamud, the radical shift of power mentioned here does not affect the virtual animal, because it is still humans that put animals online. He comments critically on the representation of animals in the digital age:

[15] The relatively recent history of the discourses of human-animal-studies and cultural animal studies has begun with centers in America and England and can be captured under the umbrella term of ecocriticism. After 2000, the research field of ecocriticism has spread all over the world. For the Polish discourse of cultural animal studies, see among others: Anita Jarzyna, *Post-koiné. Studia o nieantropocentrycznych językach (poetyckich)* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2019); Anna Barcz, Magdalena Dąbrowska (eds.), *Zwierzęta, gender i kultura. Perspektywa ekologiczna, etyczna i krytyczna* (Lublin: E-naukowiec, 2014).

[16] Megan A. Moreno, Jonathan D. D'Angelo, "Digital Media Theory. From One-Way to Multidirectional Communication," 323.

> For as long as we have records of human culture, we have had animals in human culture, and we have used animals in human culture. But it is only quite recently – perhaps in the last century, perhaps just within the last generation – that the hurtling acceleration of our cultural activities has made our incursion into the world of animals exponentially more omnivorous (both literally and figuratively).[17]

Social Media is one of the main players of the cultural activities described by Malamud and a striking example is the phenomenon of the so-called petfluencer, an animal version of the influencer. Beside the most famous pretfluencer Jiffpom, there is, among others, also the cat called Choupette. She is the cat of the fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld and she became a star on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. A diary was written for her, the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published a fictional interview with her, she worked as a model for the car brand Opel and continued her career even after Lagerfeld's death.

Because the commercial layer is so obvious here, the topic of instrumentalising animals emerges directly. In *Lexikon der Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen* (2015) [Lexicon of Human-Animal Relations], under the entry "instrumentalisation", Peter Schaber refers to Immanuel Kant's ban on instrumentalisation,[18] in accordance with which it is not fundamentally problematic to treat others as a means unless they are used exclusively as a means to other people's ends.[19] Since there are no clear answers (even with Kant) to the question of what it specifically means to use others *exclusively* as a means, Schaber refers this question to the area of ethics.[20] When it comes to ethics in the case of virtual animals, Randy Malamud gives a fairly clear answer when he talks about the cultural construction of animals:

> Some figurative animal images contain a grain of truth (yes, oxen are strong), and many do not, but in any case, such figures do more to distance us from other animals than to connect us with them. […] These figures – verbal figures, and just as commonly visual images – reveal our proclivity to frame and use animals for our own idiosyncratic cultural agendas, with minimal concern for how this transaction affects them in any meaningful or ethical way. In no way are the rights of animals, or the interests of animals, taken into account when they are transposed from their natural habitats to their cultural habitats. Animals in visual culture thus suffer as a consequence of our habits of visualizing and acculturating them.[21]

[17] Randy Malamud, *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture*, 2.

[18] Peter Schaber, "Instrumentalisierung," in *Lexikon der Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen*, eds. Arianna Ferrari, Klaus Petrus (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2025), 165f.

[19] Ibid., 165.

[20] Ibid., 166f. However, the internet in particular challenges previous ideas about ethics and the question of instrumentalisation and its moral approval seems to go beyond previous patterns.

[21] Randy Malamud, *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture*, 12f.

To put it bluntly, according to Malamud, the virtual animal is *per se* an instrumentalisation because it must remain a subaltern image as long as people regulate access to the internet.

That is why in the chapter on famous animals, one of which seems to be Choupette, Malamud writes very clearly about the famous animal:

> How does an animal become famous? The answer, simply, is that people make her famous. Fame, like so many other human constructs that animals are burdened with, is something that we concoct, in accord with our cultural logic, prejudices, and whims. A person makes an animal famous by looking at her and then culturally developing that gaze in some way.[22]

Malamud's contribution to the question of animal ethics in *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture* indicates that the online representation of animals can be seen as an instrumentalisation of them for exclusively human concerns, violating the dignity of animals. He leaves little leeway for in-between spaces in human-animal relations in the digital age. According to Malamud, petfluencers are to be understood as victims of human agency and, as mentioned in the introduction to this article, a new level of anthropocentric exploitation of animals as a capitalist resource.[23]

Another example of the anthropocentric instrumentalisation of animals, especially pets, is provided by social media platforms such as CATSTER, as Jennifer L. Schally and Stephen R. Couch explore in their essay *Catster.com: Creating Feline Identities Online*.[24] Schally and Couch describe the cats' profiles created by their owners as avatars and argue:

> Although the images that Catsters use to represent themselves are not avatars but are actual images of their cats, it can still be said that the images of the cats act as an avatar as they represent a created identity through which people communicate on the website.[25]

In their essay they make it clear to what extent the construction of identity, the life writing in virtual space, differs from that in face-to-face encounters and argue that identity construction in the virtual space is a more important component than in the real space since there is more control over the self-image in the virtual space, where the perception of oneself can be

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[22] Ibid., 25. Adding a feminist perspective, Malamud's use of the female personal pronoun is distressing here, because it attributes gender to the animal in accordance with misogynistic representations of the female.

[23] As mentioned before, the article will not elaborate on the violations of animal health that owners of petfluencers risk for commercial benefit.

[24] Nowadays, the homepage Catster functions as an online magazine and the social media component has been separated into the common social media channels such as Instagram, Twitter etc., but the results of the study are still representative for the type of anthropomorphic virtual animals.

[25] Jennifer L. Schally, Stephen R. Couch, "Catster.com: Creating Feline Identities Online," in *Speaking for Animals. Animal Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Margo DeMello (New York: Routledge, 2013), 105.

shaped more consciously.[26] They also stress that "[t]his construction of the self involves much creativity beyond what is necessary for face-to-face communities."[27] This also means that creativity allows users to present themselves as someone they are not in real life. Emphasising the characteristics which they like the most, members of Catster use their virtual cat-identities to create an image of themselves which is different from that in real life.[28] They create idealised self-images with the help of cat identities.[29] In the article by Schally and Couch, which is based on semi-structured interviews with Catster users, the anthropocentric perspective on the virtual animal plays the main role, i.e. the focus is on how animal life writing is used by people to create their own identity and to network in social media. The authors show that the additional alienation through the cat's identity as an avatar of one's own idealised personality gives users an additional level of anonymity and therefore represents a protected space, where it's also easier to show oneself.[30] While the motivation of the human users of Catster is explored very well in the essay, Schally and Couch do not address the impact on real animals used as profile pictures.

Margo De Mello's article titled *Identity, Community and Grief. The role of Bunspace in the lives of people and rabbits* complements this aspect when it comes to a similar social media platform, namely Bunspace, a platform for rabbit owners. As the title suggests, DeMello's essay is not only about human life, but also about the life of rabbits, i.e. the virtuality of animals is also discussed in terms of its significance for real animals.

DeMello emphasises that (1): "Bunspace is unique among animal networking sites because of the activism of its members, and the vegetarianism of many of its users"[31] and (2) that the aim of the Bunspace community is to give rabbits a voice.[32] She argues that "In animal networking sites, profiles are set up under the name and interests of animals, rather than the person,"[33] which actually does not match with the results of the previous study on Catster.

The differences between Bunspace and Catster become clear from DeMello's analysis: Bunspace represents a significantly smaller community than Catster and is also more exclusive because, for example, it does not

[26] Ibid., 104.

[27] Ibid.

[28] And Schally and Couch underline: "Digitally associating is the linking of oneself with brands and other symbols to project themselves as a certain type of person; actual ownership or real life associations are unnecessary." Ibid., 105

[29] Ibid., 111.

[30] As the interviews of Schally and Couch show, more than half of the participants "stated that they did not think that they would be able to express the same thoughts and feelings that they do on Catster in any other venue." Ibid., 109. To write about oneself in the third person opens up a humorous and reflective approach to one's own self-image, what plays an important role for the users of Catster. Ibid., 112.

[31] Margo DeMello, "Identity, Community and Grief. The role of Bunspace in the lives of people and rabbits," in *Speaking for Animals. Animal Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Margo DeMello (New York: Routledge, 2013), 125.

[32] Ibid., 115.

[33] Ibid., 116.

allow rabbit breeders and presents a clearer catalogue of animal welfare than larger platforms, such as Caster.[34]

In the chapter "Giving Rabbits a Voice," DeMello shows excerpts from interviews, indicating that most users want to portray their rabbits seriously and do not wish to trivialise them in order to represent and respect their subjecthood. She quotes the following words of a rabbit owner:

> I hate it when people baby their animals. When I chill and talk with Miles [the rabbit], I act like he were another person in the room. I don't downgrade him or anything… From the beginning, I knew Miles was an intelligent creature, and I treat him as such.[35]

DeMello argues that the depictions of rabbits on Bunspace show that their identity is much more heterogeneous than the cultural image of rabbits suggests, imagining them as passive animals.[36] In the chapter "Advocating for Rabbits" DeMello shows that the virtual representations help to change the cultural image of rabbits and thus also have a positive impact on the real rabbits.

To add another example to the palette of virtual animals and further complicate the distinction between exploitation and empowerment, it is worth mentioning the Ukrainian detection dog called Patron. During the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, this Jack Russel Terrier became a famous animal: a social media magnet for the Ukrainian population and the most famous dog in Ukraine.[37] In its online representation, the dog is depicted as a symbol of humanity and peace in contrast to the image of the Russian aggressor. Patron is used as a heroic figure to strengthen the identity of Ukrainians and to support Ukrainians psychologically during the war.[38] Such animals were acknowledged in BBC News headlines: "Cat and dog influencers help Ukrainians cope with war."[39] Beyond the virtual and symbolic level, in their very concrete everyday lives, dogs such as Patron discover mines and thus save the lives of all living beings affected by landmines and contribute to the decontamination of the landscape. For this achievement, Patron was not only honoured by the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as a special member of the army, but in November 2022 he also became the first UNICEF Goodwill AmbassaDog working to protect children from landmines.

Patron represents a specific example of domesticated animals, namely those that are not included in the human food chain, but whose abilities

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[34] Ibid., 116f.

[35] Ibid., 122.

[36] Ibid.

[37] The virtual animal "Dog Patron" becomes a symbolic image that is also used in other media, e.g. street art, stamps, children's books, etc.

[38] Tatyana V. Kuznietsova, Alexandra V. Podolian, "Who Guards This Neighbourhood? – Patron The Dog!: How Visual Imagery Spreads Ukraine's Strategic Narratives During The War," *Teorìâ ta ìstorìâ socìal'nih komunìkacìj* [*Teorìâ ta ìstorìâ socìal'nih komunìkacìj*], no. 34/6 (2023): 186–193.

[39] Vitaly Shevchenko, "Cat and dog influencers help Ukrainians cope with war," https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66509999 (accessed 19 August 2023).

are instrumentalised by people and therefore, as in the case of guide dogs, avalanche dogs, etc., there is a different constellation of human-animal relations. The animal as an individual plays a larger role here, as it is in the case of pets.

For the dog Patron and other domesticated animals, i.e. those existing in the human frame *per se*, virtuality as a form of visibility, as animal protection movements have proven, has a positive effect on the animals because the social discourse grants them more rights and, in a certain way, empowers them. Animal Right Campaigns achieved, for example, that male chicks are no longer shredded and police tracker dogs receive a pension.

This brings the whole discussion to a central question, namely: Are pets actually animals? Kari Weil explores this question in the chapter "Is a pet an animal? Domestication and Animal Agency" in her book *Why Animal Studies Now?* (2012):

> Much of contemporary theory would answer in the negative. "Anyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool", write Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. For the latter, a dog or a cat lover is a fool because the dog or cat is not really an animal, but a creature made by humans to confirm an image of ourselves we want to see, but one that, according to these authors, is restricting and regressive.[40]

In her approach to human-animal relationships, she adopts a less essentialist perspective than Randy Malamud and deconstructs the clear boundary between human and nonhuman animals through a sociological and intersectional view of human-animal relationships. She explains:

> I look at literary representations of pets that suggest a range of relationships with their humans. These fictions are themselves contact zones in which struggles with otherness are played out and worked through or not. Of course, humans have the last word in these representations because, as far as we know, our pets are not able to write or read […], but that does not mean that real animals have had no share in those representations. Indeed, just as our representations can have real effects in the world by shaping how we understand other animals and thus how we might relate to them, so those animals and in particular the animals we live with affect the way we represent them or their literary surrogates.[41]

In particular, her concept of the contact zone enables a constructive approach to the deconstruction of anthropocentric life writing without making the emancipatory potential of this encounter impossible. Because if, as mentioned in the introduction, one sees the visibility of animals in the digital age not only as a violation of animal ethics, but also as having emancipatory potential, then the power of fiction and narration comes into play again.

[40] Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals. Why Animal Studies Now?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 53.

[41] Ibid., 60.

Then it is through narration that we create the world:

> The world is a fabric we weave daily on the great looms of information, discussions, films, books, gossip, little anecdotes. Today the purview of these looms is enormous – thanks to the internet, almost everyone can take place in the process, taking responsibility and not, lovingly and hatefully, for better and for worse. When this story changes, so does the world. In this sense, the world is made of words.
>
> How we think about the world and – perhaps even more importantly – how we narrate it have a massive significance, therefore. A thing that happens and is not told ceases to exist and perishes.[42]

In her Nobel lecture Tokarczuk confirms emancipation movements that argue that the visibility of a group creates its intelligibility and only then can its existence be secured and rights can be won. Therefore, the animal only begins to exist in the human world when it becomes visible through narration and only then can it be given rights in the human order. In this emancipatory logic, animal autobiographical writing, with all its dangers of misrepresentation that Spivak pointed out so impressively in the post-colonial context, becomes a way to negotiate animal ethics and establish animal rights.

In addition, virtual representation can serve to establish animal rights. A famous example from the American context is the mountain lion P-22, which lived in the Los Angeles area. It was only through being a virtual animal that his representation created a social media campaign (#SaveLA-Cougars), which financed one of the longest urban wildlife crossings in the USA. The conservation biologist Christine Wilkinson comments:

> Without P-22 as a named 'poster puma', this project may not have gained enough traction for success. There is an increasing body of evidence that demonstrates the power of narrative in shifting people's attitudes and behaviours around critical environmental topics such as climate change. The power of stories should not be underestimated. Narratives and human values —and not only science — are what dictate most conservation attitudes, actions and policies.[43]

Using P-22 as an example, Wilkinson concludes that it is the duty of researchers and conservationists to weigh the pros and cons of naming and publicising individual laboratory animals, because:

> In an era of endless information and story proliferation via social media, making these conscious decisions around naming has the

[42] Olga Tokarczuk, *The tender narrator*, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/tokarczuk/lecture/ (accessed 7 December 2019).

[43] Christine E. Wilkinson, "Public Interest in Individual Study Animals Can Bolster Wildlife Conservation," *Nature Ecology & Evolution* no. 7 (2023): 478.

potential to both improve our research and substantially bolster wildlife conservation.[44]

This assessment is also confirmed by another animal protection project in Florida, whose protagonist is the Florida panther, or rather a female Florida panther who was spotted in an area for the first time after 40 years again.

The virtual representation of the Florida panther also in this case contributed significantly to the fact that a road scheme project could be stopped and a wildlife crossing could be maintained.[45] The film *Path of the Panther* (2023) focuses on the videos and photographs of National Geographic photographer Carlton Ward Jr. and thus focuses on the message that the visibility of wild animals, i.e. their cultural representation through the digital age media, ensures the survival of the species. Without being able to analyse the various motivations of the different actors in more detail and the question how explicitly digital media shapes this motivation,[46] this article aims to return to the concept of contact zones.

Kari Weil's concept of the contact zone allows to focus concrete practices of human-animal relationships from a praxeological and intersectional perspective, instead of maintaining the abstract and definitive separation of the habitats of humans and animals (as Malamud assumes). And thus, communication (across the boundaries of one's own species) in the contact zones becomes the focus of interest, namely the shared living space with all its communication channels, not just human language. In a posthuman perspective on the human-animal relationship, human language is relativised in its hegemony in the contact zone, which can be illustrated, using the example of the sniffing noses of dogs like Patron, whose noses are more relevant than human language for the decontamination of living space. The hegemony of the human perception of the world is blurred here by the ability of an animal, whose sense of smell exceeds that of humans. And, finally, the online representation of this ability that questions the human hegemony reaches through social media more people than traditional media could ever reach in the same time. The cultural divergence between humans and animals, which was constructed to justify the subjugation of animals, is challenged here with the help of the specific characteristics of social media that become a contact zone here.

As in particular the story of the mountain lion confirms the suggestion of Copeland and Shapiro, one should dare to use narration, to use social media as a contact zone in order to enable communication about the common living space for human and nonhuman animals (and plants, all kinds of materials, etc.), because it is through communication that we shape existence.

[44] Ibid., 479.

[45] Go to https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/florida-panther-secret-cultural-history for more details.

[46] The film also addresses the heterogeneity of motivations and, among others, shows the perspective of farmers who protect the puma in order to secure their own existence, arguing that nature conservation is more likely to stop the building industry than the agricultural interests of small farmers. Cf. https://wildpath.com/path-of-the-panther/.

Conclusion

Choupette and P-22 and all the rabbits on Bunspace can be defined as virtual animals by Randy Malamud, who helps people to understand how representation happens always within human frames. The anthropocentric perspective is inherent in the online representation in social media, which makes it obvious that virtual animals are not real animals, but only images of them. The insight into the social media platform Catster confirms that cat images serve as a way for people to represent themselves. It shows that Spivak's concept of subalternity refers very well to animals and that using cats as avatars refers "only to our own place in the seat of the Same or the Self."[47]

Virtual animals thus are subaltern representations that are instrumentalised in human story telling: as an economic resource (Petfluencer), as a projection surface for individual life writing and identity creation (Catster), as a means of social networking for pet owners (Catster, Bunspace) and also as strategy for nation building (Dog Patron).

Some of the virtual animals could also be read as an attempt at anthrozoological empowerment. Especially the Bunspace platform and the nature conservation campaign surrounding the mountain lion P-22 have shown that the virtual animal on social media also represents a contact zone (Kari Weil), in which the boundary between humans and animals, between power and subalternity is hybridised because communication takes place here. This, in turn, has the potential to alter human narration and cultural imagination of animals as subalterns and therefore can change the reality of animals. In the best case scenario, this change influences the life of animals in their favour and thus hybridises the hegemony.

Referring to the initial questions, it can be summarised that (1), as Spivak warns, it should be remembered that there is an agency of power at work behind every representation of subalterns. This agency has to be deconstructed and, as Spivak argues, "the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation"[48] but "[t]o confront them is not to represent (*vertreten*) them but to learn to represent (*darstellen*) ourselves."[49]

And (2) it can be argued that the virtual animal as a contact zone can be reflected as a space "to work toward an »ecocentric« or »biocentric« consciousness."[50] The digital age opens up new, more complex techniques to deconstruct the human-animal boundary (such as social media campaigns with enormous reach and thus political impact) and enables new forms and media to make animals/the subaltern speak. Virtual animals can speak differently than literary animals, their virtuality is more complex, with less anthropocentric modes of representation, such as human language, allowing animals to speak. Non-verbal communication can be conveyed much better

[47] Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, 84.
[48] Ibid., 80.
[49] Ibid., 84.
[50] Hannes Bergthaller, "On the Margins of Ecocriticism. A European Perspective," in *Literatur und Ökologie: Neue Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, eds. Claudia Schmitt, Christiane Solte-Gresser (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2017), 59.

in media other than writing, and wildlife cameras, for example, can make one more of an observer than an anthropocentric narrator.

It is the next step in the history of fictional animal representation, as Margo DeMello puts it in her introduction to the book *Speaking for Animals. Animal Autobiographical Writing* (2013):

> For thousands of years, in the myths and folktales of people around the world, animals have spoken in human tongues. […]. Animals speak, famously, in children's stories and in cartoons and films, and today, social networking sites and blogs are both venues in which animals – primarily pets – speak about their daily lives and interests.[51]

Even then we should not, with Malamud, forget that we are the ones deciding to install a wildlife camera and to share the content, to share pictures and videos of pets online. Overall, the digital age does not only provide humans with new methods for subjugating other species, but also with new, posthuman narratives, in which the animal can be heard differently than in literary representation. In online videos of pets, for example, the life writing of the human pet owner is joined and completed with the 'language' of the pet, that is no longer only an object of the narration, but becomes an author, too. The storytelling then happens across the border between human and non-human animals.

Similarly, DeMello advocates for the shared authorship, writing that "the more we recognize how much it is that we share in common, the more plausible speaking animals become."[52] She emphasises the queering of the boundary between human and non-human animals, mentioning impressive examples of speaking animals, such as Alex, an African Grey parrot, who knew more than 100 words and was able to conversate about his thoughts and feelings.[53]

But to raise one last objection to this optimistic perspective on anthrozoological empowerment, a question may be raised about who is learning whose language here. In *Thinking Animals* Kari Weil also refers to Spivak in an attempt to answer this question. She understands Spivaks essay as "a warning to some who, for example, would try to teach apes to sign in order to have them tell humans what they want."[54] She uses Franz Kafka's short story "A Report to an Academy" (1919) about an ape who became human as an example to elaborate the fundamental skepticism towards human language as a contact zone between human and non-human animals, asking: "[…]will that language enable them to speak of their animal lives or simply bring them to mimic (or ape) human values and viewpoints? Indeed, if they learn our language, will they still be animals?"[55]

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[51] Margo DeMello, *Speaking for Animals. Animal Autobiographical Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1.

[52] Ibid., 6.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals. Why Animal Studies Now?*, 5.

[55] Ibid., 6.

The answer to this question and the conclusion of this paper seems to be as ambivalent as the topic itself. There appears to be no dialectic solution to grasp, but the realisation that the online representations of animals on social media, on the one hand, indeed represent a new and different medium (including practices) of anthropocentric representation and that those representations, on the other hand, do reach a new level at both supposed ends of the scale between exploitation and empowerment. Overall, I'd like to define the virtual animal on social media as transgressive contact zone that simultaneously prevents and encourages a posthuman ontology – according to the logarithms of the digital age.

Following the emancipatory narrative, it can be concluded that virtuality in the digital age may help to find a common language, imagine a change of perspective and to gain different awareness for a respectful interaction with those who do not speak human language (of power). Ultimately, it might be more relevant to watch the world form a queer perspective: not to search for the borders of entities and species, but for the techniques of a respectful living together in contact zones, and for a posthuman communication. This naturally does not only concern animals, but everything and everybody that human beeings share the Earth with.

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