

# Stupidities (Why cartoons have animals 3)

## Description

default watermark

We donâ??t just consume animals for nutrition, but consume them culturally. They are â??painted, written, construed, arranged, stuffed, chained, trained, dissected, imagined,â?• according to cultural theorist Randy Malamud, and this happens â??with an iron-fisted sense of entitlement and control on the part of the cultural hegemons, that is, usâ?• (2).

Malamud outlines evidence of the â??digital approximation of taxidermyâ?• (12), such as online pictures and video clips of a rabbit (called Oolong) balancing different objects on its head, including a pancake, and even the skull of a rabbit (link), or a cat watching pictures of a cat watching a picture of a cat, ad infinitum. See the Infinite Cat Project from 2006.



YouTube amplifies our animal watching tendencies to the nth degree. The appetite for the human animal to observe and record other animals seems boundless. We humans put non-human animals in ridiculous situations. Then we laugh at the animalsâ?? indifference to how stupid they look.

Like many others, Iâ??m guilty of enjoying the company of animals, even if fleeting: observing a neighbourâ??s dog straining on its lead; petting the occasional cat purring on a doorstep; photographing farm ruminants munching in a field; and watching nature programs and YouTube clips.

Itâ??s common practice to apprehend the otherness of anything â?? other peopleâ??s customs, the Northern Lights,  athletic prowess, an incomprehensible machine â?? through the vehicles of humour and absurdity. If nothing else, humour and silliness acknowledge thereâ??s something *other* in our encounters.

## Animals as others

This is in part the message of Paul Shepard in *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human.* From our biological origins as rodents scurrying in the forest to upright *homo sapiens*, our co-evolution with other animals has forever imprinted in our DNA and cultural memes the important distinction between ourselves and an *other*. Without the sense that there is something a bit like us, but at the same time wholly *other*, we couldnâ??t have survived.

Shepardâ??s argument about animals and the *other* hinges on the biological costs and risks for a species with a large brain (i.e. humans), and in turn the concepts of the hunt, as predator and prey, and as participants in a game. The hunt, and fishing, loom large in this evolutionary tale: â??We are born prepared to assume that opposing forces are â??others,â?? and to feel the give the tug of a fish or the musical instrument quicken in our hands as if it were a conscious counterplayerâ?• (81-82).

default watermark

That sensibility to otherness gave us the impetus to represent, to communicate, to socialise, plan, scheme and otherwise thrive amongst the community of all living things. Communication entails the ability to operate at a distance and bide our time before engaging with the perils of the hunt.

## Mechanimals

Evidence for the importance of the otherness of animals in human cosmology persists through many cultural forms: animal deities, fables, zoos, mascots, pets, fluffy toys, cartoons, video games, zoomorphic product design (e.g. cars), and attachments to our devices (e.g. smartphones).

The design of certain digital consumer devices attempts personableness, i.e. a faltering, pet-like compulsion to please. So our fascination with such technologies derives from our engagement with animals as *other.* (I conclude this from an interesting article by Boria Sax.)

As with our pets, we donâ??t necessarily *hunt* our technologies, but we certainly play with them â?? or they play with and tease us, as if to make us look stupid, when we let them.

## References

- Malamud, Randy. 2007. Introduction: Famous animals in modern culture. In Randy Malamud (ed.), *A Cultural history of Animals in the Modern Age*: 1-26. Oxford: Berg.
- Sax, Boria. 2007. The cosmic spider and her worldwide web: Sacred and symbolic animals in the era of change. In Randy Malamud (ed.), *A Cultural history of Animals in the Modern Age*: 27-48. Oxford: Berg.
- Shepard, Paul. 1996. *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

## Note

- Facebook pages, including my own own, are populated by human-animal stupidities.

**Category**

1. Nature

**Tags**

1. animals

**Date Created**
November 1, 2015
**Author**
rcoyne99

default watermark