



Trauma and fauna

Description

Once upon a time prior to urban settlement, domestication and commerce, nature harboured enchantments lost to us now. Animals roamed as sacred, conscious, and individually unique beings. Some even attached themselves to spiritual powers. This is the **first act** in (deep) ecologist and academic Paul Shepard's 1996 account of how we came to keep some animals as pets.

Why do pets matter in the electronic age? Not least, live pets have microchips, people talk of robotic pets, people fawn over pets on YouTube, and there's the dystopian fantasy that humans might one day become pets for robots. (See [comment](#) by Steve Wozniak.) Critics of the social media generation also indicate that some people prefer the company of fake pets to fellow human beings. It's all about architecture (buildings) as well, as pets feature in definitions of the domestic sphere.

In Shepard's **second act**, humans took some animals in as members of the household, and manipulated their reproduction, and altered their biological natures to conform to human dominance (143). So that's animals for food, labour, guard dogs, and to keep out other animals. These genetically adjusted and manipulated animals diminished the number and diversity of their wilder counterparts.



Cuddling

Act three is really about infants, whose initial craving for contact with the abundance of other life (the natural world, including animals) is impeded by the security of the domestic sphere. In Freudian mode, Shepard refers to the trauma of the child's separation from its mother. Cuddly toys are transitional objects that ease the child through this inevitable separation – but, – The children who do not seem to require the security of such objects are those who are surrounded by abundant other forms of life (143).

Shepard theorises that proximity to animals makes separation from one's mother less frightening, in part as the similarities and differences encountered in the world of animals prepares us for such raw events. But now, cuddly stuffed animals and toys compensate the child in the nuclear family for this estrangement from animal encounters.

Act four involves a simpler theoretical transition. Children transfer their affection for cuddly toys onto dogs and cats: – As the toys had been pets, the pets became toys (144). The transition then extends to – the wild, – where any kind of animal gets domesticated in fiction, cartoons and CGI animations: Peter Rabbit, Pooh Bear, Micky Mouse, Simba, etc.

Animal intimacies

In the final **act (five)** we humans extend – the equivalence of the living domestic pet and the stuffed wild toy to living nature (144). Zoos epitomise this transition, according to Shepard. Drawing on an article by John Berger, he indicates that zoos ultimately disappoint us. The animals stare past, and don't do what we expect of them, i.e. acknowledge our presence, worth, importance, and desire for companionship and solidarity with the wild. Zoos are therefore lonely, melancholic place, and not only for the animals. Something similar occurs in the case of close up documentaries about the lives of animals: – these are as remote from our lives as the – friendship – of the kangaroo, donkey, tiger, and Pooh Bear (145).

One of the many interesting aspects of Shepard's account is that it places animal surrogates (i.e. stuffed toys, cartoons, robotic pets) at centre stage. They really are instrumental in our construction and understanding of the wild, and help account for any defects in our attitude towards it.

References

- Berger, John. 1977. Why zoos disappoint. *New Society*, (40) http://resources.safe.org.nz/resource3/zoos/why_zoos_disappoint.pdf, 122-123.
- Shepard, Paul. 1996. *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*. Washington, DC: Island Press

Notes

- The first image is of the elephant enclosure at Valencia Zoo.
- The Vine video is of a chameleon at the small zoo behind the Ashton Memorial, Lancaster, England.
- On cats and academia see [THE blog post by Glen Wright](#).

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. animals
2. cartoons

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