Review

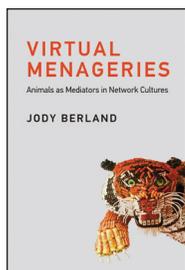**Virtual Menageries: Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures.** *By Jody Berland.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019. 328 pp. ISBN: 9780262039604

What do Linux, Firefox, MSN, Hootsuite, GitHub, TripAdvisor, Baidu, and Bumble have in common? The answer: they all use animal imagery in their logos. At first, this might seem like a trivial observation. In our busy and hurried lives, we tend not to read very much into logos. We take them for granted. We assume that marketing departments merely wish to create something memorable and instantly recognizable. However, anyone who has worked in a marketing department, especially for a major corporate brand, will tell you that the thought and creativity invested into the symbolism of a logo is anything but trivial. What, then, are we to make of the ubiquity of animal imagery in the corporate logos of digital media organizations? How else is animal imagery used in the world of digital networks? What moral significance should we attach to the use of animal imagery? These are the driving questions behind Jody Berland's latest book, *Virtual Menageries: Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures.*

Virtual Menageries marks a valiant attempt to illuminate the human-animal relationship in the era of digital capitalism. It is a highly original contribution to both critical animal studies and media theory, in which Berland brings the insights of media theory to bear on what Italian philosopher Paola Cavalieri (2002) has called "the animal question": whether and how animals matter symbolically, ethically, and politically. Drawing a critical historical link between the physical menageries of old and the "virtual menageries" of today, Berland contends that animals *do* matter: we rely upon them as mediators online.

In making her case, Berland begins with a brief history of the menagerie, the curious animal gardens that are the ancestors of modern zoos. Menageries, she observes, were a staple of the courts of royals and aristocrats. They satisfied both a zoological curiosity and a desire for ostentatious displays of wealth and power. Menageries symbolized human domination over nature, our ability to bring the most formidable animals—lions, tigers, elephants, giraffes—under the subjugation of the human gaze. These creatures, Berland points out, served as mediators between the rich and powerful. It was customary, when sending a delegation

abroad, to include one of these magnificent animals as a gift. The larger the animal, the more powerful the message. Berland calls these gifts "animal emissaries." They were the visual face, the first point of contact, in diplomatic and commercial missions. As such, animals played the role of mediators between nations, kingdoms, and empires.

Berland argues that the exploitation of animals is both physical *and* symbolic; commercial *and* political. A case in point is the place of the beaver in the Canadian national imaginary. Beaver pelts were a prime commodity in commercial relations between European settlers and Indigenous communities. They also were the lifeless and fragmentary counterparts to living animal emissaries. Like the grand and stately lions, tigers, elephants, and giraffes that represented so many governments in foreign missions, the humble beaver became the symbolic face of the Canadian settler colonial enterprise. Encoded into the very idea of the beaver is a complex repository of colonial fantasy, a set of self-serving myths that obscure and enshroud the ugly history of colonialism and animal exploitation. Although the beaver trade is a thing of the past, the idea of the beaver lives on as symbolic capital for so many cheap oddities and souvenirs; the material inscriptions of national identity.

Using this history as a point of comparison, Berland proceeds to read the digital world as a collection of virtual menageries. Digital spaces are filled with animal imagery. Online, we walk through a virtual zoological garden. Digital media groups and companies use animal imagery to stake their presence online. They channel what John Maynard Keynes called "animal spirits" (p. 10). They appeal to carnal passions and appetites to lubricate the gears of digital capitalism. The fox of Firefox, the butterfly of MSN, the owl of Hootsuite, the cat of GitHub, the animal paw of Baidu, the bee of Bumble—all are virtual animal emissaries, the first point of contact between millions of people. Like the beaver pelts that once mediated the relationship between European colonialists and Indigenous peoples, virtual animal emissaries are the visual currency mediating the relationship between digital users. Berland urges us to scrutinize the role of animal imagery online, so as to secure a better understanding of our complicated historical moment.

Berland reads the massive popularity of cat memes as an example of the widespread use of virtual animal emissaries. She contends that, in exploiting the symbolic capital of cats to communicate online, we ostensibly act like the royals and aristocrats of old who sent animal emissaries on foreign missions. Cat memes have become a kind of international currency, a universal grammar between disparate communities. Yes, the use of cat images is often purely for sheer amusement. (Who doesn't love a good cat meme with a deliberately semi-literate text?) Sometimes, however, cat memes also help express our political views. Consider, for example, Cats Against Capitalism, a Facebook group that blends cat imagery with socialist messaging. In walking readers through representations of cats in religion, literature, and philosophy, Berland convincingly demonstrates that the con-

temporary obsession with cats is not new. Rather, it follows an ancient tradition of paying homage to our inexhaustibly fascinating and irresistibly adorable feline companions.

What, then, is the moral cost and significance of virtual menageries? What are we to make of the use of animals online? Berland argues that the use of virtual animals represents a profound dismemberment, and illustrates this position through the example of wilderness soundtracks. She posits that, when listening to these "sounds of nature," we seek to recreate a part of the natural world within the artificial settings of our private domiciles; it is an attempt to take advantage of what nature has to offer, such as the therapeutic power of birdsong. In her view, when we listen to nature soundtracks on Spotify, we are not enjoying nature, but rather a grotesque distortion of it, with the appreciation for birdsong coming at nature's expense. The ability to relax and de-stress through recordings of birdsong fosters an illusion that our inner peace and harmony somehow reflect the peace and harmony in the natural world. It does not. Instead, listening to birdsong enables one to ignore our environmentally destructive lifestyles.

For Berland, relaxing into obliviousness not only distorts nature; we become distorted, too. We become something other than human. To this end, she argues that our visual and aural lives online are rapidly collapsing the differences between the human and the non-human; the animal and the machine. The result, she finds, is the emergence of mutant beings—posthuman monsters who represent the worst effects of capitalism at its most sociopathic. Cautious of falling into the trap of humanistic arrogance, Berland argues that we have a moral responsibility to wake up and rethink our relationship with animals and nature. In a haunting invocation of Marx, who in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* wrote, "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living," Berland writes, "It may be the animals that wake us up" (p. 212).

Virtual Menageries is a rich and intellectually invigorating book. It synthesizes scholarly seriousness with an unapologetic passion for animals and the planet. Berland effortlessly guides the reader through the thickets of forgotten histories, complex theoretical debates, and urgent ecological demands. She writes with a compelling and inspiring moral voice, making the stakes abundantly clear, and crafting a biopolitics for a world under digital capitalism. After reading this book, it will be difficult ever to look at our media environment in the same way. Students, scholars, and activists alike will find *Virtual Menageries* enormously rewarding. I recommend it without reservation.

Reference

Cavalieri, Paola. (2002). *The Animal Question: Why Non-Human Animals Deserve Human Rights.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Jason Hannan, *University of Winnipeg*