RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN MY RESEARCH: PROBING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN HUMAN AND NON HUMAN

My ‘non-human turn’¹, or a general presentation

The last time I spoke at the SAES (May 2011), in this very same workshop, it was together with Charlotte Gould. We were presenting a co-edited book which still had to come out: Marketing Art in the British Isles. 1700 to the Present. A Cultural History (Ashgate, 2014). For me, it was the upshot of a long-standing interest into some sort of British, commercial mindset, and the way it intersected with and impacted on artistic practice, marketing techniques but also writings on art. My PhD had been on a reproductive engraver, George Vertue (1683-1756), whose resistance to the new artistic values of his time prevented him from completing a project, that of a history of the arts in Britain, that would have contributed to the promotion of his profession.

At the time (SAES 2011), I was co-organising a second conference in Rennes on the representation of animals in Britain (voir http://animots.hypotheses.org/346), together with an animal rights scholar, Emilie Dardenne. I was excited to be part of this new adventure, not just because I happen to be fascinated by animals and a great lover of animal painting, but also because I could see several areas that I wanted to explore that would connect with what I had done before. In particular, I started to wonder what made artists turn to animals so much as they strove to define themselves, their practice, their status, and their aesthetic priorities in a shifting, complex art world in which there were an increasing number of players, not all of them entirely sympathetic to them. This was going to be the focal point of my talk at that conference, and is very much the question I have been going back to ever since.

¹ I borrow the term from Richard Grusin’s Introduction to The Nonhuman Turn: ‘Intended as a macroscopic concept, the nonhuman turn is meant to account for the simultaneous or overlapping emergence of a number of different theoretical or «critical turns» ... that argue (in one way or another) against human exceptionalism, expressed most often in the form of conceptual or rhetorical dualisms that separate the human from the nonhuman – variously conceived as animals, plants, organisms, climatic systems, technologies, or ecosystems.’ (p.x)
Question and Corpus (start of intended talk, with possible alterations)

As I delved into my chosen topic, I started to look at the usual sources: writings, formal or informal, by artists about their own art, aesthetics, taste, their place in society and on the art market. But also I also scrutinised their painted works: initially self-portraits with animals, or of fellow artists with animals, and gradually a wider variety of paintings, which I hope will carry on expanding. And, by tracking down references to animals in texts, and various animal motifs in paintings, I started to tease out a definite sense of a close kinship between these artists and the non human animals who shared their lives, a bond that suggested an almost ontological proximity.

When he came to talk to us at our conference in Rennes back in 2011, the British art historian Steve Baker was then putting the finishing touch to the manuscript of his Artist/Animal, published in 2013. Many contemporary artists, Baker shows in his book, are currently probing an imagined dividing line between humans and non humans. This in an age, ours, that is supposed to have proceeded beyond that rigid dichotomy and have grown somehow less anthropocentric. His research made me wonder how, three centuries earlier, before the Darwinian revolution but in a sensualist age in many ways very preoccupied with animals, eighteenth-century artists positioned themselves in the debate on that fine line (human/non human), where this positioning came from, and what exactly was at stake.

The research I have been able to do since then has convinced me that these artists were already highly sensitive to the porosity of this line. There were, of course, real life experiences behind this early awareness, some artists having developed fantastically rich relationships with some of their pets. There were also the usual resonances with wider contemporary debates about the nature of animality (part instinct, part reason, with a scale sliding from one writer to the next), but also that of art and aesthetics. Just like the social and economic realities of the day also surfaced through what artists had to write about a similarity in treatment between themselves and animals. As is well captured by the following expostulation by Thomas Gainsborough:

But these fine Ladies & their (‘D-mnd’ crossed out) Tea drinkings, Dancings, Husband hunttings &c &c &c will fob me out of the last ten years, & I fear miss getting Husbands
too – But we can say nothing to these things you know Jackson, we must Jogg on and be content with the jingling of the Bel(ls), only d-mn it I hate a dust, the kicking up a dust; and being confined in Harn(ess) to follow the track, whilst others ride in the Waggon, under cover, stretching their Legs in the straw at Ease, and gazing at Green Trees & Blue Skies without half my Taste That’s d-mnd hard.2

So much has been written recently about both the exploitation of animals and that of artists on the new art market that the simile used by Gainsborough needs little clarifying. It certainly is interesting, but it is one that tells us about mainly about the social status of artists. Ultimately, it is the kind of statement that does not particularly question or challenge the human/ non human divide. What I was more interested in sharing with you today is my research into an apparently popular metaphor, that of the painter as a hunting animal, that helps us better understand how structural the kinship between artists and animals was felt to be by eighteenth century writers on art, be they professionals or scholars. **NB**: I would like to say at this point that what I am going to talk about now are ideas that I have presented in an article which is still awaiting review, and whose outline you will find in the ppt document that I have shared with you and which contains a lot of the sources, illustrations and quotations used in this article.

(Animal) Metaphor into Paint: William Hogarth’s *Graham Children* (1742)


I would like to start this reflection by looking afresh with you at a mid-18th century painting by William Hogarth, that of the Graham children, currently at the National Gallery. Their portrait was painted at the request of the children’s father, the Royal Apothecary Daniel Graham. By the time it was completed, the youngest son in the bottom left-hand corner had died, an unhappy circumstance signalled by the presence of a wooden bird near him. The eldest son, on the right, looks for his part very much alive, and engrossed with a living bullfinch flapping wildly in its cage. The bird’s excitement seems to be due to the music Richard is playing on a small mechanical organ on which, as some sort of ironic counterpoint, the classical God Orpheus is represented taming the wild beasts with the sound of his lyre. A young artist in the making, Richard, whose broad grin betrays ecstatic

---

joy, is under the delusion that the bird is responding to the beauty of his music, and it takes the viewer some time to understand the real cause for the bird’s state of panic: a cat is perched on the back of Thomas’s chair, ominously ogling the caged animal with barely disguised appetite.

It looks as if, as I said, Richard is grossly mistaken, just as I was when I looked at this painting for the first time. Yet, in actual fact, this is all very understandable and related to something that lay at the core of artistic and aesthetic experience according to Hogarth. As, indeed, in his view, art in general, whether it be music or painting, was no tamer of the wildness within, and should not, by any means, be so. Orpheus, like all these continental gods and goddesses Hogarth resented so much, had it all wrong! Far from putting the passions to rest and civilising (as in humanising) its non human listeners, the hearing of music quite naturally sets what Joseph Addison had, in his 1711 papers on the imagination, called the “animal spirits” running through the veins of its receptacle (here the unfortunate bird, but in most cases humans). It hardly needs recalling here that, like Addison’s, Hogarth’s approach to art was one that was informed by a sensualism inherited from Locke and mediated by Shaftesbury. And, like Addison (and Shaftesbury too, for all his man-centered civic humanism), Hogarth made ample use of animals and animal instinct in the definition of what happens, or what moves, when an artist is busy creating or when a viewer enjoys this creation. This is particularly true of his chapter on ‘intricacy’, where we can for instance read:

- ‘The active mind is ever bent to be employ’d. Pursuing is the business of our lives; and even abstracted from any other view, gives a sort of spring to the mind, enhances the pleasure, and makes what would else be toil and labour, become sport and recreation’
- ‘This love of pursuit, merely as pursuit, is implanted in our natures, and design’d, no doubt, for necessary, and useful purposes. Animals have it evidently by instinct. The hounds dislikes the game he so eagerly pursues; and even cats will risk the losing of their prey to chase it over again.’

---

Artists and art lovers experience pleasure in chasing beauty, an instinctive pursuit that aligns them with animals which, like cats, ‘will risk the losing of their prey to chase it over again’, for play in other words. Pleasure doesn’t stem from catching anything, but from pursuing it. It originates with that movement which leads us to follow a scent, here that of the beautiful - a quest which, to use what has to be the best known quote from Hogarth, ‘leads the eyes a wanton kind of chace’. The chase looks almost desinterested here (being wanton, or gratuitous), yet it serves a fundamental purpose: that of giving pleasure by stimulating all the senses in a fashion much akin to that of animals on the hunt.

There was something fit – and fitness and acting with a purpose was Hogarth’s byword, both in theory and in life - in humans being endowed with an instinct of the chase that they shared with the rest of God’s creation. Yet this fitness clearly did not preclude creativity. In many ways, it was actually coterminous with it, and there was something eminently modern (and which incidentally connects with a lot of ‘non human’, ‘new materialistic’ research that is currently being published) in this intuition that animals were in fact the original artists after which humans had to model their practice. Something which they could achieve by acknowledging their animality rather than try to suppress, or tame it, as Orpheus seems to have invited them to do. Hogarth’s metaphor was not exactly new: John Locke had written of the ‘searches of the mind after truth’ being ‘a sort of hawking and hunting, wherein the very pursuit makes a great part of the pleasure’. Anthony Ashley Cooper, Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, Cambridge UP, 1999, Miscellany III, p. 416.

Only, Sir, to satisfy myself that I am not alone or single in a certain fancy I have of a thing called beauty, that I have almost the whole world for my companions, and that each of us admirers and earnest pursuers of beauty (such as in a manner we all are), if peradventure he takes not a certain sagacity along with him, he must err widely, range extravagantly, and run ever upon a false scent. We may, in the sportsman’s phrase, have many hare afoot but shall stick to no real game nor be fortunate in any capture which may content us.

---

4 John Locke, An Essay on Human Understanding, 1690
The *Graham Children* has often been read as an allegory of the transience of life. I like to look at it as a even better artistic manifesto than Hogarth’s self-portrait with Trump. Far from being a picture that mainly speaks of impending death (sthg belied by the brilliancy of its colours and the happiness of the children), everything is right here, and as should be in the state of nature in which the artist (here the artist as a young boy) *instinctively* partakes and from which he has to learn: the baby reaching out for the juicy cherries in a hopeful move towards life, the joy of the young musician, the frustrated urge of the stalking cat, the frantic reaction of the bullfinch. As I started this talk with Gainsborough, I would like to end with him, as an ageing artist looking back on his childhood years, a time when he was trying to imitate small Dutch landscapes. As we can read in the moving excerpt below, the thought of these early works seems to have momentarily led him to retrieve some of childhood’s “innocent” pleasures, pleasures that speak of freedom, but also movement and pursuit: flying a kite as adults would fly hawks, catching birds as his daughters would chase butterflies, building and floating toy ships and, of course, painting the world of nature.

’tis odd how all the Childish passions hang about one in sickness, I feel such fondness for my first imitations of little Dutch Lanskips that I can’t keep from working an hour or two a Day, though with a great mixture of bodily Pain – I am so childish that I could make a Kite, catch Gold Finches, or build little Ships.\(^6\)

**Forthcoming Research**

Laurent, Charlotte and I currently organising a conference on art and the environment in Britain, 1700 to today, to be held in Rennes 2 next March (2-3). An environment understood as a web of human and non human players whose interconnectedness and respective agency invite exploration. I will carry on looking at the specific place of animals in this environment, on their contribution to the shaping of artistic practice and self-definition in the 18th century. It still is a bit unclear what my particular object will be, but as I was looking for pictures staging hunting parties, I came to look more closely at the paintings of John Wootton (1682-1764), whose reputation, for reasons that are usually said to be technical, was quickly eclipsed by that of Georges Stubbs. I am suspicious of these reasons being purely technical, although I have no particular intuition

\(^6\) *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough*, p. 68. Letter to Thomas Harvey, 22 May 1788.
at this very moment and the research still needs to be carried out. I am also curious about this artist because he was a former page, and I would like to find out what impact this had on his art, on the way he represented animals and the place they occupied in his landscapes. Very little (anything at all?) has been written about him since Arline Meyer’s *John Wootton 1682–1764: Landscapes and sporting art in early Georgian England*, Kenwood 1984, and all info, suggestions, leads are welcome!
Bibliography