

Human-Animal Studies

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Human-Animal Studies focuses on the cultural, social and societal dimensions of non-human animals and human-animal relations. In this respect, Human-Animal Studies is not so much a field in its own right but rather a multidisciplinary research agenda which, with the help of an interdisciplinary research programme and methodological apparatus, aims to investigate the impact of human actions on the living conditions of non-human beings. At the same time, it emphasises the impact of animals upon human societies. Its concern is to break through the boundaries drawn between nature and culture and instead to underscore the cultural nature of animal existence. It is interested in what the dividing line between the species actually mean and what social (and in part also ethical) consequences they have. Furthermore, it asks whether and how it might be possible to look at animals from a non-anthropocentric point of view. In order to outline these concerns of Human-Animal Studies, this entry presents genealogically distinct developments in a field that is still characterised by its disciplinary indeterminacy. The debates are presented on the basis of the field's defining question of the life and existence of animals and discusses how these can be made experienceable. The categories of representation/semiotics, agency, relationality, practice/practices and materiality will be used to present relevant fields of discourse in Human-Animal Studies, and the entry outlines how animal-human relations are framed in research practice in these fields.

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1. Introduction

The death of a vast number of species, the so-called “age of extinction”, has raised numerous ethical-critical questions about the co-existence of humans with other species on this planet, not least the question of the epochally interpreted Anthropocene's long-term social and cultural impact on the relationship between human societies and animals (van Dooren 2018). Taking a critical perspective on the co-habitation of species, which it interprets as being in a state of crisis, interdisciplinary Human-Animal Studies has, since around the 1990s, focused on the interconnectedness of animals and humans. Moreover, it has endeavoured to re-orient research in relation to the study of animal-human relationships. In doing so, the pioneers of the field initially aimed to make a purely theoretical contribution to the analysis of animal-human relations (DeMello 2012; Roscher 2012; Waldau 2013; Marvin/McHugh 2014).

However, this has been complemented in recent year by numerous empirical works (e.g. Swart 2010; Benson 2013; Bull et al. 2017; Reinert 2020).

Human-Animal Studies focuses on the cultural, social and societal dimensions of non-human animals and human-animal relations. This means that Human-Animal Studies distances itself from a view that relegates animals to the space of nature or reduces them to their biological functions. With an interdisciplinary background primarily shaped by the cultural and social sciences, scholars use a methodological toolbox originally designed for the analysis of human societies and their cultural constitution, and apply it to animals or, more precisely, to human-animal relationships. Human-Animal Studies is thus concerned to break through the boundaries drawn between nature and culture by pointing out the epistemological and ethical shortcomings of a one-sided anthropocentric view. The extent to which another, less human-centred

perspective is possible is one of the central questions and methodological challenges of the field. In addition, the biopolitical implications of these boundaries are highlighted, i.e. the techniques of exercising and consolidating power over the relationship between humans and animals are examined and made explicit (Asdal et al. 2016; Wadiwel 2018). Epistemological research on, with and about animals complements and extends zoological-biological or ethological explorations of prevalent animal representations, symbolisms and stories, along with issues raised by the physical presence of animals in human societies. For example, through a spatial analysis of the coming together of humans and animals, such as in the practice of keeping pets (a phenomenon which has been widespread in the Western world since the 19th century) or in the artificial world of the zoo, the external conditions of species rapprochements are explored with a view to their emotional entanglements and social acceptance (Wischermann 2017).

The approach of Human-Animal Studies privileges a view “from *close up*” (Latour [2017] 2018: 67) or from below and operates empirically on the micro-level of the everyday co-existence of different species, of which humans are only one. It explores the material-semiotic influence which these species have and have had on cultural practices, shared spaces and social interactions (Buller 2015: 379). For instance, it examines how humans walking dogs (a cultural technique that emerged in the 18th century) had both a physical impact on the infrastructure of the landscape and a lasting influence on the value of the dog-human relationship (Steinbrecher 2015). Human-Animal Studies thus draws its inspiration on the one hand “from an uncertainty that no longer recognises the purely scientific study of animals as sufficient to explain animal life and behaviour” (Krebber/Roscher 2016: 12), for example when it comes to questions of behavioural changes in the course of the domestication process that are the result of mutual rapprochement between species (Russell 2014). On the other hand, scholars in the field point to “the important role that animals have always played in the development of human societies” (Krebber/Roscher 2016: 12), for example in the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society.

2. Subject Area: Inclusions and Delimitations

Human-Animal Studies is largely a new field of research that focuses on historical as well as contemporary human-animal relations. It has set itself the agenda – one informed by cognitive ethology as well as environmental and life sciences – of mapping the cultural space which animals, their symbolic representations and bodily existences as well as their subjective possibilities of experience have and have had in the formation of human societies. It thus looks at a common, culturally shaped environment (Emel/Taves 2018). The field of Human-Animal Studies itself is marked by constant development. While it originally involved social scientific studies focussing on micro-sociology or psychology, for example on our cohabitation with our pets, and anthropological studies of non-Western societies, that triggered the development of the theory, a large part of the research now takes place in the humanities and cultural sciences, history and literature, philosophy, and ethnology. Social scientific approaches have been expanded to include economic, juridical, and macro-sociological perspectives.

In the course of this development, the methodological approaches have become differentiated, in particular into *Multi-Species Approaches*, where the observational perspective is directed simultaneously at two or more species, and *Interspecific Approaches*, where the focus is on relationships between individuals or populations of different species. These approaches have consequences for the individual disciplines influenced by Human-Animal Studies, with respective shifts in focus. In historically oriented Human-Animal Studies, for example, the aim is to examine the dynamic, interactive relationship between humans and animals from a historical perspective, to historicise the power of the relationship and to give greater scrutiny to the material consequences of coexistence for the animals themselves (Roscher 2018). For its part, *Cultural and Literary Animal Studies*, which is influenced by literary studies, attempts to overcome a reading of literary texts that focuses solely on motifs. Instead it sees the literary animal as a special object of research that is always to be read in relation to its environment and its subject character, i.e. the character for which it stands supra-individually (McHugh 2009; Borgards 2015). For example,

text genres are compared, and different forms of animal symbolism explored. By granting animals a kind of co-authorship, literary studies of animals also break with overly linear representations of senders and receivers. *Animal Geography* focuses on the socio-spatial measurement of spaces used by humans and animals (Buller 2014; Gillespie/Collard 2017), while *Multi-Species Ethnography* develops new ethnographic methods with the assumption of an already existing interconnectedness and inseparability of humans with other life forms (Locke/Münster 2015). The latter seeks to consider both the efficacy and the experiential worlds of other species, and thus no longer treats anthropology and ethology as separate fields with entirely different approaches. Finally, *Archaeozoological Studies*, which seeks to draw conclusions about earlier human societies and their interspecific contacts with animals through the material-bodily remains of animals, such as bones, feathers, fur, etc., point to the *longue durée* of the research field. As such, it stresses the importance of observing the long-term development of relationships which can no longer be described primarily in terms of explanatory events and protagonists but instead must also take into account factors such as landscape and climate as well as economic and social structures and which in turn must be read across epochs (Hill 2013).

Despite all their disciplinary differences, the various strands of Human-Animal Studies have in common that each strives for a decentering of the human, a science “beyond the human” (Cudworth/Hobden 2013) while not losing sight of the human being but conceiving it as part of a multi-relational situation. For some researchers, however, who often argue more ideologically, this decentering does not go far enough; they see Human-Animal Studies and its methods as a mere extension of a humanist ideal of science, because no fundamental political consequences are drawn from the identification of anthropocentrism. These would, however, need to be actively expressed in a revaluation of the animal world (Wolfe 2009). This approach, which goes under the rubric of *Critical Animal Studies*, represents a kind of “standpoint theory” (Krebber 2019: 313) and is characterised even more than other currents in Human-Animal Studies by intersectional questions and inspired by a posthumanist interpretive matrix. The term Human-Animal Studies thus threatens to become imprecise at times, because it is used both as an umbrella term to

designate all research dedicated to animal-human relations in a broad sense, including the aforementioned critical-political approach, and as an independent research method that seeks to consider humans and animals equally. Consequently, it is not yet possible to definitively say whether the field is a specific orientation or “research attitude” (Borgards 2016: 5) or rather “a kind of supradisciplinary research organism” (Krebber/Roscher 2016: 11) that poses new questions to all disciplines equally and generates new impulses.

As the above discussion shows, schools of thought have emerged that differ in their epistemological claims, their political aspirations, and their empirical applications but which, despite the fragmentation of the field, have been able to give themselves a certain overall shape. In addition to the aforementioned *Critical Animal Studies* and *Cultural and Literary Animal Studies*, this is particularly evident in the case of *Multi-Species Studies* and *Animal History*. What the diverse fields have in common is that each of them counters the prevailing, dualistic view of animals and animal-human relations with new perspectives that cut across classical boundaries and redesigns relationships beyond the categories of human, nature, culture and animal. With the declaration of the “*Animal Turn*” by historian Harriet Ritvo in 2007, this development has gained traction (Ritvo 2007). The *Animal Turn* has led to an interdisciplinary understanding of animals as integrated with humans in the social structures of an interspecies society and thus raised new questions about animals’ consequent status.

3. Questions of Human-Animal Studies

3.1 Who is Animal?

The thematic field of animal-human relations touches on questions that are methodological and theoretical – in particular, epistemological – in nature, and certainly have practical and empirical consequences for the disciplines interested in them. In particular, the question of the subject status and subjecthood of animals and the animal self, which circulate “at the core of the social construction of the value of animal life” (Wischermann 2009: 10), are central to the discussion of what the analytic focus of Human-Animal Studies should be, though this question is not usually made explicit. “The animal” as a collective term for everything that is non-human

(or so it may seem) still functions in Human-Animal Studies as an indeterminate “other” onto which every difference from humans is projected; it forms an almost hermetic, essentialised, ontological counterpart to humans. However, in recent years a debate has emerged about what should be subsumed under the term “non-human other”. This debate has produced several partly opposing perspectives. One of these perspectives, which is favoured by *Multi-Species Studies* or the *Environmental Humanities*, seeks to consider not only animals in the narrow sense but also other living beings, such as fungi and plants (Tsing 2012). Another, more practical research perspective, on the other hand, focuses on those animals that live in close contact with humans, usually pets and livestock, and almost always mammals. These animals are said to have “Du-Evidenz” (evidence for the thou), i.e. they are capable of establishing active and reciprocal relationships with humans (Gutjahr/Sebastian 2013: 64 f.). Moreover, a form of individuality and thus a certain biographical capacity is assumed for these animals (Krebber/Roscher 2018). For them, there is no necessity to prove that they are unequivocally part of human-animal sociality. From the point of view of *Critical Animal Studies*, this is often taken as evidence that even Human-Animal Studies does not consider all animals equal and thus remains stuck with a speciesist hierarchy; it would thereby fail to satisfy the political-egalitarian claim which the question of the place of animals in scientific debate inevitably entails. The relational approach, which is strongly advocated by Human-Animal Studies, responds to such criticism on the one hand by pointing out that more fundamental theoretical questions must first be clarified before the more complicated (because less well-documented) relationships with insects, amphibians and fish can be addressed. A debate about the extent to which animals are producers of their own experiences is therefore no longer merely ethical, but a practical issue (de Giorgio 2016: 169): an understanding of the different horizons of experience can primarily be reconstructed through relationships with humans. Since, for example, it was possible to document our relationships to dogs or horses over a long historical timeframe and via diverse source material, these relationships have naturally taken centre stage.

In the current research discussion, too, the term animal – at least empirically with regard to actual research practice – does not refer to all animals (just

as the term human for a long time often referred to only one specific instance of the human species, namely the white, male European). However, Human-Animal Studies has developed a stratagem to answer the question of who is an animal in the sense of the subject to be studied. With recourse to Jacques Derrida, who defined the concept of the animal as a manifestation of the assertion of human authority in the naming of the living “other” (Derrida 2003: 23), it is pointed out that the *concept* of “animal” first serves as a kind of tool, through which the more precise *instance* of “animal” can then subsequently be identified. The significance of the different species would only be revealed in this subsequent step. Analogous to Derrida, either the use of the general singular “animal” refers to the constructional character of the non-human as a hermetic counter-image of the human, or the plural “animals” is deliberately used to point out that hundreds of thousands of species are hidden behind the term “animals”. In addition, scholars have increasingly alluded to the fact that even in this cultural construction of the animal, there have always been – and still are – those who cross borders. How, for example, monkeys were to be classified, and thus where the human-animal boundary was set, was a matter of some dispute until the 19th century (Fudge 2010). The spatial differentiation of animal husbandry in the 19th century, which led to a division of domestic animals into pets and livestock and with this division to new attributions of meaning to animals, for example, of chicken and cats, also points to the fluidity of boundaries in human environments. These boundaries must therefore always be interpreted according to the specific situation. With reference to “liminal animals” – a term that takes up a concept from anthropology that marks ritual threshold crossings and extends them to animal-human relations – such border crossings and their transgressions are made productive in order to question the cultural constructions of animals (Wischermann 2017; Howell et al. 2018). In other words, Human-Animal Studies is facing up to the challenges posed by questions about the definition of who is or was an animal. This is demonstrated, for example, by conceptual approaches to the study of microbes or the bridges being built to *Plant Studies* (Turner et al. 2018), where one is challenged to reflect on one’s object of study.

3.2 How does it feel to be an animal?

“What is it like to be a bat?” asked philosopher Thomas Nagel as early as 1974, arguing on the one hand that it is impossible to empathise with another species and on the other hand that we need to do just that (Nagel 1974). From Nagel's analysis it was initially concluded that empathy could only take the form of anthropomorphisation.

By declaring such an anthropomorphisation of animals inadmissible and at the same time being confronted with the question of how and whether an animal perspective can be “inferred at all from a human position” (Krebber 2019: 317), Human-Animal Studies find itself at the centre of epistemological debates which frequently arise from its methodological approach. An integrative view of animals and human society inevitably raises further questions, such as whether and to what extent the methodological separation of the humanities and the natural sciences, the study of culture on the one hand and of nature on the other, is still appropriate for investigating animals in interspecific societies, along with their experiences and possibilities of action within these societies. By concentrating on the one hand on extra-linguistic fields of action and on the other hand on the recognition of certain shared spheres of experience – which can be seen, for example, in the work shared by a tracking dog and handler or an elephant and mahout (Haraway 2008; Locke 2017) and reading these actions and shared experiences through a lens of critical behavioural research (Krebber 2019: 318), Human-Animal Studies tries at least to soften the human-centred focus. This is framed as a kind of conflation of “etho-ethnology” and “ethno-ethology” (Brunois et al. 2006), in which anthropocentric exclusivity is called into question. From this perspective, it is suggested that not only is it possible for some humans to think like some animals, but that the concrete behaviour of animals can thereby be anticipated by humans – and vice versa (Fudge 2013: 23).

Even if cows (Fudge 2017), horses (Swart 2010) and elephants (Locke 2017) have for now overtaken bats as subjects of epistemological reflection, the question of the animal perspective from a non-anthropocentric point of view remains a central core topic of Human-Animal Studies, one to be addressed through a variety of methodological procedures and conceptual approaches.

Here it is not so much about the issue of feeling, smelling, tasting and perceiving like animals, but rather of accepting different ways of experiencing the world that is said to be required as a permanent and critical intervention. Categories such as intention or instinct are seen as insufficient or outdated for this purpose; instead, concepts of agency and practices are employed. In addition, it is pointed out that although animals are to be regarded as animals, they are – just like humans – shaped by cultural, historical transformations, which in turn transform their actions along with their physiology (Fudge 2017).

4. Concepts of Human-Animal Studies

4.1 Representation/Semiotics

Until recently, cultural theory's questions about animals were often characterised by the assumption that animals in literary, historical, artistic-aesthetic and philosophical texts only ever stand for the representation of purely human discourses, in which they exclusively perform the functions of reflection and translation. Human-Animal Studies contrast this so-called representational approach with a perspective that seeks to read the symbolism of animals as indications of a material interaction. According to this reading, the source value of animals depends, on the one hand, on their cultural relevance, which, from an animal-sensitive perspective, is also evoked by the respective zoosemiotic aesthetics. It is therefore necessary, as a sort of background foil, to illuminate which specific symbolic representations of animals are taken up and become effective in discourses. For example, it is asked why colonialist representations of power always reveal themselves in the symbolic control of indigenous fauna – elephants, lions or tigers were popular species in this respect. On the other hand, an attempt is made to show the connection between material traces and discursive iconographies and the extent to which material-semiotic changes in meaning have an overall impact on the space of possibilities of action by animals and with animals (Benson 2011). For example, the question is raised as to what extent the discursive valorisation of dogs and horses as soldiers and comrades within the National Socialist Volksgemeinschaft affected the life expectancy and living conditions of individual animals (Roscher 2016).

4.2 Agency

The question of agency, i.e. the possibility of attributing agency to animals without necessarily presupposing an individual self (Pearson 2013; Rees 2017), can undoubtedly be seen as constitutive for Human-Animal Studies. On the one hand, agency is interpreted here, following actor-network theory (Latour 2005), as distributed between human-animal networks. Precisely because actor-network theory is not a methodological programme spelled out in every detail but is instead open to interpretation, animals can be lifted quite unproblematically onto the tableau of agents (Roscher 2018). On the other hand, the aim of attributing agency to animals also correlates with an ethical attitude that cannot be “permanently excluded” from the discourse on animals (Krebbler 2019: 314). Ethics and cognitive research offer the guiding discourses for this negation of exclusion (Andrews 2015; Grimm/Wild 2016; Petrus/Wild 2013), though they emphasise the importance of cognitive abilities for any consideration of animals as actors, an issue that the reference to actor-network theory is intended to circumvent for fear of a renewed hierarchisation of actors. Subject-theoretical models of action that demand such proof also demarcate humans per se from animals. However, actor-network theory is not without its critics: as a research programme, it is relatively blind to the relations of domination and conditioning and to actors’ specific capacities and contexts of action. For Human-Animal Studies, giving animals power to act and ascribing to them cultural and material properties of action thus explicitly does not mean that animals act independently. Rather, they are to be examined as part of complex relational assemblages of actors (Pooley-Ebert 2015: 152) which are located in specific historical, political, economic and cultural contexts. For example, the marketing of milk as a product of an animal that has undergone multiple symbolic and economic transformations within the last century alone is made more transparent with the help of nuanced network models (Nimmo 2011), as is the actor role of border patrol dogs in the construction, maintenance, and contestation of borders (Pearson 2016). The aim, therefore, is always to illuminate the specific integration of animal actors within specific interspecies societies.

4.3 Relationality

The actions of non-human entities do not manifest themselves in a vacuum, but rather (and this is central for the chroniclers of animal action in Human-Animal Studies) in relationships and situations. Following Donna Haraway, they therefore speak of a co-production among “companions” (Haraway 2004). Haraway had argued that human and animal species only exist in relation to each other, within the framework of forms of life and of a society shaped by culture (Haraway 2008). In a similar vein, historian Erica Fudge assumes that the view from above must be abandoned when considering animals and that instead the focus should be on permanent co-existence. So-called “living alongside” (Fudge 2017: 25) takes the intermingled lives of humans and animals as the basic premise for demonstrating animal agency (Shaw 2013; Wilkie 2015; Jamieson 2018) and places the social centre-stage; the focus is on social co-production. Reference is also made here to the spatial aspect of coexistence. It is not only social and cultural geography (re-oriented here as *Animal Geography*) that is concerned with the places where people and animals establish different kinds of relationships – increasingly conceptualised as “hybrid” spaces (Philo/Wilbert 2000; Buller 2014; Gillespie/Collard 2017). Rather, spatial encounters are understood as a lens through which the location and experienceability of animal-human relationships can be explored. Spatial aspects also play a role in the understanding of animal environments from a philosophical-theoretical point of view, especially in the *Environmental Humanities* (Wild/Hunderich 2018). As was already the case in the forerunners of environment-oriented research, however, ecosystem theory considerations are often in the foreground, despite the turn to the logic of things, i.e. a concentration on nodes and their material forms. Here, research is conducted into how the relationships between people, animals and things affect complex ecosystems (Bennett 2010; Huggan/Tiffin 2015).

4.4 Praxis/Practices

Relationships can be perceived, above all, in practices that are also physically inscribed in those who participate in them, as is the case in animal breeding, for example.

Following a praxeological approach, Human-Animal Studies therefore no longer focuses on the respective capacity for action of human and animal actors, but rather on the actions themselves (Roscher 2018; 2019). The focus is not on the intentional quality of an action but on the flow of the action, its execution. According to this perspective, both the relationships and the actors themselves are produced performatively. These only acquire their respective meanings in the joint practices and negotiations that structure the relationships between humans and animals and thus make them analytically comprehensible. Instead of assuming a fixed actor status a priori, Human-Animal Studies sees the hermeneutic potential of “non-human agency” in examining the processuality of interspecies relations in a way that expands action-theory (Baratay 2015; Cockram/Wells 2018). In order to approach the practices of these multi-relational entities, here the species in interaction, ethnographic methods such as participant observation are increasingly used (Helmreich/Kirksey 2010; Hamilton/Taylor 2017). To ground the claim that it is observing everyday practices “from below”, in which the subject and object of an action can often not be clearly identified, Human-Animal Studies therefore demands an expansion of theories of social life, that recognises that society has always already been an interspecies society (Pearson/Weismantel 2010). This is relevant for Human-Animal Studies insofar as it points to the volatility of both the concept of the subject and the concept of society, which themselves always have a historical dimension.

4.5 Materiality

Thinking social practices from the perspective of the animal, of real animals with real bodily presences, opens up new ways of making visible the interconnections between human and animal worlds. Animal and human bodies can be experienced materially. Inspired by the philosophical school of “New Materialism”, which favours the concept of the objecthood of animals over the concept of embodied agency and in which the discussion of agency is virtually absorbed into a theory of modes of existence, the materiality of the animal and the animal-human relationship is assigned a prominent status in Human-Animal Studies. Objecthood is regarded as an active presence. This assumes that things influence the cultural world of humans and, moreover, that humans

are post-humanistically stripped of their exceptional role (Rossini 2006; Coole/Frost 2010; Borgards 2017). Through the material body, historical changes become concrete and can be experienced and described as going beyond evolutionary processes (Landes et al. 2012; Eitler 2014). Emphasising the corporeality of animal bodies not only clarifies debates around intersectionality, i.e. the intertwining of different inequality-generating structural categories. The different experientialities of actions are also highlighted. For example, it is assumed that the milking of cows or the experience of being milked (Fudge 2013; Russell 2014) both generate different material realities that can be traced, without, however, having to fall back upon biological essentialisms according to which these actions would be naturally derived from the physical constitution of the cow. Instead, Human-Animal Studies explains the cultural development of milking practices that are and have been embedded in complicated negotiations of bodies and gender: of humans as well as animals.

5. Conclusion

Human-Animal Studies’ programme is to provide empirical precision and theoretical grounding to transformations in the relationship between humans and other animals which concern both material bodies and their discursive attributions. In doing so, it is challenged by the interdisciplinary perspective that the field of animal-human relations requires, the bringing together of research in the natural sciences and cultural studies, and the question of how the object of study, the animal, can be approached in an epistemologically appropriate way. In short, Human-Animal Studies’ aim is to think about and bring together the semiotic and the ‘real’ animal historically, philosophically, artistically, sociologically and scientifically.

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