

# REVIEW: VIRTUAL MENAGERIES



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Berland, J. (2019). *Virtual Menageries: Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 325 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover).

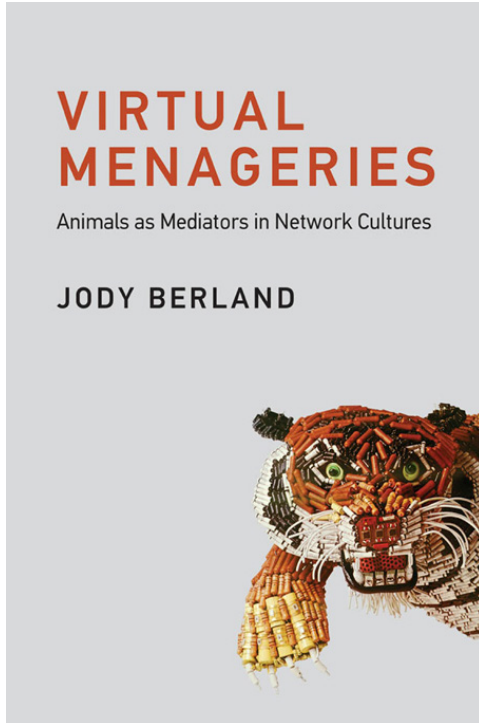
What might it take to see our contemporary digital culture with new eyes? With the title of her book *Capital is Dead: Is this Something Worse?*, McKenzie Wark (2019) asks readers to re-envision their categorization of our current networked economy, in order to understand online information extraction's new primary role. As she observes, the corporate use of predictive algorithms to track and capitalize on the desires and behavioral patterns of individuals has reshaped modern society in ways that may no longer be 'capitalism' as we have historically thought of it. Here, media consumers are tracked, studied, and sold as the primary commodity. In this new system, communication and media engagement becomes a brand of production, transforming speakers into products through their expressions of interest and identity.

While reading Jody Berland's new book *Virtual Menageries: Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures* (2019), it became clear to me that the economic mode Wark describes rode in on a wave of animal images—everything from the Linux pen-

guin to the Twitter bird. These nonhuman logos and avatars were fundamental for establishing our current structure of feeling and for ushering in the widespread use of communications technologies. In Berland's refreshing work, existing at the overlap of cultural studies, media studies, and critical animal studies, she excavates several key concepts for understanding our current, highly-mediated information economy. In the introduction, she argues for the central importance of the term "animal spirits" for understanding the spasmodic flux and flow of contemporary markets, outlining how these "spirits" have been historically conceptualized within economic theory. Used initially to bracket off elements of the economy that were thought to not be subject to rational equations of supply and demand, "animal spirits" have become more and more central for understanding the disastrous convulsions of global economies in the 21st century. As capitalism fails to uplift all but a tiny few, its structures and mechanisms are increasingly described as inhuman, initially premised on theories of human behavior that even its proponents no longer believe to be true (Harman 2010).

In this landscape, individual consumers are ever-more fragmented and animalized in their role as drivers of unreasoned market forces. Berland (2019) argues that online animal images—the adorable memes that we share, the animated sidebar ads playing in our browsers, the pet photographs we snap and send—"speak the language of these animal spirits," positioning online consumption and communication as the natural consequence of irrational, inborn desires for freedom and pleasure (11). In her inspired fourth chapter, "Assembling the Virtual Menagerie," Berland tracks the ways in which these animal iconographies were deployed by early software and technology companies to draw their users into adopting disruptive new communication technologies into their lives. She describes this use of animal images as a form of "risk management," (44) in which onscreen animals embody and seem to reconcile the contradictory forces at the heart of virtual media. Through the presentation of digital communication as akin to the natural play of animals, corporate entities and human users navigate the paradoxes of online culture—where modern technology is often free yet monetized, autonomous yet tracked, individualized yet standardized, and seemingly immaterial yet environmentally toxic. Closely examining the visual history of animals such as beavers, cats, and giraffes, Berland describes the rendering process through which animals are stripped of their surroundings and turned into abstractions capable of representing a frictionless, ahistorical ideal of the virtual.

None of this can be removed from the backdrop of environmental collapse. As species, ecosystems, and habitats are wiped out, virtual animals' offer of escape from context and surroundings becomes all the more alluring. Berland traces



es the early colonial origins of this process: linking the harvesting of beaver pelts to beavers' eventual iconic status within Canada and following the reverberating effects of the trade in "exotic" animals such as the giraffe throughout the centuries. And yet within this history of oppression, both of humans and nonhuman animals, she is sure to leave the door open for animals to signify in unintended ways, noting how lesbian communities re-appropriated the beaver's double entendre and how users create intimate communities through the sharing of domestic cat pics. She argues for a conceptual shift, in which we reinscribe abstracted images and logos of animals back into their history and environment, understanding them to be in and of the world rather than an escape from it. As I was reading these sections,

I questioned whether this type of recuperative work is up to the tasks that face us today: whether global extinction and spreading fascism could be countered by this type of conceptual enterprise. Instead, Berland's writing made me wonder how radical leftists might mobilize the techniques of the virtual menagerie towards their own ends, evoking to me the black Chilean dog Negro Matapacos, who went from being photographed protecting students from police during the 2011 protests in Santiago, to becoming an icon of the New York City subway protests of 2019 (Isfahani-Hammond 2020). In this instance, and others like it, the globalizing abstraction and distribution of animal images were directed towards revolutionary ends, pointing to a practice that might look less towards restoration and conservation, and more towards mobilizing political movements.

Ultimately, Berland's critical insights prompt me to ask why so many in animal studies continue to litigate the failures of Cartesian dualism when our current ruling class, the "vectorilists" defined by Wark, share more of their worldview with Donna Haraway, or at least B.F. Skinner, than Rene Descartes. Like Haraway's brilliant "cyborg manifesto," Berland's writing is a call for us to face the world as

it stands today, acknowledging all the previously heretical complexities of contemporary human/animal relations. *Virtual Menageries* is best read along with other works currently questioning the simple binary implied by previous critiques of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism, such as Zakkiya Imam Jackson's *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (2020) and Nicole Shukin's *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (2009). Cumulatively, these works point to major shifts in the conversation, ways of thinking through the political perils of human recognition as well as animalization, and of capital's investment in nonhuman life. Reimagining contemporary visual culture within this changing paradigm is of the utmost importance for understanding the politics of animal imagery within the Anthropocene. Following Berland's thinking, I am inspired to conclude by repeating Wark's initial statement and question, now slightly reframed as: Anthropocentrism is dead, is this something worse?

## References

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