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Bat, Reaktion, 2018. 224pp.

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Abstract

In the latest text in Reaktion Books' Animal Series, art critic and theorist Tessa Laird's *Bat* provides a cultural history of the species, including a sociological critique of the place of bats in human history. Seeking to correct what she perceives to be inaccurate, yet unrelentingly persistent representations of these animals, Laird covers everything from bat biology, to the bat trope in popular culture, to echolocation and the figure of the bat in European art and literature. Whilst Laird does discuss the perhaps more obvious references, such as Batman and Dracula at length, she also delves into our collective unconscious to examine what motivates the moral panics bats so frequently, historically and still currently, draw to the surface.

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As one of the more salient cultural associations that bats hold, Laird dilates upon their connection to madness (as in the colloquialism, 'batshit crazy'), an association that continues to inform their treatment as a species today. With myriad literary, filmic, and cultural examples, Laird demonstrates both how, and why, it is that 'historically, and in almost all corners of the globe, bats have inspired fear and revulsion' (45). She walks the reader through why, long prior to Bela Lugosi, bats were 'already disliked and feared' throughout the West and Europe (45).

Commonly understood as pests and vermin, the stigma of rabies was just one unfortunate association that passed its stain onto bats as a species, metonymically suturing them to insanity within the cultural unconscious – an association that was only further solidified with later links to Ebola and SARS. She illustrates how 'from Bacon, to Goya, to Blake' bats have collectively served as repositories for adverse cultural projections. Within European art and literature, for instance, Laird details how the presence of bats suggested anything from

‘madness’ to ‘melancholia’ to a ‘sure signifier of satanic affiliation’; standing in for ‘sacrilegious’ themes writ large (45, 49). This same typecasting is evident in what she names the ‘religious opprobrium reserved for bats’, observable within Isaiah and Leviticus and the biblical book of Baruch where bats connote uncleanness and abjection (49). Indeed, the presumption of the synonymous nature of bats and ‘the negative and darker forces of life’ was informed by such medieval Christian imagery (49).

Such metonymic links, however, did not exist merely within representations, but were similarly manifest in daily life. Historically, the sight of bats hovering within your vicinity, for instance, could constitute sufficient cause for one’s execution. Indeed, this ‘intimate association with evil’ that bats were believed to embody was, in fact, gruesomely literalised in the public burning to death of Lady Jacaume of Bayonne in France, due to the fact that hordes of bats were witnessed hovering around her house and garden (45). In antiquity, boiled bats were prescribed as a treatment for melancholic black bile; in French folklore, if one were unlucky enough to get a bat tangled in one’s hair, it forecast a ruined love affair; whilst in Ireland, if a bat were to come into possession of a human hair, a fate of everlasting perdition was believed to condemn that person. The ‘European equation of bats with the progenitor of all evil’ even influenced how European explorers perceived the fauna they encountered on their global travels: when James Cook first landed in Australia in 1770, one of his crew declared that he had come face to face with a living devil upon encountering a flying fox (49).

Yet these historical associations to insanity, evil, and magic persevere, as evinced in the pattern Laird traces through more recent art, film, literature, and even music, where bats are frequently discovered to be comfortable bedfellows with villains, to signify malevolence or profane motifs, and to symbolise madness. Aptly quoting Henry David Thoreau in his suggestion that animals are beasts of burden precisely because they are enlisted to ‘carry some portion of our thoughts’, Laird expertly unravels what it is that they are carrying for us (140). Flipping the terms in this equation, she queries what it is about humans that we utilise bats to offload. Sifting through the metaphysical underlining of our fantasy laden perceptions and illusions about these creatures, Laird argues that:

It is the crepuscular nature of the bat, of things flying between day and night, that gives us a clue to the unease bats awaken in people. Bats demonstrate ‘betweenness’ in their relation to the diurnal cycle, and physiologically, seemingly falling outside of known categories. This idea is remarkably pan-cultural, and myths the world over tell stories in which the bat cannot decide if it is a mammal or a bird. (62)

Border maintenance, then, is key here: bats’ connections with monstrosity are directly informed by an assumption of their hybridity, and their history of taxonomic ambiguity. Laird explains, for instance, how in taxonomist Carl Linnaeus’ initial endeavour at his evolutionary ordering system, bats were classified in the same category as primates, as both possess nipples for suckling their young. Later, Linnaeus would place them with birds, and later still, grouped them with mammals. Similarly unsure of how to approach and catalogue this species in his encyclopaedic *Natural History*, the Comte de Buffon lamented that the chimerical bat was ‘half a quadruped and half a bird’, and therefore ‘a monstrous being’ (cited in Laird 62). In a bid to understand what might provoke such tropes to metronomically recur, Laird suggests that bats constitute a symbolic ‘mirror-image or inversion’ of normality, due to their hanging upside down during the day, and coming to life at night (61). Referencing occultist writer Kenneth Grant, she elaborates on his notion that the vampire bat is a zootype, or totem, of a hanged human or inverted crucifix, complete with ‘all the negative freight such an inversion implies’ (61). Curiously, this imagery is evocatively taken up in the Australian ‘Grey Cross’ campaign, whereby groups of upside-down crosses are hung on tree branches to signify sites where the mass, state-sanctioned shootings of bats have taken place.

Overall, Laird demonstrates how what is manifest in these cases is an anxiety regarding the line demarcating cross-species sameness from difference – a line which secures bats’ proximity to humans, yet at the same time, appears dangerously to slide. It is this tension regarding the management of species difference here that exposes, so starkly and symptomatically, the way in which cultural misconceptions surrounding bats, and the classical oppositions they carry in their undertow, are revealed to be uncertain in their most assured evidences. For the essentialist and reductionist conditions upon which these perceptions rely do not adequately reflect anything of this species’ complexity, or of their absolute necessity to the

broader ecology. Instead, Laird articulates just how such negative connotations play a pivotal role in threatening this species' existence, and in turn, those other species whose lives depend on theirs.

Currently, bat populations the world over are rapidly declining and with the twin threats of habitat loss and climate change, many of the 1,331 species that comprise the remarkable diversity within the order *Chiroptera* are critically threatened. The timeliness of Laird's text, then, and its call to re-examine our relationships with bats, could not be more important, or relevant. Accompanied by exquisite photography and illustrations, *Bat* will provide the bat connoisseur with captivating material they would never otherwise encounter, and the general reader with a three-dimensional insight into these fascinating creatures. Given Laird's contention that bats often 'operate as strange mirrors to humanity', this book serves as an erudite provocation to consider our reflections differently (140).