

2021

**[Review] Jody Berland. *Virtual Menageries: Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures*. Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 2019. 328 pp.**

Prof. Peta Tait  
*La Trobe University*

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## Recommended Citation

Tait, Prof. Peta, [Review] Jody Berland. *Virtual Menageries: Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures*. Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 2019. 328 pp., *Animal Studies Journal*, 10(1), 2021, 286-289.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol10/iss1/15>

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**Abstract**

Animal Studies Journal 2021 10(1): [Review] Jody Berland. *Virtual Menageries: Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures*. Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 2019. 328 pp.

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**Peta Tait**

**La Trobe University**

Images of cats on the internet provoked Jody Berland to probe the historical and cultural significance of the proliferation of animal imagery in the media. She begins her engaging analysis with descriptions of hypermediatized virtual images of nonhuman animals (animals) to demonstrate their ubiquity. Berland is asking what these images mediate for humanity and how does this visual process engage with viewers. Animal species are a significant presence in media events, and they function as technological and cultural intermediaries and Berland argues that the signifying concept of the menagerie offers a way of grasping how animals mediate as well as connect colonial pasts and the anthropocentric present.

Berland points out that while some species predominate, diverse species are shown by ‘mediology’ to be ‘essential figures’ as she reiterates that the human and the nonhuman are inseparable. The book can be located within the specialization developed out of Eileen Crist’s work on images and Steve Baker’s on popular culture imagery, and Berland’s detailed interpretation of how animals become part of transactional exchanges that are mediatized through contemporary technology is prescient. The book’s discussion of ideas of ‘animal spirits’ within economics offers an intriguing approach as a way of accounting for the use of animal imagery on digital devices. The juxtaposition of historical and contemporary examples works well in this instance because of the closer association in time and inferred connection to animals in mythology.

This is a wide-ranging book that provides a compendium of sources linking theoretical approaches to visual representation and theory about animals. It has much to offer those working in cultural studies and thinking about animals in visual culture and screen media. I am reviewing this book within that disciplinary context although *Virtual Menageries* also contains selective references to animals held in historical menageries. While in some parts Berland switches rapidly between different epochs, examples and cultures, the book utilizes authoritative theorists and deftly weaves a spectrum of conceptual approaches into the discussion.

Berland asks: ‘Can the global proliferation of digital animal images inspire humans to transform their relations with other animals and the natural world?’ (4). This expresses the hopefulness underlying the motivation for investigating animals in representation. An animal studies activist might also ask whether animals should be given the responsibility to transform human social spaces, advocating instead for minimal interference with animal bodies.

Berland recognizes two polarizing positions in ‘critical animal studies’ with human dominance through late capitalism and its technological exploitation versus the value of greater access to animals and their lives and habitat needs through technologies. This distinction is highly relevant to Berland’s main areas of investigation concerned with iconic imagery and screen media and how these reflect the practices and politics of commercialization. This book is concerned with how images of species bodies function as extensions of the human world and reflect a twenty-first century colonizing imperative through widely available technological spread.

Chapter One considers the idea of the menagerie as spectacle and a manifestation of human power. It encompasses cultural theory and explanations of animals in visual culture and familiar animal studies approaches. Chapter Two usefully focuses on one animal species and juxtaposes historic and current ‘events’ with giraffes within human transactional processes in which they function as exotic tributes and embody exoticism even in the present. Chapter Three is about beavers and Canadian national identity and Berland’s archival research and consistent thread of analysis makes this chapter particularly strong. The history of the fur trade in beavers will interest an international readership even though some fascinating paragraphs can leave the

reader wanting to know more; for example, photographic images of live beavers with indigenous people (86). While beavers are also semiotic symbols, this chapter graphically reminds readers that animal exploitation is about material bodies and that physical practices enact the division of nature and culture and human and nonhuman. Chapter Five explores the relationship between corporate animal iconography and technological development and points out that subjectivity is bestowed on animals through stories created by humans. Cats reappear with mice in Chapter Six, which encompasses the proliferation of cat images in social media in a highly topical analysis. Chapter Seven is about birdsong and its copied dissemination through soundtracks and music, so that birdsong appears in the background everywhere. The illuminating discussion in this chapter reflects the type of thoughtful concern required for encounters with animals in technology.

This is a book about the proliferation of animal representation within twentieth- and twenty-first-century iconographic culture with associated historical comparisons. My preference for a more focused conceptual interpretation of animal studies scholarship within what has become such an extensive field does not forestall an appreciation of the book's integration of cultural and media theory with key works from animal studies. But in the technological 'capture' of animal species and as shapes – for example, see the edited anthology *Captured: the animal within culture* (ed. Melissa Boyde, Palgrave Macmillan 2014) – the ensuing familiarity from surveillance can detract from the physical space of species and distort human-animal relations. While historical scholarship on menageries reveals much variation within a short period of time and between countries, Berland recognizes that most species were exported as dead specimens, which is the devastating point of continuity throughout the development of colonial hunting associated with trading businesses. The public menagerie presenting living specimens was a sensory experience of heightened smell as well as sight and captive animals had to be protected from spectators who were often intrusive, even cruel, in their efforts to touch. The concept of the menagerie is used in Berland's approach as a way of framing a collection of species and infers animation if not necessarily aliveness.

I welcome explorations of how perceptual and bodily felt responses develop in relation to viewing nonhuman animals and I was pleased to find Berland's explanation foregrounding the emotions and affect in several places. The emotive appeal of animal species emerges from the book's selection of engaging images and to confirm hierarchies of human attention. The book's discursive overview effectively charts how selected animal species become virtually dominant in modes of representation ranging from photographic imagery to drawn illustration to animation such as Pokémon.