

New Horizons in English Studies 5/2020

## LITERATURE



Andrei Smolnikov

UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

ANDREISMOLNIKOV00@GMAIL.COM

[HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0003-0983-5883](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0983-5883)

---

### “Are we not Men?": Reading the Human-Animal Interface in Science Fiction through John Berger's "Why Look at Animals?"

**Abstract.** The so-called animal turn in literature has fostered the evolution of animal studies, a discipline aimed at interrogating the ontological, ethical, and metaphysical implications of animal depictions. Animal studies deals with representation and agency in literature, and its insights have fundamental implications for understanding the conception and progression of human-animal interactions. Considering questions raised by animal studies in the context of literary depictions of animals in science fiction, this article threads John Berger's characterization of the present as a time of radical marginalization of animals in his essay "Why Look at Animals?" through two highly influential science fiction texts: H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Applying Berger's reasoning to these two novels raises issues of personhood, criteria for ontological demarcation, and the dynamics of power, providing an opportunity to clarify, modify, and refute a number of his finer claims. This process of refinement allows us to track conceptions of human-animal interactions through the literary landscape and explore their extrapolations into various speculative contexts, including the frontiers of science and post-apocalyptic worlds.

**Keywords:** science fiction; animal turn; language; ontology.

No, they were not inhuman... They howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.

—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899, 44)

The stars are dead. The animals will not look.

We are left alone with our day...

—W. H. Auden, "Spain" (1937, 101–02)

In her landmark 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway famously characterized the late 20th century as an epoch of unprecedented ontological disruption, cataloguing the fact that "the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached" as the first of "three crucial boundary breakdowns" defining this modern era (Haraway 1985, 119). For Haraway, the disappearance of "animal" as a distinct ontological category was a source of hope, an occasion to imagine a future which "affirm[s] the pleasure of connection of human and other living creatures" (Haraway 1985, 119). But her initial observation, which will form a recurring theme of this essay, had, at the time of her writing, already been read in far less optimistic terms.

Eight years prior to the "Manifesto," John Berger published "Why Look at Animals?", an essay in which he ascribed the disappearance of interspecies interaction between humans and animals not, as Haraway did, to the diffusion of an ontological boundary that no longer needed to be traversed, but rather to an irreversible banishment of animals from the human world view. "[E]very tradition which has previously mediated between man and nature," Berger claims, "... [has been] broken" (Berger 1977, 3), resulting in the 20th century's radical severance from the past. By his account, this is a severance from a time when animals "were with man at the centre of his world" (Berger 1977, 3) and the prevailing dynamic between the two was one of mutual ontological construction by way of acknowledged difference: "With their parallel lives, animals offer man a companionship which is different from any offered by human exchange ... a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species" (Berger 1977, 6). In times of antiquity, Berger argues, animals were accorded a mythical function, invoked in explanations of worldly phenomena and seen as repositories of an ancient wisdom such that "a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power but never coinciding with it" (Berger 1977, 5). During the mass-industrialization of the 19th century, however, the gradual banishment of animals from the ambit of everyday experience undermined the equal footing on which this paradoxically constructive relationship was built, and, Berger claims, eroded it entirely. Incessant marginalization of animals by way of zoos and domestication as pets, coupled with the relegation of animal imagery to mass media and the increasingly commonplace anthropomorphism of animals in literature and art have profoundly destabilized human conceptions of the self. If Berger is to be believed, the incremental disappearance of animals from human consciousness and the increasing prevalence of a discourse by

which “animals are placed in a *receding* past” (Berger 1977, 12, italics in original) have cemented the alienation of humanity.

Four decades on, few of the symptoms Berger identified in “Why Look at Animals?” seem anachronistic. For the typical inhabitant of the 21st-century Western megalopolis, spontaneous contact with wild animals is, indeed, exceedingly rare, replaced by the carefully orchestrated encounters that are the domain of the zoo and the pet store. Berger’s assertion that this physical marginalization of animals is accompanied by their exile to the realm of increasingly verisimilar animal imagery (Berger 1977, 22–23) also finds a referent in the recent colossal advances of digital animation. In the years since Berger’s essay, the field has evolved to the point of routinely producing computer-generated imagery indistinguishable from real footage, and its labors are regularly directed at churning out films aimed at children, featuring anthropomorphized animals as protagonists. Little seems to have changed since the 1970s.

On the other hand, the trajectory of literary studies in recent years has provided ample reason to reconsider Berger’s diagnoses. I am thinking here of the “animal turn” which has fostered the evolution of animal studies, a discipline aimed at, amongst other things, interrogating the ontological, ethical, and metaphysical implications of animal depictions in literature. Arising out of a broader awareness of the need to acknowledge and examine the literary identity and sovereignty of marginalized groups—in a manner analogous to the proliferation of feminist and postcolonial literary studies—animal studies wrestles with questions of representation and agency, aiming ultimately to deploy “the best of our imperfect and partial knowledge ... [to] enhance the lives of all animals, ourselves included” (Weil 2010, 20). This final point is crucial, for, as Kari Weil notes,

It has become clear that the idea of “the animal”—instinctive beings with presumably no access to language, texts, or abstract thinking—has functioned as an unexamined foundation on which the idea of the human and hence the humanities have been built. It has also become clear, primarily through advances in a range of scientific studies of animal language, culture, and morality, that this exclusion has taken place on false grounds. (Weil 2010, 19)

In this context, Berger’s claims about the ontological implications of marginalizing animals may be subject to considerable revision. Not only does the animal turn evidence a renewed attention to animals that claims to bring them out of the periphery, but also the very existence of the discipline provides sufficient cause to revise the particulars of the “then-and-now” dichotomy that fundamentally underpins Berger’s essay.

Beyond these contextualized misgivings, I would also argue that Berger’s totalizing assertions in their own right mean that “Why Look at Animals?” must be interpreted with some degree of caution. Discussing Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s analysis of the development of language, Berger—who, incidentally, presents language as an infallible criterion of demarcation between humans and animals—rather helpfully makes the point that “[t]hose who disagree with Rousseau are contesting a view of man,

not a historical fact” (Berger 1977, 8). For reasons that will become apparent shortly, I am inclined to apply this reasoning to Berger’s own essay and read his arguments as philosophical contentions rather than historically rigorous claims. Motivating my decision, first and foremost, is that a significant number of critics have taken issue with the historical trajectory of animal-human relationships as presented in “Why Look at Animals?”, in several cases even offering alternative readings of history that undermine Berger’s conclusions. Jonathan Burt, for instance, suggests that institutionalization, rather than marginalization, constituted the predominant change in human involvement with animal affairs from the 19th century onwards, and that, far from being banished, animals as a result gained a newfound significance in human consciousness (Burt 2005, 212–13).

My second major reason for treating “Why Look at Animals?” ahistorically is that many of Berger’s claims are fundamentally dependent on a variety of anthropocentric projections and anthropomorphic imaginings, supplemented by a tone that, at times, approaches the mystical. Take, for instance, his description of the animal gaze:

The eyes of an animal when they consider a man are attentive and wary. The same animal may well look at other species in the same way. He does not reserve a special look for man...  
The animal scrutinises him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. (Berger 1977, 4–5)

It is immediately apparent that Berger is operating with a gross generalization of “animal” when making these rather specific claims, homogenizing a vast biological clade which is not only superlatively heterogeneous (a fact which has been common knowledge at least since the 18th-century advent of Linnaean classification, and probably since times of antiquity) but also, as has been axiomatic since Darwin, includes the very species, humans, that he seeks to exclude from it for the purposes of juxtaposition. But even leaving this aside and accepting his dichotomy, one may well ask on what basis Berger presumes to know the inner workings of the bestial psyche at all, what justification he has for concluding anything about an animal’s degree of comprehension or the dynamics of the looks it exchanges with other animals. What Berger, in a moment of pure conjecture, brushes off as self-evident is quite possibly the most difficult question animal studies seeks to address: how, given the potential inaccessibility of animal cognition, “one can give testimony to an experience that cannot be spoken or that may be distorted by speaking it” (Weil 2010, 4). It is difficult to come to any conclusion other than that Berger’s rhetorical mode relies greatly on imaginative license; as Burt puts it, the essay’s factual claims are “interwoven with a more hypothetical, quasi-mythical view of human-animal relations” (Burt 2005, 204) and are used to advance a “thesis that depends ... heavily on a linguistic/textual notion of the symbolic animal” (Burt 2005, 214).

Though Burt’s final point was clearly proffered as a criticism of “Why Look at Animals?”, the mythical dimension of Berger’s text actually provides a firm foundation for considering the essay in relation to *literary* depictions of interchange, transgression,

and conflict at the ethereal animal-human interface. In simultaneously examining and enacting the changing nature of human-animal interactions, literature, of course, has no choice but to respond to Weil's question of faithful testimony directly; Akira Lippit's observation that "Animals seem to necessitate some form of mediation or allegorization—some initial transposition to language—before they can be absorbed into and dispersed throughout the flow of everyday psychology" (Lippit 2000, 8) rings especially true when the transposition is from vague impressions to the certainty of ink on paper. Partly for this reason, ethologist Frans de Waal has long argued for a re-examination of the dynamics of anthropomorphism in human thought on animals, suggesting that whilst naive, unthinking presumptions of likeness between humans and animals should be avoided, so too should what he terms "*anthropodenial* ... the a priori rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals when in fact they may exist" (De Waal 2001, 69, italics in original). De Waal thus delineates a precarious edge on which literature in particular is obliged to balance, teetering between anthropocentrism on the one hand and anthropodenial on the other, but, in spite of this difficulty – or, perhaps, because of it – he argues for "breathing space in relation to cognitive interpretations" of animals (De Waal 2001, 42). This is a concession which, I would suggest, may be fruitfully extended to the inscription of these interpretations into literary science fiction, a genre whose capacity for insightful social commentary fundamentally depends on the intertwining of paradoxical multiplicities and discontinuities.

Multiplicities are crucial to science fiction's depictions of human-animal interplay, in large part because they allow De Waal's injunctions to be observed in a productive manner. Joan Gordon, for instance, reads such depictions through the figure of the amborg, a neologism coined to "abandon the decisive and misleading slash of the cumbersome mouthful, human/animal interface" (Gordon 2008, 191). Gordon's amborg facilitates mutual subjectivity across that increasingly hazy interface, being a concept "that is meant to acknowledge flows more than divisions" (Gordon 2008, 192) but with the free admission that in doing so, it becomes "'multiple, without clear boundary,' holding 'incompatible things together'" (Gordon 2008, 191). The amborg is thus, as Gordon puts it, a "hopeful monster," "meant to allow us to consider humans and animals not as separate and mutually exclusive categories but to consider humans as one species among many" and intrinsically dependent "upon the acknowledgement of similarities" that bring us face-to-face with the "threatening ... affinities of the uncanny valley" (Gordon 2016, 254–55). Such a figure, laden with the paradoxical dynamics of interconnection between the human and animal worlds, can only exist in science fiction; its tenability is facilitated by the genre's capacity to stimulate a total displacement of the reader's subjectivity, what Sherryl Vint calls a "'sympathetic imagination' [which] is perhaps a necessary balance to the philosophical and scientific traditions of investigating animal-being" (Vint 2008, 179).

Questions surrounding the depiction of the human-animal interface in science fiction, of course, rest firmly within the purview of animal studies, and carefully considering the literary interplay of Berger's conclusions offers insights into the challenging

questions of trauma, representation, and self-conception that the field examines. Consequently, my intention here is to evaluate the model of human-animal interactions proposed by Berger against two test cases, each of which has been profoundly influential in shaping the standing and nature of these interactions in the popular consciousness: H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Animals feature prominently in both of these science fiction novels and their status in each has direct implications for the dynamics of the gaze, the tenability of the human/animal ontological dichotomy, and the resultant conceptions of human identity. As I will argue, though the rupture between a past of interaction and a present of alienation that Berger describes broadly structures the two texts, close analysis provides an opportunity to clarify, modify, and refute a number of his finer claims. This process of refinement allows us to track conceptions of the human-animal interactions through the literary landscape and explore their extrapolations into various speculative—dare I say conceivable?—contexts, including the frontiers of science and post-apocalyptic worlds.

### I. Dialectical encounters, colonial parallels

In the context of identity construction, perhaps the most striking—and, indeed, visionary—feature of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* is the manner in which it attempts to adopt, but swiftly reveals to be untenable, the capacity for language to function as a criterion of demarcation between humans and animals. Such a criterion typically constitutes an ontological necessity in the creation of human identity; as Lippit observes, the “effort to define the human being has usually required a preliminary gesture of exclusion: a rhetorical animal sacrifice” (Lippit 2000, 8). This is a sacrifice, moreover, which, in the Western philosophical tradition, has regularly occurred on a linguistic basis: “the consensus [has been] that although animals undoubtedly communicate with one another, only human beings convey their subjectivity in speech” (Lippit 2000, 14). The assumption that language is an exclusively human trait which, as Berger puts it, “allows men to reckon with each other as with themselves” (Berger 1977, 5) and exclude animals by virtue of this reckoning is one which Prendick, the novel's narrator and focalizer, clearly holds at the outset of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. This outlook begins to disintegrate, however, when very early in the plot his command of linguistic faculties fails to elicit a mutual understanding between three fellow humans. Despite repeated appeals and protestations, Prendick finds himself unable to convince either the captain of the ship he is on, or Moreau's assistant Montgomery, to grant him refuge, and what follows is an unambiguous defeat of Berger's ideal for interaction between men: “At last, I must confess, my voice suddenly broke in the middle of a vigorous threat. I felt a gust of hysterical petulance, and went aft, and stared dismally at nothing” (Wells 1896, 51). Prendick's capitulation here suggests a breakdown of the linguistic sign; his signifiers, unable to anchor to their intended signifieds, become un-



tethered and are cast adrift. In this post-linguistic state, then, the sign ceases to confirm the language-based ontological unifier (for humans as a group) and separator (between humans and animals). This episode is the first of many to reveal the untenability of such a criterion.

As the novel progresses, much more decisive nails land in the coffin of the "language is human" outlook with the revelation that Moreau's animal-human hybrids, including those which the Doctor considers to have failed to reach the ideal of humanity, have no trouble speaking. "These things—these animals *talk!*" exclaims Prendick (Wells 1896, 96, italics in original), shocked as his assumptions unravel in the presence of the irrefutable counterexamples before his very eyes. But more striking, I would argue, are the significantly deeper ambiguities in the relation of language to humanity which develop when Moreau's creations actively *refuse* ontological construction along linguistic lines:

"Who are you?" said I. [The Leopard-Man] tried to meet my gaze.

"No!" he said suddenly, and, turning, went bounding away from me through the undergrowth. Then he turned and stared at me again. (Wells 1896, 70)

As E. Snyder astutely points out, here the Leopard-Man denies Prendick's bid to ascribe personhood to him,<sup>1</sup> and the fact that he does this through language is crucial: "In his use of human speech to reject a conception of his humanity, he actively resists Prendick's attempt to place him within a hierarchy of creation, and carves out a marginal space of his own" (Snyder 2013, 221). This gesture is significant on two fronts. Firstly, the rejection inherent in its enactment obliquely hints at what Lippit describes as "the possibility that another communicative medium [separate from language] may in fact be operative in nature's animal provocations" (Lippit 2000, 22), a medium perhaps entirely inaccessible to humans. Secondly, it makes clear that Prendick's attempt at establishing a discourse dependent upon the linguistic superiority of the human fails to meet the ideal that Joan Gordon's amborg suggests for exchange between species: "figurative interspecies epigenesis, a feedback relationship resulting not in the speech of the subaltern, but in speaking between 'alterns'" (Gordon 2010, 456). Throughout his novel, Wells reveals that the thoroughly ambiguous nature of language precludes it from serving effectively and unproblematically as a criterion of ontological demarcation. As the hybrids chant their litany at Prendick, the mantra of "Are we not Men?" (Wells 1896, 83) ceases to be a rhetorical question. Those four words come to encode the entirety of the novel's ontological anxieties, anxieties situated precisely at the ethereal human-animal interface.

In spite of these observations, I wish to suggest that some of Berger's claims about the human-animal dynamic are, in fact, upheld and expounded upon in *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, such as his contention that proximity between the two builds a con-

---

<sup>1</sup> Prendick, note, uses the humanizing "who" rather than the objectifying "what."

ception of animals as “both like and unlike” humans (Berger 1977, 4). To do this, I need to borrow a theoretical framework from a somewhat unlikely field—postcolonial studies. In fact, this jump from animal studies to the postcolonial is not quite as drastic as first it appears, as I have already hinted by quoting Conrad in the epigraph to this essay. It is by no accident that Weil, when discussing the problem of representing animal subjectivity in her overview of the animal turn, thinks of Gayatri Spivak’s influential essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Weil 2010, 3): in terms of power dynamics—in discourse and in its enactment—both animals and colonized peoples are regularly made to occupy subaltern positions. This is doubly true of Moreau’s hybrids, whose subjugation is a product not only of their animality, but also their existence in an interstitial space not easily inscribed in the hierarchies of power.

Prendick, as a representative of humanity, shares an uneasy relationship with these hybrids which can be fruitfully examined through the lens of *mimicry*, a concept developed by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha to characterize the instability inherent in discursive conceptions of colonized peoples. In othering the colonized, Bhabha argues, colonial discourse necessarily inscribes a perceptual volatility in relation to the colonized others it generates. As a consequence, representatives of the colonizing force find that perceptions of those others at the point of their contact, be it physical or literary, rapidly oscillate between recognition through acknowledgement of likeness and repulsion through dread of difference, encoded in what Bhabha calls “the twin figures of narcissism and paranoia that repeat furiously, uncontrollably” (Bhabha 1984, 132). In *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, precisely this dialectical relationship prevails over Prendick’s interactions with the hybrids from the moment he lays eyes on them:

The thing came to me as a stark inhumanity. That black figure, with its eyes of fire, struck down through all my adult thoughts and feelings, and for a moment the forgotten horrors of childhood came back to my mind. Then the effect passed as it had come. An uncouth black figure of a man, a figure of no particular import, hung over the taffrail ... (Wells 1896, 49)

As Bhabha puts it, this is an “ambivalence” which “repeatedly turns from *mimicry*—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite” (Bhabha 1984, 132, italics in original). Prendick’s othering of the hybrids, in other words, is not and cannot ever be complete, forcing a dialectic which threatens assumptions of the ontological exclusivity (and, by extension, the purported superiority) of the human. Incidentally, the exploitation of animals in the pursuit of scientific research, both within the confines of the novel and beyond, is underpinned by a similarly paradoxical circumstance, as such exploitation “requires that we hold the contradictory beliefs that animals are sufficiently *like* humans to provide useful biological matter, yet sufficiently *unlike* us that their slaughter in these pursuits is not an ethical issue” (Vint 2008, 178, italics in original). In highlighting Prendick’s response to the hybrids and situating it within the broader framework of scientific experimentation, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* develops and clarifies the precise nature



of a dynamic that Berger would later characterize as recognition of the simultaneous likeness and unlikeness of animals (Berger 1977, 4), a recognition which, on Berger's view, ostensibly underpins human-animal interactions.

Having been published at the turn of the 20th century, Wells's novel is, of course, far removed from the times of antiquity Berger has in mind when describing a past in which “animals constituted the first circle of what surrounded man” (Berger 1977, 3). As I have argued, however, the animal-human interplay is foregrounded in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* as an intertwined network of ontological ambiguities that can only be addressed through a series of sustained interactions. In Berger's model of the present, such interactions are foreclosed in principle. It is with his conception of the past, then, as a time of proximity and mutual reckoning between humans and animals, that *The Island of Doctor Moreau* more closely aligns.

## II. Animals, empathy, and commodification

If Berger's model of the past finds a degree of confirmation in the world of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, then *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, set in a distant, post-apocalyptic future, may well come to exemplify the second half of the dichotomy that “Why Look at Animals?” describes—an increasingly alienating present in which animals have been banished from human consciousness. In fact, unsettlingly, the novel presents a world whose conditions can conceivably be seen as arising directly out of the historical trajectory Berger tracked in his essay. Berger's claim, of course, was that mass-industrialization followed by the advent of corporate capitalism brought about the marginalization of animals; Dick presents a further horrifying step in this process, a barren world bearing the scars of civilization, torn apart by capitalist greed, relentless violence, and environmental pollution, devoid almost entirely of animal life due to the mass-extinction of species. To an extreme and literal degree, interactions between animals and humans are driven by the former's almost total absence, backgrounded by a disturbing landscape whose ethos remains recognizable in Lippit's description of modernity as “defined by the disappearance of wildlife from humanity's habitat and by the reappearance of the same in humanity's reflections on itself” (Lippit 2000, 2–3). In such a world, as Lippit puts it, the status of the animal “has shifted ... from a metaphysic to a phantasm; from a body to an image; from a living voice to a technical echo”, though this “disappearance does not release [animals] from their bond with human beings in a human world. Even as absent beings, animals accompany the crisis in human ontology” (Lippit 2000, 22, 20).

The matter of human-animal relations in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, however, is complicated somewhat by the existence of two kinds of machines: the eponymous androids whose presence drives the plot, and the mechanized substitutes for animals that are kept as inferior pets by the inhabitants of Dick's world. The existence of androids intervenes upon the power dynamics typically underpinning hu-

man-animal interactions: as Vint observes, the novel “[i]n many ways ... simply puts androids in the place historically occupied by animals” (Vint 2007, 113)—a place, that is, of ontological inferiority. There is also a significant correspondence to be noted between Moreau’s hybrids and Dick’s androids: both are liminal groups, seen as almost, but not quite, human. The android, that is, problematizes its interface with the organic being in a manner entirely reflecting the ambiguities of human-animal interactions; Gordon’s amborg, coined to capture the dissipation of the latter boundary, was formulated as a parallel to Haraway’s cyborg, being the embodiment of the former’s dissolution (Gordon 2008, 190). But equally, though humanity’s relations to the machine and to the animal have much in common, we should not forget that androids exist alongside, rather than in lieu of, animals in the text. Nor are animals replaced entirely by their mechanical counterparts; though the artificial versions are sufficiently advanced to be almost indistinguishable in appearance from the real thing, Dick’s characters take great pains to stress their inferiority in comparison to organic animals. Considering the nature of specifically human-animal interactions in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, as well as the precise influence the mechanical versions have on these interactions, reveals insights into the novel’s outlook on both groups.

The most prevalent roles that animals play in the world of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* are invariably associated with sustaining that world’s criterion of demarcation between human and non-human—not language, in this case, but rather the capacity for empathy. To start with a relatively utilitarian function, animals serve as the basis of most content in the Voigt-Kampff test, by which bounty hunters like Deckard, the novel’s protagonist, purport to distinguish androids from true humans. The principle is relatively straightforward: test subjects are made to imagine a variety of distressing scenarios and their physiological responses are measured. The test operates on the assumption that only a human will be able to truly empathize with the entity in each scenario and experience quantifiable distress. Overwhelmingly, these scenarios, aimed at evoking horror or disgust, involve the killing of animals and their consumption as food or commercial goods—“a calf-skin wallet,” a “bearskin rug,” boiling lobster at a restaurant, “guests enjoying raw oysters” (Dick 1968, 42–45). Of particular note here is Donald Palumbo’s axiomatic observation that these “stimuli ... would not, in all but one or two instances, elicit any such reaction from ordinary people in the real world” (Palumbo 2013, 1277). Why, then, are they so potent in Dick’s futuristic society?

A tempting explanation is that this is a collective compensatory mechanism: in a world where most animals have been made extinct (Dick 1968, 38), humans have increased their sensitivity to the sufferings of animals in an attempt to forestall their complete disappearance, from the mind as well as the barren Earth. I would argue, however, that Berger offers an alternative and more compelling assessment. “One could suppose that such innovations,” he says of zoos, animal toys, and other modern emphases on animals, “were compensatory. Yet in reality the innovations themselves belonged to the same remorseless movement as was dispersing the animals” (Berger

1977, 26). In making animals the objects of their putative empathy, that is, the inhabitants of Dick's world actually conspire to marginalize them ever further.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the keeping of animals in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, a socially-mandated activity: "You know how people are about not taking care of an animal; they consider it immoral and anti-empathic," Deckard's neighbor Bill reminds him (Dick 1968, 15). Providing for an animal's needs is intended as an exercise in empathy and thus serves as a kind of perpetual ontological self-construction but underlying this is a rather sinister dynamic. Animals, after all, are not seen as capable of returning empathy; so, forcibly confining them and caring for their needs becomes little more than an asymmetrical power play on the part of the human. This asymmetry has a profound consequence: where animals and humans might once have scrutinized one another "across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension" (Berger 1977, 5), now there is no abyss to even speak of, for such mutual exchange of gazes demands an equal (or at least, independent) footing that has been totally eradicated.

Though animals feature prominently in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, their capacity as subjects is almost never mentioned. Only a handful of times, such as when Mrs. Pilsen says that her kitten used to "stand and stare at us as if asking a question" (Dick 1968, 68) or when Deckard's goat is described as "regard[ing] him with bright-eyed perspicacity" (Dick 1968, 141) does the novel offer any glimmer of hope of returning to a past when animals could be regarded as enigmatic vessels of inaccessible knowledge. But these sparks are quickly extinguished. The overwhelming majority of dialogue surrounding animals in the novel concerns either the dynamics of the human objectifying gaze, or else questions of commercial value—one might recall the diligence with which Deckard consults his *Sidney's Catalogue* any time an animal is mentioned. As has been repeatedly argued, animals are entirely transformed into commodities in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (Vint 2007, 116; Vinci 2014, 100) and for the average inhabitant of Dick's world, altering the nature of this relationship is extremely difficult, if not impossible.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, then, empathy as such does not underlie human-animal interactions in the novel, and for precisely this reason, Berger's characterization of pets in the modern world is not quite reflected in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. "The pet *completes* [the owner], offering responses to aspects of his character which would otherwise remain unconfirmed," Berger argues (Berger 1977, 14, italics in original), but as I have shown, despite what the novel's characters may believe, the animals in their care do not and cannot confirm their owner's capacity for empathy. Whether this threatens the former's ontological status as humans remains an open question.

Thus far, I have ignored possibly the most obvious counter-example to the claims I have just made: John Isidore, one of the few characters in the novel whose interaction with animals does not depend on their commodification, and the only one who can rea-

---

<sup>2</sup> An exception, of course, is John Isidore, whose relationship with animals is certainly not centered on the commercial. I will consider Isidore specifically later in this essay.

sonably be said to achieve the state of empathy that Dick's society so fervently extolls. The fact that Isidore's relation to animals is fundamentally different from that of the other characters is underscored throughout the text, but nowhere is it more apparent than near the end of the novel, where Pris and the other androids sit with Isidore in his apartment. In one of the novel's more disturbing scenes, Isidore watches, helpless, as Pris tortures a spider before him by cutting off its legs:

"I was right," Irmgard said. "Didn't I say it could walk with only four legs?" She peered up expectantly at Isidore. "What's the matter?" Touching his arm she said, "You didn't lose anything; we'll pay you what that—what's it called?—that Sidney's catalogue says. Don't look so grim..." She prodded him anxiously.

...

Pris, with the scissors, cut yet another leg from the spider. All at once John Isidore pushed her away and lifted up the mutilated creature. He carried it to the sink and there he drowned it. In him, his mind, his hopes, drowned, too. As swiftly as the spider. (Dick 1968, 174–75)

The scene is striking not least of all because of the gulf of mutual incomprehensibility separating Isidore from the others: the androids, in construing the value of the spider purely in commercial terms, seem unable to fathom why Isidore cannot do the same. Isidore, in turn, is horrified into utter silence by the androids' wanton cruelty to the creature. His inability to interact with animals in the same ways and on the same assumptions as the other inhabitants of Dick's world make Isidore, as Palumbo argues, "the most sympathetic and apparently 'human' ... character in the novel" (Palumbo 2013, 1279). If there is a figure who best exemplifies the ideals and possibilities afforded by Gordon's amborg, whose relation to the animal world marks out a tentative track "to revalidate the embodied physical human being" (Gordon 2008, 190), it is Isidore. He, perhaps, signifies the faint possibility of a return to something approximating Berger's description of the distant past: a state where the human relation to animals is driven by mutual acknowledgement of equality and respect, rather than a protracted campaign to hold dominion over animals. It seems to me, however, that Isidore's status in the society he inhabits forecloses this possibility fairly unambiguously. Suffering from radiation-induced intellectual deficiency, Isidore has been designated a "chicken-head" (Dick 1968, 19) and consequently, like the animals, finds himself marginalized in society—which, incidentally, also provides a possible explanation of his readiness to empathize with them. On this basis, coupled with the fact that he represents an outlier in the general trend of human-animal interactions in the novel, Isidore is unlikely to exert any social influence on the overarching nature of these interactions.

To conclude, I wish to briefly dwell on the status of mechanical animals in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and consider the ways in which their existence influences the relationship between animals and humans. The mechanized creatures are, of course, the animal equivalent of androids, indistinguishable from organic animals in every way barring a minuscule control panel hidden on the body. Their creation and sale as surrogate

pets, replacements for the countless species driven from the Earth and the consciousness by extinction, finds a striking referent in Berger's characterization of increasingly realistic animal imagery—his specific example is children's toys—as a key stage in the marginalization of animals, the substitution of wild encounters by domestic replicas:

In the preceding centuries, the proportion of toys which were animal, was small. And these did not pretend to realism, but were symbolic. The difference was that between a traditional hobby horse and a rocking horse: the first was merely a stick with a rudimentary head which children rode like a broom handle: the second was an elaborate “reproduction” of a horse, painted realistically, with real reins of leather, a real mane of hair, and designed movement to resemble that of a horse galloping. The rocking horse was a 19th century invention.

This new demand for verisimilitude in animal toys led to different methods of manufacture. The first stuffed animals were produced, and the most expensive were covered with real animal skin ... (Berger 1977, 22–23)

It does not take a particularly large imaginative leap to proceed from the phenomenon Berger is describing here to the manufacture of near-perfect animal surrogates to stand in for the inaccessible real thing. Following this trajectory, however, necessitates accepting another of Berger's implicit distinctions: that between living organism and artificial machine. In his case, where the contrast is between a real horse and a wooden toy, the separation can be made intuitively and without controversy, but in the context of mechanical animals so lifelike that they are regularly mistaken for their organic counterparts, the precise placement of the dividing line—and, indeed, its very existence—proves to be a serious ontological problem.

Much in the same way as the inhabitants of Dick's world assume a clear and natural distinction between human and android, the separation of mechanical animal and real animal into two ontological classes constitutes an unthinking presumption for most of the characters in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. In fact, Isidore's expression of empathy for the mechanized creatures is taken to be evidence of his failing mental acuity: “‘I don't think Isidore can tell the difference,’ Milt said mildly. ‘To him they're all alive, false animals included. He probably tried to save [the mechanical cat]’” (Dick 1968, 66). But in establishing him as the novel's only sympathetic character, Dick casts doubt on this very distinction, and by the end of the novel some of Isidore's thinking even rubs off on Deckard, who acknowledges that “The electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are” (Dick 1968, 199). Perhaps, then, much like the way in which the advent of animal studies has hinged on acknowledging the absence of a clear ontological boundary between human and animal, reconsidering the presumption of an equivalent boundary between the living and the machine can be a fruitful endeavor. This, in fact, was the famous central claim of Donna Haraway's “A Cyborg Manifesto,” that “we are all chimeras, theorized, and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (Haraway 1985, 118).

“Why Look at Animals?” has thus proven to be a useful touchstone for the animal-human dynamic in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. In a very broad sense, these novels align with Berger’s dichotomy of past and present respectively: where *The Island of Doctor Moreau* foregrounds interactions between animal and human in its interrogation of the nature of each, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* demonstrates such interactions to be in a state of near-total collapse. On the finer level, however, Berger’s linguistic criterion of human demarcation, his conception of animals as like and unlike humans, and his characterization of the status of pets, amongst other particular claims, are refuted, clarified, and developed in considering his essay alongside the imaginings of science fiction.

In examining the interplay between science fiction and the social consequences of human enterprise, Nancy Kress has argued for a view of the genre as an intensely potent adjunct to the practical workings of science, a way of anchoring scientific activity to the imaginative consciousness. “In the world’s laboratories,” she writes, “science rehearses advances in theory and application. In fiction, SF writers rehearse the human implications of those advances” (Kress 2007, 207). As the increasing traction gained by animal studies in recent years has repeatedly reminded us, however, these implications are never just human, and the changing ways in which we structure our lives and societies inscribe novel interrelations between humanity, nature, animals, and life itself. In an era of unprecedented ecological disruption, environmental change, and mass-extinction of species in the wake of human activity, the nexus between science fiction and animal studies is more vital and more productive than ever. Careful consideration of the interactions between humans and animals as depicted in literary science fiction has the potential to foster new understandings of humanity’s place amongst the vast network of life on a rapidly changing Earth, and of the shifting roles and obligations that occupying such a place entails.

## References

- Auden, Wynstan Hugh. 1937. “Spain.” In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 8th ed., vol. 2, 2424–27. Norton.
- Berger, John. 1977. “Why Look at Animals?.” In *About Looking*, 3–28. Random House.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1984. “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” *October* 28: 125–33. doi:10.2307/778467. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/778467>)
- Burt, Jonathan. 2005. “John Berger’s “Why Look at Animals?”: A Close Reading.” *Worldviews* 9 (2): 203–218. doi:10.1163/1568535054615321. ([https://brill.com/view/journals/wo/9/2/article-p203\\_4.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/wo/9/2/article-p203_4.xml))
- Conrad, Joseph. (1899) 2007. *Heart of Darkness*. Penguin Books.
- Dick, Philip Kindred. (1968) 2017. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*. Random House.



- Gordon, Joan. 2008. "Gazing across the Abyss: The Amborg Gaze in Sheri S. Tepper's 'Six Moon Dance.'" *Science Fiction Studies*, 35 (2): 189–206. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25475138>)
- Gordon, Joan. 2016. "Responsibilities of Kinship: The Amborg Gaze in Speculative Fictions about Apes." *Extrapolation*, 57 (3): 251–64. (<https://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/10.3828/extr.2016.14>)
- Gordon, Joan. 2010. "Talking (for, with) Dogs: Science Fiction Breaks a Species Barrier." *Science Fiction Studies*, 37 (3): 456–65. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25746446>)
- Haraway, Donna. 1985. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century." In *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments*, ed. Joel Weiss, Jason Nolan, Jeremy Hunsinger, and Peter Trifonas, 119–58. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Kress, Nancy. 2007. "Ethics, Science, and Science Fiction." In *SciFi in the Mind's Eye: Reading Science through Science Fiction*, ed. Margret Grebowicz, 201–09. Open Court.
- Lippit, Akira Mizuta. 2000. *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Palumbo, Donald. 2013. "Faith and Bad Faith in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 46 (6): 1276–88. (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jpcu.12088>)
- Snyder, E. E. 2013. "Moreau and the Monstrous: Evolution, Religion, and the Beast on the Island." *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 2 (2): 213–39. (<https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/52099>)
- Vinci, Tony M. 2014. "Posthuman Wounds: Trauma, Non-Anthropocentric Vulnerability, and the Human/Android/Animal Dynamic in Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 47 (2): 91–112. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44066191>)
- Vint, Sherryl. 2008. "The Animals in That Country": Science Fiction and Animal Studies." *Science Fiction Studies*. 35 (2): 177–88. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25475137>)
- Vint, Sherryl. 2007. "Speciesism and Species Being in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 40 (1): 111–26. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44030161>)
- Waal, Frans de. 2001. *The Ape and the Sushi Master: Cultural Reflections by a Primatologist*. Basic Books.
- Weil, Kari. 2010. "A Report on the Animal Turn." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21 (2): 1–23. doi:10.1215/10407391-2010-001. (<https://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article/21/2/1-23/60618>)
- Wells, Herbert George. (1896) 2005. *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. Penguin Books.