Empowering Human Capacity for Change: The Animal from Object to Subject

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Abstract

The perception of animals in society remains highly biased: their place differs according to their "usefulness" or their aesthetic appearance. Above all, in Western society, the animal has been regarded as an object for centuries. With the recent development of science, including biology and ethology, social justice movements, the concept of anti-speciesism, and theories based on extensionist ethics, such as animal rights theory and multi-species justice, animals are beginning to emerge from the shadows of the anthropocentric world, especially through the medium of the arts. This article will consider two works of contemporary art that focus on human-animal relations, namely Ever Dundas's novel *Goblin* (2017) and the photojournalism project by the non-governmental organization *We Animals* (founded in 2019). These works depict the animal playing its role as an animal, not as an object or symbol, while at the same time questioning our relationship with non-human animals and highlighting the shift in our perception of the animal. The aim of the article is to analyze how art can bring animals out of invisibility and contribute to changing the place of the animal from object to subject.

Keywords: anti-speciesism, change, human-animal relations, resistance, subject

Introduction

Animals are the main victims of history, and the treatment of domesticated animals in industrial farms is perhaps the worst crime in history.

-Yuval Noah Harari, Introduction, Animal Liberation Now by Peter Singer

Based on Jung's idea that "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious" (Jung, 1967), what analysis of human-animal

relations should we make? Despite the fact that the idea that animals should be respected and treated well is as old as humanity itself, it may be safely suggested that for centuries Western thought has remained influenced by the Judeo-Christian vision of Man as master of the world, created in the image of God, to whom all other creatures are doomed to serve. Animals were seen as beings of a different nature, incapable of reasoning or experiencing pain. In this way, Western man drew a dividing line between "us" and "them." Descartes advanced his mechanistic worldview through the concept of the animal-machine, which stripped animals of consciousness and moral consideration by characterizing them as unthinking, unfeeling automatons. In this way, he distinguished humans from other animals and contributed to the perpetuation of dualism: human-animal and mind-body. His theory influenced the development of science by stimulating questionable practices such as vivisection. These two visions have legitimized the exploitation of animals for human purposes. Despite its proven falsity, the vision of animals as machines persists in industrial farming, despite the spread of the 'happy meat' discourse.'

The reification of the animal includes the fact that man has every right over animals: the right to life, to death, to exploit, to torture (in the name of science or entertainment), and to destroy their habitats if man finds it useful. Animals are instrumentalized: a consumer product, a hunting target, an experimental material, even a disposable gadget, but never a sentient being as they are.

Debates over the animal condition have been revived by scientific progress, particularly with the development of biology and ethology. Contrary to various thinkers and religious figures, Charles Darwin and his biologist successors have decided that there is only a difference in degree, not in kind. Biologically, man is also an animal, more specifically, a primate. The current era has also seen the development of the social sciences studying human—animal relations, leading to the emergence of animal rights theories based on extension ethics (Tom Regan, Gary Francione), multi-species justice (Danielle Celermajer, Sophie Chao), Anthropocene discourse, (Eugene Stoermer, Tobias Menely), more-than-human concept (David Abram), anthrozoology (Kenneth Shapiro) and social justice movements that include animal liberation (Peter Singer). Animal studies is now a separate field that studies animals in an interdisciplinary manner. One example of this is Université Toulouse Capitole, which launched a program in animal law in 2025 in collaboration with the L'Ecole nationale vétérinaire de Toulouse [Toulouse National Veterinary School] (Ravier, 2025).

¹ Happy meat refers to the belief that ethics, animal welfare, and meat consumption can be reconciled. This assumes that it is possible to raise and kill animals in a 'humane' manner. Thus, ethics is reduced to technical details, with the moral question of exploitation never being raised.

This scientific and social progress has also been reflected in the law, with changes in the legal status of animals. For example, the EU recognises the status of animals as sentient beings, and legislation, especially in Western countries, includes laws to protect animals from suffering.

Gilles Lipovetsky points out that cruelty to animals used to be more ferocious and flagrant. In the 19th century, brutality in slaughterhouses was commonplace; animal fights were one of the workers favourite spectacles, turkeys were made to dance on white-hot plates, pigeons locked in boxes were pelted with stones so that their heads emerged and served as targets. Nowadays, animal abuse is widely condemned, and there are protests on all sides against hunting and bullfighting, against the conditions in which animals are reared, and against certain forms of scientific experimentation² (Lipovetsky, 1983, p. 290).

In the face of change, art does not remain indifferent. Artists are influenced by their times; they do not create in isolation from the society around them, and they can share in the prejudices of their time. As demonstrated by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, art has the potential to change the world. Today, on the one hand, we see those who kill animals in the name of 'art' (like Hermann Nitsch or Damien Hirst) and on the other, those who use their art to respond critically to the violence inflicted. As Victor Hugo claimed, art for art's sake may be beautiful, but art for progress's sake is even more beautiful³ (Hugo, 1864, p. 423). In this paper, two works have been selected as we believe they represent a form of activism and aim to progress. They bring critical thinking to bear on established relationships with animals: Ever Dundas's *Goblin* and We Media's photography project.

Goblin is Ever Dundas' debut novel, published in 2017. The story takes place between the present and the different memories of the past. The heroine, Goblin, is an elderly woman who must confront her past: an outcast who grew up in London during World War II. Traumatized by the events, she found refuge with her family, which consisted of the imaginary world and of the stray animals she rescued from the streets.

² "Au XIXe siècle, la brutalité dans les abattoirs était chose courante; les combats d'animaux faisaient partie des spectacles favoris des ouvriers, 'on faisait danser les dindes sur des plaques chauffées à blanc, on visait à coups de cailloux des pigeons enfermés dans des boîtes de telle sorte que leur tête émerge et serve de cible' [le texte cité est de T. Zeldin]. Un monde nous sépare de cette sensibilité, de nos jours les sévices envers les bêtes sont massivement réprouvés, de toutes parts des protestations s'élèvent contre la chasse et les corridas, contre les conditions d'élevage, contre certaines formes d'expérimentation scientifique."

³ "l'art pour l'art peut être beau, mais l'art pour le progrès est plus beau encore"

We Media is a non-governmental organization set up in 2006 as a similarly titled photography project that tells the stories of animals in order to inspire compassion, conversation, and change (We Media, n.d.). The photos are mainly used by various non-governmental organizations fighting for better treatment of animals, activists, and the media.

These works present animals as subjects in their own right rather than as objects or symbols, while questioning our relationship with non-human animals and highlighting shifts in how we perceive both humans and animals. The aim of the article is to analyze how art can bring animals out of invisibility and contribute to changing their place from object to subject. To address this, we will first analyze how the animal emerges in works that challenge its invisibility and then examine the appropriation and exercise of biopower over animals.

The Emerging Animal: Defying Invisibility

It should be noted that the death toll of non-human animals during warfare is rarely discussed. Beyond the use of animals by the army for military purposes, this sad account includes others: military training or all kinds of research during the development of new types of weaponry (The Military's War on Animals, n.d.) and casualties among wildlife disoriented or trapped in zoos, pets abandoned, eaten or euthanized, domestic animals killed as a result of bombing or lack of care.4 Their stories are not told unless the animals do what humans find 'useful,' recognizing them as moral agents. The UK charity "War Dogs Remembered," founded in 2015, serves as an example. Stories of war hero dogs are told in order to "pay tribute to and raise awareness of all the dogs that have served in the military" (War Dogs Remembered, n.d.). Nevertheless, even if the recognition of animals that serve in the military is an important step, this approach remains anthropocentric. One could even say that it is anthropomorphic, since the animals did not have the choice to take part in the war or perform what is later considered to be 'exploits.' They were trained, most often using cruel methods, through deprivation of food or pain, for example. International humanitarian law aims solely to protect humans, with animals having the status of objects under their provisions. However, it is worth noting that it aims to 'humanize' what is profoundly inhuman: war.

As author Ever Dundas herself explained, one of the aims in developing her novel *Goblin* was "to challenge the romantic consensus around World War II and, as Ballard said of *Crash*, to 'rub the human face in its own vomit and force it to look in the mirror'" (Ross, 2017).

⁴ Kraljević, Petar, ed. "Animal victims of Croatian homeland war 1990–1992." or Ukraine War Environmental Consequences Work Group works may propose a more detailed view on animal victims.

While the human tragedy of the Second World War is well known and investigated, the other tragedy—that of non-human animals—is often forgotten by the general public. One of the main themes of the novel, the 1939 pet massacre, defies this collective oblivion. In September 1939, approximately 400,000 (mainly cats and dogs) were euthanized by their owners under the pretext of sparing them the suffering of war during the food shortages, making them one of the first victims of the war in the United Kingdom (Kean, 2017, p. 47). We read in *Goblin*:

'this,' he gestured to the mound of dead bodies. 'It's been happening all over.'

'Who's doing it?'

'We are. Freddy from next door took his pup to the vet yesterday and the pup just followed him all excited like it was an adventure. Freddy said it was for her own good. That she'd be afraid of the bombs, that she'd go crazy. Freddy said they'd have enough to worry about without this pup causing them trouble and being another mouth to feed.' (Dundas, 2017, p. 62)

Goblin, as a child, cannot believe such a tragedy is possible: for her, her dog Devil is her family, and it is unthinkable to get rid of him under the pretext of war. For her, it is easier to believe that the Nazis killed animals than to accept the reality: the moral collapse of Londoners, including her own neighbors. The scenes of the use of child labor and the abuse of children sent back to the countryside by their parents to minimize their risk underline the ethical crisis that the nation at war was going through. The novel reveals the dark side of war through the eyes of children and animals, who are far removed from the talk of glory, heroism, and the romantic mythology of war. In the face of this grim reality, Goblin finds comfort in the company of the animals she cares for: the strays she collects from the streets, the pig she names Corporal Pig, in whose company she returns from Cornwall to London, the chicks, and even a crow.

Corporal Pig is undoubtedly one of the book's most charismatic heroes: Dundas portrays the pig accurately without prejudice in describing the friendship between this intelligent animal and the girl. She also remains realistic in her description of other people's views of the pig: despite the fact that its behavior is not too different from that of a dog, Corporal Pig cannot overcome cultural prejudices; its role is to be eaten, not to fulfill the role of a friend, which is reserved rather for dogs. Therefore, despite Goblin's best efforts to protect him from the neighbors, Corporal Pig ends up being stolen and eaten.

This approach, which portrays animals as subjects who become the heroes of the book, differs from the more traditional approach, where animals play the role of object or symbol,

as seen in George Orwell's political satire, *Animal Farm*. Although Orwell criticizes the oppression of human beings, he does not question the exploitation of non-human animals.⁵ The representation of animals on the farm is stereotypical: the horse as the image of a worker, the sheep as the image of a docile citizen, and other animals embodying familiar societal roles. The non-human characters serve a dual purpose: they make the story universal while creating the necessary distance between readers and protagonists to deliver the message. Another example might be the genre of Vanitas in painting. In the works of Frans Snyders, the depiction of dead animals does not question the violence inflicted and the killing of animals, but serves to symbolize the vanity and futility of human desires. It might be suggested here that a similar depiction of dead human beings would have questioned whether war itself is so inevitable and necessary to justify suffering, as in Vasily Vereshchagin's painting Apotheosis of War, which shows a mountain of human skulls.

In turn, in the face of the long-standing tradition of photographing animals considered 'cute' or 'beautiful' by the general public, such as wild animals for conservation photography, the We Animals photography project has emerged, following the tradition of animal photojournalism. It has been said that a "picture is worth a thousand words," so this genre exposes animals that are made invisible by agro-industry and its hidden violence, aligning it with war photojournalism. In some countries, this activity is criminalised—the United States, for example, has introduced so-called ag-gag laws, making art a means of resistance not just for the animal cause but also for freedom of expression and the right to free access to information.

These photos differ from the pastoral images we are accustomed to, which typically depict happy animals roaming freely in the countryside with all their needs met. We Media gives the other perspective: the tight cages, the insalubrity, the despair, the dead bodies of those who do not survive until they are killed.

However, they once again become the subject of a forgotten story, despite the fact that we maintain many relationships with these animals that we do not even realize we have; we eat their bodies, wear their fur and skins, and our cosmetics are tested on them (We Animals, n.d). In a project entitled 'Fear, Determination, and Relief: My Night on a Fur Farm,' Jo-Anne McArthur of We Animals presents the living conditions on a fur farm in Poland

⁵ Despite the fact that Orwell condemned cruelty to non-humans, his view of animals remained anthropocentric and humanistic: he described vegetarianism as misanthropic and accused animal rights activists of romanticizing animals at the expense of human beings. Thus, it can be said that his notion of cruelty was biased and relativized. As a humanist author, he focused his efforts on humans and their rights in his major works.

and the work of investigators who document the living conditions of the animals trapped there. In his cage with bars, the fox is a prisoner through no fault of his own. Visibly ill and desperate, he has never had any other experience (Figure 1). His fate is even more tragic because the alibi of fur use is more than questionable in the 21st century, when alternatives are accessible and widespread.

Figure 1Fox in a fur farm, Poland



Source: Jo-Anne McArthur / We Animals

This work by We Animals is part of a broader campaign bringing together several non-governmental organizations with the common goal of achieving a ban on fur production in Poland. Notably, the images from We Animals used by Canadian NGOs contributed to the ban on mink farms in British Columbia (Mink farming phase-out planned in B.C., 2021) and the conviction of a fox and mink fur farmer found guilty of animal cruelty (Bruemmer, 2017).

⁶ In the meat industry, the animal becomes an absent referent; in the collective imagination, the final product is disconnected from the fact that it once was an animal—a living being—in order to "keep something from being seen as having been someone" (Adams, 2010, p. 13).

We might suggest that animals in the animal-exploiting industry are what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life," conceptualized in his 1998 work *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* Sovereign power, in other words, the master himself, determines the value of their lives and exercises the violence and power of life and death. Jacques Derrida deplores this

a strange and equivocal economy, a strange and equivocal ecology that consists in expropriating the other, appropriating the other by depriving the other of what is supposed to be proper to him or her, the other's proper place, proper habitat, oikos. (Derrida, 2009, p. 299)

In the following section, we will examine the appropriation of animals and the exercise of biopower over them.

Appropriation and the Exercise of Biopower

Goblin, rejected by her mother, feels closer to the animals who are the 'Others.' The relationship between the heroine and the animals is imbued with compassion and unconditional respect throughout the book. Her compassion extends beyond animals considered 'cute.' As a child, she would not let another boy torture spiders by ripping off their legs; as an adult, she looks after the animals in the circus where she works as a clown "despite piss and shit" (Dundas, 2017, p. 219). As Goblin herself says: "I felt safe" (Dundas, 2017, p. 219). She published a critical observation on the use of animals in the circus, which earned her the hostility of her adoptive parents and her circus colleagues, who saw it as betrayal and a threat to their jobs. She feels that wild animals do not belong in the circus; even if they are treated relatively well, the idea that they spend most of their time locked up in cages and can be euthanized if they behave inappropriately—in other words, if they attack someone and disobey-revolts her. Goblin perceives the animal as it is. She rejects the idea that, even legally, the animal is property. At one point, this earned her six months in prison following her attempt to save a dog from the crowd, as she was accused of "stealing and damaging property" (Dundas, 2017, p. 228). In this scene, the paradox of the situation in which the animal is trapped is clearly expressed: it is not an object, but it has the status of an object.

Both works raise not only the problem of the reification of the animal and its reduction to the status of property, but also the problem of domestication and our relationship with pets: the pet massacre and the issue of stray animals highlighted in the book as well as some of the photos on We Animals, for example, the photos of the mass burials of stray dogs massacred in Turkey following R. Erdogan's decree to reduce the stray dog



population (Figure 2), The extermination of stray animals from city streets goes hand in hand with this illusion of human civilisation defined by order and cleanliness, where 'dirty' animals have no place, while in reality our own waste and pollution are killing us.

Figure 2Exhumation of the body of a dog in a mass grave for investigative purposes



Source: Tunahan Turhan / We Animals

Domestication directly relates to the concept of animal ownership. Some thinkers, such as anthropologist Richard Tapper, draw a parallel between slaves and domesticated animals, whereas Tim Ingold argues that domestication should be seen as "a transition from trust to domination" (2002, p. 75). As Patric Llored notes, pets and domestic animals are no exception to the sovereign logic of appropriating their lives and managing their deaths in order to defend society⁷ from alleged risks. Any animal that leaves the private sphere of its sovereign master's home becomes a downgraded animal. Pets that become so-called strays jump from the noble category of pets into the category of vermin, against which repressive measures are authorised (Llored, 2012, p. 305).

⁷ "nos animaux domestiques et de compagnie n'échappent pas à cette logique souveraine qui consiste à s'approprier leur vie et à gérer leur mort dans le but de défendre la société"

This attitude is imbued with anthropocentrism: the animal is recognised as just when it fulfils the role assigned to it by human society; if it can no longer be useful, it becomes an outcast. The domestic environment is a place where biopower is exercised, and any living thing that does not submit to the various biopowers (mainly the State, law, and medicine) will be considered a threat by and to our societies⁸ (Llored, 2012, p. 306). Drawing on the Derridean idea that there is no distinction between care and violence, Llored demonstrates that care equals power over the animal. In effect, this power is exercised with a view to the most effective and efficient possible control and surveillance of man over beast. The political thesis behind this concept of zoopolitics is that the care provided actually helps to increase man's power over animals and, more specifically, state sovereignty over this non-human living creature ... Killing hunted stray cats thus contributes to the management and elimination of feline populations that are impure in biological, medical and social terms, and helps to consecrate the dominant model of domestication⁹ (Llored, 2012, p. 314).

According to Gary Francione's abolitionist approach, the so-called companion animals must cease to exist in the future as a species. While they are here, they must be treated well and sterilized to stop their proliferation. Pets are a form of property that most of us treat rather badly than well: even if protective laws exist in some countries, they only include the minimum that should be guaranteed for animals, and despite this, they can be euthanized if we wish or if a new owner is not found. They are entirely dependent on the will of the master-sovereign and have no intrinsic value but only the extrinsic value that is granted to them.

The Pet Massacre illustrates the fear of losing sovereignty under the pretext of providing care—a pretext that ultimately manifests as violence. Londoners, seeking to prepare for war, deemed it unwise to keep pets alive, thus reducing them to the status of useless or inconvenient property. With shifts in human lifestyles, cats and dogs lost their 'usefulness' in some eyes, whether as pest controllers or property protectors. This underscores that animals are considered 'good' and 'approved' only so long as they serve human purposes and remain within boundaries imposed by people. Even when they comply with

⁸ "tout vivant qui ne se soumettrait pas aux divers biopouvoirs (Etat, droit, médecine principalement) sera considéré comme une menace par et pour nos sociétés"

⁹ "[...] le soin comme pouvoir sur l'animal. En effet, ce pouvoir s'exerce en vue d'un contrôle et d'une surveillance la plus efficace et efficiente possible de l'homme sur la bête. La thèse politique engagée par ce concept de zoopolitique consiste à penser que les soins délivrés contribuent en réalité à augmenter le pouvoir de l'homme sur l'animal et plus précisément la souveraineté étatique sur ce vivant non humain ... Tuer les chats errants chassés contribue ainsi à la gestion et à l'élimination des populations félines impures à la fois biologiquement, médicalement et socialement, et contribue à la consécration du modèle dominant de domestication."

these limits, they remain inferior; their value is tied to their usefulness. There is a pervasive fear that they could become stray animals—potential threats from which people must be protected, especially to safeguard scarce food supplies—which causes them to shift categories: from companions to pests. Through euthanasia, humans maintain sovereignty over animals and retain the ultimate power to decide their survival or death. Notably, this peculiar slaughter—which was inherently speciesist—targeted only certain species: pets. Domestic animals deemed more useful, such as livestock intended for food, were spared. While Dundas does not provide a definitive solution to the problem of animal domestication and appropriation, she prompts us to reflect on our responsibilities toward animals entirely at our mercy, and on our exercise of biopower over them.

We Animal's project, which highlights the efforts of Ukrainian NGO Uanimals volunteers, presents an alternative perspective on war by documenting activists who risk their lives to save animals on the frontlines in Ukraine. This approach not only shifts the focus from traditional narratives of human conflict but also emphasizes compassion, sacrifice, and the often-overlooked experiences of non-human victims. To improve this presentation, the narrative should more clearly articulate how these stories challenge prevailing perceptions of war, underscore the interconnectedness of all beings affected by conflict, and invite reflection on the ethical responsibilities humans have toward animals, even in times of crisis. (Figure 3). The images here not only provide another perspective, that of the volunteers and animals, but also help to raise awareness, draw attention, and attract the funds needed to accomplish the mission. The other project, portraits of stray cats abandoned in Lebanon the day after Israel struck, serves as a reminder that war not only impacts human beings, but that we all suffer, even if other beings have not had the choice of participating in



human wars (Figure 4). War thus becomes the other aspect of our domination over other beings. It can be safely suggested that the current pollution crisis is the culmination of this domination.

Figure 3

Volunteers saving puppies in frontline, Ukraine, 2024. *Source:* Anzhelika Kozachenko



Figure 4A stray cat on a street hit by Israel in Lebanon

Source: Seb Alex / We Animals

A Shift From an Anthropocentric World

In 1970, Richard D. Ryder, a British psychologist, coined the word 'speciesism' by analogy with words such as sexism, racism, ageism, etc. The term, meaning the discrimination of living beings on the basis of their species¹⁰ (Vilmer, 2001, p. 21), has since been adopted by several philosophers of animal ethics, as has its antonym: anti-speciesism—a movement based on the moral imperative that all living things should be protected from suffering and domination¹¹ (Candau, 2018, p. 1). Both works have a strong anti-speciesist aspect and invite us to rethink not just the position of the animal but the position of the human being too: the human being is not the pinnacle of creation, an end in itself, but as Romain Gary says humanity is a myth¹² (qtd in Pinque, 2015, p. 183) capable, moreover, of committing

¹⁰ "la discrimination des êtres vivants sur la base de leurs espèces"

¹¹ "un mouvement fondé sur l'impératif moral selon lequel tout être vivant doit être protégé de la souffrance et de la domination"

^{12 &}quot;I'humanité [...] est un mythe"



the worst crimes. For Claude Lévy-Strauss, this separation between 'us' and 'them' constitutes our "original sin," which brings with it other crimes, because we can easily move this mark of separation and include others in the category of 'them' against whom everything is permitted. A person shapes both their identity and self-image through relationships that involve dominating others.

The animal is that other which, as Milan Kundera puts it, constitutes *a moral test*.¹³ The rise of dissident voices advocating for animals is helping to change our perception of animals, allowing us to see them as they are, without the prism of stereotypes of beauty, intelligence, or social role. Through representation and understanding, artists' activism is realized, and their art sparks interest in social activism, allowing it to develop in different ways.

As Éric Dacheux and Tourya Guaaybess point out, at a collective level, the mediatization of any act or object in the confluence of the media is now one of the major conditions for its entry into the public arena. Without visibility, all actions are in vain (Dacheux & Guaaybess, 2020, p. 17).¹⁴ Dundas places those who are marginalized and made invisible, including animals, at the center of her narrative. As Rodge Glass points out, Dundas has presented herself as a writer whose fiction and politics are indivisible from each other (2024) by responding emotionally to injustice. By criticizing human domination over other forms of life, both works raise public awareness of hidden violence and can change our perception, which is formed based on cultural representation rather than real experience. For example, pigs, represented as dirty beings in public opinion, are denied their intelligence, which is comparable to that of dogs, despite all the scientific evidence. It could be argued that politics-manipulating both what is seen and unseen-shapes public opinion and seeks to suppress anything that might be unsettling. Violence in itself must disturb us, because it is a daily reality for many animals. By exhibiting it, We Animals is at the same time advocating change and hope through the work of activists, vets who care for animals rescued from industry, and the lives of animals in sanctuaries, to show that another model of human-animal relations is possible, one with greater compassion and respect (Figure 5). It also reminds us that art can be a form of resistance against injustice and seeks to accelerate the progress that is so necessary today in the face of the rising tide of fascism and the climate crisis.

¹³ "un test moral"

^{14 &}quot;À un niveau collectif, la médiatisation de tout acte ou objet dans la confluence des médias est désormais l'une des conditions majeures à son entrée dans l'espace public. Sans visibilité, ces actions sont vaines."

Figure 5

A hen rescued from agribusiness receives medical help in the Czech Republic. Life in a sanctuary is her second chance.



Source: Lukas Vincour / We Animals

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