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Is it real or is it Disney?: unravelling the animal system

... life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis.

William Empson

In the late 1930s William Empson set out to explore some of humanity's contradictory attitudes to animals in a novel entitled *The Royal Beasts*. It was his only work of prose fiction, and was in fact never completed. Its recent editor has described the chief protagonist of the story, a creature whose status and identity are the subject of dispute, as setting off 'a serio-comic series of reactions which disjoint the cultural presuppositions of Western man'. The story concerns the consequences of an initial encounter between the administrator of a British Crown Colony in Central Africa and a member of a tribe of whose existence he had been unaware. The administrator asks a local messenger where his unexpected visitor is from, and receives the reply: 'The terrible hairy men live up in the mountains, in the wild country; we never go near'. Despite this reference to hairy *men*, the central conceit of the fable is the fact that this obscure tribe defies convenient categorization as *either* human *or* animal. But since (for reasons too complicated to explain fully here) the visitor, named Wuzzoo, has come to see the colonial administrator as a first step towards making contact with the King of England, he becomes enmeshed in a system which insists on classifying him as either one thing or the other.

Much of the story involves teasing out the ironies of this situation: the orderly British mind cannot find an appropriate place for a highly intelligent, upright, talking creature which has a tail and is entirely covered in smooth black hair. As the governor of the Crown Colony is later to put it, 'You can't have a hybrid who's half man and half not, because neither law nor religion nor the state know where to get hold

of him.' Wuzzoo is sufficiently conscious of colonial prejudices to resist having his tribe categorized as human if it is going to mean being treated as 'a lot of black men'. As the administrator explains, however, the alternative has serious disadvantages. Having voluntarily introduced itself to Western society, if the tribe now decides that it is animal it will lose (in human eyes) any claim to its land, its property, its gold mines and so on: 'if you are not men nothing belongs to you, nothing is yours'. It will also lack any legal redress when Western hunters come in search of its valuable fur. Wuzzoo is driven to the conclusion that the only safe option may be for the tribe to demand the status of Royal Beasts: to give up their independence in order to belong to the King of England not like his human subjects but 'like his horses and dogs'.¹

Empson felt no need to spell it out, but the precariousness of this solution becomes all too clear from a very different book, Michele Brown's *The Royal Animals*. This particular contribution to the ha-giography of the present British royal family demonstrates that the concept of a royal animal can extend without interruption from heraldic lions and family corgis to those creatures which various royals have hunted or shot. Brown informs her readers, for instance, with neither irony nor distaste, that 'the last royal tiger fell to Prince Philip in 1961'.²

Unfortunately only a tantalizing fragment survives of an episode in *The Royal Beasts* in which Wuzzoo visited London Zoo to make a speech to the British public; in it he is warned that 'if you aren't careful you will pull all the strings of popular sentiment the wrong way'. The capriciousness, inconsistency and ambivalence of human responses to animals and animality are very much the point of Empson's fable, but it is only pointing to what is already common knowledge. There is a widespread popular awareness of the ways in which society's contradictory and even hypocritical attitudes to the animal are signalled within the culture, and it would be all too easy to play this up as a major problem. Clearly, for most people, most of the time, it isn't. Empson is quite right to say that everyday life involves working around the contradictions, not resolving them. A theoretical equivalent of this practical perspective is called for: the contradictions embedded in popular attitudes need to be seen not as a matter for complaint but as evidence of how cultural understanding of the animal is structured.

The evidence of the previous three chapters has shown that animal images, animal symbols and of course animals themselves can evoke a bewildering variety of responses: pride and respect; hatred, contempt and fear; pleasure and affection. The present chapter asks why the apparent incompatibility of these sentiments does not generally seem to trouble the popular imagination.

Some of the most glaringly contradictory representations of the animal are of course to be found in the pages of the popular press. These generally appear to take one of two forms. The first involves the unremarked but telling juxtaposition of two items. A front page of the *Daily Star*, for instance, is given over entirely to two stories. One is a self-congratulatory piece establishing the paper's compassionate attitude to animals: it is entitled '*Star* gets action on cruel fur trappers', and includes a photograph of a 'fox in agony'. Alongside it is a gratuitously exploitative and voyeuristic piece with the headline 'Wolf boy!', about a boy from Bangladesh whose face is covered in hair as the result of a hormone deficiency. The paper claims that his own family 'will not allow him to be treated. They WANT him to look like a monster and make a FORTUNE from his hairy disfigurement'. This, the paper's main news story that day, is dominated by a large and closely framed shot of the boy's anomalous therianthropic features – a modern-day fair-ground attraction for the reader's delectation.³

To give another broadly similar example, an inside page of the *Daily Express* juxtaposes stories headlined 'Sex beast caged' and 'Shake on it, old friend'. The first concerns the return to jail of a man who had been 'freed to prey on little girls'. The second concerns 'Tripper the wonder dog', who had recently saved the life of his 'master'. This item includes a photograph of the happy pair shaking hands, so to speak, and appearing both to be smiling at the camera. In accordance with the conventions of the popular press, the dog's praiseworthy actions are automatically humanized (and its image correspondingly anthropomorphized), whereas the actions of the sex offender can only be comprehended as beastly.⁴

The alternative form is that of the single press story, which can just as easily accommodate inconsistency and contradiction, especially when the conventions of its telling operate largely independently of any boundaries between such categories as the 'real', the representa-

Lionheart James



LITTLE James Branch sits hugging a toy that tells the world of his courage.

The five-year-old is recovering from being mauled by a lion cub during a circus trip.

And yesterday, despite the bites on his back, his shoulder and his neck, he grinned and wrapped his arms forgivingly round his own cub.

His courage showed through as he met the Press and dealt quickly and coolly with their questions.

No, he wasn't frightened. No, it didn't hurt too much. And, no, he

wasn't going to bother with circuses in future.

James was mauled by the cub when it broke free from its collar and lead.

His father Richard, from Maidenhead in Berkshire, is taking legal advice about the attack on Wednesday. Safety officials are also investigating the incident which happened when Gandy's Circus made its first visit to the town.

Circus manager Graham Tottle was not available for comment yesterday.

29 A lesson in the public display of the animal: the real, the representational and the symbolic stood in a complex relation here as 'Lionheart James' – recently mauled by a circus lion cub – took comfort from his more reliable and photogenic toy lion and decided 'he wasn't going to bother with circuses in future'.

tional and the symbolic. The case of 'Lionheart James' (fig. 29) is typical of this kind of story. A five-year-old boy, 'mauled by a lion cub during a circus trip', is described as having displayed his courage as he 'grinned and wrapped his arms forgivingly round his own cub', a cuddly toy lion, for the benefit of press photographers. The living animal's natural ferocity, the furry toy's docility and the punning symbolism of the headline, far from being in any sense mutually exclusive, are evidently seen as contributing to the thematic coherence of this heart-warming tale. The boy's mother explained to another newspaper that 'James loves animals and he probably thought the cub would be gentle with him'.⁵

In 'Why look at animals?' John Berger quoted an earlier example of a very similar press story and commented on 'the degree of confusion' displayed in the human victim's presuppositions about animals (a lioness in that particular case). The confusion, in both cases, seems to be over *what exactly counts as animal*. Here the views of the analysts (Berger or myself) risk appearing more dictatorial and indeed more anthropocentric than the 'confused' views of those they condescendingly describe. The popular imagination, as reflected in such press stories, allows considerable leeway in such matters. In this respect it calls to mind Freud's comments on dreams and contradictions:

The way in which dreams treat the category of contraries and contradictories is highly remarkable. It is simply disregarded. 'No' seems not to exist so far as dreams are concerned. They show a particular preference for combining contraries into a unity or for representing them as one and the same thing.⁶

This is certainly rather similar to what the media do with the animal story. It is not that there are no rules; it is rather that they are internal to their own rhetoric and make no reference to an external world, a waking reality, which more strictly regulates what may 'properly' be said or thought about animals.

In fragmentary form, at least, it is quite possible to describe these internal rules. The lion's position here may be clarified by contrasting it with that of the dog. The dogs most often seen on television – the puppy unrolling the Andrex toilet roll, the slow-motion Dulux sheepdog, the Crufts champions fed on Pedigree Chum – are a particular kind of dog. They are never rottweilers or American pit bull terriers or Japanese tosas; they are, in other words, every bit as stereotyped and 'perfect' as

the people in advertisements. The image of the bad animal does not exist for advertising. It exists elsewhere in the media and in the popular imagination, of course, and was in large part responsible for the introduction of Britain's Dangerous Dogs Act in 1991. The minister responsible for the act explained the need for it with the astonishing statement 'Many are good dogs, but *there are some evil dogs*'!⁷

In the popular press there has come to be a standardized iconography for the 'devil dog' and the 'hellhound'. Typically, it has the photographic image of the offending brute, jaws menacingly open, juxtaposed with (or better still, overlapping) a separate photograph of the wounded child, whose scarred back or face is clinically displayed in its full and open horror. Such explicitness would seem out of place had the wound been inflicted by a lion. Dogs may be 'evil'; lions may not. The lion is in any case more firmly secured in its stereotypical symbolic and iconic identity: in circus or zoo or Channel 4 documentary or heraldic motif, a lion is a lion is a lion. With dangerous and duplicitous dogs, on the other hand, there is no such certainty – last year it was the rottweiler, this year the pit bull terrier: by the time you read these words it could be anything.

All this is entirely familiar; it is as obvious as the fact that Tripper the wonder dog ('Shake on it, old friend') is in a quite different conceptual category to the 'devil dogs'. In the context of their representation, it could even be said that Tripper the wonder dog and Lionheart James's cuddly toy lion and their various pictorial contraries are only intelligible in so far as they conform to and perpetuate stereotypical conceptions of the animal. They are there solely to illustrate a moral, to confirm a cliché – though their relation to the reality of everyday life, of course, is signalled and secured by the 'truth' of their photographic representation.

Common sense, systematicity and the contradictory

As the opening chapter of this book suggested, the sign of the animal typically operates in the unwritten system of common-sense consciousness, of common knowledge, of stereotypes, where meanings are assumed to be self-evident. Much as with a linguistic sign, where a majority of language-users may know nothing of its etymology, its meaning will nevertheless be known to them in the sense of their knowing when and how to use it, and they will do so quite 'naturally'

and unthinkingly. Similarly, in the context of its everyday use, there is no need to dwell on the sense of an animal sign – it is part of common sense, part of what everyone already knows, part of everyday reality. The readers of 'Lionheart James' already know how they are supposed to respond.

Here it will be useful to turn to Clifford Geertz's thoughtful essay on 'Common sense as a cultural system'. Commenting on the ways in which the notion of common sense is employed in various societies, he argues in favour of treating it as 'a relatively organized body of considered thought, rather than just what anyone clothed and in his right mind knows'. Like any body of knowledge, it is 'historically constructed':

It is, in short, a cultural system, though not usually a very tightly integrated one, and it rests on the same basis that any other such system rests; the conviction by those whose possession it is of its value and validity. Here, as elsewhere, things are what you make of them.

That last sentence is perhaps the crucial one. The meanings of common sense are made, not found. They are not pre-existing meanings drawn from or reflecting or referring to a simple material reality; they are locked instead in their own systematicity. And yet this is exactly what common sense will not allow. As Geertz himself notes, 'the unspoken premise from which common sense draws its authority' is that 'it presents reality neat'.⁸

Common sense has, in its own view, something of a monopoly on reality. It is *its* meanings, *its* truths, and *its* particular conception of reality which are undeniably the most convincingly motivated and the most thoroughly naturalized.⁹ This alone establishes the common-sensical as the most influential arena of meaning. It may lack the academic credentials and rigour which are popularly attributed to science or philosophy or whatever, but its great advantage over academic knowledge is that it is not constrained to be consistent – its systematicity is not compromised by inconsistencies. Geertz comments specifically on what he engagingly names the 'immethodicalness' of common sense:

it caters at once to the pleasures of inconsistency which are so very real to any but the most scholastic of men ... and also to the equal pleasures, felt by any but the most obsessional of men, of the intractable diversity of experience ... Common-sense wisdom is shamelessly and unapologetically

cally ad hoc. It comes in epigrams, proverbs, *obiter dicta*, jokes, anecdotes, *contes moraux* – a clatter of gnomic utterances . . . Whatever they are, it is not their interconsistency that recommends them but indeed virtually the opposite: 'Look before you leap', but 'He who hesitates is lost'; 'A stitch in time saves nine', but 'Seize the day'.

And so on. This emphasis on a discontinuous, gnomic, formulaic knowledge accords closely with other writers' descriptions of the commonsensical, from Berger and Luckmann's classic account (in *The Social Construction of Reality*) of how the coherence and reality of everyday life is maintained by a 'social stock of knowledge', to Roland Barthes's definition of the *doxa*, the 'reign of the stereotypes imposed by petit bourgeois culture'.¹⁰

The particular advantage of Geertz's version, however, is that it provides a convincing means of seeing how sense is made of the problematic *visual* examples encountered so far. That phrase 'a clatter of gnomic utterances' could hardly be improved on as a description of the popular press's abrupt juxtapositions of discontinuous and logically inconsistent representations of the animal. But these are by no means restricted to the mass media; they are to be found everywhere.

Given its symbolic complexity, it is perhaps not surprising that such representations figure prominently in the iconography of the butcher's shop, as the next two examples suggest. The first is a passage from an early Julian Barnes novel:

The butcher wore a blue-striped apron and a straw hat with a blue ribbon round it. For the first time in years, waiting in the queue, Ann thought what a strange contrast the apron and the hat made. The boater implied the idle splash of an oar in a listless, weed-choked river; the blood-stained apron announced a life of crime, of psychopathic killing. Why had she never noticed that before? Looking at this man was like looking at a schizophrenic: civility and brutishness hustled together into a pretence of normality. And people *did* think it was normal; they weren't astonished that this man, just by standing there, could be announcing two incompatible things.¹¹

The second manifestation of this perverse normality is evident in the depiction of animals themselves in this context. In some countries – certainly in Britain and France – the customer is frequently invited into the butcher's shop by the smiling image of a painted wooden cartoon pig on the pavement outside. In Britain the pig typically wears the butcher's apron, but the French ones are more varied and less coy.



30 Thankful that for the moment it's horsemeat rather than beef on special offer, but looking well prepared for a swift getaway if its fortunes change at the whim of the butcher, this cut-out cow invites customers into a *boucherie* at Bédarieux in the Midi.

They range from the pig as eager victim (smilingly advertising its naked self) to the pig as killer (with chef's *toque* and butcher's cleaver) and the pig as cannibal (with napkin round its neck, and knife and fork held precariously in its trotters).

I have no doubt that this basic taxonomy could be considerably extended; readers may even care to elaborate it for themselves as an instructive holiday pastime. The most extraordinary examples can be found in both countries, and will not necessarily even be pigs. By convention the animal advertizes the butcher's wares on the small blackboard it holds for this purpose (though less frequently, the information may be inscribed directly on to the animal's body). Occasionally, by this means, the symbolic animal eludes its fate by displacing its own identity. Less than a mile from where I live, the butcher's happy pig advertizes steak pies, smiling in evident relief that they are not pork pies. And outside at least one butcher's in southern France (fig. 30), it is a peculiar-looking cow which entreats customers to buy choice cuts of horsemeat. The contradictions are clear enough, but the 'common sense' of such representations needs further comment.

The disnification of the animal

The animal is the sign of all that is taken not-very-seriously in contemporary culture; the sign of that which doesn't really matter. The animal may be other things beside this, but this is certainly one of its most frequent roles in representation. Terms such as stereotyping and trivialization are a little too imprecise to describe quite what is going on here: I propose instead to speak of it as the *disnification* of the animal.

Disnification, it seems to me, is a specifically visual thing. The term may already be in use elsewhere carrying rather different connotations, though I am not aware that it is. With regard to the animal, the basic procedure of disnification is to render it stupid by rendering it visual. This is not a cheap gibe aimed simply or specifically at the image of the animal in Disney productions (at the animal's deliberate 'Disneyfication', in other words). What I have in mind has more to do with the connotations of trivialization and belittlement which are a central and intentional part of the everyday adjectival use of terms like 'Disney' and 'Mickey Mouse' – quite the contrary of what Walt Disney would have wanted.

The term disnification has further connotations: the faint echo of 'signification', for instance, is probably a productive one, since the relation of disnification to meaning is itself rather faint. Disnification is a kind of approximate obverse of signification – it has to do with meaning, but only in a rough-and-ready way (with about as much precision, in fact, as the typographic inversion of the opening letters of the one term would approximate to the other). A cynic might say that it is a process not of making sense of, so much as making-nonsense-of the animal.

The visual priorities of disnification may reflect a more general cultural drift. This is a drift which is evident, for instance, in Barthes's assertion that 'what characterizes the so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs'; and in Alice Walker's lament that 'animals are forced to become for us merely "images" of what they once so beautifully expressed'.¹² Implicit in such observations is a sense that the general shift from textual to visual priorities will be characterized by a drift towards the stupid and the trivial. In very many cases the evidence of animal representation would appear to support this view.

Contradiction has an important place in this process. What I am proposing as disnification is something which in its fullest form positively embraces contradiction. There is a kind of pattern: when the animal is put into visual form, it seems somehow to incline towards the stereotypical and the stupid, to float free from the requirements of consistency or of the greater rigour that might apply in other non-visual contexts. The image of the animal seems to operate here as a kind of visual shorthand, but a shorthand gone wrong, a shorthand whose meanings intermittently veer from or turn treacherously back upon that of the fuller form of the text.

Consider the *Daily Star's* front-page 'Wolf boy!' story, which was referred to earlier. The brief text accompanying the headline and photograph of this young Bangladeshi boy gives no clear explanation, but it presumably seemed to many readers that he was described as a wolf boy simply because of his hairy face. Hairiness has long been popularly associated with animality, of course, and the specific tag 'wolf boy' in the present case may perhaps have stirred vague memories that far older tales of wolf children had often come from India and thereabouts. But those older stories – as the wolf-child literature listed in Bruce Chatwin's 'Shamdev: The wolf-boy' and elsewhere at-

tests – have concerned abandoned human children who have been allegedly reared by wolves in the forest. On being returned to or discovered by human society, it has been these children's actions rather than their appearances which have seemed wolf-like.¹³ What the *Daily Star* story does, however, is to employ what it presents as commonsensical, self-evident meanings (meanings which are visually self-evident, that is to say) which choose to ignore, or at any rate work quite independently of, a more complex textual or historical order of knowledge. The look is everything: it has no need to call upon a wider frame of reference, nor to assume prior knowledge on the part of the reader. It constructs and maintains its own disnified order of common sense.

This phenomenon is not restricted to the discourse of the press. A rather similar instance of the twisting of meaning in the shift from text to image concerns Freud's famous and detailed case history entitled 'From the history of an infantile neurosis', from 1918. This is the case known popularly as that of 'the Wolf-Man'. In the course of a wide-ranging essay on the historico-cultural role of the wolf, W.M.S. Russell and Claire Russell have remarked on a notable aspect of the popular perception of this case. They note that when Muriel Gardiner's book *The Wolf-Man and Sigmund Freud* (which brought together all the material relating to the case) appeared in paperback in 1973, its jacket illustration lent substance to a popular misconception about the man. What it showed was a montage of a man with a wolf's head. As the Russells explain:

both his traditional title and the jacket picture of the Penguin edition are oddly . . . inappropriate. For the Wolf-Man was not a lycanthrope, and had no delusions of being a wolf. On the contrary, he had an extreme fear of wolves. When he was a little boy, his elder sister teased him by promising to show him the picture of a pretty little girl. When she took away the piece of paper she had used to cover the picture, the boy saw, 'instead of a pretty little girl, a wolf standing on his hind legs with his jaws wide open, about to swallow Little Red Riding Hood'.

It was the interpretation of this and of later manifestations of that fear of wolves which was the main purpose of Freud's inquiry.¹⁴

It would be possible, of course, to interpret the book jacket montage of the Wolf-Man quite differently: it need not necessarily be seen as a misleading mistake on the part of the designer. It is clear from Freud's

account that at a number of levels the Wolf-Man may have been superimposing his fear of the image of the wolf on to his understanding of various entirely human situations. To mention only the most obvious of the human connections, Freud stresses that 'his fear of the wolf was conditional upon the creature being in an upright posture', and insists that 'the wolf he was afraid of was undoubtedly his father'.¹⁵ From this perspective a jacket design which maps the image of a wolf's head over that of a man has a certain pictorial logic and subtlety. It should be remembered, however, that this is a privileged reading, an insider's reading: it is precisely the kind of interpretation that commonsense consciousness, or popular opinion, is likely to regard as 'too clever by half'. It is not at all in the spirit of disnification.

Disnification is common sense applied to the image of the animal. It is common sense's construction of the visual reality of the animal. And it is the condition under which we ordinarily make sense of animal representations. In suggesting that the gnomonic form of the visual image invites a drift into stupidity, I am trying only to describe disnification and not to condemn it. The same applies to contradictions. For a variety of reasons, the sense of an animal image will from time to time end up working against the sense of the text it accompanies or illustrates (as in the 'Wolf boy!' and Wolf-Man examples). That the one contradicts the other is not a problem; it is a characteristic of disnification. There is no single or correct logic here, no 'path to truth' as it were.

A useful parallel might be drawn with a complaint which is sometimes levelled at those Disney films which involve the retelling of traditional fairy tales. In their pre-Disney form such tales have been characterized from a psychoanalytical perspective as open-ended and difficult narratives which are meant to allow the child 'to master developmental conflicts and therefore to grow' towards maturity. Disney, it is said, has failed to appreciate this, the 'true meaning' of these tales, and has settled instead for a trivializing and sanitized cuteness which misses out on (or sometimes even contradicts) their mythological richness and their psychological depth.¹⁶ It is clear that in one respect these psychoanalytical readings have not grasped what the viewing public does with popular imagery. In instances such as these the public isn't aware that it's getting a thinner or a less reliable version of a story – a version that veers from the 'true meaning' of the tale. The public uses whatever versions are currently available to it, and creates its own

mythologies and its own sense from these. Disnification cares nothing for 'true meaning', and it is important that its representations of the animal are approached and understood on that basis.

Why representations matter

Tim Ingold's editorial introduction to *What is an Animal?* includes a section entitled 'Culture and the human construction of animality', in which he raises important questions about our access to an imagined truth or reality of the animal through a comparison of the institutions of totemism and conservatism:

a premise of totemic belief and cult is that it was the animals who made the world for man, who originally laid down the order and design of human social existence, and who are ultimately responsible for its continuation. The Western cult of conservation precisely inverts this premise, proclaiming that from now on it shall be man who determines the conditions of life for animals (even those still technically wild shall be 'managed'), and who shoulders the responsibility for their survival or extinction. Yet from the relativizing perspective of the anthropologist, the animals that occupy the cultic worlds of totemists and conservationists alike are creations of the human imagination. . . . what is the relationship between these 'animals in the mind' and those that actually surround us? . . . Do animals exist for us as meaningful entities only insofar as each may be thought to manifest or exemplify an ideal type constituted within the set of symbolic values making up the 'folk taxonomy' specific to our culture? ¹⁷

This account of a hypothetical shift from a world whose meanings are made by animals (totemism) to a world whose meanings are made by humans (conservation) is enlightening because it presents those institutions as two possible orders of thought, two possible systems of representation, among others. Totemism is not dismissed as superstitious nonsense in comparison to the practical reality of present-day conservation; the two are presented as equivalent ways of making sense of animals and making sense of the world.

Conservation in fact offers a good basis for discussing the inseparability of the 'real' and the representational, for this apparently entirely practical field of endeavour may have a greater investment in the representational than it would be comfortable to admit to itself. Consider the panda (fig. 31), logo of the World Wide Fund for Nature



31 The lovable panda, totem species of the World Wide Fund for Nature, pictured here with the organization's president who some decades earlier drew a less welcome sort of world-wide attention as a result of his own tiger-shooting exploits in India.

(WWF). It has been unkindly suggested that the WWF's donation of over £1 million to the world's largest panda preserve at Wolong in China (which had succeeded in breeding only one panda in captivity in eight years, and even that one died) was motivated in part by a concern to preserve at all costs the species on which it had staked its own visual identity by choosing it to adorn the WWF letterhead – its totem animal, as it were. As W.M.S. and Claire Russell observe elsewhere, 'a totemic clan is obsessed with the need to conserve its totem species'.¹⁸

The ability to appropriate the living animal for symbolic or representational ends is equally evident in more off-beat varieties of modern-day totemism. Several recent guides to aspects of 'new age' thought include advice on how to locate one's totem animal, whether it be regarded as a clan totem or a personal totem. One such book proposes, for instance, that 'The clan totem is your symbol of belonging and when you work under its aegis you are directly in touch with your ancestors ... If someone has the same token as yourself, this may indicate a deep link between you'. The totemic animal is valued here, certainly, and the reader is implored to 'keep it safe', but the living animal exists here solely to confirm human meanings and identities. This is clear from the example the authors give, apparently in all seriousness, of one of the ways in which a reader might establish the identity of his or her totem animal: '... you may suddenly realize that the neighbourhood dogs have started to take a friendly interest in you and congregate when you appear in the street – could it be that a dog is your clan symbol?'.¹⁹

Examples like these should not be thought to constitute a perverse misinterpretation of the animal, where by means of an inexplicable inversion the representational has come to be privileged over the real. The animal is only ever knowable in mediated forms. To see animals at all is to see them *as something* – as something we have made meaningful, even if that something is only the display of our own investment in the idea of an authentic nature, a natural order of things, for which the animal is the ideal icon under the order of disnification. As Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin write in *Zoo Culture*:

Animals quite obviously cannot and do not ... represent themselves to human viewers. It is man who defines and represents them, and he can in no sense claim to achieve a true representation of any particular animal: it merely reflects his own concerns.²⁰

The shape of the animal body

That these concerns have little to do with anyone's notion of an objective reality is perhaps clearest in the field of visual representation, especially in its high-street manifestations. Here we find a world constructed in the image of popular culture's preconceptions, a photographic mirroring of a desired reality, a preposterous Athena-print world of cuddly coexistence with even the wildest of animals: 'Boy or girl plus leopard – it's what's called the "aaah" factor'.²¹

As often as not, the 'aaah' factor extends to the preferred *look* of the animal body. The notion of neoteny is now, I think, a fairly familiar one in this context, but it is perhaps worth quoting Elizabeth Lawrence's useful summary of the argument:

Neoteny refers to a condition in which there is retention of youthful characteristics in the adult form. ... No doubt unconsciously, but yet methodically, in order to satisfy our own tastes, human beings have selectively created animals which are neotenous. Shedding light on this process, ethologist Konrad Lorenz has described and diagrammed the innate releasing 'schema' for human parental care responses. He proposes that the physical configuration of a high and slightly bulging forehead, large brain case in proportion to the face, big eyes, rounded cheeks, and short, stubby limbs calls forth an adult nurturing response to such a 'lovable' object, moving people to feelings of tenderness. The same positive reactions are elicited by animals who exhibit these juvenile traits. ... Roundness is the essence of the neotenous configuration – round heads, round cheeks, short rounded limbs, and plump, rounded bodies characterize juvenile forms in both man and animals.

Lawrence notes that doll and toy manufacturers intuitively grasped this 'cuteness' principle long ago, and she also refers to Stephen Jay Gould's famous demonstration of the increasing pictorial neotenzation of Mickey Mouse since that character's early appearances in the 1920s.²²

As these examples suggest, favourable responses to the neotenous image do not distinguish between the living animal and the animal toy. In the case of the giant panda, as Mullan and Marvin neatly express it, 'much of the groundwork for this particular kind of animal shape had been done' even before the first living panda was seen in the West in 1936, because its overall shape so closely corresponded to that of the teddybear. In this sense the panda's immense popularity and its

potential for invoking pleasure stems from its chance visual resemblance to a toy – a toy which is so familiar that its own loose derivation from a quite different species of bear is easily overlooked.

All this is highly relevant to the WWF panda logo (fig. 31), which may be regarded as a prime example of the graphic neotenizing of an already culturally-neotenized animal. Intended as the symbol of the practical conservation of the living animal, this pleasure-inducing logo may in fact be thought both apt and uncharacteristically (if unwittingly) honest if we choose to go along with Mullan and Marvin's assessment of the essentially selfish project of conservation: 'animals are preserved solely for human benefit, because human beings have decided they want them to exist for human pleasure'.²³

It is important to keep in mind the extent to which pleasure and 'reality' are entangled here. Access to reality in all its full pleasurable richness is mediated by representations which will guide how and what we think about the world. 'Share something magical with your baby from day one' entreats the advertisement for Disney Babies, the recent brand developed by the Disney Consumer Products Division in New York. That magical something is a Baby Mickey (or Minnie or Goofy), redrawn and remodelled in exaggeratedly infantile form – a product whose design and marketing has been aimed directly at women in their last trimester of pregnancy, and which the advertisement depicts cradled in the mother's arms alongside her new baby.²⁴ But if it is all too easy to mock the notion that a heightened neoteny smoothes the path to a rewarding reality in the case of Disney Babies, we should be clear that the stylized WWF panda presents us with a near-identical proposition about our relation to the animal world at large.

As I suggested at the outset, there is little point in complaining about this: it is simply how disnification seems currently to operate. Like any other cultural system, it is only answerable to itself, and its representations are fundamentally arbitrary. Once in a while it is useful to throw its representational logic into reverse in order to remind ourselves of this. Francis Masse has done so in a magnificent *bande dessinée* entitled *Les Deux du balcon*.²⁵ Taking Stephen Jay Gould's ideas on the neotenization of Mickey Mouse as its premise, the book includes a visit to an imaginary museum, a kind of Natural-History-of-Neoteny Museum. The exhibits include a row of trophies: they present the ridiculous spectacle of the progressive ageing and deflating of the cute ideal of



32 A less naive view of neoteny: in a story called 'Le Miquépitheque', Francis Masse presents an imaginary museum of natural history, where the logic of pictorial cuteness is revealed as having less to do with biology than with what Barthes called 'the decorative display of what-goes-without-saying', in which history and nature are 'confused at every turn'.

Disney's ageless neotenus mouse (fig. 32). Another room compares the neotenus and non-neotenus forms of various creatures and characters: the neotenuized vulture looks more like a budgerigar; *Tintin non-néoténique* is an ugly wrinkled thug whose only remaining connection to Hergé's invention is the wisp of blond hair; and the furrowed features of the non-neotenus pig are contrasted with the idealized form of *porc néoténique* – a sausage. We might well conclude that this must be a museum without walls: it has an uncanny resemblance to the world in which we live.

Notes

- 1 William Empson, *The Royal Beasts and Other Works*, edited with an introduction by John Haffenden (London: Chatto & Windus, 1986). The epigraph is from p.47; other quotations are from pp.26, 134, 148, 143, and 144–5 respectively.
- 2 Michele Brown, *The Royal Animals* (London: W.H. Allen, 1981), p.37. Although Brown gives no hint of it, there was in fact 'world-wide outrage' at this particular incident, as John M. MacKenzie describes in his *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism* (Manchester: MUP, 1988), p.310.
- 3 See the *Daily Star*, 11 May 1990, p.1. The press does not offer an unproblematic reflection of public opinion, of course, but neither does it operate independently of it: it must at all times maintain its popular intelligibility, after all. As Stephen Koss has cautiously argued (writing on the question of 'whether the press has ever truly mirrored public opinion' in *History Today*, September 1984, p.5): 'for want of any accessible alternative, the national press may be taken to illuminate, if not necessarily to express directly, movements in British public opinion'. At the very least, the pictorial and textual conventions of the press give an indication of the forms in which that opinion may typically find expression.
- 4 See the *Daily Express*, 27 May 1983, p.10.
- 5 See 'Lionheart James', *Today*, 29 May 1987, p.3, and 'Boy, 5, mauled by circus lion', *Star*, 28 May 1987, p.15.
- 6 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, vol. IV (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p.318.
- 7 Quoted in Judith Williamson, 'The rhetorical forces of evil', *Guardian*, 10 October 1991, p.26.
- 8 Clifford Geertz, 'Common sense as a cultural system', in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp.75–6.
- 9 If this seems too contentious a claim, consider Michael Frayn's tongue-in-cheek demonstration of the self-conceit of the common-sense viewpoint: 'What philosophers have often claimed to be concerned with is truth. But has any philosopher ever managed to say very much that wasn't later meticulously denied by other philosophers? While you and I, going about our ordinary business, manage to speak the truth almost all the time! Or at any rate to say things which are not on the whole systematically denied by our friends and colleagues.' The passage is from Frayn's *Constructions* (London: Wildwood House, 1974), paragraph 190.

- 10 See Clifford Geertz, 'Common sense as a cultural system', p.90; Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), passim; and Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p.38.
- 11 Julian Barnes, *Before She Met Me* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), p.130.
- 12 See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), pp.118–19; and Alice Walker, 'Am I Blue?', in *Through Other Eyes: Animal Stories by Women*, edited by Irene Zahava (Freedom, California: Crossing Press, 1988), p.6.
- 13 See Bruce Chatwin, 'Shamdev: The wolf-boy', in *What Am I Doing Here* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), pp.233–40; Maximilian E. Novak, 'The Wild Man comes to tea', in *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, edited by Edward Dudley and Maximilian E. Novak (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), pp.183–221; and 'Meeting the Other', chapter 7 of Barbara Noske's *Humans and Other Animals: Beyond the Boundaries of Anthropology* (London: Pluto Press, 1989). It may be, however, that the *Daily Star's* use of the term 'wolf boy' followed that of another tabloid paper only weeks earlier. The *Sunday Sport's* front-page shocker 'Evil dad dumps starving wolf boy' (22 April 1990) purported to concern a hairy-faced Mexican boy suffering from what was described as 'wolf-boy syndrome', 'one of the world's rarest genetic conditions'. While not wishing to doubt the word of such an august publication, a cursory inspection of contemporary medical dictionaries reveals no mention of the condition under that name, so it seems unlikely that this is the sense in which the public is generally familiar with the term.
- 14 See Sigmund Freud, 'From the history of an infantile neurosis' (1918), in *The Standard Edition*, vol. XVII, pp.1–122; *The Wolf-Man and Sigmund Freud*, edited by Muriel Gardiner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); and W.M.S. Russell and Claire Russell, 'The social biology of werewolves', in *Animals in Folklore*, edited by J.R. Porter and W.M.S. Russell (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer Ltd and Rowman & Littlefield, 1978), pp.143–82; the quotation is from p.179. Freud reports that the patient later discovered the frightening image to have been an illustration to the fairy tale of 'The Wolf and the Seven Little Goats'.
- 15 Sigmund Freud, 'From the history of an infantile neurosis', p.40.
- 16 See David I. Berland, 'Disney and Freud: Walt meets the Id', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15, no.4 (1982), pp.93–104. At one point Berland goes so far as to say that 'Disney praises and extols what psychoanalysis would try to cure' (p.102). Robert Darnton has pointed to the extreme historical naivety of some of these psychoanalytical readings in his essay 'Peasants tell tales: The meaning of Mother Goose', in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (London: Penguin, 1985).
- 17 Tim Ingold, 'Introduction', in *What is an Animal?*, edited by Tim Ingold (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p.12.
- 18 On the WWF, see Simon Long, 'Pan-Pan panders to taste of females in panda love-park', *Guardian*, 17 June 1991, p.22; and Rowena Webster, 'The Duke's dilemma', *Sunday Express*, 29 July 1990, pp.10–11. On totemism, see W.M.S. Russell and Claire Russell, 'The social biology of werewolves', p.178.
- 19 Caitlin and John Matthews, 'Finding your clan totem', in *The Western Way: A Practical Guide to the Western Mystery Tradition*, Vol. 1: *The Native Tradition* (London: Arkana, 1985), pp.42–4. I am indebted to Ann-Marie Gallagher for bringing this and other such examples to my attention.

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- 20 Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin, *Zoo Culture* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), pp. 3 and 7-8.
- 21 Spokesperson for Athena describing two recent additions to their range of photographic prints, on *The Art of Pleasing People*. Channel 4 Television. 15 December 1989.
- 22 The more recent elaboration of Lorenz's ideas on neoteny (which were first published in 1950) can be traced in the following texts: Stephen Jay Gould, 'Mickey Mouse meets Konrad Lorenz', *Natural History*, 88, no.5 (1979), pp.30-6, reprinted as 'A biological homage to Mickey Mouse' in Gould's *The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History* (New York: Norton, 1980), pp.95-107; Elizabeth A. Lawrence, 'In the Mick of time: Reflections on Disney's ageless mouse', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 20, no.2 (1986), pp.65-72; and Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin, 'Juvenilization: Mickey Mouse and the giant panda', in *Zoo Culture*, pp.24-8. The quotation is from Lawrence's 'In the Mick of time', pp.67-8.
- 23 See Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin, *Zoo Culture*, p.28 (on the panda's shape) and p.157 (on conservation).
- 24 See Karrie Jacobs, 'Mighty Mouse', *International Design*, Special Graphics Issue, March/April 1991, pp.44-9.
- 25 Francis Masse, *Les Deux du balcon* (Paris: Casterman, 1985).