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Review of Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*.

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**Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*.
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Research**

THE PANTHER

In the Jardin des plantes, Paris

His glance has grown so tired
of the bars passing, it cannot hold anything anymore.
For him it is as though there were a thousand bars
and behind a thousand bars no world.

The soft gait of supple powerful strides,
which turns in the smallest circles of all,
is like a dance of strength around a center
in which a greater will stands stunned.

Only at times the curtain of the pupil
opens silently—. Then an image goes in,
goes through the strained stillness of the limbs—
and in the heart ceases to be.

R. M. Rilke

In *Electric Animal*, Akira Mizuta Lippit takes up the simultaneously urgent and impervious question of animality. He comes to the animal, to interrogate the animal, to circumscribe and solicit the elusive theme of the animal through a manifold strategy--retrieving pertinent remarks in the folds and margins of philosophico-metaphysical discourses, resorting to the formulations of the human and “positive” sciences, recovering the encryption of the animal in literary, psychoanalytical, and techno-artistic elaborations. Lippit’s text, which may hereafter serve as a compendium or landmark for further research on the subject, offers moments of incisive analysis while spanning heterogeneous debates with remarkable agility. Such a multi-faceted operation or wide-ranging deployment of resources seems to be required by the subject matter itself, if one is somehow to catch and illuminate it despite its fleeting character. (“So then, Glaucon,” says Socrates in the *Republic*, “we must, like hunters, now station ourselves in a circle around the thicket and pay attention so that justice doesn’t slip through somewhere and disappear into obscurity. Clearly it’s somewhere hereabouts. Look to it and make every effort to catch sight of it. . . . The place really seems to be hard going and steeped in shadows. . . . At least it’s dark and hard to search out” [432b-c]. More on this interference later.)

One of the many merits of Lippit's work lies already in such an interdisciplinary, comprehensive thrust. For there seems to be no single discipline that would properly and exhaustively confront what could be called the problem of the animal, or animal problem. Rather, it appears that the various discourses (variously gathered in disciplinary lineages and canons) of which humans are and have been capable at once indicate the distance of the human animal from other animals *and* constitute the possibility for the human to turn back reflectively to the other-than-human animal, to stretch out across, if not to bridge such a rift. It is out of its discursive distance or difference from the animal, hence also from itself as animal, that the human can effect the reflective and self-reflective return. It would seem that it is exquisitely human to be capable of this openness to the other-than-human, to harbor, indeed, *to be* such an openness and alterity.

Lippit thus begins precisely with the age-old understanding of animals in terms of linguistic deprivation: to paraphrase Heidegger, the animal is poor in language. It is, therefore, remote from the human world. In this context, by reference to figures such as Lyotard, Agamben, and Jung, the author speaks of a certain "disappearance of the animal" connected with "the appearance of a dehumanized human being," and concomitant melancholia (19). The intimation here is that the absence of the animal always necessarily bespeaks a certain loss of the human, if indeed the *anthropos* is itself animal, that is, in the primordial sense of the term, living, partaking in life. If the twofold disappearance of the animal and the human results in humanism and its anthropocentric denials, in a countermovement to this heritage Lippit's text sets out "to recover the traces of animality, to remember animals" (26). But of course, thus characterized, the task of remembrance may entail acknowledging a certain loss and fragmentation, obscurity and incompleteness of memory. For the oblivion of the animal lies at the basis of the dream of human mastery, unqualified theoretical grasp, fullness of retention--the forgotten animal lies there as the inassimilable counterpart, indeed, the shadow, haunting the humanistic construction from within, irrepressibly threatening to undo it in resurfacing.

In the first place, Lippit assesses the Western philosophical canon in its dominant claims concerning the distinction human/animal. With noteworthy consistency, this distinction is articulated by reference to the question of mortality. The human alone is capable of dying. It is only the human that dies in the sense of the utter, irreducible, incalculable loss taking place in/with the death of an individual. And it is the prerogative of humans to relate to their own death as that which uniquely individuates each of them. To the ability to die (in the sense of the ability to relate to one's own finitude), to the loss of one's presence to oneself, in fact, to the sense of human being as being-toward-death, pertain the spirituality and self-consciousness of the human. By contrast, the animal lacks retention, memory, the ability to repeat. In its *absolute*

singularity, in its losing itself at *every* moment, it lacks presence, a substantive, continuing stability. In its ultimate in-difference and interchangeability, in its purely being resolved into the species, the animal ends up being, paradoxically, a matter of repeatability without loss. Because of this, however, the animal (the labor of metabolic survival and reproduction of life that the animal names) is immortal, or, more pointedly, undying--it indicates life's seamless continuum.

What is fascinating is how, in Lippit's deft narrative, a rather unitary lineage is brought to light, ranging from Descartes to Heidegger. Modernity formulates an understanding of the animal in terms of the mechanical paradigm. (While it appears increasingly urgent to think the animal beyond the mechanical paradigm, it may be equally crucial to venture to investigate the mechanical component in the human, that is, the automatisms and necessities at the physical as well as psychological levels. This would and will mean to broach the enormously difficult question of the relation between intelligence and mechanism.) Thus, if Cartesius introduces the notion of the animal as automaton, Leibniz develops a view of animals ("divine machines") as imperishable. Divining, *more graeco*, the analogy between the animal (*zoon*) and the soul (that whose task is to live, *zen*), Leibniz declares that "not only souls, but also animals cannot be generated and cannot perish" (34). It is precisely from the point of view of its materiality or monadic composition that the animal does not die and continually reproduces itself (the almost Empedoclean tenor of this insight is worthy of mention). Schopenhauer will elaborate on this position, coming to suggest that it is in death that the human twists free from the affirmation of individuated life inherent in all living individuals. It is through such emancipation that the human being genuinely is. In death, the individual transcends the generality of life, the commonality of all the individuals analogously clinging to life, and attains that which is genuinely singular, not common, not conscious, not representable--the primal state ultimately designated as will.

Despite clamorous anomalies (Montaigne, Rousseau, most notably Nietzsche, not to mention Spinoza, the "other traditions" of Judeo-Islamic provenance, etc.), and notwithstanding the immense difficulties inherent in the interpretation of the existential analytic, it is possible to situate the priority of the question of death informing Heidegger's early thinking in this historical trajectory and its necessities. Especially through Derrida's reading of Heidegger, Lippit points out a certain failure, in Heidegger, to think the animal, the community of the living. One would even want to add that Heidegger's diagnosis of the animal as a matter of "poverty" (poverty in world as well as destiny) and refusal to develop the question of *Dasein* in terms of animality prevent a development of the other-than-human in the direction *both* (read: *simultaneously*) of life (the animal, the physical) and of the divine.

As a singular entity (*this* cat, *this* ant), the animal is obviously capable of decaying, of being destroyed. In fact, qua singular it is always already killed/sacrificed for the sake of the establishment of the concept or the species--in brief, of interchangeability. This is brought to the fore through a reading of the Hegelian-Kojèvian reflection on the “innate, murderous quality” to be ascribed “to all modes of conceptualization” (46). The return to the animal in a conceptual-reflective mode involves a destructive appropriation that reduces the apprehended to the sameness, the in-difference of that which endures in constancy. The human, on the other hand, is irreducible to organic life, i.e., the maintenance of the species. Biology will never have exhausted the question of the human, because of the spiritual residue or supplement that, as though from outside life, excessive to life, would provide human life with its value, worth, and dignity. In this sense, the posture toward one’s own death and the rational-linguistic endowment are illuminated in their essential solidarity.

To these discussions Lippit juxtaposes those addressing the question of the animal as a cipher of the unconscious, of an intelligence rooted *in* the organic articulation of life, otherwise than logical, non-verbal. In this perspective Darwin’s contribution comes under consideration in its proto-phenomenological as well as physio-psychoanalytical anticipations--hence the interrelated analyses of Nietzsche and Bergson, Freud and Breuer. Here belong the meditations on the tense dialectic of instincts and consciousness; the therapeutic relevance ascribed to the phenomenon of somnambulism and the practice of hypnosis, linking the “psychoanalytic cure to its primitive roots in mesmerism and animal magnetism” (107); the deepening of the notion of the unconscious and unconscious dynamics in light of their indestructibility, irrepressibility or, minimally, resilient recurrence (in *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud says of the marks of desire that “they are only capable of annihilation in the same sense as the ghosts in the underworld of the *Odyssey*--ghosts which awoke to new life as soon as they tasted blood” [192]); the reconfigured understanding of body in terms of electro-magnetism, of the nervous network in terms of a system of electric conductivity, and hence of the domain of animality (of the living), broadly speaking, as a field of forces, energetic exchange, communication, circulation, propagation, transference; ultimately, a certain broadening of the approach to language, which restitutes an understanding of language in the plural, as a function of embodiment and sensibility, of interaction and sharing (135). In its “anti-logical” character (132), the animal, animated, living body, forces a re-thinking of *logos* beyond itself and its formality.

Finally, it is in that peculiar mode of linguistic articulation that we call literature that the animal is hosted, harbored, in a movement of incorporation coinciding neither with assimilation nor with allergic reaction. “Only in the literary text,” observes Lippit following Derrida, “does the animal remain in the body as a foreign element without,

at the same time, corrupting that body irreversibly” (134). The readings of Carroll, Kafka, and Akutagawa are situated in the context of this focus on literature being-and-becoming animal. And if literature reveals itself as a unique place of inscription, encryption, indeed, cathexis of the animal, cinema is presented as the cryptic space of convergence of animality, animation, biological organization, technological reproduction--the crypt within which, paradoxically, the undying, spectral absence characteristic of the animal is made perspicuous as such. It is with such a provocation, barely recalled here with no mention of its subtle developments, that *Electric Animal* ends.

As a coda to this concise presentation, it may not be inappropriate briefly to outline two reservations, or perhaps suggestions for future work. Firstly, while by no means peculiar to Lippit’s work, it seems nonetheless questionable that an account of the forgetfulness and remembrance of the animal should rest almost completely on an excursion from the seventeenth century onwards. The oblivion of the animal is indeed constitutive of modernity, and Lippit is far from alone in his strategic narrative delimitation. Yet, the complete silence on pre-modern (to avoid the hopelessly deficient category of “mediaeval”) discussions and the rather summary references to the Greeks appear to be problematic--especially because such a posture allows (indeed, calls for) inevitably reductive and generic renditions of antiquity, prevalently rendered in its obviousness and consistency with respect to modern and postmodern reflections. But, when it comes to the thought of the living and of animality, things are enormously complicated in the ancient Greek scene--not to mention other coordinates in space and time. For example:

The human is that animal that has *logos*, says Aristotle, a saying very rapidly translated into Latin and said to have announced the human as rational animal--as though that would be a disclosure and not the restatement of a question, as though the meaning of *ratio*, rationality, and reason would be self-evident, and as though, finally, *logos* would indicate *ratio* without any further qualification and not also, quite crucially: language, word, discourse, communicative bond, the gathering (*legein*) that comes to be in, through, and as the communicative, communal, communing effort. One may not be mistaken in surmising that what is hinted at in the naming of *logos* as well as in the “having” of such an asset remains yet to be thought. But the issue is even more complex. Fragile, unstable, often erased is indeed the line separating the human animal from other animals, the other-than-human animals. The results of Aristotle’s meditation on this distinction proliferate. Thus, he also ends up identifying the human characteristic by reference to a feature whose relation to rationality is altogether oblique, namely, the ability to imitate. It would be the power of *mimesis*, of copying, duplicating, reproducing life, indeed, bringing it in its essential features onto the stage, which ultimately captures and defines the human. And again, analogously

to, say, Chögyam Trungpa, Aristotle also sees the human as defined by the ability to smile and laugh, by sense of humor. Animals, he implies, know pain and joy, not irony, which remains the inalienable characteristic of human beings. It seems that an acknowledgment of such a variegated and irrepressibly multiple approach to the question of animality, right at the heart of the Greek “inception,” could be pregnant with far-reaching consequences. Or again, as another example, what about Diotima’s teaching in Plato’s *Symposium*, according to which the process of constant death and reproduction is common to both that which pertains to the body and that which pertains to the psyche, and that it is in this way that a certain immortality is achieved in both cases? What about the animal constituting a model and point of reference for Socrates in the building of the city (*Republic* 466d)? And the circulation of the souls, in the myth concluding the *Republic*, between human lives and the lives of other animals? Not to mention, of course, that, thought after the Greek manner, the soul is the animal itself, that which lives, which is animated and alive.

A second suggestion: in the wake of a “rhetoric of wildlife” may one expect the development of an ethics of wildlife, dictated by wildlife, radically exceeding the scope and command of the human? What are the ethical implications of this discourse undertaking to remember the forgotten animal? What relation to animals, to plant life, finally to the earth might be harbored here? In a letter to Fortinia of 1971, Italo Calvino imagines a future in which the human, this “recent invention” according to Foucault, has become superfluous: “The human being was necessary: now it is useless. For the world to receive information from the world and benefit from it, nowadays computers and butterflies are sufficient.” In envisioning this world “without humans left, but where the human has realized and resolved itself,” Calvino projects a possible time and place in which the human would be purely instrumental to the circulation of information in the universe, suspended between the lightness of microprocessors and that of winged butterflies, no longer posturing as the measure and master of nature. Already in 1946, in commenting in *L’unità* on the U.S. atomic experiments in the Pacific, Calvino had asked: “Have you ever wondered what the goats from Bikini might have thought? And the cats in the bombarded houses? And the dogs in the war zone? And the fish at the explosion of the missiles? How might they have judged us humans in those moments, in their logic that yet exists, all the more elementary or elemental the more--I was about to say--human? . . . Yes, we owe an explanation to the animals, if not a reparation.” And so, after Calvino, and in consonance with the reflection of, say, Merleau-Ponty or Bateson, one perceives the question of the undying (variously killed) animal in connection with that of the yet unborn human.