

Posthumanism: An Introduction
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Lecture 08

Lec 08 : Critical Posthumanism. Genealogies - 2: Human-Animal Studies - II

Think of the number of ways in which we treat other animals, we construct them as pets, we generate them as fierce monsters, we construct them as exotic species that we can go and watch in an aquarium or in a zoo or in an animal sanctuary or in animal habitats. All of these are methods of constructing the human. Then of course there are ways in which we construct them as spectacles, as specimens, as test subjects and test objects. We put them in a laboratory, we study them, we dissect them and so on. Animals as pets is arguably one of the more commonplace ways of looking at animals and treating animals.

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Othering Animals: Common Modes

- Pets
- Monsters
- Spectacles
- Test-subjects

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Here we see and treat animals as pseudo-humans. We anthropomorphize them. By anthropomorphize we mean, of course, we cast them like humans, attribute human characteristics to them. And animal suspects are seen as making up for some kind of lacuna in our lives. So we tell them that they are like our family members.

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Animals as pets

- Seeing animals as pseudo-humans, anthropomorphizing them,
- As making up for some lack in human lives,
- Are like us and yet not like us – are outside (human spaces) and yet inside

‘If all animals were excluded from the home then the boundaries that the home symbolizes – between inside and outside, friend and stranger, private and public, and so on – would seem to be always firmly in place and security would appear to be assured. The existence of a group of animals that live inside the human home, then, might be read as a challenge to such boundaries’

Erica Fudge

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We tell others that they are like our family members. We believe we treat them as though they are like us, but not exactly like us. They are outside human spaces and yet we are inside them. So we have a certain ambivalence and a certain ambiguity in animals' aspects because we like to think of them as family members but then of course animals will behave like animals too. As Erica Fudge points out that we exclude them from the home, bring them home.

Between inside and outside, they are friends and strangers. But when you bring an animal into the home, What do we expect of them? We expect that they will behave like family members, like us. But they are not like us.

Clearly not. They are animals. So when the animal does the animal thing, we get a little annoyed. We get a little embarrassed. But animals as pets are anthropomorphized because we believe they should be more like us, but not exactly like us.

So a little bit of humanity, a little bit of humaneness, but we still like to have that sense of another. Don't think of animals as monsters or predators. Recently, you may be aware that people have been debating legislation which states that certain dog breeds should not be kept as pets because they are genetically fierce, that they are by nature violent and predatory. But as genetics and geneticists will tell you, Any genetic predisposition emerges in a particular context.

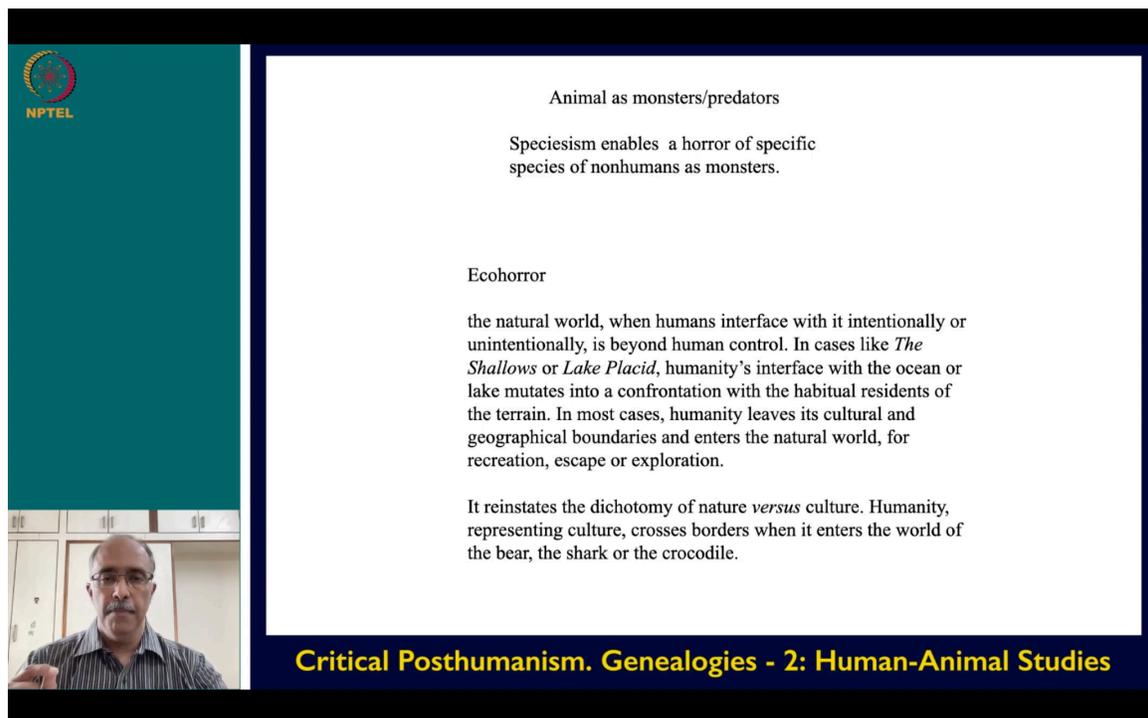
So whether it is the predisposition to disease or predisposition to high intelligence, that predisposition will become a reality, will manifest only in a particular context, which includes home ecosystems, food, the forms of socialization, etc. So a dog is not fundamentally violent or non-violent. The outcome depends on how it is trained, how it is acculturated into human interactions. Interactions with humans, to be more accurate.

So this is the problem and argument that people make among the critical post-humanists because they argue that speciesism enables a certain horror of some kinds of species because the animals are then depicted as monsters. And I think of numerous kinds of eco-horror where the natural world and the human world begin to interact. And when you think of films like *The Shallows* or *Meg* or *Lake Placid*, it of course begins with the early cult film *Jaws*. When humanity interfaces with the lake, with the ocean, with the deserts, then humanity discovers that human culture doesn't have so much control over nature.

And that is the subject of ecological horror or eco-horror, as people have called it. That when humanity or human culture intrudes into nature, meets the natural elements, which includes the other life forms, whether it's plant or animal, then you discover that certain... Equations change. The dynamics are not within your control. Humanity crosses borders when it enters the world of the bear, the shark, the crocodile, or the snake.

And ecological horror is built on that interaction, on that tense moment of facing off the other world. Then there is, of course, the animal aspect of it. The animalist spectacle, as people like John Berger and others who have studied the circus and similar events have pointed out, is the result of the near-complete disappearance of wildlife from human life. The wild is out there. We never meet them.

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Animal as monsters/predators

Speciesism enables a horror of specific species of nonhumans as monsters.

Ecohorror

the natural world, when humans interface with it intentionally or unintentionally, is beyond human control. In cases like *The Shallows* or *Lake Placid*, humanity's interface with the ocean or lake mutates into a confrontation with the habitual residents of the terrain. In most cases, humanity leaves its cultural and geographical boundaries and enters the natural world, for recreation, escape or exploration.

It reinstates the dichotomy of nature *versus* culture. Humanity, representing culture, crosses borders when it enters the world of the bear, the shark or the crocodile.

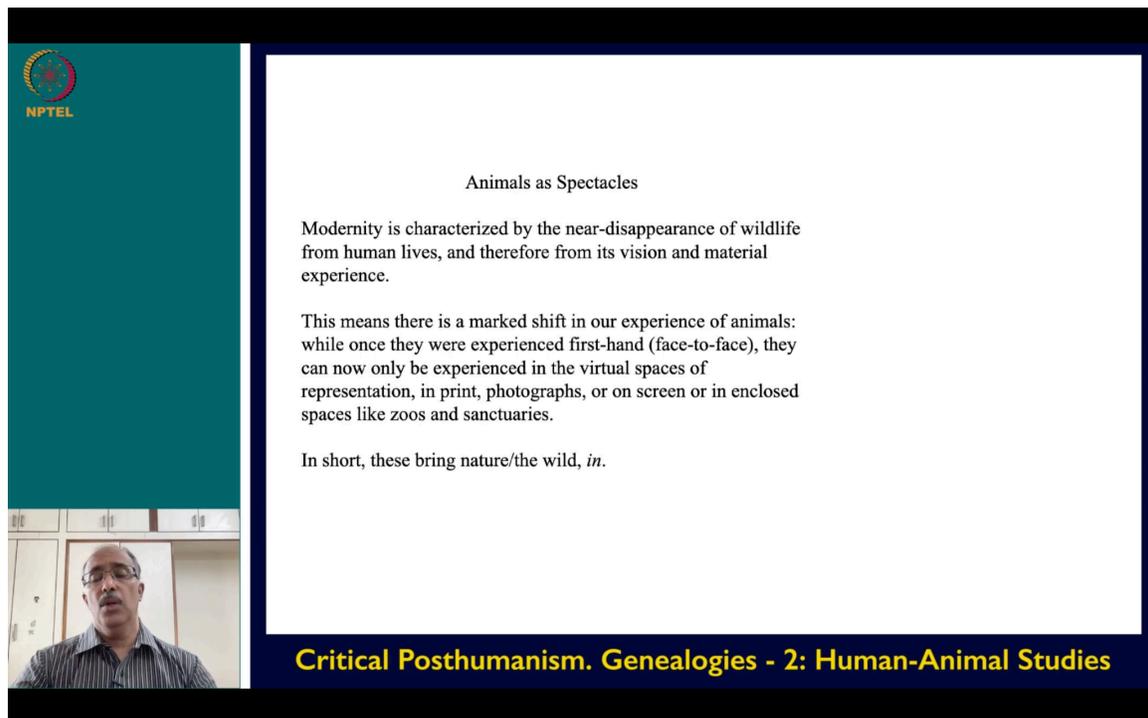
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We never engage with them because we are all conglomerated in cities, in so-called civilized areas. So the animal as a spectacle exists because you bring the animal into a controlled space, like the zoo or National Geographic. You bring the wild in. You bring the wild into a controlled, manageable space, which, as you can imagine and see, is a space humans control and determine. This is the zoo.

You can go and see the animals there. The animal is very carefully very carefully segregated away from its natural habitat into one we have created for them, which is not the zoo or the sanctuary, right? So you bring them in So you bring the wildness in.

You bring the wilderness in. But you bring it in so that you, quote-unquote, manage it. And this is a very specific aspect of critical posthumanism examination of the human-animal encounter because it says that we bring nature into the cultural realm, we manage it, we control it, we even seek to overpower it. So in many ways it's not quite natural. It's what we have constructed.

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Animals as Spectacles

Modernity is characterized by the near-disappearance of wildlife from human lives, and therefore from its vision and material experience.

This means there is a marked shift in our experience of animals: while once they were experienced first-hand (face-to-face), they can now only be experienced in the virtual spaces of representation, in print, photographs, or on screen or in enclosed spaces like zoos and sanctuaries.

In short, these bring nature/the wild, *in*.

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It uses technology. For example the animals in zoos have GPS tags. You observe them. So it's a very interesting mixture of the human, the technological and the natural. And when you look at people like Jimmy Lorime writing about it, you will see the point that you bring them in, then you observe them, you watch them, you study them.

So, to summarize, critical posthumanism believes that the agency of the non-human is a given. The animal and the human have the same animal, that is the vital force. At least by definition, at least in theory, the animal has the same moral status as a human. The human cannot be separated from the material, which includes the non-human forms, plants and animals. And it cannot be separated from the non-living either, the minerals that make up, the chemicals that make up our bodies, our ecosystems.

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Critical Posthumanism argues that

- the agency of nonhumans is a given
- the animal has the same moral status as a human
- The 'vital force' cannot be restricted to humans and some forms of the nonhuman and because it 'cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains' (Braidotti)
- the human can no longer be separated from material (including organic - plants and animals - and inorganic), technological and informational networks;
- The human's very consciousness depends upon these networks
- The human shares not only origins and evolutionary stages with other life forms but also mortality and vulnerability with them
- animals are constitutive of and not prosthetic to human worlds, human identities and human behaviour, and spaces such as the home/family.

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Just as we cannot separate the human from the technological form. In fact, critical post-humanists will argue that our very consciousness depends on this network and the embeddedness of the human in these other words. Humans are constitutive of our lives. They are not attachments. They are part of who we are and who we become.

Thank you.