

“There is a Riddle Here”: Uplift Fiction and the Question of the Animal

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Utrecht University

Merel Aalders (4170954)

Supervisor: Dr. Kári Driscoll

Second Reader: Dr. Tom Idema

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Abstract

The genre of *uplift fiction* deals with speaking and intelligent animals and their relationship with humans, critiquing the humanist conceptions of the categories *human* and *animal*, the boundaries between these categories and human exceptionalism. Its ideological critique can be related to a post-humanist philosophical discourse that includes *the question of the animal* (as considered by Jacques Derrida): how to think about non-human perspectives and how to rethink our ethical treatment of non-humans. Moreover, uplifted animals can be regarded as *cyborgs* (as described by Donna Haraway): cross-species mixtures of the organic and the technological that transgress all presupposed boundaries. The uplift fiction novel consists of a paradoxical nature: it *uplifts* animals in the first place, assuming a hierarchal picture of humans above all other life, and then focusses mainly on the differences and similarities between species. At the same time, however, uplift fiction questions the *anthropomorphic* and *anthropocentric* structures that precede these conceptions of humans and animals by a *critical* anthropomorphism: it mirrors the way in which traditional anthropomorphic (and subsequently anthropocentric) structures are manifested and it opens up a space in which communication between different kinds of subjectivity becomes possible. This is especially true for Adam Roberts' novel *Bête*, that is concerned with responding to the question of the animal specifically and emphasizing man's misrecognition of himself as exceptional, by providing a post-humanist scenario that incorporates non-human subjectivity and the urgent need for renewed ethical standards.

Introduction

If an animal could speak, what would it tell us? In the literary genre of uplift fiction, a range of possible answers to this question is explored. This branch of science fiction features animals that are *uplifted* to a human-like level of consciousness and use language to express

themselves.¹ Aspects of consciousness that are regarded as typically human, such as the awareness of a self and of mortality, are now found in an uplifted animal as well. When an animal speaks, language is no longer the boundary that divides us from it, it can tell us what we are from an outsider perspective, and the idea of *man as the measure of all things* is destabilized. The questions uplift fiction responds to can be considered within the triangular relationship between human, animal and technology. With the works of Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, Donna Haraway and others, I will explore this triangular relationship that encapsulates the questions uplift fiction raises, specifically regarding Adam Roberts' relatively recent novel *Bête* and Derrida's notion of *the question of the animal*.

Bête (2013) tells the story of Graham Penhaligon, who has been a butcher all of his life, which is especially inconvenient in a time and place where animal rights activists have implanted chips in the brains of animals, now called *bêtes*, that make them (appear) conscious. The novel starts with a conversation between Graham and a cow he is about to slaughter:

'Ask me anything,' said the cow. 'Seriously.'

'Let me tell you what is about to happen here,' I said, ... 'Amongst us humans there are some who object to the eating of meat, and to the slaughter of cattle that diet necessitates. Over the years these activists have tried various strategies to interrupt the supply of meat to the market. I'm now standing in a shed talking to the latest of these.'

'You think I don't understand the specific circumstances of my consciousness?' the cow replied. 'You think I don't know how this *thinking-I*

¹ Ina Roy-Faderman, "The Alienation of Humans and Animals in Uplift Fiction," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (2015): 78.

came about? Oh, Graham, of course I do! I remember what it was like before – what I was like.’²

The cow begs Graham not to slaughter him, but Graham does so anyway. The conversation exemplifies what is at stake in the uplift fiction novel: what would a talking animal say back? And: what does it mean to actually consider the animal’s response? According to Graham, it does not mean anything, he believes to just be talking to a chip. But by ignoring the cow’s insinuations at a large moral question, Graham’s situation only gets worse and he will eventually be forced to reconsider himself. Graham often repeats: “There is a riddle here,” referring to the riddle of the mythological Sphinx, only confused, in *Bête* it asks for a creature that walks on two legs in the morning, three in the afternoon and four in the evening.³ The riddle requires an answer that is not *man*. What, then, is the answer? And what does it mean for *man* as the answer to all questions, the measure of all things? This is the critique that uplift fiction deals with: the talking animal, a combination between organism and technology, makes us reconsider what we call human and what consequences this categorization entails. In the case of *Bête*, the justification of killing and eating animals is the consequence of categorization that is attacked mostly, whereas in other uplift fiction zoos, hunting, keeping animals as pets and laboratory experiments can be included as well.

Uplift fiction can be considered to have originated from the point where animals started to appear as a significant topic within science fiction, which, according to Sherryl Vint, who writes about animals in science fiction, started at least with *The Island of Dr. Moreau*.⁴ Science fiction has been concerned with the animal in a number of ways, the most prominent being a reversal of the hierarchy between humans and animals, and the

² Adam Roberts, *Bête* (London: Gollancz, 2014), 5.

³ The Sphinx is a Greek mythological creature with a lion’s body and a human head, that sat outside the city of Thebes, asking the ones who wanted to come in to answer her riddle: *what creature walks on two legs in the morning, three legs in the afternoon, and four legs in the evening?* The story goes that Oedipus was the only traveler to ever answer this riddle correctly by replying that *man* was the answer.

⁴ Sherryl Vint, “‘The Animals in that Country’: Science Fiction and Animal Studies,” *Science Fiction Studies* 35, no. 2 (2008): 177.

introduction of the animal as alien.⁵ The reversal of hierarchy, or the overall disappearance of any hierarchy, is often the result of a scientific or technological practice. Animals as aliens “represent both humanity’s desire for connection to another being and its fear that all others represent a threat to self and hence must be destroyed,” questioning the categories we have instituted to indicate other lifeforms and what exactly is proper to the category *human*.⁶ Uplift fiction borrows aspects from both ways in which animals appear in science fiction.

David Brin was the first science fiction writer to explicitly use the word *uplift* in his *Uplift* series (1980 – 1998), where humans have *uplifted* dolphins and chimpanzees by genetic manipulation and cooperate with them as equals, in a galaxy where the evolutionary process has been replaced by this genetic manipulation that different species perform on each other.⁷ Brin’s work is inspired by, among others, H. G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), and Pierre Boulle’s *Planet of the Apes* (1963), which are now considered part of the uplift genre as well, by Vint and other scholars that write on the subject. Influential works that preceded the genre of uplift fiction, that already featured talking animals or cross-species creatures, can be found at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Critical writers of the Enlightenment, such as Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe, were already concerned with the humanist conceptions of the categories *man* and *animal* and the question of what is proper to the category *man*:

In dismantling ‘man’, the early eighteenth-century English literary interrogation of the Enlightenment simultaneously deconstructs the crucial companion term, ‘animal’. Insisting upon the ways in which different animals and varying animal practices call into doubt the magisterial opposition of these

⁵ Sherryl Vint, *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 136.

⁶ Vint, *Animal Alterity*, 136.

⁷ Sherryl Vint, “Animals and Animality from the Island of Moreau to the Uplift Universe,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 37, no. 2 (2007): 96.

two abstract categories, Swift, Defoe and others undermine a conceptual assumption central to modernity and humanism alike.⁸

Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) features talking horses and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) deals with animals to which human behaviour is ascribed by the narrator. Both novels are ironic travel stories that compromise the supposed categories of the different species. Science fiction that features animals builds on this tradition, adding the significant part of modern science or technology, which complicates the question of the categories even further. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1831) can be considered the first science fiction novel. It does not deal with uplifted animals, but it does consider scientific experimentation and cross-species modelling specifically, questioning the category *human* by considering the perspective of a creature that is non-human. Uplift fiction pursues this tradition by giving the non-human a voice, and stressing the problem of categorization.

There are several historical developments at stake that concern the emergence of fiction that features animals as a critique on humanist conceptions of categorization. Linnaeus' scientific taxonomy of species can be considered an important one. In his *Systema Naturae* Linnaeus refused to "set out criteria of the human in his classificatory system, substituting the imperative 'know thyself'."⁹ It is also assumed that when Linnaeus was studying apes, he did not accept that they were radically different from humans in the sense that they would not have a soul.¹⁰ Linnaeus' scientific endeavours inspired travel stories like *Gulliver's Travels*, that critique the "messy materiality of human-animal encounters," presented as "taxonomic satires."¹¹ *Frankenstein's* creature "faces the radical lack of sympathy that results from his ambiguous place in the taxonomic scheme," raising the

⁸ Philip Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2008), 11.

⁹ Vint, *Animal Alterity*, 29.

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*. (Stanford University Press, 2004), 25.

¹¹ Armstrong, *What Animals Mean*, 57.

question whether Frankenstein and his monster can regard each other as fellow creatures.¹² The works of Swift and Shelley, then, pave the way for other (science) fiction that features animals and trivializes the humanist conception of strictly dividing categories of human and animal. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) can, according to Philip Armstrong, be considered “H. G. Wells’ most direct response to *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Frankenstein*.”¹³ It deals with similar topics, and, most importantly, raises the question of what is proper to what category.

Of course, by the time *The Island of Dr. Moreau* appeared, another important historical development had arisen. Evolutionary theory caused the previously imagined pyramid of hierarchy of which humans stood on top of all other lifeforms to fade, which contributed to a more value-neutral picture of animal species. “As the more value-neutral picture of the relationship of animal species came to the fore,” Ina Roy-Faderman writes, “substantial philosophical as well as scientific traditions have emerged that question the treatment of characteristics, including intelligence, as rankable.”¹⁴ In *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, scientist Moreau tries manufacture his own evolutionary process, creating rational creatures by vivisectioning all kinds of animals and moulding them back together into *better* ones. The uplifted animals, the Beast People, however, eventually devolve into their previous animal-like state again. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* narrates “anxieties about degeneration and loss of humanity,” as many uplift fiction novels do.¹⁵ At the same time, it shows how the domination of nature, and animals in particular, by its supposed separation from what is regarded human, is internal to the development of (Western) science and technology, whereas the seemingly more positive attitude towards uplifting in the work of Brin is “blind to the structures of the human/animal boundary as a philosophical discourse that continues to justify

¹² Ibid., 67.

¹³ Armstrong, *What Animals Mean*, 77.

¹⁴ Roy-Faderman, “Alienation of Humans and Animals,” 94.

¹⁵ Vint, *Animal Alterity*, 54.

our exploitation of animals and often of other humans as well.”¹⁶ Whereas Brin poses himself as an advocate of change concerning the way we regard and interact with other species, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* contains a more sophisticated critique of the philosophical discourse preceding our conceptions of the categories.

Two other prominent examples of uplift fiction from the twentieth century are Olaf Stapledon’s *Sirius* (1944) and Boulle’s *Planet of the Apes*. *Sirius* tells the story of a dog (Sirius) who shows an abnormal level of intelligence due to chemical experimentation. Like *Frankenstein*, the story has a sad overtone considering the loneliness of a creature that does not belong in any category, but also the promising quality of creating an alternative perspective from which to regard the human. *Sirius* appeals to a capacity all species possess, the capacity to connect with other species, that will hopefully “continue to grow in sentient beings who may find new ways to form community.”¹⁷ At one point, Sirius tells Thomas, the scientist that created him: ““My point of view is so utterly different from man’s, and yet at bottom the same. In making me you made something that sees man from clean outside man, and can tell him what he looks like.””¹⁸ *Sirius* is critical of laboratory experiments by emphasizing its possible negative outcome, but also offers the perspective from an outsider and stresses the importance of the consideration of this perspective.

Planet of the Apes is told from the human perspective of Ulysse Mérou, who, during a travel through space, encounters a planet that is being ruled by apes who appear to have the same level of consciousness as himself, while the human beings are unintelligent. The apes conduct scientific experiments on humans, like attempting to make them talk by electric shock therapy. One of Ulysse’s friends is placed in a zoo, other humans are hunted by the apes. Ulysse does manage to befriend some of the apes, and eventually also forms a relationship with one of the ape-like humans, Nova, and they even have a son (also called

¹⁶ Ibid., 101.

¹⁷ Vint, *Animal Alterity*, 204.

¹⁸ Olaf Stapledon, *Sirius* (London: Gollancz, 1944), 116.

Sirius). *Planet of the Apes* provides a critique of the way we treat other species and what structures precede that treatment: “Placed within a context in which alien misrecognition of human sentience is directly connected to social arrangements in which the humans are treated as humans treat animals, such moments of reversal can prompt a reconsideration of our own assessment of other species.”¹⁹ When the apes conduct experiments on humans, hunt them and put them in zoos, one cannot help but wonder how these practices (in reverse) became so normalized.

Other important historical developments for the emergence of uplift fiction are a resurgence of interest in the animal, which can be exemplified by *animal studies*, and the increasing influence of technology on our lives. Animal studies is the scientific field that is concerned with questions that concern the animal, intersecting the topic of the animal with the more general questions of post-humanism by “returning us precisely to the thickness and finitude of human embodiment and to human evolution as itself a specific form of animality, one that is unique and different from other forms but no more different, perhaps, than an orangutan is from a starfish.”²⁰ These developments contributed to the need for exploration of the relationship between humans and animals, and uplift fiction embodies this exploration.

The relationship between humans and animals is further compromised by the rapid scientific and technological developments of the past centuries. The ethical consequences this triangular relationship implies require thorough re-evaluation of our realities. “Technoculture is deeply implicated in the reshaping of human/animal interactions; and sf, as a literature concerned with the social impact of science and technology, can contribute to a necessary rethinking of responsibility and ethics.”²¹ Uplift fiction combines questions about humans, animals and technology as part of the transition between humanist and post-humanist thinking, and takes on the task of emphasizing the consequences of our ethical behaviour.

¹⁹ Vint, *Animal Alterity*, 159.

²⁰ Cary Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human: ‘Animal Studies’ and the Humanities,” *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009): 572.

²¹ Vint, “‘The Animals in that Country’,” 178.

Humans, Animals and Machines

The Question of the Animal

As a framework to explore the triangular relationship between human, animal and technology in uplift fiction, I will analyse Derrida's notion of *the question of the animal*, Haraway's continuation of that question, and the concepts of *anthropocentrism* and *anthropomorphism*.

I will first explore the relationship between human and animal by inquiring Derrida and his formulation of the question of the animal, which has been of great influence for the philosophical discourse on the animal and the emergence of the field of animal studies. In the novel *Bête*, numerous references to Derrida can be found, and the implications of his thought can also be distinguished in other works of the uplift fiction genre. The question of the animal is not a single question, but rather a whole range of questions that are generated from "the same starting point that anchors our ethical response to non-human animals."²² For Cary Wolfe, the utilitarian philosophy of Peter Singer is an example of what can be included within the realm of this question, primarily because of his coining of the term *speciesism*.²³ Singer derived this term from Jeremy Bentham, who can be considered the founder of utilitarianism, and his passage on animals and ethics: "The question is not, can they reason? Nor, can they talk? But, can they suffer?"²⁴ According to Singer we should assume that the answer to that question is yes, regardless of the question whether the animal *knows* when it is suffering, and

²² Cary Wolfe, "Flesh and Finitude: Thinking Animals in (Post) Humanist Philosophy," *SubStance* 37, no. 3 (2008): 8.

²³ The term *speciesism* derives from terms like *racism* and *sexism* and refers to the ethical mistreatment or exclusion of subjects based on their species. It implies that the more intelligent or sentient species have an equal right to be included in the utilitarian equation as humans that are biologically deprived of their intelligence or sentience.

²⁴ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 1999), XVII.

prioritize this capacity to suffer in order to equalize the ethical approach of humans and animals.²⁵

This ethical stance has no doubt far-reaching consequences, but for Derrida, the compassion that is necessary to even ask this question, if it is taken seriously, “would have to change even the very cornerstone [...] of the philosophical problematic of the animal.”²⁶ Of importance is Bentham’s remark on speech and reason as the usually decisive criteria on which to distinguish the ethical treatment of either humans or animals. Instead of asking whether they can speak or reason, he asks whether they can suffer. “The form of this question changes everything,” Derrida observes. “It no longer simply concerns the *logos*, the disposition and whole configuration of the *logos*, having it or not. ... The question is disturbed by a certain *passivity*.”²⁷ *Logos* refers in this case to speech and reason, faculties that are regarded as exclusively human. The animal is deprived of these faculties by the human, we have decided that in order to respond, to make yourself count, you need language, which renders the animal passive. Wolfe writes:

For Singer as well as for Derrida, Bentham’s passage – with its rejection of the relevance of ‘talk’ and ‘the faculty of discourse’ as an ethically decisive difference between humans and non-humans – marks a signal advance beyond the well-known ‘political animal passage’ in Aristotle which, as Derrida has noted, inaugurates an entire philosophical tradition of thinking the difference between human and non-human animals in terms of the human’s ability to properly ‘respond’ to its world rather than merely ‘react’ to it – a capacity made possible (so the story goes) by language.²⁸

²⁵ Peter Singer, "Speciesism and moral status," *Metaphilosophy* 40.3-4 (2009): 575.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 58.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁸ Wolfe, "Flesh and Finitude," 9.

The Aristotelean conception of man as a *zoōn politikon*, an animal that is defined by its capacity to be political through the use of language, has, according to Derrida, been central to the philosophical discourse of the past centuries, which contributed to the prevailing of presuppositions regarding the concept of the animal: “Wherever something like ‘the animal’ is named, the gravest, most resistant, also the most naive and the most self-interested presuppositions dominate what is called human culture [...] in any case they dominate the philosophical discourse that has been prevalent for centuries.”²⁹ Another important aspect of the dominant philosophical discourse is the Cartesian dualist conception of body and mind, the animal being solely body, an animal-machine, incapable of responding.³⁰ This dominance of presuppositions regarding the animal within human culture is what Derrida tries to deconstruct, so that a different relation between human and animal can become possible.³¹

In fact, *the animal* is a term Derrida wants to avoid, since it does not do justice to all the different species that are part of this term. It is a generalization of all non-human species that places the human above the animal. Derrida writes: “I am suspicious of the appellation ‘Animal’ in the singular, as if there were simply Man and the Animal, as if the homogeneous concept THE Animal could be extended universally to all nonhuman forms of living beings.”³² To get around this problematic term, Derrida introduces the neologism *l’animot* (a combination between the singular *l’animal*, plural *l’animaux* and *mot*, meaning *word*) to indicate his objections to the generalization of all animals instead of recognizing a diversity of life forms, as well as to make the argument “that nonhuman life forms are the site for

²⁹ Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, “Violence against Animals,” *For What Tomorrow... a Dialogue*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford University Press, 2004): 63.

³⁰ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 201.

³¹ Derrida both theorized and used the concept of deconstruction to unveil the underlying presuppositions of the Western philosophical tradition in literary texts.

³² Derrida and Roudinesco, “Violence against Animals,” 63.

questions of the (human) Other.”³³ The term *l’animot* is an attempt to deconstruct the divide between the categories *human* and *animal* and it indicates a place from which to start thinking about otherness, or alterity: the position of an outsider subject.³⁴ The consideration of otherness, then, forces us to step off the pedestal we have put ourselves on as the measure of all things.

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* Derrida describes an encounter with his cat while standing naked before it, and starts considering the point of view of the animal. What he finds is that the question of the animal “comes down to knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what *respond* means. And how to distinguish a response from a reaction.”³⁵ The question of the animal is the question of language, but it is not about knowing whether the animal speaks, rather, it is about what it means to respond. *Response* has to mean something else than its connotation that is limited to language. More important than the ability to speak, then, is the *gaze* of the animal, its point of view:

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself.³⁶

The gaze of the other offers what Derrida calls the *ends of man*, the limits of the place from which man can address himself. But this is a misrecognition, the reciprocity of gazes between the human and non-human, should not be misrecognized as the ends of man. Rather,

³³ Philip Armstrong and Laurence Simmons, *Knowing Animals* (Brill NV 2007), 5.

³⁴ Vint, *Animal Alterity*, 11.

³⁵ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

it should be the starting point from which to consider the other and its perspective. This had not been recognized by other philosophers of language:

The experience of seeing the animal, of the animal that looks at them, has not been taken into account in the philosophical or theoretical architecture of their discourse. It is as if the men representing this configuration had seen without being seen, seen the animal without being seen by it, without being seen seen by it, without being seen seen naked by someone who, from deep within a life called animal, and not only by means of the gaze, would have obliged them to recognize, at the moment of address, that this was their affair, their lookout.³⁷

Being seen as seen by the animal (*seen seen*), and recognizing it as the point from which to start thinking instead of misrecognizing it as the end of man, is core to answering the question of the animal. The misrecognition of the end of what we can respond to and what can respond to us, the end of what can be measured in relation to us, has to be deconstructed. To reconsider the presuppositions that precede our ethical considerations in order eventually to change them, we should take the intersection between *l'animot* (the deconstructed animal word, the starting point from which to think about otherness) and ourselves, as *general singulars* as well, to start with: "Let us set out again from this place of intersection between these two general singulars, the animal (*l'animot*) and the 'I', the 'I's, the place where in a given language, French for example, an 'I' says 'I'."³⁸ From this intersection, between the 'I' that addresses itself, and *l'animot*, we can do justice to the question of the animal.

³⁷ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 37.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

Cyborgs and Companion Species

The relation between human and technology, especially in the genre of science fiction, might be best approached by Donna Haraway's concept of the cyborg.³⁹ In "A Cyborg Manifesto," which she calls an *ironic political myth* (the political myth referring to what we call *us*, the myth of identity, and ironic because of the irresolvable tensions it includes), Haraway describes the cyborg as follows: "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction."⁴⁰ Cyborgs play a major part in modern science fiction. The cyborgs, combinations between organism and machine, populate fictional worlds that are both natural and artificial, just like our own social and bodily reality: "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics."⁴¹ Instead of political animals, we are now crossing the boundaries between human, animal and machine, we *are* these boundaries, we are cyborgs.

The Aristotelean philosophical tradition of thinking about humans as animals that manifest themselves politically by their use of language, as well as the Cartesian divide between mind and body and the humanist categories that divide humans and animals in order to decide what is proper to the category *human* are transgressed by post-humanist conceptions of the relation between humans, animals and technology. "The cyborg simulates politics, a much more potent field of operations," Haraway writes.⁴² Thinking about politics as

³⁹ Haraway is concerned with feminist critique, and appeals to the experience of women of the twentieth century in particular, but her analysis of the intricate relationship between technology and the structures of human social life are of significance for science fiction in general, and science fiction dealing with uplifted animals as well.

⁴⁰ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991): 149.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 130.

simulated structures instead of rooted in the essential capacity of language-use, opens up a discourse that questions everything from a perspective that does not presuppose humans as the centre of philosophical thinking: “The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically.”⁴³ The cyborg is human as well as animal, organic as well as machine and collective as well as individual.

Whereas Derrida strives to deconstruct the philosophical discourse that supposes the boundaries between humans and animals, Haraway advocates a change in the discourse on animals that is already happening through our cybernetic reality. She states that many people no longer feel the need for separation between human and animal: “The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted if not turned into amusement parks – language, tool use, social behaviour, mental events, nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal.”⁴⁴ The cyborg appears precisely when this boundary is crossed, and technological culture compromises the persistent dualisms of Western philosophical tradition, dualisms like self/other, human/animal and mind/body. Because the cyborg does not identify itself by these dualisms and does not require universalizing theories, it has the possibility to reconstruct the boundaries of our bodily and social realities.

In *When Species Meet*, Haraway is more concerned with the limits that are exceeded when humans and animals, especially domesticated ones, cross each other’s paths and the questions that raises “about who ‘we’ will become.”⁴⁵ Haraway builds on Derrida’s *The Animal Therefore I Am*, especially the third section, entitled “And Say the Animal Responded?” That is a wonderful question, she thinks. According to Derrida, the question of the animal is not a matter of giving speech back to it, but rather of approaching it in a way that crosses the categorical boundaries between the *us* and the other. To make up for the lack of

⁴³ Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*, 130.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁵ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 5.

practical advice on how to do that, how to start considering the animal at the intersection between the 'I' and *l'animot*, Haraway sketches a number real-life examples in which humans and animals have formed reciprocal relationships, becoming *companion species*, by means of which she attempts to handle the encounters in the philosophical manner necessary to break with the Western philosophical tradition of thinking about animals (according to Derrida). So, she in turn responds philosophically to Derrida's question of the animal: "And say the philosopher responded?"⁴⁶ For Haraway, Bentham's criterion of suffering is not the decisive one, for it comes down to empathy, which suggests passivity on the side of the animal, whereas she would rather include work and play in her analyses, other things that might provoke mutual response between human and animal, as a starting point from which humans and animals can become companion species.

Anthropocentrism and Anthropomorphism

Besides the question of the animal, the concepts of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism will contribute some more to the theoretical framework concerning humans, animals and machines, according to which I will analyse *Bête*. I will first discuss anthropocentrism on the basis of Agamben's anthropological machine. The concept of the anthropological machine makes clear how the categories that the cyborg transgresses manifest themselves in the first place and why we have depended on them for so long.

The anthropological machine is a hypothetical mechanism that separates the human from the non-human, a device that is at work in our culture, and, according to Agamben, must be stopped: it runs on language as the decisive criterion between humans and animals, which is merely a historical production, instead of inherent to the psychophysical structure of humans.⁴⁷ Agamben distinguishes a modern anthropological machine and an earlier one: "If,

⁴⁶ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 45.

⁴⁷ Agamben, *The Open*, 37-38.

in the machine of the moderns, the outside is produced through the exclusion of an inside and the inhuman produced by animalizing the human, here [in the earlier machine] the inside is obtained through the inclusion of an outside, and the non-man is produced by the humanization of an animal: the man-ape.” The modern machine excludes an internal animal-like quality from what is counted as human. The earlier machine produces the *man-ape*, which can be many things, from barbarians to slaves, as long as they are considered not to have the exclusive human qualities needed to count as humans. The only way the anthropological machine could work (both modern and early) is if it would consider an open space within itself, in which communication between the human and the non-human can become possible. If not, it can be considered a vital part of anthropocentric human exceptionalism and the conservation of a sense of essential difference between human and non-human that *justifies* inclusion and exclusion of ethical consideration.

Anthropomorphism is the attributing of “human thoughts, feelings, motivations and beliefs to other species.”⁴⁸ A recent resurgence of interest in this topic, Sandra Mitchell writes in “Anthropomorphism and Cross-Species Modelling,” suggests that the traditional conception of anthropomorphism is based on the Cartesian idea that animals are just complex machines that do not have the souls that make humans human.⁴⁹ However, according to Mitchell, “we are centuries beyond that.”⁵⁰ Since Linneaus did already not agree to divide humans and apes on the criterion of having a soul and Darwin’s discoveries have been taken in consideration for some time now, it is plausible that things are, in fact, changing, and that anthropomorphism is not even necessarily a mechanism that strictly divides humans and animals according to their specific characteristics anymore. According to Mitchell,

⁴⁸ James Serpell, “People in Disguise: Anthropomorphism and the Human-Pet Relationship,” in *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 124.

⁴⁹ Sandra Mitchell, “Anthropomorphism and Cross-Species Modelling,” in *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 103.

⁵⁰ Mitchell, “Anthropomorphism and Cross-Species Modelling,” 103.

anthropomorphism can even lead to a deeper understanding of the common ground humans and animals share for ethical consideration.

Mitchell lists three objections she holds against the attributes that are traditionally ascribed to anthropomorphism. The first is that anthropomorphism would be based on a category mistake, because the two categories of human and animal are precisely those that are increasingly contested. Secondly, it would be an overestimation of similarities between humans and animals, but relevant questions about for instance the cognitive states of humans and animals, should not be reduced to the question whether it is a similarity or not. The third characteristic would be that it is unavoidable, but that would mean we would not have the capability to formulate other descriptions of animal behaviour and cognition, which Mitchell also does not believe to be true. Moreover, the idea rests on a confusion with anthropocentrism. The fact that anthropomorphism applies words we apply to typically human behaviour, does not mean that that the concepts behind the words can exclusively refer to human behaviour, they are not necessarily exceptionally human.

Mitchell considers anthropomorphic models as “specific, scientifically accessible claims of similarity between humans and non-humans.”⁵¹ These claims to similarity are often the hardest to substantiate, which is why they might lead to the most reflexive scientific analyses of both human and non-human cognition. This can in turn have a positive effect on our ethical treatment of animals: “The deeper understanding of the lives of other animals may shift the focus from the anthropocentric question of whether other beings are sufficiently like humans to warrant the same moral rights as humans to a more generalized analyses of what capacities, whether found in humans or not, ought to be the basis for moral consideration.”⁵² As an example we could consider our similar capabilities to suffer, or of having a considerable perspective.

⁵¹ Mitchell, “Anthropomorphism and Cross-Species Modelling,” 114.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 115.

Tom Tyler, another author on this topic, is concerned with epistemological anthropocentrism: the idea that humans know the world by the conception that man is the measure of all things, which he does not believe to be true – anthropocentrism is not unavoidable.⁵³ By looking into the ways humans have used animals to construct their knowledge of the world, he suggests the following: “Considerations and classifications of *anthrōpos* need, ultimately, to take account of heterogeneous, incongruous, even heteroclitic modes of narcissistic identification, and we discover [...] a new, encompassing, more-than-human ‘we’.”⁵⁴ By taking into account the diverse and irregular ways in which humans have projected their supposedly unique characteristics upon non-humans to make sense of the world, a new, more comprehensive perspective on ourselves can be inaugurated.

Anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, then, are not bad things in themselves, but by analysing the way they are constructed (such as Agamben’s idea of the anthropological machine), significant questions about animals and ourselves can be brought to the table.

Literary Analysis

Uplift Fiction

According to Derrida, the question whether the animal uses language or not should no longer be the starting point from which to approach the animal (ethically), which forces man to reconsider himself as the measure of all things. Agamben’s anthropological machine runs on language as well, and anthropomorphism in the modern sense can help us ask relevant questions about human and non-human cognition, among other things, breaking with conceptions of human exceptionalism. Uplift fiction contains similar critiques, but it is problematic as well. The works that belong to this genre create a world in which the respective roles of humans and animals are reversed or tampered with, or the divide between

⁵³ Tom Tyler, *Ciferae* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 2-4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

humans and animals has been erased almost completely, but they first of all *uplift* animals, which assumes an anthropocentric hierarchy in the first place. Moreover, they *give speech back to them*, which, according to Derrida, is not the way to go when considering the animal. I would like to argue that this is the case for *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *Sirius* and *Planet of the Apes*, even though their narratives are not only as one-dimensional as the aforementioned criticism of the genre suggests, since they also mirror our anthropomorphic tendencies and questioning our ethical considerations, and that *Bête* features the uplifted animal as even more complex, doing much more justice to post-humanist critique concerning the human/animal divide.

Ina Roy-Faderman, one of the scholars writing on uplift fiction, finds that the marginalizing and including or excluding of the typically human or animal characteristics (the works of the anthropological machine) that either equalize or divide them, constitutes the paradoxical nature of the uplift fiction novel. As a result, uplift fiction engages in human exceptionalism.⁵⁵ Although it has adopted a more modern conception of the mind than the Cartesian dualist idea or the Aristotelian picture of life, uplift fiction often still proposes a definite division between mental capacities and other capacities.⁵⁶ Mental capacities can be hierarchically ranked, and are exemplified by the use of language: “In many of these works, a premium is placed on the ability to communicate with human beings using human-style communication. So human-like linguistic capacity is provided as either a sign or an instantiation of ‘real’ intelligence. [...] In this case, we are talking about human linguistic exceptionalism.”⁵⁷ Roy-Faderman takes *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and *Bête* as examples of works she thinks contribute to an interpretation of human exceptionalism and suggest an

⁵⁵ Roy-Faderman, “Alienation of Humans and Animals,” 79.

⁵⁶ The Aristotelian picture refers to a divide between mere life, the animal soul (that only confers movement) and the human soul that has the capability of rationality. This capacity of the human soul is what defines the human as a *zoōn politikon*. Agamben also claimed that Aristotle suggested a divide between *bios* (a particular mode of life) and *zoē* (natural life), but whether or not this distinction stems from Aristotle’s texts is a topic of discussion.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

impermeable boundary between humans and animals. In *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and many other uplift fiction novels, intelligence is portrayed as a singular entity and as a criterion for hierarchy. *Bête* provides a more complicated image of intelligence, by supposing that the bêtes have a consciousness like the Cartesian conception of mind, separated from the body as a singular entity, that connects with human consciousness through technology. But both works still emphasize either the differences or the similarities between humans too much, according to Roy-Faderman, and they are exemplified by language.

In “Talking (for, with) Dogs: Science Fiction Breaks a Species Barrier,” Joan Gordon focusses specifically on dogs in science fiction. As opposed to Roy-Faderman, she is less concerned with the aspect of language preventing the crossing of any real boundaries between humans and animals in science fiction. Gordon does not specifically mention uplift fiction, but does focus on the animal that has speech, which would typically signify its intelligence and indicate an uplifted animal. The language of animals has two functions in the science fiction novel: “Science fiction allows us to listen to and understand the (admittedly speculative) response and reciprocation when animals speak back while, at the same time, speaking for those animals, enacting a kind of critical anthropomorphism.”⁵⁸ Gordon thinks that the space in which the human and the animal can interact, provides a *critical* anthropomorphism: it shows us our own inclinations to the projection of human capabilities on animals (and, possibly, the anthropocentric convictions behind it).

I think it is relevant to keep the paradoxical nature of uplift fiction that Roy-Faderman points out in mind, but an interpretation of it should not have to be limited to it. I agree with Gordon that the animal’s use of language and the intelligence it signifies can provide a space for reflecting at the mechanisms that are at work, similar to the open space Agamben envisions in his *working* conception of the anthropological machine, a space that is key to the

⁵⁸ Gordon, “Talking (for, with) Dogs,” 459-460.

re-evaluation of our ethical situation. This, I think, is the same kind of space for progressive thought on humans and animals Mitchell and Tyler feel is reserved for critical anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism within philosophy and science, especially (literary) animal studies, a space in which the question of the animal can be considered as part of a cybernetic reality (which is, after all, a fiction).

Bête

Uplift fiction is not just about animals that become similar to humans by attaining language, rather, it is about *what* the animal says, about themselves, about us, and about our relationship with them. This is specifically true for *Bête*, where the uplifted animals are particularly concerned with making themselves heard. The narrative starts off with the conversation between Graham and the cow he is about the slaughter. The cow, a bête, asks Graham to be *Turing-tested*, referencing to the well-known hypothetical Turing test that would be designed to find out whether machines could simulate human intelligence. In Graham's eyes, the cow fails the test, he does not believe it to represent real intelligence and slaughters it. In another conversation, between Graham and his son Albert, an animal rights activists who thinks the way humans have been treating animals has always been ultimately *speciesist*, the two opposing opinions on the matter of uplifted animals are exemplified:

'It's like you haven't even talked to them!'

'Them?'

'The animals! It's no echo chamber. I *talk* to the animals; they *talk* to me. You think I can't tell the difference between talking to somebody else and talking to myself, like some nutter would?'

‘You’re not getting the point,’ I said, becoming heated. ‘You’re not understanding. Talk is *the problem*. Talk is what humans do – not what animals do. It’s like some super-spider took charge of the world and modified all the other animals so that they shat silk strands and wove webs with the stuff. The world would be clotted with webs, and every animal would be spiderlike. It wouldn’t be nature discovering its fucking inner spiderness – it would be imposition, exactly the same kind of imposition. Can you not see that? Talk is what *we* have, what makes *us* distinctive. Talk to us is what webs are to a spider, or speed to a gazelle.’⁵⁹

Graham is the perfect example of anthropocentrism: he finds that language is the specifically human characteristic that defines us. Like the modern anthropological machine, he thinks that the outside is produced by the exclusion of an inside: language, the inside characteristic, is excluded from the outside, the non-human. Albert, on the other hand, ascribes subjectivity to the animals without thinking about it twice, but is thereby not at all critical towards the concepts of human and animal cognition. His traditional anthropomorphic projections are not helpful in asking relevant questions about humans as animals as transgressing categories at all, which is why both views, Graham’s and Albert’s, turn out to be too simplistic.

As the animal rights activists and the bêtes gain more power, Graham has to give up his farm and flee for the possibility of being tried for the murder of an intelligent, speaking subject. He meets Anne, whom he falls in love with, and her cat Cincinnatus. Conversations between Graham and Cincinnatus form an important part of the story. As Graham sits in front of Cincinnatus naked (much like Derrida in *The Animal Therefore I Am*), they speak of the

⁵⁹ Roberts, *Bête*, 114.

cow Graham killed, and whether it is morally justifiable: is it an animal-like nature to kill, and if so, what is Graham's excuse? Soon after, the conversation turns to consciousness:

'Here's a radically different kind of intellect. The chips they put in – me.' The cat yawned. 'And the difference here, my dear Graham, is that my chip both acts and is acted upon. The mysteriously lacking ingredient x means that your laptop is never going to become conscious–' ... '–is supplied by the animal mind into which it is lodged. It's miraculous, really.'

'You're not a miracle,' I returned. 'You're a chess-playing algorithm that happens to use words instead of chess moves. You're an illusion.'

'My consciousness being precisely as illusory as yours...' said the cat, smugly; but didn't finish the sentence.⁶⁰

Cincinnatus transgresses the categories anthropomorphism suggests, by speculating about killing, whether it is part of an animal-like nature or not, and then about consciousness, thus shifting the traditional anthropomorphic model to "a more generalized analyses of what capacities, whether found in humans or not, ought to be the basis for moral consideration."⁶¹ In addition to that, the views on killing, morality and consciousness are presented precisely by his different kind of consciousness, that of a cybernetic cat.

Roy-Faderman states that because the bêtes are more machine than animal, the boundaries between the human and the animal are not really transgressed within *Bête*.⁶² It is more likely that the boundaries between humans and cyborgs is transgressed, she thinks, but what she does not recognize is that the crossing of the boundaries between human and cyborg is not just the fusion of human and technology, the cyborg combines *all* organisms and

⁶⁰ Roberts, *Bête*, 64.

⁶¹ Mitchell, "Anthropomorphism and Cross-Species Modelling," 115.

⁶² Roy-Faderman, "The Alienation of Humans and Animals," 88.

technology. The bêtes are therefore not merely machines, they are complex mixtures between animal, human and machine, they are post-animals even.⁶³ Humans are already animal-machines, now animals are becoming human-machines. The technological aspects of *Bête* are not to be seen as just some thought-experiment that has nothing to do with our *real* relationship with animals, rather, they mirror the de- and reconstruction of humanist thinking into cybernetic reality. Technology has changed our relationship with animals, and so the transgression of the boundaries between humans and technology is, in fact, very relevant for the question of the animal.

Bête addresses multiple aspects of Derrida's question of the animal, about for example appellation (Graham does not like it when the bêtes call him by his name – calling names is, after all, one of the advantages of being human) and eating (who eats whom?). One very clear example of the deconstruction of the philosophical tradition of thinking about human/animal categories, however, is the transformation of the myth of the Sphinx that *Bête* offers. Oedipus was the only traveler to ever answer the riddle of the Sphinx correctly, being “the thinker, the man of reason and intelligence, the truth seeker.”⁶⁴ He replied that the answer was *man*, because, “Is not ‘man’ the measure of all things, always the final answer, the end to all questions?”⁶⁵ Man is the only creature that recognizes himself by his uniqueness in nature. *Bête* is divided into three parts, named after but confusing the three stages of life that the mysterious creature of the riddle of the Sphinx goes through (*Two Legs in the Morning*, *Three Legs in the Afternoon* and *Four Legs in the Evening*). Throughout the narrative, many other little riddles appear, being posed or solved by Graham. But the riddle that surrounds the narrative, the one of the Sphinx, cannot be answered with a simple, singular category like *man* or *animal*. A one-dimensional answer like that does not suffice anymore, it supposes anthropomorphism or anthropocentrism.

⁶³ Vint, *Animal Alterity*, 194.

⁶⁴ Tyler, *Ciferae*, 164.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 165.

So do the two most prominently expressed views on the categories *human* and *animal* in *Bête*, those of Graham on the one hand, and those of the animal rights activists on the other. Their opinions come down to the question of language, the question whether the animal should be given speech or not, but the question of the animal desires neither of these approaches. It is much more a question of identity, and this is what Graham finally realizes at the end of the narrative: “It all comes down to the moment. A man, his cat. ‘His’ meaning not possession, but identity. There is a riddle here.”⁶⁶ After losing almost everyone around him, including his lover Anne, who dies, Graham’s identity and that of Cincinnatus are merged, he experiences an actual fusion of different types of consciousness. Cincinnatus offers Graham his chip so that he can access all the memories of Anne that are on it. When doing so, Graham first of all gives in to the idea that the other kinds of consciousness around him are worthwhile to interact with:

‘It was in my head to say, *he was my friend*. ... ‘I’ve misunderstood your lot,’ I told him.

The cat came forward and stretched himself, sinuously, winding between my legs. ‘Misrecognition, it said. ‘It’s your peculiar genius, Graham. It’s what humans are best at.’⁶⁷

Moreover, it turns out that the whole story was told by a *bête*, for Graham has become one, a human/animal/machine (having the reader even misrecognize the perspective that Graham’s story was told from). In an alternative version of the conversation between Oedipus and the Sphinx, the Sphinx finally explains her riddle:

⁶⁶ Roberts, *Bête*, 308.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 309.

‘We are equally beasts, Oedipus, but you are the lesser of the two. When you were a toddler you walked unsteadily on two legs; and when you became a man and your cock grew long you swaggered more confidently because of it; but the day will come when you become me, and walk on four legs, and only then will you have matured.’⁶⁸

The answer to the riddle of the Sphinx is that man has to recognize himself as an animal in order to mature and realize his own cocky assumptions about human exceptionality. This, again, comes down to language: the misrecognition of what *response* means, that a mutual relationship between species, companion species if you will, is not dependent on the supposedly exceptional characteristic of speech that divides humans and animals. The assumption that language is an essential human quality that justifies the idea that we can be hierarchically ranked above animals and treat them poorly is a misrecognition of what constitutes a considerable perspective, of what counts as *response*. Our assumptions about what is human and what is not rest on an anthropocentric misrecognition, the idea that there is no other perspective than a human’s (*the ends of man*), and when Graham’s consciousness blends into that of a cybernetic cat and the body of a fox, he realizes this fact: “That’s the riddle: that you have misrecognized the end and it’s not the end at all.”⁶⁹ *Bête* shows that the question of the animal, how to regard it, how to consider its perspective, and how to treat it ethically, is about the misrecognition of the boundaries of the category *human*, a misrecognition of *the ends of man*. After all, in our cybernetic realities, the boundaries are already gone. At least, that is what *Bête* responds.

⁶⁸ Roberts, *Bête*, 285.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 311.

Conclusion

When humanism turns into post-humanism, man is not the measure of all things anymore, not the answer to all questions. The question of the animal, for instance, as a combination of interrelated questions, cannot be answered by anthropocentric assumptions. Instead, to take real responsibility, there has to be created a space in which other kinds of subjectivity can be seriously considered. The most important barrier to transgress is the one language has provided for a long time within philosophical discourse on human/animal categories. The prevailing view that animals do not have language, that they are significantly different from us by this lack of communication and that this justifies our treatment of them, has to be (and is being) deconstructed. Vint writes:

This is because language is integrally tied to a form of life, produced by concrete and embodied experience that varies among species. Yet this need not to be taken only as grounds for despair and the failure of even the fantasy of communication. As Cary Wolfe points out, truly communicating with an animal other is about facing a consciousness that is beyond ours.⁷⁰

Language, as it is tied to a form of life, has been the divide between human and animal, and subsequently this divide has been taken as insurmountable. But response, reciprocity, being *seen as seen by the animal* and eventually maybe companionship are not to be limited by language. Uplift fiction is problematic in this light, since it is precisely this embodiment of the *fantasy of communication*, thereby seemingly ignoring the difficulties that surface when dealing with a *consciousness that is beyond ours*. However, uplift fiction mirrors our own anthropocentric and anthropomorphic tendencies by reversing the roles (of,

⁷⁰ Vint, *Animal Alterity*, 68.

for instance, humans and apes) or introducing cross-species creatures (such as vivisected Beast People) to make us reconsider our presupposed human/animal categories and the ethical treatment we believe is justified according to those. *Bête* is an excellent example of the ideology critique that uplift fiction can offer. It specifically tries to do justice to Derrida's notion of the question of the animal and discusses the topics of language, consciousness and animal cruelty at length. It not only attempts to solve Derrida's question of what response means, it poses a new riddle: how does man now recognize himself?

Man has not recognized himself by his uniqueness in nature, he has *mis*recognized himself by that assumption, *Bête* suggests, and humans now have to measure themselves to a larger scale of both human and non-human subjectivity, and consequently rethink their ethical conduct. This means reconsidering the killing and eating of animals, laboratory experiments, hunting, keeping pets, zoos... Especially when it comes to eating, *Bête* consists of a sharp critique, first of all by answering the question what an animal that is about to slaughter might respond, and eventually by showing that, whether an animal can talk or not, its different *kind* of subjectivity, that regards us as much as we regard the animal, its *response*, has to be considered in the first place. *Bête* has the uplifted animal function as more than a mirror, it specifically attempts to open up a space from which to start to reconsider every belief of human exceptionalism we still hold, thus providing an insightful critique of the philosophical discourse on humans, animals and language that is changing from humanist to post-humanist.

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