

Imagine (Other Beings)

The Animal Gaze in Baudelaire,
Robertson, and Varo

Module: CO5001 – Apples and Oranges. Issues in Comparative Literature

Student ID: 200038490

Word count: 3296

In his famous analysis of the gaze, Jean-Paul Sartre claims that humans need an ‘other’ to become conscious of themselves. Sartre argues, to be exact, that one needs to be *looked* at by another subject—and that the ‘other’ is recognised as a subject because they, just like oneself, project a world where one is about to be objectified. This confrontation marks the ‘original lapse’ that destabilizes one’s own, naïve sense of freedom:

Ainsi, par le regard, j’éprouve autrui concrètement comme sujet libre et conscient qui fait qu’il y a un monde en se temporalisant vers ses propres possibilités. Et la présence sans intermédiaire de ce sujet est la condition nécessaire de toute pensée que je tenterais de former sur moi-même.¹

Seeing and being seen, that is the key take-away, is at the heart of subjectivity. This raises the question, however, why Sartre only talks about humans. David Wood has pointed out that there is actually “no better model for the objectifying gaze than that of the predator weighing up dinner,”² and a naked, ashamed Derrida has shown at full length (albeit without direct reference to Sartre) that the gaze of an animal very well has the power to subjectify.³ But in the case of Sartre, his literal disregard of non-human animals is only logical. For granting subjectivity to animals would entail acknowledging their ability to foreclose human freedom—a freedom that, as Cary Wolfe suggests in his works, requires “as its material condition of possibility absolute control over the lives of nonhuman others.”⁴

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’être et le néant. Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 317 (“[l]a chute originelle”: p. 309).

² David Wood, ‘Thinking with Cats’ in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, ed. by Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 129–144 (p. 131).

³ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *L’animal que donc je suis*, ed. by Marie-Louise Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 2006).

⁴ Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 7.

Indeed, Sartre's analysis of the look is but one theory of many that seek to establish human exceptionalism by suppressing non-human subjectivity, thus reproducing (to say the magic word) a framework of *speciesism*.⁵ "In the accompanying ideology," John Berger clairvoyantly argued, "animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance."⁶ This deliberate omission can be traced, for example, in Charles Baudelaire's 1857 poem 'Le chat'.⁷ In this Petrarchan sonnet the speaker caresses his cat, and this triggers a comparison of the pet to a woman. So, whereas the poem starts with addressing the animal in the octave ("Viens, mon beau chat", v. 1), the attention turns to the woman and her cat-like qualities in the sestet ("Je vois ma femme en esprit", v. 9). Setting aside the already provocative nature of the comparison as such, the structure of the poem with its shifting reference from non-human to human animal neatly enables us to juxtapose the respective attributions. And we see that the beginning establishes a strict hierarchy. The speaker addresses the cat in imperatives ("Viens"; "Retiens", v. 1; 2), and she is being presented as a passive object of pleasure, at free disposal for the speaker's needs: "Lorsque mes doigts caressent à loisir | Ta tête et ton dos élastique, | Et que ma main s'enivre du plaisir | De palper ton corps électrique" (v. 5–8). Consequently, she is not granted her own gaze: her eyes are presented as inanimate ("Mêlés de métal et d'agate", v. 4), and the speaker, by making use of an unsettling

⁵ The term was coined by Peter Singer to describe "a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interest of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species." Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Avon Books, 1975), p. 7.

⁶ John Berger, *Why Look at Animals* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 27.

⁷ Charles Baudelaire, 'Le Chat', in *Charles Baudelaire: Complete Poems*, trans. by Walter Martin (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 88. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

metaphor, symbolically encroaches on the cat's personal freedom (“laisse-moi plonger dans tes beaux yeux”, v. 3).⁸

The notable shift in reference from ‘cat as object’ to ‘woman as cat’ takes place in the very moment the speaker imagines a human addressee, and, significantly, he suddenly recognises a gaze (and, with it, agency, profundity, and the ‘endangering’ subjectivity Sartre spoke of): “Je vois ma femme en esprit. Son regard | Comme le tien, aimable bête | Profond et froid, coupe et fend comme un dard” (v. 9–11). When presented as an animal, the cat is treated like an object, and when she is granted (an anthropomorphic) subjectivity, it is only in the confinements of a comparison in which the human is posited as ontologically given.⁹ And this can be a first interim conclusion for this essay: art is highly complicit in the othering of non-human animals.¹⁰

Robin Robertson’s poem ‘Cat, Failing’ (2007) seems to be highly aware of that. As a matter of fact, the poem begins by self-referentially acknowledging its own ontological status as “[a] figment.”¹¹ Whereas the speaker first seems to be picturing a tattered stuffed animal, “some | ditched plaything [...] | coming apart at the seams” (v. 2–3; 6), the subsequent description as a “maquette” of a cat, “thumbed” like an old book that is marked by its ongoing use, hints at a

⁸ This is the exact opposite of recognition as Levinas defines it, cf. Derrida, p. 12: “In looking at the gaze of the other, Levinas says, one must forget the color of his eyes; in other words, see the gaze, the face that gazes before seeing the visible eyes of the other.”

⁹ For this typical asymmetry in anthropomorphisms, cf., in particular, Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), pp. 241.

¹⁰ And so is critique, as we will see in a minute. Cf. also Mario Ortiz Robles, ‘Comparative Literature and Animal Studies’ in *Futures of Comparative Literature. ACLA State of the Discipline Report*, ed. by Ursula K. Heise (London and New York: Routledge, 2017) pp. 302–313 (p. 303–305); and Gillian Beer, ‘Animal Presences: Tussles with Anthropomorphism’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 2.3 (2005), 311–322.

¹¹ Robin Robertson, ‘Cat, Failing’, in *Robin Robertson: The Wrecking Light* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 18. Further references will be given in the text as well.

poetic subject (v. 2–3), as well as we are to imagine a living being that, with “his sour body | lumped like a bean-bag | leaking thinly | into a grim towel,” also comes alive in the first stanza (v. 9–12). Thus, the seemingly detached and passive first-person speaker (that is, observer) displays various, well-known figurations of the animal that reveal the ‘brutality’ inherent in modern human-animal relations to the full extent. Whether in their reification as toys, their domestication as pets, or as exhibited (literary or zoological) objects of fascination, one could argue following John Berger that non-human animals as natural beings are being increasingly marginalized and disposed of in a modern, capitalist society: “This reduction of the animal, which has a theoretical as well as economic history, is part of the same process as that by which men have been reduced to isolated productive and consuming units.”¹² The physical and cultural confinement of animals finds its epitome, Berger continues, in the extinguishment of the look between human and non-human animals, a look which was fundamental for human self-awareness and language¹³: “The zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see them, is, in fact, a monument to the impossibility of such encounters. Modern zoos are an epitaph to a relationship which was as old as man.”¹⁴ And Robertson’s clinical speaker, as if to underline Berger’s argument, studies the agony of the vanishing animal with indifference: “I sit | and watch the light | degrade in his eyes” (v. 12–14).

¹² Berger, p. 23.

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 14–18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

The second stanza bears a resemblance to the turn in Baudelaire's sonnet as it describes the eponymous 'failing' of the cat "to climb to his chair" (v. 15–16), a failure that is associated with "a new look" of shame, and, therefore, the humanization of the face of the cat.¹⁵ Different to what the poem first suggests ("brought in from the outside", v. 4), the cat seems to be not so much a stray animal as a pet, the possessive pronoun ('his' chair) further indicating a commentary on the material process of domestication that indeed makes animals "creatures of their owner's way of life."¹⁶ This could also explain the notion of guilt that is implicit in "the shame of being | found out" (v. 24–25): Presumably after a lost fight ("one ear | eaten away", v. 8–9) and after failing to reclaiming its position as a pet, the cat in a shameful moment of self-awareness "shirks | in one corner of the kitchen, | cowed, denatured"—the latter also a term of biochemistry describing the loss of the properties and functions of proteins because of the destruction of existing, naturally occurring bonds by external force—"ceasing to be | anything like a cat" (v. 16–19). Again, the poem parallels the violent death of a living being and the domestication of animals, because it is not clear whether the pet is a 'maquette of a cat' only because of the process of decay in the immanent death, or if the poem rather suggests a moment of realization on behalf of the cat that it had been alienated from itself for a long time. This matches with the ambiguous 'loss of face' that can be understood literally ("muzzle | of perished rubber", v. 7–8) or metaphorically.¹⁷ But this is

¹⁵ Sartre argues for a subjectifying, triangular constellation of shame: "*J'ai honte de moi devant autrui*" (Sartre, p. 337 [his italics]), just like shame for Derrida is the central marker of distinguishment between human and non-human animals: "C'est comme si j'avais honte, alors, nu devant le chat, mais aussi honte d'avoir honte. [...] Honte d'être nu comme une bête." Derrida, p. 18–19.

¹⁶ Berger, p. 24–25.

¹⁷ Cf. v. 26–28 in Robertson, p. 37 in Berger.

where Robertson's poetry retains more sensitivity than Berger's analysis: whereas Berger delivers his eulogy to the animal (with the narrative arc from first to "last metaphor")¹⁸ in order to give the gist of his Marxist argument that the "marginalization of animals is today being followed by the marginalization and disposal of the only class who, throughout history, has remained familiar with animals [...]: the middle and small peasant,"¹⁹ Robertson ostentatiously highlights and, potentially, renders problematic the reduction of non-human animals to a figure of speech. In the opaque layering of living, stuffed, and imagined animal, the readers cannot know exactly if they are to imagine a speaker that exploits the agony of a suffering animal for aesthetic pleasure, or if they are to picture a tattered animal or even a 'figment' that was brought alive by poetic vision. Both ways of seeing, the poem self-referentially suggests, similarly run risk of perpetuating the underlying structure of violence that organizes our relationship with animals.

Now, while Robertson's indicting 'Cat, Failing' can be deemed a significant departure from Baudelaire's representation of cats, it remains a poem where the cat is subject to an observer (rather than being the subject of a story), with alternatives only implied by their absence. That is why I want to end this essay with Remedios Varo's 1955 painting *Simpatía (La rabia del gato)*.²⁰ Combining the electrical spark that also featured in Baudelaire's poem with a shift away from solely engaging with animals 'theoretically' (from Old Greek

¹⁸ Berger, p. 16, 36.

¹⁹ Berger, p. 36.

²⁰ Remedios Varo, *Simpatía (La rabia del gato)*, 1955, Oil on Masonite, 96 × 85 cm
<<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6204436>> [accessed 11 December 2021]. See *Figure 1* on the next page.

θεωρεῖν ‘seeing’), the Spanish-Mexican painter espouses overcoming the question of knowledge and establishing a compassionate relationship with non-human animals.



Figure 1: Remedios Varo, *Simpatía (La rabia del gato)*.

At first sight, Varo's painting tells the story of an incident: a cat has just knocked over something, in this case, a glass of milk. The liquid spills over the table and then, now in an uncontrollable stream, onto the floor, creating a mysteriously sculptural, expanding puddle. Varo's own description of that scene, though, is

rather prosaic: “This lady's cat jumps onto the table producing the sort of disorder that one must learn to tolerate if one likes cats (as I do).”²¹ However, the opposition between order and disorder—as well as the respective allocation to the realm of human and non-human animals—is highly interesting if we think about the title of the painting, where the cat’s behaviour is framed as madness. This scarcely is a coincidence, as Michel Foucault has shown in *Madness and Civilization*.²² In this historicising ‘history of insanity in an age of reason,’ Foucault suggested that the concept of madness is constructed in direct relation to the concept of animality.²³ Whereas in the Renaissance, the “animal in man” had a value as “the sign of Beyond,” the Classical period (which Foucault dates from around 1650 to 1800) strictly excluded ‘mad animality’ from ‘reasonable humanity’ by chaining, caging, and exhibiting them like animals: “Madness had become a thing to look at.”²⁴ If we additionally incorporate the epistemic shift from madness as *dérison* in the Classical to the disciplinary psychologization in the Modern period (since 1800) where the “mentally ill person was now a subhuman,”²⁵ one could argue that Foucault, similarly to John Berger, traces the story of an increasing internalization of the framework of speciesism within the human. The othering of speciesism, again closely linked to the gaze, devours its own children.²⁶

²¹ Quoted in Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 122–123.

²² Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1988).

²³ Cf. Foucault, p. 77, as well as Clare Palmer, ‘Madness and Animality in Michel Foucault’s “Madness and Civilization”’, in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, ed. by Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 72–84.

²⁴ Foucault, pp. 66–78 (p. 70, p. 73–74).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, vii.

²⁶ This is one argument of Cary Wolfe for the need for Animal Studies: “[B]ecause the discourse of speciesism [...] can be used to mark *any* social other, we need to understand that the ethical and philosophical urgency of confronting the institution of speciesism and crafting a

Given the conspicuous resemblance of the cat and the woman's faces, the similar colour of skin and fur, hair and fur respectively standing on end, and of course the three cattails showing from under the woman's dress, it would be all too easy to conduct a psychoanalytical interpretation of Remedios Varo's *Simpatía (La rabia del gato)*.²⁷ But I do not wish to continue the reductive, homogenizing utilization of animals as a projection plane for human concerns.²⁸ Rather, I'd like to take my cue from the title once more to argue that Varo's painting is concerned with a *sympathetic* attempt of interspecies rapprochement. Even if the depicted eye contact between woman and cat has a quality of intimacy, of mesmerized attentiveness, and—if you consider the complementary posture of cat and human—maybe even convergence, it is the *touch* of the woman that sparks some sort of electricity that zigzags around the room, occasionally producing unintelligible constellations in the air. And if we also follow Nancy Vosburg's interpretation of the spark as an unloading of static charge,²⁹ the painting depicts a quasi-experimental scene: both woman and cat are exposed to the same stimulus, but they react differently. Highlighting the physiological or even phenomenological differences between human and non-human animals—think about the puddle or the woman's burning hair—may

posthumanist theory of the subject *has nothing to do with whether you like animals.*" Wolfe, p. 7 [his italics].

²⁷ As the accompanying text for *Simpatía* at a Christie's auction in 2019 does, where Varo's artistic output of a whole decade is classified as mere expression of inwardness: "Varo's inner world populated her easel-sized paintings on canvas and masonite in the 1950s." Still, the painting sold for \$3,135,000. Cf. Christie's, 'Lot 19' in *Live Auction 15922: Latin American Art (22.05.–23.05.2019)*, <<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6204436>> [accessed 11 December 2021].

²⁸ A power mechanism that Foucault himself reproduces in making use of the problematic categories of 'reason' and 'animality.' Cf. Palmer, pp. 80–84.

²⁹ Cf. Nancy Vosburg, 'Strange Yet "Familiar": Cats and Birds in Remedios Varo's Artistic Universe', in *Figuring Animals. Essays on Animal Images in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Mary Sanders Pollock and Catherine Rainwater (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 81–98 (p. 86).

seem banal, but in this case, it also shows graphically that the cat is a *sentient* being, just like the woman. As Derrida has argued with reference to Jeremy Bentham, this is a change in perspective that, once established, ‘changes everything:’ “La question, [...] ce n’est pas de savoir si l’animal peut penser, raisonner ou parler, etc., comme on feint en somme de se le demander toujours [...]. La question *préalable et décisive* serait de savoir si les animaux *peuvent souffrir*.”³⁰ And this is also the crucial realignment that the painting re-enacts, a shift that finds its epitome in the syntactical refinement from the earlier (*La rabia del gato*) to the final title *Simpatía (La rabia del gato)*. Instead of othering animals by imposing human categories onto non-human animals (here: reason and madness), Varo argues for an *compassionate* and *embodied* understanding of them as individual and experiencing beings.³¹

In that sense, the depiction of the cat in Varo and Robertson can be said to represent two sides of the same coin. Whereas you cannot say that Baudelaire’s speaker reflects on the idea of animal subjectivity, the indifference to animal suffering in Robertson’s poem elicits an almost visceral uneasiness, potentially corresponding to Varo’s invitation to a sympathetic, embodied engagement with non-human animals. Taken all together, the three works of art all avoid figuring animal experience by adopting the stance of a human observer (Robertson and Baudelaire in highlighting the act of seeing, Varo also by the visual medium she uses), but Varo and Robertson go a step further by—

³⁰ Derrida, p. 48 [his italics].

³¹ Quite telling, then, is the misguided interpretation of Janet A. Kaplan who assumes that the cat is infected with “anger, ferocity, and madness... *as well as the rabies*,” and that she may transmit the infection to the depicted woman. Here, Kaplan, psychologizing biographer that she is, re-pathologizes woman and cat, as if to restore by overcorrection the anthropological taboo that Varo broke when she challenged the identification of animal and madness. Cf. Kaplan, pp. 122–124 (p. 123 [my italics]).

explicitly or *ex negativo*—contrasting the violent effects of the human prioritization of sight, on the one hand, with the recognition of animal experience and individuality, on the other. This may be particularly effective: the distance between one and the other marks the ideological abyss that is to be filled, just as the observation of an observation renders visible the blind spots that make this framework of speciesism possible.³² To that effect, art may actually help us to learn something about ourselves *and* about non-human animals. We only have to be willing, to complete Sartre’s analysis of subjectivity with Varo’s syntax, to *imagine (other beings)*.

³² Cf. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), pp. 99–100.

Works Cited:

Baudelaire, Charles, 'Le Chat', in *Charles Baudelaire: Complete Poems*, trans. by Walter Martin (New York: Routledge, 2002).

Beer, Gillian, 'Animal Presences: Tussles with Anthropomorphism', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 2.3 (2005), 311–322.

Berger, John, *Why Look at Animals* (London: Penguin, 2009).

Christie's, 'Lot 19' in *Live Auction 15922: Latin American Art (22.05.-23.05.2019)*, <<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6204436>> [accessed 7 December 2021].

Derrida, Jacques, *L'animal que donc je suis*, ed. by Marie-Louise Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 2006).

Foucault, Michel, *Madness and Civilization. A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Vintage, 1988).

Kaplan, Janet A., *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988).

Luhmann, Niklas, *Die Kunst der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), pp. 99–100.

Man, Paul de, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984).

Ortiz Robles, Mario, 'Comparative Literature and Animal Studies' in *Futures of Comparative Literature. ACLA State of the Discipline Report*, ed. by Ursula K. Heise (London and New York: Routledge, 2017) pp. 302–313.

- Palmer, Clare, 'Madness and Animality in Michel Foucault's "Madness and Civilization"', in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, ed. by Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 72–84.
- Robertson, Robin, 'Cat, Failing', in *Robin Robertson: The Wrecking Light* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 18.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, *L'être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).
- Singer, Peter, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Avon Books, 1975).
- Varo, Remedios, *Simpatía (La rabia del gato)*, 1955, Oil on Masonite, 96 × 85 cm
<<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6204436>> [accessed 11 December 2021].
- Vosburg, Nancy, 'Strange Yet "Familiar": Cats and Birds in Remedios Varo's Artistic Universe', in *Figuring Animals. Essays on Animal Images in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Mary Sanders Pollock and Catherine Rainwater (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 81–98.
- Wolfe, Cary, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Wood, David, 'Thinking with Cats' in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, ed. by Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 129–144.