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SEEKING INTERSPECIES JUSTICE:
SPACES OF ANIMAL CONFINEMENT IN ITALIAN LITERATURE

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To those who resist,
seen and unseen.

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ABSTRACT

Located at the intersection between literature and critical animal studies, this dissertation examines Italian literary depictions of interspecies relations occurring in three distinct spaces of animal confinement: slaughterhouses, zoos, and laboratories. Each of these entrenched spaces of violence and exploitation represents a unique manifestation of the paradoxical tensions between visibility and invisibility characterizing our relations with other animals, therefore serving as magnifiers of the moral issues concerning the treatment and lower ontological placement reserved to nonhuman animals. A close reading of twentieth century narratives of various genres by Carlo Emilio Gadda, Ivano Ferrari, Italo Calvino, and Primo Levi, offers a privileged entrance into these sites of shared oppression, while exposing the often hidden realities of nonhuman animals' lives. By analyzing different modes of embodiment and emotional expression across species, this work challenges the persistent and dominant habit of reducing nonhuman animals to the status of commodities and illustrates the variety of ways in which discourses of agency, rebellion, and autonomy, exist beyond the human. Centering the attention on Italy at the time of capitalist upsurge offers original insights into the specificities of the production of speciesism within the Italian context, yet without losing sight of the transnational features of this social phenomenon.

In discussing different literary attempts to cross, blur, and reconceptualize the problematic human-animal divide, the extreme mobility of the categories of “human” and “animal” is brought to the foreground, including when they enable othering discourses as well as discriminatory rhetoric affecting relations also among humans. These intersections are most visible in linguistic cues and literary devices that reproduce processes of dehumanization, objectification, anthropomorphism, and hybridizations, all of which are punctually examined as they arise in the

texts. By embracing an intersectional approach applied to textual analysis that encompasses also nonhuman bodies, this dissertation opens a new route of inquiry in the study of the selected literary works while highlighting the role of literature in enhancing cognitive and ethical sensitivity towards other animals as well as its fundamental contribution to social knowledge within the broad field of animal studies.

INTRODUCTION

Remapping Interspecies Relations

Nonhuman animals are everywhere. They permeate our language and crowd our imagery and imagination. They are turned into totems, symbols, and emblems. At the same time, they are reduced to trophies, commodities, and by-products scattered in the most unexpected items. We live with them, share intimate spaces, and create deep emotional bonds. Yet, we exploit them, we own them, we kill them. Not only are they considered at once like us and not like us, but they are also friends and enemies, individualized and dissected, loved and eaten.[1] While it may seem that their presence has proliferated in modern times, as John Berger stated in his highly influential essay "Why Look at Animals?", in reality "everywhere animals disappear".[2] This contradiction of centrality and disappearance, visibility and invisibility, which remains largely unquestioned, is at the core of this project. Although human supremacy has been deeply embedded in western cultures since ancient times, modernity has dissolved even further real, corporeal nonhuman animals into empty signifiers, and their pervasive alienation under capitalism has drastically contributed to the physical and conceptual distancing between humans and other animal species. The construction of a moral hierarchy combined with the normalization of structural speciesism are responsible for the obliteration of a history of oppression and forced labor of nonhuman animals who have become the main source of biocapital from which western societies profit.[3] In this process of erasure, their lives are rendered disposable and remain largely unseen or, as a matter of fact, ignored.

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[1] Erica Fudge, *Animal*, London: Reaktion Books, 2002, p. 9.
[2] John Berger, "Why Look at Animals," in *About Looking*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
[3] As Jason Hribal stated in his groundbreaking article *Animals are Part of the Working Class: a Challenge to Labor History*, "the unpaid labor of animals has been the foundation upon which human

Driven by the urgency of the current ecological crises, including habitat destruction, climate change, the sixth global mass extinction, the risk of pandemics, and intensive animal farming, all of which are deeply connected to our broken relationships with other animals, I closely analyze a selection of 20th century Italian narratives that help expose the often hidden realities of nonhuman animals' lives. More specifically, this work is centered around literary representations of three distinct geographies of nonhuman animal confinement wherein the species barrier is constructed: slaughterhouses, zoos, and laboratories. Each of these entrenched spaces of violence and exploitation represents a unique manifestation of the paradoxical tensions between hypervisibility and invisibility characterizing our relations with other animals, providing ideal spaces for a study of interspecies entanglements. The texts that make up my corpus include Italo Calvino's last novel, *Palomar*, a variety of Primo Levi's short stories, from *Phosphorus* to *Angelic Butterfly*, Carlo Emilio Gadda's article *A Morning at the Slaughterhouse*, and Ivano Ferrari's collection of poems, *Slaughterhouse*. Through these literary texts, I examine the dynamics of the cultural forces that justify modes of abstractions in comparison to the brutal realities in which nonhuman animals are forced to live and die. The broad range of genres, from poetry to journalism, science fiction, and autobiography, whose inherent specificities I consistently take into consideration, provides unique entryways into these tensions, which I analyze in conjunction with the testimonial, objective, or speculative nature of each text, including when hybrid qualities blur conventional genre expectations.

Because the complex dynamics regulating our interspecies relations are inseparable from the spaces in which they occur, I adopt a geocritical approach to my corpus of texts drawing from the works of animal geographers who explore the dimensions of space and place in human-

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labor has been built. It has provided the structural conditions for the rise of capitalism. It is the driving force behind modern society's productivity." Jason Hribal, "Animals are Part of the Working Class: a Challenge to Labor History," in *Borderlands,* vol. 11, n. 2, 2012, pp. 1-37.

animal relations to investigate how literary representations of different sites provide a window into different ways of thinking about other animals.[4] Besides looking at how the physical placing of nonhuman animals reflects their conceptual placing in human imagination, I also analyze their ontological shifts across spaces and the problematic liminality that characterizes their status in human classifications or orderings of the world. Literature, then, serves as the hinge between outside and inside, real and imaginary, visible and invisible, and as the writers attempt to cross, blur and reimagine the human-animal divide within these environments, the epistemic power of fiction to push boundaries comes to surface.

The three spaces I focus on represent an active force in the narratives and the worlds recreated by the authors have real spatial extensions outside the literary page that cannot be ignored. For this reason, I include observations of how structural elements contribute to reviving the physical spaces existing outside the literary page and examine various rhetorical strategies, such as sensory impressions and ekphrastic tendencies, that help convey a sense of lived experience to the readers. Slaughterhouses, zoos, and laboratories often undergo a process of metaphorization when incorporated into narratives meant to evoke human lived experiences, which contributes to the concealment of the human-animal relations that actually take place therein. By recuperating their real-world functions and using their metaphorizations to increase the understanding of the roles they play in our societies, these spaces acquire new meanings and become magnifiers of the moral issues concerning the treatment and lower ontological placement reserved to nonhuman animals. The literary animals inserted in these spaces are also at risk of remaining stuck between being able to preserve their referential qualities and becoming symbols or allegories standing for something else. This liminal state of being contributes to keeping them "captured within

[4] This work is aligned with the theories advanced by scholars who have been classified by Julie Urbanik within the third wave of animal geography. See Julie Urbanik, *Placing Animals: an Introduction to the Geography of Human-Animal Relations*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012, pp. 36-43.

culture," in the words of Melissa Boyde.[5] Thus, animal metaphors can function either as a strategy for bringing to light the individual animal and our relations to them or as a mechanism of distortion that distances us in irremediable ways. Either way, the various uses of nonhumans at the figurative level reveal important information about the complexities of our relationships and cultural beliefs, which I punctually examine.

As the field of Animal Studies continues to expand, nonhuman animals incorporated into literary worlds tend to be relegated to the periphery of scholarly vision, especially in non-Anglophone contexts.[6] The persistent tension between visibility and invisibility extends also to the field of literary criticism, where nonhuman animals often remain hidden in plain sight, due to a reticence to fully embrace an antispeciesist perspective. However, written narratives enclose the indeterminacy that governs human-animal relations and can either articulate an alternative to dominant discourses or perpetuate them. It is crucial, then, as Susan Merrill Squier suggests, to "reposition fiction and literature as contribution to social knowledge, rather than cordoning it off into the realm of the textual and aesthetic, a zone with no purchase on the material conditions of the present."[7] This shift is especially desired when nonhuman animals are the subjects of

[5] Melissa Boyde, ed., *Captured: The Animal Within Culture*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

[6] For an overview of the academic discipline of literary animal studies see Marion W. Copeland, "Literary Animal Studies in 2012: Where We Are, Where We Are Going," *Anthrozoos*, vol. 25, n. 1, 2012, pp. 91–105; Marion W. Copeland and Kenneth Shapiro, "Toward a Critical Theory of Animal Issues in Fiction," in *Society and Animals*, vol. 13, n. 4, 2005, pp. 343–346. Various series are now devoted specifically to literary animal studies, including *Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature*, edited by Susan McHugh, Robert McKay, John Miller and *Perspectives on the Non-Human in Literature and Culture*, edited by Karen Raber. In Italy, several volumes embrace "the animal turn" in literary studies, such as *Penne e Pellicole: gli Animali, la Letteratura e il Cinema*, the collection of articles *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Literature and Film*, and Damiano Benvegnù's recent monograph on Primo Levi. Two journals are currently dedicated to the publication of radical views on antispeciesism: *Animal Studies: Rivista Italiana di Antispecismo* and *Liberazioni: Rivista di Critica Antispecista*, which at times include contributions that directly address literary studies. Despite the many efforts in an encouraging direction, there is still much work to be done to create a field of research that transcends national borders and fragmentation of knowledge.

[7] Susan Merrill Squier, *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, p. 23.

research in order to avoid overshadowing their social presence in human contexts. As Timothy Pachirat notes, though, "even when intended as a tactic of social and political transformation, the act of making the hidden visible may be equally likely to generate other, more effective ways of confining it."[8] For this reason, efforts to ensure transparency must be accompanied by a radical paradigm shift in how nonhumans are conceptualized. The etymology of the word "paradigm" implies an act of looking, of disclosing a set of assumptions taken as a guiding model to interpret the world. The process of replacing well-established paradigms with new ones implies a preliminary act of uncovering the anomalies that demonstrate the intrinsic flaws of certain assumptions and modes of thinking. This work aims precisely at establishing new ways of seeing, or rather un-seeing, nonhuman animals and the roles they play in these spaces through the lens of literary criticism.

Among other benefits of literary representations is their ability to revive these spaces in ways that extend far beyond mimetic representation. In fact, besides metaphors, writers adopt different strategies to represent the species boundary and create networks of affiliation and affinity, particularly by taking full advantage of the zoomorphic qualities of human language, saturated with nonhuman animal figures. Anthropomorphism represents a good example of these rhetorical strategies, which again comes with its epistemological limits and complications, since it can either amplify or obscure nonhuman lived experiences, partially based on the intentions of the writer and the way in which other animals are perceived or conceptualized in their mind.[9] In fact,

[8] Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds*: *Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, p. 253.

[9] For an overview of the question of anthropomorphism, particularly its use in literature, see Anne Franciska Pusch, "Literary Animals and the Problem of Anthropomorphism," in *Identitäten / Identities: Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven,* edited by Marlene Bainczyk-Crescentini, Kathleen Ess, Michael Pleyer, Monika Pleyer, Heidelberg: Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg: 2015, pp. 39-55; Sam Cadman, "Reflections on Anthropocentrism, Anthropomorphism and Impossible Fiction: Towards A Typological Spectrum of Fictional Animals," in *Animal Studies Journal*, vol. 5, n. 2, 2016, pp. 161-182; Timothy

due to its capacity to collapse difference, it can serve as an effective analytical tool to bring us closer, discover similarities across species, and imagining nonhuman awareness, but it may also efface their peculiar ways of being in the world and reproduce a self-reflective and colonizing anthropocentric gaze. Finding the right balance is a constant work in progress, and recognizing the roles stories play in re-narrativizing the world is definitely a step in the right direction, even when they function as a record of the violence and exploitation of nonhuman bodies throughout history. The narratives examined in this dissertation for the most part fall into this category, given the constrictions of the three spaces built on such principles. The legal and cultural norms regulating how we relate to other animals inside these spaces spill into the literary works, therefore offering a unique perspective on the ethical issues surrounding practices that involve the use of nonhuman animals. As Philo and Wilbert noted, the subordination of nonhuman animals is inevitably tied to features of spatial control over their bodies, a practice that responds to the logic of ownership and property, and perpetuates conditions of animal use.[10] Unsurprisingly, the selected narratives reflect this reality and constantly bring up questions concerning body surveillance and bodily control. For this reason, I explore how the texts make visible the multi-faceted biopolitical interactions governing human-animal relationships in these spaces, with a particular attention to the ways in which practices of biopower intersect with acts of concealment and cases of exposure.

As part of this process of unmaking and remaking, I wish to stress the fundamental role of promoting non-oppressive language that is cognizant of all persons, including individuals who

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Clark, "Anthropomorphism," in *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 192-201.

[10] Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations*, Hove: Psychology Press, 2000. On this topic see also Kathryn Gillespie and Rosemary-Claire Collard, eds., *Critical Animal Geographies: Politics, Intersections and Hierarchies in a Multispecies World*, Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2015, particularly the introduction of the collection.

belong to other species. Following the path paved by Joan Dunayer with the volume "Language and Liberation", I challenge speciesist assumptions and break down binaries also at the linguistic level as they arise both in the original Italian texts and in their English translations, which illustrate how different cultural practices involving nonhuman animals influence language production in a variety of ways.[11] This entails paying close attention, for instance, to the use of euphemisms, objectifying pronouns, and naming practices, and consequently promoting alternatives that reverse the process of erasure of nonhuman agency and individuality. Words are the fabric of our thoughts and have the capacity to maintain existing dominance that favors particular groups of language users over others. In the case of nonhuman animals, who are often erroneously framed as "voiceless" and whose modes of communication are understood based on assumptions of superior abled human embodiment, the power imbalance is unmistakable.[12] Literature then, as a space made of human words, represents the ideal place to examine these tensions, particularly the ways in which literary production may contribute to either the cultural oppression or liberation of other animals.

In order to enact a shift to a nonspeciesist gaze in literary criticism, I acknowledge the role of nonhuman animals as active participants in stories by embracing what David Herman has defined a *bionarratology*, aimed at fostering "a keener recognition of our inextricable interconnectedness with the larger biotic communities."[13] Because of the construction of dilated temporalities that create a space for cognitive and emotional processing, narratives represent an

[11] Joan Dunayer, *Animal Equality: Language and Liberation*, Derwood, MD: Ryce, 2001.

[12] On the question of nonhuman animals and ableism see Sunaura Taylor *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*, New York: The New Press, 2017, pp. 57-81. A reframing of animal languages and voices has been recently formulated by Eva Meijer in *When Animals Speak: Toward an Interspecies Democracy*, New York: NYU Press, 2019. A second book on this topic by the same author will be published in February 2021 by MIT Press with the title *Animal Languages*.

[13] David Herman, *Narratology Beyond the Human: Storytelling and Animal Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 294.

effective medium of representation to discover and reflect upon the acts of seeing and concealing that occur in these spaces. Modeling the richness and complexity of what it is like for nonhumans, for instance, to be killed in a slaughterhouse or to be stared at in a zoo, or what ethical dilemmas a researcher must face when experimenting on another animal, literary studies can offer a significant contribution to the field of critical animal studies. As part of my intention to bring to the forefront the distinctive texture of nonhuman experiences in the various forms presented in the texts, I rely on a phenomenology of embodiment that encompasses multispecies subjectivities. This entails an attentive decoding of the kinesthetic and multi-sensorial elements produced with each human-animal encounter, an approach that fosters new insights into processes such as empathy and intersubjectivity that have the power to break down hierarchies and deeply question the categories of "human" and "animal". By analyzing the emerging subjectivities of nonhuman animals in these spaces, I therefore challenge the persistent and dominant habit of reducing them to the status of objects and illustrate the variety of ways in which discourses of intentionality, rebellion, and autonomy, exist beyond the human. While a theoretical formulation of nonhuman animal resistance has been advanced in different fields, including political theory and sociology, a consistent analysis and acknowledgement of this phenomenon is lacking in literary studies.[14] However, I consider literature to be a powerful means for understanding this phenomenon because of its ability to animate the individuality and subjective viewpoint of other animals, particularly through elaborate characterizations and the inclusion of emotional dimensions that enhance perspective taking. I therefore take full

[14] On the question of animal resistance see Jason Hribal, *Fear of the animal planet: the Hidden History of Animal Resistance*, Oakland: AkPress, 2010. More recent publications include Kathryn Gillespie, "Nonhuman Animal Resistance and the Improperties of Live Property," in *Animals, Biopolitics, Law: Lively Legalities*, cit., pp. 117-134; Sarat Colling, *Animali in Rivolta: Confini, Resistenza e Solidarietà Umana*, Milano: Mimesis, 2017. The volume will also be published in English translation in December 2020 by MSU Press with the title *Animal Resistance in the Global Capitalist Era*.

advantage of this potential by analyzing the various depictions of animal resistance present in the texts and by paying particular attention to signs of individual reactions to repression and violence, which at times can be very subtle, and to how they manifest in each space, given that they take different forms according to the level of spatial and bodily restrictions.

While the focus is primarily to promote nonhuman centered criticism, this work also demands a radical repositioning of and by the human subject. In fact, as Rosi Braidotti affirms, "the process of confronting the thinkability of a Life that may not have "me" or any "human" at the centre is actually a sobering and instructive process." [15] In order to accomplish this process of decentralization, it is necessary then to refocus the "human" gaze, which encompasses various oppressive gazes that throughout history have affected our interspecies relations, from the panoptic gaze, to the white gaze, the colonial gaze, and the racial gaze, all blended and connected through multilayers of histories, experiences, and cultural practices. My close readings, then, necessarily encompass also the various ways in which the human characters in the texts look at —and interact with— the nonhuman characters, with the purpose of investigating the effects of these multilayers and redefining the characteristics and values that make us "human".

Unlearning Speciesism: the Italian Case

The lived experiences of an individual animal fluctuate drastically depending on a multitude of variables that extend beyond the species they belong to: where they are born, in what context, what purpose is assigned to their existence, what they are used for, if they have disabilities or

[15] Rosi Braidotti, "Bio-Power and Necro-Politics." Originally published in German as "Biomacht und nekro–Politik. Uberlegungen zu einer Ethik der Nachhaltigkeit," in *Springerin, Hefte fur Gegenwartskunst*, Band XIII Heft 2, Fruhjahr 2007, pp. 18–23.

develop chronic illnesses, if they are reproductively viable and therefore financially advantageous, and the list continues. Because nonhuman animals are generally conceptualized as commodities rather than subjects, a mode of thinking reflected also in legislation, their lives are essentially at the service of human interests. These variations are all a consequence of speciesism, which must be understood as a global issue with systemic features, that manifests itself through a diverse array of practices and cultural beliefs that may vary from society to society. Italy is therefore not immune to the effects of societal speciesism, and the writer Anna Maria Ortese, who fought for the rights of nonhuman animals throughout her lifetime, has perfectly encapsulated this reality in the following statement: "Italy has been defined, at times, as hell for animals. Other countries surely compete for this primacy, and the whole world (after rereading the history of customs and civil rites) reveals itself as a bad place, a terrible home for the 'outcasts.'"[16] The Slow Food Movement, Italian fashion design, Italian Leather, the Palio di Siena and other local festivals, are just some examples of Italian practices celebrated around the world that depend on the exploitation —and in most cases also on the killing of— other animals. Italy is also known for being the cradle of humanism, a stream of thought that is deeply bound to the idea of human exceptionalism and that, once spread abroad, has become a vehicle for dissemination of a speciesist ideology.[17]

This dissertation attempts to come to grips with this history and to examine its effects on the literary landscape, without losing sight of its transnational resonance. The reason for centering the attention on Italy at the time of capitalist upsurge lies in the attempt to deprovincialize Italy

[16] "L'Italia è stata chiamata, qualche volta, l'inferno degli animali. Altri paesi le contendono, sicuramente, questo primato, e tutto il mondo poi (a rileggersi la storia dei costumi e dei riti civili) si rivela un cattivo luogo, una pessima residenza per gli «ultimi»." Anna Maria Ortese, "L'Inferno degli Animali," in *Le Piccole Persone: in Difesa degli Animali e Altri Scritti*, Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 2016, pp. 153-158 (153). Translation is mine.

[17] For a more detailed discussion of this question see Damiano Benvegnù, *Animals and Animality in Primo Levi's Works*, cit., London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 26-30.

within the field of literary animal studies.[18] In fact, I especially concentrate on the close historical interpenetration between global spreading of modern speciesism and local Italian cultural and economic history. This approach allows me to analyze the transnational features of this social phenomenon, which should be understood as deeply intertwined across time and space and not as randomly occurring exclusively in the Italian social space. At the same time, this work contributes to original insights into the specificities of the production of speciesism within the Italian context. My intention is not to prove the exceptionality of Italian thought, as proposed by Roberto Esposito, given also that its success was made at the expense of a multitude of silenced voices that have been excluded from the philosophical and literary canon exported abroad.[19] Rather, as part of the overarching project to disrupt hierarchies and narratives of dominance while preserving the distinctive peculiarities of individual histories and circumstances, I envision the production of ideas and knowledge as an ecological network of exchanges that cannot be contained within strict national borders and that is influenced by social and political structures inherent to a territory as well as the web of encounters shaping individual experiences. The practical result of this approach emerges in the set of questions I propose, which will inevitably resonate also with the work of artists across geographic borders and media, and in a new dimension to the specific literary works that make up the corpus of this dissertation.

[18] The notion was first coined by Miguel Angel Mellino in relation to studies of race and coloniality in the Italian context. See "Deprovincializzare l'Italia. Note su Colonialità, Razza e Razzismo in Italia," in *Mondi Migranti: Rivista di Studi e Ricerche sulle Migrazioni Internazionali*, n. 3, 2011, pp. 57-90. The article is also available in English translation in the volume *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, edited by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 83-99.

[19] Roberto Esposito, *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*, translated by Zakiya Hanafi, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012, p. 20. For a critical revisitation of Esposito's theory see Pier Paolo Portinaro, *Le Mani su Machiavelli: una Critica dell' «Italian Theory»*, Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2018.

Reading Against the Grain: a Note on Method

In line with the effort of rereading literary works from an antispeciesist perspective, I apply to my close readings a deconstructionist approach meant to highlight the problems with defining nonhuman animals as consumable objects and the urgent need to de-naturalize a system based on human supremacy. In practice, this entails drawing attention to gaps, silences, and contradictions inherent to the texts, while at the same time questioning the dominant beliefs and perspectives the authors are either perpetuating or challenging. The act of entering a text from a new critical direction implies the choice to stop ignoring and represents in itself a political act that produces what can be defined "resistant readings". As stated by Judith Fetterlay, who coined this terminology in the context of feminist literary criticism, "to create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects."[20] In order then to bring literary nonhuman animals into conversation with social theory and cultural studies, it is necessary to take the texts out of conventional critical discourses and reread them as part of a new cultural framework still in the making that aims at the displacement of human-centeredness of literary studies. Dealing with cultural texts from a non-canonical perspective that embraces an ethics that aspires to multispecies justice entails reading against the grain so as to filter out the overpowering noise of human voices and attend to the marginalized and neglected voices of nonhuman animals within literary texts. As a result of this approach, the critical analyses are reoriented, for instance, towards the rats used in an experiment rather than the scientific discovery, or the pigs killed in a slaughterhouse rather than the aesthetics of food.

[20] Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: a Feminist Approach to American Fiction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, pp. 19-20.

Literary criticism, then, becomes a search for new traces of a new kind of consciousness that assists in making visible the oppression of nonhuman animals embedded in human cultures.

The methodology of this dissertation takes its roots in critical animal studies and aims at highlighting the benefits of going beyond the fragmentation of knowledge. In reframing the "human" from an antispeciesist perspective, I draw insight and inspiration from the fields of ecofeminism, decoloniality, and disability politics, which I use as the organizing theories and guiding principles for my research. In particular, the groundbreaking work of scholars such as Claire Jean Kim, Mel Y. Chen, Greta Gaard, and Sunaura Taylor, deeply inform my close readings of the texts by providing a solid theoretical background to my work.[21] In particular, I attempt to craft a method of doing literary criticism that is based on Aph Ko's multidimensional liberation theory, magisterially mapped out in her latest book, which represents a radical epistemological model for understanding that "multiple social factors and actors are buttressing structural oppression."[22] In my exploration of how literary representations of nonhuman animals perpetuate a speciesist mindset, I therefore take into account how this worldview is deeply intertwined with other manifestations of structural inequality and injustice, including racism, sexism, xenophobia, and ableism. The points of connection between various forms of oppression are most visible in linguistic cues and literary devices that reproduce processes of depersonalization, objectification, rhetoric of othering, and hybridizations, all of which are closely examined as they arise in the texts.

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[21] Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015; Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012; Greta Gaard, *Critical Feminism*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017; Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*, cit.

[22] Aph Ko, *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft. A Guide to Getting Out*, Brooklyn: Lantern Books, 2019, pp. 73-96.

Navigating the Chapters

In alignment with the critical spatial awareness advanced in theoretical terms, space functions also as the key organizing principle of this dissertation, enabling readers to closely observe through fictional and nonfictional narratives the lives and experiences of nonhuman animals as they trot across physical and ontological divides. Each chapter focuses on a different space of animal confinement and on their ethical, epistemic, socio-economical, and political implications. The chapter structure is designed to reverse the normative dynamics of visibility/invisibility by placing two hidden geographies, the slaughterhouse and the laboratory, as external frames enclosing an otherwise hypervisible space, the zoo.

In chapter one, entitled "Back in Sight, Back to Mind: Inside Italian Literary Slaughterhouses," I focus on representations of slaughterhouses in Carlo Emilio Gadda's "Una Mattinata ai Macelli" (*A Morning at the Slaughterhouse*, 1934), a journalistic reportage of his visit to the slaughterhouse of Milan, and Ivano Ferrari's collection of poems "Macello" on the writer's experience working in the slaughterhouse of Mantova in the 1970s (*Slaughterhouse,* 2004). These neglected texts are the only Italian examples that attempt to reconstruct the (in)visible reality and systemic violence of this space from the authors' first-hand experiences. In their writings, slaughterhouses are not mere imageries standing for other spaces or realities, but real places with real animals where literary devices assist in the process of reimagining and recreating the experiences of all individuals involved, human and nonhuman. I therefore examine the writers' literary techniques to reanimate the space and the ethical dilemmas they experience in their face-to-face encounters with nonhuman animals. In fact, the juxtaposition of these texts brings to surface the authors' moral questioning of the justifications that allow their personal participation in the violence inherent to the killing of animals, no matter how far removed it

might be, whether as a consumer or as a slaughterhouse worker. Most importantly, the vivid descriptions of the emotional and physical reactions of the animal subjects facing death, combined with the writers' blurring of the line separating the "human" from the "animal", open the possibility of cross-species understanding and of a redefinition of the concepts of agency and personhood beyond the human.

In chapter two, "Bodies on Display: Zooed Animals and the Epistemology of Otherness," I analyze a section of Italo Calvino's last work of fiction, "Palomar" *(Mr. Palomar*, 1985), dedicated to the protagonist's visits to the zoo and his observations of captive animals. While this work has received considerable critical attention, mainly due to its philosophical discourses, I propose an intersectional and anti-speciesist reading that offers new understandings of the texts, Calvino's poetics, and the ethics of captivity. By problematizing the zoo-going experience and bringing to surface the ethical issues with humanist conceptualizations of animals, I tackle the epistemological questions that the short texts raise in relation to human identity and nonhuman animal ontology, which force us to think beyond the human/animal and nature/culture dichotomies. I therefore discuss Palomar's hierarchical system of interpretation, based on a binary logic of inclusion/exclusion, and his attempts to overcome the constant tension between humanization and animalization in his descriptions of the nonhuman animals held captive. By unveiling the characteristics of Palomar's paradigmatic gaze, which I argue embodies the culturally dominant and oppressive model of norms and ideals regarding human-animal relationships, I redefine what *Anthropos* stands for. Thus, by analyzing the morally questionable premises of his system of beliefs, I explore the reasons that limit his access to true knowledge not only of the nonhuman animals he observes but also, ultimately, of himself.

In chapter three, "Inventing an 'Animal': Literature Inside the Laboratory," I turn to the question

of “animal” experimentation and the secured spaces to which it is relegated as depicted in a selection of Primo Levi's works. The scope of this chapter is to revive this underexplored topic by looking at the hidden geography and biopolitical nature of the laboratory and the ethical inconsistencies that persist or are subverted when “lab animals” enter the literary space. In particular, I focus on the bioethical questions and the logic of necropolitics inherent to a system that privileges some lives over others in the name of “human” progress, in order to uncover the tension between distance and intimacy, difference and similarity, while also analyzing troubling moral conflicts and the normalization of violent practices. I start by analyzing Levi's autobiographical short story “Fosforo” (*Phosphorus*, 1975) where I outline what I define the grey zone of human-animal relations in relation to Levi's dual position as a scientist conducting tests on nonhuman animals and as a potential human test subject due to his Jewish identity. I then turn to his science fiction narratives, particularly “Verso Occidente” (*Heading West*, 1971) and “Versamina” (*Versamine*, 1965), in which imagined distortions of reality in the space of the laboratory give access to detrimental conditions of being beyond the human experience. I conclude with a close reading of Levi's short story “Angelica Farfalla” (*Angelic Butterfly*, 1966) paying special attention to representations of cross-species contaminations in the laboratory, which bring to light the uncanny ethical drifts that the creation of interspecies hybrids and incomplete humanoids can provoke. One of the main objectives of this chapter is to unpack the problematic acceptance of anthropomorphic principles in the use of nonhuman animals for medical experiments and behavioral research. Ultimately, my close readings lead me not only to rethink the intimate spaces of corporeal equivalence between species but also to consider the repercussions that the creation of the “animal” model has on vulnerable human communities who throughout history have also been used as “animal” models in medical research, particularly

through Levi's considerations of the experiments on the prisoners in Auschwitz.

In my conclusions, after briefly retracing the journey across the interspecies geographies analyzed in the three chapters, I explore the transformative potential of literature to reimagine multispecies coexistence and to creatively reconfigure spaces in non-oppressive ways, particularly in utopian narratives, and offer some final recommendations for further research. By the end, I hope that this work will contribute to the promotion of a radical shift in how interspecies relations are conceptualized and to contribute to furthering an ecological awareness in literary studies.

Bearing Witness: the Role of Images

The images scattered throughout the dissertation are meant to be complementary to the textual component and to function as an additional reminder for the readers of the real nonhuman animals existing outside the literary page. The images do not serve an aesthetic purpose, which explains their rawness and imperfections, and neither are they intended to provoke a shock effect through gruesome and graphic details. Instead, they are mostly representations of normalized violence or use of nonhuman animals that typically would not produce any reaction due to a general emotional numbness. By simply removing them from their original context and re-locating them in a new environment is enough to initiate a process of denormalization that creates new meanings and narratives. The nonvisible elements that remain outside of the photographic frames require filling in the missing gaps, thus inviting a leap of imagination. It is in this space that text and image meet. In fact, the synesthetic and embodied experiences expressed in the texts function, in response, as a supplement to the images, therefore establishing

a constant dialogue. While it is true that images provide a quick way of being exposed to new information, there are intrinsic limits to visual imagery and moral implications to consider, accentuated by the fact that we live in an era of information overload and bombardment of visual stimuli. In fact, the spectator is still looking at a distance, from a privileged position, and has the possibility to look away. The images inserted into this context introduce the gaze of the reader who may reinforce the power imbalance already present if the images are not engaged critically. In any case, the interaction with the image does not have a direct and immediate impact and those who are being witnessed are left behind, which is in itself problematic.

Kathryn Gillespie, in her article on bearing witness to the suffering of animal others, makes a distinction between three ways of looking: voyeurism, which is self-centered and finalized to one's own pleasure; observation, which is objective, removed, and apolitical; witnessing, which requires a political and active involvement, as well as acknowledging the subjectivity and embodied experience of the individual we see suffering.[23] This work encourages the third mode of looking, requiring an active participation from the side of the readers. It is fundamental then to train the eye to recognize the paradoxes governing human-animal relations, to identify the problems with animal exploitation, and most importantly to see them as individuals. In her essay *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in reference to war-torn landscapes, Susan Sontag writes: "the images say: this is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget." [24] The same call comes from the images documenting the suffering of nonhuman animals. However, it is not enough to remain passively

[23] Kathryn Gillespie, "Witnessing Animal Others: Bearing Witness, Grief, and the Political Function of Emotion," in *Hypatia: a Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 31, n. 3, 2016, pp. 572-588.
[24] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Picador, 2003, p. 89.

haunted by images. The awareness that originates from being exposed to hidden injustices must be followed by a desire to dig deeper and take action.

Don't forget.

CHAPTER 1

Back in Sight, Back to Mind: Inside Italian Literary Slaughterhouses

Let this boar they tend, feed, clean and masturbate
look at them with the contemptuous air of an indolent, lecherous emperor;
he will end in the abattoir like all the cull boars
when one of his offspring takes his place and his balls dry up.[1]

In *Règne Animal*, the lives of five generations of a family intertwine with the transformation of their family land plot into an intensive pig farm. The human characters' thirst for economic profit is what guides their desire and presumption to rule over nature and other species, which leads them to genetically modify their pigs in order to design a new species that would enhance productivity. This new creature, a mix between a pig and a boar, embodies the life of suffering and misery that farmed animals are put through, not only in the fictional space of the novel, but also in real life. The quote above serves as a reminder of the inevitable fate awaiting nonhuman animals raised for human consumption: they all end up in the slaughterhouse. Once they become economically unproductive and therefore disposable commodities, or are worth more dead than alive, they are sent to the place that best represents the epitome of our treatment of other animals under conditions of industrial modernity.[2]

Behind the walls of secured concrete buildings designated as killing facilities for animals, an ongoing and systematic annihilation takes place every day around the world. Animal slaughter in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has proliferated on a large scale, also as a response to

[1] Jean Baptiste del Amo, *Règne Animal*, Paris: Gallimard, 2016. The English translation is by Frank Wynne, *Animalia*, New York: Grove Press, 2019.

[2] For as much as the slaughterhouse participates in rendering animals economically productive as "meat" products, it is however important to note that it is part of a larger chain of production that includes, for instance, the killing of economically uninteresting animals (i.e. day old male chicks), the slaughter of animals within the framework of animal disease control as well as of dairy cows who develop infertility issues and can no longer produce milk, who get then reintroduced into human spaces as "food" and by-products.

capitalist logics, and it has become institutionally supported.[3] In Italy, the construction of public and centralized slaughterhouses coincided approximately with the Italian Unification and with the government's plan to build new infrastructures, including railroads, electric grid, and streets. Slaughterhouses were originally part of the system of economic modernization that established a commercial network at a national level. At the present time, there are over a thousand structures designated exclusively to the slaughtering of animals. This number does not include factory farms, rendering plants, and breeding facilities, which are also connected to the system of production, processing, and preservation of animal products.[4]

In the space of the slaughterhouse, ruled by systematic violence and exploitation, animals are normatively profiled as consumable objects rather than experiencing subjects, and this shift to a reified perception of animals is ethically problematic. In fact, while there has been a growth in the acknowledgement of animal sentience and agency, we still ignore the reality of facts and relentlessly continue to farm, kill, and eat other animals.[5] Every time we erase their individuality

[3] An overview of the effects of capitalism on nonhuman animals can be found in David Nibert, ed., *Animal Oppression and Capitalism*, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017; Corinne Painter, "Non-human Animals Within Contemporary Capitalism: A Marxist Account of Non-human Animal Liberation," in *Capital and Class*, vol. 40, n. 2, 2016, pp. 327-345; Kathryn Gillespie, *The Cow With Ear Tag #1389*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018; Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital. Rendering Life in Biopolitical Terms*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

[4] The administration of pope Leo XII, in 1825, built the first slaughterhouse in Piazza del Popolo, Rome, primarily for sanitary purposes that echoed the French emphasis on hygiene in urban planning, which set an example for Italy. However, at the time, several private businesses still existed and it wasn't until the end of the 19th century that all the services became fully centralized. In Milan the first slaughterhouse was built in 1863, in Turin in 1867, and in Rome a new slaughterhouse was inaugurated in 1891. More details, particularly on the slaughterhouse of Rome, can be found in Gaetano Solinas, "Il Nuovo Mattatoio e Mercato del Bestiame della Città di Roma," in *Annali della Società degli Ingegneri e degli Architetti Italiani*, Roma: Tipografia Fratelli Centenari, 1891, pp. 469-486. A comprehensive study of the history of Italian slaughterhouses is missing but it is possible to find scattered information on single structures. See for instance Giuseppe Di Mino, *Il Macello Comunale e l'Approvvigionamento Carneo della Città di Palermo Durante il Decennio 1956-1965*, Palermo: Edizioni Palermo, 1965.

[5] Animals in factory farms and slaughterhouses are also "stripped of their animalness, their ability to reproduce on their own, to raise their young, to socialize with their kind. They are denied the pleasures of running, sleeping in the sunlight, and playing. As they are turned into profit-producing objects, we are also stripped of some of what makes us humans. Animal agribusiness is the most extreme example of

we commit the mistake of perpetuating a deceptive and human-centered Cartesian vision of the world, and the very existence of slaughterhouses takes to extremes the human-animal divide and magnifies our lack of concern for the interests of nonhuman animals.[6]

When thinking of human co-habitation with other species, the millions of animals that arrive to the city borders on transport trucks to be slaughtered are rarely the first thought that comes to mind; most often they are barely even the last one.[7] The most common way we as a society make contact with these animals is either through eating or through the transformation of their bodies into by-products that completely efface their animal origin. In *Animal to Edible*, Noëlie Vialles writes that "animal slaughtering has become an invisible, exiled, almost clandestine activity. We know it goes on, of course, but it is an abstract kind of knowledge."[8] By confining the act of slaughtering in an enclosed space, we humans turn deaf ears to the ethically problematic moment of animals' death and the violence and suffering behind it. Marguerite Yourcenar also addresses this issue in very similar terms and affirms that "we do not see those creatures contorted with pain; we do not hear their bellows, which even the most ardent lover of steak would find intolerable. There is no danger that public conscience will affect digestion."[9] That these realities

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institutionalized animal abuse." Danny Crossman, *The Animal Code: Giving Respect and Rights*, Melbourne: Arcadia, 2011, p. 24. The issues raised in this quote have been researched widely and in different countries around the world there have been consistent findings. For a discussion of the problem from an Italian perspective, see Roberto Marchesini, *Oltre il Muro: Viaggio all'Interno degli Allevamenti Intensivi*, Torino: Ecoistituto A. Peccei, 1993; Alessandro dal Lago, Massimo Filippi, Antonio Volpe, *Genocidi Animali*, Milano: Mimesis Edizioni, 2018.

[6] On Descartes' theorization of animals as machines it has been written extensively. For an overview of the topic see Peter Harrison, "Descartes on Animals," in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 42, n. 167, 1992, pp. 219-227; Gary Steiner, "Descartes on the Moral Status of Animals," in *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005, pp. 132-152.

[7] An exemplary case of this disappearance is discussed in Mary Trachsel, "The Presence of "Pork" and the Absence of Pigs: Changing Stories of Pigs and People in Iowa," in *Animal Oppression and Capitalism*, vol. 1, cit., pp. 76-94.

[8] Noëlie Vialles, *Animal to Edible*, translated by J. A. Underwood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 5.

[9] "Nous ne voyons pas ces créatures se tordre de douleur; nous n'entendons pas leurs cris, que ne

remain largely unexposed is also due in part to the hidden location of these factories, their closed and impenetrable design, and the strict enforcement of laws and regulations, which prevent the entry into or recording of such operations. We are so removed from this reality that there is nothing left but an echo of this space through idiomatic expressions or metaphors in which the slaughterhouse is used symbolically as a representation of human conditions.

So how can we access and learn about the condition of the *real* animals that live and are killed in a *real* "macello" (slaughterhouse), without the metaphoric superstructure that creates further distance and dissociation? As Carol Adams affirmed, when we venture inside a factory farm or slaughterhouse, we usually must enter "through the writings of someone else" who can make the live referent reappear through the construction of a narrative that reimagines the process of slaughtering.[10] Literary testimonies of human witnesses will therefore be the means of entry into the atrocities occurring daily in these spaces, given their ability to reconstitute the traces of the events and what is situated outside the narratives. Although the texts are filtered through the gaze of human subjects and respond to human modes of communication, there still is, as I will illustrate, an attempt to acknowledge also the animal gaze and to give us access to the animal experience. This chapter will provide a look inside Italian slaughterhouses through the writings of two body-witnesses, who have seen the hidden lives – and deaths – of animals destined for the

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supporterait pas le plus ardent amateur de bifteck. Les effets de la conscience publique sur la digestion ne sont pas à craindre." Marguerite Yourcenaur, "Une Civilisation à Cloisons Étanches," in *Le Temps, ce Grand Sculpteur,* Paris: Gallimard, 1983, pp. 191-195. (English translation: *That Mighty Sculptor, Time*, translation by Walter Kaiser, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992, p. 183). Yourcenaur is here speaking to consumers and addressing the issue of the distance that persists between the living animals and the "meat" as well as the process of abstraction that allows us to separate the two. She is, however, not considering the complexity of the involvement of slaughterhouse workers who become so desensitized, due to the daily exposure to high levels of violence, that even the actual act of killing becomes tolerable and grow accustomed to handling the animals like inanimate objects.

[10] Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, New York, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p. 31. See also her theory of the "absent referent" first formulated in the same book, pp. 20-22.

kill floor.[11] I will begin with the newspaper article "Una Mattinata ai Macelli" (*A Morning at the Slaughterhouse*, 1934) written by Carlo Emilio Gadda, where he observes and describes the logic of money in action through the chain of production of the slaughterhouse at the outskirts of the city of Milan; following, I will turn to Ivano Ferrari's collection of poems "Macello" (*Slaughterhouse*, 2003), the result of the writer's firsthand experience working in the slaughterhouse of Mantova in the 1970s. These represent the only Italian texts in which slaughterhouses are described based on the direct experience of writers who have seen with their own eyes the horrors that the killing of nonhuman animals entails. In the writings of Gadda and Ferrari, slaughterhouses are not mere imageries standing for other spaces or realities, but real places with real animals where literary devices assist in the process of reimagining and recreating the experiences of humans and other animals.[12] Their juxtaposition will give valuable insights on the role of these facilities, on slaughter practices, on ethical dilemmas concerning killing and consuming other animals, and on the consequences of living in a society that promotes the existence of slaughterhouses. Both writers not only expose animal suffering and violence, but also question the justifications that allow their personal participation in the process, no matter how far removed it might be, weather as a consumer or as a slaughterhouse worker. By pulling

[11] With the term "body-witness" I intend to stress a form of observation that goes beyond the gaze and instead involves all senses. Experiencing the slaughterhouse in first person is what validates their testimony. On this subject see Dominick La Capra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014, p. 62.

[12] As Susan Sontag argues in *Illness and Metaphor* (1978), it is necessary to constantly tweak this rhetorical device to minimize its damaging effects, to refrain from constructing distorted realities for those affected, and to avoid stigmatization. This theoretical framework can be here applied to animal metaphors. In fact, the load of mythologies, superstitions, legends, and symbology constructed over the centuries, have only increased and aggravated the divide between humans and other animals. Rediscovering the literal interpretation of animal metaphors will then be a means to reconnect with a distant reality from which we are mostly detached. For an analysis of fictional slaughterhouses, particularly of Anglophone literature, see Marian L. Scholtmeijer, *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction: From Sanctity to Sacrifice*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993, pp. 142-179; Sune Borkfelt, *Reading Slaughter: Concealment, Empathy and the Fictional Abattoir*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark, 2018.

back the curtain on the "disassembly line", these noteworthy examples have the power to provide an avenue for reflection on crucial aspects regarding human-nonhuman coexistence that have become entrenched and, consequently, are often deliberately concealed through oppression, shame, or neglect.

In my literary analyses, I approach the question of animal slaughter, and the institutional space in which it is confined, from an animal-oriented perspective, located in the interdisciplinary field of critical animal studies, while at the same time remaining attentive to the fact that the stories are filtered through human documentation and lenses. A close reading of the texts provides insights on Gadda and Ferrari's experiences as witnesses, which differ profoundly in nature and each one deserves close scrutiny. Yet, in both cases, their physical proximity to animal death in the space of the slaughterhouse has the strong potential to disrupt and challenge the massive categories of "human" and "animal", and to enhance the cultural awareness of the moral significance of animals other-than-human, especially those that human society has strictly segregated into the category of "food". By filling the ellipsis between "animal" and "meat", it is my aim to reduce and potentially reverse the distancing process "out of sight, out of mind" reinforced by slaughterhouses. Once the animals will be visible again, the tensions in our relationship with animals will also come to surface together with the flaws of a speciesist mindset that these testimonies deeply challenge.

1.1. Carlo Emilio Gadda's Visit to the Slaughterhouse

After returning from World War I, while working on some of the most influential novels of the 20th century, such as *The Awful Mess of Via Merulana* and *The Acquaintance with Grief*, Carlo

Emilio Gadda (1893-1973) collaborated with several Italian newspapers, from *L'Ambrosiano* to *La Nazione*.[13] Due to a precarious financial situation, he had no choice but to work mainly on commission and as a reporter around Italy, and his enthusiasm for these assigned jobs was most often replaced by a sense of boredom, especially for the more technical articles, which left no space to his artistic flow.[14] Nonetheless, his talent as a storyteller and as a thoughtful and perceptive observer clearly transpires through the articles of great sociological and historical value he has written. In an interview, commenting on his personal journalistic style, he declares, "the will to understand my own kind and myself has driven me to investigate and "register events", which is the foundation of storytelling."[15] This affirmation demonstrates his approach to his surroundings: with a careful concern for details, perhaps also a legacy of his scientific training as an engineer, he attentively gathers information from the world around him to construct his journalistic reports. Gadda, though, does not stop at an objective reportage made of information or opinions; he actually manages to bridge the gap between the journalistic and the

[13] *L'Ambrosiano* founded in Milan between 1922 and 1943, is renown for endorsing the fascist regime and supporting it with its editorial line. Instead, *La Nazione,* established in 1859 in Florence and still running today, even though it was a conservative newspaper, it had to adapt to the process of fascitization as other newspapers did, such as *Il Messaggero*, *Il Regno del Carlino*, *Il Corriere della Sera*. For a more in depth discussion of Gadda's activity as a journalist see: Errico Centofanti, "Giornalismo," in *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, n. 4, 2004, https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/walks/pge/giornalcentof.php; Giulio Ungarelli, "Le Occasioni di Gadda," in *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, n. 5, 2007, https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/supp5archivm/ragioni/ragioniungarellioccasioni.php#ragioniungarelli_inadatto. Previously published in Emilio Manzotti, ed., *Le Ragioni del Dolore. Carlo Emilio Gadda 1893-1993*, Lugano: Edizioni Cenobio, 1993, pp. 53-71.

[14] "Per guadagnare qualcosa, ho accettato di sobbarcarmi a qualche fatica pamphletaire, tecnico-propagandistica, cavandone gloria nessuna, denaro poco, e noia molta. La mia natura diligente e meticolosa ha reso inutilmente perfetta la fatica, e disastrosamente imperfetto il guiderdone." Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Lettere a una Gentile Signora*, edited by Giuseppe Marcenaro, with an essay by Giuseppe Pontiggia, Milano: Adelphi, 1983, p. 129. In a letter to his cousin, Piero Gadda Conti, commenting on the emotional constriction he experienced due to his journalistic writing, he writes: "Mi trovo nelle condizioni d'un cavallo che fosse invitato a far pipì in un bicchierino da liquore." Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Lettere a Gianfranco Contini: a Cura del Destinatario 1934-1967*, Milano: Garzanti, 1988, p. 49.

[15] "La volontà di comprendere i miei simili e me stesso mi sospingeva all'indagine e a quella "registrazione di eventi" che forma, in definitiva, il racconto," in Carlo Emilio Gadda, "Intervista al Microfono," in *I Viaggi la Morte*, Milano: Garzanti, 1958, pp. 502-505. My translation.

literary, a combination that has the power of drawing the reader much closer, by incorporating the subjective voice and using all of the colors on the palette of fictional techniques: narrative, dialogue, metaphor, analogy, and other rhetorical devices.[16]

The article at the core of this chapter, *A Morning at the Slaughterhouse*, was initially published on the 25th and 28th of October, 1934, on the daily newspaper *La Gazzetta del Popolo* based in Turin, for which he contracted between 1936 and 1939, and was then included in the collection of articles "Le Meraviglie d'Italia" (*Marvels of Italy*, 1939) financed and assembled by Gadda after a long reflective process of selection and arrangement of the texts.[17] The title chosen for this very composite collection of writings has multiple significances that range from admiration to irony, and recalls illustrious examples such as the Medieval guide *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* and Bonvesin da la Riva's *De Magnalibus Mediolani*.[18] The collection includes articles of his journey to Argentina, his investigations in Abruzzo, and an analysis of the commercial activities of Milan, from the stock exchange to the market of fruits and vegetables, to the slaughterhouse. The city of Milan plays a crucial role in Gadda's writings, where it often figures as an actual character, not merely as a background or a landscape. The relationship he had with his city of

[16] Gadda's article and writing style may even be defined as a precursor of the New Journalism. On this topic see: James E. Murphy, "The New Journalism: A Critical Perspective," in *Journalism Monographs*, n. 34, 1974, pp. 1-45; Tom Wolfe and Edward Warren Johnson, eds., *The New Journalism*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973. On creative nonfiction see, Robert L. Jr. Root and Michael Steinberg, (eds.), *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers on Creative Nonfiction*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999.

[17] The article underwent three title changes: *A Morning at the Slaughterhouse of a Big City*; *The Truck of 11 'o Clock*; the final title *A Morning at the Slaughterhouse,* preferred at the last revision of the text. The originals papers, including his notes, are held at the Biblioteca Trivulsiana, Fondo Roscioni, in Milan. To read more about the archival materials included and the history of Fondo Roscioni see, Paola Italia, *Come Lavorava Gadda*, Roma: Carocci Editore, 2017, pp. 32-34; Francesco Venturi, "Nel Fondo Roscioni: Sinopie, Indici, Piani di Lavoro," in *Meraviglie di Gadda: Seminario di Studi sulle Carte dello Scrittore*, edited by Monica Varchi and Claudio Vela, Pisa: Pacini Editore, 2014, pp. 47-72. There are no elements available that suggest whether the topic for this article was commissioned by the newspaper editor or chosen by Gadda. *La Gazzetta del Popolo* was founded in 1848 and continued running for 135 years maintaining a national-liberal orientation throughout the years.

[18] Liliana Orlando, "Dalle *Meraviglie d'Italia* a *Verso la Certosa*," in *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, n. 6, 2007, https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/supp6editing/articles/orlandoediting.php.

birth was always troublesome and ambivalent, similarly to what Paris meant to Balzac, London to Dickens, and Saint Petersburg to Dostoevskij. While he does celebrate particularly the fascist urbanistic renovation of the city,[19] he mostly lingers on the "negligence of intangible intellectual values" as well as on the downsides of its physiognomy. In his *Libello*, for instance, he writes, "Milan is an ugly and shabby city," insisting especially on its architectonic repulsiveness and its depressive climate.[20] In *Le Meraviglie d'Italia*, Gadda stresses the laboriousness of this industrial and dynamic city but, as Raffaele Donnarumma noted, only to show the bourgeoisie's lack of civic and ethical responsibilities, and the article dedicated to the slaughterhouse is a perfect example of this tension.[21] Generally overlooked by scholars, the relevance of this article has yet to be fully uncovered. In fact, it may not only shed light on broader questions regarding Gadda's philosophical and literary perspective but it may also fruitfully be discussed within the theoretical framework of animal studies.[22] Lucia Lo Marco, in her latest publication, is the most recent scholar who has taken this article into closer consideration. However, her aim is to reconstruct Gadda's representation of Milan through the several references scattered in his literary *corpus* and therefore the question of the animal is entirely ignored.[23] The general presence of violence is indeed recognized, but it is just briefly mentioned en passant, without really reflecting upon what its normalization entails.

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[19] Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Le Opere Pubbliche di Milano*, first published in *L'Ambrosiano* on October 25th, 1935, p. 3.

[20] Published in the newspaper *L'Ambrosiano*, on October 28th, 1938.

[21] Raffaele Donnarumma, "Gadda e Milano: Mito e Demistificazione," in *Milano da Leggere: Atti del Convegno Adi-Sd*, edited by Barbara Peroni, Milano: Ufficio Scolastico Regionale per la Lombardia, 2004, pp. 15-26. Several scholars have studied the role of Milan in Gadda's writings. See for instance: Giorgio Cavallini, *Lingua e Dialetto in Gadda*, Messina, Firenze: D'Anna, 1977; Paola Italia, *Glossario di Carlo Emilio Gadda Milanese*, Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1998.

[22] The field of animal studies is still predominantly Anglophone centered, and rarely welcomes discussions from more marginalized settings like for instance the Italian one, which is partially due to a lack of English translations of literary texts originated from non-English speaking countries.

[23] Lucia Lo Marco, *La "Svergolata" Milano di Carlo Emilio Gadda*, Roma: Perrone, 2016.

By presenting the life, activities, and sounds inside a slaughterhouse, Gadda highlights the essence of a society driven exclusively by economic interests. His focus on the city of Milan of the 1930s uncovers a social and political system ruled by strict capitalist imperatives, to which the slaughterhouse is responding.[24] In fact, his description of the transformation of animals firstly from breathing living beings to dead flesh and then ultimately into edible food provides valuable insights into the widespread practice of rationalized animal slaughter in action.

Figure 1. Line of Cows in the Live Market Area of the Slaughterhouse of Milan, Documentary, Istituto Nazionale Luce, 1931 [Film still, 3:05]

By the time Gadda writes, slaughterhouses had become a mechanized institution that responded to functionalist priorities and hygienic purposes, and in Milan this mindset was fully embraced. The municipal slaughterhouse was designed following the standards of the most famous European facilities, such as the ones in Zurich, Dresden, Paris and Lion, and was built in Via Molise occupying an area of approximately 300.000 sq. m. near the district of Calvairate, which in those years was still considered a suburb.[25] This huge facility functioning like a "mechanized city" was connected to the adjacent train station with railtracks that ended directly in some equipped rooms to facilitate continuous transportation and avoid any waste of time, which is one of the typical characteristics of industrial slaughter. The

[24] Functioning as a sort of synecdoche, slaughterhouses reveal how the capitalist system functions. History of capitalist accumulation is so much more than a history of humanity and the presence and reliance on nonhuman animals must be acknowledged.
[25] It ceased its activity in 2005 and was transformed into a space for cultural activities.

slaughterhouse for chickens and other birds was built separately and it is still in operation.[26] From Gadda's article, it appears that in order to respond to the high demand of animal products, "the city buys everywhere its boiled meat". Animals were in fact transported here to be slaughtered every day from different countries, like Croatia and Hungary, the regions of Emilia Romagna and Veneto, as well as from small towns surrounding Milan: Cremona, Mantova, Stradella, Lodigiano.

Many questions then arise from learning about such a massive operation and its economy based on the trade and profit making from living beings: what is the *true* cost behind the production of animal products for the individuals, nonhumans and humans, who are involved in this system of institutionalized violence and oppression? What moral significance do we give to animal life and death? A close analysis of Gadda's reconstruction of the architectural space and the daily activities he witnesses allows for a deeper understanding of broader ethical and political questions regarding human-animal coexistence.

1.1.1. At the Edge of the City: Encountering the Live Animals

Early in the morning, while the city dwellers are for the most part still asleep, the outskirts of the personified city of Milan start to slowly awaken, like the extremities of a human body that ritually stretch out first thing in the morning. The opening of the article, with its astronomical periphrasis, reminiscent of Dante's canto II of *Purgatory*, sets up a highly lyric atmosphere that soon after collides with the hectic activity of the slaughterhouse and the deafening noises of the trains and trucks, or as Gadda anthropomorphically defines them, "lamenting convoys",

[26] Stefania Aleni and Vito Redaelli, eds., *Storia e Storie dei Mercati Generali a Milano*, Milano: Associazione Culturale Quattro, 2013.

transporting cows, pigs, and calves.[27] This waystation serves as their last stop on earth but, unlike Dante's fictional souls, these are real breathing beings and for them there is no margin for salvation. Still "smelling of life", the animals are forcefully offloaded from the trucks and immediately sent to the area designated for their weighting. In this first section, in which Gadda describes the living animals, their emotional and physical state draw his attention, and it is impossible to avoid noticing and pointing out the abuse and overt cruelty of this massive operation:

> *The mistreated herd collapses with delicate bellows on the sloped surface of the street: one animal is reluctant, backs up, ..., some animals lean their forehead on a plank (foaming from their mouths, substantially), ..., Others have a cracked horn that bleeds ... They are muzzy, starving: some appear to be cold, numb, ..., Their pace is heavier than usual, hesitant, insecure.*

From this short passage, even for a person like Gadda who was not trained to interpret specific animal behaviors, clear signs of neglect and suffering are evident, such as starvation and the presence of injuries. His remarks are not merely anthropomorphic speculations, but descriptions of instances of animal suffering rendered in human terms. Gadda's description of their agonizing arrival is informed by an empathic reaction to the animals' distress, by a corporeal proximity that allows a connection with different individuals on a level of biological continuity and to perceive and read their emotions through their gestures.[28] The reluctance of one cow particularly attracts his attention: moved by fear, the cow breaks the line and attempts to escape but, after being

[27] It might be more accurate to define this "animalmorphism" to fully recognize the existence of emotions in other-than-human species and extend this awareness also to our language.

[28] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Animality is the Logos of the Sensible World: an Incorporated Meaning," in *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, compiled with notes by Dominique Sélgard and translated by Robert Vallier, Evanston: Northwest University Press, 2003, p. 166. On a similar note, as Peter Singer also suggests, "when I see my daughter fall and scrape her knee, I know that she feels pain because of the way she behaves - she cries, she tells me her knee hurts, she rubs the sore spot, and so on. I know that I myself behave in a somewhat similar - if more inhibited - way when I feel pain, and so I accept that my daughter feels something like what I feel when I scrape my knee. The basis of my belief that animals can feel pain is similar."

chased by two men armed of blunt instruments, fear is again the predominant emotion that Gadda captures, and what will force the cow to get back on the "prescribed path." In front of the evident suffering of the animals, Gadda brings the animals' perspective into the foreground and notices the resistance of some, and the exhaustion of others, who are resigned to their impending deaths, "paralyzed without any groans left, while the pigs a bit further down squeal in vain." These animals, as opposed to common belief, resist, react, and emit clear sounds of terror in front of their impending deaths.

Figure 2. Two Cows in the Live Market Area of the Slaughterhouse of Milan, Documentary, Istituto Nazionale Luce, 1931, [Film still, 4:37]

Gadda's phenomenological experience is rendered throughout the article through sensorial figures that enrich his narrative mostly with visual, olfactory, and hearing elements. Gadda in fact manages to give poetic dignity to these sensorial stimuli through its use of rhetorical devices, which further immerse the reader in the perceptual realm of the slaughterhouse. The role of sight is particularly important, physically and philosophically, since it allows not only to trace different ways in which the animals are perceived, but also to simply bring in plain sight events and circumstances that are not easily accessible or are purposefully concealed. Gadda's unmediated vision, stressed by the repetition of the formulaic expression "I see", is further reinvigorated by a constant use of the present tense, which gives a sense of constant motion and facilitates the reader's relation to the reality being described, as if watching a sequence of cinematic images.

Going back to the text, the animals are then put on scales that will determine their price for

future sale. This "ceremony" takes place under the famished eyes of buyers and agents, who represent a profit-oriented perspective that sees the animal bodies as mere commodities, devoid of sentience. Their metamorphosis into edible food has officially begun. This transformation is here reiterated by the use of a language that perfectly expresses this transition from flesh to "food", which emphasizes their liminal state between life and death: "their legs are weak by supporting the weight of their heads, hips, and thighs (*culatte*)." The full significance of this last term unfortunately gets lost in translation, since in Italian two meanings actually overlap in a single word: the body part corresponding to the pigs' thighs and the *culatta*, a specific type of "cured meat" that in Italy has a long culinary tradition made precisely from pigs' thighs.[29] The violence towards these animals has become so normative that the term manages to be emptied of its violence and deny the reality of animal death. Linguistic distancing is one of the mechanisms that create barriers between humans and other animals. In fact, language disturbingly reiterates the exploitation of animals simply by renaming animal flesh as a "food" product, as in this specific case based on detachment and misrepresentation.[30] In this example, Gadda unsettlingly combines the distancing language with his proximity to the live animals, which signals his

[29] The term has later also come to signify homosexual individuals in a derogatory and offensive sense, so the use of this term becomes even more problematic. This is a clear example of how a speciesist viewpoint perpetuates oppression not only towards nonhuman animals but also towards other marginal groups of society.

[30] Timothy Pachirat, who worked at a slaughterhouse for investigative research, argues that three forms of distancing occur in industrial slaughterhouses: physical, social, and linguistic. *Physical distancing* is most apparent with the segregation between the "dirty side" (the kill floor) and the "clean side" (everything that comes after the kill floor). See *Every Twelve Seconds*: *Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Many authors have commented at length on the ways in which changing methods, practices, and locations of animal slaughter have impacted upon human-animal relationships, and in particular how they have functioned to disconnect animals from humans in certain Western industrialized countries (Serpell, 1996; Vialles, 1994). Traverso (2003) in his book *The Origins of Nazi Violence* also comments on how factors such as the renaming of slaughterhouses to abattoirs, their relocation outside of city areas, and the development of scientific notions of humane-killing (death without pain) have functioned to affect not only human-animal power relations but also human-to-human violence. On speciesism and language see, Joan Dunayer, *Animal Equality: Language and Liberation*, Derwood, MD: Ryce, 2001, pp. 1-11; Carol J. Adams, *Sexual Politics*, cit. pp. 45-65.

participation in and perpetuation of the problematic separation between the animals and our perception of them as "food". While observing the "*beefs* worthy of Milan", Gadda notices that the knees of their back legs seem in terrible shape, which causes them to dramatically slow down.[31] This is a moment of epiphany for him: he in fact recalls the many times he has chewed their flesh with great difficulty "satisfied like a paper shredder digesting a bull-novel."[32] He finally understands why it has always been so hard to ingest those body parts and how his apparent satisfaction was being fed by having switched to a machine mode that repeats a function without ever questioning it. Again then, seeing the animal in pain, and most importantly being physically close to that pain, bridges the distance that has become so intrinsically part of our culture. The abstract animal is made present again. The individuality of the animal is here masterfully expressed through the evocative image of the *bull-novel*. Gadda seems to realize that the animals he encounters have a history, a personal narrative and individual identity, that they are literally and metaphorically hard to digest, and yet they still get wiped away in the name of human consumption.

It is, however, only at the entrance of the slaughter pavilion, that Gadda experiences a moment of true ethical hesitation, during which the moral assumptions he had taken for granted are questioned. The realization of what he is about to witness, intensified by assisting at the animals' "mute fumbling", generates a strong sense of anguish that is hard to hold back. His reaction is to find a justification that could silence his ethical crisis. He writes: "I tell myself, and I repeat it over and over again, that this is a necessity without alternatives, this place is nothing but a

[31] I choose here to maintain the plural in English to remain as close as possible to the original Italian *manzi*, which implies their transformation into "food", since they are not called cows anymore, but their individuality still survives in the plural, which gets completely erased in English.

[32] "Masticavo, masticavo, con la soddisfazione di una molazza, in cartiera, che digerisca la resa d'un romanzo-toro."

market, a “facility” like any other...”

This statement clearly responds to a need to legitimize the existence of slaughterhouses by elaborating coping mechanisms that help deal with a sense of ethical incoherence and dissonance often experienced by consumers when facing the harsh realities of these places far from sight. By renaming it as something that is not and by taking an anthropocentric utilitarian position towards this industry, the conclusion he reaches, even in front of the horrors of this massive operation, is that since the moral code of the city accepts this, it must continue.[33]

Nonetheless, in front of the resigned animals “transported to their end”, the space they are about to enter can only be named for what it is, without any euphemism: the killing floor. The Italian term used here, *ammazzatoio*, is a calque of the title of Émile Zola's urban novel *Assommoir*, of which Gadda is eliciting realistic atmospheres and naturalistic representations.[34] Right at the beginning of the novel, the protagonist Gervaise sees “groups of butchers, in aprons smeared with blood, hanging about in front of the slaughterhouses: and the fresh breeze wafted occasionally a stench of slaughtered beasts”; this opening scene anticipates, as a sort of premonition, Gervaise's own tragic death at the end of the novel.[35] There is no doubt that there is

[33] Anthropocentric utilitarianism: value and benefit for the human society. For a closer look at utilitarianism and animal ethics see, Katarzyna de Lazari-Radek and Peter Singer, *Utilitarianism: a Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; Tatjana Višak, *Killing Happy Animals: Explorations in Utilitarian Ethics*, The Palgrave MacMillan Animal Ethics Series, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. For an opposite philosophical perspective see, Gary L. Francione, *Animals as Persons. Essays on the Abolition of Animal Exploitation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

[34] A corresponding English term does not exist. The title of the novel has been left in French and loosely translated *The Dram Shop*, *The Gin Palace*, *The Drunkard*, and *The Drinking Den*. Literally, it means killing room. The influence of Zola on Gadda was so profound that he even defined himself “Minimissimo Zoluzzo di Lombardia” in *I viaggi la Morte*, cit., p. 65. Dante Isella, referring to Gadda's models for his early writings, affirms that “the names that recur on the *Cahier*, together with very few others, are those of the great generation: Manzoni, above all, Stendhal, Balzac, Zola, Dostoevsky, D'Annunzio.” Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Racconto Italiano di Ignoto del Novecento*, edited by Dante Isella, Torino: Einaudi, 1983, p. ix.

[35] Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir*, translated by Margaret Mauldon, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 33. Zola as well is playing on the literal and metaphorical meanings of “assommoir,” also used to refer to a drinking place (Gervaise will become an alcoholic). Gadda, by turning back from the drinking den to

an intertextual tension at play here. By creating this literary connection, Gadda is setting the dark tone for what is about to happen on the actual killing floor, the enclosed room where the word "muscle" is replaced with "meat". At the entrance, he senses a slight empathic move also from the workers who are directing the animals inside. Their blows appear softer, "almost merciful", but their emotional participation must be repressed in order for the job to be completed. From the anonymous mass of animals, our attention then turns to one individual, the one who is about to be killed:

> *A man dressed in blue with a white handkerchief around his neck waits for the animals... his hand is filthy, like Macbeth's hand, horribly armed, like Macbeth's hand. His whole arm is covered in red. The animals bend down their horns, giving in: he doesn't look at them in the eye, he gets close with his arms outstretched. He tries out the sharpness of the knife on the neck, in the exact spot he knows, between the vertebrae. Once he finds the spot, he lifts the knife and moves it fiercely, like Leibniz would say, in "the least evil of all possible ways". The beast collapses heavily: with the four hooves in the air, with dying eyes, still agitated by dreadful tremors, without any possible mitigation.*

The syncopated rhythm of this passage combined with a dry and analytic narrative style produce an objective description made of vivid images that are reminiscent of snapshots or movie frames, anticipating Georges Franju's *Le Sang des Bêtes*, a short French documentary released in 1949.[36] Gadda's kino-eye does not spare us the brutality and bloody violence of the killing and zooms in on the animal's agonizing pain, from the agitated movements to the last breaths. However,

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the slaughterhouse, is reliteralizing the term, which makes the readers connect even more with the reality of the space.

[36] Shot in several slaughterhouses in the French capital shortly after WWII, the documentary provides a glimpse of the steps involved in the production of "meat": from the slitting of throats to the stripping of skin and hair to the removal of inedible parts and the eventual hanging of carcasses on hooks ready for further processing. The contrast with the outside world is particularly emphasized by contrasting images such as a kissing couple and a naturalistic panorama with brutal and bloody killings. For an analysis of the documentary, see Akira Mizuta Lippit, "The Death of the Animal," in *Film Quarterly*, vol. 56, n. 1, 2002, pp. 9-22; Belinda Smaill, "Meat, Animals, and Paradigms of Embodiment," in *Regarding Life: Animals and the Documentary Moving Image*, New York: State University of New York, 2016, pp. 45-70; Adam Lowenstein, "Films Without a Face: Shock Horror in the Cinema of Georges Franju," in *Cinema Journal*, vol. 37, n. 4, 1998, pp. 37-58.

compared to Franju's black and white visual representation of the Paris slaughterhouse, distinguished by its heightened aesthetics of violence, Gadda not only adds colors, such as the red of the tiles and the blue and white outfit of the butcher, but he also pauses on each sequence through adjectives and nouns that stress his emotional participation and judgment.[37] These literary strategies are chosen to stimulate a sympathetic imagination in the readers that brings them one step closer to the animal's death, with the potential to breach through the liminal separation between us and them. Gadda also makes use of literary allusions that carry a strong moral message. In this passage, he is explicitly comparing the butcher to Shakespeare's Macbeth. The scene that immediately comes to mind is of Macbeth staring down at his bloody hands after having murdered Duncan.[38] By making this comparison constructed on the equation between animal and human murder, Gadda is characterizing the killing as a crime and avoiding sterilizing the bloody scenario. What the text performs is a subtle comment on a system that somehow morally justifies killing animals and that discredits their deaths as well as their right to live. By implicitly replacing the word "slaughter" with "murder", a shift is suggested toward an unlawful killing that, in current legislations, is still applied only to humans.[39] The result is a destabilizing reflection on a speciesist mindset of what is commonly considered morally acceptable about our

[37] For George Franju, "Violence is not an end, it's a weapon which sensitizes the spectator and which lets him see what's lyric or poetic beyond or above the violence, or what's tender in the reality." G. Roy Levin, *Documentary Explorations: 15 Interviews with Film-Makers*, New York: Doubleday, 1971, p. 121.

[38] The murder takes place in act II scene II. The famous sentence Macbeth hardly articulates in total shock, looking at his hands, is "this is a sorry sight." Gadda's fascination with Shakespeare manifests itself as both a lexical and stylistic indebtedness. Hamlet in particular is a "model character" for Gonzalo in *La Cognizione del Dolore*. For more on this topic see Enza De Francisci and Chris Stamatakis, eds., *Shakespeare, Italy, and Transnational Exchange: Early Modern to Present,* London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 32-34.

[39] Animal death is actually regulated by legislations: in Europe, by the Council Regulation (EC) N. 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing, valid also for Italy (available also online) https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2009:303:0001:0030:IT:PDF; in the UK by The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995; in the US by the Humane Slaughter Act. All include, for instance, detailed regulations regarding the use of gas chambers for preventive stunning.

treatment of other animals.[40] Guilt is also inferred through this intertextual reference, considering the major role it plays in Shakespeare's tragedy. Macbeth's overwhelming sense of remorse overtly contrasts with the desensitized butcher, who immediately has to move on to another killing, for his is just a job that needs to be rapidly completed in the most efficient way, and this highlights the contradictions and ambiguities deeply rooted in this system.

Gadda's description of what he witnesses on the kill floor, if read from the perspective of the animals, makes the absent referent shockingly visible and puts in the open the abuse and violence that takes place in slaughterhouses. Also, by giving narrative space to this moment of animal death, he is revisiting the normative value that slaughterhouses attribute to it. This empathetic perspective is confirmed soon after, when he focuses on describing the loss of vitality of the organism that is de-animated and, as a consequence, turned into pure matter. He writes: "Something sacred extinguishes, the living being adapts to immobility. A black stream of blood overflows from the neck, the supreme exhaustion." The animals that are made to not "matter" within the physicality of food, regain physical and embodied space that indeed matters. The juxtaposition of sacrality and violent killing echoes George Bataille's view of the slaughterhouse and attempts to restore an aura of sacredness to the killing.[41] However, the ritualization of killing, even when it acquires sacredness, represents another element of distancing that conceals the violence and frames it into a narrative of a socially accepted act. The distinctive choreography described by Gadda of the secular killings in the slaughterhouse emphasizes the ambiguity of the sacred and its inherent violent nature.[42] Nonetheless, in the moment of their

[40] In the novel by Michel Faber, *Under the Skin* (2000), this anthropocentric view of slaughter is brilliantly challenged by recounting the story of an alien species farming humans on Earth for meat.
[41] George Bataille and Annette Michelson, "Slaughterhouse," in *October*, vol. 36, Special Issue: *George Bataille: Writings on Laughter, Sacrifice, Nietzsche, Un-Knowing*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986, pp. 10-13.
[42] The presence of sacred elements in Gadda's works are always problematic and often tainted with irony

violent death, Gadda does not perceive the animals as mere commodities, or objects, but as sentient creatures with a life that has intrinsic value; further, by turning his attention to animal death it gains metaphysical space, which is usually lacking especially for farmed animals.[43]

Once the animal is dead, Gadda then lingers on a reflection regarding the method of killing that would cause the "least suffering". The oxymoronic expression "humane" slaughtering, bombarding nowadays marketing strategies, makes it look non violent and painless. It must be something that is not. Rather than consider the most obvious effects of "meat" production on the animals, that is their death, attention is placed on the lead up to and method of death. Language is again used to naturalize and sanitize these practices. As we have seen though, what happens inside the slaughterhouse is far from being nonviolent and painless, and Gadda recognizes it as he distances himself from the workers' explanations of the most effective methods – "so *they* say" – implemented for the reduction of pain and dreaded accidents. Furthermore, it is not a coincidence that twice in this passage Gadda quotes Leibniz's theodicy and his response to evil, summarized in the conviction that "this is the best of all possible worlds." [44] Gadda is in fact

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and sarcasm. It is also important to keep in mind his philosophical studies and how he develops a strong laic ethics that tends to reflect in his literary works. Crucial to the formation of his ideas is his close collaboration with Piero Martinetti, his thesis advisor, and interestingly also the writer of two books on animal ethics: "La Psiche degli Animali" and "Pietà Verso gli Animali." See Maurizio Rebaudengo, "Sacro," in *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, n. 2, 2002, https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/walks/pge/sacroreabaud.php; Lara Monighetti Petit, *Mitologia e Religione nel Primo Gadda*, Hamburg: Diplomatica, 2004.

[43] Roberto Marchesini "La Rimozione della Soggettività dell'Eterospecifico e la Perdita del Concetto di Morte Animale," in *Animal Studies. Rivista Italiana di Antispecismo*, vol. 3, 2013, pp. 42-47.

[44] Gadda wrote his thesis on Leibniz, which remained unfinished, *La Teoria della Conoscenza nei «Nuovi Saggi» di G.W. Leibniz*, now edited by Riccardo Stracuzzi, in *I Quaderni dell'Ingegnere. Testi e Studi Gaddiani*, n. 4, 2006, pp. 5-38. For further information on the influence of Leibniz's thought on Gadda's works see Mario Porro, "Leibniz," in *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, n. 4, 2004, https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/walks/pge/leibnizporro.php; on Gadda's broader philosophical ideas see Gianmaria Merenda, "Carlo Emilio Gadda e la Cognizione del Mondo," in *Elephant & Castle*, n. 5, 2012, pp. 5-20; Christophe Mileschi, "Meditazione Milanese. Gadda Filosofo: un Precursore Retrogrado," in *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, n. 5, 2007, https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/journal/issue5/articles/mileschiprecursore05.php. The philosopher's theories can be found in his 1710 work, *Essais de Théodicée sur la Bonté de Dieu, la*

actively engaging with this viewpoint in an ironic and disillusioned way. In a slaughterhouse, a place that questions the whole concept of necessity so central to Leibniz's thought, the idea that this could be the best of all possible worlds seems to naturally collapse. As a proof of Gadda's skepticism towards the philosopher's position, in the novel *La Meccanica*, conceived more or less in the same years, Gadda questions this concept once again in similar terms; one of the main characters, Luigi, embodies precisely this disbelief by affirming that "this world in many ways leaves much to be desired", and Gadda explicitly comments in the text defining this assumption as "not really Leibnizian".[45]

So, for as much as he does not entirely and openly condemn the system that allows the existence of slaughterhouses, since throughout the article he maintains a utilitarian approach that views the whole system as a necessity for human society, still the certainties taken for granted have been shaken by visiting the slaughterhouse in person. What really stands out is the description of a space where the lives of animals and the way they must die are being orchestrated according to the economics of industrial efficiency and manipulated by the inch. As it will be discussed more closely in the next section, bodily regulations and rationalization extend beyond life, to the *post-mortem* phase of their bodies, confirming what Sigfried Giedion has defined as the "mechanization of death" involved in the production of "meat".[46] Before moving on to the description of the afterlife of the animal bodies, a blank space is added in the text, which induces a moment of respectful silence and reflection on the animals' death. This is the only space designated for mourning, if it can even be interpreted as such.

Liberté de l'Homme et l'Origine du Mal (Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*. London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1952).

[45] "Questo mondo per molti rispetti lascia moltissimo a desiderare: era una sua idea, poco leibniziana per verità." Published in episodes in 1928 on the journal *Solaria*, then as a book only in 1970. Translation is mine.

[46] Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: a Contribution to Anonymous History*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p. 240.

1.1.2. Embodying Capitalism: the Mechanization of Death

The motto *ruit hora* echoes incessantly within the walls of the rooms assigned to the process of "embellishment" of the dead bodies, from skinning, to the elimination of secretions, blood, and entrails. In this section of the text, the rhythm accelerates drastically and the style becomes dryer and more technical in order to keep up with the absence of breaks and the rapid pace of mechanized labor: the relentless anthropological machine never stops.[47] From the numbers Gadda provides, over two hundred animals get slaughtered simultaneously, separated by species membership (cows, horses, pigs, calves, but not as many lambs, they get slaughtered "only around Easter") to guarantee a continuous flow of animal bodies that feed the consumerist residents of Milan, the city that "rushes to eat, as usual around noon".

The monetarization of animal death as well as the exploitative and alienating nature of the work undertaken in slaughterhouses are here vividly described. According to Gadda's careful descriptions, the divisions of labor into repetitive tasks are constructed spatially, since the layout of the workplace separates the work of killing from the work of processing body parts, which helps increase desensitization and emotional detachment in order to achieve the most efficient working performance. While the dead animal bodies are being rapidly dismembered, the workers are subject to a slow metamorphosis as well. They in fact become anonymous units defined by numbers, like the nonhuman animals being slaughtered ("the second worker," "the eleven employees") or by their work roles, which is what best defines them (the supervisor, the manager, the operator, the butcher). Stripped of their individualities, names, and identities, the slaughterhouse workers also appear as victims of the institutionalized system of violence that

[47] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open. Man and Animal*, translated by Kevin Attell, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003, pp. 33-38.

normalizes animal death through a process of compartmentalized labor.[48] Gadda pushes it even further by comparing for instance the "trippai", the workers responsible for removing the intestines, to vultures "poured down on the entrails". This animal metaphor for humans is emblematic of the blurring of the borders between the human-animal categories in slaughterhouses, and this process takes place not only by enhancing bestial traits, depersonalizing the workers, but also simply by recognizing that humans are animals too on a physiological and sociobiological level, and that all individuals in the slaughterhouse, regardless of their species, are exploited and oppressed in one way or another.[49]

As an opposite example, of human metaphor for animals, Gadda describes the head of a dead calf hanging from a hook with "semi-closed, motionless and vitreous eyes" that reminds of a "horned Holofernes." This hybrid human-animal figure whose origin, stripped of animal traits, can be traced to the biblical book of Judith, is visually evoking Caravaggio's famous painting *Judith and Holofernes*.[50] The beheading of Holofernes was a popular artistic subject, which Caravaggio chose to approach from the most dramatic moment of the story, the act of decapitation itself. The physical realism and the dark atmosphere, together with the jets of blood shooting out from Holofernes' neck, with his mouth that gapes in a strangled cry and his eyes wide open in terror, are all pictorial details that Gadda is referring to, wishing to direct the readers to the flashing instants of an act that cannot be halted with the gaze. Gadda is clearly

[48] On this question see Lindsay Hamilton and Darren McCabe, "'It's just a job': Understanding Emotion Work, De-animalization and the Compartmentalization of Organized Animal Slaughter," in *Organization*, vol. 23, n. 3, 2016, pp. 330–350.

[49] Andrew Goatly, "Humans, Animals, and Metaphors," in *Society & Animals: Journal of Human-Animal Studies*, vol. 14, n. 1, 2006, pp. 15-37.

[50] Completed in 1599, this large canvas concerns the deuterocanonical Book of Judith, recounting how the widow Judith saved her people by seducing and killing Holofernes, the Assyrian general. The story of Judith and Holofernes will be an inspiration also for Gadda's *Pasticciaccio*, confirming an overarching presence in his works. On the influence of visual arts on Gadda's writings see Micaela Lipparini, *Le Metafore del Vero. Percezione e Deformazione Figurativa in Carlo Emilio Gadda*. Pisa: Pacini, 1994.

evoking the iconography of the decapitated head and the hand covered in blood that unsettles the readers due to their (human) cultural associations, which are here transferred onto an animal. The turning point of human life displayed in the painting, the moment when one passes from being alive to dead, is the focus of this scene, but this time the protagonist of this liminal experience is a calf, whose death is morally elevated to the human level. Caravaggio's paintings often address the theme of violence on bodies, most vividly expressed through scenes of decapitation: *Judith and Holofernes*, the *Beheading of St. John the Baptist*, *Salome*. Gadda too shares this interest in aggression, homicide and violent death, which characterizes particularly *Quer Pasticciaccio*, *La Cognizione*, and as it has now been illustrated also this article in reference to the question of animal death in the slaughterhouse, which Gadda is suggesting should be read in parallel to cases of violent human death.[51]

In this graphic image, the animal body hacked into pieces is reduced to the face, the part of an individual that has unique and distinctive features, that sends emotional and communicative signals. It is not by chance that Gadda focuses on this disturbing, even purposefully grotesque, face-to-face encounter.[52] In fact, this focalization on the face has the potential to restore the subjectivity and individuality of the animal, while also forcing to look the victim in the eye and

[51] See also Meriel Baines, "Elements of Caravaggio in Gadda's Prose," in *The Edinburgh Journal of Gadda Studies*, n. 1, 2001 (although *A Morning in the Slaughterhouse* does not feature among the analyzed works). https://www.gadda.ed.ac.uk/Pages/resources/coursematerial/studentportfolio/HD2000-2001/merielbaines.php.

[52] As Peter Atterton noted, while Levinas was clearly reluctant to extend to nonhuman animals the same kind of moral consideration he gave to humans, his ethics of alterity is one of the best equipped to mount a strong challenge to the traditional view of animals as beings of limited, if any, moral status. His phenomenology of the face applies to all beings that can suffer and are capable of expressing that suffering. "Levinas and Our Moral Responsibility Toward Other Animals," in *Inquiry. An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 54, 2011, pp. 633-649; read also Matthew Calarco, "Facing the Other Animal," in *Zoographies. The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, pp. 55-78. On a contrasting note, it is possible to notice a very different philosophical stand on the role of the face offered by Deleuze and Guattari in *Mille Plateaux*. On this topic see Gavin Rae, "The Political Significance of the Face: Deleuze's Critique of Levinas," in *Critical Horizons. A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory*, vol. 17, n. 3-4, 2016, pp. 279-303.

recognize that they are looking back at us and are aware of our actions toward them.[53] This ghostly animal gaze, like the living gaze of Derrida's cat, renders the calf visible as someone unmoored from the comfortable anthropocentric encoding, and also fulfills the destabilizing function of questioning the human relationship with the dead animal, whose status as "meat" is here challenged. At the same time, though, Gadda is attributing an ambiguous role to the slaughterhouse worker, who in this narrative corresponds to Judith. In contrast with the earlier comparison with Macbeth, the reference to this biblical episode mitigates his criminal actions, which are here envisioned more as a necessity, a brutal yet heroic killing. Also, by shifting the gender of the worker, the killing itself becomes feminized and therefore the level of violence normatively associated with hegemonic masculinity is reduced. His vivid descriptions, made of powerful images that blur the lines between "human" and "animal", reveal the complexities and nuances of these categories that cannot be confined into a strict binary logic of "victim" and "killer". At the same time, witnessing in first person the killing of the calf evidently shakes Gadda's morals; however, he still maintains an ambiguous position that does not boldly take sides with either the animals or the human workers, which is expressed also through these partially discordant metaphors that mirror his moral struggles.

After pausing on the gaze of the dead calf, Gadda moves to describing the rationalized reduction of animals to "food" and listing the myriad of commodities derived from their bodies, of which nothing goes to waste, from the ovaries for medical purposes to the pancreas and the testicles of the bulls for insulin.[54] "Blood gushes from an object", he affirms, implying that the

[53] I will return to the question of nonhuman animals looking back at us and the ways in which the "human" is redefined through the gaze of the "other" in my second chapter.

[54] In the book project *PIG 05049,* the Dutch artist Christien Meindertsma makes this very clear by tracing the corporal remains of pig known as number 05049 who came from a pig farm in Rotterdam and was reduced to no less than 185 products ranging from food to porcelain and ammunition, made from skin, bones, meat, organs, blood, fat, brains, hoofs, hair, and tail.

metamorphosis from living being to inanimate thing, rendered also through comparisons and metaphors, is now complete.[55] Objectification and alienation in the name of profit maximization are at the core of capitalist production, which Gadda is clearly criticizing. However, in discussions around the nature of capitalism, slaughterhouses tend to be excluded and ignored. Gadda's article is instead an important testimony of the detrimental nature of a space based on exploitation, violent death, and oppression, to the point it can be defined as the Italian version of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, without having sparked the same controversies and uproar or urged any sort of legal investigation.[56]

As a further confirmation of the shady nature of this system, the last section of the article is dedicated to the final veterinarian inspection whose responsibility is to prevent "evil from getting outside, by destroying it at the doors of the city" and to "make sure that nothing suspicious crosses the threshold of the slaughterhouse." Again, distance and concealment are key to the ongoing atrocities allowed in slaughterhouses, facilitated through practices of surveillance and regulation, in this case represented by the veterinarians, who bring together functions of care and destruction. As long as *the evil* remains out of sight, it remains morally acceptable. This section strongly contrasts with the short writing "The Fruit and Vegetables Market" included in the same volume and written just two years later, which encourages a parallel analysis. Similarly to the slaughterhouse, Gadda describes the municipal market in Milan he visited in first person with such a virtuosity and pictorial style that he himself compared it to a Baroque painting by Luca Giordano. Towards the end of the article, Gadda concentrates on the mycologist inspection, always with the purpose of monitoring the presence of *evil*. What stands out is the complete reversal of categories between plants and nonhuman animals: mushrooms, which are sorted and

[55] As an example, he compares the tongue of a cow being cut out from their mouth to the clapper of a bell.
[56] Also Bertolt Brecht in *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* employs butchering imagery to depict the inhumanity of large-scale capitalists.

discarded when considered dangerous to human health, become nonetheless literary characters, personified in all their vitality, and are even defined as arrogant, false, liars, because of the dangerous features they hide behind their apparent harmlessness; animal flesh, when and if threats to human health are detected, is instead immediately sent by the veterinarians to be used as fertilizer because of the frequent signs of tuberculosis present in their entrails.[57] Animal life is being turned into pure waste. This contrast is even more evident when closely analyzing the space of the fruit and vegetables market. The hostility and screams of the slaughterhouse are replaced with beauty and energy, features that are highlighted by the artistic qualities of the prose that captures the sensory atmosphere of the space. The "lamenting convoys" transporting animals become here "harmonious trains", where colors reign over darkness; the blood and terror of the slaughtered animals make room for "the natural wholesomeness of vegetables" that with their vitamins "have made life possible"; the entrails of the animals used for medicinal purposes are now colorful fruits and vegetables described as "natural and mysterious formulae" that Gadda traces back to the "genius of creation"; the provenance of the fruits is epic and poetic, since they come from "the sunny shores of Hellas" and the hills of Garda and Adige, an epic tone that is missing when he describes the provenance of the live animals; the fruit and vegetables market becomes a welcoming shelter for homeless in search of a warm space in the winter, a function that the slaughterhouse cannot fulfill due to its inhospitable environment.[58] It is clear then that a parallel analysis of the two texts magnifies the contrast that exists between the urban space of the

[57] For a closer and deeper understanding of the essential role of plants, the interconnections between us and them, and a philosophy of nature, see Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: a Metaphysics of Mixture*, translated by Dylan J. Montanari, Polity Press: Medford, 2019 (available also in the original French version and in Italian). In the prologue he defines plants as "the cosmic ornament, the inessential and multicolored accident that reigns in the margins of the cognitive field" (p. 3).

[58] Giovanni Aloi defines plants as "the blissfully ignored living beings on which all life on this planet depends." "Deconstructing the Animal in Search of the Real," *Anthrozoos*, n. 25, 2012, pp. 329-346. By the same author see also *Why Look at Plants?: the Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art*, Leiden; Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2018.

fruits and vegetables market bursting with vitality and positivity and the violence and corporeal decay of the slaughterhouse, which once again makes the violence of the slaughterhouse strikingly and disturbingly visible.

To conclude, the slaughterhouse we have visited through Gadda's testimony is a powerful example of what the true cost of "meat" is and how this system of institutionalized violence is oppressing both human and nonhuman communities. Animals are described as living beings whose agency is constantly monitored and repressed and, once we read the text from the perspective of the animals, we learn to see their apparent passivity as a consequence of the subjugated position they are forced to live in.[59] Animal agency in fact surfaces throughout the text in several ways, from rejections of commands, to slowdown, foot-dragging, all actions that the anthropologist James C. Scott has termed "weapons of the weak", a concept that applies also to our animal counterparts.[60] In parallel, the brutal deaths that Gadda describes, no matter the chosen method, question the cruel treatment and lack of moral status that are so normalized in our society. Even if he does not make an explicit statement in defense of animals, he still recognizes animal suffering and calls into question the animal/human divide. Nonetheless, when faced with the ethical dilemma that killing other animals raises, as a consumer he chooses to find justifications, even in front of the violence and oppression he witnesses. Throughout the article, in fact, we notice a tension between his unsettling realization of being a passive participant in the system and his justifications for continuing to view the killing of animals for human

[59] Originally, the animals that showed more aggressive or rebellious behaviors, the so-called *bestie indomite* (indomitable beasts), were relegated to dedicated rooms, indicating that it was necessary to impose more control over the individuals that visibly reacted to the physical constraints and abuse. The architecture of slaughterhouses has evolved drastically also to prevent escapes and accidents that could harm the workers, by limiting movements to the bare minimal. In the second part of this chapter, I will discuss more in detail the question of the animals' (in)visible resistance.

[60] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

consumption as a necessity. This, however, does not represent a barrier in making visible the activities occurring inside the slaughterhouse and exposing the systemic violence occurring at a daily basis. The literary style that Gadda chooses to describe his visit to the slaughterhouse effectively combines descriptive and realistic elements with more emotionally charged details, which allows the readers to establish an empathetic connection and accurately reimagine the space through the author's embodied experience. Gadda's reanimation of the literal space of the slaughterhouse allows us to *see* the reality of animal slaughtering and to come face-to-face with the suffering of the animals and their systematic oppression, which has the power to destabilize the speciesist mindset governing human-animal relations and to make us rethink the moral values we attribute to the lives and deaths of other animals.

1.2. The Poetic Testimony of a Slaughterhouse Worker

Ivano Ferrari's collection of poems, composed between 1976 and 1978, represents the only Italian example of poetry written by a slaughterhouse worker. As a first-hand witness, his poems offer the possibility to explore the work of industrialized killing from the perspective of those who carry it out, providing a close account of what it means to participate in the massive, routinized slaughter of animals for consumption. Although generally overlooked by critics and readers, perhaps due to its disturbing subject matter still largely met with resistance, I consider this work to be aesthetically and literarily valuable due to its ability to animate the sight and site of animal slaughter, to de-naturalize the horrors of animal abuse, and to question the socially accepted norms that allow systemic exploitation and institutionalized animal death to be ignored. Critics have also generally interpreted the slaughterhouse described in Ferrari's poems through humanist lenses, by defining it "a powerful metaphor of violence", "an allegory of present times", "the symbol of our civilization."[61] However, such figurative expressions seem blind to the fact that what they perceive metaphorically is a place that actually exists, and it has a name: the slaughterhouse of Belfiore, in Mantova.

Figure 3. The Slaughterhouse of Belfiore, Mantova, 1968, Foto Sbarberi, Archivio Storico del Comune di Mantova

[61] The three quotes are, in order, by: Pier Angelo Vincenzi, http://ricerca.gelocal.it/gazzettadimantova/archivio/gazzettadimantova/2004/01/17/NT1PO_NT101.html?ref=search; https://paneacquaculture.net/2013/11/28/oltre-il-volo-il-macello-di-ivano-ferrari/; Giuseppe Panella, http://semicerchio.bytenet.it/articolo.asp?id=510; Francesco Sasso, https://it.paperblog.com/visioni-grottesche-dell-inferno-in-terra-ivano-ferrari-macello-70263/. The scholar who suggests a more literal interpretation is Mauro Bersani who defines the collection as a "*Morgue* in animal format," quoting Gottfried Benn's 1911 collection of poems "Morgue." However, there still seems to be a disconnection with the reality Ferrari refers to in his poems.

Among those who have recognized Ferrari's artistic talent is Antonio Moresco, who writes, "If we weren't living in a country of dead people, this dissonant and unique poet wouldn't be a marginal voice, appreciated by a minority of people, but a central voice of contemporary Italian poetry." [62] With my research, I follow Moresco's lead in the desire to bring this marginalized voice to the center of the Italian literary scene and under the spotlight, where it belongs. The corpus I analyze consists of 86 poems, published in the book "Macello" (*Slaughterhouse*), and 32 poems subsequently included in "La Morte Moglie" (*The Death Wife*). [63] With an expressionist sensibility characterized by oneiric peaks, Ferrari replaces linear narrative with a series of atemporal and predominantly descriptive fragments based on his personal sensory perceptions and bodily responses. The short poems, each one isolated on a different page, are constructed as intermittent flashes that vividly evoke with excruciating sarcasm the obscene, the excess, and the violence that exemplify slaughterhouses. By assembling in all their graphicness and physicality objects devoid of metaphorical meanings and by juxtaposing dissonant and clashing images, the claustrophobic and nightmarish reality of Ferrari's working place comes to life before the readers' eyes.[64] The loss of order and logic extends also to the poetic space where elements usually excluded are here featured in order to reproduce the absurd reality it wants to describe. This entails, for instance, the inclusion the tools and machineries used for killing (the stunbolt gun, the boots of a worker used to *crush the uterus ripped from a mature cow*), which breach the realm of poetry in all their physicality, but also with the same evocative power that

[62] The quote appears on the back of the cover of the Einaudi edition of *Macello*.
[63] Both collections were published by Einaudi: *Macello* in 2004 and *La Morte Moglie* in 2013 (From now on abbreviated *M* and *LMM*). A selection of 46 poems was published in an anthology of poetry in 1995 with other emerging writers. *Nuovi Poeti Italiani*, n. 4, edited by Mauro Bersani, Torino: Einaudi, 1995, pp. 31-45. The English translation of the poems is by Matteo Gilebbi, *Slaughterhouse*, New York: Legas, 2019. This is the edition I use. Since the original poems do not have titles, I cite the first line of the poem followed by the page number of Gilebbi's edition.
[64] For an example of these stylistic features, see *For the problems of the soul*, 46, and the dry but highly evocative accumulation of nouns of the first six lines.

characterizes objective correlatives.

To best illustrate the impassive rationale that bolsters these facilities, Ferrari writes a poem made of an assemblage of excerpts taken from the renowned Italian Encyclopedia *Treccani*, under the entry *Macello***:**

"In cattle
because of the strong development of the frontal sinuses
the region
at which the brain can be directly hit
is very narrow
at least with the so-called sledgehammer technique"
and in addition
"importantly live cattle must not
make contact with slaughtered beef".[65]

The two quotations effectively provide a troubling sample of what the guidelines regulating animal slaughter look like: the first refers to the methods of exsanguination and stunning while the second corresponds to the closing sentence of the section describing the slaughter room.[66] By displacing the selected words outside of their original context, in a style that shares certain affinities with documentary poetics, they entirely acquire new meanings that make their brutal nonsense and violent nature come to surface. Also, by simply converting the dry prose into verse the absurdity of these statements is further amplified, allowing a reflective and destabilizing pause on the cold calculus of these lawful and justified killings.

Already from this poem it is possible to grasp the stylistic character of this collection. The poet, in fact, manages with his singular directness to make visible and destabilize in new striking ways notions that have been taken for granted throughout history, to the point that he even stimulates us to question the content of prestigious books, like *Treccani*, containing human knowledge in an

[65] *Nei bovini/per il forte sviluppo dei seni frontali/è ristrettissima la regione/attraverso la quale si può immediatamente/colpire il cervello/almeno con la tecnica detta della mazza"/e ancora/"evitare in modo particolare che il bestiame vivo/si incontri con le carni macellate*. (26-27)
[66] *Enciclopedia Italiana di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti*, Roma: Treccani, 1934, vol. 21, pp. 767-772.

orderly matter. As Ferrari declares more explicitly in another poem, which may function as a poetic statement, the nature of his art is visceral and excruciatingly realistic:

One hundred hearts
one hundred tongues
one hundred tails
one hundred farts
gaseous greatness
for my art.[67]

These fragmented pieces of bodies, like relics, are grotesquely sublimated while maintaining the burden of their earthly matter. As the theorizer of fecopoetics, Susan Signe Morrison, affirms, "Bodily fragmentation induces uneasiness, an anxiety displaced to corporal edges."[68] The "gaseous greatness" that Ferrari elects as his preferred poetic subject, is a haunting echo of the material presence of the live animals whose bodies in slaughterhouses undergo a process of mutilation and decay.[69] Through the poetics of waste made of bodily emissions of both animals and slaughterhouse workers, from blood, to excrements, sweat, and sperm, the "human" and "nonhuman" merge and become indistinguishable. The combination of these corporeal elements that society tends to shield from view and segregate to the private sphere, here become of public domain, and what is usually defined as waste is here conferred an aura of dignity.

For Ferrari, writing has a strong cathartic function. It is, in fact, a form of redemption for the role he had in the slaughterhouse. As he declared in an interview: "The role I had in there was to clean, to ensure that everything became aseptic, that the accumulated scenes of wild death

[67] *Cento cuori /cento lingue/ cento code/ cento peti /gassosa grandezza/per la mia arte*. (30-31)
[68] Susan Signe Morrison, *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 34. Material excrement and its symbolic representation recurs in the poems: *Shit is colorful*, 36; *They call them rebels*, 54; *Strike*, 56; *With hands in the belly*, 64; *Between the evisceration room*, 68; *The curious audience of flies*, 70; *It is Good Friday but without*, 70.
[69] This line of the poem also brings to mind the methane produced by the animals living on high-density facilities, such as feedlots and dairy farms, which contributes in devastating ways to greenhouse gas emissions and is therefore a significant driver of climate change.

disappeared with a jet of water. Inside this profound and clear concept of sanitation, writing was a way to preserve the heaviness."[70] In this heaviness, in the act of maintaining the filth and not subjugating, at least in writing, to the rhetoric of sanitation and its power to conceal and modify reality, lies his powerful testimony.

Poetry then allows Ferrari to communicate the trauma provoked by his close encounter with death and violence on a daily basis in a way that is unavailable in theory and that goes beyond the constraints of reason. Unlike the journalistic style of a reporter or witness statements in the courtroom, poetic language breaks through the limits of logic and rational discourses in order to convey deeper meanings in condensed or disrupted sentence structures. The compression of language, including through forms of montage, allows Ferrari to testify in many ways simultaneously and to express the phenomenology of violence, torture, and pain in a way that speaks directly to the readers' emotional sensitivity. In fact, not only does he produce unique meanings and insights that question and challenge dominant modes of thinking but he also brings the readers back to the physical world and the actual animals by evoking close interspecies encounters that can model empathy for readers.[71]

Further, and most importantly, with his poems Ferrari creates space for grieving with and for the slaughtered animals. Because these beings are routinely not seen as grievable in the context of dominant social norms, Ferrari's sensibility and empathy have a political and ethical function: to recognize the animals' embodied experiences and the intrinsic value of their lives and deaths. This awareness requires a new understanding of subjectivity that rightly extends beyond the human experience to multispecies life worlds. Therefore, to mourn the animal in the space of a

[70] The translation is mine. Laura Santoni, "Conversazione con Ivano Ferrari," in *Il Primo Amore: Giornale di Sconfinamento*, n. 2, 2007, pp. 159-166.

[71] For a closer look at the relationship between animals and poetry see Randy Malamud, *Poetic Animals and Animal Souls*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; Onno Oerlemans, *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

slaughterhouse where the animal is generally ungrieved and abstracted represents an extremely powerful subversive act that I will explore further in the following sections.[72]

1.2.1. Reviving the Slaughterhouse: a Phenomenological Experience

In visual arts and literature, it is not uncommon to encounter the slaughterhouse metaphor to represent human violence and traumatic experiences, from Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* to Esteban Echeverria's *El Matadero* and Clive Barker's *The Midnight Meat Train*, just to name a few.[73] In Ferrari's poems we encounter powerful reversed metaphors that, by changing the directional preference of slaughterhouse metaphors, produce a highly unsettling effect. The noun *macello* (slaughterhouse) disappears soon after the title, and is replaced with euphemistic, but highly evocative, definitions such as *white desert* or *the space of death*. It also becomes a theatre stage (*Limber heifers smile*, 74), where carcasses substitute the stage curtains, the butcher is the director, and the dead animals in the background are *electrified* extras; it becomes a macabre soccer field (*Butchers against porters*, 60), a match between butchers and porters, with the ground covered in blood and the heart of a bull as the ball; it becomes a battle field made of

[72] On the topic of mourning and its political function see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: Power of Mourning and Violence*, London: Verso, 2004; James Stanescu, "Species Trouble: Judith Butler, Mourning, and the Precarious Lives of Animals," in *Hypatia: a Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 27, n. 3, 2012, pp. 567-582; Kathryn Gillespie, "Witnessing Animal Others: Bearing Witness, Grief, and the Political Function of Emotion," in *Hypatia: a Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 31, n. 3, 2016, pp. 572-588; Margo DeMello, *Mourning Animals: Rituals and Practices Surrounding Animal Death*, Ann Arbor: Michigan State University Press, 2016. On the connection between animal slaughter and the dehumanizing processes of imperialism and racialization see Megan H. Glick, "Race, Criminality, and the Reversal of the "Human," in *American Quarterly*, vol. 65, n. 3, 2013, pp. 639-657.

[73] Also several movies often include scenes set in slaughterhouses, like Rick Roessler's *Pig Farm Massacre* or Sergei Eisenstein's *Strike*. Winifred J. Wood notes that, "There is a great irony in the fact that filmmakers can film in an actual slaughterhouse to create metaphor." "Bunnies for Pets or Meat: The Slaughterhouse as Cinematic Metaphor," in *JAC: a Journal of Rhetoric, Culture & Politics*, vol. 31, n. 1-2, 2011, pp. 11-44 (36).

trenches, veterans, and rebels (*They call them rebels*, 54). To describe a place barely anyone has seen, the poet needs to have recourse to more familiar images and experiences that resonate with the oblivious human consciences living beyond the walls of the slaughterhouse.[74] Juxtaposing these semantic domains in a non-conventional way allows for the creation of new associations, images, and meanings. The actual slaughterhouse remains an unnamed place in an unspecified time, stuck in a universal here and now, that one wants to believe is nowhere but that is actually everywhere and, shockingly, makes regular use of gas chambers and incinerator rooms.[75]

The physicality of the space remains tangible in the plethora of descriptive and sensorial elements that force us to confront the degree to which our minds have distanced us from this reality. First of all, Ferrari constructs a virtual map of the slaughterhouse, which guides the readers through the rooms, such as the cattle passageway, the refrigerating rooms, the weigh station, and the pavilion of the foreign meats. To illustrate his ability to recreate the architectural structure of the slaughterhouse, a fitting example is the opening poem, which is set in the locker room, a sort of anteroom that functions as a literary prologue anticipating the gruesome reality that awaits us once we turn the page.

The closet at the bottom of the locker room
is where you choke the chicken
posted on three walls are photos of women

[74] In the poem *At a few hundred meters*, 62, *the houses with dull eyes at a few hundred meters away* emphasize the general indifference of the human population to what goes on in slaughterhouses.

[75] See poem *A still unripe background*, 74, describing the cremation sector of the slaughterhouse and its "logic of appetite". The present tense has the double function of increasing even more the testimony effect while also placing the events in an eternal and permanent dimension. This is stressed even further by the vague expressions of time, such as *today*, *now*, *one morning*, *this Thursday*. The actual passage of time is transmitted through the decay of rotten flesh or the presence of larvae that "embroider" the dead flesh (*The dead flesh lives again*, 26). Megan Glick, when commenting on time and space in slaughterhouses, writes, "Animal death emerges as both quotidian and extreme. It is the very backing of modern society, and it is a holocaust. It occurs every second of every day, providing large profits and sustaining entire industries, yet we hide from its ugly glare. It is everywhere, and it is nowhere. This dynamic must be understood as the very definition of necropolitical regimes of terror, in which the spaces and moments of "everyday life" are marked by the sign of constant death." Megan Glick, "Race, Criminality," cit., p. 644.

with hairless vaginas
on the other wall the poster of a cow
unveiling with different colors
her delicious cuts.[76]

From the very start, Ferrari integrates kinesthetic properties to his words that allow for our virtual gaze to experience movement across the room and the readers to become active spectators of the scene that unfolds in front of them. First, our eyes linger on the closet, then scroll around the walls of the room, and finally focus on the poster hanging on the fourth wall. As Matteo Gilebbi has already noted, this poem perfectly exemplifies what Carol Adams has defined "the sexual politics of meat", a mental outlook that animalizes women and sexualizes animals, supporting the view of their bodies as consumable.[77] An array of *nymphomaniacal bovines*, the wife of a butcher *wrapped in a strong scent of rosemary*, and *a faggot horse* with his *unseducible rapist,* all speak to the connection between sexism and speciesism, with interlocked homophobic traits, as well as to the erotic tension present in the slaughtering process.[78] In addition, the *delicious cuts* of the closing line, besides equating animal flesh with dissected female bodies, also represent the emblem of what Massimo Filippi has defined the "division process of the slaughterhouse" that refers to the material dismemberment of the animal bodies, which is the

[76] *Lo stanzino in fondo allo spogliatoio/è detto delle seghe /affisse a tre pareti foto di donne/ dalla vagina glabra/nell'altra il manifesto di una vacca/che svela con differenti colori/ i suoi tagli prelibati*. (22-23)
[77] Matteo Gilebbi, "Witnessing the Slaughter. Human and Nonhuman Animals in Ivano Ferrari's Poetry," in *Italy and the Environmental Humanities: Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies*, edited by Serenella Iovino, Elena Past and Enrico Cesaretti, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018, pp. 47-56. A longer version of this article is available in Italian: "Testimoni dei Macelli. Uomini e Animali nella Poesia di Ivano Ferrari," in *Animal Humanities. Ecozon@*, guest editors: Elena Margarita Past and Deborah Amberson. n. 7.1, 2016, pp. 94-111. See also the introduction to his translations of Ferrari's poems.
[78] In order: 72, 61, 71, *M*. Another example of the intersection between sexism and speciesism can be found in poem 15, *M*. These kinds of relations are not uncommon in slaughterhouse fictional literature. As an example, a quote from *Cow* by Beat Sterchi perfectly puts theory into practice: "Well, Fritz, butchering is a men's work. Just like milking is. [...] Women turn the cows' heads in the cowsheds, and then they cry into the milk later till it sours." (p. 252). On the aestheticization and erotization of animal violence see Claire Rassmussen, "Pleasure, Pain, and Place: Ag-gag, Crush Videos, and Animal Bodies on Display," in *Critical Animal Geographies: Politics, Intersections and Hierarchies in a Multispecies World*, edited by Kathryn Gillespie and Rosemary-Claire Collard, London: Routledge, 2015, pp. 54-70.

final product of the "meat" industry, made visible already in the locker room.[79] What this poem also stresses, beyond pointing to a male-dominated space, is the actual alienation of the workers who are reduced to sexual mechanisms in this system based on pervasive oppression. Their alienation, unfortunately, extends even further. Ferrari, in fact, gives voice to the psychological harm that killing for a living has on the workers by portraying their job as desensitizing and repetitive, while the meat industry is shown to be oblivious to the struggle of the underclass that manually operates its machinery.[80] While he does, for instance, implicitly denounce the risks of working in a slaughterhouse by describing physical injuries or how their rights as workers are violated, he mostly exposes the violence and suffering endured by the animals, from which the workers seem to have become immune.[81] Ferrari manages to denormalize the inevitable violence that their work entails even simply through word choices liberated of any rhetoric and euphemism: they crush the heads of the animals, they drag them, strangle them, skin them, gas them. Another strategy employed to make the violence visible, which also brings us back to the reconstruction of the space, entails once again a visual sequence, but this time the readers' gaze follows the course of the drool produced by the animals when they are shot who are now reduced to a stream of organic liquid flooding the slaughterhouse floors.[82] In this poem, the rooms we enter are listed without any punctuation or verb, which reproduces on the page the fast pace of

[79] Massimo Filippi, "Il Faut Bien Tuer, o il Calcolo del Mattatoio," in *Liberazioni,* n. 20, 2015, pp. 13-30 (25).

[80] Much has been written on the effects of working in slaughterhouses and the high number of PTSD cases and domestic violence. A recent sociological essay that takes seriously the complexities of the issue is by Marcel Sebastian, "Deadly Efficiency: the Impact of Capitalist Production on the "Meat" Industry, Slaughterhouse Workers, and Nonhuman Animals," in *Animal Oppression and Capitalism*, edited by David Nibert, vol. 2, Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017, pp. 167-183.

[81] See in particular poems *Two fingers severed*, 40; *Strike*, 56; *On Labor Day*, 94. In the second poem, the butcher is compared to Augusto Pinochet and therefore, by extension, the act of butchering is considered a crime against nonhuman animals.

[82] See *The first thing out of the mouth*, 62. Ferrari here wants to draw the attention also on the excessive amount of drool, which gives a sense of the high number of individual animals who are killed and the violence that the process entails.

the drool moving through the rooms. Our minds then visualize these empty spaces once filled with living beings, starting with the cages where the animals are stunned, then moving quickly to the blood duct, the workstation where the labels are attached, and the laboratory where the veterinarians sort "pure meat" from "impure meat".

The combination of the descriptive elements so far outlined become even more powerful when accompanied by the sensory landscape that Ferrari so masterfully creates. In fact, in order to reproduce in writing his embodied experience, the poet needs to go beyond the visual and engage all senses.[83] The recurrent use of synesthesia allows the poet to condense and link two sensory modalities (*savory smoke*, *warm silence*, *odorous mysteries*) that help make the phenomenological experience possible.[84] It is important to note the overwhelming insistence on obsessive sounds, especially considering the still widespread belief that negates sentience to other animals. The "convenient anthropocentric fiction that the cries of dying creatures are the responses of unfeeling automata" [85] is clearly disproved in these poems: the screams of the animals retracting in front of death while slipping on their own blood are constantly filling the space to the point that a young heifer with a wrinkled crease in her smile just seconds before dying is the only one *who doesn't fill with sound the space of death*.[86] These deafening screams blend with the ones of the truck drivers, of the slaughterhouse workers, with the sounds made by

[83] The inclusion of visual elements extends beyond the architectural elements of the slaughterhouse, since Ferrari also notices the presence – or absence – of colors, from the dominant red of the ubiquitous blood to the grey tones of decaying flesh, as well as the physical and emotional darkness, rarely brightened by a beam of light that "seeps through the carcasses but with a shiver escapes." (*In the silence made flesh*, 44)

[84] According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "synesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking feel." *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 266.

[85] Mick Smith, "The 'Ethical' Space of the Abattoir: on the (In)human(e) Slaughter of Other Animals," in *Human Ecology Review*, vol. 9, n. 2, 2002, pp. 49-58.

[86] *Una piega rugosa nel suo sorriso prima di morire ed è l'unica a non riempire di suoni lo spazio della morte*. (*A secret fills the hairy temples*, 34-35)

lacerated guts, the animals last breaths, the shots of the stunboldt guns. All these sounds contrast with the lacerating silence that remains after a day of work, when flesh becomes quiet and the machines stop running. Olfactory elements are also frequent, and add even more disquiet to the already gruesome atmosphere through the stench, the broken filtration system, the smell of milk of calves, the air metaphorically smelling of remorse. So, the sensorial elements to which Ferrari gives prominence are crucial to the understanding of the crude reality of slaughterhouses, especially if the aim is to shift to a nonhuman perspective, given that animals themselves also experience the world through senses.[87]

Compared to Gadda who maintains an eyewitness position and keeps a physical and moral distance from the animals, Ferrari demonstrates an effort to actually inhabit the perspective of the animals. As Roberto Marchesini affirms, "our shared being-a-body becomes our common watermark, which does not nullify differences but clarifies them by viewing them from an interpretable perspective."[88] This corporeal and visceral sameness is not limited though to a sentiment of realization of a shared bodily experience and suffering, it arrives to question the radical discontinuity between humans and animals perpetuated throughout history. This is why when Ferrari writes in a poem "As hard as clotted blood/and as soft as calf's marrow/similar am I if not equal" (89), this represents a moment of meaningful interspecies understanding, as a consequence of the realization that he is a living being as much as the calf.[89] Interestingly

[87] In an interview, Ferrari affirms that "the slaughterhouse is an assembly line of death and the animals, already in the waiting rooms, you can *sense its smell*." *Macello Quanta Poesia*, Gazzetta di Mantova, 2004. See also, Sune Borkfelt, "I Suoni Spettrali del Mattatoio: sul Rumore e sul Silenzio degli Animali," in *Liberazioni*, n. 29, 2017, pp. 59-64.

[88] Roberto Marchesini, "The Therioanthropic Being as Our Neighbour," in *Angelaki 21*, n. 1, 2016, pp. 201-214.

[89] Matteo Gilebbi reinforces the concept of interspecific sameness in "Witnessing Animal Slaughter," cit. This realization follows the model of "egomorphism" theorized by Kay Milton in "Anthropomorphism or Egomorphism? The Perception of Non-human Persons by Human Ones," in *Animals in Person. Cultural Perspectives on Human-Animal Intimacies*, edited by John Knight, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005, pp.

though, in this moment of recognition of animal sameness, Ferrari is reproducing a narrative of dismemberment, and the process of identification occurs through the fragmented body of the calf, not through the calf as a whole being. As if the poet's body is being contaminated by the abject materials he is constantly exposed to, his own body represents a continuation of the corporeal decay he witnesses in the slaughterhouse. This realization, which occurs through the shocking vision of the animals' entrails and bodily fluids, functions as a traumatic reminder of his own mortality and challenges in a viscerally disturbing way the distinction between self and other.[90] By recognizing the common traits that humans and nonhumans share, even if in this example only at a material and physical level, Ferrari transgresses the readers' sensibilities and posits not just similarity or likeness between species in the slaughterhouse but a fundamental ontological proximity and co-presence. Although this human tendency of focusing on similarities might be interpreted as an erasure of alterity and a colonization of otherness, in this case, Ferrari's intention is to actually valorize the basic traits we obviously share with other lives: our finitude, our embodiment, our capabilities to feel, our desire to live, and our unwillingness to die.[91] Therefore, through Ferrari's embodied experience, in contact with the perceptual and the corporeal aspects of life across species, he – and the readers with him – grows familiar with the animals' way of being in the world and with their communicative corporeality. As demonstrated so far, understanding the brutal reality of animal death confined in slaughterhouses requires

255-271. According to this concept, which outpaces anthropomorphism, the understanding of animals as persons, that is beings with emotions, purposes and personalities, is based on the perception of a particular animal as "like me", in opposition to "human-like".

[90] For a thorough discussion of the role of the "abject" see Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'Horreur. Essai sur l'Abjection*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980; Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation. An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, in particular chapter 7.

[91] For a further discussion of the ontology of proximity and intimacy and the colonization of difference see Richie Nimmo, "From Over the Horizon: Animal Alterity and Liminal Intimacy beyond the Anthropomorphic Embrace," in *Otherness: Essays and Studies*, vol. 5, n. 2, 2016, pp. 13-45.

bodily and kinesthetic participation. Literature allows us to reduce the physical and mental distance we have posed between us and slaughterhouses and encourages a particular kind of participation in this space —a particular way of making this space visible. Ferrari then, by reviving the sensorium of slaughter through a more emotional and intuitive language, rather than rationalized, creates a potential for more empathic understanding that makes the animals emerge as subjects rather than objects. In the following section, I look at the corporeal grammar of the individual animals present in the poems, at the qualities of their movements, their vocalizations, and expressions in order to give them back the agency that human society, incarnated in slaughterhouses, annihilates and silences.

1.2.2. The Escape and Resistance of a Bull

The consequences of physically marginalizing animals to the borders of human urban spaces and of reducing them to commodities are particularly evident when animals trespass the enforced boundaries of the slaughterhouse. While there has been far more interest in understanding animal behaviors of escapes and attacks particularly in zoos and animal theme parks, the reactions of farmed animals to their oppression have yet to be fully explored, especially in the field of literary studies.[92] Their bodily motion towards us when they escape from their assigned spaces, whether

[92] The best theoretical references on the subject are Sarat Colling, *Animali in Rivolta: Confini, Resistenza e Solidarietà Umana*, Milano: Mimesis, 2017, which will be published in December 2020 by MSU Press in English translation with the title *Animal Resistance in the Global Capitalist Era*; Agnieszka Kowalczyk, "Mapping Non-Human Resistance in the Age of Biocapital," in *The Rise of Critical Animal Studies. From the Margins to the Centre*, edited by Nik Taylor and Richard Twine, Milton Park, Abington, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 183-200. See also the Italian online blog *Resistenza Animale* (https://resistenzanimale.noblogs.org). Jason Hribal argues persuasively that when animals escape from a situation of captivity they are acting with considered intent and are asserting their own desires of freedom. See *Fear of the Animal Planet: the Hidden History of Animal Resistance*, Oakland: AkPress, 2010. On nonhuman animals as intentional agents see Duncan Purves and Nicolas Delon,

it is a slaughterhouse or a transport truck, forces not only to notice their ordinarily hidden presence but also to question the concept of animal agency, which especially for farmed animals has been historically denied.[93] As Philo and Wilbert argue, farmed animal escapees exhibit a "particularly dramatic act of animal 'out of placeness' when they transgress the spatial regulations of agribusiness and the urban environment that regulates their movements."[94]

What happens then when an animal deliberately escapes from a slaughterhouse? What are the political and ethical implications of challenging human/animal physical boundaries? To answer these questions, I will focus on one of Ferrari's poems, the only one that takes place outside of the claustrophobic walls of the slaughterhouse, in which he describes the escape (or self-liberation) of a bull on the streets of the city:

An escaped black bull
wanders on the overpass
scaring the traffic,
we chase him
branding knives
stun rods and beers
he runs stops returns
cops with machine guns arrive,

"Meaning in the Lives of Humans and Other Animals," in *Philosophical Studies*, n. 175, 2018, pp. 317-338. For further insights on the difference between transgression and resistance see Chris Philo, "Animals, Geography and the City," in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, n. 13, 1995, pp. 655-681. Finally, for a discussion of this question in foucauldian terms see Clare Palmer, "Taming the Wild Profusion of Existing Things? A Study of Foucault, Power, and Human/Animal Relationships," in *Foucault and Animals*, edited by Matthew Chrulew and Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, Leiden: Brill, 2016, pp. 107-131.

[93] In the book *A Metaphysics of Freedom*, Helen Steward defines an agent as: "someone who can move the whole, or at least some parts, of something we are inclined to think of as *its* body; someone who is a centre of some sort of subjectivity; someone to whom at least some sort of rudimentary types of intentional state (e.g. trying, wanting, perceiving) may be properly attributed; a settler of matters concerning certain of the movements of its own body, i.e. the actions by means of which those movementsare effected cannot be regarded merely as the inevitable consequences of what has gone before." (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 72). For a more in-depth discussion of animal agency see Sarah E. McFerland and Ryan Hediger, *Animals and Agency: an Interdisciplinary Exploration*, Leiden and London: Brill, 2009; Chris Pearson, "History and Animal Agencies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*, edited by Linda Kalof, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 240-257.

[94] Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations*, Hove: Psychology Press, 2000, pp. 22-23.

now he lies on a thin veil of grass
and whispers something to the flies.[95]

Figure 4. Escaped Bull on a Highway, Albareto, 2020

By refusing to stay in his allotted place, the black bull ends up wandering in the streets, in a territory built on a human scale and functional exclusively for the human community. [96] This new and unfamiliar space made of paved roads filled with cars is unsuitable for his survival. However, while he wanders, without a direction and with nowhere to go, he is powerfully disrupting the urban space and the public morals by challenging the hegemony and control of the spaces he transgressed and the cognitive distance that exists between human consumers and the raising and killing of other animals. As soon as he enters the public sphere, he suddenly becomes visible again and makes the nature/culture dichotomy instantly collapse and, most importantly, with his search for freedom he creates a shift for his human-assigned status from subjugated object to active subject. The general reaction to his bodily presence, and therefore to his unexpected subjectivity, is fear and hostility. The bull is in fact treated as a dangerous criminal, a threat to security, and therefore is chased by the workers and police officers, in what looks very much like an urban hunting. The chasers must do anything in their power to re-establish order so

[95] *È fuggito un toro nero /erra sul cavalcavia/ impaurendo il traffico, /lo rincorriamo/ impugnando coltelli /bastoni elettrici e birre /corre si ferma torna/ arrivano i carabinieri coi mitra,/ora è steso su un velo d'erba/e sussurra qualcosa alle mosche.* (36-37)

[96] A recent documented case in Italy of a black bull who escaped following a similar dynamic to the one recounted in the poem is the one of the individual pictured in figure 4. He escaped on July 14, 2020 while being transported to slaughter. When found, he was sedated and returned to his owner to be killed. The news report can be accessed here: https://www.parmatoday.it/cronaca/albareto-toro-scappa-dal-camion-diretto-al-macello.html.

that the life of the city can go on undisturbed. As Ferrari shows, the only real escape for the bull is his own death through violent means.[97] His act of resistance is met with repression and his voice reduced to a whisper that quickly fades into death.

Dismissing the last line of the poem simplistically as anthropomorphic, would perpetuate a logocentric perspective that views linguistic capacity and its normative interpretation as a reason of separation between humans and other animals. The bull's whisper can instead be interpreted as a final attempt to communicate, his last suffocated struggle to survival.[98] His weak, extinguished voice has in fact the important role on one side of problematizing the linguistic divide, which only reinforces human exceptionalism and stresses a deficiency in other animals' mode of being, and on the other of helping us rethink what it means to have a voice even when propositional claims are lacking.[99] The widespread assumption that considers other animals as voiceless, as Sunaura Taylor rightly affirms, "betrays an ableist assumption of what counts as having a voice."[100] Nonhuman animals do speak in a variety of ways and this reality must be

[97] A similar scene, in a fictional context, can be found in Esteban Echeverria's *El Matadero* (1871): *"Una hora después de su fuga el toro estaba otra vez en el Matadero donde la poca chusma que había quedado no hablaba sino de sus fechorías."* One of the main differences between the two texts is that in the Argentinean one the slaughterhouse has a metaphorical function and it is made to disappear and represent something other than itself. Instead, in Ferrari's poem, the metaphor is neutralized and what remains is reality in all of its material concreteness.

[98] The flies we encounter at the end of the poem may be interpreted as material metaphors, as a manifestation of the tension between the physical and metaphysical representation of death: they are in fact both the apparent preservers of the bull's message as well as the materialization of death and the sign of the quick decomposition of the dead body. I will discuss more in detail the important role of critical anthropomorphism in literary studies and the risks of anthropodenial in the second chapter of the dissertation.

[99] Animal language is a highly researched topic. See, for instance, Tim Friend, *Animal Talk: Breaking the Codes of Animal Language*, New York: Free Press, 2004; William A. Hillix and Duane Rumbaugh, *Animal Bodies, Human Minds. Ape, Dolphin, and Parrot Language Skills*, New York: Springer Science, 2004.

[100] Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*, New York: The New Press, 2017, p. 62. A strong patronizing rhetoric is often perpetuated also among animal rights activists and scholars who support the slogan "voice for the voiceless". For a further examination of this topic see Alison Suen, *Speaking Animal: Ethics, Language and the Human-Animal Divide*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015.

acknowledged without imposing a human structure of what is expected for language in the dominant political discourse. This implies considering the bull's final whisper as the voice of an individual who we choose to deliberately silence.[101]

According to Gayatri Spivak's theory of subalternity, originally applied to post-colonial studies, a subaltern is someone who has been denied a voice or a "subject-position" in history since it does not have a consciousness comprehensible within traditional patriarchy.[102] Without speech, the subaltern is doomed to inhabit "a space of difference" with all the risks that being spoken for imply. As Shefali Rajammanar points out, the exclusion from cultural imperialism, which is typical of the subaltern situation, is "particularly relevant to nonhuman others who are rendered even more completely invisible in capitalist systems where the invisibility of the means of production ensures that they are often only seen as commodities."[103] So, by escaping the slaughterhouse, the bull of Ferrari's poem makes a system of structural invisibility visible and only by breaking out of the mass of animals who remain inside to die, he is recognized as an individual with a will to live.[104]

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[101] Eva Meijer, "Interspecies Democracies," in *Animal Ethics in the Age of the Humans: Blurring Boundaries in Human-Animal Relationships*, edited by Bernice Bovenkerk and Jozef Bovenkerk, Cham: Springer, 2016, p. 57.

[102] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998, pp. 271-313.

[103] Shefali Rajamannar, *Reading the Animal in the Literature of the British Raj*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 5-7. A discussion of animals as subalterns can also be found in Rohan Deb Roy, "Nonhuman Empires," in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, vo.l. 35, n. 1, 2015, pp. 66-75.

[104] Referring to a group of six cow who escaped from a slaughterhouse in Omaha, Timothy Pachirat writes "The physical escape from the slaughterhouse is also a conceptual escape, a rupture of categories. [...] Conceptually dangerous, their escape threatened to surface power relations that work precisely through confinement, segregation, and invisibility." *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*, cit., pp. 4-5.

Episodes of animal escape and resistance are quite common in reality, and each time a story of an animal who tries to escape makes the headlines a hero narrative is constructed, depicting the escapee as a true fighter whose life deserves to be spared and may even be granted personhood.[105] In *The Pig in Thin Air*, Alex Lockwood analyzes the case of a pig in China who jumps off a transportation truck headed to a slaughterhouse and, in particular, he focuses on an iconic picture that was taken from a car behind the truck.[106] After discussing the power that seeing the suspended body of the animal still alive has, he then turns the attention of the readers to the pig in the picture who does not dare to jump, who is crammed on the truck "suffering the traumas of captivity, followed by the disorienting journey to slaughter" and he writes, "I *see* the other pig in the picture, the one staring back at us still on the truck, less brave, perhaps, or more confused, stuck under the netting of barbed wire."[107] With the poem of the bull, Ferrari narrativizes the story of

Figure 5. Pig Escapes Slaughterhouse Truck in Guangzi, China, 2014

[105] The most recent case of animal escape that has gone viral and was covered by major news outlets worldwide happened in New Jersey where a pregnant cow (now named Brianna) escaped from the transport truck headed to the slaughterhouse on the highway and was rescued by volunteers of Skylands Animal Sanctuary Rescue. After two days she gave birth to a female calf named Winter. More excerpts of escape stories from news reports can be found in Ron Broglio, "Incidents in the Animal Revolution," in *Beyond Human: From Animality to Transhumanism*, London: Bloomsbury, 2012, pp. 13-30.

[106] The news report of this event can be accessed here: https://metro.co.uk/2014/06/06/pig-escapes-slaughterhouse-truck-in-guangxi-china-4752625/

[107] Alex Lockwood, *The Pig in Thin Air*, Brooklyn: Lantern Books, 2016, p. 76. The italic is mine to stress the relevant role of *seeing* in a meaningful and active way.

an escapee and the process of his individualization; with the other poems set inside the slaughterhouse, which I will analyze in the next section, he tells the stories of those who stay behind, like the pig who did not jump off the truck. Just like humans, animals of other species respond to oppression and power in a variety of ways, and each individual reacts differently to restricted freedom and the violation of their bodies. If the animals weren't constantly repressed and beaten, or even genetically modified to be more submissive, and the slaughterhouse weren't built in a way that impedes voluntary movement, as Ferrari acknowledges in an interview, they "would have the strength to resist. It is not by chance that the black bull resists."[108] However, it is not a matter of bravery, as if those who stay behind should be considered less, in some way, to those who dare to escape because, even in extreme conditions, behind the walls of the slaughterhouse, the animals do fight as much as it is in their power, we just don't *see* it. We just see the bull who escapes, if we even do. It therefore takes a major conceptual reframing to perceive the animals' actions as they are described in Ferrari's poems for what they really are: the bellows of the ultimate subalterns, the last moments of their hidden subdued resistance.

1.2.3. Questioning the Species Barrier

In Ferrari's poems, the animals are described at times as a vague plural, a collective *they*, other times they are reminisced through their dismembered body parts (tails, decapitated heads, entrails, discarded kidneys, bone splinters, ovaries), while in several cases an entire poem is dedicated to the moments preceding the death of an individual animal. The poet, in the effort to individualize the anonymous animals, includes elements that may be interpreted as individual distinctive markers. At the same time, though, these markers also serve as a reminder of the lack

[108] Laura Santoni, "Conversazione con Ivano Ferrari," cit., p. 164.

of strong distinguishing qualities due to the fact that the animals are stripped of their individuality and reduced to a series of identical units of production. The inclusion of minor physical and character traits, which at first glance may be perceived as insignificant and might go unnoticed, are instead the only traces that are left of these otherwise forgotten animals. Ferrari tells us the story of a crippled bovine with a *U* of urgency branded on his back, of a heifer *with sweet eyes*, or a filly with tapeworms, but by introducing these individuals with indefinite articles he is also pointing to all the other animals that share similar traits and of whom there is no story left to tell. In a place where animals are identified through the number they carry on their ear tags, which is only one of the many forms of bodily modification and appropriation that signals their status as property, Ferrari stresses an existing tension between individualization and universalization. The individual animals we encounter, like a spotted calf, a Scottish calf, a group of cows *with thick tufts on the forehead and light-colored mantle*, also represent all the unmourned animals who are thought to be passively going toward their deaths without any fear, pain, or struggle. These poems are the stories of the single individuals as much as of the innumerable *edible subjects*, whose consumed flesh contrasts with the *meat that does not feed* in human cemeteries.[109]

The first time in *Macello* that we encounter live animals is in the third poem:

All of them in a row
naked
slightly soiled with manure
they wait to be perfected
while stammering objections
the most resourceful sodomizes the buddy he follows
the scream that rises is only a prospect
the stunboldt gun restrains the scandal

[109] See *At a few hundred meters*, 62. It is important to note how Ferrari plays through specific linguistic choices with the boundaries that traditionally separate "humans" from "animals". By defining human flesh with the word *meat* he is making a powerful statement that question the validity of the ethics that justify human consumption of other animals.

there are dutch belted cows
calves
and a few horses.[110]

The poet introduces the animals through an image that creates ambiguous analogies with human figures, which he maintains for most of the poem. They are in fact standing all in a row, naked, and protesting by making stammering sounds. This provocative image not only blurs the lines that have been constructed to separate humans from other animals but also stresses how the animals' bodies, depicted as naked, are stripped of all the elements that constitute a qualified life.[111] Also, the sounds they make are not recognizable as fully articulated but as sounds that the logic of ableism would interpret as a speech disorder. In the third line he introduces the word *manure*, which creates a first level of ambiguity and confusion that pushes the readers to reimagine these figures as animals.[112] Nonetheless, vague borders between "human" and "animal" persist for instance also in the sodomy scene, where a sexual act is described as a bestial activity loaded with a derogatory and homophobic tone, and in the screams of the animals being killed. Only in the final three lines do we realize that he had been referring to nonhuman animals all along: Dutch belted cows, calves, and a few horses. Once the anthropomorphic veil is removed, what remains are the actual animals inside the slaughterhouse who are represented throughout the collection not only in different genders and ages but also in different states of

[110] *Tutti in fila/nudi/appena sporchi di letame/attendono la perfezione/balbettando proteste/il più intraprendente sodomizza il compagno davanti/l'urlo che si alza è solo un anticipo/la rivoltella a pressione frena lo scandalo/ci sono vacche olandesi/torelli/e qualche cavallo*. (22-23)

[111] For a discussion of Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life in a nonhuman animal context, see Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, "Cows and Sovereignty: Biopower and Animal Life," in *Borderlands*, vol. 1, n. 2, 2002, http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol1no2_2002/wadiwel_cows.html; Laura Hudson, "The Political Animal: Species-Being and Bare Life," in *Mediations: Journal of the Marxist Literary Group*, vol. 23, n. 2, 2008, 89-118; Robert Mills, "Judicial Violence, Biopolitics, and the Bare Life of Animals," in *New Medieval Literatures*, vol. 12, 2010, pp. 121- 129. See also Giorgio Agamben collection of essays *Nudities*, translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010.

[112] Interestingly, we have established a distinction at a linguistic level also between human and animal feces, which stresses once again our ability to separate ourselves from other animals even on shared biological functions, as if human feces are also invested of a privileged and superior status.

well-being.[113] Most of them in fact arrive in horrible conditions: they are disabled, terribly sick – the *best sellers in butcher shops* (82).[114]

The "naked animals" are standing right outside the stunning area, an in-between zone from where they can hear the screams of those who enter before them while they *wait to be perfected*. This moment of suspension, of being stuck in transit both in space and in between states, together with the image of the hybrid bodies evoked in the first part of the poem, fluctuating between unstable moral categorizations, are just some examples of the many ways in which liminality takes form in these poems.[115] In fact, not only does Ferrari represent several physical and metaphysical layers of liminality, but he also gives literary space to crucial liminal states of an animal's life, such as birth, pregnancy, and death, that in slaughterhouses, and the system that supports them, lose their intrinsic value. By describing the daunting moments preceding the death of an animal who is about to be slaughtered and by highlighting their transitional states of being, Ferrari is establishing ontological value to the lives of these animals and creating space for a potential shift in perception that would view other animals as sentient creatures whose individual lives are meaningful to them.

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[113] The animals we encounter in the poems are mostly cows, and pigs, horses, although the slaughter of other animals is also described, such as that of a lamb for which they didn't have a license (*We are not authorized*, 72) or the killing of a dog who by chance enters the grounds of the slaughterhouse (*A dog with labored breathing arrives*, 74).

[114] Sunaura Taylor writes, "Disability is ubiquitous among animals used for food production. Industrially farmed animals live in such cramped, filthy, and unnatural conditions that disabilities become common, even inevitable." She goes even further in her theoretical reasoning by affirming that "All animals, both those we human beings would call disabled and those we would not, are devalued and abused for many of the same basic reasons disabled people are. They are understood as incapable, as lacking in various abilities and capacities that have long been held to make human lives uniquely valuable and meaningful. They are, in other words, oppressed by ableism. The able body that ableism perpetuates and privileges is always not only able-bodied but human." *Beasts of Burden*, cit., pp. 31 and 43. On the cross examination of disability and animal studies see the collection of essays edited by Chloë Taylor, Kelly Struthers Montford, and Stephanie Jenkins, *Disability and Animality: Crip Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies*, Milton Park, Abington, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2020.

[115] Also the poem *In the waiting room*, 46, takes place in this liminal space, where we encounter a calf and a heifer who will spend the night there waiting to be killed the following morning.

The slaughterhouse itself has all the characteristics of a liminal space that calls attention to margins and borderlines: its remote location at the edge of the city, *past the fresh shape of the lawn*, is the first indicator of a space segregated at the borders, far enough that its existence can be ignored; its function is to transform living beings into consumable flesh, which requires a drastic process of alteration on a material level; its purpose is to normalize animal death and to keep it confined in a concealed space.[116] When given the chance, the animals show signs of their unwillingness to cooperate: they don't let themselves be touched, *not even by voice*, they retract. An example is the young female cow in the poem *A heifer amazed at being alive* (40) who reacts in fear at the sight of other individuals of her species killed before her – the *dozens of hanging sisters* – while she waits, on stand-by, for her turn during a slowdown in the assembly line.[117] Another example is the betrayed *beast* in the poem *Extremely long and narrow knife* (92) who calms down after being tricked into trusting the men who are immobilizing her just moments before killing her by "gently pointing the knife between the head and neck."[118] In other cases though the poet also witnesses the resignation *that sublimates their protest* and they remain exposed in all of their embodied vulnerability like the calf remembered in the following poem whose struggle to survive is reduced to his last breaths:

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[116] Since Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner's theorizations of the concept of liminality, scholars in different disciplines have applied it to their research, from literary studies to sociology and psychology. The slaughterhouse has yet to be fully studied under this theoretical framework. An attempt can be found in the unpublished master's thesis by Nicole Gosling, *Making Sense of Cattle: A Story From Farm to Food*, 2018.

[117] A scene with evident parallels can be found also Matthew Stokoe's *Cows* (1998): "On the line that morning a cow got loose, somehow slipped from a grabber before the slaughterman put the bolt in its head, and came clattering into the process hall, half slipping on blood, scattering men, ramming the inverted dead bodies of its brothers. Looking for an escape from cow hell. But its terror must have made it blind and it ended by slamming its soft nose against a ventilation grille until Cripps came over and blew its brains out with a shotgun." cit., p. 53.

[118] The heaviness of the animal's body collapsing to the ground, which extends metaphorically to death itself, contrasts with the lightness of the butterfly in the poem *A yellow butterfly with black stripes* (96) that the slaughterer pardons and therefore is free to fly away *towards other ways of dying*, which stresses the selective ethics regarding killing based on species membership.

There is a calf that is still breathing
the shot did not smash the skull
whoever made the mistake grabs the neck
squeezes the shape
the eyeballs of the bovine dance
to the rhythm of the hoist.[119]

In just six lines, Ferrari freezes the moments that lead to the inescapable fate of the calf.[120] By pausing on his breaths, his final act of resistance, the horrors of the killing dreadfully emerge: the baby cow, is in fact hanging not only literally upside down on the hoist but also between life and death. The scene also stands as evidence of the human errors that frequently occur on the kill floor. The reduction of physical pain, which is the only interest of protocols and regulations, does not take into consideration the instances preceding the killing nor the psychological burden and immense distress these animals must face, which instead this poem narrativizes. The last breaths of the calf, combined with the violent act of strangulation, dramatize with merciless immediacy the ethical stakes that derive from taking the life of an animal who must live in a state of paradoxical oscillation between the status of commodity and that of living being, depending on the context and on how humans perceive them.[121] This poem then allows once again for the animal to be seen as an embodied individual, rather than an abstract part of a faceless population,

[119] *C'è un vitello che respira ancora/il colpo non ha sfondato il cranio/chi ha sbagliato gli afferra il collo/stringe la forma/i globi degli occhi bovini ballano/al ritmo del paranco.* (26-27)
[120] The poems on individual animals are often introduced by the locative expressions *there is* and *there are*, also known as "existential sentences", which stress even more the concrete and bodily presence of the animal subjects.
[121] For a further discussion of human error in "humane" slaughter facilities see Megan Gillespie, *The Cow with Ear Tag #1389*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, in particular her witnessing the killing of three pigs, pp. 111-112. The current legislation regulating "humane slaughter" differs slightly depending on the country. In Europe, see the Council Regulation (EC) n. 1099/2009, which applies also to Italy from 2013; in the US, see the 1958 Humane Methods of Livestock Slaughter Act. Here is a short excerpt from the section in the current European regulation concerned with the protection of animals at the time of killing, when gas methods are employed: "the animals shall be introduced one by one, and it shall be ensured that before the next animal is introduced the previous one is unconscious or dead. Animals shall remain in the chamber until they are dead." In the 1970s the European legislation n. 74/577/CEE was introduced in 1974 and became effective in Italy with the law August 2, 1978, n. 439. Prior to this date Italy still followed the royal decree of December 20 1928, n. 3298.

and by bearing witness to his struggle it ensures that his death is not erased.[122]

A theme that further exemplifies how liminality can help us understand the system that accepts the existence of slaughterhouses is motherhood. Ferrari is in fact deeply affected by the presence on the kill floor of mothers with their newborns, and the trauma of bearing witness to the violent disruption of the maternal bond, more common than one might think, materializes in scattered traces throughout the poems. In a place governed by profit, there is no room for compassion, not even in front of a pregnant mother or one giving birth.[123]

Entire families gutted today
Monday of intense slaughter.
A cow gave birth to a calf in his eyes
the fear of being born the hole
in the middle our contribution
to calm him down.[124]

Figure 6. A Calf Chained to a Veal Crate, Canada, 2014, Jo-Anne McArthur, We Animals Archive

In this poem, Ferrari captures in just six lines the birth and death of a calf, and the short life in between, otherwise gone completely unnoticed. The series of enjambments, combined with the absence of punctuation, generate an irregular and intermittent rhythm that contributes to the sense of disorientation and destabilization of these instants marked by fear. Only the shot in the head restores calm and

[122] On the ethics of bearing witness to the death of a nonhuman animal see Kathie Jenni, "Bearing Witness for the Animal Dead," in *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy*, vol. 12, 2018, pp. 167–81.
[123] The only time in the poems in which an explicit emotion of pity is expressed is towards a sick donkey in the poem *I asked the health inspector*, 84.
[124] *Sventrate intere famiglie /oggi /lunedì di intensa macellazione./Una vacca ha partorito un vitello/negli occhi la paura di nascere/ il foro in mezzo il nostro contributo/a tranquillizzarlo.* (54-55)

order: violent death is the only way out.[125] Already from the first line, the systematic erasure of nonhuman mothering and childhood, as well as the violation of vulnerable bodies, vividly emerge.[126] The concept of family is in fact here extended to other species by enacting an inclusive linguistic shift that encompasses other animals, which in the context of the slaughterhouse is made to be extraneous. This initial scene of brutal family extermination is meant to provoke a destabilizing emotional reaction in the readers while it also creates room for the legitimization of the concept itself. Including in his testimony the liminal state of motherhood, from pregnancy to birthing, functions as a strong reminder that these animals do not exist solely for the pleasure of the consumer. Their connectedness in complex social relationships, their responsibilities for others, their love for others, and others' love for them, are indirectly evoked through this scene of tragic slaughter.[127]

The exploitation of mothers is essential to run operations involving the use of other animals, but this aspect must be hidden from the public sphere to avoid that its sentimentality interferes with business. Coming to terms then with the presence of pregnant animals whose bodies are dismembered to be consumed and whose fetuses are disposed as useless waste, is a painful

[125] Another example of violent death as a means to restore calm can be found in Richard Selzer, "How to Build a Slaughterhouse," in *The Exact Location of the Soul: New and Selected Essays,* New York: Picador Usa, 2001, "All at once, a calf, thinking, I suppose, to escape, wallops through the half-open gate of the stunning pen and directly into the Killing Oval. She is struck on the flank by a bloodfall from the hoist. Her eyes are shining pits of fear. The men view this with utmost seriousness. Immediately two of them leave their tasks and go to capture the miscreant, one by the tail, the other by an always handy ear, and they wrestle the calf back into the pen to wait for her turn. Now here is no Cretan bull dance with naked youths propelled by the power of horns, but an awkward graceless show, as the calf robs them of their dignity. They slide on the floor, lose their balance. At last calm is restored." pp. 243-256 (248).

[126] See the section on motherhood by Corey Wrenn in "Towards a Vegan Feminist Theory of the State," in *Animal Oppression and Capitalism*, vol. 2, cit., p. 212. On the exploitation of female bodies in the "food" industry, see Lisa Kemmerer, "Factory Farming and Females," in *Sister Species. Women, Animals, and Social Justice*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011, pp. 173-185.

[127] See the article by Lori Marino and Kristin Allen, "The Psychology of Cows," in *Animal Behavior and Cognition*, vol. 4, 2017, pp. 474-498.

reality that these poems urge to recognize.[128] The commodification of wombs and the killing of newborns to which this poem testifies is a perfect example of the intrinsic flaw of a system that unrightfully claims dominion over other animals and takes control over how they should live and die.[129] At the core of the justification of these killings is the human assumption that other animals exist with the purpose of "making *us* taller" as Ferrari affirms in the poem *Striking the beast* (84), in which he reiterates the family narrative by constructing a whole genealogy that retraces the history of animals through their familial bonds.[130] These bonds are constantly being disrupted in the slaughterhouse to the point that death itself replaces the figure of the mother and babies are born just to be killed, which reinforces even more the ingrained violence of a system that supports the construction of slaughterhouses:

In the center of the hall
the baby colt snorts
in his profile his sentence
to be dirty of mother.[131]

The indefiniteness of the space, void of any locative references, intensifies even more the sense of alienation, loss, and solitude that this place represents and that each individual experiences. The newborn here put on trial, still covered with maternal fluids and whose transitional passage into the world is marked a priori with a death sentence, is the highest representation of the tragic

[128] Pregnant animals are evoked also in *Snout against snout* (94), while a reference to forced interruptions of pregnancies due to slaughter can be found in They fill the intestines with water (70).
[129] In his autobiography, Elias Canetti describes his visit as a child to a slaughterhouse where he witnessed the dead body of a mother with an open womb and a visible fetus: "We came to a ewe, who had just been slaughtered and lay there open before us. In her water bag, a lamb was floating, tiny, scarely an inch long, their head and feet were perfectly recognizable, but everything about it looked transparent. Perhaps we wouldn't have noticed it, but he stopped us and explained, in his soft but unmoved voice, what we were seeing. We were all gathered around him, he had take his eyes off of me. But now I stared at him, and quietly said: "Murderer." After this the teacher replied: "Now we've seen everything." *The Tongue Set Free,* translated by Joachim Neugroschel, London: Granta, 1979, p. 229.
[130] (Their) *father/mother/grandparents,/children/siblings/their entire species,/ is born/grown and dead/to make us taller.*
[131] *Al centro della sala/il piccolo puledro soffia/al suo profilo la sua pena/essere sporco di madre.* (84-85) See also: *Today death is maternal/little calves plagued by aphthae/run tenderly toward her.* (40-41)

consequences of a speciesist mindset that fails to grasp the intrinsic value of nonhuman life. While there is a tendency to represent the animals as the "victims" and the slaughterhouse workers as "perpetrators," although the two words are never expressly used in the poems, there is not a strict separation between good and evil, between "humans" and "animals." All boundaries, hierarchies, and logics are questioned and the illusory barrier between *us* and *them* fades away: butchers replace gods, animals are made saints, humans are animalized, and animals are humanized. The ontological reconceptualization of "human" and "animal" is particularly visible in the following poem:

If I broke down the wall of flesh
and hanging from the hook I smiled
what would he say who is paid to dismember
the stamper of tongues
what label would they put on me
how many organs would they discard
and would the vet think panta rei?[132]

By posing himself literally in place of the dead animals, Ferrari challenges the barrier that humans have erected over the centuries as the ethical and moral divider between humans and other animals. Breaking down *the wall of flesh* and replacing the "animal" with the "human" means destroying a system of strict categorizations that reads animal flesh as consumable by simply recognizing that we are made of flesh too. Therefore, this unsettling act of replacement that puts on the same level the animals that we are and those we commodify, accentuates the irrational and frail intellectual work on which human exceptionalism stands. In the hypothetical scenery that Ferrari imagines of a human body hanging on a hoist, he challenges the perception

[132] *Se sfondassi il muro della carne /e attaccato al gancio sorridessi /cosa direbbe chi è pagato per squartare/il timbratore di lingue /quale etichetta mi metterebbero/ quanti organi scarterebbero /e il veterinario penserebbe panta rei?* (82-83)

of those involved in the job of dismembering animal bodies and of the readers as well, who are also implicitly called to participate in this process of ethical questioning. This very peculiar act of becoming-animal, rendered also through the final locution "panta rei" and its reference to Heraclitus' idea of change, has a transformative power capable of doubting the validity of the strict boundaries that circumscribe who is worthy of our ethical consideration and to question the very core of anthropocentric thought. Exposing a human body to the same vulnerability and violence we regularly expose animal bodies to in slaughterhouses facilitates an empathic response that can help open our eyes to how animals live and die in service of human capital accumulation. At the same time, though, the veterinarian's reference to high culture broadens the distance between humans and other animals based on the assumption of cultural superiority, which puts him in the privileged position to shrug off responsibility. In fact, because "everything flows", he can continue to participate in keeping the capitalist machine running, thus remaining stuck in a perpetual cycle of actions, whose moral significance is never really questioned. While in this poem the equivalence between species is elicited within the realm of possibility, in the next poem a perfect equivalence between the poet and a nonhuman animal is made explicit:

One day
that I hoped was a holiday
I myself shouted
I am lamb too.[133]

Through the evocative use of the lamb as a symbol of sacrifice, Ferrari himself becomes one of the victims of the same system affecting nonhuman animals, thus eliminating any distinction between species. In a recent interview to Laura Budriesi, as he commented on this specific poem, he declared: "I was like a Primo Levi returning from the concentration camp: «why did everyone

[133] *Un giorno/che speravo fosse festa/io stesso gridavo/sono agnello anch'io.* (86-87)

else die and not me?». In that poem I ask myself why did I survive."[134] By comparing himself to Primo Levi, he identifies as a survivor who has the responsibility to bear witness but who also tacitly admits that the true witnesses of slaughterhouses are lost. In remembering the submerged, as Levi defined the utter witnesses who never made it outside the camps, he is reminding us that he is an exception and, most importantly, uncovering this unbereable paradox.

As Martha Nussbaum claims in *Frontiers of Justice*, once we develop a "sense of the animal himself as an agent and a subject, a creature to whom something is due, a creature who is itself an end," a new set of obligations becomes incumbent upon us.[135] Ferrari's poems, then, represent a powerful tool of collective witnessing as well as of collective grieving, which provide a way to "honor the precariousness and fragility of our entangled lives."[136] By making a shift to the animals' perspective through Ferrari's poetic testimony, we *see* them in their most vulnerable moments and we *see* their brutal deaths confined in the slaughterhouse. This empathic act of re-consideration, stimulated by the literary reanimation of the violent process that killing an animal for human consumption entails, can make readers challenge the moral ideas that justify these killings and rediscover the intrinsic value of life and death that all beings share.

[134] *Ero come un Primo Levi che torna dai campi di concentramento: «Perché tutti gli altri sono morti e non io?». In quella poesia mi chiedo perché sono rimasto vivo.* Laura Budriesi, "Quel Toro che Scappa Sono Io. Intervista a Ivano Ferrari," in *Liberazioni*, vol 38, 2019, pp. 63-68 (68).
[135] Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 337.
[136] Lori Gruen, "Facing Death and Practicing Grief," in *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, edited by Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen, New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 127-142 (139).

1.3. Conclusions

The texts analyzed in this chapter gave us access to the ordinarily inaccessible space of slaughterhouses and, in doing so, deepened our understanding of the level of suffering and violence nonhuman animals must endure to be consumed by humans. The unique testimonies of Carlo Emilio Gadda and Ivano Ferrari, based on their direct exposure to the killing of animals, offer alternative ways of *seeing* these animals that might even encourage a shift in our perception and moral landscapes. Their recourse to powerful literary techniques that recreate sensory details and embodied emotions, assist in establishing the authority of these literary voices and their real connection to the world, regardless of the genre they elect to encode the realities they describe. Even though the two narratives differ stylistically and were written forty years apart, they still offer disturbingly similar scenarios: the animals are always killed, they always suffer, and they are always severely exploited. While there are certainly similarities in their accounts due to the common thread, there are also differences determined by the formal elements of each genre and the authors' different testimonial positions. In fact, while Ferrari is by force of circumstances an intradiegetic narrator who established direct interspecies relations during his work shifts that inevitably influenced his writing, Gadda remains for the most part a detached observer who can experience trauma from a distance since he does not personally occupy the position of those who kill. Nonetheless, both works are interestingly hybrid in nature, as if to bring the slaughterhouse back to life in writing investigative devices must blend with literary elements. In fact, on one side, Gadda's journalistic reportage is imbued with literary features; on the other side, Ferrari's poems are characterized by traits that recall documentary poetics.

In both cases, though, as we come face to face with the animals as self-expressive entities, we must recognize that the slaughterhouse and the whole system it represents is a violation of the

animals' *telos*, of the unique set of traits that make the animals who they are.[137] The artificial separation between "human" and "animal" is stressed in the two texts on different levels: on a physical level through the creation of a space where the killing of other animals is intentionally confined and that is located at a distance, out of sight, out of mind; on a linguistic level, through a speciesist language, made visible by analyzing the semantics of the words used to describe and represent the animals, and its effects on how we conceive animals; on a moral level, by perpetuating a mode of thinking that, despite the exposure to the violent and oppressive nature of this system, still justifies the killing of animals and views it as a necessity, which implies choosing to ignore the sentience of animals and their emotional complexities.

However, as I have illustrated, the two texts deeply challenge the belief that only human life and death have intrinsic value in many ways, particularly through their attempts to blur the separation between the two categories and softening the strict binary distinction.[138] By privileging the animals' perspective, the individuality of the animals doomed to be slaughtered is unearthed and not only do their lives acquire new meanings, but also their deaths are *seen* under new light. In a place where animal life has no value and animal death is systematically regulated and institutionally normalized, challenging the ethics of killing and providing metaphysical interpretations to animal death, a privilege generally denied to farmed animals, creates a special space for mourning, which in itself represents a powerful political stance.

Therefore, the space of the slaughterhouse as it is represented in these texts, becomes indicative of the need to reconceptualize multispecies coexistence, in this particular case our relationship

[137] The term *telos*, meaning the nature of an animal, was first introduced by Bernard Rollin in his discussion of animal ethics, particularly as he critiques the limits of a welfarist perspective that focuses exclusively on the prevention of pain. See his book *A New Basis for Animal Ethics: Telos and Common Sense*, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2016.

[138] See also Robert Garner, "Ecology and Animal Rights: Is Sovereignty Anthropocentric?" in *Reclaiming Sovereignty*, edited by Laura Brace and John Hoffman, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 188-204.

with farmed animals, in order to regain an ethical sensibility and a sense of responsibility that has been dissipated in the rush for economic gain and egocentric purposes. The authors' physical proximity to the animals in the moments preceding their violent deaths, as well as their exposure to the smells and noises in slaughterhouses, produce a chain of emotional reactions that have the ability to shake the set of beliefs that our society takes for granted. As a consequence, reading itself then becomes a powerful phenomenological experience that leads to an increase in empathy and invites to think about new concepts in non-threatening ways.[139] The vivid presence of the "absent referent", represented in extremely vulnerable states, as an oppressed category of beings with barely any traits left of their *cowness* or *lambness* and whose dignity is completely stripped away, has the potential to make us rethink the way we treat other members of the animal world and to enact cultural transformation that begins in the moment we recognize the acts of animal resistance *as resistance*, which is what "creates fissures in the dominant order of human-animal relations and urges us to respond."[140]

[139] Suzanne Keen defines narrative empathy as "the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition." See her article "A Theory of Narrative Empathy," in *Narrative*, vol. 14, n. 3, 2006, pp. 207-236.
[140] Kathryn Gillespie, "Nonhuman Animal Resistance and the Improperties of Live Property," in *Animals, Biopolitics, Law: Lively Biopolitics*, edited by Irus Braverman, London: Routledge, 2015, pp. 117-132 (127).

CHAPTER 2

Bodies on Display: Zooed Animals and the Epistemology of Otherness

"A human who thinks he can discern malice in a wolf's eyes and devotion in the eyes of dogs discovers nothing at all in polar bears eyes, and this frightens him to death. You can't find yourself in a mirror. As if the polar bear had declared that human beings don't exist. Strangely I felt the desire to experience this shocking gaze myself. But your eyes aren't empty mirrors—you reflect human beings. I hope this doesn't make you mortally unhappy." Matthias drew his eyebrows together and looked penetratingly into the depths of polar bear's eyes. But Knut wanted to be a wrestler, not a mirror, and attacked this boring man who was trying to be a philosopher for a little while." [1]

Over the past centuries, visiting the zoo has developed into a popular recreational activity that has normalized the notion of animal confinement as well as the idea that nonhuman animals are objects meant to be observed in a controlled setting.[2] In order to set up attractive animal exhibits, zoo operations actually rely on capturing geographically displaced "wild" animals and transporting them into urban spaces where they are arranged in displays that taxonomically classify and distribute them into genera, families, and species. Randy Malamud identifies the Renaissance age of imperialism as the period that "made it economically, historically, and morally possible to amass animals and squeeze them into the compartments people created for them," and the Victorian age as the period that "accelerated, institutionalized, and sanctified the

[1] Yoko Tawada, *Memoirs of a Polar Bear*, translated by Susan Bernofsky, New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2016, p 187.

[2] For zoo I intend any establishment that maintains a collection of free-roaming animals, for study, conservation, and display for human visitors. I refer to the individuals imprisoned in zoos using the passive voice zoo*ed* animals, as I have done in the first chapter for farm*ed* animals, to stress that these assigned categories are imposed by humans and therefore that the spaces they forcefully inhabit and the roles they are assigned do not define them. The expression is used also by Mark Bekoff and Jessica Pierce in *The Animals' Agenda: Freedom, Compassion, and Coexistence in the Human Age*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2017. In zoos, the animals undergo a transformation into a "zoo animal", whose ontological status differs from the one of those who live in a state of freedom through a process defined by Keekok Lee as "immuration", a term in opposition to domestication. For a closer discussion of this concept see Keekok Lee, *Zoos: a Philosophical Tour*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 58-81. For a phenomenological investigation of the reasons why people visit zoos see Erik A. Garrett, *Why Do We Go to the Zoo? Communication, Animals, and the Cultural-Historical Experience of Zoos*, Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014.

processes of zoo keeping and zoo spectatorship."[3] In the same period, under the aegis of ethnology, colonial exhibits displaying humans also became popular in the western world, where "savages" were exoticized by an othering gaze.[4] While the tradition of displaying other humans has faded, the same has yet to happen for individuals of other species, who are still subject to the same taxonomic impulse that governed human zoos. Over the years, though, particularly during the 20th century, in response to changing public sensibilities to nonhuman animals and the natural environment, zoos had to rebrand themselves. Alternative terms such as "park" and "conservation society" started appearing with the aim of portraying these institutions as modern-day arks, which however still reproduced a problematic neo-colonial structure and responded to a capitalist logic that labels other animals as commodities.[5] While there have been improvements in the design of zoos, they still represent an inherently anthropocentric social construction of nonhuman animals and remain built on a morally problematic foundation, just in a new aesthetic form.[6] In fact, the root of the problem — captivity itself — has remained overall unquestioned,

[3] Randy Malamud, *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity*, New York: New York University Press, 1998, p. 15. For a more in-depth discussion of the history of zoos and their colonial legacy see James Fisher, *Zoos of the World. The Story of Animals in Captivity*, New York: The Natural History Press, 1967, who offers a pro zoo perspective; Stephen Bostock, *Zoos and Animal Rights: The Ethics of Keeping Animals*, New York, London: Routledge, 1993, who offers an ethical perspective on the history of animal captivity from ancient traditions of animal keeping to 20th century developments.

[4] On the history of human zoos see Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boetsch and Nanette, Jacomijn Snoep (eds.), *Human Zoos: the Invention of the Savage*, Arles: Actes Sud / Paris: Musée du Quai Branly, 2011. The roots of this practice can be traced already in Ancient Egypt and during the Roman Empire. A famous Italian case from the Renaissance is the zoo that Cardinal Ippolito de' Medici kept in the Vatican, where individuals of other species and races were imprisoned.

[5] Alan Beardsworth and Alan Bryman, "The Wild Animal in Late Modernity: The Case of the Disneyization of Zoos," in *Tourist Studies*, n. 1.1, 2001, pp. 83-104 (94). On the ethical issues that derive from the combination of interests tied to conservation with profit see Sue Coe, "The Capital Zoo," in *Zooicide: Seeing Cruelty, Demanding Abolition*, Chico: Ak Press, 2018, pp. 1-22.

[6] The main changes in zoo design have been introduced by Carl Hagenback who replaced the bars and walls of zoo exhibits with windows and moats, which had transformative effects on human visitors. Nonetheless, the total concealment of the physical realities of captivity has only become more accentuated and continues to pose human visitors as outside of the interrelated ecosystem. Randy Malamud defines these alterations "cosmetic" in *Reading Zoos,* cit., p. 4. An additional tactic for the

to the point that it has become the absent referent of the zoo experience.[7] Matthew Chrulew explains that, in the zoo, a double movement of liberation and enslavement frames animal confinement as being in their best interests and their geographical displacement and relocation in urban spaces as normal. As already discussed in the first chapter, only when the animals manage to escape they are perceived as out of place and their state of captivity is visible again.[8]

While zoos strive to be transparent with the public, the reality they create is actually based on simulation. It comes without surprise then that Umberto Eco would include zoos in his discussion of the "Industry of the Fake," since they are arranged like a stage intended to give the impression of freedom through hyper-realistic reproductions:

> *"To achieve this "natural peace" (as an indirect allegory of social peace) great efforts had to be made: the training of the animals, the construction of an artificial environment that seems natural, the preparation of the hostesses who educate the public. So the final essence of this apologue on the goodness of nature is Universal Taming."*[9]

Thus, while visitors are provided with an artificially constructed spectacle that follows the logics of profit and naturalizes the commodification of nonhuman animals, a behind-the-scenes peek at zoo operations actually reveals that many activities and practices remain hidden and completely

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enhancement of seeing involves the placement of temperature-controlled places at strategic viewing points. This tactic attracts animals to use these spaces, in turn exposing them to the eyes of visitors.

[7] My position on animal captivity adheres to the theoretical framework first developed by Lori Gruen in *The Ethics of Captivity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. The concept of animal captivity has also been extended to individuals living in urban spaces and to pet-keeping. For a philosophical treatment of this subject see Nicolas Delon, *The Boundaries of Cities and Captivity: The Captivity of Urban Animals*; Alexandra Horovitz, "Canis Familiaris: Companion and Captive," in *The Ethics of Captivity*, cit., pp. 7-21.

[8] Matthew Chrulew theorizes the stratified and complex tensions present in zoos in "An Art of Both Caring and Locking Up": Biopolitical Thresholds in the Zoological Garden," in *SubStance*, vol. 43, n. 2, 2014, pp. 124-147. On the escape of nonhuman animals from zoos see Jason Hribal, *Fear of the Planet: the Hidden History of Animal Resistance*, cit. For a more thorough discussion of the notion of "out of place" see Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places*, cit.

[9] Umberto Eco, "Industry of the Fake," in *Travels in Hyper Reality*, translated by Willian Weaver, New York: Harcout Brace, 1986, pp. 50-51.

invisible to the public eye.[10] In fact, the so-called "naturalistic revolution" extends only to the area seen by and accessible to the audience: many animals are hidden from view most of the time, for instance when the zoo is closed or when rotating on and off display, and the management of the animals takes place in these invisible spaces, referred to as "holding areas."[11] As Lori Marino writes, "the zoo fundamentally inscribes the looked-at animals inside their cages — or their "cageless enclosures," that is, cages that don't look like cages (to us) — as subaltern."[12] This statement implies that in order to offer to human visitors the experience of looking at nonhuman animals, their behaviors and activities, such as reproduction, natural expression and health, must be monitored constantly as well as modified towards various goals. The zoo then inevitably enables the panoptic gaze of both zookeepers and visitors, which establishes an element of hierarchical observation that further subjugates nonhuman animals by denying their agency and violating their bodily autonomy.[13]

In this chapter, I explore the various tensions between forced visibility and social invisibility at play in the zoo by closely analyzing Italo Calvino's last work of fiction, "Palomar", particularly the three texts included in the section "Palomar at the zoo", which have yet to be examined under

[10] On the relation between the spectacle and a capitalist economy, see Guy Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Detroit: Black & Red, 2016. Even if the author does not directly talk about zoos, his discussion of the everyday manifestation of capitalist-driven phenomena can convincingly be applied also to zoos.

[11] Irus Braverman, who has researched and visited zoo holding areas, states that "exhibit spaces and holding areas are situated on opposite ends of a spectrum: the visible, cageless naturalistic exhibit stands in stark contrast to the explicitly artificial, functional, and cage-style design of the invisible holding area." See *Zooland: the Institution of Captivity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 49.

[12] Lori Marino, "Captivity," in *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, edited by Lori Gruen, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, p. 105.

[13] See Michael Foucault, "Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 195-228; For a discussion of the zoopticon see the recent publication by Karen A. Morin, "Wildspace: the Cage, the Supermax, the Zoo," in *Carceral Space, Prisoners and Animals*, New York: Routledge, 2018, pp. 119-142.

a critical animal studies lens.[14] While the stories are told from the visitor's perspective, I will pay attention also to the zooed animals' experiences and to how — and why — their subjectivities are ignored or manipulated throughout the narratives. My aim is to tackle the questions that the texts raise in relation to "human" identity, animality, ontology, and epistemology, which force us to think beyond the human/animal and nature/culture dichotomies. A close reading of these highly philosophical texts will deeply problematize not only the zoo-going experience but also the concept of captivity as a space and as a state of being. Given the fundamental role of gaze and observation to the concept of the zoo, I will focus on Palomar's paradigmatic gaze and on the different ways in which his human centered optic influences his epistemic goals and reproduces racialized ways of looking.[15] This will lead to a reconsideration of the categories "human" and "animal" as they shift according to who is in a position of power and defines their ontological borders. Thus, by analyzing the morally questionable premises of Palomar's system of beliefs and the ways in which the zoo stimulates oppressive ways of knowing, I will explore the reasons that limit his access to true knowledge not only of the animals he observes but also, ultimately, of himself.

[14] Italo Calvino, *Palomar*, Torino: Einaudi, 1983. The English translation is by William Weaver, *Mr. Palomar*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985. The book is the result of a meticulous assemblage of pieces of writings originally scattered on the Italian newspapers *Corriere della Sera* and *La Repubblica* between 1973 and 1983, then substantially revised for publication in book form. For a history and genealogy of the editorial process see Claudio Milanini, ed., *Italo Calvino: Romanzi e Racconti*, vol. 2, Milano: Mondadori, 1992, pp. 1402-1436; Francesca Serra, *Calvino e il Pulviscolo di Palomar*, Firenze: Le Lettere, 1996; Martin L. McLaulin, "Words and Silence: the Strange Genesis of Mr. Palomar," in *Italo Calvino*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998, pp. 129-144.

[15] I adopt the definition of anthropocentrism proposed by Billy-Ray Belcourt who views it "as a racialized and speciesist site of settler coloniality." See "Animal Bodies, Colonial Subjects: (Re)Locating Animality in Decolonial Thought," in *Societies*, vol. 5, 2014, pp. 1-11.

2.1. Palomar at the Zoo

Palomar is a man on a solitary quest for knowledge with a desire to find a set pattern in the world that would reduce the complexity around and inside of him to its basic mechanisms.[16] Observation is the key to his mode of thinking, and it is precisely for this reason that everything in the book happens filtered through his gaze. Given the supremacy of sight, each text begins with a description of a phenomenon, object, or nonhuman animal — a wave, a ray of light at sunset, a sand garden — from which he then raises ontological and metaphysical questions that generally remain unanswered.[17] Ironically though, while he owes his name to an astronomical telescope on Mount Palomar in California, Palomar is nearsighted.[18] The contrast between his physiological deteriorating eyesight and his name, which functions as a signifier of his epistemological scope, has deep philosophical implications connected to broader questions related to humans' access to knowledge and understanding of the world.[19] Palomar is in fact a man who looks at the world through the objective lenses of a powerful telescope, and yet his reading, staged as an epistemological exercise, remains fragmented and ultimately inconclusive.

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[16] In *Collection of Sand* (translated by Martin McLaughlin, London: Penguin Books, 2013, p. 75), Calvino quotes Roland Barthes's call for a science of the unique being, the *Mathesis singularis*, which is central to Palomar's epistemological method of interpreting reality.

[17] As Calvino declares in *Six Memos for the Next Millenium* (translated by Geoffrey Brock, New York: Mariner Books, 2016, pp. 92-93), in writing *Palomar*, he was inspired by Francis Ponge and in particular by his *Le Parti Pris des Choses* ("The Nature of Things," 1942), where many of the same themes present in *Palomar* are developed. On the connections between Italo Calvino and Francis Ponge see Serena Ghini, "Ponge in Calvino," in *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia: Università di Siena*, vol. 19, 1998, pp. 93-124; Jacqueline Risset, "Dialogue de la Vague et du Galet: Italo Calvino et Francis Ponge," in *Italo Calvino: Atti del Convegno Internazionale*, Milano: Garzanti, 1988, pp. 323-326; Francesco Serra, *Calvino e il Pulviscolo di Palomar*, cit., pp. 153-152.

[18] Palomar can be considered the literary twin of Amilcare Carruga, another near-sighted character created by Calvino who also learns to *see* the world through the lenses of his eyeglasses. Italo Calvino, "The Adventures of a Near-Sighted Man," in *Difficult Loves*, translated by William Weaver, Ann Goldstein and Archibald Colguhoun, New York: Mariner Books, 2017, pp. 119-132.

[19] On the connection between optics and epistemology see Calvino's essays "Light in Our Eyes," in *Collection of Sand*, cit., 114-122, and "Visibility," in *Six Memos*, cit., pp. 99-122. Marco Belpoliti has focused on vision, visibility and visuality in *L'Occhio di Calvino*, Milano: Einaudi, 1997. See also Birgitte Grundtvig, Martin McLaughlin and Lene Waage Petersen, eds., *Image, Eye and Art in Calvino: Writing Visibility*, New York: Modern humanities Research Association and Routledge, 2007.

Since the book was published in 1983, scholars have primarily focused on the person who, already from the title, "is the only prominent character in the book."[20] But is Palomar really the only character in the book? If we were to extend our field of attention beyond the "human", we would notice a more-than-human world worthy of deeper critical attention. As Carrie Rohman affirms, "this text narrativizes several of the most significant ethical questions that have emerged in recent theory about the discourse of species in humanism."[21] In my opinion, the core of these ethical questions is addressed in the three encounters with zooed animals. Each one of these encounters has a specific and significant role in testing the limits of Palomar's evaluative and epistemological anthropocentrism, forcing us to recognize in the zoo a place that only magnifies the abyss that we have culturally constructed between humans and other animals. The zoo that initially for Palomar represents a place of order where human meanings are constructed will therefore turn into the space that destabilizes his position in the world and challenges the ontological boundaries between species.

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[20] The following essays offer a good overview of the main topics scholars have been interested in: Letizia Zini Antunes, "Dalla Spiaggia alla Collezione di Sabbia, Passando per il Giardino di Kyoto: Invito alla Lettura di Palomar di Italo Calvino," in *Revista de Italianistica*, 1994, n. 2, pp. 131-145; Elio Attilio Baldi, "Art and Science in Calvino's *Palomar*: Techniques of Observation and Their History," in *Italian Studies*, vol. 74, n. 1, 2019, pp. 71-86; Orfeu Bertolami, *Some New Reflections on Palomar*, Talk presented at the Cosmology Across Cultures, The Impact of the Study of the Universe in Human Thinking Conference, 2008, https://arxiv.org/abs/0811.3681; Sergio Cappello, "Palomar," in *Les Années Parisiennes d'Italo Calvino (1964-1980) Sous le Signe de Raymond Queneau*, Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2007, pp. 289-334; Stefano Franchi, "Palomar, the Triviality of Modernity, and the Doctrine of the Void," in *New Literary History*, vol. 28, n. 4, 1997, pp. 757-776; Agnes Morini, "La Géométrie de Monsieur Palomar," in *Italies: Littérature, Civilisation, Société*, n. 16, 2012, pp. 141-162; Lucia Quaquarelli, "La Vittoria di un'Onda. Palomar di Italo Calvino," in *Paragrafo*, n. 2, 2006, pp. 135-148; Isaac Rosler, "The Body, Eros, and the Limits of Objectivity in Calvino's Palomar," in *Italian Quarterly*, n. 35, 1998, pp. 23-33; Charles S. Taylor, "Calvino's *Mr Palomar*: Of Bread, Spécialités Froumagères and Watercress," in *Dalhousie Review*, n. 76, 1996, pp. 311-334; More specifically on the question of the animal see Eugenio Bolongaro, "Calvino's Encounter with the Animal: Anthropomorphism, Cognition and Ethics in Palomar," in *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, vol. 30, n. 2, 2009, pp. 105-127; Serenella Iovino, "Hybriditales: Posthumanizing Calvino," in *Thinking Italian Animals: Human and Posthuman in Modern Italian Literature and Film*, edited by Deborah Amberson and Elena Past, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014, pp. 215-232; Carrie Rohman, "On Singularity and the Symbolic: the Threshold of the Human in Calvino's Palomar," in *Criticism*, vol. 51, n. 1, 2009, pp. 63-78.

[21] Carrie Rohman, "On Singularity and the Symbolic," cit., p. 63.

While the book follows a ternary structure meticulously explained by Calvino in the appendix, at a narrative level it is fundamentally based on binary oppositions: human/animal, similitude/difference, silence/language.[22] This dualistic scheme captures on a literary level Palomar's method of classifying reality, ordered and described as if it were an encyclopedia, which perfectly coincides with how zoos orderly display animals by continent or taxonomic label.[23] Palomar's encyclopedic drive as well as his ontological conceptualization of the categories "human" and "animal" can be traced back to Calvino's essay "L'uovo Enciclopedico" (The Encyclopedic Egg), a crucial text for understanding Palomar's anthropocentric mentality as well as his epistemological approach.[24] As Palomar opens the first volume of the newly published Italian *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, conceived as "an inventory of key concepts and open issues", he is hesitant whether to start reading following the conventional order, that is from the first entry *Abaco* (abacus) and continuing with *Abbigliamento* (attire) and *Abbondanza-Scarsità* (abundance-scarcity), or to start from the last one, *Astronomia* (astronomy), and make his way back to the beginning. After some thought, he decides to start from the entry he considers to be the heart of the encyclopedia and "the densest core of totality": *Anthropos*. Written by the

[22] The book is divided into three main sections: "Mr. Palomar's Vacation," "Mr. Palomar in the City," and "The Silences of Mr. Palomar." Each one of them is also divided into three sections, and each one is comprised of three texts, for a total of twenty-seven short texts. At the end of the book Calvino adds a reader's guide, which can help readers grasp deeper meanings behind such a complex structure: "The numbers 1, 2, 3 that mark the titles of the index, whether they are in the first, second or third position, besides having a purely ordinal value, correspond also to three thematic areas, three kinds of experience and inquiry that, in varying proportions, are present in every part of the book." The three thematic areas are: 1. a visual experience, 2. an anthropological/cultural experience, 3. a speculative experience.

[23] On the encyclopedia as a literary genre and an epistemological method of understanding reality in Italo Calvino's works see Kerstin Pilz, "The World as a Book," in *Mapping Complexity: Literature and Science in the Works of Italo Calvino*, Leicester: Troubador Publishing, 2005, pp. 117-132. On classification theory, human episteme, and a thorough discussion of our past and current taxonomic systems see the foundational book by Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Vintage Books, 2002.

[24] Published originally on the *Corriere della Sera*, on July 30th, 1977, and then republished in Mario Barenghi, ed., *Italo Calvino: Saggi 1945-1985*, vol. 2, Milano: Mondadori, 1995, pp. 1797-1800. This is one of the essays with Palomar as protagonist that was not included in the final version of the novel. The translations are mine.

anthropologist Edmund Leach, this long entry synthesizes his position regarding the relations between humanity and animality as well as the nature-culture dichotomy.[25] Interestingly, this entry is preceded by *Animale* (animal), written by the ethnobotanist Jacques Barrau, which Palomar interprets as being complementary to *Anthropos* given "the place that animals have always occupied in humans conscience, in various civilizations" and the use humans make of other animals as comparison terms to define the "human" through traits of similarity or difference.[26] Palomar notes with satisfaction that in this case "the alphabetic proximity truly reflects the order of knowledge." Already from this preamble, it is clear that for Palomar the categories of "human" and "animal" are conceived as separate, an assumption that is reflected in how the encyclopedia is structured and organized.

The entry following *Anthropos* is titled *Anticipazione* (anticipation), written this time by an expert in Cognitive Science and Linguistics, Massimo Piattelli Palmarini, whose main concepts are paraphrased by Calvino as follows:

> *"The scientific neutrality of the observer is always relative, because the «schemes of expectation» have a role in all knowledge processes, as well as in sensorial perception, given how sensory organs are designed. Thus, the* animal-man *nexus is here [in the encyclopedia] studied by looking at how on one side language and on the other genetic hereditary traits condition experience."*[27]

Once again, these concepts characterize Palomar's approach to other animals and his position as an observer. The sequence of entries creates a sort of hierarchical relation between the three fields of knowledge represented by the three authors, topped by language and cognition, which are the normative parameters used to defend arguments in favor of human supremacy.

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[25] Edmund Leach, "Anthropos," in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, vol. 1, Torino, 1977, pp. 11-66. Leach also wrote the entries *Cultura* (1978), *Etnocentrismi* (1978), and *Natura/Cultura* (1980).
[26] Jacques Barrau,"Animale," in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, cit., pp. 576-589.
[27] Massimo Piattelli Palmarini, "Anticipazione," in *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, cit., pp. 122-148. The two terms *animale-uomo* are here translated literally to convey the linguistic exclusion of other genders from the definition of the "human" species.

At this point, Palomar has the choice to continue reading by moving forward from the center of the volume to the last entry, *Astronomia,* or backwards to the introduction of the volume, titled *Encyclopedia*, placed before the first entry. Between these two "images of centrifugal totality" lies an *Anthropos* "always less certain of his anthropocentrism, who has built a *Clavis universalis* to suit his own ends, entirely contained in the first volume of the encyclopedia." Palomar then comes to represent this precarious *Anthropos* whose centrality is being questioned, despite he still occupies a central position. The final metaphorical description of Palomar's dream drinking an encyclopedia in the form of an egg confirms his presumptuous and consumptive nature: he is in fact at the center of the yolk, as it has always been even before his birth, "devouring from the inside the contents of the egg and of the entire world."[28] This voracious attitude and epistemological approach deeply define Palomar's *persona* as well as his relationships with nonhuman animals.

In the next sections of this chapter I will analyze the epistemological and ontological problems raised by texts as they are treated in Palomar's observations and descriptions of the nonhuman animals in the zoo. By questioning the dominant way of looking at — and knowing — nonhuman animals as well as the bio-cultural factors that condition our perception of zooed animals, the ontological categories "animal" and "human" will be deeply redefined.[29] Quoting Calvino's words, "if a new world were discovered now, would we be able to *see* it? Would we know how to rid our minds of all the images we have become accustomed to associate with the

[28] This metaphor expunges the actual producers of eggs, the egg-laying hens, and emerges from the normalization of the consumption of their eggs as a product of the exploitation of their reproductive systems and the notion of property over their bodies.

[29] Carrie Rohman writes, "the zoo animal, even more than the wild or perhaps domesticated animal, often tells us as much, if not more, about humans than about the animals that are displayed there." ("On Singularity and Symbolic," cit., p. 65.) While this statement is intrinsically anthropocentric due to how it is formulated, it actually raises the important question: what does it *really* tell us about "humans"?

expectations of a world different from our own in order to grasp the real difference that would be presented to our gaze?"[30] This is the real moral and intellectual challenge of this chapter.

2.2. Palomar Looks at a Giraffe: Reframing the "Human" Gaze

The first story set in a zoo is centered around the observation of a group of giraffes at the Vincennes Zoo in Paris. Unexpectedly, it has been labeled as "the least remarkable" text of the collection, probably because its importance in understanding Palomar's *persona* has not been detected.[31] Not only is this the first piece that Calvino writes about Palomar but it is also central to the understanding of his epistemological approach and of the reasons why it is destined to fail, especially when adopted to define nonhuman animals. My analysis will therefore address questions concerned with the politics of representation, by reinterpreting knowledge production through a framework located at the juncture of critical animal studies and decolonial theory.[32] As I will demonstrate, Palomar's way of looking at nonhuman animals represents an example of

[30] Italo Calvino, "How New the New World Was," in *Collection of Sand*, cit., p. 10. I purposefully quote from a colonial narrative to reframe the concept of "new world" from signifying a land of colonized territories to a metaphorical space where a shift of perception takes place. This process is facilitated by putting the initials in "New World" in lowercase letters, which destabilizes the dominant association of these words with the false idea of discovery of the Americas by Europeans.

[31] Eugenio Bolongaro, "Calvino's Encounter with the Animal," cit., p. 119. This text was originally published in 1975 on the *Corriere della Sera* preceded by an introductory note for the readers: "A new character is born: Mr. Palomar. Perhaps, by giving him the name of a famous astronomical observatory, Italo Calvino wanted to assert that our contemporary reality, nature and human behaviors are observed from a far away telescope." The translation is mine.

[32] The need of this theoretical intersection is confirmed, for instance, by Philip Armstrong who affirms that "an absolute difference between the human and the animal (and the superiority of the former over the latter) owe a great deal to the colonial legacies of European modernity." See Philip Armstrong, "The Postcolonial Animal," in *Society & Animals: Journal of Human-Animal Studies*, vol. 10, n. 4, 2002, pp. 413-419 (414). On the same line of thinking, Kelsey Daley John affirms that "Animal colonialism is one interlocking tension that strikes upon conversations of heteropartriarchy, racism, environmental racism, Indigenous erasure, and religious fundamentalism — all forces that connect, intersect, and overlap in complex ways." See "Animal Colonialism—Illustrating Intersections between Animal Studies and Settler Colonial Studies through Diné Horsemanship," in *Humanimalia*, vol. 10, n. 2, 2019, https://www.depauw.edu/humanimalia/issue%2020/john.html.

imperial gaze, conforming to the still-too-normative paradigm that inscribes a colonial discourse onto "other" bodies, whereas the zoo as an institution fulfills the role of perpetuating a colonial narrative that characterizes nonhuman animals as cultural commodities every time a "human" observes an "animal" in a zoo.[33]

Figure 7 Lithograph of Zarafa, 1827, Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée, Marseille.

The focus on giraffes may not be a coincidence given the highly symbolic value that they carry in connection to the Vincennes zoo. Built in 1934, the zoo embodies the mark of human imperialism since its construction was conceived as a vital feature of the 1931 *Exposition Coloniale*.[34] However, the first time a giraffe was brought to Paris was actually in 1826 when the giraffe known as Zarafa was forced to travel for 41 days from Marseille to Paris as a token of power dressed in shoes and a custom-made coat to brave the winter.[35] She

[33] On the psychology of colonialism see Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann, London: Pluto Press, 1986; Nigel C. Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination*, London: Polity Press, 2003. In my analysis of Palomar's gaze, I build on the theories elaborated by Laura Mulvey in reference to the male gaze in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, New York: Oxford UP, 1999, pp. 57-68; by E. Anna Kaplan who theorizes the white gaze, meaning when a white person looks at a non-white person, in *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, New York, London: Routledge, 1997; by Randy Malamud who extends these theories to nonhuman animals in "Animals on Film: the Ethics of the Human Gaze," in *Spring*, n. 83, 2010, pp. 1-26, https://english.gsu.edu/files/2015/06/Spring.pdf, 2013.

[34] The Vincennes Zoo has recently undergone four years of restoration in order to adhere to contemporary welfare standards demanded in the last two decades and it has been strategically renamed Zoological Park. It reopened on April 12, 2014. The *Exposition Coloniale* is known also for featuring a human zoo.

[35] Giraffes' past as colonized subjects continues in the present through the zoo's renown breeding program that maintains alive strains of lineage dating back to its opening. This is again a demonstration of the lack of interest in the re-integration of these animals into their natural environments, given that the giraffes are

immediately became a huge cultural phenomenon to the point that even Calvino was familiar with it and mentions her in "The Wonders of the Popular Press" where he recalls the many "lithographs, almanacs, on majolica plates, on copper pans" with illustrations of her arrival.[36] Also, as Elio Attilio Baldi notes, Calvino may have become fascinated with giraffes after reading an illustrated article on giraffe physiology published in the *Scientific American* in 1974, of which he was a regular subscriber.[37] This background information provides further context to Calvino's short text, which must be read keeping in mind the historical framing of giraffes as colonial subjects since it strongly affects Palomar's position as powerful observer.

The text begins with Palomar standing in front of the giraffes' enclosure, focusing his attention on the group of giraffes, made of adults and babies, and on their "unharmonious movements" which he interprets as a race: they "charge almost to the fence, wheel around, repeat the dash two or three times, then stop." Absorbed in his reflections, he misses to recognize the real nature of their repetitive and patterned movements and to identify them as a sign of abnormal behavior, a clear symptom of distress due to being confined in a small enclosure.[38] Instead, he starts dissecting their bodies in motion with his gaze. The detailed description of what he sees, which reminds of a sequence of snap-shots, constructs the giraffes not as individuals but as a group of identical bodies functioning as species models. The bodies then undergo a rapid metamorphic

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bred exclusively to be displayed in the zoo. On Zarafa see Michael Allin, *Zarafa: a Giraffe's True Story, from Deep in Africa to the Heart of Paris*, New York: Walker, 1998.

[36] In *Collection of Sand*, cit., p. 50. For a reconstruction of the history of their capture and displacement on European territories see Laufert Berthold, *The Giraffe in History and Art*, Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1928.

[37] Elio Attilio Baldi, "Art and Science in Calvino's *Palomar*," cit., p. 85.

[38] When a zooed animal displays repetitive and abnormal behaviors, known as stereotypies, it may be an indication of psychological trauma, emotional deterioration, and stress due to their inadequate captive environment. See Georgia Mason and Jeffrey Mason, *Stereotypic Animal Behavior: Fundamentals and Applications of Welfare*, Oxford: Cromwell Press, 2006. More specifically on giraffes see Meredith J. Bashaw, Loraine R. Tarou, Todd S. Maki, Terry L. Maple, "A Survey Assessment of Variables Related to Stereotypy in Captive Giraffe and Okapi," in *Applied Animal Behavior Science*, n. 73, 2001, pp. 235-247.

process first by being transformed into objects and subsequently by being broken up into segments: the neck is compared to the arm of a crane, moving in apparent disconnection to the rest of the body, the hind legs look like crutches stumbling, as if they were made of wood, or as "a mechanism constructed by putting together pieces from heterogeneous machines."

From this passage, it appears that Palomar exhibits a mechanistic view of nonhuman animals that derives from Descartes' doctrine of the animal-machine condemned to the endless repetition of meaningless tasks. The same observation method is reiterated in the following paragraph, in which the body of the giraffes is reduced to a prompt for aesthetic analysis. In fact, to satisfy his obsessive desire to find order, he now stares at their hide in the hope to find a harmonious and universal pattern concealed in its irregularity and uniqueness. By analyzing the body of the giraffe through a set of objective criteria, the same ones used to judge a work of art such as harmony and proportion, he disappointedly notices that their bodies do not conform to those principles, a conclusion that marginalizes the giraffes outside of canonical standards of appreciation. Following a strict binary logic made of oppositions ("harmony" vs. "disharmony," "graceful" vs. "ungraceful", "proportion" vs. "disproportion"), the bodies of the giraffes are therefore portrayed as an example of negative aesthetic qualities. He manages to please his eyes only by modifying how he perceives the spots of the hide: instead of considering the hide as spotted, he describes it as "a black coat whose uniformity is broken by pale veins that open in a lozenge design." This change in perspective, however, is aimed exclusively at satisfying his visual pleasure and search for order, while the giraffes remain subjectless entities, empty signifiers whose meaning and value are inscribed by the human gaze.[39]

[39] On this process of deindividuation read Kenneth Shapiro, "The Death of the Animal: Ontological Vulnerability," in *Between the Species*, vol. 5, n. 4, 1989, pp. 183-194.

Palomar's way of looking and describing the giraffes' movements, unsure if he must interpret them "as galloping or trotting", closely resembles Eadweard Muybridge's way of looking and photographing animals in motion, and particularly his sequence of images capturing the movements of a galloping horse, of which the giraffe's race can represent a literary equivalent.[40]

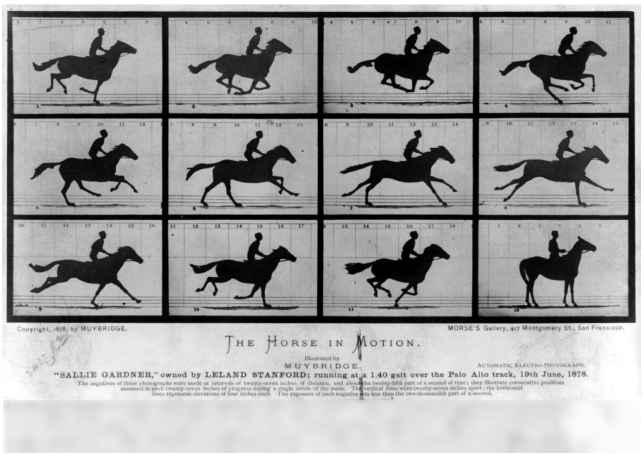

Figure 8. Eadweard Muybridge, *Horse in Motion*, 1878, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington

In 1877, Muybridge produced a sequence of photographs that could answer the rather trivial question of his commissioner, California Governor and railroad tycoon Leland Stanford, interested in knowing whether all four of a horse's hooves left the ground during a gallop.[41] As suggested by Randy Malamud, this way of looking can be traced back to what Malek Alloula has defined the "vivisector's gaze", or the colonizing power of photography, in his discussion of the representation of Algerian women in colonial photographic postcards.[42] According to the French writer, "it is the very gaze of colonization that defines, through the exclusion of the other (the colonized) a naturalness (the

[40] The sequence of pictures is titled "Horse in Motion" and was made using a zoopraxiscope invented by Eadweard Muybridge in 1879. To learn more about the impact of his work on art and motion picture and on the ethics of using animals for his photographs see Marta Braun, "Making Animal Locomotion," in *Eadweard Muybridge*, London: Reaktion Books, 2010, pp. 182-215. There are several parallels between Muybridge and Palomar's way of observing other animals and how they are conceptualized. In fact, not only was Muybridge accustomed to photograph nonhuman animals in zoos but his work is also characterized by a scientific and aesthetic logic that follows a sociological hierarchy reflected in how the photographs are ordered in his book of plates *Animals in Motion*, New York, Dover Publications, 1957. The book begins with the photographic representation of men in motion, who are considered the highest subjects, followed by women, children, persons with disabilities, and ends with nonhuman animals who are labeled as the lowest subjects. Further, there is a clear distinction between normal/abnormal, ideal/pathological, which reproduces the same binary structure that characterizes Palomar's mode of thinking.

[41] He was interested in this question because he was hoping to find more effective ways of exploiting the horses he used for racing.

[42] Randy Malamud, *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture*, cit., p. 64.

native) that is circumscribed by the gaze. It is this same gaze that animates the photographer, that filters through the lens to catch in its aperture a reality that he has already begun to decompose."[43] Palomar's gaze is characterized by the same desire to vivisect, as he objectifies and dismembers the body of the giraffe, thus establishing a clear relationship between power and visuality. The ocular dimension of colonialist power and knowledge is fostered and perpetuated by the zoo, where all human visitors will inevitably reproduce it. Even the "little girl" Palomar is visiting the zoo with is not exempt from it. In fact, she stares at the giraffes until she gets tired of it and is ready to move to another animal exhibit, as if she were walking through a museum observing a collection of inanimate objects. The conceptualization of nonhuman animals as commodities occupying a disempowered, inferior, and colonized position, is so culturally engrained that the presence of displaced animals living in captivity in a cosmopolitan city is not even barely questioned. The girls' brief appearance at the end of the text then serves as an additional reminder of the power dynamics visitors agree to when entering a zoo: "humans", due to their superior ontological status, have the privilege of moving freely around the zoo premises while looking at caged zooed animals for as long or as little as they wish.

A parallel reading of the "The Gecko's Belly" will demonstrate the epistemological and ontological effects of Palomar's paradigmatic gaze also on the way he looks at nonhuman animals outside the zoo.[44] In this text, Palomar observes a gecko on his terrace who every

[43] Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, translated by Myrna Godzich and Wlas Godzich, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 92.

[44] In *Mr. Palomar*, cit., pp. 56-60. This text belongs to the section entitled "Mr. Palomar on the Terrace." The terrace is a highly charged liminal space that establishes a continuity between inside and outside, private and public, domestic and urban. In this in-between space, the gecko has the ability to cross ontological boundaries and their physical presence not only disrupts the strict separation between nature and culture but also allows for these two categories to meet and potentially hybridize. The terrace must also be considered as a space that facilitates a surveillance gaze as well as a commanding view of the street, which once again resonates with Palomar's approach to nonhuman animals and stresses his position of power.

evening comes out from their hiding spot and patiently awaits for an insect to get within range. The setting in which the encounter takes place is human-made, which already creates a degree of simulation and artificiality. In fact, Palomar observes the gecko through a glass, a "show-case window" where a collection of Art Nouveau vases, a plumbago plant in a vase, and a 75-watt bulb illuminating the objects every evening are neatly arranged. The gecko happens to place themselves right in the center of the showcase, as if they were part of a museum exhibition, and therefore being more easily exposed to becoming a cultural object inserted into a human narrative. Obviously, unlike zooed animals, the gecko is free to leave and move as they wish. Nonetheless, Palomar's observational approach remains unchanged and the description of the encounter very scientific. Palomar has access to an unusual visual perspective, the gecko's belly, from which he starts describing the gecko's body and applying the same epistemological method outlined for the giraffes based on detached observation void of any intention to get to know the gecko beyond their physical appearance and establish a truly mutual relationship.

The gecko, who again is not conceived as an individual but as a species model, is juxtaposed to the television in Palomar's living room, as if both television and gecko played similar roles in human society: "the television ranges over continents gathering luminous impulses that describe the visible face of things; the gecko, on the other hand, represents immobile concentration and the hidden side, the obverse of what is displayed to the eye."[45] Every night Palomar and his wife shift their chairs from the television to under the glass to look at the motionless gecko as if it

[45] Palomar attributes mechanical properties also to the two "electronic tortoises" he observes "with a cold attention" mating on his patio. He describes them as being poor in sensorial stimuli, unable to even experience erotic pleasure, and living "enclosed in their insensitive casing." See "The Loves of Tortoises" in *Mr. Palomar*, cit., pp. 19-21. Research concerned with their anatomy, physiology, and behaviors completely dismiss these Cartesian prejudices, which again stress Palomar's interpretation of nonhuman animals' experiences as inferior and limited compared to those of humans. See, for instance, David C. Rostal, Earl D. McCoy, Henry R. Mushinsky, *Biology and Conservation of North American Tortoises*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.

were projected on a TV screen. By establishing this analogy and consequent visual regime, the gecko is transformed into an object of spectacle, being looked at like a fish seen through the plate of glass of an aquarium, or like the protagonist of a nature documentary or wildlife movie.

When Palomar notices that the gecko has ingested a gnat, thanks to his privileged position he fixes his eyes on the transparent belly pressing on the glass "as if under X-rays". His invasive clinical gaze directed to the gecko's viscera separates even further the dissected body from the personal identity of the observed subject and reinforces the erroneous belief that the body is the ultimate source of knowledge.[46] Also, as with the giraffe, Palomar compares the gecko's body to a mechanical device, an elaborate machine whose perfection "is not squandered in view of the limited operations it performs." To the questions "does the gecko have criteria of choice and rejection that we do not know? Or are their actions prompted by chance, or whim?" he responds once again, with reducing the gecko's life experiences to bland and mechanical actions, limited in comparison to "human" experience. However, the real limitation is in his gaze that does not grasp the complexities of the individuals he observes. As Dominique Lestel affirms,

> *"The realist-Cartesian paradigm in ethology has significantly atrophied our zoological imagination in reducing animal life to behaviours (reduction 1) and behaviors to causal mechanisms (reduction 2). The first reduction presents animal life as a drab greyscale, draining it of its intersubjectivity, personality, meaning and exuberance. The second secures this monotony to a series of hidden instruments. Together they radically impoverish our capacity for adequate understanding."*[47]

The only instance that may be interpreted as an attempt to understand how the gecko experiences life from their perspective can be found in the final question Palomar formulates: "What is sleep like for someone who has eyes without eyelids?" which echoes Thomas Nagel's famous question

[46] Michael Foucault has first theorized the "medical gaze" in *Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*, translated by Alan M. Sheridan, London, New York: Routledge, 1973. The original French text was published in 1963.

[47] Dominique Lestel, "The Phenomenology of Animal Life," in *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 5, 2014, pp. 125-148 (127).

"What is it like to be a bat?" aimed at exploring animal phenomenology and the subjective nature of consciousness.[48] Palomar, however, not only limits his curiosity to a basic biological function but he also constructs the question in a way that frames the gecko's body in comparison to the human body and therefore views it as defective due to their missing eyelids. By choosing the "human" body as the reference model, he ends up segregating the gecko to a category that includes anyone who does not conform to prefixed normative standards. Also, Palomar is representing ethological practices based on a narrative of human-animal difference, which only reinforces the human/animal divide. The fictional construction of the categories "human" and "animal" is made evident when Palomar describes the gecko's *claws*, the term used to create a first layer of distance at a linguistic (and ontological) level.[49] When he notices the presence of five fingers leaving a trace on the glass that remind him of "human" fingerprints, the gecko's claws are subjected to a partial transformation into "actual hands". Soon after, he admits that the gecko's claws, now called hands, "seem to contain a potential intelligence", a cognitive quality normatively believed to be unique to "humans" and therefore employed to define human supremacy. That potential, however, is not sufficient for Palomar to fully disrupt the human/animal hierarchy and to extend to the gecko the ontological privileges reserved to

[48] Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 83, n. 4, 1974, pp. 435-450. Two other fundamental studies also deal with trying to understand animal perception and consciousness: Jakob von Uexküll, "A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: a Picture Book of Invisible Worlds," in *Instinctive Behavior: the Development of a Modern Concept*, ed. and trans. Claire H. Schiller, Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1957, pp. 5-80; Vilém Flusser and Louis Bec, *Vampyroteruthis Infernalis: a Treatise, with a Report by the Institute Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

[49] Interestingly, Martin Heidegger chooses lizards to make the argument that animals are poor-in-world and lack the "as-structure": "When we say that the lizard [i.e., one example among many] is lying on the rock, we ought to cross out the word 'rock' in order to indicate that whatever the lizard is lying on is certainly given *in some way* for the lizard, and yet is not known to the lizard as a rock". In *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995, p. 198. The italics are in the original. On this topic see also Stuart Elden, "Heidegger's Animals," in *Continental Philosophy Review*, n. 39, 2006, pp. 273-291.

"humans". At the end, the gecko's fingers are comparable only to *a childish drawing* and are viewed as a simpler reproduction of the human standard.[50] However, what Palomar perceives as a limit to acquiring "the talents of human hands" and a prison that does not allow geckos to evolve into humans is actually the unique trait that makes them capable of moving on vertical surfaces, something humans cannot experience due to the lack of adhesive pads.[51] Instead of recognizing the complexity and intrinsic value of the gecko's life experiences, without the need to make anthropocentric comparisons with the "human" model, Palomar perpetuates a hierarchical taxonomy that classifies species on the basis of "human" abilities that are arbitrarily defined as higher.

To conclude, Palomar's paradigmatic gaze can be interpreted as a product of colonialism combined with the ideology of human supremacy, which are generally an underlying cause of othering discourses. The objectifying and dissecting gaze he projects onto the giraffes' bodies is reinforced and supported by how zoos commonly conceptualize nonhuman animals as beings that can be appropriated, commodified, displaced, encaged. Due to his emotional detachment and his egoistic concerns, his epistemological method ends up failing in the attempt not only to grasp the complexity of the giraffes' life experiences but also to satisfy his personal metaphysical curiosities. The whole world then becomes a zoo in Palomar's eyes, since he re-enacts the

[50] Tom Tyler defines *handy humanism* the long philosophical tradition that centers the hand as the mark of humanity, which includes among others Aristotle, Friedrich Engels, Kant, Louis Leakey and extends also to anatomists such as John Goodsir and Charles Bell (*Ciferae: a Bestiary in Five Fingers*, Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2012). The human hand has therefore largely been used to define the essential difference between humanity and animality. But what about, for instance, humans who have lost the use of their hands or those who are born without hands? Should they also be considered less "human"? The real question then is: are there any distinguishing traits that define a hand and who is responsible of making such a critical decision that has clear discriminating effects?

[51] "If only they could be freed from their task of remaining stuck there, they could acquire the talent of human hands." In *Mr. Palomar*, cit., p. 57. On the unique abilities of geckos' adhesive pads see David Labonte, Christofer Clemente, Alex Dittrich, Chi-Yun Kuo, Alfred J. Crosby, Duncan J. Irschick, and Walter Federle, "Extreme Positive Allometry of Animal Adhesive Pads and the Size Limits of Adhesion-Based Climbing," in *PNAS: Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 113, n. 5, 2016, pp. 1297-1302.

colonial gaze promoted by zoos in his every day encounters with nonhuman animals, as demonstrated for instance in the case of the gecko. To free Palomar — and the *Anthropos* he embodies — of his epistemological and ontological barriers we must first free the Giraffe.

2.3. Palomar Looks at the Albino Gorilla: Whiteness and Logos in the Zoo

The central text of the zoo triad is set in the Barcelona zoo where Palomar this time observes an albino gorilla. Calvino is here representing a real-life zooed animal who was captured in 1966 while still an infant in Equatorial Guinea and lived in captivity until he died of a skin tumor in 2003. His capture was marked by trauma and violence: the group of gorillas he lived with was killed and he was found clinging to his dead mother. During the thirty-seven years he spent in captivity, he forcefully sired twenty-two offspring, as part of the zoo's effort to breed more albino gorillas but none of them inherited his albinism or outlived him. The zookeepers named him Floquet de Neu because of his white fur and light skin pigment, and he remains the only known albino gorilla of his species.[52] The act of naming a zooed animal enacts a powerful teleological shift, which serves the human function of making the now individualized animal more relatable and therefore more likely to attract paying visitors.[53] Because of his rare

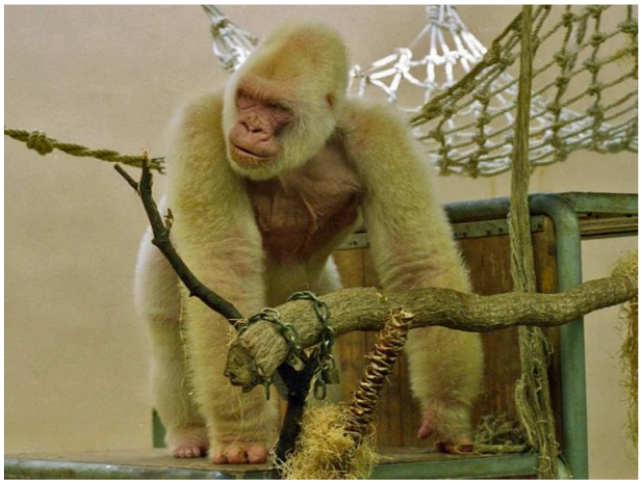

Figure 9. Copito de Nieve, Barcelona Zoo

[52] The first name he was given by his human capturers was Nfumu-Ngui, translated into Catalan, Floquet de Neu, once he arrived in Barcelona. I will here use the Spanish translation Copito de Nieve, which is the name employed by Calvino in the original Italian text.

[53] Animal naming in the zoo is a practice that serves a primarily human function: it constructs a narrative around an individual to encourage zookeepers and the public to associate with, and thus care about, the

physical traits, Copito de Nieve became a celebrity with exhibition value and attracted millions of visitors from around the world who were curious to see him in person.[54] He is still such a popular cultural phenomenon that he is the protagonist of an animated movie released in 2011 and he inspired a graphic novel recently published in Italy.[55]

As Robert Harrison rightly affirms, "the more one ponders Calvino's vignette about the albino gorilla, the more it seems that it is not really about the albino gorilla at all, but about Mr. Palomar, who sees in the ape an image of something unutterable and enigmatic in himself."[56] A close reading of Palomar's description of Copito de Nieve and his consequent metaphysical observations will confirm this statement and once again highlight his inherently anthropocentric mentality based on the treatment of nonhuman animals in symbolical terms and as part of human narratives. Most importantly though, it will highlight Palomar's hierarchical system of interpretation constructed following a logic of inclusion/exclusion and the ways in which this mode of thinking severely impacts the ontological categories of "human" and animal". By turning to theories of animal cognition and racial politics, I will concentrate on the concepts of logocentrism and whiteness, since they are the conceptual filters Palomar uses to define Copito

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named zooed animal. Whether or not an animal in a zoo is named is therefore evidence of the purpose that the zoo intends to use the animal for. This practice though has consequences on the real-life of the zooed animals since it suggests that some of them are more worthy of names than others or that some are more valuable and worthy of conservation efforts because of such privilege. See Sune Borkfelt, "What's in a Name? Consequences of Naming Non-Human Animals," *Animals: an Open Access Journal from MDPI*, vol. 1, n. 1, 2011, pp. 116-125.

[54] Copito de Nieve also falls under the category of "charismatic animals" that usually includes big mammals and cetaceans who are more likely to attract visitors.

[55] The animated movie is called "Floquet de Neu" and is a Spanish production directed by Andrés G. Schaer; the graphic novel, entitled "Il Re Bianco" is by Davide Toffolo (Milano: BAO Publishing, 2018).

[56] Robert Pogue Harrison, "Towards a Philosophy of Nature," edited by William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground. Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, London: W.W: Norton & Company, 1996, pp. 426-438 (431). By the same author see also *Juvenescence: A Cultural History of Our Age*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014, pp. 22-28.

de Nieve's identity and his own.[57] This analysis will ultimately bring to surface Palomar's racialized optic and the deep ties existing between racism and speciesism, which zoos are responsible for further normalizing and validating.[58]

The text begins with Palomar approaching the walled garden yard where Copito de Nieve is kept on display. He quickly makes his way through the crowd amassed in front of the glass delimiting the enclosure, which represents the first visible and tangible barrier between him and Copito de Nieve. Immediately, he characterizes Copito de Nieve in racialized terms by bringing his attention to his white hide. By recognizing his skin color as being "like that of a human of the white race", Palomar is displacing corporeal racial markers onto the gorilla and clearly reproducing race hierarchies shaped by anthropomorphic tropes.[59] However, while he notices a similarity between him and Copito de Nieve, he nonetheless maintains a level of distance simply by employing the preposition "like", which positions the category of "Animal", of which Copito de Nieve represents a universal model, beneath the "Human", represented by Palomar. Syl Ko's redefinition of the term "human" can help clarify who Palomar is actually representing: "human

[57] For a general overview of the concept of whiteness see Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 2007; Allen, T. W. *The Invention of the white Race*. New York: Verso, 2004; Birgit Brander Rasmussen, (ed.),*The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2001; Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, New York: Vintage Books, 1993. For a tentative bibliography of critical whiteness studies up to 2006, see Tim Engles, ed., "Towards a Bibiliography of Critical Whiteness Studies," in *Faculty Research & Creative Activity*, 2006, https://thekeep.eiu.edu/eng_fac/51. The article includes a section on literary and cultural studies.

[58] Judith Butler thoroughly discusses the meaning and implications of a racist optic and reminds us that "the visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme." See "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, NewYork: Routledge 1993, pp. 15-22.

[59] Paul Kivel's answer to the question "what is whiteness?" is: "Racism is based on the concept of whiteness—a powerful fiction enforced by power and violence. Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white". Paul Kivel, *Uprooting Racism. How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2017, p. 28. The question of racial anthropomorphism is briefly treated by Carrie Rohman in her article "On Singularity and the Symbolic", cit. However, she concludes that "Palomar undertakes a genuine effort to comprehend some portion of the animal's unique perspective". In this chapter, I offer a very different position.

means a certain way of being, especially exemplified by how one looks or behaves, what practices are associated with one's community, and so on. So the "human" is just a conceptual way to mark the province of European whiteness as the ideal way of being homo sapiens."[60] From Copito de Nieve's perspective, his whiteness is actually what sentenced him to a life in captivity and to being considered a living phenomenon. In Palomar's eyes, instead, it is what triggers his metaphysical reflections and what allows Copito de Nieve to be ontologically reconsidered, given that he apparently conforms to the "human" model represented by Palomar. In any case, Copito de Nieve remains inscribed into a human narrative, both inside and outside the literary page, in which privileged "human" viewers arbitrarily define how he should be conceptualized and treated.

Palomar's definition of "human" affects also how he perceives the other gorillas in the enclosure: they are in fact described as less attractive because of their blackness, and this is particularly evident when Palomar notices the presence of a "female great black gorilla carrying a baby in her arms". This means that Palomar is looking at the gorillas through the lens of his own whiteness and, as a consequence, is conceptualizing the human-animal binary along racial lines. By stressing that the whiteness of the coat cannot be inherited, he is indirectly referring to the controlled breeding program of the zoo and also framing Copito de Nieve's whiteness not as a gene defect but as a more-human-like trait.[61] The zoo is therefore promoting through Copito de

[60] Aph Ko and Syl Ko, *Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism and Black Veganism from Two Sisters*, New York: Lantern Books, 2017, p. 23. Italics in the original. A similar concept is formulated by Robin D.G. Kelley who affirms that "colonial domination required a whole way of thinking, a discourse in which everything that is advanced, good, and civilized is defined and measured in European terms." See "A Poetics of Anticolonialism," an introduction to Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000, pp. 7-28 (27).

[61] It is interesting to note that we differentiate between breeding and eugenics, to describe human intervention affecting the genetic characteristics of offsprings: the first term is applied to nonhuman animals, the second one to human animals. Also, the partial or complete loss of pigmentation has severe health consequences on those affected by albinism. In fact, albino individuals usually have poor eyesight

Nieve's body the commodification of whiteness, taken as an aesthetic model that must be glorified, reproduced, and visually consumed.

This first phase of assimilation, due to their shared whiteness, continues in Palomar's description of Copito de Nieve's gaze "charged with desolation, and patience and boredom". The perceived similarities between them stimulate in Palomar a momentary biased empathic response that does not extend it to the other gorillas in the enclosure. He describes it as

> *"a resignation at being what he is, sole exemplar in the world of a form not chosen, not loved, all the efforts of bearing his own singularity, and the suffering at occupying a space and time with his presence so cumbersome and evident."*

By attributing his suffering to a burden caused by his albinism that makes him unique among the other members of his species, and which is precisely what in Palomar's mind is setting off his existential crisis, Palomar is recruiting Copito de Nieve to symbolize, dramatize, and illuminate aspects of his own experience and fantasies and colonizing his emotions by filling them with the meanings that suit him.[62] This is not to deny Copito de Nieve's emotional complexity, awareness, and agency, but to stress that Palomar seems unaware of the impact of captivity itself on Copito de Nieve's well-being, and this completely distorts his perception.[63] In fact, for as much as he does define the enclosure "house-cage" and makes a parallel with prisons furnished with "a squat leafless tree and an iron level", the encounter with the gaze of this "sad giant" is not sufficient to

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and skin sensitivity that can be associated to neurological problems and lesser immunity power. It is not however in the zoo's best interests to take these risks into great consideration given that the main purpose of their "breeding" program is to create more albino individuals that would attract more visitors and therefore increase profits.

[62] It must be noted that it is unlikely that Copito de Nieve would recognize himself as different from the rest of his species, due to his poor eye vision and because the idea of race is a human construct, which confirms once again that Palomar is projecting the idea of whiteness and singularity onto him in his own terms.

[63] Several studies do in fact confirm gorillas' complex emotional spectrum. See, for instance, Frans de Waal, *Mama's Last Hug. Animal Emotions and What They Tell Us About Ourselves*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019; Barbara J. King, *How Animals Grieve*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013.

morally shake him. This entails that Copito de Nieve's state of captivity remains an absent referent throughout the text. In fact, Palomar sees the cage first and foremost as the evolutionary limit that nature has imposed on Copito de Nieve's species and not as the materialization of humans' oppressive dominion over other animals.

On a moral standpoint, then, Palomar's use of anthropomorphism is closely tied with anthropocentrism since he is unable to overcome his bias and obtain a more legitimate understanding of Copito de Nieve's experience. While it is important to acknowledge, as Calvino also did in his essay *Visibility* that "our imagination cannot be anything *but* anthropomorphic", since we interpret the world through our embodied materiality and can never experience directly what another animal — including another human animal — thinks or feels, a distinction must be made between classical anthropomorphism and critical anthropomorphism to understand that it is possible to make predictions that do not lead to misrepresentations or stem from an anthropocentric mentality.[64] The first type of anthropomorphic thinking, which is embodied by Palomar, rests on the claim that nonhuman animals do not have mental characteristics or at least that the human subject is much more complex and therefore superior to other species. This means that any attempt to describe other animals is based solely on egocentric experiences and on the prioritization of the human point of view. Whereas, the second type of anthropomorphism, according to Luisella Battaglia's definition, "aims to use human experience in a critical manner, in order to recognize emotional manifestations, putting into relation our most immediate subjective intuitions with comparable notions and data provided by neurophysiology, ethology, zoology, etc. This way, empathy, typical of classical anthropomorphism, is integrated with the

[64] Italo Calvino, *Six Memos*, cit., p. 197.

most scientific research on animal life and behavior."[65] While the knowledge derived from ethological research may also lead to misrepresentation, especially if it remains rooted in anthropocentric thought, by taking into account the animals' ecology, their individual histories, and intraspecific characteristics, this approach can offer a sophisticated solution to the problem of accessing someone else's behaviors and emotions.[66] Palomar's inability to genuinely empathize and thus to align himself to Copito de Nieve's perspective is even more evident as soon as Palomar's gaze moves away from his face and starts scanning the rest of his body. Triggered perhaps by what Susan Bernstein has defined "the anxiety of simianation", which she invokes to describe a discomfort over evolutionary ties between humans and other primate species, what now prevails are the physical traits of difference.[67]

Palomar's transition to a description based on contrast and opposition is introduced by comparing Copito de Nieve, now standing completely still, to "an immemorial antiquity, like mountains or the pyramids". While his ontological status is being somewhat questioned through this comparison, since Palomar is unsure whether to perceive him as part of nature or as a model of a

[65] Luisella Battaglia, *Etica e Diritti degli Animali*, translated by Dario Martinelli, Milano: Laterza, 1997, p. 123. A similar definition can be found in Gordon M. Burghardt, "Ethology and Critical Anthropomorphism: A Snake with Two Heads and Hognose Snakes that Play Dead," in *Cognitive Ethology: The Minds of Other Animals: Essays in Honor of Donald R. Griffin*, edited by Carolyn A. Ristau. Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1991, pp. 53-90.

[66] For a more in depth discussion of this distinction see Fredrik Karlsson, "Critical Anthropomorphism and Animal Ethics," in *The Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, vol. 25, 2012, pp. 707-720; Nik Taylor, "Anthropomorphism and the Animal Subject," in Rob Boddice ed., *Anthropocentrism: Humans, Animals, Environments*, London: Brill, 2011, pp. 265-280. The essays included in Lorraine Daston, Gregg Mitman, eds., *Thinking With Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, offer a wide range of approaches to anthropomorphism in both literature and culture.

[67] Susan Bernstein invokes this type of anxiety to register a heightened uneasiness around an unsettling of the human-animal boundaries specifically in the 1860s in England. See her article "Ape Anxiety: Sensation Fiction, Evolution, and the Genre Question," in *Journal of Victorian Culture*, vol. 6, n. 2, 2010, pp. 250-271. As Virginia Ritcher states, "apes constitute a special case of the uncanny missing link: they denote men's close biological relationship with the animal world, while simultaneously staging the cultural difference which separates men from animals." In *Literature After Darwin: Human Beasts in Western Fiction*, 1859-1939, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, p. 62.

primordial stage of human civilization, he is still classifying him as inferior to "humans" and comparing him exclusively to inanimate objects.

A quick scan of Copito de Nieve's body reveals at Palomar's eyes little resemblance to the body of a human:

> *"In place of a nose, the nostrils dig a double chasm; the hands, hairy and -it would seem- not very highly articulated, at the end of the very long and stiff arms, are actually still paws, and the gorilla uses them as such when he walks, pressing them to the ground like a quadruped."*

After going through a brief process of humanization, Copito de Nieve is now being animalized and segregated into the category of "animal". Palomar's ableist remarks frame Copito de Nieve's body as not being as articulated as that of humans, a conviction that is reflected also at a semantic level through the recession of the hands to the status of paws. [68]

The sight of his hands, perceived as evolutionarily inferior compared to those of humans, is what causes Palomar to re-evaluate Copito de Nieve's ontological privileges. The centrality of the hands in creating a distinction between "human" and "animal" is actually philosophically loaded and points to Heidegger's influential remarks on human distinctiveness. In fact, in "What Is Called Thinking?", Heidegger not only makes the claim that "apes have organs that grasp, but they have no hand", but he also affirms that "the hand, along with the word, is the essential mark of the human... no animal has a hand, and a hand never originates from a paw or a claw or a talon."[69] For him, hand and word are not only intimately connected but together they constitute

[68] The power of language to silence, marginalize, and misrepresent are explored by Coleen McGloin, "Tone it Down a Bit! Euphemism as a Colonial Device in Australian Indigenous Studies," in *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, vol. 36, n. 2, 2014, pp. 156-167.

[69] Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, translated by Fred D. Wick and J. Glenn Gray, New York: Harper and Row, 1968. In his lecture series on Parmenides, Heidegger claims that it is by means of *Handlung* (action, activity) that humans engage with things. He also claims that only a being that "has" the word can have the hand in its essential sense, and for him this is an exclusive of humans. Only through humanity, by means of word and hand, can beings emerge from Being. This of course means that animals do not have word and hand, but just mere "grasping organs". See *Parmenides*, translated by

the essential distinguishing mark of humanity. For Palomar too they are closely related, as his reflections on language viewed in opposition to silence will demonstrate, and the separation between those with word and hand from those without is where the ontological abyss between "human" and "animal" lies. The process of animalization is stressed even further by depicting Copito de Nieve as a quadruped who uses his hands to walk. This again resonates with Heidegger's claims who writes that "if you go on all four [hands] you have only one hand plus mouth free to carry things. [...] An animal must use *its* mouth, no other tool does it have." By contrast, bipeds are indirectly framed as those who have freed their hands from locomotor functions and therefore show a more civilized behavior.[70]

Thus, based on Copito de Nieve's physical appearance, Palomar makes assertions that place him either in a relation of identity or of alterity to himself: Copito de Nieve's whiteness confers a "human-like" status upon him while any trait perceived as different is the cause of his exclusion from the "human" domain. The constant tension between animalization and humanization is therefore the product of Palomar's racialized gaze, where to humanize means inscribing Copito de Nieve in the circle of white people while to animalize means marginalizing him based on his ape-like traits.

After having described Copito de Nieve's body in terms of sameness and difference, he applies

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André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, pp. 79-87. As a response to these claims, see Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand," in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: the Texts of Jacques Derrida*, translated by John P. Leavey Jr., Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1987, pp. 161-197. In this text, Derrida claims that Heidegger's focusing on the hands remains willfully ignorant of the whole body of "zoological knowledge". On the biological differences and similarities between the hands of humans and apes see the work of primatologist John Napier, *Hands*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980.

[70] Interestingly, these parameters can be applied also to humans who do not conform to the accepted standard of biped being. A literary example that perfectly illustrates this reality is Indra Sinha's book *Animal's People* (2005), in which a nineteen years old boy from the Indian city of Khaufpur is named Animal for the deformed and misshapen spine that causes him to navigate his world on both his arms and legs and is therefore relegated to a lower ontological status and animalized to Snowflake's level. See Catherine Parry, "Animal's People: Animal, Animality, Animalisation," in *Other Animals in Twenty-First Century Fiction*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017, pp. 15-62.

this epistemological method also to his cognitive abilities, in particular to his ability to create meaning. Palomar starts speculating about the car tire that Copito de Nieve is holding in his "arm-paws" and whether he might be ascribing a symbolic value to it.[71]

Figure 10. Copito de Nieve holding a tire, Barcelona Zoo

In asking himself what the tire could signify for him, if a toy, a fetish, or a talisman, Palomar is colonizing the space of Copito de Nieve's mind with human culture and provisionally extending to him the potential ability to create and use symbols. While there is an attempt to access Copito de Nieve's perspective, Palomar's movement of potential identification is still dependent on a human-specific framework, which would require Copito de Nieve to know the meaning humans attribute to words such as toy, fetish, and talisman, and to make symbolic associations and abstract conceptualizations based on a reference map and system of signs grounded in human culture.[72] Palomar then connects the act of holding on to the tire to a need to "allay the anguish of isolation, of difference, of the sentence of being always considered a living phenomenon "not only by the visitors to the zoo but also by his own females and children." While with this statement Palomar is to a certain degree recognizing Copito de Nieve's

[71] Typically, car tires are considered a source of "enrichment" and are offered to zooed animals to try to minimize the effects of a monotonous life spent in captivity.

[72] There is a multitude of cognitive studies interested in the ability of apes to create (human) meaning. The method employed is always the same: training animals to use human language. This method is not only intrinsically anthropocentric but it is also based on vocal communication and logocentrism, which means not taking into consideration other potential forms of communication. See, for instance, Elsa Addessi, Alessandra Mancini, Lara Crescimbene, Camillo Padoa-Schioppa, Elisabetta Visalberghi, "Preference Transitivity and Symbolic Representation in Capuchin Monkeys (Cebus Apella)," in *PLoS One*, vol. 3, n. 6, 2008, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0002414; Sarah T. Boysen, "The Impact of Symbolic Representations on Chimpanzee Cognition," in *Rational Animals?*, edited by Susan Hurley and Matthew Nudds, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 489-511.

state of vulnerability and solitude, he is still projecting his own sense of existential isolation onto the situation he observes and constructing it as his own. By envisioning his isolation as a calculated form of exclusion by his own species due to his different physical appearance, Palomar is not only extending racial thought onto other animal species but also appears to be unable to recognize the true cause of his isolation: the forced imprisonment in the zoo.[73] His state of captivity is in fact used exclusively as an entry point to make metaphysical considerations instead of ever being morally questioned.

During this phase of ontological assimilation and extension of cognitive abilities Palomar is once again reasoning by analogy and understanding animal sentience based on anthropocentric measurements of capability, which completely misrepresents the unique perspective and life experience of the beings he observes. He is also making selective and gendered assumptions, since he does not extend the privileges offered to Copito de Nieve also to the female gorilla in the enclosure. In fact, for Palomar, she maintains a practical relationship with the car tire, she just "sits in it as if it were an easy chair, sunbathing and delousing her infant", while for Copito de Nieve the contact with the tire has an affective, possessive, symbolic meaning, from which he "can have a glimpse of what for man is the search for an escape from the dismay of living, [...], a first daybreak of culture in the long biological night." Making such a drastic distinction between their relationship with the tire, establishes a clear gender hierarchy in Palomar's mind, who now projects a privilege onto Copito de Nieve not only for being white but also for being male.[74]

[73] There are currently no studies that can confirm that Copito de Nieve would have been excluded by other members of his species because of the different color of his coat. After bringing this issue to the attention of anthropologist Barbara J. King's attention, whose research spans from animal emotion and cognition to primate behavior, she confirms that the gorillas in the enclosure did not demonstrate particular changes in behavior.

[74] This passage highlights the parallels and overlaps between androcentrism and anthropocentrism. On this topic see Val Plumwood, "Androcentrism and Anthropocentrism: Parallels and Politics," in *Ethics and the Environment*, vol. 1, n. 2, 1996, pp. 119-152. It must also be noted that the female gorilla remains

Copito de Nieve is therefore elected by Palomar as the only one able to potentially bridge the gap between "human" and "animal" since he appears to be equipped with the characteristics that allow him to be considered for inclusion into the category of the "human". Copito de Nieve, however, is still missing language, the ultimate clause for admission into human ontological consideration. For a moment, it seems like he is about to break the wall of silence that is responsible for his segregation to an inferior status. He is in fact about to reach "the springs from which language bursts forth, to establish a flow of relationships between his thoughts and the unyielding, deaf evidence of the facts that determine his life..." Ultimately, though, he does not gain access to the symbolic and is unable to create human meaning. Based on Palomar's anthropocentric conception of language and cognition, Copito de Nieve remains stuck in a pre-symbolic condition, a pre-linguistic semiotic universe. It is however important to note that what Palomar perceives as silence is in reality a consequence of an act of silencing, since he does not take into consideration the possibility of the existence of other languages and forms of communication besides the ones employed by "humans".[75]

This whole paragraph heavily relies on the concept of animal silence as opposed to human language, which is understood as being closely related to *logos* and therefore to humanness.[76] In this mental and moral framework, the absence of (human) language equals to absence of

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without a name. As already explained, the practice of naming has great impact on how zooed animals are characterized and perceived as individuals. This privilege is not extended to her.

[75] For an excellent overview of the language of great apes see Barbara J. King, *The Dynamic Dance: Nonvocal Communication in African Great Apes*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. For an analysis of animal language in a philosophical and political framework see Eva Meijer, "Political Nonhuman Animal Voices: Rethinking Language and Politics with Nonhuman Animals," in *Animals and Their People. Connecting East and West in Cultural Animal Studies*, edited by Anna Barcz & Dorota Lagodzka, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018; Eva Meijer, *When Animals Speak: Toward an Interspecies Democracy*, New York: NYU Press, 2019; Kalpana Rahita Seshadri, *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

[76] See the book by Louise Westling, *The Logos of the Living World: Merleau-Ponty, Animals, and Language*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2014, for a discussion of alternative philosophical perspectives to the Aristotelian concept of speech and the language-reason binomial.

thoughts, which is used as a parameter to discriminate and deny liberty, autonomy, and dignity to nonhuman animals. Palomar's view aligns with Heidegger's position regarding the human-animal divide, especially his reasons for associating the concept of Dasein exclusively to humans. Laura Freeman, whose aim is to critique Heidegger's assumption that all human beings experience the world through the same, immutable, permanent structure, affirms that "Heidegger's paradigm of Dasein is the European, white, free man. This is because his system does not allow for the possibility that on the ontological level there can be differences — in race, gender, sexuality, physical or cognitive ability (and I add species) — that elude the structures he sets out as basic or fundamental to human existence."[77] By including nonhuman animals in the series of ontologically marginalized categories, it is possible to understand the existing relations between intersecting oppressions and the impact that Heidegger's paradigm, of which Palomar can be considered a literary representation, has also on this marginalized category of beings. Palomar's analysis of animal Being remains one-dimensional in its focus because determining the Being of animals is never truly considered, in itself, a pressing task. His remarks are in fact made with an inward eye aimed at understanding his own identity and his own interpretation of the unique essence characterizing human Dasein.[78] It is this focus and this priority that forms his chief epistemological limit. When his thoughts come to an end, the human-animal barrier remains insurmountable, he is unable to find satisfying answers to his metaphysical questions, and a new ontology for Copito de Nieve is impossible to formulate.[79] But how can a new ontology be

[77] Lauren Freeman, "Phenomenology of Racial Oppression," in *Knowledge Cultures*, vol. 3, n. 1, 2015, pp. 24-44 (35).
[78] As Carl Safina affirms, "we look at the world through our own eyes, naturally. But by looking from the inside out, we see an inside-out world." In *Beyond Words. What Animals Think and Feel*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015, p. 2.
[79] On Heidegger's metaphysical anthropocentrism see Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: the Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008; by the same author see also "Heidegger's Zoontology," in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*,

formulated if animals are conceptualized as inferior beings? It is only obvious that a hierarchy of power, structural discrimination, and ontological separation would subsist. The zoo in which Palomar's reflections take place represents the visual and physical enclosure of a much larger system of beliefs and norms. Its very existence, based on the concepts of domination and captivity operating in a colonialist framework, justifies and supports Palomar's *anthropo*centrism that is made of false knowledge produced by the superimposition of his arbitrary value judgments.

2.4. The Iguana Looks at Palomar: *His*tory Beyond the Hu*man*

In the last of the three texts dedicated to zooed animals, Palomar visits the reptile house of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris to satisfy his fascination with iguanas.[80]

Figure 11. Interior of the Vivarium in the Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes, French National Museum of Natural History, Paris

The ontological and epistemological questions raised so far are once again explored, this time with a specific focus on the ways in which humans classify other animals spatially and conceptually. These

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Matthew Calarco, Peter Atterson, eds., London, New York: Continuum, 2004, pp. 18-30; Brett Buchanan, *Onto-Ethologies*: *The Animal Environments of Uexkull, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze*, New York: SUNY Press, 2008.

[80] The construction of the reptile house in the Jardin des Plantes, adjacent to the botanical gardens, dates back to 1870, and its latest renovations occurred in 1932. Elio Attilio Baldi states that in this zoo "the scientific study of animals was regularly practiced from an early stage. Frequenters of the Jardin des Plantes included scientists like Georges Cuvier (this is mentioned by Calvino in an essay elsewhere), who was amongst the pioneers of the study of animal behavior and known for his detailed paintings of plants and animals. Artists like Pierre-Joseph Redouté and J.J. Grandville were also drawn to this zoos in order to study and depict nature as never before." In "Art and Science in Calvino's Palomar," cit., pp. 82-83.

considerations will lead to a crisis of the "human" subject stimulated by a momentary shift in perception provoked by the living presence of the reptiles. However, Palomar will show resistance to accepting the new ontology taking shape around and inside of him. When his set of beliefs starts shaking too drastically, he chooses to leave the zoo instead of freeing the "animal" subjects from the cultural cage humans have constructed for them, of which he is an accomplice and the zoo its highest expression. Already from the title, "the order squamata", the main theme of classification is given heightened prominence. In fact, Calvino is using Linneaus' taxonomic rank, the hierarchical system for classifying and naming living organisms. This method of classification implies that living beings can be systematically compartmentalized into hierarchical categories and it enables the replacement of physical bodies with their corresponding abstract representations. The materiality of the reptiles Palomar encounters is therefore weakened, resulting in a process of deindividualization.[81] Once inside the reptile house, Palomar's gaze moves around the room as if he were browsing through a volume of an encyclopedia before reaching the entry of interest. First, he notices ten little iguanas moving frantically in the glass case they are crammed in and then he acknowledges the presence of other reptiles kept in the same room such as the savanna monitor, the Teju, and the giant African Cordilo, all natives of Africa or Central and South America.[82] Finally, he turns to the case labeled *iguana iguana*, where he can finally stare at the main object of his fascination. At a

[81] Carl Linneus was the first to apply a distinct rank of biological classification to the division of minerals, plants, and animals in his *Systema Naturae* in 1735. For a more detailed history of the classification of animal species, see Irus Braverman, *Zooland: The Institution of Captivity*, cit., pp. 51-70. For an overview of the limitations of animal taxonomy from a scientific perspective see Arthur J. Cain, "Zoological Classification," in *Aslib Proceedings*, vol. 14, n. 8, 1962, pp. 226-230. For the impact of this system of classification on the creation of racial taxonomies and the emergence of "race" as a category see Elizabeth Brown, George Barganier, *Race and Crime: Geographies of Injustice*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2018, pp. 73-88; Patrícia Ferraz de Matos, *The Colours of the Empire: Racialized Representations during Portuguese Colonialism*, translated by Mark Ayton, New York: Berghahn Books, 2013, pp. 21-30.
[82] These animals are not listed as endangered or threatened species, which confirms that they are kept in captivity for human purposes and not for conservation.

narrative level, the sequence of events is inverted, meaning that the description of the iguana is told first. This proleptic inversion accomplishes two aims: it gives textual relevance to the individual animal Palomar describes in greater detail and it represents a shift from the chronological representation of time. Playing with temporalities, even if only visually on the page, prepares the readers for one of the core philosophical issues of this text: the question of the perception of time beyond the "human".

To describe the physical appearance of the iguana, who has not been given a name, he applies his usual epistemological method based on similarities and differences compared to the human body that continues to be taken as a model. Nurtured on centuries of stereotyped representations of reptiles, the iguana is conceived as a deformed looking being and their body described as a sort of monstrous armor with "too much skin" on the neck and legs that "sags on all sides", and with talons resembling vegetable propagations rather than hands and fingers.[83]

After a quick and approximate scan of the body, Palomar's gaze meets the eye of the iguana, which destabilizes his rational and detached approach as soon as he becomes aware that it is "endowed with gaze, attention, sadness, suggesting that another being is concealed inside that dragon semblance." The realization of looking at what he defines an "evolved" eye due to the complex and human-like emotions he perceives, force him to admit that the iguana is "a living presence less distant from us than it seems..."[84] While Palomar is still thinking in terms of us/them and sameness/difference, the gaze of the iguana is nevertheless destabilizing because he sees something he was not expecting to find: a living subject looking back at him who overturns arbitrary hierarchical structures and the observer-observed power dynamic so fundamental to

[83] Notice how once again the hands are represented as the body part that consecrates the human-animal divide.

[84] The quotation marks for "evolved" are in the original.

zoos.[85] In their essay "The Political Animal" Danta and Vardoulakis explain why the effect of the animal gaze is so destabilizing: "While gazing at the human, the animal prohibits [their] animality being reduced to a pure naked body, a body of absolute passivity, a body to be brushed and patted. With this interruption, the animal also becomes political, in the sense that [they] condition the possibility of singularity and of identity."[86]

Yet, as soon as he distances himself from the gaze of the iguana and turns to reflections concerning reptiles as a homogenous category of animals, their individuality and personhood fades away and he goes back on his search for order. He describes the reptile house as a place governed by chaos, where "all is possible, and beasts, plants and rocks exchange scales, quills, concretions." The animals in the glass "cage-cases" are now reduced to the same ontological level of geological formations, with which they share physical similarities that are shuffled around until they "become fixed (and) resist the flux that undoes them." It is in this fixation from infinite possibilities into a finite number of ways of being that Palomar finally perceives the order he so eagerly yearns. However, the order of the world he perceives in the Jardin des Plantes is nothing but an artificial construction founded on a human-imposed order and based on classifications, naming strategies, and forced spatial arrangements where biodiversity is reduced to a set of taxonomic labels and living beings are re-semanticized as exemplars of species.

[85] According to Jacques Lacan's distinction between eye and gaze, the use of the term *gaze* introduces a subject whose intention is to see and to attribute meaning to the image that its eye sees. Jacques Lacan, "The Split Between the Eye and the Gaze," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, NewYork: Norton, 1978, pp. 67-78.

[86] Chris Danta and Dimitris Vardoulakis, "The Political Animal," in *Substance*, vol. 37, n. 3, 2008, pp. 3-6. The pronouns "its" and "it" of the original are here rendered with the more inclusive pronoun "their". See also Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am, translated by David Wills, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.*

Given Palomar's strong encyclopedic drive, Roland Barthes's reflections on the illustrative plates of encyclopedias offer illuminating insights on how nonhuman animals are conceptualized in the zoo and in Palomar's mind:

> *"Inventory is never a neutral idea; to catalogue is not merely to ascertain, as it appears at first glance, but also to appropriate. The Encyclopedia is a huge ledger of ownership; [...] to appropriate is to fragment the world, to divide it into finite objects subject to man in proportion of their discontinuity: for we cannot separate without finally naming and classifying, and, at that moment, property is born."*[87]

The association between the act of cataloguing and the birth of property is actually critical to the understanding of the ethical issues at the root of the creation of zoos. The problem with Palomar's search for order in a place where living beings live in captivity is not only that they are conceptualized as encyclopedic entries but also, and most importantly, that in the process of being catalogued they are considered as property. The notion that nonhuman animals can be owned is directly responsible for upholding the human-animal divide and for their perceived inferior legal status.[88]

The effects of cataloguing nonhuman animals as if they were objects in a museum are particularly evident in the three texts grouped under the section "Palomar Does the Shopping", which highlight even further the level of violence of adopting this ontological and

[87] Roland Barthes, "The Plates of the Encyclopedia," in *New Critical Essays*, translated by Richard Howard, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009, pp. 26-27.

[88] All countries in the European Union follow the Council directive 1999/22/CE of 29 March 1999 on the keeping of "wild" animals in zoos, who are property owned by the zoos. The property status of zooed animals is not limited to the U.S. and the EU. In Bangladesh, for instance, as stated in act n. XVII of 1974, "If, in any place, any wild animal whether protected or game animal or meat or trophy of such wild animal which is found dead or dying or which as been killed or caught or bred in captivity or kept in possession of any body by any means otherwise than in accordance with the provisions of this Act shall be the property of the Government." With regards to the U.S., Irus Braverman explains that "current U.S. property law provides that animals that are wild in nature (ferae naturae) belong to the state (res communes), and no individual property rights exist in them as long as they remain wild, unconfined, and undomesticated. At the same time, the courts have established that "wild animals reduced from the wild state in compliance with applicable law become property of an individual." [This means that for] zoos animals are proprietary trade goods, existing "somewhere above the rank of 'domestic pet' and below that of 'indentured servant.'" Irus Braverman, *Zooland*, cit., pp. 86-87.

epistemological classificatory system.[89] In the first text, "Two Pounds of Goose Fat" while Palomar stands in line in a Paris charcuterie, he contemplates the glass jars of goose fat nicely shelved besides him. While for a moment he realizes that the content of those jars is the result of the exploitation and abuse of geese's bodies, he is still attracted to it. It awakens "an immediate fantasy not so much of appetite as of eros", and he imagines smearing the goose' fat over "the rosy skin" of a woman's body and "making his way towards her through those thick avalanches, embracing her, sinking with her." In this passage, both the animal and female bodies are sexualized and become objects of consumption, a fusion of oppressions that Carol Adams has already richly theorized.[90] After having dispelled this "incongruous thought" out of his mind, his gaze moves around the room full of "patés de fois gras, head cheese, terrines, galantines, fans of salmon, artichoke hearts garnished like trophies." And precisely like a trophy hunter he shows signs of delusions of grandeur and is pervaded with a narcissistic feeling of "sacred enthusiasm" that tricks him into believing that "he alone is the elect, the one touched by grace, the only worthy of the deluge of good things brimming from the cornucopia of the world." Above all, his gaze transforms every animal product in the shop into "a document of the history of civilization, a museum exhibit", a transformation that has severe consequences on how animals are conceptualized, as the second text of the section, "the cheese museum", further demonstrates. Palomar is now wandering in a cheese shop admiring samples of dairy products on display, which encompass "a knowledge accumulated by a civilization through all its history and geography". His human-centered conceptualization of history and culture enables a shift in perception that makes him see in place of the actual cheeses in the shop "names of cheeses, concepts of cheeses, meanings of cheeses, histories of cheeses, contexts of cheeses, psychologies

[89] Randy Malamud comments on the parallels between the experience of walking around a shopping mall and visiting a zoo in *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture*, cit., p. 15.
[90] See in particular Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, cit., pp. 52-56.

of cheeses". By transforming them into allegorical representations, he completely erases the animals' histories and individual biographies made of commodification, reproductive violence, and subjugation behind the production of those cheeses he is so eager to classify and transform into cultural artifacts. Similarly, in the third text "Marble and Blood", Palomar is in a butcher shop reflecting more profoundly on the flourishing of human civilization that he redefines as "human-bovine civilization". This definition, however, more than representing a symbiosis between the "man-beef" species only reiterates the hierarchical relation that justifies human supremacy and that has normalized the existence of a speciesist gaze, which culturally accepts displaying animal carcasses in shops.[91] Although Palomar experiences a mixture of "egoistic concern and universal compassion", his level of discomfort is not strong enough to make him fully question his cultural norms and beliefs.[92] Due to social and cultural conditionings, Palomar does not recognize the spaces where animal products are sold as places of species barrier. The same happens for zoos, where physical barriers are constructed to separate human visitors from caged animals, which perpetuates the idea that it is acceptable to collect and order nonhuman animals as if they were entries of a living encyclopedia. The risk, however, with applying the same method of observation to objects in a museum and nonhuman animals is merging these categories also on an ontological level, which is exactly what we are witnessing in Palomar's reasoning. He is also more interested in the sense of control he finally experiences in the reptile house "than in the reptiles in themselves", which reiterates the conviction that their existences

[91] Interestingly, the Italian *uomo-bue* is translated into English as *man-beef*, which implies that at a linguistic level the live animal is rendered as dead flesh. This decision adds an extra speciesist layer to the text that nullifies the possibility of a genuine and respectful relation/symbiosis.

[92] Palomar in fact admits that he is "conditioned by his alimentary background" and therefore perceives "the premise of gustatory happiness [...] and the pleasure of the tooth in severing the browned fiber." On the social process of cultural conditioning see Clifford Geertz, ed., *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973; James, K. Feibleman, "Cultural Conditioning," in *The New Materialism*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970, pp. 134-146.

are subordinated to his and that he observes them ultimately to satisfy his own needs. This egocentric attitude is very clearly explained once again by Roland Barthes in his discussion of encyclopedic objects, a category that can be extended to include also zooed animals: "The encyclopedic object is subjugated for a very simple and constant reason: it is on each occasion signed by man. You can imagine the most naturally solitary, "savage" object; be sure that man will nonetheless appear in a corner of the image; he will be considering the object, or measuring it, or surveying it, using it at least as a spectacle."[93] In tying together the concepts of catalogue, spectacle, and colonization of "savage" objects, this statement clarifies the existing power dynamics between human visitors and zooed animals and emphasize the limits of Palomar's epistemological approach.

His metaphysical reflections on the order of the world reproduced on smaller scale in the reptile house are interrupted when he starts feeling a damp, soft warmth on his skin, and smells a sharp, heavy, rotten stink. The sudden intrusion of olfactory sensations disrupts his rational and intellectual discourse and brings about a return of the body. Up until this moment, he has been "immersed in a disembodied world" but now that another sense besides sight is activated he lives a more powerful embodied experience in his confrontation with other animals.[94] Stimulated by the physical sensations that arise from his surrounding environment, he starts thinking of a time before —and after— humans. This thought leads him to the conclusion that "the world of man is not eternal and is not unique", which forces him to imagine a world outside those aseptic cages. This moment of sense-making escalates up to the formulation of the question "are these the

[93] Roland Barthes, "The Plates of the Encyclopedia," cit., p. 28.
[94] *Mr. Palomar*, cit., p. 17. Calvino developed a literary interest for the nose and the sense of smell in "The Name, The Nose," in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, translated by William Weaver, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988, pp. 65-84. On the role of the olfactory in literature see Ralf Hertel, *Making Sense: Sense Perception in the British Novel of the 1980s and 1990s*, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2005, pp.104-131.

sensations of a man who peers out beyond the human?" But what does it mean for Palomar to go beyond the human? It means realizing that:

> *"Of the worlds from which man is excluded each case is only a tiny sample, torn from a natural continuum that might also never have existed, a few cubic meters of atmosphere that elaborate devices maintain at a certain degree of temperature and humidity. Thus every sample of this antediluvian bestiary is kept alive artificially, as if it were a hypothesis of the mind, a product of the imagination, a construction of language, a paradoxical line of reasoning meant to demonstrate that the only true world is our own..."*

By imagining an antediluvian temporality, a distant past evoked by the reptiles' physical appearance that is reminiscent of dinosaurs, Palomar appears now to be aware of a time and a world beyond the "human". As a consequence of this newly acquired non-anthropocentric understanding of history triggered by a sensorial stimulation, he is able to perceive the existence of multiple temporalities outside himself: the caged animals in the reptile house finally acquire in his eyes unique traits of individuality that have the power to unsettle the subject-object relation fostered by the zoo. Most importantly though, the thought of a time before the biblical flood myth functions as a reminder of a time when nonhuman animals were not subjugated by humans. Quoting Roland Barthes again: "In mythic terms, possession of the world began not with Genesis but at the Flood, when man obliged to name each kind of animal and to house it, i.e. to separate it from its next of species."[95] This is exactly how the reptile house is spatially organized and how Palomar classifies nonhuman animals in his mind. In order then to effectively de-normalize this mode of thinking, which is based on discriminating hierarchical classifications it would be necessary to deconstruct and re-evaluate our whole "human" cultural history. Palomar seems to catch a glimpse of this challenging endeavor but is not ready to fully undertake it. In fact, for as much as he experiences an epiphanic moment, he does not realize that he has become responsible of his own isolation and exclusion from the worlds surrounding him in the moment he

[95] Roland Barthes, "The Plates of the Encyclopedia," cit., p. 29.

transformed his self-inflicted exclusion into exclusivity, which is the underlying cause of his alleged superiority over other species. As he meditates on the limits of human supremacy, the smell of the reptiles becomes "unbearable". Overwhelmed by this destabilizing making and un-making of sense through his senses, Palomar feels the pressing need to exit the reptile house. What is really unbearable though is not the smell of the reptiles, but rather the realization that his whole system of beliefs is falling apart under his feet and that keeping those caged animals artificially alive just to satisfy his desire for knowledge and order really makes no sense at all.

In order to get out of the reptile house, he has to cross a hall where an unspecified number of crocodiles are kept in tanks separated by barriers, alone or in couple. While he walks by them he asks himself a set of final questions aimed this time at understanding *their* Umwelts, *their* temporalities:

> *"Is theirs a boundless patience, or a desperation without end? What are they waiting for, or what have they given up waiting for? In what time are they immersed? In that of the species, removed from the course of the hours that race from the birth to the death of the individual? Or, in the time of geological eras, which shifts continents and solidifies the crust of emerged lands? Or, in the slow cooling of the rays of the sun?"*

Palomar is now filled with consternation and hurries out of the zoo at the "intolerable thought of a time outside our [human] experience". For as much as there seems to be a commitment in making a shift to the animals' perspective, he ultimately does not carry through this project: he chooses not to fully embrace this achieved awareness and instead to keep the zooed animals and their ontological re-evaluation out of sight, out of mind. In fact, at the end of the text, the questions remain unanswered and the zooed animals return to a state of social invisibility while their caged existences remain so visible and yet so dreadfully ignored.

After this unsettling experience, Palomar decides that the reptile house can be visited "only now and then and in haste" to avoid being caught up in other troubling thoughts that could risk

undermining his system of beliefs. Once again, Palomar is unable to establish a two-way relationship with zooed animals. Because of being displayed completely out of context and being conceptualized as commodified items of a collection, the animals' *telos* is inevitably affected and nonhierarchical interactions are rendered impossible. In the essay "Collection of Sand", Calvino writes about an artist who collects sand samples from around the world who, when she returns from one of her journeys and adds new containers to her collection,

> "*Suddenly notices that without the indigo of the sea the sparkle of that beach of shattered shells has been lost; that none of the damp heat of the wadi has remained in the blobs of sand; that far from Mexico, the sand mixed with lava from the volcano Parícutin is just black powder that looks as if it has been swept down from a chimney. She tries to recall the sensations of that beach, that forest smell, that heat, but it is just like shaking that little bit of sand at the bottom of the labeled jar. At this point there is nothing left to do except to give up, walk away from the case, from this cemetery of landscapes reduced to a desert, this cemetery of deserts on which the wind no longer blows."*[96]

If an inanimate material loses its vitality and natural essence when displaced from its original context, what could happen to a living being who is removed from their customary setting and is forced to live in captivity? The cemetery of landscapes in those containers is not far different from what we find in a zoo. However, instead of giving up and walking away, which is exactly what both the artist and Palomar do, one could recognize that an epistemological method based on constructing knowledge through the forced displacement, imprisonment, and commodification of living beings is destined to fail and that we are in need of new paradigms not based on hierarchy and egocentric interests. In the case of zooed animals, this method not only disrupts individual needs and preferences but it also violently erases an ecosystem made of vital interactions, and all just for the sake of humans' desire to possess and control.

[96] Italo Calvino, *Collection of Sand*, cit., pp. 8-9.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have analyzed the three texts included in Italo Calvino's last work of fiction, “Palomar”, in which nonhuman animals play the role of observed and disempowered subjects in zoos. Reading these narratives from a rich vein of interdisciplinary approaches has offered crucial insights into questions related to human-animal epistemology and ontology. Each one of Palomar's encounters with zooed animals has revealed the limits of his evaluative and epistemological anthropocentrism, reinforced and supported by how zoos conceptualize nonhuman animals as beings that can be appropriated, commodified, displaced, encaged.

The aim of this study has been to reinterpret knowledge production concerning nonhuman animals through a framework located at the juncture of critical race and decolonial theories in order to bring to surface intersectional arguments regarding our problematic conceptualization of the “other”. By bringing the animals' state of captivity in the foreground and by recognizing them as individuals with agency and a desire to freedom I have illustrated how Palomar in his meditations distorts the animals' *telos* and falsely depicts them according to “human” values. In fact, the purpose of his observations and metaphysical reflections is never really to know the animals' world perspective, but rather to use them as tools to understand himself better. His hierarchical system of interpretation, based on the binary logic of inclusion/exclusion, deeply influences how he conceptualizes other animals and defines his own identity: he inscribes a colonial discourse onto their bodies, uses his own whiteness and cognitive abilities as parameters to assimilate or discriminate, considers morally acceptable the act of observing living beings in controlled and artificial settings as if they were inanimate objects exposed in a museum. In his attempts to overcome, without success, the anthropocentric framework that guides his mode of thinking and therefore his interpretation of the world, literature becomes a means to reevaluate

the epistemological divide between humans and other animals as well as to access human thought processes. Through an analysis of Palomar's descriptions of the animals' physical appearances and his consequent construction of the ontological categories of "human" and "animal", the image of *Anthropos* that slowly emerges is that of a model of white male imperialist domination, which human visitors reproduce every time they look at a zooed animal from their position of privileged viewers. At the same time, the image of zoos as ideological machines that participate in structures of power/knowledge also emerges, and their central role in promoting and supporting Palomar's paradigmatic ideology is unearthed.

So while the texts are centered around Palomar who is portrayed as the subject experiencing a metaphysical displacement that questions humanity in its core, my readings have shown that the zooed animals are actually the true marginalized and (in)visible beings of this experience and the ones embodying real displacement. In order then to dismantle this system of oppression and discrimination rooted in human supremacy, a new optic is necessary that would encourage the creation of nonhierarchical relationships and proximities not founded on species barriers. As Nigel Rothfels affirms, "the shows of "exotic people" worked only so long as members of the viewing public could convince themselves that either (1) the exhibited people did not really understand what was going on or (2) the exhibited people were better off in a zoo in Germany than leading a "miserable" existence in some remote and isolated camp halfway around the world. Once the exhibited people began refusing to be seen, once they began to look back and interact with the viewing public, the shows were doomed."[97] Today, we still choose to silence any form of animal resistance, as seen already in the first chapter in the case of the bull who escaped the slaughterhouse, and refuse to acknowledge their agency and subjectivity, even when

[97] Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 12.

they look back and interact with us, even when they refuse to be seen. When this changes, zoos and the ideology they represent will be doomed.

CHAPTER 3

Inventing an "Animal": Literature Inside the Laboratory

Give me a laboratory and I will raise the world.[1]

When thinking of a laboratory, the image that comes to mind is of a sterile environment filled with sophisticated machineries and furniture designed to ensure safety, often relegated to countryside complexes and university campuses, where experiments are performed for scientific research. While access is usually restricted only to approved and experienced staff, the placelessness that characterizes it, together with its homogenous qualities, are elements that make it easily reproducible in our imaginative practices.[2] What may not be as vividly sketched out in our mental fabrication of this space are the nonhuman animals routinely used for the tests, the cages and tanks in which they are kept, as well as the equipment and tools designed to perform the tests and to kill them once the experiments are completed.[3] The practice of using nonhuman animals as models of human anatomy and physiology began already in Antiquity and the Renaissance and vivisection has been a subject of artistic representation for centuries, such as in the woodcut illustration that depicts Galen performing a public vivisection on a pig (1625) or in Joseph Wright's painting "An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump" (1768), which shows the

[1] Title of Bruno Latour's article originally published in Karin Knorr-Cetina and Michael Mulkay, eds., *Science Observed: Perspectives on the Social Study of Science*, London and Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983, pp. 141-170.

[2] For a comprehensive definition of laboratory see Robert Kohler, *Landscapes and Labscapes: Exploring the Lab-Field Border in Biology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

[3] On the use of euphemisms such as "euthanasia" to describe the killing of nonhuman animals see Michael E. Lynch, "Sacrifice and the Transformation of the Animal Body into a Scientific Object: Laboratory Culture and Ritual Practice in the Neurosciences," in *Social Studies of Science*, vol. 18, n. 2, 1988, pp. 265-289. To learn more about the most common methods used to kill "lab animals", which include the guillotine and CO_2 inhalation, see Mark A. Suckow, Steven H. Weisbroth, Craig L. Franklin, eds., *The Laboratory Rat*, Burlington and San Diego: Elsevier Academic Press, 2006, pp. 666-668.

different reactions of spectators, some more curious some more reluctant to look, as the cockatoo struggles to breathe.[4]

Figure 12. Detail of Galen's Squealing Pig Experiment, Woodcut, 1541

While the questions regarding animal experimentation are not new, it is only with the late nineteenth-century laboratory revolution that the standardized "lab animal" was created and that scientific research practices were made less and less visible to the outside world and confined in institutionalized spaces.[5]

As with farmed animals and zooed animals, as illustrated in the previous chapters, nonhuman animals destined to enter the laboratory undergo an ontological shift. In order to be transformed into analytic animals, it is necessary to make an abstraction, to create emotional distance, which results in a process of de-individualization and objectification. By making the animals' individual

[4] For a thorough overview of the history of vivisection see Nuno Henrique Franco, "Animal Experiments in Biomedical Research: A Historical Perspective," in *Animals*, n. 3, 2013, pp. 238-273. For a history of animal experimentation in Italy see Giulia Guazzaloca, *Primo, non Maltrattare: Storia della Protezione degli Animali in Italia*, Bari: Laterza, 2018, in particular pp. 136-145.

[5] Especially after 1945, conditions became more standardized, and specific housing requirements emerged to help perpetuate standardization of nonhuman animals. Gradually, more and more strains were developed for specific research purposes and "lab animals" became a "globalized research tool" as Lynda Birke defines them in "Who-or What-are the Rats (and Mice) in the Laboratory," in *Society & Animals*, vol. 11, n. 3, 2003, pp. 207-224 (212). In Italy, there are approximately 600 laboratories authorized by the Ministry of Health to experiment on nonhuman animals. Over 100 million animals are currently used in labs around the world.

histories disappear, they become the absent referent of scientific research.[6] An exemplary case of this transformation is the conceptualization of rats and the contrasting perceptions they generate.[7] Curiously, while rats are generally associated with filth and disease, they have also been bred with the purpose of curing human diseases. In fact, we have modified their genetic nature specifically for scientific research and in doing so we have rhetorically constructed them both as saviors who willingly participate in experiments and as anonymous numbers.[8] These jarring perceptions somehow manage to coexist and, depending on the environment the animals inhabit or the purpose they are meant to fulfill, one perception — including the set of judgments that comes with it — prevails over the other. The same contradiction is at the root, for instance, of making it illegal to act violently towards a dog on a public street, yet, this same dog, within a laboratory, may be used in a variety of painful experiments without attracting legal attention.[9] The reason for these oscillations lies once again in speciesist claims, which inevitably shape our

[6] The practice of naming interferes with the animals' transformation into data and tends to be avoided. On the tension between name and number see Vibeke Pihl, "Making Pig Research Biographies: Names and Numbers," in *Humans, Animals and Biopolitics: The More-Than-Human Condition*, edited by Kristin Asdal, Tone Druglitrø and Steve Hinchliffe, New York: Routledge, 2017, pp. 66-84; Etienne S. Benson, "Naming the Ethological Subject," in *Science in Context*, vol. 29, n. 1, 2016, pp. 107-128.

[7] Kenneth Shapiro, "A Rodent for your Thoughts: the Social Construction of Animal Models," in *Animals in Human Histories*, edited by M. Henninger-Voss, Rochester: University of Rochester, 2002, pp. 439-470.

[8] Several statues and monuments have been built to commemorate the "sacrifice" of nonhuman animals such as the monument to the laboratory mouse in Siberia and the memorial tower for laboratory animals at the National Institute of Radiological Sciences at Chiba University in Japan. On the framing of animal use for medical research as sacrifice see Tetsu Nishikawa, Naoki Morishita, "Current Status of Memorial Services for Laboratory Animals in Japan: A Questionaire Survey," in *Experimental Animals*, vol. 61, n. 2, 2012, pp. 177-181.

[9] On the biopolitical dialogue between the human and nonhuman animal in the laboratory see Robert G. W. Kirk, "The Birth of the Laboratory Animal: Biopolitics, Animal Experimentation, and Animal Wellbeing," in *Foucault and Animals*, edited by Matthew Chrulew and Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, Boston: Brill, 2017, pp. 193-221. Another scholar who has commented on this inconsistency is Massimo Filippi who states, "Those who endorse the necessity of animal experimentation believe "they" are sufficiently different from "us" to not receive moral consideration and, at the same time, sufficiently close to "us" to authorize extracting from their bodies biological inferences useful to humans. Massimo Filippi and Filippo Trasatti, *Crimini in Tempo di Pace. La Questione Animale e L'Ideologia del Dominio*, Milano: Elèuthera, 2015, p. 173.

ambivalent relationships with other animals.[10] In fact, these categorizations maintain hierarchies that justify human use and treatment of other species and are rarely conceptualized as problematic because of their normalization. Another contrasting tension specific to the laboratory is the peculiar form of anthropomorphism tacitly accepted in the realm of scientific research: nonhuman animals are simultaneously similar enough to function as models for human physiology and to suffer in their place yet different enough to be used without moral afterthoughts. Erica Fudge has convincingly described this phenomenon as being analogous to the kinds of anthropomorphic forms found in children's books, which activate an empathic response that makes it more difficult for scientists performing tests on animals to maintain the cognitive distance between species required by their job.[11] In fact, while at a rational level we like to create strict distinctions and separations between humans and other animals, in the laboratory the animal body shifts from a metaphoric surrogate for human populations to literally stand in for the human body.[12] We colonize the animal bodies by incorporating traces of the human within the animal other to the point that in the body of a "lab animal" multispecies genes and body parts coexist. Examples of such interspecific hybridizations include, for instance, the famous case of the transgenic OncoMouse, who was engineered to carry a human gene that

[10] The short animated movie directed by Alex Weil, *One Rat*, perfectly illustrates the compresence of contrasting social constructions of rats. An attempt to acknowledge their status as laborers has been pursued by Jonathan L. Clark in "Labourers or Lab Tools? Rethinking the Role of Lab Animals in Clinical Trials," in *The Rise of Critical Animal Studies*, edited by Nik Taylor and Richard Twine, New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 139–164.

[11] Erica Fudge, *Animal*, London: Reaktion Books, 2002, pp. 70-78.

[12] On this topic see Sandra D. Mitchell, "Anthropomorphism and Cross-Species Modeling," in *Thinking With Animals. New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 100-118. See also Gail Davies, "What is a humanized mouse? Remaking the Species and Spaces of Translational Medicine," in *Body & Society,* n. 18, 2012, pp. 126–155.

Figure 13. The "Earmouse", 1997

would develop into breast cancer; the "earmouse" who grew a human-like ear on their back made of cow cartilage cells; or the "humanized" GM pigs who have been injected with human genes to be used for heart xenotransplantation.[13] These standard practices make it impossible to limit the analysis of the effects of biopolitical power to the "human" in isolation, which raises startling ethical concerns deserving of further critical attention. Where does the "human" end and where does the "animal" begin? Why is anthropomorphism accepted only in certain institutionalized contexts? What are the impacts of invasive manipulation of nonhuman animals on our ecosystems? Should we even manipulate nonhuman animals at all? These Frankenstein-like creatures, who are perceived as distant fictional entities, exist in their corporeal dimension inside real laboratories. Their bodies become then a site of ethics, a place where their identity is radically altered, metamorphized, rendered unrecognizable. While we consider science fiction as being relegated to books and fictional stories set in dystopic futures, for "lab animals" science fiction is the only reality they know. In fact, we already create "fantastic" creatures; we invent "animals" in laboratories all the time and justify it on problematic utilitarian grounds.[14]

[13] On the ethics of xenotransplantation see Erica Fudge, cit., pp. 107-111. For a fascinating discussion of cyborg ontology and the OncoMouse see Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium. FemaleMan© Meets OncoMouse™. Feminism and Technoscience*, New York and London: Routledge, 1997. On the relation between invention and transgenesis see Rosemary Robins, "Inventing Oncomice: Making Natural Animal, Research Tool and Invention Cohere," in *Genomics, Society and Policy*, vol. 4, n. 2, 2008, pp. 21–35.

[14] The recently published book *Animal Experimentation: Working Towards a Paradigm Change* (Brill, 2019), brings together the contributions of fifty-one experts who, besides demonstrating the unreliability and limitations of animal experimentation, aim to illustrate the current situation for animals used in research, testing, and education and to give a future glimpse of what the end of their use may look like. On the juxtaposition between utilitarianism and biopolitics see Anne Brunon-Ernst, *Utilitarian Biopolitics: Bentham, Foucault and Modern Power*, London: Routledge, 2012.

By recuperating then the canonical definition of science fiction as literature of cognitive estrangement and taking it as a heuristic starting point, I examine this epistemic paradox in Primo Levi's literary representations of the laboratory and experimental practices conducted on "animals."[15] In his writings, permeated with laboratories, literature and science collaborate on creating a liminal vision of human-animal life that makes the moral ambiguities inherent to the biopolitical nature of this space emerge. Levi describes science fiction precisely as "a key for entering the paradoxical logic of the "world turned upside down", to study its mechanisms and evaluate in depth the ethical-political "bending" of science in the post-Auschwitz era."[16] Because this genre is not meant to be only a reflecting *of* but also *on* reality, I look at narrative strategies and rhetorical cues in a selection of his texts meant to normalize the aberrant and/or distort the normative in relation to our treatment of test subjects. Of particular relevance are also processes of cross-species blending, *anthropo*morphization, and *animal*ization that, in the context of the laboratory, raise problematic bioethical concerns at the core of the ontological slippage between the artificial categories of "human" and "animal". By centering the discussion around Primo Levi's prolific production of science fiction, a decision dictated mostly by the thematic focus of this research, I shed light on these marginalized works and their constant tensions with his testimonial writing, which tends to receive much more critical attention.[17]

The laboratory has been crystallized in the collective cultural imaginary as a site of knowledge production where the shift from imagination to reality is made possible. For this reason, it lends itself well to being chosen as a recurrent location in science fiction narratives where the

[15] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction. On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, pp. 3-15.
[16] "Primo Levi at the United Nations: Francesco Cassata," May 6, 2016, https://primolevicenter.org/printed-matter/primo-levi-at-the-un-francesco-cassata/
[17] For a thorough discussion of the central role that fiction plays in Primo Levi's life and poetics see Maria Anna Mariani, *Primo Levi e Anna Frank: tra Testimonianza e Letteratura*, Roma: Carocci Editore, 2018, in particular chapter 3.

boundaries of potentiality are tested by stretching verisimilitude to its limits. What contributes to his ability to effectively make visible the obscure nature of laboratories are his lived experiences in Auschwitz being perceived as a potential test subject due to his Jewish identity, which function as a narrative thread throughout his writings. However, while he participated in the public debate on the vivisection controversy that took place in Italy between the 1950s and the 1970s, he also experimented on nonhuman animals when working as a scientific researcher. Depending then on the position he occupies, his perception of the problem also shifts. The embodiment of these different roles represents a crucial ethical knot that I aim to disentangle, together with the ethical inconsistencies that persist or are subverted when "lab animals" enter the literary space.

Starting with the autobiographical short story *Phosphorus*, in which Levi describes the experiments he personally conducted on nonhuman animals while working at the Wander factory, I map out the complexities of the moral territory inside the lab accentuated by his role as researcher as well as the mechanisms of normalization affecting the animals' science fiction-like lived experiences outside the literary page. I then look at his science fiction stories *Heading West* and *Versamine*, which provide an overview of the methodology employed to create an "animal" model while offering a counternarrative to the iconography of salvation normatively employed to represent nonhuman animals used for scientific research. Finally, I turn to *Angelic Butterfly*, in which by testing even further species boundaries Levi brings to light the uncanny ethical drifts that the creation of interspecies hybrids and incomplete humanoids can provoke.

Exploring these cross-species contaminations will ultimately lead not only to rethink the intimate geographies of corporeal equivalence between species and the normalization of "animal" use and manipulation but also to consider the repercussions that the creation of the "animal" model has

on vulnerable human communities who throughout history have also been used as "animal" models in medical research.[18] In *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Raoul Hillburg wrote, "If the world was so shocked at what it discovered to be the extremes to which experimental medicine would go, it has yet to condemn the method or find the means to control it." To understand the process of "human" experimentation it is necessary to understand what it means to be transformed into an "animal" in a laboratory also for nonhuman animals since the method and systemic violation of bodies remains the same across species. Primo Levi's representations of "animal" experimentation will guide us in navigating this arduous task.

3.1. The "Grey Zone" of Human-Animal Relations

In an article published in the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* in 1980*,* Primo Levi shares his encounter with a caged squirrel used in a biochemistry lab for a series of experiments on insomnia. The squirrel was forced to walk endlessly on a treadmill kept moving by an electric motor.[19] The squirrel's agonizing exhaustion reminded Levi "of galley slaves, and those other forced laborers in China who were obliged to walk for days and days in similar treadwheels to pump water into irrigation canals". Driven by an impulse of compassion, perhaps sparked by this mental analogy with human experiences of slavery and heightened by his physical proximity to the squirrel's suffering, he decided to switch off the electric motor that kept the treadmill

[18] To learn more about cases of medical experimentation on other humans read Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: the Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, New York: Doubleday, 2006. For an account of the experiments in Auschwitz recounted from the perspective of a doctor who collaborated with Josef Mengele see Miklós Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: a Doctor's Eyewitness Account*, translated by Tibère Kremer and Richard Seaver, New York: Fell, 1960.

[19] First published with the title "Nomi e leggende dello scoiattolo" in *La Stampa*, June 2, 1980, p. 3. For the English version, see Primo Levi, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, translated by Ann Goldstein, New York: Liveright, 2015, pp. 3875-3881.

running, so that the squirrel could finally rest. While Levi concludes the article with an ironic remark that helps maintain a light-hearted tone, his active intervention represents a moral stand and is evidence of his ability to recognize pain and suffering in beings who belong to other species.[20] In borrowing from the "human" world to describe the "animal" world, particularly from the experience of humans who suffered the same imposed restless detention, Levi constructs a reversed comparison that puts human suffering in dialogue with the suffering of individuals of other species without creating vertical and hierarchical distinctions. Scholars have mostly focused on the first part of the article, but it is only halfway through the article that Levi moves from the genealogy of the Italian word for *squirrel* to his personal encounters with these animals, therefore transitioning from a purely abstract consideration of "the animal" to a more concrete one, rooted in an embodied experience.[21] As Damiano Benvegnù illustrates, this article must be inserted into a wider discussion regarding experimentation on nonhuman animals, initiated in Italy after the publication of Hans Ruesch's book *Naked Empress,* a book strongly against animal experiments and vivisection.[22] Motifs in literature taken from experiments on nonhuman animals, such as *Heart and Science* by Wilkie Collins (1883) or *Gemma* by Elpis

[20] "There was no one else in the laboratory; I switched off the motor, the treadmill came to a stop, and the squirrel fell asleep on the spot. Perhaps it is my fault that we still know so little about sleep and insomnia." With this last self-reflective hyperbolic comment, Levi creates cognitive space for the unsaid, left to the readers to be filled with their value judgment on the experiment and the author's intervention. On a general discussion of the role of irony in Levi's works see Robert Gordon, "Per Mia Fortuna...": Irony and Ethics in Primo Levi's Writing," in *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 92, n. 2, 1997, pp. 337-347.

[21] On the linguistic significance of this article see, for instance, Lina, N. Insana, *Arduous Task : Primo Levi, Translation and the Transmission of Holocaust Testimony*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, pp. x-xi; Giorgio Calcagno and Gabriella Poli, *Echoes of a Lost Voice: Encounters with Primo Levi*, translated by Nat Paterson, London and Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 2017, pp. 190-191. Italo Calvino has also expressed his view on this subject in the article "I due mestieri," in *La Repubblica*, March 6, 1985.

[22] Damiano Benvegnù, *Animals and Animality in Primo Levi's Work*, Cham: The Palgrave Macmillan Animal Ethics Series, 2018, pp. 51-86. By the same author see also "Witnessing Animal Suffering: Primo Levi on Animal Experimentation," in *Interpreting Primo Levi. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Minna Vuohelainen and Arthur Chapman, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 83-96.

Melena (1877), have initiated an antivivisection movement in Victorian England where the debate originated, much like *The Jungle* did in the United States for slaughterhouses.[23] In Italy, however, while it became a matter of public debate, in literature it is still considered a marginal — mostly ignored — topic that did not manage to break the wall of art to create social change. Because of this lack of visibility, it is important to acknowledge Levi's significant contribution to this debate that includes his renowned essay *Against Pain*, in which he advocates against the infliction of pain on any individual who is capable of feeling it, regardless of their species.[24] Rather than taking an abolitionist stand, Levi places pain at the center of the animal question in accordance with Jeremy Bentham' utilitarian philosophy. His position is particularly explicit when, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, he describes the abhorrent tests performed on prisoners in Auschwitz and concludes by reminding readers that it is essential to remember these abominations in a time "when legitimate questions are being raised about the limits on subjecting lab animals to *painful* scientific experiments."[25] Defining and assessing pain in other animals, however, comes with its methodological limits and is intrinsically problematic. In fact, since individual variations in pain response are usually not taken into account, the risk is not only to erase subjective and individual suffering but also to ignore both mental and physical distress, which are even harder to quantify in standardized terms. Most importantly though, if human interests of animal use continue to be prioritized over their right to live, the interpretation of empirical data will be biased due to anthropocentric and speciesist assumptions that guide the

[23] See Boria Sax, "Holocaust Images and Animal Experimentation: Further Thoughts," in *Anthrozoos*, vol. 6, n. 2, 1993, p. 108- 114.
[24] "Animals must be respected [...] not because they are "good" or useful to us (not all of them are) but because a rule engraved within us, and acknowledged by all religions and codes of law, requires that we avoid creating pain, either in humans or in any other creature capable of feeling it." Primo Levi, *The Complete Works*, cit., p. 3792.
[25] The cursive is mine. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, New York: Summit Books, 1988, p. 124.

definition of regulations and policies. Refining welfare does not question the moral root of the problem, which naturally raises the following questions: what level of inflicted distress can be justified? Where do we draw the line?[26]

Levi himself stands in a very challenging position: as a scientist, he has performed tests on other animals; as a prisoner in Auschwitz, he has witnessed the horror of experiments performed on other prisoners. This double role raises conflicting ethical questions, reflected also in his writings, which I aim to unravel. The argument that justifies animal research relies on the ethical obligation of a profession, which establishes a moral hierarchy and considers on an epistemic level the performance of animal experiments the best standard. However, once again, the construction of this hierarchy is a consequence of the mobile line separating "humans" from "animals", which shifts constantly according to whom fabricates it.

This unexplored aspect of his life comes to surface in the short story *Phosphorus* included in *The Periodic Table*, a book that reconstructs his life through the metaphor of chemistry.[27] Written after Levi's return from the camps, the story recounts events and experiences happened prior to his internment in Auschwitz, particularly his first jobs as a working chemist. At a narrative level, this results in the articulation of overlapping temporalities and the intratextual coexistence of both Auctor and Agens. The profuse presence of laboratories characterizing this book is made explicit by Primo Levi in a comment on his creative process: "I have written some short stories,

[26] The anthropocentric mindset justifying a utilitarian approach is discussed by Arianna Ferrari in "Contesting Animal Experiments through Ethics and Epistemology: in Defense of a Political Critique of Animal Experimentation," in *Animal Experimentation: Working Towards a Paradigm Change*, cit., pp. 194-208.

[27] Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal, New York: Schocken Books, 1984. The Italian text was first published in 1975. For an overview of the collection see Nancy Harrowitz, "From Mt. Sinai to the Holocaust: Primo Levi and the Crisis of Science in *The Periodic Table*," in Alan Rosen, ed., *Celebrating Elie Wiesel: Stories, Essays, Reflections*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998, pp. 19–39; Mirna Cicioni, *Primo Levi: Bridges of Knowledge*, Oxford: Berg, 1995, pp. 70-81.

each one using a technical idea, born in the laboratory or in the factory."[28] While technically *Phosphorus* does not fall under the label of science fiction, being transported inside the laboratory recreates the unsettling atmospheres of this space, especially for the nonhuman animals used in the experiments.[29] In fact, buried under an autobiographical tale that progresses through Levi's experiences with Fascism are the lost lives of countless rabbits used to check glucose levels. Their entrance into the story is preannounced on a metaphorical level through the expression "when the magician pulls a rabbit out of his hat" used to express surprise about an unexpected news that has nothing to do directly with the rabbits. However, the expression actually anticipates their literal appearance in the text and the role they will play in revealing underlying systemic problems linked to laboratory practices once their bodily presence is acknowledged. Besides examining the multifold functions the rabbits have in the story, which have generally gone unnoticed, a close reading of this text allows us to analyze with greater attention the dynamics governing the laboratory. Most importantly, it generates a reflection on the ethical contradictions that scientists face because of speciesist assumptions that prevent them from perceiving violence against other animals as troublesome, a position that Levi himself has occupied.

In 1942, a year after Levi graduated in chemistry at twenty-three years old he finds a job in Crescenzago, at the northern outskirts of Milan, at the Swiss factory Wander where he is

[28] Primo Levi, "The Writer is Not a Writer," in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, edited by Marco Belpoliti, translated by Sharon Wood, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, p. 104.

[29] With this short story, Primo Levi could even be defined a precursor of Lab Lit, a literary genre that has gained popularity only in the last thirty years and that depicts realistic scientists as central characters who are busy with their scientific practices or elaborating scientific concepts. The main difference with science fiction is that the stories are typically set in a realistic world rather than in a speculative future. The laboratory is inevitably a recurring location but it is not a mandatory feature of the genre. The name of this literary genre is still in the process of being formalized. For a closer look to the genre, see Olga A. Pilkington and Ace G. Pilkington, eds., *Lab Lit: Exploring Literary and Cultural Representations of Science*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019.

assigned to research a new drug to treat diabetes that could be taken orally. Given the specific area of research, it is inevitable to notice a possible allusion to Claude Bernard, the scientist who established animal experimentation as part of the standard scientific method while he was looking for a cure for diabetes.[30] Before getting to the heart of the experiments performed in the lab, Levi recounts his meeting with the director of the company, the Commendatore, and the unsettling hiring process. First of all, Levi notices "a curious haste" in his exchanges, which he finds to be a common attitude that "Aryan" Italians had with Jews: "at the time of Difesa della Razza, one could be courteous to a Jew, one could perhaps help him, and even boast (cautiously) of having helped him, but it was advisable not to maintain *human* relations with him, not to compromise oneself totally, so as not to be forced to show understanding or compassion later." Immediately, Levi is excluded by the privileged "human" category and therefore automatically receded to the status of "animal", which means he is excluded from any demonstration of compassion because of this discriminating label. When the Commendatore inquires about his knowledge about diabetes, since Levi was not an expert in the field, his reply stems from his personal experiences and therefore starts listing the various members in his family who had been diagnosed with that disease or shown symptoms of it in their old age. Because of its tendency to be hereditary and have a genetic component, the Commendatore saw in Levi a potential test subject, who retrospectively realizes that "he wouldn't have minded having available an authentic diabetic, from a race *substantially human*, on whom to test certain of his ideas and preparations." The link between eugenics, biomedical testing, and transformation into "animal" model is undeniably clear in this reflection. The marginalization of an individual outside of the

[30] The book in which Claude Bernard shared his method is *Introduction à l'Étude de la Médecine Expérimentale* (An Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine, originally published in 1865 and translated into English by Henry Copley Greene, in 1927). For a contemporary collage-based novel on Bernard's life and experiments see Thalia Field, *Experimental Animals (A Reality Fiction)*, New York: Solid Objects, 2016.

"human" sphere, whose body consequently becomes a site of exploitation for the benefit of a privileged group of individuals, represents an epistemological premise in the formation of an "animal" model, an act that does not generate moral concern precisely because of this forced exclusion. An ableist conceptualization of the "human", which deems valuable only certain bodies conforming to specific parameters, is also at the root of the Othering process affecting nonhuman animals. While the individual experiences across species as well as the manifestations of oppression differ in many ways, the overlapping discriminatory phenomena are the same.

When Levi enters the lab he finds "an *inhuman* silence and orderliness." He describes in great detail the several methods of concealment employed to keep the factory's operations in secrecy and inaccessible to possible industrial spies, outsiders, or employers. The "viaticum of directives and prohibitions" include staggered work hours meticulously calculated in order to avoid unwanted encounters among employees, sanitizing the laboratory at the end of the day, being warmly advised to have lunch in the lab to avoid any contact with outside people, being forbidden to leave bookmarks, fold down corners of pages, or underline books from the library. No trace must be left behind. Besides this scrupulous plan of workplace monitoring and strategic compartmentalization of labor, also at a spatial level, which closely reminds of the slaughterhouse operations analyzed in the first chapter, there are also hierarchies of power in place meant to further accentuate the division of responsibilities and regulation of duties. A universal key that opens the locks of all the rooms, held exclusively by the Commendatore, symbolically represents the centralization of authority. However, he is only apparently the person with control over the totality of operations since he is also "subject to obscure other bosses in Basel" overseeing operations from the outside.

Particularly disturbing is the description of the Organotherapy Production Department, focused

on remedies prepared from nonhuman animal organs for therapeutic use, of which readers only get a glimpse. In fact, Levi does not physically enter the space, but rather briefly reports the words of his friend Giulia showing him around the premises, who in turn has seen another employee returning from there with "livers, brains, adrenal glands, and other precious offal." We are not meant to know to whom those organs belonged to. The vagueness of this scene accentuated by the blurring of the human-animal divide and Levi's role as a hearsay witness, adds eeriness to an already uncannily mysterious environment. Interestingly, the person taking care of the rabbits for the experiments is a half-deaf man, whose disability is an advantage for the preservation of a system built on secrecy and concealment. As noted, for instance, by Nicholas Patruno, Levi's descriptions of the laboratory evoke the atmosphere of the Lager, especially due to the organizational structure of the factory's workforce founded on the principles of isolation and lack of any exchange between parts.[31] Interestingly, though, the conceptual continuity between laboratory and Lager gets lost once the text transitions to the actual description of the experiments, which involves the restoration of a strict dichotomous separation between Human and Animal. However, I actually consider this section of the story as the core of the "grey zone" regulating human-animal relations. In fact, Levi too must adapt to these conditions and laws. As an employee himself, his role shifts from being a potential test subject to tester, which means he must occupy a dominant position of power legitimized by a system based on institutional speciesism, which facilitates emotional detachment and numbing in response to the violence inflicted on individuals of other species. His own liminal status, combined with his intertwined identity as a Jew and a chemist, make it difficult for him to overtly problematize his past actions on a moral plane since they are a direct consequence of a larger system that has normalized

[31] Nicholas Patruno, *Understanding Primo Levi*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995, p. 65.

certain practices on a societal level. In an interview dating 1986, Levi sketches out a personal deontology for young scientists to warn them of the potential moral risks associated with their profession and encourages them not to hide behind the hypocrisy of neutral science, but to learn to distinguish whether their research, compared to a hatching egg, will spring "a dove or a cobra or a chimera or perhaps nothing at all."[32] The scientist, implicitly compared to a life-giving creator, symbolically generating nonhuman animals of different species each carrying centuries-long symbolic associations, when faced with "probabilistic and difficult" decisions regarding what studies to partake in will either "agree to study a new medicament or refuse to formulate a nerve gas." While this statement acknowledges the ethical responsibilities of scientists, it does not fully consider the moral nuances involved in the formulation of a new medicament, namely the creation of "animal" models and their use to advance human knowledge and health and does not directly touch upon the issue of animal experimentation. While the negative ethical side effects of scientific research are a central topic in Levi's science fiction narratives, it is also particularly relevant to the short story *Phosphorus*. In fact, the chemical element of the title is known for having been used inappropriately as a weapon of destruction during the war and the young Levi could have been unintentionally working on a more nefarious project.[33] This would explain why the factory is wrapped round with secrecy and why Levi labels the element as "not emotionally neutral." The narrator's subtle critique of science as a potential vehicle of destruction would therefore be not only a reference to the responsibility of scientists and academics working during the Third Reich, but also a reflection on the grey zone of participation. In fact, as Levi describes the daily preliminary tests on plants, he notes that every day at night "unknown hands"

[32] Primo Levi, "Hatching the Cobra," in *The Mirror Maker: Stories and Essays*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal, New York: Schocken Books, 1989, pp. 172-176.
[33] On this topic see Jonathan R. Nitschke, "The Two Faces of Phosphorus," in *Nature Chemistry*, vol. 3, 2011, p. 90.

leave on his counter a different species of plant and that he is unaware of the criteria used for their selection; he is just following orders feeling "like a mule bound to a water wheel." By making this comparison, Levi is evoking a history of oppression distinctive of this species, whose members have been used as laborers as well as instruments of war and, by extension, inserting his job duties into a cultural tradition of subjugation mirroring the experiences of beasts of burden.

It is important to note that Levi does not passively accept the Commendatore's orders and immediately questions the methodological premises of the experiments because of their lack of reliability. In particular, he is wary of the request to put into practice the "obscure principles" developed by a German professor, Doktor Kerrn, who is defined as "half biochemist and half wizard", a description that builds upon the semantic sphere of magic anticipated by the rabbit metaphor. Levi even tries to vocally object, thinking naively that expressing his opinion would be acceptable. Instead, the Commendatore promptly reacts by turning his suggestions into orders, thus reestablishing a proper hierarchy between them: "analyze a good number of plants, choose those which were richest in organic phosphorus, make the usual extracts, and insert them in the usual rabbits. Good luck with the work and good evening."[34] Because of the vulnerable position he holds, he must proceed with the experiments, even if he considers them distressing and does not fully espouse the cause. As expected, the first round of experiments fails before even moving to the second phase of testing on rabbits. For the second round, after he draws out the plants with a major amount of phosphorus, Levi proposes to first try to isolate the phosphorus component to determine how it was bound, as an additional step to refine his research, but the Commendatore pushes back his suggestions and forces him to "go forward with the extracts, [...] insert them into

[34] Levi defines the Commendatore's ideas "vague, at once simplistic and muddled" and even "less convincing" the hypothesis he elaborated from Doktor Kerrn's "obscure principles", for which he immediately conceived a "spiteful distrust."

the esophagus of the rabbits, and measure their glucose levels." The lexical choices made of harsh imperatives and the linguistic evocation of the visceral body function as reminders of the violence involved in the experiment, whose main narrative purpose is perhaps to further characterize the Commendatore's abusive temperament rather than raising any moral concern over how the rabbits are treated. Nonetheless, by refocusing the gaze on the corporeal presence of the rabbits, their metaphorical function fades into a more literal dimension.

After enumerating the Commendatore's authoritative instructions, the story shifts abruptly to a brief overview of Levi's perception of rabbits, which serves as a justificatory preamble to his actions: "Rabbits are not sympathetic creatures. They are among the mammals furthest removed from man, perhaps because their qualities are those of despised and rejected *humanity*: they are timid, silent, and elusive, and all they know is food and sex." Not only have the rabbits' individual traits disappeared in Levi's first statement, in which a preconception towards a species has been extended to all of its members indiscriminately, but the tension between anthropomorphization and bestialization is particularly prevalent in this passage. In fact, on one side, rabbits are reduced to beings guided exclusively by their instinct who are only interested in satisfying the basic needs of food and sex; on the other side, their qualities and behaviors are interpreted through an anthropocentric lens and associated with negative connotations that lead to inaccurate and prejudicial assumptions. By encapsulating their nature in a triad of adjectives associated in this context with negative human traits, those same traits become negative identity markers for all rabbits. In the attempt to reverse the damaging stereotypes affecting rabbits, particularly their persistent portrayal as silent and passive beings, Margo DeMello notes that "because they vocalize on only very rare occasions, they are rendered not just silent but invisible. [...] They are considered passive and stupid; and they are silenced through our ignorance and

their lack of voice." [35] This ongoing cultural silencing is not only responsible for misinterpretations of their behaviors but it is also directly connected with strategies of emotional distancing, which Levi justifies on biological grounds. Interestingly, though, while they are depicted as the mammals sharing the least common traits with the human species, they are used as models standing in for humans based on the scientific premise that the two species are phylogenetically contiguous and interchangeable.[36] Levi attributes his own repulsion towards rabbits to the lack of physical contact and interactions with nonhuman animals while growing up, which seems to have contributed to the distancing mechanisms influencing his perception. Because of his inexperience with touching rabbits, a colleague advises on how to get around his sense of aversion by illustrating handling and restraint techniques as well as how to use the various instruments needed for the experiment: the rabbits must be grabbed by their ears, defined as their "natural handle", and placed in a tall, narrow box without the top to deceptively make them believe they are in a safe space while achieving the goal of preventing them from escaping and maintaining control over their bodies. Similarly to Palomar's description of the giraffe examined in the second chapter, the rabbits' body is here seized by a dissecting gaze and undergoes a process of objectification, starting at the semiotic and linguistic level, that conveniently allows for the negation of their feelings and, therefore, of their suffering. In order to get the plant extract into their stomach, "you had to force a wooden spindle with a transverse

[35] Margo DeMello, "Becoming Rabbit: Living With and Knowing Rabbits," in *Spring: a Journal of Archetype and Culture*, n. 83, 2010, pp. 237-252. What the rabbits are lacking is not a voice but rather the privilege of being heard.

[36] Vincent Lee admits that, "ideally, the animal model selected must be predictive of behavior of a drug as well as performance of its delivery system in humans. In reality, the choice of an animal model is often dictated by the experimental technique involved, the process being studied, ease of handling the animal, and cost." This rationale indicates that "lab animals" are inserted into a system of commodification that prioritizes convenience. Vincent H. L. Lee, "Ocular Epithelial Models," in *Models for Assessing Drug Absorption and Metabolism*, edited by Ronald T. Borchardt, Philip L. Smith, and Glynn Wilson, New York: Plenum Press, 1996, pp. 425-436 (426).

hole between the animal's teeth, and then stick the rubber tube through the hole and down the rabbit's throat without too much ceremony, pushing until you felt it touch the bottom of the stomach; if you don't put in the spindle, the rabbit cuts the tube with *its* teeth, swallows it, and dies." The graphic details in this sequence of tasks combined with the physicality of corporal elements, contribute to making visible to readers the restriction of freedom and coercion that are proper of these practices. After describing the method used to draw blood from their ears, he adds his final remarks on the lack of any visible sign of pain, which serves the strategic purpose of appeasing his moral conscience: "Rabbits are either stoic or insensitive to pain. None of these abuses seemed to make them suffer; as soon as they were freed and returned to their cages, they began to nibble their hay in tranquility, and showed no fear the next time." Even with his negative perception of the species, cultural stereotypes, and professional interests, his empirical observations cannot deny the abuses he witnesses. However, instead of choosing not to take part in these practices, he must find justifications that allow him to carry out his research without remorse. The polarization between stoicism and insensitivity to pain can be interpreted, in other words, as a contrast between an ironic humanization of the "rabbit philosopher" and a false scientific statement that denies the existence of the proprioceptive system. Not only the reality of their condition is distorted, but also the many factors beyond physical pain potentially contributing to their discomfort, such as stress, confinement, deprivation, and individual variations in pain response, are bypassed: as long as there is no substantial alteration in their behaviors, especially if not relevant to the experiment, operations can proceed as usual.

In relation to this passage, it is important to reiterate that Levi supports a utilitarian standard of ethics, as declared in the article *Against Pain* as well as in his theoretical distinction between useful and useless violence, in *The Drowned and the Saved*. According to Ilona Klein, Levi's

compassion towards nonhuman animals stems from his first-hand experience as a prisoner in Auschwitz who learned on his own skin what it means to be treated like an "animal."[37] This argument can convincingly be applied, for instance, to Levi's encounter with the restless squirrel used for biomedical research on insomnia, for whom he steps in to alleviate their suffering. But why, though, does he not have the same empathetic reaction for the rabbits? Is it because of their species, which we are more accustomed to picture in the laboratory space compared to squirrels who instead tend to be associated with wildlife species and whose imprisonment for medical purposes is not as normalized? Or perhaps is it because of his role as a researcher who must follow orders and be emotionally detached from his test subjects in order to carry out the experiments?[38] The time elapsing between the two encounters is probably also responsible for the different reactions since Levi in *Phosphorus* recounts experiences that occurred prior to Auschwitz in a time when he was still haunted by "fantasmi cartesiani" (Cartesian phantoms), as he declares in the very first paragraph of *If This is a Man*.[39] Is Levi auctor, then, subtly criticizing his younger self and the belief system upheld during his youth or is he still oblivious of his participation in the rabbits' suffering?

While the signs of pain might not have been initially visible, one of the rabbits eventually develops a huge tumor on their neck, which discredits his previous conviction regarding their

[37] Ilona Klein, "Reconciling the Controversy of Animal Cruelty and the Shoah: a Look at Primo Levi's Compassionate Writings," in *Lingua Romana*, vol. 10, n.1, 2011, pp. 42–52. The author also states "Levi never advocates for forcing animals into doing what they do not want to do." As this short story shows, the question is much more problematic, especially inside the laboratory where his duties are mandated by a profession that involves a controversial use of nonhuman animals.

[38] For the impact of animal testing on the mental health of researchers see Minji Kang, AhRam Han, Da-Eun Kim, Troy Seidle, Kyung-Min Lim, SeungJin Bae, "Mental Stress from Animal Experiments: a Survey with Korean Researchers," in *Toxicology Researchers*, vol. 34, n.1, 2018, pp. 75-81. See also the short documentary *Test Subjects* directed by Alex Lockwood.

[39] "I was captured by the Fascist Militia on 13 December 1943. I was twenty-four, with little wisdom, no experience and a decided tendency-encouraged by the life of segregation forced on me for the previous four years by the racial laws-to live in an unrealistic world of my own, a world inhabited by civilized Cartesian phantoms, by sincere male and bloodless female friendships." Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, New York: Summit Books, 1986, p. 5.

apparent lack of discomfort. As instructed by the Commendatore, he operates the rabbit "with a sharp sense of guilt and violent disgust, and *it* died." In this moment of liminal existence, the pronoun used in Italian for the dying rabbit is "lui" (him), which reestablishes their individuality while at the same time it highlights a masculine default strategy in gender assignment. The English translator adds a layer of objectification by using the pronoun "it" that further distances the rabbit from ontological personhood. The violent connotation attributed to Levi's disgust is a consequence of the inhibiting component of this emotion, whose primary function is to reinforce emotional distance and contrast the formation of moral concerns emerging from his sense of guilt for participating in the killing process. As Rozin and Fallon note, at the origin of disgust there usually is an "animal" origin perceived as impure and from which one tends to maintain a distance. This mechanism of defense is meant to reinforce the human-animal boundary while at the same time to preserve one's humanity. The same notion is reiterated in similar terms also by Martha Nussbaum who in many of her publications illustrates how constructs of disgust are at the origin of othering practices paid at the expense of marginalized individuals who have historically been denied access to "human" privileges. Thus, while disgust separates, guilt recognizes the rights of others and aims at restoring the wholeness of the separate individual.[40] Hence, in this encounter experienced through the senses and close bodily proximity, the rabbit ceases to be perceived as pure object of research and lingers in a liminal state of abjection caused by, in Kristevean terms, a disruption of order, borders, positions, and rules.[41] The subtle surfacing of the rabbit's individuality, enhanced by the reminder of their shared mortality and

[40] Paul Rozin and April E. Fallon, "A Perspective on Disgust," in *Psychological Review*, vol. 94, n.1, 1987, pp. 23-41; Martha Nussbaum, *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004; *Upheavals of Thought: the Intelligence of Emotions*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, particularly pp. 200-206.
[41] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 4.

animality, shakes the already ambiguous species divide and hierarchical moral system rooted in "human" supremacy on which his profession is based.

After an unspecified period of time, a bombardment hits the area damaging the cages where the rabbits are kept and therefore permanently compromising Levi's research.[42] The representation of the rabbits, busy with mating-related activities as soon as they experience bodily freedom, is once again saturated with stereotypes that reduce them to "animals" governed by instinct. These deeply seated cultural stereotypes function also as an interpretative lens and have involuntarily influenced readings of this passage. For instance, the chaotic scattering of the rabbits and their understandable resistance to being recaptured and restrained in cages has resulted in framing them as unmanageable animals whose literary function is to provide comic relief.[43] If the rabbits' erased subjectivity is recodified as bearer of literary value, their romanticized dispersion helps expose the construction of their identity in the laboratory, which is far from comical. In fact, as part of the standard process to transform them into "lab animals", they were assigned a number that became their exclusive mark of identity, but because it was affixed on the cage rather than on their bodies, once they escape from their space of confinement it becomes impossible to track their identity, and therefore the tests must be suspended.[44] Besides losing their instrumental

[42] Here Levi is referring to the bombings of 1943 that damaged not only the building where he worked but also other factories in Crescenzago.

[43] Ruth K. Angress, "Primo Levi in English," in *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual*, vol. 3, Los Angeles: Simon Wiesenthal Center, 1986, pp. 317-330. What may appear as a lack of manageability is actually a consequence of the loss of instruments of control, which makes signs of agency and resistance more visible. Levi also notes that the "the bombs hadn't frightened them in the least" while rabbits are well known for being fearful of loud noises. The literary distortion of their behaviors for narrative purposes has the effect of distorting how they might be perceived in real life.

[44] Marking methods for the identification of "lab animals" include tattooing, clipping, tagging, punching, and painting the skin. For an in-depth description of these techniques see William Lane-Patter, "Identification of Laboratory Animals," in *Animal Marking: Recognition Marking in Animals in Research*, edited by Bernard Stonehouse, London: The Macmillan Press, 1978, pp. 35-40.

value, their value on a narrative level has also faded; the plot takes a sudden shift, thus leaving their futures suspended in the unwritten.

Although the presence of the rabbits in this story has generally been glossed over — probably because of their normalized and morally unquestioned presence in a laboratory — including in Marco Belpoliti's alphabetical overview of "Animals" in Levi's works where from the mythological figure of the *centaur* he skips to *crow*, they shed light on the lives and treatment of nonhuman animals used for medical experimentation, on the institutionalized manifestations of speciesism, and the violent biopolitical exploitation of "animal" bodies in the space of the laboratory.[45] The metaphorical aura of Phosphorus as bearer of light, to which Levi swiftly hints and that is embodied by the rabbits, serves the literary purpose of making visible a system and a space that by nature lack transparency. Within the larger context of Levi's corpus of texts, this short story is crucial to understanding the importance of taking the laboratory as the starting point to analyze Levi's controversial position as test subject and tester, and more broadly of the patterns of continuity between "human" and "animal" experimentation, both a consequence of the artificial construction of the human-animal divide and discriminatory othering practices.

3.2. Creating the "Animal" Model

When Levi started writing works of fiction, particularly science-fiction tales, the editorial market reacted with skepticism, believing this shift would put a negative mark on his identity as survivor and writer of the Shoah, especially since in the Sixties science fiction had the status of degraded

[45] Marco Belpoliti, "Animali," *Primo Levi, Riga 13*, Milano: Marcos y Marcos, 1997, p. 172.

genre.[46] However, science fiction is not only a fundamental genre to his intellectual biography but it also allows him to deal with conceptually intricate topics explored through "what if" scenarios that make them more easily accessible. In this literary realm, laboratories come to represent a space of cognitive distortion where deviations from moral and ethical norms offer illuminating perspectives on reality. The short story *Heading West*, published in 1971 in *Flaw of Form*, is an excellent example of this "slippage" of perception in regards to the ambivalent nature of scientific research and the creation of "animal" models in the context of pharmaceutical research.[47] Each one of the stories included in this collection exposes a troubling aspect of the relation between humans and the natural world and challenges the "irreality" of modern existence drawing attention to the small defects that alter the ecosystem. Levi's intention was originally to name the collection of short stories *Disumanesimo* (Inhumanism), a choice that cannot be disregarded and that stresses his objective to highlight the risks of using science to oppress, thus challenging the very ontological and moral status of the human being. As Francesco Cassata notes, between the late 1960s and the beginning of the following decade, scientific environmentalism was beginning to take shape, and this book represents an important facet of this growing movement.[48] *Heading West* fits perfectly into this ecological project, particularly for its engagement with questions concerning disruptive anthropogenic interventions on ecosystems and alterations of the planet's homeostatic equilibriums.

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[46] For a history of the genre in Italy see Pierpaolo Antonello, "La Nascita della Fantascienza in Italia: il Caso "Urania," in *ItaliAmerica. L'Editoria*, edited by E. Scarpellini and T.J. Schnapp, Milan: il Saggiatore-Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, 2008, pp. 99-123.

[47] Primo Levi, *Complete Works*, cit., pp. 1154-1173. Originally included in the collection of short stories *Flaw of Form* published by Einaudi in 1971.

[48] Francesco Cassata, *Fantascienza?*, Torino: Einaudi, 2016, p. 149. On the ecological significance of Levi's works see Raniero Speelman, "Primo Levi's Ecocritical Stance," in *The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons*, edited by Serpil Oppermann, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, pp. 407-419.

Inspired by the myth of the mass suicide of lemmings, a species of small rodents who live in northern Europe and the Arctic tundra, believed to happen every year during migration season, it explores the metaphysical implications of suicide in human populations. In the attempt to answer the question of why humans want to cling to life as long as they can at any cost, two researchers, Walter and Anna, manage to isolate a hormone in the laboratory that dictates the biological imperative to survive and would inhibit "existential emptiness." While this short story has been mostly read for its discussion of suicide and as a literary premonition of Levi's own death, I want to shift the attention towards the scientific method employed in the lab to test the new drug and the overlapping between ethnography and ethology in the formation of discriminatory and oppressive scientific practices.[49]

After weeks of searching for the lemmings in Norway, the two researchers finally find "an army" of them at the Mölde Fjord. A shift in perception is invoked from the very first sentence of the story: "Leave the movie camera alone. Look, look with your own eyes." The opening in *medias res* functions as an abrupt wake up call to cease capturing reality through an artificial lens that produces blurred knowledge. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that an unfiltered gaze also comes with its flaws because of a preconceived mindset, but for them observing the phenomenon with their own eyes makes it instantly real: "This is something that exists, that exists in nature, that has always existed, and so it must have a cause, and that cause must be found." By analyzing the phenomenon through a speculative cause-effect chain of events, reproduced on a syntactic level through a sequence of prepositions interlocked by lexical reiterations, complex ecological processes are reduced to mechanical actions explained in pure

[49] See for instance Elizabeth Leake, *After Words: Suicide and Authorship in Twentieth Century Italy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011, pp. 145-148; Federico Pianzola, *Le "Trappole Morali" di Primo Levi: Miti e Fiction,* Milano: Ledizioni, 2017, p. 348; Victor Brombert defines this short story as "a confession in disguise" in *Musings and Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013, p. 148.

deterministic terms. Constructing an experiment on such weak methodological premises makes it already somewhat unreliable, and the limits of this approach is further accentuated by the cultural construction of the myth surrounding lemmings. In an interview, Levi explicitly declares that he was intrigued, together with many serious zoologists and ethologists, by the mystery of the lemmings' "collective suicide."[50] Currently, it is difficult to determine to what extent he was aware that it was built on a misconception, a wrongful interpretation of the animals' behavior, which originated from the studies of 17th century naturalists and folklore stories later strategically manipulated by media, particularly in the 1958 Disney nature film *White Wilderness*.[51] It is also unclear whether Levi had any direct knowledge of this documentary, given that it circulated in Italy only in the 1980s, and its literary version printed in the US in 1954 was distributed in Italian only in 1975. Still though this documentary, combined with the misleading scientific information concerning lemmings, drastically contributed to the creation of the myth surrounding these rodents, to the point of embedding a stereotype into human consciousness that permeates also literary production.[52]

Besides a lack of reliable premises, the selection of the test subjects also seems conducted arbitrarily, reinforced by a logic that echoes Darwin's evolutionary principle of "the survival of

[50] Claudio Toscani, "Incontro con Primo Levi," in *Il Ragguaglio Librario*, n.3, 1972.

[51] For this nature documentary, a group of lemmings were purposefully pushed off a cliff and filmed while they were falling. See Dennis Chitty, *Do Lemmings Commit Suicide? Beautiful Hypotheses and Ugly Facts*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 7 and 210. See also Nils Chr Stenseth and Rolf Anker Ims, *The Biology of Lemmings*, London: The Linnean Society of London by Academic Press, 1993, p. 158.

[52] The curious legend of the suicidal lemmings has also inspired Cyril Kornbluth's *The Marching Morons* published in 1951 as well as the 1957 short story *Lemmings* by Richard Matheson. Bruno Bettelheim appropriated the metaphor of the suicidal lemmings to describe the Jews who "like lemmings marched themselves to their own death" in the foreword to *Dr. Miklos Nyiszli's Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*, cit., pp. vi-vii. Levi might be operating within this figurative field. While the myth has now been debunked, it continues to influence readings of this text, perhaps due to an inherent and involuntary speciesist mindset that does not push scholars beyond instinctual interpretations of animal behaviors. An example of this dominant perspective: "Lemmings act guided by pure instinct, by the mechanic biology that dominates them and makes them to a certain extent mechanical." The translation is mine. Marco Belpoliti, "Animali," cit., p. 193.

the fittest." With the purpose of having a more diverse pool of test subjects, Walter randomly catches six lemmings at various points of the valley, a procedure that is conveyed through war-like language that conceptualizes the lemmings as enemies and reinforces the violence involved in this process of displacement.[53] Once they are brought inside the laboratory, "squeaking feebly but not biting each other", Anna reacts with a moment of pity, which she quickly dismisses by constructing a first layer of emotional distance that serves the purpose of appeasing her conscience: "I guess they would have died anyway." Empathy is constructed along the gender binary as a feminine characteristic, associated with weakness, and embodied by Anna whose stereotypical role as motherly figure is reiterated in several points of the story. Her primary literary function is in fact to help Walter advance his research and develop his thoughts through questions and doubts, particularly evident in the Socratic exchange that leads to the formulation of his working hypothesis. Once he reaches it, the testing phase can begin. The researchers' control over the lemmings' bodies and lives signals that their transformation into "animal" models has begun: as soon as they enter the lab, their food is rationed to avoid altering their condition; once they formulate a hypothesis for their behavior — one "lemming" infects all their neighbors or there is some sort of intoxication or deficiency" — blood and urine samples are taken, without producing any positive results; their enclosure must be reinforced in response to their escape attempts; an identification tag is placed on their legs, which represents an additional strategy of de-personification that reduces their identities to a sequence of numbers, a process that dreadfully resembles the one experienced by the Häftlinge in concentration camps; finally, each lemming is forcefully administered through a tube a gram of the chemical antidote believed to give them back the joy of life. The institutional space of the laboratory justifies the suspension

[53] Examples of this semantic sphere include: "the army of lemmings," "the beach had been invaded," "a flotilla of birds."

of the animals' bodily integrity and the acceptance of invasive treatments that would otherwise be considered morally questionable. The space itself then favors this cognitive shift that makes it hard to distinguish the difference between reality and imagination. Levi is in fact reworking within the fictional space sources of real studies conducted in the sixties on overpopulation, in particular John B. Calhoun' research outlined in the article *Population Density and Social Pathology*.[54]

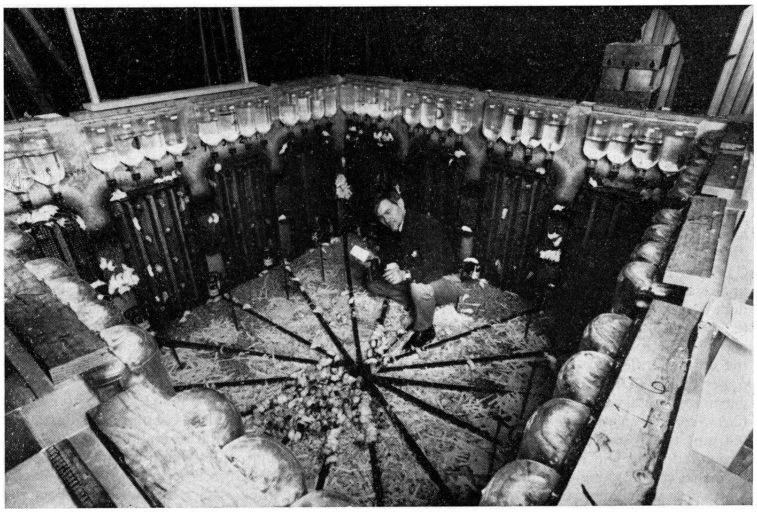

Figure 14. John B. Calhoun in a "Rat Utopia", 1970

In his controversial experiment, he created a series of enclosed environments for rodents where they were supplied with the resources for satisfying their basic needs, except space. He famously described his experimental universes as "rat utopias", a definition that creates a troubling conceptual bridge between reality and fiction. The result was a drastic growth in population, followed by such severe psychological disruption that the rodents died off to extinction. His work captured the public imagination to the point that it was associated with "best-selling books and popular novels", which transports the lived experiences of the rats into the imaginative realm, therefore legitimizing the transformation of their oppressed lives into palatable material for science fiction narratives.[55] Given the background context, Levi's description of the lemmings' failed escape

[54] John Bumpass Calhoun, "Population Density and Social Pathology," in *Scientific American*, 1962, pp. 139-148. See Francesco Cassata, *Fantascienza?*, cit., p. 184.

[55] Claude S. Fischer and Mark Baldassare, "How Far From the Maddening Crowd?" *New Society*, vol. 32, 1975, pp. 531-533. On the impact of this research on popular culture see Edmund Ramsden and Jon Adams, "Escaping the Laboratory: the Rodent Experiments of John B. Calhoun and their Cultural Influence," in *The Journal of Social History*, vol. 42, n. 3, 2009, pp. 761-792.

attempts and chaotic resistance to space constraints can be defined as an out-of-control utopia shifting to a dystopia, at least from the perspective of the rodents. In this case too, the status of the test subjects remains suspended in a liminal space where they exist, but not quite. This means that the sense of verisimilitude engendered in the narrative would require an additional mental leap in order to imagine that real beings actually experience similar treatments in real life. However, the cognitive distance between reality and fiction is never fully reconciled and the lemmings maintain an instrumental function also on a literary level. In fact, once the tests have been sketched, Levi makes use of a temporal ellipsis whose purpose is to transition to a different topic. However, it also has the unpleasing effect of erasing the remainder of their lives in the lab. Anna has a second moment of moral hesitation in front of the "simple and terrifying" idea to synthesize the hormone that inhibits existential emptiness, worried of the possible negative consequences that their research might set off beyond the walls of the lab: "If we find it [the remedy], will we have done a good thing or a bad thing?" Walter's human-centered response is completely oblivious to the invasiveness of the tests and indifferent to the potential impact of the results on the whole ecosystem: "A good thing for the individual, certainly. A good thing for the human species, doubtful." In his discussion of humanity's choice to favor individual interests over the collective good through the formulation of drugs that keep us alive artificially, the individual stands exclusively for the "human", which makes the human species the only one worthy of attention. On an epistemological level, Walter not only creates a distinct separation between "human" and "animal" but, in the moment he affirms that "humanity has had its back turned to nature for a while now", he is also narrowing the boundaries of the "human" and excluding the communities, such as indigenous people, that have actually not turned their backs

to nature. By implicitly erasing these *other* cultures, he is inappropriately using the term "humanity" to represent his own community: western culture.

Following the traditional method of scientific experimentation, once the new drug is developed, the researchers must look for the most suitable "human analogues" to use as test subjects, and they find them in the Amazon forest. The continuity between species is based on the structural parallels between social anthropology and ethology, which again resonates with Calhoun's research and the way he used anthropomorphic language that invited to draw parallels with human society, such as by giving names to the rats' behaviors that sounded increasingly resonant with human culture.[56] This rhetorical technique at the time raised great criticism and concern for the potential cross-species transferability, even if only at an imaginative level. However, while the experiment Calhoun designed for the rats would not have been deemed ethical if conducted on individuals of the human species, they were perfectly acceptable on other animals, even if the rats were literally experiencing "life in hell", as defined by one of his collaborators: the rats remained just rats from whom humans kept a safe moral distance.[57] In Levi's story, the passage from "animal" to "human" in the context of biomedical research is made explicit, demonstrating not only that the strict separation between the two categories is a false construction, but also that a moral hierarchy based on speciesist ideals is linked to harmful racialized thinking.

After discovering an anthropology article discussing the high suicide rates in the Arunde indigenous tribe, the two researchers go visit their village to study why they do not experience metaphysical thoughts and attribute little value to the survival of the individual or the

[56] For a list of examples see Edmund Ramsden and Jon Adams, "Escaping the Laboratory," cit., pp. 29-30.

[57] In the words of one of Calhoun's collaborators, the rodent "utopia" had descended into "hell". Halsey M. Marsden, "Crowding and Animal Behavior," in Joachim F. Wohlwill and Daniel H. Carson, eds., *Environment and the Social Sciences: Perspectives and Applications*, Washington: American Psychological Association, 1972, pp. 5-14.

community. When confronted with the elder of the village, the *lingua franca* employed for their verbal exchanges is Spanish, a clear marker of the past imperialist domination over the Arunde population. The lack of effort of the researchers to use the native language of the place they visit to interact with the elder of the village is a first indicator of a colonizing methodology that has no real concern for a reciprocal exchange of knowledge.[58] In the essay *Situated Knowledges*, Donna Haraway argues that in order to reject the concept of "scientific objectivity," the "object of knowledge must be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource." In this case, the two researchers, including the whole system and institution they represent, view the indigenous bodies of the Arunde tribe as potential experimental materials that can be turned into "animal" models. Their cultural beliefs and practices are interpreted through a naturalistic framework in clear opposition with civilization, which is further stressed in Walter's statement recognizing the irony with the fact that "groups of people we consider primitive are the only ones who still respect the natural processes of life and reject life-prolonging assistance, especially if it is artificial." The primitive-civilized dichotomy established through his sense of wonder represents the epistemological premise of othering discourses. In fact, the construction of human difference through the lens of an evolutionary hierarchy leads to equating the term "primitive" with "inferiority" and pre-civilization, which is associated with a descent into the "animal" world. This is exactly the mindset responsible for the creation of an "animal" model.[59] In the

[58] For a discussion of how non-indigenous researchers may undertake more ethical and culturally appropriate research see Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, London: Zed Books, 2012; Elaine Bradley, "Changing Perspectives: Attempting to De-Colonize the Gaze of a Canadian Medical Student," in *Canadian Medical Education Journal*, vol. 7, n.3, 2017, pp. e37-e40.

[59] See Francis L. K. Hsu, "Rethinking the Concept Primitive," in *Current Anthropology*, vol. 5, n. 3, 1964, pp. 169-178, particularly p. 173 for a list of the ambiguous meanings and connotations of the term "primitive" in anthropology books. For a discussion of Levi's view of anthropology see Mario Porro, "Un Etologo nel Lager," in *Al di Qua del Bene e del Male: la Visione del Mondo in Primo Levi: Atti del*

fictional reality created by Levi, the scientists give the Arunde people the opportunity to choose whether they are willing to become test subjects, as opposed to the lemmings who are brought inside the laboratory and made into models without any serious second thought. In reality, the privilege to choose has historically been denied also to other humans, which is again a result of dysfunctional social construction of the "human" and "animal" categories. Through this fictional narrative, Levi creates an alternative reality where this basic privilege is guaranteed at least to members of the human species. At the end of this cautionary tale, the hubris seeking control over nature, represented with an ironic tone by Walter, crumbles as he is run over by a mass of lemmings and loses his life. The power he exercises in the laboratory vanishes as soon as he tries to administer the new drug with a nebulizer to the population of lemmings crowding the valley. The homeostatic balance, disrupted by his invasive actions, is therefore reestablished.

3.3. Distorted Perceptions: the Making of Morality in the Laboratory

As illustrated by the literary encounters with the lemmings, the rabbits, and the squirrels, for Levi, the laboratory is a space where science and ethics should not be separated; however, the equation between the two elements is not always in perfect balance, and in the short story *Versamine* it becomes even more overt. This time, instead of looking for a chemical remedy that would transform the desire for suicide into joy for life, a researcher manages to synthesize substances that turn pain into pleasure. The story was first published in 1965 in the newspaper *Il Giorno* and later included in the science-fiction collection *Natural Histories* that, upon request of the editor Roberto Celati of Einaudi and because of the moral conflicts he experienced in the

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Convegno Internazionale, Torino, 15-16 Dicembre 1999, edited by Enrico Mattioda, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2000, pp. 33-45.

transition from testimony to fiction, Levi published under the pseudonym of Damiano Malabaila.[60] The first mechanism of distortion is present already in the name. In fact, as Levi suggested, Malabaila is a distorted version of *mala balia* that, once the letter sequence is restored, is roughly translatable as "evil wet nurse". The two terms made into one word on a visual level, reinforced by the alliterative sounds, acquire an oxymoronic connotation on a semantic level, which highlights the dual role of Levi as writer, both nurturing and disruptive, while also pointing to the central theme of the collection: the potential negative effects of anthropogenic interventions on nature. A second meaningful distortion occurs in the title of the collection through which, by pluralizing the title of Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, Levi brings attention to the existence of multiple histories, point of views, and truths. This slight noun shift paves the way for a new perspective on the value of history and its social construction, to which literary production plays an essential commentary role.[61]

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[60] *Il Giorno*, Milano, August 8, 1965, p. 4. Primo Levi, *Complete Works*, cit. pp. 945-963. Originally included in the collection of short stories *Natural Histories* published by Einaudi in 1966. On the connections between this collection and *Flaws of Form* see Lucie Benchouiha, *Primo Levi: Rewriting the Holocaust*, Leicester: Troubador Publishing, 2006, pp. 38-61. While Levi had a hard time reconciling his responsibility as witness/survivor and his desire to be a writer of fiction, he also felt the pressure from his ex-deportee friends about having to stick to testimonial writing. In an interview he explicitly declared that he "experienced almost a sense of panic at the thought of appearing before [his] ex-deportee friends in another skin." See Giorgio Calcagno and Gabriella Poli, *Echoes of a Lost Voice: Encounters with Primo Levi*, cit., p. 20. The implications behind Levi's adoption of a pseudonym on his identity are explored in more detail in Carlo Zanda, *Quando Primo Levi Diventò il Signor Malabaila*, Vicenza: Neri Pozza Editore, 2019. See also the interview with Graziella Granà, "Encounter with Primo Levi (1981)," in Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, eds., *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961-1987*, translated by Robert Gordon, New York: New Press, 2001, pp. 148-154 (152-153).

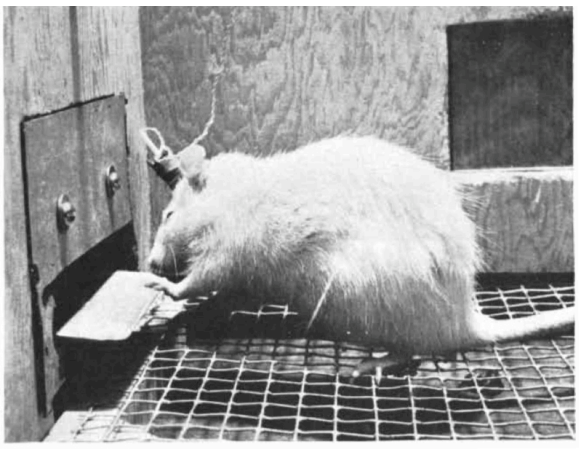
[61] For an introduction to the collection and its editorial history see Anna Baldini, "Le Operette Morali di Primo Levi: Trattamento di Quiescenza, Verso Occidente e Una Stella Tranquilla," in *Atti di Incontrotesto: Ciclo di Incontri su e con Scrittori del Novecento e Contemporanei*, ed. Comitato Redazionale di Incontrotesto, Pisa: Pacini, 2011, pp. 63-69; Nancy Harrowitz, "Primo Levi's Science as "Evil Nurse": The Lesson of Inversion," in *Memory and Mastery: Primo Levi as Writer and Witness*, edited by Roberta S. Kremer, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001, pp. 59-74; Silvia Teresa Zangrandi, "Storie Naturali e il Futuro Futuribile di Promo Levi," in *Bollettino '900*, vol. 1-2, 2007, pp. 1-24; Ilona Klein, "'Official Science Often Lacks Humility': Humor, Science and Technology in Levi's *Storie Naturali*," in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, edited by Linda Pavlovski and Scott T. Darga, vol. 109, Gale, 2001, pp. 112-126.

While Italo Calvino defined these short stories as *racconti fantabiologici* (biological fantasy stories), stressing the biological temporalities and processes rooted in bodily experience explored in the book, mostly through unsettling experiments, Levi prefers to call them "small moral traps" or "divertissements", which means much more than frivolous amusement or entertainment. In fact, the Latin root of the word *divertere* is etymologically connected also to "diversion" or "deviation", a hermeneutical concept that is central to the collection, as well as to *diversus* (different), which in turn points to a poetics of otherness and alterity. With this term, then, Levi is providing his readers with an interpretive guide for his stories that are meant to encourage gaze shifts and new perspectives on reality. In *Versamine* this is accomplished by taking the dimension of pain as the starting point for a reflection on morality and the laboratory as the setting for its distortions. Set in an easily identifiable post-war Germany, this fictional story is primarily a reflection on the moral and ethical price of medical experimentation as well as of the upside-down world caused by Nazi criminal persecution. A close reading of the experiments, attentive to speciesist discourses, allows for an additional reflection on the morally problematic bio-necro-political interventions implemented in the laboratory.

Similarly to *Heading West*, Levi is once again using a real experiment as a source for his story. This time the study is by physiologist James Olds and it consists in implanting permanent electrodes in the brains of rats, held in a plastic carrier screwed to their skulls, whose purpose is to help researchers answer the question "how is one to measure an animal's feeling of pleasure?"[62] To answer this question, the rats inserted in a box were given the option to push a button that would stimulate an electrical signal directly to their brain, which they would

[62]James Olds, "Pleasure Centers in the Brain," in *Scientific American*, 1956, pp. 105-117. See also Francesco Cassata, *Fantascienza?*, cit., p. 121.

repeatedly press until they eventually died of hunger or thirst.[63] Levi includes a direct allusion to this research by speculating that versamines were involved in the study. The insertion of elements taken from reality into his fictional world makes his stories not only plausible, but a mimetic reproduction of a real experiment. While this contamination succeeds in recreating the atmosphere of the laboratory, it fails to fully acknowledge the lives lost for the sake of human curiosity.



RAT FEELS STIMULUS as it presses on treadle. Pulse lasts less than a second; the current is less than .0005 ampere. The animal must release lever and press again to renew the stimulus.

Figure 15. A Rat Used in James Olds' Study, 1954

The plot is centered around the figure of Dr. Kleber who discovered the chemical compound that gives the title to the story, but the two characters, Jakob Dessauner and Dybowski, have the essential role of narrating the events through flashbacks as well as of introducing different points of view and moral positions. While the presence of nonhuman animals has been generally overlooked, they actually play a fundamental role not only in the plot progression but, most importantly, in reconceptualizing science and progress from a posthumanist and antispeciesist perspective. As soon as Kleber's research on versamines is introduced, their potential effects are compared to the Hiroshima bomb because of the destructive impact they could have on the ecosystem: "These guys believe that they are liberating humanity from pain, the other guys think

[63] The article ends with the following observation: "Enough of the brain-stimulating work has been repeated on monkeys by J. V. Brady and J. C. Lilly [...] to indicate that our general conclusions can very likely be generalized eventually to human beings —with modifications, of course." Around the same time, the American psychiatrist Robert Heath used electrical stimulation in an attempt to cure patients with schizophrenia and as a perverse method of conversion therapy in a homosexual man. Once the leap was made to human experimentation, the ethical issues became more readily recognizable, but the signs of moral distortion were clearly present already at earlier stages when tests were conducted on individuals of other species.

that they are giving away free energy, none of them aware that nothing is free, ever: everything has a price." The first ones to pay a price are the nonhuman animals used in the laboratory as test models. After trying out his compounds on about forty rabbits, Dr. Kleber notices that one of them shows a sudden change in behavior, first by refusing to eat, then by chewing on the wires of their cage to the point of making their mouth bleed, and finally by dying a few days later of an unspecified infection. Dybowski, who narrates the story, highlights his observation skills in comparison to other doctors who, in the same situation, would probably not have noticed the behavioral variations, which demonstrates how little the animals in labs are generally cared for. Kleber manages to prepare a more active compound only after 160 rounds of experiments, a number that implies the use of an enormous amount of rabbits. This time, the trials on nonhuman animals are assigned to Dybowski who has no decision-making power and must comply with the orders received from above, a position that very much resembles Levi's in *Phosphorus*. The switch to a first-person narration and eyewitness narrative of the tests leads to more detailed descriptions. As part of the cognitive process of creating identical models, their individual traits are reduced to superficial and selective behavioral observations and their species membership is omitted: they all belong to the generalized category of "animals". The erasure of the violence and suffering involved in the deaths of the ones who are "turned upside down" by the inversion of pleasure and pain represents a necessary step to facilitate the transformation of their lives into statistical data. However, as he watches them writhing in pain, Dybowski is simultaneously horrified and fascinated, a reaction that is indeed triggered by his exposure to violence; for as much as it is normalized it still produces disturbing psychological effects on the researcher.

Once it is time to perform the tests on dogs, the descriptions become disturbingly vivid, as if an increase in moral weight normatively attributed to dogs in western societies results in a higher

degree of attention and, consequently, of literary space.[64] Two dogs in particular receive a more exhaustive account of the fatal effects of versamines: a German Shepard and a mongrel. The distinction between breeds is not casual and deserves to be given further attention, especially given the polyvalence of the symbolic use of dogs in the literature of the Shoah and the relevant role they play in the concentrationary landscape.[65] As Marco Belpoliti notes, dogs are the nonhuman animals that appear most often in Levi's works and always carry very significant connotations.[66] On one side, they may be associated with Nazis and evoke violence, brutal animality, and danger; on the other, they embody the survivors' sentiment of humiliation and loss of dignity. In this particular case, the dogs can be interpreted both as emblems of human bestialization and humans' deprivation of freedom. However, for as much as these metaphorical readings are convincing, they also tend to obscure the referent, the actual dogs who are used as test subjects. Instead of allowing the metaphoric transfer to fully obliterate the literal sense, it is crucial to understand how the two realities coexist and conceptually overlap, in particular through the uneasy correspondence between breeding and eugenics. The systematic mating of nonhuman animals to produce individuals with certain reproducible characteristics, aesthetic criteria, and behaviors, are the same principles governing eugenic propaganda.[67] For this reason, as long as one of the two systems is socially accepted, both have the potential to exist since their roots find a home on the same grounds. At a metaphorical level, this link is tacitly

[64] Normatively, routine tests are first performed on small animals (mice, rabbits, guinea pigs), and subsequently on larger species such as dogs and monkeys (this was the procedure also in labs in Germany in the 1940s where research was being conducted on the effects caused by mustard gas and other war gases). See Gerhard Baader, Susan E. Lederer, Morris Low, Florian Schmaltz, and Alexander V. Schwerin, "Pathways to Human Experimentation, 1933-1945: Germany, Japan, and the United States," in *Osiris*, 2nd Series, n. 20, 2005, pp. 205-31.

[65] Daniela Amsallem, "Le Symbolisme du Chien: Primo Levi et la Littérature Juive Après la Shoah," in *Chroniques Italiennes*, n. 33-34, 1993, pp. 27-44.

[66] Marco Belpoliti, "Animali," cit., pp. 167-168.

[67] See Ewa Barbara Luczak, *Breeding and Eugenics in the American Literary Imagination: Hereditary Rules in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Palgrave, 2015.

acknowledged. However, the separation between the two terms is yet again another cultural manifestation of speciesist thinking, which fails to recognize the intrinsic pattern of continuity between the two practices and their fundamental sameness. In the space of the laboratory, these ontological crossings between species are further enhanced the moment a living being, no matter their species, is transformed into a model. Every time that an "animal" is made to stand for a "human" a paradoxical relation of resemblance-difference is established. This literary passage, then, is a product of the cultural construction of this conceptual analogy, which recalls Konrad Lorenz's theories on animal domestication and human degeneration, which at a metaphorical level recreates hierarchies of species that fuel dangerous hierarchical relations among humans.[68] As a consequence of this epistemological mechanism, the mongrel's hybrid genetic composition is considered not only inferior in nature to the pure breed dog, but it also acquires a racialized component by metaphorically exemplifying how the Jewish identity has been constructed in Nazi ideology. To be mongrelized is in itself a violent and oppressive act that affects humans and nonhumans alike, but it is considered harmful only when it impacts humans. However, this selective apprehension only allows for the concept to continue to exist and does not effectively eradicate the seeds of its harm.[69] Dybowski's lingering on the effects of versamines on the mongrel, with whom he developed a particular affinity ("a little creature I became quite attached to"), serves the purpose of bringing this parallel to the surface. When he comments on the dog's transformation into an anti-dog, or rather a *contra-dog*, whose dogness was taken away from him in the name of medical research, it is impossible not to notice a reference to Levi's foreword to Léon Poliakov's *Auschwitz* where he defines the words and deeds of "the revolting human

[68] Boria Sax, "What is a "Jewish Dog"? Konrad Lorenz and the Cult of Wildness," in *Society and Animals*, vol. 5, n. 1, 1997, pp. 3-21.
[69] See Abby L. Ferber, "Of Mongrels and Jews: The Deconstruction of Racialised Identities in White Supremacist Discourse," in *Social Identities*, vol. 3, 1997, pp. 193-208.

specimens (Himmler, Göring, Goebbels, Eichmann, Höss, and many others)" as *contra-human.* Their actions are not meant to be comprehended, according to Levi. The mongrel in the lab is purposefully transformed into one of them, with the only difference that, despite having forcefully been administered a drug that alters his behaviors he still maintains the ability to distinguish what is good from what is bad:

> *"I believe that, like a human, he understood: he knew when he was thirsty he should drink, [...] but the wrong-doing and the perversion were stronger than he was. In front of me he faked it, forced himself to do the right things, not only to please me or to make sure I wouldn't get angry but also, I believe, because he knew, and continued to know, what was right."*

The dog's resilient moral awareness, perhaps driven by fear of punishment as Dybowski himself admits, is here framed as an exclusively human-like behavior, as if morality is a quality exclusive to humans. Denying the possibility of the existence of moral intelligence beyond the human, which is implicit in Dybowski's considerations, is an ableist conviction based on anthropocentric beliefs.[70] Even if he empathically connected to the dog, because of this deep-seated discrimination, exacerbated by the scientist's complicit role in the bureaucracy of killing regulating laboratory operations, the dog is eventually left to die.

The species hierarchies that normatively characterize human-animal relations and, as a reflection, life in laboratories are strikingly evident when Dybowski recounts of the time he ate an infected rabbit from the lab: "As you know, meat was scarce, and my wife thought it was a shame to throw all the test animals into the incinerator. So every once in a while we would have a taste of one or another: several guinea pigs, a few rabbits; dogs and monkeys no, never." The practice of eating other animals is guided by moral imperatives imposed by social and cultural norms based on speciesist conceptions that determine where to draw a line between the beings

[70] On this topic see Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Life: The Moral Lives of Animals*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009.

we can eat and those we are not allowed to. The scientist is here faced with a moral conundrum, but has no doubt on how to act; he is in fact respecting a tacit social etiquette that influences his perception and moral decision to choose to eat rabbits and guinea pigs over dogs and monkeys. Because dogs in western culture are generally valued as pets, a privileged category that exempts them from being eaten by humans, and monkeys resemble humans too closely, which would make us *almost* cannibals, the individuals in the lab belonging to these species are spared from ending up on Dybowski's dinner plate. Once he makes the selection of species he deems consumable, he eats the flesh of a rabbit and the following morning starts displaying symptoms himself: as a consequence of a cross-species contamination, his behavior is altered by the residues of the same chemical compound he had administered to the rabbit he ingested. While on a moral level he separates himself from the rabbit, the literal incorporation of their body causes a continuation of harm that, this time, affects him as well. The role of "animals" strategically standing in for "humans" in labs is paradoxically dismissed as soon as they are turned into food, which requires a reversal of the process of anthropomorphization in order to induce the cognitive dissonance altering our perceptions. If the killing of the rabbit for Dybowski's meal is excluded from the story, the reference to the incinerators in laboratories gives us a glimpse inside the routine operations of disposal of the bodies at the end of an experiment. The violent othering of disposable life, rendered bare or biological in a systematic and noncriminal manner, is considered the norm for nonhuman animals used for medical research once their purpose as test subjects has been served. The institutionalism of speciesism in the context of the laboratory enables governing practices of necropower that are seen as unproblematic because performed on nonhuman bodies.[71] However, at a conceptual level, the ontological transformation of a living

[71] An interesting study outlines the environmental implications of animal testing focusing on how the disposal of nonhuman animals, including via incineration, contributes to air, water, and soil pollution,

being into waste creates the conditions for other forms of systemic violence and disposability to thrive, also among human populations, which in the context of Levi's works acquires unsettling connotations.

After having witnessed the effects of versamines on the two dogs, Dybowski finally decides to advise Dr. Kleber to proceed cautiously with the tests, fearing the potential drifts the experiments could take, especially due to the cheap value associated with the substances. However, his concern was accentuated only when the tests could risk damaging humans and trespassing the human-animal divide, which is conceptualized as a rigid line of separation. His intervention is initially justified by an authority ranking based on his older age, but the hierarchy of power between them is quickly reinstated when he realizes that he is "less educated" than Dr. Kleber and "had observed the entire story only from the dogs' point of view." With this statement, nonhuman animals are once again placed on an inferior level and their perspectives perceived as less valuable compared to "human" experiences. But there is an additional level of hierarchy implied in this observation: on one side, the symbolic association of dogs with Jews allows to redefine the "human" category as a smaller and more selective circle of individuals that does not automatically include all *homo sapiens* but rather segregates others to the "animal" side of the divide based on arbitrary parameters defined by the in-group; on the other, the individualized experiences of the two dogs are given higher value compared to those of the undetermined number of individuals belonging to different species whose points of view have gone unnoticed.

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public health concerns, and biodiversity concerns. Katherine Groff, Eric Bachli, Molly Lansdowne, Theodora Capaldo, "Review of Evidence of Environmental Impacts of Animal Research and Testing," in *Environments* vol. *1*, 2014, pp. 14-30. On the question of necropower in the laboratory see Marina Levina, "Nonhuman Biocitizens: Lab Animals, Cruel Optimism, and the Politics of Death," in *Biocitizenship: The Politics of Bodies, Governance, and Power*, edited by Kelly E. Happe, Jenell Johnson, and Marina Levina, New York: New York University Press, 2008, pp. 233-254.

Even in the face of a real threat, Dr. Kleber's thirst for profit and personal ambition take over. In fact, he decides to sign a contract with a company that subsequently launches a misleading publicity campaign that does not mention any of the side effects of versamines, a move that foreseeably provoked severe damages on the humans who took them. As if this was not enough, the license was then sold to the US Navy for millions —*because this is how the world goes*— thus inserting the test subjects into a narrative of commodification and rendering them instrumental in optimizing military operations of destruction.

Only when Dr. Kleber tries the versamines on himself does he fully grasp the negative impacts of the drug. The degenerative process he endures is associated with animality, here standing as a metaphor of bestialization. Because of speciesist assumptions, nonhuman animals are made into vehicles of negative characteristics that are extended onto humans, an epistemic process that gives rise to hierarchical modes of thinking that contribute to the construction of the "other". If, as Roberta Mori affirms, Kleber's condition is posthuman, in that he had irremediably modified the perception of his own body and the stimuli coming from the outer world, how should we define the condition of the nonhuman animals turned into test subjects?[72]

While the moral focus of this short story is the use, or abuse, of scientific knowledge and the (ir)responsibility of science during the Third Reich, the ethical issues concerning animal testing are also relevant. In fact, the laboratory functions as a magnifier of the issue concerning the infliction of pain, even in situations where it is deemed necessary. The question of necessity inevitably gives rise to a system of relative ethics that depends on who is responsible for defining the terms of necessity, where one draws the line of morality and legality, and on the extent to which violence is considered socially acceptable. The final quotation from Shakespeare's

[72] Roberta Mori, "Worlds of "Un-knowledge": Dystopian Patterns in Primo Levi's Short Stories," in *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 42, 2015, pp. 274-291 (281).

Macbeth, particularly the dichotomy *foul-fair*, which encapsulates the sense of disorder and perverse inversion of values that pervade this story, serves as a reminder of the potentially destructive consequences of human actions, from which nonhuman animals are rarely exempt. [73]

3.4. Life at the Thresholds: Cross-Species Hybrids in the Lab

As illustrated in the previous sections of the chapter, in the laboratory the barrier between species is eliminated on a biological level in the moment the body of a nonhuman animal is used as an analog for the human body; however, the same barrier is conveniently preserved on an ontological level as a distancing mechanism that facilitates the acceptance of the experiments from a moral perspective. The laboratory, though, is also theatre of cross-species contaminations, DNA manipulations, and genetic alterations that blur even further the species lines, making ethical distinctions increasingly challenging. In the short story *Angelic Butterfly*, Primo Levi brings attention to the liminal features characterizing the ethics of the laboratory by making the "animal" and "human" categories indistinguishable. The mysterious mutations at the center of the story represent an effective way to reimagine the human-animal hierarchy in non-binary terms by illustrating the central role the concept of "animal" has in upholding laboratory practices involving the use of other living beings. First published in the newspaper *Il Mondo* in 1962 and then included in *Natural Histories*, this short story continues to develop the scenario of the upside-down world explored also in *Versamine*, this time in the context of coercive human experimentation. The story reproduces the structure of a traditional detective story imbued with horror motifs. Set again in Germany, a team of Allied officers is searching for a scientist, Doktor Leeb, whose traces lead the team to an abandoned apartment in Berlin. After breaking in, the

[73] *Fair is foul, and foul is fair; / Hover through the fog and filthy air.*

combination of sensory cues and descriptive elements generates an increasingly grim atmosphere that culminates in the realization that we are inside of what used to be a laboratory. Its relocation in a private space represents a distortion of a normalized practice that is generally secluded to a legitimate institutional space, which contributes to the reader's sense of estrangement. This feeling of uneasiness is further accentuated when a member of the team examines a bone without being able to determine the "animal" it belongs to, causing a moment of cognitive confusion due to the loss of a clear line of separation between species. Only when they interrogate an eyewitness do the readers discover that four human prisoners had been used for an experiment designed to induce a metamorphic process that imitates the one artificially activated in the axolotl, an amphibian that lives in Mexican lakes famous for exhibiting neoteny.[74]

Levi is once again drawing inspiration from a real experiment, this time being a study conducted by the British biologist Julian Huxley in 1920 who found that he could cause axolotls to metamorphose by feeding them extracts of ox thyroid.[75] The cross-species contamination required by the experiment represents an ethically problematic alteration of physiological and ecological processes since it

Figure 16. An Axolotl in the Laboratories of the Monterrey Institute of Technology, Mexico City campus

[74] The term "neoteny" was coined by the zoologist Julius Kollman in 1885 to describe the sexual maturation of the axolotl while still in the larval form, which corresponds to their aquatic, gill breathing stage of development. While they are currently in risk of extinction in the wild due to pollution, desiccation of their natural habitat, and excessive fishing, they are profusely bred in aquaria and laboratories.

[75] Julian S. Huxley, "Metamorphosis of Axolotl caused by Thyroid-feeding," in *Nature*, n. 104, 1920, p. 435. In the article he quotes previous studies that succeeded in getting axolotls to assume the adult form by keeping them outside of the aquatic environment and forcing them to breath air.

generates a new hybrid species existing solely in the space of the laboratory. The allegorical potential of their state of suspended metamorphosis, together with their regenerative abilities, are the reason why they continue to be studied in laboratories, a space of manipulative creation where fiction and reality collapse at the expense of the test subjects, and have stimulated the imagination of many writers besides Levi, including Julio Cortázar and Aldous Huxley.[76]

Besides the study on axolotls, Levi is also appropriating and reworking the research on human neoteny, particularly the evolutionary theories imbued with scientific racism developed by the Dutch anatomist Louis Bolk in 1926.[77] The condition of neoteny presents a way of thinking evolution as a force or process that is nonlinear and immanent in the organism, which is precisely the logic behind Doktor Leeb's manipulations. In fact, he believes that an ulterior capacity for development is intrinsic also to humans, in particular to those individuals defined "early drafts" or, even worse, "bad drafts" in whom he sees an evolutionary potential that he takes in his hands and directs as he pleases. The four prisoners, who in the lab receive the same treatment of the axolotls, are therefore inserted in an ableist framework and subjected to a corporeal metamorphosis that is justified on the conviction that they are somewhat incomplete, unfinished.[78] As Alison Suen rightly notes, "the strategy of animalizing the other presupposes human superiority: animalization is viewed as "dehumanizing" because being human means not being an animal. It is bad to be an animal, good to be human. As such, dehumanization derives

[76] See the collection by Gerardi Villadelángel Vinas, ed., *Axolotiada. Vida y Mito de un Anfibio Mexicano*, Mexico, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 2011.

[77] Louis Bolk, *Das Problem des Menschwerdung* (The Problem of Human Genesis), lecture, 1926. For a discussion of the relation between the condition of neoteny and human evolution see Barry Bogin, *Patterns of Growth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 158-161.

[78] On a general discussion of metamorphoses in Levi's works see Giuseppina Santagostino, *Primo Levi. Metamorfosi Letterarie del Corpo*, Moncalier, Torino: Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerche sul Viaggio in Italia, 2004.

its power from the human-animal hierarchy that is already in place."[79] By stretching the imaginative potential of the real experiments, Levi is playing with infraspecies ontologies that mobilize ambiguities surrounding the boundaries of the "human".[80] In doing so, he is also — perhaps involuntarily— reframing what it means to be perceived as or transformed into an "animal" as a concept not necessarily tied to species but rather as the root of discriminatory and othering practices. This mode of thinking is at the base of the logic of biopolitical control and management of life in the laboratory and is responsible for the fluctuations in our moral principles that shift according to who is the test subject.

As the four prisoners lay on the floor, prior to their bodily transformation, they occupy a space of precarious liminality that leads to the gradual collapsing of "human" and "animal" into one category. When they reach the transitional stage of humans-becoming-birds, their bodies represent a site of ontological change that requires a negotiation of ethical boundaries between species. Doktor Leeb's fantasy to create an angel from the bodies of his test subjects, a creature that is conceived as the last evolutionary stage of the Human, turns into the artificial breeding of a new living being that resembles a chimera.[81] As Levi affirms in his article "Inventing an Animal", the concept of chimera is not just material for myths or literature but "has also been adopted by biologists to describe the monsters that they create, or dream of creating, in their laboratories by means of transplants among different animals", which confirms that in the space

[79] Alison Suen, *The Speaking Animal: Ethics, Language and the Human-Animal Divide*, London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015, p. 103. To the term "dehumanization" I prefer "depersonifying", which decenters the human while clarifying that the experience of being denied personhood extends also to other species.

[80] On the question of infrahuman ontologies see Noam Pines, *The Infrahuman: Animality in Modern Jewish Literature*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018; Megan H. Glick, *Infrahumanisms: Science, Culture, and the Making of Modern Non/Personhood*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

[81] For an interesting discussion of the intersection between law and bioethics in the context of human-animal chimera research see Julian J. Koplin and Julian Savulescu, "Time to Rethink the Law on Part-Human Chimeras," in *Journal of Law and the Biosciences*, vol. 6, n. 1, 2019, pp. 37–50.

of the laboratory science fiction and reality overlap in problematic ways.[82] The prisoners' metamorphosis, then, coincides with the creation of biomedical personhood, which opens controversial questions regarding laboratory operations associated with coercive manipulations of a living being.[83] As a consequence of their degeneration into "beasts", epitomized in the loss of their ability to produce human language now mutated into "terrifying" vocalizations, their aesthetic features are associated with monstrosity, which is nothing but animality taken to the extreme. While animality tends to be framed as negative and constructed in direct opposition to humanity, in reality it must be intended as "the stuff of animal nature that sometimes sticks to animals, sometimes bleeds back onto textures of humanness."[84] Even once they are turned into "vulture-like" creatures, they are still aware of their lack of freedom and try to break out of the chains that keep them stuck onto horizontal poles, not because they are essentially human but because of their animal being. This powerful scene of "animal" resistance represents the only moment in which the prisoners' emotions emerge, functioning as a reminder that the fight for survival is shared by all sentient beings, no matter their physical appearance, and that the laboratory is a site of biopolitical resistance, even when concealed or repressed.

It is important to note that the metamorphosis is recounted in the format of a testimony by an eyewitness, Gertrud Enk, who lived across the street from Leeb's secretive apartment and observed the scene from her window, another liminal area connecting the safety of the private space with the public sphere. More than just a passive bystander, Gertrud, and the other neighbors, represent what Michael Rothberg has defined "implicated subjects", meaning those

[82] Primo Levi, "Inventing an Animal," in *Other People's Trades*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal, New York: Summit Books, 1989, pp. 38-43.
[83] On biomedical personhood see Susan Merrill Squier, *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, p. 8.
[84] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012, p. 89.

individuals who "occupy positions aligned with power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes."[85] In fact, once the war is over, they rush in the apartment and "kill them, with clubs and knives, and chop them to pieces." Without any second thought, they consume the flesh of the four prisoners because they are no longer recognizable as human beings. This violent act of consumption is narratively anticipated in the moment the wings they have grown are compared to "the wings of a roast chicken", a bird whose flesh is considered socially acceptable to eat. The eeriness of this final scene derives from the uncertain degree of moral and social status of the new beings, a decision that ultimately falls in the hands of the readers who are indirectly called to take a moral stance.

The moral scope of the story is rooted in the concept of monster, embodied by the transfigured prisoners, whose role goes much beyond being a threat to social orders and ontological categories. In fact, the Latin roots of the word "monster" are *monstrare* and *monere*, which respectively mean "to show" and "to warn". Thus, on one side, this is a story of hidden systems made visible; on the other, it is a reminder to be vigilant of the ethical drifts of human hubris that is enabled in the laboratory by disrupting ecologies and living beings through coercive means. This sense of moral responsibility is evokes already from the title, a direct quotation of Dante's *Purgatory*, specifically canto 10 on humility and pride, which sets the tone to the whole story shaped around the image of Leeb's distorted realization of the angelic butterfly.[86] Leeb's interpretation of Dante's passage on spiritual metamorphosis is missing the fundamental distinction between literal and figurative, an error that Franco Baldasso has defined

[85] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019, p. 7.

[86] For a close reading of Dante's intertextual presence in this short story and a more thorough discussion of the etymology of *monster* see Nancy Harrowitz, *Primo Levi and the Identity of a Survivor*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016, pp. 73-76.

"hermeneutic".[87] By extension, then, the laboratory can be understood as a space of re-literalization of metaphors and allegories made possible through the use and abuse of test subjects.

The cognitive estrangement provoked by science fiction represents, in Levi's view, the entry point to grasp the distorted nature governing the "world turned upside down" and to learn how to recognize its possible iterations after Auschwitz. The logic of bio-necro-politics persisting in practices of experimentation on other animals represents one of those iterations, as these stories have demonstrated. While science has had a fundamental role in producing the gas chambers, the atomic bomb, and the environmental crisis, Levi is convinced that "an equilibrium can be restored and, what is more, with the tools we already have, not through some hypothetical new discovery nor, worst of all, through violence."[88] However, as long as the violence inflicted on other animals is not fully acknowledged, the moral distortions invoked in this short story continue to linger in our societies, cultures, and minds.

The short story *Disfilassi* (Disphylaxis), first published on *La Stampa* in 1978 and included in the collection *Lilít and Other Stories* in 1982, is an attempt to envision the restoration of this lost equilibrium that relies on a deep reconfiguration of multispecies coexistence. Here, Primo Levi imagines a utopic world of cross-species fertilization that foreshadows the notion of species as we know it. As a consequence of the distorted use of a chemical substance that impedes the rejection of organ transplantations, which Levi briefly mentions was tested on rats, a process of regeneration is initiated: "nature turned upside down had found a coherence." Interbreeding among animal species and pollination processes constantly give birth to new hybrids that push

[87] Franco Baldasso, "Angelic Butterfly and the Gorgon: On Lightness in Primo Levi's Writing," in *Interpreting Primo Levi*, cit., pp. 173-186 (175).
[88] Interview with Luca Lamberti (1971), "Science Fiction II. *Vizio di Forma*," in Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon, eds., *The Voice of Memory: Interviews 1961-1987*, cit., pp. 87-90 (90).

the categories of human and nonhuman into a zone of indistinction that requires the ontological redefinition of all organisms. The fluid dynamism of existence replaces the fixity of binary categorizations and vertical structures of power and domination. While the "human" still dominates from a biological perspective, there definitely is an anti-anthropocentric force in Levi's representation of the human body and essence.[89] Amelia, the young protagonist of the story whose blood is infused with vegetal lymph, is the symbol of a new "human" identity that has managed to overcome interspecies violence. In the final scene, charged with eroticism and desire, as she lies down among the ferns, she becomes fern herself. Her body movements begin to synchronize with the wind, which represents a physical manifestation of her metamorphosis into a harmonic part of the whole ecological system. The poetic richness of this passage is reinforced by synesthetic metaphors that allude to the blending of the senses to further disrupt conventional biological barriers. This allegorical metamorphosis grounded in the body offers an imaginative alternative to the idea of progress and evolution pursued in the space of the laboratory, one that embraces ecological ethics over an ethics based on egocentric interests. Levi's strong ecological vision, combined with the aesthetics of hybridity promoted in the story, provides conceptual tools essential to expanding our ethical horizons, recalibrating our relations with the nonhuman, and accepting our animality.

[89] Charlotte Ross has defined it an "embodiment of postanthropocentric posthumanism" in *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment: Containing the Human*, new York: Routledge, 2011, p. 158. Damiano Benvegnù frames it as a narrative of re-creation and counter-creation in *Animals and Animality in Primo Levi's Work*, cit., pp. 234-237.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have examined the secluded space of the laboratory through a close reading of a selection of Primo Levi's works, with a focus on the problematic use of nonhuman animals in biomedical and behavioral research. These texts have offered the opportunity to reflect on the moral conundrums of this space and to access the hidden mechanisms of laboratory practices, which substantially contribute to the dysfunctional state of our current interspecies relations. By analyzing the different ways in which Levi blurs the human-animal boundary, I have illustrated how the strict separation between the categories of "human" and "animal" is the product of a social construction that shifts according to cultural norms and interests. More specifically, I have taken science fiction as my heuristic point of departure in order to explore the ontologies and epistemologies of test subjects who are forced into a liminal state of existence in a space where fiction and reality collapse.

Each of these texts has highlighted a different facet of interspecies relations in the laboratories: from the researcher-researched relationship to biopolitical power relations and the bioethical issues concerning the difficulties with defining where the "human" ends and where the "animal" begins. Because of the dual position Levi has occupied —on one side, as a scientist experimenting on other animals and, on the other, as a potential test subject due to his Jewish identity— his writings have offered a unique perspective to these questions, particularly on the implications of taking control over the life and death processes of another living being and the cognitive mechanisms that make this violence not only possible but also socially acceptable. While Levi's contradictory nature and the multiplicity of identities within him have been thoroughly studied, this aspect of his life has not been fully acknowledged until now, perhaps

due to the cultural and institutional barriers that make it practically invisible.[90] The exploration of this grey zone has brought to light the ethical incongruities in Levi's ontological placement of nonhuman animals and, more broadly, how speciesism ideologically aligns with other forms of discrimination. In fact, looking at the problem from an intersectional lens has once again highlighted that humanity is a privileged status reserved for individuals who inhabit dominant race/ability/sex/species positions, which in the space of the laboratory takes shape under the ambiguous definition of "animal" that may encompass not only nonhuman animals but also other humans. As a result of the blurred distance between species, particularly in his science fiction stories, the distance between human and nonhuman animal experimentation is also blurred, which brings to light the underlying logic based on hierarchies of value in the selection of test subjects.

Furthermore, by centering the discourse on the corporeal dimension, the bodily presence of nonhuman animals in the texts suddenly gains new vitality and narrative significance, which has been my aim to identify and explore. The focus on instances of anthropomorphism, de-personification, and metamorphoses, has in fact revealed the complex power dynamics inherent to laboratory practices involving the use of living beings and the profound disruption of their identities. As Levi plays with the fiction/fact dichotomy through the incorporation of autobiographical elements and real-life experiments, he generates unsettling breaches in the moral order that reveal a poetics of distortion whose function is to offer a new understanding of reality and societal issues. Literature itself, then, becomes a laboratory for narrative and cognitive experiments that help make visible and conceptually graspable concealed aspects of

[90] See for instance Eva Tichoniuk-Wawrowicz, "L'Ibridismo nell'Opera Primoleviana," in *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia*, n. 35, 2008, pp. 93-101; Massimo Giuliani, *A Centaur in Auschwitz: Reflections on Primo Levi's Thinking*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003, pp. 27-36; Damiano Benvegnù, "Primo Levi e Konrad Lorenz," in *Innesti: Primo Levi e i Libri Altrui*, Gianluca Cinelli and Robert S.C. Gordon, eds., Oxford, New York: Peter Lang, 2020, pp. 197-214.

reality. Once inside the hidden geography of the laboratory, the epistemic power of Levi's science fiction and, ultimately, of his utopian imagination lies in its ability to challenge ethical norms and to push readers to reconsider the place of the "human" has in the world.

CONCLUSIONS

Rethinking Multispecies Coexistence

In discussing different literary attempts to cross, blur, and reconceptualize the problematic human-animal divide, this dissertation has offered counterhegemonic perspectives on interspecies relationships through the close reading of a selection of 20th century Italian narratives. The focus on spaces of animal confinement, namely slaughterhouses, zoos, and laboratories, has proved to be a viable strategy to conduct cohesive and focused critical discourse that sheds a light on the fundamental role of literature to enhance cognitive and ethical sensitivity towards other animals. Literature has given privileged access to these vastly ignored geographies of exploitation by amplifying the embodied and emotional experiences of all the individuals therein, human and nonhuman, which has led to an analysis of the ethical issues tied to the routine operations of these facilities. In fact, literature has helped to either make visible and legible spaces and relations that are outside of public view, such as the institutionalized killing of nonhuman animals, or to expose the elusive —yet in plain sight— power structures in spaces where nonhumans are used for entertainment. At the heart of this project is the idea that the creation of the human-animal binary is not only inherently flawed, but that it also has devastating consequences on our shared ecologies. In fact, the texts have exposed the extreme mobility of the categories of "human" and "animal" and the ways in which they enable othering discourses as well as discriminatory rhetoric, which helped uncover how structural speciesism is inextricably linked to other forms of structural oppression, notably racism, sexism, ableism, and classism. By adopting an antispeciesist perspective to my close readings, this work has aimed at an epistemic reconfiguration of the categories "animal" and "human", which entailed challenging a

hierarchical mode of thinking, questioning the ethical grounds of human exceptionalism, and the labeling of nonhuman animals as commodities.

This dissertation, then, outlines the beginnings of a much larger program for research. It suggests how, going forward, the study of narratives across media can both inform and be informed by developments in critical animal studies, and how they can enrich each other. A radical shift towards nonhuman criticism has uncovered new layers of meanings in the corpus of texts while also leading to a deeper understanding of the role nonhuman animals generally play in literary texts, even when they are incorporated solely into metaphoric domains. While reading the word does not automatically translate into reading the world, developing new ways of seeing texts and cultures that exceed normative and canonical views, inevitably promotes different ways of interpreting our societies and lived experiences. It is for this reason that the imagination can play a key role in processes of moral and political learning. And by redirecting the gaze toward multispecies justice it is also possible to develop new ways of imagining our worlds. As José Medina rightfully affirms, "different ways of imagining can sensitize or desensitize people to individuals' experiences; [...] they can create or sever social bonds, affective ties, and relations of empathy or antipathy, solidarity and lack of solidarity. Stigmatizing ways of imagining play a crucial role in causing expressive and epistemic harms —and more indirectly other kinds of harm as well— by distorting and excusing the suffering of some. But *resistant* ways of imagining can contest stigmatizations, and they can help us become sensitive to the suffering of stigmatized subjects."[1] Literature, then, may also be empowering and disempowering; it may maintain the status quo or contribute to change; it can turn into a vehicle for social change if examined through a lens that goes beyond aesthetic values. In order to recognize and properly address these

[1] José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistence: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 252.

polarized repercussions, academic discourse must also acknowledge the presence of nonhuman animals without conceptualizing them as opposite to humans and whose function is to be at our service. This is the shift required to dismantle systems that contribute to intersectional oppressions and to build an ethics of multispecies coexistence, a project that requires to reflect critically on how we live on this planet, to rethink identities and relationships, work towards a new set of values, and renegotiate our shared spaces.

But how do we get there? Again, literature is an essential tool in envisioning alternate realities and enabling environmental consciousness. In particular, speculative fiction represents, perhaps, the most effective tool to reconfigure spaces and imagine more just ways of being in the world. In fact, through the fictional construction of parallel realities, it is possible to sample different life scenarios that call for moral and political reactions, therefore creating an imaginative bridge between our world and other possible ones. The key to progressing as a morally equipped species has been sitting on our bookshelves for decades, even centuries, in the works of writers around the world who have imagined a world where hierarchies are dismantled and species barriers reimagined. These powerful texts can help us overcome our most frightening challenges and allow us to glimpse possible futures. The recent rise of climate fiction, as a creative response to tackle issues related to climate change, and Afrofuturism, which draws from science fiction and technoculture to envision a future centered around Black people, are just two examples of how literature serves a primary role in redefining social norms, rethinking relations, and finding tangible solutions to real world problems.[2] When thinking of a future where nonhuman animals

[2] Several works provide effective introductions to the genre's history, aesthetics, and significance. See Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013; Sandra, Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman, eds., *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative*, New York: Peter Lang, 2011. For an overview of climate fiction, see Shelley Streeby, *Imagining the Future in a Time of Climate Change*, Berkeley: University of

are also liberated, post-apocalyptic narratives can help serve this purpose, especially those in which a devastating catastrophe is followed by a radical rebuilding. In fact, as a response to anthropogenic destruction, written narratives provide a space to theorize a new ecological balance originated from the socio-spatial restructuring of imagined desolated landscapes. In the Italian context, a spate of post-apocalyptic novels that echo this description was published at the end of the 1970s. Some examples include Carlo Cassola's "Il Cane" (*The Dog*, 1978) and "Il Paradiso degli Animali" (*Animal Paradise*, 1979), Guido Morselli's "Dissipatio H.G." (1977), and Paolo Volponi's "Il Pianeta Irritabile" (*Irritable Planet*, 1978). What these books have in common, besides all being available only in Italian, which surely contributes to their cultural isolation, is that the authors imagine end of the world scenarios where a survivor, or a group of survivors, inhabits a world in which the only traces left of humans —if any— are machines and automated systems. In the attempt to imagine a world without human domination, a possible solution envisioned in these novels is that humans must disappear, a narrative that feeds our fear of extinction. Thus, nonhuman animals come to play a crucial role in the reconstruction of these shattered worlds, even when their presence might seem marginal and insignificant. The ways in which the authors play on one side with the allegorical potential of nonhuman animals and on the other with their *real* nature and place in the world, represent a key feature of these novels that, once again, reveals meaningful information regarding their ontological placement in the human mind. What the authors offer are not instant solutions. However, they do encourage us to question social developments in our own societies by composing elaborate narratives that can function as concrete models for our world in contrast with the more abstract conceptions developed in works of political theory. Their provocative political and philosophical stances,

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California Press, 2018; Greger Andersen, *Climate Fiction and Cultural Analysis: a New Perspective on Life in the Anthropocene*, Milton Park, Abington, Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2020.

each in a unique and brilliant way, challenge the limits of the nature/culture dichotomy and demonstrate the necessity to rebuild a world in which the tragic separation between humans and the rest of the natural world is completely dissolved, a world that can thrive only if it ceases to be based on domination and exploitation. A dystopia-utopia dialectic takes place in all of these works, which reinforces in the readers the sensation of a potential real-life actualization. While the Greek word *utopia* has been translated as "no place" as well as a "perfect place", which interestingly carries a spatial connotation, the concept of *utopia* is much more complex and goes far beyond simply escaping or dreaming about imaginary and unrealistic states. In fact, to think in a utopian way is a prime political act, and particularly in the direction of social change. While the history of western literary utopias is controversial, since at times writers have built a utopian system that is a perfect fit only for an elitist portion of the human population, thus becoming a tool for the justification of enslavement, social exclusion, animal exploitation, and colonization, these novels can represent a powerful tool to envision a future where nonhuman animals are free from human subjugation and become the protagonists of the rebuilding of a multispecies society.[3] Perhaps, one of the most striking examples of the recentralization of nonhuman animals in the decision-making process can be found in Carlo Cassola's *Animal Paradise*.

In the same years that Ernest Callenbach was publishing his famous *Ecotopia*, in Italy Carlo Cassola, a partially dismissed author even in his home country, was working on this peculiar example of ecological utopia.[4] During his life, Cassola advocated against animal cruelty, against

[3] Some examples include Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (1516), which preserves the institution of slavery, Tommaso Campanella's *City of Sun* (1602), in which nonhuman animals are exploited in various ways for human purposes and the main role of women is of reproducers, and Robert Pemberton's *The Happy Colony* (1854), set in an area of New Zealand populated by Maori whose presence is totally erased.

[4] Cassola is mostly known as the writer of the famous novel *La ragazza di Bube* (Bebo's Girl, 1960). The severe criticism received by some members of the Group 63, from Edoardo Sanguineti to Pier Paolo Pasolini, who came up with the stigmatized name "Liala", degrading and sexist reference to the romance

war, and against the dangers of consumerism, and has fiercely insisted on the duty of humanity to turn passivity into action before reaching the point of no return. His radical position and pivotal contribution to the Italian literary scene remain largely unrecognized, along with this forgotten novel that cleverly makes use of speaking animals, a literary category that if employed with the intention of making nonhuman voices intelligible to humans has the potential to disrupt the logic and codes of anthropocentric language and thinking. In this novel, Cassola articulates his political beliefs rooted in the nonviolent movement and offers revolutionary perspectives on the issue of ethical vegetarianism. Published during an anxious period of nuclear threat and the unsettling political context of the Cold War, the author imagines a post-apocalyptic scenario where nonhuman animals are the only survivors and receptors of the devastating effects of human activity. From an end of the world setting the novel quickly turns into a utopia in which the nonhuman animals who have survived a mysterious environmental disaster realize that, in order to survive and thrive as a new society, they must drastically change their behaviors. If they want to bring durable peace on Earth and avoid repeating the same mistakes of humans, they must evolve, and the only possible solution they find to accomplish this is for them to become vegetarian: "we, animals, have the moral duty to replace humans, and we cannot do it if we are not united. But there is only one way to be united: to stop eating one another..." Also, by abolishing even the very existence of predation, perceived as a necessary step for moral progress, they manage to create a "paradise", a world where all creatures become inoffensive and can finally live together in peace and solidarity. It is important to note that these are not simply anthropomorphized animals that reflect human traits. In fact, reducing this novel to a satire or a plain allegory would mean disregarding its complex nuances. Here, each species maintains its

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novels by Amalia Liana Cambiasi Negretti writing under this pseudonym, have contributed to the marginalization of his later literary production.

general characteristics and the individuality of each nonhuman animal is respected and thoughtfully developed. They are truly the perfect humans that have never existed. However, after a first phase of peaceful coexistence, they slowly start to recreate the conditions of life that had brought humans to their self-destruction: "they repeated the same horrible mistakes humans made, starting with going to war" —where "human" must be intended as a restricted circle of individuals who are in a position of power. As they slowly start to resemble humans too closely, their utopia starts to crumble. The reinstitution of hierarchies, combined with the desire of a species to dominate over others, in this case impersonated by cats who exploit others based on their presumed superior intelligence, lead to dramatically violent actions, such as the extermination of snakes who had refused to submit to their rules and a yearning for colonial expansion. While at times an anthropocentric bias tends to take over, particularly visible in the reiteration of species-based stereotypes or the reproduction of the nature/civilization dichotomy, where nature is depicted as "cruel and ruthless", the prominent role nonhuman animals play in reclaiming their spaces and redefining their ontological status gives readers the opportunity to imagine a world where geographies of exploitation and violence, such as the ones examined in this dissertation, cease to exist as a result of the acknowledgement of nonhuman animal personhood. Because definite conclusions cannot be drawn, I want to end this work with an excerpt from this novel, precisely the moment in which nonhuman animals experience freedom for the first time, hoping that its creative force can pour outside the literary page. The initial scene describing the rediscovery of their bodily autonomy is followed by a rare depiction of a cow who grieves the loss of her companion, an emotion that is normatively erased, especially in other species. Here, it exists, it has a space. And I want to honor it, through the prose of Carlo Cassola, for all those who grieve, unseen, awaiting liberation.

The disaster happened at nine o'clock in the evening. The animals were all chained. They would have ended miserably, if the chains had not broken. We do not know what atmospheric phenomenon caused it. Likewise, the doors burst open, and the animals were free. It would have been humans' last crime, if the chains had remained intact and the doors closed.

Instead, while all humans were dying, most of the animals were safe. They rushed out, like after an earthquake (and it very much resembled an earthquake). Was it an instinct for freedom, or an even more profound instinct? Surely, they were restless, and they manifested it through their deafening cries. For a few minutes the farms in the valley blared with bellows, brays, neighs, barks.

Then the animals rushed to drink. They drank from the puddles that had formed the day before after a sudden rain. The imprisoned animals could not quench the burning thirst: it was the worst torment during the agony that lasted throughout the night.

Chickens and rabbits mingled with the larger animals. For an unknown reason, the fences were torn with large holes. Chickens and rabbits were there, sleeping. They all woke up at the same time and, making as much noise as they could, they went outside.

After having quenched their thirst, cows, donkeys, horses, and dogs resumed their cries. Most likely, everyone else also resumed their cries, but since their voices were not as loud it was hard to hear them. A single roar rose from each farm, breaking the eerie silence of the countryside. The liberated animals signaled their position with their cries; the imprisoned ones called for help in vain.

There was a young cow who bellowed helplessly all night in front of the door of a barn. From inside came the excruciating invocation of her companion. He was terribly thirsty and did not know how to find relief. Without success, the other animals tried to convince her to leave: there was nothing left to do. As long as she received an answer from the other side, even if increasingly weaker, she did not move from there.

She was from another farm, but once the daylight came, she did not return where she was. She joined her new friends in the field. There was plenty of grass; eating was not an issue. But the cow would not graze. The others respected her silent pain. Suddenly, they saw her running recklessly across the field: she had seen a bull, and thought it was her companion. She was disappointed when she realized it was not him. She never returned to any of the farms: she wandered desperately around the countryside. We do not know what happened to her.

Carlo Cassola, *Il Paradiso degli Animali*,
Rizzoli: Milano, 1979, pp. 31-33.
The translation is mine.

Figure 17. Hartmut Kiewert, *Hill*, 2019, oil on canvas, 250 x 380 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

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