

A Rupture in the Field of Representation: Animals, Photography and Affect

***Recruiting Strangers and Friends: Moral Shocks and Social Networks in Animal Rights and Anti-Nuclear Protests.* James M. Jasper and Jane D. Poulsen. 1995. *Social Problems* 42(4): 493–512.**

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Abstract

This review essay explores the sociality of photographic affect through an analysis of animal photography. It offers a social reading of Barthes's concept of the punctum by examining the importance of animality to the concept's formulation. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's work on animality as a key question in Western thought, the paper argues that Barthes's engagement with animality is not arbitrary and that thinking in terms of animality helps us to understand photographic affect as necessarily social.

Keywords: affect, animals, Barthes, punctum, photography

Picturing Animal Suffering

In their analysis of the difference between animal rights activism and anti-nuclear activism, Jasper and Poulsen (1995) find that, unlike the case with other forms of activism, animal rights activists do not primarily emerge from social networks, that is through extended discussions of the issues with people

they know or by seeing friends or family model activist commitment to them. Instead, they are galvanized by their encounter with images, largely photographs, of animal suffering. Some viewers of these photographs enter activism in response to the affective demands placed on them by images of suffering animal bodies. Jasper and Poulsen situate these affective responses as “moral shocks” which they define as occurring “when an event or situation raises such a sense of outrage in people that they become inclined toward political action, even in the absence of a network of contacts” (1995: 498). The fact that images of animal suffering can spur viewers to become activists suggests that the photographs’ affective charge elicits action and social involvement.

For Jasper and Poulsen, the galvanizing effects of photographs of animal suffering are the result of the framing of the images by animal rights activists who use them as “condensing symbols.”¹ They suggest that activists use the multiple meanings attached to the images to function as recruitment tools based on viewers’ pre-existing left-liberal values and frames (Jasper and Poulsen 1995: 507).^{2,3} While Jasper and Poulsen acknowledge that the photographs used in animal rights activism are “well chosen to shock” and point out the importance of photography’s presentation of an “illusion of unmediated reality” to the effectiveness of animal rights activism’s use of images, their argument is ultimately unconcerned with the affective potential of photographs, and is instead aimed at demonstrating the importance of moral shocks to the development of activist networks. As importantly, their analysis undermines John Berger’s canonical argument that

photographs of animals reinforce a separation between humans and animals. In “Why Look at Animals?,” Berger (1980) argues that photographs present an image of the animal as fundamentally separate from humans, and points out that capitalism’s reorganization of society separates humans from the animals with whom they once lived; we can no longer see animals because they are so marginalized that they can no longer meaningfully look back at us. Animals and their representations can either disappoint us or function as ideal figures of freedom. Berger’s presentation of animal imagery as compensatory fantasy stands in marked contrast to the politically galvanizing images described by Jasper and Poulsen,⁴ whose findings suggest that we might look to animal photography to gain purchase on a social model of photographic affect.

This review essay explores the sociality of affect constituted by photographs of animal bodies. Drawing connections between debates about the affective demands of animal rights activism and the concept of “moral shock” developed by Jasper and Paulsen with Jonathan Burt’s account of moving animals in film as “rupture[s] in the field of representation” (Burt 2002: 11), I provide a context for understanding an often overlooked but nonetheless pivotal preoccupation with animals in Roland Barthes’s landmark book, *Camera Lucida*. By drawing on Jacques Derrida’s work on animality as a key question in Western thought, I suggest that Barthes’s engagement with animality is not arbitrary and that thinking in terms of animality helps us to understand photographic affect as necessarily social (Derrida 2001; 2003).

Moving Images of Animals

In seeking to draw out the implications of Jasper and Poulsen's work, I follow Jonathan Burt who expanded on their arguments in his book *Animals in Film* (Burt 2002). In discussing the affective potential of animals in film, Burt suggests that "The position of the animal as a visual object is a key component in the structuring of human responses towards animals generally, particularly emotional responses" (Burt 2002: 11). Visual representations of animals, including films and photographs, not only provide access to them but also produce an affective response.⁵ The reason for this, according to Burt, is that "animal imagery has a rupturing effect, both in terms of the way it unavoidably points beyond itself to wider issues and in its capacity to resist or problematize its own meanings on screen" (Burt 2002: 13). By this he means, in part, that the body of the animal provokes an affective response in viewers that collapses the fictional structure of a filmic representation in favor of an emotionally charged ethical response. While Burt's concern is with filmic representations, his arguments resonate also for animal photography, and suggestion that animals signify a "rupture in the field of representation" (Burt 2002: 11) provocatively parallels Barthes's account of the punctum. Exploring what it might mean to suggest that animals acts as filmic punctums allows me to revisit Roland Barthes's analysis of the punctum and reveals the extent to which Barthes's analysis of photographic affect (Barthes 1982) is haunted by the spectre of the animal.

Burt notes that audiences appear unable to accept animal images as merely fictional. He locates this difficulty in a distinction

between performing and acting in relation to animal representation in film. Animal bodies act but they do not perform. That is, through training they produce behaviors that are integrated into the diegetic structure of the film as meaningful but they do not intend that meaning. This gap between meaning and intention opens up an ethical charge in relation to the representation of animal bodies such that people seek to intervene in, regulate, and censor the production of animal representations.⁶ Burt's argument expands the field of Jasper and Poulsen's concerns from the image of the suffering animal body to any filmic depiction of the animal.

It is the naturalization of animals' movements that contribute to making the filmic animal "represent an insertion of the real or the natural into film" (Burt 2002: 136). Seeing animals as an insertion of the real does not simply suggest that audiences suspect that the things depicted really happened to the animals involved, nor is it simply that animal imagery is laden with multiple and contradictory meanings, but rather that "the animal is also marked as a site where these symbolic associations collapse into each other. In other words, the animal image is a form of rupture in the field of representation." However, Burt cautions that this rupture does not simply suggest that the animal functions as a floating signifier. Instead he argues that "the fact that the animal image can so readily point beyond its significance on screen to questions about its general treatment or fate in terms of welfare, suggests that the boundaries of film art ... cannot easily delimit the meaning of the animal within its fictions" (Burt 2002: 11).⁷

By presenting the image of the filmic animal as a paradoxical conflation of

ideas that highlight the exteriority of representation, Burt positions the filmic representation of animals as containing two tensions:

The first is characterized by metaphorical parallels that seek to collapse human and animal at some level and which highlight a shared experience of suffering. The second detaches human and animal suffering as separate issues, but also bases itself on a refusal to read the animal image purely as an image. This split within the animal image—the artificial image that can never be read as artificial—ruptures all readings of it. (Burt 2002:162–163)

In seeing the animal image as rupturing any reading, I propose that Burt presents animal bodies as filmic punctums. Yet, unlike Barthes's description of the punctum as a private experience, Burt's argument suggests that the filmic punctum of animal bodies is not private, but rather social and political. Burt's analysis of animal bodies as filmic punctums can help us understand the workings of the photographic punctum.

Punctums

The comparison of film and photography has stressed filmic images' integration into a narrative flow and film's reanimation of the moment against the profound stillness of photography (Metz 2003). The question, then, is to what extent the analysis of the animal bodies' rupture of the filmic narrative carries over to the singular image of photography. In order to situate Burt's argument in relation to photography, I turn to Barthes's canonical analysis of photographic affect. Barthes's formulation of the punctum in *Camera Lucida* is generally

understood as a model of hermetic individualism that contrasts markedly with Burt's social notion of the affective nature of the filmic representation of animals.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes famously distinguishes between the studium and punctum on the basis of their production of affect. The studium is the social and cultural field of photography and is characterized by affective indifference. Barthes's argument for affective indifference does not claim that studium photographs are without interest, but rather that they are without affective charge. This means that in relation to studium photographs, "emotion requires the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture" (Barthes 1982: 26). If we respond affectively to the studium photograph, it is because of what we know and bring to the image, not because of what we see.

In contrast to the indifference of the studium, Barthes describes the punctum as a wound, as "that accident which pricks, bruises me" (Barthes 1982: 26). The wounding experience of the punctum exposes us to the exteriority of the photograph—what Barthes calls the blind field—opening us up to the life outside the image. This affective exposure of the viewer by the photograph to exteriority is at the root of Barthes's expansion of the punctum from a property of some photographs to a property of photography in general in the second part of *Camera Lucida*. In what he calls its "madness," the photograph, in its exposure to our view of a scene we did not see, its exposure, that is, of our exteriority, exposes us to our own finitude (Barthes 1982: 111). The photograph shows us a catastrophe, the live image of the dead. It gives us an image

that is haunted by the inevitability of an impending death that has already occurred, an impending death that is also our own.

However, it is photography's opening us up to what Barthes calls a "flat death" that also makes photography's affective charge a private experience for him. Photographs address us individually in our historical contingency (Barthes 1982: 97). This individualism also means that the look that the photograph presents us with remains exterior to us despite its emotional charge. Barthes describes this exteriority in relation to Kertesz's photograph of a boy and a puppy: "That lower class boy who holds a newborn puppy against his cheek . . . looks into the lens with his sad, jealous, fearful eyes: what pitiable, lacerating pensiveness! In fact he is looking at nothing; he retains within himself his love and his fear: that is the Look" (Barthes 1982: 113). The photograph looks at us but its look cannot be reciprocated. The exteriority of the look is the photograph's affective madness: "Bearing effigy to that crazy point where affect (love, compassion, grief, enthusiasm, desire) is a guarantee of being. It then approaches, to all intents madness" (ibid.: 111). It is because of what Barthes sees as the necessarily individual confrontation with finitude, exteriority, and mortality that he claims "[t]he reading of public photographs is always, at bottom, a private reading" (ibid.: 97). And, it is for this reason that he famously cannot reproduce the Winter Garden photograph of his recently deceased mother as a child, because, as he says, "[i]t exists only for me" (ibid.: 73). For us there would be no wound, no punctum, no affective charge. Our relation to our finitude and the exteriority of the photograph is private because for Barthes

photographs address us in the individuality of our mortality (ibid.: 84). Ultimately, Barthes suggests that photography's exposure to finitude produces in us an experience of pity tinged with madness. Thus, he suggests that in each of the photographs in which he experienced the punctum, he "passed beyond the unreality of the thing represented" and "entered crazily into the spectacle, taking into [his] arms what is dead, what is going to die, as Nietzsche did when, as Podach tells us, on January 3, 1889, he threw himself in tears on the neck of a beaten horse: gone mad for pity's sake" (ibid.: 117). The punctum, as the affective charge of our exposure to the real in the photograph, is the embrace of suffering and mortality, the maddening embrace of the suffering animal body (which is also our own). Photography's madness presents us with the overwhelming demand of suffering.

There are two ways, Barthes tells us, of taming this madness of the photograph, of taming, in other words, the suffering of the dying animal. We can generalize the photograph into banality where everything dissolves into images. Or, we can turn the photographic image into art or project it into film: "The cinema participates in this domestication of Photography—at least the fictional cinema, precisely the one said to be the seventh art; a film can be mad by artifice; can present the cultural signs of madness, it is never mad by nature (by iconic status); it is always the very opposite of an hallucination; it is simply an illusion" (Barthes 1982: 117). Through integrating photography into the directed flow of images and reanimating the dying body it displays, film tames the madness of the photograph by offering us dreams.⁸ Yet, as Burt's analysis suggests, the

reanimation of the animal image fails to tame the affective madness of the photograph. How are we to understand this failure and what might it mean for the understanding of photographic affect?

Animality, Exteriority and Finitude

Barthes positions the punctum as the experience of death (through a shared suffering understood as animal) that is singular and unshareable. Yet the possibility of the punctum as a generalizable experience of photographic affect depends on our shared experience of finitude. Outside our shared finitude through our shared exposure to mortality there is a second finitude we share—one that is often taken to divide us from animals—the exteriority of language (Wolfe 2003). The exteriority of language means that the concepts we use, including our self-conceptions as human, pre-exist us; they are not our own. This fundamental insight of the exteriority of language, and hence its necessary impropriety, that Barthes so powerfully deployed in “The Death of the Author,” seems not to have survived the death of his mother (Barthes 1977). Barthes refused to accord the meaning of a text to the intentions of its author-god, seeing the meaning as endlessly and differentially produced in its encounters with readers, yet photographic affect remains for Barthes unshareable because it is not fully reproducible. However, if the experience of photographic affect is always also for Barthes the experience of death then this refusal is problematic. For it is precisely through the exteriority of language that we have access to the necessity of our own death while at the same time no proper concept of it. We cannot experience or think our own death;

we can only conceive death through the other (Derrida 1996). Thus, the punctum has its roots in an experience that cannot be personal and can only be conceived as an experience through the other.⁹

Akira Lippit (2000), following the line of Western ontotheology, emphasizes animals’ inability to comprehend or conceive death. For this reason, he describes film, and technology in general, as an attempt to mourn the disappearance of animals by continually reanimating them in moving images. However, as Cary Wolfe suggests, if we accept Derrida’s argument that animals must signify to the extent that they are social beings, then we cannot deny animals the exteriority we presume to keep for ourselves (Wolfe 2008; Derrida 2001, 2003). Moreover, Derrida argues, in his reading of *Camera Lucida*, that there is no distinction between photography and film in their wounding exteriority as technologies of the image (Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 113–134). For Derrida, “As soon as there is a technology of the image ... We are already specters of a ‘televised’” (Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 115–117).¹⁰ The madness of the photograph (of any image) is, for Derrida, the spectral logic of hauntology.¹¹ As Wolfe explains, “a kind of ‘spectrality’ inheres in the technology of the image because of its iterability” (Wolfe 2008: 30).¹² This spectrality is wounding because technologies of the image offer an unreturnable look from outside that questions the surety of our identities, up to and including the stability of our distinctions between humans and animals (Derrida and Stiegler 2002: 122–123).

In regard to the character of this look, I propose that while images of humans offer us a face,¹³ which potentially places

an ethical demand on us, images of animals engage us affectively, opening us up to the experience of embodiment¹⁴—an opening that we can attempt to tame, or harness, by framing it as a moral shock. To return to Barthes, this suggests that the madness of the photograph is based on our experience of embodiment and finitude. Yet, because our finitude is shared, the affective exposure of the photograph does not have to leave us isolated but can instead open us up to our being-in-common, a being-in-common that we cannot preemptively circumscribe through our belief that we already know who we are and what distinguishes us from others.¹⁵ There is, then, ultimately no taming of the madness of photographs. Instead we must take their wounding as an opening to share. This implies that the possibility of a just image that Barthes seeks is not only to be found in the private encounter with the lost loved one, but any image that allows us to transcend our own finitude by opening us up to our exteriority can be “a just image” (Barthes 1982: 70); an image that opens us up to suffering opens the possibility of justice. This also suggests that the possibility of justice is not to be found in an impossible identity between the technical exteriorities of representation and a presumed unity of interiority, but rather in the infinite demand of the madness of both animal and human suffering which we must necessarily, in our finitude, fail to be adequate to but which at the same time opens us to the exteriority of the future. Animals, then, profoundly haunt *Camera Lucida* and its presentation of the punctum. By taking animals seriously we can open up our understanding of the punctum’s presentation of affect to exteriority and, thus, to the social.

Notes

- 1 Jasper and Poulsen define a condensing symbol as a “multireferent, visual or verbal encapsulation of other cultural meanings” (Jasper and Poulsen 1995: 495).
- 2 Frames are explanatory structures that shape how individuals view and understand situations in the world (Jasper and Poulsen 1995: 495).
- 3 Here it is important to note Steve Baker’s caution that the politics of animal rights have historically not mapped straightforwardly onto a left–right divide (Baker 2001). I am, however, bracketing from my analysis any consideration of the strategic effectiveness of imagery for the promotion of animal rights that Baker takes as his focus.
- 4 Berger’s argument has come under pressure in contemporary scholarship. See, for example, (Brower 2005; Burt 2005).
- 5 Similarly, Derek Bousé suggests that wildlife films encourage viewers to form para-proxemic relations with the animals depicted, that is, to feel an intimate or emotional connection to them. However, unlike Burt, Bousé suggests that these emotions are false (Bousé 2003).
- 6 This need to intervene in the representation of animals can be seen, for example, in the use of Humane Society inspectors in film production.
- 7 By drawing on Hilda Kean’s argument that the development of concepts of animal welfare and rights were connected to the formation of the modern subject in which being seen to behave humanely was an important marker of civilization, Burt locates the ability of the animal image to point beyond the fictional framework it is embedded in, to the social condition of animals, historically (Burt 2002: 35–36; Kean 1998). The emphasis on the display of animal welfare Kean identifies was part of the process by which the death of animals disappeared from the center of modern Western cities to be displaced to windowless abattoirs on their outskirts. It is in part this animal suffering, hidden in order for us to appear modern to ourselves, then, that animal rights photography seeks to expose. This indicates

that the moral regulation of animal representation is an attempt to define and regulate the human.

- 8 Akira Lippit suggests that film technology is a mourning of the impossibility of animal death (Lippit 2000).
- 9 Affectively, however, the death of a loved one is experienced personally and, as Freud argued, the individual experiencing the loss has to learn how to incorporate that loss into their sense of self (Freud 1957 [1917]).
- 10 Derrida is using “televised” to indicate a distanced, or technologized, vision.
- 11 For a reading of the Derridean problematic of spectrality in relation to photography, see Kaplan 2008.
- 12 On iterability as the necessity of *différance* in repetition, see Derrida, 1988.
- 13 The concept of the face refers here to the Levinasian problematic of the face of the other as the origins of the ethics in the infinite and asymmetrical demand it places on me to be responsible. Levinas suggests that animals do not have faces in this sense (Levinas 1969). My argument here suggests that the understanding of the face as an ethical demand is connected to our identifying as human.
- 14 In linking animal representation’s production of affect to embodiment, my argument approaches those understandings of affect which see it as embodied (Massumi 2005).
- 15 My reading here is close to the Nancean reading offered in Louis Kaplan’s *American Exposures* (Kaplan 2005)

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