

# Mediating Vulnerability

*Comparative approaches and questions  
of genre*

Edited by  
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# Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	vii
Introduction: on/off limits <i>Anneleen Masschelein, Florian Mussgnug and Jennifer Rushworth</i>	1
<b>Part 1: Human/Animal</b>	<b>17</b>
1. What if they could speak? Humanized animals in science fiction <i>Simona Micali</i>	19
2. Rewriting the myth: consideration of the Minotaur in Georgi Gospodinov's <i>The Physics of Sorrow</i> <i>Nicole Siri</i>	38
3. A vulnerable predator: the wolf as a symbol of the natural environment in the works of Ernest Thompson Seton, Jack London and Cormac McCarthy <i>Kateřina Kovářová</i>	52
<b>Part 2: Violence/Resistance</b>	<b>69</b>
4. Retelling the Parsley Massacre: vulnerability and resistance in Danticat's <i>The Farming of Bones</i> <i>Eleonora Rapisardi</i>	71
5. Toni Cade Bambara's vulnerable men <i>Tuula Kolehmainen</i>	82

6. <i>The Secret Agent</i> – fictionalizing history: Joseph Conrad and Stan Douglas <i>Sandra Camacho</i>	99
7. New worlds: violent intersections in graphic novels <i>Jessica Gross</i>	116
<b>Part 3: Image/Narrative</b>	<b>133</b>
8. Ludic space in horror fiction <i>Onni Mustonen</i>	135
9. Graphic stories of resistance: a comic memoir of becoming <i>Pinelopi Tzouva</i>	149
10. The cryptographic narrative in video games: the player as detective <i>Ana Paklons and An-Sofie Tratsaert</i>	168
11. Narrating pornographic images: photographic description and ekphrasis in <i>De fotograaf</i> by Jef Geeraerts <i>Karen Van Hove</i>	185
<b>Part 4: Medium/Genre</b>	<b>201</b>
12. Through the doors of time: media interactions and cultural memory in <i>El Ministerio del Tiempo</i> <i>Katie Ginsbach</i>	203
13. Vulnerability as duality in speculative fiction <i>Eva Dinis</i>	223
14. No, poetry is not out of date: notes on poetic writing and digital culture <i>Jan Baetens</i> <i>Translated by Marie-Claire Merrigan</i>	238
Afterword: Covid-19 or the vulnerability of the future <i>Florian Mussnug</i>	252
<i>Index</i>	258

# 1

## What if they could speak? Humanized animals in science fiction

Simona Micali

From *Aesop's Fables* to Disney's *Zootopia* (2016; also known as *Zootropolis*), the fictional imagination has offered countless stories of 'humanized animals' – animals that think, speak and behave as humans. Their characterizations and narrative roles cover a vast range, from fantastic beings who may act as helpers or antagonists in fantasy tales to generic animals, which are clear allegories of human types or qualities. In all these cases, the figures are the product of the universal practice of anthropomorphization, a cognitive and imaginative mechanism that functions as a filter both in our perception of and in our speculation about non-human beings and entities.<sup>1</sup> Recent studies in cognitive psychology, anthropology and ethics have shown that anthropomorphism may have an important role in shaping our attitudes and behaviour towards other species, thus gradually dismantling the centuries-long scientific arguments against it. Yet it is quite evident that anthropomorphizing animals does not automatically affect our consideration of animals per se. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the continuous practice of seeing and imagining animals with human features has not hindered in the least the equally continuous exploitation, maltreatment and slaughter of animals for our own purposes.

In this chapter I will leave aside anthropomorphized animals and focus instead on works of fiction in which the humanization of animals is meant in a literal sense, namely, science fiction (SF) stories involving figures of animals that have undergone a process or a procedure through which they have acquired some human features. These figures are not a particular case of the more general category of anthropomorphic animals. Indeed, the assumed plausibility of their origin radically changes

their ontological and fictional status. Mickey Mouse and Philip K. Dick's post-atomic mice are not variations of a single figure, but completely different creatures. The former is the inhabitant of a fantasy world in which animals are assumed to be analogous to humans, and the rules of 'make-believe' require us to accept this purely imaginary premise for the whole time of our experience. On the contrary, Dick's mice are the inhabitants of a fictional world which is a credible and very realistic transformation of the one we live in, due to some exceptional (yet epistemologically possible) condition or event. The narrative pact requires us to accept this new world as possible not only temporarily, within the limits of the work we are reading, but also in the general sphere of our real world. If we assume that a humanized mouse is actually *possible*, it stops being a nice, cute creature and becomes instead a more disturbing, problematic being. More importantly, its characterization and fictional behaviour necessarily affect the way in which we regard actual mice, as they draw our attention to some features or potentialities in mice which we may previously have disregarded or underestimated. In short, it produces what Darko Suvin has defined as 'cognitive estrangement', that peculiar mechanism produced to a greater or lesser extent by any SF work.<sup>2</sup> By inviting us to see possible developments in or alternatives to the world we live in, SF enhances our critical understanding of what is real by highlighting or interpreting, or else by criticizing, particular aspects which we do not usually perceive clearly or thoroughly understand, or which we take for granted. In the case of humanized animals, I will argue that their SF occurrences always tend to be problematic, even when they are not openly threatening or *unheimlich* (uncanny), to evoke the Freudian term. They usually share some common features, including a peculiar and estranging use of language, a strongly pathetic profile and a controversial legal status. All these features, which are clearly connected to our notion of the 'vulnerable subject', refer to the same general category of the 'subhuman', that is, creatures outlined and perceived according to the human standard and yet regarded as insufficient or underdeveloped versions of it – as *not fully, not yet human*.<sup>3</sup> In other words, humanization is never complete. It is even suggested that humanization may never be able to be fully accomplished, thus leaving the test subject stuck in an ambivalent, intermediate condition between humanness and animality, which disturbs us since it obviously questions the very boundary between human and animal, thus hampering the functioning of what Giorgio Agamben has defined as 'the Anthropological Machine'.<sup>4</sup>

Mutant animals are fascinating, fantastic creatures and therefore very popular in the SF imagination across multiple media. From

Godzilla to Jurassic Park's dinosaurs, from the evolved monkeys of the *Planet of the Apes* film saga to the cyber-animal Rocket Raccoon in the Marvel comic *Guardians of the Galaxy*, we could illustrate a rich typology of characterization, modes of representation and narrative roles. Yet in this chapter I will direct my attention almost exclusively towards literary representations. My impression is that in all media involving visual representation the humanizing effect relies primarily on the physical aspects of the creatures: human features, clothes, an upright position, voice and so on. When represented visually, the animal's humanness is somehow normalized and becomes almost a foregone fact, no longer disturbing, in a manner similar to what happens in anthropomorphic representations. Instead, in literary representations the visual aspects are clearly secondary, mediated elements and humanization concerns primarily language and agency, in the sense that the humanized animal manifests itself mostly and above all by the way it speaks and acts, and by the motives and emotions which produce its speech and actions. Therefore, literary speculation mainly involves not so much the way in which the creature is characterized by the narrative but the way in which it positions itself in relation to the other characters, the plot and the narrative itself. In short, my interest is directed towards the humanized animal not as an *object* of fictional representation, but rather as a possible *subject* within fiction.

In the following pages, I will discuss the features of some of these very peculiar creatures, which I believe may both usefully highlight some implications of the theme of vulnerability in literature and connect it to the emerging discussion of non-human animals as 'vulnerable subjects' in Human-Animal Studies.<sup>5</sup>

## Victor Frankenstein meets Charles Darwin

The theme of humanized animals clearly finds its origin and epistemological ground in Darwin's theory of evolution, of which it emphasizes the implicit questioning of anthropocentrism and speciesism. In fact, both H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Heart of a Dog* (1925) can be easily read as rewritings of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* – probably the most influential archetype of modern SF – in light of the popularization of the theory of evolution. While Shelley's arrogant scientist defied God's authority to instil human life in inanimate matter, the post-Darwinian scientists compete with Him in trying to reproduce instantaneously the ages-long work of evolution which has transformed the beast into an intelligent, ethical creature. Yet,

just like Frankenstein, they will be severely punished for their hubris, as the creatures will reject their mastery and revolt – although the consequences will be tragic in the moralistic Wells, but much milder in the disenchanted and ironic Bulgakov.

H. G. Wells wrote *The Island of Doctor Moreau* in the wake of the dispute raised by the first protests against the practice of vivisection in Victorian Britain.<sup>6</sup> Despite his being a man of science and a student of Thomas Henry Huxley, Wells seems to take a firm stand against experimentation on animals in his portrait of the fanatic Moreau – who, as the protagonist Prendick suddenly recalls, had been ‘howled out of the country’ by the scandal raised regarding his experiments on living animals and had chosen to exile himself on a deserted Pacific island.<sup>7</sup> Here he is totally alone with his assistant Montgomery and a large number of wild animals upon whom he is totally free to carry out his research work, which is aimed at transforming them into human beings, by manipulating their bodies through surgery and their minds through hypnosis and terror. Nevertheless, it is not vivisection in itself which arouses Prendick’s (and the reader’s) moral judgement (as he remarks, ‘there was nothing so horrible in vivisection’), but the fact that Moreau’s experiments are ‘wantonly cruel’.<sup>8</sup> The scientist will in fact explain that he regards the infliction of physical pain on his subject as totally irrelevant in view of his noble scientific goals:

‘You see, I went on with this research just the way it led me. That is the only way I ever heard of research going . . . You cannot imagine the strange colourless delight of these intellectual desires. The thing before you is no longer an animal, a fellow-creature, but a problem. Sympathetic pain – all I know of it I remember as a thing I used to suffer from years ago. I wanted – it was the only thing I wanted – to find out the extreme limit of plasticity in a living shape.’

‘But,’ said I, ‘the thing is an abomination –’

‘To this day I have never troubled about the ethics of the matter. The study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature.’<sup>9</sup>

If experimenting on animals does not raise ethical issues, inflicting unnecessary pain on a ‘fellow creature’ does. The ambivalence is therefore connected to the question of how much pain is inflicted and how ‘necessary’ we consider it to be. Wells’s narrative strategies actually illustrate this ambivalence. The narrator, Edward Prendick, is a gentleman

and himself an amateur natural scientist, therefore he is in the best position to appreciate Moreau's intellectual passion. From this narrative perspective, in our first encounter with the large number of brutes who inhabit the island we regard them as weird, underdeveloped or degenerated human beings, whose beastly countenances and behaviour trigger horror and disgust. Here is the description of the first of Moreau's creatures Prendick encounters:

He was, I could see, a misshapen man, short, broad, and clumsy, with a crooked back, a hairy neck, and a head sunk between his shoulders . . . The facial part projected, forming something dimly suggestive of a muzzle, and the huge half-open mouth showed as big white teeth as I had ever seen in a human mouth. His eyes were bloodshot at the edges, with scarcely a rim of white round the hazel pupils . . . I had paused halfway through the hatchway, looking back, still astonished beyond measure at the grotesque ugliness of this black-faced creature. I had never beheld such a repulsive and extraordinary face before.<sup>10</sup>

At first Prendick supposes they are men on whom Moreau has run some devilish experiment. When he finds out the truth, he undoubtedly disapproves of Moreau's experiments, which he regards as an unacceptable manipulation of the laws of Nature; yet he still feels aversion for the test subjects, which he considers as 'bestial monsters, mere grotesque travesties of men', to be distrusted and feared.<sup>11</sup> The animal in them is still too clearly visible; 'the unmistakable mark of the beast' excludes them from the range of our sympathy. Moreover, the humanness of these 'Beast Folk' – as he calls them – is precarious, since the animal component remains latent and is ready to take over at any time.<sup>12</sup> Their violent drives, their dullness and their inability to manage complex concepts and speech are markers of their persistently animal nature. In fact, once Moreau's control over them finally comes to an end, each species rapidly regresses from its acquired subhuman condition to its original animal one. On an allegorical level, the story may thus be read as a fantastic transposition of the theory of atavism, in which Wells was particularly interested. According to this theory, the evolution leading from animal to man is not a one-way path; rather, the animal's genetic traits remain dormant within the human gene pool and may re-emerge at any time, thus pushing us back towards our animal ancestors. The underlying vision which Wells's fantasy evokes is that of progressionary evolutionism, the popular version of the Darwinian theory, which presumes humans to be

at the top of the 'evolutionary ladder', the culmination and *telos* of the million-years-long evolution of living species. The resurgence of animal traits is therefore seen as a throwback of evolution, a regression from what is more perfect and valuable to what is incomplete and less worthy.

What challenges Prendick's self-confident speciesism, that is to say his trust in the natural superiority of man and his right to dispose of other species at will, is being confronted with the expression of their pain. When Moreau starts to perform his surgery on a puma, the continuous cries of the beast are 'such an exquisite expression of suffering' that he finds himself unable to bear them.<sup>13</sup> Later on, he will be touched by the manifest suffering of the Beast Folk in repressing their natural animal drives. The animal is revealed to be a vulnerable, pathetic creature, and the acknowledgement of its pain triggers our empathy and brings about the sense of an interspecies community which stops us from considering it as ontologically different from ourselves. But this can happen only if we are allowed to *hear* the animal. As Prendick remarks, '[i]t is when suffering finds a voice and sets our nerves quivering that this pity comes troubling us'.<sup>14</sup> Empathy may be triggered exclusively if the animal is granted the right to a voice. Eventually Prendick will definitively reject Moreau and will passively assist when the Beast Folk take their bloody revenge on their God-torturer. Notwithstanding his instinctive aversion to them, Prendick chooses to betray his fellows and stand with the subhuman creatures, thus becoming in practice a defendant of animal rights.

## Listening to a dog's voice

Significantly, the moving cry of an animal in pain opens one of the most bizarre works of early twentieth-century SF, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Heart of a Dog* (*Sobachye syerdtseye*): 'Ooow-ow-ooow-owow! Oh, look at me, I'm dying.'<sup>15</sup> The voice of the animal this time is not filtered through the perception of a first-person narrator but addresses us directly, requiring us to unexpectedly empathize with the animal Other and to share the vision, opinions and emotions of the stray dog Sharik, the owner of the title's heart.<sup>16</sup> Sharik has a rich emotional and intellectual life; he understands perfectly what humans say – although he does not grasp their thoughts and motives completely – and can even read. However, he has no means of expressing himself to other species; we readers are the only beneficiaries of his perspective. Most importantly, Sharik is not just the primary focalizing character of the novel, he is the only one. His perspective is the only one we are allowed to share. When he ceases to be himself – that is,

when he starts his humanizing process – we are not allowed access to any other point of view. The story is then recounted through the technique defined as ‘external focalization’ and we see and hear what happens from a totally external, impassive perspective.

This narrative strategy is the most original element of the novel and grants it its bizarre quality. The story in itself can be read as a satirical rewriting of *The Island of Doctor Moreau* – and, further back, of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as well. The renowned surgeon Filipp Filippovich Preobrazhensky is in fact dragged into his foolish experiment neither by Frankenstein’s Promethean arrogance nor by Moreau’s fanatical scientific passion. He and his protégé, Dr Bormenthal, are simply experimenting with new ways of achieving bodily rejuvenation, for which their rich patients are willing to pay whatever honorarium they request.<sup>17</sup> The great scientist has put his genius to the service of the vanity of the upper class and sacrifices poor Sharik to it with a light heart. He had picked up the dog in the street and misled him into thinking he had finally become a bourgeois pet. In this case, humanization is produced as an unexpected side effect of the experiment. By substituting the dog’s pituitary gland and testicles with that of a young thief who had recently died, the result is not a renovation of the canine body, but its total transformation into a complete human being. The transformation of the body is paralleled by a surprisingly rapid acquisition of the ability to speak, but the utterances of the creature are not what we would expect. The first word he utters is ‘Nesseta-ciled’, which is easily deciphered as the reversal of ‘delicates-sen’; then he calls his creator a ‘bloody bastard’, causing him to faint; the third utterance anticipates his main passion in life, ‘liquor’; finally, all possible swear words follow in an endless litany.<sup>18</sup> Dr Bormenthal, who is keeping the clinic log, entirely mistakes what is happening and thinks that what they are watching is the actual humanization of the dog Sharik himself:

As I see it, the situation is as follows: the implanted pituitary has activated the speech-centre in the canine brain and words have poured out in a stream. I do not think that we have before us a newly-created brain but a brain which has been stimulated to develop. Oh, what a glorious confirmation of the theory of evolution! Oh, the sublime chain leading from a dog to Mendelejev the great chemist! A further hypothesis of mine is that during its canine stage Sharik’s brain had accumulated a massive quantity of sense-data. All the words which he used initially were the language of the streets which he had picked up and stored in his brain.<sup>19</sup>

This new being maintains very few traits of his former animal self, namely terrorizing cats, his voracious appetite and the tendency to catch lice. Surprisingly, however, he develops the psychological and moral traits of the man from whom the organs were taken, who unfortunately had been a scoundrel, ignorant and shameless. In short, the two scientists will have to acknowledge that what they are dealing with is not a humanized Sharik, but the revived dead thief in the body of Sharik. While the dog Sharik had been 'naughty' but funny and loyal to his master, the citizen Poligraf Poligrafovich Sharikov – as he chooses to call himself – is rude and stubborn, harasses the housemaid, steals money and drinks alcohol.<sup>20</sup> What is worse, he gangs up with the proletarians who have occupied part of the elegant building in which Preobrazhensky lives and have been trying to expropriate part of his luxurious apartment. He himself thus becomes the nemesis for the reckless scientist. The monster which this new Frankenstein has brought to life is an impudent proletarian who calls him 'Dad' and 'comrade' and threatens to destroy the wealth and very bourgeois life of his master.<sup>21</sup> Nor can he be banished, as Frankenstein's Creature was, because he cleverly defends his right to being taken care of by the man who brought him to life. But this time, the creator will be wiser than his predecessors and will find a way to reverse his unfortunate creation. When the criminal police, 10 days after the sudden disappearance of Sharikov and with news of a violent fight heard from Preobrazhensky's flat, go to arrest the doctor for murdering the man, they find the creature almost entirely returned to a canine state:

from the door into the study appeared a dog of the most extraordinary appearance. In patches he was bald, while in other patches his coat had grown. He entered like a trained circus dog walking on his hind legs, then dropped on to all fours and looked round. The waiting-room froze into a sepulchral silence as tangible as jelly. The nightmarish-looking dog with the crimson scar on the forehead stood up again on his hind legs, grinned and sat down in an armchair.<sup>22</sup>

The regression of the subhuman creature back to the animal condition solves all legal and practical issues. As a humanized being, Sharikov shared all human rights and any abuse of him would have had to be legally prosecuted. As an animal, he is instead the property of Preobrazhensky, who is entitled to dispose of him as he wishes.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the novel implicitly exposes the animal condition of what has been defined as 'situational vulnerability'.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the creature has by now conveniently lost any

ability to communicate with humans. As Preobrazhensky explains to the astonished policemen, “[s]cience has not yet found the means of turning animals into people. I tried, but unsuccessfully, as you can see. He talked and then he began to revert back to his primitive state. Atavism.”<sup>25</sup> It is hard to believe that here Bulgakov is not parodying the tragic story of Moreau’s abominable experiments. If in Wells the process from Beast to Man had been indisputably assumed as an enhancement of the intellectual and moral status of the creatures, in Bulgakov such an anthropocentric vision appears at best questionable, if not openly invalidated. All the human characters, Sharikov included, are portrayed as arrogant, selfish and devoid of any compassion; our sympathy and compassion go exclusively to the dog Sharik.<sup>26</sup> We cherish and take pity on his reappearance on the last page of the book, reinstated as the house pet, yet definitely damaged in mind and body from the experiment.

## The freak children of the bomb

Language, and especially the possibility of interspecies communication, holds a crucial role in fantasies exploring the possibility of a different relationship between human and non-human animals. As Gary Steiner has remarked, the anthropocentric vision can be summarized in the assumption that ‘all and only human beings are worthy of moral consideration, because all and only human beings are rational and endowed with language’.<sup>27</sup> From this perspective, the stories we are dealing with, and more generally the works of SF involving communication with animals, explore the possibility of bridging the species gap by enabling animals to express themselves through human language, thus removing one of the main anthropocentric biases which have oriented our vision of (and relationship with) non-human animals.<sup>28</sup>

In the two novels mentioned above, speaking animals were exceptional cases, creatures produced in single specimens by a post-Darwinian Frankenstein trained in surgery and natural biology. In the wake of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, both scientists and SF writers learned not only that genetic mutations could be produced either by the million-year-long work of evolution or by lab experiments, but that they might also be an appalling side effect of nuclear fallout. Post-atomic scenarios of the 1960s and 1970s offer us worlds richly populated by mutated or evolved animals, and conversely by regressed or degenerated humans. In this sense, the nuclear holocaust works like a sort of genetic spell which upsets and mixes up the genetic make-up of the living world,

causing sudden deviations, contaminations and devolutions, as well as evolutionary leaps.

In the novels of the most visionary SF writer of these decades, Philip K. Dick, the post-apocalyptic narrative is intertwined with, and counterbalanced by, what we could define as a 'regressive utopia', resuming the model of the small pre-industrial community. In fact, the catastrophe works as a sort of blank slate on which we can start over again, retrieving the naturalness and humane solidarity of 'the good old times' which preceded the degeneration of modern and technological capitalism. A strong emphasis is thus given to the opposition between images of decay and images of healing; it is suggested that a decaying humanity and the wounded Earth may be healed only by means of this re-founded communal solidarity, within humanity itself but also within the larger family of all living beings, all the old, new and mutated or damaged species. In *Dr Bloodmoney* (1965), many animals have evolved to be sentient and some have even gained the ability to use human language. Some of them seem like pathetic imitations of humans, such as Terry, the good-natured talking dog, of whom the whole community of Marin County is fond. When the new schoolteacher, Barnes, meets him, he cannot make out the words Terry struggles to utter:

It was a hideous sound, and Barnes shivered; it sounded like [. . .], a damaged person trying to work a vocal apparatus which had failed. Out of the groaning he detected – or thought he detected – a word or so, but he could not be sure. Bonny, however, seemed to understand.<sup>29</sup>

Other animals have developed more dangerous abilities and appear to be a threat to humans. Cats, who have developed their own language and at night are heard 'mewing to one another in the darkness', live in small, organized gangs, and rumour has it that 'they killed and ate small children almost at will'.<sup>30</sup> As for rats, many humans think they should be killed systematically as they have become too smart and '[s]omeday America may be taken over by rats if we aren't vigilant'.<sup>31</sup> But others maintain that all these 'brilliant animals' (as they are collectively referred to) could instead be an important asset for humans, as helpers or 'servants to us human beings'.<sup>32</sup> Most importantly, mutations have also deeply changed the human species, producing a large number of so-called 'funny people': 'strange and exotic variants on the human life form which flourished now under a much more tolerant – although smokily veiled – sky'.<sup>33</sup> From this perspective, animal freaks are not so different from human

freaks. Both are feared and rejected by many (there is also a new US Eugenics Service which is supposed to dispose of 'funny people'), but they were born in this world as well, and they have a right to inhabit it. As Stockstill, Marin County's doctor, realizes: "There is nothing . . . which is "outside" nature; that is a logical impossibility. In a way there are no freaks, no abnormalities, except in the statistical sense."<sup>34</sup> Whatever regeneration may be possible for the living world, it needs to make room for all the 'funny' and 'unfunny' creatures now populating it.<sup>35</sup>

This is made even more explicit in *Deus Irae* (1976), which Dick published together with Roger Zelazny and which is in many respects a fantastic and religious rewriting of *Dr Bloodmoney*. Here, the nuclear catastrophe has triggered a general process of genetic mutation and hybridization involving all animal species. The result is quite a wide range of mutants and freaks, a weird bestiary composed especially of grotesque hybrids of human and animal genes. All of them are sentient; some may be very dangerous, such as the huge dark worm who kills every living being who gets too close to its 'possessions', which are a very poor trove of trash from a past civilization.<sup>36</sup> Others are instead well-mannered and benevolent, such as the 'lizards', evolved humanoid reptiles who revere and protect human beings, convinced that humans will be able to repopulate the Earth. The figures composing this diverse population outline a proper hierarchy of living species, a sort of new post-apocalyptic Tree of Life. At the bottom of it are the 'regular' animals, those who have not mutated, such as the cow which pulls the cart of the phocomelic protagonist, Tibor McMasters, or the nice dog the lizards give him to protect him during his pilgrimage. On a higher level are the new hybrid species: the lizards and the worm, but also the disgusting 'bugs', endowed with great loquacity and wit, or the 'runners', humanoid hares who spread 'a kind of peace' wherever they go.<sup>37</sup> Still higher up are the damaged or degenerated humans, including the protagonist Tibor, called 'inc.', that is, 'incomplete', and therefore placed a step below regular humans but still credited with the worth and respect due to those who were once masters of the planet. Above them are the 'complete' humans; and on top of the chain of living beings is the 'God of Wrath', the divine incarnation of the supreme being worshipped by the new post-atomic religion. Tibor's mission is to find Him and reproduce His image in the church mural he is painting for the Servants of Wrath. But when the God of Wrath kills Tibor's dog out of pure wickedness, the inc. kills him. The message is that all creatures who inhabit the Earth are valuable. Even the lowliest living being has its own dignity and right to exist, and if the master of the creation kills it, then He himself deserves to die. In short, interspecies harmony, respect

and solidarity among all living beings are the only ways to restore life and heal the planet.

However, the possibility of linguistic exchange is not necessarily a step towards the utopia of an interspecies community. As observed by Sherryl Vint, '[p]erfect knowledge does not immediately and without struggle lead to perfect harmony'.<sup>38</sup> On the contrary, the intellectual evolution of an animal species may be seen as an obvious threat to our leadership on the planet and even to our survival. This dystopian reversal of the theme of humanized animals is typical of popular SF or fantasy, usually grounded in an anthropocentric vision, from the very popular franchise derived from Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990) to blockbusters such as *Reign of Fire* (2002). The archetype of these fantasies is definitely the 1963 novel *La Planète des Singes* (*Planet of the Apes*) by the French writer Pierre Boulle, which spawned a rich progeny of intermedial adaptations, sequels and rewritings. Boulle does not deal with the threat of an impending nuclear conflict, although his novel is a clear reflection of Cold War anxieties.<sup>39</sup> As a SF novel of the 1960s, *Planet of the Apes* appears quite naïve in its scientific references and political critique, yet Boulle's novel still arouses our interest in some of its ideas. Foremost among these is the pre-eminent role assigned to linguistic ability. In fact, the apes manifestly hold the right to rule the alien planet on which the terrestrial explorers have landed because they are able to master a complex language; the humans of the planet cannot but be regarded as wild animals because they are not only speechless, but also unable to manage any means of complex communication. The protagonist, Ulysse Merou, manages to attract the attention of the simian scientists simply by showing that he has the cognitive ability to attempt verbal and written communication. Later on, when he has learnt simian language, his public speech at the scientific congress will be enough to grant him the right to be regarded as a 'rational being', and therefore let out of the cage in which he has been held captive and set free. In the end, he will come to be seen as a possible threat to simian civilization, as he may succeed in teaching other humans to think – and to speak. In fact, something similar happened when the apes replaced humans as lords of the planet. The story of the rise of the apes is brought to life by 'awakening the memory of the species' in one of the savage humans. This is how the protagonist and his scientist friends learn that at some point in its civilization humankind suddenly underwent a fast intellectual decline, while primates evolved simultaneously. The reasons for both phenomena are not clarified. All we know is that humans rapidly became intellectually 'lazy' and cowardly and let the apes take over without resistance. It was precisely

the acquisition of the ability to use human language that marked the beginning of the apes' rebellion against humans, as one of these memories effectively points out:

Ça y est ! L'un d'eux a réussi à parler. C'est certain, je l'ai lu dans le Journal de la Femme. Il a sa photographie. C'est un chimpanzé . . . Il y en a d'autres. Le journal en signale tous les jours de nouveaux. Certains savants considèrent cela comme un grand succès scientifique. Ils ne voient pas où cela peut nous mener ? Il paraît qu'un de ces chimpanzés a proféré des injures grossières. Le premier usage qu'ils font de la parole, c'est pour protester quand on veut les faire obéir.<sup>40</sup>

[It's happened! One of them has succeeded in talking. It's certain; I read about it in Woman's Journal. There's a photograph of him, too. He's a chimpanzee . . . There are several others. The papers report fresh cases every day. Certain biologists regard this as a great scientific success. Don't they realize where it may lead? It appears that one of these chimpanzees has uttered some ugly threats. The first use they make of speech is to protest when they are given an order.]<sup>41</sup>

Like Shakespeare's Caliban, as soon as the (animal) slave learns the language of his master, he uses it to reject his rule: language is the first step in the process of empowerment of the subordinate subject. The implicit suggestion of Boulle's novel is that we had better beware intelligent (animal) slaves, and especially not let them learn to speak.<sup>42</sup>

Although in relatively more critical terms, the warning of the dangers of letting animals become too smart is reiterated in the latest reboot of the saga, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011, by Rupert Wyatt), which focuses on the beginning of the progressive 'humanization' of the apes, which will eventually make them the dominant species on the planet. As happened in Boulle's novel, there is a strong connection between the animals' acquisition of linguistic ability and their rebellion against their human masters. The primates will symbolically acquire the right to rebel at the moment the most evolved of them starts to speak human language, and significantly, the first word it utters is 'No'. From this moment on, the revolt appears legitimate, as it does to the protagonist, Dr Rodman, too, who gives up trying to stop the apes as soon as he realizes that they have learned to speak. But it must be noted that, in this updated and more plausible version of the story, the

evolutionary leap of the apes is not a natural phenomenon but is produced by foolish humans themselves, through experimentation with a virus which enhances the apes' cognitive abilities. And this brings us to the last and most recent type of SF humanized animals: mutants produced by genetic engineering.

## Genetic engineering, or the new Frankensteins of the third millennium

Among twenty-first-century SF works, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003–13) offers us the richest and most detailed critical reflection of the dangers brought about by the reckless use of new biotechnologies. The first two novels, in which the chronicle of the present day after doomsday alternates with the recollection of the pre-apocalyptic years, outline the scenario of a near future overwhelmed by the combined effect of unrestrained post-industrial capitalism, globalization and the uncontrolled development of biotechnologies. As a result, the Frankensteins of the third millennium have the power to freely manipulate the whole animal species system, modifying or mixing different genetic pools in order to create new species, according to the demands of the ever more careless 'consumerist-corporatist culture'.<sup>43</sup> There are 'wolvogs', an interbred hybrid of wolves and dogs who are used as merciless weapons. The 'ChickieNobs' are living aggregates of edible chicken parts without brains or eyes; they perfectly meet both the need for ever more meat and the ethical scruples of the defenders of animal rights. As explained by the most gifted of these new Frankensteins, Crake, 'the animal-welfare freaks won't be able to say a word, because this thing feels no pain'.<sup>44</sup> The most questionable creation is probably that of the 'pigoon', or '*sus multiorganifer*'. This is a transgenic pig which grows multiple 'organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection', thanks to the use of human genetic material.<sup>45</sup> In this case, though, ethical scruples are unavoidable, as the new creature is literally, unmistakably, a humanized animal.<sup>46</sup> But in a civilization which is already collapsing, where natural resources have been totally exhausted and most people are regarded as worthless and are abused by the elites, moral concerns are easily put aside. As recalled by Jimmy, one of the few survivors of the next apocalypse:

In the OrganInc brochures . . . to set the queasy at ease, it was claimed that none of the defunct pigoons ended up as bacon and

sausages: no one would want to eat an animal whose cells might be identical with at least some of their own.

Still, as time went on and the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes, and meat became harder to come by, some people had their doubts. Within OrganInc Farms itself it was noticeable how often back bacon and ham sandwiches and pork pies turned up on the staff café menu. André's Bistro was the official name of the café, but the regulars called it Grunts.<sup>47</sup>

After the almost complete extinction of humankind, caused by a virus engineered by Crake himself, these 'chimeric animals' are the main threat to the small community of survivors. This community comprises a few humans, but also a new species of human hybrids, a perfectly 'eco-sustainable' people whom Crake created with the aim of repopulating the Earth after the Sixth Extinction. The 'Crakers' are vegetarian, immune to illnesses, devoid of aggressive, violent drives, unable to manage complex concepts and abstract language; they naturally seek a balance with the ecosystem and the other species, which they respect and try to understand. Thanks to their mediation, the human community will in fact be able to establish contact with the community of pigeons. In the third volume, a pigeon delegation comes to meet the human people in order to ask for their help in fighting three other human survivors, a criminal gang which has been molesting both communities. The proposal is conveyed to the human leaders, Toby and Zeb, by a Craker translator, as the humans are unable to understand what they perceive as simple 'grunt-ing . . . going on, from pig to pig':<sup>48</sup>

'Then why aren't they talking to us?' says Toby. 'Why are they talking to you?'

Oh, she thinks. Of course. We're too stupid, we don't understand their languages. So there has to be a translator.

'It is easier for them to talk to us,' says Blackbeard simply. 'And in return, if you help them to kill the three bad men, they will never again try to eat your garden. Or any of you,' he adds seriously. 'Even if you are dead, they will not eat you. And they ask that you must no

longer make holes in them, with blood, and cook them in a smelly bone soup, or hang them in the smoke, or fry them and then eat them. Not any more.'

'Tell them it's a deal,' says Zeb.<sup>49</sup>

The two communities fight and win the battle together, then agree between them to execute the human criminals, and they celebrate a common funeral for both pigoon and human victims. Significantly, in this rite the pigoons carry the human dead on their backs, 'as a sign of friendship and inter-species co-operation'.<sup>50</sup> This event functions as the establishment of an interspecies pact, which will be kept thereafter and will be recalled in the foundational epics of the new post-human civilization. Together, the former vulnerable subjects – research animals, women, marginalized people – are now empowered not only to survive but also to restore the world to a better place.<sup>51</sup> Maybe the Earth will now be able to heal in peace from all the damage inflicted upon it by human civilization.

As hinted at by *Deus Irae*, and more consciously articulated by Atwood, playing God with the Earth is leading us to destroy the ecosystem, and us with it. Our only chance for survival lies in acknowledging our position, rights and obligations within the necessary ecological balance of all living forms, and in starting to truly respect them. But the first step in this process consists in overcoming anthropocentric prejudice, recognizing ourselves as part of a single although diverse community of living species whose survival on the planet is precarious and fragile. This is the only way to reverse the apocalypse into a true palingenesis – or better, out of the fictional allegory, to avoid it. Yet it is difficult to acquire such an awareness and to cease regarding the world as a set of resources at our complete disposal. Maybe if we could understand what animals say, it would be easier to make up our minds. Let us hope that it will not take an actual apocalypse to do so.

## Notes

1. This double implication of anthropomorphic practice has been clearly highlighted by Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman: 'humans assume a community of thought and feeling between themselves and a surprisingly wide array of animals; they also recruit animals to symbolize, dramatize, and illuminate aspects of their own experience and fantasies' ('Introduction', 2).
2. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*.
3. I have discussed in detail the category and phenomenology of the subhuman in speculative imagination in Micali, *Towards a Posthuman Imagination in Literature and Media*, 33–82.
4. Agamben, *The Open*.
5. This discussion was opened by Satz, 'Animals as vulnerable subjects'. See also Thierman, 'The vulnerability of other animals'; Johnson, 'Vulnerable subjects?'; Pick, 'Vulnerability'.

6. For an analysis of the novel in relation to the vivisection controversy, see Dewitt, *Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel*, 175–81. The cultural context of the anti-vivisection movements in late nineteenth-century Britain has been described by Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*.
7. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 43.
8. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 44, 43.
9. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 101.
10. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 12.
11. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 109.
12. As Moreau obscurely explains: 'And they revert. As soon as my hand is taken from them the beast begins to creep back, begins to assert itself again' (Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 106).
13. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 48.
14. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, 48.
15. Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog*, 5. Written in 1925, the novel was denied publication in the country for more than 60 years, as it was a manifest satire of Bolshevism and easily interpreted 'as an allegory of revolution, the operation of its aftermath paralleling the revolution's misguided attempt to radically transform mankind' (Haber, *Mikhail Bulgakov*, 216–17).
16. The English translation chooses not to modify the protagonist's name, which is a very common Russian name for a dog, meaning 'Little ball'. My gratitude goes to Alessandra Carbone, who helped me to check the original version of the novel.
17. This is clearly stated in the clinical log of the experiment written by Bormenthal: 'Purpose of operation: Experimental observation by Prof. Preobrazhensky of the effect of combined transplantation of the pituitary and testes in order to study both the functional viability in a host-organism and its role in cellular etc. rejuvenation' (Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog*, 59).
18. Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog*, 61–2.
19. Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog*, 67.
20. Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog*, 57.
21. Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog*, 73–4. The Russian term Sharikov uses, 'папаша' (translated here as 'Dad'), is actually ruder and could be better rendered with 'Pop'.
22. Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog*, 126–7.
23. This is made very clear by the reference to "my dog" when the policemen are accusing Preobrazhensky of murder (Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog*, 126).
24. In the taxonomy of vulnerability proposed by Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds ('Introduction'), 'situational vulnerability' is a condition deriving from specific situations such as that of domesticated animals, who are completely dependent on the will of humans. As remarked by Ani Satz, '[t]hroughout their lives, domestic animals rely on humans to provide them nourishment, shelter, and other care. The permanent dependency of domestic animals is created and controlled by humans, rendering them uniquely vulnerable to exploitation. Domestic nonhuman animals are, for this reason, perhaps the most vulnerable of all sentient beings' ('Animals as vulnerable subjects', 80). On animals in relation to the taxonomy of vulnerability, and in particular regarding laboratory experimentation, see Johnson, 'Vulnerable subjects?'
25. Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog*, 127.
26. The scene of the surgery is the true epiphany of this axiologic inversion between human and animal: while Sharik's body lies 'helplessly' and 'defenceless' on the operating table, the two doctors operate in a hurry and furiously, 'as two murderers working against the clock', with a 'fearsome' expression and a 'savagelook', 'like a tiger' or 'a satisfied vampire' (Bulgakov, *The Heart of a Dog*, 53, 55, 56, 57).
27. Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents*, 2.
28. Vint, *Animal Alterity*; McHugh, *Animal Stories*.
29. Dick, *Dr Bloodmoney*, 120.
30. Dick, *Dr Bloodmoney*, 112.
31. Dick, *Dr Bloodmoney*, 115.
32. Dick, *Dr Bloodmoney*, 116.
33. Dick, *Dr Bloodmoney*, 140.
34. Dick, *Dr Bloodmoney*, 142.
35. Fredric Jameson's enlightening study of the ideology conveyed in *Dr Bloodmoney* is based in fact on a narratological analysis of the system of 'freaks or anomalous beings that people this extravagant work': see Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 349–62, citing from 353.

36. Dick and Zelazny, *Deus Irae*, 95.
37. Dick and Zelazny, *Deus Irae*, 88.
38. Vint, *Animal Alterity*, 69.
39. That the exchange of positions between the former human masters and their simian subordinates was created by a nuclear holocaust was in fact suggested by the 1968 cult film adaptation by Franklin Schaffner.
40. Boulle, *La Planète des Singes*, 166.
41. Boulle, *Planet of the Apes*, 181–2.
42. The novel and its early film adaptations naturally lend themselves to critical readings through the lens of postcolonial theory. For a political analysis of the whole *Planet of the Apes* saga, see Greene, *Planet of the Apes as American Myth*.
43. Moore, *Ecological Literature and the Critique of Anthropocentrism*, 233.
44. Atwood, *MaddAddam*, 203.
45. Atwood, *MaddAddam*, 22.
46. For a discussion of Atwood's novel in the context of recent scientific research into the real possibility of growing human organs in pigs, and the ongoing debate between 'bioliberals' and 'bioconservatives', see Camporesi, 'CRISPR pigs, pigoons and the future of organ transplantation'.
47. Atwood, *MaddAddam*, 23–4.
48. Atwood, *MaddAddam*, 268.
49. Atwood, *MaddAddam*, 270–1.
50. Atwood, *MaddAddam*, 373.
51. On the political message conveyed by Atwood through the account of the post-apocalyptic world, see Weafer, 'Writing from the margin', and Tate, *Apocalyptic Fiction*, 61–82.

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