

Summary: Figurations of interspecies harmony in literature, film and other cultural texts of the English-speaking sphere, from the mid-19th to the 21st centuries

We are living in times of multiple crises, which include climate change, mass extinction and industrial farming. Interdisciplinary animal studies and the environmental humanities are creating a critical metadiscourse that makes it possible to better understand the major problems of the Anthropocene and the aesthetic strategies used in literary and cultural texts to represent these problems. In other words, these discourses speak of important but very sad topics. However, this project tries to reverse the dominant optics in animal studies and to examine literary and cultural texts that do not present “negatives” but propose idyllic visions of interspecies harmony. Thus, it attempts to seriously approach contemporary cultural texts that are usually perceived as light and pleasant. Achieving this goal is facilitated through a juxtaposition of contemporary pop-cultural visuals with earlier (beginning in the mid-19th century) figurations of human-animal harmony. Today, we are constantly surrounded by cultural texts that focus on positive human-animal relations, but we do not take them seriously; they are rather a cheap form of entertainment, a breather in-between more significant topics: a cat mama adopts a baby mouse, a coyote helps a badger cross a busy highway – such videos quickly become “viral” on social media. Narrations about human-animal friendship are also all around us: a rescued dog helps change the life of a hitherto selfish man. Do these cute and moving texts, usually consumed in a rather naïve manner, constitute a reaction to the serious problems of the Anthropocene? Something if a safety valve? The project proposes to examine figurations of interspecies harmony in Anglo-Saxon culture from the mid-19th century in order to better understand the contexts and roots of the images and narrations that surround us today and to trace the evolution of possible interpretations of such texts. The project also brings in even earlier contexts as reference points, e.g. the pastoral idyll or Biblical contexts. Grounding contemporary figurations in specific historical contexts and traditions makes it easier to understand the role such narrations currently serve. This research method is going to make it possible to perceive certain continuities and, conversely, to emphasize that texts that share certain visual or narrative similarities may have been interpreted differently at different times and in various contexts. The project analyzes both texts that propose comprehensive solutions that lead to human-animal harmony (e.g. in literary utopias) as well as texts that incorporate examples of “desirable” singular harmonious relationships. In order to enable thorough analysis of varied types of cultural texts, the team consists of researchers specializing in several fields from within American and British literary and cultural studies.