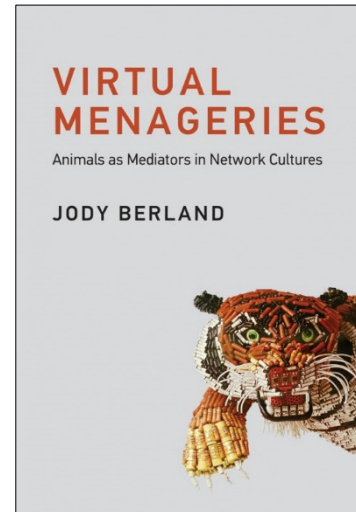


Jody Berland, **Virtual Menageries: Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019, 328 pp., \$24.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Soledad Altrudi
University of Southern California, USA

In the last couple of decades, nonhuman others—such as “natural” and technological entities—have been the focus of significant scholarly interest in the humanities and social sciences. However, although mostly absent from media and communication studies, “nature” and animals have not been absent at all from the media and communications sphere; instead, they have been increasingly mediated by photographs, films and the Internet. Taking this presence as axiomatic, the latest book by Jody Berland started with a simple question: Why are there so many cats on the Internet? **Virtual Menageries: Animals as Mediators in Network Cultures** is an extended answer to that, one that seeks to understand animal representation and mediation vis-à-vis the emergence of new media technologies.



Specifically, the main objective of the book is to shed light on the use of animals in the spread of global communicative networks and the work those representations have done in changing social configurations. Building on the notion that animals have historically served as mediators for human interaction, the author anchors the analysis in the trope of the “menagerie”—understood as a collection of wild and exotic animals—and argues that the animal image as emissary or mediator in the launching of electronic and digital media in contemporary times can be construed as a direct parallel to the animal body as emissary or mediator in early modern colonialism.

To substantiate this analytical arch, Berland focuses on specific instances of animals as mediators across historical eras that illuminate essential links between a colonial past and an anthropocentric present. Thus, after elaborating on the history and practice of the menagerie in the first pages, chapter 2 discusses the case of a giraffe captured in Kenya and sent as a gift by a ruler in Bengal to the emperor of China in 1414, and compares it to April, the pregnant giraffe, who was an online sensation in 2017. As an exotic animal from a faraway land (and habitat), the 1414 giraffe was a medium of communication (a “first contact” of sorts) between distant people and places, enchanting the recipients and invited lookers and opening new trade relations characterized by the colonization of the lands from which the animal was taken. As a virtual giraffe, April brought together millions of viewers who were also enchanted by her online presence and was instrumental in forming affective links between digital media, animals, and humans by advocating for friendly relations between us, the technologies, and the institutions that framed that online presence. Similarly, chapter 3 focuses on the body of the beaver (particularly, its pelt) as a first contact medium between colonial settlers and Indigenous people in the context of Canada’s fur trade boom, as well as on the image of the whole beaver as a popular national and corporate symbol.

Arguably the linchpin of this book, chapter 4 delves into the animal images that began to circulate in the 1960s, a time when the connection between the technical and the animal was mobilized in unprecedented ways, through software engineers' innovations, almost all of which were branded with images of animals. Berland's argument is that these animal icons provided both an efficient way to identify the new products (like Honeywell's computers, or O'Reilly's coding languages guidebooks) and an allegory for the freedom conferred to the individuals whose "animal spirits" could master and survive the introduction of new technological resources. In the following chapter, the author furthers this analysis to include mobile digital devices and discusses how their commercial promotion through happy-looking animals sought to transmit how easy this technology, which has become indispensable for participation in a networked society, was to use. Here, Berland is mostly concerned with the idea of these digital animals and the connections of which they speak as part of a management strategy directed at the growing risks and fears of technological growth.

After laying all this analytical groundwork, Berland finally turns to her initial "object" of curiosity, the cats on the Internet, whose foundational role in online communication is rooted in their ability to make people feel cozy and connected, and to encourage them to expand their reach into diverse platforms and activities of social media. Chapter 6 recounts the ever-changing role and perception of cats due to changes in the social landscape (from hybrid-workers in the fields to spirit-demons of witches to domestic pets of urban dwellers) and explores the Internet cat phenomenon, highlighting these animals' ability to traverse domestic and online spaces. Lastly, in the final chapter, Berland changes the focus of her analysis and moves on to aural representations of animals, articulating "nature" soundtracks and their use in therapeutic spaces as comparable to the menageries described in earlier chapters.

Despite the approachable empirical sites explored, this work is intended for an academic audience, and those already versed in some of the topics this text touches on are probably going to benefit the most from this reading. Throughout the book, Berland makes ample use of metaphors and is constantly drawing from and connecting her arguments to previous work in critical animal studies, media studies, postcolonial studies, and environmental humanities. While this provides a rich analysis, the reader must determine whether these rhetorical devices work to thicken the theoretical discussion or distract as conceptual add-ons. Moreover, although all the chapters include photographs and concrete examples of animal mediation, their effectiveness in substantiating the discussion varies, given that at times, such as in chapter 5, the empirical sites lose ground against theoretical argumentation and those present get short shrift. Additionally, while the last chapter adds a very interesting example, the birdsong recording analysis draws from different sociotechnical histories (on which the author is nonetheless proficient), which adds some friction to this transition and unsettles the place of this lone last chapter in a book that has thus far been entirely preoccupied with the visual culture realm.

Notwithstanding this, readers—particularly those in the communication field—should not be discouraged from exploring *Virtual Menageries*, as this piece not only provokes reflexive thinking about animality, humanity, nature, culture, and capitalism but also makes three important contributions to the study of animal (re)mediation. First, by calling attention to "the grammar of animal representation in the age of risk" (p. 126), Berland exposes the problematic ways of looking at animals we humans have developed; that is, frames that cast animals as aesthetic objects and that release us from having to attend

to the habitat and practices that inherently constitute those nonhuman others. Here, animals are invariably depicted as disembodied figures or voices, making the disappearance of their *umwelt* the usual condition for their appearance in menageries. Through the "attentiveness to the medium" the author exercises, she denounces the damaging deanimalization of animal mediators and challenges us to problematize and rethink this mediation as a process capable of opening spaces where animals are not reduced to bodies and where the material realities of the human-animal-technology entanglement are also rendered. This is related to the second contribution of this book, which is that Berland engages directly with mediation itself as a complex process that is affected when the animal becomes the mediator. For this, the author draws from McLuhan in conceiving of animals as essential figures in the encounters she explores instead of seeing them as part of the content transmitted via a particular medium, but she also follows Jon Durham Peters in considering how they expand understandings of mediation itself.

Finally, after establishing that animals become mediators, Berland also explores that which they are mediating. Sometimes, this is clearer, as the example of the 1414 giraffe who launched new topographical imaginations and powers that paved the way for the emergence of colonial capitalism. As we move closer to the present, the discourses that these deanimalized digital figures mediate get more complicated, but Berland organizes them around the concept of risk management. Thus, she makes the case that these animal mediations become coping mechanisms to assuage the ironies and paradoxes of our risk society, namely that the mobile digital communication devices that help users manage contemporary insecurity and risk are also the ones that produce the risk that threatens the wellbeing of the planetary body. In this context, the animal imagery in social media or the birdsong in a "nature sounds" playlist become affective technologies that promise to help us manage our everyday life and feelings while simultaneously doing "everything possible to silence and contain the actual real, the environmental impact of climate change and particularly of electronic waste, which is despoiling sizable parts of the globe where these same animals have roamed" (p. 132).

In conclusion, *Virtual Menageries* is an interesting and rich book that advances academic knowledge on animal mediation and in so doing demonstrates the potential that an interdisciplinary critical approach holds for looking at contemporary media phenomena, such as cats on the Internet.