

FACTORY FARM ANIMALS: OUT OF TOUCH, OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND

Eva Kořátková and Hana Janečková (eds.), *Animal Touch* (Prague: ArtMap, 2021), 244 p. ISBN 978-80-907873-7-7

Factory farming is not a sexy subject. Despite seemingly improving regulations and technologies, animal farms remain isolated and hidden not only from our sight, but also, ideally, from all of our senses. And yet it is hardly possible not to think about them globally in the context of the climate crisis and their devastating environmental effect, or stumble upon them more locally, entangled in the political power relations and economic interests involving the previous prime minister of the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš. And, of course, there is more to factory farming than these considerations; there is, for example, a surplus of suffering, death, and exploitation, to name just a few of the most obvious aspects of this form of (not) being with the animals.

Given this, it is a great thing that the Institute of Anxiety (Institut úzkosti) and the publisher ArtMap commissioned *Animal Touch* (available also in Czech as *Dotek Zvířete*). This collection of 14 articles, edited by Eva Kořátková and Hana Janečková, became available in 2022 in both Czech and English. It brings together a number of artists, researchers, and writers to examine large-scale livestock farming and explore the need to get back in touch with animals. As the editors explain in the book's introduction, "the key motivation was to study more systematically the relationship between humans and more-than-humans, focusing on the concept of factory farming as a contemporary tool of power and control which reduces this relationship to binary categories: privileged and oppressed, useful and useless, edible and non-edible, actors and passive subjects, humans and the others" (14).

Looking back at theoretical attempts at thinking the nonhuman, and animals specifically, it might seem that the subject of animal farming is not just unappealing, but also outdated. After all, it was philosophically and systematically considered, and then consequently condemned, nearly half a century ago in such classic books as Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* and *Practical Ethics*. However, despite a certain conclusive-

ness surrounding the utilitarian approach to factory farms, the reality of this form of interaction with animals prevails and keeps provoking human conscience, resulting in new textual attempts at grappling with it.

For example, in the late nineties, animal farming became an important element of J. M. Coetzee's unusual Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, in which he created a fictional story of a woman named Elizabeth Costello, whose uncompromising commitment to animal welfare gets her in all sorts of trouble in the academic, theory-fuelled world. This curious literary and theoretical experiment was then published under the title *The Lives of Animals* and featured commentaries from several scientists and thinkers, the above-mentioned Singer included. It then became an important point of reference in the thinking of Cora Diamond in *Philosophy and Animal Life*.

More recently, Sunaura Taylor published *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*, which confronts the discrimination towards animals with the reality of discrimination experienced by people with disabilities. Drawing on disability studies, Taylor argues that the predominant discrimination in favour of abled-bodied people "helps construct the systems that render the lives and experiences of both nonhuman animals and disabled humans as less valuable and as discardable, which leads to a variety of oppressions that manifest differently".¹ Reflecting on parallels and relations between animality and disability, she remarks that "disability is ubiquitous among animals used in food production"² and "it seems impossible to consider the disability that farmed animals experience as separate from their environments",³ that is, physical spaces operating within a particular logic, as a part of efficient systems.

Argentinian author Agustina Bazterrica's 2017 novel, *Cadáver exquisito*, translated into English in 2020 as *Tender is the Flesh*, engages with the reality of factory farms and meat consumption through provocative means, and has been said to have had a practical impact on discouraging people from reliance on intense large-scale animal farming. The author wants us to imagine a world in which a virus wiped out all animals, and humans were faced with the "necessity" to consume human flesh instead. Significantly, and predictably, those meat providing humans have to be significantly "othered" in the process.

By a sometimes similarly provocative means, *Animal Touch* makes space for attempts at new imaginaries. And yet, it does not offer one normative set of conclusions. Instead, it provides heterogeneous insights into different aspects of animal farming and being with animals. For example, in "How Am I Not Myself: On Taking Metaphors Seriously", Lucia Pietroiusti does what she proposes in the title, that is, takes the metaphors we

¹ Sunaura Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2017), p. 66.

² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

use seriously to reflect on links between meat eating, birthing, and grieving. One of her leading metaphors is that of a mother, which denotes, for example, a yeast starter, but is also linked to giving birth and thus commonly understood as operating within particular sets of species boundaries, which Pietroiusti calls into question. The chapter, and its first sections in particular, brings to mind the Polish philosopher Jolanta Brach-Czaina's philosophical depiction of women's everyday hustle and bustle in her excellent 1992 book *The Rifts of Existence* (*Szczeliny istnienia* – not translated into English, but translated into Czech as *Škvíry existence*). It thus provides an intimate account of human-animal interaction from the perspective of a woman situated within common life experiences and everyday practices, that remain lacking in larger literary and philosophical traditions. In “Memories of a Factory Farm”, Lenka Vítková develops this line of thought by drawing clear parallels between factory farming and the system developed around giving birth, nursing, and schooling. Her reflections are illustrated with evocative paintings by Věra Kotlářová-Chovancová from the Museum of Roma Arts and Culture in Brno.

More experimental in its form, the chapter written and illustrated by the artist Marie Lukáčová provokes bewilderment and, possibly, a sense of discomfort, as she merges the animal and human in a desire-driven dance of eroticism and consumption. While a straightforward moralistic interpretation is possible, stemming from engagement with traditionally understood gender roles and exploitation of women and animals, the character of this contribution seems to be in line with the editors' commitment to evoke these contradictory emotional states so that they contribute to changing the dominant ideas and narratives: “By working with affects of revulsion and desire, different emotional pathways can be forged. These made, synthetic, alienated affects can lead to the kind of thinking and feeling that is necessary for building more equitable relations with others whom we do not perceive as our own, or are excluded from our community and are not seen as part of our own affective register.” (24)

This state of epistemic and normative confusion is further enhanced by the sets of photos with which this small book is interwoven, literally from cover to cover. The images feature pieces of animals sculpted in vegetables. While the editors refer to these creations using the category of monstrosity, I find them to be aesthetically refreshing hybrids with resolutely ambiguous and audacious (sometimes literally) muddled epistemic and normative content. For it is not clear what kind of message these chimaeras deliver, except for the aforementioned methodologically encouraged confusion and micro-disorientation, which can be epistemically worthwhile. The philosophical basis and moral value of this state has been recently recognized by Ami Harbin as a means of tenderising, which could open us to “live unprepared, sense vulnerabilities, experience in-this-togetherness, and live partly against the grain of norms”.⁴ In *Disorientation and*

⁴ Ami Harbin, *Disorientation and Moral Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 121.

Moral Life, Harbin reflects on the mechanisms of moral action and agency, suggesting that disorientation can have “moral benefit” through “disrupting habitual ways of being in the world”.⁵ In the context of *Animal Touch* and its authors’ commitment to challenge the dominant ways of thinking and being with farm animals specifically, it is crucial that “disorientations seem to challenge what we know and leave us feeling like we know less than we once did. Yet at the same time, in some cases of disorientation, individuals express gaining new kinds of awareness about the complexity of their social locations, and about the norms that structure their lives.”⁶

Despite the strongly speculative and questioning nature of many contributions in the book and the authors’ need to restrain from prescriptiveness and easy answers, there is an underlying tool to be used and guide us throughout different chapters and it is the eponymous animal touch. Understood very broadly, it evokes the event of (non)encounter and brings to the front the realisation that our current access to animals is deeply mediated. Particularly strikingly in the context of intense factory farming, animals are kept out of human touch and sight. Our contact with animals is interfered with by cages and often transmitted by camera surveillance. These means are not innocent as they distort the image of animals.

Animal Touch does not shy away from engaging with the political aspects of the animal and human exploitation of intensive livestock farming. This is evident, for example, in the essay by the researcher Tomáš Uhnák, who looks into the social and environmental aspects of the fishing industry. Its brutal practices affect the animals involved, vulnerable humans – Rohingya refugees caught in a vicious net of slavery and exploitation – as well as the environment. Bob Kuřík’s essay draws on critical engagement with the concept of the Anthropocene, suggesting that, in fact, the term Plantationocene might better describe our condition. Enabled by slavery and consisting of the (often brutal) imposition of monocultures, this form of life control seems to be the culprit behind the most harmful ways of interaction with the nonhuman.

In her contribution, British philosopher Esther Leslie takes on a challenge posed by Haraway in *When Species Meet*, in which she suggests that the question “Can animals suffer?”, while important, should not close the path to posing further questions, including “Can animals play?” or “Can animals work?”.⁷ It is this last question that Leslie tackles in her analysis, which involves Marx and the English Marxist utopian artist William Morris. Bringing work- and animal-related language expressions to the centre of attention, she draws parallels between the conditions of work performed by animals and those of humans. She depicts the way technology and control shape such work(s), suggesting new forms of nature-inspired human work through biomimetics.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁷ Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 22.

These loose philosophical reflections constitute a useful frame for a more systematic and sociologically-informed study on animal work.⁸

Very compact both in its size and content, this collection constitutes a welcome and accessible invitation to ask further questions and give attention to this issue. A particularly good example of this is Filipa Ramos's interview with Astrida Neimanis, where a new kind of imaginary is proposed to combat the dominant conception of the subject. It is hoped that these new metaphors and new practices of considering one's place in the world could feed into more sustained and sustainable ways of thinking and being. Still, these ideas are mostly hinted at, as the themes are discussed very broadly without going into philosophical details.

On a more practical level, two accounts of animal activism are presented, one more uncompromising than other, but both stemming from a sense of caring for animals. Petr Dobrý explains the mechanism behind his commitment to rescue chickens from factory farms. He humbly depicts the motivation and intricacies of this initiative that has turned into a sustained practice by means of positive communication and hard work. The chapter also sheds light on the damage done by the predominant myths about chickens, but it is worth reading for many other reasons, including to learn about "stray bees" and how to help them. There is not a hint of pretentiousness or assumed heroism in Dobrý's account and yet his contribution radiates with the hope and importance of solid, organised grassroots work.

A completely different strategy emerges from the conversation between Eva Kořátková and Michal Kolesár. It is also in this dialogue that we come across probably the most evocative definition of intense livestock farming included in the book: "Factory farming is a euphemism for an intensive concentrated mechanism using life as an industrial commodity and focused on profit. To achieve this, it does business with life, cripples it and ruins it." (167) In response to this understanding of the issue, Kolesár takes part in direct actions, rescuing animals: "I go to buildings where animals are legally crippled and illegally take them away to better lives and safer homes. Hens, ducks, pigs, rabbits, lambs, foxes. I do it without hiding my identity because I reject the idea that I'm doing something wrong." (162) That is why he calls his form of involvement "open rescues" or "direct rescue action".

What is striking in his account, especially in comparison to Dobrý's, is his strong unwillingness to cooperate and communicate with those in power – be they political representatives or factory owners – to write petitions, make appeals, or mitigate the poor conditions in which farm animals are kept in any form that would represent a compromise. He is not convinced by any such attempts as they, in his view, operate

⁸ See, e.g., Jocelyne Porcher, "Animal Work", in *The Oxford Handbook of Animal Studies*, ed. Linda Kalof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 302–318.

within the “free market, instructions and power”, and thus they effectively embody “an obedience where there should be resistance” (169).

Kolesár is not interested in systemic changes or even raising awareness of these issues. He criticises many forms of the animal rights movement, including the entire animal rights discourse, and considers veganism to be narcissistic and out of touch with the reality of animal’s lives in factory farming. Because despite his reluctance to preach (for example, in one place he mentions that “nobody has an obligation to help others” [166]), it is this spontaneous and undeniable recognition of atrocities when one is confronted with them and natural instinct to help that motivates his actions, even though it means living with a criminal record for ecoterrorism. Additionally, it is in Kolesár’s account that the importance of animal touch comes to the forefront, as it is through the direct, physical handling of an animal that the rescues happen and preparation for this close encounter forms part of the training of those participating in actions.

There is something existentially rebellious and anarchistic in this anti-systemic commitment. It is not exactly hopeful and it gives no redemption or reconciliation, as Kolesár admits that despite years of involvement in this form of being with animals, he has “not come to terms with anything” (168). It is captivating and potentially inspirational to gain an insight into these two very different approaches sketched by Dobrý and Kolesár, as they shed light into different personal, social, and political complexities and consequences.

Animal Touch is not a comprehensive, systematic, and academically cohesive study into factory farming. Chapters vary deeply and links between them are sometimes tenuous, although the overriding framework just about succeeds in holding them together. Ironically, I would like to question what seems to be one of the few unifying methodological decisions, namely the insistence on using the term “more-than-human world” when referring to animals, plants, or other elements of nonhuman nature. In addition to a potentially trivial quantitative element (there being more of what is not like us, representatives of *homo sapiens*, than us), this way of referring to the nonhuman seems to evoke qualitative evaluation of the sort performed in the traditional ideological framework, only with a different vector. This semantic implication seems to be even clearer in the case of “more-than-humans”: it places value, as if being non-human and thus “not-human”, just “different to” or “other than”, did not suffice and it was necessary to be “more than” to warrant attention. The humble term “nonhuman” is not completely innocent either, but it seems to be less loaded and it seems to leave the door open to acknowledging the nonhuman within the human, along the posthumanist line of thought. Acknowledging the lack of a systematic terminological framework surrounding these relatively new paths of investigation, I would like to suggest that “more-than-human” is not a fortunate choice, as to me, paradoxically and against the intention of the users, it seems to strengthen the “human”.

To sum up, this compact book in a subway-friendly format, combining short and multidisciplinary texts that are miscellaneous in their form and content and interwo-

ven with stimulating artworks, deserves wider attention. It is clearly a project prepared with care, and not only in regards to farm animals even though this particular way of relating to nonhuman others occurs throughout the book. All contributions are accessible to non-specialists and no deeper knowledge is presumed or required. If anything, those already specialised in particular fields might find some contributions lacking in depth, but given the format and length of both individual chapters and the book, the authors do the best they can to present selected ideas and reflections in a way that would encourage readers to further investigations. After all, this is not your usual, “boring” edited collection. It is a fun, thought-provoking and sense-awakening assortment of textual and visual resources.

Julita Skotarska