

A SHORT HISTORY OF TAXONOMY

and the

NAME OF THE DOGS

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Since time immemorial, perhaps even before man truly became man, animals have been our closest and most vital link to understanding the world around us and consequently understanding ourselves. They were our first subject in art, considered to be magical beings able to connect us to things outside this world. Over time, we have grown apart from our natural family and from a holistic view of our place in the world. Nature has become a distant realm that stands apart from us: it is a thing we study, collect, control, and perhaps most of all, use to our own benefit. Realizing that the Western relationship to nature has reached the limit of its capacity, it is now more important than ever to reconceptualise the ways we perceive, represent, and ultimately act toward non-human animals and each other.

As with so many aspects of Western culture, the root of the divide between man and animal can be traced back to the great minds of Ancient Greece. In order to structure the universe, and make sense of creation, Aristotle devised the *scala naturae*, or great chain of being. Roughly put, the *scala naturae* divides everything into five categories: at the top of the chain are the spiritual beings, followed by humans, then animals, plants, and finally minerals at the bottom. Humans, therefore, occupied a symbolic place between the spiritual and the natural. The natural however, was anything but a stable entity and its parts were merging continuously into one another, from inorganic material via the plants to the animals and to humans.¹

This ideological structure of nature would remain dominant until the late 18th century and is represented in the *wunderkammer*; considered the predecessor of modern museums. Most importantly, the traditional *wunderkammer* did not make a distinction between man-made objects

and those created in nature by the hands of God. This malleable, ambiguous view of nature would change radically when Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), the 'Father of Taxonomy', 'revolutionized biology [...] with his development of formal principles of classification.'² Most interestingly, Linnaeus' schema was based on human relations and hierarchies, in other words, he organized nature in the same way we organize ourselves, at once confirming both the relation and distance to it.

'Linnaeus' genius was to apply the social hierarchy of his day, with its kingdoms, provinces, parishes and villages, to the natural world. He slotted plants and animals into a framework of five main categories—kingdom, class, order, genus, species. Almost incidental to his encyclopedic audit of the natural world was his decision to call each living thing by just two Latin names, representing genus and species. This innovation, known as binomial nomenclature, has proved to be Linnaeus' greatest gift to posterity.'³

Because of his systematic approach to nature, Linnaeus 'was the first to classify human beings in the same genus as other primates.'⁴ This did not however bring man closer to nature. Instead, the cold rationalism used as a way of gaining control over the 'chaos' of nature, caused a divide in practically every aspect of life, because it set Man centre stage as the one with the hermeneutic authority. Since biblical times the act of naming – a right given to Adam by God - is also an act of power, of taking control and ownership of that which is being named. The newly defined taxonomy is again reflected in the museum where 'with the development of Linnaean taxonomy [...] the endless play of meaning possible in the *wunderkammer* was superseded by the rational structures governing the display practices of the modern museum.'⁵ These rational structures ultimately found their conclusion in the separation of museums for natural history and art: nature and culture, man and animal, are now severed both in theory and in mind.

What this very brief history of taxonomy and representation of nature shows, is that our relation with and perspective of the animal world is not only actively imposed and performed by man, it is constantly changing. The shifts that occurred in the past, may prove useful for the future, because now that we are facing serious practical and political problems concerning the conservation of biodiversity (and ultimately of course our own way of life) it has become pertinent to rethink the way we position ourselves among other living things. And here science once again can play a leading role as it can no longer specify the exact difference between humans and animals, living and dead. In fact, in light of the latest scientific discoveries, the entire opposition

of culture and nature no longer makes any sense. We now can begin to come to terms with the interchangeability of these previous distinctive terms and start rekindling our connection to animals. But where to start when animals that we previously depended on for work, food, transport and clothing, have mostly been replaced by machines? When our rural life styles have now more than ever been exchanged for a life in the concrete jungles that are our cities. In this situation, the only animals that are still part of our life are our pets who therefore take centre stage in our thoughts about the animal world. Driven by sentiment, we tend to attribute our pets human features, we relate and to some extent even equate ourselves with them.

The film *Tampopo Head and the Name of the Dogs* (2011) by Toshie Takeuchi tells the story of a man named Hilko who perhaps has taken the relationship between himself and his dogs a little too far. Not only does he let his dogs completely take over and destroy his house, he has named the female dogs after people he knows, one being the artist Takeuchi herself. Somehow the naming of the dogs has transferred part of the namesake's identity onto them and vice versa, making the act of naming a slightly disturbing one. The traditional boundary between man and animal has been crossed, and with it we realize how fragile this divide really is. Our identity is anything but safe: we can redefine the Self by the simple act of naming, just as classifications were created by this same act a long time ago. But naming is not only an act of power, it also gives the thing named an identity. By naming the dogs after people he knows, it shows how Hilko sees and feels about these animals. They are not really animals to him but rather companions that happen to be other than human. You could say that Hilko is endowing the dogs with a soul that traditionally they are thought not to possess, making them equal to himself, and (although he is still the one doing the naming) the divide between man and animal much smaller and insignificant.

Similar to the fact that in naming the world we have defined ourselves, the film is also about human affiliations. The two main characters Hilko and Ed have a difficult relationship with the world outside the comforts of their homes. For both, the world they have created with each other and the dogs, offers an escape from a world that doesn't seem to accept them. The different realities of the individuals in the film and the lives of the dogs all collide and merge, suggesting another way of thinking somewhere between dream and reality. A space in which man becomes dog, dog becomes man. A space of alternative possibilities that is, no matter how strange it might seem to some, not as distant as we've come to believe.

¹Schüttpelz, Erhard. 'Scala Naturae'. In: *Natural History and Other Fictions. An exhibition by Mark Dion*. [tent.cat.] Birmingham: Ikon Gallery/Hamburg: Kunstverein/Amsterdam: De Appel Foundation, 1997: 34.

²Marks, Jonathan. 'The Great Chain of Being.' In: Moore, John H., ed. *The Encyclopedia of Race and Racism Vol. II*. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008: 69.

³Warne, Kennedy. 'Organization Man' *Smithsonian.com*. May 2007. February 6, 2014 <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/organization-man-151908042/>>.

⁴Warne, Kennedy. 'Organization Man' *Smithsonian.com*. May 2007. February 6, 2014 <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/organization-man-151908042/?page=3>>.

⁵Corrin, Lisa Graziose. 'Mark Dion's Project: A Natural History of Wonder and a Wonderful History of Nature'. In: Corrin, Lisa Graziose, Miwon Kwon, and Norman Bryson, eds. *Mark Dion*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997: 53.