

Evolution or representation? The strange case of an academic report¹

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Abstract. This essay explores the theoretical propositions regarding the ontological divide between nature and culture as proposed by Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruno Latour and Vinciane Despret's ethological studies within the framework of semiotics. In particular, it discusses the second generation of zoosemiotics, which challenges previous naturalistic paradigms by adopting an inter-natural approach, through the analysis of Franz Kafka's "A Report to an Academy". In Kafka's text, the transformation of an ape into a human becomes a complex narrative that challenges Darwinian evolution through parody. It is an opportunity to navigate the blurred boundaries between the animal and the human: unlike Kafka's "Metamorphosis", where the transition from human to animal is seen, this story is the opposite, with an ape taking on human characteristics while retaining animal instincts. Kafka skilfully creates a regime of belief, challenging perception through an academic yet theatrical lens of an ape's journey to humanisation and the inherent satire within.

It is possible to read Kafka's animal stories for quite a while without realising that they are not about human beings at all. When one encounters the name of the creature – monkey, dog, mole – one looks up in fright and realizes that one is already far away from the continent of man.

Walter Benjamin

1. Animals have their say

Among the gags in *Hellzapoppin'* – Henry C. Potter's famous meta-film (1941) – is that of a dog who, hearing a bear chattering, exclaims: "How strange, a talking bear!". In that situation a bear talks and nobody cares; the talking bear is more disturbing to the dog than to the men. Somewhere else, however, there is a talking dog, which is another anomaly, but nobody cares, neither humans nor animals. Thus, the animal has taken the floor to point at another animal that has taken the floor, causing a vertigo full of consequences. Strictly speaking, which is *weirder*: the first case or the second? Both? As is often the case, the comic force of the scene is semiotically effective: there is an upside-down world (in which we find a talking bear) and there is another possible world (in which we find the observing dog) that would like to put the first back in its place, by turning it upside down again (the dog is also a talker).

In this triple inversion, a sort of carnival of our everyday life, lies a large part of what we could call, semiotically speaking, *animal discourse*. An expression that does not refer to the animal speaking, with its own code of communication and, as it is assumed, a capacity for language. Rather, it refers to an animal that finally has something interesting to say, that finds itself in the relevant environments and contexts where it can best express itself: with other non-human animals, but also and above all with humans, in a common social consensus where all humans and non-humans, individuals and collectives, technologies and divinities are linked by relevant networks of meaning, by dense and shifting plots of signification.

For semiotics, the question of the talking animal is an obvious one but, in other ways, something unthought of. It's an issue that still needs to be worked on and discussed, towards new models of observation and

¹ Traduzione parziale del saggio "La scimmia di Kafka" contenuto nel volume *Nel Semiocene. Enciclopedia incompleta delle vite terrestri* (Luiss, Roma 2024). Traduzione di Giorgia Costanzo [N.d.R.].



analysis. Talking animals are the norm in fairy tales, legends, myths, fiction and so on: all the material that has led to the theory of narrativity, in which a non-human actor can play even very complex narrative roles. But this is also something unthought of, because narrative grammar, in its interplay of actors and actants, has in a way humanised animals by situating itself within an epistemology that we could define, as we shall see, as animistic. In short, a clear epistemological positioning is needed to avoid a naive assumption of the notions of animality and humanity.

2. Multinaturalism

Philippe Descola's (2005) theoretical proposal is well known. According to the French anthropologist it is necessary to abandon the traditional opposition between nature and culture, to go beyond the "great divide" that for about two centuries has pitted one nature against several cultures and that belongs to the specific "ontology" of naturalism. For Descola, *naturalism* (typically Western and Modern) is only one of the possible ontologies among the cultures of the world, according to which there is a discontinuity of interiority and a continuity in physical, biological terms between humans and non-humans. Other cultures have different divisions, such as *animism* (continuity of interiority and physical discontinuity), *analogism* (physical and interior discontinuity) and *totemism* (continuity in both). Hence the idea of *multinaturalism*, conceived as the paradigmatic existence of multiple ontologies that can be reconstructed in their mutual relationship according to a structural model of general anthropological interpretation.

It is important to note that Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2009), the Argentinean anthropologist who first elaborated the notion of multinaturalism from his studies of the Amazonian Achuar (using also the formal apparatus of Emile Benveniste's enunciation), gives a very different definition to this notion. For Viveiros de Castro, it is the Achuar culture as such that is multinaturalist since, according to this population, humans and non-humans have a common culture but multiple natures. In other words, for Viveiros, multinaturalism is not an *epistemological category* of anthropology, but an *empirical phenomenon* to be interpreted like many others within the discipline of anthropology. If for Descola it is the scholars (who study "savages") who must be multinaturalists, for Viveiros it is the "savages" themselves.

Bruno Latour (1991, 1999), for his part, stressed that the great modern division between nature and culture is more a matter of principle than a concrete cultural condition, especially in the Modern West. If modernity is fully naturalistic at the level of a general theory of science, in its socially widespread intellectual practices it tends instead to produce *hybrid* entities that always mix natures and cultures. To the point that, according to Latour (1991), we have never been modern – the title of a well-known book by the French theorist that sums up his thinking on multi-naturalism very well. Latour, who, as we know, has often used the tools of semiotics to dissect scientific practices and the politics of nature (which he sees as two sides of the same coin), has very effectively shown how nature is ultimately the final (and changing) meaning effect of complex networks of facts and values. At the abstract and a priori level of the Western philosophical tradition, the distinction between objective facts on the one hand and social values on the other goes back at least to Plato's parable of the Cave in *The Republic*, which established a regime that was at once political and scientific, in which scientists dealt with the "kingdoms" of nature (thus working on facts) while politicians managed public affairs (working on values). But from the point of view of concrete cultural and social experience, *facts* are always *constructed* in the dispute between politicians and scientists, from the interaction between them and many other possible social actors, human and non-human. In other words, *facts are made up of values*, and similarly *there are no values without the facts* in which they are inscribed, in order to manifest a totally semiotic statement: no ontology, therefore, in the singular, but a lot of signification, in the singular, which produces a series of ontologies, in the plural.

3. Aporias of semiotics

All this is well known. However, the question for the science of signification is: how can semiotics deal with the question of multinaturalism? How should this phenomenon be taken into account? One must adopt the point of view of Descola, Viveiros or Latour?



On the one hand, it has to be admitted that semiotics, in its most frequent declinations, fits into a naturalistic, or rather mono-naturalistic, paradigm: it tends to consider nature as a single entity from which multiple cultures are produced as its otherness, to the point that, for Greimas, the anthropological opposition /nature vs culture/, projected onto the semiotic square, is universal. On the other hand, we know that, for semiotics, this opposition has not an ontological but a semantic basis. /Nature/ and /culture/ (with their negative terms) are *meaning effects* that constitute themselves reciprocally and discursively, not concrete entities. If /nature/ is the result of a certain articulation of signification, it emerges as plural, in function of changing isotopes, discourses, narratives, cultures. Here is the semiotic aporia: an *epistemological* mono-naturalism underlying a *methodological* multinaturalism.

Moreover, as we know, narrative grammar derives from Proppian morphology and post-Proppian narratology, according to which narrative forces can be both human and non-human (things, animals, spiritual beings, etc.). In stories (myths, fairy tales, short stories, novels...) there are no characters in the traditional sense of the term, but actants who become actors, semantically charged with modalities of action and, above all, at a discursive level, with multiple possible thematizations and figurativizations: a flying carpet in a fairy tale can be subject or helper or sender or perhaps anti-subject... Now, from this point of view, which is the *theoretical* level of the science of signification, semiotics is no longer naturalistic but, on closer inspection, animistic: in the fairy tales – that is in the profound articulations of cultures – non-human beings do things, feel passions, act, understand, have feelings and sensations... and therefore, from this perspective, it is as if they had a soul. Just like the animals and plants of the Amazonian Achuar, which have been studied by anthropologists.

We must therefore admit that, as semiologists, we are in an awkward situation: at the epistemological level we are mononaturalists; at the theoretical level we are animists; at the methodological level we are multinaturalists. Semiotics as a rigorous scientific framework is in danger.

4. The search for empiricism

We can be helped by the empirical level, that of sociosemiotics and cultural semiotics, where the myriad of texts circulate, intertwining and narrating each other to constitute the dynamics of the semiosphere. Situating ourselves at this level would make it possible to ascertain whether and how, in contemporary Western society and culture, the naturalistic ontology in which we find ourselves, as it were, by default, is the only one that can be viable and practiced, or whether it is not mixed with other possible ones. Are we, like the Achuar, contemporary multi-naturalist social actors? To answer this question, we should ask ourselves whether there are multiple ontologies in our contemporary world that each of us uses as implicit meta-valorisations within our everyday and social experience. For example, we can easily imagine someone who is a scientist (naturalist), consults the horoscope every morning (analogue), loves his cat by including it in his family status (animist), and drinks the so-called natural wine (totemist). The problem then, as in other cases, will be to understand which is the *dominant* ontology and which others are hierarchical to it.

For this reason, it would perhaps be more appropriate to abandon the term “multinaturalism” and adopt that of “*internaturality*”. The term “multinaturalism”, like the similar term of “multiculturalism” used by sociologists, suggests the idea of autonomous and separate worlds, with no relationship between them, in which identity (individual or collective) is constituted by the progressive accumulation of features internal to each culture or type of ontology. On the contrary, that of “*internaturality*”, like that of “*interculturality*”, thinks identities as results of mutual relations, differences and oppositions, dialogues and conflicts, contracts and polemics. Ontologies, as Descola (2005) himself observed, are constituted in relation to each other, as are cultures.

Thus, for example, on the Web, or more precisely in social networks, there is an open conflict that often stems precisely from a conflict of ontologies. Or, to take another example, many controversies in the contemporary world relating to wine culture are conflicts between different ontological dispositions: on the one hand, the naturalists, who think of wine as the product of chemical and biological processes, starting from the different types of vine, which would be identical everywhere in the world; on the other hand, the totemists, who think that wines are the result of different *terroirs*, which give specific properties



to all the types of entities belonging to the same territory. This is why so-called natural or organic wines are not naturalistic but totemistic.

5. Animality

One field of research that can be particularly useful in pursuing reflection on such matters is precisely that of animal discourse. Thus of the systemic relations between humans and the non-humans we call “animals” within the same collectives or, if you like, the same societies. If one of our problems is to assess the animism that may be present in semiotic theory, we need to work on that being called “animal”, which lies on the threshold between nature and culture, biology and society, and which at the same time is endowed, at least thanks to the lexeme that encapsulates it, with something like a soul.

Let us be a bit more clear. The theme of animality is very much in vogue today: in the arts and the media, where the figure of the animal is present in literature, in the visual arts, in newspapers, on television, on the Internet, in the social sphere, and so on. It is also present in the human and social sciences (in anthropology it’s called “animal cultures”), and again in philosophy, law, politics and landscape studies (it’s the subject of the Anthropocene), where, for example, the question of animal rights is stormily debated, as is that of the shared worlds of humans and non-humans. This trend also touches on public sensibility and ethics, hence phenomena such as vegetarianism and animalism, veganism, etc., which aim to inscribe all living beings in the same common world.

But this is not a fashion like any other. In fact, beyond cultural marketing, it raises at least one delicate question: mankind is no longer alone at the center of the universe, a privileged kind of living being who by (divine?) right dominates all others. For this reason, the question of animal rights, even though it is often based on arguments drawn from the natural sciences, is both strongly rational and strongly metaphysical, almost religious, perhaps even mystical. Once the question is asked, science and spirituality, biology and transcendence meet. But one strong argument remains: since the law is a purely human institution, is it not an excessive stretch to use it for animals? What do they think?

As for fashion, it is not a problem for the semiologist: it is sufficient to include it in the corpus of analysis and to consider it as a media genre with its own stylistic features and semiotic devices. Studying the cultural trend of animality is the same as studying animal discourse.

6. Zoosemiotics

Thus, after a long trip, we arrive at the *Second-generation of Zoosemiotics* that takes up a protracted tradition of study, renews it and brings it towards different methodological and epistemological direction. Indeed, we know that one of the most popular lines of work in semiotics in the 1960s and 1970s was precisely that of zoosemiotics as a project to study the “language” of animals – a strategic move to extend the domain of application of the new science of signs beyond human languages and cultures, and beyond the domain of the social. The search was on for forms of communication in the “animal kingdom”, forms that Thomas A. Sebeok, one of the project’s founders, called *natural signs*. According to this point of view, there are two types of signs: the cultural and the natural. An idea as fascinating as it is destined to meet and unconditionally annex a series of ancient and modern reflections on the subject (from the Stoics to Montaigne, from theoretical biology to critical ecology, and so on). What are the lines of continuity and discontinuity between humans and animals? Between the *Umwelt* of the one and that of the other? between the open and the closed? Does language really belong to mankind? Or are rather humans who does not know and understand the languages of that constitutive otherness which is the animal? And does the presence of any language in animals imply any consciousness on their part?

Such a research perspective also opened up a dialogue with ethology, which had expressed a number of perplexities about zoosemiotics: under what conditions can we say that an animal speaks? what are the minimal features of a set of signs that can be said to constitute a language? and above all: what do animals talk about? what are the privileged themes of their speech? hunger, love, fear, relations with other living species? Are we sure that for them interactions are aimed at solving problems? In any case, the first



generation of zoosemiotics had a very clear idea: to demonstrate the importance and power of semiotics, a young discipline struggling to establish itself in the market of knowledge. But this project also had tacit assumptions: animals live in a separated world, they belong to different biological species, they do not speak to each other and, above all, they are part of an autonomous and separate sphere from the social that we like to call “nature”, unique and silent. In the end, this first generation of zoosemiotics had a very precise strategic objective: to approach nature and its knowledge, that is, to accredit itself as a science in its own right, a science of nature as well as a parallel gesture to Chomskyan linguistics, eager to accredit itself with the hardcore scientists.

It was, quite clearly, a semiological project based on a paradigm of sign and code, not of signification and textuality; a project based on expressive substances (distinguishing, for example, between visual, acoustic, chemical, tactile communication, etc.) and not on forms of content. In short, to return to our questions, it was an ontologically *naturalistic* project.

The project of renewing zoosemiotics, of founding a kind of semiotic study of animals that we call the second generation, must therefore start by questioning the methodological and epistemological limits of its first version; and it must continue by assuming a narrative and discursive semiotics, a structural sociosemiotics open to the theme of internaturality. Thus, instead of asking whether and how animals speak, whether they have a conscience, etc., it seems more appropriate to understand whether and how we talk about them – and relate to them – in social discourses, and, in parallel, how they become actants (subject, object, etc.) of the cognitive, passionate, ethical-political, etc. practices of our societies. In short, the zoosemiotic question becomes: what kinds of narrative relations do animals maintain with other human and non-human actors (putting into brackets, if not eliminating, the preconceived notion that animals are natural entities while humans are social beings)? Thus, the problem will no longer be to determine to what extent there is animality in humans (in terms of, for example, aggression, instinct, etc.) or, conversely, to assess whether the animal possesses specifically human characteristics (such as language, consciousness, the ability to use tools, and the like). The idea of second-generation zoosemiotics is to analyse whether and how animality, in interaction with other social/natural actors, *makes sense*, articulates forms of signification, contributes to the enactment of narrative and discursive forms, and participates in the formation and circulation of social values.

7. Humanimals

The work of Vinciane Despret (2002, 2004, 2007), who has published a number of important socio-anthropological analyses of ethological practices *in situ*, provides important clues in this direction. In the same way that Latour and Woolgar (1979) ethnographically studied scientific laboratories and elaborated an almost canonical practice of fabricating facts, Despret attempts to do the same with the fieldwork of animal behaviourists. Understanding ethology as a scientific discourse rather than as a science of nature thus leads to the observation, made earlier, that the definition of the animal and its behaviour is not so much the result of epistemologically neutral observation and reflection, but of an ideological and political, ethical and perhaps aesthetic, or, in short, semiotic stance. The scientific gesture is mixed with concrete action and the values necessary to produce it. For example, the Russian prince Pyotr Alekseevich Kropotkin, a well-known theorist of anarchy, studied the animal world and so-called primitive populations in search of a perfect social community that could serve as a model for the construction of a future political utopia. Similarly, Despret shows, the Freudian theory of the primitive horde, of Darwinian derivation, implicitly tends to preserve the Victorian ethic, which was very concerned to protect the morals of European ladies – descended, yes, from apes, but from pudgy apes, and strictly loyal to their alpha male.

In Despret’s view, as in the view of many other scholars working on the same issues and problems, it is necessary to work on “hybrid communities” that bring together humans and animals with different relationships between them, arising from the most diverse circumstances and practices. In other words, the problem is not to study animals, but to study societies and to “discover” that in them there are not only humans, as one implicitly tends to think, but also animals, with the most diverse relationships with and between humans. The ethno-ethological gaze thus leads to the elucidation of those complex but not



hybrid entities that Despret, with Donna Haraway, calls “humanimals”. Introducing a major conference on the subject, this scholar’s position is very clear:

Nous nous sommes préoccupées, non seulement des animaux avec lesquels des humains échangent des services, des informations et des affects (‘espèces compagnes’, animaux de service et animaux de ferme), mais aussi des animaux sauvages qui vivent libres et plus ou moins indépendants des établissements humains. Nous avons donc évoqué des animaux qui importent à certains d’entre nous, soit parce qu’ils partagent leur espace quotidien, soit parce qu’ils sont au travail avec eux, soit parce qu’ils les chassent, s’en défendent ou les protègent, soit enfin parce qu’ils en font un objet d’étude ou de réflexion (Despret and Larrère 2014, p. 8).

This means, among other things, that the very common statement among philosophers that “we know nothing about animals” only makes sense within a naturalistic ontology that conceives knowledge as the self-evident result of “pure” scientific experiments producing unique truths and unquestionable laws. From the semiotic point of view this assertion appears to be quite fallacious. Firstly, because, as we know from narrative grammar, tacit forms of knowledge and forms of valorisation are implicit in the immanence of our concrete social practices. Furthermore, these forms can be explained through the analysis of the narrative’s paths and values. From Propp at least, but perhaps even earlier from Aristotle, we know that from the sequences of actions performed by the actors in a play – fictional or not – we can reconstruct the psychological motivations of the actions themselves; and thus the so-called “interiority” of the characters – fictional or not – whether they are human or non-human. In other words, although we know nothing about what animals think, and even less about whether they think at all, we know very well what they do, with us and with each other. It’s a type of knowledge from which we can infer the “psychic” assumptions of their actions, as well as the forms of sociality within which they operate.

According to Despret, this form of knowledge about animals cannot be an “ascetic” knowledge, that of an external observer who fixes his own objective gaze on a supposedly universal and necessary nature, but rather the committed gesture of a subjectivity that intervenes in the field, bringing into play passions as well as reasons, values as well as methods. Despret made extensive reference to the famous experiment of Jane Goodall who refused to study chimpanzees without first establishing some kind of affective relationship with them. By infiltrating the social life of these monkeys (family, rearing young, etc.), she managed to overturn precisely those Darwinian (and Freudian) ideas about apes mentioned above, according to which a single male would dominate the entire group. By transgressing the protocols of science, by reinventing a science full of affection, a feminine science, according to Despret, Goodall turns primatology on its head, but she also changes the chimpanzees and herself. By becoming a sensitive, involved woman rather than a cold, impartial scientist, Jane Goodall was able to understand not only the role of women in the group and the centrality of motherhood within it, but also her own maternal experience. “Chimpanzees taught me how to be a mother”, she is said to have repeated many times.

This is not just a joke, but a famous and extraordinary example of the way in which the knowledge relation in ethological discourse is not between a subject and an object, but between two subjects, thus including their intersubjective relation, in which each involved actor changes or may change in relation to the other. Just as there is a shared world of humans and non-humans in everyday and social life, so the ethological knowledge shouldn’t ignore it. Humans’ gaze on the animals, as strategic as any other gaze, transforms the animals and at the same time transforms humans. Not only our cognitive representation of animality is transformed, but also in their ways of doing and being, in their values, in their cultures of reference. And in doing so, human beings also rethink themselves. In other words, the transformations as well as identities are reciprocal and temporary, depending on strategies and tactics of the involved subjects. Consider the case of parrots: according to Despret, the question is not, in the stereotypical sense, whether they can speak or not, but whether they have something to say, that is, whether we are able to put them in a position to do so by having something interesting to say to them in return. So the problem shifts: for ethologists, it is not the ability to speak that is the subject of the problem, but the set of communication and the values that it brings into play. Similarly, it seems that we only began to understand the behaviour of crows when a researcher took them into his home, gave them an identity, a role in the interpersonal relationship with himself and his family.



9. Accelerated evolution

Franz Kafka's academic monkey can help us to discuss this problematic framework. The reference is to the famous short story "A Report to an Academy" (*Ein Bericht für eine Akademie*, 1917), which deals with the transformation of an ape into a human being: a kind of accelerated parody of Darwinian evolution. From the very first lines, the question of the different experience of time is raised: "It is now nearly five years since I was an ape, a short space of time, perhaps, according to the calendar, but an infinitely long time to gallop through at full speed, as I have done" (Kafka 1917, p. 250). A difference that is played out on several levels: that of the fundamental separation between humans and non-humans, who precisely have a different perception of lived time, which is a theme placed at the level of the utterance; but also the encyclopaedic level of the Darwinian question of the evolution of the ape into man, which is precisely parodied by the double enunciator of the story. On the one hand, the inscribed narrator, who is the monkey-like protagonist of the story; on the other hand, the actual enunciator, a constructed ghost of the author, who inserts this story into an imaginary that is both specific and indeterminate, which is, quite simply, Kafkaesque. An imaginary populated of an array of problematic animal characters.

9.1. Negotiating competences

The story of the academic monkey is the opposite to that of Kafka's famous "Metamorphosis", in which, as is well known, it is a man who becomes an animal. Generally speaking, the phenomenon of *becoming an animal*, as Deleuze and Guattari (1975) have observed, is central to the Bohemian writer's work, where the procedures of transformation, the forms of passage, are far more important than the initial and final status. The process of becoming, in one sense or another, is more relevant than what one becomes and what one no longer is. In Kafka, the metamorphosis is never quite complete: there is always a remnant, a hybrid, an actor who is never quite human or quite animal. As Isabella Pezzini (1998) has observed, in "Metamorphosis" Gregor Samsa already has the body of an animal when the story begins. What happens in the course of the story is the gradual, improbable acquisition of purely animal competences. Gregor has to learn to have passions, desires, tastes, action programmes and values of a cockroach: or rather, he has to translate human passions, desires, tastes and value programmes into those of an animal. But, as always with translations, the final result of the transformation process will never be exactly the same: it will rather be a hybrid, halfway between man and animal, between Gregor and a cockroach. So that when he almost succeeds, he lets himself die.

In "A Report to an Academy" it is more or less the same, except that the ape, having become almost human, begins to mock man himself, without, however, being able to find any real form of freedom. Another relevant difference between the two texts is that in "Metamorphosis" the discourse is in the third person, whereas in "Report" the first person is used. The monkey tells his story in the form of an academic report. One of the skills that the monkey has acquired in the course of its accelerated evolution is precisely the narrative and generally communicative one: he managed to govern a relationship that, before being academic, is first of all intersubjective, and to transform the discursive genre. In other words, the Kafkaian text is not an academic relationship, but the fiction of an academic relationship within a story where, as we shall see, the question of fiction, or if you prefer theatricality, is very much present.

But what is the story? It is about the capture of a chimpanzee in Africa, its transport on a boat to Europe, where this chimpanzee (called Peter the Red because of a scar of that colour) is locked in a cage. In an attempt to find not an escape, a *vanishing point*, but rather a "way out", less satisfying perhaps, but far less rhetorical than any affectation of total freedom, the chimpanzee decides to gradually get to know some human ways of life, or rather what he believes to be human ways of life, through his very attentive but at the same time hallucinated, alienated, otherworldly gaze. Gradually, the ape understands (or thinks to understand) what humans like to do: spit, smoke a pipe, drink a lot of alcohol. So, in order to be accepted by humans, the ape imitates his tormentors, doing what is stereotypically typical of apes: he imitates the behaviour of those in front of him, he mimics them. He begins to spit, smoke a pipe and, not without difficulty, drink alcohol. There is a double regime of veridiction at work here: the monkey believes he is doing typical human actions, he is trying to become human, and he is doing this in order to be accepted



by the humans who keep him imprisoned as an ape; but the humans are watching him, having a great deal of fun, believing he is doing typical ape-like things, and they keep him even more imprisoned.

Thus, as with Jane Goodall and her chimpanzees, there is a double metamorphosis:

- Peter becomes a showman, an actor,
- while the men watching him are no longer ruthless hunters, but nice spectators, people enchanted by a caged ape.

The prey had to, and was able to, transform himself, not into a generic man, but into a comedian in order to succeed in turning his predators into spectators. But at the same time, it is the predators who have transformed the prey: from a wild ape, Pietro has become something else, he has risen, he has evolved, he has specialised in something useful, profitable; and they will profit from it. So when Pietro the Red finally arrives in Europe, he is sent to a circus, where he decides to continue working in order to “train” himself, that is, to become more and more human (or an ape imitating human). And he succeeds: Peter becomes a celebrity (remember, the story is told only by his point of view) and takes further private lessons to become a skilled human (or a circus ape). Finally, at the height of his career, he is invited to a university to give an academic lecture in which he tells his own curious story of evolution by adaptation to the environment... As in Despret’s ethno-ethology, the transformation is not unilateral but reciprocal, and the domestication of the animal is not a loss of its natural state but an additional naturalisation that takes place in parallel with the transformation of humans.

The most important aspect of the text, however, is the fact that the whole story is read by an Enunciatee who follows it step by step, phenomenologically transposing the stages of the monkey’s discourse, starting with the title of the story. Gradually, the reader realises that this is not a real academic lecture by a professor, but the speech of a monkey who has rapidly and extraordinarily become an academic. It’s the learned testimony of a subject who, by ridiculing Darwin’s theory of evolution, proves it.

But is it really a scholar, a professor, albeit the result of evolution from the monkey state? Or is it not about a monkey who, having become an actor, recounts his life experiences? Or again, perhaps it is neither a professor, nor a monkey, nor an academic lecture, but a circus act in which a monkey, or rather a man who imitates monkeys, tells a comic story through the simulation of a monkey who believes a little too much in Darwin’s theories... who believes that he is a monkey who has become a man. A regime of belief is established here that Todorov (1970) would have called *fantastic*: that of an a priori undecidability, a knowledge adapted to contexts, rejecting the objectifying asceticism of the naturalist (in the double sense of the word) in order to live together with the entities, the human animals, that are the objects of that same knowledge. Who is the addressee of the text? Every answer makes sense, none is certain.

It should also be noted that the opposite of Gregor Samsa’s experience does not happen all the way through in this story: the ape has become a man, thinks like a man, has almost acquired the morals of a man, but still has the body and affectivity of an ape. He is hairy and his passions are hardly human, they are bestial: he feels no shame, for example, in pulling down his trousers to show the scars scattered over his body. And when it comes to sexual relationships, he has no doubts and turns to little female monkeys, with a great desire to please, but with a certain *pruderie*:

Nearly every evening I give a performance, and I have a success that could hardly be increased. When I come home late at night from banquets, from scientific receptions, from social gatherings, there sits waiting for me a half-trained little chimpanzee and I take comfort from her as apes do. By day I cannot bear to see her; for she has the insane look of the bewildered half-broken animal in her eye; no one else sees it, but I do, and I cannot bear it (Kafka 1917, pp. 258-259).

9.2. Aping

The story flows seamlessly, but we can divide it into sequences, following temporal and spatial transformations:

- The plot starts *in medias res*, in the headquarters of an unidentified academy, where the protagonist begins his speech in the negative, declaring that he does not know and cannot give an account “of the life I formerly led as an ape”, since he has no memory of this ancestral



existential stage of his life. His report will focus more on the transformation from ape to man, in search of a “way out”, not so much to return to being an ape, but, less adventurously, to adapt to the new life that had befallen him;

- Hence a long flashback that takes up almost the entire text, not without a partial return to the enunciative present, where Peter the Red narrates:
 - that he was shot twice and taken prisoner by the Hagenbeck Company (ruthless poachers in search of animals to sell to European circuses and zoos) while watering his herd;
 - to proudly keep the two scars he regularly shows as proof of his former animal status (a sort of Proppian hero-marking, useful for the constant demands of *anagnorisis*);
 - of being locked in a tiny cage for the entire crossing of a ship bound for Europe;
 - to often think back to that imprisonment and everything that happened there;
 - that he arrived in Hamburg and managed to go not to a zoo (where another cage would welcome him for the rest of his life) but to a circus;
 - having made his fortune as an actor in vaudeville and other forms of show, he decided at the same time to educate himself as quickly as possible about human customs;
 - to have become a kind of star in the world of men, but, as mentioned above, to enjoy sexually, every night, with a female monkey;
- and finally the return to the present with the announcement that he had succeeded in his intention to find a way out (“I achieved what I set out to achieve”).

Let us focus on one point in particular: that of the *theatrical isotopy* and, more specifically, that of the imprisonment in the cage during the passage of the ship. In his report, Peter speaks as a theatre actor, certainly not as an academic: he is a monkey who, having become a theatre actor, is invited to give a speech at an academy. And indeed, referring to his “five years of galloping” between the ape and human stages (mentioned above), he states that he was “more or less accompanied by excellent mentors, good advice, applause and orchestral music”. The stage itself is the place and the form of his metamorphosis. He learns this during the crossing, where, confined in the cage, he has strange relations with the sailors of the ship. Let us look in particular at the various steps of this story inside the story.

Peter is locked in a cage with metal bars on three sides and wooden planks on the fourth. “The whole construction was too low for me to stand up in and too narrow to sit down in. So I had to squat with my knees bent and trembling all the time, and also, since probably for a time I wished to see no one, and to stay in the dark, my face was turned toward the locker while the bars of the cage cut into my flash behind”. Immobilised and destroyed (“hopelessly sobbing, painfully hunting for fleas, apathetically licking a coconut, beating my skull against the locker, sticking out my tongue at anyone who came near me”), Peter did not want to see anyone, he just wanted to be in the dark. This was not a trivial desire for freedom, nor the insignificant value of men without brains or dignity, nor even an elaborate escape plan: even if he managed to break the bars and get out of the cage, the sailors would soon catch him. In short, a solution was needed that was neither human nor animal, but somewhere *in between*, a solution that came to Peter’s confused mind and suffering body by observing the sailors around him, their behaviour, their gestures, their habits.

To do this, he makes a small but extremely significant and therefore decisive gesture: he turns his back on the wooden planks, turns towards the bars and begins to observe the world around him. A world that in turn begins to observe him. He looks, confused, at the sailors who, for him, are the spectacle of this world. The sailors, bored and despondent, look at him in search of a moment of entertainment, a flash of distraction. This is enough for Peter to leave his animal state: “Yet as far as Hagenbeck was concerned, the place for apes was in front of a locker – well then, I had to stop being an ape. A fine, clear train of thought, which I must have constructed somehow with my belly, since apes think with their bellies”. All this with extreme calm, a necessary feeling to enter the new dimension, which is at the same time biological and cultural, existential, phenomenological.

The observation of the actions of others is very detailed:

They were good creatures, in spite of everything. I find it still pleasant to remember the sound of their heavy footfalls which used to echo through my half-dreaming head. They had a habit of doing



everything as slowly as possible. If one of them wanted to rub his eyes, he lifted a hand as if it were a drooping weight. Their jests were coarse, but hearty. Their laughter had always a gruff bark in it that sounded dangerous but meant nothing. They always had something in their mouths to spit out and did not care where they spat it. [...] When they were off duty some of them often used to sit down in a semicircle around me; they hardly spoke but only grunted to each other; smoked their pipes, stretched out on lockers; smacked their knees as soon as I made the slightest movement; and now and then one of them would take a stick and tickle me where I liked being tickled (Kafka 1917, p. 254).

So the sailors, spectators of the monkey's theatrical performance, behave like animals. Whereas the ape, using the sailors for his performance, will behave like a man. At this point, in order to stop being a monkey, Peter decides to act like a monkey, using his most ancestral, most stereotypical, most effective species-specific skills. He begins to imitate men, their gestures, movements, behaviour. Thus he begins to imitate sailors, to reproduce their movements and speech, in both perfect and ironic way. He blatantly mocks them, more or less clumsily, because this mimetic capacity works only at the plane of expression, completely ignoring that of content:

It was so easy to imitate these people. I learned to spit in the very first days. We used to spit in each other's faces; the only difference was that I licked my face clean afterwards and they did not. I could soon smoke a pipe like an old hand; and if I also pressed my thumb into the bowl of the pipe, a roar of appreciation went up between-decks; only it took me a very long time to understand the difference between a full pipe and an empty one (Kafka 1917, p. 255).

The monkey, having observed the sailors' gestures, succeeds in imitating them: he smokes the pipe by putting his thumb in the stove; and the sailors, having observed the monkey doing the monkey according to the script, are having a great time. They enjoy themselves like children at the circus. But the most complex problem, as Peter the Red tells to his academic audience, is learning to drink schnapps, an action that in his eyes includes so many other actions: a true intertextual frame, a typical script. Every evening, a sailor approaches the cage and, very slowly, uncorks the bottle, raises it to his mouth, gulps down the liquid and, finally, strokes his belly with great moans of satisfaction. In turn, Peter, unable to overcome his disgust for alcohol, throws the bottle away each time, without forgetting to caress his belly, grinning with satisfaction. Signifier without signified. Until, one evening, he finally manages to drink the schnapps and, in spite of himself, emits what the sailors perceive as a human phoneme. Much to his delight, the ape has learned to speak:

What a triumph it was [...] when one evening before a large circle of spectators [...] I took hold of a schnapps bottle that had been carelessly left standing before my cage, uncorked it in the best style, while the company began to watch me with mounting attention, set it to my lips without hesitation, with no grimace, like a professional drinker, with rolling eyes and full throat, actually and truly drank it empty; then threw the bottle away, not this time in despair but as an artistic performer; forgot, indeed, to rub my belly; but instead of that, because I could not help it, because my senses were reeling, called a brief and unmistakable 'Hallo!' breaking into human speech, and with this outburst broke into the human community, and felt its echo: 'Listen, he's talking!' like a caress over the whole of my sweat-drenched body (Kafka 1917, p. 257).

The game is played and the yoke is removed. Peter the Red has learnt to amuse men by imitating their behaviour. Something he is still doing, like a good monkey, in the academy hall, pretending to be an academic himself. A genius? Perhaps another victim: to succeed, he must become the stereotype of himself.



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