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Virtual Menageries: A Preliminary History

A cat can look at a king, and even at a philosopher (Derrida, 2008), but can it talk to him on the phone? Hundreds of commercial billboards and television slots, websites, comic strips and digital art projects are now exploring this scenario. Between personal blogs, Facebook, YouTube, advocacy sites, personal emails and other URLs, the population of animals on the internet possibly exceeds the population of living animals in the “real” terrain served by the internet. An historical study of software design finds an equally startling plethora of programs named after animals going back to the 1970s. In this paper, I outline and illustrate the complex process of constructing an historical archive of animal representation in digital culture.

Why are there so many images of animals trolling the highways of the information age? How do such images speak in the context of consumer mobilization, and how are our relations with and understandings of non-human animals referenced or altered by this process? My research begins the complex process of constructing an historical archive of human-animal “quasi-objects” (to use Latour’s term) on the internet. It examines these images as the product of a triangulation of media technologies, animals, and virtual readers who embrace strong affective investments in both new technology and animals. In so doing, it draws on and looks for points of intersection between internet history, actor network theory, animal studies, visual culture and cultural studies. It proposes that the desire to constitute and circulate virtual menageries has been a significant agent in the development of the internet and explores the consequences of this finding for an informed approach to image, object and emotion in the digital era.