

Electric Animal

An Interview with Akira Mizuta Lippit

by Lauren Corman

Dr. Akira Mizuta Lippit, author of *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife*, explores, in the context of the development of cinema, how the concept of “the animal” has become central to modern understandings of human subjectivity. Lippit considers the disappearance of real animals and their concurrent appearance in various conceptual and material uses, particularly noting the ways in which the conjoined notions of humanity and animality figure into and through cinema. The animal, he argues, haunts the foundation of western logical systems. Yet, despite the fact that humans and animals suffer under the discursive weight of the signifier, Lippit is careful to note the increasing instability of the human-animal boundary and what might be done to realize more just relationships among both humans and other animals.

On February 12, 2008, Lauren Corman spoke with Lippit as part of the “Animal Voices” radio program, a weekly show dedicated to animal advocacy and cultural critique. They discussed how Lippit developed his thesis and the ramifications of his theoretical work.

Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife was published in 2000 by the University of Minnesota Press. “Animal Voices” can be heard weekly on CIUT 89.5 FM in Toronto, or online at animalvoices.ca.

Lauren Corman: How have questions regarding animals and animality figured into your film scholarship? When did you bring these themes into your work, and why?

Akira Mizuta Lippit: That is its own story in a way. The book that you refer to, *Electric Animal*, was written initially as my doctoral dissertation, and at the time, I was thinking in particular about the moment at which cinema appeared in the late 19th century. There are all kinds of phantasmatic and imaginary birthdays of cinema, but generally people agree that 1895, or thereabouts, was when cinema appeared as a set of technological, aesthetic, and cultural features, and as an economic mode of exchange. People sold and bought tickets and attended screenings.

And I was thinking about what it must have felt like at that moment to experience this uncanny medium. There are various reports of early film performances and screenings, some of them apocryphal and inventive and embellished and so forth, but I think the fascination, the kind of wonder that cinema evoked among many early viewers had to do with this uncanny reproduction of life, of living movement, and the strange tension that it created between this new technology (and we are in the middle of the industrial revolution and seeing the advent of all sorts of technologies and devices and apparatuses), and its proximity to, in a simple way, life: the movements of bodies. And I began to think that the principle of animation, here was critical. To make something move, and in thinking about the term animation and all of its roots, to make something breathe, to make something live.

What struck me, in this Frankensteinian moment was the sense that something had come to life, and the key seemed to be about how people understood, conceived of, and practiced this notion of animating life through a technology. I started to hear a resonance between animals and animation. I started to think about the way in which animals also played a role, not only in early cinema and in animation and the practice of the genre but leading up to it in the famous photographs of Edward Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey, the moving images of animals that were produced serially, as well as the “chronophotographs” that rendered animal motion. And it occurred to me that there was a reason to pause and think about what role animals were playing at that moment in history.

As I began to read, and as I began to collect materials and to think through this question of the status and function of the animal, what animality meant, it took on its own set of values, and essentially *Electric Animal* ended up being a kind of preamble, or an introduction to a book that I haven’t yet written, because I only reach at the end of the book, and in a very perfunctory manner, the advent of cinema. So in a sense, this book, and this question, about what an animal meant for generations before, at that moment and in successive generations, became its own subject, one I still think is critically linked to the question of cinema, and the arrival of cinema, and the force of cinema throughout the 20th century.

LC: Let’s return to that piece that you mentioned about life, and that cinema could show or play this Frankensteinian role; of course, a parallel stream is

around death, and some of the work that I have read about early cinema shows that people were quite afraid, initially, of what it meant. Could you comment on that theme of death and the animal in cinema?

AML: This emerged as a major issue during the course of my study. The discourse on death and the uncanny, the idea that something appears to be there, in the form of a ghost or a phantom, already existed in discussions of photography throughout the 19th century. The sense that photography forges a material connection to the object, that the photograph establishes a material connection to the photographed object, and as such when you look at a photograph you are not simply looking at a rendering, like an artist's interpretation in a painting or sculpture, but you are actually looking at, experiencing a kind of carnal, physical contact with the persons themselves, or with an object, reappears frequently in the discourses on photography. This creates a real excitement, and also fear. I think that effect, the photographic effect of somehow being in the presence of the thing itself, is enhanced by the addition of movement, because with movement you have the feeling that this being is not just there, looking at you perhaps, but also moving in its element, in its time, whether (and this is very important to the discussions of photography) that person is still alive or not. I think that gap is produced at the moment of any photograph and perhaps in any film: the person who appears before you, who appears to be alive, who at that moment is alive, may or may not still be alive. So it produces, among those who have thought in this way, a sense of uncanniness, something is there and isn't there at once.

Where I think that this is particularly important in this discussion of "the animal," and as I began to discover in doing the reading (I should add that I am not a philosopher, I don't teach philosophy, but I am a reader of philosophy; I read it sporadically, I read here and there wherever my interests are) is that with very few but important exceptions, there is a line of western philosophy that says animals are incapable of dying. On the most intuitive level this seems nonsensical. Of course animals die. We know that animals die. We kill animals; we kill them and we see them die. No question that animals die. But the philosophical axiom here—which begins with Epicurus, but is repeated over and over, by

Descartes perhaps most forcefully, and in the 20th century by Martin Heidegger—is that death is not simply a perishing, the end of life, but it is a experience that one has within life, a relationship with one's own end. The claim that is made over and over again, which has been disputed by many people – and it is certainly not my claim – but the claim that one finds repeatedly in philosophy is that animals don't die – they don't have death in the way human beings have, and carry with them, death. Animals know fear, they know things like instinctual preservation, they seek to survive, but they don't have death as an experience. Heidegger will say in the most callous way, they simply perish.

It struck me that this problem was not a problem of animals, but rather a problem for human beings. If human beings don't concede the capacity of animals to die, then what does it mean that animals are disappearing at this very moment, in the various developments of industry, in human population, in urbanization, environmental destruction, that animals are increasingly disappearing from the material and everyday world? And where do they go, if we don't, as human beings, concede or allow them death? (Of course this is only in a very specific, and one might argue, very small, discursive space in western philosophy. Many people have pointed out that this is not the case in religious discourses, in a variety of cultural practices, and in various ethnic and cultural communities. This is a certain kind of western ideology that has been produced through a long history of western philosophy.) So the question of death, the particular form of suspended death that photography and cinema introduced appeared in response to perhaps a crisis in western critical and philosophical discourse that denied to the animal, to animals, the same kind of death that human beings experience. You have this convergence of two death-related, life-and-death related, problems at a time when I think that these issues were particularly important.

LC: So from there, the question that comes to mind is what purpose does it serve and the word that is coming to mind is identity, and the idea of human identity and subjectivity. There must be some reason that western thought keeps going back to this denial of animal death. You tie it in, as others have, to language.

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AML: Two key features of human subjectivity, in the tradition of western philosophy, have been language and death, and the relationship between language and death. This goes back to Plato, to Socrates, and before. The point at which I was writing *Electric Animal*, at the end of the 20th century, gave me the ability to look back at developments in critical theory, philosophy, and the history of ideas throughout the 20th century, and it became clear with the significant interventions of the late 1960s that from at least one century earlier, the question of human subjectivity, its stability, its absoluteness, had already been in question. This question is slowly working its way toward a radical re-evaluation of the status of, the value of, and ultimately the confidence that human beings place in their own subjectivity, and there are many, many influences: around questions of gender and sexuality, questions of race and identity, and in crimes like genocide, for example, during World War II, but before and after as well. All of these developments contribute to this reevaluation, but one could argue that at this moment, in the late 19th century already, there was a certain sense that what had been insisted upon as absolutely unique, as an absolute form in itself – the human subject – required a whole series of constant exclusions and negations for it to survive.

One such exclusion is to claim as properly human, language; what makes the human being human, is the capacity for language, and through this capacity, the capacity for death. As many philosophers argue, only human beings can name death as such, because language gives us the capacity to name those things, not just objects around us, but to name those things that do not appear before us, and these would be the traditional philosophical objects: love, death, fear, life, forgiveness, friendship, and so on. And it will be assumed that animals have communication, they communicate various things within their own groups and between groups, they signal of course, but that animals don't have language as such, which means they can't name those things that are not before them or around them. And it is very clear that there is an effort among human beings to maintain the survival of this precious concept of human subjectivity, as absolutely distinct and absolutely unique. So you find in those long discourses on human subjectivity, this return to questions of language and death.

I would suggest that at this time, with the appearance of Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution, and with other disruptive thinkers like Sigmund Freud and the advent of psychoanalysis, there is a great sense of uncertainty regarding these edifices of human subjectivity, language and death. In *Electric Animal* this moment is particularly rich with such shifts and instabilities, and the sense that language is not exclusive to

human beings, as many people thought, but also that language is not as self-assured in human beings as people thought. Here psychoanalysis plays an important role in indicating, at least speculatively, that we are not as in control of the language that we use to the extent that we would like to believe.

LC: What are the consequences of this process in western thought, where the subject is conceived through an exclusion or a negation of the animal? What are the implications for humans, and also what are the implications for animals? I know that is a huge question.

AML: It is a huge question; It is a very important question.

One could argue that the consequences of a certain practice, let's say, of the politics of the subject have been disastrous, certainly for animals, but also for human beings. If you take one of the places where the form of the human subject is created, it would be Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, his attempt to figure out what, when everything that can be doubted and has been doubted, is left to form the core. And this is his famous quote: "Je pense donc je suis", I think therefore I am, I am thinking therefore I am. If you read the *Discourse on Method*, this is a process of exclusion: I exclude everything that I am not to arrive at the central core of what I am. The process he follows leads him to believe that it is his consciousness, it is his presence, his self-presence with his own consciousness that establishes for him, beyond any doubt, his existence. This is somewhat heretical, it is a break from theological discourses of the soul; it represents a form of self-creation through one's consciousness.

But consciousness is a very complicated thing, a very deceptive thing, because what I believe, what I feel, is not always exactly the way things are. Looking at a series of important shifts that have taken place during what we might call generally the modern period, which extends further back than the recent past, one finds a number of assaults on the primacy of consciousness. Freud names one as the Copernican revolution, which suggested that the earth was not the centre of the universe and that human beings were not at the centre of the universe; the Darwinian revolution, which suggested that human beings were not created apart from other forms, all other forms of organic life, and that human beings shared with other animate beings, organic beings a common history, a pre-history. And Freud (he names himself as the third of these revolutionaries), is the one who suggested that consciousness itself is not a given at any moment, or available at any moment, to us as human beings. What constitutes our sense of self, our consciousness, is drawn from experiences that we no longer have access to—interactions with others, the

desires of others, the kinds of influences and wishes that were passed into us through others, our parents, other influential figures early in our life—and that what we believe to be our conscious state, our wishes, desires, dreams and so forth, are not always known to us, and in fact can't be known because they might be devastating and horrifying, in some cases. They will tell us things about ourselves that we couldn't properly accept or continue to live with.

I think that what is happening, certainly by the time that we enter the 20th century, around this discourse of the subject is that it is no longer holding, it is no longer serving its original purpose; it is generating more anxiety than comfort. Key historical events, World War I, for example, are producing enormous blows to the idea of western progress, humanism, and Enlightenment values, to the cultural achievements of the West—Hegel, for example, a 19th century philosopher, is very explicit about this—to those values that helped to shape the world, and ultimately were supposed to have created a better world for human beings: the Enlightenment, the pursuit of knowledge, science, medicine, religion and so forth. And yet, by the mid-twentieth century many of these beliefs were exposed as illusions, especially after the advent of death camps, camps created for the sole purpose of producing, as Heidegger himself says, producing corpses, a factory for corpses. It's not a place where people happen to die. This is an entire apparatus designed in order to expeditiously, efficiently, and economically, create corpses out of living human beings. Similarly, with the first use of the atomic bomb, on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, on human beings. This was a machine, a science, a technology, a weapon devised for maximizing, efficiently and economically, the destruction of human beings. I think what this created for many thinkers, philosophers, writers, artists, activists, citizens around the world was a sense that in fact what had helped to create this situation and these catastrophic results was not a matter of totalitarian regimes and bad politics, but something more fundamental: a certain belief that I have the right to destroy or take life from others.

And how is that achieved? By first denying that those others are like me. So the discourse on Jews practiced throughout Nazi Germany is in fact even more extreme than that of the discourse on animals; in fact, as many people have pointed out, that many Nazis were famous for their love of animal, some were practicing vegetarians; they outlawed animal experimentation. In a sense animals were more like Aryan Germans, than Jews were.

You have a series here of rhetorics that allow you to cast the enemy, the Other, at a distance from your own subjectivity, and in order to achieve this you have to deny

them any form of subjectivity. Not just that they are just culturally different, or that they engage in different practices: They are radically and absolutely unlike me. And I believe that as many people began to think about this condition (Adorno has a very famous passage in which he talks about this), it became clear that one of the sources of this, is in fact the very ideology of the subject, which insists on an absolute autonomy, singularity, and distinct mode of existence from that which is not the subject, not any subject, the Other.

Adorno, in a passage he wrote in a book titled *Minima Moralia*, which is a collection of aphorisms and observations he wrote during and after World War II, offers an observation I quote in *Electric Animal*. He titles it "People are looking at you", and he says there is a moment in a typical scene of hunting where a wounded animal looks into the eyes of the hunter, or the killer as it dies. It produces at that moment, an effect that is undeniable: This thing, that is alive, that I have wounded and which is now dying, is looking at me. How can I deny that it is alive, that it is there, that it exists in the world, with its own consciousness, its own life, its own dreams, and desires? Adorno says the way you shake this off is you say to yourself, "It's only an animal." He will then link that gesture to the history of racism, and what he calls the pogrom, or genocide, against other human beings. You transfer this logic. So the ability to say to an animal, toward an animal that you have killed, whose death you've brought about, "It's only an animal", becomes the same logic you apply to other human beings when you harm or kill them. It's a very profound observation because it suggests that in fact there is no line that separates the killing of animals from the killing of human beings. And in fact already at the moment when we kill an animal, we recognize something immediately that we have to erase from our consciousness with this phrase, "It's only an animal."

LC: It seems to me then, too, that it's this kind of perpetual haunting, because in that erasure, in that statement, "It's only an animal," there's the animal itself that you had to assert yourself against and its living beingness. Do you think in that moment that he's talking about—because it seems like kind of a struggle, or a narrative that you have to tell yourself—do you think that is also a moment potentially of agency, or resistance, in terms of an assertion of an animal subjectivity, or *umwelt*, or however you want to describe it?

AML: Absolutely, and I think that Adorno's phrase and that passage in which he is writing about this scene, an arbitrary, perhaps imaginary but typical scene of the hunt written shortly after the end of World War II, as well as all of Adorno's pessimistic observations about the state of human culture, are written in a state of deep anguish. As he says in this very brief aphorism, we

never believe this, even of the animal. When we tell ourselves, “It’s only an animal”, we in fact never believe it. Why? Because we are there and we see in the presence of an Other, a life that is there. For him it is important that the gaze, as he says, of the wounded animal, falls on the person who has perpetrated the crime. You seek to exclude it, to erase it, to dismiss it by saying that it is only an animal, but it allows you to transfer that very logic into the destruction of other human beings.

Your phrase “haunting” is really important because I think that it suggests that a phantom animal becomes the crucial site not only for an animal rights, but for human ethics as well. The ability to kill another, is something in fact we—we, human beings—never properly achieve; we never truly believe this, “It’s only an animal” at that moment, Adorno says. We tell ourselves this, we insist upon it, try to protect ourselves through this mantric repetition of a phrase, “It’s only an animal,” “It’s only an animal,” yet we never believe it. And as such, we are haunted by it. I think the crisis in human subjectivity, in discourses on the human subject that arrive in the late 1950s, has everything to do with this kind of haunted presence. Human subjectivity is now a haunted subjectivity, haunted by animals, by everyone that has been excluded, by women, by people of different races, different ethnicities, different sexual preferences. And in fact the convergence of civil rights, critical theory, animal rights, feminism, the gay and lesbian movements, all of these things really shape—to use Foucault’s term—the episteme in which the primary political focus for many philosophers and theorists erupts in a critique of the subject.

LC: Without getting you to offer something prescriptive [both laugh] about where to go from here, I do, I guess, want to ask about where to go from here. Because our audience is sort of the average person, turning on their car radio, or the animal rights activist, what does this mean then for... It just seems like a huge juggernaut, this huge weight, of Western history for people who want to shift, or people talk about blurring the boundaries between humans and animals (and this, of course, is very anxiety-provoking considering the legacy of Western thought), where is the turn now? Or where do you think there are potentials for (I think your phrase is) “remembering animals”? Is that the best we can do?

AML: Again, it’s an important question in so many ways. There are so many things I would like to speak to in response to that question. I would say that I don’t know if I am, by nature, an optimist or a pessimist. I do think, however, that a lot of things have been turning away from this condition, let’s say, or a certain kind of assumption, about the longevity of the human subject. I think that human subjectivity practiced honestly and

ethically will continue to re-evaluate the terms of its own existence in relationship to Others, defined in the modern sense. And I do think that a certain ability to exist with an Other—an Other that may not share the same language that I speak, but certainly exists in a world that is as valuable, authentic, legitimate, as my own—will be the goal. I’ll introduce a phrase by Jacques Derrida. Somebody asked him, what does justice mean? What would justice be? He says justice is speaking to the Other in the language of the Other. I find this to be a very beautiful and very optimistic expression. It is not my task to exclude from my world those that I don’t understand; but it is my responsibility, or it is the practice or task of justice, to learn the Other’s language, which is to give the Other that capacity for language, to assume that there is in the Other, language. Language is, according to that earlier part of our conversation, language is that which is traditionally denied to the Other. “I don’t know what you mean when you speak”; “women speak emotionally”; “animals don’t have any language”; “the language that less developed cultures speak is not as articulate or precise as the language that I speak”, and so on and so forth. I think this pursuit of justice, defined as Derrida does, is very important.

The other thing I will add is that the development of a field that some have called, perhaps temporarily, provisionally “Animal Studies”, is absolutely critical. I think there was a time when Animal Studies would have meant zoology, or in a very focused and direct manner, the pursuit of animal rights. What has been really been exciting for me to observe in this field of animal studies—and it’s not merely a community of scholars and academics; they are artists and performers, who engage in expressive and creative actions, activists who are committed politically, activists who are engaged in their daily lives and daily practices, and also a wide range of scholars in a variety of fields (feminists, literary scholars, historians, historians of ideas, philosophers, and so forth)—there is a certain understanding that “the question of the animal”, as it’s been called, or “of animals” or “of animality”, is not something that is restricted in the end just to the well-being of animals: it affects everybody in fact in ways that are obvious and perhaps less obvious. I think this kind of realization and this kind of community, let’s say, ex-community of people, who are in the field but also outside of their fields but in contact with one another is another way in which, much of what has been established can be critiqued, rethought, unthought, reformulated, toward a viable existence for all forms of life on this earth, and elsewhere.

LC: It seems to me that it’s a difficult but important place to be, working in Animal Studies, in these divergent fields. My own experience was coming from Women’s Studies. It’s interesting how you point to

these different groups, marginalized groups, and I think that one of the saddest things for me has been also that there's this incredible moment of optimism, and potential to be thinking about "the animal" in different ways, (and thus us in different ways) but also in those moments of marginalization there has been a scrambling, a push towards a reinforcement of that human subject to say, "Ah, we are just like that, though. We are not like animals." I think that this is very classic, in terms of an older feminism: liberation is about inclusion into a human culture that is necessarily exclusionary of animals. I think that's still happening, that while there's a kind of opening up of what this question means, "the question of the animal", there's also a concern, my concern anyway, that a simultaneous reinforcement as marginalized groups fight, using language, using the discourse of rights, etc., to become a part of what they were always excluded from.

AML: That's right. That's a very difficult situation that traditionally marginalized groups have had to address. When you have been denied very basic civil rights, for example, one of the immediate and legitimate goals of any movement is to make sure that one secures those rights for one's constituencies, for one's members, and at the same time to make sure that the pursuit or achievement of that right does not reproduce the exclusion of others that one was fighting against initially. That's why I think the role of animal rights is so impor-

tant, because the animal is perhaps the place where life as such has been most excluded in the history of human cultures. And as such it is the place, perhaps, where this rethinking has to begin. There will be all sorts of differences, and all sorts of different objectives and agendas, but when this discussion is practiced rigorously and in good faith, I think ultimately it will be productive. Remember that most of those whom we now think of as the great thinkers were often marginalized in their time; many endured this marginalization, ridicule, hostility. It's part of the task, and I think one of the comforts we can draw in these situations is that the process is ongoing and one makes a contribution where one can, one engages where one can, and it continues forward hopefully toward some better formulation of life for all beings.

LC: Thank you very much. I hope you can join us again on the program sometime. It was really a great honour, and a great pleasure, to speak with you today.

AML: It was a great pleasure for me today. And I really appreciate the work you're doing. The questions were just fantastic. I enjoyed every moment of it.

LC: Thank you so much. Today we've been speaking with Dr. Akira Mizuta Lippit.



Untitled, Photograph by Jackson Tait