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## Editorial

### Animals: Projecting the heroic across species

Heroic figures can stabilise social orders but just as often, they also call them into question. Conceiving of the heroic as an essentially social phenomenon, the Collaborative Research Center 948 “Heroes – Heroizations – Heroism” is interested in conjunctures and transformations of the heroic in specific sociocultural contexts, with a view on the *longue durée*. This issue of *helden. heroes. héros.* extends this scholarly interest to the field of heroised animals, striving to add new perspectives to notions of heroism and the heroic.

Animals have long played a crucial role in how we construct our identity as human beings. Over time, our perception of animals and how they relate to us has undergone significant changes. In recent decades, there has been a surge of interest in human–animal relations. The ‘animal turn’, mainly associated with the 1990s, raised questions of boundaries between men and the rest of the natural world with renewed vigour.<sup>1</sup> Granted, these questions are not as new as they would seem at first sight. They were foreshadowed when Charles Darwin published his seminal text, *On the Origin of Species*, in 1859, and later became urgent in his *Descent of Man* (1871), where he applied his findings on evolution to *human* evolution, making it clear once and for all that man is but a cognisant animal. In the light of the multi-disciplinary approach characteristic of human–animal studies as they present themselves in the early twenty-first century, the boundaries between species, particularly non-human and human animals are tenuous at best.<sup>2</sup> As Linda Kalof succinctly notes, animal studies thrive with the increasing awareness of the commodification of animals, of the rampant loss of natural habitats, and the necessity to co-exist with animals (cf. Kalof 1). All this may lead, on a very basic level, to a sense that all species are in it together, that thinking within the human–animal divide and hence implicitly adhering to an

anthropocentric world-view imposes unnecessary restrictions on a fuller understanding of the socio-political, historical, and ecological conditions under which societies exist.

Heroic behaviour has traditionally been conceived of as intrinsically *human* behaviour but it is a feasible and potentially profitable enterprise to look beyond the limits of species in hero studies. A heroic deed comes to mind, a feat achieved, maybe a heroic death, and almost certainly an afterlife: a heroic reputation guarded, commemorated, and celebrated by a community of admirers. Animals have been heroised in very similar ways. To the extent that their behaviour appears analogous to that of humans, we project onto them concepts of heroism and the heroic. In fact, a closer look reveals a plethora of animals that have become the focal point of such anthropomorphic attributions. There are many instances where the heroisation of animals is long lasting, as in the case of the paradigmatic war horse Bucephalus, belonging to Alexander the Great, opening up a long tradition of heroic horses.<sup>3</sup> Exceptional situations like war seem to be occasions not only for human but also for animal heroism. Conceivably, the acts of animals can be treated in much the same way as human acts: they can be medialised, disseminated, and remembered.

However, there is much more to the heroisation of animals. First and foremost, the concept of agency is reconsidered when talking about animals: how are their actions to be assessed? And is it possible to talk about any form of agency without assigning animals reason? Certainly, as some essays in this collection show, animals can become actors in Latourian actor-network formations, which explicitly include non-human (indeed, non-animate) agents in the first place (Roscher 2016: 48).<sup>4</sup> While the Latourian concept tends to envision the agency of non-human actors as the cause of human behaviour (a cause-and-effect relation captured in the German *Wirkungsmacht*), more radical conceptualisations go as far as granting animals the capacity to act autonomously (*Handlungsmacht*)

4 (Roscher, "Wirkungsmacht und Handlungsmacht", 48-52).

Furthermore, there are numerous common features shared by animal and human heroism; among them is the sense of exceptionality, of pushing the boundaries of expectable everyday behaviour, and finally transgressing them. When it comes to the heroisation of animals, the heroic puts just as much a lens on sociocultural needs and attributions as it does in the case of human heroism. As they are unable to articulate themselves through human language, animals may be even more prone to subsummation in agendas than human heroes, transporting standards and values that a given community is interested in propagating.

### About this issue

The manifold approaches and the wealth of potential material for investigation would make a comprehensive collection an unrealistic project. This issue contains a group of case studies, highlighting crucial questions in the intersection of the heroic with the animal world, probably raising many more questions than it manages to solve. The collection begins with fantastic animals, moving on to animal biographies of the eighteenth century and testaments to animal heroism in nineteenth-century wars, concluding with cultural products of the twenty-first century: novels and other fictional texts, documentaries as well as feature films. With the exception of Stefanie Lethbridge's essay, which deals with fantastic animals, all contributions have mammals and their heroic qualities at their centre: domesticated animals which have for long periods of their biological history lived in close community with men, like dogs and horses; or animals which normally live in the wild but are occasionally kept in captivity, like whales and bears. Famous animals and nameless ones figure in almost equal measure.

**Stefanie Lethbridge** examines the popular TV series *Game of Thrones*, where, she suggests, dragons and direwolves become heroic actors. The series systematically upends traditional notions of chivalry, presenting deficient knights while heroic animals are ready to sacrifice themselves for humans. Interestingly, the dragons and direwolves are marked as species in their own right (i.e., distinctly non-human) but act out heroic behaviour patterns and tropes. Animal actions combined with human actions seem to ensure the best chance of survival in the world of Westeros. However, Lethbridge's article points out that assuming fluid boundaries

between human and non-human is not the point; rather, *Game of Thrones* is about the networks of man and animal which enable heroic action.

**Angelika Zirker** looks at English animal biographies, which became a fashionable genre in the second half of the eighteenth century. Next to satiric strategies of narration, the examples clearly show how animal protagonists are not merely narrative focalisers but become exceptional characters and, in view of the harsh treatment they suffer at the hands of humans, proponents of animal protection.

**Kelly Minelli's** contribution investigates the role of horses in the Napoleonic Wars, studying two famous horses in particular: Napoleon's Marengo and Wellington's Copenhagen. Minelli points back to the tradition of heroised war horses of antiquity, suggesting that in view of actor-network theory, horses can, and indeed do, become actors. Both Marengo and Copenhagen became famous in their own right, with reports celebrating their courageous deeds in battle, and a memory culture surrounding them after their deaths. Minelli goes on to look at the less famous: common soldiers and their horses, where she finds much the same processes of heroisation. A good horse could be essential for a soldier's survival, and the common danger forged bonds between men and animals.

Moby Dick, maybe the most famous literary whale, figures prominently in **Klara Stephanie Szlezák's** study of the potential of animal heroism in Herman Melville's novel. Moby Dick emerges here as a monster with demonic qualities that is capable of cognition, a combination that makes him superior to humankind. Szlezák concludes that Moby Dick is an ambivalent hero but arguably a hero. He is partly a space for allegorical projection but he is also very much an exceptional animal in his own right, inspiring fear and wonder. Moby Dick's malignity is attributed by the human whalers, who become insignificant in comparison with the whale's strength and sublimity.

**Tina Hartmann's** essay provides a close reading of Michael Degen's disturbing, partially grotesque novel *Blondi* (2002), and investigates discourses of guilt and victimisation in the Second World War. Degen's text seems to oscillate between equally abhorrent constellations, representing dogs as human incarnations and alternately as complicit perpetrators and defenceless victims, focussing on the apparent arbitrariness of evil and the indifference of God in the face of (human and animal) suffering.

**Tom Chadwick** studies a controversial film about a controversial character: Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*, an account of activist Timothy Treadwell's life and work with grizzly bears in

Katmai National Park, Alaska. Species boundaries are questioned and potentially reinforced when Treadwell and his partner lose their lives in a grizzly attack. In Herzog's film, Treadwell in particular is assumed to have attempted living as a bear amongst bears, an undertaking that goes fatally wrong. Chadwick insists that Treadwell remained aware of the fundamental difference but still tried cohabitation. In light of this, Chadwick's essay probes twenty-first century concepts of nature and 'the wild', reading Treadwell's medialised life and death as a subversion of the survival narrative: here, the survival of companion species in Haraway's sense (2008) relates to an inter-species cohabitation, in which heroism is not framed as antagonism or the conquering of nature. Rather, it would be heroic to co-exist peacefully – a goal which was not achieved here.

**Claudia Lillge** also contributes a study on big mammals; however, her example has captivity as a central determining factor; she examines Gabriela Cowperthwaite's documentary film *Blackfish* on the life of the orca Tilikum in Sea-World. Tilikum is a dangerous animal who killed at least one of his trainers; at the same time, the film is a narrative of endurance and heroic suffering – captive orcas, as highly intelligent animals, live a life of restriction and deprivation. Lillge's paper demonstrates the political impact of the film, and the consequences for aquariums around the world.

## Where to go from here

There is a number of research desiderata emerging from this collection. The case studies assembled here can only provide an initial look at heroisation processes centring on animals. Further research could help to draw a more nuanced picture of possible differences in conceptualisations of animal heroes across historical periods, (textual) genres and media. As for the status of animals in comparison with humans, the work gathered here suggests that the question of animal agency, or degrees of agency, cannot be fully answered while offering a broad spectrum of possibilities.

It is striking that fantastic, monstrous, and supernatural animals make a reappearance in the popular cultural imagination of the twenty-first century.<sup>5</sup> These creatures cross boundaries easily and are ideal canvases for heroic projection, catering to the audience's desire for the fantastic and spectacular. Stefanie Lethbridge's essay goes the furthest towards granting animals agency in the senses of both *Wirkungsmacht* and *Handlungsmacht*. Maybe this raises

the question of whether full agency can only be realised in fantasy creatures. It would therefore be interesting to further pursue this line of fantastic animals as potential heroes, including studies into the monsters that populate mediaeval tales. On the whole, what emerges from the essays in this collection is that heroisation processes involving animals are manifold, and that the roles these animals play go well beyond that of mere props or accessories to help showcase human excellence and heroism.<sup>6</sup> While their roles need to be considered alongside human knowledge and knowledge systems, animal heroes clearly deserve to be considered in their own right. They do not simply convey human values and norms – by their very existence partly within, partly without man-made orders, but above all, by their actions they create potentialities for alternate standards and, maybe, alternate heroic orders.

**1** The question of an animal turn and its consequences for the humanities is still pertinent and under discussion. From the huge number of seminal publications, see for example Ritvo and Wolfe. Notable is also the number of conferences thematising the animal turn. Among recent examples are "Minding Animals, Mexico City, 17-14 January 2018, "Brauchen die Kulturwissenschaften einen Animal Turn?" Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, Essen, 14-15 March 2018), and "Animals in the Humanities: Relations, Representations, Ethical Implications", Roanoke College, Virginia, 23-24 March, 2018.

**2** Particularly the work of Donna Haraway has done much to shed light on the permeability of boundaries between species. In fact, the boundary image itself is no longer viable. It is noteworthy that in *The Companion Species Manifesto* Haraway refers to herself as a "Darwinian" in the telling of her tale (5).

**3** For animals in antiquity, which this collection does not include, the reader is referred to Fögen and Edmund (2017) in particular.

**4** For animal agency, see in particular Roscher in Kurth et al., and Kurth, Dornenzweig, and Wirth in the same volume, and also Helen Steward, "Animal Agency" (2009).

**5** J. K. Rowling's *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2002) and its film adaptation (2016) are cases in point. Generally, the early twenty-first century trend of hugely popular fantasy texts and films, and the fantastic animals which tend to inhabit them, would warrant a closer look.

**6** The editors would like to thank Barbara Korte and Ulrich Bröckling, who considered the topic of animals for a special issue as feasible as we did. Our thanks also go to Ralf von den Hoff for his readiness to give space to our ideas, and to question them if need be; and to Sebastian Meurer, who was always willing to engage in discussion, and who substantially contributes to a working environment that is both productive and enjoyable.

## Suggestions for further reading

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