

Thinking with Animals

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V. Yans-Mclaughlin, SAS - History

M 10:55A-01:55P

Hickman Hall Room 113

College Ave Campus

Will Count Towards SAS - History Major

Will Count Towards SAS - History Minor

Some people eat animals. Others think about them. Animal Studies, a growing body of knowledge within the humanities and sciences, has recently changed not only how we think about “them” (“the animals”) but also how we think about “ourselves” (“the humans”). Paradoxically, at a moment when humans jeopardize animal existence and threaten to alter evolutionary relationships between man and beast thousands of years in the making, animals appear to be becoming “more human.”

Psychologists and cognitive scientists, for example, explore “mind and emotion” in animals while genetic scientists identify the close proximity of the human and the feline genomes. Laboratory scientists have “designed” mouse robots to use human brain waves. Some legal scholars and philosophers endow all sentient creatures with “rights” and literary scholars re-discover what Doris Lessing, Charles Dickens, and T.S. Elliot had to say about cats. Today’s popular discourse joins in this blurring of the line between man and beast. We live in a moment when a video series stars a cat that thinks and speaks like an existential philosopher. Consider as well advocacy groups battling for animal rights and against species extinction, meatless diets, and endlessly popular You Tube videos anthropomorphizing domestic pets.

This class will explore writings across the science and humanities disciplines, popular culture expressions, and visual representations of animals; hopefully, visits to or from a “field practitioner” who actually works with animals can be arranged. Examples of some weekly reading topics are: the co-evolution of men and beasts, ritual, deification and destruction of animals including extinction, Mind (what is your dog thinking?), maternal attachment among mammals (including animal/human attachments), animals as objects of scientific investigation, and animal rights. Students will write short commentary essays and one longer essay over the course of the semester.

PROFESSOR GINNY YANS is an American historian and documentary filmmaker. She has published on the history of anthropology and produced a film on the famous anthropologists Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson and Ruth Benedict. This course is rooted in her study of the history of the social sciences and daily “interrogations” from two Persian cats (and their predecessors) with which she shares her home.