Carollyne Yardley
Instructor: Magnolia Pauker
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Squirrealism and *The Great Silence*

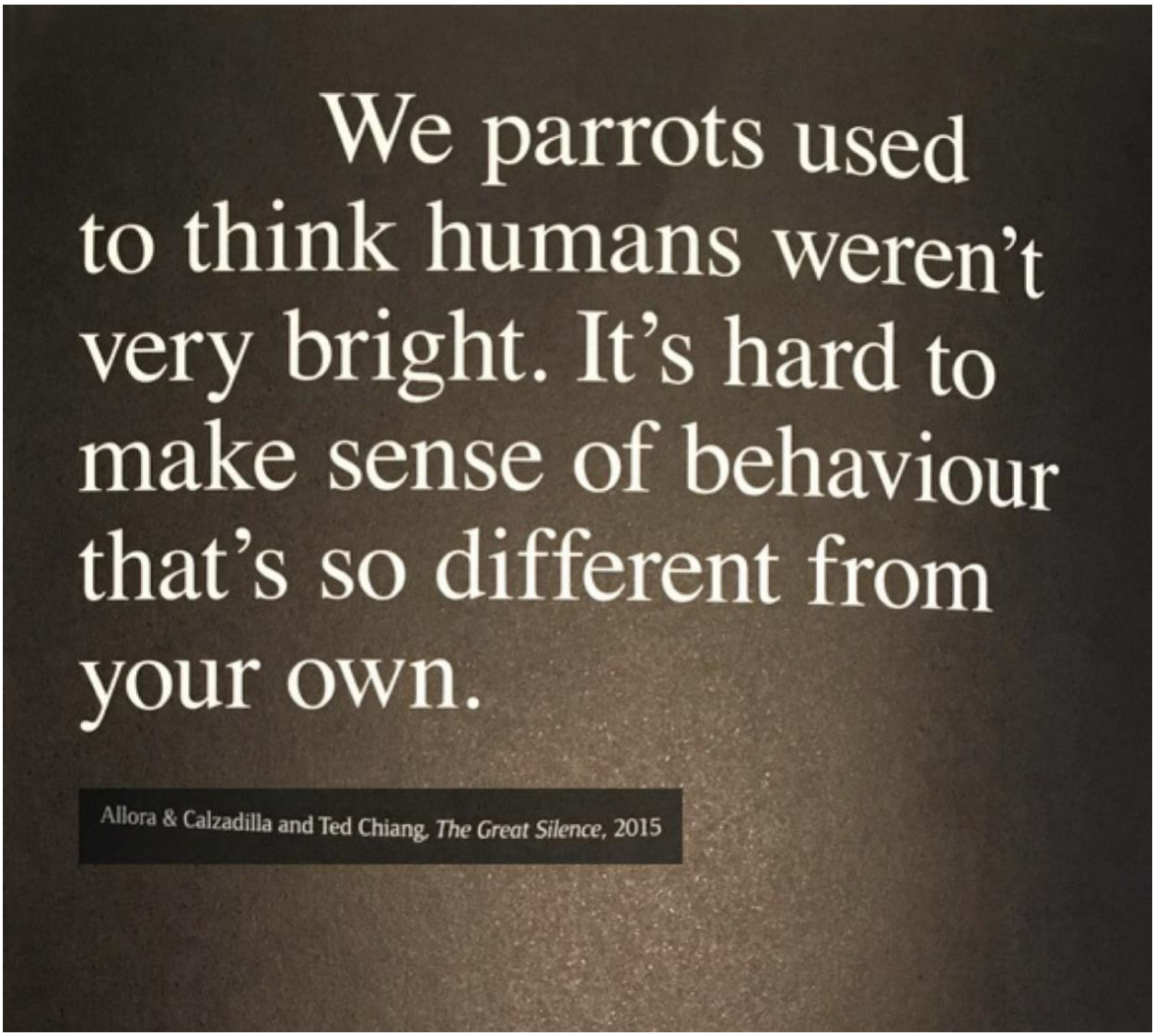

Fig. 1. Allora, Jennifer, and Guillermo Calzadilla, in collaboration with Ted Chiang. *The Great Silence. 2015. Reproduced in Animals: Documents of Contemporary Art,* edited by Filipa Ramos, Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2016, p. 6.

Introduction

“We parrots used to think humans weren't very bright. It's hard to make sense of behaviour that's so different from your own.”

This subtitle quote is from *The Great Silence* (2014), a three-channel HD video by Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla in collaboration with Ted Chiang. Their work attempts to identify why humans are seemingly incapable of comprehending animals. I first encountered the quote as a text image in *Animals*, edited by Filipa Ramos (2016). *Animals* is a compilation of essays that invites readers to observe how humans can dialogue with nonhumans and look beyond anthropomorphic attributions and anthropocentric representations. As Ramos writes, “By considering animals, humans can not only regain the lost animality of their senses, muscles and instincts, but also conceive expressive means beyond conventional verbal communication” (Ramos 14).

The Great Silence uses subtitles to narrate the story from the parrots’ perspective while examining the complicated relationships between the human and nonhuman, and the terrestrial and cosmic. The film focuses on the world’s largest single-aperture radio telescope at the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico, which is surrounded by the Río Abajo forest, home to the last wild population of critically endangered Amazona vittata parrots (“The Great Silence”). Parrots are vocal learners, and the first-person subtitle text explains how sound plays a vital role in the creation of mythologies and origin stories. While humans scan for signs of life in deep space, the parrot reflects on the end of their kind and the disappearance of their language, rituals, and traditions on Earth. As the parrot observes, “Human activity has brought my kind to the brink of extinction, but I don’t blame them for it… They just weren’t paying attention” (Allora and Calzadilla).

But human activity can be malicious. Throughout Western history, humans have been categorized as more-than-animal, and boundaries and hierarchies have been constructed in pursuit of so-called civilization. Euro-centric thought has long defined what it means to be human, beginning with Aristotle’s classification system, which placed the human male at the top of the hierarchy of nature, while “the rest of the animal kingdom forms a downward ladder, from women to sea urchins” (Cox 19). This hierarchical worldview continues to inform how humans justify domination over nonhuman life.

I selected this subtitle quote for my GSML 502 Thought Paper as a vehicle for researching the human–nonhuman relationship in order to build a theory of experience within my art practice. The quote implies that parrots have made progress in understanding human behavior, while humans remain oblivious to the nonhuman relationships available to them. Humans search for extraterrestrial intelligence while ignoring the complex intelligences that exist on Earth.

Beacon Hill Park, Colonialism, and the Zoo

My research into the structures of power between humans and nonhumans begins with an investigation into the colonial history of Beacon Hill Park in Victoria, British Columbia. In September, I attempted to mimic the seasonal behavior of the Eastern Grey Squirrel by collecting and burying Garry oak acorns. While walking through Beacon Hill Park, I encountered a Garry oak meadow that predates colonial settlement. Beneath the oak trees I noticed dropped peafowl feathers, which raised the question: how did Indian blue peafowl, a species native to the Indian subcontinent, come to live in this park?

Beacon Hill Park is the site of an ancient Indigenous cemetery and is sacred to the Songhees (Lekwungen) Nation. After the Songhees people were forcibly relocated, the area was set aside in 1850 as part of a British colonial plan to create an "ideal society." The Beacon Hill Park Zoo opened in 1889, and its first animals included "six deer, a bear, a wolf, sheep, an eagle, two young swans and pheasants" (Ringuette, "The Zoo"). As animals disappeared from everyday human life through urbanization, zoos became a way to capture and display nonhuman others. In the case of peafowl, their presence in Victoria reflects imperial power, since the capture of exotic animals was "a symbolic representation of the conquest of all distant and exotic lands" (Berger 21).

Historical records show that the animals in Beacon Hill Park required constant protection from the very public that came to see them. Humans "shot arrows into mallards, stoned swans, poked bears with sticks and decapitated peacocks decade after decade… no fewer than five deer have been killed by dogs" (Ringuette, "Double Rescue"). The zoo was intended to allow people to observe animals, but it did not permit genuine relationality. As John Berger argues, animals in captivity are "rendered absolutely marginal" (26). While humans look at animals, animals no longer look back. Their gazes drift past, "immunized to encounter" (Berger 28).

Jacques Derrida criticizes this philosophical blindness, noting that many thinkers have studied animals without ever allowing themselves to be seen by them: "their gaze has never intersected with that of an animal directed at them" (Derrida 382). Western philosophy has historically positioned animals as objects of knowledge rather than as subjects capable of perception and response.

The architecture of zoos—cages, bars, partitions—reinforces this division. Zoos organize animals within taxonomic systems, turning them into figures of scientific representation. As Vincent Normand explains, "the zoological garden is the framework in which a capture gradually organizes itself; the objectification of the animal figure" ("Chessboards" 3). Film and photography intensified this objectification by producing mechanical representations that replaced lived encounters (Normand, "Chessboards" 3).

Cinema, Anthropomorphism, and the Nature–Culture Divide

Our relationship to nonhuman animals existed long before film and photography, yet mainstream cinema produced another boundary by constructing anthropocentric archetypes of animal characters. In these representations, animals are made to embody human virtues and vices. As Seung-hoon Jeong observes, "We immediately recognize animal allegories for human characteristics, good or evil, brave or cowardly, generous or greedy" (Jeong 139). Disney, for example, sent animators to the Griffith Park Zoo to study animal anatomy and movement in order to better simulate life (Pierce). These simulations, however, did not bring humans closer to animals; they transformed animals into symbolic vehicles for human emotion.

This anthropomorphic tendency operates according to what Fredric Jameson calls hermeneutic "depth models," where a latent meaning is assumed to exist beneath visible appearance. As Jeong explains, anthropomorphism depends on the belief that there is an essential signified beneath the animal signifier (141). This framework erases the animal as a being with its own perceptual and social world. Anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism thus reinforce the nature–culture divide by replacing animals with projections of ourselves.

Euro-centric thought has historically sustained these boundaries. Carl Linnaeus attempted to bridge the gap between humans and animals when he rejected Cartesian theory, which held that animals were mere machines without souls (Agamben 23). Descartes believed animals were "simply machines or automata, capable of complex behaviour but lacking a soul, reason or feeling" (Cox 28). Later, Jacques Lacan fractured the Cogito when he claimed that language precedes thought. As Magnolia Pauker summarizes, Lacan's position is that "language thinks me, therefore I think, therefore I am" (Pauker). This placed linguistic beings in a privileged ontological position, excluding animals who communicate differently.

Religion and politics further entrenched these divisions. For centuries, the Vatican prohibited the use of sign language because it did not conform to Latinate norms (Melitopoulos and Lazzarato). Contemporary law also continues to separate animals into categories of value. In 2015, France recognized domesticated animals as sentient but excluded wild and ownerless animals from this recognition ("France: Recognizing Animal Protection"). Even Deleuze and Guattari reproduce this hierarchy by privileging pets as the only animals psychoanalysis recognizes (Laurie 160).

Decentering the Human

Recent scholarship has sought to challenge anthropocentrism through decentering subjectivity. Félix Guattari proposed that subjectivity is not uniquely human but emerges across machines, animals, and environments. As Melitopoulos and Lazzarato explain, Guattari separates subjectivity from the human in order to escape the subject–object and nature–culture divide (97). Subjectivity becomes a distributed process rather than a human possession.

Before the eighteenth century, language was not assumed to belong exclusively to humans. As Agamben notes, even birds were once believed capable of speech (24). Julia Kristeva's theory of semanalysis offers a way to understand nonverbal communication through gesture, rhythm, sound, and silence. As she writes, poetic and artistic languages "reorder psychic drives which have not been harnessed by the dominant symbolization systems" (Kristeva 79). These semiotic systems—tail flicks, vocal calls, and bodily movements—allow interspecies communication beyond words.

Darwin further destabilized human exceptionalism by demonstrating that species evolve through difference and mutation. Christoph Cox argues that this produced a fascination with monstrosity and hybridity as signs of becoming (21). Darwin's theory of evolution dissolved fixed boundaries between species, allowing organisms to be understood as constantly becoming-other. Derrida's concept of différance similarly disrupts the idea of stable identities (Hendricks). Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "becoming-animal" describes how humans can enter zones of shared affect and action with other species (Cox 23). Becoming-animal is not imitation but a relational shift that expands perception and response.

What Is It Like to Be an Animal?

This question echoes Thomas Nagel's famous inquiry, "What is it like to be a bat?" Nagel argues that subjective experience is real even when it cannot be fully accessed by others (Nagel 436). Humans can know how echolocation works, but not what it feels like to experience it. As Donald Rumsfeld famously said, there are "unknown unknowns"—things we cannot know that we do not know ("Donald Rumsfeld").

My own artistic research asks: what is it like to be a squirrel? I coined the term *Squirrealism* to describe the entanglement of human and squirrel lives. Using video-processing technology, I simulate squirrel color vision, which is dichromatic and excludes red. Tree squirrels also organize their food using "chunking," a cognitive strategy humans use to manage information (University of California, Berkeley). Studies show squirrels categorize nuts by type and even deceive others when they feel watched (Central Connecticut State University). While we can never fully know what it is like to be a squirrel, these observations allow us to approach their perceptual world with greater humility and care.

Indigenous Ontologies, Animism, and Making Kin

Not all cultures accept the Western idea of fixed boundaries between humans and animals. For Rande Cook (Kwakwaka'wakw), the very concept of such boundaries is a colonial construction. As Cook explains, the idea that humans and animals are separate is "a Western idea; it is a colonized ideology" (Cook). His family origin stories are not symbolic myths but lived histories of animal–human kinship.

Anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro describes an Indigenous theory of perspectivism in which animals and other nonhuman beings see themselves as persons. Humans perceive animals differently than animals perceive themselves. These differences are not metaphorical but perceptual. As de Castro writes, animals experience their bodies—fur, feathers, claws—as cultural instruments, just as humans experience clothing and tools (132). Nonhuman animals possess subjectivity "formally identical to human consciousness" that is concealed behind animal form (de Castro 132).

This perspectivism rejects anthropocentrism without denying anthropomorphism. As de Castro explains, Western evolutionism is anthropocentric but not anthropomorphic, whereas animism is anthropomorphic but not anthropocentric (231). David Abram similarly describes animism as a way of perceiving through other beings, suggesting practices of sensory attunement such as meditation and "moving into the bird" as a form of knowing (Abram 256).

Jane Bennett argues that a careful form of anthropomorphism is necessary to counter human narcissism: "We need to cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism… to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world" (16). However, Anselm Franke cautions that animistic relationships resist exhibition and objectification because they exist in lived relations rather than in representations (11).

Donna Haraway offers the concept of *sympoiesis*, or "making-with," to describe multispecies collaboration. In *Staying with the Trouble*, she imagines humans and monarch butterflies forming a symbiogenetic kinship that allows humans to experience butterfly perception. This shared vulnerability creates ethical responsibility and mutual care. As Haraway writes, multispecies symbiosis requires learning "to live collectively in intimate and worldly care-taking symbiosis with another animal" (146).

Encounter with the Deer

My artistic practice emerges from the urban garden I share with tree squirrels and Black-tailed deer. These deer have occupied this territory for thousands of years, according to Songhees Nation records. Despite urbanization, cars, dogs, noise, and loss of habitat, a herd of nine deer continues to live between my garden and a small meadow.

On November 24, 2019, a doe we call "Herself" suddenly collapsed and died in our garden. Her fawn remained nearby, confused and alert. Another doe arrived and sat down, calling out in low, resonant bleats. Birds bathed in the fountain, squirrels circled the edges of the space, and sunlight filled the garden. I sat quietly with the deer as we watched one another.

This was not symbolic. It was relational. I was, in Derrida's words, "seen seen" by animals (Derrida 382). In that moment, we occupied what Franke calls the "middle ground" between subject and object, where beings encounter one another through shared vulnerability (26). Life and death were not abstract concepts but a shared condition across species.

Conclusion

As Bruno Latour suggests, the division between nature and culture is maintained only by suppressing the relational space that connects beings (qtd. in Franke 26). Life and death, perception and presence, exist in this middle ground. When humans begin paying attention, it becomes possible to build bridges between humans and nonhumans, between animate and inanimate, and between scientific knowledge and lived experience.

In moments of shared presence—such as standing beside a grieving fawn—we enter what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a zone of becoming (Cox 23). These encounters do not collapse difference but deepen it. They allow us to imagine other ways of living, sensing, and being-with.

Move into the deer.
Keep your mind open.

Fig. 2. "Herself." 29 June 2018. Photograph by Anonymouse. Died 24 Nov. 2019.

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