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# STEALING FROM BAKHTIN

## *Writing the Voices of the "Voiceless"*

by Guro Flinterud

*This essay investigates an approach to writing about animals within the humanities. The goal is to focus attention on animals as actors, rather than speaking on their behalf. By combining Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of speech genres with Donna Haraway's perspectives on co-habitation between all species, I suggest that a careful attention to animals as communication partners might give us a tool to capture the contribution animals make in the creation of history and culture. Two examples will be provided to illustrate this concept: The first example is a media story about celebrity polar bear Knut. The second example is an oral account of human-animal interaction in the zoo.*

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# Introduction

The impact of animals on human culture is gradually becoming an acknowledged fact in the human and social sciences. Animals are our companions, for millennia they have fed us, clothed us, pulled our plows, and sniffed out our prey. Yet the animals themselves are often silenced in our accounts—it is easy to write about what we use them for and what they mean to us, but more challenging to think about what they do to us. In this essay I investigate the possibilities that lie in using theories from folklore studies as a method to capture those voices that often are silenced in the humanities.

The case study used to exemplify this way of writing is the celebrity polar bear Knut, who lived in the Berlin Zoo from 2006 to 2011. Knut was abandoned by his mother after birth, and thus hand-reared by the zoo staff, in particular zookeeper Thomas Dörflein. He quickly became a media favourite in Germany, and at almost four months age he rose to world stardom after an animal rights activist was quoted in the German tabloid Bild as saying that Knut's upbringing was unnatural, and that he should be killed.

This is however not an essay about polar bear Knut as such, but an experience based essay on how one might approach text in order to write animals within the humanities. What kind of contribution does the polar bear in question have in the stories that were told? How might we discover the wordless communication of animals within our word-filled accounts? I will present first the theoretical grounds that inspired me to think the animal as an actor in creating cultural meaning, with theories drawn from Mikhail Bakhtin paired with perspectives provided by Donna Haraway, and then present two examples of how I have used this to write about animals as cultural producers.[1]

# Voices, echoes and meetings

Coming into animal studies from folklore and cultural studies, I was preoccupied with voices. I had studied human cultural expressions through analysing verbal utterances, drawing on linguist and literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on speech genres (Bakhtin 1986). In his influential essay "The problem of speech genres," Bakhtin investigates the utterance and its part in creating and sustaining culture. In order to communicate, Bakhtin claims, humans make use of speech genres appropriate to the context in which we want to be understood. We might succeed or fail, depending on whether or not our interpretation of the context matches that of those with whom we want to communicate. Every articulate human master an extended repertoire of speech genres, most of which are utilized without our even knowing it; we automatically speak differently to our mothers and the girl at the supermarket check out. When writing a formal letter, most people are aware that there are conventions to be followed, but we might not be so conscious that we are following similar conventions when communicating with friends on Facebook.

The importance of the utterance for a cultural theorist lies in the exchange between the individual utterance and the context in which it is uttered. In every utterance, one finds a trace of previous utterances that tie it to a larger context, and an expectation of future responses. When expressing ourselves we make use of generic knowledge, but our expressions are at the same time singular, expressing the individual creativity of each person. Communication is dependent on certain stable elements, but it is also always marked by the speaker's individual interpretation and use of these elements. As a method for analysing culture, this theory encourages close reading of textual and verbal expressions, looking for recurrent elements, quotations and references as well as their creative reworking and perhaps most interesting, sites where communication breaks down. It encourages us to ask with whom our sources communicate, whose voices are echoed and who are addressed? And through these investigations, we can start to form understandings of how meaning is created, negotiated and sustained, how humans go about our lives continuously creating and re-creating the cultures we live in through interacting.

Using this theory as a foundation, I had been studying fan cultures, writing humans through repeating their words, quoting them, making utterances that echoed theirs and pointing this out. Playing with words while also conforming to the speech genre of the academic essay. There is however a latent criticism in this way of analysing culture, in that it relies so heavily on words, written or spoken, while excluding gestures or visual communication. In his essay, Bakhtin does not explicitly exclude the possibility of including non-verbal communication; but nevertheless, his theory has during the last decades been utilized mainly within the realm of the textual and verbal.

Promptly after commencing my project on polar bear Knut, my conception of academic writing, so reliant on the Bakhtinian method, was challenged by thoughts within animal studies pointing out that if we want to investigate human-animal relations, it is not enough to just write humans. Donna Haraway starts her book *When Species Meet* asking "whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?" (Haraway 2008:3). From the point of view of a Bakhtinian understanding of communication, this seemingly simple question contains a key to a whole new understanding of writing. First of all,

[1] For an in depth analysis of the two cases presented here, see Flinterud (2013).

the dog in this situation is both a whom and a what. Both subject and object. Second, the idea that touch is an important aspect of this relation. In her book, Haraway presents stories that are created through the co-habitation of humans and animals. She highlights meetings, insisting that humans and other animals are companions, stressing the importance of living together as separate yet co-dependent species. The key concept she uses is becoming with, which in a Bakhtinian understanding could be seen as introducing an expanded understanding of interaction in the creation of cultural meaning. And this, I would argue, is the crucial contribution of Haraway's perspective for writing animals in the humanities: what become stories about our cultures and societies is created through lived relations, not just spoken or written ones. The texts that we as scholars within the humanities read are first and foremost accounts of lived relations, and it is our job to make sure the wordless communications of animals are not lost in translation.

## Writing animals in the media

The interest for my research came through media texts, more specifically I wanted to write about Knut as a celebrity. The main claim was that the animal celebrity is different from the human celebrity, and that a close study of the animal celebrity would add to our understandings of the celebrity phenomenon. This entails that when a category generally reserved for humans is represented by an animal, our conceptions of what is human and what is animal is challenged. Writing about the animal as celebrity can prove to be a difficult task, because the very definition of what an animal is, is challenged by its existence. The Bakhtinian understanding of communication sketched above provides a pragmatic approach to this problem, as we are allowed to assume that we are not writing humans and animals, but communications between individuals.

Knut was celebritised through several media, the most active of which were the tabloids. The initial reports belonged to a genre of animal stories found not only in tabloids, but increasingly also in more serious news channels, presumably to provide relief from the "hard news" of politics, war and catastrophe (Molloy 2011). The initial story of Knut, from early on individualized with a name, was a story about a cute polar bear cub who was abandoned by his mother, but saved and nursed back to life by the self-sacrificing zookeeper Thomas Dörflein, also individualized in the stories.

The national tabloid Bild was perhaps the most important actor in the celebritisation of Knut. In their first report, on January 25, 2007, their headline read "Poor, cute polar bear Knut", followed in capital letters by: "You will never see your mom again, because she would eat you" (Colmenares 2007). On top of the page, capital letters printed in black proclaim: "Animal drama in the Berlin Zoo" (Colmenares 2007) Tabloids work within a sensationalist speech genre, and it is obvious that the story of Knut lends itself well to this form: there is a drama unfolding, it involves a baby animal who is at once cute and to be pitied, and a mother who is a potential cannibal. The three exciting claims are illustrated by two photos of the cute cub, one where he is lying on his back lifting his front paw as if waving to the camera, another where he is being held upright by his front paws, echoing images of human babies being held up to practice walking. A third photo shows a close up of the two polar bear parents in their zoo enclosure.

On the surface, this page fits neatly into the tabloid genre. We hear echoes of the abandoned child, the bad mother, and of drama, an all-purpose description in tabloid depictions, this time specified as an animal drama. In other words, it is easy to analyse it as being about humans. The animal in question here has not done very much, the journalist writing has never met him, and there is arguably not much direct communication going on between human and animal making out the basis for the early tabloid news coverage of Knut. The story is created to evoke our sympathies for the abandoned child. Describing Knut as "poor," it is assumed that Knut misses his mother and that he wants to see her again, but that he will not be able to because of her cannibalistic tendencies. This last description stands as particularly grotesque in the setting, as it is the only description that refers to actual polar bear behaviour: polar bear mothers who are not able to nurse their new-born cubs often eat them. When giving birth in the wild, polar bears spend months in a snow cave without access to food. The mere process of birth severely eats into the bear's energy reserves, and if she then had to struggle for hours to get the cubs to suckle, she would have died from exhaustion along with the cubs. Her instincts of self preservation then rather makes her leave the cubs for dead, and starving as she surely is, she often eats their flesh in order to regain her strength. This is the scientific explanation as told by the zoo biologists, but it sounds terrible when described in the tabloid setting, where the statement stands not as a description of animal behaviour, but of the potential actions of one singular polar bear, and a mother at that.

From the three main statements of the tabloid story, one animal is indeed readily present: not Knut, but his mother. This immediately comes down to a description of her potential behaviour. This behaviour is not just associated with animals, but also with "savage humans." Echoed in the idea of a mother eating her child is the image of the savage cannibal, somehow existing on the borders between humans and animals, or of a Medea killing her children. Writing from an animal studies point of view, I find that the crucial question in this case is not just what associations were spurred by the description, but also who initiated the description in the first place? And this question goes straight back to Haraway asking about her dog. There is both a "whom" and a "what" that would be lost in an analysis that does not take into account the female

polar bear and what she communicated and initiated through her actions. Indeed, the story about the poor Knut would never have come about had it not been for the actions of a female polar bear giving birth in the Berlin Zoo. Analysing the Bild story without acknowledging these actions would be writing the animal out of the story. The reference to cannibals could be read as a response to previous utterances about beings consuming members of their own species, but it could just as well be interpreted as addressing a certain association in the readers' imaginations. What spurs these associations is the behaviour of the polar bear leaving her cubs after several unsuccessful attempts at suckling them. Hence, the story of Knut in the tabloids could be read as a response to the female polar bear, who is then translated into the evil mother to communicate to the readers in their expected speech genre. With Haraway's perspective, we are allowed to notice that there is a wider story here, told by a female polar bear who year after year have experienced stressful and failed births at the zoo.

But what about Knut, the cub at the center of attention? At this point he is described with two words, "poor" and "cute." "Poor" is, as we have seen, connected to the abandoning mother, referring to the idea of the child mourning the loss of his mother. Cute, however, describes a response to the animal body. At two months age, Knut had arguably not done very much on his own, but his generic cuteness as polar bear cub was an important factor in making the story interesting to readers. At such an early stage of celebritisation Knut arguably did not have a strong voice in the telling of the story yet, but the effect of his appearance on humans should not be undermined as a driving force for the tabloids. So despite the obvious anthropomorphization in this tabloid article, a reading that pays attention to the actors in the story reveal that there are two animals whose communication is crucial for the narrative development.

## Writing animals in the zoo

After Knut's first public appearance in the zoo at four months, the until then mostly singular narrative of "cute Knut" developed in several directions as people were allowed access to view him directly. Translations into the spectacularizing tabloid speech genre could still be read in newspapers and on the Internet in years to come, but inside the zoo gates, regular visitors—self-ascribed "Knutians", I identify them as fans—developed their own narratives of who and what Knut was, dependent on their individual meetings with him. The stories they told about their interactions with Knut were clearly experienced by them as communication.

It has been argued in scholarship that zoos provide us with wrongful representations of nature.[2] The animals there are not "real" animals, it is claimed. True as this might be on a conceptual level, it does not follow that the beings that reside in zoos are not still sentient beings. Like Knut, most zoo mammals today are born in captivity, where they arguably never develop many of the behaviours they would acquire in the wild. Yet that does not mean that they are not still living beings, and in most cases social beings. There is however a tension running through these discussions that will never be solved, concerning animal suffering. Where does one draw the line between unusual behaviour and behaviour that express suffering? This question is crucial not only for zoo ethics, but also because it reflects the unsolvable tension between wanting to write the animal on its own terms and always on some level ending up writing a human interpretation. As I am interested in mapping out the polar bear's contribution to the creation of his story, I have tried to convey the actors' points of view rather than position myself in this debate. It is however an important issue to contemplate, and my goal is to highlight Knut's impact in creating cultural meaning, leaving the question of ethics open for the reader's interpretation.

Entering the zoo with the intention of listening to the Knutians' stories, I believe that taking the perspective that it is merely about people looking at an animal would be limiting for creating an understanding of what was going on. In the specific case of Knut and the Knutians, there is an important aspect of communication in the stories told, and Knut's contribution to this should not be undermined. A favourite story, both of the Knutians and mine, is the story of Knut and the ball game. Already at seven months age, Knut had grown considerably, and the presence of human playmates gradually disappeared from inside his enclosure. Biologically, however, he was still a cub, still playful and contact seeking. He would seek contact with the crowd outside the fence, sitting up on two legs facing them, sometimes waving at them or holding up objects in front of one eye, perhaps mimicking the many visitors waving to him and taking photos. The zoo director was opposed to having playthings in the enclosure, apart from natural objects such as a tree trunk. The Knutians however, who had fallen in love with Knut's playfulness, would bring toys for him to play with, in particular balls that they would toss into his enclosure. At one point, Knut started to catch the balls thrown in to him in his mouth and fling them back out to the crowd. The audience threw the ball back in, and this developed into an exchange that could go on for quite some time. Soon, every Knutian entered the zoo every day hoping for a ball game. This continued until just before his third birthday, when the female polar bear Giovanna moved into his enclosure. With the arrival of a mate of his own species, Knut soon turned his attention towards her rather than the human crowd.

I started my fieldwork soon after Giovanna was moved in with Knut, so I never experienced the ballgame myself. Yet when I was talking to the Knutians, this was a story that they all wanted to tell.

[2] See for instance Mullan and Marvin (1999) and Acampora (2005).

One of my main informants also wrote about this incidence in her blog, and in both the oral and written account she stressed that the ballgame was Knut's invention (Meier 2011). He might have gotten the idea from people continuously tossing things into his enclosure, she admitted, but aside from this, he made up the rules. First of all, he was the one who started the game. The game was not on just because someone threw in a ball, the game started when he decided to pick it up and throw it back. He was also quite impatient, so if some tourist wanted to keep the ball or it was for some reason not thrown back in due time, he lost interest. According to the stories, he was also quite strict about people lingering in a small area between the fence and the glass wall of his moat people were forbidden to enter this area by the zoo, and if the ball landed here and someone jumped in to fetch it, Knut would end the game if they did not leave it immediately after.

In this story, Knut's animality is much more readily present than in the media example. Yet there is an interesting dynamic here that is important to catch in the analysis. Knut is obviously an active part in creating this story, but the active Knut as he is described by the Knutians could also be read as a human version. He is described as relating to the throwing of the ball as a game, he is ascribed intentions and even morals through punishing trespassers. In the previous example, the evil mother from the tabloid speech genre could be written as animal in the analysis with reference to the instinctual behaviour of her species. In this story, there exists no such reference. A polar bear playing catch is a construct of the zoo setting. The Knutians obviously relished in the attention that Knut showed them, and their story is about an inventive and contact seeking animal. Critics of the zoo, however, might add this unusual behaviour to the list of stereotypic behaviour performed by an understimulated animal. The fact that he stopped the activity as soon as he was presented to a female of his own species might even support such a view. Then again, the fans would argue, his preference for a species mate does not rule out the possibility that he enjoyed playing with the ball when he was alone in the enclosure. Both these interpretations tell a story about human-animal communication, and they show how difficult it can be to write animals in cultural analysis, where the very concept "animal" proves itself to be tainted with opinion as soon as it is expressed in words. Again I would argue that the most honest position from which to write this is the combination of a Bakhtinian search for the diverse voices, and a Haraway-inspired awareness that these voices come about in the interaction between animal and human.

## Conclusion

Writing animals in cultural analysis is largely dependent on a change in perspective. Following Haraway, I argue that animals not only live with us, but also take part in the negotiation of meaning. Through taking seriously the contributions of animals, and pinpointing not only the meanings we give to them but what they inspire us to think and do, I argue that we can deepen our understanding of cultural processes. The two examples presented in this essay present two approaches to writing animals in cultural analysis, both of which highlight the importance of paying attention to the relation between the real animal as an actor and "the animal" as concept. As with all communication, one can never fully know the "real intentions" of the other, and in reading a verbal utterance as a response to silent communication with an animal, there is no way of claiming that the outcome is a way of writing the Animal with capital A, or even the individual animal in question. What the above examples do show is how an attention to the voice of the animal, discerned through the description of behaviour, sometimes with reference to ethological knowledge of the species, might add a dimension to the analysis that would otherwise be lost. Taking animals seriously as conversational partners might provide a way to deepen our understanding of how culture is created, sustained, and re-created through interaction.

Reading Haraway on Bakhtinian terms provides an opening into capturing animals in our texts, as our stories are created not just through speech, but also through the echoes of a silent communication with animals in our verbal utterances. Meetings between human and animal that leave their mark in writing do not merely relate the human point of view; they should rather be understood as responses. We do not just talk about animals, we communicate with them, and traces of this communication can be glimpsed in verbal utterances. If every utterance is the result of previous conversation, then surely utterances made about animals results from meetings, where the animal communicates something to the human that makes the human want to talk about it. This does not imply that we can capture the "real intention" of the animal's communication, as in all communication we are still limited to capturing echoes within the human speaker's interpretation. But what this approach opens up for is a reading that comes closer to the animal that is experienced by the speaker through communication. It encourages us to read our sources in a way that will enable us to write not just what ideas lies in the texts, but also how these ideas are created in the meeting between human and animal. The creation of culture happens not only as intertextuality, but also as inter-action. The goal is to be able to write a cultural analysis that includes animals' influence in the creation of meaning. That is, writing animals the same way that we have previously been writing humans.

*Guro Flinterud received her PhD from the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages at the University of Oslo with the thesis "A Polyphonic Polar Bear. Animal and Celebrity in Twenty-First Century Popular Culture."*

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