BECOMING ANIMAL: LIMINAL RHETORICAL STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICAN ART

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Abstract

In this article, I address the liminal therianthropic body in contemporary art that employs hybridity (performed and represented), as a mode of rhetorical potency in the expression of marginal subjectivity. The Derridian position that postulates human identity in a metaphoric relation to the animal (*animetaphor*), and Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of *becoming animal*, are instrumentally applied within the scope of this article.

By way of situating these theoretical positions in the South African art and social context, I discuss specific works by two contemporary South African artists whose methodological approach invokes the hybrid animal/human body. The chimerical sculptural work of Jane Alexander, where human form seamlessly meets animal façade, is referred to as an example of a representational mode of this therianthropic tendency. I thereafter discuss artworks in which the artist has created the sense that the human body is being performed in animal likeness and gesture. In doing so, I look at Nandipha Mntambo's performed animal transformations, in which she paradoxically critiques and embraces the figurative animality of the African body in colonial discourse. In analysing these artistic instances, I employ a dialectical approach that manifests in two textual voices. The "academic" voice highlights symbolic meaning, while a voice speaking in "intuitive prose" draws attention to elements of the artworks that are aligned with the notion of a human/animal "becoming". Through this off-set dialogue, I foreground the anthropocentric motives of symbolic representation, whilst also gesturing towards the agency enhancing properties of this trope in artworks wherein the artist courts disenfranchised human identity. The deterritorialising effect of "becomings", where fixed subjectivity becomes dissoluble and mutable is highlighted, as well as the less colonising ends of such strategies in terms of the project of non-human agency. By way of stretching the discussion of artists who employ hybrid therianthropic strategies to a global context, I also discuss the performative artwork of the British contemporary artist Marcus Coates.

Introduction: voices of reason and rhyme

As the title of this article implies, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1988:274) notion of 'becoming animal' plays a key role in the impetus for this discussion. In what follows, I provide a limited definition of this slippery term to give some background to the two-tiered approach I adopt in this article. Firstly, I explore a rhetorical reading of representations of hybrid animal/human beings, while drawing attention to the pitfalls of animal signification in the service of human narrative. Secondly, I enact a Deleuzian model of "becoming animal"[1] in relation to analytical readings of hybrid animal/human artistic formations. This model proposes

something quite different to the rhetorical reading: it entails enacting and transforming signification. In exploring these distinct positions, I refer to specific examples of work by two contemporary South African artists: Jane Alexander and Nandipha Mnthambo, and to the work of the British artist Marcus Coates. These three diverse and far-flung artists have one commonality – in their art practice there is a distinct and recurring theme of therianthropic transformation, "animal becoming" and signification through the animal vehicle. What also stands out about this unlikely trio is the concentration on minority positions and social ills that are exercised and brought under the spotlight through their art practice. In writing about the artwork of these three artists, I find that social comment and transformative impetus can be extracted from a reading bent on finding symbolic meaning by association, as well as in a reading expressing inherent affect (more instinct than deductive reasoning) that is roused by the experience of these embodied artworks.[2]

It is important to note that the reasoning behind this two-fold analytical approach is not a comparative undertaking, setting off one artistic endeavour against the other. Neither is it an exercise of drawing conclusions for or against the effect of a particular artistic strategy in relation to another approach. Rather, in writing this article, my aim is consider the role of animal signification in particular visual human narratives, and to address instances pertaining to the notion of "becoming animal" in the practice of the three aforementioned artists. The binary opposition that cannot be disclaimed in this article pertains to the manner of juxtaposing a traditional academic voice concerned with the action of reason, deduction and signification, against a voice communicating in prose, resisting the limitations of reason and attempting to speak in an affected and instinctual manner. In addition to more metaphoric representational tropes, this voice considers the way in which the notion of "becoming animal" in each artwork under scrutiny may or may not be related to; it also draws conclusions regarding the varying modalities of these "becomings".

Furthermore, this "becoming voice" seeks to destabilise and decentralise the notion of the 'animetaphor', a binary conception that speaks of humankind's physical and metaphysical subjugation of the animal world in the exercise of identity construction (Derrida cited by Lippit 1998:1113). This argument cannot be repudiated and it is certainly not my wish to do so. Nonetheless, this qualitative notion is perhaps short-sighted in relation to specific instances of artists who engage animal/human hybridity in their practice as a method of addressing disenfranchisement. It is all too easily argued that such artists, instead of destabilising minority positions, create yet another disenfranchised group in the execution of their campaign – the animal signifier becomes a mere ghost, worn, extracted from and discarded in the process. In the discussion to follow, I attempt to disrupt the logic of such easy findings. This persuasive theory of the employment of the animal as a figurative vehicle in human language and identity (Derrida cited by Lippit 1998:1113) can offer insight into the reductive action of group aesthetics and generalisation. Given that it adopts a cautioning tone, the notion of the 'animetaphor' suffers from the disempowering tendency of all reformers and ignores the agency and potential of those it seeks to save, in this case, the latent potential of animal beings as powerful mirrors for human reflection. This theory of metaphoric subsumption of the animal can have the effect of cheapening hybrid human/animal interactions, or art in which these themes are addressed or enacted: the magic of the sometimes unholy and often fraught material that is forged in the artist's crucible. This reading also seeks to affirm the animality of human beings by not defaulting to a purely binary position that affirms human segregation

rather than complicity and inherent connections to animal beings.[3]

Becoming animal: manifest alliance, not pretence

Deleuze and Guattari (1988:252) state that,

> [t]heology is very strict on the following point: there are no werewolves, human beings cannot become animal. That is because there is no transformation of essential forms; they are inalienable and only entertain relations of analogy. The Devil and the witch and the pact between them, are no less real for that, for there is in reality a local movement that is properly diabolical.

Following on the above disclaimer, they discuss a theological understanding of two models of 'becoming animal' employed during the inquisition: '[t]he imaginary vision and the spell' (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:252). In explaining the first model, they note that the subject imagines themselves to have transformed into an animal, and that those observing the subject believe this transformation is owing to a 'local movement' ? the transfer of internal stimuli manifest in external circumstances (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:252).[4] The second model relates to a belief in the supernatural notion of the transport of experience between essential forms (not the transformation thereof) (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:253). An example is the belief that the devil may inhabit the body of an animal and inflict wounds upon it – wounds that may be magically transported directly to a human subject under a spell (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:253). In both instances, these theorists point to an indisputable connection between the animal being and the human being in terms of participation and alliance. Their argument proposes that although transformation is not physically realised, the participation of defined subjects (such as humans) with other substantial forms (such as animals) realises 'a flutter, a vibration in the form itself' (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:253); in other words, that experiences or beliefs of species transference 'shift the composition of individuations' (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:253).[5]

Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari (1988:274) note that, 'becoming animal' does not involve mimesis, but rather an enacted and embodied cutting across of Cartesian species and imagined social boundaries whereby the body becomes the site of a deviating, desirous, and actualised, rather than symbolic, event. In relation to this, they mention a scene in the film *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese 1976), where Robert De Niro walks "like" a crab.[6] They go on to explain that when questioned, the actor stated that he does not imitate a crab, but rather that it is a question of 'making something that has to do with the crab enter into composition with the image, with the speed of the image' (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:274). Here they point to a mode of function that is more than simile: a "tremor" of crab in the individual's step, motion and thought. This elemental attention to detail raises another integral tenant of 'becoming animal', namely 'molecular becoming' (Deleuze & Guattari 1988: 275). Deleuze and Guattari (1988:275) assert that becoming is primarily a molecular activity, pointing to biological and metaphysical multiplicity and shifting states of being.

Another fundamental notion in understanding the disparate and surprisingly lateral train of thought that underpins and emerges as a theme in the Deleuzian notion of 'becoming animal' is the concept of rhizomatic thought. Deleuze and Guattari (1988:7) propose that a rhizome is a plant form that belongs to the best and the worst of plants (weeds). They argue that because the rhizome has no beginning or an end, and exists as a multiplicity rather than a singular, that this humble organism offers insight into modes of thought

that decentre and deterritorialise individuation (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:7-12). These theorists argue that the disparate trajectories of development characterised by the rhizome, break with the structured arboreal patterns of thought, much favoured in western thinking (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:7-12). There is no doubt that rhizomatic patterns of thought are fundamental to Deleuze and Guattari's oeuvre, which is marked by flagrant, yet remarkably economic connections between seemingly disparate fields and subjects. In terms of formulations of animal and human hybrids, the rhizome's ability to rupture, reform, connect and grow together with any point of another rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:7), to become the other, is significant.

Rhetorical animal signification

There is little left to be said about the use of metaphoric and metonymic animal signification in the visual arts that has not already been put forward; it is a subject that seems endless in its diversity and range. The little dog in the *Arnolfini Wedding* (1434), by Jan Van Eyck seems to be an adequate example of this figurative/symbolic tenet of visual signification; the doting presence of the furry little dog is not there in and for itself, but rather to signal the fidelity and loyalty of the marriage. One can barely look at an image of an animal or animal/human hybrid form in the visual arts without falling into this mode of figurative thought. I am not an exception, as to resist this traditional model would be to miss much of the richness inculcated into artworks by artists operating in these symbolic modes of thought. Perhaps what matters most in discussing this ancient form of representational signification is to consider the effect that such a submissive language has on the meaning of animal beings in the world. As such, I must account for my position and crisis in relation to rhetorical modes of animal representation.

In a recent article (Tully 2010), I discuss the metaphoric and metonymic terms of Jacques Derrida's notions of the 'animal-autobiography', human biography through the imaginative mobilisation of animal signs (Derrida 2002:402). However, in the context of this article, I concentrate on foregrounding the reduction and subsumption of sentient animal subjects in this hybrid formulation. From a literary perspective, an important influence on this position is Derrida's (cited by Lippit 1998:1113) assertion that in naming non-human creatures "animals", the 'animetaphor' is created: a state whereby human reception of animal beings is diminished and distorted by discursive anthropocentric subtexts. Seminal animal theorist, Akira Mizuta Lippit's (1998:1112) discussion of Sigmund Freud's connection between the animal, the metaphor, and the expression of the human unconscious is an instrumental example of this argument. Lippit (1998:1112) states that, 'in each case the animal becomes intertwined in the trope, serving as its vehicle and substance'. Lippit (1998:1112) also notes that Freud links the dream state to metaphor, and metaphor to a transferential function, a shamanic rhetoric; transporting humanity's archaic animality into the contemporary register of language and consciousness. In this vein, Lippit (1998:1113) surmises that the notion of the animal functions in language as a foreign presence – a living phenomenon collapsed into a rhetorical figure in the experience of human apprehension, speaking and dreaming. Lippit (1998:1113) abridges the nature of this sentient redundancy aptly when she states that, 'the animetaphor may also be seen as the unconscious of language'.

To demonstrate this unconscious animal register, I need only look at two safari publicity advertisements in the May 2009 *Africa Geographic* (Figures 1 & 2). The first one, an advertisement for the Djuma Game Reserve, depicts game rangers in a game viewing vehicle gesturing a welcome to the assumed tourist on the receiving

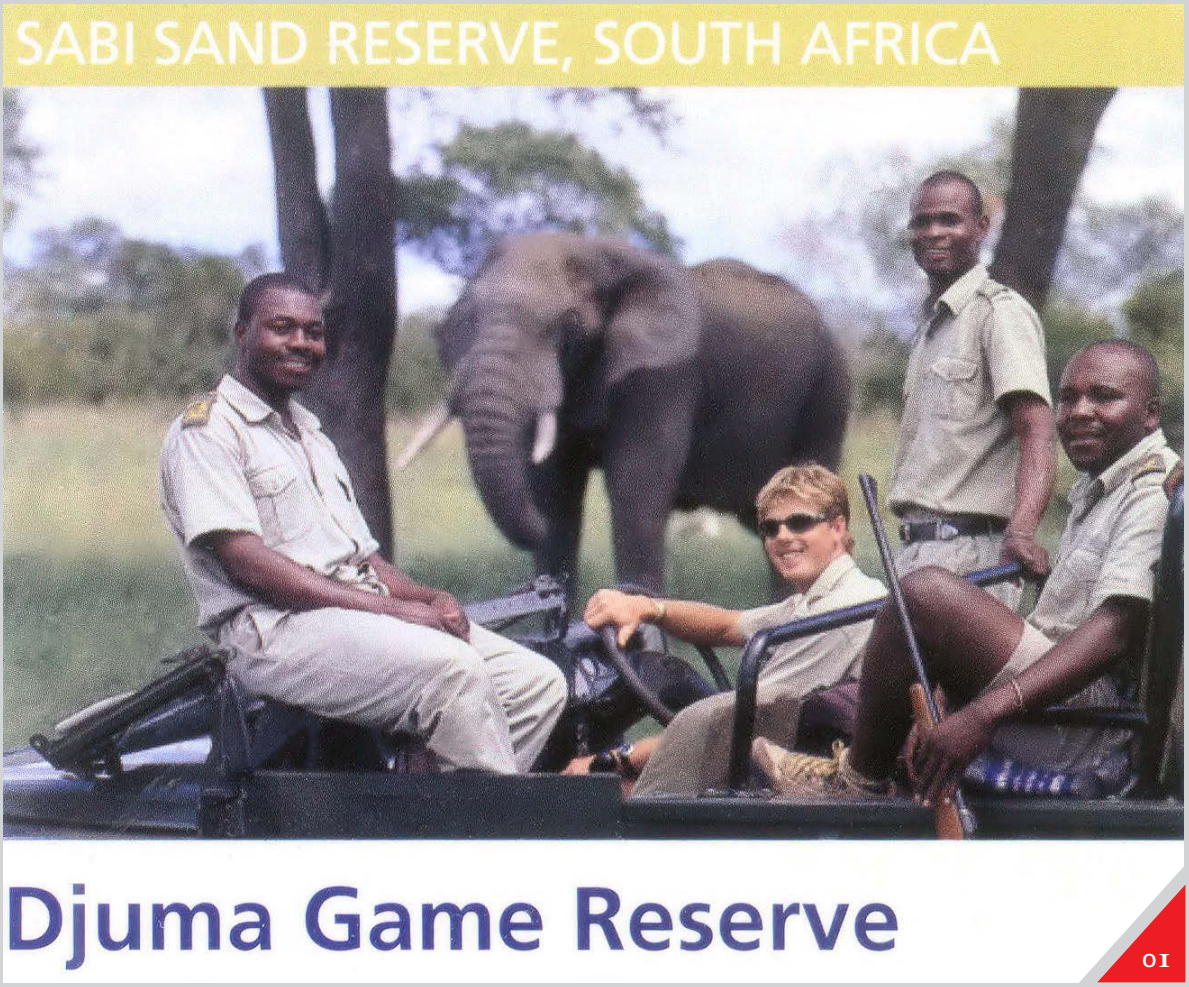

Figure 1: Sabi Sabi Djuma Game Reserve print advertisement, 2009 (*Africa Geographic* 17(4):76). Courtesy of Sabi Sabi Djuma Game Reserve.

end of the image. Behind them and slightly out of focus is a perfectly situated African elephant strolling along contentedly. The second image, an advertisement for walking safaris in the Kruger National Park, depicts a group of ardent tourist adventurers passing an elephant in the distance. The mythical proportions of these images unleash a range of associations reminiscent of colonial notions of "savage nobility" in Africa. The depicted elephants are ostensibly transparent, present in a ghostly and intangible form that positions them simply as guides or harbingers of the indexical and symbolic tenor of the advertisements. Undoubtedly, the intention and the effect of these promotions are to create a suggestive mystic medium where the viewer sees one thing through the veil of another. In the eye of the desirous soon-to-be-tourist, the elephants in these images constitute such a mantle; on the other side of their fleeting figurative forms are images of gin and tonics set against African sunsets à la Karen Blixen. This metaphoric passing away of the representation of the empirical elephant is not the end of the creature's obscurity – a further metonymic and symbolic death awaits: to the ardent African safari enthusiast the elephant constitutes a part of the whole of the "African experience", a symbolic cipher, but hardly ever just functions as an image of an elephant for its own sake.

Figure 2: Kruger National Park print advertisement, 2009 (*Africa Geographic* 17(4):76). Courtesy of Kruger National Park.

Steve Baker (2000:74) offers further insight into the meaning of the term 'animal-autobiography', explaining that this conglomerate word (animal-auto-bio-graphy) points to Derrida's (paraphrased by Baker 2000:74) persuasion that 'human conceptions of the animal are stuck in a language which generally does animals few favours'. The anthropocentric dimension of the human reception and conception of animal beings in human narratives and identity construction is made manifest in morphemes such as "auto" (autobiography) and "bio" (biography) in this constructed new word (Baker 2000:74). It is arguable that hybrid animal and human configurations in art contexts also do animals no favours. Even though, at times, these hybrid forms appear to provide a dissident model for tackling the biased conceits of the human-centred binary relationship to the animal, in many instances, the animal countenance appears to be worn as an allegorical cloak rather than being fully integrated into the life and body of the human host.

This reduction of the animal figure to countenance can be demonstrated in Piero di Cosimo's *The Death of Procris* (1500) (Figure 3). This painting is an allegorical image based on Ovid's tale of jealousy and murder later adapted by Niccolo da Correggio (Hagen 2001:181) with multivalent layers of meaning and narrative attributed to alchemical and mythological subjects. One such

Figure 3: Piero di Cosimo, *The Death of Procis* (*A Satyr Mourning over a Nymph*), c.1500, oil on canvas, 65 x 183 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery Picture Library, London.

layer of meaning, and indeed the one most pertinent to my argument, is the concept of autobiography. *The Death of Procris* was created by a man who Giorgio Vasari (cited by Clark 1977:176) reported to be 'less [of] a man than a beast'. The faun in this image, who kneels attentively at the side of the fallen Procis, has been linked with Correggio's play where the faun covets Procris and ill advises her against her husband, and in so doing, brings about her undoing (Hagen 2001:185). A further compelling and biographical reading is to link this therianthropic creature with the mythic and animalistic reputation of the artist and the punctum: *man cloaked in beast*. This figure's faun legs constitute a metonym for the larger notion of animality. Yet the apparent peeling off of the faun's animal skin (visible at the waist), and the anthropomorphic tenderness of his gesture, tell another story: *man and not beast*. This is a humanist sentiment typical of the era of its creation, where human beings saw nature as a pleasant setting for their lives (Hagen 2001:185), and as a foil for the depiction of human character.

As demonstrated in the above analysis, Derrida's (2002: 402) nuanced argument that animality is always depicted as an adjectival addition to the centralised human subject is convincing. However, this position is also guilty of assuming a one-sided tone, championing a certain animal-centred ethical position, and as such, lends itself to a somewhat myopic sensibility when considering the human impulse to rhetorical animal narrative. Further reflection points beyond a mere tendency for mimesis (an analogous animal wardrobe) to an enacted and realised "becoming animal", and as such, to a far more impassioned and meaningful exercise than is implied by my previous reading (Tully 2010). To recognise only an unequal binary formulation in animal/human hybrid representation fails to consider that "becoming animal" is not just a binary semblance, it is rather a mode of compromising and complicating human and animal unity.[7] That is not to say that unequal binaries do not exist, but rather that they can exist in contradictions and multiplicities of difference that destabilise hegemonic identity.

Analysis and analogy: Ovid and the others

In the following analysis, the methodological approaches adopted by Jane Alexander, Nandipha Mnthambo and

Marcus Coates in invoking the rhetorical and actualised animal/human body are considered, drawing particular attention to the representational or performative nature of particular works. These observations are fundamental markers in considering the meaning and the nature, if any, of an "animal becoming" in relation to particular artworks. In order not to fall into a limited definition of what is or is not "becoming animal", it is useful to consult Deleuze and Guattari's (1988:246) discussion of the "animal becomer" as a sorcerer, in which they note that sorcerers lurk at the edge of forests, existing 'between villages'. This analogy strikes me as in keeping with the liminal nature of an animal transformation, not born of filiations or descent but of a taboo alliance, a curse or contagion8 (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:238, 247); a cauldron of manifest disbelief. In homage to this compelling analogy, I draw lines of flight between the artists and their individual methods of hybrid representation/performance and types of sorcery and the supernatural (as I perceive them).

A further metaphor in the analysis of the above-mentioned artists' work is an ancient ally of sorcery: tales of sorcery and the supernatural. In an undoubtedly rhizomic line of reasoning, it strikes me that when Deleuze and Guattari invoke the notion of 'becoming animal' ? a transformational experience to do with possession, alteration and alliance – they are echoing a voice 2000 years old: the poetic and decidedly therianthropic work of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ted Hughes (1997:7) describes the apocalyptic and changing world of Ovid's oeuvre, a man born in the year following Julius Caesar's death, who completed the *Metamorphoses* in the period of the birth of Christ. Hughes (1997:11) describes a world 'at sea in hysteria and despair' and notes that Ovid lived 'in the psychological gulf that opens at the end of an era' encompassing ecstatic cults, Christian fervour and martyrdom, and, above all, a search for 'spiritual transcendence' – or, what I call (with some liberty taken) a claim on identity and meaning.

This hysteric register reflects in Ovid's licensed telling of humans magically transformed by Gods into animals (theriomorphic), and hybrid creatures combining animal and human features (therianthropic). Drawing loosely from older myths, Ovid's telling is often unfaithful, always favouring the supernatural event over the dreary detail of character. Hughes (1997:9) links this tendency and Ovid's enduring popularity to his interest in 'human passions in extremis – passion where it combusts, or levitates, into experience of the supernatural'.

Hughes (1997:10) notes that the act of metamorphoses constitutes a 'symbolic device', transforming ordinary human passion into myth. Interpreting the word "symbolic" in this sense is pivotal. This use of the term is, in my opinion, not aligned with structuralist discourse, where the symbolic realm represents the most abstract generation of meaning in the hierarchy of signs: iconic likeness, indexical inference and symbolic meaning by contract. I argue, rather, that Hughes applies the word "symbol" in a broader and more profound sense in relation to human/animal metamorphoses, enveloping all three Peirceian modes.[9] In this sense, the representation of therianthropic metamorphoses means enacting/representing likeness to an alien other through the body of the human self (iconic). This broader notion of the term "symbolic" also incorporates the indexical mode of gesturing and leaving trace in the manner of the other and the self. The Peirceian symbolic mode is also active in this conglomerate understanding, whereby rhetorical meaning about the human self is constructed through the reduction of one or both human and animal being to conventionalised sign. This manner of "active" symbolism is reminiscent of the 'deviating, desirous, actualised' body that Deleuze and Guattari (2004:300-302) contemplate in their notion of 'becoming animal',

and it is in this redolent sense, charged with mythic and transformational potential, that I gesture to the work of Jane Alexander, Nandipha Mnthambo and Marcus Coates, drawing lines of flight to Ovid's *oeuvre*.[10]

All four of these artists produce subjects that are marked by hybrid therianthropic form and gesture as an artistic device for positioning alterity, questioning social boundaries and inciting social conscience through the mobilisation of "sorcery" (deception and revelation, transformation and intercession). Ovid's age of violently conflicting and shifting social modalities perhaps shares a spirit with the troubled and hopeful age of the South African present. With this in mind, the following analysis identifies rhetorical themes present in both Ovidian tales and contemporary South African artistic employment of therianthropic symbolic device. Other rhetorical themes and observations are also touched upon. As mentioned in the introduction, each artwork selected is also subjected to a reading in prose that considers the nature of "becoming animal" as it manifests (or not) in each artist's work.

Jane Alexander and Ovid's Actaeon: ciphers of crime and punishment

Ovid's Actaeon is a noble hunter, who errs against the goddess Diana in an act of voyeurism; he is cruelly punished in a theriomorphic transformation into a stag, following which he is devoured by his own dogs. Ovid (1997:105) begins this haunting tale with the following lines:

> Destiny, not guilt, was enough
> For Actaeon. It is no crime
> To loose your way in a dark wood.

This theme of wrongful punishment permeates this tale, which paradoxically stresses Actaeon's wrongdoing. Describing the nymph's desperate attempts to conceal Diana's naked body from Actaeon's probing eyes, Ovid (1997:105) notes that although he saw their attempt to hide the goddess, Actaeon continued to stare unabashed. Derrida (2009:147) reflects instrumentally on Jacques Lacan's notion of crime and innocence in relation to animals and humans when he deconstructs Lacan's argument that the beast is 'ignorant of the law, is not free, neither responsible nor culpable, cannot transgress a law it does not know, cannot be held to be a criminal' (Lacan cited by Derrida 2009:147). For Lacan, transgression of the law and therefore guilt and criminality belong to humanity, who are in possession of an ego and a superego and therefore have the means to understand and indeed, stipulate and transgress the rule of law (Lacan cited by Derrida 2009:149).

This binary and arrogant logic of animal machine versus human liberty, which Derrida (2009) brilliantly deconstructs, can be applied to the tale of Actaeon. In so doing, one must attribute guilt to Actaeon's "conscious" and human form. Once transformed into a stag, one may feel less sure of his guilt. Regardless of the continuation of his protagonist perspective, his inhabitation of a "dumb" animal body and his violent death by means of his own dogs infuses the reader with a sense of his innocence, which is no doubt enhanced by cultural assumptions of the innocence of all animals.

In her award-winning sculptural work, *Bom Boys* (1999) (Figure 4), Jane Alexander evokes a therianthropic theme of crime and innocence made manifest in the rhetorical relationship between animal signifiers and human subjects. Kerryn Greenberg (2003) notes that by masking 'these eerily familiar figures from daily life' (vagrant street children), Alexander achieves a sense

Figure 4: Jane Alexander, *Bom Boys*, 2002, sculptural installation view, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Tobu Museum.

of alienation and ambiguity. Greenberg (2003) states that, 'the *Bom Boys* … exist in a nowhere land, they are simultaneously victims and aggressors and evoke multiple responses of pity, curiosity, fear, shame, pathos, guilt, anxiety, and sympathy'. This empathetic response has much to do with the animal attributes of these figures, associated in human narratives with innocence. It does not escape Greenberg (2003) however, that every day many South Africans pass similar subjects on street corners, unimpassioned and even a little irritated by the inconvenience and latent threat of their demanding presence. The animal features that take the form of masks accompanying these child-like figures contribute to this impression of threat and criminal intent. This is owing to the criminal associations of masking one's identity, as well as the Lacanian and populist understanding of criminality as limited to human beings. The previous impression of innocence brought on by the juxtaposition of animal features and childish forms is simultaneously interrupted by a realisation of human threat contained within an animal façade.[11] Through a combination of magic realism, which is the artist's signature style, and the juxtaposition of uncanny human and animal features that provoke rhetorical contemplation in her ambiguous figures, Alexander shifts the apathy that often attends the reception of beggars and other figures of social derision. This feat of raising the ordinary to the extraordinary has a decidedly Ovidian character.

Figure 5: Jane Alexander, *Harbinger*, 1997-1998, as it appears in the *African Adventure: To the Cape of Good Hope* installation (1999-2000). DaimlerChrysler catalogue (detail). Courtesy of the artist.

Jane Alexander and the sorcerer's art: deceiving and revealing

From a distance, these confused and confusing boys are chimerical figures, donkey-boys and bird-boys alike. A closer inspection reveals little boys masked in animalised balaclavas, not animal skins, masks with cut out eyes (gouged out), ears and snouts protrude awkwardly – at first glance a metamorphosis and then a trick. Tricks that slide are this artist's way. These fleeting boy/animals are at once shifted, at once become not animal, only pretending, poorly, in obvious contrivance. This apparent pretence of metamorphoses means that there must be no animal *presence* and no animal *becoming* in this scene (and this is perhaps the pertinent point for Alexander), highlighting the animalisation of the human, which Emmanuel Levinas (cited by Fudge 2002: 1-10) has so profoundly rebuffed in relation to its logical reverse, the anthropomorphism of non-human creatures.[12]

Then bodies are revealed, stiff hands turned out, feet ajar – a pattern repeated over and over and over (as if spat out of a mould), without love, without perfection. What is the artifice now? The masks, once only attire, seem increasingly the point. Ears once attached to cloth and seams remain attached to cloth and seams, but there is more. There is an animal presence. I know this because Actaeon is only perceived as truly innocent or overly punished in his *become stag* state. In the same way, *Bom Boys* can only possess the theme of crime and innocence so completely if there is an animal firmly in the mix. It is the figure of the awkward monkey-like creature known as *Harbinger* (1997-1998) (Figure 5), that haunts this fiction.[13] As much as these "pretending" *Bom Boy* companions of this creature negate an animal phenomenon, this strange and alien non-human

proportion is compelling in its dog-like gait and its fearful and enquiring gaze. My narrative compulsion is to read *Harbinger* as theriomorphically transformed – tentatively poised amongst previous companions, much like Actaeon was pursued and hunted by his comrades in arms. Against all odds, *Harbinger* is *become monkey*. Sensing this secret, the complete and unequal metamorphoses of boy into monkey, animal/boy, boy/monkey, the accompanying fake boys (boys masquerading as animals) are "tainted" by the animal presence. I marvel at the mutability of the sorcerer's blow against surety. Here, as so often in this artist's exposition, confusion and duplicity collide in resident uncertainty.

Nandipha Mntambo: myth and meaning

In a strikingly mythological register, the South African artist Nandipha Mntambo enacts a therianthropic metamorphoses. The resulting work entitled *Europa*

Figure 6: Nandipha Mntambo, *Europa*, 2008, archival ink on cotton rag paper, 100 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.

(2008) (Figure 6), is a photographed enactment of the artist as a bull-like creature. The title of this work points to the mythological figure of Europa. Mythology positions Europa as a mythological Phoenician princess, who, following her abduction by Zeus gave birth to Minos. This story continues when Minos became the husband of Pasiphaē, who is credited with being the Minotaur's mother (Guirand 1985:87). Europa is thus the step-grandmother of the Minotaur. Mntambo presents the viewer with a fusion of the human grandmother with her hybrid grandchild. This is a powerful symbolic device, which points to a synthesis of otherness: Mntambo's reconfiguration of the Phoenician Europa in animal form heightens the viewer's awareness of a figure of amplified minority status, namely a non-western woman. Thereby, the colonial notion of the animality of the non-western other is challenged in a mirrored enactment of colonial conceit and absurdity. This fascinating figure of taboo addresses the othering and animalisation of non-western racial identity and sex with conviction. Mntambo's embodiment of Europa also displays a notable aggression that points to a contested but compelling materialist cyborg notion of assertively appropriating the guise of oppression as a significant inversion of power (see Haraway 1991).[14] Set against the mottled brown backdrop of the photographer's studio (a site that resonates with masculine threat), Mntambo shows her Europa as revelling in her possession not only of the pose, but the medium (once male). The labyrinthine prison of identity politics is paradoxically challenged and collapsed in this confusing liminal and rhetorical apparition.

Nandipha Mntambo: shape-shifting and uncertainty

Mntambo's *Europa* is a shape-shifting aniborg captured in mid-flux. Detailed apparition is the mode of this magic: transfixed by smoking red eyes, the viewer can almost stroke this figure's sleek and silvery fur, rippling seamlessly amongst glimpses of smooth skin. The horns exemplify this apparent shift of form, seamlessly emerging from the figures' head; these alien appendages bear scars and scuffs of a lifetime of conflict and self-defence. This is no beast of burden, but one who has resisted burden; one that has struggled and confronts us with rage and certainty. But amongst the immaculate detail lurks a lingering uncertainty (a deliberate gesture). Just beneath the foreshortened vision of the face, the human body it is attached to is revealed – *human flesh, not beast*. The apparition holds though; it is the outcome that is uncertain: will Europa "become cow" (or is it bull), or does she return to human state, or is this liminal and impossible state all that there is? Deleuze and Guattari (1988:238) note that there is no 'become animal', only "becomings".15 This sorcerer/shape-shifter/artist is not concerned with definitive ends or merely associative play, but also with stages of flux and flutter between ontological absolutes.

Marcus Coates: don't signify or do so badly

Marcus Coates is himself a liminal contradiction: a self-proclaimed shaman and an artist who is frequently described as being 'completely mental' (Cunningham 2009). In the thirty-minute video performance work entitled *Journey to the Lower World* (2004) (Figure 7), Coates awkwardly covers himself in a deerskin replete with deer head and horns and embarks on a shamanistic quest to deliver a message of solace, hope and direction gleaned from the spirits of the animal world to the generally elderly residents of a Liverpool Tower block set for demolition (Dorment 2010).[16] During the course of the video, the residents of the block of flats, obviously embroiled sufficiently in Coates's inconceivable scheme, ask the artist if they have a protector (Coates 2004). The then clean-cut and un-cloaked Coates, responds by explaining that he is about to per-

Figure 7: Marcus Coates, *Journey to the Lower World*, 2004, dual channel digital video, 30 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Workplace Gallery.

form a ritual descent into the underworld where he intends to communicate with the spirits of 'small dead animals' who, hopefully, will send him back with some helpful wisdom (Dorment 2010). This absurd statement is delivered with a straight face and some conviction, following which he briefly exits the room to re-emerge dressed in a reindeer headdress and pelt, accompanied by the sound of rhythmic drumming and thereafter appears to fall asleep (Dorment 2010).

When he awakens he is altered, his movements appear more animal than human (Dorment 2010). He proceeds to swirl around the room barking, grunting, howling and hissing with remarkable fidelity, while the residents of the block of flats sit in bemused disbelief, not to mention the video audience (Dorment 2010). He emerges from the trance in a sweat and politely recounts his journey through the netherworld and his encounter with the spirit of a sparrow hawk, and describes the

predictable and feel-good wisdoms he acquired (Dorment 2010). Dorment (2010) astutely notes that the point of the artwork is the audience's reaction rather than the answer from the spirit world. This observation is supported by the fact that the video continuously cuts away to the incredulous, bemused and even contemplative faces of the people watching this unlikely performance on the twentieth-floor of their dull apartment block (Dorment 2010). Insightfully, Dorment (2010) notes that the artist's real answer to the residents is that those with the capacity to transcend disbelief are free of their surroundings and situation; those who cannot transcend disbelief are stuck on the twentieth-floor of a condemned building.

Figure 8: Marcus Coates, *The Plover's Wing*, 2009, single channel high definition video, 22 minutes 30 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Workplace Gallery.

What is most compelling for me about this work is the lack of rhetorical animal signification. The most obvious signifier of animal presence – the animal cloak – is so deliberately and poorly integrated with the human bearer, that any symbolic inference is eclipsed by humour. Instead of conveying spiritual veracity to its wearer, Coates depicts the deer (a creature often observed by shamanistic cultures as a spiritual vehicle) as a limp signifier of the awkward attire of an un-tanned, spectacled and mundanely attired Englishman. Figure 8 is a still from Coates' recent performance video entitled *The Plover's Wing* (2009), in which he enacts a shamanistic séance for the Mayor of Holon (Israel), apparently responding to the Mayor's query regarding an answer to the problem of violence amongst the young people of Holon (Coates 2009). Coates attends this occasion dressed with precision in a stuffed badger "hat" and what can only be described as "Elvis Presley" sunglasses. He couples these incomparable items with a bright blue tracksuit with speed stripes that appear to complement the stripes of the badger "hat". Dressed in this abominable combination of populist and spiritual signifiers (which have the effect of cancelling the significance of both), he squeaks his way through the séance. The findings of his journey take on a metaphoric tone as he recounts meeting with a plover that averts attackers from its nest by faking injury, and interprets this as a message in relation to the conflict in Israel (Kunsthalle Zürich 2009).[17] However, this is where the rhetoric ends. Coates skilfully avoids the rule of rhetoric in animal/human hybrid couplings by presenting the viewer with a vision simultaneously incredulous and believable, wherein even the most archaic signifiers such as worn animal embellishments are rendered obsolete by his unique brand of the absurd. For Coates, enacting, transference, and audience interaction are the sites through which meaning is generated.

Marcus Coates: sorcery and states of intercession – shaman or madman

Deleuze and Guattari (1988:244) state that, 'we Sorcerers know quite well that the contradictions are real but that real contradictions are not just for laughs'. Coates is barking. He barks at Deleuze and Guattari. He barks at us all. One cannot be sure if

he is barking in madness or as the cry itself (rendered unfaithfully by an infidel human).[18] Both options seem true and false. Here magic resides in the energy and tension between ambiguous elements. This is a fitting zone for the archetypal shaman to inhabit – a figure standing between the now and the netherworld perpetually in-between, straddling and interceding. Coates operates in this rupture. His ambiguous and anachronistic gesture rips up the threshold of perceived realty. His shamanic conviction (both severe and hysterical) straddles the rift from whence he speaks in a language (not language). Hearing these sounds (not words) reconfigured as wisdom retrieved, forces a re-imagining of ourselves and all others (people and plovers) differently. Are we crazy or is Coates really barking? Can 'small dead animals' (Dorment 2010) really solve global conflicts? When Coates concludes his diatribe in quiet reflection, the viewers have shifted their individuation; they *have become uncertain* and entered into an irreducible relation to the power of beasts once imperceptible. In this sense, the viewer *becomes imperceptible*.[19] Laughing and sniggering alongside the rhythmic drumming and practiced animal cries of this shaman/pied piper of art, the viewer willingly follows him into the second order of theological belief in the transfer of experience from one substantial form to another (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:253) – *the viewer is spellbound*. Uncannily, the artist's rehearsed animal cries incite an "animal becoming" in the audience. In errant laughter, there is no symbolic encoding, only pure animal expression.

Conclusion: Ovid and the artists

Through the above discussion of these three artists concerned with hybrid human/animal representation in relation to positions concerning rhetorical readings of animal signifiers and notions of "becoming animal", I draw the following conclusions. Therianthropic representations seldom escape the action and purpose of rhetorical signification (metaphor and metonym). Neither can they avoid the transformative potency of "becoming animal". In Alexander's *Bom Boys*, metaphoric association seems overpowering in the masked figures of these lost boys. However, there is also a distinct sense of "becoming animal" that attends this work – a sense most visible when viewed from a distance – where the seam-lines of masks merge with human forms. This impression is compounded by the viewer's knowledge of society's merciless animalisation of "outsiders". Mntambo's artwork *Europa* presents a rich tapestry of metaphor and social ills, whilst also conjuring a vision of perpetual transformation – a "becoming incomplete". Coates fails miserably and deliberately in the practice of rhetoric in order to foreground the veracity and transportability of the "becoming animal" experience in both his video artworks *Journey to the Lower World* (2004), and *The Plover's Wing* (2009).

Socio-political concerns also appear to be a motivator in the creation of therianthropic artworks. It is helpful to return to Ovid when further considering artworks of therianthropic dimensions in relation to socio-political impetus. As Hughes (1997:11) notes, Ovid lives through tumultuous times and his striking tales of metamorphoses appear driven by this *Zeitgeist* of uncertainty. In describing Ovid's enduring popularity and appeal to artists throughout the ages, Hughes (1997:9) states that it is not the many qualities of Ovid's writing that endear him to the reader – qualities such as 'the swiftness or filmic economy of his narrative, or the playful philosophical breadth of his detachment, his strange yoking of incompatible moods'. According to Hughes (1997:9), what sets Ovid apart is his interest in 'what a passion feels like to the one possessed of it. Not just ordinary passion either, but human passion *in extremis*'. This live current of impassioned curiosity

in social contexts seems to indicate a manner of "becoming animal" in the artistic imperative itself – to become extreme, to become altered, to become, or to create in and of the time of making.

Notes

1 Throughout this article, when quoting directly and paraphrasing, I employ single-inverted commas when I discuss the term, *becoming animal* in relation to the originators of the term, Deleuze and Guattari. When employing the term *becoming animal* in its broader discursive sense I use double inverted commas.

2 Readings of particular artworks carried out in the mode of this instinctive "becoming animal voice" are indented and executed in Times New Roman font.

3 This open-ended position is taken up in relation to artistic projects that seek to overturn pejorative stereotypes. In doing so, I by no means retreat from a conviction that the colonising effects of figurative animal sign mobilisation is extremely problematic and has much to do with the devaluation of animal beings and human beings in human societies.

4 Deleuze and Guattari (1988:238) refer to the actions of imagination in the manifestation of things and states imagined, noting that, 'becoming does not occur in the imagination, even when the imagination reaches the highest cosmic or dynamic level, as in Jung or Bachelard. Becomings animal are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real'.

5 It is important to note here a disciplinary particularity of art practice in relation to the idea of imagining an "animal becoming" as opposed to having a supernatural experience of sensory inter-species transport. The artist may or may not imagine him or herself as being under a spell or as an animal. Art practice usually involves a representational act and therefore a slightly distanced position from which to experience the 'flutters' (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:253) of individual shifts in relation to another substantial form such as an animal (the work of Marcus Coates, is perhaps an exception to this). What does seem important in relation to any artistic exercise of combining the feted human subject with an animal being in manifest rendering or performance is the transport of feature, gait and expression into the mode of the other. In this contrivance, (or belief) there is undoubtedly a shift in perceived and experienced individuation that cannot be ignored.

6 De Niro based the side-to-side swagger of his character Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* on the movement of a crab (Biography for Robert De Niro [s.a.]). He is paraphrased as saying that he felt the character of Bickle was shifty and indirect, and was thus best exemplified by the irregular motion of a crab (Biography for Robert De Niro [s.a.]). This is a clear example of the human tendency to draw metaphoric comparisons between animal and human character.

7 Conceptions of unity are often a structural element of discriminatory practices, where one variety of human is configured as being more unified and therefore more valuable than another human.

8 The sorcerer or supernatural being is a fitting analogy through which Deleuze and Guattari (1988:246)

construct some tenets of their notion of 'becoming animal'. One such aspect of the theory of 'becoming animal' is a break with filial and hereditary models more aligned with human subjectivity (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:241). By comparison, supernatural beings often emerge from contagion or epidemic, characteristics they align with 'becoming animal' (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:241). Deleuze and Guattari (1988:242) cite as a case in point the vampire or werewolf, who becomes animal owing to an 'infected' bite.

9 The three Peirceian modes of signification are widely applied in semiotic theory and discourse as iconic signification by likeness, indexical signification by inference, and symbolic meaning through convention.

10 The term 'lines of flight' emerges directly from Deleuze and Guattari's (1988:11) understanding of rhizomic structure, such as the lateral movement of root systems between disparate rhizomic entities.

11 Children, like animals, are often associated with innocence.

12 In a summarised account, Erica Fudge (2002:7) recounts the message of Emmanuel Levinas's *The name of a dog, or natural rights* (1967) in which Levinas wrote disparagingly of his experience in a Nazi camp where a dog named Bobby was hailed by the Jewish prisoners as more human than their captors because of his natural affinity towards the prisoners (Fudge 2002:7). Levinas warned against the desire to anthropomorphise Bobby, noting that humanising the animal is a colonising gesture that impedes the ability to see animals as and for themselves and allows for the concomitant merciless animalisation of humans (Fudge 2002:7).

13 This monkey figure, which the artist refers to as *Harbinger*, does not appear in every installation view of the sculptural installation *Bom Boys*. According to Alexander (2011/07/05), this particular manifestation of the *Harbinger* theme (pursued in other forms and contexts) was only included on the *tableau* for the exhibition *Bom Boys and Lucky Girls* at the University of Cape Town's Irma Stern Museum in 1999. Although this combined staging is not represented in the figures of this article, it is however, the instance that I refer to in this particular reading. Alexander (2011/07/06) notes further that this particular *Harbinger* figure has 'travelled' as a temporary element in at least two other *tableau* installations, one being *African Adventure* (1999-2002) at the Cape Town Castle (Figure 5). Alexander (2011/07/06) also notes that this figure appears in several photomontages from the work *African Adventure: To the Cape of Good Hope* (1999-2000), sometimes distorted or enlarged, such as in *Landscape with Water Hole and Burning Train* (1999); *Harvestime* [*sic*] (1999); as a figure in the far background (situated on the hill) in the artwork entitled *Vissershok* (2000); in *Mans* [*sic*] *Hair Stylist*; *Vanguard Drive* (2000); *Japan Line* (1999); *Mountain View* (2000); as well as in the seventh image of *Adventure Centre* (2000). Alexander (2011/07/05) points out that the forerunner of this particular *Harbinger* appeared in a cut and paste photomontage predating Photoshop applications in her work titled *Beauty in a landscape: born Aliwal North 19-?, died Boksburg 1992* (1995), as well as in a small *tableau* arranged in a vitrine predating this analogue montage.

14 Donna Haraway's theoretical line has progressed firmly into animal studies circles especially in terms of considering the role and experience of companion species. She began her theoretical teleology in discussing the feminist mobility of "monstrous" cyborg identities. She notes that monsters such as Centaurs and Amazons have always occupied the imaginative periphery of western society, in order to define clearly the 'centred polis of the Greek male human' (Haraway 1991:180). Haraway (1991: 180) celebrates the deterritorialised and non-unitarian composition of the cyborg body as a means for the generation of alternative identity and meaning, in opposition to 'the mundane fiction of Man and Women'.

15 On this, Deleuze and Guattari are very clear. They note that the 'becoming animal' experienced by human subjects is irreducible even if there is no definitive transformation – no 'become animal'. Furthermore, they explain that, 'becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself' (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:238).

16 In addition to the video artwork, *Journey to the Lower World* (2004), I also rely on the writing of *The Telegraph* art critic, Richard Dorment (2010), for an account of the video artwork in this article.

17 In addition to the video artwork, *The Plover's Wing* (2009), I rely to some extent on an online account, by Kunsthalle Gallery (Zürich Kunsthalle Zürich 2009) for my descriptive account.

18 Akira Mizutta Lippit's summative reading of the philosophical history of the animal cry and its relation to death and ontological immediacy is an instrumental guide to this mutable and prolific philosophical term. Lippit (2009: 812) explains that when Derrida discusses the animal cry as a phenomenon that 'pierces' the human symbolic realm of language and difference encoded therein, he is drawing on the *oeuvres* of Edmund Burke and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. For Burke (cited by Lippit 2009:813), the animal cry arouses a sublime extemporaneous moment outside of reason. In terms of Coates's shamanistic artwork, this notion of transcendence in the experience of a shocking animal articulation is integral; as is Burke's (cited by Lippit 2009:813) further assertion that, 'such sounds as imitate the natural inarticulate voices of men, or animals in pain or danger are capable of conveying great ideas'. The idea that even the imitation of animal sounds can convey ideas of sublime origin adds some believability or at least interest, to Coates' work. The Hegelian understanding adds another layer of "magic" and meaning to this work. Hegel (cited by Lippit 2009: 814) connects the animal cry to death, noting that during the death of the animal, the creature's cry rips itself apart from the subject and lingers in the world as 'trace and memory' of the animal's death itself. I am not well versed in Hegelian dialectics, but must confess to being struck by its magical tone. With this in mind, shamanistic claims of animal intercession through the enactment of the animal cry seem less singular and absurd.

19 Deleuze and Guattari (1998:280) pose 'becoming imperceptible' as a lineal end to the molecular, animal and rhizomic becomings that are posited in '[b]ecoming-intense, becoming animal, becoming imperceptible …'. There is not enough scope here to unpack the disseminating meanings attributed

to this term; suffice to say that the authors give spiritual and religious significance to this stage. Encapsulated in this term is the notion of ascetic personal transformation through which a 'becoming everybody' or becoming humble is attained (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:280). Deleuze and Guattari (1988:279) link the term 'becoming indiscernible' to 'becoming imperceptible', noting that in 'becoming animal', which humans cannot achieve, they are swept up in a 'not returning to what we previously believed to be human' – which is irreducible. In this ruptured state, clear conceptions of identity are no longer clearly discernible. I use the term here in this secondary sense, whereby a clear sense of individuation is compromised.

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