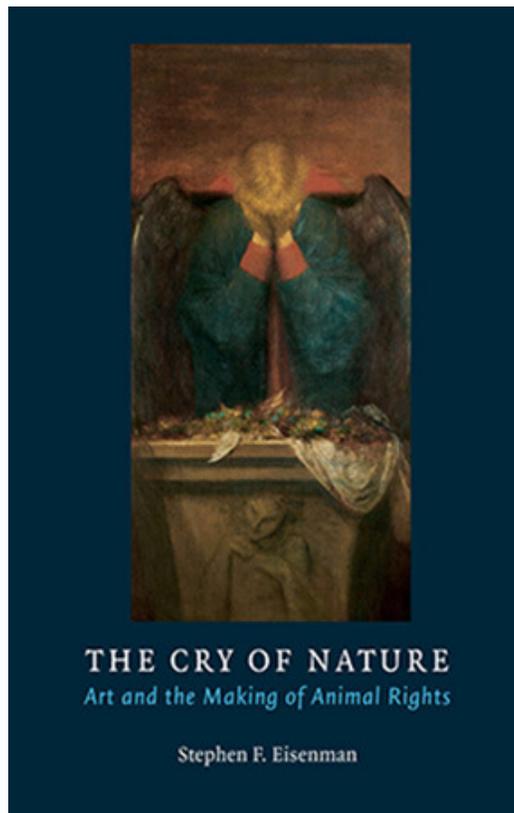


Reviews

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Blood and Paint

Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*. London: Reaktion Books, 2013. 309 pp, 98 illustrations. \$29 pbk.



Stephen Eisenman's *The Cry of Nature* has both the strengths and weaknesses of truly interdisciplinary work. His account of artists' involvement in the debates surrounding animal consciousness and rights juxtaposes art historical analysis with evidence drawn from social and cultural history, literature, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and ethology. Eisenman not only analyzes historical and contemporary attitudes toward animals, he also predicts — and advocates for — a new age of human-animal relations in which the binaries between species dissolve and animals are accorded all the rights associated with personhood. Eisenman's dazzling negotiation of sources and approaches and his commitment to animal rights make *The Cry of Nature* a challenging and deeply moving read. But it is also in some ways a frustrating one, especially for

students or scholars of visual culture. It is sometimes difficult to connect Eisenman's arguments about works of art to the visual qualities of the works themselves, and his occasional reliance on popular or outdated sources, or omission of important references, fails to give full force to his otherwise compelling claims.

The *Cry of Nature* is nonetheless an important contribution to a growing body of recent scholarship on animals in art. The bulk of the book focuses on European paintings and prints produced between 1730 and 1970. This alone make *The Cry of Nature* a vital intervention, because there are few comprehensive studies of the depiction of animals during this period. Diana Donald's *Picturing Animals in Britain, 1750-1850* (Yale University Press, 2007) and Louise Lippincott and Andreas Blühm's *Fierce Friends: Animals and Artists, 1750-1900* (Merrell, 2005) stand almost alone, and Eisenman's work covers more ground than either. Eisenman brackets his account of animals in the modern era with considerations of works from antiquity through the seventeenth century, and of contemporary practice, making *The Cry of Nature* a partial but still valuable survey of almost 3000 years of the representation of animals in Western art. As such, it is a welcome addition to a very small field of broad surveys which includes Linda Kalof's *Looking at Animals in Human History* (Reaktion, 2007) and the essays on the visual arts in the six-volume *Cultural History of Animals* (Bloomsbury, 2011).

But Eisenman clearly conceived of his book as something different from these art historical studies — he does not, in fact, reference any of them. His introduction traces two major threads of thought about animal rights in modern Europe and America: on one hand, a reformist position that seeks only to minimize suffering, and on the other, a radical position that argues for the autonomous selfhood of animals and their right to freedom. These polemics, Eisenman argues, were initiated by the animals themselves, who from the late eighteenth century onwards were gathered in larger and larger numbers in urban slaughterhouses. Their audible and visible pain transformed them into political agents. For Eisenman, then, understanding the history of meat production and consumption is crucial to understanding the literary, philosophical, and visual discourses around animal rights. Indeed, Eisenman is explicitly committed to a Marxist understanding of social and political change; he argues that the struggle for animal rights is determined not by scientific, philosophical, or religious debates but by “the state of the human and animal class struggle; that is, the actual material and social relation of people and animals to each other at given moments in history” (33).

His first chapter investigates the ways in which animals have been differentiated from humans, arguing that these differences are more apparent than real. There is

overwhelming evidence, he argues, for non-human animal consciousness. Thus animals have moral rights — rights which have been denied to them by Western capitalism, which regards them as mere raw material. Eisenman draws his evidence from popular and academic writing on animal behavior as well as from his own interactions with his dog. He holds up the animism of hunter-gatherer societies as an alternative form of human-animal relationships that recognizes and respects animal consciousness. Animism, he argues, persists to this day in numerous literary and artistic genres, and has potentially liberatory consequences.

Chapter Two, “Animals into Meat,” introduces both the historical and art historical narrative, beginning with the ancient world and culminating in mid-eighteenth-century France. That intellectual and aesthetic history is structured around the social history of animal slaughter and meat consumption. Eisenman weaves his analysis of writings by Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, Michel Montaigne, René Descartes, Jean de La Fontaine, and Julien Offray de La Mettrie in and out of his readings of works of art ranging from the Lion Hunt reliefs of ancient Assyria through medieval illuminated bestiaries to the prints of Albrecht Dürer, the meat still lifes of Pieter Aertsen, Frans Snyders, and Rembrandt, and the works of Jean-Baptiste Oudry and Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. One of Eisenman’s goals is to tease out how the texts and images under consideration either express the prevailing anthropocentric and speciesist world view, or make more radical claims about animal consciousness and individuality. The work of Aertsen, Snyders, and Dürer, Eisenman argues, typify early modern assumptions that animals were mere brutes, utterly different from and divinely subordinated to humans, whereas Rembrandt and Chardin, to different degrees, subvert those attitudes. But even Aertsen’s and Snyders’ paintings can be, and have been, read as more equivocal statements about animal life and death than Eisenman allows; his argument does not account for, for instance, Nathaniel Wolloch’s work on these paintings as anti-Cartesian arguments. Nor does Eisenman consider Dürer’s well-known watercolors of hares and other animals, which elicit viewers’ close consideration of, and even identification with, living animals; instead he focuses on an engraving of the legend of St. Eustace.

One of the key terms in Eisenman’s visual analysis is what he calls the “pathos formula,” a concept developed in his earlier book *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (Reaktion, 2007). The pathos formula, he argues, is a morally suspect visual trope endemic to Western representation, offering viewers “the beautiful death: humans or animals whose suffering is rendered so exquisite, piteous or erotic that they seem to welcome it, or at least accept it without serious complaint” (54). The pathos formula as applied to animals, according to Eisenman, naturalizes their suffering and death. Thus even Chardin’s sober, pared-down still lifes of dead game, read by art historians like Sarah

Cohen as meditations on materiality and the existence of the animal soul, are in Eisenman's account guilty of the same delectation of animal death and human domination as Aersten's and Snyders's market stall paintings.

Is there, then, any way out of the pathos formula? What does a morally good picture of animal life and death look like? Eisenman reserves his praise for artists who either present an ugly picture of the harm caused to animals by humans (William Hogarth's tortured animals, Rembrandt's isolated, roughly painted ox carcass, Théodore Géricault's abused horses) or who capture the inner life of animals and elicit sympathy and identification from the human viewer. Each of these possibilities presents problems. What is the difference between Chardin's and Oudry's paintings, both of which confront the viewer with carcasses of game animals? Eisenman associates Chardin, despite his use of the pathos formula, with pro-animal sentiment, based on the artist's visible paint handling and the tactility of his modeling. Oudry's dead animals, by contrast, he finds "lifeless," "inert," "highly contrived and utterly dead" (91). But visible painting handling is not a reliable indicator that an artist is sympathetic to animal pain, even in Eisenman's own narrative; he roundly condemns Claude Monet's Impressionist dead animal still lifes (formally very similar to Chardin's work) as anthropocentric and lacking empathy (167).

Likewise, what does inner life look like in a painting? This question has plagued the depiction of humans for thousands of years. Portraiture, for example, has used eye contact or lack thereof, profile or three-quarters views, busy compositions filled with symbolic attributes or blank backgrounds, and rough or smooth paint handling to represent human consciousness and individuality. Animal consciousness, a concept not universally acknowledged by artists and viewers, is even harder to communicate visually, and Eisenman's criteria for recognizing it in works of art are never made clear. Eisenman argues, for instance, that George Stubbs captures the "unique comportments and attitudes" of the horses he depicts, conveying their emotional life and their autonomy (110). But how do Stubbs's horse portraits differ visually from early English horse portraiture, or from seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of prize livestock? Can we really speak of emotion and autonomy in the likeness of a horse with a docked tail being held by a groom in front of a landscape clearly shaped by human intervention? I think Eisenman's claims about individual artists and works are, for the most part, correct, but more sustained, specific, and nuanced visual analysis would have helped convince his readers, many of whom will be unfamiliar with the art historical narratives in which his arguments are rooted.

Chapter Three, “The Cry of Nature,” deals with art and writing from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, including the 1791 treatise by John Oswald that structures Eisenman’s argument. Oswald’s *The Cry of Nature; Or, An Appeal to Mercy and to Justice, on Behalf of the Persecuted Animals*, a pro-vegetarian argument against human cruelty to animals, provides not only the title of Eisenman’s book but also the basis for his theory of animal agency. That cry, Eisenman argues, is the vocalization of animals in pain, an unmediated voice of Nature that has the power to change history if only more humans understood and heed it (146, 260). He places Oswald’s writing in the context of artworks by William Blake, Thomas Bewick, Géricault, Rosa Bonheur, and J.J. Grandville. Among these artists, Eisenman singles out Géricault for championing animal liberty and autonomy in his paintings and lithographs of horses. Eisenman argues that Géricault’s 1817 *Race of the Riderless Horses* is about the resistance of oppressed animals. But its pro-equine message is at best ambivalent; it is also a celebration of the human (male) bodies controlling the horses (154-155). It is not clear, moreover, why Géricault’s painting is morally better than Rosa Bonheur’s *Horse Fair* (1853), a work that Eisenman dismisses as denying animal individuality (181).

Chapter Four, “Counter-Revolution,” is organized around the histories of urban stockyards and slaughterhouses in London, Paris, and Chicago in the second half of the nineteenth century. The centralization of animal slaughter and its removal from public view, Eisenman argues, aided the counter-revolution against animal rights by silencing the cry of nature. Each slaughterhouse is paired with artworks and writings — Claude Monet, Gustave Caillebotte, and Émile Zola for Paris, Charles Dickens, Charles Darwin, Edwin Henry Landseer, and William Holman Hunt for London, and Sinclair Lewis and William Harnett for Chicago. Eisenman emphasizes the impact of Darwin’s work, which provided scientific evidence that humans and animals exist on a continuum and share emotions, particularly the sensation of pain. The visual arts fare worse in his analysis; he roundly condemns Impressionist still life painting, for instance, as reproducing the “modern myth of the painless, rational and redeemed animal death” (167).

Chapter Five, “Primal Scenes,” covers from about 1900 to 1970. This era, Eisenman argues, saw the birth of a post-humanist philosophy and art. Eisenman builds his narrative around an analysis of Sigmund Freud’s conception of the human self. According to Eisenman, Freud’s most famous cases (the Rat Man, Little Hans, and the Wolf Man) revolved around the human subject’s witnessing of a “primal scene” of animal suffering or recognition of the blurry lines between humans and animals. This trauma and truth, Eisenman argues, also structures the work of Isaac Bashevis Singer, George Orwell, Pablo Picasso, Chaim Soutine, Francis Bacon, and Joseph Beuys.

Eisenman's pairings of literary and visual sources (Singer and Soutine in particular) are convincing, and resound satisfyingly with his earlier discussion of still lifes of meat. But there are still frustrating problems of evidence and analysis — Eisenman's discussion of Picasso's *Guernica*, focused on the screaming horse, neglects the rest of the composition. Indeed, he only reproduces that detail of the eleven by twenty-five-foot painting, effectively depriving himself and his readers of Picasso's larger visual gambit. Likewise, Eisenman's treatment of Freud's Wolf Man case depends on his own speculations about the patient's childhood relationship to animals.

Eisenman's conclusion, "Art and Animals Right Now," extends his argument to the present, tracing artistic and philosophical responses to the rise of factory farming after 1960 and identifying a new form of human identity and society predicated on our relationship with animals. We are now, Eisenman suggests, experiencing a dissolution of the binaries (self/other, mind/body, human/animal) as well as of the social relationships (kinship, community, employer) that structured human identity in the past. At the same time, our affective relations to companion animals are increasingly important to our social and emotional lives. This new kind of "relational identity" is "multiple, hybrid and dependent on other beings and things for its changing definition" (252), a kind of return to animism in a posthumanist world. In support of this fluid new form of identity, Eisenman invokes Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), and Latour's idea of a "parliament of things" that would erase the oppositions between types of beings. The work of Sue Coe and Damien Hirst are his primary examples of (very different) artistic projects aimed at exposing this new relationship with animals and its persistent contradictions — contradictions that will only be resolved when more people hear and heed the cry of nature.

But who is the "we" who is experiencing this new form of relational identity, and whose emotional well-being is increasingly dependent on companion animals? The forms of pet-keeping on which Eisenman's argument depends are specific to the wealthiest classes of the wealthiest nations. His elision of class-based difference is particularly striking given his commitment to a historically grounded understanding of the material and social relationships between humans and animals. That commitment, which serves Eisenman extremely well in his discussion of meat production and consumption, is also less evident in his analysis of works of art. We hear very little about how these works were produced, circulated, viewed, and understood, or about the institutions and traditions in which they are embedded, or even about who paid for them and why. The differences between Blake's and Hogarth's audiences, or the Orientalist context of Stubbs's *Horse Attacked by a Lion*, inflect these works' meanings,

and accounting for them would enrich Eisenman's argument. Art historians will also notice that Eisenman's narrative of animal rights in the visual arts fits comfortably within the canon of Western art post-1700. That narrative is almost entirely French and English until the mid-twentieth century, and within those national traditions is strongly dependent on painting and prints. The result is some peculiar blind spots. No one would dispute that artists like Chardin, Géricault, or Soutine were deeply engaged with the representation of animals, but what about the innumerable porcelain animals produced by the Meissen factory or the oeuvre of the sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye or the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge? These works may have been less formally innovative but their very popularity constitutes important cultural evidence about human-animal relations. Eisenman's discussion of European and North American thought about the relationship between humans and animals in the age of Darwin would be strengthened, moreover, by engagement with the problems of colonialism and scientific racism. *The Cry of Nature* remains, despite these questions, a passionate, thought-provoking, and genuinely interdisciplinary contribution to the history of the visual representation of animals, to the scholarly literature on animals as historical agents, and to the animal rights movement.