

THE ANIMAL BODY

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'We believe in the existence of very special becomings - animal traversing human beings and sweeping them away, affecting the animal no less than the human'. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005, p. 237)

Introduction

'Take care of your animal body' are the famous words of Steve Paxton. The concept of the animal body 'refers to the presence of a being underlying the socialized self, a being underlying that part of the self which is expressed through verbal language, linear thought, and movement behavior appropriate to civilized spaces' (Lepkoff, 1998, p.1). In contrast to our culturally conditioned self, the animal self is a physical intelligence that consists of reflexes, instincts and primary movements - both learned and acquired. The animal body becomes accessible to us by play, as the energetic release of forces, weight and flow.

Paxton's animal body resonates well with Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy (1987). The animal body implies "a series of assemblages between deterritorializing forces that are circulating on the edge of the human and the non-human, in order to make them indiscernible" (Beaulieu, 2011, p.7). It is in such a zone of proximity, of uncertainty, or of indetermination that becomings occur.

Children seem to be particularly sensitive to becomings (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Beaulieu, 2011): this is most noticeable in the way children approach animals (without fear) as well as in the way they explore their direct environment (e.g. trying to eat all kind of substances). Even more, (young) children are experts in play and their own idiosyncratic way of moving often exceeds and proceeds our habitual and functional way of moving. In this essay I will explore the assumption that children have a more direct access to the animal and the non-human. I will do so by looking into hide and seek games and the desire of both animal and child to be invisible for others.



Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy

'Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd' (p.3, Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). With this opening sentence, Deleuze and Guattari pull down the Freudian universe of a stable, singular and coherent identity as it is constructed through language. 'For Freud, when the thing splinters and loses its identity, the word is still there to restore that identity or invent a new one. Freud counted on the word to re-establish a unity no longer found in things' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.28).

In the process of becoming the singular and coherent identity is deconstructed until only several abstract lines and movements remain. By process of dissolution, one is no longer anything more than an abstract line, a trait, or a piece of an abstract puzzle. The goal is to eliminate everything that exceeds the moment, put in place everything that includes the moment.

To become, writes Deleuze, – is not to attain a form (identification, imitation, mimesis) but to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferenciation where one can no longer be distinguished from the animal (Beaulieu, 2011, p.74). There are several ways of becoming: becoming-woman, becoming-animal, becoming-molecular, becoming-imperceptible and becoming-revolutionary. In this paper I will focus exclusively on the becoming-animal.

But what exactly is becoming animal? Let us begin with what it is not. Becoming animals has nothing to do with resemblance, imitation, imagination nor it is a dream or a fantasy, since all these acts are affirmative to the notion of identity. 'Becoming-animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.238). In other words, one does not literally turn into an animal. In our efforts to become animal, we enter an in-between zone, a zone of proximity that frees ourselves from a fixed form.

The becoming animal is a process that is fueled by desire, by a longing for proximity and sharing (Brown, 2007). It's the ability to participate in the other. In otherness. Becoming animal is a bodily experience: we sense the presence of the animal, we use our embodied sensitivity to creatively engage with the animal. We enter into a relationship that consists of movements and rests. Becoming animal is not a *thinking of* the animal, but a *sensing of* the animal.

Bodily experiences thus form the basis of our engagement with the animal. There is an inhuman possibility in us, a potentiality that can be reached and approached. By connecting with the animal we cross the boundaries between the human and the non-human. In this zone of proximity our identities dissolve and we engage in that which is unknown, uncertain and indefinable. We experience 'an open, creative whole of proliferating connections that is neither ordered by language nor logic' (Colebrook, 2002, p.5).

There are different ways and tactics in the process of becoming animal. It is a mistake to think that one needs to be close to an animal, that one needs to live with an animal or needs to have an empathic understanding with an animal. It is more about the willingness to be altered by the animal.

I am not so much interested in the way children treat their pets, nor their indignation to animal abuse or their desire to be surrounded by animal-like figures (such as cuddles). I am more interested in child behavior that resembles animal behavior, in terms of sensomotoric attunement, playfulness, specifically when it comes to seek and hide games.

There is one particular thing that animal and child share: the tendency to remain close to the background. Animals like to hide, so do children. Both feel comfortable and safe when they are close to the background. Animals often distort their own appearance, thereby fooling possible predators. Through background matching, the animal blends in with its environment. Children do the same. They play hide and seek. They merge into the background.



The animal and the lived body

Animals and children are masters at hiding. The ability to hide and to stay in the background is exactly what makes animals – and children- so perfect (Ten Bos, 2008). While animals and children move to the background, grown-ups move to the foreground. Man is a creature that has developed a sense of self on the basis of thought and analysis: a self that wants to distinguish itself and move to the front. Animals, on the other hand, make sure not to distinguish themselves too much from their background.

One could say that Deleuze grants nonhuman animals ‘a privilege over humans, or, at least, other animals can signal to humans how to enter into relationship with inorganic life’ (Beaulieu, 2011, p.71). An animal does not sit on a couch, it sits on the floor and is most of the time in full contact with the earth. Becoming animal is a strategy to leave our substantial identities behind and to give way to alliances, passages and becomings between beings and things.

Through this process, impersonal forces are grasped and expressed. In the zone of proximity becomings occur. As being said before, children seem to be sensitive to becomings. The child playfully engages with the environment: he creates assemblages between the human and the non-human. Since becomings do not follow predefinite rules, they happen like an event: ‘We can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.292).

The play of young children for example holds a strong resemblance with the play of animals. Play is a spontaneous activity that connects, communicates and relates to the environment. Play is an intense activity that requires an involvement of the whole body. Children love to play hide and seek, however it is not the only activity in which becoming imperceptible is. Children look for secret spots, in and around the house, that belong to them and the existence of which is unknown to adults. It is in these special places that children can shape their own experience in an autonomous way. Children physically relate to these special places in a dynamic and ever-changing process. The becoming of space in this sense is closely related to the becoming imperceptible.

Children are drawn to places that are secret to others. Young children derive pleasure from other people being unable to find them. They look for places where they are invisible, hidden away, and left alone. In these hidden places the child can withdraw from parental demands, and as a result he can physically engage in the here and now. It allows the child to be sensitive to the small world around him, like the fabric of the curtain, the wooden drawer in a closet, the grass, the leaves, the bugs...Hidden places provide opportunities to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker & Mulderij, 1983). Even more, in order to remain hidden, both child and animal have to adapt to the environment, they have to attune to and take on the rhythm of the place. Being invisible means being sensitive to the environment. Both child and animal show a willingness to be shaped by the

environment, to be folded and curved into the smallest possible space. Environment and child (or animal) collaborate together in this. Being invisible requires an environment that provides affordances to hide. To hide therefore is a relational and compositional activity.

In sum, both animal and child seek for hidden places in contrast to human adults that prefer to move and live in the wide open. Animals and children like to withdraw into the background while the human adult, as a thinking entity, has put himself to the front.



Conclusion

Becoming-animal is to 'unlearn physical and emotional habits in order to expand the world's experience. This would contribute to humans changing their perception of their relationships with themselves, with other bodies, and with their environment' (Beaulieu, 2011, p.86). This is not an easy job: it requires much sobriety, much ascetism and much creative involution. Becoming animal is a strategy to reduce oneself to one or several abstract lines, it is a way to enter the impersonal. The result is dissolution of a singular self into infinite microscopic and molecular lines.

It must however be noted that there is never a complete dissolution of identities. 'Assemblages only partially eliminate the identities of each of the becomings parts' (Beaulieu, 2011, p.82). Different bodies enter into alliances in order to do things but are not undone by it (Baker, 2000). After the becoming of an animal, the child is still a child.

Both animal and the child feel comfortable at the edge of the visible. They merge with the process itself, and hence with one's environment. The process of becoming invisible is cosmic, it is linked to a sense of inter-connectedness: both child and animal move towards the outside by a sensory and spiritual stretching of the boundaries (Braidotti, 2006, p.27). In this process of invisibility a fusion takes place between the self and the habitat. Identities dissolve as well as the boundaries that are set up between us and the environment. 'In this new field novelty and creativity can occur' (Brown, 2007, p.262). In this zone of proximity we are altered by the environment: we step out of our central position and enter the space in-between. We do not possess this in-between space, we only move through it in our attempt to become invisible.

Like animals, children have the desire to hide, to become one with the background. Both animal and child prefer to stay as much as possible in the background. The lesson we need to learn from this is: look at children, look at animals. Stay close to the background. Become an animal. This becoming animal has multiple shapes and facets: it is not about imitation, not about identification. It is about being invisible and undetectable. Animals understand that. As do children.

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