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Animal and/as Medium: Symbolic Work in Communicative Regimes

Jody Berland

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the widespread imagery of animals in contemporary media culture. Focusing on advertising for cell phones, it suggests that dogs and monkeys mediating between phones and users carry pedagogical messages that work across and underneath the surfaces of corporate advertising. Images from this well orchestrated campaign reveal a shift in how technologies are marketed to youths. Analyzing first the rhetoric and then the connective actualities of these ads, I argue that they serve a dual purpose of industrializing emotion and militarizing security by organizing new conditions for communicative action. Simultaneously they hint at the true stakes of the toxic manufacture and waste production that comprise the production cycle of these machines-animals. These images carry a powerful emotional affect that needs to be understood in relation to a war on nature in which communication may or may not make the difference.

ANIMAL AS MEDIUM

At the end of a powerful investigative series on global warming published in the *New Yorker*, Elizabeth Kolbert throws up her hands in trying to explain the cause of this looming disaster. “It may seem impossible to imagine that a technological society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing” (Kolbert 63). Commenting on her conclusion, Andrew McMurray writes: “That we could choose self-destruction is a datum in great need of explanation by anyone who styles himself an eco-critic” (McMurray 1). Let us put aside for a moment the questions that spring

so readily to mind from the vantage point of cultural theory: questions about terms like “we” and “self-destruction” and “technological society.” The challenge Kolbert poses is a very timely one. I am interested in extending her premise of a civilization at war with itself into the culture of everyday life, where the increasing visibility of “nature” in visual culture serves both to reinforce and to challenge the increasingly dangerous legacy of the “technological society.” In this terrain, the image of “technological society” has morphed möbius-like from its historical role as object of the critique of capitalist modernity to being a potential danger against which advanced security technologies must be mustered. Needless to say, this transition has a double edge.

This paper addresses the images of animals used to market mobile technologies in the hyper-networked landscapes of communicative culture. No one can fail to notice the increasing visibility of animals in the visual landscape and how frequently they pertain to the hardwares and softwares of human connection. It is both ironic and poignant that such images have been so closely aligned with the signs and practices of technoculture. As Lisa Nakamura observes, “In this post-Internet culture of simulation in which we live, it is increasingly necessary for stable, iconic images of Nature and the Other to be evoked in the world of technology advertising” (Nakamura 258). In her account, such images beckon the viewer toward travel to beautiful and exotic places. In the widespread ad campaigns for cell phones and other mobile digital devices, however, the imaginary horizon is considerably reduced. It is the mobility of the phone that is celebrated, and there is no landscape; the featured animals possess no relationship to any site but the interface. I want to explore this semiotic assemblage of animals, communication technologies and humans as a media “event” within an increasingly mobilized risk-oriented technoculture. Animal figures operate at the interface of cultural and biological being, where they are mobilized to incite and legitimate practices of connection as part of the management and dissemination of technological risk.¹ Their message does not end with the purchase of the telephone.

In a political climate in which environmental destruction is being processed as the new terror, and a theoretical climate which increasingly foregrounds the network or assemblage, this analysis must begin by disassembling the parts (animals, mobile technologies, consumers) and considering how they are being strategically recombined. The now inescapable associations between animal species and digital technologies reveal an historic shift that is nervously percolating behind the scenes. One can trace the triangulation of humans, animals, and knowledge as far back as Greek philosophy; indeed wherever philosophers or writers have sought to reflect on the boundaries of human nature, animals are an essential second term in a figuration of three. Over the history of human accounts of themselves, the third term has changed, and the definition of human nature has altered discursively from purveyors of wisdom (God)

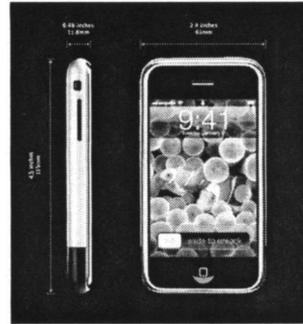
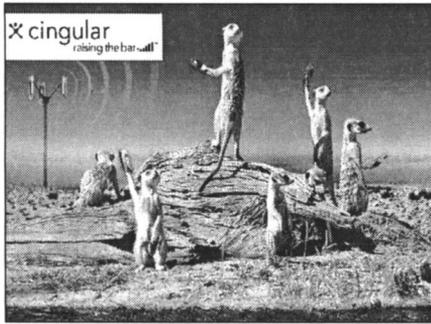
to makers of tools (nature) to the organic extension of informatic networks (software) and the mobilization of the communicative techno-apparatus of the war that humans are waging upon their own embodied selves.

Mobilization—technoculture-war—it seems strange that cute animals should provide the visible face of this transitional period in our history. The management of the contemporary human-technology connection somehow requires the presence of the third agent, the animal. The concept of the event helps to explain this anti-intuitive conjuncture. The event describes the coming together of several overlapping systems of order and agency involving media forms and the social body. This concept calls upon us to re-theorize relations between meaning, medium, order, and agency without any presuppositions about their necessary outcome. In the scale of contemporary technological trajectories, the texts, technological agents, and living entities arrive at combinations and contexts that are both continuous and discontinuous with the symbolic and social relations from which they arise. Images of well connected animals have appeared over the last decade as part of a comprehensive campaign to “naturalize” the impulse to connect to others through technologies. The inescapable rhetorical connection between animals and mobile digital devices has conscripted “nature” to play Mephistopheles to its own destruction. These technologies both advance and destroy the human capacity to connect, just as in the industrial age, as Marx so clearly understood, technology simultaneously empowered and alienated its human users.

The triangulated human-animal-communication technology that arises in the forefront of this media event also points us toward the concept of risk society. Thinking about media events in relation to risk management enriches our understanding of the role of culture by pointing to its limits. The tenuous boundary between representational meaning and the destruction of meaning is another point I hope to illustrate in the following analysis of animals, humans and digital communication devices in contemporary popular culture.

PROLIFERATION

One question the cultural researcher must always ask is, why now? In the 1950s, billboards were full of kitchen appliances, which as Susan Buck Morss has shown were instrumental in spreading a utopian imaginary called America across the dreamscape of the Soviet empire.² In the 1990s, images of angels crowded the surfaces of popular culture and kitsch commodities, arguably in connection to the growing militarization of space. They functioned as consoling souvenirs or prisoners of war (as I have argued elsewhere) from a distant space once known as heaven but later conquered by Star Wars and optical probes.³ Now small animals cover the billboards, calendars and coffee mugs. What are they telling us?



In his reflection on “the aesthetics of livingness,” Jonathan Burt suggests that there are two possible conditions of response to the animal in art: “something to say and nothing to say.”²⁴ To follow this trail into advertising is to undertake an exercise in semiotic analysis of a site of meaning production that is, in the words of Andrew Wernick, “evolving towards a decorative eclecticism whose signifying gestures refer us only to the universe of symbols from which they are drawn” (Wernick 216). Indeed there is no more familiar and accessible a universe of symbols than the graphic representation of animals. They are part of the pedagogical mainstream of childhood in many cultures. You can trace the morphology of this universe through children’s literature and toys through National Geographic and exotic tourist motifs to *Shrek* and *Nemo* to contemporary advertising. The memories triggered by these associations are comfortable ones. These images refer to phantasms rather than to something that actually exists. They encourage a child like narcissism as they transform nature into technoculture.

By having nothing to say, these digital animals have something to say. The images suggest affect, but they don’t deliver on it, and we have to do the emotional work ourselves. Because they gesture at feeling without expressing it, they offer a homeopathic intervention into the state of embodiment we know as attachment. The images offer this important feeling to viewers as the potential outcome of technological mediation. The pictures of animals promise a sense of attachment and security which might feel analogous to the “natural” connection between animals and man, and which is waiting to be fulfilled the way a love-struck teenager waits for a phone call. This promise has been extremely effective in the campaign to mobilize consumers in the development of the global telecommunications network.

Consider the excitement with which mobile digital technologies are being embraced by consumers, journalists, entrepreneurs, consultants, academics, artists, and funding agencies. Announcing Apple’s iPhone as recipient of the *Time Magazine* 2007 Invention of the Year award, *Time*’s Lev Grossman writes: “One of the big trends of 2007 was the idea that computing doesn’t belong just

in cyberspace, it needs to happen here, in the real world, where actual stuff happens. This is just the beginning” (Grossman 1). The new trend is the revelation that cyberspace isn’t real after all. The idea is that reality is better conveyed rhetorically through the link between mobile technologies and animal bodies. Animals are real, or at least their image represents the reality associated with embodiment through which technologically alienated humans seek to be re-joined to the natural world. Humans can reclaim their physical and emotive selves by projecting themselves onto these images, confirming Akira Lippit’s idea that “the combination of the animal subject and the photographic image alters in some essential fashion the dialectical flow of subjectivity . . . one that allows for an economy of the gaze, identification, and becoming” (Lippit 120).

These digitally remastered animals are happy with their newfound connection with humans. This happiness declares that something more compelling than cyberspace is now emerging, something magical, something personal you can carry with you: “a more general telematic trend towards wearable, handheld and pocket communications and entertainment media...in which individuals are being microtargeted” (Richardson 1). If technology is guilty of distracting its users, the convergence of mobile digital technologies promises to restore them to a universe in which they once again occupy the center—with the help of animal subjects and cell phones, which ask for nothing back. This narrative is, among other things, a form of liberal pedagogy which emphasizes individual desires and promises that can be fulfilled in the rapidly changing world of commodity exchange. Telephone companies “exploit a social need for connectedness in times of social fragmentation” while advancing expensive consumer needs, inferior services, toxic byproducts and increased corporate “freedom” from public policy.⁵

You can see this process at work in the language through which new devices are celebrated. It is no accident that in L. Grossman’s hymn to the iPhone, it is the device that communicates and converges, not the person. The popularity of wearable communications media arises from the trend, over the last two decades, to abolish distinctions between mass media and communications technologies. As information, communication, and digital technology merge, a growing range of telecommunications services are reshaping the personal environments of their users. In this revolutionary network of “new intensities,” all users are agents, all bodies are interfaced, and since everyone is connected, there is no outside to it. (Rossiter 33-34) Like the new soldier in the “re-enchanted” military, each body is encased in a personal shell of mobile interactive telephony which mediates the horizon of everyday life.

In some important respects, however, it is the same old technoculture. We do not need to know where this “revolution” is taking us so long as it is experienced as a manifestation of progressive technological and personal change. The claim that the digital media network can reconcile the space between in-

dividual and planet disguises a global trajectory of unprecedented destruction in which researchers' role as progressive knowledge workers is far from certain. To that extent, these commentaries demonstrate the victory of neoliberal thought in the contemporary academy.⁶ If defining ideal communication in terms of a move towards reciprocal understanding is perceived as obsolete, these new technologies are like the old ones in one respect: their advocates emphasize the capacity of enhanced technical interconnection to advance the cause of individual mobility and freedom. This discourse renders communication a function of the speaker's tools. The cell phone constitutes an intimate bond between the user and her medium in which a dialogic other is hypothetically optional. It could be a monkey or a fish.

There are in the world of computing things "which professionals are almost trained to ignore," writes Arnold Pacey (Pacey 36, quoted in Sterne 28). Commenting on this observation, Jonathan Sterne argues that such "things" include "the continued onslaught of computer trash and the ongoing manufacture of obsolescence by the hardware industry, [which] inadvertently support the global trade in toxic materials" (Sterne 28). As Elizabeth Grossman observes,

Virtually none of the books chronicling the rise of high technology or high tech's social and cultural influences consider the industry's impacts on human health or the environment . . . An enormous gap remains between what professionals and general high-tech consumers know about the hazards posed by e-waste and the environmental impacts of high-tech manufacturing, let alone the importance of solving these problems . . . It seems to me that without this understanding we will continue to behave as if high-tech products exist in some kind of cyberuniverse, one that has little to do with the air we actually breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, or our children's health. (Grossman 112-114)

Thus students can celebrate the creative GPS capacities of cell phones while bemoaning smart bombs, or buy bottled water for seminars in which they discuss degradation of the environment. Knowledge about water supplies available to an average consumer is separated from the question of egregious toxic waste produced by the manufacture of plastic bottles and released into the water, an issue separated from the violent privatization of the world's water supply. Like the mobile phone, the plastic bottle can be understood as a medium and/or pedagogical tool which separates consumers from the wisdom of a spatially and ethically informed citizenship. What the bottle "represents" is substantially different from what the bottle "does." This fragmentation of knowledge and emotion perpetuates a global war on animals, natural resources, land, and peoples. Creative directors in advertising companies seem presently to be more attuned with the anxiety surrounding these issues than most progressive academics in cultural and media studies. As Maxwell and



Miller conclude, “Ecological ethics barely figures into the way media and communication researchers think about media technology. . . . Media studies would be profoundly disrupted were it to install an ecocentric ethics into its thinking on media technology” (Maxwell & Miller 337).

In rhetorical terms, this campaign involves a move toward the restoration of “the real” to the surfaces of commodity culture, echoing in the loquacious drama of the simple image the utopian intent of Socialist Realism to “make the viewer feel ‘alive’ – alive and sensually responsive. Such goals as to ‘stir up,’ to ‘awaken,’ to ‘touch on the raw’ take precedence over purely ideological indoctrination” (Buck-Morss 119).⁷ Thus air and water were put to work in the Bolshevik imaginary, and then, in a stunningly self-defeating rapprochement with capitalism, the American kitchen. Like socialist realism, these images of connected animals gesture toward real function while doing everything possible to silence and contain the actual real – the environmental impact of electronic waste, for instance, which is despoiling sizable parts of the globe where these animals roam. In his study of the culture of risk, Joost van Loon uses the term “fable” to describe a narrative which offers an ordered representation of the world by forgetting it. The fable trumps other kinds of knowledge because it disconnects representation, signification, and value (van Loon 196). Its rhetorical effectiveness relies on what Eve Stoller describes in the emotional geography of empire as a “willful compartmentalization of its entangled parts” (Stoller 10). Such disconnection seems ironic in a terrain obsessed with convergence. As digital devices converge with animals, however, what matters is not actuality but the emotionally powerful fable of compulsory communication as a liberating event.

Letting lose the butterflies, birds, lizards, dogs, cats, fish and monkeys across the advertising spaces of our cities is part of the process through which communication technologies converge in the fold of your hand. These technologies, like the ads that promote them, succeed to the degree that they are

contoured to the routine practices and feelings of everyday life. Like advertising, the technologies promise to enhance your social life without damaging what you value in it. Connecting to others can happen without any limitations, for now – when so much damage appears outside your control – is the time to be flexible and free. The freer you are, and the more ambiguous your place in this hyper-mediated landscape, the more open you must surely be to diverse forms of experience. If connection completes you, why not connect to animals? From updated platforms named after birds and snakes to hundreds of interactive websites featuring winsome kittens to thousands of billboards showing dogs with cell phones, there is no escaping this association.⁸ As an animal lover, Greenpeace supporter and sometimes-vegetarian who worships cats, I embrace this openness to other species and hope that this sense of connectivity is part of a just future emerging from post-human sensibilities. However, the idea that mobile communication can solve all the problems created by coercive technologies of the everyday is a fabulation with disturbing implications. How appropriate that an animal should illustrate a fable.

While the question of animal subjects is being widely explored, the convergence of animal theory and medium theory is at a very early stage of development. My shorthand for this inquiry is to address the animal body as a medium of communication in relation to the contemporary event of technological mobilization, wherein violence is dematerialized and repackaged in the name of love.

VOCABULARIES OF CONNECTION

Note that this is an always-already-triangulated image, in which an animal embraces a cell phone, or vice versa, and looks straight at us, the viewers. Their readiness to look back at us functions (my informants believe) as a promise of compensation for the cold universe of machinic distance. Advertising is all about producing lack and compensation together, promising new resources for



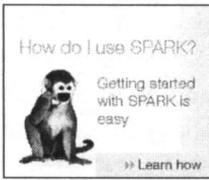
negotiating the spaces that arise between them. To understand such promises is to open a Pandora's box of unresolved dilemmas. Let us examine the rhetorical achievements of the cell phone ads in this light.

First: these images contribute to a process of reification through which personal communication devices appear to be simple and straightforward to use, not requiring any special technical knowledge or skill. These animals descend directly from the babies used to advertise player pianos a century ago. As I explain elsewhere,

The idea that mechanization of instruments made music accessible to the unskilled efforts of toddlers and children became a central motif in their promotion, and quickly became the chosen strategy for advertising automatic pianos. Gulbransen used the image of a baby accompanied by the slogan "easy to play: all the family will quickly become expert... Without long practice! All the joy without hard work!" Or as Kodak put it in an important post-war marketing campaign: "Just push a button. We do the rest." (Berland 2007 157)

Second: an animal doesn't have a body, the thinking goes: it *is* a body. In other words, as ethnologists have argued, it has nothing to learn to become what it is. In the animal-phone convergence, the animal body stands in for that part of us that is not incorporated by the machine, offering a glimpse of that freedom which might be realized by being incorporated into the machine. The animal is the body in movement, unconstrained by stationary media like conventional telephones ("land lines") or computers ("desktops") with their topographic baggage. If the cell phone keeps you tethered to your work station, the animals appear to be unconnected to everything, including the land they stand on, but the network.

Third: these technological assemblages rely on human-machine interfaces to solve the problems of staying connection that plague the everyday lives of busy people. The wider the range of resources you have at hand, the less time you have to spend choosing one over another. Do you want to summon sound or image, to consume or communicate, to be lost or found? It's best if you can do it all at the same time, efficiently and conveniently, for such technical adeptness helps to negotiate admission to the communities being formed in the kinship of equivalent technological capacity. This pursuit of diversification advances the individual's flexibility while challenging established practices of identity. The mobius-shaped homology between animal, device, and belonging can thus be seen as a form of postmodern totemism. Totemism was an important subject for early modern anthropologists excited by the visible logics of primitive societies under their gaze, as brilliantly summarized in Levi-Strauss's book *Totemism*. Their debates concerned the role of animal imagery in organizing parallel and commensurate social differences within a distinct clan or group. A



raven and a whale are both different and equivalent, having been linked by a taxonomy of meanings and social practices through which parallel clans are formed. Today's image culture is not comprised of clans organized by association with chosen animals – there is no evidence that people buy phones from specific phone companies because they like one animal more than another, although this doesn't mean it never happens. These pictures suggest rather that cell phone users are free agents who can create their own tribes.

These images invite us to produce affectionate but unfixed associations between communication technologies and cute animals. Like human-animal interfaces in primitive societies, these associations exceed the symbolic. They don't just dispense with the substantive distinction between the text and its referent, the body and the image, the animal and the machine; they also work to transform the links between human bodies and modes of communication, both symbolically and practically.⁹ If the monkey "means" anything here, it is that mobile communication technologies can help you destabilize and remobilize social identities. Homologies between animals and human identities are completely arbitrary, it seems, like differences between Levi's and Buffalo jeans or Fords and Hondas. If modern western subjects are formed in the selection, possession and display of their chosen objects of desire, they also need to be flexible, adaptive, mobile, even disloyal. There is a cumulative detachment from meaning tied up with attachment to the object, a loss that is parallel to the detachment of animals from their habitat. This loss seems potentially contradicted by the presence of the friendly animal which can roam across tropical zones without requiring us to think about them. The world's a jungle out there.

Fourth: If a body cannot make the sound of a hundred instruments sounding simultaneously, a computer can; if a body cannot be in three places at once, or feel connected to others in just one place, a cell phone can help. These digital communication devices resemble biotechnologies in that they are "concerned in more or less sophisticated ways with diversifying those limited things of which bodies seem capable" (Shildrick 180). Thanks to Photoshop, these animals seem infinitely adaptable to machinic environments. They talk, they invest, they rap, they gamble. We don't have to worry about other kinds of environments, because we don't see them. Being transparently artificial, the image occupies a completely abstract digital space and suggests that we can harmlessly do the same. Indeed cell phone users are oblivious to the space

they're in, but they talk of little else. I'm coming out of class. I'm just leaving home. The bus is at Yonge Street. We've landed and I'll see you in a bit. By putting her phone to use, the speaker establishes her location and reconfirms her agency. The proposed human-animal mimesis can be seen as symbolic and practical armour against the leaking of meaning from the body in a culture that is obsessed with the body but has no time for embodiment.

Fifth: these images speak to and reinforce young people's awareness of the currency of their personal technologies. The display of communication technologies is part of the presentation of self to others, and cultural competence in the uses of these technologies is highly coded, especially in terms of gender (Moore's 124-126). Mobile digital convergence acquires precedence over prior modes of interaction, knowledge and skill. Multi-featured cell phones enhance their owner's social capital; they privilege mobility, currency, and connection, and they valorize speed and convenience, all important aspects of contemporary technoculture. The social consolidation of a technology like the cell phone (or earlier, like the car) also shapes the habits and expectations of the people who use them. As we learn to depend upon them we become human extensions of their techno-social forms.

This cumulative interaction is part of the increasingly complex management of risk society. The paradox of risk society is that by using technologies to manage risk, the entrepreneurs of risk create further dangers which are less and less subject to conventional management. The technologies that solve problems of security and safety in one place, or for one group of people, can create destruction and dissent in and for another. Such hazards are permissible as long as they are profitable and distant. The theory of risk society permits us to understand the hazards of consumer technologies while empathizing with the needs and feelings of young people who consider their personal digital communication media to be lifeboats in the face of unmanageable uncertainty and danger. The animals remind them of their freedom and innocence, which they hastily abandon on their own behalf. It is not just animals who fail to benefit in the balance of things.

Sixth, and last: these images are not just communications dedicated to interaction, as totems are said to be; they are blatant invitations *to* communicate. Ironically, these animal images are inviting us to communicate 24-7 in the same cultural moment that philosophers are debating species incommensurability and the perceived impossibility of communicating with animals. The overcoming of any imagined impossibility of communication is one "meaning" we can attribute to these images.

But communication is a problematic term, not least because there is a significant gap between how we depict our relations with the animals and how we actualize them. These wired animals are cheerful. They appear to like us. They do not appear to be threatened or burdened with impending extinction.

Their habitats are not destroyed because they have no habitats. Their habitats are irrelevant, just as ours are. It's okay if we exploit them. In other words, what is not visible is as significant to the "meaning" of this event as what is visible. This dilemma requires that we detour the question of communication that so persuasively occupies the centre of this image event, and acknowledge other modes of connection being actualized in the convergence of animals and digital communication devices.

TRIANGULATING RISK

With triangulation, as with network theory, the meaning of each part is determined by its relationship to other parts of the constellation. In *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant notes that in early modern Europe, "The goat and cat were associated with women and witchcraft because of their presumed sexual lust and slyness" (Merchant 137). The representation of cats was inseparable from their importance as sacrificial bodies within an emergent biopower apparatus. While some animal theorists question the relevance of sacrifice to animal theory and animal rights today,¹⁰ cat massacres were for many centuries public, well documented ritual events in Europe. The meanings of these events were gradually secularized, but the practices partook at least mimetically of characteristics of the sacrifice. We could say that the sacrifice of cats was a "vanishing mediator" in the transition from established religious authority to secular modern power. Eliminating women's traditional healing practices was crucial to the ascendance of modern medical science which strategically provoked residual superstition to advance their patriarchal strategy of subjection. Cats were unwilling mediators in the struggle between religious or secular authorities and their perceived opponents for almost a thousand years.¹¹

The same principle of transitional triangulation animates the juxtaposition and powerful semiotic interdependency between mobile digital devices, small animals and consumers which pervades commercial image culture in these first years of the 21st century. Through this relationship, phones become pets and animals become media of communication, cajoling young consumers to connect better, more often, everywhere they go. These properties are also practices. Phones are vital elements of self-presentation that redefine the context of social encounter; phones placed on the table while friends eat or drink together signal that participants are ready to leave their face to face conversation to engage in a mediated conversation with someone else without leaving the table. As media researchers Caron and Caronia show, social context is redefined by techno-objects which introduce a new pattern of meaning: the *absent presence* of human subjects (Caron & Caronia 34-35). The person who is abandoned by her friend's phone call is on stand-by, and must learn to interact with ghosts. The phones introduce "new cultural models for the context and

the participants' behaviour," (ibid. 13) and as Caron and Caronia suggest, youth function as adept translators of technologies "into the terms of their specific cultures" (ibid. 11). The person who has abandoned her friend is not rude; she is cool. Where these friends are having lunch is not a gathering place but a launching site for personal encounters and social differences which are justified and normalized by the technology. The minimum obligation is "to be always, at all times, and everywhere at least available for communication" (ibid. 75). Two things are lost in this new regime of compulsory communication: freedom and silence.

In French sociologist Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory, reality is produced through interaction amongst multiple agents: human, technical, animal, and others (Latour 2004). Water can be an agent, or a microscope, or radiation, or wolves. To say that each entity is an agent in the translation of virtuality to actuality is not to say that they are equally empowered, nor that they fare equally well in the shifting constellations of instruments and purposes that constitute such networks. Animals are obviously not the authors of the current advertising campaign, for instance, despite their clever representation as neoliberal subjects. These digital animals and the connections of which they speak are part of a management strategy directed to the growing risks and fears of technological growth. Understanding this campaign as both risk formation and risk management allows us to emphasize what Latour's work does not: the significance of what is concealed.¹² The animal confidently displaying its mobile communication device draws carefully on undercurrents of the unseen to restore a sense of equilibrium to anxious consumers who confront the risks that neoliberal governance has downloaded onto their bodies, their routines, and their futures. The simulated, despatialized embodiment of the animal communicates the idea that information can be liberated from time, space and materiality in general. The more strongly you feel the effects of compulsory connectivity, the less likely you are to acknowledge its effects on distant or near bodies and natural spaces.

Mobile digital communication devices help users to manage contemporary insecurity and risk, but, as their semiotic link to animals hints, they are also part of the production of risk which threatens the wellbeing of the planetary body. This paradox is the underlying logic of the media event. Theorists of the "event" describe it as an eruption of unresolved meaning that both disrupts and extends the political logic from which it emerges. If violence is an outcome of the production of abstract space through which natural space is subject to domination and capital is accumulated, as Marxist theorists like Lefebvre (1991) and Harvey (1996) argue, the event has a "disarticulating" force which can be released to unpredictable effects by the actualization of the material properties of the media.¹³ The current animal-device-human embrace is part of a major discursive shift in which social and political certainties are

giving way to a new kind of “re-enchanted” war, as Christopher Coker calls it, through which human armies are being supplanted by information, and conventional military power by the assemblage of organic and non-organic matter in a cybernetic grid (Coker 33). “Our former belief in the survival of the fittest has been replaced by a belief in the survival of the best informed,” he suggests (ibid. 33). Just as the mystique of military sacrifice gives way to informatics, so the concept of survival of the fittest gives way to adaptation to insecure environments through information processing (ibid. 35). These trends are brought together in the rhetorical triangulation of communications and animals, with obvious resonance in popular culture.

Perhaps the authors of this campaign have feelings about the rain forest or experiments on animals, perhaps not. They may have chosen animal images because they wanted to avoid associating their products with specific human faces or bodies with all their contentious races and ethnicities. They may have been drawing on more esoteric connections between software platforms and species like birds and snakes which have circulated for decades in the digital background of the public networks. Whatever their intent, these animals’ cuteness both evokes and dissimulates the violence through which animal bodies, human bodies and technological systems “converge” in the telematic network in whose name they appear. The semiotic mobilization of animals as subjects and objects in this connective network silences and displaces the real suffering encountered by animal species, manufacturers and toxic waste dispensers in third world countries, and the rapidly depleting biosphere on which they depend. Through the animal body, violence is enacted, dematerialized and repackaged in the name of love.

Theorists describe technological society as one in which “people think of the world around them as mere indifferent stuff which they are absolutely free to control any way they want through technology.” In this configuration, liberalism forms “the political corollary of technology;” both proceed from the assumption that “man’s essence is his freedom [and that] liberty is achieved by overcoming or defying necessity, not by living within it. [Thus] the human good is what we choose for our good” (George Grant, cited by Barney 51). By excluding the rights of non-humans and some humans, technological achievement becomes end rather than means, and political judgment disappears.¹⁴ It is not surprising, given how long “man” has been the “we” in such philosophies, that the world is running into difficulties. “In societies where ‘man’ is seen as the measure of things,” writes risk theorist Joost Van Loon, “risks cannot but become more prominent” (van Loon 5). As historian Erica Fudge reminds us, western culture also instrumentalizes the figure and body of the animal. “Animals are present in most Western cultures for practical use, and it is in *use* – in the material relation with the animal – that representations must be grounded” (Fudge 7). The campaign to expand the market for rapidly obsolescing con-



sumer electronics through association with animals is part of a strategy to engender support for the development of communication-military hardware on which the American economy, in particular, so strongly depends.

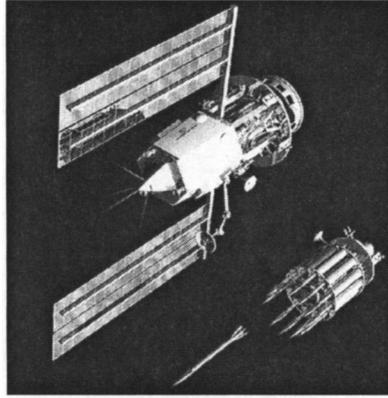
In countries in Africa and Asia, however, the peoples, landscapes and non human species who are *not* included in the modern “we” bear the destructive weight of a rapidly growing volume of toxic trash which completes the cycle of production and consumption of these rapidly obsolete telecommunication technologies. So drastic are these conditions that new paramilitary security forces are being formed to control the workers whose job it is to dispose of the toxic trash that “we” are exporting to their countries. Of course none of this is visible in any explicit sense in the portrayal of animals and machines with which we are presently concerned.

RODS FROM GOD

In examining the widespread association of digital technologies and animals, we are not just looking at texts discernable through ecological metaphors. Such assemblages are also material practices with their own ecology of forms and habits. The semiotic association of phones and small animals emerges in a context that is dominated by the de-naturalization of communicative space and the destruction of natural space that together shape the infrastructure of global culture. The collapse of currency and information into one another, the re-articulation of these in a global communication-security network, and the emergence of the animal image from the debris of this collapse, are all commensurate with this process.

As an invention, something like Rods from God is obviously far more overtly military and destructive of life than the iPhone. But it would be neither thinkable nor economically feasible without the growing market for digital and satellite communication technologies.

Rods from God is an outer space weapon being developed by the Pentagon that deploys digital information processing and search capabilities to guide lethally projected tungsten rods to targets on or beneath the earth’s surface. Guided by satellite and driven by its own kinetic energy, the Rods from God is heralded as an exciting, unprecedentedly powerful, fearsomely expensive innovation in the corporate-military-research-and-development infrastructure. The weapon is the brainchild of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs, which pursues the application of digital and network theory to war. The RMA was instituted in order to establish what Brian Murphy describes as a “Con-



tinuous four dimensional physical and cyberspace grid through which all war-fighting relationships are linked” (Murphy 2007). This “revolution” replaces earth-bound technologies of the military arsenal by shifting communication from a tactical to a strategic role (ibid.).¹⁵ Over time, this process will permit militaries to replace human soldiers with cybernetic avatars, so that human skill is displaced onto the weaponry (Coker 135) and obviating the need for soldiers to enact skill, presence, consent, sacrifice, or ethics.¹⁶

Moving at unimaginable speed, tungsten rods can burn and destroy targeted matter far below the earth’s surface. Despite their unique horrific fascination, they are the logical end of a military-corporate partnership which is redefining both war and communication by focusing on the relationship between them. Between 1992 and 2004, the Pentagon was strategically transformed into C₄ISR: Command, Control, Computers, Communications, Intelligence gathering, Surveillance, Reconnaissance. According to Murphy, 25 per cent of its contractors specialize in information technology and have not held previous military contracts. Canadians are not untouched by this trend. In 2006 Telus reduced its staff by a cruel 25 per cent and won a contract to supply the Department of Defense with “global telecommunication services” (Kirby 42). Today Telus generates 44% of its revenues from wireless communications which are being lavishly marketed to consumers in both developed and “developing” countries.

Media events mobilize diverse agents, some of which are part of altering history while others slide back into oblivion. Similarly, risk management encompasses and mobilizes agile and adaptive tactics for averting and diverting the subjects of risk culture. With all this in mind, let us revisit the face of this telematic grid and its assemblage of small animals and small machines in the fable-izing universe of total communication.

These animals look at us, and say: you are not alone. Whether you are living or dead, you can reach out and touch someone. Just as companion animals

confirm our humanity, so you will find companions in the midst of dead space and the death of space. These species are all mobile in relation to the human body – that is, we can imagine picking up and carrying any one of them, like a telephone, except perhaps for the butterfly. As the exception that proves the rule, Google creates neighbors of Moose Internet Services and moose hunting licenses, constellating an animal image that advertises its own murder the way that simulated cows sometimes appear in food ads inviting us to eat manly beef. How easily companionship flips into violence when the animal begins to grow. But this is the deeper truth of all the images. Let us consider their rhetorical achievements.

TALKING TO ANIMALS

In his 1995 study of angelology, Michel Serres observes that media establish human-machine intercommunication but do not enable us to talk to animals (Serres 68). In contemplating the question of communication with animals, John Durham Peters makes a similar point: “That we can never communicate with the angels is a tragic fact, but also a blessed one. A sounder vision is of the felicitous impossibility of contact. . . . My emphasis on the debt that the dream of communication owes to ghosts and strange eros is intended as a corrective to a truism that is still very much alive: that the expansion of means leads to the expansion of minds” (Peters 29). In his review of Peters’ book, Donald Theall adds that “the problem of communication is not that we think of animals, aliens, and machines as exotic, but that we fail to recognize that it is we who are exotic” (Theall 413).

Projecting exoticism into the animal reinforces the assumption that humans understand, while animals lack sentience and reason. It is because western civilization relies on this distinction that cruelty to animals has been condoned throughout its history.¹⁷ Philosophers and animal rights activists now dispute this allegation, helping to animate what Derrida has described as a major ontological shift in the west making it possible to imagine the act of looking in both directions.¹⁸ These commercial images play light-heartedly with the assumption that animals lack thought or perception by associating them with a deliberate act of mediated communication. The irony of the “dumb” animal speaking on the phone hints that reason or intelligence are extraneous to the task of re-enchanting the world of new media. The joke is that they want to communicate with us. The joke is on us, because we are more like “animals” than we think. We are willing to abandon security and ethics if we can buy a cute new phone like this one. We are willing to sacrifice the land, the safety of others and the future of the species for the pleasure of autonomous technological prowess. Whether or not humans are unique in our grasp of concepts and moral relations, our objects undergo constant slippage, one thing constantly substituted for another as though nothing is unique or sacred or indispensable.

The way this process seems to be carrying us slowly and inexorably toward the extinction of life might be considered one of the ways we are exotic.

Having to resituate the idea of the media event in the context of risk society is being forced to realize that even complexity has limits. The actualization of social or technological potential is not always an affirmative process. We can demonstrate this by clarifying the nature of the risk associated with mobile communication and the specific strategies of risk management that arise in relation to it. Let us turn then to five points of actualization in the connection between cell phones and animals.

First: at the end of a course called "Nature in Narrative," I queried five 4th-year undergraduate women over a beer. All of them had cell phones; all had pet photos displayed on them, including one student who doesn't own a pet. Viewed together, these snapshots draw our attention toward the ordinarily unrevealed networks of human-animal-technological interfaces in which compliance is translated into love. If possession of the phone starts to feel compulsory or invasive, possession of the pet photograph provides evidence of good nature. Freedom so quickly turns into its opposite where love and technology is concerned.

Second: cell phones are physically harmful to animals through each stage of their cycle of production. They contain an ore called coltan that is mined in Africa. While many animals are in wildlife reserves or "protected" parks, illegal miners continue to invade the area because demand for the ore is so high. Cell phones and their accessories also contain arsenic, cobalt, copper, lead and zinc. "So animals are not only put in danger while we mine the necessary products to produce the phone, they are put in jeopardy when we throw them away too" (Hall 1).¹⁹ A 2007 study conducted by three departments of Panjab University in India reveals that cell phone towers are the "dominating source of electromagnetic radiations in environment in the city" and can lead to disease in plants and animals. One newspaper write-up begins, "Ever wondered where the butterflies, some insects and birds like sparrows have vanished?" and continues, "Well, your constantly ringing cell phones could be responsible for this" (Sandhu 1). Chemical compounds used in batteries and chip production and crowding the recycling sites spreading across the developing world are known to cause neurological and environmental damage. Americans discard an average of 130 million cell phones per year (Maxwell & Miller 346), each one of which contains more than 200 chemical compounds (Mooallem 41).²⁰ Now that Google is expanding into mobile communication software, the company offers advice on how to avoid symptoms like hot ear, dizziness, nausea, illness, and tumor when using your phone. American researchers have announced a plan to equip cell phones with monitoring devices that will alert users to toxic materials in their environments. They don't explain how to manage the millions of cell phones discarded across the country, most of which end

up in poisonous recycling plants processed by poor laborers in distant countries. An uneasiness about the issue haunts the landscape.

Third: there is always an upside: you can donate your cell phones to zoos, humane societies and animal rights organizations, which will use the proceeds to help animals, including endangered species.²¹ If you aren't ready to lose your phone, you can buy a purple paw to hang on it, and Purple Paw will donate funds to the Animal Rescue Site.²² Zoos may be losing their credibility as contributors to animal welfare, but they are working hard to regain legitimacy by taking in the e-waste generated by young adults with fond memories of days at the zoo.

Fourth: if information overload or planetary depletion are stressing you out, medical research confirms that companion animals are good for your health; owning a pet shows direct benefits for blood pressure and other stress-related physical indicators, as the lucrative pet food industry is happy to point out. If you are worried about losing your pet, you can equip her with a microchip, a digital communication device, or even a cell phone; you can always know where they are, just as someone can always know where you are.

Fifth: during Hurricane Katrina, some people were rescued because they had access to cell phones. Many did not survive, whether or not they had the phones. Animals did not survive the floods. They were expendable, just like the black people of New Orleans, as Carolyn Ellis writes in an eloquent account of reliving Katrina at the moment she sees a half-dead cat (Ellis 7). In the wake of global climate change, poor people and animals are losing their habitats. Some populations, like cats and mosquitoes, are exploding; others are being cornered or decimated by the destruction of their habitats and by the manufacture and disposal of the digital communication devices upon which we knowledge workers so strongly rely.

CONCLUSION

I want to return to my opening question: can a society be said to “choose” to destroy itself? The “we” posited in texts such as this one echoes the “we” constructed in the discourse of “banal nationalism,” or even “banal terrorism,” defined by Cyndi Katz as the commonsense construction of a “homeland” that is “porous and perforated” and needs more than ever to be defended against external threat (Katz 350). The “we” invoked in the fight against global warming is so perforated that it has become its own threat, creating a space in which a new mobilizing rhetoric can emerge. This perforated social sphere's failure to connect is one of the most challenging obstacles to halting the marathon of global destruction.

Feminist cultural studies suggest that we approach the reception of these ads in terms of affect, rather than meaning as conventionally understood. Animals don't “mean” nature here, in any literal sense; they mean the desire to

connect, particularly in a context where nature is so remote as to be reducible to an animal fetish. As feminist cultural theorists like Lauren Berlant, Jennifer Harding and Deidre Pribham emphasize, emotion is a central category of experience which is increasingly implicated in power relations and constantly negotiated in the relationship between public and private spheres (Harding & Pribham 407). These ads excel because they are successful in manipulating real emotions. They produce lack (of embodiment, connection, relations to nature) together with compensation for it, and promise something magical in the spaces between them. This promotional logic, like the technology being promoted, is spreading into all domains of personal and social experience, including nature. What is being materialized in this mobilizing event is simultaneously a greater presence for and awareness of the embodied animal world in the spaces of image culture, and an almost psychotic capacity to remain indifferent to this world as it relates to personal and political practices of connection.

The recurrent appropriation of animal representation by the telecommunications industry parallels the appropriation of environmentalism's anxiety about and attachment to nature by the discourse of security known as "soft power." As I have shown, however, this relationship is not merely analogical but interlinked through the changing assemblage of popular culture, telecommunications, and the military-entertainment complex. The visual language of triangulation serves to re-articulate one discourse (nature, the animal, the instinctive, and the welfare of the planet) to another (communication, technology, connection, and security), making it seem impossible to consider one without reference to the other. This articulation works at the level of persuasion because it is true at a profound level. Just as risk management assuages but also releases the unpredictable that follows from cumulative technological management, so the animal, released into the forefront of visual culture, may remind viewers of immanent "natural" disaster through which "our" interests become one with the animal world.

Writing about nature and miracles before the turn of the millennium, environmental philosopher Neil Evernden had this to say about technological modernity:

The fact that we are content to construe nature as an object of the moment is symptomatic of our desire to avoid any constraints and to have a free hand to manipulate the world into the forms suited to the exchanges of modern technocracy. The investment we have in the maintenance of this understanding of nature is enormous. And yet, it is not secure. Nature-as-self is also a contemporary reality. It is certainly not the norm, but it is credible enough to generate widespread discussion. And if we ever find that nature-as-miracle has found its way into the columns of

Time Magazine, we may begin to wonder whether nature, whatever it may be, is about to slip its leash.” (Evernden 164)

What distinguishes the present is the degree to which nature *has* “slipped its leash.” The resources, tools and species with which we humans interact have their own agency in the production of society. In a society of compulsory communication bruised by natural disasters and terrorized by the war on terror, pictures of animals address and enhance the emotional need for connection and security for people who are adept at adapting to new technologies. Fulfilling their emotional needs for connection and security ironically exacerbates the risks involved in the global campaign to militarize and industrialize both security and emotion. These images help to naturalize and obscure a new order of things. We look at the animals and the animals look back. They are not speaking, but they are not silent, either.

Notes

1. The notion of expressly technological risk is elaborated by Joost Van Loon in his book *Risk and Technological Culture: Toward a Sociology of Virulence*.
2. See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*.
3. Berland 1993, 17.
4. From Jonathan Burt, “The Aesthetics of Livingness,” a conference paper presented at “Representing Animals,” York University, 2007. I thank the author for this citation.
5. For more on the rhetoric of connectedness in relation to corporate capitalism, see Dan Schiller’s *How to Think about Information*. Also relevant is Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, “Ecological Ethics and Media Technology.”
6. Is the author a critical scholar or the author of a report to Motorola? (This is not a frivolous question, since digital theorist Sadie Plant wrote a report for Motorola advancing similar conclusions, and Motorola has also co-sponsored research on the creative use of cell phones in Canada.) The question is difficult to answer because universities and corporations co-sponsor countless symposia, collaborate projects and creative experiments on the progressive capacities of “new media.” Given their mandate to demonstrate that such media render earlier models and approaches obsolete, they are hesitant to acknowledge hazardous connections between embodied communication and the embodiment of the planet, between personal use and the political judgment required of the global citizen.
7. Buck-Morss quotes from Alla Efimova, “A Prescription for Life: Sun, Air, and Water in Socialist Realism and Soviet Health Care,” unpublished manuscript.
8. See my “Cat and Mouse: Iconographies of Nature and Desire.”
9. Regarding Levi-Strauss and Volosinov, David Morley writes that both emphasized the “versatility or multi-acculturality of signs through which a community distinguishes itself from others. . . . Their shared vocabulary allows people to share conceptual forms without, at the same time, necessarily requiring them to share their meanings.” (Morley 243). These postmodern animals are particularly versatile.
10. This is another point I take from Jonathan Burt. See the citation above.

11. This is part of the argument I make in “Cat and Mouse: Iconographies of Nature and Desire.” See the citation below.
12. The notion of concealment in relation to risk is picked up repeatedly by van Loon.
13. From a recent conference on Deleuze, media, and movement: “A Deleuzian theory of media asks, “what kind of variation at the level of events is afforded by our material culture? We must then determine what kind of event is a medium. In keeping with Deleuze’s ontology of immanence we do not align media practice with representation or simulation, only with more or less adequate models of repetition . . . that co-ordinate a space where an event can occur. Events . . . not predicated on this cultivation of space but erupt continuously as a disarticulating force, the multiple or variable index of forces and relations. A medium is a place of inscription, a possibility of life. The event is not merely a possibility but the actualization of a virtual, which is real but un-mediated.” See the CFP for the Deleuze Conference on Media and Movement, UC-Berkley, <<http://gavinwit.googlepages.com/Deleuzeconference>>.
14. Darin Barney’s conception of technology as a form of life exempt from political judgment is a central argument in his book, *Prometheus Wired*. See also his 2008 Hart House Lecture, “One Nation Under Google: Citizenship and the Technological Republic,” delivered at the University of Toronto.
15. See also Tim Blackmore’s *War X: Human Extensions in Battlespace*.
16. In addition to cybernetic theory, Coker is drawing here on Elaine Scarry’s explanation of the merging and “building-in” of human skill with weapons. See Scarry, 152.
17. For example, see Mary Midgley’s *Animals and Why They Matter*.
18. See the recent posthumous translation and publication Derrida’s “The Autobiographical Animal” entitled *The Animal That Therefore I Am* . . .
19. Susan Hall writes further: “One of the things that stayed with me was that something we use on a daily basis is killing gorillas and other animals in central Africa. Believe it or not, it is our cell phones. Cell phones contain an ore called coltan that is mined in Africa. Even though many of the animals are in wildlife reserves or “protected” parks, illegal miners continue to invade the area because demand for the ore is so high. Although I know it is hard to stop something that is happening so far away, we can help. Did you know that it is estimated that more than 100 million cell phones are thrown away or tucked in a drawer every year? Many times it is all too easy to throw something in the trash and let somebody else worry about it. But cell phones and their accessories contain chemicals such as arsenic, cobalt, copper, lead and zinc. So animals are not only put in danger while we mine the necessary products to produce the phone, they are put in jeopardy when we throw them away too.” The Zoological Society of San Diego and Eco-Cell, a cell phone recycling company, have set up a recycling program just outside the zoo and the Wild Animal Park to encourage all of us to dispose of phones properly.” Hall goes on to explain that it is not at all clear where the actual recycling takes place. See “Cell Phones Can Harm Animals,” *The Californian/North County Times*, <http://www.nctimes.com:80/articles/2006/09/13/news/columnists/susan_hall/21_46_339_12_06.txt>.
20. For an account of cell phone waste, see Elizabeth Grossman’s *High Tech Trash*.
21. For example, the website for the Providence Animal Rescue League: “We Recycle Cell Phones & Empty Printer Cartridges! If you’re wondering what to do with your old cell phones or empty printer cartridges, then give them to PARL! We recycle these items in exchange for funds to help us provide care and find new homes for the many pets at PARL. We can take the following items: Cell phones (all makes and models).” See <<http://www.parl.org/>>. Prior to recycling or disposal, personal data and information can be wiped or erased from a cell phone with an open-source Cell Phone Data Eraser tool. As instructed by Wireless Recycling—“the industry source for used wireless solutions”—to erase information and data from a phone, “Just search for the make and model of your phone and download the instructions.” See <<http://www.recellular.com/recycling/>>.
22. See The Animal Rescue Site <<https://shop.theanimalrescuesite.com/store/item.do?itemId=25644&siteId=310>>.

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