

Frederike Middelhoff / Sebastian Schönbeck /
Roland Borgards / Catrin Gersdorf (Hg.)

Texts, Animals, Environments
Zoopoetics and Eco-poetics

abstract
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FREDERIKE MIDDELHOFF/SEBASTIAN SCHÖNBECK/
ROLAND BORGARDS/CATRIN GERSDORF

Preface

Texts, Animals, Environments: Zoopoetics and Ecozoetics has been a joint venture from the very beginning. Without the incredible support of those people dedicated to our project of thinking about the relationship of animals, environments, literature, and culture, this book would never have come into existence. *Texts, Animals, Environments* started out as an international, interdisciplinary three-day symposium held at Castle Herrenhausen in Hannover in the fall of 2016. The symposium served as a platform to bring together junior and senior scholars from the US, Brazil, Canada, France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Germany. It instigated a conversation between experts with backgrounds in diverse literary histories, cultural studies, media studies, and anthropology and provided an opportunity to exchange ideas about the connections of all those beings, books, and environmental phenomena composing and transforming the multiple *oikoi* of the planet we collectively inhabit. The book in hand gathers the contributions to this inspiring event.

As the organizers of the symposium and the editors of this volume, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to the Volkswagen Foundation for making the symposium and this volume possible. Thanks to the generous support of the Foundation, the idea of reinforcing the interaction between animal studies and ecocriticism, zoopoetics and ecozoetics eventually had the chance to materialize. We would especially like to thank Anke Harwardt-Feye, Margot Jädick-Jäckel, and Silke Aumann for organizing an unforgettable event in the beautiful Castle Herrenhausen and for their outstanding support in the lead-up to the publication of this book. In addition, we want to express our deepest gratitude to Bernhard Malkmus for assisting us during the symposium in Herrenhausen and for his inspiring remarks in the final part of the event.

Since none of us are native speakers of English, we are very grateful for the editorial assistance we received on our way to completing this volume. Alisa Kumm, Molly Bashaw, and Aimee Barrett did a wonderful job in helping us to copy edit and proofread the collected essays. Thanks to Anka Büchler, we obtained a cover image not simply illustrating this book but also the goal of the entire project, inviting us to explore the connections between

texts, animals, environments, aesthetic practices and techniques. We would also like to thank Rombach Verlag, and Friederike Wursthorn especially, for assisting us in planning and releasing this book.

Our gratitude goes to everyone who was and continues to be involved in this amazing journey which resulted in, but has not yet ended with, the publication of *Texts, Animals, Environments: Zoopoetics and Eco-poetics*.

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Coming to Terms: The Poetics of More-than-human Worlds

It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories.
(Haraway, *Staying* 35)

Texts are fabricated fabrics. The Latin *textus* for “tissue” originally derives from the verb *texere*, meaning “to weave” (“text, n.”). Since classical antiquity, human and nonhuman characters and their respective environments have been woven into the tissue of Western narratives. Throughout the ages, animals and environments appear as either essential threads of literary texts, as a means to create the weaving patterns of a text, or even as the constituents of an entire genre: Be it Aesop’s fables or Thoreau’s nature writing; be it an internationally renowned poem such as John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” an acclaimed prose text such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s “Novella” or a (children’s) classic such as Felix Salten’s *Bambi. A Life in the Woods*—animals and their environments abound in the fabrics of literary texts and the history of Western literature. In contemporary fiction, the textual presence of animals and environments is interspersed with concerns about global warming, climate change, factory farming, and species extinction.¹ Animals and environments are vital representatives and integral components of the “more-than-human world” (Abram) in and beyond literary representation.

Like texts, “animals” in this volume are emphatically conceived in the plural form. Most of the time, literature does not revolve around “the” animal as an abstract category but presents us with a variety of diegetic or semiotic-metaphoric species and animal individuals. Not least as a consequence of Derrida’s already canonical reflection on the human and, even more so, on Western philosophy’s hubris to categorize “the other” or “otherness” as “the animal” or “animality,” scholars have emphasized the need for acknowledging the diversity and heterogeneity of nonhuman animals. Even though speaking of “animals” instead of “the animal” is itself incapable of

¹ Cf., for instance, Heise, *Imagining: Natur*.

doing justice to this diversity, it may highlight the plurality and acknowledge the abundance of species. Using the term “animals” in this volume, we not only intend to address and keep in mind the plethora of animal species, but we also want to reflect on how and why texts deal with nonhuman beings. Derrida introduced the neologism “*l’animot*” (cf., e.g., Derrida, *Animal* 47-51) to concede to the anthropocentrism of language and to simultaneously reflect its foundations and means of negotiation. *L’animot* morphologically conflates the general singular form “the animal” (*l’animal*) and “the word” (*le mot*) and is phonetically indistinguishable from the plural form of *l’animal* (i.e., *les animaux*). The neologism highlights the fact that even the plural is only a word, a “*mot*.” Using the term “animals” in the title of this volume, we try to address and give credit to the abundance of nonhuman animals, while also reminding ourselves (and our readers) of the violence and ignorance imposed by concepts such as “the animal” which “men have given themselves the right to give” in order to “corral a large number of living beings” (Derrida, *Animal* 32). Furthermore, using the word “humans,” we think of “humans” in the sense of “human animals,” a species which is part of and not superior to what has been conceived as the class of *mammalia*.

Since animals within and without literary contexts are never detached from or devoid of their environments, an investigation of animals *and* environments seems indispensable. In Uexküllian terms, an environment can be understood as “the sphere of influence *which is created by the individual* and in which surrounding things enter but which remains a distinctly individual realm *and which, moreover, can never be experienced in the same way by other living beings*”² (Herrmann 15). Animals live in and embody environments as their specific “milieus,” their “self-worlds.” These “subjective environments” are thus nothing less than individual “subjective realities” (Uexküll and Kriszat 93).³ Bearing the plurality and heterogeneity of environments *and* animals

² “Es handelt sich um einen Einflussbereich, der *vom Individuum gestaltet wird*, in den Dinge der Umgebung eintreten, der aber in jedem Falle ein ausschließlich individueller Bereich bleibt *und sich zudem grundsätzlich der Erfahrbarkeit durch andere Lebewesen entzieht*.” All following translations from the German are our own.

³ Today, Johann Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944) is hailed as a pioneer of ecology and bio-semiotics (cf. Tønnesen). Uexküll acknowledged the profound difference between the area surrounding (“Umgebung”) an organism and an individual or species-specific environment (“Umwelt”) as it is perceived *and* created by a subject. He maintained that “every subject lives in a world in which there are only subjective realities and in which the environments themselves only represent subjective realities. Those who deny the existence of subjective realities, fail to understand the foundations of their own existence” (“[J]edes Subjekt [lebt] in einer Welt, in der es nur subjektive Wirklichkeiten gibt und die Umwelten selbst nur

in mind, this volume explores the very acts and challenges of “weaving” animals and environments into narrative textures and cultural contexts. It investigates the significance of animals and environments for literary production and poetic form, for theory, epistemology, and culture more generally. What do animals and environments “do” in literature and how do they relate to each other? How does this relation pertain to our thinking about animals, environments, and artifacts as well as the supposed “divide” between nature and culture? And which role do animals and environments play in the poetics of a text? Are they merely interchangeable devices, a picturesque canvas on which “all too human” stories are painted? Or is there more to literary animals and environments than rhetoric and representation? To address these questions, the contributions to this volume probe the interrelations between ecocriticism and (cultural) animal studies and examine promising concepts such as ecopoetics and zoopoetics. The volume connects these two recently established but as yet most often independently working fields including their objects and methods. At the same time, the volume develops new ways to describe these connections theoretically.

The Green Worlds of Starlings

The cover of this book shows a swarm of starlings at dusk. The birds fly up from a cornfield to settle on electricity pylons traversing an agricultural landscape. The words *Texts*, *Animals*, *Environments* foregrounding the evening sky, inscribe linguistic and textual materiality into the picture. Beneath the three nouns, two other words in the same green color as the field and the starlings are discernible: *Zoopoetics* and *Ecopoetics*. Title and subtitle are located on a specific photographic background which not only organizes them but also provides the viewer with a more specific meaning of this organization: *Animals* refers to the starlings, *Environments* to an agricultural landscape which is (trans)formed by the signposts of cultural institutions and technologies, indexing the electricity and farming industries which provide energy and nourishment for both humans and animals. These signposts also hint at other places where this nourishment is processed and consumed. In the context of this book, what is more important than the specific (and, in fact, not unproblematic) meaning of the words and their denotation beyond the

subjektive Wirklichkeiten darstellen. Wer die Existenz subjektiver Wirklichkeiten leugnet, hat die Grundlagen seiner eigenen Existenz nicht erkannt”; Uexküll and Kriszat 93).

picture is their relationship to each other as well as the pictorial means of representation (and, certainly in this case, defamiliarization in terms of color). If the cover of this volume were to be analyzed from a holistic perspective, it would be necessary to elaborate on the relations between the starlings *and* the cornfield *and* the aesthetics *and* the technology rather than looking at each of these aspects separately.

Two approaches corresponding to the respective fields of research invoked by the title can be distinguished: While scholars working in the field of ecocriticism primarily adopt a systemic-relational approach to explore phenomena related to the environment, those in the field of cultural animal studies are mainly focused on the study of individual or species-specific aspects; ecocriticism pays attention to ecological contexts and environmental issues; cultural animal studies looks at animal collectives or individual animals in specific, often socio-cultural, contexts. Undeniably, however, animals—be it those in or outside literature—cannot be fully grasped without their environments, whereas, in turn, environments cannot be conceived without the animals living in and affecting them. Interpretations of the starlings on the cover which ignore the birds' environmental context would not only neglect to acknowledge the complex interactions between the animals, the power poles, and the agricultural spaces but would also fail to grasp the dynamics of “environing,” i.e., the process of shaping and imprinting a surrounding, performed by the animals as well as the energy sector and industrial farming. In turn, analyzing the environment of the birds without acknowledging their participation in policies and techniques of keeping electricity, corn, and birds apart would disregard the animals' role in shaping and constituting this environment. Furthermore, it would underestimate the relationship between the starlings and their environment for the poetics of the text and the photo-optical background.

In this book, the authors are concerned with literary texts and cultural spaces in which animals *and* environments are created and reflected in ways which negotiate and underscore the relations and co-dependencies between animals and environments. Both animal studies and ecocriticism have emerged as responses to political and ethical challenges, not least since concepts such as “the anthropocene” (Zalasiewicz, Crutzen, and Steffen), the human-made geological age, have come under scrutiny. From the very start, scholars of both fields discussed the status, the possible impetus of literature as well as the political and ethical agenda of the fields. Can literature make a difference? “What’s in a word?” when it comes to pressing issues such as animal ethics and environmental crises? And what kind of agency

do texts, animals, and environments have in this matter? The volume in hand addresses these and closely related questions but does not propose to give final answers. It is concerned with the inquiry into the relationships between animals, environments, and texts and encourages further research and discussions; it studies the connections between animals, environments, poetics, and politics; and it comments on the dynamics of animals, environments, media, and space.

The Poetics of Animals and Environments

Texts are essential for ecocritics and cultural animal studies scholars in at least three ways. (1) They represent cultural knowledge and conceptions of animals and environments; (2) they reflect (implicit) ideologies pertaining to how and why humans deal with animals and environments; and (3) they are themselves productive elements shaping the environment and the socio-cultural structures in which animals live. At the same time, animals and environments may play specific roles within a text. They can appear as (main) protagonists and characters with agency in works of fiction (the whale in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*; the weather in Adalbert Stifter's *Nachsommer*), as metaphors and semiotic agents within figurative speech or in idiomatic expressions (*homo homini lupus*; to steal someone's thunder; to kill two birds with one stone etc.). Finally, they can appear as basic elements within (non) fictional poetics (the ape as a means to illustrate mimesis; "nature" as the archetype of literature in Romantic poetics).

Using the concept "poetics," this volume investigates the relations between texts, animals, and environments. Both cultural animal studies and ecocriticism have adapted the concept of a "poetics" to their specific fields of research. "Poetics" stems from the Greek *poiésis*, the noun is derived from the verb *poién*, "to make" and "to create" ("poem, n."). As Kate Rigby reminds us in her approach to "ecopoetics," this process of human "making" and "creating" is not solipsistic but "reframe[s] human creative and emancipatory endeavor as a mode of participation in the more-than-human song of an ever-changing earth" (Rigby, "Prometheus" 251). Similarly, Aaron Moe envisions nonhuman species beyond a paradigm of poetic objects for human "poiesis." With his concept of "zoopoetics" he acknowledges that "nonhuman animals (*zoion*) are makers (*poiesis*)" and that their participation in the composition of a poem can be conceived as "a multispecies event" (Moe, "Toward Zoopoetics" 2). These conceptions of zoopoetics and ecopoetics highlight the fact that both cultural animal studies and ecocriticism not only

take an interest in the same objects but also share fundamental assumptions about poetics, and methodological approaches. The volume aims to explore the link between zoopoetics and ecopoetics and thus provide new ways and theories to advance and deepen the work of both ecocriticism and cultural animal studies.

Marking and Re-weaving Territories

Since around 2010, scholarship has begun to investigate the associations between the concerns of ecocriticism and animal studies. Contrary to Scott Slovic's prediction of a break between the two fields (7), animal studies has developed a keen interest in looking at animals from ecocritical perspectives, while ecocriticism has discovered animal studies as a viable lens to contemplate relations of place, the concept of "the nonhuman", and interspecies engagements. Thus, a complex dialogue between the two fields has unfolded. In their outline of the objects, concerns, and relevance of "literature-environment studies," Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise, and Karen Thornber discuss "ecocriticism's complex attentiveness to ... the ethics of relations between humans and animals" (417) in an article dating back to 2011; Gabriele Dürbeck's first German introduction to ecocriticism of 2015 includes an article on "Cultural Animal Studies" (Borgards); a 2016 issue of *Ecozon@* focuses on *Animal Humanities* (Past and Amberson); and Hubert Zapf's *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* includes Axel Goodbody's analysis of "Kafka's Animal Stories," in which he concludes that "[a]nimal studies ... reveals itself as a field in which literature serves as a prime medium of cultural ecology" (269). In turn, in the *Oxford Handbook of Animals Studies* Anita Guerrini elaborates on "Animals and Ecological Sciences"; the *Routledge Handbook of Human-Animal Studies* features Philip Armstrong's and Annie Potts' article on "The Emptiness of the Wild"; and Roland Borgards' first German cultural studies handbook *Tiere* includes an article on "Tiere und Umwelt" ("Animals and Environment") by Catrin Gersdorf.⁴

Moreover, scholars are expanding their respective fields. Stephanie Posthumus has not only published articles on eco-approaches in francophone literature and thought but also edited *French Thinking about Animals* in 2015. The same interest in and engagement with approaches stemming from both

⁴ Cf., among other pertinent projects combining animal studies and ecocriticism, Nelson; Milne; Moolla.

ecocriticism *and* animal studies is discernible in the work of Kate Rigby, Axel Goodbody, and Benjamin Bühler. The volume in hand furthers the dialogue between ecocriticism and animal studies and is dedicated to the enterprise of weaving zoopoetics and eco-poetics into what might be termed “eco-zoopoetics,” i.e., the study of the relationships between and the agencies of literature, animals, and environments. But what exactly do concepts such as “zoopoetics” and “eco-poetics” offer? How can they challenge conventional notions of poetics? And what kinds of “zoopoetics” and “eco-poetics” have emerged? Both terms are currently being used in and beyond the academic world and are examined for their theoretical and practical potential. As such, they are still in a phase of conceptualization. In the following, we provide a glimpse at the current state of this phase. Indicating the methodological assets of the different concepts and their common grounds, we would also like to point toward our volume’s contribution to this current state of affairs.

Zoopoetics

One of the first scholars to refer to a “zoopoetics” was Jacques Derrida who brought the term up in a 1997 lecture on “The Autobiographical Animal.” This lecture became his last book, now a pioneering text in animal studies theory. When Derrida used the term “zoopoetics” to speak about and contextualize the bathroom encounter with his cat, the word was surely not a concept yet, although in later accounts which pushed its conceptualization forward, scholars have often felt has felt obliged to quote Derrida’s lines. Even if Derrida used the word (only) to describe his cat as a “real” cat in opposition to cats in literature and in the arts more broadly, it is rather doubtful that Derrida wanted to disqualify “literary animals” in general, not least because he always felt the need to question the very separation between “world” and “text,” “language” and “being.” Yet it remains unclear whether the cat in Derrida’s bathroom really was not part of “zoopoetics” after all, or whether it must instead be considered a distant relative of *Le maître chat ou le chat botté*. The paragraph reads as follows:

I must immediately make it clear, the cat I am talking about is a real cat, truly, believe me, a little cat. It isn’t the figure of a cat. It doesn’t silently enter the bedroom as an allegory for all the cats on the earth, the felines that traverse our myths and religions, literature and fables. There are so many of them. The cat I am talking about does not belong to Kafka’s vast zoopoetics, something that nevertheless merits concern and attention here, endlessly and from a novel perspective. (Derrida, *Animal* 6)

Derrida performs the differentiation between reality (“a real cat”), truth (“truly”) and conviction (“believe me”) on the one hand, and figurative speech, allegory, mythology, religion, fables, and “zoopoetics” on the other hand. Repetition, affirmation, and negation unfold the act of differentiation in language, exposing the effects of anthropo-technique and anthropocentrism as always already effective in language. By incessantly repeating that his cat is real and not literary, Derrida, in fact, highlights that both reality and literature are not only intertwined in his perception of the real cat but also in the perception of literary texts like Kafka’s. Hence, Derrida can assert that “Kafka’s zoopoetics” is something that “nevertheless merits concern and attention here, endlessly and from a novel perspective” (6).⁵ The interconnection of “real” and “literary” animals does not mean that both are identical. Instead, it becomes apparent—also from the perspective of Derrida’s last seminars (Derrida, *Beast*)—that neither element can be considered independently of the other.⁶

Aaron Moe provides another conception of zoopoetics:

Zoopoetics—a theory I introduce—recognizes that nonhuman animals (*zoion*) are makers (*poiesis*), and they have agency in that making. The etymology also suggests that when a poet undergoes the making process of poiesis in harmony with the gestures and vocalizations of nonhuman animals, a multispecies event occurs. It is a co-making. A joint venture. (“Toward Zoopoetics” 2)

In his articles as well as his 2014 monograph, Moe develops “zoopoetics” as a theoretical approach which stresses the plurality of nonhuman beings “who exhibit agency within environments” (“Zoopoetics” 28). Moe’s work brings together the two areas that “zoopoetics” combines: “*zoion*” and “*poiesis*” underline that zoopoetics is most pertinent in modern poetry. In poems—e.g., in those of E. E. Cummings or W. S. Merwin—literary animals are not simply described as objects. Cummings and Merwin, as Moe shows, were attentive to and affected by animal *poiesis*. Animals must be acknowledged as agents who participate in the material and creative productions of poetry. In this respect, “[z]oopoetics is the process of discovering innovative breakthroughs in form through an attentiveness to another species’ bodily *poiesis*” (Moe,

⁵ Cf. Danta 152-68.

⁶ “Without asking permission, real wolves cross humankind’s national and institutional frontiers, and his sovereign nation-states; wolves out in nature (*dans la nature*) as we say, real wolves, are the same on this side or the other side of the Pyrenees or the Alps; but the figures of the wolf belong to cultures, nations, languages, myths, fables, fantasies, histories” (Derrida, *Beast* 4-5.; cf. also Kling 20-21).

Zoopoetics 10). Literature, therefore, can display and include the agency of non-human others; zoopoetics relies on animal makers and “is best understood as a poetry that revisits, examines, perplexes, provokes, and explores the agency of the nonhuman animal” (Moe, “Zoopoetics” 30). While Derrida performs and simultaneously questions the act of differentiation between reality and literature, expressing a need for a “novel perspective” of “zoopoetics,” Moe reminds us of the etymology of poetics which does not exclude animals from processes of “poiesis.”

Kári Driscoll’s work on “zoopoetics” is the third and last position which shall be sketched out in this introduction. Driscoll defines “zoopoetics” as

concerned not only with the constitution of the animal in and through language, but also the constitution of language in relation and in opposition to the figure of the animal. Zoopoetics thus also always involves the question of zoopoiesis, of the creation *of* the animal as much as the creation *by means* of the animal. In a sense, zoopoetics may be regarded as the most fundamental form of poetics, in that it incorporates the primary distinction between human and animal on the basis of language. (Driscoll, “Sticky” 223)

Compared to Moe, Driscoll’s approach organizes differently the two elements brought together in “zoopoetics”. This combination of zoo-poetics creates an additional perspective for both “animal” and “language.” Not only does Driscoll’s concept juxtapose both elements, but it also comprises the “constitution of the animal in and through language” *and* the constitution of language in relation to “the animal.” In this sense, Driscoll’s conception of “zoopoetics” also touches the question of anthropological difference and the limitation of language. Language can be the medium used to differentiate between humans and animals, and, at the same time, language can also be the medium of a skepticism concerning the sharp distinction between humans and animals. As a result, “zoopoetics” is a term that simultaneously raises questions about animals and the operating modes of language. It is a term with two suggested meanings which can denote an “attribute of literary and theoretical works” that are concerned with animals, and, “a methodological question” (223) about the value of animal studies for literary studies and vice versa.

It is now possible to distinguish between three “definitions” of zoopoetics. First, Derrida subtly indicates that however hard we try to sever “real” from “literary” cats, we cannot conceive of the one without the other. Second, Moe develops “zoopoetics” as a theory that expands the realm of creative agents in the making of poetry. Third, Driscoll proposes “zoopoetics” as a method and an object of study; a concept which—like a chiasmus—addresses both

the zoology of poetics and the poetics of zoology. In a recent edited volume, Eva Hoffmann and Driscoll have reflected the challenges posed by thinking about and working with “zoopoetics.” The question “What Is Zoopoetics?” raised in the title of the volume provokes not one but a variety of possible answers. The chapters of the volume agree, however, that “zoopoetic texts are not—at least not necessarily and certainly not simply—texts *about* animals. Rather, they are texts that are, in one way or another, predicated upon an engagement with animals and animality (human and nonhuman)” (4). Arguably, zoopoetics marks a consciousness concerning the precarious meanings of animals in and for literature. The term currently raises questions about the relationship between texts and animals rather than giving finite answers.

Ecopoetics and Environmental Poetics

Finding an answer to the question “What Is Ecopoetics?” is likewise not an easy task. First, it depends on who is asked—writers or literary scholars, poetic practitioners or theorists.⁷ Instead of a unified response, there are several approaches to thinking about the intersections of ecology and poetics or, more broadly, the relations between environmental phenomena and literary texts. Second, we must at least address the question of whether there is a conceptual difference between “ecopoetics” on the one hand, and “environmental poetics” on the other. This distinction begs yet another, no less fundamental question: What do we mean when we use (and possibly misuse) the prefixes “environmental” and “eco-” as the foundations of a concept?

Like “zoopoetics” in animal studies, ecocriticism has coined the terms “environmental poetics” and “ecopoetics” as theoretical and methodological approaches for discussing the relationship between texts and more-than-human worlds. In the German-speaking community, both terms have been conceived as more or less interchangeable and translated as either “Umwelt-poetik” (Morton 93, 160) or “Ökopoetik” (Mackenthun 83). This indicates not only that English-speaking scholarship has made use of the terms in varied contexts, but it also points to issues of translation and transfer. As

⁷ For conceptions advanced by poets and novelists, cf. Sherry; Gander and Kinsella; Hume; Skinner, “Ecopoetics”; “Why Ecopoetics”; Hume and Osborne. Skinner points out that “[r]ather than locate a ‘kind’ of writing as ‘ecopoetic,’ it may be more helpful to think of ecopoetics as a form of site-specificity—to shift the focus from themes to topoi, tropes and entropologies, to institutional critique of ‘green’ discourse itself, and to an array of practices converging on the *oikos*, the planet earth that is the only home our species currently knows” (“Ecopoetics”).