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Critical Animal Media Studies: Challenging the Hegemonic Representations of Oppressed Groups through Communication Research

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Critical Animal Studies: From oppression to total liberation

What is oppression?

As bell hooks stated, “being oppressed means the absence of choices” (1984, p. 5). Melanie Joy defines oppression as “the unjust allocation and use of power” (2019, p. 13) and adds that it is “arguably the single greatest cause of human and nonhuman suffering and of some of the most perilous environmental problems our planet has ever known” (2019, p. 13), besides the significant suffering inherent in nature, that also exists.

Oppression is manifested in any behaviour or system that mirrors and supports the exercising of unjust power and control over another or others (Joy, 2019). Manifestations of oppression range from those that can seem benign to others that are catastrophic, and they go from a micro level (how we treat individuals) to a macro level (how we operate as a collective). While a sexist comment towards an individual may seem like a more benign manifestation of oppression, such manifestation is found on a continuum with discrimination and labor inequality, for

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example, which act at the macro level and substantially conditions the life of that individual person (in this case, by their gender or their gender and class).

Intersectionality: Oppressions are not isolated

Oppressions are not isolated. In 1984, in her *Feminist theory: from margin to center*, writer and activist bell hooks criticized the approach of white feminists who elaborated a critique of male oppression but left out of their analysis the black women from underprivileged classes. Five years later, law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the concept of “intersectionality” to describe how different social categories, such as race, class and gender, interlock with one another and overlap, having an effect on the experience of life.

Crenshaw first publicly laid out her theory of intersectionality when she published a paper in the University of Chicago Legal Forum titled “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (1989). Crenshaw chose the word “intersection” as a metaphor. When one is standing at the centre of the intersection of A Street and B Street, it is not possible to say which of those two roads one is on—one is on both of them at the same time. When Crenshaw analysed her cases concerning job discrimination against women of colour, she saw that it was often impossible to say whether the discrimination was due to either racial bias or gender bias—it was both at once, in alloys not predictable by simple admixture. The interactions between racism and sexism turn out to be multiplicative rather than additive, and as Crenshaw views it, the functions of those interactions cannot be disaggregated. This means that racial stereotypes are gendered, and at the same time, violence against women is enabled by racism.

As Crenshaw explained in an interview for Columbia Law School, intersectionality describes the phenomenon in which an individual suffers oppression or holds privilege based on their membership in multiple social categories. Intersectionality is a tool:

A lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that [single issue] framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things (Columbia Law School, 2017).

The concept also refers to the complex way in which inequality is organised on a social level, such that some social groups have relative power over others, even though they may be harmed in one way and privileged in another.

Drawing on the lessons previously taught by women such as Sojourner Truth or Simone de Beauvoir, Crenshaw showed that considering white women of the upper-middle class or heterosexual black men as representatives, respectively, of the categories “woman” or “black person” makes everything that exists only in the intersection invisible. Intersectionality, then, allows us to see elements that we ignore at first sight, and also shows that if someone is immersed in a large number of oppressed identities, the oppressions will also be multiple. Oppressive behaviours, as well as the attitudes that accompany them, are historically self-reinforcing: oppression begets oppression in a feedback loop.

Therefore, ending oppression means intercepting and transforming the deeply ingrained patterns of thinking and behaving that form the foundation of global suffering and destruction. For Melanie Joy (2019), it is arguably the single most important undertaking of our time.

What is total liberation?

Oppressions exist next to each other, instead of above or below one another. By rejecting the idea that oppressions are independent from one another, and embracing the concept that systems of oppression are connected, we avoid establishing hierarchies of oppressions that could misguide us towards the false belief that one oppression is greater than other oppressions.

The total liberation frame emerged during the 1990s among radical environmental and animal liberation activists who were influenced by the politics of social justice that permeated many other social movements, social change organisations and academic disciplines on university campuses. Ideas such as intersectionality and social privilege took hold in many of these spaces.

In a presentation at the 2010 International Meeting for Environmental Ethics, professor and activist Steven Best introduced the term “total liberation” to describe the concept embodied in his use of the term “revolutionary environmentalism.” This idea came about thanks to the previous work done in the feminist and black liberation movements, as well as that of ecofeminists such as Greta Gaard, Noël

Sturgeon, Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, who had extended the idea to include nonhuman species and ecosystems embracing a total liberation framework.

According to the idea of collective or total liberation, all social struggles are interconnected with one another. These struggles need to work collectively to finally achieve the liberation of everyone. Liberations are bound up with each other. Within this reasoning there are multiple roads towards the goal of liberation. And while all activists are not on the same roads, they can build bridges between movements when they realise that all of the oppressions have common roots.

From the idea of total liberation, different oppressions are analysed as interconnected events. The history of colonialism, for example, is connected to the subjugation of human and nonhuman animals and the earth alike. The extermination of the North American Indians is expressed as a phenomenon based on an interest in expanding the international trade in fur, wool and leather. The so-called “American intervention in Mexico” is clarified as being a war motivated by the benefits that acquiring land to feed animals would entail, the same goal that the Spanish conquistadors pursued in South America when they turned colonised lands into pasture for the animals they had brought from Europe (Nibert, 2002).

According to the concept of total liberation, the different hierarchies interact with each other in a profound way, facilitating the domination of one group by means of dominating all other groups. In *The Politics of Total Liberation*, Steve Best summarises the issue: “it is imperative that we no longer speak of human liberation, animal liberation, or earth liberation as if they were independent struggles, but rather that we talk instead of total liberation” (2014, p. 81). Critical Animal Studies scholars such as Best convincingly demonstrate that we need to increase the density of links between the different liberation movements if we want to achieve this total liberation.

Intersectionality and total liberation in CAS

Three of the ten principles of Critical Animal Studies, developed in 2007 by Steven Best, Anthony Nocella, Richard Kahn, Carol Gigliotti and Lisa Kemmerer, are related in some way to intersectionality.

For example, the 4th principle is about the interlocking of oppressions. It states that CAS “advances a holistic understanding of the commonality of oppressions, such that speciesism, sexism, racism, ableism, statism, classism, militarism and

other hierarchical ideologies and institutions are viewed as parts of a larger, interlocking, global system of domination” (Nocella II et al., 2014, p. xxvii). The 6th principle promotes alliance politics and solidarity among struggles of oppression and the 7th principle underlines “the inseparability of human, nonhuman animal and Earth liberation” (Nocella II et al., 2014, p. xxviii) as part of one struggle.

CAS scholars reveal an axis of inequality that had remained obscured in the majority of analyses: the one constructed with humans as agential subjects creating culture, and nonhuman animals as passive parts of “nature.” This dichotomist view (culture being “better” than nature) perpetuates the belief that humans are unique, different and superior to nonhuman animals; it also views women, queer people and non-privileged masculinities as inferior via othering processes. So, if intersectionality reminded us that we cannot understand one form of oppression without understanding others and that various forms of inequality interrelate and work together to produce advantages and disadvantages for individuals and groups, in CAS, the category of “humanness” is introduced as an additional form of privilege.

Representation as cultural violence

Representation is understood here as an image or idea of reality. We refer particularly to media representations and are particularly interested in thinking about how media shape and construct social and cultural ideas around various oppressed groups in our societies.

Media representations work as a type of cultural violence that helps sustain the unequal social order and perpetuates the oppression of minoritised groups² such as women, females, queers, blacks, indigenous people, racialised people, migrants, impoverished, the disabled, the ageing, children, and nonhuman animals, among others. We live in a violent and oppressive world, and we learn this violence through culture, which includes the media. In this way, violence is concealed, normalised and perpetuated.

² Minoritised groups are used here in a political sense in which members of these discriminated groups are stripped of power and influence in social structures. This term is used throughout the chapter as a synonym for “oppressed groups” and seeks to emphasize the fact that there are power structures that “minoritize” or “otherize” certain people because of their gender, social class, race, species, body size, abilities, age, etc. We don’t mean here that women, queer, impoverished, indigenous or black people, among many others, are quantitatively few in society as a whole.

More specifically, sociologist and peace researcher Johan Galtung defined cultural violence as “those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence” (1990, p. 291). Galtung presented the violence triangle theory to explain how direct violence, the most visible one manifested in violent behaviours, is supported by two other types of violence: structural violence, which refers to the structural conditions that strongly limit the satisfaction of basic needs, and cultural violence, which is manifested in attitudes. Both structural and cultural violence are invisible, but it is the latter that legitimises direct and structural violence by creating a cultural framework for it to exist. For Galtung, cultural violence works as “a substratum from which the other two can derive their nutrients” (1990, p. 294).

Hegemonic representations of oppressed groups: the case of nonhuman animals

Hegemonic representations refer to the dominant ways in which oppressed groups are presented in the media. These hegemonic representations are permeated by harmful ideologies such as cis-hetero-sexism, classism, racism, colonialism, ableism, ageism, speciesism and environmental domination. Ideologies are understood here as a set of beliefs that legitimise an existing or desired social order (Nibert 2003, p. 8).

In the first place, nonhuman animal media representation is characterised by silencing, meaning insufficient coverage of nonhuman animal realities on various media platforms. In order to promote an ethical representation of sentient individuals, their stories deserve to be routinely made visible, not only in exceptional cases (Freeman & Merskin, 2016; Almiron, Cole & Freeman, 2018). But even then this representation is mostly characterised by a speciesist ideology based on human supremacy, the instrumentalization and othering of nonhuman animals, the reproduction of the human/animal binary and the distorted representation of other animals and their relations with human animals (Nibert, 2002; Khazaal & Almiron, 2016).

An analysis of nonhuman animal media representation clearly demonstrates the interconnectedness of several systems of oppression and domination. For example,

the previously mentioned binary thinking inform our notions of nonhuman animals by creating a mindset that privileges a rationalist, colonial and cis-hetero-patriarchal understanding of them. This binary thinking influences the social construction of nonhuman animals as irrational, instinctive, untamed, deviant and uncontrollable beings. Therefore, the bodies, attitudes, geographies and theories embodied by the cis-hetero white able-bodied human male are understood as universal and thus bias the representations of nonhuman animals and affect social perceptions of them. This binary thinking is harmful to nonhuman animals as well as to other oppressed groups, especially those who are animalised or devalued by being compared to nonhuman animals: blacks, the racialised, and migrants (Ko & Ko, 2017; Khazaal & Almiron, 2021), women and queers (Jones, 2014), the disabled (Taylor, 2017) or fat people (Fernández & Parada, 2021), among others.

Arnold Arluke and Clinton R. Sanders (1996) analysed the sociological differential perceptions of other animals through the concept of the “sociozoologic scale.” These authors argue that the sociozoologic scale reflects our binary moral categories. The scale shows the inconsistent treatment of diverse nonhuman animals (e.g. those we consider companions, in contrast with those we consider food or those we consider pests) through the construction of some of them as “good” and others as “bad.” This categorisation is also related to the inconsistent treatment of human animals (Arluke & Sanders, 1996, p.170).

Empirical research on press representation of introduced species of nonhuman animals (considered “invasive” or “pests”) supports this claim. For example, press news covering possums in Australia (McCrow-Young, Linné & Potts, 2015), the Asian carp in the US (Mando & Stack, 2018), or the monk parakeets in Spain (Fernández et al., 2022) reproduced xenophobic metaphors and othering discourses that contributed to criminalise and stigmatise individual animals and certain species. Therefore, helping to justify their killing and eradication. In the case of farmed animals, Freeman’s analysis (2009) of their representation in US news coverage concluded that it typically reinforced the agribusiness view of them as bodies not beings, objectifying them discursively through commodification, neglecting their emotional perspectives, and failing to describe them as inherently valuable individuals. Another analysis showed that the press news of different countries and cultural contexts portrayed farmed animals through crude speciesism (Spain) or camouflaged speciesism (US) (Khazaal & Almiron, 2014). While speciesism’s manifestation may change on the surface, the substrate of it as cultur-

al violence remains. The lowest common denominator in media depictions of other animals – including those we live with, those we share space with, and those we exploit – is the absence of a framing that encourages discussions of whether it is right for human animals to breed, use, kill, control and/or consume them. Even if the news includes discussions of animal welfare, the status quo of speciesism is reproduced, creating a cultural violence frame (Galtung, 1990) that legitimises direct and structural speciesist violence.

Challenging cultural violence through communication research

As we have shown in the case of speciesism, media representations participate in the reproduction of cultural violence. We therefore consider communication research from a critical animal studies perspective to be a powerful tool that can enable us to more deeply understand, question and counteract these harmful representations. Since media greatly influence social behaviour, critical media analyses may empower media practitioners, consumers, researchers and educators to challenge hegemonic frameworks and question the cultural violence implicit in the representations of minoritised groups. To this end, below we present a range of methodologies and perspectives of analysis in communication and some empirical examples of the nonhuman animal case that can be used as a guide for future research. These examples reflect how a critical animal and media studies approach can contribute to broadening our understanding and challenging the hegemonic representations of oppressed groups.

Ethics of representation and frame analysis

One of the analyses that can be carried out in the communication field has to do with the ethics of representation. This analysis consists of examining the ways in which nonhuman animals are represented in various media from an ethical point of view. As Freeman and Merskin observe: “To be represented in mass media, particularly in the digital age, is to be validated. Absence is erasure.” (2016, p. 208). Media representation profoundly impacts the lives of other animals and human perceptions and attitudes towards them by shaping human imagery of other animals and human–nonhuman animal relations. Therefore, an analysis of representa-

tion from a critical point of view can help us to detect the continuity of coverage of nonhuman animals in the media, to check if their perspectives, interests and voices are being considered (Freeman, Bekoff & Bexell, 2011). It can also allow us to see the ways in which the language and media frames encourage or enable the questioning of anthropocentrism and speciesism in journalism, advertising and public relations and the entertainment media industry (Freeman & Merskin, 2016). The ethics of representation of nonhuman animals could include the representation of animal liberation/rights activists by considering how stereotypes, ridiculization, mockery and criminalization of animal advocates indirectly damages the legitimacy given to animal ethics, anti-speciesism and veganism (e.g. Best & Nocella II, 2004; Cole & Morgan, 2011).

Along with considering existing ethical guidelines in terms of their respectful representation of nonhuman animals (Freeman & Merskin, 2016), framing analysis is another interesting way of examining representation. Snow and Benford defined a frame as “an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment” (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 137). Framing, then, is an operation that ideologically delimits a certain sphere of appearance, emphasising certain values and ideas. Framing analysis has been a key methodology within critical animal and media studies, especially for press representation (e.g. McCrow, Linné & Potts 2015, Moreno & Almiron 2021; Fernández et al. 2021) and also for media directed to children (e.g. Cole & Steward, 2014) and the discourses of social movements (e.g. Freeman, 2014).

Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) can be defined as “discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (Van Dijk, 2015, p. 466). This critical perspective aims to highlight issues of power asymmetries, manipulation, exploitation and structural inequities. As a perspective, it is interested in the use of linguistics, metaphors and rhetoric and it gives attention to the societal context, the audience and the producer of the message with the mission of revealing the ideological message behind what may seem

to be a neutral discourse. Critical discourse analysis research concerning nonhuman animal exploitation has mainly been conducted using Dunayer's (2001) and Stibbe's (2012) sociolinguistic approaches to speciesist language and discourse around nonhuman animals. Regarding empirical research, some insightful examples we want to underline are Glenn's CDA of the factory farm discourse in advertising (2004), Carreras's CDA on the European dairy lobby (2021b, 2024) and the UPF-CAE project "Media Observatory of Speciesism" (UPF-CAE, 2022), which employs this critical perspective to analyse Spanish and Catalan news discourse on nonhuman animals.

(Audio)visual analysis

Visual and audiovisual research involves analysing static, moving images, and visual semiotics. Its main aim is to decode and understand the meanings of visuals and what they are intended to represent, as well as how the audience interprets them. According to Gillian Rose (2001), all the different levels of meaning made in an image should be examined, including the sites of the image (the image by itself), the sites of its production (where it was made), the sites of its circulation (where it was spread) and its audiencing (the interaction with the audience). There are several visual methodologies that can be adapted to different research aims (e.g. Rose, 2001).

Critical Animal and Media Studies have shown great interest in visual narratives and their power to convey and challenge human perceptions of other animals. Some examples are Claire Parkinson (Molloy)'s pioneer research on popular culture and animals (2011), Malamud's research on animal and visual culture (2012), Almiron, Cole and Freeman's volume on Critical Animal and Media Studies (2016) or the well-known work of Carol J. Adams on the sexual politics of meat that is abundant in the visual advertising of animal exploitation industries (Adams, 2016). At first, nature documentaries and human intimacy desires with nonhumans were at the centre of visual studies, but increasingly other aspects of visual communication have been examined, such as animal advocacy documentaries (e.g. Freeman & Tulloch, 2013), activist visual strategies (e.g. Fernández, 2021a), TV series (e.g. Elrød Madsen & Leth-Espensen, 2019), social media (e.g. Linné, 2016) and press photography (e.g. Fernández, 2021b).

Political economy of communication

Finally, the political economy of communication (PEC) has proven to be a valuable research perspective in critical animal studies given its capacity to understand the economic relations that underlie the exploitation of other animals and the discourses that justify it (Almiron, 2016a). The PEC pays attention to the network of economic interests, such as lobbies, think-tanks and discourse coalitions, that determine the functioning of the media. It then examines how the media builds economically-driven and ideology-based speech and values that perpetuate the oppression of nonhuman animals and other minoritized groups.

The corporate power networks that benefit from the exploitation of nonhuman animals are a route we can follow to understand the driving force of speciesism as an ideology (Nibert, 2002). PEC empirical analysis of the vivisection industrial complex (Almiron & Khazaal, 2016), aquaprisons and the entertainment industry (Almiron, 2017) and the agri-food/dairy industry (Almiron, 2016b; Carreras, 2021a, 2024) shed light on how these industries manufacture media consent to the exploitation of other animals and favoured limiting human compassion and responsibility towards them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have highlighted the opportunities that scientific research in communication from a Critical Animal Studies perspective can bring to better understanding and challenging the interconnected systems of oppression visible through its cultural and media representations. The methodologies presented are just some examples that can be used as inspiration and broadened by future communication and social sciences researchers interested in nonhuman animals and human-nonhuman animal relations. The goal remains promoting total liberation, and we believe the critical media studies lens can definitely contribute to this.

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