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KAFKA'S ANIMALS SPEAK BACK: ZOOPOETICS, ALTERITY, AND THE LIMITS OF THE HUMAN
INTERVIEW WITH NAAMA HAREL

OS ANIMAIS DE KAFKA RESPONDEM: ZOOPOÉTICA, ALTERIDADE E OS LIMITES DO HUMANO
ENTREVISTA COM NAAMA HAREL

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This interview with Naama Harel explores a posthumanist rereading of Franz Kafka's animal narratives through the lens of zoopoetics, Critical Animal Studies and critical theory. Departing from entrenched allegorical and anthropocentric interpretations, Harel argues that Kafka's animals should be read not as symbolic stand-ins for human concerns but as agents that actively destabilize the human–animal binary.

Central to the discussion is the concept of the *humanimal*, a fluid, liminal space in which species boundaries are rendered mutable and hierarchical distinctions between humans and nonhumans are undermined. Drawing on thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno, Cary Wolfe, and Donna Haraway, Harel situates Kafka's work as both anticipating and contributing to posthumanist critiques of biopolitics, anthropocentrism, and human exceptionalism.

The interview addresses key texts including *The Metamorphosis*, *A Report to an Academy*, *The Burrow*, and *Investigations of a Dog*, highlighting how Kafka's narrative strategies (hybridity, bodily estrangement, nonhuman voice, and linguistic subversion) challenge dominant assumptions about agency, speech, and ethical consideration. The conversation also reflects on the methodological implications of deallegorizing Kafka's animal stories, the interdisciplinary reception of Harel's work, and the relevance of Kafka's zoopoetic imagination to contemporary debates on ecology, animal ethics, and posthuman thought. Ultimately, the interview positions Kafka's animal writing as a crucial site for rethinking identity, alterity, and interspecies relations in both literary studies and the humanities more broadly.

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About Naama Harel

Naama Harel is a renowned academic and a Scholar of Modern Hebrew and Jewish literature whose work lies at the intersection of literary studies, Human-Animal Studies, ecocriticism, and posthumanist theory. She holds a PhD in Hebrew and Comparative Literature from the University of Haifa and is currently co-chair of the Columbia Seminar of Human-Animal Studies. Her research consistently interrogates the boundaries of the human, attending to the ways literary texts destabilize anthropocentric paradigms through figures of animality, embodiment, and alterity.

Fig. 1. Naama Harel (2021)

This interview departs from Professor Harel's monograph *Kafka's Zoopoetics: Beyond the Human-Animal Barrier* (University of Michigan Press, 2020), a study that offers a radical rereading of Franz Kafka's *oeuvre* through the lens of zoopoetics. Challenging long-standing allegorical and anthropocentric interpretations, Harel argues that Kafka's animal figures are not merely symbolic stand-ins for human concerns, but active agents in the construction of a *humanimal* space – one in which the rigid distinction between humanity and animality is profoundly unsettled. Through close readings of Kafka's animal narratives, this monograph reveals how Kafka dismantles the conceptual, linguistic, and ethical hierarchies that traditionally separate the human from the nonhuman. In dialogue with the centenary of Kafka's death and with contemporary critical debates on post-identity, alterity, and relationality, this interview explores the broader implications of Harel's zoopoetic approach. It addresses Kafka's questioning of stable identity, his interrogation of the human–animal binary, and his resistance to fixed meanings through language and narrative form. The conversation also aims at situating Kafka's work within wider discussions of power, mediality, and non-anthropocentric modes of reading, highlighting its continued relevance in the context of ecological crisis, technological mediation, and posthuman thought. By revisiting Kafka through the prism of animality, Harel's work – and, hopefully, the present interview – invites readers to rethink not only Kafka's literary legacy, but also the conceptual foundations through which we understand the human, the animal, and the fragile spaces that emerge between them.

Interview with Naama Harel

Ricardo Gil Soeiro: I thank you, Professor Naama Harel, for taking the time to speak with *2i | Journal of Identity and Intermediality Studies* (University of Minho, Portugal). It is a pleasure to have you with us and to benefit from your insights during this interview. To kick off our conversation, what motivated you to focus on Franz Kafka's representations of animals as more than allegorical or symbolic figures? Your book (fig. 2) reframes Kafka's animals as central rather than peripheral – what inspired that shift?

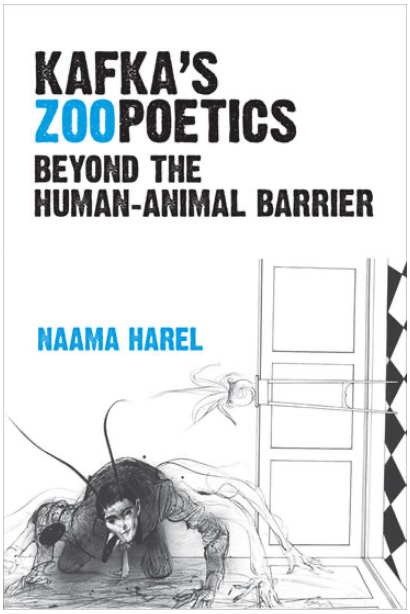

Fig. 2. *Kafka's Zoopoetics* (2020)

Naama Harel: I actually chose the animals before I chose Kafka – my entire ongoing scholarship focuses on Literary Animal Studies. I've always been interested in questions of representing nonverbal subjectivity in a verbal medium, the spectrum of anthropomorphism, the various ways that fiction can undermine anthropocentrism, etc.. I chose Kafka because nonhuman protagonists are ubiquitous throughout his work, but they were typically allegorized and never systematically examined as a distinct corpus within his writings. And, indeed, using a posthumanist prism has allowed me to innovatively explore one of the most prominent authors in world literature.

RGS: Can you explain to our readers what you mean by *humanimal* and how it functions in Kafka's stories? How does this concept challenge traditional boundaries between humans and animals? Which authors were seminal in your conceptual framework?

NH: Posthumanist scholars have long pointed out that the human–animal contradistinction is a discursive binary, constructed by anthropocentric ideology. Through denying animalistic elements in humans, disavowing agency from other animals, excluding them from social life, and neutralizing compassion for them, this binary is designed to regularize both humanity and animality. Kafka's liminal figures set across and beyond the human–animal barrier, fusing together human and nonhuman features and often embodying species fluidity. As such, they radically undercut this human–animal barrier. So, I define Kafka's fictional realm, where species boundaries are essentially mutable and obscure, as *humanimal*. Kafka's humanimal realm, which is antithetical to the human–animal binary, is not only a fictional manifestation of critical zoopolitical theories, it also anticipated them.

RGS: Your book has gained a great deal of international attention. One of the main reasons, I think, might be linked to the original way in which your work posits that Kafka's animal figures are not merely metaphors for human anxieties. How does a posthumanist reading change our understanding of stories like *The Metamorphosis* or *A Report to an Academy*?

NH: Since Kafka's stories were published, over a century ago, they were analysed from so many different perspectives: religious, mystical, psychoanalytical, Marxist… you name it. In one way, the posthumanist approach joins these former paradigms, as one of

the numerous keys to interpret Kafka's brilliant and enigmatic body of work. On the other hand, unlike the previous theoretical frameworks, the posthumanist one does not reduce the nonhuman figures to intra-human issues through allegorization. Instead, it offers a synthesis between the literal level, which deals with human–animal relations, and the thematic level, which also deals with human–animal relations. Posthumanist analysis of *The Metamorphosis* and *A Report to an Academy*, among many other things, reveals how species identity is generated through biopolitical practices of segregation, exclusion, confinement, and violence.

RGS: You're absolutely right. By foregrounding species identity as something produced through biopolitical mechanisms rather than fixed essence, a posthumanist reading draws attention to the instability of the human–animal boundary in Kafka's work. This instability becomes especially visible in his recurring use of hybrid or ambiguous creatures, which resist clear classification. Against this backdrop, the question arises: Kafka's animal figures are often liminal, neither fully human nor fully animal. How does this liminality help us rethink anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism in literature?

NH: Think how queer identity, particularly trans and nonbinary, destabilizes the norms of gender binary… Obviously, unlike queers, Kafka's humanimal figures are fictional, but they similarly destabilize hegemonic norms. By undermining the presumed categorical separation between 'the human' and 'the animal' they resist anthropocentrism and expose the violence of binary classification. Although these liminal figures don't exist in the real world, the very fact that we can imagine them, situated on the alleged threshold between humanity and animality, destabilizes – and ultimately collapses – this barrier, which is at the core of anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism.

RGS: Is it fair to argue that many Kafka characters experience alienation not only from society but also from their own bodies? Could you elaborate a bit more on how animality functions as a way of expressing bodily estrangement and fragmented identity in Kafka's texts?

NH: It's very true. However, many interpretations that read animality as an expression of bodily estrangement and fragmented identity exclude animal-related issues altogether. My purpose has always been to delve into such themes, without reducing the animals to intra-human topics. This is exemplified in my analysis of Kafka's *The Burrow*, which is a disturbing monologue of a ground-dwelling creature. Instead of understanding the story as a mere allegory to human estrangement, I stay with the animal as such, seeking to trace her[1] radical solitude, constant fear, and also her unique conception of the self, which includes some of her surroundings.

[1] By referring to the burrow-creature as "her," Harel is very likely making a deliberate critical gesture. Kafka himself leaves the creature in *The Burrow* radically indeterminate: its species, sex, and even ontological status remain unstable. Harel's use of the feminine pronoun therefore does not resolve this ambiguity so much as intervene in habitual modes of reading that tend to anthropomorphize the creature or default to the masculine. The pronoun choice thus aligns with her broader attempt to destabilize anthropocentric interpretive frameworks and forms part of the ethical-critical orientation of her zoopoetics. At the same time, within contemporary animal studies and posthumanist criticism, feminine pronouns are occasionally employed strategically for vulnerable nonhuman beings, insofar as the generic masculine may unconsciously reinscribe assumptions of mastery, rationality, or universality.

RGS: Many animal narrators in Kafka occupy ambiguous positions in relation to speech and communication. How does this tension between voice and silence relate to power, exclusion, and otherness?

NH: Throughout history, harking back to the classical determination of man as the speaking animal (*zoon echon logon*), as Aristotle famously specified in his *Politics*, the capacity to speak has been regarded as a distinct and constitutive feature of humanity that also defines agency. Animal inability to speak has significantly contributed to the denial of their subjectivity and their exclusion from ethical consideration, facilitating their victimization, against which they cannot protest, due to their inability to speak. This vicious cycle is broken through the freedom of fiction; unlike real animals, literary animals can speak out against their victimization. Interestingly, first-person narration is not so common in Kafka's stories, but it is quite common in his animal tales, such as *A Report to an Academy* and *The Borrow*.

A story that embodies this concept of speaking out is *Jackals and Arabs*, where the narrator is human, but he is approached by jackals, who verbally protest against their oppression. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the backbone of resistance is language, and therefore even the strongest animal is infinitely feeble. In some of his animal stories, Kafka grants his nonhuman protagonist with this backbone of resistance, making them less feeble.

RGS: How did you integrate (in practical terms) posthumanist theory into your literary analysis of Kafka? Were there particular theorists or frameworks that shaped your approach? How important were figures such as Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe to your research?[2]

NH: While the term 'post-humanism' was coined in the late 1970s, and is typically identified with contemporary thinkers, like Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe, I find that the formative text of this field is *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the magnum opus of the Frankfurt school, and particularly the chapter "Man and Beast". Horkheimer and Adorno don't use the term 'post-humanism' in their seminal 1947 work, but this entire critical project is essentially post-humanist. Their critique of the construction of the human–animal contradistinction highly inspired me in reading Kafka's stories, like *The Metamorphosis* and *A Report to an Academy*, which I read as a radical alternative of this contradistinction. Cary Wolfe's original synthesis between posthumanism and the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics was also valuable in my interpretation of these stories, which focus not on killing animals, but rather controlling animals, as well as animality. Donna Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto* was particularly inspiring in my analysis of Kafka's *Investigations of a Dog*, as she points to the liminal status of dogs, arousing ambivalent feelings of both affection and revulsion.

RGS: That's a great point, and it really clarifies how deeply post-humanist concerns were already at work well before the term itself was coined. Your reading compellingly shows

[2] Cary Wolfe and Donna Haraway are among the principal theoretical figures underpinning Naama Harel's analysis in *Kafka's Zoopoetics*: Cary Wolfe (2010). *What Is Posthumanism?* University of Minnesota Press; Cary Wolfe (2013). *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*. University of Chicago Press; Donna Haraway (1989). *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*. Routledge; Donna Haraway (1991). *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge; Donna Haraway (2005). *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Prickly Paradigm Press.

Kafka not as an allegorist of the human condition, but as a writer who destabilizes the human as a privileged category altogether. Do you see Kafka's zoopoetic world as having relevance beyond literary studies – for example in ethical or ecological discourse? How might Kafka help us think differently about human–animal relations today?

NH: Literary works are obviously affected by their cultural climate, but in many cases, they also inspire and shape social and philosophical thoughts. This is particularly relevant when it comes to such an original and influential author like Kafka. Adorno, whom I mentioned before as a pioneering theorist of posthumanism, is also known as a profound interpreter of Kafka. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari's key posthumanist concept of "becoming-animal" was famously coined in their 1980 *A Thousand Plateaus*, but already in their 1975 *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* they delved into Gregor Samsa's transformation into an animal. So, the dialogue between literature and theory is bidirectional.

RGS: Absolutely. Building on your previous responses, you alluded to the intricate ways in which Kafka's nonhuman characters occupy a fluid human–animal space. My question would then be: What new insights do you think this fluidity offers into issues like agency, consciousness, and interspecies communication?

NH: I believe that such humanimal fluidity offers us insights into a non-binary, as well as non-hierarchical, understanding of our relations with other animals. We all know that we are actually animals, right? And, yet, none of us would hesitate to enter a restaurant where there is a sign *No Animals Allowed*. We're animals in the biological discourse, but stand in opposition to animals in all other discourses. We somehow live with this contradiction, which serves us well. We can test products on animals, because they are similar to us (biologically), but also because they are considered radically different (ethically). The strategy of 'divide and conquer' is applied here in two senses: the discursive separation between humans and animals and also between biology and ethics. Kafka's humanimal fluid space is the antithesis of 'divide and conquer'.

RGS: Indeed. Now, expanding on a methodological point you raised earlier, I am curious on how close readings of Kafka's animal stories unveil dimensions that broader allegorical readings might miss. What challenges did you face in writing a book that intersects literary criticism and interdisciplinary theory? Did academic conventions in Kafka studies resist or welcome your approach?

NH: Allegories are typically quite simple texts, pointing to a particular allegorical meaning. Orwell's *Animal Farm* is a good example. Kafka's animal stories have been often allegorized, but they are not allegories per se, as they allow so many different allegorical meanings. Using an allegorical prism, all the elements that don't fit this prism are screened out. Alternatively, reading this interspecies narrative from a human-animal perspective allows a very close reading, filling significant literary gaps that most critics overlooked. My journey with Kafka's animals goes back to my PhD dissertation, which I completed in 2010. Back then, I received many skeptical responses. I was once even told in a conference by a distinguished German literature scholar, "you can't deallegorize Kafka's animal stories because they are allegories!" However, by the time I published my book, ten years later, the field of Human-Animal Studies has become more established, and the book has been very well received not only within Human-Animal Studies, but also among German Literature scholars.

RGS: Definitely, it seems to me that your book not only bridges these disciplines but also contributes to shaping a more integrated scholarly conversation about human–animal relations across the humanities. On that note, how do you hope your book will influence future research on Kafka, animals in literature, or posthumanist theory? Do you see it inspiring similar analyses in other authors or genres? Do you imagine yourself broadening this type of analysis so as to include other authors? Or are you directing your research towards a different direction?

NH: First, I hope that the animal (or humanimal) theme will be recognized as central in Kafka's criticism, to the point where academic courses, conferences, textbooks and anthologies will include a section on Kafka's animals alongside the traditional sections. I also hope it will inspire similar projects, focusing on other authors and literary corpora. Unlike well-explored neighbouring perspectives, such as postcolonial or feminist, there is a significant lacuna in Literary Animal Studies accounts, especially when it comes to canonical literature. It seems to me that most recent literary animal studies deal with contemporary narratives that overtly hold a posthumanist approach. Demarginalizing posthumanist literature is highly worthwhile, but so is the deallegorization of canonical animal stories, which are typically reduced to intra-human themes. In my current project I don't focus on a single author, but on a group of East European Jewish writers at the turn of the 20th century and the theme of animal slaughter. Later, I plan to further explore metamorphosis narratives. Actually, there is an author, whose humanimal writings really fascinate me – the Brazilian author Moacyr Scliar[3] – but first I'll have to learn Portuguese…

RGS: That sounds like a promising direction – especially since Scliar's work offers such rich material for thinking about human–animal transformation, even if learning Portuguese may be a project in itself! I'd like to ask a broader, framing question about Kafka's narrative techniques and their wider implications. His stories often depict grotesque transformations or blurred categorical lines. Do these narrative strategies have a political or ethical dimension in how we imagine relations between species?

NH: As I point out in my book, Kafka blurs categorical lines not only ontologically (namely, by presenting humanimal hybrids and transspecies), but also through his subversive use of language. He often uses animal-related terms to describe humans and vice versa, drawing attention to the anthropocentric premise of our common language. For example, his counter-conventional choice to use the word "Mord" [murder] to describe the killing of a nonhuman animal in *A Crossbreed*. By transgressing the regular use of language, Kafka destabilizes the oversimplified polarity between the human and the nonhuman world. His deliberate disruption of language conventions, alongside the ontological disruption of biological categories, challenges us to rethink human and other animals in a non-binary manner.

RGS: This raises an interesting point about how literature can shape our understanding of urgent issues like environmental crises and animal rights. How does Kafka's

[3] Moacyr Scliar (1937–2011) was a renowned Brazilian writer and doctor from Porto Alegre who authored over 70 works, including novels, short stories, and chronicles. A prominent figure in literature, he is known for notable works like *O Centauro no Jardim* (*The Centaur in the Garden*; 1980) and *Max e os felinos* (*Max and the Cats*; 1981). The latter famously inspired Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001), adapted into illustrated edition (2007), film (2012) and theatre (2003; 2008; 2013).

zoopoetics intersect with contemporary debates around environmental crisis and animal rights? Can literature contribute meaningfully to these debates, and if so, how?

NH: In his biography of Kafka, Max Brod tells that while visiting the Berlin aquarium, Kafka (who was vegetarian) gazed into a fish's eyes and said: "now at last I can look at you in peace, I don't eat you anymore." Kafka's look into animals in his writings is not just poetic; he directs his readers towards interspecies ethics and politics. Undermining the barrier between us and other animals, as Kafka does in his animal stories, allows us to see them in a profound and critical way that is rarely possible in our anthropocentric world. His fictional humanimal space thus subverts anthropocentrism, speciesism, and human supremacy.

RGS: I really appreciate your insight, especially the way you highlight Brod's anecdote at the aquarium. I explore that moment in *Corpos-em-devir*,[4] showing how Kafka's gaze opens an ethical, interspecies space – one that gently unsettles anthropocentrism and species boundaries. Okay, changing direction a bit… Kafka's work has been adapted across multiple media, from film and theatre to animation. How do you think his human–animal boundary crossings translate – or resist translation – into other media forms?

NH: Interestingly, before *The Metamorphosis* was published, Kafka wrote a letter to the publisher, asking not to include an illustration of the metamorphosed protagonist aside the text, because "the vermin cannot be depicted." It's important to note that "Ungeziefer" [vermin] is not a biological category but a social one; it refers to animals that humans find objectionable. A visual illustration would reduce the vermin into a particular biological essence (beetle, cockroach, etc.), and it seems that Kafka wanted to avoid it. So visual adaptations of *The Metamorphosis*, which is Kafka's best-known story, are essentially problematic in this sense. However, I recently watched *Franz*, a 2025 biographical Polish film directed by Agnieszka Holland. It's really not a standard biopic, as it successfully visualized the Kafkaesque effect. Kafka's fascination with animals and the rest of the natural world, as well as his repulsion to meat, are emphasized and creatively depicted there. Highly recommended!

RGS: Appreciate the tip! I haven't seen *Franz* yet, but the way you describe Kafka and his aversion to meat has me intrigued. Thinking about Kafka and how he engages with animals actually ties into a bigger question I've been curious about: One hundred years after Kafka's death, his work continues to generate new interpretations. What do you think makes Kafka's engagement with animality particularly resonant for twenty-first-century readers and scholars? In your view, what makes Kafka's worldview so compelling? Is it the ambiguity of his oeuvre? Is it the surreal yet precise imagery?

NH: I think there are two main reasons for that. First, allegorical interpretations in general have become poetically questionable. Reducing the literal level to the thematic one, allegorization tends to simplify poetic texts and ignore literary nuances. Alternatively, scholars seek integration between the literal level and the thematic one. Contextualizing Kafka's animal stories within the theoretical lens of Human-Animal Studies is thus particularly suitable. Second, as several of Kafka's scholars famously noted, whatever worldview emerged in the Western intellectual scene, Kafka's work seemed to respond to it eagerly. I think it indeed has to do with the obscurity of his writing, allowing – and

[4] Cf. Ricardo Gil Soeiro (2025), *Corpos-em-Devir. Kafka. Cortázar. Lispector*, Edições Húmus.

even inviting to – multiple interpretations. Today, facing a global human-driven climate crisis, theoretical prisms of posthumanism, Human-Animal Studies, and ecocriticism have become prominent, so it's expected that such prisms will be applied to the work of Kafka, filling the interpretative lacuna created during the first 100 years of reading Kafka.

RGS: Before we wrap up, if readers were to revisit only one Kafka text through the lens of zoopoetics and humanimality, which text would you suggest – and what should they read differently this time? Is there a particular story that you feel best epitomizes your argument? Why that story, and what should readers pay attention to when they revisit it? You have already alluded to *The Metamorphosis* and *A Report to an Academy*. Are there any other texts you'd suggest?

NH: My book focuses on six of Kafka's animal stories, the most elaborate ones. The overall theme is undermining the human–animal barrier, but I divide these six stories into pairs, according to the order they were written. Each pair undermines this barrier differently: Kafka's first two animal stories, *The Metamorphosis* (1915) and *A Report to an Academy* (1917), revolve around protagonists transformed from either human to animal or vice versa. The next pair, *Jackals and Arabs* (1917) and *Investigations of a Dog* (1922), reflect on interspecies power relations. The perspectival shift in Kafka's two canine tales subverts anthropocentric presumptions. Finally, the last animal stories, *The Burrow* (1923) and *Josefine, the Singer or the Mouse Folk* (1924), cast doubt on the nature of their protagonists' species, producing a performative humanimal hybridity. In addition, there are several shorter animal stories that deserve zoopoetic attention, among them *A Crossbreed* and *The Animal in the Synagogue*.

RGS: Professor Harel, many, many thanks for sharing such thoughtful insights with us!

NH: Thank you so much for your interest and for the profound questions! It was very interesting for me to revisit my work on Kafka's animals.

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