Lenore Malen: I Am The Animal

The week before last I was in Paris for spring break, staying in an apartment near the Bastille. It just so happened that right across from the apartment where I was staying, there was an "apiculture" shop—something I had never seen before. It was filled with books about bees, information about honey, and products made from honey; the window had a big poster that said, "Penser l'abeille" ("Think bee"). Of course, the fact that interest in bees has spread across the Atlantic, if not beyond, is not surprising, given the widespread media attention to colony collapse and the fear invoked at the end of Lenore's video—that, unlike rats and various microbes which seem to be able fight back and withstand the immense destruction of their environments by adapting to them, bees may not be similarly well equipped. Will they outlast us or will we, rather, be their death? This question has inspired much work in animal studies over the past decades, although it is perhaps only recently that insects, and bees in particular, have been included in this concern. The idea that the loss of animals is the impetus behind our "modern" failed attempts to reintegrate them into our lives was the thesis of a now classic text of animal studies, John Berger's *Why Look at Animals?* Until the eighteenth-century, Berger suggests, we lived with animals (whether combatively or symbiotically) and experienced them not only as suppliers of food (think honey) and clothing, but more important, as mortal, sentient beings whose different yet parallel lives offered the possibility of imagining nonhuman subjectivity. Since that time we have developed a range of practices to try to compensate for this loss: pet-keeping, zoos, even Disney cartoons —practices, he argues, that rather than bring us any closer to non human subjectivity only distance us from any true engagement with animals. Should we include beekeeping among such practices, especially now that hives have been installed, not only in backyards but atop the Paris Opera, the Tate Galleries in

London, and the Whitney Museum in New York? Or are bees among those animals who defy any easy separation between animal-nature and human-culture? Adding to the list of practices that, Berger says, only de-nature animals, he includes certain photographic techniques that reveal the most furtive species to the curiosity of the human eye but leave them as objects of a human gaze. "The fact that they can observe us," he says, "has lost all significance." Putting Lenore's installation in dialogue with Berger, we might want to ask, can the camera reveal the gaze of the bee? Her film answers with a smarter question, or even a series of them. Is subjectivity confined to the gaze? Is it only by invoking the point of view of the animal that his or her subjectivity can be invoked? Might that not be an impoverished understanding of subjectivity?

Indeed, this identification between subjectivity and the act of looking may be a shortcoming in Berger if not in Derrida, whose text Lenore invokes throughout her piece. It is, of course, in noticing his female cat looking at him that Derrida remembers she has her own "point of view," one, however, that he understands he may not be able to grasp or comprehend. And yet it is this encounter with the animal/otherness that, for Derrida, reveals our own human incapacities, our vulnerabilities by stripping us of those clothes and technologies by which we have falsely imagined our ability to lay claim to our difference or justified our domination. And it is thus in that encounter that, he says, thinking itself may begin. "The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there" (*The Animal That Therefore I Am*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008: 29).

"I am the animal," Lenore's title boldly proclaims, as if her video-camera were to effect a kind of "thinking bee" that throws into question what this thinking is that has been said to be the property of humans alone. Derrida's title The Animal

That Therefore I Am—although the original title, *L'animal que, donc, je suis*, can be translated as "... That Therefore I Follow:)—must, of course, be heard as following Descartes's "I think therefore I am," replacing the "I think" with "the animal that," thereby challenging his philosophical predecessor, who denied animals the ability to think. For Descartes, animals were machines that could only react to stimuli as if from a mechanical principle, not with anything even resembling thought or consciousness.

Lenore's "I am the animal," is, of course, a hybridized "I" partaking of, while representing human, animal and machine. It demonstrates how we humans have become dependent upon the machine as a kind of prosthetic for our thinking. As Lenore writes, "For humans, inventions take place outside our bodies, whereas for bees, their bodies are their inventions, made and remade with the wax that extrudes from their abdomens." It is thus easy for us to become estranged from our inventions as from our thinking, and such alienation is part of the double or really triple movement of Lenore's film. In early frames we see scientists building boxes, methodically laying out sheets or painting spots on bees for some sort of experiments we are not privy to. Alongside these experiments we are presented with noises and music and images that seem to have nothing to do with bees—xylophones, tap dancing, the "tap tap tap" of something between toy and instrument, Fred Astaire singing "Night and Day"—each happening undercutting the goal-oriented projects of science by revealing the propensities for "unproductive" or unpurposive rhythm and duration that intrude at their core, turning calculation to confection. Is this animality infecting the projects of culture? Or is it culture that turns mechanical animality away from any necessary relation with utility? The eye/I of the video renders the answer undecidable.

One of the effects of such repetitive sounds is to "deterritorialize" (in the

Deleuzian sense) vision—to liberate it from its conceptual framework and render it incapable of picturing the world as an object of knowledge. What, in fact, we must ask, can vision reveal of the worlds or *Umwelten* of bees, which, we are reminded early on, consist greatly of smell? Can we see what the bees smell? Can we see the difference between fear and love that they detect in a smell? This poverty of our vision is highlighted by the unclear connections between images or between images and sounds. We humans demand a supplement in the form of another prosthesis—text, writing—to clarify what it is we are seeing. But when this text appears in Lenore's piece, it moves quickly, joining the mechanical reeling of the video. I wanted to slow it down or stop it so I could read, so I could understand and say, Ah ha! Is this what Derrida means when he writes, "Man is less a beast of prey than a beast that is prey to language"(121)? It is interesting for our purposes here to note that this is a comment Derrida makes in his essay on Jacques Lacan, and specifically in response to Lacan's take on the work of Karl von Frisch and the language of bees. I quote Derrida:

> Lacan claims to be relying on what he blithely calls the "animal kingdom" in order to critique the current notion of "language as a sign" as opposed to "human languages." When bees appear to "respond" to a "message," they do not *respond* but *react*; they merely obey a fixed program, whereas the human subject responds to the other, to the question from or of the other. This discourse is quite literally Cartesian(123).

Derrida does not want to argue that there is no difference between reaction and response, but rather to criticize the way in which this difference has, for too long and too simplistically—or, one might say, instinctively—been aligned

with a division between animal and human. For Lacan, as for Descartes, animals have only coding—a form of communication that fixes a sign to a singular referent and reality; it is a reactive and unchangeable, not a thoughtful and questioning language. Only humans have so-called, "real language," which he distinguishes this way: "The function of language is not to inform but to evoke. What I seek in speech is the response of the other. . . . In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me" (124). Language is what reveals the interiority of the other, a consciousness that grapples and, especially, that grapples with me, responds to me. The language of bees may be a delicate dance, but it says only a fixed number of things in reaction to its environment. It does not reveal a consciousness, and it does not respond to me, or so Lacan would say.

But why, we should ask on a first level, should language be taken as the index of thought or consciousness except that we take it as such for humans? Couldn't we say that this view of language and, by extension, of our difference from animals is itself determined by a fixed, if not inescapable anthropocentrism rather than by any real response on our part. Indeed, and more important, why should we demand a response from the other as the condition for our responding to them? This may be another way of interpreting who follows whom. For if I will only respond to one whose language I recognize as such, am I not disavowing my responsibility to that very notion of the evocative, as opposed to the informative, that Lacan claims constitutes language? And why, above all, is it the other's response to me and to my names that is at stake, rather than mine to the other? What if the animals are calling us but we can neither hear nor read them? What if we humans simply do not respond?

Lenore's video does not invite us into the language of bees or attempt to

reveal their world to us. It defends itself against any suggestion that one could represent the language or point of view of a bee. Rather, it thinks with bees and, with machines and film and with other humans, to evoke an ongoing response, one, moreover, that is meaningful, but not because it is predicated on understanding or knowledge. What it evokes, rather, is the relay of response between bee, machine, and human such that the buzz of one affects the music of the other, which affects the rhythms that can be heard, the taps that can be danced or waltzed from day to night and back to day in a loop that may affect if not infect the science and the scientist with admiration more than knowledge.

"I am the animal," Lenore announces in tandem with Derrida, who admits that "my animal figures multiply, gain in insistence and visibility, become active, swarm, mobilize and get motivated, move and become moved all the more as my texts become more explicitly autobiographical, are more uttered in the first person"(35). What is visible in the video, as it is in Derrida's figures (and I would say unlike the texts of Deleuze or Agamben), is what Derrida calls the irreducible hetero-affection at the seat of the I—the imaginative capacity or vulnerability to be affected or moved by an other or other-animal that infects the very autonomy of the I and, with it, any simple delimitation between man and animal—or, in this case, woman, animal, and machine. It is in heter-affection that we viewers follow the animal-other and in step with the "beat beat beat" of the tom-tom.