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Book Review: *The Sensory Modes of Animal Rhetorics: A Hoot in the Light*

by Alex C. Parrish
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In the last decade, the field of rhetoric has undergone an “animal turn,” meaning that scholars are considering the treatment of nonhuman animals in rhetorical scholarship as well as whether they can be said to practice rhetoric. Such deliberations largely result from George Kennedy’s “A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of General Rhetoric.” This 1992 article reintroduced rhetoric—a practice predominantly viewed in relation to humans—as a technology also utilized by nonhuman animals. Rhetorical scholars have since responded with a range of scholarship envisioning the field unmarked by anthropocentrism, highlighting its need to embrace a biocultural paradigm, identifying the presence of nonhuman animals in its canonical works, and interrogating its history in regard to human exceptionalism. *The Sensory Modes of Animal Rhetorics: A Hoot in the Light*, by Alex Parrish, continues this work by offering a robust, transdisciplinary exploration of the rhetorical nature of senses as they manifest among humans and nonhumans. Parrish argues that by “seeing that animals communicate differently, we can appreciate the great variety of persuasive techniques found in nature without imposing value or inviting bias” (p. 340). Because of diversity among environments, there is no universal model to which all communication should subscribe.

The Sensory Mode’s introduction (Chapter 1), establishes the book’s primary themes of illuminating environmental impact on sensory abilities and communication, toppling hierarchical understandings of communication, and fostering empathy for nonhuman animals. Parrish finds inspiration in Marshall McLuhan’s statement that “the medium is the message,” which refers to the impact different mediums have on the ways messages are perceived. Parrish merges this insight with Jakob von Uexküll’s theory that animals all occupy a niche in their environment and possess unique bodies, cognitive functions, and sensory abilities. Perspectives formed as a result of such unique trait combinations blind animals to the perspectives of other species—an issue which greatly affects human treatment of nonhuman animals. Thus, this book directs attention to the interrelatedness of environments and senses and how incomplete understandings of abilities and perspectives can prove harmful. Parrish suggests different ways that humans can work to mitigate their hierarchical thinking in these areas.

Structurally, *The Sensory Modes* is divided into four parts, which introduce the study of animal rhetorics, investigate familiar senses as they appear among humans and animals, investigate senses that appear more frequently among animals, and discuss the dangers of and alternatives to human exceptionalism, respectively. Part I introduces the study of animal rhetorics and

establishes concepts essential to later discussions on cross-species rhetorical studies. This section seeks to amend dualism in biology and culture by stating that the need for culture (which humans share with other intelligent and social animals) is biological. Similarly, culture influences biological materials (such as genetics, hormones, and phenotypes) to equip individuals to endure their environments. The text then identifies how such studies could be disrupted. The opposition named includes humanism (which has a tendency for dualisms), scientific traditions (which sometimes demonstrate anxiety over decentering humanity), difficulty understanding animal communication, and difficulty related to transdisciplinary work. Part I closes with a discussion of deceit, information sharing, and manipulation that shows the presence of deceit and its varying degrees of intensity in both human and nonhuman animal cultures.

Part II is dedicated to detailed analyses of the familiar senses, their rhetorical properties, and their potential to blind humans to the other communicative methods in the world. It highlights the degree that humans rely on their sight and hearing (the visual and audio senses). Despite these being humanity's most favored senses, the author explains that they manifest more strongly among other animals. Parrish describes the importance of the often-neglected sense of touch to physical development and tool use among humans and animals. The relationship between touch and intimacy is specifically discussed as being important to humans. Finally, this section discusses the senses of smell and taste (the olfactory and gustatory senses) and the rhetorical signals that they provide in the lives of humans and animals, affecting appetite, sexual activity, and sense of environment.

Part III focuses on three senses that humans are rarely able to detect, but that they might interact with unknowingly. One is the ability to sense heat in surrounding environments and in other living creatures (thermoception). While humans are severely deficient in this skill, they have replicated it in technologies such as infrared. The second is the ability to sense electrical currents through water and, occasionally, on land (electroreception). Despite the rare appearance of this sense among terrestrial animals, owing to the electrical resistance of air, human substitutions for this lack arise through products such as personal oceanic devices. The third sense is the use of strong pulses to communicate, gather information about conspecifics, and map out environments (echolocation). This sense is well-known to humans via radar and sonar technologies. However, the nonhuman world is the locus of natural echolocation.

Part IV, the book's final section, provides a robust history of rhetoric's role in encouraging human exceptionalism and attempts that have been (or are being) made to decenter the human, beginning with Isocrates distinguishing humans by their use of eloquence and reason and ending with Amy Proppen's example of humans interceding for marine mammals ("Technologies of Mediation and the Borders and Boundaries of Human-Nonhuman Animal Relationships in Marine Species Advocacy"). The book suggests ways that humans can work to eliminate animal oppression, noting that attention must be given to mutually beneficial relationships between animals and humans. The book closes with a call to broaden communication-oriented fields to be more inclusive of animals' abilities and agency—and with

a warning about how hierarchical, exclusionary thinking brings harm to both animals and humans.

The greatest strength of this book lies in its transdisciplinary source material and its acknowledgment of alternative perspectives. Parrish uses insights from a host of disciplines, including biosemiotics, communication studies, disability studies, ethology, and others to inform his discussions of animal rhetorics. He makes visible efforts to include other perspectives; for example, he includes a few notable examples of non-Western perspectives despite the book's primary focus on the West. Having noted the book's greatest strength, it is also appropriate to mention a weakness that appears throughout the text. Parrish frequently notes that humans have, and are in the process of, adapting sensory abilities that are predominantly present among nonhuman populations. One might easily reach the conclusion that being able to adopt the rhetorical modes of others serves to confirm human exceptionalism.

The Sensory Modes of Animal Rhetorics: A Hoot in the Light is a valuable transdisciplinary work that illustrates why rhetoric is inseparable from environmental context and how senses function rhetorically. This book shines in its argument that humans often judge their abilities as communicators (or rhetors) without fully considering their environments and the abilities of other animals. Thus, this proves a necessary read for anyone in the fields of communication studies and rhetoric.

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