

Animal Voices

Scott Bradfield, *Animal Planet*, Picador, London 1995, £14.99 HB, ISBN 0-330-34360-2

Julian Stallabrass

Animal Farm was written as a warning against revolution which would bloodily install the same bosses in new guises. *Animal Planet*, though its message is less forthright, also tells the story of a revolution corrupted and sold out. Why the attraction, over this historical distance, of a clumsy allegorical form in which animals stand for the poor? Firstly, because allegory is very good at describing a system where people are treated as objects, and commodities appear as personalities; secondly, as much now as in Orwell's day, because the poor are treated as animals, just as animals are treated as objects. Both animals and the poor are subjected to the bodily and mental torment of being handled and discarded as if they were inanimate. In Bradfield's book, there is also an awareness that animals and humans are parts of a single ecological system which binds their fates together; so the animals of *Animal Planet* are not just allegorical figures but also stand in for themselves.

The novel begins in London Zoo, plainly an image of the welfare state where no one pays much attention to anyone but themselves, and no one is particularly happy, but where the animals are given just enough to keep them quiet, having 'pumped-in muzak, fresh meat and greens, weekly hose downs, and even ... a bone or two.' The Zoo is broken open by a combination of terrorist action and economic recession which removes these anaesthetising goods. Running free, the animals start to look upon one another, realising that 'We are all different ... And yet all somehow the same'. They produce their one-word revolutionary slogan, 'us'.

To animal activism, particularly their new-found use of language, humans respond with world-wide repression backed by arms. So often in this part of the book there are echoes of real struggles: when propaganda is dropped from planes over the penguin population of Antarctica, warning them that they have nothing to fear but themselves, we may think of the billions of threatening leaflets that fluttered down upon the largely illiterate peasantry of

Vietnam. And, as in Vietnam, once troops are committed, the generals find that they always need a few thousand more.

If animals are animals, Bradfield suggests, it is only because the system sees them as such. The revolutionaries develop non-animal characteristics as they learn to talk; Charlie the crow has heels, and Buster the penguin goes unshaven. But most of the animals are clichéd, cartoon images of themselves—gorillas, for instance, love bananas and eat off toilet seats. In all this, contemporary US politics is much to the fore. The animals, it is clear, are the US underclass whose lives are ‘nasty, brutish, and short’ as one Hobbes-spouting goon puts it, and have only themselves to blame for their benighted condition. Animals have disgusting eating and sanitary habits, they tend not to speak well or think clearly; their leader, the crow, also known as ‘The Nig’, is, of course, black.

If these descriptions are sometimes uncomfortable, it is not just because there is not enough sense of the positive powers which oppose the wielding of mass-media cliché, but also because the humour of this satire sits oddly with its subject. Monkey antics can be funny but, when we think of the consequences of what Bradfield is recounting, the laugh sticks in our throats: it is, after all, a system which condemns all those outside the ‘golden billion’ to poverty and insecurity, which routinely starves a fifth of the world’s human inhabitants, which threatens the ecological health of the planet, which maintains itself not only with lies but, where necessary, with imprisonment, torture and murder. But in this book, humour, satire, irony—call it what you will—lies between the reader and that realisation: it makes *Animal Planet* a safe place to be.

Bradfield tell us how the revolution collapses as factional interests corrupt it, and as capital markets it as T-shirts, films and toys. Again, current events in the US are behind this story: ‘We don’t want Western culture!’, cries revolution’s demagogue, Mr. Big, in an echo of the PC debates in academia, and the animals’ slogan changes from ‘us’ to a simple, deadly ‘no’. With the revolution falls language itself—the crow, demoralised and soaked in booze, begins to lose the ability to speak. In this new world of identity politics, the revolution founders: ‘It wasn’t even a political crisis anymore. It was a crisis of representation, and that was the scary part. Words no longer represented things, governments no longer represented people, and images no longer represented stuff. All across *Animal Planet*,

animals were giving up on rhetoric altogether. Instead they were taking up big sticks, rocks, broken bottles, axe handles, splintery pool cues, and two-by-fours.’ (And those who do not turn to senseless violence become safely ensconced in a ‘Midwestern Cultural Studies Department’.) But what is not spelt out is how far the market is responsible for this failure of unified opposition, with its corruption of every emotive word in advertising, its reduction of complex identities to simple, saleable essences, its constant division of people into this or that buying type.

Towards the end of the book, the conservative, Orwellian case is put by one animal character: ‘It will never be safe to live among the animals ... Because animals will always be animals. And meat will always be meat.’ Bradfield has no reply to this, except to suggest that we can all decide to be nicer to one another. Buster is given a ride by a reformed human-supremacist truck driver, and eventually swims off into the distance to find the love of his life. Yet previously Bradfield has given fine accounts of the structural causes of brutality—of the action of private wealth on politics and culture. They cannot be simply wished away.

For Bradfield, human beggars carry the same message as Orwell’s pigs on two legs. Revolutions may perhaps become perverted from the inside, but they are rarely given that chance. Eduardo Galeano put the matter well in an essay defending Nicaragua: ‘The pitiless, ever-growing siege and blockade are not taking place because democracy does not exist in Nicaragua, but so it never will. They are not taking place because a dictatorship exists in Nicaragua, but so one may again. They are not taking place because Nicaragua is a satellite, a sad pawn on the chessboard of the great powers, but so it may be one again ... Deforming the revolution would be, in the end, wiping it out: *deforming it to such a degree that no one could recognise himself in it.*’

Allegory is good at describing the appalling operation of Capital, but less good at giving an image of a possible future beyond it. This future is only gestured towards in *Animal Planet*. But the dispossessed do frequently find their voice, even if it is little heard in the Western media—they have found it recently, for instance, in the writings of the Zapatistas—and in listening to that voice, in learning from it, and relaying it, it should not always be necessary to think and speak in code.

