



ANIMALS ON SHINY FLOORS: THE REPRESENTATION OF NON-HUMAN ANIMALS IN TALENT SHOWS

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Abstract: Exhibiting animals and their qualities are not new to human beings. Human Beings as a species has this innate curiosity to prove and assert that they are different from other species and hence must take the roles of protectors, defenders and teachers when it comes to them. Non-human animals have always been an important component of human leisure in the form of hunting, exhibiting and performing. From menageries to zoos to parks to circuses to films and literature, animal representation has always invoked pleasure and wonder in human beings. And in the new millennia, these trends mainly continue in the forms of Insta media and YouTube blogs. Humans tend to project the special qualities of their non-human companions in a space that is completely used by human beings. The non-human beings, in these social sites are put under public eye to comment, criticize and compare. And one of the important and more popular medium of such criticism is the ‘Talent Show’ industry. Looking at the most famous talent competitions of the ‘Got Talent’ franchise, we cannot deny the fact that they feed on people’s wonder. If we observe carefully the two most viewed talent shows in the world, Britain’s Got Talent (BGT) and America’s Got Talent (AGT), the animal representation in these shows include apart from humans- dogs, cats, horses, donkeys, ferrets, pigs, snakes, rats and even tortoises. The best acts get to the next level, but the worst acts are the ones that always remain in viewers’ minds. Whereas brilliant acts have their own strength in that it shows those

non-human animals in a different light and feeds the wonder in the viewers' minds. Because without doubt the singing, dancing, stunts performing non-human animals are always the prime attraction of such shows. But the important questions that still looms over it all is - why are 'they' doing it. From tortoises that want to break the Guinness records to dogs that want to perform in front of the Queen to horses that want to win pounds and dollars, are all asking one question. For whom are we performing?

This paper analyses how talent shows become a vehicle of non-human animal representation, suppression and exploitation.

Keywords: Animals, Animal representation, talent shows, posthumanism, animal ethics

Exhibitionism has always been a mode of entertainment for human beings. Whether it is their selves, their possessions or their achievements, humans always found vanity in exhibiting and merry in onlooking. And Non- human animal exhibition in various modes and mediums are an important example for such a conduct. Humans have always had the inherent belief of elitism and ownership when it comes to the animal 'other', often pretending themselves as the guardians, protectors and guards of these non-human creatures. However, there also is this thought of dependency and control which is interchangeable. Hunters are both dependent and controlling over their game and so are farmers. And so are all the others who engage with their animal others, in various fields, for various aids.

Non-human animals have always been an important component of human leisure in the forms of hunting and exhibiting and performing. From menageries to zoos to parks to circuses to films and literature, animal representation has always invoked pleasure and wonder in human beings. However, the medium of non-human exhibition has changed overtime. When humans transferred from real space to virtual space and landscape to digital scape, they also took animals with them. They put these non-human animals in an exclusive human space of social

network sites like Instagram or YouTube, for humans to view, comment, compare and criticize. Visual medias like film and television have always exhibited animals but in the new millennium, this concept is taken a step ahead by talent show industries. Even if talented animals have been on television shows since the late 90s, a boom in this practice came in with the advent of the Got Talent TV format, by SYCOtv. The Got Talent is a TV talent show format which spreads across the globe in various talent shows such a Britain's Got Talent (BGT), America's Got Talent (AGT), Spain's Got Talent, Arabia Got Talent, France's Got Talent, India's Got Talent and so on. The show showcases contestants with incredible talents competing for a final prize and fame. Interestingly, the criteria of gender, age, occupation and even species doesn't apply to its contestants. Hence, when exploring through the acts showcased on these talent shows, it must not surprise anyone to see animals of all species in there.

It is a wonderful example of inclusion but also a perfect example for oppression. The non-human animals par their age and species are brought in front of a large crowd to 'perform' their unique talent. Examining just the most old and popular talent shows of this format – AGT and BGT, the species of animals introduced ranges from humans to dogs to cats to otters to rats to snakes to birds to tortoises so on. Whether it is the brilliant act of Ashley and Pudsey who went on to win BGT in 2012 or the act of One Man and his Dog, whose Dog for the whole time chased BGT presenter Ant Mcpartlin around the stage and into the wings, the end results were the same: People enjoying and ratings increasing. It was not only the best acts that shone but the failures too. The talent-show agencies which feed on people's awe and wonder and thrive on unpredictability, have appealed to the audience through these animal acts. The unpredictability of talent-show contestants, started with the Susan Boyle audition of 2009 was acknowledged by Ant when he turned to their camera to ask: "You didn't expect that did you?"

(BGT, 2009) was mirrored in 2012, when Ant and Dec exclaimed seeing Pudsey's act to say "It's walking – backwards!" (BGT, 2012)

Interestingly, not only good acts but bad acts also bring in absolute audience joy. An example is an act called Catalyst of the first series of BGT, where a lady was about to recite a poetry about cats, using two cats as her poetry props. One of the cats were too bored of the whole endeavour that she dragged presenter Declan Donnelly who was holding her leash, from the stage to the wings, repeating four to five times every time he returned her to the stage (BGT, 2009). However, the most famous, hilarious, watched animal fail on BGT is with presenter Ant Mcpartlin, who was chased to the wings four or five times by Max, a Yorkish Terrier. Britain's Got More Talent, a sister show of BGT, also showed a whole segment of failed non-human animal acts once, appreciating the entertainment value they bring in. It's not just cats or dogs. But birds like owl, pigeon, parrot etc. also have high entertainment value. Their total unpredictability is something these franchises feed on. Moreover, the chaos that has occurred on and off the stage with horses (who dumped on the stage), otters (who ran around and to the wings forcing Ant and Dec to run around collecting them), tortoise (who was expected to complete a world record but stopped halfway for no reason anyone could procure) and love birds in cages (who does nothing but eat their biscuit) are one of the things that makes the show appealing and interesting.

However, the important concern here is of safety. One of the dog acts showcased a jump through fire, which the dogs didn't complete as they were afraid and one of the cat acts showcased a cat falling from a ledge while performing. Such cases were deemed as unlucky and accidents. Questions were evoked about the licence and qualification of human owners, but no effective measures are taken to ensure the same. The question of consent and belonging are looming in the threshold here, as many a times these non-human animals don't even want to be on that stage. This is where Claire Rasmussen's observation of human/animal relationship

comes in, where she observes: “the act of seeing and the production of affect are not determinate and must be framed within a broader set of power relations that entangle humans and animals.” (Rasmussen, 58)

The non-human animal who are apparently unaware of the prize and glamour of the show is showcased without their interest or consent. Even if the producers take care to make sure they are not hurt on-screen, how they are trained and the mental torture they must go through while on-stage are all things to be considered. A similar issue arose long ago about showcasing children in talent shows, which paved way to several discussions and guidelines. Such a disciplining is very much needed, even if it is a long shot and unable to apply right away, it's high time discussions and started and alternative are found.

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