

Maria Vogel

ÄsopScans

The Greek poet Aesop, considered to be the father of the fable, is said to have lived in the sixth century BC. His real identity is lost in legend, because it was not until three hundred years later that a collection of fables currently in circulation appeared in his name. The idea of translating human behaviour into animal characters has fascinated story-tellers, poets and thinkers right down to the present day. La Fontaine's masterly fables are best-known simply because of their succinctness. Animal fables always have a moral. It is thus not surprising that Lessing, as the author of *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (The Education of the Human Race) was also interested in them. He explained the translation of human characters to animals by pointing out that the latter had unambiguous and generally known qualities. Magpies are thieving, foxes cunning, doves peaceful, owls clever etc. Today great restraint is exercised in this respect, but however much behavioural researchers try to avoid humanizing animals they will never succeed. We can see animals only from our point of view and describe them only in our language. But on the other hand they are closer to us in their genetic structure than previously thought. Therefore it is perhaps not such a mistake to draw analogies. But on the basis of contemporary scientific knowledge these will relate more to physiological than character traits.

It is an old dream to look behind the exterior, to see what is hidden, to know what is happening inside someone else, to read thoughts and to identify oneself with a person on another creature, in order to be able to recognize what is »real«. Fairy-tales with hats that make the wearer invisible and transformation myths tell us a great deal in this way. But not just them. The history of any area has discoveries to report. They could be the result of deliberate procedures but often they happened by chance, as in December 1895. The physicist Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen was investigating cathode rays with a Hittorf tube and as a side effect discovered the short-wave, electromagnetic rays that penetrate material. The enthusiasm with which they were used is known not only from medical history. There was an X-ray machine in every shoe-shop that used to check whether new shoes fit. It was only when it became clear that X-rays are dangerous that these devices disappeared. X-ray machines have cropped up again in a new form and new places of recent years: in airports above all, where they are used to show up dangerous items in luggage.

As in the work *Lesungen Rémy Markowitsch* also brings different things together in *ÄsopScans*, 1996. He had animal specimens photographed frontally or diagonally from below, with an X-ray apparatus of the kind used in the security service. The images produced in this way were sampled in a scanner to establish their structure and then projected on a monitor in three colours. Each colour stands for a different type of material. Orange identifies organic matter, blue inorganic and mixed materials are coloured green. Markowitsch photographed the images directly from the monitor, had them enlarged to the original size of the animal specimens, and after they had once more been analysed into their data by a scanner, printed on paper by a plotter. Again a certain reality is addressed digitally and stored, in other words divided up and fitted together and this time additionally made recognizable again by photography, scanner and print.

In *ÄsopScans* Markowitsch takes further something that started with photographs of pictures from books. For these he used to shine strong light through pages of books with illustrations on both sides, and then photograph them. Because the images partially overlap they form new figures with interpenetrating layers. His color prints *Nach der Natur* (After Nature), 1991–94, show domestic pets doubled in reversed images and partly blending with each other. These two-headed, eight-legged monsters immediately bring chimeras created by genetic engineering to mind. Here nature is changed. In the preserved animal specimens the illusion of nature is preserved. Well preserved specimens seem so genuine that they suggest an encounter with living animals. But all they have in common with the creatures they originally were are bones, horny parts and fur, feathers or skin. The rest is an artificial arrangement.

As in the fables, animals are used as illustrative material. It is no chance that most schools have preserved animal specimens in their collections. They are usually presented in a way that corresponds with the common image connected with them. Cats lie in waiting, cranes stride, ravens hold a branch with their claws, swans stretch their necks. These are not moral characteristics as in the fables, but again something is imposed on the animals that is generally felt to be typical. Seen from the outside, the artificial quality of such animal specimens is scarcely perceptible. The better they have been prepared, the more »natural« they seem. It is only when they are X-rayed that the constructed interior is revealed, and thanks to the distinctions in material made by the colours even the structural method and the added parts can be determined. It is immediately possible to work out whether the material is organic, inorganic like wires, or semi-organic and synthetic.

Markowitsch uses digital printing to reduce the animals to two dimensions, shows them as illustrations of the kind that are found in books. Because it is so easy to imagine three-dimensional extension, it can be assumed that sight is simultaneously directed at two- and three-dimensional perception. Visible things in their three-dimensionality are placed in a spatial structure in which we can localize them, but where they show only their surface. Even if, as with these animal specimens, the surface is penetrated by rays, only new surfaces are to be seen. Anyway X-ray images are never three-dimensional, but restricted to two dimensions. Thus the digitalized prints are like copies of coloured drawings of the kind that might be reproduced in a book. Markowitsch's *ÄsopScans* move in the opposite direction to his previous photography of overlapping book illustrations. He has projected the three-dimensional into two dimensions.

It is astonishing how artistic the X-rayed animal specimens look. In the case of the birds the supporting wires seem like vigorously drawn loops. In the snake, wolf, fox and crocodile the wire follows the creature's principle »Gestalt« line. Thanks to the technical procedure, and of course thanks to the preserver's design skills, the animals become products that look as though they have been drawn and painted by hand. The almost idyllic aesthetic side is also part of *ÄsopScans* but Markowitsch breaks it up by including in the work a programme showing a hundred cooked meat dishes, passing permanently across a screen. They come from illustrated cards showing international recipes from the 70s. Markowitsch came across them as randomly, as he did the slides that he used in his works *Kastanienallee 1994* (Chestnut Avenue 1994) and *Oranienburgerstrasse 1994* (Oranienburg Street 1994). Like those they were transferred to a CD by a digital process. This technique with its »stripping into pieces« of the model becomes an analogy of dismembering animals in terms of the preserved specimens and the meat dishes. Synthesis into a recognizable image then corresponds to the unity of a meat dish, enriched with other ingredients. The animal itself is degraded to become a usable object with no value of its own.

The selection of dishes shows a broad spectrum. Markowitsch has paid attention to sequences of »chapters« in pictures in which the cooked meat becomes increasingly distant from the shape of the former animal. It begins with whole chickens and ducks, followed by roast and preserved meat. Every animal is cut into pieces to the point of absolute unrecognizability, with the sausages at the end of the line. The meat is arranged on platters with all kinds of ingredients, all in all good, solid food with lots of sauce; in terms of decorations as well this fits in neither with the *Nouvelle Cuisine* period nor with the pre- or post-war years – it could only be part of the 70s. The dishes with their generally accepted meat types cover a broad spectrum. There is no offal or horsemeat. This has hardly changed in international cuisine, right down to the present day. Food for the masses always moves in a similar frame, even if it is prepared with southern or Asiatic ingredients.

Domestic animals in their cooked state are products for the masses. Anyone who asks about their living conditions is still in a minority. It is somewhat different with exotic animals. Documentary films of living animals, above all in areas that are a long way away from us, are popular entertainment for the television audience. But usually the commentaries on them are so silly and the accompanying music so superfluous that the animals are again not allowed to be what they actually are: creatures with specific qualities. As they were in the fables, they are being abused »for the education of the human race« and for instruction.

Markowitsch has used animals in his selection of specimens that have a part to play in fables and fairy-tales, in mythologies and as symbols; they may be domestic animals, or belong to an ancient species: raven and fox, swan, crane and stork, badger and wolf, cock, mouse and cat, snake, crocodile, monkey and armadillo. But most of these animals do not just carry a literary charge, they are to some extent revalued as well; this does not necessarily involve just their flesh, but in the case of snakes and crocodiles their skin, and the badger's hair. There is scarcely a single human need in which animals are not involved, and look at the extent to which things have been tested on and with them! They have been tormented and killed in the name of medical and technical progress, monkeys have been sent into space and other species almost or completely exterminated for commercial reasons.

When looking at *ÄsopScans* we are inevitably taken into a moral sphere, although Markowitsch never says a word about this, and does not wag his finger at us. He has created a new kind of fable. It does not preach at us from a great height, and is not intended educationally. It shows in various media and from various points of view what has happened to and is happening to animals and leaves people who are addressing the issue to draw their own conclusions.

Maria Vogel

Aus:

FINGER IM BUCH
Rémy Markowitsch
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Justin Hoffmann
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Maria Vogel
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□ by Maria Vogel und Rémy Markowitsch

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e-mail: rmarkowitsch@web.de
www.markowitsch.org