

Cute power: anthropomorphic 'enhancement' and ethical regression in digital representations of other animals

Dr Matthew Cole and Dr Kate Stewart

Abstract

In this paper we critically analyse digital media as a cultural space in which children interact with dominant representations of other animals. In these spaces, we argue that children are socialized into dominant practices (such as eating other animals' flesh) and acceptance of the mediation of human-nonhuman animal relations through a capitalist lens of commodification. For instance, in social media games such as 'Farmville' or 'Family Farm', players adopt a 'farmer' role and control a farm or ranch populated with 'cute' representations of other animals. The deployment of 'cute style' legitimates and conceals the violence that underpins dominant practices in the non-digital realm. Furthermore, we argue that digital representations cultivate and channel children's empathy in ways which tend to insulate those violent and exploitative practices from critical questioning, while simultaneously developing and enacting valued character traits of compassion, caring and responsibility. Children thereby tacitly learn to internalize and reproduce the skills of 'correctly' categorizing other animals, and therefore their 'correct' relationships with them (to eat them, love them, spectate them and so on). We argue that caring relationships are therefore restricted to 'types' of animals that reproduce dominant human-nonhuman animal relationships and do not disturb exploitative capitalist practices, resulting in a profound impoverishment of children's capacity for ethical critique of human violence towards other animals.

Author Biographies

Dr Matthew Cole is an Honorary Associate and Associate Lecturer with the Open University. Dr Kate Stewart is a Lecturer in Social Aspects of Medicine and Health Care at the School of Medicine, University of Nottingham. Their first jointly authored book, a critical sociological analysis of the socialization of human-nonhuman animal relations in childhood, was published by Ashgate in Autumn 2014: *Our Children and Other Animals: The Cultural Construction of Human-Animal Relations in Childhood*. Their research interests also include the genealogy and representation of veganism and the relationship between public health and plant-based diets.