

Emmanuel Gouabault, Annik Dubied, Claudine Burton-Jeangros

Genuine Zoocentrism or Dogged Anthropocentrism? On the Personification of Animal Figures in the News

Introduction. Over the past few decades, animal figures seem to have been increasingly personified in Euro-American information media. References to domestic or wild animals described as human characters have become more frequent; an identity and a genealogy (first name, surname, filiation, etc.) are attributed, for example, to Knut, the polar bear cub of the Berlin Zoo; to JJ3, a bear killed in Switzerland; as well as to Tinkerbelle, Paris Hilton's chihuahua. The feelings and actions of these animals are often described at length. At the same time, however, an opposite trend can be observed in news reports highlighting aggressive or threatening animals; dangerous dogs, mad cows, birds or pigs spreading the flu seem more common than before, and these incidences, contrary to the trend of personification, reinforce human-animal alterity. This ambivalence in the media raises questions regarding public attitudes about the borderline between humans and animals. On the one hand, a vanishing borderline supports the idea of an increasing zoocentrism proposed by Adrian Franklin in *Animals and modern culture* (1999); on the other, reactions to new animal threats not only highlight the felt need to maintain a clear distance, but also suggest the permanence of anthropocentrism in human-animal relationships. This article attempts to analyze the extent of contemporary European zoocentrism, as measured through recent media coverage of certain animal figures.

Are zoocentrism and personification dominant trends today? The study of personified animals reveals certain current trends related to animals, both in the media and society at large. Nowadays, animal representations in European media portray ambivalent figures. While animals may be shown as being very close to humans (i.e., personified animals) in some cases, in others we see that they are depicted as a source of danger. This reflects an evolutionary trend in human-animal relationships, and consequently raises many questions. Franklin associates ambivalent animal representations with a shift from anthropocentrism towards zoocentrism. He observes a "decline in anthropocentrism (the assumption of the moral ascendancy and centrality of humans in the world) [and] the emergence of zoocentrism (the recognition of animals as full or partial moral subjects)" in interactions with animals, as in the development of animal-assisted therapies (Franklin and White 5). In another article discussing animal rights

supporters, Franklin specifies this evolution as “neither the zoocentrism of strict animal rights nor an anthropocentric privileging of the human, but hybrids of the two” (Franklin, Tranter and White 6), which means that these two attitudes are not in strict opposition. The sensibility of a growing zoocentrism described by Franklin is reinforced by the emergence of the pet phenomenon, which from the middle of the nineteenth century has offered a widespread model for human-animal relationships in general based on the difference between wild and not-wild.¹ This has occurred in a context of urbanization and industrialization that has contributed to the reinforcement of the distinction, firmly established in the Age of Enlightenment, between nature and culture. This clear distinction has been challenged, however, by the emergence of ecological awareness in the 1960s and 70s, and, at the same time, by the epistemological revolution of ethology, which may also be taken as evidence of growing zoocentrism. Nowadays, animal cultures are acknowledged, and wild animals are considered to be “strong” subjects, even persons (Lestel, *Origines* 135-139).² Another trend worth mentioning is the polarization of animal friends in relation to certain flagship species, such as the wild and threatened ones, also called the *Mediagenic megafauna* (Freeman, 49; Champion-Vincent, 23). These animals, whether large felines, elephants, cetaceans, or polar bears, clearly fascinate many people who, living mostly in urban environments, idealize those distant creatures. This fascination, combined with other factors such as a polemical ecological discourse, makes it possible for animals previously considered pests to be today’s heroes, and indeed “symbols of those spaces that have been reconquered from polluting humanity, of this protected nature that is once again in balance” (Champion-Vincent, 34). Wolves and dolphins are good examples of this process. Representations of human-animal relationships are clearly embedded in this re-negotiation of the human relationship with nature, in association with a growing concern for the environment, for sustainable development, and for the management of risks induced by nature. Our analysis of zoocentrism through personified animals in the media aims at providing complementary insights into these tendencies from the perspective of the social sciences.

Over the last few years, the European media have increasingly favored individualized, personified, and even “starified” treatment of information. A multitude of articles focus on stars or on figures symbolizing a cause, a process characterized as starification, media treatment centered on the private lives of figures (Dubied, “L’information-people” 11-18). The placement of individual figures at the center of media representations increases the potential for emotional connection and proximity, and makes the treatment of general interest subjects more concrete, more available, but also more problematic. We claim that the personification of animals through the promotion

of information provided in terms of individual figures not only depicts a shift in human-animal relationships, but also challenges the definition of identity that humans from Western societies attribute to themselves (along with or against other groups of existing entities³) and the values surrounding this definition, such as individualism, respect for nature, ethnocentrism, etc. The human tendency to personify animal figures has been discussed in terms of spheres other than the media, in a number of situations related to the history of human-animal relationships. Cultures based on animist or totemist ontologies, as well as ancient and medieval societies, feature a number of personified and famous animals.⁴ However, the transition through modernization to a naturalist ontology — the “great divide” of Latour, based on a rupture between human and animal nature — excludes neither animist thinking nor the persistent personification of certain animals. Méchin substantiates this through the attribution of names to domestic animals during the nineteenth century. These names were in general very descriptive, taking into account, in the case of bovines, for example, their color and/or behavior. Animals intended to be eaten, on the other hand, were either not named, in order to avoid an inopportune attachment, or were given standardized names that transformed them into objects that could then be morally slaughtered; this is known as the “comedy of innocence” (Dalla Bernardina, *Personne* 36). In any case, attachment could not really be avoided, due to the animal husbandry context that favored identification with the living, which Rousseau considered to be an essential faculty of humans, even before the consciousness of oppositions. Therefore, the personification of animals is not specific to the present time. The process nonetheless acquires new significance and forms during the 20th century, notably in the media, and can be seen as an illustration of a growing zoocentric sensibility (Franklin, 54-55).

Before proceeding to our empirical analysis of the personification process, we must examine the notion of the “person” in anthropological discourse. According to Mauss, the notion is relative and varies with states or social situations that individuals encounter (331-362). Leenhardt insists on the necessity to conceive it in a relational, *i.e.* social and symbolic, dimension (cited by Rabain-Jamin, 571-573). The attribution of the status of person is therefore variable, depending on a specific interactive context. Sanders defines four criteria for the personification process in the interactions between humans and dogs: the attribution of (1) a thought process (remembering, deducing, understanding, believing, etc.); (2) a personality (biography, preferences, desires, etc.); (3) a potential reciprocity in order to co-construct the relationship between human and animal; and (4) a role in the human group (210-221). In the context of ethology, Lestel⁵ questions the identity of some animals that are in close relations with humans, referring instead to “human-animal hybrid communities,” such as friendship relationships, and

insists on the concept of shared identity (which he refers to as “co-identity”). Moreover, the attribution of complex cognitive capacities to animals allows us to consider them not as autonomous weak subjects, but rather as heteronomous strong subjects, or even persons. In their interactions with humans, as in the exemplary relationship between primates and primatologists, animals develop a more accurate awareness of their identity, as well as a richer memory and increased capacity for anticipation, while at the same time reinforcing their self-representations through diverse strategies (Lestel, *L’animal* 57-58). The construction of the status of “person” — human or not — depends in the end on a tripartite concept of history: phylogenetic (history of the species), cultural (history of the group), and individual (biographic history) (*op. cit.* 135).

These elements show how sensitivities toward animals are evolving through diverse forms of zoocentrism. Anthrozoological relationships nonetheless seem to remain ambivalent. It is our intention to examine these tensions through the analysis of a large corpus of Swiss media extracts.⁶

Methods. The analyzed media corpus consists of 4,244 articles extracted from fifteen Swiss newspapers over the period 1978-2007, and 236 TV news extracts. We examined the personification process in three analytical stages. In the first global analysis conducted with the CAQDAS *Atlas.ti* database, each extract was coded according to the role assigned to the animal in the media discourses. Among the five main figures of animals that emerged from this coding the figure of the “shown animal” (i.e., animal figures specifically used by journalists to be shown to the reader) was the one most directly linked with the personification process. In the second analytical stage, a sub-corpus of 225 items was used to identify eight “attributes of personification” among cases related to the “shown animal” figure. Finally, we focused our attention on a specific case of a “shown animal,” namely that of Knut, and compared this, through the use of the “contrasted portrait” approach, to the undesirable animal figure of the pitbull. These two figures allowed us to delineate the ambivalence of contemporary animal representations.

The Swiss paradigm presents a number of interesting characteristics. Firstly, this is because Switzerland offers a multilingual media context (French, German, and Italian) situated at the crossroads of European cultures. Moreover, Switzerland typically boasts a high density of media usage in relation to per capita press (ranked fourth worldwide in 2007) and of TV-set possession (95% of households in 2007). Analysis of animal representations in this setting appears therefore to be a promising endeavor in terms of richness and diversity of results, allowing for fascinating comparisons with related research in other national contexts.

Let us finally emphasize that we do not intend to place weight on the diversity of the media coverage, but rather to focus on personified animal representations in the media in general.⁷

A content analysis of the media extracts allows us to establish a list of “personification attributes” that can then be compared to those described in other studies, like Sanders’s, addressing the process of animal personification outside the media. By combining these attributes, three levels of personification were deduced:

1. The *singular animal*, presented as a specific subject, different from its own group or species;
2. The *individualized animal*, described in an anthropomorphic way, as a genuine individual;
3. The *superindividual*, referring to the most developed stage of personification, in which a process of “starification” is applied to the animal.

The superindividual dimension will be more thoroughly analyzed in the case study of the polar bear Knut, the abandoned cub of the Berlin Zoo. The “Knut story” turned into an international narrative, and the little bear’s figure became emblematic, to be used as a trademark and a symbol for environmental campaigns. The case of Knut will then be compared to an opposite animal figure placed in the media forefront at the same time, that of the three pitbulls who killed a child on his way to school in eastern Switzerland.

Levels of animal personification. In the content analysis of the selected corpus of animal representations in the Swiss information media, we identified five main animal figures (Figure 1) representing contrasting roles that humans tend to attribute to animals portrayed in the media.

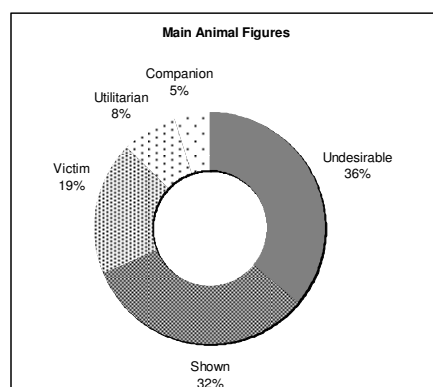


Figure 1 : Main Animal Figures (n=4480 articles and TV news extracts)

These contrasted figures confirm the ambivalence of animal representations in today's media, as well as highlighting the importance of the personification of animals, in particular through the figure of the "shown animal," which represents 32% of the corpus (second most important after the "undesirable animal"). The "shown animal" is on the whole a fairly stable figure throughout the three studied decades, but it is divided among a series of sub-figures that evolve differently. Among these sub-figures, the animal "on stage," which is of particular interest for the analysis presented here, has become more frequent over time.⁸ The figure of the "companion animal" also refers to the personified animal to an extent, in particular through the sub-figure of the "companion's personality," within which the animal is described in an anthropomorphic way.

In total, we identified 225 items directly related to the personification process transversally in the corpus. In extending Sanders's work, we established eight "attributes of personification," most of which can be identified as "human attributes," since the animal is never really considered in and of itself:

- The **context** in which the animal is described characterizes its specificity, without taking into account any indication of its personality, personal history, or even name.
- The **speaking**, which consists of "speaking for" the animal, more than "speaking with," as observed by Arluke and Sanders regarding dogs (61-81). These authors considered this attribute mostly in the context of an animal-person dyad, something which is rarely the case in our corpus.
- The attribution of an **individual name** to the animal (humanlike or not). Méchin underlines that to be named an animal has first to be individualized. Describing the evolution of animal naming in France, she insists on its fundamental role in animal personification. In the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, the rule was to give descriptive, even if individualized, names to domesticated animals; nowadays the rule has shifted towards giving human names to companion animals.
- An **individual history** is sometimes formulated, including references to family, parents, age, date of birth, etc.
- The attribution of a **national or territorial identity** can contribute to the success of certain animal media figures, as in the case of Knut. The *Mediagenic megafauna* that we evoked earlier involve the fascination, widespread in Europe, for what have been called the "big herbivores, indigenous, primitive, archaic, or

prehistoric” (Lizet and Daszkiewicz 63). This passion targets, for example, bison, some equidae species (Franche-Montagne in the Swiss Jura) and certain capridae species (the Nera Verzaschese in the Swiss Ticino). As with the *megafauna*, this process illustrates a quest for origins, observable in the reconstitution of the animal’s native origin. In such cases, the discourse on identity is central, in particular when the preservation of some “indigenous” species prevails over that of other species considered as invasive or exotic. Referring to “wild naturalized living,” Micoud highlights the artificiality of the process (208-209).

- The **interiority** of the animal refers to its emotional reactions and/or thought processes, an attribute highlighting anthropomorphization. Baker writes of “disnification” regarding the depiction of animals in visual media, which “incline towards the stereotypical and the stupid, float free from the requirements of consistency or of the greater rigor that might apply in other non-visual contexts” (175). This notion fits with the kind of anthropomorphism appearing in our analysis of the press corpus, as will be detailed below.
- The **mediatization** turns an animal into a media figure. This attribute contributes widely — as a cause or as a consequence — to the massive interest generated about animals in the Western world. It refers to the media coverage of a specific animal, such as Dolly, the cloned sheep, included in our corpus.
- The “**starification**,” in reference to the work of the sociologist Edgar Morin (122-126), refers to an animal as a “superindividual” or a “star.” In the media discourse, such an animal is attributed two qualities: on the one hand, it is like everybody (having a daily life with emotions, difficulties, etc.), while on the other hand it is a hero, inaccessible and fascinating. The superindividual is like a model, embodying specific values. Nowadays, a lot of sportsmen, movie actors, or politicians are analyzed from that sociological perspective. Here we suggest that some animals undergo a similar process.

Our analysis suggests that Sanders’s criteria appear to be relevant also for media animal figures. This means that personification might be similar in the media and in a typical interactional context. While the motivations are different in these two contexts, the means are similar. We underlined this through the distinction between “speaking for” the animal and “speaking with” it. Does the personification of animals in the media support the claim of a growing zoocentrism? Indeed, apart from the context — and some obvious elements of the individual history (such as parents, age) — singularized animals seem to be assigned typical human qualities, such as the use of verbal

language, a baptismal name, a coherent humanlike biography, emotions, etc. To sum up, these animals encompass all the characteristics of a modern individual able to tell its story and to formulate an identity through it.

According to these attributes, animal figures can be classified into three contrasting levels, emphasizing an increasing complexity and shift towards human qualities. Through the description of examples from the corpus, we propose a distinction among singular animals, individualized animals, and superindividuals. With each level of personification, more human attributes are associated with the animal, and the borderline between human and animal is further blurred.

At the first level, the singular animal refers to a single animal presented as a specific subject, separated from its own group or species. Illustration 1 provides a first example: words are put in the mouth of a swan (see caption below) “asking” a man, who is smoking, for hashish.⁹ In this case, only the attributes of context and speaking are present in the article.

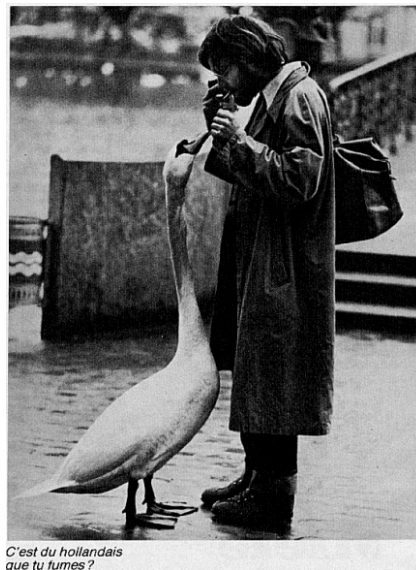


Illustration 1: The swan and the man

In a second article, entitled “Aspiring actors,”¹⁰ dogs are waiting for a tryout with their owners (Illustration 2). Here only the attribute of context is present.



Illustration 2: Aspiring actors

The second level — referring to the individualized animal — is more complex. It includes at least two attributes, and potentially all of them, with the exception of the last one (i.e., “starification”). The animal is described in an anthropomorphic way, as a genuine individual. Three examples will help us to describe such animals. Illustration 3 presents “Sammy,” the “friendly” elephant seal that is shaking hands with a man in the Berlin zoo.¹¹ In the context of the show, the journalist suggests that Sammy should have something to say about the appropriateness of what he is asked to do. Three attributes are present here: the context, a human name, and interiority. The animal’s name is a nickname, emphasizing the comic character the elephant seal, who often acts like a clown in the shows.



Illustration 3: Sammy, the “friendly” elephant seal

In the article entitled “‘Fungi’ lives it up” (Illustration 4), which also includes a picture of Fungi the “happy” solitary (but social with humans) dolphin of Dingle in Ireland,¹² five attributes are present: context, human name, individual history, territorial identity, and interiority. The stereotype of the friendly dolphin is clearly applied to Fungi. This figure, widespread in social representations,¹³ is an accurate illustration of Baker’s disnification.



Illustration 4: Fungi lives it up

The most complex example relating to the individualized animal is that of the Scottish sheep Dolly. She was the first adult animal cloned, in 1997. The case provoked a great deal of bioethical concern, highlighting negotiations between moral and instrumental tendencies, as observed by Macnaghten in his analysis of the public attitudes towards genetically modified animals (*Animals* 538-539). In the case of Dolly the Swiss media made use of six of the attributes we previously distinguished: the context, a human name, individual history, national identity, interiority, and of course mediatization. The sheep was called Dolly by the scientists as a reference to the singer Dolly Parton,¹⁴ Malamud pointing out that “the cloned cell was a mammary cell and Dolly Parton has famously large breasts” (10). This example again illustrates the interest of study animal naming.



Illustration 5: Dolly Parton / Dolly the Sheep

The third level — referring to the superindividual — is the most complex, and includes all the attributes without exception. The personification process is amplified and can be qualified in terms of “starification.” The best example in our corpus is Knut. Currently, the personification of animals is carried out mostly by the media, and is accentuated by their own dynamic, emphasizing the individualization of news. The star animal represents the most elaborated example of this process. We will now show that this third level of personification illustrates the existing ambivalence between zoocentric and anthropocentric sensitivities.

Knut, JJ3, Max and their Friends. The animal celebrity as a superindividual. The global corpus we analyzed includes several starified animals, among others Max, a ringed stork equipped with an Argos satellite transmitter since 1999 (and who turned

out to be a female), and Knut, the little polar bear of the Berlin zoo. The latter generated considerable media coverage and is at the top of the hierarchy we described above. As a celebrity animal he incarnated both the tendency of the media to personify animals, as well as the crisis of the human-animal frontier. Therefore his case deserves a detailed analysis.

Knut was born in December 2006 in captivity, in the Berlin Zoo. Like all offspring of threatened species, his birth provoked public curiosity. The case of Knut, however, would not stop there: rejected by his mother, as sometimes happens in a captive environment and after spending some time in an incubator, Knut then chose to “adopt” a substitute mother and found one in one of the zoo keepers, Thomas Dörflein.

Round, white, and silky, Knut then attracted with his somersaults the attention of an eager international public, live and through the media (Illustration 6). The Berlin Zoo quickly calculated the profit it could generate out of this animal, and produced an impressive number of derivative products associated with Knut, ranging from soft toys to children songs.



Illustration 6: Knut superstar

Through this process, Knut became the center of a mass-media phenomenon that became known as *Knutmania* (Illustration 6).¹⁵ Like any celebrity of the modern star system, he became a trademark well beyond his “domain of competency” (Benhamou, 22). He maintained this status until he reached adolescence, when he lost his freshness

and chubby charm. As a greyish and plantigrade young adult, he was no longer capable of attracting the attention of the public, nor of enjoying the protection of his substitute mother, who died soon after teaching him to be autonomous, in September of 2008. The adult bear Knut fell into a melancholy that some media compared to that developed by Britney Spears at the time of her *un-success story*.¹⁶ A tragic story, then, which the media told through the figure of the innocent orphan — an orphan polar bear cub with clearly human characteristics: abandonment, adoption, childish games and pranks, learning, and even video productions! Indeed, the media coverage did not establish any boundaries between children and Knut.¹⁷

In our study of the Swiss media, we gathered 31 items (articles and TV news extracts) about Knut. The majority of articles were collected from the German-speaking media, probably due to a greater cultural proximity between the German and Swiss-German media. The content of these items can be distributed into four categories highlighting the contradictory ways in which journalists decided to deal with the matter. The idealization of Knut in the media discourse is the most frequently chosen angle, representing two thirds of the articles devoted to him (Figure 2). In the 22 articles and TV news items categorized as idealizations, Knut was presented as a legendary and almost human hero-to-come, and more specifically as a mythic promising child. Several features were associated with him, the main one of which (nine items) referred to his “admirers.” For example, a caricature¹⁸ represented the German Chancellor Angela Merckel delivering a speech for the fiftieth anniversary of the Roma Treaty Signature (25th March 2007), in the presence of the little bear (by her left side), thus mocking the fact that after the main celebration everyone was invited to go to the zoo to see Knut.

It is evident then that despite the *Knutmania* generated by the media, the animal in question is not being considered in and of itself, as would have been the case in the context of a genuine zoocentric sensibility. Here the animal appears to be more than a person. It becomes a superindividual, a super-human figure reminding people of their faults, and embodying also the protection of the environment. Consequently, we suggest that an anthropocentric sensibility prevails.

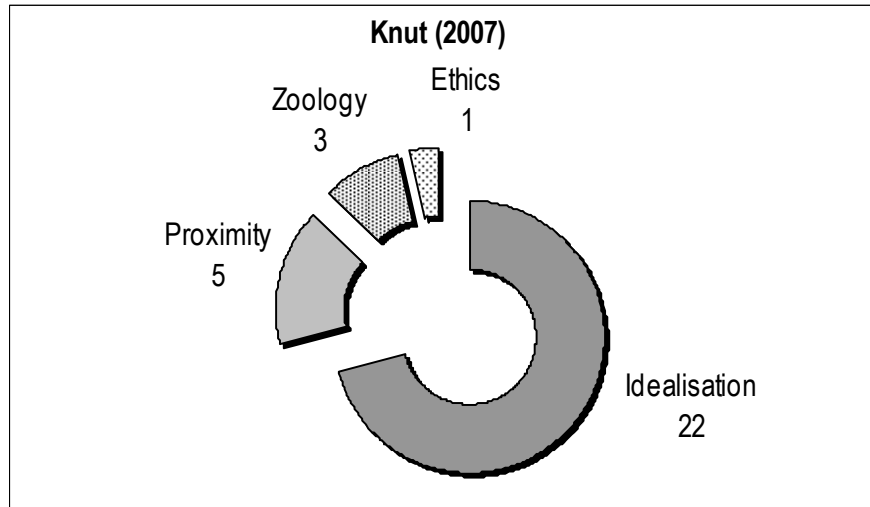


Figure 2. Knut (2007; n=31 articles and TV news extracts)

The idealization category contains further subcategories. In the “realizations” subcategory (three items), Knut’s development is depicted as a great accomplishment. An article goes so far as to describe the different stages of his first months in the form of a career.¹⁹ In the “savior” subcategory (three items), Knut becomes a symbol for an environmental campaign in favor of biodiversity and against global warming. A front page, referring to the context of environmental protection, is titled: “Will Knut save the world?”²⁰ In other idealized figures — such as power (one item); superstar (three items); model (two items) — Knut embodies some important values, such as youthfulness or perfect “Berlinership.” Referring to Knut as a “king” (one item), one journalist jokes about the celebrity of the little bear. The figure is used as a symbol of reconciliation with the animal kingdom, Knut being a mediator between nature, as an animal, and culture, as human-raised: he is an inverse wild child. A link can be made here with Brydon’s analysis of the return to nature of the orca Keiko, the star of the movie *Free Willy*. The killer whale had also been raised by humans and was made symbolically responsible for “re-establishing” a connection with nature. More recently, the birth of a female cub “Flocke,” on 11th December 2007, provided a potential follow-up to the Knut serial. The Nürnberg Zoo tried to generate a media/economic phenomenon around Flocke similar to, or indeed even more intense than, that of Knut.²¹ Some journalists pushed the tale, imagining the future wedding of Knut and Flocke, and the birth of their offspring (cf. Ganz-Blaettler).

Knut’s case suggests that one of the functions of the animal celebrity figure is to incarnate the hierarchy of values promoted in a specific sociocultural context. Arluke

and Sanders have demonstrated this hierarchy by means of the notion of a “sociozoological scale,” a scale of values embedded in Western social imaginaries since Aristotle (167-186). Other scholars, like Detienne and Boia, have shown that vertical thinking is ancient, and creates a hierarchical classification of alterity, attributing infra-human categories to animals or any human reduced to bestiality.²² Humans occupy the middle position in the scale, while the upper position is attributed to gods and superhuman creatures. The work of Renard on the human savage, and of Gouabault (*La résurgence* 434-472) on the opposition of values between sharks and dolphins illustrates this structure, as a continuation of the structural analysis of Lévi-Strauss. Studies on the values conveyed in star information also confirm this line of thought through the star figures.²³ Knut is no exception, and like his human brothers he is an innocent child, a victim of an abandonment that “society” compensates for. Any attack on his “person” is unbearable, so long as he remains a child, children being at the heart of many social issues in Western modern societies. In this respect, its figure is ambivalent: excessively anthropomorphized, but at the same time presented as over-human in his ability to encompass nature and the value thereof. The Knut phenomenon emphasizes the permanent negotiation surrounding human-animal relationships.

Knut versus the Pitbulls. Knut is not the only animal to have appeared on the front page of the media corpus we analyzed. Positive figures like his may have, of course, a limited shelf-life, for they are regularly overshadowed by other less amiable or even threatening animal figures. When the story of Knut appeared very early in 2007, the Swiss information media had been discussing for over a year news of a “crime” associated with the figure of the dangerous dog.²⁴ This ambivalent coexistence sets up a contrasted portrait (Legros *et al.*, 128-133) that illustrates how the media figures of Knut and the Pitbulls were constructed upon their very opposition. This portrait offers a dualistic and hierarchical representation of animals, aptly summarizing their current ambivalence.

The contrasted aspects of these two figures are summarized in Table 1. Knut’s figure leans towards Humans, whereas pitbulls lean towards the Beast. This opposition evokes another one, described by the extremes of the “sociozoological scale” (Arlucke and Sanders, 167-186), between Angel and Demon. This duality is underlined in the media pictures by Knut’s whiteness and the pitbulls’ darkish colours, the latter calling to mind demons “reversing the master-servant relationship” (Arlucke and Sanders, 181).

CHARACTERISTIC	KNUT, THE LITTLE POLAR BEAR	THE PITBULLS
Ontological reference	Inclines towards Human (culture)	Inclines towards Beast (nature)
Western Symbolic Reference	Angel	Demon
Degree of Individuality	Knut is presented as an individual	The pitbulls are considered as a species
Attitude	He is friendly	They are aggressive
Name	He has a name	They are anonymous
Origin	His parents are mentioned	They have been illegally imported
Living Context	He lived in a favorable environment after a difficult birth	They lived in an unfavorable environment

Table 1: Knut and the Pitbulls, a “contrasted portrait”

Newspaper coverage clearly underlines differences: Knut is the “World Savior” (“*Retter des Erde*”) and a “Superstar of climate protectors” (“*Superstar der Klimaschützer*”),²⁵ while the Pitbulls are treated as “Battle Machine[s]” (“*Kampfmaschine*”) and “Killer[s](...)”.²⁶ Bad animals are mostly considered as a *species*; furthermore, their foreign origin — as is often the case in the crises associated with animals — encourages the description of danger as coming from outside. In our case, it underlines two aspects of the opposition Knut/Pitbulls: first, western societies favor individuality, a positive value attributed to Knut; second, multiplicity refers to an out-of-control animality, which is one of the deepest western fears.²⁷ Even though history has provided some examples of famous personified “bad” animals like Gustave, the monstrous crocodile from Burundi (Monestier, 261-272), we do not know of any study describing a superindividual “bad” animal.

Does the opposition between Knut and the Pitbulls suggest a contemporary “comedy of innocence,” which would consist in offering great honors to one animal, while others are treated in ways about which Humans feel guilty, such as chickens in the industrial poultry farms or the Chinese dolphins being exterminated by human activity? This idea of redemption is developed by Dalla Bernardina (*L'éloquence* 145-181). However, Knut did not stay long at the heart of public attention; after one year he was dropped as

radically as he had been chosen in the first place. The temporary *success story* of Knut, and the ambivalence of its figure, might be interpreted in terms of the symbolic domestication of savage animals: the polar bear, known for its savagery, its ferocity, and its scarcity, is here totally assimilated to humans, to the point that it adopts their attitudes and weaknesses. Let us remind ourselves that the adolescent Knut is presented as succumbing to neurasthenia because he cannot bear being rejected by humans.

Clearly, the personification process questions the human/animal borderline: to be a star, Knut had to become humanlike (cf. Malamud). Saved from euthanasia, he later lost a great deal of his supposed “animal nature” by being brought up by humans.²⁸ Furthermore, the personification process confirms the ambivalence of contemporary animal representations in Western societies: the idealization of Knut, in parallel to the demonization of the Pitbulls, certainly highlights it.

Conclusion. The personification of animals in media discourse is associated with the re-negotiation of certain social values, such as individualism, respect for Nature, etc. We have empirically described different levels of such a personification process, with Knut, the polar bear cub brought up at the Berlin Zoo illustrating the most elaborate level of personification within the superindividual category. Our analysis questions the extent of zoocentrism. Indeed, in the media context, the process by which the animal is singled out and made “as human as possible” is more supportive of an anthropocentric sensibility than a zoocentric one.

The personification process follows a “pet relationship model,” in the sense of a relationship in which the animal is anthropomorphized and considered dependent on humans. Social representations of wild animals like dolphins, for example, can sometimes follow this model, which can lead to ignorance of their own world (rules, specific signals of communication, etc.) and consequently may generate danger for humans. A “companionship model” — in which the animal is rather considered in and for itself — was observed by Franklin, especially through the relationship between animals at home and their owners, but it did not appear in our corpus. In fact, the analyzed articles have a lot to do, in terms of the animal self or interiority, with the “disnification” underlined by Baker.

In conclusion, the personification process evident in the Swiss media illustrates the current ambivalence between zoocentric and anthropocentric sensitivities. Naturally, personification provides a positive image of animals, but it does so at the cost of

jettisoning most of the animals' characteristics in the process. This suggests that rather than supporting a growing zoocentrism, the media portray representations based on diverse motivations regarding animals and nature. Knut's story seems to reflect particularly well this complexity, through the variety of reactions it has provoked. Moreover, despite an apparent zoocentrism, the media discourse insists on maintaining an appropriate distance from animals. The human-animal borderline is indeed always present and reappears again and again, sometimes in unexpected ways. The contrasted portrait of Knut and the Pitbulls symbolizes the modern "great divide" between nature and culture, between civilization and savagery. The analysis of this structural opposition shows how much the animals we studied in the press are not considered in and for themselves, but as figures in a media bestiary. Prolonging and adapting the religious and moralist tradition of medieval bestiaries, this portrayal of animals as objects, *i.e.* not in and for themselves, showcases some social values (individualism, innocence, etc.) through edifying stories. In this sense we may conclude, based on parallels with the celebrity press, that the animal starification process becomes increasingly similar to the human one, demonstrating complex interactions between zoocentric and anthropocentric sensitivities.

Notes

1. Cf. Digard, whose study includes sociological, anthropological and historical analysis concerning pet relationships, primarily in France.
2. Cf. also Despret.
3. Descola and Latour suggest that we should consider adopting hybrid categories, notably with regard to the notion of identity, integrating both humans and non-humans; such an assumption is becoming more and more widely accepted (cf. Macnaghten, "Nature").
4. Cf. Descola for the renewal of the anthropological definitions of animism and totemism, and Pastoureau for his historical perspective on famous animals.
5. Cf. particularly on these subjects: *Les origines animales de la culture* and *L'animal singulier*.
6. This paper forms part of a larger research project that aims to document the social representations associated with animals portrayed by the media in

Switzerland over the last 30 years: Claudine Burton-Jeangros and Annik Dubied (dirs), *The representations of Animals in the Swiss Information Media, 1978-2008. From the 'Nice Pet' to the 'Threatening Other,'* funded by the Swiss Veterinary Office, 2007-2009.

7. For specific results regarding the diversity of media coverage, see Burton-Jeangros *et al.*, *Les représentations des animaux dans les médias suisses d'information, 1978-2008. De la 'brave bête' à l'altérité menaçante,* Genève, 2009. The research points out that no major difference between linguistic regions or between types of media (weekly versus daily, reference press versus popular press) could be observed in relation to the undesirable animal figure (pp.46-48).
8. For details see Burton-Jeangros *et al.*
9. Article published in *L'Illustré* (05.07.1980).
10. Article published in *Corriere Del Ticino* (12.30.1995), entitled "Aspiranti attori."
11. Article published in *Le Matin* (08.26.1988), entitled: "Bien le bonjour...".
12. Article published in *Le Matin* (10.10.1991), entitled "'Fungi' fait la fête."
13. Cf. Gouabault entitled: "Le dauphin. Stéréotype, contre-stéréotype, symbole."
14. This picture of Dolly Parton and the sheep Dolly is extracted from an article published in *Blick* (27.02.1997).
15. A German webpage is dedicated to Knut, with pictures and videos, and offers a global view on this phenomenon: <http://www.rbb-online.de/knut/index.html> (visited on 4th August 2009). The picture referring to Knutmania is extracted from an article published in *Schweizer Illustrierte* (02.04.2007).
16. Cf. Gorin et Dubied, "Desirable People: Identifying Social Values Through News of Celebrities."
17. Knut died on March 19th 2011. His death produced significant media coverage that confirmed the analyses we propose in this article. The attention given to the disposal of his body – some media wrote about building a mausoleum, others

discussed the possibility of stuffing Knut – and the widely expressed emotions further illustrated the personification process. In this context, references to the cause against global warming also highlighted the continuity between humans and animals, and challenged one again the frontier between us and them. Finally, the death of Knut does not mean the end of his story.

18. Published in *Blick*, 03.26.2007.

19. Published in *Schweizer Illustrierte*, 04.02.2007.

20. *Blick*, 24.03.2007.

21. Flocke also has her own webpage: [http://tiergarten.nuernberg.de/v04/Flockes-Personal.129.0.html?&no_cache=1&sword_list\[\]=flocke](http://tiergarten.nuernberg.de/v04/Flockes-Personal.129.0.html?&no_cache=1&sword_list[]=flocke) (04.08.2009).

22. See Bancel *et al.* on human zoos.

23. Cf. Gorin et Dubied, “Desirable People: Identifying Social Values Through News of Celebrities.”

24. The mediatization of the death of the young Suleyman, attacked by three pitbulls on his way to school and later succumbing to his injuries, began in December 2005. The media coverage of this incident was at its high point at the end of 2006, at which time the trial of the dogs’ owner took place (Burton-Jeangros *et al.*), and continued until the beginning of 2008.

25. See *Blick*, 24.03.2007.

26. See *Blick*, 06.12.2005.

27. Cf. Terrasson, who worked on the fear of nature through psychosocial experimentation by night in forests ; cf. Durand for a study considering mythologies, archetypes, and the collective unconscious; cf. Kellert for a study by questionnaire; and cf. Thomas for a study of science-fiction literature.

28. See *Blick*, 24.03.2007.

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