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To cite this article: Lucia Tomassini & Giovanna Bertella (2023): The human gaze at animals and the missing animal gaze in tourism studies, Current Issues in Tourism, DOI: [10.1080/13683500.2023.2215920](https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2023.2215920)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2023.2215920>



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Published online: 26 May 2023.



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The human gaze at animals and the missing animal gaze in tourism studies

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ABSTRACT

This research letter critically reflects on the missing animal gaze in tourism studies and elaborates on the urgency of including it in the discussion about the relationship between human and non-human animals. Drawing on the Foucauldian gaze and on the John Urry's tourist gaze, we reflect on the unproblematised power imbalance between human and animal gazes that is inherent in tourist representations. Inspired by posthuman thinking, we use features of critical theory, sociology, and geography. This letter aims at casting a novel light to the human-animal relationship in tourism studies identifying a promising novel research line.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 April 2023
Accepted 13 May 2023

KEYWORDS

Tourist gaze; animal gaze; animal-based tourism; posthumanism; critical theory

Introduction

Animals surround us in many tourism-related contexts: pets join us on our holidays, wildlife populates the nature we explore during our leisure time, farm animals live in the countryside we visit, and captive animals inhabit sanctuaries, zoos, aquariums, and circuses. Such a widespread animal presence involves gazing, but the animal gaze has remained largely absent from tourism studies. Tourism – as a cultural phenomenon and industry – largely revolves around gazing at, visiting, and encountering a human and non-human 'otherness'; such encounters carry a gaze from both sides. While the human gaze has been largely explored (Samarathunga & Cheng, 2020), mainly as tourist gaze (Urry, 1990; Urry & Larsen, 2011), host gaze (Moufakkir, 2011; Moufakkir & Reisinger, 2012), and the mutual gaze between both (Maoz, 2006), the animal gaze has remained uncharted together with the theoretical, methodological, and practical implications of this absence. Hence, a critical reflection on the animal gaze is needed to update critical tourism studies by challenging the uneven relationship between humans and animals and their gazes. By taking a posthuman perspective, we elaborate on the human gaze at animals and the missing animal gaze in tourism studies to question the unproblematised power imbalance between humans and animals in tourist representations (Foucault, 1976) and tourism sociological space (Massey, 2005). In doing so, we pave the way for more critical tourism scholarship, highlighting the relevance of the animal gaze and indicating promising opportunities for future research.

Human gaze at animals

The human fascination with animals is ancient and has surfaced in several fields resulting in us gazing at animals in many tourism-related contexts (Fennell, 2011; Franklin, 1999). Drawing on

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critical theory and sociology, we posit that the gaze embodies an individual's (or group's) awareness and perception of other individuals or groups (Ankor & Wearing, 2013). Humans gazing at animals not only contributes to our enduring fascination with them, but also to shaping our relationships with and understanding of them. Awestruck, we gaze at animals in zoos or natural habitats (Carr, 2016) [Figure 1]. Curious, we gaze at farm animals in the countryside (Barbieri et al., 2016). Worried, we gaze at our pets in travel crates while waiting to board a plane to a tourist destination (Tomassini, 2022).

The role of the human gaze in the social construction of animals makes that gaze an expression of power and control (Winter, 2020), reflecting Foucault's (1976) foundational work on the power of gaze and Massey's (2005) relational spatiality imbued with power geometries. The gaze becomes an instrument of control and surveillance and an exercise of power within unbalanced relations (Foucault, 1976). In tourism such relations shape and reproduce the spatial and mobility justice of tourism practices (Tomassini & Lamond, 2022). Hence, humans gazing at animals socially construct the power geometries in which animals become 'trapped'. Wild animals in zoos or the natural environment are 'trapped' as touristic attractions. Farm animals in the countryside are 'trapped' both as rural heritage and edible commodities [Figure 2]. Pets in our homes are 'trapped' as family members.

Tourism studies on the gaze have barely considered the animal gaze. The understanding of the gaze in Foucauldian terms was elaborated by Hollinshead (1999), who acknowledged a debt to Urry (1990), whose analysis considered the role of vision in determining how tourism and tourism spaces are socially constructed and experienced. Such considerations are relevant to tourists gazing at animals and the power relations involved in such gazing (Fennell, 2011; Franklin, 1999). By positing that the human gaze constructs and reinforces human power geometries and the animal gaze and its implications remain neglected, we question such unbalanced gaze between humans and animals through the lens of posthumanism, an emergent philosophical approach in tourism studies (Guia & Jamal, 2020; Tomassini et al., 2022; Tomassini & Lamond, 2022).

Animal gaze

Embracing a subjectivity understood as rhizomatic, Braidotti (2011, 2013) discusses a posthuman critical theory positing a nomadic subjectivity made of human and non-human entities. Such posthuman approach to subjectivity casts a novel light to the relation between humans and animals and



Figure 1. Zoo, Czechia (Photo Credit: Lukas Vincour / Zvirata Nejíme / We Animals Media).



Figure 2. Santiago Province, Chile (Photo Credit: Gabriela Penela / We Animals Media).

urges a critical reflection on the animal gaze and its absence in tourism studies. Several movies, documentaries, and fictional narratives have explored the animal gaze at humans and human activities. Some recent examples are *Gunda: Mother, Pig* (2020), Viktor Kossakovsky's documentary film chronicling the daily life of a mother pig on a farm and *EO* (Skolimowski, 2020), a road movie directed by Jerzy Skolimowski about a donkey's journey across Europe and among humans. Similarly, the animal photojournalism agency *We Animals Media* (www.weanimalsmedia.org) depicts the sociological and physical space of animals in human societies, being sociologically and physically trapped while casting their animal gaze at humans [Figures 2 and 3]. Unbalanced mobilities and spatialities are generated by – and contribute to – uneven power relations (Braidotti, 2011); as such, a politic understanding of spatial and mobility conditions allows identifying power geometries as 'the



Figure 3. Safari Niagara, Canada (Photo Credit: Ira Moon / We Animals Media).

various power differences between distinct forms, categories, and practices of movement for both human and nonhuman mobile units' (Braidotti, 2011, p. 11).

The interest in the animal gaze emerges also in fictional narratives and essays (Sliwinski, 2012). In *Lives of Animals* of the Nobel Prize Winner John Maxwell Coetzee (1999), the character Elizabeth Costello evokes Kafka's short story *A report to an Academy* recounting the tale of Red Peter, an ape within the human society. Red Peter's first-person account is a cartographic approach to his subjectivity, evolving from a 'beast' to an educated human-like ape in the human society. As such, a subjectivity constructed and mapped through unbalanced power relations with humans (Braidotti, 2011). Through a mirroring narrative technique, Elizabeth Costello is in front to an academy as well, discussing animals in human society:

I was taken on a drive around Waltham this morning. It seems a pleasant enough town. I saw no horrors, no drug-testing laboratories, no factory farms, no abattoirs. Yet I am sure they [animals] are here. They must be. They simply do not advertise themselves. They are all around us as I speak, only we do not, in a certain sense, know about them. (Coetzee, 1999, p. 119)

The image of a silent animal presence surrounding and observing us while 'trapped' in the unbalanced power relations inherent in the human use and abuse of animals is strong and can be applied to tourism. This use and, sometimes, abuse occur in tourism in various forms and modalities that differ in terms of the centrality of the tourist–animal relationship and the mutuality of the gaze. In some cases, this relationship and mutuality constitutes the peak experience for the tourists, as in swimming with dolphins, during which some tourists want to experience eye contact with the animals (Curtin, 2006). In other cases, the animal presence is less evident, not sought, and may even be intentionally avoided by tourists, as in the case of animal farming in rural destinations (Caffyn, 2022). Whether central or marginal to the tourism experience, the presence of animals as sentient beings carrying a gaze is only partially acknowledged in tourism studies.

To our knowledge, there are extremely few exceptions to this lack of interest. Some tourism studies (Äijälä, 2021; Haanpää et al., 2021) have adopted videography to explore a more-than-human gaze in a tourism space by investigating the dogs' perception of the winter landscape during a dog-sled tour. Bertella (2020) focused more explicitly on the animal gaze: drawing on the essay *The Animal that therefore I am* (Derrida, 2008), she elaborated on the future of whale watching in case the animals could express their perspective on humanity and tourism. Similarly, the concept of the animal gaze was touched on in an autoethnographic investigation of farm animals that included a portrait of a sheep staring at the camera (Bertella, 2023). Hence, we conclude this research letter stressing the urgency and relevance of the animal gaze in tourism studies and highlighting some opportunities for future research.

Implications and opportunities for future tourism studies

Excluding the animal gaze from academic studies is uncritical and limiting. Theoretically, the missing animal gaze locates tourism studies behind scientific progress in animal biology and ethology, reflections within several social science fields (e. g. philosophy, sociology), and non-scientific productions (e. g. films, fictional narrative, and art). Practically, this contributes to the reproduction of uneven power relations between humans and non-humans depriving tourism scholars and tourists of potentially enriching meaningful experiences.

We call for a fundamental change in the way tourism is conceptualised and practiced, especially with regards to animals. Such a change includes:

- more studies acknowledging animals for what they are (rather than what they are *for us*);
- collaborative studies with natural scientists to broaden and deepen our understanding of animals in tourism through both quantitative and qualitative research approaches;

- experimentation using disruptive methodologies to capture animals' ways of perceiving and understanding the world and us;
- innovative ways to disseminate the results of such studies;
- tourism experiences that encourage tourists to step into the animals' positions and look at the world, including humanity, from such positions.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to *We Animals Media* (www.weanimalmedia.org) and to its founder, the photojournalist Jo-Anne Macarthur (www.joannemacarthur.com) for granting us the permission to use their images. *We Animals Media* was founded in 2019 as a non-profit organization dedicated to animal photojournalism, which is a genre of photojournalism that represents not only wild or charismatic animals, but farmed, experimented upon, and otherwise exploited animals. Animal photojournalism is an emergent genre of photography that captures, memorializes, and exposes the experiences of animals who live among us, but who we fail to see.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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