

Changing Shapes. A different look at the history of human-animal boundaries

Current histories of the relations between humans and other species range from hunting and husbandry through to vivisection. They habitually treat humans and animals as two separate bodies, but such a vision is only part of what the human mind has produced. A proper look at the merging between human and animal may yield surprising and intimate insights in human history and culture, both as how we treat animals and how we “think with animals”.

The range of human expressions concerning animal metamorphoses encompasses language through to literature, ritual performance, material culture and art, and should offer promising insights as it centres on the concept of physical and conceptual transformation. Yet our understanding of this fundamental aspect of human culture remains fragmented, as studies have focused on specific aspects such as shape changing in East-Asian cultures, metamorphosis in pre-Christian iconography, post-medieval ritual animal disguise, or body metaphors in modern belief narratives. The topic has certainly not been thematised across the different disciplines and in order to catch up with cutting-edge academic paradigms, requires a novel and significant inter-disciplinary framework.

Rather than seeing metamorphoses as something entirely exotic, this conference purports to include the Western World (i.e. Europe and North America), from Antiquity to the twentieth century. Drawing on a variety of sources, conference participants will chart the range of animal shapes – both wild and domestic – that figure in human to animal shifting, consider the means of transformation, and uncover underlying concepts about body and soul.

One of the most important aspects of the conference will be to explore the importance of context in determining specific expressions of metamorphosis. In this respect, key questions will consider the role of individual identity in and outside of society, gender, impacts of religious conversion and the relevance of local ecology. The conference will also explore broader contexts of metamorphoses, such as animal comparisons in language (proverbs, fables), monstrosity and hybridity in art, animal disguise in ritual and custom, totemism, sexuality, bestiality and the animalisation of deviancy. It will also encompass critical and contextually-sensitive biological, anthrozoological and psychological perspectives.