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The “unlike animals” syndrome: proposals for a semiotics of speciesism

In this lecture, I intend to illustrate, through the tools of semiotic analysis, the various employment of anthropocentric and speciesist practices in linguistic, cultural and everyday discourses. Speciesism, it is suggested by philosopher Peter Singer, is “the current accepted form of discrimination”, and – as such – can be, and is, employed (consciously or not) in a “natural”, socially-accepted, way, not unlike racist and ethnocentric discourses were central in different societies until, approximately, the mid-20th century (the wide popularity of “coon songs” can be taken as an example of a heavily chauvinistic cultural object, perceived as perfectly inoffensive, and in fact amusing, form of entertainment).

Within this perspective, speciesism and anthropocentrism can be culturally produced in various forms: from identity construction (the concept of “humankind” as opposed to “animality”) to intergroup biases (the non-human animals as “outgroup”), from the most diverse rhetoric solutions (various schemes and tropes like the antithesis “We are humans, not animals”, or the simile “he behaves like a beast”) to specific discourse-modalities (e.g., the concept of “anthropomorphism”). The present lecture shall attempt to introduce and classify all such cases, offering a semiotic interface to analyse them.