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Peter Sahlins, *1668: The Year of the Animal in France*. New York, N.Y.: Zone Books, 2017. 491 pp. Plates, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (cl) ISBN 9781935408994.

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Animal studies, a critical field now well-established in literary inquiry and assessments of contemporary culture, has still considerable work to do in historical research and interpretation, especially in the pre-modern and early modern eras. Peter Sahlins's tightly argued book, *1668: The Year of the Animal in France*, seeks to redress this lack in a series of integrated case studies that overwhelmingly demonstrate how important animals were to the period in French history in which the young Louis XIV was consolidating his power. Technically, "Circa 1668" would be a more accurate heading to characterize the topics Sahlins addresses, the dates of which extend from the establishment of the king's Menagerie in 1664 to Mademoiselle de Scudéry's publication of the "History of Two Chameleons" in a collection of her writings in 1688. But the year 1668 gains particular significance in Sahlins's history not just because it epitomized the many and varied ways in which animals figured in and around the court both as representations and as living actors, but also because he construes it as a tipping point when the ideology of the animal shifted. In the early years of the Menagerie, animals were presented as models of a civilizing process for the admiration and even self-identification of the king and his courtiers, building upon a longstanding "theriophilic" model of human and animal continuity, which Sahlins labels "humananimalism." By contrast, in and after 1668, the animal fell increasingly under various kinds of control—scientific, medical, artistic, philosophical—and was correspondingly "devalorized." The human, for its part, gained a new, paradoxical status: while Cartesian philosophy definitively separated the human's spiritual soul from its animal body, art produced for the royal court came to promote, in Sahlins's view, a negative model of human animality that only a powerful monarch could regulate.

Sahlins argues that this ideological shift in the way animals and their human counterparts were conceived and characterized during the crucial year of 1668 offers scholars of early modern France "new ways to think about absolutism and mechanism" (p. 16). And indeed, his arguments reaffirm common scholarly assumptions about the seventeenth-century period of Louis XIV's long reign: that by regulating and ordering every aspect of the natural world, from individual bodies to the cosmic landscape of Versailles, the king and his functionaries captured the empiricism of progressive science and caged it for use in asserting monarchical authority. Although René Descartes had published his *Discourse on the Method* in Leiden in 1637, igniting an explosive debate in the Netherlands, Sahlins argues that it was only in the 1660s and afterward that the French reading public became involved in the battle over Descartes's radical assertions. At particular issue was his claim that bodies were machines expertly crafted by God, and that nonhuman animals had no "soul," or consciousness, through which they could deliberately act. Sahlins inventively characterizes Descartes's animal-machine as a "fable" that the philosopher used to illustrate the way in which nature, once divinely created, could function on its own as a wonderful mechanism with no need for Aristotelian inner forces, or anything mystical at all. At Versailles and in such royally sponsored establishments as the Gobelins tapestry manufactory and the Royal Academy of

Sciences, the “fable” of deterministic, mechanized animal life was wielded in various ways, but always, he argues, toward absolutist ends—even if this absolutist message was not always successfully conveyed.

Moving chronologically, the three sections of Sahlins’s book evaluate the agency of animals as subjects and specimens, images and objects, as well as the topics of a variety of texts. We begin with the Menagerie, where a preponderance of birds, many of them exquisite and exotic, set a civilizing tone, especially after the violent displays of wild animal combat staged previously at the royal château of Vincennes. Sahlins argues convincingly that the transformation of animal display from the extreme aggression of the Vincennes arena to the refined civility of the Menagerie’s seven radiating courtyards represented a concerted royal effort to establish Versailles as a new kind of peaceable kingdom. The king himself, Sahlins argues in the shadow of Foucault, architecturally dominated this kingdom through the Menagerie’s central octagonal viewing pavilion designed by Louis Le Vau. By contrast, the principal recorder of animal life on the ground, the Flemish born and trained Pieter Boel, set his sights on the animals themselves in lifelike sketches that he further refined in oil studies. It was probably Boel himself—not the engraver Gérard Scotin, as Sahlins assumes—who wittily combined a few of these studies to create scenes of markedly social animal life in and around the Menagerie.[1] Sahlins pairs these prints with literary descriptions of the Menagerie by Mademoiselle de Scudéry, Jean de La Fontaine, and the fountain engineer, Claude Denis, all of whom emphasized the beauty of the birds, ingratiating themselves to visitors in the manner of courtiers.

This “humananimalism” encouraged in the early years of the Menagerie was subsequently replaced, Sahlins argues, by the advent of what he calls “Classical naturalism,” a term he uses to characterize the “renewed interest in (and understanding of) nature—specifically of animals—to ground and legitimize the political ideals of absolutism, but also the principle of mechanism...” (p.43). For it was only in and around the year 1668 that Sahlins believes Cartesian mechanism finally made serious inroads into the absolutist agenda, especially as it was developing physically at Versailles and in the productions of royally sponsored institutions. What exactly is “classical” about the control of nature through a mechanized understanding of how it worked, however, Sahlins does not make clear. He implies that he is appropriating traditional aesthetic conceptions of a transition from “Baroque” to “Classical” form, whereby the “Classical” seeks to order, simplify and clarify the Baroque’s tendency toward complexity and ornamentalism. Art historians have in fact all but abandoned such aesthetic categorizations in the interest of social and artistic contextualization, and in literature the new, short pieces such as fables, stories, and topical poetry were called by their own practitioners “Modern” as opposed to “Ancient.” Applying the term “Classical naturalism” to the history of science is downright puzzling, especially given Descartes’s own rejection of Classical (i.e., Aristotelian) wisdom in favor of empiricism and independent thought.

Beyond his terminology, however, Sahlins is very clear as to what made 1668 so transformative. It was the year in which the royal painter Charles Le Brun prepared his physiognomic lecture comparing human and animal heads. It was the time in which the architect and scientist Claude Perrault was beginning to publish the results of his dissections of animals that had died in the Menagerie and at Vincennes, culminating in a monumental, illustrated publication of 1671. It was the approximate completion date of the Gobelins tapestry series known as the *Months*, which featured royal residences centralized in the background and, in the extreme foreground before a

balustrade, selected animals from Pieter Boel's many studies. Most notoriously, it was the year of the "Transfusion Affair," when the Montpellier physician, Jean Denis, completed a series of transfusions of the blood of calves, lambs and kid goats into the veins of human patients, giving rise to a storm of controversy between those who argued that animal blood could purify ailing human blood and those who asserted that it was by its very nature corruptive. Sahlins devotes separate chapters to each of these milestones in "the Year of the Animal," offering well researched accounts and nuanced interpretations of their historical significance. He pays particular attention to the many ways in which he feels animals—and humans who looked or behaved like them—were becoming subject to use as negative moral exemplars or as instruments of scientific and/or royal control.

Considering the range of areas Sahlins investigates—tapestry weaving, artistic studies, scientific discourse in text and image, medical practice and theory—as well as his effort to find common ideological threads running through them, it is perhaps inevitable that a reader will encounter conundrums and paradoxes, most of them original to the seventeenth century but also a few of Sahlins's own making. Arguments lobbed against the transfusion of blood from animals to humans is an historical case in point: the fierce anti-transfusionist Pierre-Martin de La Martinière, in Sahlins words, posited that "if it was true that 'no animal can become a man,' it was equally true that men who received animal blood would lose their reason and become animals" (p. 270). But if animals could never gain the reason that constituted humanity—presumably even if they were infused with human blood—why would receiving the blood of an animal cause the human to become an animal? Sahlins implies that by 1668 and afterward French scientific efforts to elevate the thinking human soul beyond any taint of the bodily "animal-machine" meant that the animal itself had to be cast as a base, corrupted class of being whose lurking incarnation in human flesh and blood nevertheless loomed as a constant threat.

This moral and physiological tightrope walk informs Sahlins's nuanced interpretation of Charles Le Brun's many graphic studies of heads from a wide range of species, including those "species" that the artist himself invented in which human and animal physiognomies are provocatively fused. Since the text of the lecture for which these drawings presumably served as preparation and/or illustration is lost, and the only two accounts of it are contradictory and unreliable, one must work with the visual evidence and what one can glean from careful parsing of the shaky texts, which Sahlins skillfully accomplishes. Ultimately he concludes that Le Brun's aim was to demonstrate not just the inferiority of the earthly animal in relation to the soulful human, but also, in regard to those fantastic human-animal heads, that the lowest levels of humanity are themselves little better than animals.

This is a bold argument, and while it certainly fuels Sahlins's overall point about the shift from "humananimalism" to hierarchical order, the rest of Le Brun's tremendous oeuvre does not help to confirm the artist's intent. One searches in vain for any sign of these goat-men, boar-men, wolf-men, or the others among Le Brun's human characters in his paintings. Even those figures traditionally represented as "base," such as Pilate's goons who hoist the Cross of Christ, appear in Le Brun's treatment of the theme in the standard guise of human models (see *The Raising of the Cross*, Troyes, Musée des beaux-arts). From the perspective of artistic process and medium, one might also question Sahlins's contention that Le Brun sought to "immobilize" and assert control over Pieter Boel's lively studies of the animals in the Menagerie both in his own drawings and in designing the tapestry series of the *Months*. Indeed, many of Le Brun's drawings of animal heads

were based directly upon studies by Boel (a large number of which Le Brun himself appropriated after the Flemish artist's death); these he further abstracted by reducing them to contour drawings and plotting their features through triangulations—to say nothing of using them as the physiognomic basis for the eerie animal-men. From a practical point of view, Le Brun's use of Boel could be seen as a useful way for a specialist in human figure painting to understand animal form. Certainly, the heads lose some of their original animation, but not necessarily out of ideological motivation.

As for the animals taken from Boel's studies that populate the extreme downstage position on the scenic sets of the *Months*, Sahlins argues that the medium of tapestry in effect traps the creatures and that their placement makes them appear as objects of royal ownership. One could object that tapestry weaving will always render more static an artist's preliminary design, especially considering the fact that it would not have been Boel himself who prepared the tapestry cartoons. And, as Sahlins acknowledges, it is the living animals, not the distant royal residences, that one confronts most immediately in regarding these large tapestries that hang high above one's head; perhaps this could be one of those instances when one's actual viewing experience undermines to some extent the intended royal message.

Not all of the ways in which the animal was appropriated during the general period of "The Year of the Animal" were, in Sahlins's account, so bent on downgrading its status. There were, to use the words that head one of his later chapters, means of "resisting Descartes," the most important of which Sahlins attributes to the novelist, *salonnière* and amateur naturalist, Mademoiselle de Scudéry. Her *History of Two Chameleons* offers an observant and highly empathetic account of the brief, tumultuous lives of her own pet reptiles, to which she appended verses dedicated to the animals by a number of poets in her circle. Sahlins brilliantly compares and contrasts Scudéry's account of her chameleons with that offered by Perrault on the royal chameleon he and his associates dissected and featured quite prominently in their publication of 1671. Perrault was by the very nature of his project the more coldly objective of the two, but Sahlins's interpretation of his position on the animal is appropriately nuanced, arguing that although he focused his dissections upon understanding the inner structure of the animal "machine," Perrault was in essence a vitalist who did not subscribe to Descartes's divestment of the animal body from a soul. Sahlins offers the fascinating proposal that in Sébastien Leclerc's full-page illustrations of the living animals, the inner organs laid out as if on a cloth suspended in the sky represent the animal's "soul" from the perspective of a dedicated anatomist.

Sahlins ends his book with two short case studies that have been addressed previously, but never in regard to the history and changing status of animals. One of these was the debate within the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture as to whether or not the revered painter, Nicolas Poussin, was correct in omitting from his painting of *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well* (Paris, Louvre) the ten camels that appear in the Biblical passage as recipients of Rebecca's generosity, in addition to Eliezer himself. Sahlins points out that Poussin, perhaps confirming the suspicious moral status of the animal (as Le Brun argued in the debate), replaced the ten camels with ten women who witness the fateful meeting of the two human protagonists. The other case study focuses upon the playwright Jean Racine's one comedy, *Les Plaideurs*, in which a dog named Citron is tried in court. Recalling Aristophanes's *Wasps*, the plot was also very likely intended to mock the actual trials of animals that occupied a small but serious place in the French legal world prior to the rationalist "Year of the Animal."

But it is his penultimate chapter that Sahlins reserves for the climax of his account: at Versailles, in the shady garden grove designed by André Le Nôtre as a labyrinth, thirty-eight brightly painted lead fountains depicting animal fables from Aesop were installed in 1674. For Sahlins, this spectacular project epitomized the “rethinking of animals that took place in the shadow of Descartes and under the rays (and gaze) of the Sun King” (p. 43). Although the idea of featuring fables so prominently was probably inspired by the immediate success of Jean de La Fontaine’s *Fables choisies*, first published in 1668 (and certainly another manifestation of the “Year of the Animal”), Sahlins notes that the poet, who had worked for and long remained loyal to the disgraced and imprisoned Nicolas Fouquet, was deliberately passed over for the Versailles project. He also discounts Charles Perrault’s poetic claim that the Labyrinth was reserved for love, despite the fact that a statue of Cupid was paired with one of Aesop himself at the entrance to the labyrinthine grove. Rather, Sahlins calls attention to the violence and competition that in fact prevails among the texts of the fables depicted in the fountains, using as his primary evidence the epigrammatic sentences composed for each by the court ballet poet, Isaac de Benserade. These brief retellings of the fables were stationed on plaques within the grove itself and were also published in an illustrated pamphlet readily available to the reading public.

Emphasizing the shaded, literally sidelined situation of the Labyrinth within the gardens, its confusing network of pathways, and especially what he perceives to be the bestial actions of the animals featured in the fables, Sahlins argues that the whole grove was in fact dedicated not to demonstrations of love but, quite the contrary, of the baseness, even danger of creatures left on their own with no strong, centralized ruler to control them. Such an interpretation provides a fitting, if grim, conclusion to the shift Sahlins perceives from the “theriophilic” outlook that prevailed earlier at Versailles to the later, hieratic vision of natural beings ordered by an intensely Cartesian monarchy. Here his argument intersects with those of previous students of Versailles who have read in its geometries, its hydraulics, its architecture, and even its dance technique physical manifestations of the king’s authoritative agency.[2]

I have argued elsewhere that such readings overlook the actual, sensual *experience* an elite visitor might have had at Versailles, and I find that Sahlins’s interpretation of the Labyrinth raises similar questions.[3] I wonder what Sahlins would make of the many other shady groves Le Nôtre devised on either side of the central axis of the Versailles gardens. Although none were actual labyrinths, contemporary reports suggest that many were filled with turns and surprises as one progressed through their complex pathways.[4] Neither shadiness nor the ability to lose oneself was unique to the Labyrinth among the Versailles groves. Perhaps more important would have been the spectacular nature of the Labyrinth’s fountains themselves. Judging by Sébastien Leclerc’s elegant illustrations in the pamphlet, which closely follow the descriptions of the fountains (probably written by Charles Perrault), the fountains were a wonder of *rocaille* style, with highly ornamental compositions featuring the animals spouting curved and diagonal jets of water from their mouths as if they were so many words. Despite the aggression that emerges from many of the texts of the fables, we actually see very little combat among the painted lead creatures, who seem to discuss, rather than fight out, their competitions, disagreements, and resentments.

Unfortunately, only worn and faded fragments of the actual fountain sculptures remain, and the grove itself was destroyed in the late eighteenth century, so assessing the full extent of their visual appeal must admittedly entail imaginative reconstruction. Sahlins has opted to base his interpretation upon the only part of the grove that has survived intact, Benserade’s pithy sentences

conveying the essence of each fable reprinted in the published pamphlet. The almost Hobbesian world view Sahlins draws from the grove's fables indeed contrasts with the tone of the Menagerie in its first incarnation. One might note, however, that it also contrasts with *later* stages of Louis XIV's Menagerie, after he had turned it over to the young duchesse de Bourgogne, spouse of Louis XIV's grandson, in the 1690s. With *grotesques* on the ceilings of the interior and a working dairy in one of the radiating courtyards, the Menagerie under the duchess's purview became a more playful site for human and animal confrontation.[5] One wonders whether the experience of the Labyrinth would have changed during this later context of the Sun King's reign.

Many other questions regarding manifestations of the animal in seventeenth-century France will doubtlessly arise from the arguments Sahlins makes in his provocative book. Indeed, this well-researched study is as much a contribution to political history as it is to cultural history and animal studies in its evaluation of how animals were used as instruments of royal assertion. The clarity and organization of Sahlins's writing will make the book accessible to many. The text is lightly sprinkled with typos and other editorial mistakes, but there is only one that leaves a reader truly stumped. On p. 111, recounting information imparted in Budinus's *Roman des oiseaux, histoire allégorique*, Sahlins writes that "the king was the 'Aigle de Galatie'... while the *Infante* was the 'Aiglonne d'Ibérie'...; Cardinal Mazarin was a rooster, and his counterpart, Luis de Haro, was a— an unflattering bird...." One really wants to know about this unlucky Luis de Haro: what kind of animal was he?

#### NOTES

[1] Because Scotin's engraved scenes combine selected individual studies by Boel, the inscription "Boel inv." that appears on each print in the series would not necessarily preclude the possibility that Scotin composed the scenes themselves. However, Scotin's own specialty as an engraver was in multi-figure religious scenes; animals were rare in his oeuvre. Boel, who produced large, finished paintings filled with closely observed animal subjects, more likely composed the scenes for Scotin to engrave. The two would have known one another through their common work for the Gobelins Tapestry Manufactory.

[2] The classic study in this line of interpretation is Jean-Marie Apostolidès, *Le Roi-machine. Spectacle et politique au temps de Louis XIV* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1981). See also, Chandra Mukerji, *Territorial Ambitions and the Gardens of Versailles* (New York, N.Y. and Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Susan McClary, "Unruly Passions and Courtly Dance: Technologies of the Body in Baroque Music," in *From the Royal to the Republican Body: Incorporating the Political in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France*, ed. Sara E. Melzer and Kathryn Norberg (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 85-112; Claire Goldstein, *Vaux and Versailles: The Appropriations, Erasures and Accidents that Made Modern France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[3] Sarah R. Cohen, *Art, Dance, and the Body in French Culture of the Ancien Régime* (New York, N.Y. and Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[4] See, e.g., André Félibien, *Relation de la feste de Versailles du 18e juillet 1668* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1679), 7.

[5] See Meredith Martin, *Dairy Queens: The Politics of Pastoral Architecture from Catherine de' Medici to Marie-Antoinette* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), chapter two.

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