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Animal musicians in illuminated manuscripts (1300-1450)

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The illustrations of illuminated manuscripts between 1300 and 1450 featured a very large number of animal musicians. They were set in the marginal borders of the pages, and framed the text and miniature with their musical sonorities. Along with King David, animals were the main musicians featured in medieval illuminations, far more numerous than angels and minstrels. The monkey, dog, fox and half-animal, half-human hybrid creatures were the “champions” of instrumental music.

At the crossroads of history and art history, musicology and literature, their representations suggest that we identify typologies of books, animals and instruments. They raise several questions on three levels:

1/ the visual level of the instruments and instrumental practices represented
2/ then, the level of the cultural foundations of images and their rhetoric *modus operandi*

3/ finally, by adopting a synaesthetic approach to images and sounds to try to understand how to describe the sounds of instruments when they are “produced” by instrumentalists as peculiar as animals (sounds, noises, harmony, *musica*, silence?). This synaesthetic approach is also anthropological: as animals imitate human beings, what can be considered musical in both of them? What makes “musicality” and “sonority” criteria that allow us to distinguish and organise creatures in the order of God's creation in a hierarchy according to the medieval understanding of the world?

I will discuss these questions from the perspective of the intellectual context: humanism present in princely courts, but also Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism taught in European Colleges of Arts. These human-centred intellectual traditions

have contributed, on one the hand, to develop the natural sciences originating in the Antiquity; and, on the other hand, they have shed a new light on questions pertaining to language and music as parts of rhetoric and poetry. Intellectual innovations of that time have indeed changed the distinctions between human beings and animals, especially through sound and voice, memory and reason.

The method consists in not taking these images of animal musicians in the first degree, to not consider them just as amusing manuscripts decorations. It is a journey from what is visible (the tip of the iceberg) to what is invisible (the underwater portion, the archaeology of knowledge and cultural genealogies). Beast musicians have (ancient) cultural origins, (mnemonic and conceptual) medieval practices and (anthropological) meanings that go beyond visual images.

I. Instrumental practices of animal musicians

Let us start with some examples, which depict a *mundus inversus* between beasts and people, “normal” and “abnormal” practices, and sound and silence. These images are from 14th- and 15th-century books of prayer.

1) *Mundus inversus* and sonorous instruments

Animal musicians were represented with a rather repetitive *instrumentarium* from one manuscript to another, which mainly consisted of:

- bagpipes
- fiddles
- drums
- and spherical bells and small bells.

These are the same instruments as those played at that time. They are sonorous, which does not mean that they are boisterous. Although their association with beasts was common, it remains astonishing. Visually, this association creates a *mundus inversus*. It also reminds us that images were not reproductions of reality and instead, they fell in the characteristically medieval “figurative mode of thinking” as established by Pierre Francastel.

2) *Mundus inversus* and silence

Animal musicians also achieved *mundus inversus* through silence. Indeed, they used unique and original “sonorous objects” that no other illustrated “musician” used,

namely the bellows, cauldron, rake, jaw, hay bale and grill. These are no musical instruments, yet animals used them as such. They were diverted from their true functions, and although they were played like musical instruments, only produced silence. The intentionality of producing sound is established but not achieved.

The modes of representation of silence are a jaw made out of bones pretending to play the fiddle, and a monkey without instrument also pretending to play the fiddle with a simple stick; bellows replaced the fiddle and plucking replaced bowing.

The inversion is twofold: animals imitated playing musical instruments, which remained silent, and these “instruments” were objects that could not produce sounds. Indeed, the blow of the bellows was associated with a string instrument instead of being assigned to a wind instrument, and the jaw made out of bones evoked the soundboard, but its inert, inanimate matter prevented it from vibrating and therefore producing sounds. Similarly, in the case of the monkey musician, the absence of instrument, the void, depicted silence. The inability to produce sounds thus induces a contradiction: the intentionality of emitting musical sonorities but producing none.

However, to better understand the surprising musical practices of animals, they must be compared to the types of manuscripts that featured them to analyse the cultural, rhetorical and cognitive reasons for their iconographic development.

This is my second major point.

II. Images: cultural foundations of images of animal musicians

How are we to explain the development of representations of animal musicians, especially in books produced from 1300 to 1450? As representations were mostly featured in psalters and books of hours, then what was the nature of their relationship with the text and book they decorated? Based on ancient rhetoric and natural philosophy, especially that of Aristotle, what cognitive and memory processes were used to produce effects (which ones?) on the readers’ senses (sight, hearing) and memory?

1) Why are there animals and music in manuscripts and why are they associated in images?

Animals and music belong to both pagan and Christian ancient culture. In the *artes liberales cursus* dispensed in schools and at University, they have always been present in encyclopaedias (Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, *The Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville) and bestiaries (*Physiologus*), allegorical poetry (Ovid, Horace,

Aesop), grammar (Donatus and Priscian), rhetoric (Quintilian, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Cicero) and *ars musicae* (St. Augustine, Boethius). Their educational and cultural purposes are not new. What is new is their appearance in the illuminations of 13th-century manuscripts and the impressive development they underwent in the 14th century until the middle of the 15th century. Their “invention,” in the words of Frances Yates, probably resulted from the encounter between school cultures and the Aristotelian natural philosophy in the Universities of Paris and Oxford, particularly in the 14th century. It is believed to have originated from the concurrent reading of *De Anima* and Aristotle's *Physics*, Boethius' *De Institutione musica* combined to Augustinian semiotics (*sonus-vox*). It also corresponds to the translation and distribution of bestiaries and encyclopaedias in Europe (Bartholomew the Englishman, Vincent of Beauvais, etc.) in the 14th and 15th centuries. It was contemporary to the development of polyphonic music (motet) and theories on *musica sonora* where the relationship between the sign, note, word, sound and voice took on unprecedented scriptural (writing) and musical forms.

2) Ancient rhetoric used to name and explain inverted and “abnormal” musical practices

At a time (1300-1450) when speech (preaching, poetry, chant) prevailed in culture and society, images were words made visible and audible. This technique belonged to the rhetorical vocabulary and mnemonic processes featured in Cicero's and Quintilian's oral treatises, which accounted for the visual and acoustic *modus operandi* of animal musicians in medieval images.

Firstly, we can establish a parallel between their representations and the word *pictura*. Isidore of Seville used the antique definition: “an image that depicts the appearance of a thing.”¹ As established by *Rhetorica ad Herennium*² echoed in St. Augustine's *Confessions* (Book X, Ch. 8), the aim of *picturae* is to remind readers what they want to remember, for as long as possible, in the heart of their memory. The more wonderful and surprising the forms, the more efficient and lasting their imprint in the readers' memory.

Like their contemporaries at the University, illuminators were accustomed to these *picturae* that functioned as *voces animantium*. These images related words (for

¹ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies, liber XIX*, 16.

² *Ad Herennium, III, xxii*.

instance, the image of a bear to say “*urs*”); they were vocal, voices, or sonorous words, which represented beast musicians, birds, chimeras, etc. As explained by Mary Carruthers, these “things” were alive and vocal because they were set in motion. These *imagines rerum* originated in the *Bestiary*, Aesop's fables, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pliny's *Natural History*, *The Etymologies* of Isidore, the Bible, etc. Their visual and vocal forms gave them a mnemonic purpose. Albertus Magnus, for instance, placed great emphasis on the necessity to use these fabulous images to “potently strike” people's memory and enable them to learn and know about the world. However, it is hard to picture them from an acoustic point of view today: what does the lion playing the fiddle “say” in *Reginald of Bar's Breviary*?

Then, animal musicians exemplify the stylistic device called *inversio*. It was best known as *permutatio* in Latin and, most of all, as *allégoria* in Greek, which means using a word that conveys a double meaning. According to Quintilian, *inversio* is to mean the contrary of what is stated.³ We have seen examples of inverted instrumental practices in the first part.

Finally, marginal animal musicians pertained to nature's *mundus inversus*. This *topos* enlivened and belonged to encyclopaedic and moral poems in the ancient tradition of allegorical poetry.⁴ It was based on *adynata* or *impossibilia*, meaning “the association of incompatible things.” The ancient technique of *adynata* in Greek and *impossibilia* in Latin was perpetuated in medieval poetry and images. A donkey with a lyre, a bullock dancing, a fearful lion (like that featured in *Reginald of Bar's Breviary*) etc. were some of the oldest *adynata* still in use in the Middle Ages. They can be found for instance in *Carmina Burana*, where animals talk. Through inversion, *impossibilia* were used for the social satire of the church, chivalry, courtly love, etc. in romances (*Reynard the Fox*), fabliaux, and, during the same period, in the margins of manuscripts. They were also used in preachers' *exempla*, and could be found in the works of authors including Pieter Brueghel (*Dutch Proverbs*, 1559, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Gemälde Gallery), François Rabelais (*Pantagruel*) and Jean de La Fontaine (*Fables*.)

³ Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 8, 6, 44: “*allegoria, quam inversionem interpretantur, aut aliud verbis aliud sensu ostendit aut etiam interim contrarium (...).*”

⁴ Ernst R. Curtius, *op. cit.*, p. 170-176.

3) Seeing sounds and the sense of hearing: images of beast musicians provide an opportunity to see and hear = they relay the theories of physics and natural philosophy, particularly that of Aristotle

Some of the manuscripts in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* translated by William of Moerbeke⁵ (c. 1325) were also illuminated with animals and hybrid musicians. The movement of their colourful and contorted bodies is striking in these books. They make the Aristotelian principle of movement – a component in the production and perception of sounds – tangible and perceptible in terms of potency (*dynamis*) and action (*enargeia*): movement in the air produces sound (*percussum*), makes it audible and offers people access to knowledge. This is, in very broad terms, the summarised version of the Aristotelian theory of sensation as presented in *Physics* and *De Anima*.

The parallel between physics and representations of animal musicians can be established at the time of encyclopaedias, which were profusely copied and translated: animals were believed to be both the cause of the sensation and the visual expression of its perception; the shape of their moving bodies reportedly produced sounds and impacted the senses of sight and hearing; and they purportedly triggered the memory of sensations and reasoning processes. Thus, sounds and the sense of hearing were connected to sensations and reason and allowed people to access knowledge. They were inseparable from the *natura* (*phusis* meaning the movement of growth) and *musica* (rhythmic and sonorous motion).

This is my third and final major point.

III. The animal *musicus*: what is musical in animals vs. people?

Music is a criterion that allows distinctions to be made between animals and people: *musica* (Pythagoras, Plato) is the science of *numerus* and is founded on *ratio*, *mensura* and *proportio*. Being endowed with reason, people understand musical science, and, as a result, they differ from beasts. The example of St. Augustine comparing the virtuosity of harpists and flute players to the nightingales' songs is a known occurrence (*De Musica*, 6).

However, in images, music, sound and the sense of hearing were characteristic of both human beings and animals. As explained by Elizabeth Eva

⁵ Paris, BNF, ms. Lat. 6299, Aristotle's *Metaphysics* translated by William of Moerbeke, 1st quarter of the 19th century, United Kingdom.

Leach⁶ and Jean-Marie Fritz, *vox* usually refers to all things that resonate and all sounds produced by language or any other mode of sound production. Grammatically, it (*vox*) corresponds to the audible form of the word: the sound is a voice, that of human beings, however, as explained by Aristotle, Donatus, Priscian, St. Augustine, Isidore of Seville, Guido of Arezzo, John Cotton, Albertus Magnus, etc., all sounds are not a *vox verbum* with a semantic content. This confusion comes from the inversion between animals and humans, between instruments and “normal” practices. It was used to portray people as what they were and what they were not, or should not be: animals dominated by their animal instincts, monkeys “*similitudo hominis*” reminiscent of the original sin: people created *ad imaginem Dei* yet degenerated.

The confusion between people and animals is obvious if one focuses solely on animal musicians featured in images. However, once they are connected to the entire illuminated *codex*, it becomes clear that decorations established a hierarchy of *natura* and creatures, which was based on music. Indeed, animal musicians, such as jugglers, were always connected to King David who was featured in the first image of the Psalter or Book of Hours. His representation made up the *Bildeinsatz*, which introduced what followed. The purpose of this introductory image (called *ekphrasis* in rhetoric) was to file “things” (*res*) to be remembered during the reading (*legere*, put together, connect) in the readers’ memory.

David is the ultimate archetype, hyper-theme of *musicus*. According to the Book of Samuel, David appeased the wrath of King Saul with the melodies of his harp; like a juggler (jogler), he danced naked before of the Ark of the Covenant; as a harpist, he composed psalms inspired by the dove of the Holy Spirit (*Luttrell Psalter*); he knew the musical laws of harmony and represented the world order. Featured in the introduction of the psalter, his image structured the musical and rational hierarchy of the illuminated page. Animal musicians were his subordinates, inferior to him because of their animal nature and low rationality. Jugglers, minstrels and birds were found between them and David. Therefore, in images, animal musicians and people did have music in common, but to a lesser extent: their music was set at the sensory level (the mind and soul), it was intended for the senses rather than intelligence. Thus, it differentiated people and animals through the hierarchy of creatures.

⁶ Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds. Music, nature and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages*, Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 2007, p. 24-44.

Beast musicians also indicated the distinction between people and animals from the readers' perspective. As senses were essential to the imaginative and rational capabilities of the soul, images of animals thus played an important sensory and mnemonic role for readers. Indeed, their purpose was fundamentally moral in nature. In the tradition of *psychomachia*, the conflict between vices and virtues, they helped the readers to remember and morally convert: they were mnemonic symbols of vices and virtues, but also of the Genesis before and after the Fall of Adam. Thus, they contributed to make the readers (believers) human beings endowed with reason and not animals, while revealing their animal side – the frontier between animals and people is a thin one. Along with psalm singing and the model of David – *Præfigura Christi*, they helped to make the readers Christians concerned for the salvation of their soul.

Conclusion

Thus, animal musicians make readers see and hear the harmony and disharmony of nature. As elements making up the *ornatus* of the *codex*, they make God's Creation – *cosmos* (the Greek translation of the Latin word *ornatus* means what is proper, what is beautiful) – its hierarchy of creatures and “abnormalities” perceptible through the senses of sight and hearing. Together, animal musicians, King David and jugglers, combined to psalm singing, give an aesthetic version of God's Creation while being the instruments of its praise.

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