

Wildlife rhetoric: colonization, commodification or interspecies collaboration?

Sonja Britz

Design Center, Greenside
Johannesburg

Research into wildlife rhetoric in sub-Saharan Africa has led to the supposition that wildlife representation in contemporary visual culture resides in media representation and wildlife tourist industries rather than in the fine arts. Tourist industries contribute, to a large extent, to what constitutes the notion of wilderness and wild animals. This paper argues that cinematic and photographic technologies and colonial views on animals are sometimes organically conjoined in a complex network binding together and governing the way these discourses mutually affect each other. Contemporary discourse in animal studies challenges reductionism and anthropological views held on animals: central to the ethical debate surrounding animals and animal representation is the acknowledgement of a choice to be made between either dominion or stewardship of the animal.

Key words: representation, the tourist gaze, agency, cinema and photography, colonial and postcolonial discourse, safari, wilderness.

Retoriek insake wild: kolonialisme, kommodifikasie of interspecies kollaborasie?

Navorsing insake die retoriek betreffende wilde diere in Afrika besuide die Sahara, toon dat die representasie van wilde diere binne die visuele kultuur te vinde is in media-uitbeelding, asook in die natuurlewe toeriste-bedryf eerder as in die skone kunste. Die toeriste-bedryf dra tot 'n groot mate by tot die idee van wildernis en wilde diere. Hierdie referaat stel dit dat film en fotografie tegnologie tesame met kolonialisme tot groot mate die diskoerse in verband met wildernis en wilde diere reguleer. Kontemporere sieninge in die veld van dierestudies bevraagteken reduksionere en antropologiese sieninge oor die dier, in stede word die keuses voorgestel tussen dominasie en oorsig.

Sluutel terme: representasie, toeriste blik, film en fotografie, koloniale n post-koloniale diskoerse, safari, wildernis

In this paper I wish to consider several forms of 'visual rhetoric' that co-exist within the broader discourse of South African wildlife and their environment. In our country wildlife representation is a genre that attracts a wide and contrasting range of responses. Not surprisingly this area of art is dominated by wildlife 'illustrators' who make painterly renderings from dramatic photographs of prime specimens of African wildlife. The popular local appeal of such paintings and their association with the wider tourist souvenir market have contributed to the contemporary South African art world's scepticism about the 'seriousness' of art which has animals as its prime, or ostensible subject.

The above situation may seem unremarkable, yet on closer examination the local art world's attitude seems somewhat anomalous, or even myopic. In recent decades manifestations of the historical oppression and marginalisation of various forms of 'other' have been the dominant subject matter of South African art. Although such an emphasis is wholly understandable, it is ironic that concentration on human 'other' has marginalised concern for the historical exploitation of animals and the environment humans share (or more frequently contest) with them. By contrast Erika Fudge observes in her essay *a left-handed blow: writing the history of animals*, (2002:16) that whilst writing of the history of animals is impossibility, establishing the history of human attitudes towards animals is an emergent, but increasingly significant factor in the understanding of animal history. I wish to propose that the establishment of such a discourse in sub-Saharan Africa could play an important role in the development of what Fudge refers to as 'interspecies competence' and the creation of an 'ecologically sensible' view of this history" (2002:11).

Although there is a growing awareness of the significance of non-human actants in the field of visual theory such accounts often relegate animals to rhetorical roles such as symbols or metonymy. Even the influential art historian and cultural theorist WJT Mitchell while alluding

to the "darker side" of landscape in *Landscape and Power* (2006:59), lacks any mention of animal as agency. Instead animals become aesthetic tropes of the picturesque, whilst the broader moral implications of their presence (or absence) in the landscape is overshadowed by the higher niveau of anthropocentric discourse on landscape and power. However, more recently Mitchell described the aesthetic history of animal representation as 'deeply interwoven with structures of power and social otherness (2006:59).

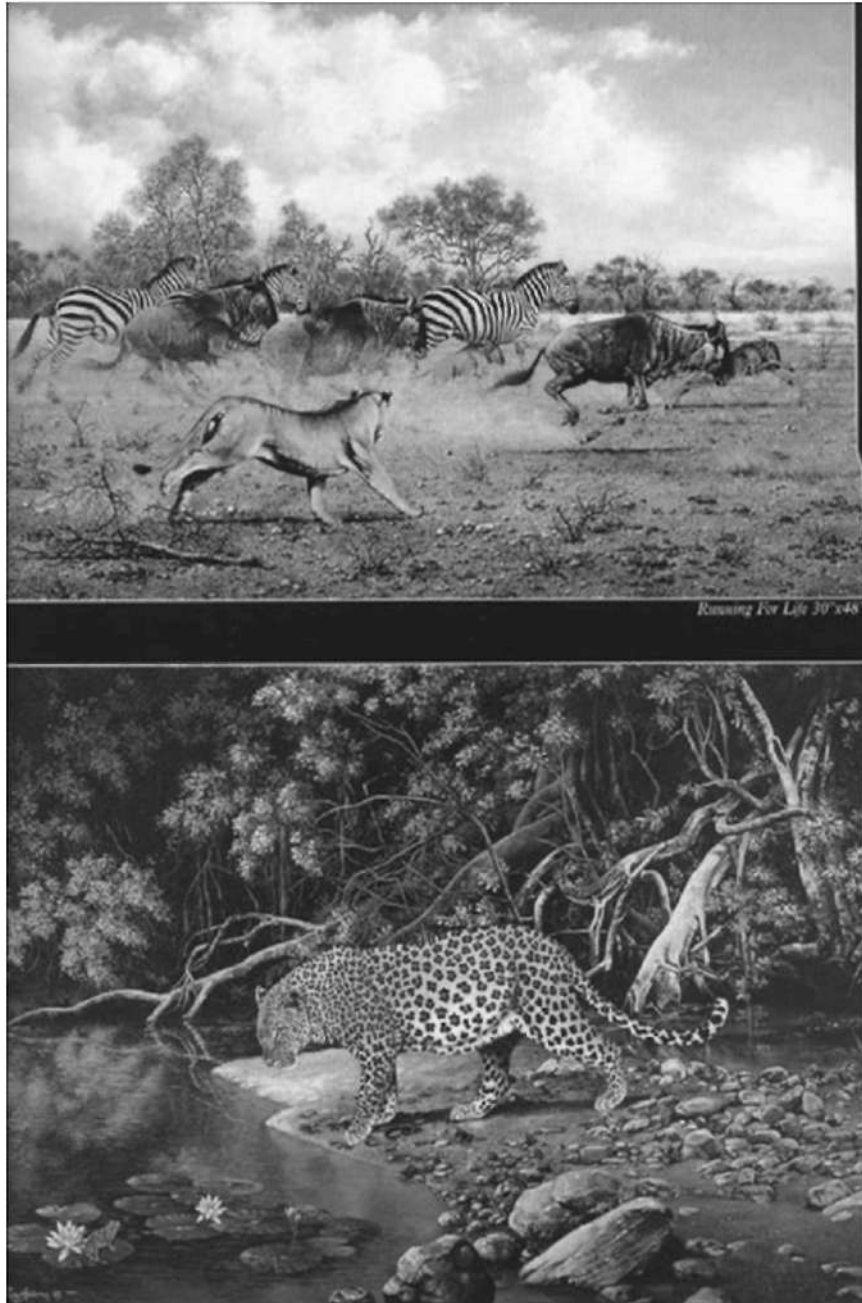


Figure I:
 Ray Holling, *Running for life*, (30"x48").
Chance encounter, (30"x48")
African Sporting Gazette. 11 ((1))

The term *animal agency* needs to be qualified by the fact that an unequal relationship of power exists between human and animal. Nevertheless the term does redress an imbalance which foregrounds the impact animals have on humans. In *The Postmodern Animal* Steve Baker argues that in contemporary artwork dealing with the animal, the 19th century notion of animality - with its connotations of symbol, sentiment and beauty- has been replaced by the

notion of the *botched* animal (2006:71) (Fig I). Baker seems uncertain as to whether such a bleak perspective offers a positive re-thinking of the human-animal relationship or whether it intensifies the social and actual alienation of the animal from what Akira Mizuta Lippit refers to as "the ethical folds of the human world"(2002:18). Lippit posits the theory that wildlife has disappeared from human habitats and that its reappearance is ensured only through technology and film (Moten 2000:1171).

As artists are usually in the foreground of social change and given current concern for conservation and the environment, it seems remarkable that contemporary South African artists seldom engage with these issues, let alone seek to restructure attitudes towards animals and environment into more sophisticated ethical and practical views on interspecies relations. Instead wildlife rhetoric resides most evidently in eco-tourism industries which despite contrived discourse seek to re-define terms like "wildness" and "wilderness" in the service of commodification and capitalist "progress"(fig ii).



Figure II

Shamwari Lodge Far and wild safaris.2007[o].

Available: <http://www.africasafari.co.za/malaria-free/shamwari/shamari.htm> Accessed on: 09/01/07.

The purpose of this paper is firstly, to explore how contemporary wildlife rhetoric in sub-Saharan Africa has been built on a colonial past, but is increasingly tempered by ecological realities. Secondly, implicit to this account are the influence of early cinema (figiii) in Africa and the advent of wildlife photography on wildlife leisure and tourist industries. Thirdly, I will also argue that our understandings can be further informed by examining the constructed semiotic landscape of the tourist's participation in these industries and the implications of what Urry terms the *tourist gaze*.

Two types of private Southern African commercial wildlife ventures have been chosen as case studies in order to illustrate how historical colonial discourses and contemporary ecological ones appear to intersect: These are 1) the luxury eco-safari, or personalized wilderness as exemplified by the *Shamwari Game Reserve* and 2) the "adventurous" hunting safari as exemplified by the *Erindi Safari Company* (fig iv&v)

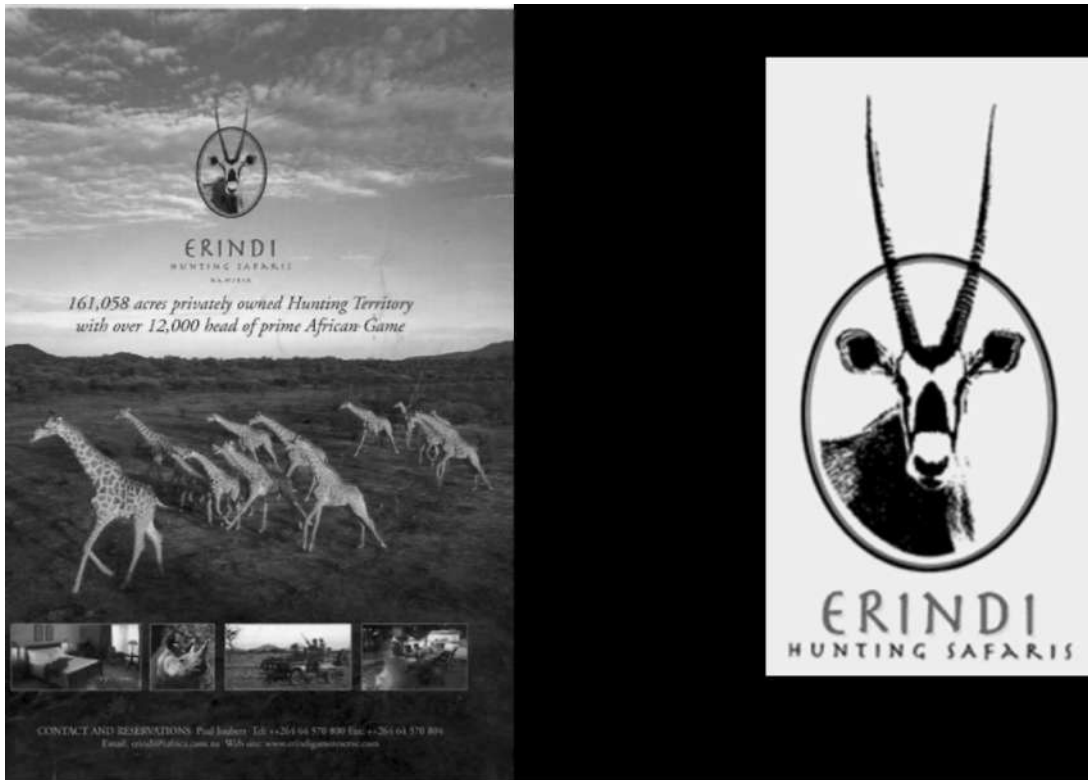


Figure III
 Erindi Game Lodge media advertisement. African Sporting Gazette. 10 (2)

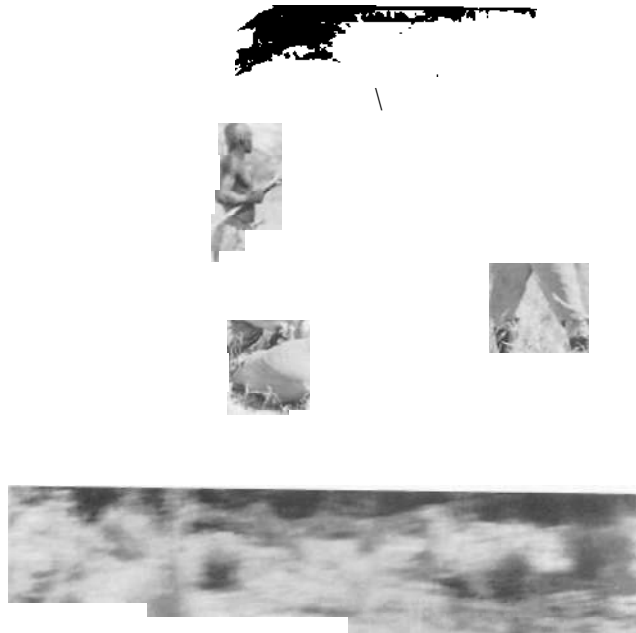


Figure IV
 Two hunting scenes from W.S.Dyke's Trader Horn (1930).
 Burt, J. 2002 Animals in film. London: Reaktion Books.



Figure V

Roosevelt, Percival and R.J. Cunninghame on safari. Beard, P. 1988. *The End of the Game*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.

Mass tourism and photography developed at about the same time as characteristics of modern societies. According to Urry (2002:124) mass tourism: "developed as a result of a variety of economic, urban infrastructural and attitudinal changes which had transformed the social experiences of large sections of the population of European societies during the course of the 19th century". Correspondingly, the immensely expanding popularity of photography in the latter part of the 19th century became a central element in the construction of the tourist gaze. Novel modes of visual perception provided evidence of what was seen and experienced and laid claim to a certain 'authenticity'- in fact Urry has suggested: "It ends up with travellers demonstrating that they really have been there by showing their version of the images that they had seen originally before they set off (Gordon 1999:11).

A brief history of the promotion of tourism in Southern Africa could help explain the backdrop against which lodges like Shamwari evolved. Whereas the promotion of tourism, prior to WWI, focussed on upper-class hunters, a new phenomenon arose in the 20th century aimed at attracting the mass tourist. In 1913 the Southern African railways had already started an overseas advertising campaign and after the War a publicity agent was stationed at the South African High Commission in London (Gordon 1999:112). The three major attractions offered to the foreign tourist were i) climate, ii) natural and scenic beauty and iii) fauna and flora (Gordon 1999 :112).

Furthermore, Urry also notes that, 'the seventeenth century disease of nostalgia seems to have become a contemporary epidemic' (2002:95) and those especially private initiatives have "inspired new ways of representing history, through commodifying the past in novel forms". Tourist industries contribute, to a large extent, to what constitutes the notion of wilderness and wild animals. In many respects the tourist gaze has supplanted the colonial gaze in its quest for the exotic and the spectacle.



Figure VI

Shamwari Longlee Manor offers "refined elegance and gracious living from a bygone era".

Eagles Crag provides privacy, luxury and tranquillity in a valley setting,

Bayethe tented camp "provides" unsurpassed comforts" in a tented accommodation,

Riverdene houses only 18 guests and boasts of landscaped gardens in the wilderness,

Lobengula Lodge offers a "traditional African experience" and finally

Bushmans River Lodge is a "beautifully restored Victorian homestead" surrounded by "private wilderness and unadulterated luxury" (Shamwari 2006).

Shamwari Lodge Far and wild safaris.2007[o].Available: <http://www.africasafari.co.za/malaria-free/shamwari/shamari.htm> Accessed on: 09/01/07.

On the web page of one of South Africa's most prominent game lodges, Shamwari in the Eastern Cape, the potential tourist is welcomed to visit a malaria free zone of great scenic beauty boasting five eco systems and the resulting proliferation of animal and plant life (figvi).

Furthermore, the nostalgic appeal to a present day simulation of the safari of a bygone era is defined as being "about conserving a vanishing way of life and is the realisation of one man's dream and the success of many people's passion" (Shamwari 2007).



Figure VII

Bryndis Snaebjornsdottir and Mark Wilson available: <http://www.snaebjornsdottirwilson.com/artistsatement.html> Accessed on 12/9/06

Whereas the colonizer in the 19th century sought to translate alien territory and its components into familiar spaces or products which reflected him or her psychically and metaphorically, the late 20th and early 21st century South African advertising and tourist industries seek to construct a glamorous fictionalisation of a harsh colonial past sourced from cinematic history.

The role attributed to the animal in such fictionalisation is multi-dimensional as an a-temporality is imposed on animals in contrast to the clearly defined temporality of imaged human beings in film. In early 20th century hunting movies (figvii) glamorisation of the hunt, the thrill of animal kill and exoticism were key factors. The notion of the animal as spectacle, wherein hierarchical power structures between the animal and the human being are clearly defined, not only evokes current game viewing platforms and their commonality with the viewing stations of Picturesque tourism, but also the colonial gaze evident in documentary photographs of human beings. In the latter instance the displaced reality of colonised people was sanitised and made to seem credible through the realm of the photographic studio.

In his essay *Backdrops and Bushmen* Robert Gordon makes the point that colonial fantasies and desires are hegemonically regulated by a combination of adventure and the role of technology (Hartman & Sylvester 1999:111). Early moving making in 1880's Africa (Roberts 1987:191) concentrated on wild life and expressed both appetite for "exotic" scenes filled with adventure and a quest for scientific knowledge. Film was seen as an important research and educational tool, with claims for objectivity and a kind of realism akin to the representational practises of the diorama (Mittman 1993:64).

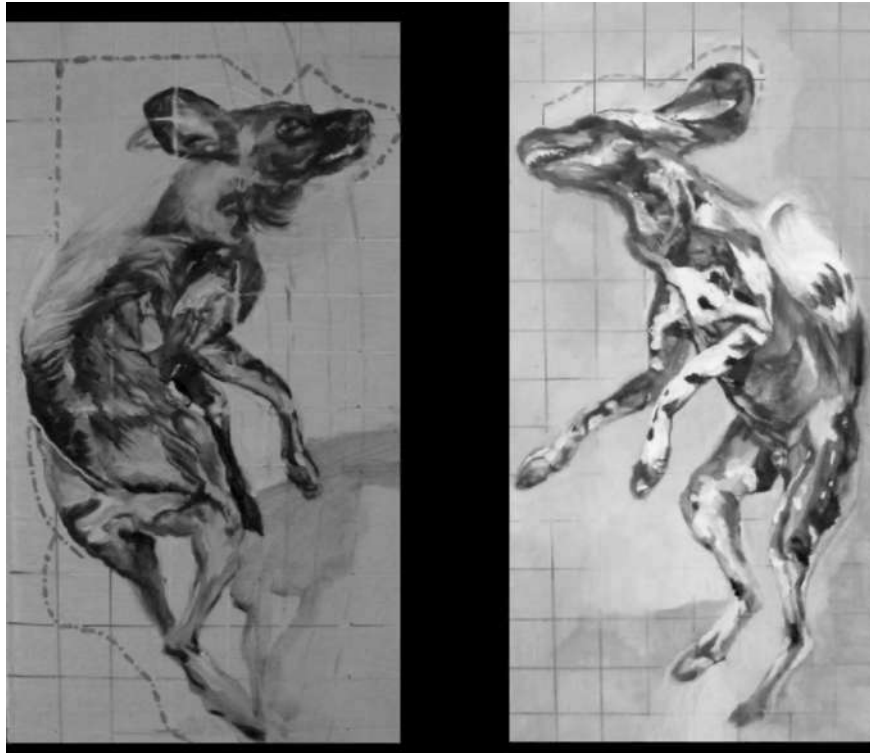


Figure VIII
Sonja Britz The African wild Dog: Rearing (oil on canvas) (76x38cm).

Carl Akeley (fig viii), most famous for his career in taxidermy and the construction of the Hall of African mammals in the American museum of natural history improved on the then existing motion picture camera for filming in nature. Fuelled by his passion for African animals and desire to develop techniques for producing life-like specimens for his dioramas, he joined President Roosevelt's on an expedition to Africa in 1909 (figix).



Figure IX
Sonja Britz "puppy" (oil on canvas) (76x102).

The use of film as an educational research tool, conjoined with American visions of manhood and the preservation of heritage was led by President Theodore Roosevelt in the early part of the 20th century (Haraway 1984-85:38). In many ways the camera began to replace the gun as tool alleviating thereby the complex relationship of ritual and economics embodied in colonial hunting practises in Africa.

In *On photography* Susan Sontag states that (Haraway 1984-85:38):

Guns have metamorphosed into cameras in this earnest comedy, the ecology safari, because nature has ceased to be what it had always been - what people needed protection from. Now nature - tamed, endangered, mortal needs to be protected from people. When we are afraid, we shoot. But when we are nostalgic we take pictures.

This implied conjunction between the actual animal and the photographic representation of it reminds us of what Haraway refers to as: "the penetrating and deadly invasiveness of the camera" (1984:40). Furthermore, the *penetrating invasiveness* of the camera functions voyeuristically with regard to the human-animal gaze. This gaze culminates in a manifestation of desire comparable to looking in pornographic terms: the beginnings of cinema represent what Linda Williams refers to as an "interpenetration of the perverse and scientific" resulting from the desire to look at bodies in motion (Burt 2002: 42-43).

The ideal Shamwari tourist seeking novel and specialised experiences is most probably unaware of the embedded complexities of commercialisation and commodification invested in the intended interaction with the animal. Contemporary, charged and changed ethical and practical views regarding human and non-human interaction, often crystallise in a desire for viewing experiences of wild animals and wilderness. Furthermore, tourist industries offering wildlife viewing, are subjected to , as Wilbert states : "...very domesticated and highly managed forms of supposed 'wildness' and that many tourist encounters with animals may lead to factors contributing to detrimental changes in animal behaviour(Rothfels 2006: 45).

It is increasingly difficult to define what constitutes *authentic* nature and its inhabitants. In his essay the *moral ecology of wildlife* Andrew Isenberg refers to one of his student's definitions: "Nature is where Bambi lives". (Rothfels 2002: 48). This opinion not only sums up the difficulty of defining *Nature*, and what is implied by wilderness, but also reveals the influence of mediated experiences on the ways in which animals are perceived and represented.

When John Urry coined the term "tourist gaze" (derived from Foucault's 'medical gaze') he directed it at holidays, tourism, pleasure and consumerism - all activities which in some way or another differ from everyday life and which are associated with leisure. An important part of such experiences is to gaze upon a set of different scenes or subjects which are unfamiliar to the tourist. This gaze is as socially organised and systematised as the gaze of the medic. The tourist gaze is constructed and developed by many professional experts and it changes and develops in different societies and social groups in diverse historical periods. The gaze of any historical period is mainly constructed through difference (Urry 2002:1).

Since the animal has historically and philosophically stood in a bipolar relationship to the human being since antiquity it is a prime site for the investigation of the tourist gaze as developed by tourist industries directed at wildlife tourism. Some countries in Africa are even starting to brand themselves as unique eco-tourism destinations in a bid to carve a lucrative niche in the global market. Bi-polar relationships usually privileges one part of the binary over the other. Reconstructing the tourist gaze in order to realign this relationship and recognize the shared fates of humans and animals lead to issues of land and environment, and the effect these have on cultural perspectives.

Shamwari's revival of the defunct Settler term, "manor"(fig x) reflects the fantasy of the establishment of manorialism which, in addition to hunting, had been the privilege of the British ruling classes since medieval times. The lodges in turn evoke associations with the middle classes and rural capitalism. Although these terms are no longer in use in the EC establishments like Shamwari has revived the term for nostalgic reasons which conjoin economic and elitist enterprises. Shamwari's previous status as a collection of cattle farms is not actually concealed but the renaming of the former farmhouses as "manors" and "lodges" creates a spurious historical connotation because of the association with hunting practices and their associated prestige in Europe at the time.

Udeniable links with a privileged past and exclusivity aimed at an international market provide a blueprint for the representation of animals in this establishment. Although Shamwari Lodge hosts the Big Five, animals are not stereotypically represented in photographic form in this advertisement, but by means of a symbol -a footprint- which indexically signify the animals. Instead, views of the interiors of the lodges depict spaces which offer luxury, comfort and entertainment. This of course does not mean that Shamwari is not aware of the important role assigned to its animal tenants. Animal visibility is manifested through documented statistical sightings of animals (available to tourists on the net) and photographs or video clips (also on their website) of animals photographed in seeming wilderness. These are juxtaposed to photographs of the Settler homestead promising a 'colonial African experience'. This custodial relationship to animal communities symbolically replaces the destructive practises of hunting, but ironically refers to the manageability of wilderness. Animals therefore become precious commodities to be preserved and protected in view of both their own survival and that of commerce.

In view of the proliferation of animal imagery in the hunting advertisement to be discussed next the diminished visibility of such imagery in the Shamwari lodge advertisement becomes a meaningful signifier by comparison. Firstly, the implied action on the part of the tourist as hunter is contrasted to the more passive (intellectual) participation on the part of the ideal Shamwari tourist who is invited to an African colonial experience imbued with elegance and yet located in the wilderness. Secondly, prospective Shamwari visitors are expected to be aware of ecological issues and their roles as custodians rather than exploiters (Shamwari 2006).

By contrast, the Erindi Hunting Safaris advertisement serves as an example of the hunting safari as adventure and foregrounds the use of animal imagery. The central photograph depicts a herd of giraffes galloping across what seems to be untouched wilderness. The individual animal is sacrificed to the group thereby connoting abundance in animal numbers. In addition, smaller photographs of animals are arranged, in conjunction with interior views of the lodge furnished with zebra skin carpets. When, as in the smaller picture of the rhinoceros, the head and horn of the individual animal is focussed on, it can be viewed as a potential trophy rather than a portrait of the animal. A graphic image of the gemsbok as logo hovers in the blue sunny skies above the herd of running giraffes and the antelope's horns protrude from an oval frame whose format evokes a trophy mount. Iconic and symbolic signs of animals in this advertisement combine to represent potential for the hunt, fulfilment of desire in the form of the acquired prize - the trophy and enjoyment as represented by the luxurious commodities. On the one hand the animal, often anonymously subsumed within the sensationalising term 'the Big Five', namely the lion, buffalo, elephant, rhinoceros and leopard is the unique attraction of the safari. On the other hand, the animal body becomes a synecdochal and metaphoric sign which serves to establish an arena for discourse between simulated colonial and post-colonial worlds.

By contrast Shamwari ostensibly exemplifies the attitude of veneration in its acknowledgement of diminishing wild life populations and a Romantic yearning for 'wilderness' as

popularized by ecologists in the 1960s and one which continues into the present day (Rothfels 2002:48). In the Erindi advertisement exploitation is evident in the notion of hunting safaris as leisure activity Ubiquitous presences in hunting lodges although not exclusively so, are artefacts and objects derived from animals and correspondingly from the implied hunt. Often in the form of furnishings and decorations for game lodges, animal skins and artefacts become signifiers for the colonized animal body and entice potential visitors to export a "taste of Africa " to their home country (fig xi). The colonial vogue for hunting and African trophies influenced interior decorating, helped shape masculinity and was seen to contribute to zoology and the advance of technology in weaponry.

A certain ambivalence evident in contemporary attitudes to animals, which oscillate between the two poles of veneration and exploitation can be traced to the manner in which the animal is represented (Burt 2002:29). In my research I have noticed that what is made visible in the representation tends to simultaneously imply that which is meant to remain invisible. On the one hand the animal, often anonymously subsumed within the sensationalising term 'the Big Five' manifestly elicits veneration from the viewer. On the other hand, regarding the exploitative features of this representation, the tourists in their adoption of a simulated colonial relationship with the represented animal reveals a callousness and ignorance as to the actual context which made this viewing possible, even for a brief aesthetic thrill. This attitude reveals the animal body becoming a synecdochal and metaphoric sign which serves to establish an arena for discourse namely a specific perpetuated aspect of colonialism vis-a-vis responsible custodianship.

In her book *Animal* Erica Fudge identifies the key differences between the two words *dominion* and *stewardship* as being central to the ethical debate surrounding the animal in the 21st century (Fudge 2002: 15): dominion implying the right to use and stewardship human duty to act responsibly. This distinction seems to be a crucial realisation for animal survival and more importantly for how human beings live with animals.

The literal meaning of the word *aporia* is an "impassable path" and in philosophy describes a group of statements which whilst they are individually plausible, are inconsistent or contradictory when taken together (Macey 2001:18). It would appear that wildlife rhetoric in sub-Saharan Africa has reached a crossroads of aporetic dimensions. The antinomy established between definitions of what constitute responsibility and accountability in the examples discussed above does not describe a contradiction among equally imperative laws but constitutes what Derrida refers to as an "interminable experience" (Derrida 1993:16). An experience which acknowledges a sense of duty towards animals and how we live with them with the expressed aim to become a responsible decision which must obey an "it is necessary" and which must owe nothing (Derrida 1993: 16).

I wish to conclude with the following reflection on the new millennium by Julia Kristeva which sums up the spirit of what Derrida is proposing: "By this I mean the human desire to think (not in the sense of calculating) but of questioning that distinguishes human beings from other species and thus, *a contrario*, brings them closer to them" (Kristeva 2002:447).

Works Cited

- Acampora, R. 2001. Electric animal: Toward rhetoric of wildlife. *Society and animals* Volume 9(3).
- Baker S. 2000. *The Postmodern Animal*. Reaktion Books: London.
- Baker, S. 2006. "You kill things to look at them": animal death in contemporary

- art, in *Killing animals, Animal Studies group*. Urbana: Illinois Press: 69-98.
- Burt, J. 2002. *Animals in film*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Derrida, J. 1993. *Aporias*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Donalds, D. 2006. Pangs watched in perpetuity; Sir Edwin Landseer's pictures of dying deer and the ethos of Victorian sportsmanship, in *Killing animals, Animal Studies group*. Urbana: Illinois Press.
- Fudge, E. 2002. *Animal*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Gordon, R. 1999. Backdrops and Bushmen: an expeditious comment in the *colonising Camera*. U.S.A. Ohio University press: 111-117.
- Hartman, W., Silvester, J and Hayes, P. (Ed) 1999. *The colonising camera*. U.S.A. Ohio University press.
- Kristeva, J. 2002. *The portable Kristeva: updated edition*. K. Oliver editor. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Macey, D. 2000. *Dictionary of critical theory*. London: Penguin.
- Mitchel, W.J.T. 1994. *Landscape and Power*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Rothfels, N. 2002. *Representing animals*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Shamwari Lodge: Far and wild safaris. 2007. [O]. Available: <http://www.africasafari.co.za/malaria-free/shamwari/shamari.htm> Accessed on: 09/01/07.
- The Animal studies group. 2006. *Killing animals*. U.S.A.: University of Illinois Press.
- Urry, J. 2002. *The tourist gaze*. London: Sage.
- Wilbert, C. 2006. What is doing the killing? Animal attacks, man eaters, and shifting boundaries and flows of human-animal relations in *Killing animals, Animal Studies group*. Urbana: Illinois Press: 30-49.

Sonja Brits is currently senior Lecturer at Greenside Design Center, College of Design, Johannesburg and practising Fine artist. Her most recent show in 2007 July on the African wild dog was sponsored by Sasol Rosebank Johannesburg.