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THE DERRIDEAN GAZE OF THE "WHOLLY OTHER" IN STEPHEN KING'S "RAT"

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Abstract

Building upon the theoretical framework that Derrida conceives in his posthumous environmental reflections and the interdiscipline of biosemiotics, this essay delves into the ethical questions posed by Stephen King related to other-than-human sentience, suffering, and subjecthood in "Rat." Derrida and King generate thought-provoking portrayals of what happens when we are confronted with the gaze of the "wholly other." When the other-than-human gaze falls upon us, Derrida and King insist that we cannot disregard the ethical summons that accompanies it. This transformative gaze compels us to think and live otherwise. The limitrophic reflection actuated by the other-than-human gaze eliminates the sharp ontological gap between humans and other animals. Owing to the strength of these encounters with other-than-human alterity, species boundaries erected on the shaky foundation of binary logic become unclear and unstable.

Keywords — Stephen King; Jacques Derrida; Non-human Sentience; Environmental Ethics; Biosemiotics.

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INTRODUCTION

Although Stephen King is often "misinterpreted by both the popular press and academicians," or relegated to the status of a "trashy" horror writer, this essay demonstrates how the so-called master of the macabre poses ethical questions about other-than-human sentience and subjecthood in his short story "Rat" that recall Jacques Derrida's "reinterpretation of the living creature called 'animal'" in his posthumous ecological thought (Smith 336; Derrida, *The Animal* 76). Specifically, the protagonist Drew Larson's transformative encounter with what he perceives to be a badly injured Norwegian rat during an unforgiving storm in rural Maine in "Rat" is reminiscent of "what happens when, naked, one's gaze meets that of what they call an animal" vividly and sometimes comically depicted by Derrida in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* and *The Beast and the Sovereign* series (Derrida, *The Animal* 29). It may initially seem strange to discuss environmental ethics in King's fictional universe in which the author has found a plethora of creative ways to torture, maim, and kill humans and other animals, but "Rat" illustrates that King is above all a humanist who decries real-life violence and injustice in its myriad forms. Despite his evident faults, the character Drew Larson reflects King's conviction that "most people are good" and are capable of making a moral "stand," as evidenced in the aptly named *The Stand* (King qtd. in Brooks n.p.). For this reason, when a seemingly dying rat shows up on his welcome mat and their eyes meet, Drew cannot turn away from the moral summons extended by the gaze of what Derrida refers to as the "wholly other" (Derrida, *The Animal* 11).

Similarly to how Derrida first recognizes what it means to *see* and to *be seen* by other sentient beings through the destabilizing "experience of coming out of the shower and being looked at naked by his household cat" recounted in *The Animal That Therefore I am*, the visibly suffering rat becomes a catalyst for philosophical reflection for the protagonist in "Rat" (Naas 225). Before the story takes a supernatural and dark turn, the experience described by the narrator in "Rat" closely parallels Derrida's revelations about how "[t]he animal looks at us, and we are naked before it […] (and) Thinking perhaps begins there" (Derrida, *The Animal* 29, my insertion). As a decent human being with a conscience, Drew is transfixed by the gaze of the wholly other that compels him to act in order to end or at least minimize the anguish of another organism that does not even bare a vague resemblance to the Cartesian caricature of the animal-machine. In the moments before this rat that appears to be ordinary on the surface is revealed to be a djinn endowed with magical powers, Drew starts to engage in what Derrida calls "limitrophy." Caught under the spell of the "bulging black eyes" of the rat, Drew is struck by the epiphany that the dichotomous boundaries between humans and other animals, which we have partly inherited from Judeo-Christian ideology, Renaissance Humanism, and Cartesian philosophy, are in reality extremely porous (King 399). Instead of being a robotic automaton that is "merely obeying the fixity of a program" deprived of any capacity to experience pleasure, pain, anxiety, and fear, Drew finds himself face to face with a fellow subject that bleeds, suffers, and dies just like us (Derrida,

ENTHYMEMA
ISSN 2037-2426 – No. 37 (2025)

The Animal 117). Moreover, the rat is a semiotic agent that can communicate its suffering during its time of need from a biosemiotic[1] perspective.

1. CONTEXTUALIZATION OF "RAT"

This universal suffering of the living is one of the recurring themes throughout the collection *If It Bleeds* in which "Rat" was published in 2020 and in King's *œuvre* in general. Caitlin Duffy and Neil McRobert note how King covers some familiar ground in "Rat" that will remind readers of seminal works such as *The Shining*, *Misery*, *Salem's Lot,* and *The Dark Half*. Drew Larson is a professor and a creative writer who has written several well-received short stories but has never been able to realize his dream of composing a full-length novel. Before retreating to his family's isolated cabin after having an idea for a novel, Drew's wife is apprehensive because "earlier attempts have driven him close to madness" (McRobert n.p.). In this vein, "Rat" is another King narrative that "explores the dark side of the artistic and creative process" (Books n.p.). Nonetheless, "Rat" adds a new wrinkle to King's prolific and diverse body of work by underscoring the searing pain that other animals experience during their ephemeral time on earth as well. Coming from a writer whose protagonist Greg Stillson in *The Dead Zone* brutally kicks a dog to death, or whose first main character Carrie is doused in the blood of a butchered pig in *Carrie*, the poignant depictions of other-than-human anguish in "Rat" even attack the sensibilities of seasoned King readers or fans. Although Drew soon makes a Faustian bargain with this supernatural rat capable of granting one wish that he will forever regret leading to the death of his department head Al Stamper who dies in a car accident after fully recovering from pancreatic cancer, this price that he pays for finally writing a successful novel takes a backseat to the *ordinary* characteristics that the rat shares with all animals. King's contestation of the human-animal divide and the faulty mechanistic, anthropocentric logic upon which it is predicated are what remains with the reader.

2. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF DERRIDA'S POSTHUMOUS THOUGHT

Compared to pioneers of the environmental movement in the Francophone world like Michel Serres and Edgar Morin, "Derrida seemed to come late to the animal question" (Wood 319). However, Derrida's lectures and seminars published after his death as *The Animal That Therefore I Am* and *The Beast and the Sovereign* series have "become the touchstone for anyone working in critical animal studies" (Westling 198). Derrida forces us to confront the "bottomless gaze" of the wholly other, as he takes the "grand mechanistic tradition back to the drawing board" (Derrida, *The Animal* 12; 76). It is this "gaze called animal" portrayed by King in "Rat" that enables Derrida to outline his "most crucial theoretical propositions regarding the limit between man and

[1] The basic tenets of biosemiotics will be highlighted in greater detail in the final section of the essay.

animal" in which the "full extent of Derridean inquiry as it reproblematizes everything we think we know about the animal" manifests itself (Derrida, *The Animal* 17; Michaud 41). Derrida's project of "producing a full-length text addressing the many questions of animality […] never came to fruition," but the Franco-Algerian philosopher systematically dissects "the binary discourse of species that puts man in the center and at the top" imploring us to think harder about the actual similarities and differences between the human animal and other species in *The Animal That Therefore I am* and *The Beast and the Sovereign* based on empirical evidence and sound logic (Congdon 191; Kleinhans 2).

3. THE ETHICAL SUMMONS EXTENDED BY THE DERRIDEAN GAZE

After "he is exposed naked to the gaze of his cat," Derrida becomes aware that his feline companion possesses "its (own) point of view […] the point of view of the absolute other" (Harding and Martin 2; Derrida, *The Animal* 11, my insertion). This unsettling experience makes the philosopher ponder what it means to be seen through "the eyes of a non-human being," or "the vantage of the animal" (Simma 84; Derrida, *The Animal* 21). Even if we will never be able to comprehend the "secret inner stirrings of animals" from the outside looking in fully, Derrida avers that scientific discoveries, quotidian encounters with our other-than-human family members, and common sense support the conclusion that all other species have their own subjective inner world or frame of reference (Derrida, *The Animal* 6). Unable to turn away from his cat's stare, Derrida confesses, "The animal is there before me […] it can look at me […] nothing will have ever given me more food for thinking that this absolute alterity of the neighbor or of the next (-door) than these moments when I see myself naked under the gaze of the cat" (*The Animal* 11). Catching a glimpse of "the looking glass […] from the point of view of the animal," "the refusal of alterity through non-recognition is no longer possible" for Derrida (Derrida, *The Animal* 9, Wadiwel 15).

Derrida begins to rework Levinisian ethics by undercutting the notion that "the face-to-face encounter that commands us to be ethical" is "uniquely human" (Oliver 65). In response to Levinas who "does not really think that animals have faces" (Bruns 409), Derrida muses,

Ok, the snake has eyes, it has a tongue, it has a head to some extent, does it have the face? What about the snake's face? […] Does an ethics or a moral prescription obligate us only to those like us-you remember the question of the semblable […] i.e. man, or does it obligate us with respect to anyone at all, any living being at all, and therefore with respect to the animal? (*The Beast and the Sovereign*, *vol. 1* 237-244).

Like many other "pet" owners, Derrida observes that his cat has a face that is capable of expressing many different emotions including happiness, sorrow, fear, and anger in *The Animal That Therefore I am*. Derrida deduces that if we were to spend a lot of time with other non-domesticated animals, including reptiles, we would be able to interpret some of these facial expressions in *The*

Beast and the Sovereign. When our faces meet those of other-than-human entities, they emerge from the shadow of non-recognition and are placed into the light of moral consideration. In simple terms, the ethical imperative to be compassionate towards the Other mediated through the gaze is now applicable to other animals. Derrida thus concludes, "If I am responsible for the other […] isn't the animal more other still […] than the other in whom I recognize my brother, than the other in whom I identify my fellow or my neighbor. If I have a duty […] wouldn't it then also be toward the animal" (*The Animal* 107).

Not only does King laud "the everyday courage and morality of everyday people" who are subjected to this Levinisian gaze in their daily lives, but he also implies that this recognition "translates into a sort of duty" like Derrida (Diaz n.p.; Tozzi 225). Given the many horrific ways in which humans and other animals die in King's narratives, some critics have overlooked the highly developed ethical strand in the author's fiction that "constantly raises the question of morality" opining that "each must make a stand, make a commitment to either good or evil" (Nash 168; Egan 219). Despite the fact that Drew's wife "Lucy hated rodents" and "Drew didn't care much for rodents himself, and understood that they carried diseases" in "Rat," the protagonist cannot ignore the Derridean ethical summons that is extended by the animal gaze on the welcome mat of his front porch (King 399). Like many people in Western society, Drew considers rats to be disease-ridden, filthy, and inferior creatures. Nevertheless, the force of the gaze is so strong when his eyes meet those of the rat that he is obligated to act. As the narrator elucidates, "*The rat on the mat needs help stat*" (King 400, italics in original). Before this face-to-face encounter that forever changes how Drew perceives rodents, there would have been no reason for him to help an animal that is widely conceived to be an unwanted, dangerous pest in our society.

When Drew answers the door after hearing the rat intentionally scratching seeking shelter from the storm and a place to stay warm, or to die more comfortably, Drew sees, "Its brown-black fur […] littered with tiny bits of leaf, twig, and beads of blood. Its bulging black eyes were looking up at him. Its side heaved […] It lay there panting and looking up at him with blood on its fur and in its whiskers. Broken up inside and probably dying" (King 399). Owing to its apparent physical condition, Drew's first thought is to end the suffering of this rat communicated to him via the other-than-human gaze through a *coup de grâce*. The protagonist cannot deliver this "one hard hit" with a shovel "to put it out of its misery," because the black eyes implore him to act differently (King 400). Drew ultimately decides to pick up the rat and place it in front of the fireplace so it can die more peacefully away from the furor of the elements. Faced with a dilemma of how to treat a fellow sentient being with dignity, Drew's actions are emblematic of a "response to the injunction, the interpellation, of the other's face" to which he cannot turn a blind eye (Benaroyo 327). A gaze from a member of a species that Drew has always loathed changes everything, as he treats the rat with the same neighborly courtesy to which Derrida refers that Levinas reserves exclusively for humans.

4. DECONSTRUCTION OF THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BINARY AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL EXERCISE OF LIMITROPHY

In this regard, the ethical imperative emanating from the other-than-human gaze in Derrida's philosophy and in King's "rat" interrogates the human-animal binary and investigates the fluid boundaries between *Homo sapiens* and other animals. For Derrida, the human-animal dichotomy is fraught with peril, because it obfuscates the scientific reality that humans are mammals-primates, even if there are many significant differences between humans and other organisms. Hence, the philosopher calls into question "the autobiography of the human species, the whole history of the self that man recounts to himself, that is to say the thesis of a limit as rupture or abyss between those who say 'we men,' 'I, a human,' and what this man among men who say 'we,' what he *calls* the animal or animals" (Derrida, *The Animal* 29-30, italics in original). Derrida takes aim at "this dogmatic and for the most part uncritical and unjustified division between the human animal and all other animals" through the creation of the neologism *animot* and what he calls "limitrophy" (Naas 222). Transcending "the seduction of cheap verbal play," "Derrida makes incisive inroads in effacing the unfairness of the category 'animal' in which animals constitute a homogeneous set in fundamental opposition with the human […] To that end, Derrida proposes the concept *animot/animaux*, a neologism that is pronounced identically in both the singular and plural forms in French, so that the plural for *animals* resonates in the singular form" (Garnier 27; Slater 687, italics in original). Derrida scoffs at the reductionistic, catch-all word-concept of the "animal" pitted against the "human." In the words of the philosopher, "The confusion of all nonhuman living creatures within the general and common category of the animal is not simply a sin against rigorous thinking, vigilance, lucidity, or empirical authority, it is also a crime" (Derrida, *The Animal* 47-48). A fortuitous and embarrassing experience connected to the other-than-human gaze is what leads Derrida to challenge "the very category of 'the animal' itself" (Oliver 54).

Derrida endeavors to redraw the borders between humans and other species in non-oppositional terms without effacing them entirely. Gerard Bruns explains that "Derrida's idea is not to erase the line that separates us from other living things […] but rather to multiply its dimensions" (Bruns 415). Derrida's deconstructive approach is "a matter of taking into account a multiplicity of heterogenous structures and limits" (Derrida, *The Animal* 48). The philosopher offers this operational definition of his theory of "limitrophy:"

> *Limitrophy* is therefore my subject. Not just because it will concern what sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what *feeds the limit*, generates it, raises it, and complicates it. Everything I'll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply. (*The Animal* 29, italics in original).

Without reducing difference to sameness or replacing one reductionistic theoretical framework with another, Derrida reexamines and multiplies the limits between *Homo sapiens* and other

ENTHYMEMA
ISSN 2037-2426 – No. 37 (2025)

animals. Derrida provides a preliminary blueprint for (re-) envisioning the actual differences and similarities between humans and other organisms with whom we share the earth outside of simplistic, binary structures through the philosophical exercise of limitrophy.

Several passages from "Rat" concretize limitrophy in action presented in an accessible form for a large public. As opposed to describing the rat as a thing, or a robotic entity that operates according to an internal machinery, the protagonist is taken aback by how "human" that this tiny creature seems to be. In addition to the power of the other-than-human gaze itself that opens the door to the possibility of moral consideration, the rat has other characteristics that resemble humans and other animals. As the narrator explains, "It was lying on the threadbare welcome mat, one of its paws-pink, strangely human, like a baby's hand-outstretched and still scratching at the air" (King 399). Before Drew lets the rat inside, the narrator adds, "the rat was still on the mat. Sleet had begun crusting on its fur. That one pink paw (so human, so human) continued to paw at the air, although now it was slowing down" (King 400). Drew cannot prematurely end the life of the rat, because it reminds him of a vulnerable baby or an injured person. The Derridean moral imperative beckons him to offer hospitality and compassion to another sentient being, as Drew starts to reconsider traditional conceptions of humanity revolving around dichotomous thought paradigms. The scratching at the door is eerily similar to a person knocking or a dog clawing to come inside or go outside.

The repetition of the word human in the above passages is also revealing from a scientific angle. King's reappraisal of what it means to be human outside of dominant anthropocentric fallacies is supported by empirical data. Specifically, genome research initiatives have discovered that we share a lot of DNA sequences in common with many other animals, including rodents. Summarizing the results of an international rat genome sequencing project that studied a species of Norwegian rat (*Rattus norvegicus*), Geoff Spencer reveals, "humans have 23 pairs of chromosomes, while rats have 21 and mice have 20. However, the new analysis found chromosomes from all three organisms to be related to each other by about 280 large regions of sequence similarity - called 'syntenic blocks'" (Spencer n.p.). The scientist Eric Lander notes that "about 99 percent of genes in humans have counterparts in the mouse" (Lander qtd. in Walton n.p.). Due to these striking genetic similarities, it is not surprising that different species of rats are exploited as guinea pigs in controversial research studies designed to improve human health. The rodent in "Rat" appears to be "so human," given that it is not that dissimilar from us at all. King points out our inescapable animality in "Rat" as part of a *limitrophic* reflection that decenters the narrative around the essence of humanity.

5. THE RECOGNITION OF OTHER-THAN-HUMAN SUFFERING AND OUR SHARED MORTALITY

Putting the supernatural elements of the narrative aside, "Rat" is first and foremost a story highlighting the reality of other-than-human suffering. Derrida and King's ethical projects coalesce

around this focus on this shared genetic makeup as fellow animals (*animots*). Derrida laments how "the animal is reduced to the status of a machine without reason" in much of the Western philosophical tradition (*The Animal* 111). With a heavy dose of scientific realism alluding to empirical studies and encouraging us to learn from our daily encounters with other-than-human alterity, Derrida puts the final nail in the proverbial coffin of the animal-machine hypothesis or the "claim that animals are 'literally and simply machines'" (Castricano 17). When evidence, common sense, and experience are factored into the equation, Derrida demonstrates that "what becomes undeniable as we move forward is that animals suffer" (Lawlor 45). In a passage that resonates with many readers who have seen an animal suffer from physical pain, anxiety, stress, and fear firsthand, Derrida contends, "No one can deny the suffering, fear, or panic, the terror or fright that can seize certain animals and that we humans can witness" (*The Animal* 28). Owing to this "shared vulnerability," Derrida argues that "we owe to animals the debts of pity and compassion" (Egerer 443; Nash 65). When we observe "the sharing of this suffering among the living" on an other-than-human face, this gaze forces us to be ethical for this reason (Derrida, *The Animal* 26). Furthermore, Derrida affirms that the fact that *all* animals try to stave off the internal and external forces of death for as long as possible during our "finite, precarious lives" fosters a type of moral solidarity with "the *other*-living-mortal" (Reszitnyk 154; Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign, vol. 1* 126, italics in original). According to Derrida, it is our "shared bodily mortal existence" that "complexifies the limit between the animal and the human" (Oliver 67; Slater 691).

Derrida theorizes that the realization of this universal suffering and unavoidable mortality filtered through the other-than-human gaze revolutionizes our ethical systems entirely. The philosopher opines that the anguish communicated through a face-to-face encounter with the "wholly other" serves to "awaken us to our responsibilities and our obligations vis-à-vis the living in general, and precisely to this fundamental compassion that, were we to take it seriously, would have to change the very cornerstone […] of the philosophical problematic of the animal" (Derrida, *The Animal* 27). Whereas anything is permissible in the ethical and philosophical sense if we are referring to a mindless machine, Derrida illustrates that at least a degree of moral consideration must be conferred upon another sentient organism that lives, suffers, and dies just like us. Derrida asserts that a much-needed point of departure for modifying our obsolete, anthropocentric ethical systems is to recognize "the *other*-living-mortal" as a "fellow." Since "The worst, the cruelest, the most human violence has been unleashed against living beings, beasts […] who precisely were not accorded the dignity of being fellows," Derrida declares, "I am surreptitiously extending the similar, the fellow, to all forms of life, to all species. All animals qua living beings are my fellows" (*The Beast and the Sovereign, vol. 1* 108; 109).

ENTHYMEMA
ISSN 2037-2426 – No. 37 (2025)

Since the rodent in "Rat" is clearly identified as what Derrida terms a "fellow," Drew's ethical duty cannot be swept under the rug or the welcome mat. Even if Drew does not think that he can save the rat's life, he has a moral obligation to ease the pain of another sentient being to the greatest extent possible. Swayed by the summons transmitted through the rat's "bulging black eyes," Drew's actions are fueled by a deep sense of compassion. Abandoning the rat in the cold to experience more pain and discomfort before succumbing to death is not an option, so "He had to close the door and he wasn't going to leave the rat to die slowly in the dark. And on a fucking welcome mat, to boot" (King 401). Drew chooses what he perceives to be the most humane course of action possible uttering "'Go ahead and die now' […] 'At least you're out of the weather and can do it where you're warm'" (King 401). Scientific studies by researchers such as Karim Aysha et al., Gin C. Hsieh et al., and Howard Curzer et al. lend credence to Derrida's philosophical theories and King's literary representations of other-than-human suffering. Although millions of rodent "pests" are exterminated across the globe every year without a passing thought, "rats are sentient animals (capable of experiencing negative and positive feelings" (Belmain n.p.). Additionally, some of the common methods for killing rats like "glue traps and anticoagulants can lead to extreme suffering" (Belmain n.p.). This lack of understanding and compassion, which epitomizes the relationship between humans and rodents in Western civilization, is why the rat "rewards" Drew with a wish. As the rat explains, "'You were going to kill me with a shovel, and why not? I'm just a lowly rat, after all. But you took me in instead. You saved me'" (King 404). King rehabilitates the image of rats that are often conceived of as "rapacious, beady-eyed vectors of filth and disease" in the pages that precede the dirty bargain itself that allows Drew to become a novelist (Keim n.p.).

The debilitating cold that the protagonist assumes that he catches from a local store owner named Roy DeWitt while he is attempting to write his first novel appears to make Drew even more sensitive to the plight of the rat. Drew's physical ailment is not a death sentence compared to the rat, yet their shared suffering creates an emotional bond and a sense of brotherhood. In fact, Drew candidly admits that he is full of compassion for this other-than-human fellow whose anguish seems to be more pronounced than his own. The narrator provides this synopsis of Drew's compassionate stance:

> A tree had crashed the rat's home and crushed him […] he had somehow managed to drag himself to the cabin. God knew how much effort it had taken, and was this to be his reward? Another crushing, this one final? Drew was feeling rather crushed himself these days and, ridiculous or not (probably it was), he felt a degree of empathy. (King 400-1)

It is the force of the other-than-human gaze that places the rat into the light of moral consideration as a fellow, but Drew's illness intensifies the feelings of compassion that he experiences. Drew may not be afflicted by a life-threatening health condition, yet he can relate to the extreme vulnerability of the dying rat on a deeper level because of his intense cold.

6. THE EXISTENCE OF OTHER FORMS OF SEMIOSIS AND THE DOCTRINE OF UNIVERSAL SUBJECTHOOD

The compassion that Drew feels for the rat is also connected to the realization that this creature is a semiotic agent that knows how to communicate purposefully and strategically. Even before the rat begins to speak to the protagonist in English in a fantastical scene, this rodent had already been conveying its needs, fears, and desires effectively through paralinguistic means. Albeit in vastly different mediums, Derrida and King contest the traditional logic that creates a sharp divide between "semiotically active humans and a semiotically inactive nature" (Maran 142). Whereas mainstream philosophical and linguistic paradigms still mostly adhere to the disproven notion that communication is a singular attribute of the human species, King and Derrida push back on the thesis of "animal linguistic poverty" that does not hold up to any kind of scrutiny (Peterson 90). Building upon recent scientific discoveries and the interdiscipline of biosemiotics, Derrida underscores how *all* organisms conceive, exchange, and interpret signs in the semiotic sense that are laden with context-dependent meaning. Even if *Homo sapiens* are hardwired with the most sophisticated semiotic system that biosemioticians refer to as "language," scientists like the founding father of biosemiotics Jakob von Uexküll emphasize "the communicative nature of all living organisms" (Wheeler 140). Intentional and meaningful semiosis "is a community shared by all living beings" (Iveson 103). Moreover, two semiotic agents that are endowed with different primary modeling devices (PMD) find a way to negotiate meaning and space *together* when they are in close proximity. This is exactly what happens in our daily encounters with domesticated animals, as Derrida maintains, or even when we are thrust into direct contact with other "wild" animals like the rodent in "Rat." The other-than-human gaze is both a summons and a sign-message that we can decode. Other-than-human agents also take advantage of various types of body language like gestures, scratching, howling, barking, purring, and whining to create signs that we can successfully interpret.

In the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign* and throughout his posthumous environmental thought, "Derrida criticises the philosophical tradition for precisely the claim that animals cannot communicate" (Hurst 124). Derrida pokes fun at other thinkers who are stuck in outmoded, dichotomous thought structures and fail to realize that "Mark, gramma, trace, and différance refer differentially to all living things, all the relations between living and nonliving" (*The Animal* 104, italics in original). After providing concrete examples that discredit the lingering theory that other animals are entirely deprived of communicative faculties, Derrida proclaims, "The assertion that the animal is a stranger to learning technical conventions and to any technical artifice in language is an idea that is quite crude and primitive, not to say stupid […] The idea that the animal has only an innate and natural language, although quite widespread in the philosophical tradition and elsewhere, is nonetheless crude and primitive" (*The Beast and the Sovereign, vol.* 2 222). When our primitive thinking about other-than-

human semiosis, one of the "many *asinanities* concerning the so-called animal" that has yet to be fully dislodged in our anthropocentric imagination, is reexamined on the basis of evidence, the biosemiotic recognition of the "degree of semiotic freedom" that all living things possess paves the way for universal subjecthood (Derrida, The Animal 63, italics in original; Sharov, Maran, and Tønnessen 2). Instead of being the only species that can communicate anything significant at all surrounded by animal-machines, Derrida elucidates that we are immersed in a sea of meaningful semiosis at all biological levels of organization. The biosemiotic insight confirmed by scientific data that the universe is teeming with communication means that a level of subjecthood must be conferred upon other semiotic agents. Regarding what Thomas Sebeok calls a "semiotic self" (Kull 59), Derrida concludes, "Let me repeat it, every living creature, and thus every animal to the extent that it is living, has recognized in it this power to move spontaneously, to feel itself and to relate to itself. However, problematic it be, that is even the characteristic of what lives" (*The Animal* 94).

The first image of the rat conjured up by King is in keeping with Derrida's reworking of other-than-human semiosis and subjecthood. Even before the force of its gaze communicates its suffering, the rat proves to be adept at conceiving signs. During the storm, the rodent incessantly scratches at the cabin door despondently hoping that someone will open it. Leaving little room for doubt that the signs transmitted by the rat are indicative of the deliberate actions of an autonomous, semiotic agent, the narrator reveals, That was when he heard a scratching at the door. A *branch*, he told himself, *Blown there by the wind and caught somehow, maybe on the welcome mat. It's nothing. Go to bed.* The scratching came again, so soft he never would have heard it if the wind hadn't chosen those few moments to lull. It didn't sound like a branch; it sounded like a person. Like some orphan of the storm too weak or badly hurt to even knock and could only scratch. (King 399, italics in original).

The personification in this passage is a classic literary device that King utilizes to pose questions about the porous boundaries between human and other-than-human subjects. In the same vein as a human "orphan" or storm victim who is crying out for help, the rat is able to capture Drew's attention. The rat's biosemiotic behavior also reminds readers of how their canine or feline family members communicate with them on a regular basis. Without sharing the same semiotic system, researchers have discovered that "Dogs show a flexible behavioural repertoire when communicating with humans […] They use their whole body to communicate, conveying information intentionally" (Siniscalchi et al. 1). This research from veterinary science applies to the signs emitted by many other animals. Manon Schweinfurth in an article entitled "The Social Life of Norway Rats (Rattus Norvegicus)" discusses "the intentional transfer of information between two individuals" within rodent societies (12). When rats and humans are in close association with each other, as many gerbil owners can attest, they can relate to each through the exchange of signs.

In addition to highlighting how semiotic interactions frequently occur between two different species or semiotic agents, King plays with pronouns to broach the topic of other-than-human subjecthood. Drew oscillates between the pronouns typically reserved for humans ("he-him") and the ones that refer to other animals or objects ("it-its"). The protagonist cannot definitively decide which pronoun is appropriate, for he realizes that the borders between humans and other organisms are malleable or fuzzy at best. Assuming that the rat is a male, Drew contemplates, "*Here is something interesting*, he thought. *When I first saw it, I thought 'he.' Now that I've decided to kill the damn thing, it's it*" before waffling back and forth again moments later and reverting "*back to him now*" (King 400; 400, italics in original). When we are seen through the eyes of another agent with a semiotic self, the question of subjecthood cannot be avoided for either Derrida or King. The author does not provide a clear-cut conclusion to the question of how much agency should be granted to other species in "Rat," but rather he is engaging in limitrophy. King leaves the question open to haunt the reader in a universe in which semiosis is everywhere.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the father of deconstruction Jacques Derrida and the master of horror Stephen King generate thought-provoking portrayals of what happens when we are confronted with the gaze of the "wholly other." When the other-than-human gaze falls upon us, Derrida and King insist that we cannot disregard the ethical summons that accompanies it. This transformative gaze compels us to think and live otherwise. As the suffering of another sentient, mortal being becomes apparent, the *animot* reveals itself to be much more like us than we would like to admit. The *limitrophic* reflection actuated by the other-than-human gaze eliminates the sharp ontological gap between humans and other animals. Owing to the strength of these encounters with other-than-human alterity, species boundaries erected on the shaky foundation of binary logic become unclear and unstable. The epiphany that the biosphere is replete with other semiotic agents that are capable of conceiving, transmitting, and decoding signs further erodes the pervasive doctrine of human exceptionalism. Trapped under the other-than-human gaze, we become astutely aware that the problematic expression the "human condition" is really the universal story of existence. At the dawn of the Anthropocene-Technocene, this fundamental compassion for our "fellow" *animots* could be a starting point for (re-) envisioning a more sustainable roadmap for the future.

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