

Article

# 'In The Empire of the Senses' and the Narrative Horizons of Comics

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**Abstract:** With their 1980s independent comics series *The Puma Blues*, writer Stephen Murphy and artist Michael Zulli presented a foreboding scifi vision of ecological catastrophe in a near-future USA, where mutated manta rays fly the skies, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse roam the desert sands of the southwest and imminent nuclear devastation looms. Yet for all its pessimism, the series (in 2015 expanded, completed and reissued through Dover Press) has rightly earned critical accolades for Zulli's extraordinary nature drawing, in particular of animals. The chapter "In the Empire of the Senses" puts Zulli's stunning nature work most fully on display, utilizing comics techniques such as line work, framing, panel progression and sound effects to create the illusion of a puma's nighttime hunt, often from its perception-rich point of view. Throughout the series, animal and non-human experience/umwelt receives a degree of attention rarely seen in comics, a genre more popularly known for superheroes and anthropomorphized "funny animal" stories. Through a close reading of "In the Empire of the Senses," the paper explores Murphy and Zulli's bid to depict animal ontology through comics' unique capacities, contrasting their approach with that of cinema, viz. Bill Viola's avant garde ethnographic documentary *I Do Not What It Is I Am Like* (1986). My analysis has implications for narratology, the potential of comics' representational strategies and for the depiction of non-human experience more generally.

**Keywords:** comics; animals; narratology; cinema; sound effects; science fiction

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"[M]oral philosophy functions, by and large, within an implicit anthropocentric, subject-centered model, and in order to make a case that can gain a hearing within that model, one has to speak its language and accede to its demands. Of course, it is precisely that moral model, language and demands that have been used to deny animals basic moral standing for centuries . . . ". (Calarco 2008, p. 9)

"If the animal is celebrated it is as a sign but not as a body". (Burt 2012, p. 26)

## 1. Introduction

With their independent comics series *The Puma Blues* (1986–1989), writer Stephen Murphy and artist Michael Zulli presented a foreboding scifi vision of ecological catastrophe in a near-future USA, where mutated manta rays fly the skies, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse roam the southwest desert sands and imminent nuclear devastation looms. Yet for all its pessimism, *The Puma Blues* (in 2015 completed, expanded and reissued through Dover Press [see (Murphy and Zulli 2015)]) achieved legendary status among knowing fans as a cult work *par excellence* for its lyricism, fractured experimental narrative and Zulli's extraordinary nature drawing, especially of animals. As *Rolling*

Stone put it, “*Puma Blues* is John J. Audubon listening to Crass and dreaming about the Book of Revelations” (Rolling Stone 2014).<sup>1</sup>

But the series’ achievements transcend the artistic. As the first project from maverick publisher Dave Sim’s Aardvark One International, whose alternative publishing model challenged the monopolist comics distributor Diamond—eventually leading to the series’ premature cancellation<sup>2</sup>—*The Puma Blues* served as full-fledged community space for a sort of gonzo environmentalist politics.<sup>3</sup> The paratextual content regularly included in its 23 issues, such as “Notes on the Environment,” “Blue Notes” and “The Fraying Weave,” reported on deforestation, species extinction and problems related to global warming (just then seeing its first glimmers in US public consciousness).<sup>4</sup> On its letters page, “Blahblahblah,” eco-warriors clashed with enviro-skeptics while animal lovers and concerned comics fans voiced their worries over the planet.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the series, animal experience saw a degree of attention rarely vouchsafed in comics (a medium more popularly known for superheroes and anthropomorphized “funny animal” stories), in particular through a recurring, unnamed puma character. The early episode “In the Empire of the Senses” (Murphy and Zulli 1986–1989, #5) puts Murphy and Zulli’s commitment to the representation of non-human ontology most fully on display, deploying comics techniques such as line work, framing, panel progression and sound effects for a bravura depiction of the mountain lion’s nighttime hunt, often from its own perception-rich point of view. In so doing, the authors demonstrate not only how a comics focalization on an animal protagonist alters the representational stakes. Their experiment in overwriting readerly preconceptions about how graphic narrative communicates (including “across” the species barrier) carries implications for the capacities of the medium itself, at the same time that it reasserts the very real limits involved in representing a non-human *umwelt*.

In exploring such implications and limits, this essay carries out a close reading of “In the Empire of the Senses,” contrasting its approach with those of ethology, Japanese manga and experimental cinema.

## 2. Empire of the Ghost Cat

*Puma concolor*, the most successful and adaptable land predator of the Western hemisphere, thrived there until the conquest and settlement of the ‘New World’. By the 1930s they were believed eradicated from Eastern North America, despite anecdotal reports (Hunter 2006/2007, p. 20).<sup>6</sup> Their impressive size (specimens often exceed 200 pounds), solitary nature and unmatched stealth have led to a legendary reputation as “ghost cats,” both among native peoples and their conquerors.

<sup>1</sup> Critical reviews uniformly echo the fan discourses. Tim O’Neil of *A.V. Club* calls it “an environmental fable,” effusing: “It seems almost lazy to call the work *sui generis*, but nothing really serves to adequately summarize such a surpassingly odd but also supremely affecting work... it eventually grows to encompass pseudo-autobiography, New Age mysticism, conspiracy literature, UFO-logy, and natural history” (O’Neil 2016). *The Comics Journal*’s Alex Dueben calls it the “missing link—a pop culture precursor to DC’s Vertigo line, *The X Files*, *Twin Peaks* and a thousand other creative works” (Dueben 2016b); while Nerdy Show also emphasizes the series’ wide-ranging influences: “*Transmetropolitan* meets *Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep*, liberally dipped in the grittier side of the 1980s and paired with John Audubon-style nature art” (Nerdy Show).

<sup>2</sup> See the series’ own coverage in *The Puma Blues* (Murphy and Zulli 1986–1989, #16, March 1988) and “Aardvark-Diamond Chronology” (Murphy and Zulli 1986–1989, #20, September 1988), and (Bissette 2015, pp. 532–35).

<sup>3</sup> Zulli called *The Puma Blues* “sort of a shot across the bow to wake the fuck up” (Dueben 2016a).

<sup>4</sup> In a section called “Blue, Blue Oceans,” Murphy sets down a list of sobering statistics, e.g., “lifespan of a plastic six-pack ring, in years: 450” (Murphy and Zulli 1986–1989, #15, February 1988, emphasis in original); “Notes on the Environment” informs: “The United States Supreme Court handed down a decision limiting the ability of citizens to sue polluters for past violations of the Federal Clean Water Act, thus giving industrialists a measure of protection against suits brought by environmental groups . . . ” (Murphy and Zulli 1986–1989, #14, January 1988).

<sup>5</sup> “Blahblahblah” (Murphy and Zulli 1986–1989, #16, March 1988) devoted a section to reader responses to a previous letter-writer’s contention: “I think environmentalism is a lost cause.”

<sup>6</sup> Despite occasional sightings of specimens crossing over from other regions, the US Fish and Wildlife Service declared the eastern cougar extinct in 2011 (Bolen 2013, p. 37). In part due to increased sightings in Ontario, the Canadian government in 1971 proclaimed the species “endangered” after earlier saying it had disappeared entirely. “There was a time that if you reported a cougar, it was like you reported a flying saucer,” declared an official of the Canadian Ministry of Natural Resources in 1968 (Hunter 2006/2007, p. 19). An ironic statement, considering *The Puma Blues*’ ufological predilections.

“Even its name defies confinement: Generations of hunters have dubbed it cougar, panther, puma, painter, catamount, and more,” writes *National Geographic* (Dutcher 1992, p. 42).<sup>7</sup>

As far back as the 19th century, naturalists were observing the “American lion’s” shyness around humans. “The puma does not ordinarily attack men, but, on the contrary, when surprised attempts to flee from them,” noted Frederick True in 1892, adding, “The puma seeks his prey chiefly at dawn and twilight and under cover of night . . .” (True 1892, p. 170).<sup>8</sup> More recent researchers have supplemented and augmented that picture. An observational study in California’s Cuyamaco Rancho State Park found “pumas generally showed opposite activity patterns to human visitors,” likely because “puma activity is most influenced by the activity patterns and periods of vulnerability of deer, the major prey of puma” (Sweanor et al. 2008, pp. 1080–82).<sup>9</sup>

Between 1890 and 2005 only about 117 puma attacks on humans were officially documented across the US and Canada. However, over half those attacks had occurred in the previous 16 years. Prior to the CRST study, the park had recorded 18 aggressive puma incidents, including two attacks and one human death, all in the 1990s (Sweanor et al. 2008, p. 1076). Presumably due to human encroachment into the cat’s habitats, the number of dangerous encounters was increasing. (And of course, ranchers had long vilified the animal for taking its cattle, sheep and even horse colts, and had actively sought to eliminate it.)<sup>10</sup>

All the same, Sweanor and her collaborators insist that most pumas most of the time will retreat from people; in another field study, they reported that “only 9 percent of approaches to within 50 m resulted in a threat response” (Sweanor et al. 2005, p. 911). They did caution against unwarranted generalizations, however:

Some individuals never showed a threat response, even though they were approached multiple times; others gave threat responses during the first and only approach. We could not predict whether a puma that behaved one way during an approach would behave in a similar way during a subsequent approach (Sweanor et al. 2005, p. 912).

Despite sensationalistic accounts in the mass media, human-cougar run-ins remain rare, deaths from same exceedingly so. A portrait emerges of a quiet, unobtrusive killer, leery of people, content to hunt its preferred quarry of deer, antelope and sheep, though prepared to react with deadly force if cornered, a “ghost” living an unglimped existence parallel to that of humans. A portrait not unlike that painted by wildlife journalist Ben East:

A pioneer farmer, walking a woods-bordered wagon road on the way home to his isolated cabin in the dark of night, could never be sure that a cougar was not keeping pace with him in the timber a few yards away, slinking through the undergrowth with no more commotion than drifting smoke, itself unseen but measuring with its big yellow eyes each step the man took. It was a chilling thought (East 1979, p. 20).

The setting and circumstances described by East oddly mirror those found in the early portions of *The Puma Blues*—albeit without the science fiction sheen. Gavia Immer,<sup>11</sup> a government agent stationed by the Quabbin Reservoir in rural Massachusetts in a future 1997, spends his days monitoring the water for signs of acid rain and searching the forest for mutated airborne manta rays and other fauna.

<sup>7</sup> Disagreements persist even among scientists on the proper designation for the animal. See (Hunter 2006/2007, p. 21).

<sup>8</sup> Human-on-cougar violence of course occurred much more often than the reverse. Then-president Theodore Roosevelt killed a Tom weighing 227 pounds in Colorado in 1901 (East 1979, p. 51).

<sup>9</sup> The study did indicate a variation in movements based on sex: “Male pumas in CRSP traveled 1.7–2.8 times greater distances than females (mean of means) during crepuscular and night periods, when pumas were most active” (Sweanor et al. 2008, p. 1079).

<sup>10</sup> Throughout the text I elect to use the pronoun “it” when referring to animals, as a marker of their non-human status. I wish to express my thanks to the article’s anonymous reviewers who helped me clarify my own position on this and other relevant issues.

<sup>11</sup> Latin for “common loon”; see (Dueben 2016b).

The animals have been altered by lingering nuclear radiation from a blast which destroyed the Bronx, New York. When he finds them, he uses a matter “transducer” to teleport them to an undisclosed location. Most of the time, however, Gavia has little to do. Suffering from a melancholy disposition, he falls into something like full depression while mourning his deceased father.<sup>12</sup> The series in its first phase shows Gavia in his lonely cabin, speaking to his mother via a video-phone; drinking; listening to Iggy Pop’s *Cry for Love* on headphones; interacting with Jack, a trespasser on the grounds; and watching his late father’s paranoid, UFO-obsessed experimental videos.<sup>13</sup> Unbeknownst to our young hero, a puma lives and stalks the environs, virtually under his nose (at one point standing immediately behind him) (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 7).<sup>14</sup> Gavia never notices his “ghost” companion.<sup>15</sup>

Here and throughout “In the Empire of the Senses,”<sup>16</sup> the anonymous cougar adheres to the broad behavioral parameters for its species sketched in the ethological discourses we have sampled. Indeed, the episode deserves its reputation as a groundbreaking “hyper-real” comics exploration of animal subjectivity. The authors produce an immersive reading experience grounded in a “direct” engagement with the natural world, effected through the unique communicative capacities of graphic narrative. As Murphy explained to an interviewer:

Night. What happens at night in an island wilderness like the Quabbin? That was the starting point. The issue, like certain others, was an experiment with narrative. Could we answer that question while using wildlife and their various vocals as a means of telling a story? As a starting point I used an experience of mine where I’d snuck up on and scared a beaver, prompting the beaver to immediately slap its tail against the water surface in a loud clap in order to warn other beavers of my presence. I then wrote a script centered on the puma making its way through a very noisy night in the Quabbin watershed—an empire of the senses. If you’ve ever spent a night out in true wilderness, especially in spring, it can be really loud. That’s what we were trying to capture (Dueben 2016b).

Apart from a brief framing sequence (addressed further below), the episode remains steadfastly within a non-human milieu for 17 unbroken pages. We follow the puma figure as it strides through a nighttime forest alive with sound and movement, encountering chirping crickets, warring raccoons and a splashing beaver, which spoils its hunt of two deer. The cat seems to lash out at the interloper, who vanishes underwater. The cougar ends up satiating its hunger with the scavenged carcass of some unidentified animal. The simple plot belies Murphy and Zulli’s remarkable technical achievement with “In the Empire of the Senses.” I will examine three key facets of their representational strategy: Time, Sound and Agency.

Comics scholars have long noted an irreducible ambiguity involved in the medium’s depiction of time. Briefly, they tend to describe the comics panel’s immediate function as one of conveying a temporal “unit” of a highly flexible and subjective nature, which combines with other panels (both contiguous, on the same page and throughout a given work) to produce narrative flow. In this

<sup>12</sup> Many of these details, including the late father, follow Murphy’s own biography. See (Bissette 2015, p. 531) and Murphy’s blog *Contains Traces Of* at <http://containstracesof.blogspot.ca>.

<sup>13</sup> Other characters, including the patrician Ms. Malcolmson and her android chauffeur Ernest, and a loose plot which eventually takes Gavia to a nuclear facility in the deserts of Nevada, and in the conclusion, to Alaska, lie beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>14</sup> All further references to *The Puma Blues* come from the 2015 Dover collected volume.

<sup>15</sup> East reports a cougar following a man for over a mile and even watching him have lunch for an hour, unnoticed (East 1979, p. 19).

<sup>16</sup> Murphy and Zulli derived the title from the British musician Bill Nelson’s song of the same name, which appears on the 1982 album *The Love That Whirls (Diary of a Thinking Heart)*. It features these relevant lines: “Is there life beyond the curtain? / All these things are so uncertain . . . / in the empire of the senses, / in the empire of the senses . . . ” The phrase also recalls the morbidly erotic arthouse film *In the Realm of the Senses* (Oshima 1976).

process, textual as well as graphic elements together impart a sense of reader-determined duration.<sup>17</sup> For example, as Scott McCloud writes, “For sound effects, we extrapolate from our experiences of sounds in the real world—the panel lasts at least as long as the sound to which the effect refers” (McCloud 2006, p. 109).<sup>18</sup> Thierry Groensteen puts it perhaps more lyrically:

[C]omics, in displaying intervals (in the same way as persistence of vision erases the discretization of the cinematic medium) rhythmically distributes the tale that is entrusted to it. To ignore speed—its images are immobile and no voice imprints a delivery in dialogue—does not suggest any less of a cadenced reading, or an operation given rhythm by the crossing of the frames . . . Each new panel hastens the story and, simultaneously holds it back. The frame is the agent of this double maneuver of progression/retention (Groensteen 2007, p. 45).

“In the Empire of the Senses” very much partakes of comics’ “progression/retention” dynamic, though here premised on a non-human consciousness modality. The lack of dialogue (in the conventional sense), repetitive page designs, nighttime setting and narrative languors evoke an ambience of suspension, even as events unfold. Most panels take up the entire length of the page, in four- and five-tier arrangements, creating a cinematic “wide-screen.” Zulli’s black and white pen technique, supplemented with zipatone and other graying effects, renders the puma’s hunt mysterious and sensual, an atmosphere accentuated by unusually wide gutters between panels, which accommodate sound effects. For long stretches, nothing and everything happens in a world only partly glimpsed through nocturnal murk, but filled with noise.

The “timeless” mood manifests from the first frame of the “hunt” sequence, as we observe a manta ray gliding above the Quabbin Reservoir, full moon casting shadow-reflections of coniferous trees and mountains onto the ripples. The mutant has an airborne close encounter with an owl before darting off, its body momentarily obscuring a curious puma who looks on from shore (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 100). The imaginary flying creature (not seen again until the end of the episode) thus frames and “reveals” the naturalistic milieu opening up before our eyes.

The cougar, still looking up, starts to move off but stops short, seeming to contemplate some crickets chirping in its path. It dangles a paw at them and leaves the shore, loping into the forest, closely watched by what appears to be a weasel (Murphy and Zulli 2015, pp. 101–2). The panels grow progressively larger and more square; we see the puma in a half-page frame discovering deer tracks, lowering itself to the ground (it could also be stretching). A landscape of the moon over the reservoir,<sup>19</sup> which punctuates the action, here brings the opening “chapter” to a close (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 103).

How long does the cougar regard the flying manta ray? How much time does it accord the crickets at its feet? How many minutes or hours pass before it stumbles on the deer tracks?<sup>20</sup> The comics reading experience, fueled by the psychological engagement of a (human) reader, offers no set answers; the effect is very much heightened by the lack of a *homo sapiens* protagonist, or even narrator.<sup>21</sup> Neither the content of the panels nor the spaces between them (the gutters) supply definitive clues as to timeline or a chain of actions—we don’t even know for sure if we are witnessing the same night,

<sup>17</sup> Of course, panels act in conjunction—and often in tension—with myriad other devices, as Charles Hatfield has written: “the single image functions as both a point on an imagined timeline—a self-contained moment substituting for the moment before it, and anticipating the moment to come—and an element of global page design” (Hatfield 2009, p. 140).

<sup>18</sup> For a similar, if more complicated, view, see (Cohn 2010).

<sup>19</sup> The first of these landscapes depicts the reflection of the moon unrealistically high, so that it encroaches on the mountains’ reflection (the effect is not as stark in subsequent landscapes). Zulli presumably drew it that way to underscore the sequence’s subtle irreality (?) in light of the conclusion.

<sup>20</sup> As McCloud writes, “Silence has the effect of removing a panel from any particular span of time . . . Silence also allows readers to step off the twin conveyor belts of plot and dialogue long enough to let their eyes wander and explore your world, instead of viewing it as nothing more than a passing backdrop” (McCloud 2006, pp. 164–65)

<sup>21</sup> For example, Alan Moore, Steve Bissette and Zulli’s short story “Act of Faith,” set in the *Puma Blues* universe, achieves a very different, more human-centered effect through a narrator commenting on the rays’ behavior. See (Alaniz 2008).

or following the same puma! Put in the position of contending with a non-human focalization, the consumer of “In The Empire of the Senses” must draw their own conclusions about such matters much more so than when reading, say, *Donald Duck*.

Murphy and Zulli augment the defamiliarization still further in moments when they seem to abandon narrative altogether. At one point, they present eight adjacent portraits of various fauna—weasel, raccoon, frog, wolf, moth, owl, katydid, cougar—once more set off by the full moon/reservoir landscape (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 107). Though the reader understands some of them to be vocalizing (the owl “hooo hhoos”), their sound effects appear separate from the image, beneath them in the wide gutters. Consigning the sound to a separate “track” allows for the panels to remain paradoxically “silent.” While, in conjunction with the preceding page, the “portraits” can be read as reaction shots (which I address in my conclusion), nonetheless these “frozen” panels bear a striking resemblance to nature photographs or even postage stamps (a similarity enhanced by their juxtaposition on (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 107)). They congeal into a sort of visual poetry made up of what McCloud calls “aspect-to-aspect” panel transitions (McCloud 1993, pp. 72, 80–81) which retard story flow in favor of some “natural” tempo.

Even in more narrative-driven “sub-plots” to the puma’s wanderings, like the dramatic instant when a life ends, the authors break down the action in such a way as to confuse a straightforward linear continuity. In one bottom panel/tier, we see stylized “sonar” waves<sup>22</sup> wash over a dragonfly perched on a stump. At the top of the next page, a bat swoops down to snatch it, claws mere millimeters from prey (Murphy and Zulli 2015, pp. 109–10). Murphy and Zulli’s “death by page-turn” interrupts the action in mid-kill, taking the reader momentarily out of the storyworld for the duration of the page-flip (or if you will, the “hypergutter”), casting even more doubt on the precise time allotted. A bat zeroes in on its meal, then grabs at it, all over the course of turning the page, the dragonfly’s final milliseconds captured in “snapshot.” I maintain that such sequences in *The Puma Blues* do much to, as Steve Bissette puts it, “steep the reader in the rhythms of animal lives” (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 529). In so doing they pose numerous challenges to the anthropocentric norms of comics reading—while tapping techniques unique to the comics medium for precisely those effects.

“Empire” utilizes another psychologically engaged, highly immersive narrative strategy: sound effects. The use of the wide gutters as an ambient “soundtrack” renders creatures seen and unseen, on- and off-panel, uncommonly “alive”: the calls of birds, the splash of fish, the sniffing of deer, the grunt of the cougar. This running soundscape appears as phonetic spellings, mostly machine-printed,<sup>23</sup> highlighting the repetitive nature of those sounds which form a backdrop to the puma’s hunt throughout the night. The onomatopoeic “tsip tsip” of crickets and the “peep peep” of birds, especially, pervade the chapter, and the authors vary the quality of their din through capitalization, as for example on page 111: “tsip TSIP tsip TSIN peep tsip TSIP tsip TSIP tsip TSIP peep” (emphasis and spelling in original). By contrast, the animals *not* making sounds stand out: the spying weasel, the hiding rabbit.

Variations of the unusual sound effect “KKSCHH!” bookend the nocturnal hunt sequence, at pages 100 and 116—these signal the presence of the flying mutant manta.<sup>24</sup> But the stylized letters of this effect (inspired by Japanese orthography) strongly hint at the provenance of “Empire’s” approach to sound: Japanese manga comics. In fact, the chapter seems a consciously transnational attempt to replicate the representational conventions of the world’s most developed comics culture for domestic, “documentary” goals.

Indeed, as argued by pioneering US manga scholar Frederik L. Schodt, “It is in the realm of sound effects that the Japanese language performs magic . . . [manga] artists have wrought miracles of

<sup>22</sup> They resemble the “radar” grapheme from the Marvel superhero series *Daredevil* (launched Lee and Everett 1962).

<sup>23</sup> Most mainstream comics at the time used hand-lettering, as did *The Puma Blues* for its word balloons and sound effects in chapters other than “Empire.” As Murphy explained: “It was the only time that I had a hand in the art, in that I helped Michael paste in all those various sound effects over the course of a very long afternoon. But it was fun” (Dueben 2016b).

<sup>24</sup> Though it remains unclear whether the sound effect conveys the glide of the manta through the air, or the flap of its wings. Such indeterminacy underscores the creature’s “unnatural,” imagined status.

paradox: the use of sound to depict silent activities and emotions” (Schodt 1983, p. 23). Strategies that marry Japanese’s extravagant number of onomatopoeic forms (far more than in English)<sup>25</sup> with the visual pliancy of the language’s writing system produce a rich descriptive field in manga storyworlds, which as Robert S. Petersen writes, “convey the essence of lived sensations by using the sound-like experience to fuse the sign/icon into a single sensation” (Petersen 2007, p. 578). Writing on the “acoustics” of manga, Petersen maintains that works which fully exploit such aesthetic potentialities yield what he calls a Narrative Erotics—moments “when the narrative becomes embodied through a sensual experience,” often prompting the reader to slow down to savor the full effect. “Narrative erotics create an animated interior for the story to live within, allowing it to become more evocative and memorable” he writes. “This presence is not in opposition to meaning; rather it creates a space for meaning to accrue” (Petersen 2007, p. 580).

Petersen’s insights on sound in manga have an especial relevance for “Empire,” in which the soundscape lends depth and vividness to innumerable actions, from the plain (“SHLAPP!” of a beaver’s tail on water, deer loudly escaping through underbrush (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 112)) to the more subtle (the puma panting, then regaining its breath after exertion: “HHUF HHUF hut-hut uf” (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 114)) to the barely “heard” (the beaver’s near-silent response [“wff”] to the cat’s approach, before it quickly slips underwater [“SSPLLIICH”] (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 113)). As noted, Murphy and Zulli also deftly deploy the *absence* of sound: the “page-turn death” of the dragonfly has no sound effect attached (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 110); the weasel seems to silently catch the rabbit (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 113). Finally, style, size and positioning of the sound effects text has a close relationship to such physical/spatial characteristics as loudness and nearness: the “wff” of the beaver accompanies a panel of the animal in close-up, while its “SSPLLIICH” of underwater escape we see in long shot from “afar”—consequently the text beneath appears smaller. The authors take the reader’s relative “distance” from the proceedings into account, inflecting the perception of events on a near-subliminal level.

But for all its incorporation of a transnational “manga” sensibility, I want to emphasize, “Empire” deviates sharply from most manga proper in that its sound effects, as mentioned, are not visually incorporated into the panels themselves, but remain in the “gutter track.” This leads to, firstly, the oxymoronic effect of “silent” panels suffused with sound. At the same time, such a design invokes an earlier, more “primeval” stage in the historical development of comics, to an era before dialogue appeared in speech balloons within the panel, but instead as text beneath. (In a dangerously broad generalization, we can trace the change to turn-of-the-20th century US newspaper comics.)<sup>26</sup> The chapter thus yokes its representation of nature to both national and historical “others”—a point which will come up again further below.

We may take the “raccoons” sequence as emblematic of both the breakthroughs and shortcomings of “Empire’s” manga-derived approach to sound. The puma comes to an overlook, as the cricket sounds intersperse with “hhiiiissss” and “rrrooo.” The cat sees two raccoons circling each other in a clearing, about to come to blows. The soundtrack reads: “RRROowl GGGrrllll HSSSt.” In the third panel, the cougar interrupts the contretemps, enunciating “mmrrooowwsssss uuurrf.” Panel four shows the raccoons wide-eyed, in shock at the interloper; the gutter beneath signals not sound but emotion: “!?’ ‘!?’” (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 104). The next page presents, unusually, a top panel filled with various sound effects, including “CRUNCH,” “crac,” “RUN,” “SNAAP,” “CLIMB” and “WAEET.” The panel/tier below that places the raccoons atop a tree, clinging to its branches and looking down, partly-clouded-over moon in the distance (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 105). The “empty” gutter beneath the image indicates no one dares make a sound.

<sup>25</sup> Kodooka notes upwards of 1600 in the Japanese language (Kodooka 2002, p. 267). See also (Huang and Archer 2014, p. 474).

<sup>26</sup> On the historical development of word balloons in comics, and in particular on animal representation’s role in the process, see (Smolderen 2006, p. 104).

This comical sequence (seemingly making light of the procyons' terror of the cat) engagingly depicts actions through close-ups, sound effects and McCloudian closure (the reader deduces that the "sound effects panel" conveys the raccoons' frantic climb to escape a predator). As Petersen holds, "The presence of sound gives force and dimension to the dramatic action" (Petersen 2007, p. 583).

But as mentioned, the vignette goes beyond the onomatopoeic (what the Japanese refer to as *giseigo/giongo*), into the realm of non-mimetic or affectual representation (*gitaigo* aka phenomimes and psychomimes).<sup>27</sup> And here *The Puma Blues* inches into the same ethically problematic territory as so many previous depictions of animals in comics: anthropomorphism. The delegation of an interior state via punctuation and humor through "funny" sound effects<sup>28</sup> works at cross-purposes to the series' professedly "testimonial" and unsentimental approach to non-human representation.<sup>29</sup>

### 3. The Empire Gazes Back

The British historian Jonathan Burt, in his study on animals in cinema, identifies the matter as one of whether or not a given work should

entail or inspire a sense of the real animal uncluttered by the emotional and psychological links that allow for human-animal relations in the first place. The visual animal is caught in an argument over whether the animal should be considered on its own terms or understood through a network of human-animal relations (Burt 2012, p. 188).

What Burt calls "multiple metaphorical significances" lead to "a kind of semantic overload" (Burt 2012, p. 11): the animal figure "means" whatever the reader/holder alights on (e.g., "patriotic" American bald eagle), while the animal as animal risks becoming fully suffused into the human, disappearing altogether. Numerous scholars, most famously John Berger, thus warn against the colonizing effect of the human gaze; speaking of the denizens of zoos, he declares, "*you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal*" (Berger 1980, p. 24, emphasis in original). For Akira Lippit, visual/electronic media form nothing short of "a vast mausoleum for animal being" (Lippit 2000, p. 187). Non-human life in our representations, these scholars attest, is doubly dead: as physical body in an age of mass extinctions and as self-determining agent.

"The Empire of the Senses" presents us with a tantalizing test case for such surmises; do the puma and the creatures it encounters reflect, not an "accurate," or even plausible, but *subject-driven* approach to animal life? Readers give the benefit of the doubt easily enough in the case of human-focalized graphic narratives; but a non-human protagonist, as noted, throws up myriad challenges to this sort of "realism."<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Huang and Archer describe *giseigo/giongo* as words that mimic the actual sound of an object or action (*giseigo* for animate objects, *giongo* for inanimate), while *gitaigo* conveys a state or abstract quality or condition, for example a sound effect to denote something being done quickly (Huang and Archer 2014, p. 475). Schodt offers these examples of the latter: sound of a penis standing erect (BIIN), the sound of silence (SHIIN), the sound of milk being added to coffee (SURON), slurping noodles (SURU SURU) (Schodt 1983, p. 23) Petersen adds such phenomimes and psychomimes as "noro noro" for moving quietly and "peko peko" for bowing humbly (Petersen 2007, p. 583). Beyond Japan, Joost Pollman cites the invented sound effects of Dutch artist Jeroen de Leijer (e.g., "Kazwierp" for the action of a ticket-dispensing machine); the French artists Dupuy and Berberian ("Pschhrrrllloo" for a flushing toilet); as well as those of US artists Ben Katchor and Walter Simonson as comparable to the Dada poetry of Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara (Pollman 2001, p. 14).

<sup>28</sup> On different kinds of sound effects and their affectual content, see (McCloud 2006, pp. 146–47). On the use of sound effects for explicitly humorous ends, see Harvey Kurtzman and Wally Wood's *locus classicus* "Sound Effects!" (Kurtzman and Wood 1955). See also John Byrne's parodic depiction of superhero action via sound effect in *Alpha Flight*, (Byrne 1984).

<sup>29</sup> See for example such critical responses as Dueben's: "the nature drawings in *Puma* especially, but so much of the detail in the book feels like an act of witness" (Dueben 2016a).

<sup>30</sup> One may object that readers of science fiction and fantasy comics routinely engage with non-human characters. These figures (whether Marko of *Saga* or DC's J'onn J'onz), however, mostly behave as humans. Even Lockjaw, the Inhumans' gigantic dog, acts in ways that meet the expectations for such a long-domesticated species. See comments on "ani-drag" in Alaniz (2017).

In attempting an answer, I proceed from the assumption that full-fledged animal consciousnesses fully divorceable from human expectations and representations exist,<sup>31</sup> along the lines of philosopher Thomas Nagel's well-known formulation for bat-being as something very real (albeit inaccessible):

Thus we describe bat sonar as a form of three-dimensional forward perception; we believe that bats feel some versions of pain, fear, hunger, and lust, and that they have other, more familiar types of perception besides sonar. But we believe that these experiences also have in each case a *specific subjective character*, which it is beyond our ability to conceive (Nagel 1974, p. 439, my emphasis).

The presumption of a grounded material reality for non-human being, even if one not fully graspable due to the limits of human empathy/mind, seems to me a firm foundation for an ethical project of animal representation. Premising his own argument on Actor-Network Theory, Burt offers a model of animal agency which privileges reciprocity between agents, both within and across species. This approach would

redress an imbalance in the theorizing of human-animal relations by seeking, instead, to outline the impact animals have on humans rather than always seeing animals as the passive partner, or victim ... [I]n film human-animal relations are possible through an interplay of agency regardless of the nature of animal interiority, subjectivity or communication (Burt 2012, p. 31).

Burt's formulation thus assumes that animals have interiority, without seeking to delimit it. In short, animals "act" in films (true, partly in fulfillment of training, but also for their own inscrutable ends), in turn provoking responses in the human viewer—a transpecies chain of affectual sway. "It is in the context of these unintended effects by the animal itself," he concludes, "that we best understand what it means to talk about the manner in which the animal, *pace* Lippit, does regulate its symbolic effects" (Burt 2012, p. 32).<sup>32</sup> In film, humans and animals share a sort of leveling fictional space, through which they interact and influence each other, all the time regarded by a human audience which projects its symbolic presumptions onto the animals (and humans), but is also put in the position of accepting them as agents of their fates, and even falling under their "influence."

To pick a cinematic example with surface similarities to "Empire," the US artist Bill Viola's experimental documentary *I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like* instantiates a network of missed mutual gazes (Viola 1986). The camera focuses obsessively on close-ups and long takes of animals: fish in water, birds at the San Diego Zoo, bison on the range. Yet none of these creatures seem particularly invested in returning Viola's look. As the title suggests, the video enacts both a quest for identity in the body of the other and as Catherine Russell puts it "an exploration of the undisciplined gaze" (Russell 1999, p. 183), culminating in an oft-cited sequence: a slow zoom into the face of a disinterested owl followed by a series of shots showing the filmmaker's own reflection in the creature's eye.<sup>33</sup>

Clearly Viola himself in this intensely personal work, but also the viewer of *I Do Not Know*, is "influenced" by the non-human creatures depicted; she is left to ponder their inner worlds, poignantly seeking a connection, affirmation, recognition which of course never comes. Through the animal scenes, the audience is thrown back to a contemplation of its own bewildering humanity. In Russell's words:

<sup>31</sup> A historically controversial notion, as is Cary Wolfe's in *Animal Rites*: "[W]e share our world with non-human others who inhabited this planet before we arrived on the scene and will in all likelihood far outlast the tenure of *Homo Sapiens* but also that *we*—whoever "we" are—are in a profound sense constituted as human subjects within and atop a nonhuman otherness that postmodern theory has worked hard to release from the bad-faith repressions and disavows of humanism" (Wolfe 2003, p. 193, emphasis in original).

<sup>32</sup> The animals' "unintended effects" in Burt's model clearly link it to the concept of excess in cinema; see (Thompson 1986).

<sup>33</sup> The sequence seems a literalization of the anthropologist and naturalist Loren Eiseley's adage: "One does not meet oneself until one catches the reflection from an eye other than human" (Eiseley 1978, p. 16).

The naked state that Viola develops strips the gaze down to its scopophilic structure: the desire to see, which is indulged fully, but is always unsatisfying, always leaving a gap of unknowing, of desire that sustains itself through lack. In Viola's portraits of bird, fish and animals, the gaze functions as a form of containment and a site of excess<sup>34</sup> (Russell 1999, p. 120).

The question arises: would such a form (of both containment *and* excess) obtain in a non-photographic work of comics such as *The Puma Blues*? Does the absence of sound, motion and measurable time retard the represented non-human subjects' influence? What "unintended effects" on the reader could Zulli's exquisitely-drawn animals bring about?

Despite the obvious objection (cinema and comics "involve" readers in very different ways, leading to different forms of viewer identification), I will insist that some version of Burt's "agency" argument holds in *The Puma Blues*, most potently through Zulli's animal portraiture and "Empire's" various alienating effects (a comics analogue to Viola's long takes and narrator-less imagery). The non-human "acts" through the artist's pen—Zulli, a wildlife illustrator for several years before embarking on a comics career (Dueben 2016a), avidly studied his subjects and their behavior, the better to represent them in a static medium—a first-order agency whose traces pervade the text, transmitting its "influence" on to the reader. Zulli's closely informed drawings thus mirror the "unintended effects" of the film animal "actor." And though Burt emphasizes animal-human interactions, "Empire" exemplifies how we may dispense with the second part of the equation, whether through "missed" gazes (Gavia's blithe unawareness of the puma which stalks him) or by eliminating the human from the visual field *in toto*.

Indeed, the puma's hunt is a tightly choreographed dance of gazes, actions and reactions between non-human species, some of whom affect the lives (and deaths) of others without realizing it. At one point, the feline predator silently closes in on two grazing deer, so intent on its prey that it fails to register a rabbit hidden by rocks and foliage, under its very snout—a situation wryly analogous with that of the clueless Gavia and his elusive ghost cat. Two panels show long-shot and close-up views of the scene: the "objective" and "subjective," the latter emphasizing the lapine quarry's terror as a huge clawed foot passes within inches (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 109).

At the conclusion to the night's hunt, a carefree bathing beaver splashes loudly with its tail ("SHLAPP!"), frightening the nearby deer, who scamper off. Their frantic "snaps" and "crunches" through the undergrowth in turn flush a rabbit from hiding (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 112), make a weasel pause over the body of another rabbit (or perhaps the same one, killed between panels)<sup>35</sup> and "enrage" the cougar, whose prey has escaped. Growling, it approaches the beaver, who seems confused by all the clamor. Sitting placidly in the water, it utters a non-committal "wff" and disappears beneath the ripples (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 113). An impressive leap by the puma comes to naught: a bottom-tier panel shows it catching its breath, surveying the empty shoreline, all other actors vanished. The crickets soon resume their chirps (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 114). Whatever else these animal figures express, they decidedly deport themselves with a supple agency generative of manifold "unintended effects"—on themselves and on the reader. It seems no coincidence that reviewers tend to reference "In the Empire of the Senses" more often than any other chapter of *The Puma Blues*; for many readers it conveys something truly visceral and "real."

<sup>34</sup> As Russell goes on to say, "The visual economy of *I Do Not Know* is reduced to its purest voyeuristic structure within the context of a crisis of subjectivity" (Russell 1999, p. 187). See Russell for a much fuller treatment of Viola's video art. The more conventionally ethological documentary *Kestrel's Eye* (Kristersson 1998) also makes for a good cinematic comparative case to "Empire."

<sup>35</sup> We never know, in fact, if this is the same rabbit that was hiding from the cougar before (it seems to be), or whether this is the same weasel that was previously observing the cougar. Murphy and Zulli leave such questions open.

#### 4. Conclusions: A Tree Falls

But of course, for all its agential “authenticity” and narrative erotics, Murphy and Zulli’s fictional facsimile of the natural world in “Empire” never operates outside an inescapably anthropocentric frame, its depiction of a puma’s nocturnal wanderings as man-made as the Quabbin reservoir and the mutant mantas that ply its skies. One might say such a frame is built into the comics reading experience itself.

Take as an example the horizontal panels which accommodate the cougar’s body (see (Murphy and Zulli 2015, pp. 102–3) for a representative sequence). They mimic the animal’s shape and posture; Zulli also often depicts the cat from a low angle, i.e., from its or other forest creatures’ perspectives (such as the weasel’s). Yet, as Thierry Groensteen reminds, the panel has far from a neutral value, it “can connote or index the image that it encloses. It can go so far as to instruct the reader on what must be read, or even as far as to supply a reading protocol, or even an interpretation of the panel” (Groensteen 2007, pp. 49–50). In other words, the very act of representing the animal in comics—regardless of the artist’s “egalitarian” aims—enframes it within an ideological no less than an aesthetic space. Zulli is choosing which moments of the puma’s hunt to illustrate, choosing how it appears, where it gazes, what it does, how far or close it moves, choosing even the amount of visual space above, below and to its sides. All of this seems, even accounting for Burt’s “agency” argument, a profoundly colonizing practice in regard to non-human life.<sup>36</sup>

It seems too to risk what Steve Baker calls modernity’s “disnification” syndrome, whereby “common sense” is applied to the animal image, “render[ing] it stupid by rendering it visual” (Baker 2001, p. 174). He elaborates:

[W]hen the animal is put into visual form, it seems somehow to incline towards the stereotypical and stupid, to float free from the requirements of consistency or of the greater rigor that might apply in other non-visual contexts. The image of the animal here seems to operate as a kind of visual shorthand, but a shorthand gone wrong, a shorthand whose meanings intermittently veer from or turn treacherously back upon that of the fuller form of the text (Baker 2001, p. 175).

Particularly at points when the animals in “Empire” appear to express familiar and plausible emotions (the “enraged,” “bemused,” “disappointed” cougar, the comically panicky raccoons), the hand of a human maker most discloses itself. Other such instances include the selectivity of sound effects and their rather arbitrary phonetic renderings, while the representation of a katydid’s call as “katy-did katy-did” (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 107) adheres more to cultural convention than verisimilitude.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the use of a “Japanese” font exclusively for the sound of a mutated ray (Murphy and Zulli 2015, pp. 100, 116) invokes troubling associations between animal alterity and ethnic/racial otherness.

The imposition of narrativity itself (even one as fragmented as that of *The Puma Blues*) onto non-human experience also jeopardizes a project to “steep the reader in the rhythms of animal lives” (Bissette 2015, p. 529). Though superficially free-flowing and temporally ambiguous as related above, the cougar’s story essentially adheres to a three-act structure, with rising/falling action and a denouement of sorts.<sup>38</sup> Such narrational “press-ganging” of the animal figure subsumes it

<sup>36</sup> The authors’ dilemma has a correlate in ethological debates over the use of remote camera traps for wildlife observation. Despite their aleatory nature, they too enframe the animal subject, artificially removing context. Among other things, the very act of introducing the man-made camera trap into the environment risks altering the findings: “Behavioral responses by animals to camera traps potentially introduce biases to ethological and population ecology investigations” (Meek et al. 2016, p. 3217).

<sup>37</sup> On the at times vast gulf between different languages on the onomatopoeic interpretation of animal sounds, see (Nunn 2014).

<sup>38</sup> I would go so far as to say the “happy ending” to the hunt (the cougar finds a carcass to dine on, apparently just before dawn) also constitutes an “anthropocentric” narrative arc.

within another fundamental attribute of graphic narrative, what Groensteen, ironically enough, calls “anthropocentrism”:

The narrative drawing privileges the character, the agent of the action; it successively accedes to each character the level of protagonist, in the etymological sense of “he who plays the primary role.” Moreover, the format of the panel often appears calculated to be married to the body of the character represented in the frame, as if the panel constituted its natural habitat, its vital space, delimiting the space of its immediate behavior<sup>39</sup> (Groensteen 2007, pp. 161–62).

To present the cat as protagonist of its story privileges subject-object relations and biases clearly carried over from a human ontology/ideology; its logic comes to pervade the proceedings even if consciously resisted. We never cease, in sum, “to consider the animal as a visual image in a network of cultural and social associations” (Burt 2012, p. 39), even in fictions such as *The Puma Blues* which seek to meet the animal “halfway.”<sup>40</sup>

“Empire’s” largest cougar portrait, in the top panel of page 109, encompasses these various fraught contradictions of animal representation. Referred to previously, it shows the cat crouched (possibly stretching) over a set of deer tracks. It faces forward, in the center of the frame, picturesquely surrounded by woods, rocks, still water. Tail lowered, it displays no legible emotion. Crickets chirp on the sound effects “track.” Though no human appears in the panel, everything here seems composed, arranged and stilled to put the puma on display for a *human viewer* (the effect enhanced by the animal’s Friedian absorption). “We” are not there, the picture says, yet everything has been calculated to make *there* accessible to “our” colonizing gaze.<sup>41</sup> The image, in fact, could easily adorn a Nature Conservancy calendar.

The foregoing restates in aesthetic terms the anthropocentrism quandary of much recent animal rights discourse, how its parameters are often shaped by human-based models (as articulated in the epigraph by Calarco to the present essay). But the problem long antedates the current debates, as elaborated by naturalist Konrad Lorenz in 1935:

The observer who studies and records behavior patterns of higher animals is up against a great difficulty. He is himself a subject, so like the object he is observing that he cannot be truly objective. The most “objective” observer cannot escape [sic] drawing analogies with his own psychological processes. Language itself forces us to use terms borrowed from our own experience (quoted in (Lehner 1979, p. 44)).

And yet, crucially, *The Puma Blues* (despite the inevitable shortcomings described) does not wish away the problem, but engages with it. As if in recognition of its own anthropocentric lens, “Empire’s” framing sequence hints at the invented character of the sensual world laid out for our perusal. We see Ruth, Jack’s partner, indoors (we might say, “completely cut off from nature”), before a fireplace, silently examining the photograph of a ray. In a rather startling sequence, her eye in close-up “morphs” over three overlapping panels into the eye of the manta which glides over Quabbin

<sup>39</sup> Burt discusses a cinematic correlate to Groensteen’s “anthropocentrism,” emphasizing the highly illusionistic construction of most filmic animal portrayals: “Just as the animal image is divided by cultural contests over its status, so the image is made up, technologically, by a process that usually depends on some form of montage. More than most other forms of filmmaking, animal cinematography invariably requires considerable editing to fit the different shots into the required narrative structures” (Burt 2012, p. 87).

<sup>40</sup> In fact, “Empire” bears striking resemblances to the episode “Puma Pass” of the TV nature documentary series *Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom*, which aired in December, 1963. The episode shows a cougar hunting mule deer in Colorado, and even an extended encounter with a beaver.

<sup>41</sup> Such “romantic sublime” imagery instantiates what Kai Mikkonen describes as “the central role of ambiguous and doubled focalization in the medium” (Mikkonen 2012, p. 87). The reader enjoys the fantasy of their own absence from a “wilderness” which they can nonetheless still witness. On the romantic sublime and the deeply-rooted appeal of wilderness in US culture, see (Cronon 1995).

Reservoir, initiating the nocturnal hunt portion (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 99). At its conclusion, we return to Ruth, sitting on her couch, lost in contemplation. Jack returns,<sup>42</sup> interrupting her reverie (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 117). This turn casts into doubt the “reality” of the entire forest episode (puma, crickets, deer, raccoons, beaver)—we could read it as Ruth’s dream, fantasy, or telepathic vision. The “eye-match” panel sequence tantalizes with an even more radical possibility: that Ruth carries some sort of genetic link to the mutated rays, that the borders between humanity and animal have blurred drastically.<sup>43</sup> Thus, in a self-conscious moment, Murphy and Zulli’s sci-fi comics-ethology acknowledges its highly-subjective, romanticized conception of nature and one of “Empire’s” chief underlying themes: the utopian impulse to “become” animal.<sup>44</sup>

In so doing it isolates a “bio-escapist” strain in late capitalist life, given voice in recent memoirs such as Charles Foster’s *Being a Beast* (2016), Thomas Thwaites’ *Goat Man: How I Took a Holiday from Being Human* (2016) and Helen MacDonald’s *H is for Hawk*, in which she writes: “Hunting with the hawk took me to the very edge of being a human. Then it took me past that place to something where I wasn’t human at all” (Macdonald 2014, p. 195).

*The Puma Blues*, what Bissette calls a “‘jazz-like’ comic book meditation on our culture’s headlong rush toward ecological disaster” (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 530), functions as just such a fantasy of escape into nature—only to return the reader to an awareness of that escapism’s roots: a pessimistic postmodern environmentalist angst. The cougar’s immersive milieu, with all its rich details, offers a defamiliarized, oblique view of a better place—but accessible, we’re reminded, only through imagining oneself (like Ruth) beyond the human.

“Empire’s” imagined “hybrid” reader—apprehending a work focalized through an animal’s perceptions—suggests the extraordinary potential of a verbal-visual medium for reorienting cognitive engagement. At its best it unlocks the embodied nature of the text, what the phenomenologist Gail Weiss terms the “narrative horizon” of reading. “[T]he body is . . . the omnipresent horizon for all the narratives human beings tell (about it),” she writes. “As such, it grounds our quest for narrative coherence” (Weiss 2008, pp. 70–71). Murphy and Zulli’s quixotic gambit to break through anthropocentric biases—to rebuild the master’s house, using the master’s tools—vicariously “re-horizons” the reader along transpecies lines.<sup>45</sup>

To close: a particularly compelling instance of “Empire’s” “re-horizoning.” Let us return to the eight adjacent portraits of amphibian, mammal and insect life alluded to earlier, which I likened to a visual poem (and to postage stamps) (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 107). The page opposite is dominated by a very different four-panel sequence: a dead tree creaks, sways and tumbles down with a loud crash (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 106). We may thus read the resulting two-page spread as a series of action-reaction shots: the tree drops, the animals bear witness.

A droll revision of the old saw “If a tree falls in the woods and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?”<sup>46</sup> the scene answers, “Yes.” Eight times.

<sup>42</sup> The previous chapter established that Jack had gone to the bathroom, leaving Ruth to regard the photo alone (Murphy and Zulli 2015, p. 95).

<sup>43</sup> *The Puma Blues*, even in its completed 2015 version, never definitively confirms or denies this possibility. Consider also the gendered implications of a feminine figure with a deeper “connection” to the natural world than the flailing Gavia or the utilitarian Jack.

<sup>44</sup> Such human/animal “blurrings” find expression in many turn-of-the-21st-century discourses. The Russian author Viktor Pelevin’s short story “A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia” (first published in 1991), posits a protagonist who transforms into a wolf; the heightened awareness brought on by the change makes him dread ever returning to human form (Pelevin 1998, pp. 15–16). See also “Words of Prey” by Jonathan Menjivar, a 2014 segment on the radio program *This American Life*, which chronicles the intensely anthropocentric reactions of viewers to an “osprey cam” at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts (Menjivar 2015). See also Herman’s contribution to the *Humanities* special issue on Animal Narratology (Herman 2016).

<sup>45</sup> Other episodes in *The Puma Blues* saga imaginatively re-enflesh the reader as animal. See Murphy and Bissette’s short story “Pause,” told from the point of view of a dog, in *The Puma Blues* (Murphy and Zulli 1986–1989, #20, September 1988).

<sup>46</sup> A philosophical conundrum, variants of which have been attributed to the British philosopher George Berkeley and others. A 2011 National Public Radio report complicates the question for the modern age (Messenger 2011).

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