

Extinction by Exhibition: Looking at and in the Zoo

Ralph R. Acampora

Unity College
Quaker Hill Road
Unity, Maine 04988
USA

Abstract

This paper compares the phenomenological structure of zoological exhibition to the pattern prevalent in pornography. It examines several disanalogies between the two, finds them lacking or irrelevant, and concludes that the proposed analogy is strong enough to serve as a critical lens through which to view the institution of zoos. The central idea uncovered in this process of interpretation is paradoxical: zoos are pornographic in that they make the nature of their subjects disappear precisely by overexposing them. Since the keep are thus degraded or marginalized through the marketing of their very visibility, the pretense of preservation is criticized. It is suggested that the zoo as we know it be phased out in favor of more authentic modes of encountering other forms of life.

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Second Nature poses more problems for us more acutely than ever before because we have come to realize at once the extent of our dependence upon it and the extent to which our demands could be deadly. (Schwartz 1996, 173)

Throughout its past the zoo has demonstrated a relational dynamic of mastery. Originally, in its days as a private garden, it was a powerful symbol of dominion, projecting an imperial image of man-the-monarch — ruler of nature, lord of the wild. Eventually, it was converted into a public menagerie and became a ritual of entertainment, projecting an almost trickster imagery of man-the-magician — tamer of brutes, conjurer of captives. The contemporary zoo has become a scientific park and aesthetic site, and its meaning is redemptive; it stands as an emblem of conservation policy, projecting a religious image of man-the-messiah — the new Noah: savior of species, the beasts' benign despot. From empire to circus to museum or ark, the zoo has been organized according to anthropocentric and arguably androcentric hierarchies and designs (Mullan and Marvin 1987).

Historically marked by patterns of paternalism and traces of patriarchy, zoological institutions are now justified by appeal to their allegedly saving graces. Zoos are legit-

imized as havens of wildlife protection, vessels for the rescue of an animal kingdom under attack from industrial civilization. Following John Berger (1977), I argue that this self-promotion is an ideology caught in paradox — for the very exposition established by zoos erases the most manifestly “natural” traits of what were once wild beings, namely their capacities either to elude or engage others freely. (Such an erasure occurs even if one eschews a classical doctrine of natural kinds. My argument depends not on immutable essences of species as such, but rather on received meanings of wildness for any animal at all.) Thus this exhibitionism extinguishes for us the existential reality of those animals even as it proclaims to preserve their biological existence. Even the astute zoo apologist, Emily Hahn, admits that “the wild animal in conditions of captivity ... is bound to alter in nature and cease being the creature we want to see” (1967, 16). Berger elaborates the irony thus: despite the ostensible purpose of the place, “nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal ... At most the animal's gaze flickers and passes on ... They look sideways ... They look blindly beyond ... They scan mechanically” (1977, 26).

Since it effectively forces its show-items into an overexposure that degrades their real nature, the zoo can be seen to partake in the paradoxical form of pornography — conceived not as something sexy, but as an institution of visive violence. Hence “the zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see them, is in fact a monument to the impossibility of such encounters” (Berger 1977, 19). Here possible parallels with gender analyses of the pornographic may be intimated poignantly by substituting “strip-bar ... men ... women” for “zoo ... people ... animals” (Kappeler 1986, 75-76).

The broad analogy between zoos and pornography is useful because, if it holds true in the relevant respects (as I think it does), then the comparison casts a new and decidedly critical light on the debate over keeping and breeding wild animals in captivity. As an illustration, consider the controversy over pornography. There are several conceivable defenses of pornography, but imagine for a moment an apologist taking the position that we should permit — indeed promote — the institution because it excites or inspires us (particularly the young) to esteem the subjects displayed, because

it “educates” us to look out for the welfare of those so exposed. The centerfold, in other words, would be seen as an icon of compassion and respect! All that need be done now is to discover why so many of us accept the same sort of reasoning when it is presented on behalf of zoological exhibition. Surely there are relevant disanalogies that would warrant the different reactions — or are there?

First, we might be tempted to think that zoos are truly educational — in a way that pornography (at least typically) is not. But this alleged difference does not hold up under scrutiny. We have to ask tough questions, such as those framed by Paul Shepard: “The zoo presents itself as a place of education. But to what end? To give people a respect for wildness, a sense of human limitations and of biological community, a world of mutual dependency?” (1996, 233). No, we have to answer, zoos either teach poorly or instill false and dangerous lessons all too well. One environmental researcher found that “zoo goers [are] much less knowledgeable about animals than backpackers, hunters, fishermen, and others who claim an interest in animals, and only slightly more knowledgeable than those who claim no interest in animals at all” (Kellert 1979). Nearly twenty years later, his verdict is still dismal: “the typical visitor appears only marginally more appreciative, better informed, or engaged in the natural world following the experience.” In reply to Shepard’s question, he finds that “many visitors leave the zoo more convinced than ever of human superiority over the natural world” (Kellert 1997, 99).

There are several unsurprising reasons for these abysmal findings regarding the educational value of zoos: the public is largely indifferent to zoo education efforts (few stop even to look at, let alone read, explanatory placards); animals are viewed briefly and in rapid succession; people tend to concentrate on so-called babies and beggars — their cute countenances and funny antics capture audience attention (Ludwig 1981). Of course, this sort of amusement is at the heart of what a zoo is (scientific ideologies of self-promotion notwithstanding). Consequently, and insidiously, what visits to the zoo instruct and reinforce over and over again is the subliminal message that nonhuman animals are here in order to entertain us humans. Even when, during our deluded moments of enlightenment, we insist that they are here rather to edify — even then their presence is still essentially assigned *to or for us*. Thus the phenomenological grammar of their appearance precludes the possibility of full otherness arising; this is what it means to put and keep a live body on display (a structural inauthenticity that remains despite the best intentions of humanitarian/ecologic pedagogy).

If this again sounds too pornographic, perhaps we can wash away the association by discovering the relevant disanalogy elsewhere. Undoubtedly, someone will think that the

likeness I allege is strained on account of the obvious difference in attraction — erotic versus biotic entertainment. Here I must give some ground, for it is not the average zoo visitor who actually desires a romp with the rhino. I grant that bestiality is not part of the ordinary dynamic of zoo visitation (although it can be seen as an indirect ingredient, as in Peter Greenaway’s 1988 film, *ZOO*). Nevertheless, I maintain that the analogy even here holds strong enough to warrant its validity. The aesthetics of the zoo are not, I believe, far removed from that of pornography. We find in both cases fetishes of the exotic, underlying fear of nature, fantasies of illicit or impossible encounter, and a powerful presumption of mastery and control (Griffin, 1981). Given these similarities, I do not think it at all unbelievable to claim that zoo inhabitants and porn participants are very much alike in this respect — they are visual objects whose meaning is shaped predominantly by the perversions of a patriarchal gaze (Adams 1994, 23-84, esp. 39-54).

At this point some of the impatient among us, unsettled if not outright disturbed by the parallels, may be tempted to rescue the respectability of both institutions at once by wielding the double-edged sword of freedom. Pornography itself is not so bad, the argument would go, because it is staffed by professionals who have “chosen” their careers; and, as for zoos, the animals are “creatures of instinct” anyway and hence were never truly free even in the wild. This counter-argument is far from convincing, however. First, in rejoinder, I would point out that many (probably most, perhaps all) of those who are displayed in pornography can hardly be said to have freely chosen their objectification. Furthermore, I am not prepared to allow instinct to become the imprimatur of zoological exhibition. Biting the bullet, I wish to remind the reader that some cetaceans and other primates appear to partake in what philosophers call positive freedom (roughly autonomous agency). Dodging the bullet, I want to say that most (if not all) other wild animals are at least negatively free in the sense of being at liberty to individually fulfill their species-being (which many qualitatively experience as well).

It will be of no use, at this juncture, for zoo defenders to shift the ground and sing the praises of reform in naturalistic architecture, alleging that in the brave new no-bars biodome, the keep are effectively at liberty. No, that move won’t work — not, for instance, when the measurement of one jaguar’s wild territory (twenty-five thousand acres) is greater than the total land area of all major zoos worldwide (Preece and Chamberlain, 1993)! Moreover, there is reason to suspect the appeal to freedom that we are treating is itself aligned with the structure of possessive consciousness. Indeed, the phenomenology of control from Hegel to Sartre shows that the dialectic of oppression manifests a paradoxical need —

namely, that the master, consciously or otherwise, desires the slave to be free in and through exploitation itself.

It would seem, then, that what may have come across as outlandish at first glance — the analogy between zoos and pornography — is not at all preposterous and rather has much to support its strength. The reader may wonder here what the upshot is. After all, one might counter, this comparative critique succeeds only if one assumes a dubious attitude of moralistic prudery in the case of the analogue. My reply to this last objection is that plausible distinctions can be made, in the area of erotica, between the politics of degradation and the aesthetics of revelation. One way of marking that divide is to speak, as Berger does, of the difference between nudity and nakedness: “To be naked is to be oneself ... To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself ... A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude ... Nakedness reveals itself ... Nudity is placed on display ... To be naked is to be without disguise ... Nudity is a form of dress” (Berger 1972, 54).

Now let us re-assess the difference at stake, by substituting the words *captive* and *wild* for *nude* and *naked*. The transformation is not seamless, but with a bit of interpretive finesse it is telling: to be wild is to be oneself; to be captive is to be seen wild by others and yet not recognized for oneself (*why aren't the nocturnal animals dancing by day when we come by?*); a wild body has to be seen as an object in order to become captive; wildness reveals itself (*camouflage notwithstanding*); captivity is placed on display; to be wild is to be without disguise; captivity is a form of dress (*costume complete with placards of identity and matching signs of exhibit's corporate sponsorship*). My parenthetical remarks are not the only ones possible — with a little imagination, anyone who has gone to a zoo can add her own comments.

In conclusion, I believe the study of zooscopic pornography would be particularly helpful in critically understanding the emergence of a generally visual culture — for therein the politics of perception ramify to include even natural history. Michel Foucault once observed that “for millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question” (1980, 143). Perhaps the postmodern human is an animal whose techniques of perceptual power make his relations with other living beings suspect; maybe we now need a genealogy of the “zoopticon.” However that may be, before ending I want to avoid misconstrual of my central analogy and make it clear that I do not frown upon involvement with “wildlife,” whether biotic or erotic. In the case of the former, I do feel there is an authentic animal encounter for which we have a biophilic need.

The popularity of zoos far outstrips that of even major

league professional sports; in the United States alone, they attract 135 million people per year (Kellert 1997, 98). It is likely that the promotional factors of preservation, research, and education are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the existence of zoos. What we too lightly call “amusement” is probably both necessary and sufficient, and therefore we ought to redefine and further research this latter motive. If something like what E. O. Wilson (1984) describes as biophilia lies behind our exhibition of other organisms, then I submit that our task is to develop modes of cultivating that biophilic drive and the associated affiliation with animals in ways beyond and better than zoos do or can.

To some ears, it may sound as if I am closing the door prematurely on the promise of ameliorating zoos. In fact, one observer has already laid out an intriguing set of possible pedagogical reforms for these institutions. Scott Montgomery envisions the zoo as a place to study the domestication of animals, to reflect on animality's conventional meanings, to investigate the cultural history of the zoo itself, and to question the very idea of Nature (Montgomery 1995, 576ff.). These are sophisticated goals, some of which are at odds with the entertainment dynamic of the zoo as such. Actual educational reform at the zoo is more modest, though still interesting as a putative catalyst for awakening student curiosity (*Sunday Morning*, 1998). My guess is that true transformation — one which curtails the triviality and stereotyping of, say, television's *Animal Planet* and Disney's *Animal Kingdom* — would change the zoo so radically that another name for the site would be called for.

So what might such changes look like? A first step might be to strip the zoo of its exoticism; the Belize Tropical Education Center, for instance, keeps only native animals and then usually only those that have been injured or orphaned (Coc et al. 1998, 389f.). A second step could involve abridgment or abandonment of the notion and practice of keeping itself. In Victoria, for example, at the southeast edge of Australia's mainland, I have observed a site that has been set up for the protection and viewing of blue (or ‘fairy’) penguins who retain access both to the sea and their regular roosting burrows. It seems to me that, whatever else one may say about ecotourism such as this, one of its cardinal virtues is that it allows the animals themselves to engage or break off any encounter with human visitors. It is the observance of this elemental kind of ‘etiquette,’ referred to throughout Weston (1994), that marks a distinctive departure from the pattern of pornography I have criticized above.

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