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Zoos and Eyes: Contesting Captivity and Seeking Successor Practices

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. The paper asserts that the keep are thus degraded or marginalized through the marketing and consumption of their very visibility and criticizes the pretense of preservation. Furthermore, the paper subjects the related framework of captivity to Foucauldian analysis and critique—we see that the “zoöpticon” deserves designation as an island of power in the carceral archipelago of hegemonic social institutions mapped by Foucault. Hence, this paper suggests that the zoo as we know it be phased out in favor of richer and less oppressive modes of encountering other forms of life; toward this end, the paper explores and assesses alternative approaches to, and practices of, nonhuman animal spectatorship and cross-species conviviality.

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, p. 173)

Throughout its past, the zoo has demonstrated a relational dynamic of mastery. Originally, in its days as a private garden, the zoo was a powerful symbol of dominion: It projected an imperial image of man-the-monarch—ruler of nature, lord of the wild. Eventually, the zoo was converted into a public menagerie and became a ritual of entertainment, projecting almost trickster imagery of man-the-magician—tamer of brutes, conjurer of captives. The contemporary zoo has become a scientific park and aesthetic site. 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 & Marvin, 1987).

Historically marked by patterns of paternalism and traces of patriarchy, zoological institutions now are justified by appeal to their allegedly saving graces. Zoos are legitimized as havens of wildlife protection, vessels for the rescue of a nonhuman animal kingdom under attack by industrial civilization. Following Berger (1977), I argue that this self-promotion is an ideology caught in contradiction—for the very exposition established by zoos erases the most manifestly “natural” traits of what once were 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.

The Modern Zoo

My argument depends not on immutable essences of species as such but on received meanings of wildness for any animal at all. The modern zoo promises its visitors a brush with the wild, and the premium of this entertainment value is evident in the current effort increasingly to display animals in mock-ups of their natural habitats. However, sheer placement in a recreated habitat cannot provide the experience that zoo visitors seek. For the experience to approximate an encounter in the wild—as an experience of the “wildness” of the animal—the visitor must have some purchase in a transactional relationship with the animals’ acting normally in their regular environment and with the spectator engaged in some way as a participant. However, as one might easily recognize, the behavior of animals not in captivity generally does not include close relationships with human beings. This is true not only

because of fear the animal might experience but also because of lack of interest, nocturnal patterns of activity, territorial range, and mode of locomotion. The activities of animals in their natural habitats are not organized in terms of human conveniences. Yet, it is precisely animals as they would be if the spectator were not there that is the object of visive interest and desire. Thus, the zoo's exhibitionism extinguishes for us the existential reality of its animal presentations even as it proclaims to preserve their biological existence.

Even the astute zoo apologist Hahn (1967) admits, "the wild animal in conditions of captivity . . . is bound to alter in nature and cease being the creature we want to see" (p. 16). The situation, however, involves more than just making animals ill at ease or failing to replicate the conditions for them to behave as they would were they actually in their respective, natural environments. The very structure of the human-animal encounter is disrupted, and the interaction that is sought—encountering the animals—becomes impossibility as the "real" animals disappear and the conditions for seeing are undermined. Not only can we as spectators not truly see the animals; but we cannot be seen by them. We are just as invisible—at least in terms of being encountered and approached as the animals we are—as the animals we expect to see (but cannot find) in the zoo.

Berger (1977) elaborates this 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" (p. 26). 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, p. 19).² In this respect then, insofar as 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 defined as visive violence. Ordinarily, this form of pornography obviously is not about sex; much as feminist analyses of human pornography have detailed, however, it does engage a destructive desire in relation to the object of inspection.

The Zoo and Pornography Analogy

At this juncture, it will be well to clarify a meta-level issue, because some may refuse even to consider the proposed analogy on the grounds that pornography essentially is representational, whereas zoos directly compose simple presentations. If the position I argue for is plausible, however, then it should become apparent that there is nothing straightforward about zoological exhibition: On the contrary, its very structure presupposes a highly mediated context for display wherein (sightings of) the specimens as such are constituted precisely as re-presentatives of their species in particular and of the wild or exotic in general—just as live sex performances (apart, that is, from pictorial conveyance) are not pure presentations of individuals' reality but, rather, graphically and textually sedimented portrayals of reified stereotypes (nymph, seductress, slut) and of the erotic or lust at large. An anonymous reviewer suggests that concern about this issue of representation might be motivated, "not least because the photographic representation of zoo animals—in the work of Noelker and Jaschinski—has been one of the forms in which their oppressive display/presentation has been challenged most effectively in recent years."

Yet, in light of the formulation just offered, I would say that if such works actually have contributed to the subversion of animal exploitation that is due, at least partially, to their capacity for surfacing the representational status of zoological exhibition, for effecting—as it were—an exposé of exposure's assumptions and implications.³

A Useful Comparison and Persuasive Justifications

The broad analogy between zoos and pornography is useful because, if it holds true in the relevant respects (as I argue it does), the comparison casts a new and decidedly critical light on the debate over keeping and breeding animals in the wild in captivity (as well as shifting the balance of concern to include effects on human spectators). As an illustration, consider the controversy over pornography. There are several conceivable defenses of the institution, but imagine for a moment an apologist's taking the position that we should permit—indeed promote—the practice 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.

How would one mount such a defense? Following this line of reasoning, we can imagine that a pornographer might protest that such an aim is accomplished in the presentation of women as vulnerable, prone, and in positions of submission. Even the depiction of women in pain and tortured (say, the notorious *Hustler* cover of a nude woman positioned in a meat grinder), the pornographer could argue, as much arouses our pity and its corresponding feeling of compassion as it does our more prurient interests. The centerfold, in other words, would be seen as an icon of sympathy or respect!

Yet few of us, even among those who wish to defend pornography, find such justifications persuasive. Why is it that a similar form of reasoning is accepted readily in the case of zoological exhibition? One explanation might be that zoos instruct their visitors about biology and ecology. But this alleged difference does not hold up under scrutiny. There are tough questions that such defender would need to answer. Shepard (1996) writes, “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?” (p. 233).

Certainly not, we must reply, for there is strong evidence that zoos teach poorly or, worse, leave their visitors to formulate distorted and even quite detrimental impressions of animals and their relationships to human beings. One environmental researcher found, “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 20 years later, his verdict still is dismal: “[T]he typical visitor appears only marginally more appreciative, better informed, or engaged in the natural world following the experience”; in effective response to Shepard’s question, Kellert (1997) finds that “many visitors leave the zoo more convinced than ever of human superiority over the natural world” (p. 99).

Message and Mission

Why do zoos fail to educate? Several unsurprising reasons are apparent: 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; and people tend to concentrate on so-called babies and beggars—their cute countenances and funny antics capture audience attention (Ludwig, 1981). People come to zoos with an expectation of entertainment, not education. For the viewing public, 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 not-so-subliminal message that nonhuman animals exist, at least in their placement in the zoo, specifically to entertain us humans. Even when, during our deluded moments of enlightenment, we insist they are present to edify—even then their presence still essentially is managed around a human viewing audience. That is to say, even in the less common moments in which we approach the zoological display for educational purposes, the very structure of that encounter is organized in accordance with human interests and the demands that follow from how humans are able best to inspect, observe, witness, and scrutinize their objects of investigation.

The educational mission of the zoo requires that humans encounter animate beings other than their fellow humans. It promises the cultivation of an appreciation for other forms of life. The phenomenological grammar of their appearance, however, diminishes the manifestation of otherness (autopoietic activity at variance with a given identity). This is what it means to put, and keep, a live body on display: A structural inauthenticity is engendered that remains despite even the best intentions of humanitarian or ecological pedagogy.

If this description sounds too pornographic, perhaps we can purge the association by discovering the relevant disanalogy elsewhere. Undoubtedly, it will appear to some that the similarity I allege is strained because of the obvious difference in attraction. We might call this a difference between *erotic* and *biotic* entertainment. Indeed, I do not suggest that the average zoo visitor is motivated by sexual attraction to the animal inhabitants, but I am suggesting that there is a certain economy of desire operative that has structural similarities in these cases. The aesthetics of the zoo are not, I believe, far removed from that of pornography. We find in both cases fetishes of the exotic, under-

lying 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, pp. 23-84).⁴

Positive Freedom and Pressure to Participate

At this point, we may be tempted—some, unsettled, if not outright disturbed, by the parallels—to rescue the respectability of both institutions at once by wielding the double-edged sword of freedom. Pornography in 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 never truly were free even in the wild. These counterclaims are far from convincing. By now, the results of extensive sociological and psychological research on pornography have become well known, and they echo the anecdotal accounts of those who have “survived” the pornography industry. Most subjects are pressured to participate because of their social and economic conditions, and they are kept in the industry through fear, drug addiction, and psychological manipulation. They hardly can be said to have chosen freely their objectification.

As for the claim that zoo animals are beings driven simply by instinct and thus cannot be said to be free, I am not prepared to allow instinct to become the imprimatur of zoological exhibition. First, it is worth pointing out that some cetaceans and other primates appear to partake in what philosophers call positive freedom (roughly autonomous agency). Second, it is unnecessary for animals to demonstrate they are free precisely in the way that we attribute that property to human beings. Most (if not all) other wild animals are at least negatively free in the sense of being at liberty individually to fulfill their species-being (taxonomically typical mode of existence), which many also qualitatively experience.

Perhaps, it could be protested, I have misrepresented zoos for the purposes of my argument, ignoring that many contemporary zoos have made tremendous strides in the development of naturalistic architecture and the removal of bars that made the zoo feel more like a prison than a place in which animals

actually can thrive. Surely, such defenders would claim, even I would agree that this approach grants a greater sense of liberty to the animal inhabitants. I do not doubt that these measures improve the quality of life of the animals residing in zoos, just as work in law reform can enhance the lives of participants in pornography.

Focus of the Argument

My argument here, however, is not focused on the worthy consideration of minimizing the distress of animals kept in captivity. Nonetheless, it must be granted that even the reformist approach simply cannot meet the needs of many captive animals. Consider the case of the jaguar, whose wild territory—25,000 acres—is greater than the total land area of all major zoos worldwide (Preece & Chamberlain, 1993).⁵ My argument is aimed at the way in which the display and presentation of live beings can be considered within 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. As much as I am concerned for the welfare of animals in captivity in the zoo, my argument here focuses on what the institutions of animal-keeping, particularly the zoo, reveal about us and our possibilities for relating to other human and nonhuman animals alike.

Finally, one might claim that my comparative critique succeeds only if one assumes an attitude of moralistic prudery in the case of the pornographic analogue. My reply to this last objection is that plausible distinctions can be made between the pornographic politics of degradation and the erotic aesthetics of revelation. One way of marking that divide is to speak, as Berger (1972) 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 (p. 54).

Now consider the difference at stake when substituting the words “captive” and “wild” for “nude” and “naked.” The transformation is not seamless; with a bit of interpretive finesse, however, it is quite suggestive: To be wild is to be oneself; to be captive is to be seen wild by others and yet not recognized for oneself (why are the nocturnal animals not dancing by day when we come by?); a wild body has to be seen as an object 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).

Other Possible Remarks

My parenthetical remarks are not the only ones possible. With a little imagination, those who have gone to a zoo can add their own comments. With the aid of Berger (1972), we are now in a position to recognize that the very structure of the spectacle presented at the zoo substitutes one experience for another. It presents as wild (animals themselves) what is captive (animals conjured as spectacle). Zoo visitors are somewhat complicit in this process. Indeed, because their latent desire is to be entertained by visual spectacle, zoo-goers in effect demand the representation of wildness that, in turn, entails captivity. In other words, wildness-fit-for-display is what zoos offer and their audiences unconsciously seek. Yet, to satisfy the conscious aim for authenticity within this structure, animals are supposed to “be themselves.” Thus, the levels of desire within the dynamic of zoo spectatorship operate at odds with each other. It is worth repeating here that the phenomenology of desire and power from Hegel to Sartre shows that the dialectic of oppression manifests a contradictory need—the master, consciously or otherwise, wants the slave to be “free” in and through exploitation itself.

It would appear, then, that what might have seemed outlandish at first glance—the analogy between zoos and pornography—is not at all preposterous and, rather, has much to support its strength. Further study of zoöscopic pornography could be particularly illuminating for critically understanding the emergence of a visual culture—for therein the politics of perception ramify to include even natural history. Foucault (1976/1980) once observed “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 (p. 143)."

Perhaps, as we have seen above, the postmodern human is an animal whose techniques of perceptual power make his relationships with other living beings suspect; maybe we now need a genealogy of the zoöpticon.

Zoöpticon Revealed: Foucauldian Interpretation and Criticism

As I have elaborated at some length elsewhere,⁶ the zoo, despite appearing to present a "peaceable kingdom" in a park-like setting—or perhaps more sinisterly, because it appears to do this—is an institution of power whose specific functions are to display and preserve biotic energies organized in such a way as to become resources for human pleasure and entertainment. It is not necessary to regard zoo-keepers as prison wardens to find Foucault's (1975/1979) analysis of the structure of the institution of the prison to be informative here. Like the prison, the zoo creates an artificial space of enforced occupancy and demonstration. It marks a place in the series of socializing institutions Foucault describes as "the carceral archipelago" (p. 297). Examples include not only the prison but also the medical clinic and educational institutions.

Let us consider briefly what might be described as the "lifeworld" of the zoo. A lifeworld is the experienced environment of a given subject, community, or species. In other words, it is the object of ethnographical and ethological inquiry. In the zoo, the lifeworld is structured around holding and showing wild animals in captivity and thus violating their status as free beings (in the sense qualified above in the distinction between wild and captive). Considered from the standpoint of bodily experience, this structure ensures the production of docile or—worse—dead bodies because the creatures presented as if at liberty are incapable of living the lives they are purported to enjoy; they are prevented from participating in behavior presented as their defining characteristics. Precisely because they are unable to elude the gaze of others, to associate or refuse to associate with human beings, they are prevented from living the lives they are supposed to have. Such production of docility, in and of itself, constitutes and demonstrates a relationship of powerful dominion (captor over and above captive, the carceral shot through the carnal).

We witness this transformation in the zoo in several ways, particularly in practices that would seem to be aimed at revivifying the animate lives of their subjects. Naturalistic architecture and behavioral enrichment can be construed as simply more advanced stages of carceral inspection. Foucault (1975/1979) suggests that what he calls “carcerality” has productive effects going beyond simple suppression. His well-known example is Bentham’s prison design, the Panopticon. The purpose of this structure’s design was “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (p. 201).

Also in the zoo, we find a nexus of power and vision; in this case, however, the roles are reversed: The function of controlling the animals’ placement and diet is to habituate them to tolerate indefinite exposure to the visive presence of humans (the placement renders them prone to sighting, and the diet typically is provided and thus erodes the perceptual sensitivities of predator-prey relationships). The ultimate goal of the so-called naturalistic zoo is to acculturate the animals sufficiently to ignore their human spectators. Ideally, they remain ready for inspection and observation, while the artificiality of that situation recedes for both spectator and spectacle alike. The animals must become comfortable enough to act as though they were free, as though they were not in captivity, so that they will engage in the behaviors that the spectator imagines they would were they in the wild. Usually, this situation does not eventuate (because of the stultifying effects of monotonous routine on the captives); even when it does, however, visitors still know (though they may avoid full consciousness) that they are witnessing simulacra.

This zoöpticon is a kind of panopticon turned inside out—similar principles are at work that (though arranged in opposite vectors of force) tend over the long term to produce the same result: an institutionalized organism, one largely incapacitated for life on the outside. More insidiously still, whether originally human or nonhuman, the transmogrified product often is a monstrous animal all too ready for the carceral milieu that have socially and ecologically colonized the (no longer quite so) external world.

Consider the following: Wildlife reintroduction programs must monitor the movements of the released frequently by remote electronic equipment; parole boards now use similar tracking devices on former prisoners (Flynn, 1996).

With this juxtaposition of technique in mind, it is not so difficult to share the fear, “that there is no wildness [free otherness] anymore in the contemporary world, in the technological imperium” (Birch, 1990, p. 10). Whether the animal sanctuary or the group house awaits them, many freed captives never really “return home.”

Reconstruction: Toward Transformation of Animal Encounter

This result may sound too bleak. Indeed, beyond diagnosis, critics of the zoo have a responsibility to frame institutional or social therapies. In general, deconstruction should be not the terminus of critique but rather a propaedeutic for reconstruction. More specifically, in the area of present concern, it will not do to condemn zoos and leave it at that. After all, it could be that we have a biophilic need (a natural or innate affinity) for interspecies animal encounters. The sheer popularity of zoos suggests that they fulfill, or at least extend the promise of fulfilling, a powerful and significant need. Zoos command audiences that exceed those of major league professional sports; in the United States alone, they attract 135 million people per year, a figure greater than the attendance at all major professional sporting events combined (Kellert, 1997, p. 98). As I have implied above, the promotional factors of preservation, research, and education are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for the existence of zoos. Still, what we too lightly (and as yet naively) call “amusement” might very well be both necessary and sufficient. To explore this possibility further, we could focus on what Wilson (1984) describes as biophilia to see whether such might lie behind our spectatorship of other organisms. If so, then our task would be to develop modes of cultivating that biophilic drive and the associated affiliation with animals in ways beyond, and better than, zoos do or can.⁷

Possible Reforms and Changes

Is the zoo really beyond rehabilitation? Can no reforms provide opportunities that would be genuinely educational and fulfill the need described above? One observer already has laid out an intriguing set of possible pedagogical reforms for these institutions. Montgomery (1995) 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” (p. 576). These are sophisticated goals, some of which are at odds with the entertainment dynamic of the zoo as such. Moreover, it is not obvious that these reforms would satisfy what appears to be a genuine need to be engaged with other forms of life.

Actual educational reform at the zoo is more modest, though still interesting as a putative catalyst for awakening student curiosity (*Sunday Morning*, 1998). My sense is that true transformation—one that curtails the triviality and stereotyping of, say, cable television’s *Animal Planet* and Walt Disney’s *Animal Kingdom*—would change the zoo so radically that the transmuted site would need another name. To educate truly about the wild, it would be necessary to allow predation to occur on site, and that would change the terms of encounter radically for all involved. Would we be able to equate visiting such a site with going to a zoo? No, I think (experience of) the new zone would require novel terminology.

So what might other salutary changes look like? To open the possibility for genuine encounters with animal others, it is necessary first to strip the zoo of its exoticism. The Belize Tropical Education Center keeps only native animals and usually only those who have been injured or orphaned (Coc, Marsh, & Platt, 1998, p. 389). A second step would involve abridgment or abandonment of the notion and practice of keeping. At Phillip Island on the southeast edge of Australia’s mainland, a site has been established for the protection and viewing of Blue (Fairy) penguins who retain access both to the sea and their regular roosting burrows. In this case, it is the viewers who are corralled and whose actions and activities are regulated and restricted (no flash photography, no eating or drinking, little sonic interference, and presence only within the perimeter established by the wildlife center).

Comparisons and Contrasts

Are the orphanage, rehabilitation (rehab) center, and ecotourist excursions zoos? It is valuable to consider the ways in which they are not, even though they are organized, at least partially, to meet similar needs and expectations of human spectators. The captive constituents of orphanages and rehab centers are determined haphazardly. They do not reinforce the impression that

humans have, on quasi-divine authority, the dominion over animals that allows humans to name, organize, and collect representative samples.

The orphanage is comprised of creatures who presumably have suffered some misfortune that prevents them from caring for themselves. Thus, the contact between the human and the animal is organized in a different way, one in which the need of the other animal assumes primacy. The structure of needs and interests in such a place potentially differs quite significantly from those operative in zoos. The need of the animal for privacy is conveyed more easily and intelligibly. The physiology of the animal becomes of greater interest as part of the story of the animal's journey to the center. Plans for rehabilitation or explanation of the impossibility for a "return to the wild" are fit more easily into a broader narrative of animal life-worlds that become compelling on their own.

The ecotourist encounter of the kind described above also rests upon an element of chance: The penguins simply might not return to the beach on a particular day, the weather might be inhospitable for human viewing. The organization of interests, again, is driven largely by accommodating the needs of the animals. Having witnessed it, I can testify to the feeling shared by countless others who wish to "capture" the experience on film. One would like to have more optimal viewing conditions: better lighting, more proximal contact, and greater opportunity to share one's excitement with others through talking and laughing.

To achieve a situation more favorable to these human desires would undermine precisely the interests and activities of the animals. The animals prefer dusk so as to elude preying animals who might be close to the shore. Their concern is to locate their young in the nests in the rocks to feed them the fish they have caught during their day out at sea. They locate their young by making distinctive cries and barks and listen for a reply. Noise from human voices and mechanical vehicles interferes with this process and creates a hostile environment, and so it is strictly monitored.

Again, the very organization of these sighting opportunities establishes a set of relationships in which the interest in genuinely understanding something about the animal not only is possible but also desirable. Even those who come only to see the penguins cannot help learning something about their natural habitat and their patterns of relations with each other and other nonhuman

animals in their ordinary lives. One cannot help becoming better educated, even when one is disappointed by the perceived quality of the spectacle. It seems to me that whatever else one may say about such ecotourism one of its cardinal virtues is that it allows the animals to engage in, or break off, any encounter with human visitors. Observance of this elemental kind of “etiquette” (Weston, 1994) marks a distinctive departure from the patterns of pornography and carcerality I have criticized above.

Transforming Zoöscopic Practices

Yet, this is not all that needs to be changed. I wish to investigate further the possibilities for transforming zoöscopic practices by examining and weighing relevant phenomenologies and hermeneutics of vision as set forth by provocative and productive thinkers such as Frye (1983) and Lingis (1983). The first of these, a theorist of feminist critique, should help us to recapitulate my diagnosis and then aid in characterizing alternatives. Frye speaks of “arrogant eyes which organize everything seen with reference to themselves and their own interests” (p. 67); she has in mind the controlling gaze of patriarchy and its effects on women, but her analysis in several respects is quite capable of extrapolation to the gaze of anthropocentrism and its effects on nonhuman animals. Frye astutely notices that the agent of arrogant vision “coerces the objects of his perception into satisfying the conditions his perception imposes” (p. 67). This pattern, translated to the interspecific situation, I have identified above as the pornography of preservation embodied in the zoöpticon. It is constituted by capture, feeding schedules, architecture of display, and breeding regimens.

Another example of the linkage between Frye’s (1983) account of androcentric optics and homocentric zoöscopy can be traced from her observation that “[h]ow one sees another and one expects the other to behave are in tight interdependence, and how one expects another to behave is a large factor in determining how the other does behave” (p. 67). As we have seen, one hardly can go to the zoo and truly expect an authentic encounter to occur; it should not surprise us, if Frye is right, that none takes place. Overall, what we are presented with in the vision of arrogance is a leitmotif of disintegration, the perceptual consumption of a coherent organism and its breakdown through and into the interests of the spectator (Frye, p. 66). This same dynamic is in

operation both under the aspect of patriarchy and under that of zoological exhibition or imperium.

A Salient Alternative

If this is a sort of spectatorship to be avoided, what might a kind to be fostered literally look like? Frye (1983) calls a salient alternative, “the loving eye.” Negative descriptions give us some idea of what she means when she writes, “the loving perceiver can see without the presupposition that the other poses a constant threat or that the other exists for the seer’s service,” and so “[t]he loving eye does not make the object of perception into something edible, does not try to assimilate it, does not reduce it to the size of the seer’s desire, fear and imagination” (pp. 74-76). Of course, there indeed are times when we face hostility or hunger, and defensive or venatic eyes may be appropriate; however, when self-preservation is not at issue, how do loving eyes see?⁸ Frye’s positive characterization is open-ended; for her, the loving eye lavishes a creative type of attention since “[i]t knows the complexity of the other as something which will forever present new things to be known” (p. 76).⁹

Here we might admit the proper sphere for a certain sort of showiness in nature. As Lingis (1993) has it, the kaleidoscopic manifestations of organic phenomena—especially the blooming, buzzing confusion of colors and shapes displayed by animal forms—exceed the necessities of camouflage and communication. They point beyond those functions to organisms’ participation in a “logic of ostentation” that is driven by a “compulsion for exhibition, spectacle, parade” (p. 8).

In the thick of such morphology (described from the perspective of marine diving expeditions), Lingis (1993) becomes a voluptuary of visual delight and discovers a compassionate kind of loving sight, the hallmark of which is its maneuvers of caressing: “The voluptuous eye does not seek to comprehend the unity in the surface dispersion of shapes, to penetrate to the substance beneath the chromatic appearances . . . it caresses, is caressed by the surface effects of an alien domain” (p. 13). Forgoing the ego and its projects of appropriation, this species of optics melts into a general sensuousness immersed in the “exorbitant materiality” of the natural lifeworld (the matrix of per-

ception and perceptibility that Merleau-Ponty once called the flesh-of-the-world) and thereby paradoxically “expose[s] exposure itself” (p. 10).¹⁰ At this point, Lingis suggests, the so-called rapture of the deep spreads itself across a profundity of surface aesthetics.

Conclusion

Although such experiences of sensual immersion are revelatory and valuable, life is not always lived through them. So, it is important to stay in touch with, and further refine, other practices of perception. Distinct from erotogenic or romantic models of fusion, the loving eye—as Frye (1983) portrays it—maintains the distance of vision itself. One who employs it does not dissolve into the other: “There are boundaries between them [seer and seen]; she and the other are two; their interests are not identical; they are not blended in vital parasitic or symbiotic relations” (p. 75). Elsewhere, I have underscored the ethical significance of a jointly held form of bodily consciousness called “symphysis” (Acampora, 1995); here we see a complementary apprehension of separation, which is necessary to engage periodically so as to keep in play an ontological and moral dialectic of difference and similarity. In Frye’s (1983) words, “. . . it is a matter of being able to tell one’s own interests from those of others and of knowing where one’s self leaves off and another begins” (p. 75).

This power of discrimination is a necessary condition for relationships to be conducted along an axis of optimal freedom, whereby the spell of captivity cast by the arrogant eye is broken and encounter becomes volitional rather than compulsory. The advantage of such a transformation is palpable: “It is one mark of a voluntary association that the one person can survive displeasing the other, defying the other, dissociating from the other” (Frye, p. 73). All too often, of course, just the opposite holds in the lives (and deaths) of zoo and circus animals, companion and working animals, and even wildlife who get too, “in the face of” civilization.

Thus, changing over from the vision of arrogance to that of love could produce remarkably beneficial results not only for interpersonal but also for interspecies relationships. Finally, in the twilight of the zoo, it will be up to biologists, animal advocates, and concerned citizens to look ahead with new

eyes, devise novel and better modes of cross-species encounter, and see them through to implementation and inevitable revision.

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Notes

- ¹ Correspondence should be sent to Ralph Acampora, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York 11549-1000. E-mail: phirra@hofstra.edu. An earlier version of part of this paper appeared in my *Extinction by exhibition: Looking at and in the zoo*, *Human Ecology Review* 5.1 (Summer, 1998): 1-3.
- ² 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, p. 75).
- ³ Of course this putative benefit has to be weighed against the risk of aestheticizing (and thus perpetuating) oppression, a danger already courted or prefigured in a title such as that carried by Noelker’s compendium of zoo portraiture—viz. *Captive beauty* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004). The extent to which these positive and/or negative potentials have been realized is an empirical matter I have not investigated and leave to the observation and judgment of others.
- ⁴ For more on this connection, see the discussion below on the “arrogant eye.”
- ⁵ See also the recent supporting study by Oxford University scientists that generalizes this point for an unfortunate number of mega-fauna: Mark Derr, Big beasts, tight space and a call for change. *New York Times* 10/2/03: A26.
- ⁶ See my *Zoöpticon: Inspecting the site of live animal infotainment*. In M. Carroll & E. Tafoya (Eds.), *Phenomenological approaches to popular culture* (pp. 154-158). Bowling Green U.: Popular Press, 2000, [Copyright, University of Wisconsin Press].
- ⁷ Thus transformation of animal encounter might correspond analogically to salutary forms of erotica as contrasted to objectionable pornography. Whether this is plausible will depend greatly on the dynamics of phenomenological optics discussed in the final pages below (Lingis and Frye).
- ⁸ Regarding the awareness of predator and of prey, cf. Jose Ortega y Gasset’s *Meditations on hunting*.
- ⁹ Cf. Yi-Fu Tuan’s conception of love in *Dominance and affection: The making of pets*, p. x.
- ¹⁰ This bears some resemblance to, and can be compared with Caputi’s (1994) psychodynamic rehabilitation of obscenity as “that dimension of culture that allows

us to cross boundaries, exceed limits . . . [and] allows for continuity, the sensation of merging and fusion with the world, a sense of communion". *Voluptuous yearnings: A feminist theory of the obscene* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield), p. 6.

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