

Liminal Animals in Liminal Spaces: A Day at Berlin Zoo

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Abstract: This reflexive essay is based on a visit to Berlin Zoo on an overcast February day. It attempts to make sense of the “zoo experience” through critical self-reflection and observations of how visitors relate to animal others. The concept of zoo inhabitants as liminal beings, neither domesticated nor truly wild, is explored. Animals born and raised in captivity do not belong in the wild any more than their ancestors belonged in a zoo. Although they likely could not survive in their “natural” habitats, they are no less “elephant” or “tiger” than free-living members of the same species. These animals occupy liminal spaces where they are subject to “the gaze” and exist as entertainers and educators. Despite concerns regarding the ethics of keeping captive wild animals, I argue that, given proper respect and husbandry, keeping some individuals as ambassador animals could be justified. However, any moral justification for captivity should be considered from the perspective of individual animals and species.

Keywords: Animal Exhibits, Gaze, Liminality, Zoos

Contemporary Western zoos arose from the nineteenth-century culture of colonialism, with emphasis on leisure and consumerism (Willis, 1999), but evolved in response to “cultural changes in the perception of the interactions between humans and nature” (Ginsberg, 1993, p. 4). Whereas nineteenth-century zoos were essentially menageries of “exotic” animal collections, modern layouts in accredited zoos are based on ecological themes, with animals exhibited in enclosures intended to represent their natural surroundings (Powell, 1997; Benbow, 2004; Milstein, 2009). In response to charges of cruelty, zoos moved away from promoting entertainment at the expense of the wellbeing of the animals (Baratay & Hardouin-Fugier, 2004). In the late twentieth century, many zoos increased their focus on species preservation via captive breeding programs (Miller et al., 2004; Milstein, 2009; Tribe & Booth, 2003).

Historically, the plight of these animals was much worse (Baratay & Hardouin-Fugier, 2004). Kawata (2013) asserted that “history is often inconvenient” and insisted we not forget that the well-adapted apes of America’s accredited zoos “stand on heaps of

dead conspecific; untold numerous lives perished during capture, transport and after the arrival” (p. 29). Despite the considerable improvements seen in reputable modern zoos, Kawata (2013) did not believe the recent success of captive-animal breeding programs atoned for the atrocities committed upon their ancestors.

Critics contend that modern-day breeding efforts focus on species for whom zoos hold a vested interest in exhibiting with little concern for their wild counterparts (Hancocks, 2001; Milstein, 2009). Furthermore, the majority of captive zoo animals today are not endangered species and zoos typically do not pursue reintroduction programs (Jamieson, 1995; Milstein, 2009). Nonetheless, others still conclude that the role of these zoos is to raise awareness about conservation issues, educate the next generation, and provide an influential voice in conservation debates (Miller et al., 2004).

The mission of modern zoos is grounded in education (Ginsberg, 1993; Benbow, 2004; Miller et al., 2004; Falk et al., 2007; Milstein, 2009; Marino et al., 2010), although visitor motivations are predominantly entertainment-based (Reade & Waran, 1996; Tomas et al., 2003). Therefore, zoos must cater to visitor expectations if they are to fulfill their mission to educate. They seem to be successful in this respect; zoos are popular, with an estimated 600 million annual visitors worldwide (Gusset & Dick, 2011). American zoos attract more visitors annually than professional baseball, football, basketball, and hockey games combined (Milstein, 2009). Willis (1999) reports that “in no other tourist venue including theme parks and resorts, have I observed people so bemused, so enraptured, as they are in zoos” (p. 677).

Despite their popularity, zoos exhibit a highly skewed representation of the animal world. The so-called “ABC animals” are the large carnivores, such as big cats and bears, and large herbivores, such as elephants, rhinos, and giraffes, without whom zoos would be less popular (Hanson, 2002; Kawata, 2013). Not only are zoos mammalocentric, but the popular ABC-type mammals themselves make up a very small minority of all mammalian species (Kawata, 2011). Similarly, birds are over-represented by penguins, raptors, ratites (mostly flightless, large, and long-legged birds), and parrots (Kawata, 2013). While many shorter-lived, underrepresented species tend to live longer and readily reproduce in captivity, the

popular ABC-type animals suffer the most in terms of health, longevity, and reproductive success (Kawata, 2013; Tidière et al., 2016). Furthermore, longevity and physical health alone are not good measures of quality of life as they do not consider emotional wellbeing, and veterinary care may mask psychological problems by treating the physical manifestations (Hutchins, 2006; Kitchener & Macdonald, 2005; Mason & Veasey, 2010).

BERLIN ZOO

Many zoos were founded in Europe and North America during a time of rapid urbanization when more and more people were feeling removed from nature (Baratay & Hardouin-Fugier, 2004). Berlin Zoo was established in 1844 and was immediately open to the public. This set Berlin apart from other European zoological collections of the time, such as Amsterdam and Antwerp, which were exclusive to elite scientific societies (Bruce, 2017). Motivated by human interests in either science or entertainment, the founders of the nineteenth-century zoos likely did not dwell on the ethics of placing wild animals in captivity (Baratay & Hardouin-Fugier, 2004; Bruce, 2017). However, the animals were “loved” by the publics who visited them, and Berlin Zoo has a long history of celebrity animals. For example, a three-year-old gorilla named Bobby arrived to Berlin Zoo in 1928, and as the only member of his species in Europe at the time, he became an instant sensation. Bobby remained a popular attraction until his death in 1935 and his image remains the official zoo logo (Bruce, 2017). Other famous inhabitants – all ABC-type mammals (Bell, 2001; Bruce, 2017) – included Rostom, an Asian elephant who in 1881 became the zoo’s second elephant to kill an employee, Knautschke the hippo, who survived the WWII bombing of 1943, Evi (1961-1995), a sun bear born in Berlin and raised by the family of the zoo director, and Knut the polar bear (2007-2011).

This paper attempts to make sense of the zoo experience by observing how myself and other visitors relate to animal others. This reflexive essay is based on a visit to Berlin Zoo, Germany, on February 26, 2017. The day was dry but overcast, with an average temperature of 8°C. I chose to follow the prescribed path and absorb the zoo experience while making notes and taking pictures. This was my first visit to the Berlin Zoo. The paper develops the concept that zoo inhabitants are liminal animals who are neither truly wild nor domesticated.

Liminal Animals in Liminal Spaces

Root-Bernstein et al. (2013) placed anthropomorphism on a continuum, with “stronger” anthropomorphism being an “endorsement of a personally held belief that the non-human agent has humanlike characteristics or traits” (p. 1579). This can potentially lead to misrepresentation and misunderstanding of nonhuman behaviors and emotions and is most damaging to non-mammalian

species with whom we have less in common (Dwyer, 2007). At the other end of the continuum, anthropomorphism is about “identifying similarities between ourselves and the anthropomorphized object (Root-Bernstein et al., 2013, p. 1579).

As humans, we understand the world around us in human terms, using thoughts and emotions to which we can relate. However, humans are animals too, and behaviors and emotions thought to distinguish humans from other animals invariably turn out not to be exclusively human (Buchanan, 2015; Laland & Hoppitt, 2003). Philosophical ethology is an approach to research which asserts that understanding others should be guided by “an investigation of human animality rather than human exceptionalism” (Buchanan et al., 2014, p. 2). Following this same principle, Marchesini (2017) stresses that “human subjectivity is not the result of emancipation from a generic animal condition, but rather the very expression of a specific animal condition” (p. 62). The framework of philosophical ethology is not dissimilar from what Milton (2005) conceptualized as “egomorphism” – using personal experience to understand other persons (both human and nonhuman).

My personal experience as a human may help or hinder my understanding of the lives of zoo animals. Therefore, I chose not to attempt to garner a better understanding of what it might be like to be a zoo animal. Instead, I considered what my anthropomorphic (or egomorphic) interpretation might say about how I, and potentially other visitors, related to zoo animals. This is relevant because the way in which people perceive others affects how those others are treated by society.

Turning right from the zoo entrance, the elephants first grabbed my attention. Six large animals stood around in what I perceived as a rather small enclosure, showering dirt over their bodies, and lethargically tossing around fern branches (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The Elephant Enclosure at Berlin Zoo



Proximity to these massive mammals was awe-inspiring, and given my limited knowledge of elephant behavior, I believe I witnessed no undue distress. Yet at the same time, something felt wrong. Attempting to analyze this emotion, I first inferred it was because the animals appeared sad and bored. Were these animals truly sad or bored, and if not, why did I perceive them this way? Perhaps I recognized that they were captive animals and projected my own reaction to this knowledge onto these animals. Upon further reflection, it occurred to me that the chill and greyness of a February day in the city (note the cityscape backdrop in Figure 1) did not correlate with my reconceived idea of “elephant.” Elephants in documentaries are invariably shown in their natural environments and, standing in front of the enclosure, I was reminded of a photo my mother shared with me while visiting an elephant sanctuary in Sri Lanka. Those elephants seemed more real to me than the ones I stood next to in Berlin.

Rather than dismissing these projections as “sentimental anthropomorphism” (Lockwood, 1985), however, they can be considered within the framework of symbolic interactionism to understand human interactions with other animals (Irvine, 2012). Symbolic interactionism is the theory that interpersonal communication is facilitated by symbols that have acquired conventionalized and shared meanings (see Aksan et al., 2009; Blumer, 1969). Essentially, people respond to social symbols and objects via interpretation of their socially assigned meaning (Blumer, 1969). Like most visitors, I came to the zoo with some prior understanding of captivity, zoos, and the animal inhabitants. My intention here is to reflect upon my own subjective position and examine how I am perceiving the zoo inhabitants.

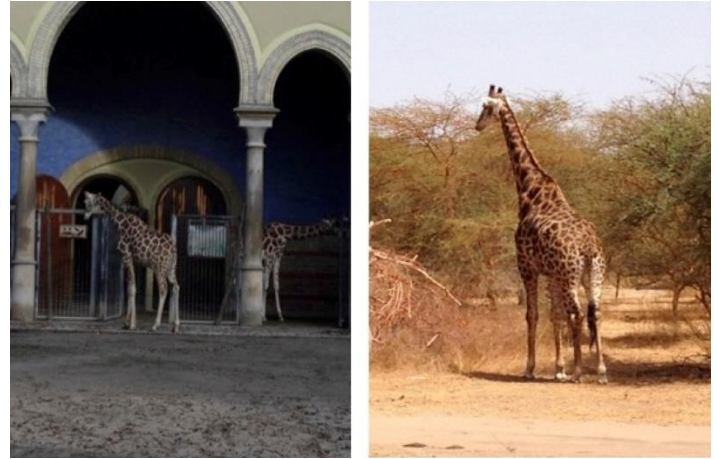
After leaving the elephants, I experienced a similar emotional reaction at the giraffe enclosure, which I contrasted to my memories of giraffes at Senegal’s Réserve de Bandia in 2013 (Figure 2). I perceived the free-roaming West African safari park animals as being at home, whereas the Berlin giraffes and elephants struck me as out-of-place.

My feeling persisted that these animals did not belong there. Others have described modern zoos – where wild animals live in captivity – as culturally liminal spaces (Hanson, 2002; Milstein, 2009). Arguably, these individuals could not thrive in their “natural” environment as the zoo setting is all they have known. Willis (1999) described zoo animals as “body doubles, stand-ins for the real animals existing (or becoming extinct) elsewhere,” and the zoo itself as “a living cemetery” (p. 674). Describing a cheetah at the zoo, Willis (1999) wrote, “it may look like a cheetah, and its genetic code is that of the cheetah. But released into the wild it cannot be a cheetah: Its cultivation has failed to include all the skills, practices, and awareness

that cheetahs in the wild acquire in order to live in the savannah” (p. 674).

Figure 2

Encounters with Giraffes



Note: Berlin Zoo (left); Réserve De Bandia, Senegal (right)

Zoos rarely keep animals with the intention of releasing adults into the wild. Animals are kept for exhibition, education, and sometimes to preserve genetic stocks (Patrick et al., 2007; Roe et al., 2014). Therefore, these individuals need not hone skills for future survival outside of the zoo. I do not agree that being different renders zoo animals any less “cheetah,” “elephant,” or “giraffe.” However, the fact that they are unlikely to thrive if released into the wild (Beck, 1995) suggests that these individuals are fundamentally different from their wild relatives. Furthermore, breeding programs may be inadvertently initiating domestication, or at least influencing the selection of traits that better-enable these animals to thrive in captivity (Schulte-Hostedde & Mastromonaco, 2015). This latter scenario potentially threatens the success of any mission to reintroduce to the wild members of that species who are descended from many generations of captive-bred individuals. Zoo animals are liminal beings who are neither domesticated nor truly wild, and individuals raised in zoos do not belong in the wild any more than their ancestors belonged in zoos.

Exhibiting Animals

Integral to symbolic interactionism is the process of intersubjectivity, which refers to the shared space between conscious (subjective) minds where shared meaning is made. A concept of interspecies intersubjectivity developed from acknowledging that nonhuman animals also possess subjective minds (Alger & Alger, 1997; Haraway, 2008; Irvine, 2004). The ways in which zoo animals interact with their keepers, the visitors, and other inhabitants shape both the human minds and the minds of the sentient nonhuman beings. The

focus here is on the human perception of zoo animals, but human perceptions of other animals are directly relevant to how these animals are treated by society. Emel (1995) stressed that “how we represent and identify ourselves and others – whether they be animals or people – means everything for what and how we feel or do not feel” (p. 708). Therefore, zoos have a responsibility to not perpetuate harmful misunderstandings or exhibit “exoticism” by exhibiting animals in such a manner that serves to justify poor treatment of individuals of that group or species (Bettany & Russell, 2011; Borkfelt, 2011; Emel, 1995).

In keeping with Berlin Zoo’s education mission, information boards describing the species and their natural habitat accompanied the various enclosures. However, most visitors appeared to give these information boards no more than a cursory glance. The two observed exceptions were one family, evidently attempting to educate their young children, and a school group fulfilling assigned educational activities. The majority of visitors seemed happy to gaze at the animals, enjoy a day out with family or friends, and take photos.

Carr and Cohen (2011) recognized that “despite the questionable morality of zoos as sources of entertainment it is vital today to engage the interest of potential visitors and ensure they have a ‘good time’ during their visit to a zoo” (p. 186). Thus, despite the greater emphasis placed on animal wellbeing and education, the zoo residents nonetheless remain exhibits, and essentially, performers. As exhibits, the animals are “objects of a spectacular show, ranked and displayed so as to please, thrill, amaze, and instruct the human visitor” (Willis, 1999, p. 671). Hanson (2002) described zoos as occupying “a middle ground between science and showmanship, high culture and low, remote forests and cement cityscape, and wild animals and urban people” (p. 7). Milstein (2009) suggested that the fact that zoos are culturally “in-between places of tension” and occupy a “liminal cultural space” can account for their popularity.

Benbow (2004) reported that spaces and boundaries in modern zoos reflect a compromise between providing for “the aesthetic demands of visitors as well as some of the needs of captive species” (p. 15). This was apparent in the architecture and artifacts placed in many of the enclosures at Berlin Zoo. For example, while the mountain-like terrain in the mountain goat enclosure might be for the inhabitants’ benefit, the little wooden cabin was clearly meant for the aesthetic enhancement.

The glass wall is another common feature, often employed in exhibits featuring aquatic animals (Willis, 1999), but also used at Berlin Zoo for other exhibits (see the wolves in Figure 3), Willis (1999) likened the effect to “peering into an ant farm,” and described the way it “puts the viewer in a position he or she could not otherwise attain except when swimming and diving” (p. 679).

Figure 3

Glass Fencing Surrounding the Wolf Enclosure



Surprisingly, Willis (1999) took a very negative perspective of this form of display, claiming the objectification of the animals and the dissection of their habitat. However, the exhibition of animals in this way remains a central function of zoos.

The Gaze and Power

Milstein (2009) described gaze and power as two underlying themes that have remained fundamental to the concept of the Western zoo as it evolved from a place of nineteenth-century colonial exhibitionism to the more education-based contemporary model. Although the latter better considers the wellbeing of the animals on display, they remain at the mercy of their keepers, and all decisions regarding their health, diets, and living spaces are made on their behalf.

Control is a dominant feature of zoos (Willis, 1999), and animals must be caged for their own protection as well as for the safety of visitors. Furthermore, the animals are there to be observed. The bodies of zoo animals are on almost constant display, necessitating the need for panoptic-like constructions. However, unlike in Foucault’s panopticon – a form of control exerted via the knowledge that one is being observed, the animals need not know that they are being gazed upon and efforts may be made to conceal the human gaze from them (Palmer, 2003). Yet power is manifested in other ways. The fact that the human is free to leave while the zoo animal is objectified renders the gaze as one-way, subject-to-object (Kaplan, 1997; Palmer, 2003). Milstein (2009) wrote, “the visitor sees the animals, gains pleasure, knowledge, power, and entertainment from them” while remaining “protected from feelings and realities of vulnerability via the animals’ captive state, and devoid of reciproc[ity]” (p. 32).

Willis (1999) likened modern zoos to gardens by suggesting that zoos “display and use animals much as a horticulturalist deploys plant material” (p. 696). Indeed, both the garden and the zoo are about taming nature and exhibiting specimens. Drawing a comparison to how “gardening journals are full of accounts of how to kill or keep animals out of the garden,” Willis (1999) believed similar problems exist for zoos whose perimeter fences are invariably breached by native fauna (p. 696). Zoo architects also consider that “overt human domination of the visual field can produce a failed exhibit” (Willis, 1999, p. 677). For example, the San Francisco Zoo wanted visitors at their primate center to enjoy treetop views but were mindful to design the viewing platform such that the monkeys would not perceive the humans as dominating them from above (Canty, 1985). However, because there is very little that zoo animals can do to resist the degree of control exerted over their bodies, Palmer (2003) asserted that “the relationships between humans and animals in zoos come very close to those Foucault describes as domination” (p. 54).

Berlin Zoo advertises its various “feeding times” as “shows,” and feeding time in the Great Ape House during my visit drew a crowd several rows deep (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Dinnertime at Berlin Zoo’s Great Ape House



Comments on how human-like the apes were could be easily overheard, along with jokes about the “dinner-table conversations” viewers imagined being exchanged between the orangutans. Tait (2012) claimed “circus took full advantage of how animals are anthropomorphized” and how by learning and repeating prescribed movements, “animal bodies became enveloped in human emotions” (p. 1). By eating in front of an audience at scheduled times, the animals at Berlin Zoo are, essentially, performing. I could not resist comparing the fascination with these animals doing seemingly

ordinary activities with the phenomena of reality TV, or the obsession with the daily lives of celebrities. Although most people are aware that reality TV is staged and dramatized to varying levels, the distorted reality is not always apparent to young or impressionable viewers (Peek & Beresin, 2016). However, in the context of the zoo, the first priority is for young visitors to take an interest in the zoo animals. Indeed, for young viewers, a wildlife documentary may not grab their attention in the same way as watching animals close up at the zoo.

Many zoo animals tend not to look directly at the humans gawking at them (see Figure 5), but gorillas often do. Willis (1999) wrote that “when it comes to gorilla watching, humans are enthralled” (p. 678). The naturalist George Schaller (2007) wrote, “no one who looks into a gorilla’s eyes – intelligent, gentle, vulnerable – can remain unchanged, for the gap between ape and human vanishes: we know that the gorilla still lives within us. Do gorillas also recognize this ancient connection?” (p. 84).

Figure 5

Gazing at the Gorilla



Of all the animals, I could most readily imagine changing places with the Great Apes and relate to how it might feel to be watched. I am most uncomfortable with our closest living relatives being on display this way. This is something others have recognized too:

Of all the animals in the zoo, the gorilla, especially the dominant male, is most likely to return the look, to meet one’s eyes and stare rivetingly and disdainfully back into them. It is an uncanny and unnerving experience because the same lines of sight which in every other instance ensure human domination are here used by the animal to contest domination. (Willis, 1999, p. 678)

CONCLUSION

While critics claim zoos could be doing more in respect to conservation, zoos have been instrumental to breeding programs that have facilitated the recovery of thirteen endangered species (Conde et al., 2011; Fa et al., 2014; Hoffmann et al., 2010). Others argue that the role of zoos need not be focused on conservation per se, but more on inspiring people to support efforts to preserve wild habitats and native populations (Patrick et al., 2007; Roe et al., 2014). I prefer seeing animals in safari parks or reserves, but these are less accessible for many people. Willis (1999) claimed that a “half hour tuned to Animal Planet can provide more drama than a lifetime spent at the zoo” (p. 685). While this might be true in some instances, I question whether documentaries can captivate children or disinterested adults in the same way a zoo experience can. Berlin Zoo works closely with school groups to educate and promote interest among young people, and studies have demonstrated that zoos provide a long-term positive effect on attitudes toward other animals (Falk et al., 2007). I relate to the objection that wild animals do not belong in captivity but recognize that wild populations can only be protected if people care about them.

However, the plight of less charismatic animals may be overlooked because they are not major attractions. Furthermore, it is the large ABC-type mammals who are the ones who have been – and continue to be – the most negatively impacted by captivity (Kawata, 2013; Tidière et al., 2016). For the current inhabitants, life outside of a zoo is unlikely to be in their best interests. Rather than an overarching statement such as, “giraffes do not belong in zoos,” perhaps we should think more in terms of individuals. Zoos are home to liminal animals, and given proper respect, husbandry, and enrichment, they could live acceptable lives as ambassador animals.

Yet the question remains as to whether it is ethically acceptable to condemn unborn individuals to a life of captivity, and if so, under what circumstances. Hanson (2002) recognized the modern zoo as a cultural in-between place of tension – between recreation and education, and between science and showmanship. Zoos reflect the societies in which we live, including tastes in entertainment, academic and educational trends, environmental conscientiousness, moral values, and empathy for other animals (Baratay & Hardouin-Fugier, 2004; Kawata, 2013; Roe et al., 2014). Milstein (2009) asserted that the zoo is a “symbolic-material cultural site” that “also serves to shape discourse” about how we relate to other animals (p. 32). Perhaps now is the time for zoos to encourage visitors and critics to shift from thinking in generalizations about zoos as institutions, to considering captivity from the perspective of individual animals and species.

Disclosure

All photos captured and provided by author.

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