

JOURNEYS TO THE URBAN EXOTIC:

EMBODIMENT AND THE ZOO-GOING GAZE

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The term 'icon' implies an image captured, a static visual reference, a material artifact whose surface represents or symbolizes a fluid depth of social relationships, ideas (*eidos*), and ways of being-in-the-world. As a cultural text, the icon implicitly relies on a dialogic relationship between the visual and the social, where objects are endowed with significance, brought to life, through practices of exchange and circulation in shared environments of meaning. Largely inspired by the Foucauldian knowledge/gaze dialectics, recent studies of gendered, ethnic and sexualized iconographies in the EuroWest have focused on the way in which acts of looking are informed by discursive fields which both constitute and express the power relations inherent within social process. This position has stemmed from and contributed to a core concern over practices of visualism in EuroWestern theory, a 'scopic regime'¹ which separates the spectator from the object of the gaze, and where 'other' objects, peoples and places are bestowed meaning from the privileged position of the authoritative observer.² This paper will focus on how the 'animal' icon has been constituted in this nexus of power/knowledge in the West, focusing in particular on how the non-human primate has been discursively constructed as both origin and antithesis of a broad

category 'humanness'. Yet the aim of this paper is to suggest that while practices of visualism underscore complex politics of identity construction in the West, vision itself is never static, and that the meaning of the animal object is multi-layered, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory. Further, I argue that practices of looking exist in tandem with an embodied apprehension of objects being-seen; through examining audience responses to the spectacle of gorillas in cages in a city zoo. I suggest that while animal bodies are inscribed by a politics of vision, the apprehension of animals and animality is sensory as well as visually symbolic, affective as well as an effect of discursive fields, and that iconographies may be intercorporeal as well as indexical.

GOOD TO THINK WITH: THE ANIMAL AS REPRESENTATION

The 'animal' has recently become the subject of an interdisciplinary investigation which has examined the way in which animal bodies have served as key sites in processes of human self-definition. Key works by historians such as Thomas, Midgley, Willis, and Ritvo,³ have drawn attention to the way in which representations of animals have shifted according to changing social, moral and political landscapes. Haraway's important work

on the scientific stories that endow the nonhuman primate body with meaning has drawn critical attention to the complex material-discursive practices that surround the nonhuman entity.⁴ Studies of popular and political representations of animals have focused on the way in which animals have served as icons of otherness; Elder, Wolch and Emel for example, have explored the way in which 'animals and their bodies appear to be one site of struggle over the protection of national identity and the production of cultural difference'.⁵ Through examining the use of animal images in political propaganda and mass media⁶ Baker has suggested that 'our visually oriented culture objectifies the animal and keeps the animal at a distance';⁷ Ham and Senior have discussed representations of 'animal acts' in circuses and zoos and how these sites 'provided spaces in the city where...continuities between man and animal could be dramatized'⁸ and a recent collection by Rothfels⁹ has explored a broad field of human/animal relationships, from fox hunting to animal cloning.¹⁰ Some scholars have explored the way in which the nature/culture divide that has underscored the human/animal split is not universal, but a product of situated Western epistemology.¹¹

In a cognate field of research, scholars have explored the postcolonial dynamics inherent in the capture and display of animal bodies in the zoological garden. In his study of Western literatures that have focused on the theme of the zoo, Malamud for example, has argued that practices of animal containment 'convince people that we are the imperial species—that we are entitled to trap animals, remove them from their worlds and imprison them within ours'.¹² In her compelling history of Victorian relationships with animals, Ritvo

suggests that 'what zoogoers see in cages actually represent a kind of human contrivance immeasurably distant from the real animal life...[a] 'colonialist text'.¹³ In a similar vein, Mullin and Marvin assert that 'the zoo constitutes a gallery of images constructed by man. The fact that he is able to arrange around him living creatures from all parts of the world, to make decisions with regard to the quality and condition of their lives...is, in the end, an expression of power'.¹⁴ French historians Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier agree:

Every aspect of humanity's relationship with nature can be perceived through the bars of the zoological garden: repulsion and fascination; the impulse to appropriate, master and understand...linked to vast parallel histories of colonization, ethnocentrism and the discovery of the Other...To tour the cages of the zoo is to understand the society that erected them.¹⁵

In Australia, Anderson has examined how practices of animal containment and display at the Adelaide Zoo reflect broader global shifts in patterns of imperial appropriation and animal husbandry, arguing that 'the public has been initiated into a way of seeing that—in manifestly variable ways over time—parades humans' capacity for order and command'.¹⁶

The caged animal might indeed be seen as representative of a broader postcolonial politics of appropriation and domination, yet this interpretation of the contemporary zoo belies the multi-layered meanings that surround the non-human body. While this paper will build upon previous studies of zoos as sites for the imperial containment and exhibition of *exotica*, and animal bodies



Figure 1: Taronga Zoo Enclosure

as 'mirrors' upon which cultural values are inscribed,¹⁷ my aim here is to introduce the ways in which animal bodies are actively apprehended not simply through visual 'readings' of the animal as an representative object, but through a blending of sensory and bodily as well as visual modalities. 'Semiosis is politics by other means' as Haraway has suggested, yet the meaning ascribed to animals in the modern West is multi-layered, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory.¹⁸ On one hand, the animal body has historically been used as object/signifier in a multitude of discourses which examine and negotiate the moral parameters of being-human, from the ancient fables of Aesop to contemporary morality tales in Disney films such as *Bambi* and *The Lion King*. On the other hand, animality has been historically constructed as a condition of being, as a subaltern quality, as a corporeal manifestation, as an

essence of deviance and pathology. As Tapper writes 'certain animals are idealized and used as models of order and morality' while animals may also 'sometimes be represented as the Other, the Beast, the Brute, the model of disorder'.¹⁹ Throughout the history of Western knowledge practices and in contemporary relations between humans and non-humans, these two interweaving poles form the grounds of and give meaning to the modern spectacle of the animal body. Yet, as I argue below, while the animal may serve as an iconic re-presentation of broader practices of power and identity formation, spectatorship itself is not a process of monolithic vision, where meaning is homogenous and singularly bestowed. Spectatorship is filled with multiple frames of reference, multiple means of making sense of the object on display; it produces multi-layered interpretations which continuously unfold.

This investigation is based on six months fieldwork at Taronga Zoo in Sydney, Australia. To make sense of humans making sense of gorillas in cages, I will outline a history of zoo practices and explore how historical constructions of the animal icon infiltrate the simulation and replication of 'nature' in the zoo. Secondly, I pay attention to the minute codings, gestures, comments and bodily choreographies that occur among audiences at the gorilla enclosure, heeding Devereaux's claim that these everyday aspects of human experience can be understood as symbolically rich indicators of meaning. She writes that:

All that is encoded in public spectacle, and much more, is already inscribed in the actions and interactions of everyday life. Public spectacle may reinforce the hierarchies of value by expressing the relations of hegemony and by coding them as desirable and natural in the language of dominant discourse, but it never creates them. This creativity lies in the ten thousand interactions and significations of daily living, through which people witness, experience, discover and express their existences, in this particular place, this language, this group.²⁰

It is in the ten thousand interactions and significations that take place among audiences at the zoological garden, the smell, the sound and the vision of caged animal bodies, the movement of bodies through space, as well as through the discursive constructions of 'animal' and 'animality' that infiltrate these experiential modes, that practices of looking at animals, and animal alterity itself, can be apprehended. How does the historical dialectic of animal as object and animality as a state of being infiltrate and impact upon the contemporary experience of

viewing animals in zoos? How are these experiences of looking informed by complex discursive histories? And, perhaps a question that has been markedly absent from studies of animal representations and captivity – how might we frame and describe the lived, sensory experience of looking at, being near, and wandering through, the zoo of animal iconographies?

THE ARTIFICIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ANIMAL SPACE

Exotic animals have been kept in captivity throughout Western history and the caging and display of animals has consistently been linked with practices of sociopolitical power and status. Ancient Romans used wild cats and elephants in displays of military might, where, often after being paraded, the animals were subject to bloody massacre in public arenas. The early Middle Ages saw a notable decline in the practice of keeping and parading wild animals,²¹ and a revival of exotic animal containment occurred during the Renaissance, when wild and ferocious animals were held in the menageries of royalty and aristocracy and large animals such as elephants and lions were often paraded or pitted against domestic animals in combat. These animals often served as 'living trophies' of political power, used as diplomatic gifts between sovereigns, and as symbols of the imperial conquest of foreign lands, souvenirs of colonial adventures in the wilderness.²² Traveling showmen paraded wild animals to a paying public throughout this period, often displayed alongside human 'freaks' and 'savages'.

Reforms in practices of public education and an increasing opposition to elitist princely menageries under the French Revolution led to the creation of

Europe's first modern zoological garden, the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris in 1794. The garden established a system of structured exhibition space which would be implemented in zoos throughout Europe²³, with monkey and bird houses, a bear pit, and a building for ferocious animals, surrounded by green foliage and lawns and winding pathways. In London, animals held at the Tower of London menagerie were gifted to the newly established Zoological Society of London, and were the foundation for the establishment of the Regents Park Zoo, which opened in 1828.²⁴

While menagerie animals had been utilized in scientific research during the seventeenth century, the *Jardin des Plantes* and Regents Park Zoos signalled a new era of scientific involvement in the capture and collection of animal bodies.²⁵ Throughout the early to mid-nineteenth century the *Jardin* served the dual purpose of entertaining the public and providing a site for the scientific observation and dissection of animals. The arrangement of the cages themselves reflected the empirical ethos of the developing sciences of zoology and anatomy, arranged in an orderly succession of cages which allowed optimum viewing space for observers, a 'living display cabinet with a number of well laid-out and correctly classified species...allowing naturalists and artists to examine often immobile animals closely as if they were models'.²⁶ At the Regents Park Zoo, the Zoological Society of London aimed to provide a similar venue for the advancement of zoological classification and description, as well as the domestication of new animals, and similarly placed its animals in ordered houses and cages. Rapid urbanization and an increase in leisure time from the 18th to 19th centuries led to an increasing public desire to be entertained

by curious spectacles and, in the case of the zoo, to find 'natural' spaces where one could relax and be healed of the modern woes that industrial society bestowed on its working populations.²⁷ As Rothfels suggests, the zoological garden was in turn linked to the 'power and ambitions of the new bourgeois elite', the possession of a zoological garden a key marker of status and municipal wealth in the nineteenth century urban landscape.²⁸

A key shift in practices of displaying animals at zoological gardens occurred in 1907, when renowned animal trader and collector Carl Hagenbeck established a 'zoo without bars'. Partly in response to a growing public criticism over the caging of animals and partly as a result of needing a place to store his considerable stock of wild creatures, Hagenbeck decided to establish an 'animal paradise' in Stelligen, Germany, where animals were placed in enclosures which attempted to replicate indigenous habitats and were separated by natural landscape features rather than cages and rails. The zoo signalled a radical departure in animal display practices and implemented a critical new rhetoric of 'freedom in captivity'.²⁹

In addition to the rapid spread of zoo-without-bars policies, the twentieth century saw key changes in moral discourses on the treatment and containment of animals, spurred on in part by shifts in media and scientific representations of animals. The development of Disney biotopes and nature films brought wild animals increasingly under the public gaze, field ethology presented the public with accounts of animals in their natural habitats while animal psychology and cognition studies provided accounts of the animal mind; further, the mid-twentieth-century saw the implementation of widespread animal protection laws. Each of these developments contributed to

and reflected a twentieth century public ethos increasingly uncomfortable with the spectacle of animals behind bars and to practices of what Rothfels has referred to as 'managing eloquence',³⁰ or creating an illusion of 'freedom' and naturalness in animal enclosures, where zoo audiences are made to 'suspend disbelief long enough to accept what they saw before them' was a natural setting.³¹ Thus, in today's zoos, one typically finds animals enclosed in 'natural' habitats featuring foliage, rocks, water features and landscape designs reminiscent of the animal's indigenous settings, often separated by a moat or physical distance from the zoo audience; cages and bars are becoming inconspicuously present, hidden behind trees and landscape objects to produce a spectacle of naturalness.

And yet, as I discuss below, the spectacle of naturalness in the contemporary zoo remains a 'compelling illusion'.³² The imperial practices inherent in the foundation of early zoological gardens remain prevalent today, yet there have been several striking shifts in the practices and discourses that surround contemporary practices of animal containment. Colonial enterprises such as Hagenbeck's have given way to transglobal networks of animal preservation conglomerates and corporate financing. The 18th-19th century focus on cataloguing and containing nonhuman bodies has been replaced by a project of replicating and simulating an 'authentic' natural world. This construction of 'real' copies of animal worlds is surrounded by a rhetoric of salvage and preservation of animal species, a project of 'rescuing' animals from their indigenous environments on foreign shores. Within these twin themes of preservation and simulation, animals themselves are made to perform daily rituals of eating, resting, moving inside and outside enclo-

tures in a replication of what they would do 'naturally' in the wild; the corporate logos, electronic fences, wires and faux landscapes a downplayed feature in the conservation and preservation of animal bodies: a reproduction of 'nature' in both the biology and technology.

TARONGA ZOO AND THE MASTERPLAN: A NEW AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION

Taronga Zoo in Sydney, Australia, was established in the nineteenth century, reflecting a broad proliferation of zoos in European cities and colonies throughout this period. The Zoological Society of New South Wales was founded in 1879, with the aims of promoting and advancing the science of zoology and conserving indigenous species; it officially opened its first public zoo in 1884. After a visit to one of the Hagenbeck-inspired 'zoos without bars' in Germany, the secretary of the zoo sought a larger site for the creation of a similar display in Sydney, and land for the new zoo was granted by the New South Wales government. Like many zoological societies across Europe, the Zoological Society of NSW gradually became less involved in the administration of the zoo, focusing instead on the production and dissemination of scientific papers. In 1913, management of the zoo was passed to the New Zoological Gardens Trust, and Taronga Zoo was officially opened on October 7, 1916. Exhibits were gradually completed over time, with the construction of a giraffe house in 1923, an aquarium in 1927 and tiger pits in 1939. From the 1960s, echoing changes in zoos across the West, the philosophy of the zoo shifted to a new emphasis on conservation, education and research, and attractions such as the monkey circus and elephant rides gave

way to a Rainforest Aviary and water-fowl ponds. Today, the zoo houses 380 species and over 2200 individual animals in a variety of open enclosures, aviaries, tanks and themed 'forests', and is visited by over 1.5 million humans a year.³³

The policies and aims of Taronga Zoo are made clear on their website, where it states that through 'our commitment to conservation, research, education and recreation, Taronga and Western Plains Zoos aim to inspire Australians and our visitors to discover, explore, delight in and protect our natural world'. The zoo summarizes its activities under the broad banner 'Zootopia: in search of the perfect zoo', where it states that:

Zootopia is a quest and a commitment. It is a pledge towards excellence in the conservation and preservation of wildlife and our natural environment. It is also our endeavour to teach and inspire, and to preserve our natural heritage for future generations.³⁴

The quest for the 'perfect zoo' is outlined in what the Zoo refers to as a 'Masterplan', a program of zoo construction which will take place over the next twelve years. The masterplan, the site suggest, signals an 'historic new era' of animal conservation, which will 'increase our ability to achieve our aim to be leaders in the conservation, presentation and care of wildlife'.³⁵

According to the website, this plan to be a world leader in wildlife conservation and presentation will involve a program of new exhibits which will take zoo visitors on a 'journey' through authentic replications of indigenous spaces, which may include the reconstruction of 'local villages'.

In a description of the zoo's plans to construct an 'Asian Elephant Rainforest', nineteenth century practices of displaying 'primitives' in zoos and fairs echo with colonial tales of journey and discovery in colonized territories:



Figure 2: Taronga Zoo spectator

On entering the Asian Elephant Rainforest, Taronga visitors will initially take a unique journey through a busy Asian village on the edge of the forest, to an elephant activity area showcasing their traditional role in village life ... Following the trail of the elephants, the path takes visitors into the lush surrounds of the dense Asian rainforest. Wildlife throughout the rainforest will be 'discovered' just as it would in a real Asian rainforest³⁶

A description of plans to re-create a 'real African safari' follow a similar theme:

Visitors will be taken through the safari on guided tours and will experience the delight of discovering large free-ranging animals and African game species...The new African village will provide an opportunity for guests to relax and share this unique experience at the end of the journey.³⁷

What is interesting here is a juxtaposition of a concern with the replication of the 'real' with historical discourses of 'discovery' and 'journey', 'following a trail' through 'lush' and 'dense' tropical forests. This speaks at once to Benjamin's assertion that mass mechanical reproductions of objects and images produce a desire to bring real objects 'closer', both 'spatially' and 'humanly';³⁸ yet it also speaks to a new desire for the simulation of a lost 'authenticity' within the global imaginary; a number of scholars have pointed to the way in which mass global tourism has been intertwined with an emerging 'invention of tradition', in which colonial imaginings of a lost, primitive paradise are re-created and marketed to Western audiences.³⁹ In the context of the zoo, these practices suggest a reinvention of a pristine

'nature', in which visitors can retrace the steps of colonial explorers, discovering for themselves an unsullied wilderness and then at the end of this journey, compare their experiences of 'discovery' with other travellers at a local village; the zoo invites an iconic spatio-temporal shift into wilderness while replicating both the narratives and practices of nineteenth century colonial conquest.

Mitman has argued that the desire for a 'real' zoo experience stems from an emerging aesthetic in early twentieth century natural history, where 'value was placed on sensation ... through an immersion in nature's language—the language of the senses—that empathy, that truth of feeling, a knowing of the individual animal'.⁴⁰ In their program of zoo 'education', Taronga lists three forms of 'experience' at the zoo which at once build on an historical legacy of zoos as sites for animal classification and this desire for an 'immersive' and sensory experience of animal bodies; the site suggests that visitors can 'See It', ('[w]hether studying the characteristics of a particular animal to describe its classification or focusing on an animal for life drawing, Taronga Zoo has something for everyone'), 'Sense It' ('see, hear and smell wildlife at Taronga Zoo') and 'Save It' ('Learning about animals and plants in their environments increases our awareness, develops understanding and builds positive attitudes towards wildlife').⁴¹ What is crucial to note here is that 'it' is not an *a priori* nature which is replicated in zoological space, but a nature actively re-created in acts of replication and simulation; both the meaning of 'nature' and the meanings ascribed to animal bodies are, to use Butler's terminology, 'elaborate performative fictions'. Consider Butler's assertion that gender itself is built on a

'tacit agreement to perform, produce and sustain' gendered identities, where the 'authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one's belief in its necessity and naturalness' and gender itself is a 'putatively regulated cultural fiction'.⁴² So too, 'wildness' and 'nature' might be seen as performative spaces which are both historically constructed and embodied in an iconographic 'experience'.

Just as zoos and menageries throughout European history have embodied the weave of the cultural imaginary and the mechanics of colonial political economy, today's zoos re-present the complex relationship between imagined spaces of nature and the construction and performance of consumable otherness. The transition from the historical display of animals in ordered and successive houses and cages to simulations of the 'real', reveals the way in which the presentation of animal bodies indeed mirrors existent politico-moral landscapes and knowledge practices: the animal is no longer an object to be placed in a cage and gazed upon, but is an object which invites a certain kind of *experience*, a 'being there', a participation or re-enactment of journeys into the jungle. The vast economic networks behind the manufacture of 'natural space' are kept largely from sight in the contemporary rhetoric of salvage and conservation. This tension between manufacture and authenticity is captured at the entrance to Taronga's gorilla enclosure, which boldly bears the title 'McDonalds Gorilla Forest', where the corporate giant takes on the face of benevolent host to animals threatened by Third World destruction. Yet how do audiences themselves apprehend the animal bodies before them? How is it possible to understand the dialectic

between the discursive construction and technological replication of nature and the lived experience of 'natural' animal bodies in the zoo?

TALKING ABOUT ANIMALS: POPULAR DISCOURSE IN THE GORILLA ENCLOSURE

The gorilla exhibit at Taronga Zoo is half way down the zoological park, separated by foliage and walkways from its neighbours, the 'Asian African Rainforest', the seal sanctuary and a food kiosk.⁴³ Rounding a bend in a pathway that leads down from the kiosk, the long enclosure comes into sight; a grassy bank with scattered trees, a waterfall cascades down on a faux-rock ledge, tree stumps reach over a trickling stream, connected by hanging wires for the gorillas to swing from. In the far right corner, another clump of trees sits before a small stone and dirt plateau which slopes down in front of the rear rock face. Next to the outdoor enclosure is the indoor gorilla den, with brightly coloured jungle gym and viewing windows, and to its right, a small outdoor setting closed to the public. The audience is separated from the gorillas by a moat, and follow a pathway parallel to the enclosure to arrive at a covered viewing platform with a small amount of seating at its rear; they enter the enclosure from the right, follow the pathway to the platform and exit to the left.

Rounding the bend to find the gorilla display, audience members frequently gasp with pleasure and interest at the sight before them, eager to seek out the gorillas dotted around the enclosure. The choruses of exclamation mingle with the sound of the trickle of the waterfall, the occasional pok-pok of a juvenile male gorilla beating his chest, the call of birds, the low murmur of the rest of the crowd,



Figure 3: Taronga Zoo gorilla

and the shouts and laughter of children, who often race back and forth along the pathway against the enclosure. Most of the audience congregate at the viewing platform, where they rest their hands against the rails of the enclosure and peer in. Kibabu, the large male silverback is without doubt the primary object of audience interest, and people commonly express their frustration at not being able to see his face, or to make out his body as he rests behind trees and bush; they form tight groups at the corner of the enclosure where Kibabu often hides behind a clump of foliage. When Kibabu makes a public appearance, he is greeted with exclamations of wonder at his size; a child exclaimed *I didn't know he was that big!*; an adult male noted, *Look at the size of that thing!* When the silverback is out of view, audiences frequently say *Where is he? I want to see the big one!*, or, as a disappointed child stated, *Why is it hiding*

from us, I want to see it!

The juvenile gorillas are another source of public amusement, and often interact or play with each other. The audience commonly laughs in delight at these spectacles, pointing their fingers at the animals and sighing in disappointment when these moments of activity pass. When the animals are still, audience members will spend a few minutes at the enclosure, waiting for activity, and then move on down the pathway. *They're not doing anything for us*, stated one child, *They are just sitting around, it's boring, they are ignoring the people*, to which his mother replied, *Let's come back later when something is happening*. A visitor made the disappointed comment, *They're not looking too magnificent, they're looking a bit ... reclining*. When the animals are active, cameras are produced from pockets and bags in a flurry of shutter-clicks; when three juvenile gorillas chose to sit in a

row, arms around each others shoulders, audience members happily exclaimed *It's the three wise monkeys ha ha! and gotta get a picture of that!*. Such moments suggest that humans primarily seek out entertainment from the spectacle of animal bodies before them; inactivity produces dissatisfaction which commonly results in people leaving the enclosure. As Mullan and Marvin note, there is 'usually a sense of disappointment in the visitor when the sleepy and lethargic beasts visible in front of him are not easily imagined as the accomplished hunters of the African plain...'.⁴⁴

Particularly 'animal' activities such as urinating, defecating or touching genitals evoke amusement and repugnance among the audience. Comments like *Ooh that's disgusting! Gross!* are frequent. *Oh yuk! He's not human!* exclaimed a small child, to which his mother replied *I hope he's going to wash his hands!* Occasionally, mythologies of gorilla ferocity and brute strength, made popular in tales such as King Kong, enter the zoo arena, where, for example, a young girl exclaimed, *Don't put your hands over the edge, they'll rip your arms off!* Yet at the same time, there are underlying moral concerns in the comments of zoo-going audiences regarding the appropriateness of utilizing animals as amusement, particularly as the gorillas are deemed 'almost human'. Audiences will frequently comment *Look at their eyes, they are so human, They are just like us, I wonder what they are thinking or they're like humans, they do the same things humans do.* Audiences will often note with some discomfort, *these gorillas come from Africa and animals shouldn't really be kept in cages, they belong in the wild.*

This oscillation between the 'humanness' of the gorillas and their animal behaviour and activities reflects broader historical Euro-Western dialectics of

the ape as both antithesis and origin of being-human. Throughout the history of the Euro-West, 'animality' has represented a multitude of behavioural and bodily transgressions associated with the instinctual, the carnal, the sexual and the earthly, all of which have shifted ambiguously between notions of the nature of a human nature and the animal nature which lurks quietly inside the human. The ape has historically embodied these twin poles of humanness and animality, from medieval visions of wild men on foreign shores to Enlightenment speculations on humanity's origins.⁴⁵ At the same time, the ape has served as a parodic and grotesque figure, a state expressed in the dictum *simian quam similes turpissima bestia nobis*, 'How like us is that ugly brute, the ape'. The continued role of the ape as carnivalesque figure is made clear in the delight and repugnance that contemporary audiences express towards gorilla bodily functions; these 'human-like' figures transgress and turn 'upside-down' standards of civilized bodily conduct with defecation, genital touching, (and more common among the chimpanzees, masturbation) and audiences respond with happy revelry and mock horror at this spectacle of the 'unfinished and open body....which is blended with the world, with animals'.⁴⁶

Yet, for the zoo-goers, the perceived 'humanness' of the gorilla adds an element of unease to the grotesque spectacle. The eyes of the gorilla frequently evoke their sentience for zoo audiences; as one audience member commented, *You can see right into their souls.* Indeed, Bakhtin points out that the 'eyes have no part' in grotesque images, for 'they express an individual, so to speak, self-sufficient human life'.⁴⁷ Thus, while on one hand, audiences enjoy their delighted repugnance at the spectacle of the open, leak-

ing animal body, the perceived presence of a 'subjectivity' behind the eyes of the animal disturbs this comic vision; there occurs an uncomfortable fit between 'they are just like us' and 'let's watch the gorillas do things for us'. This phenomenon evokes what Peter Berger sees as a certain ontological emptiness in the zoo-going experience, where animals are reduced to tragic and non-comprehensible objects, where the animal's 'silence guarantees its distance, its distinctiveness, its exclusion from and of man'.⁴⁸ He writes that the 'look' that humans and animals once shared has been extinguished and in its place, an anxiety marks the visual relationship between human and nonhuman:

They proceed from cage to cage, not unlike visitors in an art gallery who stop in front of one painting, and then move on to the next or the one after the next. Yet in the zoo the view is always wrong. Like an image out of focus. One is so accustomed to this that one scarcely notices it anymore, or rather, the apology habitually anticipates the disappointment, so that the latter is not felt ... However you look at these animals, even if the animal is up against the bars, less than a foot from you, looking outwards in the public direction, *you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal.*⁴⁹

Among audiences watching apes, the perceived subjectivity of the gorillas produces a multi-layered anxiety; I argue that among audiences there is an ontological recognition of the fine line between being 'human' and one's own animal origins, between being-self and being-other. The spectacle of beings with 'human' eyes and sentient capacities enclosed in captivity, invites a translation of 'their' experience into one's own experience,

where subject and object, human and animal temporarily merge. At the same time, I suggest that when audiences believe they see their own humanness reflected in the visage of the gorilla, this occasionally produces an apprehension over the potential threat of their own containment. *I wouldn't like to be stuck in a cage like that.* The illusion of 'freedom' in animals without bars produces an affirmation of audience members own spatial and ontological 'unboundedness': a privileged freedom to move.

What is striking in this context is the way the 'human' and the 'animal' are multi-layered and ambiguous categories which are produced both in discourse and in dynamics of intercorporeal engagement. Perceived 'gorilla sentience' must be seen as an outcome of a shift in knowledge practices which have encouraged a belief in primate cognition and emotionality; several decades of field ethology and animal language/awareness experiments have re-created the meanings ascribed to the primate body, producing notions of nonhuman primates as capable of 'feeling', of having tool-making capacities and family/tribal organizations, of being 'proto-human'.⁵⁰ This pedagogy infiltrates practices of looking-at primates, and combines with a lived sense that there is a subject behind the visage of the animal other, where, as the ancients suggested, *animi sedem esse in oculus*, the seat of the soul is in the eyes. In this experiential semiotics of animal otherness, the 'gorilla' is endowed with an historically constructed set of meanings which infiltrate the lived experience of spectatorship, at the same time that the nonverbal, intercorporeal practices which with humans make sense of one another infiltrate that knowledge-of otherness; gorilla bodies, like human bodies are read intersubjectively, their eyes and

facial expressions taken as signifiers of the subject within.⁵¹

MOVING ANIMALS: EMBODIED SPECTATORSHIP

As Jackson writes, meaning cannot be reduced to a sign which 'lies on a separate plane outside the immediate domain of the act';⁵² practices of looking are accompanied by sensory modalities of the body which inform and infiltrate visual experience. The verbal responses of audiences to enclosed animals are woven into an embodied, visceral and sensory choreography: a 'making sense' of the animal spectacle.⁵³ Travelling to Sydney's Taronga Zoo one exits the busy metropolitan Circular Quay on board a ferry, slowly leaving behind the hum of traffic, bodies and buildings as it makes its way across Sydney Harbour towards Manly. On the fifteen minute journey, a dense network of buildings gives way to a magnificent waterway, surrounded by lush, green foliage and dotted remnants of Sydney's colonial history. As the scent of Sydney's pollution gives way to the odour of the sea, one arrives at the ferry platform, which winds its way upwards to the zoo entrance and the animals that wait within. The series of spatial movements and sensory shifts invites all manner of metaphoric and tropic analyses of imperial space, of times and others;⁵⁴ a movement from the urban to the wild space of exotica, a journey across the water into the forest, a gradually de-temporalizing from post-industria, past the crumbling ruins of convict shelters and imperial estates, to the original pristine state of jungle-ness, trees and animals and ocean. The spatial organization of the zoo itself is ripe with signification: upon arrival, one enters a cable car to be taken slowly up, past the animals below,

to the top of the zoo; the ultimate view from above. From one's position as the surveyor of animal bodies below, a gradual descent of (hu)man is invited, with map in hand, one walks down through meandering pathways and trails, following a cartography of iconographic signs to find living examples of animal bodies, until one reaches the bottom of the zoo, crosses the road and waits for the ferry that returns to urbanity.

Inside the zoo, the movement of human bodies follows a series of repeated patterns. The mimesis of animals is a recurring activity, and points to the embodied grounds with which humans make sense of animal objects. Among the gorilla audience, historical conceptions of the ape as parodic mimesis undergo a curious twist: often, audiences will imitate the ape. Frequently children and sometimes adults, beat their chests like male gorillas, they will jump up and down or walk in the long-armed gait of a non-human primate. When a gorilla scratches its head or grooms its body, the children may motion to each other and repeat the acts themselves in parody. Children will make the 'hoo-hoo' noises associated with the hoot-pant of the chimpanzee, or roar mightily like a ferocious gorilla. These occurrences lunge 'us into the plane where the object world and the visual copy merge'.⁵⁵ These acts of imitation highlight the bodily, synaesthetic elements of acts of looking, where 'being-animal' is momentarily apprehended as a movement in space, a set of repeated actions through which one can 'yield into and become Other'.⁵⁶ Through these acts of mimesis, there occurs a lived experience of the animal object, a visuality accompanied a brief em-bodying of the animal body.

Yet, as Taussig suggests, acts of imitation cannot be conceived outside the

historical production and negotiation of alterity. While the mimetic movement of human bodies at animal enclosures can be seen in part as an imaginative means of apprehending animal-others, the choreography of the gorilla audience itself reveals the way in which politico-cosmological distinctions and boundaries can be embodied in particular corporeal activities. Moving into an enclosure to witness a spectacle, leaning against the rails, and following the pathway out of the enclosure is a series of bodily movements so common in the contemporary milieu that it has become a taken-for-granted aspect of exotic animal-viewing. Human relationships with wild animals in the modern zoological garden, the theme park, the wildlife sanctuary, the aquarium are each marked in various ways by a movement into a display space, a separation of human and non-human with rails, glass, moats, or ditches, a watching of the animal on display, and a movement onwards to the next object. Bourdieu's (1977) analysis of body movement in the context of symbolic ritual is useful in the context of the modern animal spectacle:

All symbolic manipulations of bodily experience, starting with displacements within mythically structured space, eg, the movements of going in and coming out, tend to impose the integration of the body space with the cosmic space by grasping in terms of the same concepts... the relation between man and the natural world.⁵⁷

Imperial practices of display and containment, and historical representations of the ape as liminal entity both feed into and are affirmed by this experiential semiotics of animals and animality. Leaning against the railings of the gorilla

enclosure, humans express a desire for contact with the animals (*I wish I could pat one*), yet these railings provide both a certainty of security from the wild animals (*They'll rip your arms off*); there thus occurs in space what might be seen as the essence of contemporary relationships with non-human beings: a desire to share common ground with the animals and a recognition of the fundamental differences between the world of humans and the world of beasts. This gap is mirrored in the act of looking at animals, who remained confined, open to inspection, while human bodies progress onwards past them; or, as Malamud writes, deciding 'when to come, look and depart, while the subject must stay'.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

The commentaries and bodily movements of audiences at the gorilla enclosure evoke comments by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz on the Balinese cockfight, where in a single structured space of human/animal activity one can find broader social patterns of 'assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment'; where one learns a cultural ethos and 'what it looks like "spelled out" externally in a collective text'. Certainly, the animal spectacle re-presents a broader politics of containing and displaying the bodies of those 'others' which have long constituted a semiotic chain with the animal: the freak and the 'savage'. The spatial organization of the zoo, from the nineteenth century caging and staging of organized bodies, to the twentieth century replication of 'natural' space reflects a broader relationship between political economy and practices of display, a movement from containment and classification to

salvage and simulation, from a civilizing mission to a repatriation of endangered others, from wildness to wilderness. For zoo audiences, the gorilla enclosure is, to use Geertz's words, 'a story they tell themselves about themselves'.⁵⁹

Yet it is a story with an 'unfinished' body and one which reveals the way in which meaning is produced in a dynamic experiential semiotics which blends knowledge practices with a lived, sensory, and corporeal engagement. The meanings attributed to the animal body are the product of a weaving of multi-layered discourses which both stem from and impact upon a lived experience of bodiliness; the gorilla body is a body without culture, it masturbates, it defecates, it does not recognize a civilizing process;⁶⁰ at the same time, it reflects back, it gazes, it suggests a presence of sentience; the ontological recognition of 'subjectivity' in the eyes of the ape itself speaks to a Western metaphysics which places the eye as the mirror of the soul and a cosmology which situates the non-human primate as a wild man or pre-human who dwells in a liminal space. The efficacy of the symbol of the ape as a grotesque spectacle or parody resides in the attribution of qualities of an embodied 'humanness' to the ape, its animal actions make sense as comic visions precisely because those eyes stare out with a gaze that is recognized, at least momentarily, as self.

Like the 'noble savage' of the enlightened imaginary, the gorilla in its 'natural' zoological space re-presents a lost idyll which must be 'rescued' from the ravages of third world ecological destruction; colonial imaginings of dense African forests ready for discovery are translated into immersive, sensual environments where one can momentarily become-other while maintaining the

privileged position of 'human' unbound- edness. Both the zoological garden and the gorilla itself are not simply representations of animal otherness, but sites in which the parameters of human and animal, are played out in bodies and in space: an embodied iconography.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the advice and comments of Mandy Thomas, Howard Morphy and two anonymous reviewers in writing this paper. I also acknowledge the assistance given to me by the staff of Taronga Zoo in Sydney during the research process.

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- 34 Taronga Zoo website online at: <http://www.zoo.nsw.gov.au/content/view.asp?id=46>, sourced May 2002.
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- 42 Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', 405.
- 43 The current gorilla group of 10 (7 females, 3 males) largely arrived in 1996 from Apenhau Primate Park in the Netherlands; Kibabu (1977), the lone male silverback, has fathered eight of the gorillas in the enclosure; Mouila (1972), the oldest female and the only gorilla in the group born in the wild, is the mother of the female Kriba (1979), male juveniles Haoko (1993) and Shabani (1996), while Kriba is mother to the females Kjivu (1993) and Safiri (1996) as well as another female Joas (1989), who was taken to Basle Zoo on a breeding loan. Frala (1981), half-sister to Kriba is mother to the two females Shinda

- (1991) and Anguka (1994). Mouila and Kibabu recently produced an infant female Mbeli (Feb 2003), followed by Frala and Kibabu producing the infant male Fataki (March 2003).
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- 48 J. Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books), 1980, 4.
- 49 Berger 21–22, original emphasis.
- 50 Haraway, *Primate Visions*, 133–185. I refer here also to works in popular socio-biology such as those by Desmond Morris, who has produced a large body of popular works dealing with the issue of the human–animal and the biological grounds for contemporary urban human behaviour. See for example D. Morris, *The Naked Ape: A Zoologist's Study of the Human Animal* (London: Jonathon Cape), 1967.
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- 55 M. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge), 1993, 35. Recent studies of children's relationships with animals have emphasized the nonverbal dimensions of child interactions with nonhumans, where children imaginatively grant animal's agency, and in their own movements and discussions of animals, affirm their own status as agents in a world of other things and beings. O.E. Myers *Children and Animals: Social Development and Our Connections to Other Species* (Boulder CO: Westview Press), 1986. See also B.A. Birney 'Children, Animals, Leisure Settings', *Society and Animals* Vol. 3, No. 2, 1995. S.R Kellert and M.C. Westerveld 'Children's attitudes, knowledge and behaviour towards animals, Phase V', (Arlington VA: NTIS No. PB83-211474), 1983.
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- 57 P. Bourdieu, *Outline of A Theory of Practice* (Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press), 1977, 91.
- 58 R. Malamud, *Reading Zoos*, 86. One area of future investigation is that of cross-cultural differences in audience responses to zoo animals. My own research indicates that while broad patterns of behaviour recur among all members of the audience, there are some cultural variations in the amount of time spent photographing or engaging with animals. Birdwhistell's film *Microcultural Incidents in Ten Zoos* (1969) which examined the nonverbal family interactions in zoos in England,

France, Italy, Hong Kong, India, Japan and the US highlights these variations and will prove a useful antecedent in future research into the topic. It may also be fruitful to explore the way in which zoo-keeping staff negotiate the marketing strategies of zoo administration which construct an artificial nature for consumption and the everyday demands of animal care in a zoo environment (I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this insight).

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- 60 N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Part One, A History of Manners* (New York: Pantheon), 1978, [1939].