theories and methodologies

Zoos, the Academy, and Captivity

NIGEL ROTHFELS

IN A 1966 LECTURE TO THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, RAY L. BIRDWHISTELL PRESENTED A SILENT FILM SHOWING FAMILIES VISiting elephant exhibits at zoos around the world. This film, along with the audio of Birdwhistell's lecture and an epilogue, was then released in 1969 by the East Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute with the title *Microcultural Incidents in Ten Zoos*. Using his theory of kinesics (roughly, the study of "body language"), a "context control method," and "purposive" filming of families viewing elephant exhibits, Birdwhistell hoped to demonstrate that physical gestures are not universal but are rather culturally specific and only comprehensible in carefully described contexts (fig. 1). *Microcultural Incidents* positions the ethnographer as a detached observer dissecting scenes for his audience, translating the language of gestures with the use of a slow-motion projector he calls a "perceptiscope." Even with his many hours of raw footage and the subsequent analysis with the perceptiscope, however, Birdwhistell's conclusions are remarkably small. Among the gems we learn, for example, are that on trips to the zoo English fathers are the keepers of food and knowledge and unselfconsciously teach their children to speak to elephants and that when the French stick their kids' hands into elephant trunks, the children look at their hands with a mixture of surprise and horror before wiping them off on their clothes. Still, for Birdwhistell kinesics held the promise of revealing hidden truths about people and cultures.

And what about the elephants? For Birdwhistell, the elephants—most often seen as just an extended trunk—are irrelevant; the animals simply provide a reproducible and, he would argue, neutral backdrop. Indeed, Birdwhistell could presumably have chosen any number of other settings for his film, such as a museum, a market, a park, or a sporting venue; *Microcultural Incidents*, he would insist, is not about elephants, nor even about animals or zoos, but about people. For a growing number of researchers interested in the history, importance, and meaning of cultural institutions like museums and zoos, however, and for many others interested in the place of animals in human

NIGEL ROTHFELS is the author of a history of naturalistic displays in zoological gardens, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2002), and the editor of the cross-disciplinary collection *Representing Animals* (Indiana UP, 2002). His current research focuses on ideas about elephants since the eighteenth century.

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FIG. 1
Feeding elephants in Paris. From Ray L. Birdwhistell's film *Microcultural Incidents in Ten Zoos* (1969).

lives, or, more interesting, in the ways through which animals and people build meanings in the intersections between their lives, Birdwhistell's unproblematized (non)view of elephants—his apparent inability to see "the elephant in the room" or even the room itself—seems wholly inadequate. The plain fact is that Birdwhistell *chose to shoot at zoos* (instead of, say, at marketplaces) and *chose to shoot in front of elephants* (instead of in front of, say, sea lions) precisely because—nodding to Mary Midgley—zoos and elephants uniquely matter; they are significant and intriguing, even if it is not immediately evident from his film that Birdwhistell realized that.

Over the last forty years, we have witnessed the shifting and refocusing of Birdwhistell's lens onto the animal and onto the zoo. We have come to understand that the zoo, as a cultural object, is neither the neutral and innocuous space of Birdwhistell nor a place that the academy can still easily dismiss as only of interest to the uninteresting. When H. L. Mencken wrote that the zoo served as nothing but "childish and pointless show for the unintelligent, in brief, for children, nurse-maids, visiting yokels and the generality of the defective" (115), a place of "banal knowledge, absurdly emitted and defectively taken in" (111), he offered little to explain why people sought then, or continue to seek today, an authentic or even passing interaction with extraordinary animals in zoos. Just as it would be limiting today to conceive of human history and thought without acknowledging the encounter with nonhuman selves, we do not accomplish much by dismissing as culturally insignificant, anachronistic, or perhaps simply disappointing the presence of zoological gardens and other venues where people—where we—come into contact with unusual, if not entirely nondomestic and certainly not wild, creatures. Randy Malamud is correct when he writes that "zoos provide a

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fascinating paradigm of people's *interpreted world*" (9); zoos are not the world as it is, and the animals in them are not as they are but as we, or at least the designers of zoos, want them to be: cute, ferocious, rare, elusive, like us or not. At the same time, if, as John Berger famously pointed out, visitors so often leave a zoo in disappointment—a feeling he framed by the question "Why are these animals less than I believed?" (19)—then we must ask why hundreds of millions of people every year continue to visit zoos, continue to think zoos are important educational institutions, continue to believe that critical science occurs in them, continue to claim that zoos play a crucial role in conservation, continue to make clear that they like visiting zoos and don't mind paying a lot of money to do so. Given the conservative inertia in most of the official announcements and programs of the major zoo professional and lobbying organizations, given the awkwardness with which most local zoological gardens confront complaints about animal welfare and collection goals (see Donahue and Trump), it is hard to believe that visitors keep coming because they have been duped by khaki-wearing businessmen with "go wild" ad campaigns. I also doubt that we can fully account for this esteem by saying that it is a cover for a pleasure (and even, following Ralph Acampora, a voyeuristic or perhaps sadistic pleasure) people take in seeing creatures held in captivity. In the end, I think there is more going on at the zoo than many commentators would have us believe; and sometimes, I think, there is a great deal less.

The rise of the public zoological gardens in Europe and North America and then around the world can be traced to the late eighteenth century, and by a century later the leaders of essentially every city that saw itself as such either had built a zoo or wanted one (see Kisling). Intellectually and sometimes literally growing out of older collections of exotic animals maintained by the aristocracy and impresarios, the new public zoological gardens, despite their rhetoric, did not differ that much from the earlier collections in their commitments to science, education, and public recreation; all three of these goals were also claimed by the earlier collectors. Nevertheless, funded typically through public subscription or by scientific societies, the new zoos differed from their predecessors because they were intended to reflect the public strength and global interests of the burgeoning cities rather than the glory or talents of an individual. To put it simply, an ambitious city had to have ambitious infrastructure and public amenities. As Andrew H. Green, of the New York Zoological Society, put it in 1895, "[T]he establishment of a superb zoological collection [is] one of the things necessary to the true greatness of New-York," and consequently the society was determined "to make this new zoological garden the finest in the world" ("Zoological Society"). What distinguishes the great zoological gardens of the nineteenth century, with their previously unimagined access to money and new kinds of animals, was their immense scale and seeming Noachian commitment to taxonomic thoroughness. However, while they often appeared quite different from the earlier collections, and while they looked quite different, as well, from our most popular collections today, nineteen-century zoos shared one quality with all other collections: more than anything else, and despite the rhetoric about scientific research, education, and, more recently, conservation, all these places have been built for recreation. When Mencken claimed that zoos offered only a "form of idle and witless amusement" (110), he hit on the consistent element in all these collections: they were intended to bring pleasure to human audiences.

Probably no case makes the importance of recreation more clear than the remarkable success of the first "barless" zoo, Carl Hagenbeck's Tierpark, which opened in a suburb of Hamburg, Germany, in 1907 (see Rothfels).

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Many factors were behind the success of the Tierpark, including its location in Hamburg and its founder's long history of organizing exhibitions of animals, traveling circuses, and immensely popular shows of indigenous peoples. By the time the Tierpark opened, the name Hagenbeck was already widely associated with the exotic, animals, and exhibitions designed for the urban bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century. Indeed, with his special displays at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 and at the Saint Louis World's Fair in 1904, and with the use of his name for the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, based in the United States, "Hagenbeck" was even known widely throughout North America. At the new Tierpark, Hagenbeck created a series of panoramic exhibits of animals. More than just showing animals behind moats instead of bars, in itself a novel idea, Hagenbeck arranged successive exhibits so that from one viewing point, for example, visitors could look out across a small pond to an apparent riverbank enjoyed by ducks, flamingos, and small deer. Beyond them, the visitor would see a mixed group of larger antelopes, ostriches, and zebras, which seemed to be watched by lions and tigers resting before a rocky cliff providing habitats for wild goats and vultures. The cliff was carefully molded to represent particular geologic formations, and the whole effect was designed to convince visitors that they were seeing the animals' natural habitat (fig. 2).

We are all familiar with these sorts of exhibits today, but when visitors first came to Hagenbeck's they felt it was revolutionary. At a time when the public was becoming concerned about the endless pacing of caged bears and cats, the miserable expressions and short life spans of primates, and the intense smells inside the buildings of the great city zoos, Hagenbeck gave his visitors open-air exhibits where the animals seemed free to move about and mix with other animals. There is little

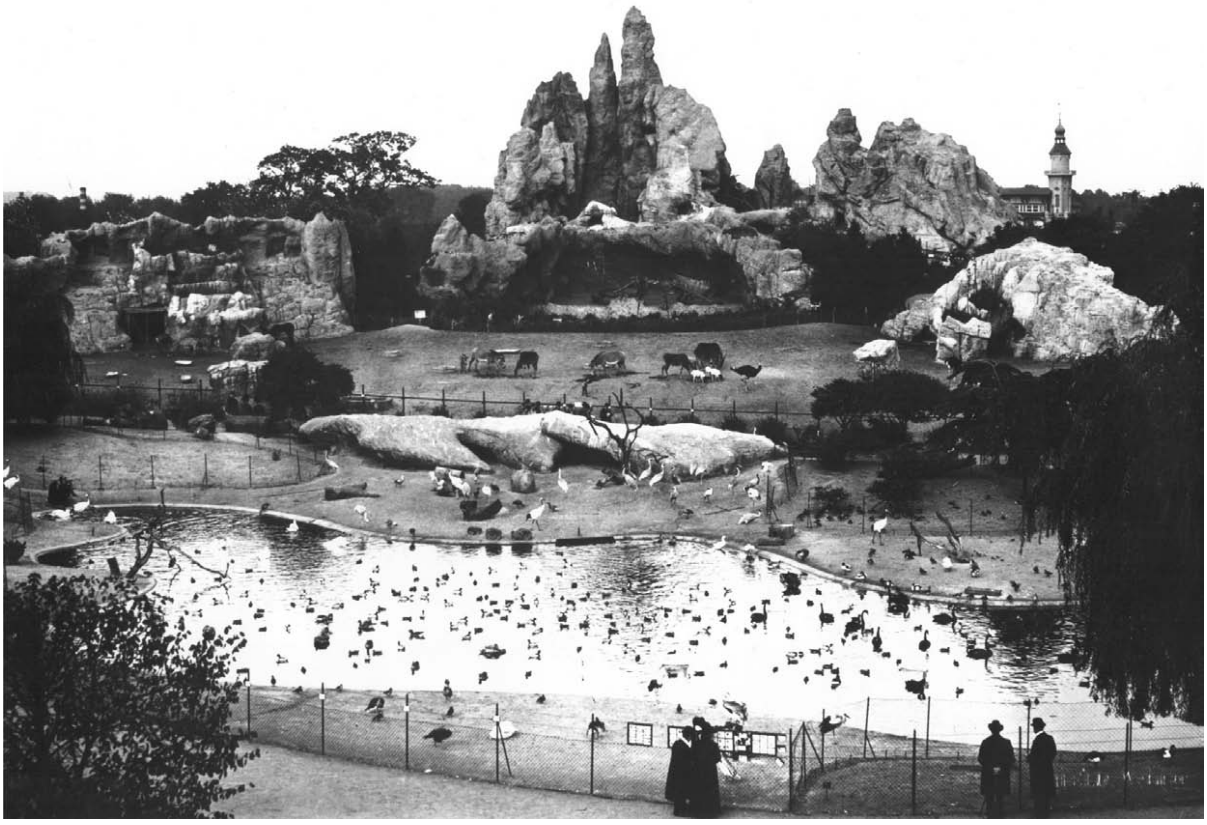


FIG. 2
Panorama at Carl Hagenbeck's Tierpark, Hamburg, Germany, around 1908. Courtesy of Tierpark Hagenbeck.

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reason to believe that the animals in Hagenbeck's Tierpark in 1907 were, in fact, better off than the animals at other zoos; the public standing before these scenes, however, was largely convinced that the animals had finally been released from their cages and were free to live more natural and necessarily happy lives. Most strikingly with Hagenbeck, but right up through the spectacular exhibits at what we've gotten into the habit of calling "good zoos" today, directors, designers, and the public have been on a quest to make the captive lives of animals seem less depressing. This was as true, as Elizabeth Hanson notes, of the Denver Zoo's bear exhibit of 1918 (130–61) as it is of the exhibits at the "progressive" Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum today (see Hancocks). Although exhibit designs must address the basic needs of the animals, the exhibits have clearly been built for people more than for the animals. In the "habitat" for gorillas at the Congo Gorilla Forest in the Bronx Zoo, for example, the natural trees are wrapped in electrified wires, intended to repel the gorillas and keep them from damaging the trees. The wires are disguised to resemble vines. Does it matter to a gorilla how the electric wires in his or her exhibit look? What is certain is that the public believes the animals are happier if the wires look more like vines than like wires.

The issue of animal happiness is also central to one of the most recent chapters in the history of zoological gardens: the computer game *Zoo Tycoon*, released by Blue Fang Games and Microsoft Game Studios in 2001 ("*Zoo Tycoon*"). The central goal of the game is to build what Microsoft calls "the ultimate zoo." On the official Web site, the company admonishes, "Design, build, and manage your ultimate zoo—but carefully—you are responsible for the happiness of your animals and guests" (*Zoo Tycoon: Complete Collection*). In the game, animal happiness is generally achieved when the exhibit is spacious and most closely resembles the stereotyped habitat of the animal (apparently lions can only be happy in a "savannah," resting under acacia trees), when care (that is, the provision of food and removal of waste) is consistent, when the public is not too close, and when the animals are heterosexually paired. Human happiness in the world of *Zoo Tycoon*, on the other hand, is achieved when there are ubiquitous bathrooms, shopping opportunities, extra entertainments such as rides, food options, places to sit and rest, as many especially endangered kinds of animals as possible, and, most important, everything needed for animal happiness (fig. 3).

The lives of animals in the world of *Zoo Tycoon*, and in zoos more generally, are obviously vastly different from those of members of the same species living in the "wild." Elephants in Africa do not usually live in nuclear families of one adult male, one adult female, and (if they're happy) one "baby" as they do in *Zoo Tycoon*. Nor do wild female elephants spend decades in only the same-sex company of two or three other female elephants as they share the daily rhythms of caregivers; the shiftings from stall to stall, to outside, to back inside again; and the days of many visitors and the days of just a few that are typical of city zoos. The animals in *Zoo Tycoon* and our local city zoos live the unnatural histories of the many animals who are, to a significant degree, "a product of human thinking" (Mullan and Marvin xv). But are these lives somehow less? This fundamental question has preoccupied us for over a century. On one side are those who, like Malamud, see the "substantial and essentially unchanged reality of zoos" as "prisons for animals and quick, convenient, sometimes titillating, but ultimately distorting experiences for people" (49); and on the other are those who, like David Hancocks, a former zoo director and a progressive critic of the zoo establishment, insist that it is possible to create exhibits and even whole zoos that are good for animals, good for the planet, and able to help people appreciate "the splendor and wonderment of the wild" (xv).

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As I look over the current scholarship about the significance of zoos in our lives or when I consider the complex photographs of animals in zoos by such artists as Britta Jaschinski, Candida Höfer, and Frank Noelker, I also think of a jaguar who used to live at the Milwaukee County Zoo. In 2004 I asked to be part of the committee consulting with the designers of a major renovation of the Milwaukee zoo's cat house. I was present officially as a "zoo visitor consultant"; the rest of the committee comprised county officials, members of the zoo administrative and curatorial staffs, leaders of the "friends-of-the-zoo" organization, and the three keepers who worked in the building. Over the weeks of our discussions, I learned a great deal about the practical aspects of managing lions, cheetahs, tigers, jaguars, snow leopards, and hyenas in captivity. I learned about the advantages and disadvantages of hydraulic and manual systems to raise and lower gates; I learned about the art of placing "furniture" around an exhibit to encourage the animals to lounge in certain locations; I learned about how sand of the wrong grain size could be picked up in a cat's coat and then scratch the expensive glass through which the public viewed an exhibit. We had discussions about whether the animals should be fed from the public side of the exhibit or from behind; whether we should have public viewing of the food-preparation room; and whether certain kinds of human "cultural markers" from the exhibited species' origin countries (e.g., an "African" hut) belonged in the building or not.

I also became more deeply aware than ever before that the quality of an animal's life in the zoo depends more than anything else on its relationship with its keepers and not on whether the exhibit is framed by bars, glass, or a moat; a convincing replication of a natural environment; an abundant educational apparatus; or the presence of a species survival plan. At one point in the discussion, a keeper



FIG. 3
Happy animals, happy people in *Zoo Tycoon*.

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asked simply that a warmed platform designed for the jaguar exhibit be lowered because Valera, a jaguar facing numerous geriatric issues, would struggle to jump to the proposed height. I had always known that the keepers often, even typically, had deep emotional and physical connections to the animals they cared for every day, that the hyenas loved to be petted off exhibit, and that before the zoo opened in the mornings and the wolves became "timber wolves," they liked to romp around their exhibit like a bunch of large dogs with one of the keepers. It was simple thoughtfulness that lead to the lowering of the jaguar's platform in the plans, but I think that sort of thoughtfulness needs to become a more central part of our inquiries, absent as it understandably is in the stark photographs of animals in "sad"—nonnaturalistic—cages. As Vicki Hearne argued so well, "[T]he possibilities of mutual respect between wild animals and humans" is of "urgent importance" (66). When people run, work, and live with animals; when people and animals learn from and teach each other; "when," as Donna Haraway notes, "species meet," we can all be profoundly changed. In the end, I think this is why people keep going to the zoo and scholars keep writing about their doing so. People go not because they fail to see the limitations of the place but because they are searching for the possibilities.

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