Where to Look, What to Emphasise: The Conflict of Dividing Attention between the Individual Animal and the Global Process of Climate Change – at Rotterdam Zoo

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Abstract

A thick description of a field trip to Rotterdam Zoo, I use the polar bear exhibit as an example of how the zoo shapes the encounter between visitor and animal in order to analyse this personal 'meeting between species' and how it reflects on zookeeping and human responsibility in the age of the Anthropocene. I argue that Rotterdam Zoo should stress the entangled nature of their animals, their visitors, and the entire planet, in order to play a more effective role in combatting climate change through education.

Introduction

During a recent field trip to the polar bear exhibit at Rotterdam Zoo, I was struck by a feeling of disappointment, or rather, sadness. As will become clear, I experienced a disconnection from what I was seeing. Unable to participate in the encounter between visitor and animal, I became a bystander. Although it is the zoo's task to facilitate such an encounter, I felt a distance between myself and the animals in their enclosures, as well as between myself and the other visitors. Curious as to why this came to be, I will explore the nature of zoos and provide a description of the polar bear enclosure at Rotterdam Zoo, essentially offering a visit to those that have not been to Rotterdam Zoo themselves.

My experience at the zoo is in accordance with John Berger's theorisation of the modern zoo. He argues that in modernity, animals are reduced to an observable object: "The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance" (27). In line with this, the emergence of the modern zoo is a testament to the disappearance of the dual relationship between the human and the nonhuman animal (30). Berger problematises the observation of animals precisely because of this loss of duality. Despite the zoo's role to display animals, the public cannot encounter the animal behind the fence as anything more than an object, because the animal gaze is no longer of interest to the visitor, who is completely unaware of this loss (33). It explains, however, my feelings of sadness and shame, and why "the zoo cannot but disappoint" (37). Berger's argument on sadness at the zoo will frame my analysis of the polar bear exhibit since it is this feeling that allows for a critical reflection on the human-animal relationship.

However, the specificity of the human-polar bear relationship needs to be taken into account. The image of the polar bear has long been used for campaigns on climate change and has become a symbol for global warming and animal habitat destruction. It is with this in mind that I analyse this personal 'meeting between species', looking at how it reflects on zookeeping and human responsibility in the age of the Anthropocene. My main concern, then, is how Rotterdam Zoo combines attention for their individual animals, in this case the polar bear, with the process of climate change, which is global and affects all species.

My observations will be analysed from several perspectives. I will start with an evaluation of the enclosure's design, and from there move on to address the problematic nature of promoting individualised solutions as a way to influence planetary processes such as climate change, as well as the tension between individual animal welfare and species conservation. Here I will draw from a concept from Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet*: "becoming with" (3), which refers to the idea that every organism is connected in "material-semiotic […] knot in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another" (4). This connection comes prior to the individual organism, since every organism is constituted in "intra- and interaction" (4). This line of reasoning is supported by scientific evidence that all organisms are always constituted in relation to many others, blurring the lines between an individual and a community of diverse beings (3-4). Central to her argument is the encounter: human and nonhuman organisms are entangled and 'meet', and one place that actively facilitates and frames such a meeting is thus the zoo.

My analysis will take the form of a thick description. It draws on the work of social anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who is concerned with the practice of ethnography, and addresses the difficulties surrounding scientific explanations, arguing that no scientific theory or interpretation can or should explain everything – or even every aspect of some-*thing*. In ethnography, theories are used as discourse that can help define, and relate to, the object of study (8). As such, ethnographers work from the observed towards an interpretation instead of from theory to data. Ethnography has recently seen an expansion to include the nonhuman, which is referred to as "multispecies ethnography" (Kirskey, Helmreich 545). As Eben Kirskey and Stefan Helmreich argue: "Creatures previously appearing on the margins of anthropology – as part of the landscape, as food for humans, as symbols – have been pressed into the foreground" (545). The anthropocentric nature of this model is still apparent, however, since all these organisms gain their relevance through their interaction with human social world. Multispecies ethnographers thus study "contact zones where lines separating nature from culture have broken down" (546). Aligned with Haraway's 'becoming with', a thick description is therefore the right format for this exploration, as my

analysis will focus on one of these contact zones: the zoo. I will provide a detailed account of the material-semiotic knot of the polar bear enclosure and highlight its design, the animals and the visitors, as well as the information provided by the zoo. It is my contention that Rotterdam Zoo should stress the entangled nature of their animals, their visitors, and the entire planet, in order to play a more effective role in combatting climate change through education.

2. The Polar Bear Exhibit

2.1 A Sad Spectacle

Rotterdam Zoo – Diergaarde Blijdorp in Dutch – in the city of Rotterdam, is over 150 years old, and with approximately 1.5 million visitors per year one of the busiest attractions of the country (Zwinkels et al. 67). The only competition in terms of visitors is Artis Royal Zoo Amsterdam, although it is significantly smaller in size. Rotterdam Zoo has built its enclosures in such a way that most, if not all, are accessible for viewing from more than one location. Approximately half of the polar bear exhibit is surrounded by a pathway and viewing area, which enables the visitor to view the polar bear from almost all sides. There are two paths leading up to a specific viewing area, one from the left and one from the right. I arrived from the right, an elevated pathway that gives the visitor an overview of most of the exhibit. At the highest point of the pathway is an information panel, which should detail some information on the species in the enclosure, as is the function of these panels throughout the park. This particular panel, however, was broken. More specifically, the sheet of paper attached to it was torn, making the information largely unreadable. This was unfortunate, since these panels give an insight into the animal's habitat in the wild and detail some of the key characteristics of their species. The exhibit itself consists of rugged terrain with an artificial pond in the centre. This 'pool' area is walled off with glass to allow the visitor to see what is happening underwater. This part of the enclosure is connected to a semi-indoor viewing area that is deliberately constructed on a lower level than the rest of the

route. There is also a small amphitheatre-style sitting area on an even lower level.

During my field trip the visitors viewing the polar bears were mostly bundled together at the glass wall that was still on the 'main route', with only a handful of people standing outside or sitting further down. In sharp contrast to the famous image of the polar bear in the wild, the exhibit at Rotterdam Zoo contains no ice, which makes the basin of water the only thing resembling what is usually portrayed as the natural environment of these animals. One of the polar bears in particular was in the water for almost the entire duration of my observation, which lasted around 30 minutes. The animal kept jumping up out of the water towards something invisible to the spectators inside the viewing area. There is a possibility it was part of what is called 'environmental enrichment' – in this case some kind of toy placed on top of the enclosure as part of what Heini Hediger terms "occupational therapy" (qtd. in Keulartz 18). Hediger has been instrumental in the development of the elaborate, scientific, and managerial approach to animal welfare in zoos; and, according to Jozef Keulartz, "animal training is an important component of animal enrichment programmes as it facilitates exercise and mental stimulation" (20). In a blog post from the 25th of April 2017, Rotterdam Zoo announces the polar bears have been given a white, floating ball to play with, as part of what they describe as "behavioural enrichment," which indicates their alignment with this approach. Whatever this instrument might be, it made the animal jump up repeatedly, right at the edge of the basin near the glass wall. This provided quite the spectacle, especially for the younger viewers.

I had visited this zoo once before as a child as well. The only thing I can remember from that visit concerning the polar bears – or *any* particular animal – is that I have indeed *seen* them. Encountering animals like these for the first time is often an overwhelming experience for a child; and, according to Berger, the "animals seldom live up to the adult's memories" (33). This is something I can attest to, since I was struck by a profound sense of sadness and shame witnessing these polar bears as an adult. My adult shame at being complicit in this animal's suffering, exacerbated by the shame of my childhood response, was a

response which I saw reflected in the behaviour of the other visitors. Taking a step back and reflecting on one's younger self helps to establish a critical distance with which to revaluate one's self as well as the perceived object, in this case the captive animal. Later, when I walked out of the indoor area onto the second outdoor path, I could make out some kind of rail placed immediately above the glass wall. It is connected to the indoor building and therefore out of the viewers' sight when inside, but even from the outside it was impossible to determine what it might be or why it made this particular polar bear jump up time and time again – if this even was the reason why the animal acted like this. It was definitely out of reach for the animal, and with no zookeeper around, I left without knowing what it might be.

My experience corresponds with Randy Malamud's summary of Jean Stafford's "In the Zoo" from 1953, which starts at Denver Zoo, and more specifically, with a polar bear (313). Malamud describes the polar bear from the story as "pathetic" and its habitat as "grossly inappropriate" given the warm summer weather (314). Similarly, the exhibit at Rotterdam Zoo struck me as rather small – especially from what I remember as a child – and also somewhat unfit: no ice and shades of green grass. It was rather warm on the day of my visit, with temperatures reaching 20 degrees Celsius, which made the animals look particularly out of place. Malamud focusses on the polar bear "ceaselessly shaking [its] head [indicating] what a zoologist would diagnose as the abnormality of stereotypy" (314). The behaviour of the bear is then juxtaposed with the visitor's: "Most of the zoogoers ignore the bear, confirming the frequent observation in zoo stories that, by and large, sloppily unobservant spectators *miss* more than they see" (314). Whereas most of the animals I observed tended to show signs consistent with lethargy or boredom, including the other polar bears, the one I am highlighting here definitely displayed actions close to hyperactivity or stereotypy. Berger connects the animals' artificial living spaces to their tendency to group together at the edges of the enclosure, since it represents the barrier between their captivity and the possibility of something more, and concludes by stating: "In all cases the environment is illusory. Nothing surrounds them except their own lethargy or

hyperactivity" (35). In line with Malamud, my assessment has led to me to believe the behaviour of the animals I observed is indicative of mental health problems caused by living in captivity. In sharp contrast to my experience, the crowd pressed against the glass was only concerned with the polar bear jumping up near the barrier and describing the animal as either scary or stupid. Standing so close to the barrier separating them from the bear, and seemingly not at all plagued by a feeling of shame or sadness, the crowd's positioning is emblematic of a non-critical response to encountering an animal in captivity. Although the design of the exhibit and viewing area ensures a good view of the spectacle of the polar bears, it is lacking both in terms of animal welfare and in terms of providing information on the animals as a species due to the broken panel. This information could place them in a larger framework and point towards a global entanglement of animals: scattered groups of polar bears living out in the wild and captivity.

2.2 Dividing your Attention

The jarring spectacle of the jumping polar bear made me wander around the indoor area, where I found a second 'room' within the indoor section. The entire indoor department, including the viewing area, is made to resemble a cage or house of ice. All of the walls are irregular in shape, yet smooth and painted white. The 'main route' only leads visitors past the enclosure, where the animals attract their attention, so it was no surprise to see the other room almost completely deserted. Upon entering, the visitor is confronted with a makeshift theatre, complete with fake iceberg stools and a big TV screen showing footage of polar bears. Several big posters on climate change have been put on the backside of the wall that separates this room from the main area. They list the causes and effects of climate change, efforts made by the zoo to halt and/or revert this process – such as the use of solar power, recycling, and limiting their water consumption – and what visitors can do to help in their daily lives.

Zoos are primarily designed with the customer and not the animal in mind. As Nigel Rothfels claims: "despite the rhetoric about scientific research, education, and, more recently, conservation, all these

places have been built for recreation" (482). Zoological design is a well-thought-out process aimed at pleasing the customer. Their plans comprise not just the exhibits, but also the viewing areas and walking routes, as well as the entrances and exits, restaurants and gift shops. Therefore, it is necessary to remember that this specific indoor room is also a consciously designed part of Rotterdam Zoo. As Sarah Salih argues: "Zoos are all about looking" (300), and this statement is not limited to the animals. The entire zoo is constructed to make the visitor look a certain way, and therefore not look somewhere else (300). Whereas Salih applies this reasoning to different animals and forms of suffering, the same logic applies to looking at polar bears or at large posters on climate change. Apart from the physical impossibility of viewing both at the same time, due to the wall separating them, they also represent two separate ways of 'looking' at human and nonhuman animals.

On one side, there is the animal exhibit, with the individual, materially-located polar bear incessantly jumping up out of the water; and on the other, a number of posters informing and instructing the visitor on climate change. They state that global warming causes animal habitat destruction, affecting species such as the polar bear. The melting icecaps are then connected to the rising of sea levels and an increase in flooding, which threatens human life. Whereas the animals gain the attention from most visitors, aided by the route the zoo has laid out – guiding them to the viewing area; the posters target the visitor directly and implicate them in the global process of climate change. They state things like: 'unplug your charger' and 'turn off the lights', or 'turn down the heating by one degree and wear a sweater instead'. Whereas the polar bears at the zoo have come to represent the disconnection between human and nonhuman animal, the posters aim to represent a 'coming together' of species. However, the posters are anthropocentric in nature, portraying the visitor as unique and different to all other species, which are grouped together based on their otherness.

The privileging of the human over all other species ties in with the Anthropocenic paradigm; an emergent, widespread idea which posits that "the human species is now the dominant Earth-shaping force" (Baskin 9). As Jeremy Baskin rightly points out, the Anthropocene is a

paradigm masked as an epoch, which allows its proponents to advocate further human intervention in the process of climate change, while simultaneously stripping all that is nonhuman of its agency (14, 17). Two main points of critique concerning this ideology are its conceptualisation of 'human' and its conceptualisation of 'nature'. As Baskin continues, it "draws 'the human' into 'nature' but not the multiple and unequal social values, relations and practices of power that accompany actual humans" (16). It also disregards diversity found in nature and the intra-active relationship between human and nonhuman organisms. It thus limits the bio-community to two highly reductive concepts. In their poster display, Rotterdam Zoo adheres to this worldview of human exceptionality and nonhuman otherness by placing its visitors separate from their animals, both spatially and conceptually. Effects on wildlife and effects on humans are listed separately and especially the effects on humans are presented as the *definitive* reason to become involved. Moreover, the human is addressed in their role as individual consumer, implying they can have an impact on the global climate through individual actions such as 'unplugging your charger'. This individualisation is problematic because it suggests individual actions will automatically help to save polar bears, maybe even their entire species, and by extension the planet as a whole.

Another problematic aspect of this representation by Rotterdam Zoo is the lack of correlation between their own polar bears, which the visitor has just seen, and the use of the *image* of the polar bear in their plea for awareness about climate change, which is a connection the zoo should definitely exploit more. Here, the image of the polar bear becomes a stand-in for their species, and even for all animals. The relation between individual animal welfare and species conservation has long been a source of tension. Keulartz explains these two sides as two "ethical frameworks" (1):

> the individualistic framework of […] animal ethics in which species are of little or no moral relevance, and the holistic framework of environmental ethics that tends to make the rights and welfare of individual animal subordinate to the

> interests of the greater whole of which they are part, such as species or ecosystems (1-2).

Modern zoos like the one at Rotterdam have to fulfil many different and at times conflicting roles. Although they are first and foremost a form of entertainment, they are also expected to provide the best possible care for their animals, and support species conservation – through working with wildlife organisations, doing research and funding projects. And yet, entertainment can aid in education, and well-cared-for animals are conducive to species survival and maintaining healthy ecosystems in the wild. Maintaining healthy ecosystems, in turn, is vital for keeping the planet habitable for human and nonhuman organisms alike. It remains to be seen if and how Rotterdam Zoo will bridge the apparent gap between the welfare of their own animals and their goal of combatting climate change.

3. Conclusion

My field trip to Rotterdam Zoo has left me contemplating what I consider to be several problematic aspects and events entangled in the polar bear exhibit. One of these is the struggling polar bear that captivated the visitors, another is the process of climate change and how it is represented. A third is the almost complete lack of integration of the two by the zoo. The individual animals and the posters are both meant to capture the attention of the visitor, but in completely different ways. In order to more effectively integrate animal welfare and visitor recreation with climate change policies and visitor activation, Rotterdam Zoo could do more to represent their animals and their policies as entangled. By addressing the visitor as enmeshed with the nonhuman animal, as well as by emphasising how both are constituents of the global community of organisms – all of which are affected by climate change, albeit in different and unequal ways – Rotterdam Zoo could promote a more inclusive agenda regarding climate change. This is crucial for gaining a greater understanding of the various entanglements between human and nonhuman animals at the zoo, which in turn can help to

effectively reimagine approaches towards combatting climate change and keeping the Earth habitable in the future – the most pressing issue facing the planet today. As of now, the polar bear exhibit hinges too much on the recreational side of the zoo; most of its design is aimed at showing the individual animals, and the information on global warming is presented only as an afterthought for those visitors who actively seek out such information, making the zoo a microcosm of society as a whole.

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Biography

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