Watching nature

How zoo visits shaped Western identities in the 19th and 20th century

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The development of zoos is closely linked to the rise of modern urban environments. Initially, zoos were a symbol utilised to distinguish social classes similar to the department store that shaped the social identity of women at the beginning of the 19th century[1], but also a place to envision a natural order from watching wild animals. Thus, the cultural meaning of nature and experiencing nature became revealed and formed in zoos[2]. This makes also the consumption aspect of zoos, in the form of goods and experiences, less an isolated matter of choice to fulfil a need or desire but more an expression of its embeddedness in cultural symbolism[3]. In light of the consumed experiences, zoo visits reflect back on how humans identify[4] and ought to identify themselves in relation to nature as it becomes part of their lifeworld[5].

In this essay, I will elaborate on the question of how the consumption pattern in and of zoos changed over time and how it, thereby, influenced the self-understanding of their visitors with regard to nature. For this purpose, I will follow the historical development of zoos in Western Europe from their creation during the industrial revolution until the 1970s alongside the sociocultural change of the view on nature. In the course of these roughly two hundred years, four phases will be identified: before the rise of modernity, the years after the first zoo openings, after the zoo revolution in 1907, and after the environmental movement in the 60s. As I could not identify research concentrating on the consumption aspect of zoos, I extracted relevant conclusions about consumption from mostly secondary sources about historical, social and philosophical perspectives on animals and zoos.

[1] Lenz and MagShamhrain (2012, p. 279)

[2] Baranowski and Furlough (2004, p. 21) links this to tourism in general.

[3] Trentmann (2012, p. 3)

[4] I define self-identification roughly as the internal understanding of who we think we are.

[5] Fraser and Switzer (2021, pp. 370, 380)

My overarching thesis is that after the industrial revolution, zoos amplified the human-nature divide we experience in Western thinking today. As such, they contributed to the historical development of exploitive attitudes towards nature in modern capitalistic societies, which advanced climate change and species extinction.

The rise of zoological gardens: from dominion to rational superiority

The gifting and collection of wild animals as a symbol of power was already popular in ancient times[6]. In Europe, this motive was internalised during the rise of Christianity which, in contrast to polytheism, established a dualistic structure of humans and nature. Nature including non-human animals lost its purpose while humans inherit God-willed pre-eminence and ought to utilise nature for their ends. By the late 16th century, this impression of human superiority over nature was materialised in menageries which is French and means fittingly "place for management"[7]. Menageries were arranged around a villa built on the highest spot of the property and showed the collection of exotic animals of the owner as a reflection of wealth, social dominance and control over nature[8].

In contrast to the anthropocentric world of the elite, the general public lived and felt closer to nature before the industrial revolution. However, this began to change by the end of the 18th century when menageries started to open up for visitors. On selected days, families could walk through the park, see exotic animals for the first time, and celebrate the human culture in an uplifting environment with music and distinct fashion [9]. This opened up the idea that in the social order of life, civilisation trumps nature, and even the socially least privileged citizen could feel dominance over other animals.

The heydays of menageries were accompanied by the rise of science: Rene Descartes (1596-1650) had a lasting impact on scholars of the following centuries by transferring the Christian idea of dualism into modernity. Human superiority over nature became an ontological fact through the rationality only humans possessed. The self-identity as a thinking being was thereby established in opposition to nature as the "other" deprived of purpose and structure[10].

[6]Hancocks (2001, p. 14)

[7]Veltre (1996, pp. 19, 24)

[8]The word "exotic" was established to demarcate the higher symbolic standing of foreign animals from domesticated ones (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 2002, p. 29).

[9]Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier (2002, p. 55) and Kohlstedt (1996, p. 15).

[10]Thomas (1983, p. 34)

Also the enlightenment period after Descartes was informed by the desire to celebrate rationality through advancing natural sciences. It became the task of civilisation to replace God in imposing structure on nature, and Carl Linnaeus executed this by inventing his taxonomic systems "Systema Naturae" (1758) which placed every living being in the appropriate place of genus and species. The system was, however, not looking for the essence of each species but, fuelled by its human bias, established hierarchical thinking without altering the assumption of human supremacy[11].

Alongside the irresistible progress of enlightenment, the industrial revolution gave birth to a new middle class in rising cities. The bourgeoisie opposed the elitist structure of society and identified themselves through a new demand for cultural institutions. All over Europe, private zoological societies were founded at the beginning of the 19$^{\text{th}}$ century and created gardens showing their living exhibits in London (1828), Amsterdam (1838) and Berlin (1844)[12]. The exhibited picture of nature was not simply one of pure submission as in menageries but also one of classification according to the cultural ideal of scientific objectivity[13]. Animals were placed in small cages in a structure that civilisation imposes on the chaos in nature, so that zoos became a tribute to bourgeois self-identification where animals served as symbols of authority and witnesses to how progress could edify the educated citizen while taming nature[14]. However, this distinction between cultivated and wild was not one visitors stumbled upon by looking at exotic animals. Quite the contrary, animals were purposefully characterised as fiery and starved until they showed the most savage behaviour possible. At the same time, animals were deprived of bonding with mates and unable to move in their austere enclosures to look powerless in the light of the superior visitor. This dichotomy prompted a visitor of the London zoo in 1824 to report that "[we are] surrounded by death under its most frightful form, and yet we hold our life as secure as if we were seated by our own hearths."[15]

During the first half of the century, the "contamination of the [z]oological [g]arden[s] by admission of the poorer classes of [s]ociety"[16] was prevented by restricting visits to members only. This, I think, was a precursor to the latter consumer orientation of zoos: paying members gained cultural capital from consuming the local zoo while establishing

[11]Braverman (2012, p. 118) and Myers (2007, p. 32).
[12]Hyson (2004, p. 1356)
[13]Anderson (1995, p. 283)
[14]Rothfels (2002, p. 22)
[15]Templeton (1824, p. 364)
[16]Blunt (1976, p. 32)

oneself above lower social classes and the non-human world[17]. In contrast to the closed buildings of museums, zoos were open spaces which amplified the visibility of the inside-outside distinction in public. Thus, though starting as a sort of scientific endeavour, the initial phase of zoos was already marked by consumption - "social consumption".

Becoming public: let the show begin

By the mid of the 19th century, new financial sources were required because of the increased expenses of catching animals and caring for their survival in zoos. This forced European zoos to open up their gates to the general public within the following decades[18]. The official story for this opening was, however, the idea to serve the public interest in scientific education[19]. For example, the Hamburg zoo was opened in 1863 by wealthy merchants and public servants for "studying nature, especially animals, and for recreation and education of the people."[20]

The general public seemed to embrace the new spaces for exploring their own interest in scientific education during the 1850s and 1860s. Even the urbanised working class was after all allowed to spend recreational time disseminating nature for their rational enlightenment, while at the same time gaining greater cognition from the upper classes[21]. Amplified by the increasing gap between city and land and the implied increased perceptual distance to nature, they were able to experience indirectly what it was to be human as opposed to something "other" for the first time. This new way of seeing led to a distinct way of being relative to nature - being alienated but superior[22]. The arising view was thereby symptomatic for a period where people also observed patients in mental hospitals and exhibited human "freaks" in zoos: animal and human madness became a thing to watch, something staggering and contrasting to the rational civilised mind[23].

Despite the initial success of the scientific agenda, I would argue that soon the general public looked for entertainment rather than education[24]. On the one hand, science was not yet fully endorsed by the public which is exemplified by the rejection of Darwin's evolution theory by the Daily Telegraph in 1861: "Human dignity and human feeling

[17]Here, consumption is linked to status and social hierarchy as proposed by Trentmann (2012, p. 9).
[18]Osborne (1996, p. 41)
[19]For example, Mehos (2006, p. 56) argues this was the main cause.
[20]Reichenbach (1996, p. 52)
[21]Hancocks (2001, p. 47)
[22]Anderson (1995, p. 279)
[23]Mullan and Marvin (1999, p. 36)
[24]Mehos (2006, p. 88) agrees with me here.

both revolt against the absurdities of the would-be scientific men. GOD made man in his own image [...]."[25] On the other hand, the most popular animals were either human-like, dangerous or funny-looking, so exciting or unusual but not necessarily of scientific value[26]. In addition, the most cultivated people started to reject zoos in favour of other cultural institutions like natural-history museums which became public at around the same time[27]. For example, the Daily Telegraph wrote in 1870: "We all go to the British Museum for instruction's sake, but we visit the Zoological Gardens for amusement [...]."[28] Mullan and Marvin argue that museums gained high cultural status because their dead exhibits could be shaped by humans and thus, become irreplaceable cultural objects. In contrast, zoos' living exhibits could not be shaped by culture in the same way and remained in their essence natural, so without purpose and value[29].

As a result of this development, zoos looked more like a mix of an urban and amusement park by the end of 19th century, which coincides with the rise of capitalism after the industrial revolution[30]. After the 1870s, this led to market competition from moving animal shows like circuses and forced zoo directors to increase the entertainment factor at the expense of scientific correctness[31]. In light of the consumer revolution where needs were not served but raised through steady novelty, public mass consumption was enabled through public feeding, restaurants and concerts at the zoo[32]. Animals were still kept in the small cages of the previous decades but rearranged to increase excitement[33]. Visitors walked effortlessly by the exhibit and occasionally stopped to throw a glance at the animal which could be easily spotted because of the lack of hiding places. I agree with Jones that this invites a comparison with the emerging department stores in major cities around the same time. Rustic cages were shown like sequences of store windows, each of which presents a glimpse into an exciting world. Here, the opposition of rustic signs of captivity and its exotic "content" fed the commercial imperative of novelty but also reinforced a hierarchy of superiority between consumers holding power (humans) and products determined by their market value (animals)[34].

[25] As cited by Blunt (1976, p. 143)
[26] Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier (2002, p. 173)
[27] Mehos (2006, p. 122)
[28] As cited by Hancocks (2001, p. 47)
[29] Mullan and Marvin (1999, pp. 117, 123)
[30] Rothfels (2002, p. 32)
[31] As one visitor of the Berlin zoo clarified in 1870: "[z]oology for the Berliners [at the zoo] was unimportant" (Nyhart 2009, p. 85).
[32] Nyhart (2009, p. 87)
[33] Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier (2002, p. 149)
[34] Jones (1997, p. 13)

Driven by the increasing commercialisation of zoos, individual animals were granted star-like status. Particularly, elephants and apes were credited agency, though, only through captivity and under the sphere of humans[35]. Anthropoids were dressed as humans and placed at tables for tea time[36] as symbol of imposing Western civilisation on them. Elephant rides became popular among children[37], and Jumbo, the giant elephant whose legacy can be found in "jumbo jets", became one of the most famous citizens of London. It is striking that people valued them not for their animality but cultural value imposed by civilisation and thus, these animals gained similar value as exhibits in museums as discussed above. This cultural signification is exemplified by the marking of animals through zoo buildings representing distinct human cultures[38] as well as through the public outcry when Jumbo was sold to an American circus in 1882: the commodification of their beloved elephant for show purposes was not accepted, whereas the own commodification by keeping him captured and cultivating him as a quasi-citizen with human-like personality was seen as appropriate[39].

This new way of consumption established the idea that zoos were "gardens of Eden" where certain animals became guests of the benign influence of Western culture[40]. This normalised the appropriation of nature by Western societies but also denied modern civilisation the possibility to identify itself through the otherness of nature. Instead, nature was culturally transformed into a consuming unit in a human-only world, and in the act of going to the zoo, the modern urban dweller could no longer reflect upon herself critically but only confirm her own pre-established identity of superiority[41].

Zoo revolution: watching nature

The reality of city lives caught up on many residents at the start of the 20$^{\text{th}}$ century. People lost their natural balance and, imprisoned by artificial structures of human civilisation, unemployment and social anxiety arose as mass phenomena. With this perceptual

[35] Anderson (1995, p. 284)

[36] Photograph shown by Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier (2002, p. 180).

[37] Blunt (1976, p. 165).

[38] Mullan and Marvin (1999, p. 124)

[39] Jones (1997, p. 19)

[40] See Nyhart (2009, pp. 87-8) and Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier (2002, p. 197).

[41] Around this time, also a nationalistic and imperialistic layer of identity shaped the zoo, exemplified through majestic animal housings based on colonised cultures but also the exhibition of Indigenous people. For more details see Rothfels (2002).

shift, nature was increasingly seen as romanticised and in opposition to cities[42]. Natural tourism as an escape from stressful lives began to flourish, and zoos profited from this by advertising their exhibition which still followed the idea of peaceful gardens: those who could not afford to travel far could cost-effectively experience the pristine wilderness in the local zoo[43].

Carl Hagenbeck (1844-1913), an animal trader from Hamburg, saw the chance to benefit from this new nostalgic interest in zoos. He considered cage barriers to remind people of prisons and the uninspiring space around the animals as diminishing the illusion of purity. In 1896, Hagenbeck patented his solution in form of large outdoor enclosures showing various animals together in a naturalised scenery without scientific information. Instead of iron barriers, an unbreachable moat protected visitors from animal attacks while keeping the imagined excitement of this very possibility[44]. However, Hagenbeck was less concerned about the authenticity of the enclosures but more with "present[ing] the animals in most freedom and thereby demonstrate [...] what acclimatisation was able to accomplish"[45]. The economical advantage was thereby twofold: more visitors due to an increased entertainment factor while it also became "unnecessary to construct luxurious and costly buildings with large heating systems to keep animals alive and healthy"[46]. Other directors initially criticised the lack of heating but adapted it ultimately to be competitive in the modern market of nature tourism[47].

The first exhibit of Hagenbeck was the "Polar panorama" (1907) showing seals and polar bears in a naturalistic setting of ice imitates made of concrete. The glass separations between the predator and its potential prey as well as the chains keeping the animals in place were invisible for the more than 10,000 visitors during the first day[48]. The predator behaviour was hidden purposefully from visitors to keep the illusion[49]. Also within the remaining buildings, the imagined pristine character of nature was emphasised by replacing the iron barriers with glass panels and tiling floors. This reduced the prison character perceived by the visitor, removed distracting smell and simplified the cleaning[50]. Thus, the modern zoo was born as a dramatised illusion of watching apparently untouched

[42]Berger (1980, p. 15)
[43]Hanson (2002, pp. 40, 132)
[44]Reichenbach (1996, pp. 59-60)
[45]Hagenbeck (1908, p. 173) (own translation)
[46]Hagenbeck (1908, p. 173) (own translation)
[47]Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier (2002, p. 242)
[48]Rothfels (2002, p. 42)
[49]Mullan and Marvin (1999, p. 5)
[50]Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier (2002, p. 150)

nature, and other European zoos followed Hagenbeck's idea by building outdoor enclosures made of concrete and wood[51]. The public response was generally positive even though little attention was paid to Hagenbeck's passion for detail. Instead, increasingly weird pictures of "nature" were presented as authentic[52]. Irrespectively, the cultural idea of simulating nature was suggested to visitors and reinforced their understanding of human mastery over nature with submission as the appropriate relationship between humans and animals[53].

In the first half of the 20th century, the success of Hagenbeck's revolution was an increase in the popularity of zoos, from 4 to 18.5 million visitors per year. This was of course not only driven by the consumer-oriented designs but also by the removal of the last social restrictions and adjusting prices to attract the widest possible audience[54]. Zoos continued to advertise the combination of education and recreation with slogans like "Visit the Zoo: Laugh and Learn."[55] However, the entertainment factor needed to be prioritised in the ever-growing demand of mass consumption and competition[56].

The idea of a modern consumer culture was expressed in the desire for unique zoo designs optimised for human consumption while keeping the living conditions of the animals to a bare minimum. Presenting the same species in various, ever more attractive "habitats" ignored the animal's preference for the same natural enclosure. Also, the fact that animals are wild partly because they hide was ignored in forced settings where they were steadily available to be watched[57]. Thus, animals were not allowed to convey a self-created sense of being which would be required for real appreciation[58]. Instead, they were commodified as time- and spaceless products. Drawing on Adorno and Horkheimer, I would argue that this is an allegory for the spirit of consumerism in the globalising capitalism of that time[59]. As such, this form of presenting nature was doomed to be inauthentic and resulted in further distancing from and degradation of the animals.

[51]Reichenbach (1996, p. 61)
[52]Hancocks (2001, p. 67)
[53]Mullan and Marvin (1999, p. 39)
[54]Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier (2002, p. 204)
[55]Advertisement from 1961 (Anderson 1995, p. 286).
[56]Hyson (2004, p. 1357)
[57]Braverman (2012, p. 157)
[58]Mullan and Marvin (1999, p. 59)
[59]Trentmann (2012, p. 10)

Zoo evolution: consumption for conservation

Only after the Second World War, shifting cultural expectations led zoos to adjust their treatment of animals: the idea of human superiority and dominion became less bearable in the public, and television brought many families pictures of real wildlife into their living rooms for the first time, disenchanting the illusion provided by zoos[60]. In line with the general critique of modern thinking in the 1960-70s, movements for animal and environmental rights finally challenged the optimism around zoos as places of education and recreation[61].

As a consequence, the Animal Welfare Act of 1966 secured animals a minimum right to food and housing, and in 1973, the Endangered Species Act, restricting activities involving endangered animals to secure biodiversity, complicated purchasing new exhibits for zoos[62]. However, in this very threat of species extinction, zoo directors found in conservation a new justification that appeased many critics[63]. The role zoo officials envisioned was so-called ex situ conservation, so the breeding of endangered species in captivity for a later reintroduction to the wild[64]. Thus, the freedom of endangered species was now used to justify their captivity in zoos[65], and visitors were no longer presented as masters but guardians of nature: though Western populations caused the unprecedented surge of extinction, only they could save nature from collapsing[66].

Zoos capitalised from the new message by using consumption as a form of social redemption: gift shops sold plastic animals as means of saving their living counterpart, advertisements raised awareness for individual environmental-friendly actions, and monetised animal shows provided information about the threats of the wild counterparts[67]. Thus, visitors were allowed to express their concern for the environment in the safe harbour of consumerism. I would argue that this provides evidence for a deeply embedded idea of the superiority of capitalism: instead of pin-pointing the very act of mass consumption as the main cause for exploiting nature and mass extinction, it was sold as a tool against its own consequences.

Simultaneously, this presentation undermined the educational aim of zoos to shift

[60] Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier (2002, p. 224)
[61] Fraser and Switzer (2021, pp. 36-7)
[62] Braverman (2012, pp. 277, 283)
[63] Hancocks (2001, p. 111)
[64] Braverman (2015, pp. 68-9)
[65] Jamieson (2006, p. 138)
[66] Braverman (2011, p. 821)
[67] Braverman (2011, pp. 829-31)

the visitor's own understanding towards one sensible for biodiversity loss. This would have required visitors to change their perception of the exhibition, but perception is not neutral but reflects the sense of what is important for the perceiver: seeing is an activity rather than a pure input device and depends on the prior modes of appreciation and expectations[68]. Thus, zoos did not overcome but reinforced their historical meaning as entertainment institutions fuelled by their ongoing consumer-orientation and the joyful memories many had from their childhood. This is also highlighted by studies in the US from 1981, where zoo visitors could be identified as being considerably affective for wild animals but with very little knowledge about ecological issues, and the UK in 1995, where a majority of subjects thought that biodiversity was a type of washing powder[69]. It seems then that conservation measures were not more than false promises because zoos remained optimised for human consumption since their opening. The natural world remained something observable and fun.

This impression is further supported by the arising "immersive" designs that were more in line with the aesthetics of naturalism: enclosures represented animals in a habitat close to their ecological niche while removing all human traces from the visitor's view. Thus, the complex order of nature in contrast to the human-controlled structuring from the previous century should be emphasised[70]. However, the immersion was achieved with artificial flora and sound effects, and the degree of the animal's wildness was still modelled following consumer expectations, with the exemplary difference that instead of small enclosures or chains, temperature zones and spots lights now guaranteed the visibility of animals in their enclosures[71]. Hence, zoos attempted to tell a story of authenticity though remaining theatres of inauthenticity[72]: the hyperrealistic nature and enforced encounters which they presented to the consumer diminished the possible appreciation of real nature, and the illusion of humans being external to nature nourished the Western self-understanding as independent beings. Instead of internalising the existential bonds between humans and animals, the visitor still fell into the trap of seeing humans as having transcended nature and remaining masters of the world.

[68]Crary and Gruen (2022, p. 117) and Fraser and Switzer (2021, p. 85).
[69]Hancocks (2001, p. 156)
[70]Hanson (2002, p. 175)
[71]Braverman (2011, p. 825)
[72]Mullan and Marvin (1999, p. 130)

Conclusion

This essay presented zoos as phenomena of Western urbanisation that constantly struggled with their motives and representation of nature, and I attempted to show how this variably constructed nature correlated with the change of visitor's self-identity with regard to it.

The opening of the first zoological gardens by the bourgeoisie coincided with the end of the enlightenment period where scientific curiosity and rational superiority were imperatives. The new class demarcated itself from lower social classes and nature through absolute control and self-imposed structuring of the natural world, both exemplified in their zoos. With increasing industrialisation, zoos as urban places also served as symbols for the triumph of city over land and thus, helped construct the identities of the modern urban dweller. The transformation of nature to a cultural symbol, however, also removed its otherness which was previously used as a sign of aristocratic power. Further cultural appropriation happened with the opening of zoos for the general public during the late 19^{th} century which made anthropocentrism a mass-phenomenon.

The increased urbanisation amplified the distance between modern citizens and nature but also intensified nostalgic feelings toward wilderness. As a result, revolutionary designs emerged trying to profit from the new interest by simulating nature. However, designers were trapped with the prevalent picture of Eden-like nature and emerging consumerism: instead of offering a more authentic picture of nature, the normalisation of a human-centred identity was amplified through transforming animals into cultural captives as individual stars. Hence, entertainment became the main incentive for going to zoos whereas scientific or educational purposes were eclipsed.

After all, the efforts of the animal welfare and environmental movements of the 1960s forced zoos to adapt their presentation. The resulting immersion design should strengthen the human relationship with nature to raise awareness for endangered species and the loss of biodiversity. However, I tried to show that this endeavour was unsuccessful due to the continuous consumer orientation instead of criticising this way of consumption that is at its core dependent on delimiting and utilising nature as shear means.

Overall, I attempted to show that zoos exhibited the idea of domination and marginalisation of nature to their visitors over the course of two centuries. Thus, zoos contributed to the loss of the otherness of nature for Western societies which fuels the current situation where most of us cannot see plants and animals as more than objects in a human-only world. Based on the presented material, I also doubt that zoos can present authentic nature in the future as long as they follow the premises of modern capitalism where

the constant visibility of animals and an idealised picture of nature are demanded. The relationships required for engaging people to overhaul their identity towards one of co-dependency on nature need them to have real encounters outside a zoo and consumer setting, and thus, free from illusions.

This essay can be seen as the first step towards a full account of culture-nature relations under the lens of the history of consumption. Further research could focus on questions about specific groups within zoo settings, for example, how the selves of children are shaped by zoo visits. Also, other channels of consumption, like animal toys and films featuring nature, could be analysed to bring the relationship into a broader consumer perspective.

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