

Guest Editor's Introduction: Seeing, Looking, Watching, Observing Nonhuman Animals

A recent special edition of *Society & Animals* [Vol. 9 (3), 2001] was dedicated to the representation of nonhuman animals and how the processes of such representations relate to the human experience of nonhuman animals. Baker (2001), in his introduction, commented that recent books on animal representations “acknowledge the extent to which human understandings of animals is shaped by representations rather than by direct experience of them” (p. 190). This special edition, to some extent, deals with representations of animals. Such representations emerge in the main, however, from a direct experience of—or a direct encounter with—an embodied, living animal that begins with looking. The animals in all these articles are looked at. The central concerns of all the authors are with (a) how they are looked at, (b) how the nature of that looking at is fundamental to how the animals are responded to, and (c) the creation of the relationships that humans have with the animals.

Perhaps, inevitably, any interpretation of the visual encounter with animals must engage with Berger's

(1980) essay, the title of which poses the direct question “Why look at animals”? Berger offers such a challenging and critical view of the place of animals in the modern western world that this essay cannot be ignored.

Central to Berger’s (1980) concerns is his view that, as a consequence of industrialization and the development of capitalism in Western Europe and North America, animals have “disappeared” from the modern world or have become both physically marginal within that world and culturally marginal to the people who inhabit that world. His main point of comparison is with the centrality of animals in the daily worlds of pastoralists and peasants. There is no space to engage with his particular arguments about the ways in which companion animals (pets) and animals in the zoo, a major part of his essay, are looked at. However, it is worth commenting on his notion of “disappearance.” It is even more important, in the context of this introduction, to comment on the nature of looking when it is directed at animals.

The Idea of Disappearance

Have animals disappeared from our modern, post-modern or, more simply, our present world? At a global level, the answer would have to be that they are still present. Many peoples in the world live in close proximity with wildlife or with domesticated livestock who are an essential source of food. Some animals provide the indispensable means for working agricultural land or for transport; others, classed as vermin or pests, intrude into their dwellings. Berger’s (1980) focus, however, is more restricted. He is writing about Western Europe and North America, but even here the idea of disappearance needs to be questioned. The wild spaces of the natural world are still home to a wide range of animals, even though many species have disappeared. The agricultural spaces of the countryside continue to be inhabited by animals there to service human needs.

Perhaps what is significant is that fewer people in the present world have the chance, the reason, or the wish to encounter these animals. They are not an immediate part of their lives but are there to be encountered should people wish to travel to see them. Certainly, in terms of the lived world of the cities that are home to most people in the west, animals—apart from pets—do not figure as a significant part of their daily lives. They are, however, pre-

sent, and cities teem with wildlife, even though people scarcely pay attention to many of these creatures.

A key issue here is that of attention and the nature of the attention paid to animals. Few people have close relationships with animals in terms of their work or livelihoods, but the desire to encounter animals has emerged in different ways as significant entertainment or leisure time activities. Perhaps it is true, as Lippit (2000) argues, that animals are more likely to appear as representations in various media than they are as embodied creatures in the habitats of humans; or, as Burt (2002) neatly has synthesized the Berger/Lippit perspectives, “modernity dissolves the empirical animal into pure spectrality” (p. 26).

However, the very proliferation of such representations in wildlife documentaries and films featuring animals attests to a popular interest in animals. Setting aside the intellectual minefield of what constitutes a “real” animal, people do seek new ways of encountering living animals. Ecotourism, safaris, and other wildlife-watching trips are increasingly popular, bird watching attracts thousands of people, visits to zoos, aquariums and other wildlife centers have not lost their popularity, many farms now open their gates to visitors, and most of those certainly are going to see animals rather than crops (Franklin, 1999). People, it seems, want to see animals. But what of this seeing, this looking at animals?

Why Look at Animals?

Berger (1980) asks, “Why look at animals”? I suggest that he does not fully answer his own question, he really does not tell us “why” people look at animals, nor does he tell us much about what people gain from looking at animals—although he does tell us what he thinks animals lose from being reduced to a spectacle and being looked at.

“Why” cannot be answered here, but I think it is worth problematizing “look” and “looking” as an introduction to the articles that follow. Berger (1980) approaches the visual encounter between humans and animals as though this were a mono-visual or one-dimensional process between the subject and the object and that to look or looking is the only mode of visual engagement.

This is not to suggest that he implies a unified form of seeing or looking in all contexts.

From Berger's (1980) article, we can understand that a peasant does not look at his pig in the same way that a zoo visitor looks at a lion, nor does a hunter look at a deer in the same way that a companion animal guardian looks at her dog or his cat. Are they though, simply looking? To look is only one form of visual encounter and, when it comes to animals, to use a phrase of Berger (1972) from another context, there are many "ways of seeing"². Humans look at animals in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes, and the different ways of looking and seeing both imply and generate different relationships between them and animals. A consideration of "how" people look at animals perhaps offers a way of making the "why" more socially and culturally complex and nuanced.

Some Visual Terms

Once again, it is impossible to consider fully the implications of different modes of the visual process. However, I would like to introduce some visual terms commonly used to describe how living animals are viewed and to suggest that some, more than others, are more resonant of the particularity of different visual encounters between humans and animals. The terms—to see, look, observe, and watch—are richly elaborated in English: Together, their definitions take up more than 20 pages in the full Oxford English Dictionary (OED).³ All can be used to describe how humans engage with animals through sight. Seeing, however, is not the same as observing; watching can be distinguished from observing and from looking, which, in turn, implies something more than seeing.

I suggest that seeing is the most basic and the least intense visual engagement with animals. The *OED* offers "to perceive (light, colour, external objects and their movements) with the eyes" as a primary definition of "see." To see an animal suggests that the viewer is doing little more than registering the fact that the animal is present and visible. I can see a "squirrel in the tree." The viewer notices the animal, but this scarcely, or only minimally, is an activity.

A more active engagement comes with, "to look" or "looking." Activity and

direction are key aspects of the many definitions of the terms in the *OED*—“action or part of an action of looking,” “a particular direction of the eyes,” “to direct one’s eyes,” “to apply one’s sight.” This suggests that the viewer is engaged in something more purposeful than mere seeing. “I am looking at a squirrel in the tree.” Here, the squirrel is a focus of attention, with “at” indicating a visual movement toward it. Although there is here a focus on the squirrel, this “looking at” still is only a general visual encounter that does not suggest or indicate any specific purpose to the looking.

“Watching” is a more attentive viewing than looking and it also indicates that time is being given to the process; one does not watch in a moment. The *OED* refers to “the continued act of watching,” to “observing with continuous attention” and “to keep a person or thing in sight.” Watching is an event in which the viewer is alert to the animal. “I am watching a squirrel in the tree.” The viewing is active and clearly focused on the animal. In some ways, it is difficult to distinguish watching from observing, but watching does suggest a reason for viewing the animal.

“Observing” is a concentrated, attentive, viewing guided by a particular interest. Once again from the *OED*, “attend to, pay attention to,” “with regard to attention,” to take notice of, to be conscious of seeing,” “to mark.” Here, the viewer is interested in the animal, both actively and purposefully: “I am observing a squirrel in the tree.”

This form of viewing clearly indicates a steady and focused attention, and it implies that the behavior, rather than the mere presence, of the animal is of special interest. It also is highly significant that taking note of the process of viewing is part of this activity. It is an interrogative or investigative viewing that in some way is recorded. The *OED* certainly makes a link to a scientific perspective—“to take notice of scientifically, especially to examine (phenomena) as they are presented to the senses without the aid of experiment; to perceive or learn by scientific inspection.”

By separating out these different ways of viewing animals, I do not wish to suggest that any particular act of viewing will be in one mode and one mode only. Seeing might lead to looking at and looking at to watching intently. However, because they suggest a movement along a continuum from unengaged to engaged, it is useful to distinguish between them—if we are interested

in how people view animals and for what purpose. Different people will view different animals in different ways on different occasions; each of these will involve different intensities of viewing with different intent, interests, knowledge, and purpose informing the act. It also is important to distinguish between what might be termed “passive” and “active” viewing. In passive viewing, a person with no particular interest in animals might see a squirrel and stop for a while to watch the squirrel, but that is the limit of that person’s engagement. The person probably would not know whether the squirrel was male or female, young or old, sick, or in good health.

Perhaps a person notices a particularly colorful bird. Never having seen such a bird before, the person may be unable to name the bird. An active viewer, however, will use sight in more specialized ways for particular purposes. People who seek out visual encounters of this kind with animals would include bird watchers and other animal watchers, certain ecotourists, and those on wildlife safaris. Perhaps the most complex visual encounters would be experienced by those who have a professional interest in animals and whose daily lives intersect with them: livestock breeders, farmers and herders; wildlife managers and zookeepers; natural history documentary film makers and artists; vermin control officers and hunters; veterinary surgeons; animal trainers; medical researchers, field biologists, zoologists, pet breeders, and breeders of animals—such as horses and greyhounds—used for racing and other competitive sports. All these people need to look at animals in very particular ways, ways that are part of complex relationships with them.

With this emphasis on the visual encounter with living, embodied, animals, I am emphasizing the direct experience of the empirical animal rather than encountering an image or the spectral animal (Burt, 2002). However, this is not to suggest that there can be anything approaching a pure or unmediated viewing of animals. All such viewing is shaped by social and cultural factors, and an animal before us never can be simply a neutral presence: A squirrel is represented the moment when recognized by us as a squirrel. Although a living animal never is merely or solely a representation; the animal is, in the moment of our encounter, always a social and cultural animal. There is no asocial or acultural platform on which we can stand to see an animal as that animal really is. It is important to attend to these social and cultural perspectives if we are to understand how and why people look at animals and

the practices that result from such viewing and if we are to understand what happens in the encounter between humans and animals when animals are present and not merely represented.

Authors' Diverse Ways of Viewing Animals

Each essay in this collection considers particular and diverse ways of viewing animals—those of the hunter, the cattle breeder, the racehorse buyer, and the zoo visitor. They are ways of looking related both to work and leisure practices and that focus on both domesticated animals and animals in the wild. In some cases, the viewing is directed toward a particular, individual animal; in others, it is concerned with the animal as a representative of a type. With all, it is highly significant where the viewing takes place; all are active and purposeful forms of viewing.

Brower's Essay

The animals in Brower's "Trophy Shots: Early North American Animal Photography and the Display of Masculine Prowess" had to be looked for and then carefully watched and observed if the photographer or the hunter was to "take" them successfully with his camera or gun. Brower explores how a pioneer of wildlife photography equated the practice with that of hunting. Such photography "used all the skills of hunting and added still more demands; thus its claim to be a sport." The essence of this sportsmanship was not just marksmanship—being able to hit the target—but woodcraft—the skill of being able to get close to the target undetected, to see without being seen.

To take a shot with a camera demanded more of the photographer than of the hunter because of the need to be "within closer range of his timid game than his brother of the gun need obtain." In the successful, early wildlife photograph, "the image preserves the moment of the animal's capture," and the initial, direct view of the animal is transformed into an image that can be looked at in a different manner—a trophy of the skill of the camera hunter. Brower contrasts this early wildlife photography with sports hunting in which the trophy is of another order, a cultural symbol that has "an indexical relation

to the activity that (it) represents,” for without the activity of the hunter, without killing the animals, there are no trophies. The trophies, at least at the level of surface, are the animals fixed and mounted for display—not to be looked at or admired for what they were but to be seen for what they are now—memorials to the manliness of their hunters.

Grasseni's Essay

The focus of Grasseni's "Designer Cows: The Practice of Cattle between Skill and Standardization" is the Swiss Brown cow and that cow's place both in the economy of working dairy farms in the foothills of the Italian Alps and in the exhibition space of cattle shows. Grasseni discusses the breeding culture of the Brown cow, centering on the primacy of the skilled—but differently configured—eye of the dairy farmer and the breed expert.

To produce the economic commodity, milk, the milk producer first must be produced. This production, the breeding for an ideal type, begins with an experienced and accomplished observation of cows. The observing eye is directed at the "look," the form or shape, of the animal in order to make instrumental judgments about the cow's productive and reproductive potential. As Grasseni argues, if farmers are to maintain economically viable herds, the traditional skills of visualization no longer are enough. The "impact of agri-biotechnology quickly has shaped the farmer's "perception of animal nature." "Standard practices, expert advice, and biotechnology now mediate a breeder's skill in knowing his animals and predicting their productive capacity." Here, different ways of seeing literally shape each generation of cows.

Cassidy's Essay

In "Falling in Love with Horses: The International Thoroughbred Auction," Cassidy deals with another highly bred, pedigree animal, the racehorse—the elite of whom are the most expensive animals in the world. Others are at the center of a multi-million pound leisure industry; yet, the scientific techniques of artificial insemination that now produce the Swiss Browns of the Italian Alps have no place in the breeding and selection of racehorses.⁴

Decisions—which mare to breed with which stallion or which young horse is a potential race winner—are based on the visual skills of the bloodstock

agent, who is the focus of Cassidy's essay. In a world of betting, this is a huge, professional gamble. The agent only has sight and experience to guide him. Through his viewing of pedigree charts and his observation of the physical conformation and the movement of the animal present before him, he must see a future animal.

Cassidy explains that little is written about how to look at young horses and "selecting yearlings on this basis is not thought to be something that one might learn, or teach. It is a gift." Those who are talented in selecting horses are described as having a "great eye," the highest accolade in this business. Cassidy nicely captures the essence of this skill or quality of sight by likening it to classic anthropological notions of divination, for the agent must see things that are not visible to others. From visual clues the agent must divine the inner horse. The vision of a "great eye" is "not a quality that can be reduced to "seeing," at least not in the sense of "seeing" an objective set of properties . . . It is a mystical property that refers to their sense of the yearling as a complete entity, and this depends not only on the physical properties of the horse but also on the horse's spirit, intelligence, or heart."

Acampora's Essay

With Acampora's "Zoöscopy Unmasked: The Pornography of Preservation," we return to wild animals. In contrast, however, to the hunters and photographers of the first essay who ventured into the wilderness to encounter animals in their natural habitat, these wild animals are contained within spaces of human habitation where they easily can be seen.

Acampora's account of zoos is of a different order from the forms of viewing discussed in the other essays in the collection in that it is a strongly argued case for the wrongness of the display and the inappropriateness of the viewing. He is critical of the zoos' "oppressive display/presentation" and the intrusive viewing that he likens provocatively to the visual encounter at the heart of pornography and suggests, "we find in both cases fetishes of the exotic, underlying fear of Nature, fantasies of illicit or impossible encounter and a powerful presumption of mastery and control." Part of his criticism is that looking at animals in the zoo de-natures and trivializes the animals whose sole purpose for existence is reduced to that of being "resources for human pleasure and entertainment."

Acampora is not content simply to critique the visual encounter between humans and animals in the context of the zoo. He concludes his essay with a discussion of the possibilities of transforming “zoöscopic practices” in all their manifestations that are driven by “arrogant eyes which organize everything seen with reference to themselves and their own interests” (Frye, 1983, p. 67) and with suggestions for creating the conditions for new, benign, ways of seeing.

Conclusion

These essays focus on how humans see, look at, watch, and observe animals. Each one offers an account of the grounded practices of people engaging with animals for particular purposes in specific contexts. It never is the case that “the” human encounters “the” animal; always, there is social and cultural mediation. If we seek to understand fully the complexities of the relationships people form with animals, it is vital, therefore, to have such case studies of how people look—in highly differentiated ways—at living, embodied, present animals. Furthermore, case studies of this sort are an essential basis if we wish to develop more general and comparative analyses and interpretations of human and animal relationships.

Notes

- ¹ Correspondence should be sent to Garry Marvin, School of Business, Social Sciences and Computing, Roehampton University, 80 Roehampton Lane, London SW15 5SL, UK. Email: g.marvin@roehampton.ac.uk
- ² See John Berger (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC/Penguin.
- ³ Phrases and quotations attributed to *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* are taken from *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition) Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK.
- ⁴ See Rebecca Cassidy (2002). *The sport of kings: Kinship, class and thoroughbred breeding in newmarket*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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