Apes and Elephants: In Search of Sensation in the Tropical Imaginary

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This paper will explore the tropical exotic in relation to the widespread European fascination with tropical animals exhibited in zoos throughout the long nineteenth century. Zoos became places where human animals could experience the chill of a backbone shiver as they came face to face with the animal/other. It will examine the establishment of the first zoos in relation to Harriet Ritvo's argument that their major imperative was one of classification and control. On the one hand, the zoo fulfilled the public's desire for wild, exotic creatures while, on the other hand, the zoo reassured the public that its major purpose was control of the natural world encapsulated by the stereotype of tropical excess. I will argue that these various places of exhibition created an uncanny zone in which the European subject was able to encounter its animal self while reaffirming an anthropocentric world view.

Throughout the long nineteenth century colonial dignitaries, administrators, and businessmen captured large numbers of animals from tropical zones and shipped them back to populate European zoos, travelling menageries and fairgrounds. Expansive and well-stocked zoos signified Europe's imperial might and its ability to impose order on the natural world. In the popular imagination, the tropics constituted an uncanny zone, which represented everything that was antithetical to the European world's new obsession with order, classification and control. In a Foucauldian sense the zoo became a place, an apparatus, designed to establish a system of power relations between human and animal in which the wild animal body was to be disciplined until rendered docile. In particular, the civilized European subject was both attracted to yet repelled by nonhuman animals, which, in the wake of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, reminded humanity of its controversial origins in a primitive past. To impose order and exercise control over the natural world went some way towards separating out the human from the non-human animal. Not all however regarded the tropics, in their great variety, as places to be colonized and subjected to order. The French naïve painter Henri Rousseau painted tigers, apes and elephants at the Jardin des Plantes, not as they appeared to him, but as he imagined they might have been in the wild tropical jungles of their birthplace. Although he never left France, and most of his works were painted in front of the caged animals at the Jardin des Plantes, and in the large greenhouse, Rousseau had become famous for his paintings of tropical jungles and wild creatures. In some canvases he even imagined a phantasmatic jungle scene in which human and animal lived together in harmony. To the surrealists of the early twentieth century, Rousseau's paintings represented a deep-seated human yearning for an Edenic past. Andre Masson captured his joyous response to the tropics in his work entitled *Vegetal Delirium* of 1925. To the nineteenth century European subject, such 'delirium' was both alluring yet confronting. The newly established zoos of the period were places where these conflicting forces held sway, but ultimately fell apart when the threat of animality grew too strong, undermining what the surrealists saw as the façade of civilization.

It is instructive to look back to the period when the surrealist movement was in its heyday and to consider the place that the tropics occupied in their lives. Significantly some members of the surrealist avant-garde came not from Paris but from tropical lands. In 1996 Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski edited a collection of essays entitled, *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean***.** The essays and articles, most of which had never before been translated, were written during the years 1932-1946 when a group of Caribbean intellectuals who studied at the Sorbonne engaged in a series of debates with the French surrealists about the tropics, colonialism, the French civilizing mission, art, voodoo and negritude. The surrealists whose refusal to accept the values of the French civilizing mission won the admiration of these Caribbean writers, namely Réne Ménil, Aime Césaire and Suzanne Césaire, who on returning to Martinique and published a journal, *Tropiques*, whose first edition appeared in 1941.

The essays are quite remarkable, not only because of their focus on Caribbean surrealism but also because of the discourse on the tropics that runs through them. In her essay 'A Civilisation's Discontent' Suzanne Césaire describes how French colonialism has imposed "a system of 'civilization' and a 'style'" on the black people brought from Ethiopia, from one tropical zone to another (in Richardson & Fijalkowski, 97).This is a system of "Repression, suffering, sterility". (98) She sees surrealism as giving back to these people their potential, their possibilities. "It is inspiring to imagine these tropical lands being restored at last to their inner truth, the lasting and fertile accord of man and the land. Under the sign of the plant" (99). Earlier she described the Martiniquan who is Ethiopian as "the plant-man" (97):

> Like the plant, he abandons himself to the rhythm of universal life. He makes no effort to dominate nature….I am not saying that he makes the plants grow; I am saying that he grows, that he lives like a plant. (97)

In their essay "Creole Dialogue" André Breton and André Masson also encounter the tropics through its vegetation – in particular the tropical rain forest. Masson writes:

> The forest envelops us: we knew the forest and her spells before we arrived. Do you remember a drawing I called 'Vegetal Delirium'? That delirium is here, we can touch and participate in it. We are one of those layered trees that holds a miniature marsh in the hollows of its branches, with all its parasitic vegetation grafted onto its central trunk: rising, falling, active, passive, and rigged out from top to bottom with star-flowered lianas. … It is inevitable that they [surrealist landscapes] should find a resolution in those lands where nature has not been tamed at all. (Breton & Masson in Richardson & Fijalkowski, 185)

To Breton and Masson the tropical forest signifies mystery and entanglement – this is where "nature has not been tamed at all". Further into the essay, they discuss Rousseau's *La Charmeuse de serpents* ('The Snake Charmer') in which a woman, regarded as a black Eve, charms the wild animals with her flute; they refer to the painting's "mystery and excitement" (186). They wonder at Rousseau's vision – his paintings are just like the scenes they see everyday when they walk through the jungle. They ask themselves if the artist might be a "medium" (187). "In fact one could argue that Henri Rousseau was the repository of dreams and ancient desires. The longing for an Edenic life is striking in him" (187).

Like Rousseau, the majority of Parisians also learnt about the tropics from visiting the botanical gardens and reading books. Unlike Rousseau, however, it appears that not all were interested in charming the wild animals into friendly companionship. Many visitors to the zoos in Paris, London and Germany wanted to confront the dark side of the tropics, to feel the thrill of danger, to experience the ancient reflex that Charles Darwin wrote about – the backbone shiver. Max Ernst has captured this sense of darkness and danger in his *Joie de Vivre* (1936), which he painted on his return from the temple ruins at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Ernst depicts the jungle as a Darwinian space, dark and fertile with a strange menacing creature hidden in the lush vegetation. To Darwin the tropics epitomized 'entanglement'. On the final page of *The Origin of Species* (1859) Darwin wrote:

> It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth. (913)

According to Robert McNab, Ernst captured the entangled nature of the tropical jungles in his use of the term 'naturgefühl': "To be entirely surrounded by plant life, by trees, moss, dead wood, one he defined as *naturgefühl*, nature-feeling or contact with nature." (2004, 169)

Modernity, Sensation & the Zoo

Ben Singer, in his essay 'Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism', writes that a number of overlapping ideas have been proposed in order to define modernity. These include modernity as a moral and political concept, in which "all norms and values are open to question"; a cognitive concept with a focus on "instrumental rationality" and a socioeconomic concept, referring to "the array of technological and social changes" that reached a "kind of critical mass near the end of the nineteenth century" (in Charney & Schwartz, 1995, 72). Singer then argues that there is a fourth concept, which should be addressed. This is the idea that modernity has changed the nature of subjective experience and is "characterized by the physical and perpetual shocks of the modern urban environment" (72). He refers to the writings on this subject of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin. Singer argues that:

> Modernity implied a phenomenal world – a specifically urban one – that was markedly quicker, more chaotic, fragmented, and disorienting than in previous phases of human culture. Amid the unprecedented turbulence of the big city's traffic, noise, billboards, street signs, jostling crowds, window displays, and advertisements, the individual faced a new intensity of sensory stimulation. …Modernity, in short, was conceived of as a barrage of *stimuli*. As Simmel put it in his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" … modernity involved an "intensification of nervous stimulation." (72-73)

One of the most popular places to visit in the mid to late nineteenth century was the zoo. It is significant then that a number of the great thriving, bustling modern cities such as London, Paris and Berlin all located their zoos, not in the countryside, but close to the heart of their turbulent

metropolitan centers. In brushing up alongside the evolving cities of the modern world, and its new civilized citizens, the zoo with its captive tropical animals and cultivated gardens, existed in an uneasy relationship of stark contrast. In his book on the history of zoos, *A Different Nature*, David Hancocks writes that there was much discomfort in the nineteenth century about "people's place in Nature and their relationships with other animals" (2001, 28). Tennyson wrote that Nature indeed was "red in tooth and claw" (quoted in Hancocks, 2001, 28). People debated the reasons why God had not created a perfect world.

> William King, archbishop of Dublin, explained for example that whereas God could have created a world free of predacious carnivores, this would have resulted in a world less full of life. (28)

Hancocks points out that although there was much discomfort about people's place in Nature:

> It was a discomfort that would later be salved by the enormous public pleasure in using urban botanical and zoological gardens as a retreat and for perceiving them as microcosms of Nature in the cities of the nineteenth century. (28-9)

These areas offered a retreat from the towns and cities which "rapidly became polluted, full of stench, clamor and disease" (29). There was a movement back to Naturalness in landscaping (31).

In the England of 1800, however, when it was becoming clear that many wild species were disappearing, the first stirrings arose of a belief that Nature was worthy of respect and care for its own intrinsic value and that wild animals should be protected simply for their own sake. William Blake decided, "Everything that lives is Holy" (31).

The modern zoo attracted crowds of visitors for a variety of complex reasons. The zoo offered a place of retreat, an opportunity to learn about nature, and the possibility of experiencing the thrill of an encounter with wild and exotic animals which might awaken 'dreams and ancient desires'. Although the Zoological gardens offered a chance for the modern individual to gaze upon the beauty of nature, this was not a view of uncontrolled nature, as in the tropical jungle, but rather of nature controlled – landscaped, designed and cultivated, its great wild creatures locked in cages and compounds throughout, their presence signifying, at a subliminal level, humankind's evolutionary history. To Singer's four interconnected ideas that represent modernity, I propose to add a fifth. The changed nature of subjective life in modernity, particularly after Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, is also characterized by a new ambivalence about what it meant to be human. The modern subject looked back to wild nature with fascination and dread and forward to a new future with triumph and trepidation. The new public zoos, which were central to the imperial, scientific and cultural project of modernity, came to epitomize these contradictory desires.

Gardens of Intelligence

The first zoos were not public places but private menageries, which existed as far back as ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt and China. Around three thousand years ago, the founder of the Chou

dynasty in China, Wen-Wang, created the first animal reserve, which was popularly referred to as a 'Garden of Intelligence'.

> It was a peaceful, sacred place called, to the delight of modern zoo professionals, the Garden of intelligence. As kingdoms became established across Asia, the libraries, museums, botanical gardens, and zoos in court palaces served as repositories of knowledge of the known world. (Hancocks, 8)

This fascinating term emphasizes the association between the first zoos as places, which were emblematic of a civilized society and as places to study nature, zoology and science. In medieval Europe some wealthy individuals, royal personages and local municipalities maintained collections of wild animals. The oldest existing known zoo, which was at Schönbrunn in Vienna, developed from a Habsburg menagerie established in 1752. The Vienna zoo was opened to the public in 1779. There was also a menagerie in the Tower of London which existed from 1252-1834. In 1793 in revolutionary Paris the Jardin des Plantes was established as part of the Muséum d'histoire naturelle. It is located in Paris in the botanical gardens close to the River Seine. The Jardin des Plantes was the world's first national zoological garden and the first that was open and free to the general public. Its first inhabitants consisted of the animals, which were left alive at the Versailles Menagerie, after the majority had been butchered in the first days of the Revolution. Other animals were added from travelling circuses. According to Hancocks, the animals at Paris zoo suffered from neglect and the establishment fell into decline until 1838 when Isidore Saint-Hilaire became the new director. During the first three decades of the nineteenth century it built up an impressive collection of exotic animals, the largest in Europe. The design of the royal menagerie at Versailles, created by Louis X111 in 1624, signified the epitome of order and symmetry, influencing European zoo design for two centuries.

> A perfect example of the desire to master and exclude wilderness, its radial symmetry manifested the French academic approach to planning: the orderly display of animals showing the superiority of civilized humanity and the formal geometry of its plan revealing the finesse of its creator. (Hancocks, 34)

The London zoo is the oldest scientific zoo in the world. Managed by the London Zooological Society, it opening in 1828 for scientific study and was later opened to the public in 1847. The London zoo was hugely successful from the beginning. It not only developed a new approach to zoo design and landscaping, with its English gardens, but it also created a new level of public interest. It emphasized the importance of family entertainment combined with the opportunity to learn about science and nature. Hancocks writes that it "was in essence the world's first zoological garden" (42). Situated on the northern boundary of Regent's Park, it too exists within the larger Metropolitan area. The London zoo was the first zoo to construct a Reptile house (1849), first public Aquarium (1853), first insect house (1881) and first children's zoo (1936). As zoo officials thought that tropical animals would not manage in London's chilly weather, the animals were initially all kept indoors. It was not until 1902 that the animals were brought outdoors where they were healthier and happier.

The other major European Zoo is the Berlin Zoo, the oldest zoo in Germany. Opening in 1844 it is located in Berlin's Tiergarten – also close to the main Metropolitan area. With the appointment

of a new director, Heinrich Bodinus, in 1869 the decision was made to create fabulous new forms of architecture. The zoo established an antelope mosque, monkey palace, elephant temple, and castle for the carnivores. By 1939 it had the most important collection of animals in the world almost all of which perished in the bombings of World War II. Today it is considered to have one of the most diverse collections of species in the world exhibiting over 1,500 different species and around 19,500 animals. It is the most visited zoo in Europe with up to 3 million visitors a year.

As an entity the various Zoos of the fine de siècle period stood between two worlds: the nineteenth century world still very much a colonial period and the early twentieth century world of modernity, with change taking place in all aspects of life. These zoos and their lush parks and gardens which housed captive lions, tigers, elephants and apes represented a strange place which spoke of lush tropical jungles and humanity's primitive past while promising new scientific knowledge about man's place in the greater scheme of things. The zoos, however, did little to salve people's discomfort about, what Hancocks described as their "place in Nature and their relationships with other animals" (28). The zoo also became a place where the civilised subject might contemplate his or her evolutionary origins. Had man truly evolved from his primeval origins or was he in danger of devolving? What was the true nature of civilized man?

Charles Darwin at the London Zoo – 1838

Charles Darwin published his three great works on evolution in the second half of the nineteenth century: *The Origin of Species* (1859), *The Descent of Man* (1871) and *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). In *The Descent of Man,* Darwin finally discussed human evolution and notoriously argued for a common ancestor between human and ape. He wrote that despite his array of "exalted powers – Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin" (1871, 689). In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin argued that human and animal alike expressed many of the same emotions and that these too had evolved in human and animal species alike. His aim was to demonstrate that the mind, as well has the body, was a creation of evolution. Darwin's theories were so controversial they led to much heated debate at the time – debates which continue to the present day. The zoo of the fine-de siècle period offered the public a new experience and sensation – the uncanny shock of recognizing humanity's face in the face of the ape. The zoo became a place where the curious visitor might contemplate humanity's primeval origins in tropical forests of Africa while embracing a new modern future and a new human subject.

On 28 March 1838, Charles Darwin visited the London Zoo to see Jenny, the first orangutan acquired by the zoo. It was his first sight of an ape and he was deeply moved by the experience. Darwin visited Jenny on two more occasions. He described Jenny and the range of emotions she expressed in his notebook:

> Let man visit Ouranoutang in domestication, hear expressive whine, see its intelligence when spoken [to]; as if it understands every word said - see its affection. - to those it knew. - see its passion & rage, sulkiness, & very actions of despair; ... and then let him boast of his proud preeminence ... Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work,

> worthy the interposition of a deity. More humble and I believe true to consider him created from animals. (In Barrett et al., 1987, 300*)*

Not everyone shared Darwin's humility in the face of nature. In 1842 Queen Victoria visited the London Zoo where she sighted the second orangutan, also named Jenny, which she mistook for a male. She commented: "The Orang Outang is too wonderful . . . he is frightfully, and painfully, and disagreeably human" (quoted in Jones, 2011, 1). The idea of evolution was not new. It was Darwin's meticulous research that offered the first credible evidence supporting this view. Seventeen years after this visit Darwin published *The Origin of Species* which as Steve Jones points out provided "the theory that established the Queen's and his own kinship to Jenny, to every inmate of the Zoo, and to all inhabitants of earth" (1).

Frémiet's *Gorilla Carrying off a Woman* (1887)

Darwin's theory of a close kinship between human and animal, combined with his theory of sexual selection, led to fears among civilized Europe of bestiality and devolution – two topics which excited and stimulated the imagination. Many art-works, plays and novels of the period, which explored these themes, set out to shock and excite the public. One narrative in particular stood out – this was the belief that the male ape sexually desired white women.

The discovery of the great apes stirred the human imagination, leading to a near obsession with the nature of the relationship between human and ape. In 1859 Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* served to further fuel this interest. Although gorillas are gentle creatures they had been widely represented as savage meat-eating monsters that harboured sexual designs for the female of the human species. Midas Dekkers documents "the ardent desire" of male apes for white women, which was public knowledge in Europe well before Darwin published his book (1994, 44).

The French sculptor, Emmanuel Frémiet, caused much controversy when he exhibited his work *Gorilla Carrying off a Negress* (1859). The statue was remarkable for its accuracy and life-like depiction of the ape. Frémiet began his career at the Museum of Natural History, which was attached to the Jardin des Plantes, which according to curator, Ted Gott, was not only a national centre of learning but also a place of popular entertainment (Gott, 2005, 18). Frémiet's statue depicts a gorilla carrying off a black woman. According to Gott, "The sculpture not only depicted a murder, but also seemed to allude to ravishment" (16). The statue was installed "in a niche behind heavy green velvet curtains" (16). It soon became a *cause célébre* and it was a 'must' for visitors to the Salon to part the curtains in order to glimpse the work, which both shocked and probably titillated many. Eventually it was declared offensive to public morality and destroyed. It made no difference that the gorilla was a female. The public craved sensation which was amply provided by the clear suggestion of a sexual relationship between the great apes of tropical African and African women.

In 1887, Frémiet revisited his original work with a second version. This was even more sensational and shocking. It was entitled *Gorilla Carrying off a Woman* (1887) and exhibited in Paris at the 1887 Salon. The bronze depicts a gorilla holding a struggling and naked white woman in one arm while in the other the creature holds a large stone and growls menacingly at

anyone or anything that might attempt to intervene. Frémiet won the prestigious Medal of Honour for his work. Frémiet's sculpture created a scandal while demonstrating the desire for sensationalism which was to become a hallmark of twentieth century modernity. Once again this work demonstrates ways in which tropical animals had become such a central part in the popular discourse about the tropics, danger and devolution. Ted Gott also points out the influence of Frémiet's statue on the classic Hollywood film *King Kong* (1933) which did much to popularise the connection between the tropics, savage apes and the threat of devolution.

> Central to most of the posters issued on the release of *King Kong* in 1933 is the film's most enduring leitmotif – the fair maiden, helpless in the clutches of the monstrous, aggressive gorilla – an image that bears an uncanny ancestral resemblance to Frémiet's celebrated sculpture. (53)

Darwin's Backbone Shiver

Interestingly Singer does not specifically mention zoos as places that gave rise to new sensory stimulation and hyperstimulus. He does however refer to Coney Island which had its own zoo. "The Coney Island amusement complex opened in 1895, and other parks specializing in exotic sights, disaster spectacles, and thrilling mechanical rides". (88). Charles Darwin however was very much alive to the sensations on offer at the London zoo. In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) Darwin discussed the relationship between the experience of intense emotions and the effect these have on the body including one which he refers to as a 'peculiar effect'.

> We know that every strong sensation, emotion or excitement - extreme pain, rage, terror, joy, or the passion of love - all have a special tendency to cause the muscles to tremble; and the thrill or slight shiver which runs down the backbone and limbs of many persons when they are powerfully affected by music, seems to bear the same relation to the above trembling of the body, as a slight suffusion of tears from the power of music does to weeping from any strong and real emotion. (216)

To Darwin it appeared that both music and the arts, as well as other intense emotional experiences, have the power to cause a backbone shiver (Beer, 2009). In 1872 Darwin performed an experiment on himself at London's Zoological Gardens, which he wrote about in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. He was standing in front of the snake exhibit, determined not to flinch on seeing the great and dangerous puff adder. However when he found himself face to face with the snake he was overcome with an instant of fear.

> I put my face close to the thick glass-plate in front of a puff-adder in the Zoological Gardens, with the firm determination of not starting back if the snake struck at me; but, as soon as the blow was struck, my resolution went for nothing, and I jumped a yard or two backwards with astonishing rapidity. My will and reason were powerless against the imagination of a danger which had never been experienced. The violence of a start seems to depend partly on the vividness of the imagination, and partly on the condition, either habitual or temporary, of the nervous system. (43-44)

Darwin states that his start backwards has nothing to do with whether or not the danger is real. This is a reflex action which depends "partly on the vividness of the imagination, and partly on the condition, either habitual or temporary, of the nervous system" (44). Darwin used instances such as this to offer further evidence of our evolutionary origins or pre-history in a distant past and place – thought at the time to be Africa. Tiffany Watt-Smith writes about this episode in her article 'Darwin's Flinch: Sensation Theatre and Scientific Looking in 1872.' She points out that the Reptile House was "a place for scientific curiosity and self-scaring, a place where an eager public sought education about evolution and the opportunity to flirt with the 'slimy and creeping' dangers precariously contained behind looming glass-fronted tanks" (2010, 101). Watt-Smith makes the important observation that at the time Victorians developed a craze for 'sensation theatre' of the 1860s and early 1870s. These plays offered audiences a series of "spectacular, shocking and notorious effects" designed to meet the craving of the audience for "breath-taking, spine-tingling, hair-raising spectacles" (104). The opposite approach was scientific – those in life who could exercise an "unflinching eye" stood for the values of "self control and authority" (102). Queen Victoria was noted for her unflinching gaze. Just as theatre goers sought out plays that caused "spine-tingling, hair-raising" effects on their bodies, visitors to the London zoo, such as Charles Darwin, engaged in what Watt-Smith refers to as activities of "self-scaring". Darwin's "backbone shiver" more than adequately describes the 'violence' of his start backwards when he came face-to-face with the frightening pose of the puff adder. In this context, the nineteenth-century zoo offered a space where the upright civilised European subject (men in tightly tailored suits and women in steel and whalebone corsets) could experience an intense and momentary loss of control in the face of "spine-tingling, hair-raising spectacles" of the reptile house or big cat enclosures.

Harriet Ritvo sees as the main imperative, particularly of the nineteenth century zoo, as that of classification and control. On the one hand, the zoo fulfilled the public's desire for wild, exotic creatures while, on the other hand, the zoo reassured the public that its major purpose was control of the natural world encapsulated by the stereotype of tropical excess. In her discussion of the London zoo, Ritvo writes:

> In the menagerie itself, the effort to control the natural world was both more abstract and more sweeping. The animal creation was to be not only represented but given its proper designation and put into its proper order. The naturalists who arranged the displays were echoing the work of Adam, if not that of God; the zoo represented the triumph of human reason over the profusion and disorder of nature. (1996, 46)

Ritvo's analysis of the zoo as a space designed to represent "the triumph of human reason over the profusion and disorder of nature" is tellingly illustrated by Sir Edwin Landseer's painting of the American animal tamer Isaac Van Amburgh who was popularly known as "Van Amburgh the Brute Tamer". Van Amburgh was famous for putting his head into the mouths of lions. It is said that he beat his animals so savagely with his trademark crowbar they cowered at his feet. He even forced the lions to lick his boots in an act of complete submission. To defend his actions, he would refer to Genesis, arguing that God gave man dominion over the animals. When he travelled to London in 1839, Queen Victoria was so taken with his act she travelled to watch him perform at Drury Lane on six occasions. Landseer's painting *Isaac Van Amburgh and his*

Animals which was produced in 1839 for Queen Victoria, depicts the lion tamer casually reclining in a cage with a magnificent lion behind him, and various big cats including two tigers and two leopards also reclining alongside a white lamb that is nestled into Van Amburgh's chest. He is dressed like a Roman conqueror. A crowd of onlookers stare in through the bars of the cage in the background. John Simons interprets Van Amburgh's performances in terms of power and control.

> Van Amburgh's displays reinforced two things. The first was the right of dominion that man enjoyed by divine decree over the rest of sentient creation. The second was the dominion of western empires (it is not [by] accident that van Amburgh dressed like a Roman) over other cultures. (2012, 92)

Queen Victoria also went backstage after his performance to watch him feeding the animals. Apparently Van Amburgh starved the animals for 36 hours so that they would be particularly ferocious. It was reported that aggressive pouncing of the lion, at another cat, was so frightening that it shook the strongest nerves so much so that members of the royal party "speedily retreated". However, "the youthful queen never moved either face or foot, but with look undiverted, and still more deeply riveted, continued to gaze on the novel and moving spectacle" (Rothfels, 1992, 159). Simons refers to the "frisson the Queen must have enjoyed when she witnessed the savagery of the feeding" (93). Shows such as these were designed to scare and even terrify the spectator who would have experienced moments of intense fear combined with excitement. This however was at the expense of the animal who was often treated with great cruelty designed to bring the beast to its knees. Landseer's painting of Van Amburgh in a gladiator's outfit, lord of the wild beasts, is a far cry from the tropical freedom of Max Ernst's *La Joie de vivre*, Masson's *Vegetal Delirium* or Rousseau's sublime paintings of the tropical rainforest and its wild inhabitants. "The forest envelops us: we knew the forest and her spells before we arrived" Masson had said (185). These are the lands where "nature has not been tamed at all" (185). In Landseer's painting order and control have replaced the 'delirium' of the Tropics. Attempts however were made by various zoos to offer visitors the thrill of a backbone shiver. Some commissioned large realistic Panoramas of lush tropical settings in the animal enclosures in order to create an imaginary zone of tropical excess.

Execution of Elephants

During the course of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth there were a number of cases in which zoo animals who became uncontrollable were executed. The case of the elephant Chunee was one of the most notorious. Chunee was one of the animals in Polito's Royal Menagerie where conditions for the animals were appalling. Chunee was a large Indian elephant whose cage was so small, his keeper walked him each night along the Strand. Chunee was well known and something of a celebrity among the local inhabitants. In 1826 he unexpectedly became enraged and killed his trainer. It was discovered later that he had a diseased tusk. Eventually it was decided that Chunee, who was continually battering his cage, presumably due to the pain, must be put down. First his keeper decided to feed him poison, but the great beast refused to eat it. Next a group of soldiers armed with muskets were brought from Somerset House to shoot Chunee. Chunee's keeper ordered him to kneel. He was hit by a barrage of

musket balls – over 150 – but refused to die. Eventually his keeper armed with a harpoon attacked him. It was reported that the terrible sounds of Chunee dying in agony were worse than the loud reports of the guns. A drawing of Chunee's death which depicts the elephant bleeding profusely is notable for the impression it conveys of the depths of human cruelty. It is instructive to compare the death of Chunee in 1826 with the execution of Topsy, an elephant from Coney Island, in 1903.

The case of Topsy, which took place nearly a century later, illustrates the depth of the growing public desire for sensational experiences. Topsy was a four-ton African elephant who had performed throughout the United States for nearly thirty years. Her final years were spent at the zoo on Coney Island. Gradually becoming more and more aggressive, Topsy killed three trainers. When her current trainer, who possessed a sadistic streak, tried to feed Topsy a lighted cigarette she crushed him. At first zoo officials decided to hang Topsy; elephants had been hanged before, from the back of train carriages. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals intervened. Electrocution which had been used successfully on humans since 1890 was determined as preferable. When Thomas Edison offered to carry out the electrocution, Luna Park agreed. Edison was not just helping out. Edison who had invented the direct current found his method challenged by George Westinghouse's alternating current. Edison determined to prove his current was superior by successfully electrocuting a large beast such as an elephant. He attached specially made wooden sandals with copper electrodes to Topsy's feet and tied her between two posts. A copper wire ran from the elephant to Edison's electric light plant which discharged a 6,600 volt of electricity into her body. Edison made a short film, an early *réalités*, of Topsy's execution, entitled *Electrocution of an Elephant*; it can be viewed today on the Internet. The newspapers ran sensational articles on Topsy's electrocution. An excited public responded. A crowd of over 1,500 people paid to watch the event, which took place at Luna Park, Coney Island. Apparently, Topsy's popularity with the public increased when the news that she had killed three men was circulated. According to Lisa Cartwright "an uncontrollable, man-killing beast was a much more exciting attraction than a docile animal" (1995, 17).

The film commences as a trainer leads Topsy towards the camera. The onlookers are visible in the background. Topsy is later tied to a post. The following shot is of Topsy wearing the execution apparatus. She faces the camera, her right foot pawing the ground. Next we see smoke envelop her body. Topsy pitches forward. After 10 seconds the smoke clears revealing Topsy lying on the ground. Her limbs seem to move for 10 to 20 seconds before she becomes still. The crowd obviously desired to witness the power of a new invention, such as electricity, to kill such a large creature. In her discussion of Topsy, Mary Ann Doane refers to a report from *The New York World* of January 5, which stated that "fifteen hundred persons looked on in breathless excitement" (2002, 145). Topsy's electrocution reveals the depth of the public's need for sensation. To have the technology to electrocute such a large beast – a symbol of Africa and Mother Nature herself – was surely an indication of how far Western civilization had come in comparison to other more backward nations of the world. It also pointed to the exciting new thrills offered by amazing inventions of the modern period.

During the long nineteenth century the Tropics existed in the popular imaginary of the West as a place of exoticism and otherness – distant, luxuriant, primitive and unregulated. It was the figure of the animal, the ape in particular, that captured the Western imagination. The tropical zones in

and of themselves signified nothing; they existed as an imaginary space onto which the western subject projected his/her fantasies – fantasies about untamed nature, devolution and desire. Even the surrealists' view of the tropical jungles as places imbued with 'delirium' constitutes a form of fantasy.

***Nenette* (Philibert, 2010)**

Earlier I discussed Jenny, the first orangutan acquired by the London zoo, whom Charles Darwin visited in 1838. Darwin was deeply moved by his encounter and took care to describe the range of emotions she expressed. It was this encounter which played a key role in forming his view that human and ape had evolved from a common ancestor. The human imagination has always been drawn to the orangutan, whose name means 'Person of the Forest'. They are a highly intelligent species native to Indonesia, Malaysia where they live on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo. They use a variety of complex tools, build elaborate sleeping beds in the trees and have the ability to think and reason. The orangutan continues to be one of the most popular exhibits in contemporary zoos, and now the object of global attempts to prevent the potential extinction of the species.

One of the best-known and most loved of these remarkable creatures is Nenette, who was captured when young in the jungles of Borneo and taken to the to the menagerie of the Jardin des Plantes on 16 June 1972. She was accompanied by Toto, a young male in poor health. French filmmaker Nicholas Philibert has made a documentary about Nenette, her keepers and her visitors at the zoo. At the time of filming in 2010 Nenette was the oldest inhabitant at the zoo. Her keepers describe her as an 'unknowable celebrity', 'the bane of the zoo' and a 'goddess' who 'loves cameras – paradoxically'.

What is distinctive about Philibert's documentary is that while the screen shows us images only of Nenette and her companions, the soundtrack offers only comments from the visitors and keepers. The only glimpses we catch of the human participants are reflections in the glass barriers. In this way the comments are frequently undercut through an ironic juxtaposition of sound and image. The visitors' comments function as a set of personal, often intimate, reflections on themselves, their feelings about Nenette, their relationship with her as an ape and fellow creature. As with their Victorian counterparts, Nenette's visitors have also come to experience new sensations and to consider their own relationship as human animals with the apes. They project their own emotions onto Nenette and her companions. For instance one visitor remarks as she looks at Nenette who is lying down, staring into space:

> I think she's depressed, totally depressed. Maybe her husband is already dead. Aren't there other apes? I mean a girl and a man? I mean a girl for him. And another man for his mother. It would be more fun than a mother with her son. That's no fun.

She also attempts to talk to Tübo who moves his lips in response.

> I'd like to show you something. He doesn't know I'm an ape like him. I understand ape language. And I can climb like her too. And I'd be as sad as she is if I were alone with my son because you need someone, even at her age. Look she's utterly sad. At last, look!

Nenette's presence also invokes various memories associated with the maternal body: home, birth, mother. Another comment:

> Maybe she misses the country she comes from…I miss mine too…She's huge…What is it?... A whale…They're born wrinkled…She's almost as big as mum…I'd like to touch her.

Nenette comes across as a totally benign presence – a large, intelligent creature who appears overcome with boredom. Her keepers comment frequently on her boredom. The head keeper comments:

> Everyone drains her. She is drained by curiosity. People drain her, see. And she displays something, something very limited. She has seen it all. She has seen all of us already. And we all merge.

At one point, Philibert gives a voice-over history of exactly what European travellers and writers thought about the sexual desires of the male orangutan. At a deeper level, these reveal the depth of human fantasies about the possibility of human/ape procreation. Edward Tyson said that the orangutan – "Eats no flesh. It cannot speak. Yet it understands better than other animals". Schoutten argued that: "They are fascinated by women. The latter are not safe in the woods as these apes suddenly attack and rape them". Dampier went further: "Other travelers claim that they kidnap girls aged eight or ten and carry them off into the trees". Mr de la Brosse stated: "They try to take Negresses by surprise, keep them to use as they wish and feed them very well". The human desire to attribute man's darker impulses to the animal, particularly the animals whose home is the dangerous tropical jungle, tells us more about ourselves than anything else.

Then right at the end one of the film, one of the keepers states, in a common refrain:

> She seems familiar to us because we're protected. But if the glass were to break all of a sudden, it would be panic stations. You wouldn't hear "My sweet Nenette" anymore. You'd only hear, "Run for your lives."

I think he has underestimated the effect of forty years of captivity – the Foucauldian system of checks and balances, Nenette has had to undergo for almost all of her life. In the transformation of her natural body into a docile one, she has endured a system of constraints, watching and surveillance. Nenette may yearn deep down to return to her tropical forests, but the reality is that she now eats her yogurt, takes the pill, plays with the straw, sleeps, watches and listens. It is the human animal who sadly yearns for that ancient reflex – the backbone shiver in order that he/she may feel the thrill of being fully alive in the modern world.

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