

REBECCA BISHOP

a complex millennium of
ZOOS

ERIC BARATAY AND ELISABETH
HARDOUIN-FUGIER

*Zoo: A History of Zoological Gardens
in the West*

Reaktion Books, London, 2002

ISBN 1-86189-111-3

RRP \$89.95 (hb)

The art of a good collection rests in finding a unification and coherence between entities, a bringing together of objects that perhaps seem random in order to produce the illusion of a coherent whole. Recent scholarship has pointed to the ways in which practices of order and collection are embedded in a long European history of appropriation, containment and display that have been at once tied to practices of imperial domination and to a complex epistemological history. In their work *Zoo: A History of Zoological Gardens in the West*, French historians Eric Baratay and Elisabeth Hardouin-Fugier attempt to tie the origins and development of the Western zoological garden to the practices of power that have contained and made spectacle of a variety of exotic 'others', tracing the rise of the ancient menagerie through to the development of the nineteenth-century zoo as both curiosity and platform for the display of imperial domination, and on to the contemporary politics of ecology and environment in the twentieth century. Yet, their bringing together of historical facts, anecdotes and accounts is, unlike a good collection, often without a coherent thread; the dense portrayal of political and economic events surrounding the development of the modern zoo leaps both chronologically and thematically to produce a sense of narrative vertigo. However, despite these shortcomings, the vast array of historical material packed into the volume, often in minute detail, makes this a fascinating and useful addition to the growing field of scholarship that examines the politics and semiotics of animal keeping.

The authors' intentions are clearly stated in their introduction; their aim is to explore the 'concepts, customs and intellectual interactions relevant to the history of zoos, in an effort to understand why human beings keep wild species near them in enclosed spaces, and why these spaces are attractive to the curious' (10) and to understand the way in which the zoological garden is linked to 'vast parallel histories of colonization, ethnocentrism and the discovery of the Other'. (13) To achieve their aims, the authors divide the book into five sections, the first four of which are loosely chronological. The first chapter, 'The Passion for Collecting (1500s to 1700s)', outlines the possession, collection, parading and trading of animals from the third century BC to the seventeenth century, arguing that animals have long been used as displays of imperial power and princely sovereignty, and have been complexly tied to a long-standing European fascination with, and desire to control, exotic and foreign bodies. The authors draw a compelling parallel between an imperial desire to control 'all living things' (38) from foreign territories and the development of an architecture of spectacle in the menageries and gardens of Europe, where landscapes, pagodas and enclosures were designed to stage the marvels of nature as a controlled 'theatricalized reality'. (30) Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier link the development of these spectacular aristocratic scenographies both to the development of natural history from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries and to popular interest in travelling menageries, which showcased wild and exotic creatures, pointing to the way in which direct observation of exotica became

both a source of fascination for local audiences and a 'guarantee of credibility in scholarship'. (64) Unfortunately, the authors make little reference to the exhibition and study of monstrosities and 'primitives' that occurred alongside emerging taxonomic and zoological classifications and only briefly refer to these phenomena in their text. Given the authors' intention of placing the zoological garden within broader practices of colonial 'othering', the work would perhaps have benefited from a more comprehensive analysis of the socio-political links between animal, 'primitive' and monstrous bodies within the Euro-Western empire. The little discussion devoted to the exhibition of indigenes reveals a tendency towards vague interpretations of historical material; in the brief discussion of renowned zoo entrepreneur Carl Hagenbeck's ethnological exhibits, which often displayed 'primitives' alongside wild animals, the authors broadly assume that '[s]pectators sought to communicate with the actors ... While a powerful erotic fascination was awakened on both sides, the scientific value of these shows was deceptive.' (128)

Chapter 2, 'The Need for Control (1800s)' traces the rise of the 'zoological garden' in Europe as a site for scientific research and a source of popular entertainment, and chronicles the increasing global traffic in animal specimens for housing in zoos. This traffic was tied to a political economy of appropriation and conquest of lands both inside and outside Europe, where animals were often acquired as the result of invasion and military victories and where the quantity and exoticism of animals in

European zoos themselves were often 'an indispensable tool in the confirmation or maintenance of a city's status'. (83) The authors link the politics of animal acquisition with increasing struggles for control of zoological gardens among European politicians, bourgeoisie and scholars, and argue that these struggles led to the development of zoological societies whose objectives were to make 'a contribution to the advancement of science', to promote the 'popularization of science in a refined, light and pleasurable way' and to create 'a trade in animals'. (99) The finely detailed anecdotal stories in their account of animal trading are fascinating; for example, Hagenbeck's tale of journeying a hippopotamus across the Sudan for several weeks, 'wrapped in a stretcher made of hide ... carried by two dromedaries and water for his bath by two others'. (117) Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier also chronicle the arrival of a giraffe in Marseilles who entered the city under the cover of night so as not to spread fear that a 'gigantic monster' had arrived in town, and who quickly became the subject of plays, pamphlets, songs, crockery and a variety of fashions *à la girafe*. This global movement of animals, the authors suggest, was tied to an increasing scientific desire to examine 'real' animals, rather than relying on preserved specimens and travellers accounts, and they note that this desire for 'reality' often involved the dissection of zoo specimens that had died due to mistreatment and malnourishment (a laboratory, for instance, was installed behind the carnivore house at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris so that operations could begin as soon as possible after death). In a covert tone of irony prevalent throughout

much of their text, the authors point out that the examination of dead specimens occurred alongside an increasing public fascination with live zoo animals.

Chapter 3, 'The Yearning for Nature (1900s)', outlines increasing public resistance to keeping animals in captivity within broader developments in the portrayal of animals in the mass media, safari parks and mass tourism. Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier argue that popular texts such as Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*, the anthropomorphisation of animals in Walt Disney films and the growth of wildlife documentaries or biotopes 'became the touchstones which invalidated zoos' (224), an invalidation that led to shifts in marketing zoological gardens as places for public education and animal preservation. In this chapter, the authors' opinions of zoo keeping are made explicit; they argue that attempts by zoos to promote themselves as sites for the preservation of endangered species is 'an inversion of the utopia of acclimatization: the new dream of humankind with delusions of godhood' (236) and point out that the 'humanization' of animals in zoos and in the mass media conceals what they see as commonplace animal mistreatment and a gradual bowing 'before the altar of American finance and consumer culture'. (234) The authors outline the way in which shifts in popular responses to animals in zoos occurred in the context of key developments in global policy in regard to the treatment and keeping of animals, as well as of the growth of animal liberation movements, all of which contributed toward situating the zoo from the 1960s onwards as a 'site of recreation, education, research and

conservation'. (236) In their discussion of the development of 'zoos without cages', which placed animals in enclosures reminiscent of their natural habitats, the authors again make their standpoint explicit, stating that the 'construction of illusionist zoos in the early twentieth century centred around settings that benefited humans and not animals, who cannot have been fooled by the concrete that enclosed them'. (264)

The real strength of this work lies in the final two chapters, which provide beautifully reproduced illustrations, photographs and paintings with zoological themes. While the book is interdispersed with illustrations and photographs to support the text, the solely visual focus of the final two chapters is compelling in its simplicity. Chapter 4, 'Zoos Through the Ages', provides imagery that reflects chronological changes in zoos in London, San Diego, Moscow, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Rotterdam, Paris and Frankfurt from the early nineteenth century through to the twenty-first century. These images lend strong visual support to earlier discussions of shifts in the spatiality and design of modern urban zoos, from the early attempts to enclose and order animals in caged sequences to the development of open habitats and 'natural' landscapes. The strong juxtapositions of steel architecture, cages, foliage and animal bodies in these images nicely balances the authors attempt to purvey the 'doubts and contradictions of Western society's relationship with the rest of the world'. (281) 'Artists and the Zoo', the final chapter, contains magnificent colour and black-and-white reproductions of

zoo-inspired art, from the eighteenth-century works of Giovanni Tiepolo to the shadows and dappled light of Max Liebermann's paintings of the early twentieth-century zoo-going. The photographs by Candida Höfer contrast the beautiful 'animacy' of animal bodies with their stark concrete and steel environments, while the elegant and somber black-and-white images by Britta Jaschinski support the authors' fundamental claim that zoological animals be seen as 'hostages from a conquered world'. (281)

As *Zoo* was originally published in 1998 in French, problems in the translation to English are clear at the outset, where, for example, it is stated that 'the zoological garden brings the various aspects of society's relationship with the world in focus—their thoughts about it, conduct towards it and utilization of it. Consequently, zoos help in the identification and compilation of these aspects ...' (9–10) Difficult pieces of translated text are teamed with problems in the overall organisation of material. The work is tremendous in scope, yet its juxtaposition of information is often scattered and repetitive, jumping centuries within chapters, iterating points already made and giving only cursory attention to the complex socio-politics that surrounded the classification and organisation of animality in Euro-Western philosophy and science. The authors claim that their aim is not to 'record the technical history' of zoos, their 'architecture, their integration into processes of urban development, the sociology of their founders and personnel' (10) and yet the strength of this work lies in just that: the incredible depth and

detail afforded to accounts of animal journeys across foreign lands, of public responses to travelling menageries, and of local practices and figures in zoo keeping. The authors argue that they wish to place the development of the zoological garden within broader practices of 'othering' and within key sociopolitical developments in European morality and politics and yet, analysis of these themes is often scant, with only brief mentions of what are arguably key historical developments in European responses to animal bodies; for example, in the context of their discussion of a growing public distaste for animal combat in the seventeenth century, the authors only briefly note that this might be seen as the outcome of 'a change in mentalities as a result of the civilizing process that has been described by historian Norbert Elias'. (28)

For its vast historical scope and outstanding illustrations, Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier's work is an important addition to emerging interdisciplinary scholarship that examines the relationship between the zoological garden and broader sociopolitical practices of making spectacle out of exotic 'others'. The material presented in the book offers a useful compendium of the events, discourses and narratives that surrounded the captivity of animal bodies and will be a valuable reference point in the contemporary study of zoo practices, practices that, with the current introduction of cyber-zoos on the Internet, will undoubtedly lead to further transformations in the hyper-visibility of captive and captured animal bodies.

REBECCA BISHOP is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, Australian National University.
