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## The Aesthetic Appreciation of Animals in Zoological Parks

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### Abstract

Can we appreciate in a serious and deep way the aesthetic qualities of wild species in exemplars held captive for exhibition in the artificial installations of a zoo? To answer this question I invoke theories concerning the aesthetic appreciation of nature propounded by Yuriko Saito and Allen Carlson. I then argue that zoos impose their story on animals, thereby preventing us from appreciating the animals on their own terms. I claim that captivity and its effects on the health, behavior, and appearance of animals make serious and deep appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of wild species impossible.

### Key Words

animal aesthetics, biodiversity, captivity, environmental aesthetics, wildlife, zoo

### 1. Introduction

According to the IUCN, over 23,000 animal and plant species are at risk of extinction because of human activity. In such a drastic situation, zoological parks have come to defend a supposed role they play in animal conservation. They affirm that exemplars kept in captivity act as ambassadors for wild populations, as a visit to the zoo raises awareness of the need to protect wildlife in their natural habitat. Zoos claim that the aesthetic appeal of animals, alongside moral and scientific reasons, will inspire people to protect threatened species.

The hope that aesthetic appreciation of nature will lead to an ethical commitment is shared by many, from philosophers to environmentalists. What is specific to zoos, however, is that they aim to show the aesthetic qualities of animals through the menageries they hold captive. Several philosophers and experts on wildlife have criticized the holding of animals captive in zoos on moral and scientific grounds.<sup>[1]</sup> I completely agree with those criticisms but here I want to explore a question that belongs to the field of aesthetics: Can captive exemplars in the artificial installations of a zoo reveal to us the beauty, ferocity, elegance, grace and monstrosity of their species in a serious and deep way?

In searching for an answer to this question, I have come across a range of ideas. In his book, *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, Malcolm Budd answers the question in the affirmative:

At a zoo you cannot appreciate an animal in its natural environment. But it does not follow that your appreciation must be of a caged animal – an animal as caged. Rather, you can ignore its surroundings and appreciate the animal itself (within the severe limits imposed by its captive state).<sup>[2]</sup>

An opposing answer comes from Holmes Rolston III, who compares the experience of seeing wild animals in their natural habitat to exemplars in a zoo:

[T]he wildlife encounters are entirely off the map. One needs proper habitat, of course, but habitat is necessary not sufficient for encounter. You have hoped for six days of the Yellowstone trip to see a bear, and on the last day, there one is, only a cub, but a bear nevertheless, feeding in the Shepherdia bushes.

You never expected the coyote, and he walked by the car, six feet away, taking you by such surprise that you couldn't get the camera from the back seat. ... This explains why zoos do little to preserve wildlife aesthetically. ... a caged bobcat is aesthetically a bobcat no more.<sup>[3]</sup>

Although I have found some answers to the question that concerns me here, unfortunately I have not found any systematic analysis or, even less, a discussion among several authors. This absence of debate is symptomatic of the fact that the aesthetic appreciation of animals receives little attention. Indeed, there are not enough publications on the topic for us to be properly justified in talking of a specific research field with its own tradition, a canon of fundamental papers and books, its own discussions, and everything else that constitutes a specific field of research in philosophy.

Because there is not yet a proper field of animal aesthetics, in order to articulate an answer to my question, I take the theoretical framework for it from environmental aesthetics. First, I consider Yuriko Saito's idea that to appreciate a natural object means to appreciate the object as it really is, not as if it were some other thing. Second, I examine Allen Carlson's thesis that in order to aesthetically appreciate a natural element, we need to have scientific knowledge of it. Although both Saito and Carlson mostly develop these theories as they relate to environments and only briefly apply them to animals, I find them to be a sound foundation on which to build a theory of animal aesthetics.

In the next section of this paper, I use Saito's and Carlson's views to show why, at first glance, it seems that at a zoo we can appreciate the aesthetic qualities of wild animals. Then, in the third section, I continue working with Saito's and Carlson's theories to argue that, in fact, if we explore this question in a more rigorous and critical manner, we come to realize that at a zoo we cannot appreciate the aesthetic qualities of animals in a serious and deep way. In the fourth section, I synthesize and discuss both sets of arguments. Connecting with that discussion, in the fifth section, I defend the necessity of developing a field of research on the aesthetic appreciation of animals. Finally, I offer some conclusions.

## **2. Reasons why it seems that we can appreciate the aesthetic qualities of wild species through exemplars held captive in zoos**

**2.1** In her paper, "Appreciating Nature on Its Own Terms," Saito affirms that in order to appreciate nature aesthetically in an appropriate way, we must appreciate nature as it is.<sup>[4]</sup> If we project our own stories onto nature, we negate the possibility of knowing and appreciating the reality of nature. I find Saito's idea insightful because we often do instrumentalize nature as a vehicle to transmit human meaning. When animals, natural environments, and other natural elements are depicted in art or publicity, they are usually presented as metaphors for or symbols of human emotions and ideas, not as what they themselves actually are. Saito claims that any natural element has its own biological role to play, its own story, independent of the symbols we may impose on it. Because of this, in order to appreciate nature in a deep way, we should listen to nature's own story.

I think this should be a fundamental idea in the development of animal aesthetics. However, I wish to make one small point explicit. Definitely, seeing a natural element "on its own terms" is more an ideal to orient us than a goal that we can fully achieve. Complete objectivity is impossible, as many philosophers have argued, because we humans always appreciate nature from our own perspective, that is, from within our own biological nature, our culture, and our subjectivity, and we cannot totally free ourselves from that. Nonetheless, to assume that we should conceive of and appreciate a natural element on its own terms is the appropriate attitude because it implies a basic form of respect and fosters critical reflection on our own appreciation of nature. The subject has to listen to the object, to its otherness, and not to subsume it into his or her own desires and fantasies, not to instrumentalize it as a mere metaphor for his or her own views, not to reduce it to a mirror for self reflection. For example, the use of an image of a desert in an advertisement to sell cars or an image of a hawk to sell perfumes are clear cases of natural elements not being seen as what they are but being instrumentalized as symbols of human values.

We can use this idea to answer our question. At first glance, it seems that modern zoos do present animals as they are, as ambassadors of their species, and not as fantasies or metaphors. In this sense, zoos appear to be very different from other modes of exhibiting live animals, such as the circus, which I mention in the next subsection, and also from representations of animals, which I consider below in the third subsection.

It also seems that modern zoos, such as San Diego Zoo in California or Bioparc in Valencia, Spain, put considerable thought into their design. The animals are exhibited in enclosures that aim to recreate their natural habitats, where we can observe them from a variety of angles and appreciate many different aspects of their bodies and behavior. Well-designed zoos offer visitors viewing conditions that they would never find in nature, where most animals hide from us, and it is difficult to get close and observe them for long periods. In modern zoos, we can even see what goes on inside some dens.

In her article, Saito also affirms that we should not reduce

nature to its visual appearance. The Western tradition of picturesque painting and aesthetic formalism reduces natural elements to their pictorial surface and formal design. In contrast, Saito strongly defends the idea that we should appreciate nature with all our senses. If we apply this approach to our question, we can claim that, in a zoo, people hear the sounds animals make, smell them, and sometimes even touch them. Appreciating animals in a zoo is a more bodily, multisensory, and interactive experience than contemplating them in photographs or films.

**2.2** It seems that at a zoo we can appreciate animals better than in any other type of exhibition of live animals. At a circus, in contrast, we find animals dressed up and forced to perform in unnatural ways to the rhythms of music. In fact, what makes animal circus shows amazing is precisely that the animals accomplish feats that they would never spontaneously perform in nature and that are so astonishing as to seem unbelievable. To see wild animals interact successfully with artifacts, like a bear playing a trumpet or a chimp riding a bicycle; to see animals do dangerous things for no reason, like lions jumping through a hoop of fire; to see predator and prey interact in unnatural ways, as in a tiger riding a horse; and, above all, to see animals perform all these acts because a person orders them to, is so strange that it only seems possible in a magical world, and this is the kind of emotion that the circus tries to provoke in its audience. But the sad reality behind the magic is that this unnatural behavior is the result of a long and cruel training that provides us with moral arguments against this kind of practice.

From an aesthetic point of view, the problem is that circus animals are not presented as themselves. Although the animals are physically present at the circus, they are not acting as ambassadors of their species but representing human fantasies about our ability to dominate and transfigure nature. At a zoo, in contrast, although the animals are maintained captive in enclosures designed by human beings, it seems that they are more autonomous in their behavior.

**2.3** Zoos also seem to offer a good opportunity to understand animals because they present real animals, whereas society is full of artistic and decorative representations of them. Although I think that art has the capacity to recount animals' own stories and educate us about them, especially when it is allied with science, if we look at the history of art, the vast majority of depictions of animals do not represent them on their own terms but transfigured into symbols of something else. Nowadays, we are surrounded by representations of animals in art, publicity, and artifacts that we encounter in our everyday life. They are omnipresent as commercial brands, as symbols of human ideas, as fantasy beings created to entertain children in cartoons, and as mere ornamental figures, for example, in jewelry.

It is important to consider whether all these representations of animals, in which they do not appear on their own terms, could have the effect of making us forget what real animals are like, or could lead us to confuse real animals with fantasy beings or

metaphors. The team of artists *Transnational Temps*, formed by Fred Adam, Andy Deck, and Verónica Perales, deplore the fact that we are surrounded by images of animals used as commercial brands, sometimes representing companies that knowingly reduce biodiversity. The paradox the artists denounce is that our world is full of images of fantasy animals, while at the same time we ignore real animals condemned to extinction.<sup>[5]</sup>

In her paper, "Aesthetic Value and Wild Animals," Emily Brady makes a point in defense of some uses of animals as symbols: "Some cases of symbolism based on expressive qualities may therefore be appropriate and reasonable because they are, in fact, connected to the character and behavior of such animals."<sup>[6]</sup> Even if we accept Brady's idea, I find it problematic that the immense majority of our artistic and decorative representations of animals do not show them as they really are but transfigure them into something else, sometimes bound to the animal's nature and sometimes wildly arbitrary.

Also Thomas Leddy, in his article, "Aesthetization, Artification, and Aquariums," makes a defense of the metaphorical appreciation of animals:

But is seeing something in terms of a category to which it does not belong necessarily a bad thing? Although this is assumed to be true by most scientific cognitivists, the thesis limits creativity. When we creatively see something, whether in art or in science, we see it in terms of a category to which it does not literally belong. We can call such seeing "metaphorical perception." To say "Man is a wolf to man." is to see man in terms of a category to which he does not belong. Nonetheless, when elaborated, this metaphor presents a possibly valuable thesis concerning the nature of man. Many studies in the philosophy of science, the philosophy of art, and linguistics show that metaphorical perception plays an important role in cognition. Should we exclude such perception from appreciation of the natural environment?<sup>[7]</sup>

The very example Leddy uses shows the problem of this view. Leddy uses "wolf" as a metaphor applied to human beings. By this metaphorical sense of "wolf," he means an irrational beast driven by egoism, violence, and cruelty. However, when we scientifically observe the behavior of wolves, we understand that they are intelligent and deeply social and emotional creatures, capable of empathy and compassion, who develop a fundamental role in the environments they inhabit. The real nature of wolves does not resemble this metaphorical view of them as an evil beast. To see wolves as dark monsters can be creative but to disguise reality with our fantasies can have real consequences. When people believe that wolves are evil creatures, they will be less disposed to respect and defend them. The current hate against wolves, and the fact that they

are massively hunted in many countries, has its roots in this distorted image of them propagated in our culture that has nothing to do with their real way of life.

**2.4** Let us now consider Carlson's proposal. In his book, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, Carlson, like Saito, defends a cognitive aesthetics, but the difference is that Carlson has a more strict conception of knowledge.<sup>[8]</sup> For Carlson, only natural science provides the framework we require to be able to appreciate nature as it really is, just as the history and philosophy of art provide us with the framework required to appreciate artworks.

Carlson claims that in the Western tradition, two cultural factors have prevented us from appreciating nature as it really is: a) religion, which views nature as embodying spiritual symbols; and b) pictorial representation and aesthetic formalism, which reduce nature to images. In contrast, Carlson defends a secular and scientific foundation for the aesthetic appreciation of nature. It is also important to highlight the fact that in his defense of scientific knowledge, Carlson is not referring to vivisection in a laboratory but is invoking naturalists who familiarize themselves with environments and their inhabitants, listening to nature's own stories. Carlson's argument evokes the American tradition of nature writing, as exemplified by Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold.

Carlson's idea that only natural science provides us with the framework necessary to appreciate nature as it is has received several criticisms. Different authors have claimed that science is not a sure way to objectivity, and that, in spite of its quantitative approach and strict methodology, science remains as cultural in its essence as art is.<sup>[9]</sup> As an example of the failure of science to offer an objective view, we should remember that for centuries scientists defended a mechanical view of animals and nature.

I do not consider these criticisms as sufficient to refute Carlson's theory but they should be taken seriously. I think that one sound response could be to maintain a critical and prudent attitude to the particular scientific knowledge we are using, and not to forget the transient nature of scientific theories. However, this attitude is already a proper part of science, as scientific progress consists of continuously rethinking and correcting previous ideas. Also, I consider that defending science as the proper framework from which to appreciate nature aesthetically should not exclude art. It excludes certain kinds of art but not all art. I consider that good artistic representations of nature that are scientifically informed, that bring together art and science, can help us to appreciate nature aesthetically.<sup>[10]</sup> In the same way, I think that traditional knowledge based on accurate observations of nature can also help us to get to know and appreciate nature aesthetically, an idea that I think is similar to the one Yuriko Saito and Thomas Heyd defend.<sup>[11]</sup>

If we apply Carlson's theory to our problem, we find that modern zoos seem to offer a scientific framework within which to appreciate animals. The distribution of animals within the

zoo corresponds to a scientific classification, and every enclosure includes information concerning the name of the species and some scientific background, as in a natural history museum. In the particular case of aquariums, Nola Semczyszyn even claims in her paper, "Public Aquariums and Marine Aesthetics," that "Aquarium displays should be considered scientific representations of marine environments."[\[12\]](#)

So, at first glance, it certainly seems that at zoos we can appreciate the aesthetic qualities of wild species. However, if we continue to analyze this issue in a more rigorous and critical manner, we will see that in fact we cannot appreciate the aesthetic qualities of wild animals in a serious and deep way in a zoo.

### **3. Reasons why we cannot appreciate the aesthetic qualities of wild species in a serious and deep way through exemplars held captive in zoos**

**3.1** Displaying animals in zoos entails an *object model* of appreciation, which Carlson has denounced as inappropriate, while defending the *natural environmental model*:

Natural objects possess what might be called organic unity with their environments of creation: such objects are a part of, and have developed out of, the elements of their environments by means of the forces at work within those environments. Thus their environments of creation are aesthetically relevant to natural objects.[\[13\]](#)

The aesthetic qualities of animals are relational. It is necessary to perceive the animal in her natural environment in order to comprehend her. The external appearance of an animal, her form, color, and kind of fur or feathers she has, the sounds she produces, and how she moves, all evolved over thousands of years in particular environments. The color of a lion is the color of the African savanna. The color of a polar bear is the color of frozen seas. The fur of arctic foxes is a response to the freezing weather. The shape of the beak of each species of bird depends on the food she eats. The way an ibex moves has to do with her ability to climb rocks. An animal is not an object that you can just move from one setting to another, like a sculpture. When you remove an animal from her natural environment, you no longer have a complete animal, only a fragment.

**3.2** Because of processes of globalization and homogenization, all around the world most zoos exhibit the same delocalized animals, "star species," such as large mammals. This phenomenon is similar to the omnipresence of certain international commercial brands in every big city and airport, and it has an important consequence. The presence of the same species in zoos all around the world instills in visitors the belief that they know these animals, in the same way a shopper feels familiar with the products of a commercial brand found in many different cities and countries. Because of this, it



is more difficult for visitors to understand that when they see an orangutan in a zoo enclosure, they are only seeing a delocalized fragment and not a complete animal. In fact, the more they see the orangutan in different countries, the less likely they are to remember which environment the species belongs to. The ubiquity of the orangutan in zoos in every continent generates the illusion that she does not belong to any specific environment.

At the same time, this phenomenon exacerbates the tendency for many people to neglect the local fauna of their own environments because they find it too ordinary, in contrast with the spectacularity and glamour of star species advertised by zoos.<sup>[14]</sup>

**3.3** Saito claims that in order to aesthetically appreciate animals of a particular species, we should appreciate the distinctive characteristics of that species: the cheetah-like-ness, the eagle-like-ness, and so forth.<sup>[15]</sup> But animals display their distinctive characteristics through their natural behavior. We appreciate the agility of a cheetah when she runs, and the elegance of an eagle when she flies. The limited and artificial space of zoos makes it impossible for animals to behave naturally.

Moreover, animals have to develop artificial behavior in order to adapt to the designed spaces they are confined to. Their enclosures are ruled by arbitrary human norms, and because animals are often moved from one zoo to another, they may have to readapt to new arbitrary rules. When zoos develop programs of captive breeding, they are creating exemplars that are only able to survive in the artificial world of a zoo, governed by human whim.

Consider, for example, that zoos deny animals the possibility of searching for their food. In zoos, humans decide when and how often the animals eat, and also what kind of food they receive. Instead of actively searching for food, the animals have to passively wait for it. Very often, zoos give animals their food in front of visitors, although for a wild animal it is unnatural to eat in front of people who applaud and cheer. We should also take into account that most zoos prevent predation, and sometimes substitute it with very artificial behavior. For example, bears, tigers, and lions are given food hidden inside toys they have to open. In this particular case, zoos change behavior expressing ferocity, velocity, and intelligence that shows the wild animal as the dangerous creature she is for interaction with a toy that shows the animal to be passive, inoffensive, and childlike.

In the case of dolphins and orcas that are trained to perform, they have to learn to obey human orders, to perform choreographed sequences, and to learn that they receive their food when they do as their human trainers command. Although zoos call this enrichment, the result is that the animals have to adapt to the arbitrary rules that humans impose on them. In this sense, although what zoos do to animals is apparently different from what circuses do to them, actually it is very similar. Zoos modify animals behavior to adapt it to the very



fact that they are exhibited to an audience.

Furthermore, captivity affects health, appearance, and attitude. Captive animals often perform compulsive movements, behave repetitively, and may also have wounds and bruises. Most of them look sad, frustrated, stressed, depressed, or angry. Their native aesthetic qualities are seriously impoverished.

**3.4** There are some specific aesthetic qualities of wild species that it is almost impossible to appreciate at a zoo. Many wild animals, such as big cats or crocodiles, are dangerous creatures; they are strong, fierce, fast, imposing, and aggressive. The appreciation of these animals has more to do with the sublime than with beauty itself. When we have the opportunity to encounter them in their natural environments, they awaken our admiration at the same time as our fear. We know that a bear or a mountain lion could kill us, and the sensation of danger that we feel belongs to the aesthetic experience. On seeing a wild crocodile, just as on witnessing the power of a great storm, we experience ourselves as finite and humble creatures before the forces of nature, and this can be a deep and meaningful aesthetic experience. However, when we go to admire these animals at a zoo, we encounter subdued animals caged in small spaces and passively waiting for their food; all their force and power has disappeared. Then we go to the gift shop and find bears portrayed as teddy bears, crocodiles used as a basis for funny designs on children's pajamas, or tigers adopted as motives for jewelry. In this way, zoos neutralize the force and power of wild species and prevent us from appreciating these animals as they really are. As Thomas Leddy affirms about the souvenirs in aquariums shops: "Many of these artifacts are clearly kitsch; they play on sentimentality and discourage serious reflection. ... It is crass when people are encouraged to reduce their experience of a seal to a furry purchasable item."[\[16\]](#)

The aesthetics of modern zoos is constituted from a mixture of a natural history museum, an amusement park, and a mall to go window shopping in, and they are specially designed to entertain children. Many zoos combine animal enclosures with play facilities for children that are designed using representations of animals. London Zoo has a carousel of toy animals; Barcelona Zoo even has real ponies to ride. It is quite remarkable that in 2013, the Barcelona City Council offered a combined entrance ticket for both its zoo and an amusement park called Tibidabo; the publicity for the offer depicted a real zebra in front of a toy horse. The audience was apparently invited to identify a real animal with a toy whose function was to amuse children.[\[17\]](#)

Zoo gift shops reinforce the perception of animals as toys. The teddy bears they sell represent animals but have softer textures, brighter colors, and other changes that make them more attractive to children. Similarly, children's books are full of animals represented as fancy imaginative creatures; some real features are mixed with fantasy, and it can become difficult to teach the difference between fantasy and reality. In addition, this infantilizing of animals instills the idea that

animals belong to a childish fantasy world that should be abandoned when one becomes an adult.

Children are the most important public at zoos; they visit zoos both with their families and with their schools. In contrast, it is highly infrequent to encounter adults visiting zoos with no children. When I visited several zoos in different countries to gather material for this paper, I went alone and spent time in front of every enclosure taking notes. That made me a very unusual kind of visitor, and was sufficient to awaken the attention and suspicions of some caretakers who tried to find out just who I was and what I was doing.

**3.5** When we aim to appreciate nature aesthetically, we can enjoy a huge range of aesthetic experiences of plants, geological elements, meteorological events, environments, and so on, but only through animals is nature able to look back at us. Animals are the only natural elements that can perceive us, that can look at us when we look at them, that can react to us with different emotions and behavior, and that, in some cases, can even communicate with us. This is because animals, like us, are not objects but subjects. To look into the eyes of an animal that looks back at you is one of the most awesome aesthetic experiences that we can enjoy in nature. In the words of Holmes Rolston III:

The aesthetic experience differs because of the reciprocity. There is a 'window' into which we can look and from which someone looks out. They have, so to speak, points of view. There is fire in those eyes..... (...) There is kinship, as there may not be with aesthetic contemplation of flowers or scenery. But there is never identity, and humans can but imagine what it must be like to be a duck, a chipmunk, an elk, a plover. There is alien subjectivity which stands over against human subjectivity, a mysterious other with differences both of degree and kind.[\[18\]](#)

Every animal is not only an ambassador for her species but is an individual with a subjective life and a personal story. They are subjects who feel pain and pleasure, who possess cognitive, emotional, and communicative capacities, and who possess memory and form social links.[\[19\]](#) As a consequence, to be exhibited in a zoo causes them suffering. For example, chimpanzees in a zoo become stressed, because there are so many people around the cage all day long looking at them, pointing at them, shouting at them, banging on the glass, taking photos, throwing objects, and making noise.[\[20\]](#)

If we want to appreciate animals on their own terms, then viewing them as subjects should be the central factor. But zoos do not display animals as subjects. If they did, we would understand that the animals are in the zoo against their own desire for freedom, and that they are suffering physically and psychologically because of their captivity. Zoos only attempt to show animals as ambassadors of their species, and they present them in an objectified way. For example, on the information panels provided in the enclosures, zoos usually

offer general information about the species but it is extremely rare for them to offer particular information about the individuals exhibited, such as origin, history, personality, health, family, and so on. At most, they will offer a name and some nice anecdotes aimed at children. In contrast, in sanctuaries and rescue centers, such as the *Fundación Mona*, in Spain, that rescues chimpanzees and macaques who were used in the circus and on TV shows and were severely abused, the focus is on the stories of the rescued animals, their personalities, and the effects that captivity and mistreatment have had on their physical and psychological health. To present animals as individuals is necessary in order to understand what animals are, to learn to respect them, and also to appreciate them aesthetically, because every individual is unique.

#### **4. Discussion**

I will begin the discussion with a brief summary of the previous sections. In the second section, I presented some arguments in defense of the idea that we can appreciate the aesthetic qualities of wild species through captive exemplars held in zoos. That is, that zoos are appropriate places to go if we want to admire the aesthetic qualities of wild animals. Then, in the third section, I provided several arguments against that thesis. Now, I wish to bring both sets of arguments together and play them off against each other.

All the arguments in favor of zoos share a common idea: that zoos offer us an objective, neutral, and unbiased frame that allows us to appreciate animals as they are. According to these arguments, zoo enclosures are windows into nature; zoos frame a piece of nature for us, and give us enhanced conditions of visibility that we could not find in the wild. In contrast, arguments against zoos share an opposing idea, that beneath the appearance of objectivity zoos are actually presenting us with an incomplete, superficial, and distorted view of animals. In order to be exhibited in the zoo enclosure, the animals have been extracted from the environments where they belong and without which they lose part of their identity. In these enclosures, the animals cannot behave naturally and, at the same time, are forced to perform artificially. Because of all this, captivity affects the physical and psychological health of animals. Furthermore, zoos are presenting animals as ornamental objects to contemplate, as nice appearances to watch and photograph, but not as subjects who also look at us and who suffer from stress when they see so many people looking at them every day. The way in which zoos provide information on animals is deeply biased in order to foster their infantilization. They are presented as fantasy creatures and toys, not as the wild animals they are.

When we bring the two arguments together, the following idea comes to the fore. What makes visitors believe that they are appreciating the aesthetic qualities of wild species in zoos is the mere fact that they are perceiving the real animals that are in front of them in the enclosures. In this situation, it is easy to believe that zoos are windows into nature. It is more difficult to understand that zoos use real animals to prevent visitors from viewing animals on their own terms. What the arguments

against zoos are telling us is that zoos are not windows into nature but *Procrustean beds*. In order to comprehend this, we need to compare the aesthetic appreciation of animals in the wild and animals in zoos. At the zoo, we encounter the body of the animal in the cage but we are missing the conditions in which that body can flourish. We are missing the environment which the animal belongs in and where she can develop her way of life. Furthermore, we are missing a correct framework that would allow us to understand all this.

Zoos reduce animals to bodies, to a mere physical presence, to ornamental objects that can be exhibited and contemplated, to pleasant appearances we like to watch, but the true identity of an animal is much more than her body. They are subjects with different capacities, who develop and express their identity in complex behavior and through multiple relations with their environment, and with all the other individuals of the same and different species who inhabit it. This is the core of the problem. At a zoo, we cannot appreciate in a serious and deep way the aesthetic qualities of wild species because zoos are not showing us wild animals on their own terms.

Zoos present the cage as an objective and unbiased frame within which to view animals, but a cage encloses the animal far away from her environment and her freedom. The cage is not an unbiased frame but a *Procrustean bed*, an artifact that radically changes the life of the animal held in it. The cage contains the body of the animal but has, in fact, mutilated her identity. Unfortunately, if people have visited zoos since childhood and have always seen animals this way, they are unlikely to be conscious of what they are missing.

In addition, we have to emphasize the fact that zoos aestheticize captivity and normalize the image of wild animals behind bars in artificial enclosures and displayed for our enjoyment. In a zoo, the audience learns to accept the captivity of animals as a spectacle to watch, and this reinforces the view of animals as our property, as commodities for us to use as we wish.<sup>[21]</sup> Although zoos claim that the function of holding animals captive is to convince us to protect wild animals in their natural habitats, it is difficult to see how the image of a caged animal can teach us the value of freedom. This contradictory message that a cage can help to protect freedom actually becomes a justification for holding the animal in the cage. When children visit zoos with their schools and families, they learn that cages are the places where animals live.

The negative effects of zoos are not limited to old-fashioned ones with animals confined in small and simple cages without enrichment. Although modern zoos offer larger and enriched enclosures, the animals are still captive in artificial spaces ruled by arbitrary human norms. The aim of zoos is to exhibit the animals, and because of this, even the most modern zoos treat animals as spectacles to watch, expose them many hours every day to the noise and annoyances that people produce, and foster an objectified, distorted, and infantilized view of them.

## 5. The need for animal aesthetics

After that brief discussion, I would like to consider the specific question regarding the aesthetic appreciation of animals in zoos from a broader perspective. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there is not yet sufficient literature on animal aesthetics for it to be considered as a research field in its own right. What are the reasons for this?

In his paper, "The Aesthetic Value of Animals," Glenn Parsons sets out to identify and analyze the reasons philosophers could have for not embarking on the study of animal aesthetics.<sup>[22]</sup> One of the reasons he examines is that the aesthetic appreciation of beings that deserve moral respect, such as humans and other animals, quickly becomes morally and politically problematic. According to Parsons, the problem is that the aesthetic appreciation of animals or humans seems to focus only on their external appearance; that is, it seems to reduce them to a superficial perspective. As a consequence, it would seem that to defend the aesthetic appreciation of animals could go against their defense as subjects who deserve moral respect. The "immorality objection" for engaging in animal aesthetics, as Parsons calls this, means that we should study animals as part of ethics, not within aesthetics.

I agree with Parsons that this may be one of the reasons for the neglect of animal aesthetics, and I also sympathize with his way of defending animal aesthetics against this objection. Parsons claims that an appropriate animal aesthetics cannot be attacked via the "immorality objection" because it does not reduce animals to their mere appearance and does not relate with them in a shallow way. Quite the contrary. An appropriate animal aesthetics takes into account the nature of animals in a significant way. His idea is that to aesthetically appreciate animals means to appreciate their functional beauty, to appreciate how they are "looking fit for function." For example, the body of a cheetah is beautiful because it is functional, because it is constituted in such a way that allows the animal to run at high speed, which is one of the principal characteristics of the behavior of a cheetah. By appreciating the functional beauty of animals, by appreciating how animals are indeed "looking fit for function," we appreciate their aesthetic value as it is intrinsically related to their nature.

I also value a partially similar approach by Ned Hettinger, in his paper, "Animal Beauty, Ethics, and Environmental Preservation," to the defense of animal aesthetics when faced with a set of arguments that run along the same lines as the "immorality objection." Although I do not agree with some of his ideas, I do agree with his claim that the aesthetic appreciation of animals is more rich and complex than a trivial appreciation of the mere attractiveness of a body.<sup>[23]</sup>

What I find is most important to defend here, however, as an answer to this kind of objection, is that to develop animal aesthetics could be enormously helpful to animal ethics. My point is that several forms of exploitation and mistreatment of animals imply a shallow and distorted aesthetic appreciation of them, and the claim I wish to make is that a critical theory of

animal aesthetics would allow us to analyze and denounce such cases. The problem posed by the appreciation of animals at zoos is just such an example. The case of circus animal shows would be another, and I can imagine several more: bullfighting, hunting, bird song competitions, horse and dog racing, and so on. We could analyze how, in these cases, animals are reduced to their external appearance and treated as mere ornamental objects, as spectacles to watch, and we could contrast this with an opposing serious and deep aesthetic appreciation of those animals.

In order to appreciate animals in an appropriate way, as Yuriko Saito affirms, we should appreciate them on their own terms, as what they are. We can respectfully visit their environments and view animals there as subjects who are living their lives. We do not need to travel far away to see "star species," we can go to the nearest forest or beach and take delight in the local fauna. If we feed our aesthetic appreciation with the knowledge provided by natural science, as Allen Carlson recommends we do, and we contemplate animals with some background knowledge of their physiology, evolutionary story, behavior, capacities, and so on, then we can enjoy a progressively deeper appreciation. In the behavioral patterns of every species, we will appreciate the expression of a specific intelligence, and of different ways to resolve problems, to express emotions, and to communicate with others. And no matter how much knowledge we possess concerning them, animals will always surprise us. Surprise is the gift that free animals offer us and that zoos take away. Precisely because zoos can assure us that we are going to see the animals, that the animals are waiting in their cages to be seen, the magic of surprise, which is the magic of freedom, disappears.

With time and patience, we learn to recognize the songs of different bird species, and we appreciate in this a plurality of aesthetic qualities; we find some birdsong harmonious, some joyful, and another melancholic. We see that every bird flies in a particular manner, and we judge some flights to be graceful, others elegant, and others mysterious. We learn to appreciate the subtleties of the facial expressions of mammals, who can look beautiful to us but also terrifying. We enjoy the way animals hide in and mimic the vegetation, so that sometimes, despite being so very near, they are almost impossible to perceive. We follow stories, the stories of particular individuals we recognize, whose behavior we observe over years, and we happily follow stories of learning, when young birds learn to fly, for example. But we also follow dramas, such as when an individual is expelled from a group and has to set out alone. And, unfortunately, we follow tragedies, as when one animal is killed by another and mourned by her fellows. Seeing behavior such as predation, we find that aesthetic appreciation of animals not only gives us pleasure but it can also cause us displeasure and provoke in us suffering, sadness, and melancholy.

In her article, "Ugliness and Nature," Emily Brady reflects on the aesthetic appreciation of predation and defends the notion that some animal species, some animal behavior, some

individual animals affected by disease, and the corpses of dead animals can be judged as ugly. She also reflects on other aesthetic qualities that provoke different kinds of displeasure in us, and affirms that the aesthetic appreciation of these qualities plays its own role in our relation with animals and nature.<sup>[24]</sup>

In summary, the aesthetic appreciation of animals is not about ornamental objects or mere bodies and appearances, it is the appreciation of subjects living their lives. As a consequence, the appreciation of animals leads us to appreciate the networks of life to which they belong and the environments they inhabit. However, we should face the problem of the impact that may be caused by too many people visiting some environments. One solution could be to combine the visits with other strategies, like the installation of webcams in the environments that allow us to watch wild animals without disturbing them and can be used for scientific and educational purposes, be commented on in social networks, and so on.

The diversity of animal species is so huge that we still do not even know how many currently inhabit this planet. When we concentrate on appreciating dragonflies, for example, we find that there are currently more than 3,000 species. By comparing different dragonflies, we can admire multiple combinations of forms and colors and also variations in behavior. In this way, aesthetic appreciation of animals teaches us to take delight in difference and plurality, that is, biodiversity. Biologists tell us that biodiversity is the fundamental measure of the health of an environment. If there is a wide variety of species, and also a wide genetic variety within every species, then it is a healthy environment. If there is a low level of biodiversity, the environment is stressed and can be more easily affected by disease. In a similar way, we can state that biodiversity is a measure of the aesthetic richness of an environment.

That we aesthetically appreciate animals does not mean that we should protect the species we judge to be beautiful and eliminate those we judge to be ugly. Precisely what aesthetic appreciation of animals teaches us is that beautiful and ugly are only two of the great diversity of aesthetic qualities we value in different species, and also in the different behavior exhibited by the same species, which can be judged as elegant, harmonious, joyful, playful, graceful, fierce, majestic, imposing, delicate, fragile, tender, colorful, monstrous, comic, mysterious, enigmatic, interesting, melancholic, disgusting, terrifying, sublime, and so on. Some of these qualities prompt different kinds of pleasure in us, like joy, serenity, vitality, amusement, surprise, and so on, and others provoke different kinds of displeasure in us, for example, sadness, fear, or disgust. This plurality of aesthetic qualities is the appropriate way to admire biodiversity, which is the very core of nature. It is appropriate to find aesthetic value in every species, and because each one is unique and plays her own role in her environment and has a particular way of life, in every species we can admire a different combination of aesthetic qualities.

To classify species as beautiful or ugly would be to reduce the



immense diversity of nature to a simplistic binary system. To protect the animals we judge to be beautiful and eliminate those we find ugly would be to subject the plurality of nature to the monopoly of a very particular taste imposed by one species. An environment will always be aesthetically richer if it has a high level of biodiversity, and it will be aesthetically poorer if it is dominated by one species that imposes her particular criteria on it. The cause of the present aesthetic impoverishment of nature is the extinction of species and destruction of habitats brought about by humans. I should add, nonetheless, that people do not only damage species they find ugly, they also damage the ones they find aesthetically attractive because they hunt them to gain a trophy or to display them in their collections, and here we once again run into to the problem with zoos.

Furthermore, I think that a serious and deep aesthetic appreciation of animals can instill moral respect in us. That aesthetics could lead to ethics is an old hope in philosophy that has been defended in several ways and criticized in many others. It is a tricky topic that, no doubt, we will continue to discuss forever. We can look, however, to what happens in environmental philosophy. In the field of environmental aesthetics, we find a common expectation shared by many authors that a serious and deep aesthetic appreciation of the environment can lead to an ethical commitment. Every environmental philosopher defends this idea in his or her particular manner, and some may be more optimistic than others. But there is a shared intuition that aesthetics and ethics can reinforce each other and that they should work together to protect nature.<sup>[25]</sup> I have the same expectation and the same hope of animal aesthetics working together with animal ethics.

Notwithstanding, some philosophers defend the need for animal aesthetics but not this strong connection with ethics. This is the case, I think, with Stephen Davies. In his book, *The Artful Species*, Davies offers an interesting contribution to animal aesthetics, studying the evolutionary roots of our appreciation of animals. He describes many different ways of appreciating animals aesthetically. But when it comes to the relation with ethics, Davies denies any direct connection between a superficial appreciation of animals and morally wrong behavior towards them, and claims that a superficial appreciation of animals can also be valuable. Discussing the idea defended by Carlson and Parsons that we should appreciate animals for what they are, Davies affirms:

I share the thought that we can take pleasure in an animal's suitedness to its environment and way of life, but I think alternative approaches to animal beauty are not inappropriate or immoral in the way that is suggested. For instance, we might consider a bird as if it is a mobile sculpture. ...so long as it does not lead to immoral behavior, there need be nothing untoward in pursuing and enjoying an aesthetic response that is shallow. ... There is no doubt that animals can be and often

are morally wronged by humans. But I doubt that there's a direct connection between that fact and the adoption of an aesthetic attitude to an animal's appearance that is partial or even shallow.[\[26\]](#)

I believe that such a connection does exist. To see a bird as a mobile sculpture, as in the example Davies proposes, means seeing the bird as an ornamental object and not as a subject. Objectifying a subject in this fashion is a way to prepare the terrain for her exploitation. The problem is not an isolated case but the fact that in our society the appreciation of animals as ornamental objects is systematic, and this kind of appreciation fosters an attitude that makes it easy to exploit and mistreat animals.

Viewing an animal as what she is, viewing an animal as a subject developing her own way of life, entails a basic form of respect, and it is this basic form of respect that can lead to an ethical commitment. To appreciate an animal as what she is requires an effort on our part to give primacy to the animal over our desires and interests; it requires an attitude of humility. It means listening to the animal instead of imposing our own voice. In contrast, when we have a distorted and superficial view of animals, we give primacy to our own desires and interests over those of the animal. We want the animal to look like and to mean what we want it to, and this attitude is a will for dominance over the animal. We conceive the animal as a mere instrument for our own ends, as an aesthetic instrument. We want to dissociate the appearance of the animal from her identity, and use her appearance to dress our own ideas.

How can the appreciation of a bird as if she were a mobile sculpture lead us to behave in a morally wrong way towards that animal? I think it could lead to killing the bird, dissecting her, and exhibiting her as a sculpture in a literal sense. Or it could lead to putting the bird in a cage for the rest of her life, as many people do. If we conceive and appreciate the animal as an object, it is easier for us to treat her as an object. In contrast, if we appreciate the bird as a subject who has her own interests, desires, and emotions, and her own life to live, then it is easier for us to develop an attitude of respect for her life and her freedom, easier than we step back and renounce dominance over her, stop reducing her to an instrument for our own ends.

To impose our fantasies on an animal is a form of aesthetic domination, and it has a strong connection with real domination and real abuse. There is a connection between the aesthetic appreciation of animals as toys and the exploitation of animals in circus shows, where they are forced to perform as if they were toys. There is a connection between the aesthetic appreciation of a bull as a dark monster that symbolizes night and death, and cruelly killing him in a bullfight. In several cases of exploitation and mistreatment of animals, we are forcing them to incarnate our fantasies, metaphors, and symbols. We impose our stories on animals with such

conviction and intensity, we impose our stories on so many animals and so often and in such a systematic way, that we finally forget the identity of the animals and believe that our fantasies are their true identities. This is exactly what I think happens in zoos.

## 6. Conclusion

For all these reasons, I believe that at a zoo we cannot appreciate the aesthetic qualities of wild species in a serious and deep way. Furthermore, I argue that the fact that zoological parks cannot reveal the aesthetic qualities of animals to us in a serious and deep way sharply brings into question the effectiveness of zoos at raising awareness concerning endangered species. I think that this criticism should be added to the moral and scientific criticism that philosophers and experts on wildlife level against zoos.

Of course, different arguments could be raised against my claims, and further discussion will be necessary. However, the only way to discuss all this in detail is to give animal aesthetics the attention it deserves. Environmental aesthetics is a rich field that enters into fertile dialogue and collaboration with environmental ethics. Animal aesthetics could play a similar role in relation to animal ethics. In fact, I think that the four disciplines could work side by side towards a deeper understanding of our relation with animals and nature, and help us to find a way to a better life together.

I think, further, that animal aesthetics should enter into dialogue with non-philosophical disciplines that also focus on our relation with animals and take into account aesthetic perspectives. Ecocriticism, critical animal studies, and visual studies applied to animals are clear cases in point. In fact, it is interesting to see how, in these fields, reflection on animals is rapidly growing.<sup>[27]</sup> Animals are becoming the center of interest of many disciplines, and it would be a regrettable loss if philosophers were not to develop animal aesthetics.

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## Endnotes

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[8] Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

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[10] Marta Tafalla, "From Allen Carlson to Richard Long: the Art-Based Appreciation of Nature," *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics*, 2 (2010), 491-515.

[11] Thomas Heyd, "Aesthetic Appreciation and the Many Stories about Nature," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 41, 2 (2001), 125-137.

[12] Nola Semczynszyn, "Public Aquariums and Marine Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 11 (2013), Section 4.3.

[13] Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, p. 44.

[14] I thank Yuriko Saito for this idea.

[15] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. III.

[16] Thomas Leddy, "Aesthetization, Artification, and Aquariums," part II, section 4.

[17] <https://twitter.com/zoobarcelona/status/486459774339657729> (accessed 15 June 2017).

[18] Holmes Rolston III, "Beauty and the Beast: Aesthetic Experience of Wildlife," p. 31.

[19] Of course, these capacities vary according to the species. Whereas a gorilla is a highly conscious and intelligent animal, we are not sure what kind of consciousness insects may have.

If we stay with vertebrates, there is little doubt that they are subjects.

[20] Lori Gruen, "Dignity, Captivity, and an Ethics of Sight," in *The Ethics of Captivity*, ed. Lori Gruen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 231-247.

[21] Ralph Acampora, "Zoos and Eyes: Contesting Captivity and Seeking Successor Practices," *Society & Animals*, 13, 1 (2005), 69-88.

[22] Glenn Parsons, "The Aesthetic Value of Animals," *Environmental Ethics*, 29 (2007), 151-169. See also Glenn Parsons & Allen Carlson, *Functional Beauty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 112-124.

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[27] See, for example, the classic: John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 1980); and the recent: Randy Malamud, *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998); *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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