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## **Review: Cathode Ray Cages**

*Olivier Razac, L'Écran et le zoo: spectacle et domestication, des expositions coloniales à Loft Story. Paris: Éditions Denoël, 2002.*

**By Ron Harpelle**

In a zoo, we do for animals what we have done for ourselves with houses: we bring together in a small space what in the wild is spread out.... A house is a compressed territory where our basic needs can be fulfilled close by and safely. A sound zoo enclosure is the equivalent for an animal....” Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (2002:19)

In the *Life of Pi*, the protagonist argues that because of the protection and nurturing afforded animals in a zoo, their quality of life is better and life expectancy longer than that of their counterparts in the wild. Pi states that the “heart of the art and science of zookeeping” is getting the captives used to being observed by human beings and this calls for the need to provide a suitable living environment in order to minimize the psychological damage caused by the loss of freedom. Accordingly, animals in custody are provided with “a lookout, a place for resting, for eating and drinking, for bathing, for grooming” and they soon adapt to the confines of their enclosure (Martel 2002: 44). Once an animal is comfortable with its new surroundings, the difficult task of reducing its “flight distance” is undertaken in order to put them on display. Knowledge of the animal, and guaranteeing its comfort and protection, are the tools used to diminish its flight distance. With care and consideration a zookeeper can produce “an emotionally stable, stress-free wild animal that not only stays put, but is healthy, lives a very long time, eats without fuss, behaves and socializes in natural ways and the best sign reproduces,” preferably in the presence of observers (Martel 2002: 19). A zoo is a controlled environment where people can safely observe wild animals and where animals are given a better life.

The art and science of zookeeping has a long history, but the modern version was pioneered in the late nineteenth century by Carl Hagenbeck, a renowned German zoologist, animal dealer and trainer. Hagenbeck collected animals in the wild, bringing them back to Europe where he conducted eugenic experiments on some of them, crossing such things as lions and tigers, and where he pioneered new ideas in animal exhibition. In

1907, Hagenbeck became the “father of the cageless zoo” for his design of the Hamburg Zoo, a revolutionary park where moated exhibits and technological innovations like the use of artificial concrete rockwork were combined with exotic looking plants to create “naturalistic simulations” (Hyson 2000: 32). In Hagenbeck’s zoo, animals roamed and socialized more freely in an environment that was designed to be “realistic” in order to make them feel at home and give the observer an idea of the animal’s natural habitat. In some cases, predators and their prey were placed in the same enclosure. Hagenbeck’s objective was to make visitors and animals alike “imagine themselves in the wild” (Hyson 2000: 32). As a result of Hagenbeck’s efforts, zoos everywhere began examining the aesthetics of their exhibits and soon the small cages that characterized animal displays prior to 1907 gave way to the modern zoos we know today.

Olivier Razac’s *L’Écran et le zoo: spectacle et domestication, des expositions coloniales à Loft Story*, begins with a look at a much less celebrated aspect of Carl Hagenbeck’s career. In 1874, Hagenbeck introduced Europe to “exotic” members of the human family, one of the most ubiquitous animal species on earth. This little known episode was an innovation in zookeeping because the event was welcomed by the people who had read descriptions penned by the adventurers who ventured to the distant reaches of the planet in lock step with European imperialism. Hagenbeck’s first exhibition of “savage” human beings took place when he placed a family of Laplanders and a few reindeer in his garden and charged people admission to observe them. The family lived in a hut in the garden, going about their daily lives under the scrutiny of anyone who could afford the price of admission. The family demonstrated such things as the construction of a sleigh and lassoing of reindeer, but in the end, the breast feeding of the baby was what patrons liked most. Just as they would for the feeding time for seals or other programmed activities at any zoo, people lined up to see a woman nursing her child. (29-30) Like the animals found in any other zoo, the intimate aspects of the daily lives of the people on display were subject to public scrutiny and his exhibition was a financial success.

Hagenbeck’s exhibition was not the first time Europeans had seen “exotic” foreigners, but it was a novel way of presenting them. During the 400 years after Christopher Columbus brought back the first human “specimens” from the Americas, Europeans saw a steady flow of conquered people on exhibit. However, unlike kidnapped aboriginal peoples from distance continents, or the occasional slave whose life of drudgery was diverted from the plantations of the Americas to the households of the European elite, the Laplanders were put on display in a natural setting and customers were led to believe that what they were observing was real. In Hagenbeck’s garden, the people were real, the reindeer were real and the setting was “natural.” The exposition not only helped establish Hagenbeck’s credentials as a zoologist, but it created the foundation for all subsequent displays of the human animal. In this new realm of zoological exhibition, people’s curiosity about the world around them was satiated by the absolute power afforded Europeans as the conquerors of the world and a new form of voyeurism emerged.

The first part of *L’Écran et le zoo* explores the reception in Europe of government sponsored exhibitions of colonized peoples. Razac’s discussion of exhibitions of humans in Europe in the decades that bridged the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, much like Pi’s descriptions in Martel’s novel, focuses on the function and methodology of zookeeping. The difference is that Razac’s analysis of the zoo demonstrates how human beings were

zoomorphised by the people who put them on display and by those who came to watch. Razac presents exhibition as a self-fulfilling prophecy for the observers who wanted Africans to be uncivilized and therefore incapable of ruling themselves. This is because the ethnographic exhibitions discussed in *L'Écran et le zoo* were a function of the rapid expansion of colonialism at the end of the nineteenth century which gave impetus to European government efforts to justify the “burden” of conquest. These exhibitions, that also found their way North America, became a common part of the celebrations of empire.

Conquered peoples were presented to audiences in their “natural” and obviously non-Western state. Marquees advertised the exhibition of Dahomey Warriors, Cannibals and Head Hunters at a time when European armies were fanning across Africa and venturing into the Indian Ocean and Orient in search of raw materials and secure markets for industrial goods (65). In this way conquest provided entertainment and the entertainment provided justification for further conquest. Anthropologists became the apologists for world domination and the vanquished became prizes to be put on display. Consequently, the zoological display of humans remained popular through the first decades of the twentieth century and culminated in the 1930s when the “burdens of empire” became too great and a changing world spelled the end of an era. The decline of interest in human exhibition coincided with the decline of colonialism, but people’s desire to observe the intimate lives of others continued and found expression in other forms.

Several decades after the last “ethnographic exhibition,” “reality TV” has filled the airwaves and, in the second part of *L'Écran et le zoo*, Razac examines this new form of voyeurism. In almost every country in the world people are placed in defined spaces with complete strangers and asked to go about their daily business under the watchful eye of surveillance cameras. One of the most popular reality TV programmes to hit Europe is “Loft Story,” a show allowing viewers to observe a group of young people thrown together in an apartment and simply asked to live with one another. The variations on the theme seem endless, but Razac offers a sound analysis of why so many people around the world are attracted to this kind of programming. The author builds on his earlier discussion of the art of zookeeping and human exhibition in Europe as a means of deconstructing the mechanisms of presentation used by the makers of reality TV. Razac shows how human fascination with the exotic has translated into a billion dollar industry and a cultural phenomenon. Like the protagonist in the *Life of Pi*, Razac delves into the “needs” of the animals on display in a reality TV show and provides insights into how broadcasters, the modern zookeepers, maintain their exhibits so as to keep them popular with patrons.

One of the main points made by the author is that although zoos, and reality TV shows, are places where animals can be observed, the species on exhibit also study the observers. To see and be seen suggests that the animals on both sides of the cage act and react in accordance with their perception of how they should respond to the presence of other beings. Like Foucault’s discourse on the prison, Razac argues that a zoo enclosure or a reality TV set are one in the same in that they create a context and expectations to which animals must adjust and adapt. Animals on exhibit change their habits to conform with their new surroundings, which are a product of zookeepers’ desires to provide “naturalistic simulations” of environment and to ensure that observers can see the

captives. Therefore, the act of observation automatically alters that which is being observed. Flight distance is lessened as a matter of course and everyday activities like feeding, sleeping and sex become part of the spectacle. Observers, whether looking at Laplanders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or a group of young people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, expect behaviour consistent with what they understand to be the truth and, as long as what they are looking for is present, they will accept everything they see as being real. The people who “volunteer” (compete for the positions advertised by television producers), to have their daily lives recorded, edited and diffused as part of a reality TV program, have an understanding of both what they want to present to the observer and what they expect people want to see. An unlikely grouping of individuals, with varied ethnicities, sexual orientations, class backgrounds, education levels and whatever else advertisers want their clients to see, are put in (sur)real situations and viewers accept what they see because they get what marketers know they are looking for.

However, “Loft Story” is only one contribution to the rapidly growing phenomenon of reality TV. Demand for the genre spread quickly and, like the offspring of Hagenbeck’s eugenic experiments with animals, were crossed with other reality programs to produce similar, but different versions of the same thing. Some are like game shows, others present physical challenges and they all invite viewer participation through the Internet. Among the more innovative is a Dutch program, set in a restaurant, that combines profit with voyeurism and the desire for fame by asking viewers to drop by, order a meal and be part of the show. L’Écran et le zoo prepares the reader to better appreciate this new genre of human exhibition, but Razac does not stray beyond an analysis of “Loft Story” and does not link reality TV to the documentary films that bridged the gap with the colonial exhibitions of the past.

Although the title of L’Écran et le zoo suggests it is a study of the evolution of and reaction to the public display of human beings from European colonial exhibitions to “Loft Story,” the book is primarily an examination of the similarities between the zoo and the TV screen. In Razac’s book, the story of human exhibitions ends in the 1930s with the decline of colonialism and resurfaces nearly fifty years after the debut of television. The leap forward does not detract from the book, but an important stage in the evolution of reality TV is missing. With Robert Flaherty’s release of “Nanook of the North” in 1922, the documentary film became a significant medium for permitting the public access to the intimacies of other people’s lives. Filmmakers like Flaherty, a native of Thunder Bay, Ontario, and the “father” of the documentary film, picked up where the colonial exhibitions left off. The film camera, directors and editors, brought viewers into the villages and homes of people living in the most isolated regions of the earth. The documentary style touted by Canada’s John Grierson evolved and flourished as means of exposing “truths” about the world and, in the 70s and 80s, the cross-over to reality TV began. By the late 1980s documentary camera operators were being used to shoot dramatized “re-creations” of events for programs like “Top Cops” and other early reality TV shows. Then, with the advent of “Survivor,” “Loft Story” and other recent hybrids, the current formulas for reality TV developed. These stages in the evolution of reality TV need to be understood in order to better appreciate the veracity of Razac’s analysis.

L’Écran et le zoo is important precisely because it suggests new possibilities for the reading of texts like film, theatre and other entertainment that rely on the exhibition of

human beings. Olivier Razac's contribution to our understanding of human exhibition is refreshing because he reminds us that we are, in a sense, on TV all the time, and, in a world that is moulded by what programming executives decide we should watch, the danger lies in not being able to distinguish between reality and the TV. Reality TV becomes real when it crosses the threshold of the television screen and becomes a part of our world. *L'Écran et le zoo* warns us that reality TV, like colonial exhibitions of the past, distorts and confirms perceptions of ourselves and the world around us. The key difference is that unlike the people put on display in Europe a century ago, today the observers are not isolated from the subjects on reality TV because the new specimens are from somewhere down the street and they look just like us. Like Hagenbeck's cageless zoo, reality TV makes us predators and prey in the same enclosure.

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