

Western Ideas about Elephants

– a Commentary

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An elephant is a strange creature. While at home in eastern and southern climatic zones, it also has a rich Western cultural history. This history, or more precisely Western ideas about elephants, is the theme of Nigel Rothfels's article. The author introduces the reader to an interesting history and not the least rich source material from the presentation of elephants in bestiaries (collections of animal fables) from the Middle Ages through French natural philosopher Comte de Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle* (1749-1804) to controversial American photo artist Andres Serrano's elephant pictures. What kind of elephant do we see in these and other presentations? Which contexts were they part of and what may they tell us today? These are among the questions asked by the author.

Rothfels claims that the popularity of Serrano's elephant pictures does not stem from the controversial photographer nor from the photos themselves, but rather from "a particularly modern way of thinking about elephants". The origin of thinking about elephants in this way takes the author back to the end of the 1800s with criticism of not least the upper classes and their elephant hunts, where elephant body

parts such as feet and tusks were brought home as trophies of their great deeds. In this century such acts came under strong criticism. As I read Rothfels, it is possible to see from this criticism how a new image of the elephants emerges, an elephant that suffers, is homeless and alone, which Rothfels calls *E. dolens*. In this image it is not only we (mankind) who see, rather the elephant also sees us! The elephant has become a subject that suffers, grieves and longs for, if not home, at least somewhere to roam freely. This modern way of thinking about elephants is about freedom and liberation.

In the introduction to the article the author shows two types of picture he feels are characteristic of elephant presentations early in the 20th century. He takes the first picture from the memoirs of Carl Hagenbeck, the well-known zoo owner, where a photo of an elephant dressed in a large heavy blanket stands out from the other pictures in the book. We do not see much of the elephant, only its eye. Then there is a picture of an elephant surrounded by playing children. "Blind Children at Ringling Bros Circus" was the title of the picture when printed in the *Chicago Daily News* on 20 April 1917. The fact that the

picture was newsworthy Rothfels writes, tells us that the picture was part of a context that is not as obvious to us today as it would have been back then. This was at a time of the widely popular biography of Helen Keller, who was blind but also a presence as a sensing being in a public sphere. The picture of the elephant with the playing children should be read in such a context, a different one from ours.

While most people today probably will be fascinated by the picture and the stories about the “cold elephant” and the “elephant with the children”, Rothfels argues that it is the *sight* of captivity that dominates the modern view of these elephants, while this was not the case for those who in the early 1900s were confronted with these pictures. No doubt they also saw a creature in captivity, but they primarily would see a creature that with special wisdom had accepted its fate. More than captivity, these people would have seen sensitivity and empathy. Rothfels speaks about this perception of elephants as *E. sentiens*. He traces the origin back to the last half of the 1700s and Buffon’s presentation of the elephant in the large work *Histoire Naturelle*.

Buffon gave the elephant special status, believing it belonged in “the first distinction”. Of all the earth’s creatures the elephant was closest to mankind. The elephant was wise in the widest sense of the word because it had both a rational and an emotional intelligence, according to Buffon. It was aware of its surroundings and also had moral conscience.

Rothfels also emphasizes that Buffon was interested in the elephant’s eye, pointing to the imbalanced relation between the huge body and the small sad eye. It is precisely here – in the look itself – that the elephant’s special characteristics appear as Buffon describes it and Rothfels analyzes it.

There is, nevertheless, a third type of elephant which Rothfels speaks of as *E. horribilis*. He finds this primarily in the animal fables of the Middle Ages, where the relation between fable animals and real animals is more ambiguous. In these presentations the elephant appears together with creatures such as unicorns, griffens and dragons. While these creatures eventually come to be defined as fable and fantasy animals, the elephant steps out of this role, becoming a real animal, an animal that exists, but about which there continues to be great uncertainty as to what way it exists. *E. horribilis* is an ambiguous creature: fierce and fantastic, terrifying and spectacular, all at the same time. One of the most well-known motifs from this period is an elephant carrying not merely one but many soldiers on its back. Such depictions have roots back to antiquity, and in Rothfels’s interpretation show elephants with special power, physically strong but also with great wisdom.

Even if Rothfels identifies three types of elephants in his presentation and places them in chronological order, one does not replace the other. His goal as I read it is to point out some roles the elephant has been and still is given in Western cultural history. The pictures point back in time as well as to the future. He puts the picture of the blanketed elephant in Hagenbeck’s memoirs and the elephant with the blind children in an intermediate position, belonging with pictures from the 1700s and 1800s, but also signifying something new, the modern picture of the elephant as a creature that is lonesome and alone.

There are several reasons why this story of the elephant in Western cultural history is so interesting and thought-provoking. First it is interesting that Rothfels defines cultural types of elephants, and by giving

them Latin names he is in one sense building a bridge between natural history and cultural history. With these characteristics the author indicates that the story of elephants is primarily a story about mankind, thus making it cultural history, not in the sense that there is no creature such as an elephant walking around in the world, but rather that our perceptions, pictures and narratives about it will always be dominated by time and the context they are part of. This is thought-provoking, not only in relation to elephants but also in relation to mankind and animals in general.

It is also interesting that the author attaches much importance to the look. In Western cultural history it is the sense of sight that has been given most emphasis, of all the senses being closest to logos. In cultural theory inspired by phenomenology, the eye and sight are man's opening on to the world. When sight meets the world and the world meets the look, something happens – virtually a touching, to borrow the words of Merleau-Ponty. One touches and is touched. Sight is distance and closeness at the same time.

Roland Barthes has also focused on sight. He opens his essay *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie* (1980) with reflections upon the sense of wonder that occurred when he saw a photograph long, long ago. Barthes writes:

On a long-ago day I happened on a photograph showing Napoleon's oldest brother, Jérôme (1852). I told myself with a wonder I have never quite got over that: "I am seeing the eyes that have seen the Emperor." I would occasionally mention this wonder, but as nobody appeared to share it /.../ I forgot it (Barthes in Well 2003:19).

Well, perhaps so, but being on the track of this wonder is what the essay deals with. For Barthes, the photograph has implications of perception theory based not on what it is, but rather on what it has been. It is the time dimension that provides photographs with special status. Meeting the eyes of somebody who has seen, even eyes in a photograph, results in a strange wonder. This wonder is what Rothfels in a way opens for.

Rothfels' article also reminds readers of more. The article reminds us of the simple but important fact that there is always more in what we see than what we see. Pictures in a wide sense, i.e. also ideas expressed in texts, are not prints of reality, but cultural expressions with traces and remnants from the time and the context they once came about in and were part of. Thus different times have different looks. Hence we do not see the same, not even in apparently innocent pictures of elephants.

Translated by John Anthony

Reference

Well, Liz (ed.) 2003. *The Photography Reader*. London & New York, Routledge.