

A Zoo-logical Nature

The Construction of Africa in Kristiansand Zoo and Amusement Park

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Abstract

In 2007 a new Africa-section opened in Kristiansand Zoo and Amusement Park, with four lions as the chief attraction. In the article the constructed Africa is analysed as a display of living nature. With nearly 700 000 annual visitors, the Zoo is a major contributor in the shaping of attitudes towards wildlife. A central concept in the analysis is the term *zoo-logical nature*, a term that is coined in an analytical intent to embrace different, often contradicting and paradoxical aspects of the Zoo enterprise. Business, profit, moral and love of nature interact with the strategically planned design of buildings, enclosures and landscapes, and the presentation of real and mediated animals. Together these aspects contribute in producing specific relations between the animals and humans, as well as morally acceptable positions for humans in wildlife. In Kristiansand Zoo you meet the lion as a mythical figure, as an individual with a fun personality as well as a specimen – and the mediated lions seem to interact with the real lion in such a way that the captivity is concealed. Instead the animals appear to be protected and free, and the visitors as caring and distanced. The Zoo, then, can be seen as a privileged site to study the meanings we ascribe to wildlife.

For the first time lions have come to reside in Norway on a permanent basis. In June 2007 a new Africa-section opened in Kristiansand Zoo and Amusement Park with four lions brought in from Denmark as the chief attraction. The main motivation of the new section is to provide “new knowledge about the African continent” to the zoo-visitors. The displays of the animals, the construction of the landscape and the buildings, as well as the staged activities are all parts of the product the Zoo offers to its visitors. With 670 000 annual visitors

Kristiansand Zoo is the second largest tourist attraction in Norway,¹ and a central actor in the forming of public attitudes towards wildlife. The new Africa is elevated into a distinct thematic area in the Zoo, and massive resources have been invested to ensure that “architecture, sounds and music puts you in the right mood when you enter the gate to Africa”.²

Viewing the Africa-section as a display of living nature is the analytical lens employed in this essay. The analysis will focus on how the Zoo’s landscape, con-

structions, animals and activities form part of what I will term a *zoo-logical* nature. By that I mean a culturalized natural environment that integrates different, often contradicting and paradoxical aspects of the Zoo enterprise. Business, profit, moral and love of nature interact with the strategically planned design of buildings and landscapes, and the presentation of real and mediated animals. One way of approaching the Zoo is through experience; by walking, looking, sensing the place and its animals.³ I will use myself and my experiences in the intent to figure out how this zoo-logic functions, by interpreting how it affects me as a cultural analyst.⁴ The experiences gained by being at the Zoo will analytically be combined with the reading of the zoo-environment; the new Africa-section is jam-packed and overflowing with man-made representations of animals and landscape. More than anything the Zoo is a cultural place where animals, plants and natural surroundings are given culturally contingent shapes of nature: it is an artificial and controlled reconstruction of elements from the natural world that is presented in a cultural context (Mullan & Marvin 1999). It may look like nature, it may be sensed as nature, but it can for sure be read as culture. The zoo, then, is a privileged site to study the meanings we ascribe to wildlife.

Displaying Wildlife

The zoo-logic has changed over time. In 1907 the German financial magnate Carl Hagenbeck initiated a zoo-revolution when he opened his *Tierpark* in Hamburg. While zoos until then had put animals in narrow cages and behind bars, Hagenbeck designed *naturalistic enclosures* that attempted to emulate the animal's natural

habitats: the idea was to give the visitors an impression of how the animals actually lived in their natural settings. Essential to this display of animals, was the obliteration or transformation of boundaries between humans and animals. The visitor could for the first time in zoo-history look directly at the animals without any visual obstruction (Mullan & Marvin 1999). Hagenbeck's novel idea was to embed the boundaries into the landscape itself; moats, waterfalls, escarpments or cliffs kept the species apart instead of cages and bars. The historian Nigel Rothfels uses the expression *managing eloquence* to describe how the visitors' attention thus is redirected from seeing and

The lions appear to be protected and free in the new Africa-section. Photo: Lise Camilla Ruud.



imagining the animal's ill fate in captivity (Rothfels 2002). Recently, in zoos, this technique of display is connected with the idea that the animals have a right to privacy, and that they should be able to withdraw from the human gaze if they want to. When the animals were kept in cages the distance between animals and visitors could be reduced to a minimum, but the idea of the animal's right to privacy implies a greater distance – and undisturbed places are being created in the Zoos (Mullan & Marvin 1999).

The presentation of animals, the construction of landscapes and buildings are all essential in the forming of a zoo-logical environment – and they interact in the conveying of messages about the human-animal relationships, and about how human should be positioned in wildlife. While the cages in the 19th century zoos can be interpreted as an explicit expression of human power and control over wild animals, the 20th century naturalistic enclosures convey a message of a less asymmetric relation. In the construction of Kristiansand's Africa a new zoo-logic seems to be emerging: animals, plants and the landscape are presented as vulnerable and in need of protection – a protection that is manifested through keeping the audience physically and metaphorically apart from the animals and the landscape. In different ways the visitors are placed in positions and relations where they appear as distanced and thereby protective vis-à-vis the displayed animals and landscape.

An African Entry

To enter the lion area, *Kilima Simba*, and the four lions purchased from the Givskud Lion Park in Denmark, one has to go through a tunnel. The tunnel is submerged

in the ground, and intersects the lion's outdoor area before it reaches the lion house entry. The tunnel walls are made of brick, and apart from one panoramic window it is solely through bars that I can see the area and the lions outside. Due to the submerged level I barely get a glimpse of the sky above the ground outside, through the bars. The daylight scarcely reaches into the tunnel, so it's pretty dark. Quite cramped as well, especially when there are many visitors. The fact that the architects mainly have used bars in the tunnel, and that they have lowered it into the ground, turns the short walk through the tunnel into an ambivalent experience. I do feel sort of protected; the lions are actually out there somewhere. But more than that, I feel forced into a position that I don't quite understand. Why do I have to walk down here, in the crust of the earth? To look out through the bars is like looking out from a dungeon. The lions are out there in the green grass, beneath the blue sky – they seem to be enjoying their freedom while I am left down here, inside the brick wall and behind bars. During the walk I am continuously informed by photo-posters containing informative texts about African wildlife. I can even push buttons so that animal roars resound throughout the tunnel.

At the end of the tunnel lies the bright and spacious lion house. Since the Zoo explicitly has shaped its architectural design to support the conveying of knowledge, this contrast is interesting. The short walk through the tunnel has in several senses been a journey from a cramped darkness into something bright and open. First, the buildings and landscape enforces the actual movement through the tunnel into the house. Second, it has been a movement in terms of knowledge; I have passed from

being an assumed ignorant to via the posters and sounds to be quite illuminated concerning African wildlife. Third, the movement from dark to bright also has its parallel in the western history of Africa as an unknown, threatening and dark continent, and its change into a bright, vulnerable and beautiful place. The transition from a dark to a bright Africa also implies a change in the relation between nature and culture; from a “nature worthy of manly fear, to nature in need of motherly nurture” (Haraway 2004:172). Next stop is the lion house.

Catching the Lion's Eye

Entering the Lion House few minutes after the opening hour, as the first visitor that day, I looked straight at one of the lions. Right there behind the glass wall, a huge male lion was walking back and forth, less than 50 cm from where I stood. Before he withdrew to the rear of the house, where the lions stayed for the most part when they were inside, we looked at one another for a brief moment. The encounter was fascinating, but also deeply disturbing – and all I could think of was that I had to take a photograph. But why was it so important for me to pick up the camera? And was it a different lion I saw through the camera than I did in the direct eye-to-eye encounter? This deserves further elaboration; there seemed to be some sort of interaction between my encounters with the real and with the mediated lion.

Before I went to Kristiansand I read about the construction of Africa on the Zoo's webpage. I had paid special attention to the description of the lion's journey from Denmark to Norway. In a detailed photo-series one can follow the veterinary controlled shipment from the rather brutal

anaesthetization to the woozy awakening, with the presence of photo-shooting journalists wearing white sterile jumpsuits. One of the photos shows how the leader of the animal department, wearing green surgical gloves, takes an aim with an anaesthetic rifle at a lion. The lion is inside a cage, and throws himself towards the man and the bars. “The last lion is to be sedated. It doesn't like it much..” is the subtext.⁵ Another article on the webpage describes the lions' personalities, and how they got their names.

After the announcement of a naming contest, and the subsequent ballot over the suggestions, the lions were named Sera, Kila, Aragorn and Aslan. Both male names have literary-mythical origins; Aragorn is one of the leading characters in J.R.R. Tolkien's “Lord of the Rings” while Aslan got his name from the leading lion-character in “Narnia” by C.S. Lewis. The female names are perhaps not that potent in their connotations, both names are geographic names in respectively Kenya and Ethiopia. They also sound similar to some of the names in the Disney “Lion King” movies (Simba, Nala, Kiara). On the internet one can also read the zoo keeper's description of the animals' personalities. In the group of four, Aragorn is the unquestionable leader, he is provocative and can be a true quarreller. His half-brother Aslan is more of the quiet type. Even though he is vigorous and strong, he is both kind and modest and most of the time he just tags along with the rest of the group. The female Sera is normally calm and relaxed, but she surely can get worked up if necessary. Kila, on the other hand, also female, is playful and curious – as well as a bit shy (!). The internet description's not only consists of texts and photos, there is also a web-camera at the www.dyreparken.com, 24 hours a day one

The enclosure produces a relation of seemingly respect and distance between human and animal.
Photo: Lise Camilla Ruud.



can observe what's going on inside the lion house. This could certainly have added a touch of "big brother" to the relation between visitor and lions, had it not been for the lousy quality: one hardly sees anything. The presentations of the lions are varied, both in texts and pictures. Especially the camera's mediation of the animal appears to be important, but what is it that the photography does with the relation between the visitors and lions?

The camera shows us animals we cannot normally see. The photograph can be seen as a privileged site in the constitution and maintenance of conceptions of animals, and it seems to be a non-interventionist way of practice. Through the camera humans can be positioned as considerate, and the relation with the animal become one of distance. The lens guarantees a non-invading and respectful encounter between human and animal, by producing a distinction, a separation between the parties. One could also say that through the lens the

production of the photograph and thereby the intrusion in the animal's life is concealed and hidden. The posters, the photos, and the web-camera all function to secure the appropriate distance between visitors and animals in the zoo-logical Africa. The visitors are being positioned in an ideal relation: they are given access to the lions, while at the same time being able to show respect and distance (Brower 2005).

No one goes to the Zoo to look at photos; it is the real thing the visitors are after. But the lions are actually quite a bore to watch, 21 hours a day they are just lying around, lazy and drowzy, and nothing seems to happen. From the Zoo's perspective it can therefore be an advantage to present the animals in different ways, and the mediated lion is much more plastic and mouldable than the actual lion. Not only can it be given mythical names, a fun personality, be looked after by well-meaning vets and made eternal by journalists with sterile suits and big cameras. It can also become an individual the

visitor feels sympathy and grows affection for – precisely via the multi-faceted acquaintance. The combination of real and mediated animals seems to interact, they define each other, the real lion become more real through the mediations and the mediations seems more real when associated with the actual lion. Or, as Donna Haraway puts it: “the camera has shown itself superior to the gun for the possession, production, preservation, consumption, surveillance, appreciation, and control of nature” (Haraway 2004:175). I don’t know what the lion saw when he looked at me, perhaps a potential breakfast, but what I saw in his eyes was probably a hotchpotch consisting of the fascination in seeing a lion *for real*, a specimen of *Panthera Leo*, wondering whether it was Aragorn the quarreller or Aslan the quiet one, mixed with a healthy portion of moral hesitations, and maybe even a bit of an exhilarating feeling of control and power vis-à-vis such a mighty animal. Perhaps did these parallel and ambivalent experiences force me to pick up the camera, so that I could produce a protective distance and a mediating buffer between him and myself. If looking into his eyes was too much of a reminder of something unpleasant, say moral qualms about the asymmetrical captivity, with the camera I was able to redefine the relation into a less actual, less empirical one. The animal imprisonment became less persistent, and I was ready to move outside.

Constructing Africa

The lion’s outdoor precincts are next to the Lion House, and the area is planted with the Zoo’s special “lion mixture” of grass. The first thing that strikes me is the inaccessibility. The enclosure is delimited by a tall fence. On its outside facing the visitors there are long wooden logs, probably

meant to give an African look. The logs are assembled tightly and make it difficult to look inside, only from selected places it’s possible to have a peek into the area. At one point a jeep is mounted into the fence, here you can sit behind the steering wheel and from the car seat gaze at the lions (like a safari). If you choose to buy a “lion-burger” at the Soko Food and Souvenir you might get a glimpse from the café-table. One can also look in from the backside of the area, or from behind some of the flower beds, where the fence isn’t covered with logs. However, the overall impression is that it’s actually quite difficult to see the lions behind the tightly assembled fence. But is it the lions that are locked up, or the humans that are kept out?

A central message seems to be that the lions need to be left alone, and thereby protected. This is interesting if one considers the Zoo’s explicit purpose to transmit “new knowledge about the African continent”. It seems that the learning process consists not only in watching the animals, but also in *not seeing* them. A suitable term for this display-technique can be *protective enclosures*: the lions are being presented as free, protected and hidden from our vision. The captivity is turned upside down: it seems to be the humans with their intrusive, damaging eyes that are being kept out and not the lions that are being captured and locked up.

The lions’ enclosure is both naturalistic and protective. The intention is partly to recreate the animal’s natural habitat, the four lions are placed in an enclosure that looks like African nature. At the same time the distinctions between human and animal are accentuated and pronounced with the high fences, as well as with the brick and bars in the tunnel. The lions are given almost-African grass to tread on (given their

Danish upbringing, they have actually never put their paws in real African grass) and with the African-looking fence they are protected against human intrusion. It may seem paradoxical to construct an enclosure where it's difficult to see the animals, but the display contains its own logic. The high fences contribute in producing a relation of seemingly respect and distance between human and animal. In this manner, the protective enclosure also becomes a moral enclosure; one that produces a specific understanding of how humans should be positioned vis-à-vis wild animals. The attendants appear as caring by keeping themselves at a distance, and by not looking at the lions. It might seem absurd in the first place, buying lions from Denmark and building them an pseudo-African landscape and then complicating the visual access to them, but it's everything but absurd. The lions seem to be living an undisturbed and

free life inside the enclosure, where they are protected against the visitors invading eyes. The coining of the term protective enclosures, then, seems to imply a new phase in the zoo-evolution, and one that actually contradicts what the zoo historically has been all about: a place to look at animals. The moral message is that the humans should keep away from wildlife, and that the animals are better off living in their natural habitats (of course, this is not an option – their habitats are destroyed, or unsafe, precisely because humans haven't kept themselves at the necessary distance, so the zoo-logical habitat is probably the second best). Next stop is the public area lying vis-à-vis the lions enclosure.

A Natural, Ahistorical Culture

In Kristiansand's Africa the zoo-logical environment also includes the culture. The

A stagnant culture. Fences and houses are made of natural materials that don't reveal origin in any historical period.
Photo: Lise Camilla Ruud.



public area is constructed as a small African village, *Manyatta*, with circular huts with roof of straw, and a train-station with a mini-train that moves in a trajectory around the village. The area is decorated with barrels, oil drums, wooden trunks, an old rusty Bedford truck and artistic carved wooden figures. And it is animals, not humans that reside in the village.

It seems to be an Africa of the past that's presented to the zoo visitors. Both "fantasy and special solutions" have been used by the employees to make new look old. The corrugated plates on the roof are brand new, but to make them look old and rusty they have been painted and sprinkled with red sand. Much resources have also been spent to make the vegetation look as African as possible. Because of the climatic differences, it was impossible to use actual African plants, instead they have imported 70 trees, 950 shrubs, 1850 varieties of perennials and grass, all from Germany. The woodcarvers who have decorated the area so that it looks truly African have been brought in from Bali. The village people consists of cute and tiny animals and the visitors are allowed to cuddle and play with them. A wooden fence surrounds the village, so the mini-goats, pigs and hens are free to walk about in their village. The mini-goats are presented at the webpage as modest, hardy animals which rarely get angry, and mostly they are kind and contact-seeking. They are very practical inhabitants as well, not only adorable, but also suitable small, and they cannot jump the fences and do a runner.

Animals and plants have been carefully selected and imported to match the Zoo and Amusement park's requirements. At the same time the need of respect and distance between human and nature is emphasized. The clumsy, demanding hands

of visiting children may become too persistent on the animals, so there are dedicated huts and outdoor spaces where only animals are allowed. Here signs are put up: "Only for us with four legs" or "Sometimes we need peace. Be kind to us. The animals". Not only the animals, but also the vegetation is giving messages to keep an appropriate distance: "We love to be left in peace. Greetings from the plants" says the sign next to the plants imported from Germany.

It is not much in Kristiansands Africa that's actually African. This is probably not a big surprise, after all this is an amusement park, not a museum, and we don't expect the same level of authenticity here. But if one consider the park's intention of conveying knowledge about the African continent to its more than 670 000 annual visitors, the question of authenticity become both relevant and important. What type of knowledge is being created and conveyed here? Perhaps did the creation of a zoo-logical Africa result in a simplified, unambiguous continent in the balancing between entertainment and education, between profit and moral. The village partly got that timeless, ahistorical character which often has been ascribed to "primitive" cultures in our part of the world, also in ethnographical and natural history museums (Rekdal 2003). Fences, houses and wood carvings are made of natural materials that don't reveal origin in any distinct historical period. In spite of their Balinese, German or Norwegian origin, the artefacts are being presented as African, and with an ahistorical, close-to-nature appearance: it could be brand new, or hundreds of years old, the age doesn't really matter, because it is a stagnant, naturalized culture we meet in Kristiansand's Africa. The tiny, cute animals living in the village huts of straw cer-

tainly add weight to that argument. And skulls from dead animals are nailed to the fences as decoration. They've always lived like this in Africa, haven't they?

However, in the village one can also see a rusty truck and a train station. With cultural symbols of western origin, the village is placed into modernity: the car and the train points in the direction of development and progress. Yet, the station roof is like a rusty patchwork, and the timber has turned grey. The truck has clearly seen better days. Perhaps we are placed in an Africa at a time when the white man has started reflecting on his behaviour in this continent; maybe the decay symbolizes our shortcomings? A more reasonable interpretation is perhaps that we are carried to a post-colonial time, where a stagnant Africa is left with the rusty leftovers from imperial exploitation. This interpretation embraces not only the symbolism of decay, but also that of progress and evolution: it is the western culture that brings history and

development to Africa. The train and the truck perhaps bring the backside of modernity to Africa, but they certainly keep the village wheels running as well. The children that take a trip on the train, certainly look like they are enjoying their ride.

Love and Profit

On my way out of the park I pass through the lion house once again. Inside there is a poster with a photograph of a lion couple. This time I look at it with slightly new eyes. The lions in the photo are leaning against each other, the female in front of the male. He pushes his snout against the back of her head. Their look is not directed towards me; rather they are looking in separate directions, downwards and away from each other, away from the camera. The picture is beautiful, but it also makes me a bit sad. "We love animals" is written in bold types across the poster, but I am not convinced that the love is mutual. The poster informs about the cooperation between the Zoo and Animal Planet; the Zoo and the television channel "share a strong and serious commitment for animals and nature, and collaborate to stimulate the interest for the animals of the world". They encourage the visitors to look at TV "when you can't be here in the Zoo and watch the animals for real, you can enjoy a commercial-free TV-channel filled with wild, mysterious and incredible animals – 24 hours a day".

In the zoo-logical Africa, entertainment, education and moral go together with commercial interests. Kristiansand Zoo is owned by the privately held investment company Braganza, which manages a capital of about 200 million Euros. Its portfolio includes investments in sectors such as pet shops, airline companies, biotechnology and pharmaceutical science.

A rusty truck and timber turned grey. The western culture seems to bring history and progress to the African village. Photo: Lise Camilla Ruud.



The company apparently has a good nose for enhancing the Zoo's popularity among the attendants and it knows with whom to associate in order to increase its capital. They cooperate with Animal Planet, which

with its half a billion viewers in 160 countries is the world's largest actor in mediation of animals, and shaping attitudes towards nature. This results in a powerful alliance between two dominant contribu-



*Too small to do a runner.
The animals are put on display in a vulnerable nature
and a naturalized culture.
Photo: Lise Camilla Ruud.*

tors in the forming of attitudes towards wildlife, an alliance that with great force produces, maintains and conveys specific cultural representations of animals, landscape and culture in Kristiansand's Africa.

The modern Zoo makes the animal disappear, according to the art-critic and writer Peter Berger: "in zoos they constitute the living monument to their own disappearance" (Berger 1980:272). The combination of real and mediated animals seems to increase the human dominance in the zoo-logical nature, as well as to decrease the presence of the actual lions. In the Zoo we can see the lion as a specimen, as a mythical figure, as enjoying its freedom, as veterinary controlled, but what we see most in Kristiansand's Africa are the protected animals, the animals that are put on display in a vulnerable nature and a naturalized culture. Most of us would certainly agree with the moral message of protection and keeping distance that's conveyed by the Zoo. Yet it is discomfiting how the Zoo presents itself as an advocate for animal rights and simultaneously, without reflecting upon it, puts the animals in a captivity that is very concealed. Within the zoo-logic the different presentations of the animals confirm and strengthen one another. The protective enclosure, the alliance between the Zoo and the TV-channel, the use of photo-posters and the web-camera do not capture the animals any less than the cramped iron cages in previous zoos did. At the same time, it is exactly the variation in representations that confirms the Zoo's statement that they love and protect the animals.

Conclusion

With the term zoo-logical nature I have tried to show how the forming of the land-

scape, the buildings and the presentation of animals interact in an intent to link profit and moral, entertainment and education and how a simplified almost-African nature is constructed. The zoo-environment conceals the animal's captivity while at the same time manifesting the overall importance of protecting nature and respecting other species. If the lions are hidden behind high fences, it is a persistent nature with overexposed animals we meet in Kristiansand's Africa. However, the identification of a zoo-logical nature is not about exposing the Zoo as a commercial actor. Rather the demonstration of such an environment can be an entry into understanding how attitudes towards wildlife are created and sustained in a wider context, and of how they're characterised by paradoxes. It is due to the Zoo's aim at making a profit that they must offer that very nature which millions of Norwegians wants and feels comfortable with. This makes the Zoo a very important place for the production of attitudes towards nature and animals.

Notes

1. Only Holmenkollen Ski Jump Arena has more visitors than Kristiansand Zoo and Amusement Park.
2. See www.dyreparken.com
3. The methodical approach is based on fieldwork in Kristiansand Zoo and Amusement Park, I have also used the Zoo's webpages as sources. www.dyreparken.com
4. Hjemdahl (2003) distinguishes between *reading* and *experiencing* the theme park as a cultural phenomenon, and she uses the last method, following a six year old boy around the world of Moomins and Pippi Longstocking. As a mother of four, I'm well equipped with potential "research assistants" like the one Hjemdahl used. But, of course, the little rascals loved Zoo-Africa. They found riding the train awesome, the lions spectacular and the mini-goats adorable. Their experiences just didn't fit into their mother's moral doubts about the Zoo. So instead I follow my own zoo-logical experiences. Like Hjemdahl I "throw myself wholeheartedly into experienc-

ing”(but imagine my relief when they said I was too old for a ride on the mini-train!), perhaps not as an average visitor, but as a cultural analyst with a certain moral and analytical disposition.

5. To look at the photo-series go to:

<http://www.dyreparken.com/index.jsp?a=104619> (read 27.05.2008)

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