

The Eyes of Elephants: Changing Perceptions

Nigel Rothfels

The Edison Initiative, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
rothfels@uwm.edu

Abstract

By placing two early twentieth-century images of elephants against a broader background of ideas about the animals, this essay critiques a particularly modern claim that by looking into the eye of an elephant one can gain a deeper understanding of the animal and its consciousness. In recent decades, elephant eyes have become ubiquitous markers in popular, natural historical, and rights-based studies of the animal; indeed, it has become difficult to open any book about elephants and not find at least one and sometimes many close-up shots of eyes. By examining this way of looking at elephants through placing it in a historical context, and by demonstrating how the animal's eye has become central to a discourse of suffering connected to modern elephants, this essay calls for a re-examination of broadly held assumptions about the animal.

Keywords:
Elephants,
eyes,
history

In a 1909 edition of the 1908 memoirs of the Hamburg animal dealer Carl Hagenbeck, there is an unusual photograph included in a chapter entitled “Elephant Memories.” The photo does not appear in the original edition and seems to have been added in the later edition, along with many others, to increase interest in the volume. One of eleven pictures in the chapter, the photo receives no additional description in the body of the text, but has been published only with a simple caption: “At -40° on the 12th of February, 1900. 120 km from the Oestersund River” (fig. 1). Like other photographs in the chapter – of trained African elephants, the disembarkation of an elephant from India, a perform-



Fig. 1.
Courtesy of Tierpark
Hagenbeck.

ing elephant lifting a woman on its left front leg, elephants working on the construction of Hagenbeck's Tierpark in Hamburg, and a picture of another cold elephant at, evidently, -20° – the picture of the fur-clad elephant is meant to tell a fairly straight-forward story all by itself. Just as the other pictures were part of ongoing discussions about elephants – about whether only Asian elephants were capable of being domesticated, whether elephants could be trained to perform both spectacular *and* useful functions, how best to ship elephants to Europe – the photograph of the somehow pathetic-looking modern-day mammoth was part of several recurring themes in Hagenbeck's memoir.

First, all of the pictures in the book were intended, like the text itself, to surprise and amaze Hagenbeck's readers and they should be understood as part of the showmanship at the base of much of Hagenbeck's undertakings. When Hagenbeck spent extraordinary sums to outfit an expedition to central Africa to capture a legendary dinosaur, when he built his Tierpark to be one of the great wonders of modern times, when he walked confidently as impresario before his exhibitions of indigenous peoples and trained animals, he was actively constructing an image for his company as the place to which the public could turn to see the extraordinarily spectacular (see Rothfels 2002). On a more practical level, however, the image of the furry elephant should be understood as part of Hagenbeck's essentially constant appeal to the directors of the zoological gardens of Europe and North America that they work harder to acclimatize exotic animals to northern conditions and exhibit animals, whenever possible, outside. In a letter he wrote to William Hornaday, director of the Bronx Zoo, in 1897, for example,

Hagenbeck urged that if the proposed New York Zoological Park's lion house was built according to his "system," through which the animals would be exhibited mostly outside and not in a large building, the Bronx Zoo would "save ... many thousands of dollars and besides, the people will have more pleasure, as then the animals will be always in more lively condition." Insisting that hot, humid conservatories were not healthy for even tropical animals, Hagenbeck was a charter member of what has been called the "fresh air school" of animal exhibition, and thus the picture was intended to show to his professional colleagues that elephants can flourish in even *extremely* cold weather provided they are given adequate protection.

But with all this, there is still clearly more to be said about this image than that it echoed a few dominant themes in Hagenbeck's memoir. On the one hand, the basic elements of the picture are easy to describe. Against a neutral backdrop screen stand three figures. On our left we see a man in a light-colored fur coat holding an instrument, which, were it not for the presence of the elephant, might be misapprehended as a the end of a harpoon but here it is understood clearly as an ankus, the ancient tool and symbol of the elephant keeper. On our right is another man, carrying a long guiding wand who seems to be positioning the elephant for the photograph. As for the elephant herself, not much of her can be seen. Poking out of the bottom of the giant fur coat we can make out one of her front feet, but beyond that, only the front part of her head, her curled trunk, and the short tusks of a female Asian elephant can be seen. On the other hand, beyond the obvious physical layout of the image, there is something about it that seems more ineffable, more tied to an emo-

tional response we have as viewers. I suggested this already in describing the elephant as “pathetic,” but it is important to emphasize that *this* specific response is very much connected to our contemporary ideas about elephants. In Hagenbeck’s time, this image was likely understood as peculiar, amusing, fanciful, and perhaps even preposterous, but not many viewers wondered out loud, or even to themselves, whether the elephant enjoyed trudging around in the snow. But if readers in 1909 did not consider the elephant, they were soon to be replaced by new generations of Europeans and Americans for whom such questions about the animal would become urgently important. This picture, in fact, marks a watershed moment in ways of thinking about elephants in the West, a moment which echoes broader themes in the way we have come to think about nature more generally over the last century.

If it marks a watershed, however, it does not do so alone. Indeed, key elements of the photograph of the cold elephant are echoed in many other images of elephants from the period, including one with a group of children (fig. 2), taken on April 20, 1917, for the *Chicago Daily News*. Again, the basic elements of the photograph are not difficult to describe. As a boy reaches his left arm out to touch the left temple of the elephant, which has laid down in the middle of a street, a little girl sits nervously on the animal’s back, leaning forward with both hands to steady herself on the giant creature. An older woman can be seen behind the elephant resting both of her hands on the back of the animal’s head; her face looking down as she seems to concentrate on the point where her hands are feeling the creature. Behind her, we can make out a man, perhaps the animals’ handler, who is looking up at the girl on the

elephant’s back. Another girl, facing us at center left, can be seen reaching out her left hand toward the animal as her right foot rests on top of the elephant’s outstretched right foreleg. And, in the front center of the image, an apparently smiling boy, shown in profile, appears to lean his body onto the front of the elephant’s head, his left hand braced against the animal’s forehead, his right on the base of the animal’s trunk. The elephant, herself, appears as a sort of fantastic piece of playground sculpture as she submits to the clamoring throng of children fascinated by her presence.

At the bottom of the image we can read the caption: “Blind Children at Ringling Bros Circus,” and it is this caption that takes this picture beyond the simply unusual to the extraordinary. What makes an image like this significant is as much the cultural back story embedded in it as the actual events portrayed; in this case, the back story includes the fascination at the

Fig. 2.
Chicago History Museum
(DN-0067851).



time with the biography of Helen Keller and the history of ideas about blindness in the period, and it even includes a likely awareness of the ancient parable about epistemology, which tells of a group of blind monks asked to describe an elephant, a story made popular in the West in the late nineteenth century through the American poet John Godfrey Saxe in his “The Blind Men and the Elephant.” Saxe’s poem begins:

It was six men of Indostan,
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind
(Saxe 1873:135).

After each of the men feels a different part of the elephant, they begin to argue, for while one thinks the elephant is like a wall, another is certain it is more like a spear, another a snake, another a tree, another a fan, another a rope. Saxe concludes:

And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!

So, oft in theologic wars
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean;
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!
(Saxe 1873:136)

A wide range of cultural narratives thus construct the background to the image of

the elephant with the blind children; they are, in fact, the reason why the story of a group of blind children touching an elephant was deemed newsworthy, why the photograph was taken in the first place, and even why the whole event of bringing an elephant to the children was organized. And, again, like the photograph of the cold elephant, beyond the ways an image like this was already part of a set of cultural expectations for viewers seeing it in 1917, there are a different set of ways in which it resonates for people today, close to a century after it was taken. For us, while clearly part of another historical time and place, the image seems to point to more modern concerns about elephants and their relations with humans. Thus, while from a historian’s perspective, it might not make sense to discuss this picture as also being about the nature of elephant subjugation in western contexts, for many viewers today, that is precisely their first concern about the image. That is, just like the cold elephant, people today are as likely to want to know about the life of the *elephant* in the picture and wonder what *she* thinks – in this case, about being crowded in upon by a bunch of children – as they are to wonder about what it must be like to be a blind child and feel an elephant for the first time. Put a different way, many people in Chicago today might want to touch an elephant, to feel its complex textures of wrinkles and folds, bristly hairs, warmth, but I believe what they expect from that experience, both for themselves and for the elephant, is something quite different from what people expected of that touch 90 years ago.

Beyond all these similarities, I have put these two pictures beside each other for yet another reason. In different ways, both of these images foreground the act of seeing.

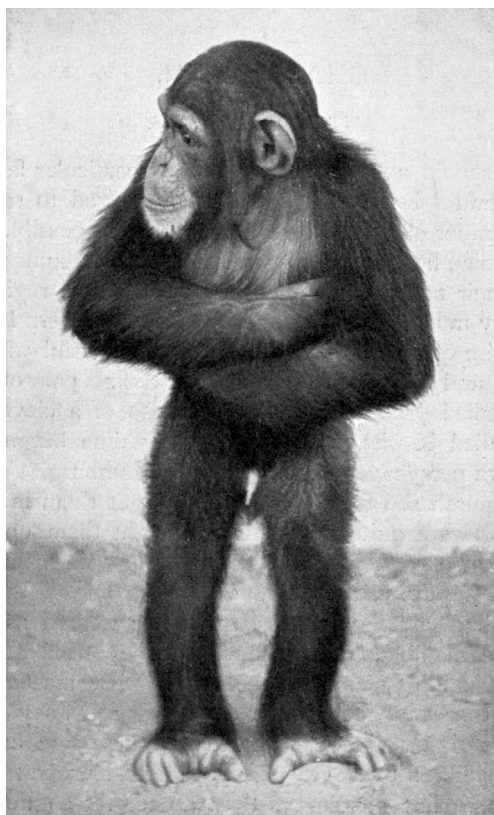


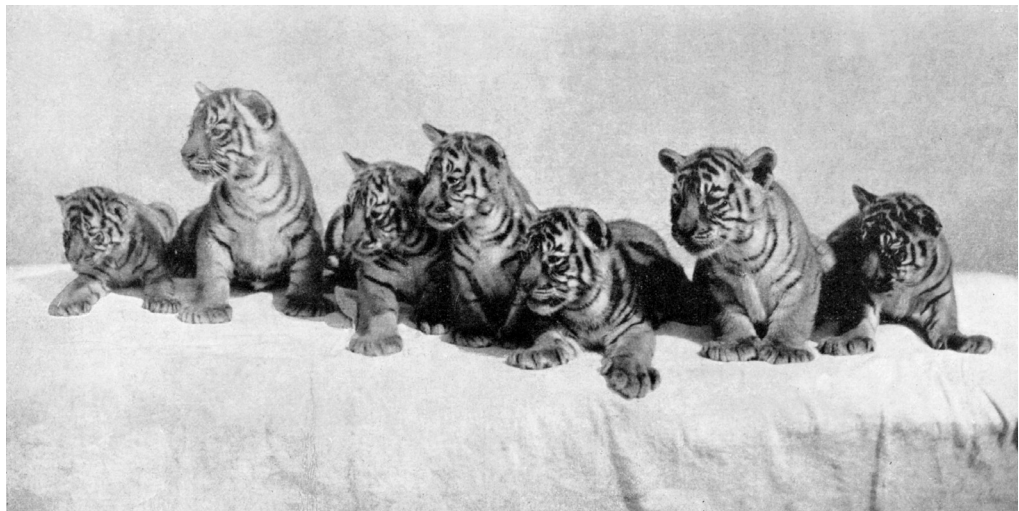
Fig. 3. Courtesy of Tierpark Hagenbeck.

In the picture of the children, of course, the issue of seeing turns on the children and the surrounding crowd of onlookers. In the case of the cold elephant, however, the picture is unusual because unlike all but a very few pictures of especially primates in Hagenbeck's memoir, this elephant has been photographed looking out to the photographer and the reader. We cannot know whether the photograph was shot to capture the elephant's returned gaze, just as we cannot know whether it was selected for the memoir for this reason; but there is nevertheless something quite different about this image when it is compared to more typical photographs of Hagenbeck's memoir (figs. 3, 4), and that difference points to a trajectory in thinking about ele-

phants which will lead over the course of the twentieth century to a time when images of elephant eyes are ubiquitously seen in the media and in popular books about the animals. The simple question we need to ask is: where do images like the 2006 cover photo by Andres Serrano for the *New York Times Magazine* (<http://www.nytimes.com/indexes/2006/10/08/magazine/>) come from? Part of the answer is undoubtedly to be found in the history of photography and both the development of a *technology*, which has made highly detailed close-ups like this possible, and the evolution of a *style* of art photography, which has placed cropping and framing at the center of practice. Another part of the answer, of course, is clear when one considers how Serrano's elephant photographs are related to his other work, a contrast which is clear when one considers his similar techniques in his morgue series. With all this said, though, just why the *New York Times* chose a close-up shot of an elephant's eye for the *cover* of the magazine and *then* chose an additional eye-shot to be among the four photographs included in the feature article by Charles Siebert (2006) on post-traumatic stress syndrome and elephants, has, I would argue, a lot less to do with either modern photography or Andres Serrano and a lot more to do with a particularly modern way of thinking about elephants. The history of this way of thinking about elephants, and how it connects to emerging ways of imagining a creature like the cold elephant, becomes more clear if we briefly consider several different ways elephants have been thought about over the last few hundred years.

The *Workshop Bestiary* (ca. 1185), now part of the collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library & Museum in New York City, contains two miniatures of elephants,

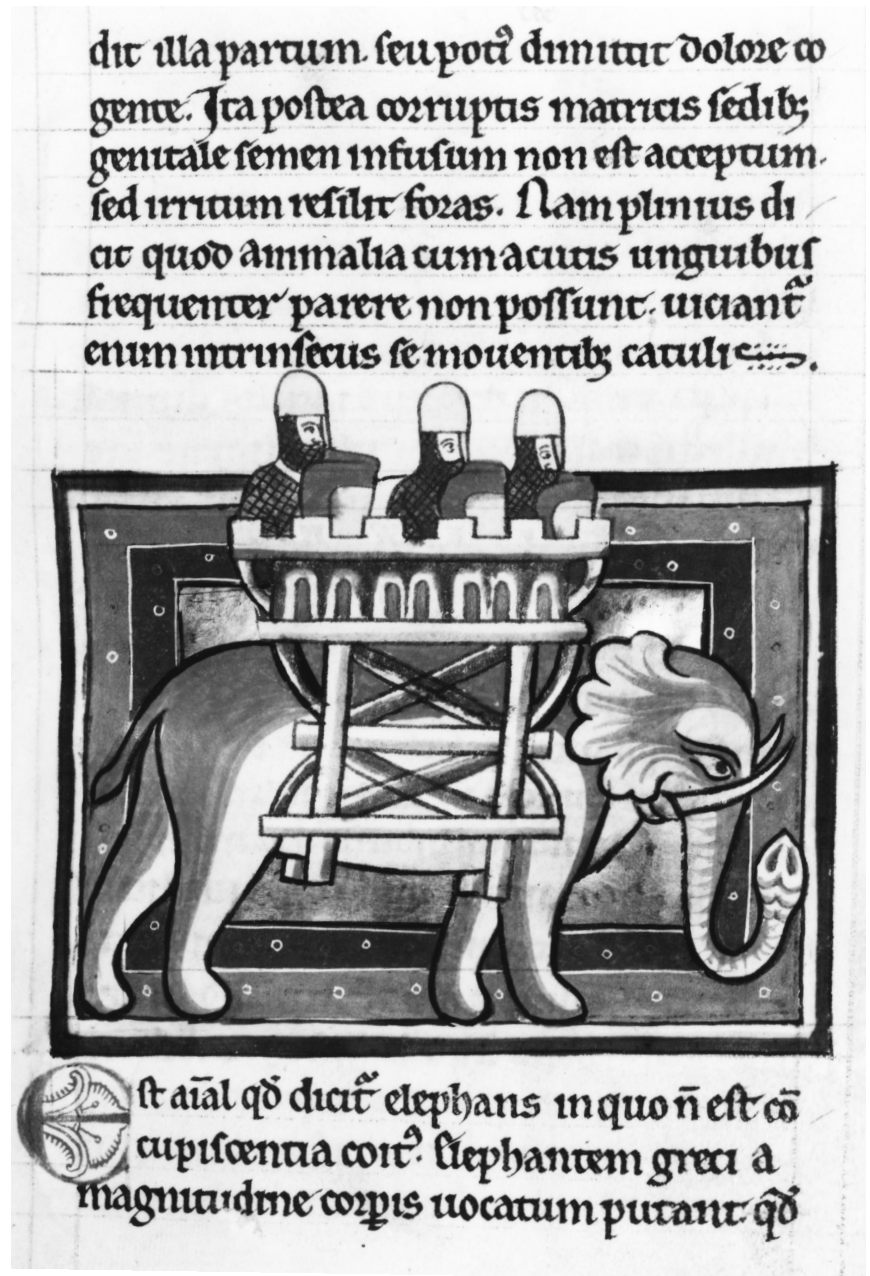
Fig. 4.
Courtesy of Tierpark
Hagenbeck.



one showing the animal carrying on its back a tower containing three soldiers in armor (fig. 5), and the second illustrating a battle between an elephant and a snake-like dragon. The two images point to much older accounts of elephants in Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79), Aelian (AD 175-235), and later in Isidore of Seville (seventh century), which, among other things described the use of elephants in battle and the natural enmity of elephants and dragons (two of the most powerful creatures). While I suspect that many readers today might be more intrigued by an image detailing a battle between an elephant and a dragon, of all the European illustrations, sculptural works, and architectural elements representing elephants up through the seventeenth-century, as Georges C. Druce made clear in his "The Elephant in Medieval Legend and Art" (1919), probably no theme was more popular than that of an elephant carrying a soldier-filled tower or castle on its back. Taken from ancient stories, including those of Alexander's conquests and the battles described in the Apocryphal *Books of the Maccabees*, the idea of a creature not just carrying a single soldier but serving as some sort of living armored personnel carrier for

many soldiers, had the attraction of being both spectacularly fantastic and verified by both a long tradition of writings and just-often-enough reports about the actual appearance of living elephants in Europe. As the basilisk, barnacle goose, catoblepas, unicorn, griffin, and other creatures began to be seen as more imagination than reality, stories of the awesome power and strength of elephants persisted and were renewed. When the elephant Abul Abaz walked into Aachen, a diplomatic gift to Charlemagne from Caliph Harun al Raschid in Baghdad in 802, when the elephant given by Louis IX to Henry III in 1255 was illustrated in Mathew Paris's *Chronica majora*, when the elephant Hanno knelt before Pope Leo X in 1514 (see Oettermann 1982 and Bedini 1997), stories of the awe-inspiring creature of kings were revived and carried forward as a particular mix of legend and verified natural history. But as a mixture of ideas, I think it is helpful to think of these elephants – to think of the Workstop elephants – as representatives of a distinct "species" we might designate as *Elephas horribilis* – an elephant that was spectacularly terrifying and dreadful, but also astonishing, amazing, and tremendous.

Quite a few depictions of this kind of elephant have survived the centuries. Their number, however, does not make it any easier to provide an unambiguous image of what the creature looked like. For example, although it is clear that the creature was large, it is difficult to know how large. Many illustrations suggest that the creature was about the size of a large horse; others suggest something more on the scale of a large pig. The Worksop elephants appear to be not much taller than humans. Essentially, all the accounts agree that the creature had a long, often snake- or horn-like nose, and most agree that it had two elongated teeth or tusks. There nevertheless remained some confusion about whether these tusks grew from the top jaw, from the bottom, or from both. Beyond these more striking features, there also remained disagreement about the general conformation of the body, legs, toes, tail, and especially ears. While the physical descriptions of the animal varied, however, there was more consensus on a series of other points. In addition to being useful in military engagements, for example, the animal was generally understood to live as long as 200, and perhaps even 300 years. It was intelligent and could be tamed to serve man. In one important way, though, this elephant contrasted sharply with all other domesticated animals. From classical times it was known that this creature refused to reproduce in captivity and thereby perpetuate a state of slavery. This indignation for captivity – which the animal could accept for itself but not for its offspring – was further exacerbated by the fact that this kind of elephant needed utmost privacy for mating, a condition simply unattainable in captivity. When the time came, it was thought that the male and female elephant would retire to a hidden clearing in the forest (usually in the



East), and only when convinced that they were unobserved, would they let down their guard and mate, typically after the female induced the male to eat the fruit of the mandrake tree.

The fantastic image of *E. horribilis*, a collection of ideas that reached from classical times up through the early modern peri-

Fig. 5.
 The Pierpont Morgan Library.

od, began to be supplanted in the eighteenth century by a new conception of elephants. Central to the change was the appearance in 1764 of the eleventh volume of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière*. There are only a handful of works on natural history that have had as profound an influence on how people in the West have thought about the natural world. From 1749 when the first three volumes of Buffon's natural histories of quadrupeds, birds, and minerals appeared, to long after 1789 when the last supplement was published, the work was *the* European authority on nature (Robbins 2002:172). After completing an entry in the *Natural History*, a reader could have the sense that he or she knew everything that needed to be known about that animal. As Louise Robbins has made clear, however, Buffon's goal was not to banish completely all the allegorical significance attributed to animals; indeed, part of the pleasure in reading his accounts was to be found precisely in the anecdotes that brought the animal closer to the human experience. At the same time, Buffon sought to include only those stories he believed were verified by reliable observers.

Thus, in his lengthy discussion of the elephant, the creature that he considered the "first and grandest of terrestrial creatures," Buffon insists that classical writers had erred in ascribing to elephants fantastic "intellectual powers and moral virtues." Ancient and more recent authors, he writes, "have given to these animals rational manners, a natural and innate religion, a kind of daily adoration of the sun and moon, the use of ablution before worship, a spirit of divination, piety towards heaven and their fellow creatures, whom they assist at the approach of death, and after their decease bedew them with tears, cover them

with earth, &c" (1812:139-140). Buffon concludes that, "After removing the fabulous credulities of antiquity, and the puerile fictions of superstition, which still exist, the elephant, even to the philosophers, possesses enough to make him be regarded as a being of the first distinction" (1812:142). By "first distinction," Buffon meant that elephants were as close to humans as soulless matter could be. Indeed, of the four species Buffon felt were deserving of special note, the dog (for its ability to form attachments of affection), the ape (for its physical structure), the beaver (for its ability to act in society and cooperation), and the elephant, the last stood apart from the others. In the elephant, Buffon saw the *combination* of "the sagacity of the beaver, the address of the ape, the sentiment of the dog, together with the peculiar advantages of strength, largeness, and long duration of life" (1812:138).

The elephant, Buffon insists, is, excepting humans, the most impressive creature in the world, the animal with "more memory and intelligence than any other animal" (1812:188). In his listing of the admirable qualities of the beast, Buffon notes its size and strength, that it can carry an armed tower on his back, that it is courageous, prudent, moderate, impetuous in love, and a vegetarian (1812:139). Indeed, Buffon's description seems to be of an Enlightenment super-creature born out the pages of Voltaire or Swift. With Buffon's description we see the beginning of the end of the overwhelming *horribilis* and the entrance of a new creature whom we might better designate as *E. sentiens* – an animal that feels, experiences, and is somehow physically, intellectually, and emotionally deeply sensitive to its surroundings.

Buffon does not dispose of everything from earlier writers that might be consid-

ered a bit dubious. He accepts, for example, that elephants can live for 200 years, that the young suckle with their trunks, that elephants mate face-to-face, that the smell of hogs frightens them, that they are naturally modest, and that they refuse to breed in captivity and thus sustain an unnatural state of slavery. But these points are accepted precisely because they fit so neatly within Buffon's broad conception of the elephant as a "miracle of intelligence and a monster of matter" (1812:188). In a time when the issues of human slavery and subjugation were becoming increasingly important, for example, it made sense to Buffon that elephants would abhor slavery so much that they would deny themselves physical pleasure in order not to perpetuate the slavery of their kind (1812:152-153). But if they despised their slavery, these elephants were both wise and moderate enough to accept their captivity; they would become model citizens, paying close attention to all instructions and obeying with enthusiasm, but also with that calm dignity that marked the animal so much for Buffon. As he noted, "the elephant's character seems to partake of the gravity of his mass" (1812:162).

What makes Buffon's discussion of the elephant such a milestone in our understanding of this animal, however, is his claim that a fundamental quality of the elephant is its capacity for sentiment. In an utterly new discussion of elephant eyes, for example, we can read about a creature who, especially when compared to the monsters of earlier centuries, now seems strikingly familiar. Buffon writes:

In proportion to the magnitude of his body, the eyes of the elephant are very small; but they are lively and brilliant; what distinguishes them from the eyes

of other animals, is a pathetic expression of sentiment, and an almost rational management of all their actions. He turns them slowly and with mildness towards his master. When *he* speaks, the animal regards him with an eye of friendship and attention, and his penetrating aspect is conspicuous when he wants to anticipate the inclination of his governor. He seems to reflect, to deliberate, to think, and never determines till he has several times examined, without passion or precipitation, the signs which he ought to obey. The dog, whose eyes are very expressive, is too prompt and vivacious to allow us to distinguish with ease the successive shades of his sensations. But the elephant is naturally grave and moderate, we read in his eyes, whose movements are slow, the order and succession of his internal affections (1812:183).

If the soldier-filled tower was the most popular way to represent the creature I termed *horribilis*, an all-seeing eye – an eye which, though diminutive, reveals deliberation, emotion, rationality, and wisdom – marks the entrance of *E. sentiens*. Whereas the 1675 English pamphlet, *A True and Perfect Description of the Strange and Wonderful Elephant* describes elephant eyes unremarkably and specifically unflatteringly as "small and like the eyes of Swine" (1675:3) ("piggish" eyes were seen as an imperfection in animals), Buffon finds them "lively and brilliant" and sees in them the "succession" of the animal's "internal affections."

Throughout the nineteenth century, many of Buffon's ideas about elephants, especially those whose disproving required simply more contact with the animals, gradually fell by the wayside in European minds. However edifying it may have been

for readers in post-Revolutionary France to think of the elephant as only willing to breed in a state of freedom, for example, such ideas were eventually dropped as more elephants made their way into the western world. Nevertheless, as new ideas were added to the elephant, Buffon's interest in the expression of sentiment through the eyes of the elephant has persisted. When Buffon and other eighteenth-century natural historians discarded at least some of the unverified stories about elephants passed down through the centuries, we began looking at a much more rational, sensitive, and emotional creature. It was during the second half of the nineteenth century, however, when a particular aspect of the emotional lives of elephants emerged as especially important in western cultures. Whereas Buffon's ideas of elephant sentiment turned largely on the animal's capacity to show affection, by the late nineteenth century, authors increasingly began to focus on the elephant's capacity to suffer.

In contrast to today, however, the concern about elephant suffering did not focus on elephants in zoos and circuses (such as the Hagenbeck and Ringling elephants at the beginning of this essay), but on elephants experiencing accelerating assaults by hunters and colonial officials. Key figures for criticism in this development were such hunters as Roualeyn Gordon Cumming, Samuel Baker, Hans Schomburgk, Theodore Roosevelt, and Arthur Neumann. Only among the more striking of the hunters' critics was Sir James Emerson Tennent. In his 1861 monograph *Sketches of the Natural History of Ceylon*, Tennent repeatedly expresses his disgust with elephant hunters and insists that hunting elephants "requires the smallest possible skill as a marksman" (1861:142). After referring to a Major Rogers who

killed "upwards of 1400" elephants, Tennent continues in a footnote:

To persons like myself, who are not addicted to what is called 'sport,' the statement of these wholesale slaughters is calculated to excite surprise and curiosity as to the nature of a passion that impels men to self-exposure and privation, in a pursuit which presents nothing but the monotonous recurrence of scenes of blood and suffering" (ibid.)

Turning to a story by Samuel Baker about a boar hunt, Tennent concludes that

If such were the habitual enjoyments of this class of sportsmen, their motiveless massacres would admit of no manly justification. In comparison with them one is disposed to regard almost with favour the exploits of a hunter like Major Rogers, who is said to have applied the value of the ivory obtained from his encounters towards the purchase of his successive regimental commissions, and had, therefore, an object, however disproportionate, in his slaughter of 1400 elephants (1861:142; see also Rothfels 2007).

Tennent, along with many others, prepared the ground for a critique of elephant hunting in the twentieth century that eventually turned the older romantic, daring, and heroic scenes of hunts into the tears of Jean de Brunhoff's 1931 Babar as he stood beside his dead mother, killed by European hunters.

Near the end of his entry on elephants and decades before de Brunhoff, Alfred Edmund Brehm in his new kind of animal encyclopedia focusing on the lives of animals in the wild, *Brehms Thierleben*, relates a similar scene to that illustrated by de Brunhoff of the attempted capture of a

young elephant after the death of its mother. Noting that young elephants are often seen in tears as they suffer from their injuries and that they have been known to die simply from the pain of having lost their mothers and their freedom, he quotes briefly from Georg Schweinfurth, who explored central Africa in the late 1860s. Several days after having been given a young elephant as a gift, Schweinfurth watched it die from the stresses of its capture. The explorer writes:

For me there was something unendingly moving in watching the already quite large yet so helpless creature die while breathing with such difficulty. Whoever has looked into the eye of an elephant will find that, despite its diminutiveness and the short-sightedness with which these animals are born, that eye holds a more soulful look than that of any other quadruped (Brehm 1876-1879:498).

With Tennent, Schweinfurth, Brehm, and other writers from the second half of the nineteenth century, we can see the emergence of a new kind of elephant, one still with us I believe, which might best be called *E. dolens* – an animal that both physically and mentally feels sorrow and pain; the elephant that suffers. It is the still just emerging concern for this kind of elephant, I believe, which rests behind our discomfort with the images of the Hagenbeck and Ringling elephants.

Like *E. horribilis* and *E. sentiens*, the name *E. dolens* does not describe what an elephant *is*. I use these names to describe dominant ways that elephants *have been imagined* in different historical settings; the terms describe how we think about elephants. I am not arguing that we imagine elephants today only in terms of suffering;

if we consider the main elements of most of the elephant management controversies over the last century, however, if we examine the range of recent popular literature about elephants (everything from Peter Beard's *End of the Game* [1977] and Jeffrey Masson and Susan McCarthy's *When Elephants Weep* [1995] to Barbara Gowdy's novel, *The White Bone* [1999]), if we analyze the current arguments brought forth by animal rights advocates to remove elephants from circuses and zoos to new elephant sanctuaries – the sort of place, incidentally, where Serrano took his pictures – a key concern has been the belief that elephants can experience great emotional, mental, and physical pain. This *E. dolens*, a creature seen as a victim of the avarice, brutality, and disregard of modern man, came into existence during the nineteenth century with critiques of hunting, and we look into the soul and suffering of this creature – this creature of Schweinfurth, de Brunhoff, and Serrano – through its eyes.

We make our elephants; they are, in some profound way, a reflection of our worries, fears, and hopes. I am not saying that there are no such things as real elephants walking around in the world – that the only elephants are the ones we dream up. But when we look at a photograph of an elephant's eyes, it is plain that the photograph is also somehow about ourselves and about how we conceptualize the combination of age and wisdom we seem to find in the large gray mammal. When people claim that elephants never forget, when they believe in the profound emotional lives of the animals, when they spend thousands of dollars to purchase paintings made by elephants while fomenting a controversy around the elephant painted by the "graffiti artist" Banksy for his 2006 work addressing world hunger, when they argue that an elephant

having lived at a zoo for most of its life deserves “retirement” in a sunny sanctuary, they are thinking about both the lives of elephants and their own lives. It is vital that we be clear about the difference.

Part of this essay is from my “Elephants, Ethics, and History,” which appears in *Elephants and Ethics: Toward a Morality of Coexistence*, ed. Christen Wemmer and Catherine A. Christen (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2008). It is reproduced here with permission.

References

- Anon., approx. 1675. *A True and Perfect Description of the Strange and Wonderful Elephant Sent from the East-Indies and Brought to London on Tuesday the Third of August, 1675: with a Discourse of the Nature and Qualities of Elephants in General*. London, J. Conniers.
- Beard, Peter 1977. *The End of the Game*. San Francisco, Chronicle.
- Bedini, Silvio A. 1997. *The Pope's Elephant*. Manchester, Carcanet.
- Brehm, Alfred Edmund 1876-79. *Brehm's Thierleben: Allgemeine Kunde des Thierreichs*. 2nd. ed. Leipzig, Verlag des Bibliographischen Instituts.
- Brunhoff, Jean de 1931. *Histoire de Babar: le petit elephant*. Paris, Editions du Jardin des Modes.
- Buffon, G. L. Leclerc, comte de 1812. *Natural history: General and particular: Vol. 7. History of quadrupeds*. W. Smellie (trans.). London, Cadell and Davies.
- Druce, Georges C. 1919. “The Elephant in Medieval Legend and Art” (1919). *Journal of the Royal Archaeological Institute* 76. London.
- Gowdy, Barbara 1999. *The White Bone*. New York, Metropolitan.
- Hagenbeck, Carl, to William Hornaday. 11 Nov., 1897. Incoming Correspondence, Director's Office, Archives of the New York Zoological Park, Wildlife Conservation Society.
- Hagenbeck, Carl 1909. *Von Tieren und Menschen: Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen*. Leipzig, Paul List.
- Masson, Jeffrey. M., and Susan McCarthy 1995. *When Elephants Weep: the Emotional Lives of Animals*. New York, Delta.
- Oettermann, Stephan 1982. *Die Schaulust am Elefanten: Eine Elephantographia curiosa*. Frankfurt, Syndikat.
- Robbins, Louse E. 2002. *Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots: Exotic Animals in Eighteenth-Century Paris*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP.
- Rothfels, Nigel 2008. “Elephants, Ethics, and History.” In Chris Wemmer and Catherine A. Christen (eds.): *Elephants and Ethics: Toward a Morality of Coexistence*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP.
- Rothfels, Nigel 2007. “Killing Elephants: Pathos and Prestige in the Nineteenth Century.” Pp. 53-63 in Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin Danahay (eds.): *Victorian Animal Dreams: Representations of Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Burlington, VT, Ashgate.
- Rothfels, Nigel 2002. *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins UP.
- Saxe, John Godfrey, 1873. “The Blind Men and the Elephant.” *The Poems of John Godfrey Saxe*. Boston, James R. Osgood.
- Siebert, Charles 2006. “An Elephant Crackup?” *New York Times Magazine* (8 Oct., 2006): 42ff. Online: <http://www.nytimes.com/indexes/2006/10/08/magazine/>.
- Tennent, James Emerson 1861. *Sketches of the Natural History of Ceylon*. London, Longman.