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Animals on Display: The Zoocurriculum of Museum Exhibits

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Abstract

Museums have been viewed as valuable education resources as well as sites of reproduction of colonialist narratives about the “other.” This article, based on ethnographic field studies of school visits to museums and drawing on postcolonial critique in visual culture and critical education theory, analyzes two different museum exhibitions and the human-nonhuman animal relations they produce. Different agendas seem to be at work at the two museums; one inviting a conventional zoological gaze of “exoticism,” and the other interrogating issues of power inherent in human-nonhuman animal relations. I argue that the pedagogical messages produced by particularly the natural history museum are part of a generic zoocurriculum; a species-coded hidden curriculum structuring human-animal boundary work by delimiting and separating human and animal subject positions. However, student responses to both museum displays indicate that their own interpretive framework largely operated in the opposite direction as the stuffed and dismembered animals seemed to invoke reflections on mortality that facilitated students’ self-identification with them.



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Introduction

From an educational perspective, zoos and museums have been analyzed as similar institutional arrangements that both work primarily through visual modes of representation. Milson (1990) describes museums, zoos and aquariums as “tools” for education that show the “real thing.” For instance, in museum exhibits, “[s]tudents can learn so much more from watching a native American making an arrowhead, than from just reading about the process.” (p. 522)

The perceived “realism” of these institutions, claiming that objects and contexts are and can be displayed as “authentic” entities and represented through “typical” specimens, is, however, problematic, and so too is the tendency toward appropriation and authority that both zoos and museums achieve through the classification and ordering of their displayed objects. Also Montgomery (1995) has made a pedagogical analogy between zoos and museums, but in a more critical vein. In his analysis, museums, like zoos, create order on the basis of collection before a collective and collecting eye (“the Public”). In both cases, the purpose is visual consumption in the form of entertainment, education and conservation.

Much like zoos, museums in the 17th to 19th centuries primarily addressed visitors from the privileged bourgeois class before becoming more of a contributor to the public education system (Beckman, 1999). Hooper-Greenhill (2001) has described the educational approach of traditional “modernist” museums that evolved during the last part of the 19th century as a “transmission approach” based on an idea that placing objects on view was sufficient to ensure learning. Museum displays were used to authoritatively transmit the universal laws of object-based disciplines, among which natural history was the paradigm:

Objects were seen as sources of knowledge, as parts of the real world that had fixed and finite meanings that could be both discovered, once and for all, and then taught by being put on show. /.../ Making this knowledge visible and available through public museums was in itself a pedagogic act; a walk through the museum galleries would result in learning. It was thought that large numbers of people could be taught in this way at the same time, and thus a huge social gain would occur. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2001 pp. 5-6)

According to Hooper-Greenhill (2001), objects are arranged in museums to make visual statements and combined to produce visual narratives. The narratives constructed by museum displays and the methods used to communicate them, i.e. the content and style of the displays, together form a hidden curriculum that communicates ideas about expected responses. The effects of this hidden curriculum, however, depend largely on the interpretive framework within which the objects are seen. A display may therefore be invested with multiple meanings from the position of the observer who will construct her or his own coherence, which may or may not be in compliance with the educational intent of the museum (Hooper-Greenhill, 2001).

This article is part of a larger research project on human-nonhuman animal relations in formal education (Pedersen, 2007; 2010).¹ The project, located in the interface between critical education and critical animal studies (for other examples, see Andrzejewski, 2003; Andrzejewski, Pedersen & Wicklund, 2009; DeLeon, 2010; Kahn, 2010; Kahn & Humes, 2009), analyzes educational practices and processes that organize, define and delimit what relations are possible between humans and nonhuman animals. Following the investments of critical animal studies to “illuminate and eliminate” micro- and macro-mechanics of exploitation (Best, 2009), the project also problematizes power arrangements that reduce human-nonhuman animal interaction to modes of production and consumption. In the critical ethnographic tradition (Willis & Trondman, 2000), the study addresses the notion of power as being lodged within taken-for-granted meanings and everyday practices as they are lived, experienced, and handled by various actors in school. In so doing, I seek to understand how subject positions are produced to create both hegemonic consent to *and* resistance toward dominant discourses of nonhuman animals (Pedersen, 2010).

Drawing on previous critique of museums as manifestations of power, this article investigates upper secondary school students’ encounters with animal representations in two particular museum exhibits (The Swedish Museum of Natural History and a special exhibit, “We love them... and eat them,” located on the premises of a zoo). After this ethnographic “guided tour” of the two museum sites, I discuss educational implications of the human-animal relations negotiated within these encounters. I suggest that the pedagogical mission of particularly natural history museums is embedded in, and contributes to shape, a *zoocurriculum*; a species-coded hidden curriculum structuring human-animal boundary work as well as the position and possibilities of nonhuman animals in human society. I will argue, however, that students created meaning in, and relationships with, the stuffed and dismembered animals that destabilized the educational effects of the museum’s zoocurriculum.

Museums as sites of cultural reproduction

Museums have been described as sites of power that form links in the chain of cultural reproduction together with, for instance, schools and media (Nederveen Pieterse, 1997). Critical examinations of museums as authoritative repositories of “truth” focus on the museum as producing narratives about margin and center, identities, and meanings,

¹ The empirical research behind the project builds on a field study carried out in four Swedish upper secondary schools (students 16-18 years old). The first phase of the study involved 12 semi-structured interviews with students, teachers and school leaders that took place between September and November, 2003. The second phase involved an ethnographic study including 88 days of participant observation studies, analyses of policy documents, learning materials and other artifacts in my field schools, and informal interviews and discussions with students and teachers that took place between March and December, 2004. Two of the schools offered vocational programs in animal care (with approximately 200 students at each school with female students being in the majority), designed to prepare students for professions in areas such as zoos, pet shops, wildlife management, veterinary clinics, etc. These schools kept animals at the school premises for educational purposes. The other two schools (with approximately 1,000 students each) did not have this animal care specialization. These schools focused on university preparatory programs in the humanities/social sciences and the natural science/technical sphere, respectively. All personal names used in the empirical material in this article are fabricated.

including “otherness” and subordination based on, for instance, ethnicity. In her critical analysis of the “modernist” museum, Hooper-Greenhill (2001) remarks that museums “construct relationships, propose hierarchies, define territories, and present a view” (p. 18).

The order created by museums thus presumes and reproduces certain worldviews. Nederveen Pieterse (1997) argues that the museum is an outcome of the Enlightenment and has been a site for producing national and imperial identities informed by race, class and gender. The dominant discourse permeating above all ethnographic museums has been colonialism in the exhibition of trophies of imperial endeavors, but also in postcolonial times, museums have a preoccupation with narratives about the “other.” These representations of “others” can be exoticizing (emphasizing difference) or assimilating (emphasizing similarity), but either way, both are defined from the point of view of the center (i.e. “us” as privileged observers) and such power arrangements tend to remain unexplored (Nederveen Pieterse, 1997). Bal (1992) has noted that the manner in which a museum physically and conceptually organizes its displays and the relations between them may in effect make the visitor identify with the Western white hegemonic culture that produced the museum in the first place. When nonhuman animals are put on display, often in the form of taxidermy, certain dimensions are added that contribute to, and interact with, the meaning-making of museum narratives.

Animal Taxidermy

Taxidermy – a process of replication involving the stuffing and mounting of a dead animal – is a technique embodying the rationales of “realism” as well as of human appropriation and control over nonhuman animals (Desmond, 2002). Haraway (2004) has called taxidermy “the production of permanence” (p. 152). In order to create a taxidermic “fiction of liveness” (Desmond, 2002 p. 159), ironically the animal must not only be killed (and all marks of killing erased), but its body must also be dismembered and reassembled. In exhibits, the manipulated animal body is also frequently situated in “typical” posture in a reconstructed piece of habitat, implying a “suspended narrative” of a moment of a life frozen in time (pp. 172-173). Taxidermic displays not only articulate a vision of a natural world and a vision of science, but also allow for unusual intimacy between human and nonhuman animal bodies (Desmond, 2002). This intimacy, enabling the museum visitor to examine the animal closely for as long as (s)he wishes, gains its attraction from the impossibility of such a situation in the wild.

Bryant and Shoemaker (1988) have noted that there is a considerable diversity in the various forms and social functions of taxidermy. In museum exhibits, the purpose of taxidermy is primarily to educate and to evoke interest in or attention to zoology, but also to conserve wildlife that is considered to be part of a cultural inheritance (Simpson, 1999). I would like to add that taxidermic displays in museums can also function as “markers” of a historical period or a social or cultural context or as markers of wildness and exoticism (cf. Nederveen Pieterse, 1997). As a more implicit purpose, Ryan (2000) emphasizes taxidermy as a desire to possess and control nature. It is within these dimensions that narratives about animals merge with narratives about human “others.” In some natural history museums (as in some zoos), this merging becomes explicit when displays of native peoples and their cultures have been placed in juxtaposition to exhibits

of animal models, whereas Western, “white” culture has been displayed in art and history museums (Bal, 1992; Nederveen Pieterse, 1997). Like zoos, museums can be seen as extensions and manifestations of both state and species empire (Best, 2010), and in some cases both institutions have relied on the same animal dealers (Hanson, 2002).

The Museum Visits

During my field study, I joined School X in a visit to the Swedish Museum of Natural History, and School Y in a visit to an exhibit entitled “We love them... and eat them” (*Älskas... ätas*). The latter exhibit, which explicitly addressed human-animal relations, was arranged in cooperation between a zoo and a museum. The two exhibition settings were very different in terms of size, location, content and style of displays.

Both student groups I followed were enrolled in vocational animal caretaker education programs. Although the museum visits were arranged as part of the formal curriculum, the visits were carried out in a leisurely atmosphere and no formal assignments were given to the students to work on in the museums.² This facilitated more spontaneous interaction between students and displays as well as between students and their peers.

In the following sections, I will describe encounters between students and displayed animal representations during the visits to the Museum of Natural History and the exhibition “We love them... and eat them.” I have chosen these settings as two remarkably different examples of museum concepts and of the gazes they invite. The contexts of these two particular visits also allowed me to carefully observe student responses to displays without too much intrusion. At the Museum of Natural History, the visit was formally organized as a guided walk through several spaces of the premises, and in the case of the exhibit “We love them... and eat them,” the small exhibition area (accommodated in a single room) and the large number of students facilitated very close observations.

Zoological Gazes: The Swedish Museum of Natural History

In the Museum of Natural History, huge quantities of animal bodies are collected although not all of them are on public display. The museum’s website explains that

The Swedish Museum of Natural History houses collections of millions of specimens that in size and quality belong to the finest in the world. The collections form a basis for the research conducted at the different research departments and they are continuously used by researchers and institutions from all over the world in the form of loans and visits from guest researchers. One of the most important tasks of the museum is to take care of the collections so that they are preserved for posterity and kept accessible for international research. /.../ (The Swedish Museum of Natural History, 2006)

² During one museum visit, one group of students was, however, encouraged by their teacher to take the opportunity to gather ideas about texts and displays for their own upcoming “open house” event at their school, when the school’s animal facilities and other spaces were opened for visitors.

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Public exhibits are thus not the only task of the museum. Research is another important area, and the student group I joined was welcomed by the museum staff as future natural science researchers rather than as representatives of the general public. After dividing the class into two groups, we were given a guided tour “behind the scenes” of the museum through spaces not normally open to the public. During the tour, the museum guide, assuming the role of an educator, asked the students questions such as the species of the animal skeletons we were shown, how much the animal weighs, and the animal’s name in Latin. When a student gave the right answer, she was praised by both the guide and her teacher. (Field notes)

The dimension of most of the museum’s physical environment is overwhelming in their size: high ceilings, tall cupboards, large skeleton parts. Research objects surround us everywhere, sometimes locked inside cupboards, sometimes displayed behind glass or standing freely in the different rooms in the museum. My group started the guided walk in the taxidermist laboratory:

We are informed that this is the place where “newly killed” animals end up. The taxidermist tells us that environmental toxins can be traced through the animals, that animals can be sold and stuffed, and that uncommon species are stuffed whereas usually only the skeleton of more ordinary species is preserved. On the wall hangs a poster with pictures of various wild domestic animal species. It is entitled “State property.” This means that if you find a dead animal of one of those species, you are obliged to take it to the police. The taxidermist remarks that “many rarities coming from the East are not State property,” that is, there is no obligation to take them to the police. On a table lies a big bird with one wing cut off. We are informed that cutting off one wing is done on a routine basis. The reason is that visiting researchers who, for instance, are writing a book about birds usually tear off the wings when they handle the dead birds. To prevent this from happening, the museum staff themselves cut off one wing for the researcher to look at. Next, the taxidermist shows us a little bird and says, “Here we have a real rarity...” (Excerpt from field notes)

When we look into a small wardrobe-like space belonging to the laboratory and see the dead animal bodies collected there, the teacher comments, “A lot of corpses.” One student replies, “I feel really repulsed.” Meanwhile, our guide speaks about the length and weight of a dead eagle. He also comments on the problems with illegal shooting: “A poor eagle that was found had been shot twice.” (Field notes)

We proceed with our tour to another space in the museum where we encounter a diversity of “exotic” and other stuffed (or, as the museum staff calls them, “mounted”) animals:

Here are whole or parts of bodies, including the heads of both giraffe and moose. One display shows a monkey head mounted on a stand with the description “Head of mandrill.” Other monkey species, both adults and babies, are displayed surrounded by branches as if to give associations to their natural habitat. When we walk into the next room, the first thing we see

is a stuffed dog lying on top of a cupboard. Our guide remarks that “sometimes people leave their pets here [for stuffing].” Many students seem to react particularly to the stuffed dog and one student says, “Pets, give me a break, that’s repulsive!” We are informed that the dog has been brought to the museum by an employee. (Excerpt from field notes)

On our way back from the museum visit, the stuffed dog was brought up again as a topic of discussion among the students and some of them identified themselves with the dead animal’s caretaker. One student said, “Imagine if it was your dog” and “Imagine if it was your rabbit.” Another student reflected over what it would feel like to have had the company of your dog when it was still alive, and then come to the museum and see it stuffed. Desmond (2002) refers to pets as a special case in taxidermy. Pets have a special position in human society since they are often regarded as “family members” and therefore the pet’s body, to a larger extent than most other animals used in taxidermy, represents the pet’s *being*. Bryant and Shoemaker (1988) refer to pet taxidermy as a form of “nostalgia taxidermy” that for some may be a way of dealing with emotional loss, whereas others may view it as a morbid practice.

While our guide shifts between information talk addressed to the group and discussions with the teacher about the knowledge to be gained from the animals, student attention is directed more towards the visual sensation of the animal bodies surrounding us. One student notices a collection of bats put on display behind glass with their wings spread out: “Oh, how cool [they are]!” One of the boys turns to a female classmate and asks, “Mia, did you see the snake skins in there?” Another student named Julia, imagining herself to be in the situation of the stuffed animals and referring to her own name in plural form as if to illustrate her imagined shift of identity, remarks to her classmate, “Imagine if we were lying in there, ‘here we have Julias’.”

When I ask a few students what they think about the displays, one girl says “I think it’s grotesque having stuffed animals, repulsive.” When asked for his opinion, another student replies “Exciting, awesome.” Yet another girl says, “Stuffed animals are unpleasant.” When I ask her why, she replies, “They have been alive.” (Field notes)

The next space we enter is full of whole animal hides:

The hides are preserved with faces and paws intact. They are hanging in dense rows with strings running through their eye sockets. We are informed that here are “felines from all over the world,” but also other fur-bearing animals. One student comments, “There’s an entire wardrobe hanging here.” “Repulsive,” remarks another. Another student dialogue goes, “Imagine if we hang like this some day.” “I’m sure we will.” “I don’t think they want us.” The guide mentions the cost of one hide and remarks, “Of course it is more fun when they are mounted.” One cupboard carries the sign “Second-rate collection. Hides for lending and teaching.” (Excerpt from field notes)

According to Hooper-Greenhill (2001), a major function of museums during the modernist period was the mapping of the world through the collection of artifacts brought back by explorers, traders, missionaries and others who voyaged across the world, and the establishments of such collections can be viewed as a form of symbolic conquest. In

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the above example, the very *quantity* of animal bodies collected signals the power to objectify. In students' responses, such associations became located and expressed within personal frameworks of interpretation that centered primarily around their own subject positions.

We then reach another room, containing several rows of locked wooden cupboards:

The room's interior seems to make the students associate to horror movies. Our guide has no key to the cupboards but informs us that they contain birds. The teacher opens a box full of bird carcasses. "Here they lie piled up," he remarks. Turning to me and some students standing beside him, he asks jokingly: "Have you seen *Six Feet Under*?" (Excerpt from field notes)

We proceed to a room filled with animal skeletons. A monkey skeleton, hanging with one arm from a tree branch, is displayed behind glass. This room houses long rows of cupboards. Each cupboard carries a sign showing the classification of animal body parts and a photograph showing the animal in the wild. One girl asks her classmates, "Can you think about some really awesome animal that you would like to see?" Our guide informs us that the museum possesses 13,800 fox skulls, "and then we have 10,000 jaws in the attic that nobody bothers about really." On our way out, I ask a girl if she would like to work at the museum after graduation. "A bit scary. I think I'd rather work with living animals," she says. When asking the same question to the boy who earlier had found the stuffed animals "exciting" and "awesome," he too replies "No, repulsive to work with stuffing animals." (Field notes)

Our last stop on the guided tour at the Museum of Natural History is a separate building with several rooms. In the first room a collection of reindeer skulls is arranged with horns intact. The next room contains whale skeleton parts:

Our guide speaks about how the skeleton is constituted in whales. He shows one part and mentions a famous expedition in the 19th century. "This is the mother whale and this is the baby whale," he says and points at a skeleton. Standing among the remains of dead whales and speaking about living animals, he asks one student about how long a distance the whales can communicate with each other. Another girl remarks, as if to herself, "Keiko, he is dead." I ask a few students if they would like to work here. One student replies, "I want to be a vet, so my task is to *save* animals, before they end up here."

Now our guide shows us the largest skeleton parts. He holds up one part in each hand so that everybody can see them. "This is the inner ear of a whale," he explains. The teacher asks if they correspond to the human [ear], but the guide replies apologetically, "I only know about whales." The teacher then starts discussing with some of his students that the school should perhaps go on a whale safari field trip to Norway. (Excerpt from field notes)

After leaving the museum premises, students discussed their impressions from the visit.

When asked if they could imagine working at the museum, most students seemed to prefer working with living animals, although one student I talked to was open to the possibility of research or museum work, since “you never know.” Some students found the museum experience “repulsive, but interesting at the same time.” On our way back home, one girl commented on the museum visit with the brief remark, “How boring to be dead! You don’t experience anything then.” (Field notes)

Beyond Exoticism: “We love them... and eat them”

The exhibit entitled “We love them... and eat them” (*Älskas... ätas*), located on the premises of a zoo, deviates remarkably from the Museum of Natural History. The exhibition explores the ethics of human-animal relations. It is described in the zoo information brochure as follows:

How have we treated, used and exploited animals? And how have we created the animals we need? What are our views on animals in captivity and in the wild? Who is dependent on whom, and who holds the power of life and death? /.../ The basic theme involves ethical issues relating to how we treat our animals, animal rights, and human obligations, or perhaps the opposite. Where do we draw the line – the hamburger, the handbag, or the transplanted kidney? (*Våra Djur: The Animals at Parken Zoo*, 2004 p. 34)

The exhibit is housed in the entrance building of the zoo, separate from the animal enclosures. The destination for this school excursion is primarily the zoo itself, which functions as an introduction to further project work on zoo management during the school year. Although the exhibit is not mentioned in the written assignments handed out to students prior to the zoo visit, during lunch at the zoo, when all students are gathered, one of the teachers encourages everybody to visit the exhibit. The small exhibition area is crowded from floor to ceiling with a diversity of messages in texts, quotations, models, artifacts, pictures and photos that represent different voices contributing with various perspectives to the overall theme of the exhibit. One of the issues most spectacularly represented is the animal agriculture industry. Especially the slaughter process is depicted in great visual detail:

Among the first displays encountered when entering the exhibition area is a small space with a chopping-block and an axe with painted bloodstains. On the floor lie a number of fluffy toy chickens. From the ceiling hangs a long row of broiler models upside down, decapitated and with bloodstained bodies. One wall in the exhibition area displays a long photo sequence describing the slaughter process of pigs, step by step. Following the photo sequence is an information text with the title “Slaughter.” It reads, “Very very few domestic animals die a natural death. Most of them are slaughtered at an abattoir to become food for us humans. It would be wrong to deny that many animals experience stress and agony, but with correct handling the slaughter can be made humane to the extent that the animals feel secure until the end. This is also an advantage for us since the meat is of better quality.” But there is also a counter-hegemonic voice represented, a quotation from

“Anna, vegan, 1998”: “I am a living, feeling individual, just like all those non-human animals who today are utilized and murdered for the benefit of the animal species called the human being. I would no more exploit a cow than I would a human being.” Another information sign focuses on breeding: “/.../ Technology substituted natural fertilization and the human being had taken another step toward control of the animals’ reproduction and sexuality.” A quotation from the pig industry recommends insemination rather than natural fertilization, “/.../ Breeding work is directed toward profitability with a focus on maternal characteristics and meat quality.” Another sign, located by a huge cage in which a model of a human-pig hybrid is placed, reads: “When the human being plays God. From breeding to genetic engineering. /.../ What responsibility does the human being have, as a species, as a fellow being, as society and as individual?” (Excerpt from field notes. All quotes are my translations)

Fur production is also briefly dealt with at the exhibition with a few color photographs and a fur coat hanging on the wall. Beneath the fur coat is a quote from a zoologist: “The human being is the only species who adorns herself with body parts from other species.” Animals in circuses are problematized by a small model of a circus performance in which a pig, placed in the center of the ring, is taming humans, instead of the other way around. Here, the sign reads, “When the human being controls movement and place: Why does the human being enjoy training her fellow beings? Or is it about interplay, about playing together? How far should the human being’s power extend over where animals should be and how they should move? When does power turn into abuse?” (Field notes. Quotes are my translations)

According to Nederveen Pieterse (1997), power is more often fetishized in exhibitions than interrogated by them, but the exhibition “We love them... and eat them” seems to fall outside the exoticism – assimilation paradigm. A more critical agenda seems to be at work here. In Nederveen Pieterse’s (1997) words, the exhibition represents “a shift from discourse about others to discourse about *othering*” (p. 141), even though closer observation reveals that the exhibition is still to some extent guided by the power arrangements that it intends to explore. For instance, instrumental social positions such as “battery hens” and “breeding animals” are used by the exhibition without critical analysis, and animal experimentation and its institutional arrangements are only superficially referred to:

A model of a laboratory rat cage is on display together with a few color photographs (which do not depict any invasive animal experiments). An information sign says that the animal ethics review committees “with the Animal Welfare Act as a point of reference weigh the benefits of the experiments against the animals’ suffering.” The question is posed: “Where the limit is drawn can be discussed. Can the suffering of hundreds of mice be legitimated by the possibilities for curing human beings?” The sign also mentions that there are researchers who are beginning to question the effectiveness and applicability of the experiments. (Excerpt from field notes. Quotes are my translations)

The hunting issue is also somewhat underthemed at the exhibition as, although it occupies an entire wall in the room, the only information provided is some uncommented statistics from the Swedish Association for Hunting and Wildlife Management on the number of animals shot in Sweden in one year, together with two small black and white photos of shot animals. More remarkably, although the exhibition is hosted by a zoo, I can see no displays that refer to zoos at all.

“We love them... and eat them”: Student Responses

When the whole student group enters the exhibition room they almost fill it up entirely. I stay for a while beside the slaughter photo sequence:

Many students pass by slowly. They look at the photos and read the texts carefully. I hear reactions of discomfort and dismay, although one student remarks that she doesn't think the animals feel so much since they are anesthetized. One student looks at a photo showing pigs' bodies hanging upside down and remarks that the pigs are given more space as dead bodies than as living beings. Another student says when she sees one of the slaughter pictures (a pig hanging in front of a blood-stained wall) that it really looks like murder. Yet another student sees a photo of a pig hanging upside down and remarks sadly that its tail is completely slack. She lets her finger slowly and gently trace the shape of the tail on the photo. A fourth student says to her classmate, “I know that I should become a vegetarian, but... .” Her classmate replies that she herself is, turns toward a large plastic model of a cow standing beside them, caresses it and says reassuringly, “I won't eat you.” As if suddenly realizing the absurdity of caressing a plastic cow, the two girls start laughing. (Excerpt from field notes)

When passing by the animal experimentation display, one student points at the laboratory mouse cage and comments briefly, “That's fair play.” At the companion animal displays one student stops in front of an authentic-looking, fur-wearing cat model, and scratches its back.

When asking some students afterwards what they thought of the exhibition, I got comments such as “scary but interesting” and “grotesque.” Others found it confusing and strange but still providing food for thought. One student said that the exhibition was good and gave rise to discussions on veganism and vegetarianism and whether free-range hens really are better off. Some felt positive about the exhibition showing “reality,” especially for young children. When I asked another student if he was familiar with these issues prior to the museum visit, he replied that he had had some knowledge of them before, but not about everything in the exhibition. A third student complained about the lack of wild animals in the exhibition, saying that horses and pigs are not as interesting.

Processes of Meaning-making in the Exhibitions

According to Hooper-Greenhill (2001), museum visitors deploy their own interpretive strategies and repertoires and may invest displayed objects with emotional significance that may deviate from the pedagogical intent of the museum. During the visit

to the Museum of Natural History, I could discern at least two parallel processes of meaning-making. While our museum guide informed us about the zoological “facts” of the animal species displayed (represented by remains of dead “specimens”), student attention seemed more focused on the questions of life and death evoked by the displays (but not explicitly referred to by them).

The students’ preoccupation with life and death in the museum environment also became interwoven with images of “self” and “other.” Hooper-Greenhill (2001) states that assemblages of words and artifacts in a museum act to produce identity and self-image in the sense that the imagining of possibilities for the self is materialized and made tangible through objects. At the Museum of Natural History, encounters with dead animals gave in a similar manner rise to reflections around self-identification, either with the animals themselves or (in the case of the stuffed dog) the animal’s caretaker. The teacher, on the other hand, seemed to assume a mediating role. As a member of the group being guided and, at the same time, sharing a common professional identity with the guide, he contributed to shaping both meaning-making processes by shifting between them.

Nederveen Pieterse (1997) argues that exoticizing (or assimilating) discourses about the “other” tend to leave other possibilities ignored “such as recognizing difference without exoticism, others as counterparts in dialogue, or oneself as an other” (p. 125). The natural history museum displays seemed to a large extent to adhere to the conventional exoticism discourse in order to generate an appropriate zoological gaze, subtly normalizing human-animal power relations.³ In the school newsletter at School X two weeks later, one staff member reported on the museum visit. Her account conformed well with the gaze of exoticism invited by the museum:

.../ [The museum visit] was very interesting and fun since we had an opportunity to visit departments that are normally not open to the public. .../ We could walk around different rooms/departments. One room was filled from floor to ceiling with animal skeletons such as elephants, giraffes, birds. It is fantastic, there are skeletons, hides, mounted animals, for instance, from expeditions carried out more than 150 years ago. Also Linnaeus’s materials are preserved but regrettably we could not see this. .../ (Quoted from school newsletter, my translation)

Student responses to the experience, however, resemble more Nederveen Pieterse’s (1997) “other possibilities.” Although students are not immune to the exoticism imbued in the museum exhibits (which implies a conception of distance between self and other), their own interpretive framework largely appeared to operate in the opposite direction as the stuffed and dismembered animals seemed to invoke associations with mortality and vulnerability that facilitated self-identification with them. In the process, focus shifted from the “scientific” knowledge manifested by the exhibits to human/nonhuman animal subjectivities. Following Calarco’s (2008) reading of Levinasian ethics, it might even be possible to say that the stuffed animals, with their mortality and vulnerability, in a certain

³ On one occasion during our walk around the museum premises, however, our guide acknowledged that museums were previously guilty of exploitation during their expeditions abroad (field notes).

sense brought about an interruption of the formal lesson of the museum experience. Thus, what Best (2010) has described as “institutionalizing a human-nonhuman dualism via the spectator-object split” (in the context of zoos) clearly does not account for everything that was going on between the students and the animals in these exhibits.

If issues of life and death, self and other arise as “side effects” of the displays at the Museum of Natural History, the exhibition “We love them... and eat them” explicitly used these conceptions as tools with which to problematize human-animal power relations in a visually dramatic manner. At the exhibition “We love them... and eat them” students related to animal representations perhaps not fully as “counterparts in dialogue” (Nederveen Pieterse, 1997 p. 125), but almost as if they were physically present as “real” embodied beings in the room.

Conclusions

From a critical perspective, museums may be seen as sites of cultural hegemony where narratives about “others” and our relations with them are manufactured, reproduced, and presented as education, entertainment and/or conservation. On the other hand, as Hooper-Greenhill (2001) suggests, museums can also be potential sites for social and cultural change if their development is driven by questions of meaning and if the cultural politics in which museums are engaged are acknowledged. Although the two museums explored in this study clearly had different agendas and arrangements, in both cases oscillations between conceptions of life and death took place in the museum settings, and in this process, human-animal relations relying on demarcations between “self” and “other” become visible, addressed, and reconfigured.

How can we understand the human-nonhuman animal relations emerging from these museum encounters within a critical education framework? I have elsewhere proposed the notion of *zoocurriculum*, a species-coded elaboration of the hidden curriculum, as a tool for theorizing speciesist practices, processes and ideologies in education (Pedersen, in press). By selecting, structuring and presenting a shared frame of reference of human-animal relations, the zoocurriculum typically performs a range of boundary work not only positioning the “human” in a different ethical and ontological space from that of the “animal,” but also reaffirming human privileges in relation to other species. In this manner, the zoocurriculum enables certain human and animal subject positions while disabling others (cf. Pedersen, 2010), delimiting our possibilities and repertoires for thinking about, educating about, and relating to nonhuman species and individuals. The zoocurriculum is not simply a product created at the education policy or authority level; it is, more importantly, a lived educational experience co-produced among actors in school (students included) within their daily interactional activities; an experience that is given meaning precisely by its process of collective formation (Pedersen, in press).

The various corporeal-material forms in which nonhuman animals enter the museum spaces, whether as mounted specimens, diorama components, bones, hides, or as entirely artificial models, as well as the oral and textual pedagogical messages accompanying them, are all productive elements of the zoocurriculum. This becomes particularly conspicuous in the case of the natural history museum; whereas the other

exhibit analyzed in this article, “We love them... and eat them,” appears to leave at least some more space for negotiation. In both cases, however, students’ responses to the displays suggest that the delimitations of education in conceptualizing human-nonhuman animal relations are not fixed: they are, rather, dynamic, elastic, and as unpredictable as education itself.

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