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Attending the Giraffe

Imagine being one of the first people outside of Africa ever to see a giraffe. No one you know has ever seen such a thing, it is entirely strange. If you belong to the inner circle of a powerful king or emperor's estate, you may have seen elephants, monkeys, lions, and other exotic species arrive from distant places you will never see, and added to the private collection. Captured from their natural habitats and isolated from other members of their species, the new animals' appearance in the menageries and zoos of China and Europe was part of creating new relationships between emperors and kings, new empires and their distant territories. What the animal "meant" to collectors and viewers in these early menageries was not so much "species" — a concept that did not yet exist — as curiosities, a wordless demonstration of the sender's imagination and power to bridge two worlds.

In 1414, a ruler in Bengal shipped a giraffe to the Emperor of China. The gift was a tribute, a gesture of good will cementing the special powers and potential economic relations of two rulers. Sparse records of this event include an ancient painting and some brief academic commentaries tracing the story of "the emperor's giraffe."

Attr. Shen Du: Tribute Giraffe with Attendant, 1414. (Philadelphia Museum of Art)

We know very little about how exotic animals arrived to populate early modern menageries.[1] How did they capture the giraffe? Why was there only one? What kind of ship would carry a giraffe from Africa, where it originated, to Bengal, and then to China, in the 15th century? If the ship changed the life of the giraffe, did not the giraffe also change the shape and purpose of the ship? Imagine them together, the ship and the giraffe, crossing an ocean, crossing cultures, and launching a new world order.

A painting was made of this tribute giraffe that is considered historically important today. The fate of the giraffe featured in this painting is unknown. There is no record of affectionate relations between humans and giraffes in this or other early menageries, which is not to say that such relations did not exist yet — only that those who had ongoing personal encounters with the animals were not those authorized to record such events for posterity. To understand better the modern world and its organization of people, places, and animals, we need to establish that the giraffe was as much a medium of communication as the ship that carried it. The tribute was a ritual exchange performed in anticipation of an altered future. It demonstrated both the inviting mystery of a distant natural world, embodied by the animal, and growing human mastery over nature, embodied by the ship. Its arrival altered relations between two imperial powers and helped to precipitate the emergence of transcontinental trade, an enterprise that became, through complex historical processes, world capitalism.

To borrow McLuhan's well-known phrase, the medium is the message, and in this story, the medium is an animal. To elaborate this idea, and to consider some of its implications, I compare the story of the 1414 tribute giraffe with the story of April, the famous pregnant giraffe of 2017. Both giraffes were conscripted to enact a complex social ritual that brought together and changed the people involved in the event. To play this role, the giraffes had first to be conveyed from natural habitats into confinement, from distance into quasi-intimacy with European and global observers, from matriarchal family structure into an individual with a face that could at least hypothetically look back at its human viewer. Each step of being made visible relied on something else being made invisible. I will argue that this double act of foregrounding and disappearing has discursively shaped both our relations with animals and the visual aesthetics of modern culture.

Let's start with the visible. Giraffes are so oddly crooked, so lovely with their earthy savanna colors and placid herbivore demeanor, so unreachable and tall. In the west, they are popularly associated with menageries and zoos, children's toys, textile designs,

African safaris, and more recently, the prospect of extinction. The 1414 giraffe launched new topographical imaginations and powers associated with its arrival, and "new ways of organizing nature," as Jason Moore writes in "The Rise of Cheap Nature." Encompassing humans, animals, and geopolitical space, these new powers laid the groundwork for the emergence of capitalism as a "world-ecology" (86, 85).

April the pregnant giraffe of 2017 did not cross an ocean, but her image did. The screening of April's pregnant pacing stimulated an audience of millions excited by the prospect of seeing her give birth online. Their desire to witness April's prolonged pregnancy day after day can only be understood in relation to the largely unspoken and unseen effects of loss among endangered animals, together with the absence of direct interaction with undomesticated animals in their everyday lives. Six hundred years passed between these two events, a passage marked by the emergence of a capitalist world order and growing public anxiety about precarity and environmental risk. This precarity, a consequence of what has been named the Anthropocence, is widely conceptualized as the result of human domination of and estrangement from nature, beginning with the industrial revolution and/or the rise of modern science (Moore, *op. cit.*). But tracing the story of the tribute giraffe reminds us that in the process of colonization some people were estranged from nature, while others were defined and exploited by their proximity to its resources. These others had to develop methods or techniques to capture, kill, and transport animals for purposes previously unknown to them. Together with their habitats and lands, these others came to comprise the back stage from which colonial subjectivity and the power of capital were extracted and performed. The giraffe made visible in this process represented and extended the influence of the nobles from Bengal, but not that of the Africans who captured the giraffe and arranged for its export to Bengal, or the animal keepers who accompanied the giraffe to China. This giraffe reminds us that it is important, when we talk about human destruction, to ask, *whose* Anthropocene? *Which* humans? As Dikesh Chakrabarty reminds us, "The story of capital, the contingent history of our falling into the Anthropocene, cannot be denied by recourse to the idea of species, for the Anthropocene would not have been possible, even as a theory, without the history of industrialization" (Chakrabarty 219-220). Add this probing postcolonial question to McLuhan's media theory and Goffman's cartography of social interaction, and you have begun to bridge the lives and surrounding cultures of two celebrity giraffes separated by six centuries.

Antoine Thiébault & Jacques Garnier-Allabre: A Giraffe from Sennaar, Africa, Presented by the Pasha of Egypt to King Charles X of France at Saint-Cloud, July 9, 1827. Print. (The Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations [MuCEM], Marseilles)

Non-human animals have mediated social relations throughout history. They have played a significant role in relations between rulers, between families, between landowners and peasants, colonial invaders and Indigenous peoples, governments and subjects, technologies and users, environmentalists and climate change deniers. In conditions of mobilization or movement they sometimes function as what cultural anthropologists and Star Trek fans call *first contact* between groups or territories. The 1414 giraffe, sent from one Asian ruler to another, represented both difference and the possibility to cross that difference. First contact mediators and the narratives that surround them help make sense of the unknown, and they have important but diverse semiotic consequences. As Alan Liu observes, "first contact" encounters also arise in relation to new media when familiar images help users to befriend and navigate the daunting technology and to imagine where the interaction might lead. However familiar, these images cannot fully predict or control how media will reshape the cultures or subjectivities of the people who engage with them. Liu is not thinking of animals when he describes first contact narratives drawing users into new media. But in the 1970s and 80s, in the dawn of the so-called Information Age, and even today, many

entrepreneurs have put this idea into practice. Tigers, penguins, monkeys, birds, lizards, lions, and cats have all served as friendly mediators for navigators looking to find their way into new interfaces (cf. Berland, "A Visitor's Guide"). They mean something different from these early menageries, but they would not be conceivable without them.

If an animal can be a medium, and not just the content of a photograph, painting, or advertisement, and not just the body of an animal, what exactly is it mediating? The fascinating complexity of this question makes the idea of the animal medium worth examining. Most obviously the naming of the animal as a medium is a project in the relatively new project of media archaeology, which seeks to rewrite the archives of human culture in search of their underlying material histories. Despite this project's notable attempts to counter anthropocentrism, this endeavor has rarely (with the notable exception of Nicole Shukin's *Animal Capital),* accommodated the non-human animal as part of such histories. Reframing this initiative to include the nonhuman animal highlights the animal's role as what Derrida calls a supplement to the social relationship in which it appears. The supplement both adds to and takes the place of the human subject to which it is added, thus rebalancing or more accurately unbalancing the architecture of personal and political relations in which it appears. A text adds a layer of meaning to, and simultaneously diminishes the established authority of, a field of knowledge; a new child expands and disrupts a relationship or family; a new technology enhances and displaces the bodies and work practices of people who engage with it.

As hinted in the way I have described it, there are parallels between this idea and McLuhan's study of media as "extensions of man," providing extensions of our limbs and senses that simultaneously enhance and displace their powers. The car extends our feet but also diminishes their importance and the autonomy of the human body, an observation that applies equally to spectacles, telephones, and gloves. The way our limbs and senses require supplementation in order to flourish is the comparative strength and weakness of the human species. There is an analogy to be made here (especially for readers of Harold Innis, Canadian communication theorist and mentor of McLuhan, who emphasized the relationship between communication and empire) between this extension of the body and the way a giraffe supplements an emperor.

We are back at the beginning of the modern period, and the emperor is seeking to expand his power as though more territory will make him more powerful, as though

his territory is somehow inadequate on its own. By sending an animal as tribute to a potential ally, the ruler conveys the exotic richness of his country, and by making the wealth of his country appear to depend on the supplementation of the proposed alliance he also makes it potentially subject to invasion through or despite its expansionary drive. Throughout the modern period, as territories or countries are colonized, they are (inequitably) enriched by the exportation of their material resources and yet diminished by their dependency on external powers. This relationship is commonly expressed in a reliance on images of wild nature, of "otherness," so that a country's destiny seems to be "defined by — and perhaps limited to — its beauty, wildness and natural wealth" (Berland, "Animal And/as Medium" 90). Now consider this pattern of colonial supplementation in relation to Irving Goffman's idea that human social interaction is essentially theatrical. Advocating in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* for a dramaturgical approach to the study of human behavior, Goffman shows that the "presentation of self" entails the strategic employment of select personal features and behaviors or "faces" that are distinct from those lived and more or less hidden "back stage." Modern countries continue to symbolize themselves through their most beautiful or symbolically potent animals. We do not see the labor and exploitation that enables the distant or proximate other to appear in the guise of beautiful wilderness and wonder.

These ideas can be somewhat accommodated within an appropriately expanded field of media archaeology enriched by the recognition that the history of natural resources is also a history of colonialism. But the animal body is also different from dust, copper, chemicals, or gold; it does not disappear quietly into the image making apparatus, and has never done so. Furthermore, whatever physical materialities are mediated in the acts of communication through which we become who we are, all societies involve conflict, and human conflicts are also expressed and negotiated through culture. As a mediator of social exchange, an animal medium can be simultaneously a body of bones and blood, a political tribute, a theatrical supplement, a ritual event, a resource for financial exploitation, and a resource for hope in the face of an ominous future. Recognizing culture as both symbolic negotiation and material infrastructure is essential to understanding how and why animals appear in the midst of human social relations and cultural events.

Drawing of Zarafa the giraffe, as imagined en route to Marseille France from Egypt, ca 1827. (Provenance unknown)

Welcoming the exotic. Ownership of menageries was a common feature of aristocratic life in Roman and medieval times. Records of their collections include elephants and lions, but not giraffes.[2] The famous 1414 giraffe, born in what is now Kenya, was shipped from Bengal to the Middle Kingdom, where it was decisively misunderstood as a species. The only communication that preceded its arrival was a rumor, a word that meant "monster," and since they expected to see a monster comprised of parts of various animals, that is what they saw. The Chinese court welcomed this camel-leopard monster with great fanfare; it was exotic, it was irresistible, and it was a tribute to their greatness. Who caught the giraffe, who accompanied her, who fed her, who saw her, how long she lived, what she thought about her experience, all this is unknown.

Despite the promising reception of this tribute, Chinese trade ended by the middle of the 15th century (Ringmar 376). But the new career of giraffes as emissaries of international trade had just begun. Egyptian rulers sent several giraffes to Europe, first to Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence in 1486, and then, several centuries later, to King George IV of England and King Charles X of France, in 1827. Note the dates of these gifts, writes Eric Ringmar in the *Journal of World History*. If these giraffes were not the first to arrive in Europe, they held particular historical importance.

> The first [1486] giraffe appeared right before the Europeans — Florentine explorers prominently among them — went off to discover what was to become "America." The second giraffe appeared only three years before France's first imperialist venture began — the bloody war in, and

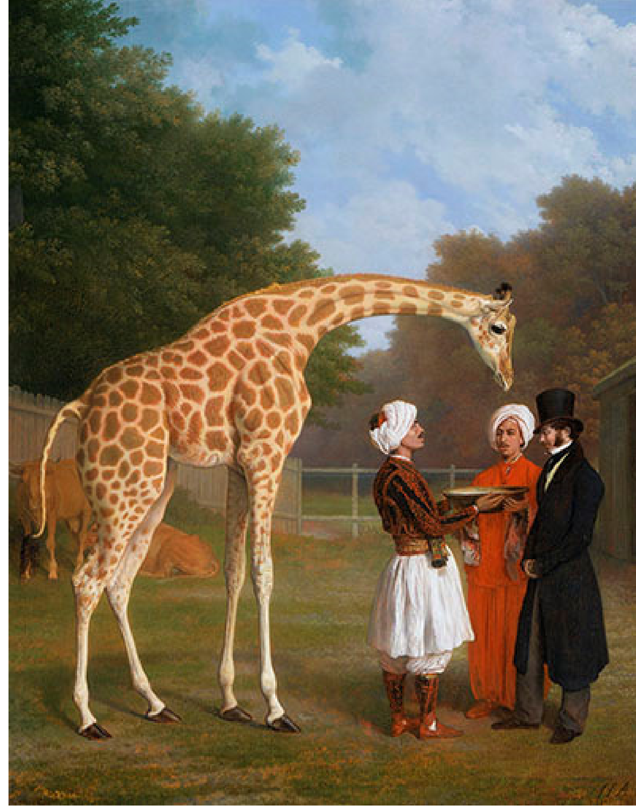
> subsequent occupation of, Algeria. By studying how the Europeans reacted to these two animals, we should be able to understand better how they regarded the extra-European world at the cusp of the two waves of expansion. (377-378)

Sent from one ruler to another, the giraffe could have been, and was in a sense interchangeable with, gold or silk brocade (Zielinski). But the giraffe had unique persuasive powers. Like other curiosities of the early modern period, it stimulated a combination of carnal acquisitiveness and a more disinterested curiosity about natural science.[3] It was even greater curiosity because giraffes do not fight or eat other animals, which made them a novel innovation in the arena of courtly entertainment, disrupting what people expected of exotic animals (Williams 52).

This peaceful disposition did not reduce its charismatic power. Ringmar writes:

> When suddenly seeing something that surpassed the expected in beauty, diversity, or abundance, the mind was overwhelmed. People were first astonished, then delighted, and finally excited. Clearly there was something highly addictive in this mixture of emotions. It piqued people's curiosity, and once they had seen a little, they wanted to see more. Obviously, in terms of height and sheer impact, there was no more marvelous, or more curious, animal than a giraffe. (379)

Giraffes were able to convey the quality of the marvelous even after they had ceased to be "curiosities" as such, that is to say, after acquiring them ceased to be novel or exclusive to the private amassment of wealth and knowledge. They have become more accessible outside of Africa through their presence in public zoos, natural history museums, films, and pictures. They flourish in children's culture, providing friendly anthropomorphic figures for early object attachment while linking kids to a commodity market that is more and more child-centered. Their unique shape is almost normalized, insofar as it is possible to normalize a giraffe outside of its natural habitat. Combining childhood attachment, commercial mediascapes, and ecological vulnerability, the giraffe's meanings continue to accumulate. This transformation alters what we understand to be its mode of mediation: how it mediates, and what it is mediating.



Jacques-Laurent Agasse: *The Nubian Giraffe*, Commissioned by George IV in 1827. (Royal Collection Trust)

As my thinking about animal mediation unfolded, I began to wonder whether we should be thinking of these animals as "vanishing mediators." Fredric Jameson introduced this concept in 1977 to summarize Max Weber's foundational analysis of bureaucracy, and in particular the role of religious authority in the development of modern industrialization. In this analysis, the priest in religious Europe represented and was seen to mediate the spiritual and the administrative authority endowed by God. This spiritual authority authorized the birth of modern bureaucratic organization which originated in the Church but spread beyond it. As organizations further rationalized themselves to manage the more spatially and technically complex processes of industrialization and urbanization, modern bureaucracy abandoned its fealty to religion and made the priest's specific religious power obsolete. The priest is the vanishing mediator of bureaucratic industrialism.

In our story, the giraffe is presented as a ritual gesture to rulers preparing to embark on joint mercenary ventures into the unknown, and its conveyance precipitates new ways of seeing, transporting, owning, and connecting with other cultures. The prospect of extinction for giraffes and other species seems to make the utility of the vanishing

mediator concept uncontroversial. But the vanishing began much earlier than any prospect of extinction confronted the species. While giraffes were welcomed in Europe, they did not always flourish there; the death of the beloved giraffe after eighteen years in the Jardin du Roi was, according to painter Eugène Delacroix, "as obscure as her entry into the world had been brilliant" (Ringmar 388).[4] Her fortune was better than the Medici giraffe, who broke her neck almost immediately on a beam in the special barn Lorenzo had built for her. Even before these events, there were disappearances; in order to capture the tribute giraffe, hunters likely killed its mother (Buquet 6). To continue the export of giraffes, Africans had to adapt or modify their practices in order to capture and transport the young giraffe in aid of a purpose previously unknown to them. The capacity to exchange the tribute giraffe thus involved seizing power not only over the animal, but also over the people who shared its habitat. This ritual performance of colonial power is vividly documented in the 1988 film "From the Pole to the Equator," made from the film archives of global explorer Luca Comerio (1874-1940).[5] Its depiction of the performative killing of animals before Indigenous hunters is particularly gruesome.

The animals depicted in this record of conquest were not exported as live animals but hunted, killed and rendered into parts as trophies and other products, as I have documented in "The Work of the Beaver." Such practices entrenched the colonized African or Indigenous person as a dual figure: both the inhabitant of a rich land capable of supplying wealth in the form of animal bodies, and a sacrificial figure represented metonymically by the animal it has forfeited. Here the animal extends and symbolically displaces the Indigenous person. Indigenous and tribal peoples became vanishing mediators in the dissemination of wild animals to diverse parts of the globe. The giraffe came to represent Africa without any sign of them, just as the beaver came to represent Canada (which according to Margaret Atwood was built on dead beavers [*Surfacing* 39-40], without carrying visible evidence of the colonial and Indigenous trappers who traded them. The origin of an exotic animal is in short both a crucial part of its perceived meaning, *and* a background rendered invisible by the technologies and discourses through which it appears elsewhere in the world. Colonies are often called "frontiers" for intrepid explorers, but this process keeps colonized places and peoples back stage, as Goffman's describes it, and whatever happens there, as Edward Said writes in *Culture and Imperialism*, remains unseen.

Nicholas Huët, the Younger: ***Study of the Giraffe Given to Charles X by the Viceroy of Egypt, 1827*****. (The Morgan Library and Museum)**

Later appearances of the giraffe have built upon these first encounters. Ringmar's reference to the heightened desire to see something marvelous forms an important link between 15th century giraffes and the animals circulating today in media culture. giraffes have become more accessible by means of their presence in zoos, natural history museums, films, and pictures. In contemporary consumer culture, the animal plays an important function for children, providing anthropomorphic figures for early object attachment while linking them to a commodity market that is more and more child-centered. Here there need not be just one giraffe because one toy can be replaced with another. As even children are learning, this is not true of the species as a whole. By combining mass mediation, childhood attachment and release, and ecological vulnerability, the giraffe's meanings have again changed. Now the giraffe occupies an uncertain place in the social drive to save/extinguish species that defines the so-called Anthropocene. This transformation alters what we understand to be its mode of mediation: how it mediates, and what it is mediating.

This story of the tribute giraffe is a starting point for re-thinking the animal-medium relation, both as an historical project and as an important task for media and animal studies. Scholars have written a great deal about the essential yet sometimes surprising role that communication has played in human history. But to understand the historical changes that occurred in the 15th century, and to consider their complicated relationship to the present, we first need to establish that the giraffe is as much a medium of communication as the ship that carried the giraffe to a country that had never seen one. The coming and going of ships and giraffes together helped to alter their environments by simultaneously demonstrating human mastery through new technology and embodying the exotic and untouched. Only by reading the event as the imbrication of the animal and the technological, that is to say of two different but interdependent relational processes, can we understand its effects on how humans think and feel about animals, or how the venture of world trade was launched that later became, through various complex historical processes, global capitalism.

Understanding animals as mediators in the interplay between digital machines and reconfigured humans is different from viewing animals as the content being transmitted in that milieu. Taking up the insight that an animal is a medium and the medium is the message means acknowledging, as Jon Durham Peters does in his book *The Marvelous Clouds*, that thinking about animals in the context of mediation is not just important for our consideration of human animal relations; it expands our understandings of mediation itself. If McLuhan's insights demonstrate "that media are not only carriers of symbolic freight but also crafters of existence" (Peters 15), this insight applies to animals whether they occupy terrestrial, aqueous, pictorial, digital, or philosophical environments. This does not mean that animals are always mediators, willing or otherwise. As Peters notes, "Because media are in the middle, their definition is a matter of position, such that the status of something as a medium can fade once its position shifts" (29).

That is to say, one giraffe can be an undisturbed member of a matriarchal family, another can be food for a human or animal predator, another a tribute sent to an emperor, another a prisoner behind bars, and another (differently) a figure on t shirt where before one was more likely to see eagles and elephants. Recognizing that one entity changes through interaction with others is the foundation of ecology. Ecology referred originally to the interactions of species, but McLuhan applied it to the interactions of communication media. Giraffes become mediators when they appear in the middle of things, when they intertwine the ecology of species and the ecology of

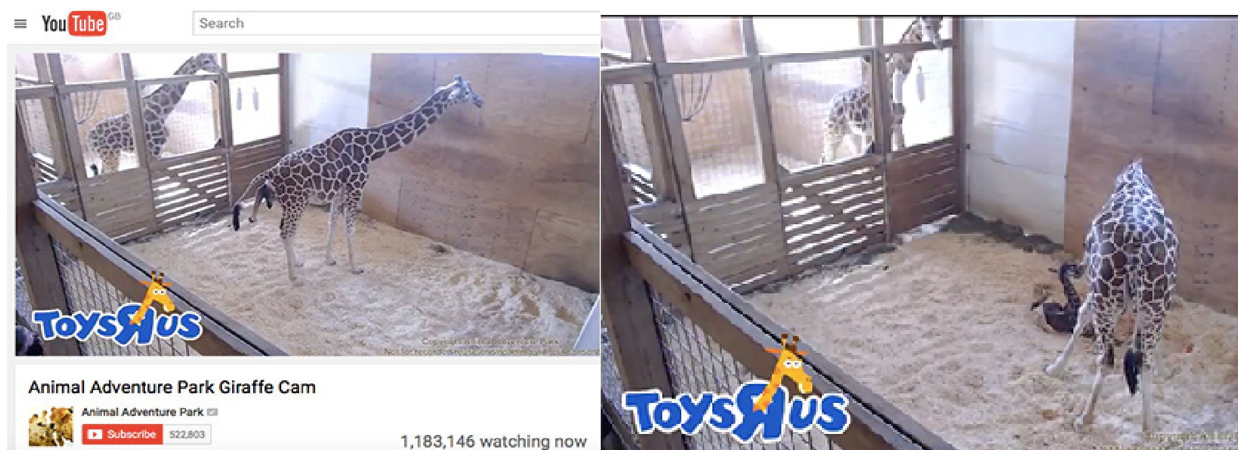
media, when endangered species meet webcams that meet with delayed motherhood, when movement from one territory to another shifts the geopolitics of nature and the grammar of looking. As always, what is hidden in these arrangements colors what is visible.

If a medium creates a "common situation" in human culture, as McLuhan wrote (cited Gordon 53), if a medium doesn't "mean" things but "does" things, and if a boat is a medium that brings people and things together in the form of a new assemblage or new ecology, then a post-anthropocentric interpretation of these events must acknowledge the fact that forging good will between emperors relied as much upon the giraffe as it did upon the boat. Giraffes have special qualities that determine what and how they mean for the various people who encounter them. At the same time, layers of historic events and discourses have accumulated to shape what any animal can mean today.

Pregnant giraffe April with one of her handlers, image captured from live cam feed, 2017. (©Animal Adventure Park)

On Mediation in the Anthropocene-Capitalocene. For several months in the spring of 2017, a global audience waited for April the giraffe to give birth in a small zoo in upstate New York. The owner mounted a camera and transmitted a live feed of April as she paced back and forth in her pen, separated by a fence from Oliver, the father, to ensure the safety of the calf. This is not the first time a zoo has sought to capitalize from a prospective birth, but this event broke all viewing records, creating a news sensation and a financial coup for the zoo. According to counts of online views, April's prospective calf became briefly more famous than any human baby in history, including Britain's toddler Prince George and Beyoncé's unborn twins. Viewers' comments heightened the intensity of waiting and reinforced the sense of a significant event. They confessed that they were hooked, they were addicted, they could not believe what they

were doing, the incredulity echoing in some strange way the marvel that must have been felt upon seeing the first giraffe. But this time, the description of enchantment is darkened by the frequent reference to addiction. This addiction is voluntary and involuntary at the same time; it is experienced as contagious, like a virus. To explain the apparent need of participants to confess as well as to watch, it is essential to acknowledge the reputedly viral qualities of this event. For such viewers, the enchantment of encountering the animal empowers and disempowers them at the same time.



Left to right: April in labor, screenshot from live cam, 2017. April and newborn Tajiri, screenshot from live cam, 2017. (©Animal Adventure Park)

This enchanting contagion is both personal and public in its effects. Thousands shared online their conviction that they could not sleep until April had had her giraffe. All the public feelings about the future of the giraffe as a species, the complicity of humans in the endangerment of wild animals, the confusion about what could be done to reverse an unthinkably huge extinction event, the unfortunate and unnatural everyday existence of giraffes penned in small spaces, and the unspoken boredom or loneliness of the watchers, all these were sublimated and poured into the need to watch April. The "event" gave participants an opportunity to express their own sense of being captured along with their hopes for a birth as affirmation of the vitality of nature. This love for April was expressed not only in online professions of insomnia, excitement, and addiction, but also in the vigorous sales of mother-giraffe memes and April-named t-shirts and maternity clothes.

This community of April fans is not the elite milieu shared by the royal owners of tribute and Medici giraffes, quite the opposite. In this affective entanglement, anyone with a computer could look at April; anyone could express their feelings online. The giraffe was a medium again, but this time, for millions. This giraffe is performing a very different kind of political mediation. It provides an appropriate case study for Foucault's analysis of modern governmentality as a discursive process within which the constitution and practice of human subjectivity is formed. Governmentality is directed to the governance of people, rather than territories or possessions. Through its mechanisms, humans learn to consider and to regulate themselves as autonomous subjects posed to take full possession of their own lives, only secondarily and more or less instrumentally connected to others. Because the regulative idea of self-governance has been internalized, the people that comprise the population regulate themselves, or submit themselves to its directives, even when the logic of individual agency collapses before them. Because precarity has become so foundational to the neoliberal order, the practice of self-governance is increasingly shaped around it and can potentially evolve in various directions. The sense of being enmeshed in a state of precarity can engender recognition of the precarity of others and a sense of "being with," a recognition that all life is co-existence (Nancy). "Precariousness designates something that is existentially shared, what is problematized here is not what makes everyone the same, but rather what is *shared* by all" (Lorey 19; emphasis in original).

The vulnerability of endangered species is now the principal rationale for animal captivity, but this context was hardly mentioned in the course of this media event. April's craftily produced celebrity returned sovereignty to the individual viewers who invested love and hope in *this* giraffe, *this* baby, not *all* giraffes. April's maternal body was a mediator between two powerful discourses, two potential world orders: neoliberalism, with its necrophiliac emphasis on the sovereignty of individual human subjects, and political ecology, with its life-affirming emphasis on habitats, cross-species entanglements and collective survival. Shared motherhood aside, these logics are irreconcilable outside the space of the zoo. The affectionate alliance between April and her fans failed (at least in the short term) to the extent that it confirmed and naturalized the zoo's authority in the posited order of things. Their feelings about risk, an essential component of this event, were discharged through the carefully orchestrated love for an individual animal who once again, once its calf was born, would disappear from their screens.

Google search result for April t-shirts. (photo by author, 2017)

April is not mediating two emperors but rather more than a million viewers joined together by her image on the Internet, and by the way the prospective event appeared to confirm their passionate commitment to nature and rebirth as a solution to precarity. Watching April did not just absorb the attention of enchanted animal lovers, and did not just create a market for t-shirts and memorabilia; it also served to endorse unseen intermediaries (such as the zoo owner, who hovers on the edge of the screen) as instruments of risk management and animal salvation. Audiences were well prepared to engage with this animal by their already-established relationship with animals on their toys, picture books, television and computer screens, and phones. As new media tools are launched, users are enticed to interact with them by images of animals that convey appropriate proportions of lovability, cuteness, mobility, autonomy, and adaptability. In this animal-tool entanglement, the magic of one is enhanced by the magic of the other. Just as in 1414 a giraffe appeared in advance of new political relations, today animal images appear whenever new electronic spaces or devices are being launched (Berland, "A Visitor's Guide"). These images continuously reanimate our associations between animal motion and the vitality of representation, making new media programs and devices seem both exuberant and safe. The designers creating these animal mediators have retrieved and modernized the attitudes toward formerly unknown exotic animals that were inaugurated centuries ago: curiosity, acquisitiveness, fascination, and a blithe disregard for habitats and cultures.

Mom posing as April the giraffe with newborn son (Credit Erin Dietrich via Facebook).

As viewers watch April pace, the live feed joins the giraffe's body to our feelings of protectiveness and affection, and our need for diversion and pleasure. Joined together by the optics of the zoo, we wait for her to do what giraffes must do (and we cannot) and what ensures the viability of the zoos that contain them, and that is to save the species. April the mother is the captured agent of a biopolitical economy that mediates and magically resolves the conflict we experience every day as we negotiate between money, global geopolitics, and the conflicted impulses within our hearts. These layers of meaning challenge our attempts to understand the April experience. What is problematic is not love for giraffes or elephants, or April's evocation of the past, or the technological mediation of the encounter, but rather her triple commodification — the zoo, the advertiser, the measurement of online hits — and its carefully successful management of our perceptions and responses, which like colonialism, but differently, shape how she appears and what she means. April is thus an agent of the larger governmental practice of risk management. Describing April's mediation as risk management is not the same as talking about the risks animals themselves face in interactions with humans, or the way such risks are represented explicitly in human images or texts, or the security of April herself as a widely celebrated, privately owned

commodity. April's global profile calls for a more socially and politically grounded theory of risk together with a revitalized theory of mediation.

At a general level, potential risks that this maternal star of the virtual menagerie might assuage include: a loss of profit for zoos; more politically volatile uses of online spaces; boredom and indifference with life online; users' non-participation in social media, with a negative effect on user data monetization; spreading animal rights activism; and a volatile concern about climate change and the devastated landscapes of the Anthropocenic environment that catalyzes a need to act, *somehow*. A million individual users sharing the April experience can ameliorate some of these risks. But risk management in the age of climate change produces new risks, political and economic as well as ecological, that require the cultivation of new techniques, and we are subject to another cascading series of techniques to follow the waves and mediations (cf. Van Loon).

April reminds us how much these new techniques of human governance concern our feelings. Just as the giraffe and the ship are entangled in a performative event, so the co-appearance of social media devices with their animal sidekicks plays an important role in the current "shift in our dominant cultural logic of mediation." These devices do not just promise convenience and connection; they forge affective links between themselves, their animals, and us, which promise to help us manage our everyday lives and social interactions. Animals, of course, touched humans before now, but how animals figure into the management of our experiences, how affect is mediated and toward what ends, what affective entanglement means in this context, has changed profoundly.[7] Affect is a subtler concept for talking about these media encounters than McLuhan's speculative cybernetic physiology, in part because McLuhan was not very attuned to affect, or to politics, or to animals, for that matter, but also because the processes that he intuited have become so much more explicit.

Just as the 1414 giraffe was sent to advocate for friendly relations between two rulers, so contemporary celebrity animals advocate for friendly relations with the technologies and institutions that frame their presence. Their performative place in the virtual menagerie is part of a new "digital nature" that, as Charlie Gere observes, is helping to naturalize institutional arrangements with complicated political repercussions (Gere 144-5). April's glorious sweetness and fame seems to re-enchant a disenchanted world. Like other animal figures populating the virtual menagerie, April's appearance has been stripped, coded and dramaturgically shaped as part of a post-narrative

aesthetic regime that stimulates the human-(quasi)animal interactions we long for, and generates profits from them. This multi-media regime interacts with our perceptual capacities and affective states in ways that have come to feel natural, the way artificial plants function when you walk into a bank. Our "common situation" as McLuhan termed it is a scopic regime that foregrounds the animal's charismatic beauty and hides the irrelevant/inescapable fate of their natural milieux.

As Cheryl Lousley writes:

> Distilling ecological relationships into icons of charismatic life displaces how biodiversity is one of the most contested areas of environmental politics where the decidedly social questions of sovereignty, property rights, justice, livelihoods, and the capacity to shape a future are all at stake…. The slippage from vitality to commodity enchantment is especially hard to avoid, I argue, because capitalist economies thrive on the appearance of flourishing objects of desire, available for intimate appropriation. (710)

As we set our eyes upon these objects of desire, we participate in an habitual process of staged and regularly updated interaction that renders unseen the realities of habitat loss, declining populations, poaching, and protective incarceration. It is crucial to this scopic regime that we want to look, that we adapt to new techniques and temporalities of viewing, and that we momentarily forego political or ethical concerns about the implications of our own desires. In this festival of looking it is not only the animal who is sacrificed. As bodies and images are detached whether by guns or Photoshop from the nature that makes them animal, the force of the imagery inveigles us to abandon the thoughtfulness that allegedly makes us human. But images of animals awaken an enriched sense of the vulnerability of the natural world. They can stir deeply ethical responses to our shared creatureliness and precarious futures, as the writing of Lori Gruen, Isabell Lorey, and Anat Pick reminds us. The experience of being joined to millions of viewers by a common passionate feeling for an animal is arguably as unique and potentially transformative an experience as seeing a live giraffe for the first time.

Close up of a giraffe taken on safari. (Photo by Emily McGiffin, 2017)

Conclusion: nature shots. McLuhan chose watchdog and fish metaphors to describe the state of distraction humans experience when they focus on the content of a medium rather than the medium itself. Peters rejects this metaphorical use of the animal, for it teaches us nothing about them. "One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in," claimed McLuhan. "In fact," Peters interjects, "fish probably know a lot about water's temperature, clarity, currents, weather, purity, and so on, but the point was that they did not recognize it as water" (Peters 55). And we don't recognize the fish as medium. It does not matter whether animals interact with us in terrestrial, aqueous, domestic, digital, dietary, or philosophical environments: they can be a medium as easily as the water can. Taking up the insight that "the medium is the message" without abandoning the squids or giraffes means acknowledging how much animals expand our understandings of mediation itself. How and what animals mediate is contingent on more than their biological niche, more than the technologies within which they appear, more than the feelings and ethics of individual people looking at them, although each of these plays a role in the moments and outcomes of mediation. This is true of any image. McLuhan asks us to reverse our perspective on images so that we view ourselves from the perspective of the media, that is, with "attentiveness to the agency of the medium in the analysis of social change" (Mitchell and Hansen, xi). It is as when Mitchell asks, in his book of the same title, "what do pictures want?" but looking

through the picture to see ourselves being made by their making. This "attentiveness to the medium" is related to the suggestion that we look at ourselves from the point of view of the animal, acknowledging how little we know about what they know or feel or see but nurturing more empathic relations nonetheless. Delving into mediation challenges us to multiply our gaze on ourselves. This is a profoundly political task of cultural and ontological reorientation.

What might animals need to flourish in the environments of the future? They need us to see and feel the animals we encounter and to clearly face and sense what seems invisible behind them. We are as embedded in the world of natural and digital habitats as animals are, and we need to find more complex ways to render these realities and more sustainable modes of entanglement with them. Nurturing awareness of how animal and technological media shape our embodied cognition of the world provides a chance to practice living with their eyes on us, and to realize how images that produce the greatest wonder are entangled with the politics of nature and desire in contemporary risk culture. Tangling them differently offers a chance to focus not just on charismatic giraffes needing to be saved, but also on the visual languages, discursive mediations and reconfigured human-animal ecologies that can make diverse multi-species futures viable.

Notes

1. A fuller discussion of this history will appear in my forthcoming book, *Virtual Menageries*.

2. Claire Cock-Starkey claims in *Penguins, Pineapples and Pangolins* that giraffes were known in Europe since Julius Caesar brought a giraffe to Rome as part of his menagerie (11). See also Lisa J. Kiser, "Animals in Medieval Sports, Entertainments and Menageries;" and Eric Ringmar, "Audience for a Giraffe."

3. See Martin Jay and Sumathy Ramuswami, eds. *Empires of Vision*, especially Nicholas Thomas, "Objects of Knowledge: Oceanic Artifacts in European Engravings."

4. There are other versions of this story in which the giraffe's loss is publicly mourned, however.

5. Comerio was "a pioneer of documentary film making who traveled widely and often recorded the interaction of people and animals; indeed, the abundant animal footage here is the contemporary film makers' most chilling material" (Maslin).

6. See van den Oever and Winthrop-Young.

7. In *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for our Relationships with Animals*, Lori Gruen develops an understanding of affect that is founded in the recognition of entanglement with animals and a call for such entanglement to be more empathic.

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