

## Animal Attractions: Cinema, Exoticism, and German Modernity

On June 20, 1908, Kaiser Wilhelm II. made his first visit to Carl Hagenbeck's zoo near Hamburg. »Guten Morgen, Kameraden!« he said to Hagenbeck's sons, who greeted the Emperor at the park's main entrance. »Ich kenne Ihren Tierpark schon durch den Kinematographen, aber mein Bruder hat mir gesagt, ich müsse ihn mir selbst unbedingt einmal ansehen!«<sup>1</sup> Without realizing it, the German Emperor situated Hagenbeck's zoo in its historical context – in the context of cinema and the new visual culture around 1900. At this time, the zoo and the cinema engaged in a lively reciprocal exchange, supplying each other with attractions that mutually informed and expanded their different exhibition programs. What is more, they commonly invoked cultural fantasies of exotic adventure, and transformed these fantasies into vicarious thrills.

In this paper, I will argue that urban entertainments like the zoo and the cinema converged in their treatment of the exotic as a spatial problem. Live and recorded displays construct space in different ways, to be sure. Yet analyzing such differences helps us gain a more nuanced understanding of the crucial role of space in modern urban spectacles.

### I.

We have to imagine the zoo around 1900 as a radically foreign place in itself. For this was the moment when the zoological garden gave way to a new design, a technologically engineered and thoroughly modern form of display. The world's largest exotic animal dealer, Hagenbeck openly challenged both the scientific expertise and the display logic of the zoological garden.<sup>2</sup> That model had put animals in cages and arranged display in taxonomic fashion. What urban audiences really wanted, he believed, was to experience the thrill of wild animals in apparent freedom.

The German term for Hagenbeck's zoo was *Tierpark*, a coinage which combined the words for animal garden (*Tiergarten*) and amusement park (*Vergnügungspark*). The logic of exhibition there was shamelessly commercialized. Every animal on display was also for sale. Once an animal had been purchased – by a filmmaker,

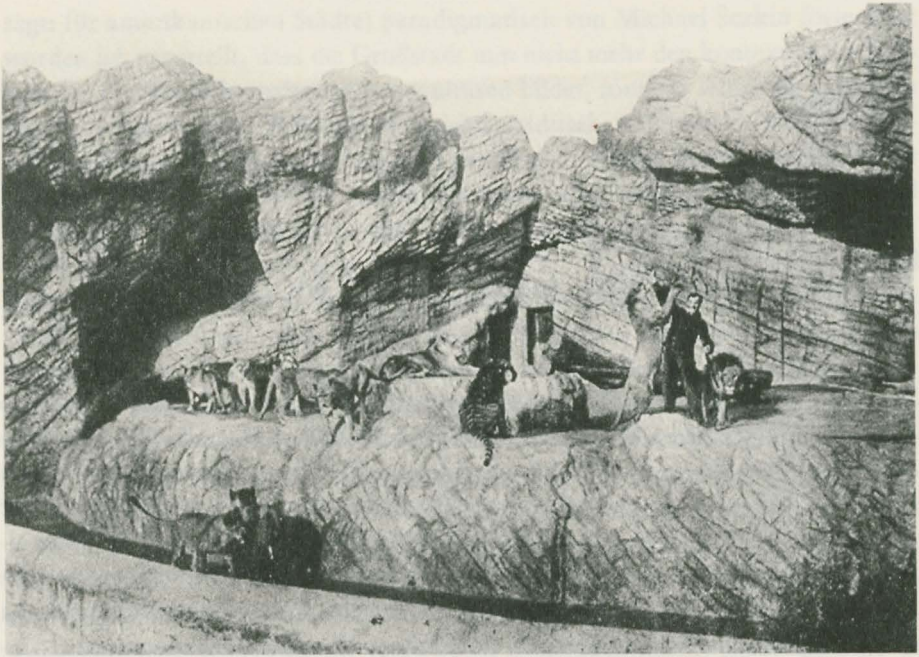


Fig.1: Löwengrube (Hagenbeck, Von Tieren, S.388)

for instance – it was replaced by another animal, even a member of a different species. The first program brochures flaunted the status of the open zoo as a gigantic emporium, foregrounding the advantages of the animals' exchangeability, while emphasizing the possibilities of high turnover for new modes of spectatorship.<sup>3</sup>

Like early travelogue films, the open zoo presented spectators with a montage of exotic views. Visitors followed a winding path through the park, leading them past a series of re-created spectacles from around the globe, from the »Südpol-Panorama« to the »Japanische Insel«, to the »Afrikanische Steppe.« The open zoo thus became a destination within the city and a gateway to imaginary excursions abroad. Hagenbeck transformed zoo-going into a touristic practice infused with the spirit of adventure. For this reason, an avid explorer like Wilhelm II. hardly attended the Berlin Zoo, a typical zoological garden set in the imperial capital, but visited Hagenbeck's on numerous occasions. During its first three years of operation, from 1907 to 1909, more than three million people attended the *Tierpark*. The open zoo attained its phenomenal popularity because it activated a variety of imaginative encounters between the observers and the wild bodies on display. In many ways, this new design had more in common with amusement parks like Coney Island – where Hagenbeck also exhibited – than it had with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century zoological garden.<sup>4</sup> (In fact, the zoo-keeper even added an amusement-park annex, complete with water slides and electric rides, in 1912.) The *Tierpark* was essentially a

theme park *avant la lettre*, a multi-media complex offering spectacles, products, and services all »themed« around the exotic.

On the most basic level, Hagenbeck reconceived of the zoo as a spatial practice. This idea expressed itself – but also deliberately concealed itself – in his patented technique of cageless or panoramic display. (Fig. 1, Lions) For example, this photograph shows the »Raubtierschlucht,« one of the stationary panoramas or so-called »Freigehege« at Hagenbeck's; it was the centerpiece of the park when it opened in 1907. Hagenbeck's trick was to appropriate certain devices of the indoor panorama, and refunctionalize them for live, open-air display. I'll mention only the most important one: Indoor panoramas typically used a system of blinds or interferences that concealed the light source, and thereby helped immerse the viewer into the depicted scene. This system appealed to Hagenbeck as a novel technique for concealing the barriers required for zoological display. Interferences, he found, could be put to contradictory uses for an effect, simultaneously facilitating the spectator's immersion and separation. At the open zoo, the bars of the cage dropped out, and they were replaced by moats or trenches. The artificial terrain that you see here was supported beneath by wood and iron scaffolding, as well as a network of plumbing and heating pipes. In the final stage of construction, a team of laborers covered the scaffolding with cement, coated it with paint, and decorated the display space with rocks and vegetation. The open enclosure thus effaced all of the work that went into engineering and staging the view.

This photograph of the »Löwengrube« was shot from a viewpoint along the walking path that bordered the display; in the lower-left foreground, you can see the trench. Open enclosures had multiple functions: By eliminating the bars of the cage, they extended the range of the animals' movement and immersed the zoo-goer into the space of performance. Animal trainers often appeared in the midst of the animals, like the one you see here; their role was to help relay the viewer's gaze from the path into the pit. Staircases allowed visitors to walk all around the edges of the installation, enabling them to view the animals from above the trench as well as from the pathway in front of it. In order for a »civilized« person to experience the exotic, however, it had to be contained and controlled. So the trench was also a safety device that confined the animals and protected the viewers from the hazards of cageless display.

The *Tierpark* created an illusion of shared space between audiences and the wild bodies on display. The thrill of spectatorship involved testing this illusion, exploring its precarious boundaries. As Hagenbeck wrote in his memoir:

Die Freiheit, welcher sich alle diese Geschöpfe erfreuen, ist Schein und Wahrheit zugleich. Die Löwen in ihrer Grotte können zwar ihre Kräfte frei entfalten, kein Gitter schließt sie von der Umgebung ab, wohl aber ein breiter Graben, der durch die ganze Terrainanlage und durch eine mit Gewächsen bepflanzte Barriere unsichtbar gemacht ist. Die Illusion ist so vollkommen erreicht, daß die meisten Besucher sich erst durch eine Besichtigung des Grabens von der Tatsächlichkeit der Anlage überzeugen lassen.<sup>5</sup>

As this passage indicates, the showman was aware of how cageless display affected viewers: It stimulated the feelings of unease and excitement at the same time.

First-time visitors especially fell prey to Hagenbeck's illusions. The most famous instance was Thomas Edison's visit to the zoo on September 27, 1911. As legend would have it: »Edison walked around a group of trees to suddenly confront a lion face-to-face, with nothing, apparently, to separate them. It scared the daylight out of the old inventor (...).«<sup>6</sup> Edison's jolt of astonishment describes an instance of successful staging. When the space of display was convincingly naturalized as contiguous with the space of the viewer, it delivered a kind of shock, a bodily reflex that registered the momentary collapse of the perceived divide between the wild and the civilized.

For film historians, this anecdote will deeply resonate with the origin myth of cinema spectatorship – namely, the first audience's response to Lumière's *Arrival of a Train*. In the zoo story, however, the myth has undergone a series of substitutions: On the level of spectacle, a wild animal (the lion) now stands in for technology (the train). On a different level, Edison appears as the supposedly naïve spectator, while Hagenbeck plays the part of illusionist and exhibitor. I would like to examine this nexus of zoo and cinema more closely now, as evidenced by Hagenbeck's transactions with *Nordisk Films*.

II.

The first film production and distribution company in Denmark, Nordisk was established in 1906 by Ole Olsen, a former amusement-park manager himself. In 1907, Olsen traveled to Hamburg on two occasions, where he filmed the city, the *Tierpark*, and its open enclosures. During the next two years, he returned to record performing troupes from Sri Lanka and Ethiopia. In exchange for these recording sessions, Olsen sent a projectionist to the zoo, where the same Nordisk films were shown as well. But the zoo at this time was not only a place for exhibiting the »real'; it was also as an imaginary site where fantasies could run wild. With this in mind, I'd like to suggest that fiction films – fantasies of adventure or safari – provide rich ground for an archaeology of institutional crossover, especially in the case of Hagenbeck and Nordisk.

Between 1907 and 1908, Olsen purchased a variety of animals from Hagenbeck in order to produce three sham hunting films. The first of these films, *Die Eisbärenjagd (Isbjørnejagt)*, was so successful that Nordisk took the animal as its company logo.<sup>7</sup> But it was the second film, *Die Löwenjagd (Løvejagten)*, which put Nordisk on the map of early cinema.

In his autobiography, Olsen explains that he was unable to »travel to Africa to see it in reality.« So he tried to re-create this fantasy of imperial adventure at home. As Olsen put it: »with two lions, used in the right manner, perhaps an illusion

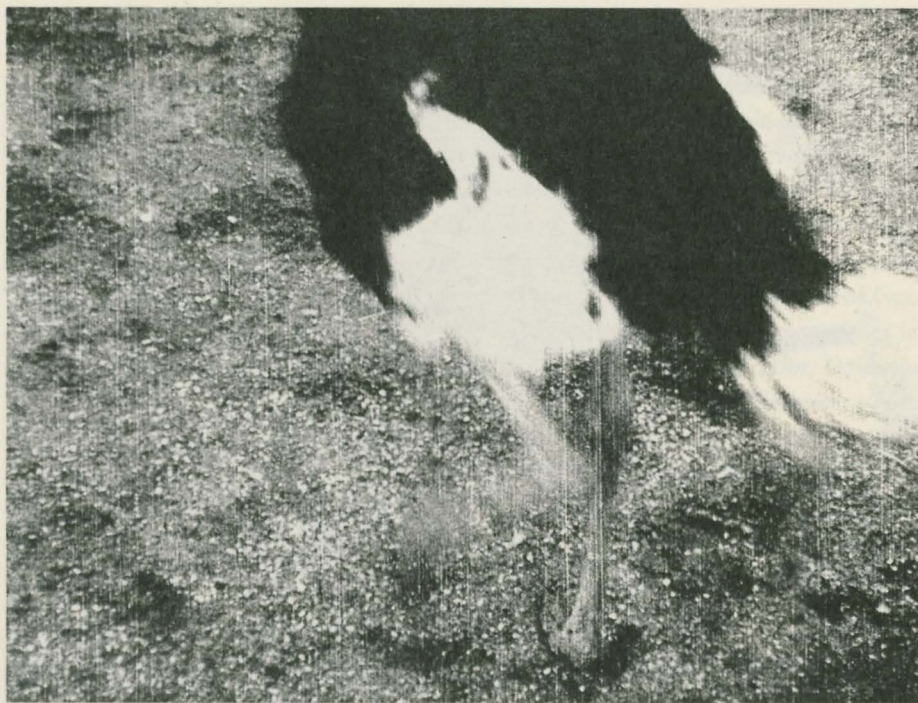


Fig.2: Die Löwenjagd (1907), Filmstill (Det Danske Filmmuseum)

could be created.«<sup>8</sup> Both of these lions were bought directly from Hagenbeck. In preparing to film *Die Löwenjagd*, Olsen and his cameraman, Viggo Larsen, chose the island of Elleore, part of a fjord near Copenhagen, for their location. Transforming this terrain into an African jungle was an enterprise not unlike Hagenbeck's. Olsen and his crew planted dozens of palm trees on the sandy island; they imported a man named Thomsen from a Danish colony in the Caribbean to act as their »native guide«; and they brought their camera to the Copenhagen Zoo, where they filmed the animals to inhabit their cinematic jungle.

*Die Löwenjagd* consists of two parts, each with a different logic and emphasis.<sup>9</sup> Part one serves an expository function, situating the hunters and their guide »in the jungle«, while exhibiting the wonders of the animal kingdom. (Fig. 2, Ostrich) Shots like this one, showing an ostrich on the run, were taken at the Copenhagen Zoo, from a camera position above or between the bars of the cage. With an abrupt cut, the camera shows a zebra galloping in the opposite direction; cut again, and the body of a hippopotamus fills the entire frame. These shots were presented to audiences as cut-ins, embodied in the hunters' point of view. Editing, framing, and camera positioning all served to create the sensation of animals rushing past »on all sides«. Just as the camera transports the audience through the bars of the cage and into the space of zoo display, part one concludes by performing this very move: The



Fig.3: Die Löwenjagd (1907), Filmstill (Det Danske Filmmuseum)

hunters enter the unseen cage, kneel down, and try to play with a monkey.

In part two, the emphasis shifts to the hunt. Now a chase structure unfolds, the cutting tempo increases, and the lions are set loose. Ron Mottram has observed that as the hunters travel, »they repeatedly point to off-screen space which we either see in the following shot as their point of view or as the space which they are about to enter.«<sup>10</sup> This part of the film privileges such techniques as matching on direction, subjective viewpoint, and cross-cutting, which it employs for two related purposes: to extend the construction of an imaginary geography, and to suggest the illusion of spatial contiguity between the hunters and the lions. (Fig. 3, Hunter and lion) The actors themselves, however, only enter the same screen space as the animals when the first lion has been killed and the second is being shot. In a promotional letter to an American distributor, Olsen mentioned this last scene in particular: »The hunter is in the picture while the lions are being shot – a point which makes this piece still more interesting.«<sup>11</sup> Integrating humans and wild animals in a common space was considered an attraction in itself.

*Die Löwenjagd* remains intriguing to film historians for its innovative montage, given the status of editing in 1907.<sup>12</sup> This early example of cross-cutting is usually treated as nothing more than a creative response to the pragmatic dilemmas of in-

corporating animals into narrative. Yet *Die Löwenjagd* was in many ways the result of Olsen's experience at the *Tierpark*. The film invokes the amusement-park thrills that Hagenbeck offered, and reworks them cinematically, through montage.

Olsen was one of many film pioneers to explore the cinematic space of safari.<sup>13</sup> Still other figures, such as Joseph Delmont, traveled to real jungles as well. Perhaps no one in the entertainment industry was more familiar with both live and recorded animal attractions than Delmont. As a boy he toured with the circus in Austria and Germany; later, he struck out for Africa, where he learned first-hand the art of hunting and catching big game. Specializing in adventure films, he became one of Germany's first film stars, and went on to direct movies for production companies in Europe and the United States. Author of the book, *Wilde Tiere im Film*, Delmont identified the difference between live and recorded animal shows as follows: »Nun war es beim Film notwendig, das Raubtier in ganz anderer Form vorzuführen wie auf der Bühne oder in der Manege. Die Tiere sollten im Urwald, Dschungel oder Steppe in voller Freiheit und besonderer Wildheit gezeigt werden. Dies ist zum Teil schwieriger als die Vorführung im geschlossenen Käfig.«<sup>14</sup> *Die Löwenjagd* offers a case in point. As we have seen, however, the goal that Delmont ascribed to cinema was also pursued by the open zoo, with its re-created jungles and »African steppes«. In view of the *Tierpark*, film's alterity lay not in its attempt to stage »absolute freedom and wildness«, as Delmont would have it (using terms identical to Hagenbeck's), but rather in the means by which film constructed this space. As the open zoo used trenches and moats, cinema also enlisted technology – that is, recording and montage – in order to efface the bars of the cage.

These examples of the two-way traffic between zoo and cinema highlight the role of space in representations of the exotic, and in modern spectacle more generally. So I'd like to close by suggesting how this example might give us a better understanding of visual culture around 1900.

### III.

Hagenbeck and Olsen were not so concerned with simulation or humbug, as were many showmen of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, what is at stake now, in the early 1900s, is the widescale physical dislocation of the spectacle to the observer. This, I think, is the central characteristic of modernity's project of theme space (as opposed to post-modernity's project). Hagenbeck and Olsen commonly set out to offer spectators convincing expressions of »authentic space«. In so doing, they demonstrated a remarkable confidence in the physical tokens of the people, animals, plants, and objects that they imported and put on display. What is so fascinating about the visual culture of 1900 is the implicit assumption that authenticity is something portable – not simply that authenticity exists, but that it could be extracted and circulated.

By bringing spectacles to urban observers, showmen like Hagenbeck urged

them to explore these re-created spaces of amusement. And this exploration usually took place along a boundary – in this case, the uncanny space between the foreign and the familiar. In each entertainment we see a paradox at work – a paradox of flaunting juxtapositions and covering over their seams at the same time. Urban spectacles offered audiences safe spaces of alterity, where the risks of encountering cultural difference and otherness could be taken with an apparently comfortable degree of control. As imaginary encounters with cultural consequences, they helped audiences negotiate the exciting and potentially threatening experience of a rapidly shrinking world.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in Lorenz Hagenbeck, *Den Tieren gehört mein Herz*, Hamburg 1955, 97.
- <sup>2</sup> Carl Hagenbeck, *Von Tieren und Menschen*. 1908, Berlin 1909, 52.
- <sup>3</sup> *Führer durch Carl Hagenbeck's Tierpark in Stellingen*, Hamburg 1907, viii. Archiv der Firma Hagenbeck, Hamburg-Stellingen.
- <sup>4</sup> As Tom Gunning suggests: »The relation between films and the emergence of the great amusement parks, such as Coney Island, at the turn of the century provides rich ground for rethinking the roots of early cinema.« See Tom Gunning, *The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde*, in: Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema: Space – Frame – Narrative*, London 1990, 58.
- <sup>5</sup> Hagenbeck, *Von Tieren*, as in fn. 2, 383.
- <sup>6</sup> Bernard Livingston, *Zoo: Animals, People, Places*, New York 1974, 150.
- <sup>7</sup> Erik Norgaard, *Levende Billeder i Danmark*, Copenhagen 1971, 46-47.
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted in Ron Mottram, *The Danish Cinema Before Dreyer*, Metuchen 1988, 30.
- <sup>9</sup> These differences basically enact cinema's crossover from spectacle to narrative around 1907. See Tom Gunning, *An Unseen Energy Swallows Space: The Space in Early Film and Its Relation to American Avant-Garde Film*, in: John L. Fell, ed., *Film Before Griffith*, Berkeley 1983, 355-366; idem, *Cinema*, as in fn. 4, 56-62. For a list of shots used in *The Lion Hunt*, see Mottram, *Cinema*, as in fn. 8, 31-32. For a more detailed shot analysis, see Marguerite Engberg, *Dansk Stumfilm*, vol. 1, Copenhagen 1977, 136-146.
- <sup>10</sup> Mottram, *Cinema*, as in fn. 8, 31.
- <sup>11</sup> Nordisk Company Papers. Letter from Ole Olsen to Miles Bros. Co., 26.08.07. Brev 1 (17.11.06-18.09.07): 373. Det Danske Filmmuseum, Kopenhagen.
- <sup>12</sup> Mottram, *Cinema*, as note 8, 30-33. For a balanced discussion of editing before Griffith, see André Gaudreault, *Detours in Film Narrative: The Development of Cross-Cutting*, in: Elsaesser, *Early Cinema*, as note 4, 133-150.
- <sup>13</sup> See Ariane Heimbach, *Die inszenierte Wildnis. Exotische Tierwelt im Film*, in: Jörg Schöningh, ed., *Triviale Tropen. Exotische Reise- und Abenteuerfilme aus Deutschland 1919-1939*, München 1997, 158-166.
- <sup>14</sup> Joseph Delmont, *Wilde Tiere im Film. Erlebnisse aus meinen Filmaufnahmen in aller Welt*, Stuttgart 1925, 16.
- <sup>15</sup> I wish to thank the staff of the Firma Hagenbeck (especially Klaus Gille) and that of Det Danske Filmmuseum for their generous assistance in researching this paper.