

Key moment.
Multiple realities of
an artefact in an
ethnographic study
of animal-human
relations in the Zoo.

Priska Gisler

Prelude

What to do with a narrative that lingers in one's memory, surfacing again and again, without ever revealing its identity. I still remember so well the account of a journey a member of the Zurich Zoo told me about in an interview some years ago: the account revealed a key moment in his trip to a nature reserve in Brasil. Why do I think there must be something special about it? Is it just because I have such a vivid memory of the way it was told, how my interlocutor changed his voice, introducing a very personal part of his story? Or is it due to the particularity of that key moment that I cannot forget? In this article I will show how I realised that these questions can only be answered by considering his 'key moment' as an artefact; an artefact that helped me in bridging the gap between two realities that I encountered in a process of enactment during my research on human-animal relations in zoos.

Introduction

"No longer independent, prior, definite and singular as they are usually imagined in Euro-American practice, they [realities] become, instead, interactive, remade, indefinite and multiple. But if this is right then it suggests we need ways of exploring the enactment of and the interactions between different realities" (Law, 2004, 122)

"And in Brasil, I wanted to visit a reservation. Many times, I went to the Ibama in Manaus. For a while, they held me back, presumably they wanted to wear me down/to demoralize me. But at one point, I got the permit. But it was just for three days. Well, I told them, well, I mean, three days – but the boat is going there only once a week...? (...) Then they twinkled with the eye – and said I should just go now! At that point, I knew, okay, I simply had to go there. And similar to how we have it here [in the Zurich Zoo] in the Pantanal, they had indeed these huts, they had a house-boat. As a ranger's post!"

At one point during the interview, the zoo-pedagogue – engaged in conceptualising and developing the Pantanal, a specific site at the Zurich Zoo – had changed his voice. He had already confessed some sentences earlier that the invention of the enclosure we were talking about, had been inspired by a journey he had undertaken some time ago to Southwestern Brasil and into the Pantanal. I had interviewed him in April 2013

during an ethnographic study in the Zurich Zoo because of his role in the development of the Zurich Pantanal site. He had not only lobbied for, but actively contributed a fair amount of 'ground truth'^[1] to the reconstruction of the Pantanal within the Zurich Zoo. He brought in the idea because – as he explained in the interview – there was much more for tourists to see in this region than in the Amazonian basin that represents the actual touristic hot-spot.

I will concentrate on this narrative in my contribution, since over time I came to understand the key moment I heard about as an artefact. A short story – referred to by my interview-partner as key moment – during an interview has to date been archived as an audio-file on my hard drive without being analysed in detail; simultaneously, it developed a life of its own in the back of my head as an interesting, unresting memory. The way he told me about this crucial experience – I come to realise – is representative of a process of actively connecting two realities: the *Pantanal* in the Zurich Zoo as an immersive space and the *Pantanal* as one of the largest inland wetlands on earth situated in South America.

The Pantanal in Zurich, a statement of the Zoo's public relations department says, is a "mosaic of wetlands and grasslands" visitors are invited to explore. It is designed in many careful details after its role-model, mirroring the life (and deaths) of animals in the existing nature park. The statement of the Zoo's public relations department continues: "*The original and model of this new enclosure is sited in South America. It encompasses large parts of Brasil, Bolivia and Paraguay. Coined by the seasonal flooding the Pantanal turns into the world's biggest wetland every year.*"^[2] The Zurich Pantanal shares more than a name with its not so well-known counterpart: it mirrors, but simultaneously constructs a parallel Pantanal reality.

Both realities came under my scrutiny, when I was doing research on human-animal relations in zoological gardens in the context of an interdisciplinary, artistic and social-scientific research project^[3]. I am exploring Zoological Gardens from an STS-perspective, understanding them as spatial habitats that generate and are generated by social order. I assume – together with my research team – that zoos feature heterotopic characteristics. As heterotopias, Foucault's

'completely other places' (Foucault, 1993, 45; Foucault, 2005), zoos tend to have illusionary character, replacing stable, lived realities through temporal ones: they are achievements in relation to ordering, making things clear.

Many zoos these days, and Zurich is no exception here, are dedicated to nature conservation. For my research I aimed at finding out more about the suggestions given by Zoos such as the Zurich one: providing for the protection of endangered ecosystems and their biodiversity. I strived to know *how* – in the eyes of the Zoo – *we are supposed to live together*. The multiplication of realities is an important outcome of the heterotopical function of zoos. The *Pantanal* in Zurich as an immersive enclosure provides an extraordinary case for exploring such a question.

The Pantanal cannot be understood as one. Films, narratives, images might multiply them easily.^[4] From our science-studies perspective, at least two sites are described as Pantanal.

For this contribution, I will explore some of the enactments and the interactions that were installed to create, to bridge, or even maybe: to confuse these realities. As I will show: an artefact has contributed to achieving this. The article will be divided into the following sections: first, I will outline current accounts of the cohabitation of humans and animals in the American Pantanal. Second, I'll provide some insights into how the Pantanal in the Zurich Zoo is construed. In the last section my artefact will come into play: the 'key moment' will be revealed that I felt was at the heart of the construction of the Pantanal-Pantanal relation as a heterotopian space. I then come to the conclusions that a small anecdote from an interview manifests itself as an artefact by enacting and entangling narratives and materials turning them into the scaffolding of a bridge built between two realities that are not necessarily one.

a) Pantanal – original and model

So, let us see, what we can learn about the Pantanal of the Americas. I will have to rely on written and photographic evidence, never having visited the park myself. The *Pantanal* – Portuguese for swamp, as Wiki informs – is indeed one of the

largest inland wetlands on earth. Although the species-rich territory has been put under protection and declared a world heritage site by UNESCO in 2000, it is acutely endangered by industrialisation and deforestation.^[5] What kind of place is the Pantanal, who lives there and from what do its inhabitants make a living? How is the flora and fauna to be imagined?

More than 70 indigenous tribes are said to inhabit the Pantanal with a "remarkable mastery of their environment", as the close to cynical description of the biologist goes (Por, 1995, p. 89). Amongst them are the Cadiveus, said to have been visited and photographed by Claude Levi-Strauss (Por, 1995, p. 90, p. 95). In the 18th century slave-hunters entered the region (Por, 1995, 92), and it was the fight for gold that made up first conflicts between the Portuguese conquerors and the – now – 'marauding Indians' in the same century (Por, 1995, 92).

A vast part (more than 147,000 of the roughly 230,000 km²) of the Savannah wetland is Brazilian, covering especially the Amazonian region. It touches Bolivia to the north and Paraguay to the south (Alho, 2008, 957). Amongst the endangered species are first of all fishes, an important resource in many respects, but also amphibians, reptiles, waterfowl, mammals (amongst them howler monkeys, Capibaras, marsh deers, bats, small mammals). From a scientific perspective, the extent of endangered species is due to non-sustainable human activities (Alho, 2008, 964). Since the people living in and from the Pantanal are mostly a farming (Pantaneiros) and fishing (Ribeirinhos) community (Por, 1995, 95), they are as dependent on a change in ecological thinking in the region as animals are.^[6]

A scientific report on the biodiversity in Pantanal states: "Under an evolutionary focus, local biodiversity seems to be well adapted to seasonal shrinking and expansion of natural habitats due to flooding. However, the conversion of natural vegetation due to human occupation is a real threat to biodiversity." (Alho, 2008, 957).^[7] Besides deforestation as a consequence of increased cattle ranching, unsustainable agriculture, mining, and environmental contamination, unorganised tourism and other factors are considered to contribute to these effects (ibid.).

The increasingly difficult situation of the population is indeed much more complicated than suggested by Alho, who entirely disregards socioeconomic factors underpinning the mentioned trends (loris, 2013, ca. 243). Greenpeace, for example, refers to the gruesome consequences of increased cattle-meat production in the region and reports a high rate of slave labour in Brasil in general and in the Amazonian forest in particular.^[8]

Furthermore, public-policy scholars point to the disagreement between diverse social groups in relation to the appropriate management of the ecosystem and natural resources (loris, 2013, 240; Schulz et al., 2015).^[9] They state that the current literature boasts a 'great divide' between physical and socio-economic theories while there is a lack of understanding on the socio-ecological dimension (loris, 2013).

What might be inferred from this all too superficial and sometimes contradictory background knowledge? Do we want to think of the Pantanal as a sparsely populated kingdom of nature threatened by humans? Or do we have to assume a region infested by social conflicts, environmental catastrophes and tragedy? Many a coffee-table book with glorious photographs of the Pantanal or the Amazonian forest does share a similar problem with the scientific literature: the social dimensions, or more concretely, the human-human as well as the human-animal interactions in regards to possible nature preservation, fall short. And this is the moment we could turn to the Zurich Pantanal, where the human is supposed to consciously immerse itself in the artificial wetlands: possibly in order to learn about the 'original' by investigating the model, but also to compare knowledge and images about the original with the sketch designed by a Zoo.

b) Pantanal – model or original

The Pantanal-site in the Zurich Zoo opened its gates in March 2012 after a planning and construction phase of three years. It covers 9700 m², and cost 9.7 million Swiss francs. Obviously, it hosts only a fraction of species as the South American territory with the same name: amongst the animals living in the enclosure are mammals (5

rainforest, but also onto something which s/he might have dismissed until now: a criminal suspect locked up in an inbuilt prison, sitting in the corner of the room. The set-up is carefully designed and full of details: the prisoner will start snoring on a regular basis while the Mate-tea on the floor next to his makeshift bed, is the original herbal tea.



Figure 4: Artificial prisoner at the Pantanal site, Zurich Zoo

The Pantanal enclosure is a landscape on top of the hills of Zurich, a world within the world of the surrounding Zoo that houses many other, purportedly natural worlds. Apart from that, it is a reconstruction and it allows to re-enact an imagined or real police station somewhere in the Pantanal. While being completely artificial, it creates a world for living beings and allows an original encounter between visiting humans and imagined inhabitants, as well as between visiting humans and endangered animals. The reason for illegal animal trade, the rationale goes, is human. Who the prisoner is and why the Swiss visitors get the chance to follow the gaze of the police-man from outside into the cell (and not from inside out of the cell), is not pondered here. The interactions of realities between humans and humans, as well as between humans and animals, again fall short.

c) Pantanal – an original as model?

My interview partner, the zoo pedagogue, described the Pantanal as follows: "The Pantanal is

a rag rug of forests, of gallery forests along rivers, of peninsulas with a lot of grasslands. They will be flooded (...). When you travel down there as tourist, it is much, much easier to see animals there [than on the Amazonas]." He, however, wasn't there just for fun. He wanted to become engaged in some animal-protection activities. And this was what he did after he arrived at a rangers' station in the Pantanal with food and supplies to propitiate the rangers.

Later in the interview, my interlocutor came up with a short story, a kind of anecdote supporting and contextualising the narrative he had created for the Pantanal in the Zurich Zoo. He called it a "Schlüsselereignis", which translates from German into English as a crucial experience, a key moment. Why I could never forget this part of the interview, is difficult to say. Maybe this was because it seemed particularly 'narrative', as though my interview-partner had told me something very personal, nearly a secret.

"The job of these rangers was – there on the beach, where the rivers meander – with the turtles...they are nesting there. A huge population of turtles lives in the Amazonian region. And there are breeding grounds where they lay their eggs. And the natives collect these eggs, which is not allowed. [...] Our job was during the night-time to watch that no egg-thieves would arrive. And early in the morning, at dawn, the baby turtles hatched from their eggs and ran down to the river. There were hundreds of birds of prey wanting to catch them, really brutal. So, we had to be quick and collect them in pots – and next to the ranger station there was a small lake – and they released them there, they saved them. And you had to be really quick, because if you didn't manage, the birds just fed off a leg or the head."

With the benefit of hindsight it becomes clear that his story held most of the elements of classical storytelling (Bruner, 2003). Some obstacles had to be overcome first and the narrator had to generate trust from the side of the locals, before he was able to enter the land he was looking for. After overcoming all obstacles and arriving in the Pantanal, our hero was able to help protect some

endangered animals.

Finally, in his coda, he ended with a clue that, in a way, bridged his personal story with the enclosure built later in the Zurich Zoo:

“And I had a key moment when I was on my way back. They told me to take the liner, the liner that arrives once a week. They would go to stop it for me, they said. But you don’t know exactly when this happens, it might be in a window of opportunity of several hours. You just have to keep ready, you know it will arrive tonight – from around four o’clock in the afternoon until ten o’clock in the evening. So, they were watching out for me, you may see the lights, you can hear it. Finally, they gave signals with a torch and then, the ship arrived, it was a ship of the line – a two-three-storey ship just as they have them on the Amazonas, with lots and lots of passengers. So, it had to come to a halt.

I was the only passenger, a gringo, entering with a backpack. After boarding, the people, the staff, told me they were really relieved I was only a tourist. They had been frightened that the rangers would want to make a control of the freight. ... And then, I thought, felt okay. Finally, they showed me what they had in the cargo hold. ... And they had tons of dead turtles down there! They had leather, you know, snake skins, it was really full.”

Later in the interview I learned that turtles are a popular dish in the Pantanal and Amazonas region. Turtles are not amongst the endangered animals and therefore they are not protected in Brasil. While I saw that there was some proximity to the story of illegal animal trade with rare birds told in the Zurich Zoo, I knew that the turtles did not play a role in the Zurich narrative. Precious birds were the figureheads in the Pantanal-enclosure in Zurich. This key moment proved hard to decipher. Should I trace it back to the Zoo’s interest that this kind of little inconsistencies in the narrative didn’t matter? After all, dimensions such as why the people on the ship did transport dead turtles were not mentioned in the official story of the Zurich Pantanal.

To me, this difference seems important: not turtles, but mostly birds, such as hyacinth macaws, are often illegally traded from South America to the North, to Europe and beyond (Gisler, 2015). While it is one thing to protect little turtles from birds of prey, it is quite another to protest against the circulation of precious birds across the globe and into the rich Western world. The second is mostly human-made, and dare we say, also Zoological gardens participate in the trading of animals albeit they do so on legal grounds and without economic profit. Thus, the Zoo with referring to illegal animal trade accounts for a tragedy the Western World is deeply involved in, but it tends to keep up the space for a heterotopical ‘illusion’ . Such is that the locals – if they just keep away from illegal trading – can live in peace with their environment and neither do harm nor are harmed by the other human or non-human agents sharing this space with them.^[11]

As we have seen being the case with the two individual realities: The social dimensions or more concretely, here: the human-human as well as the human-animal interactions in relation to possible nature preservation fall short. Hence, a very specific version of the preservation problem is constructed and presented to the Zurich public visiting the Zoo and it does not contain knowledge such as how humans and non-human animals over time live together in the spaces referred to by the narrative. So, what does it mean, then, that a Schlüsselerlebnis, a ‘key moment’ is enacted and played out to bridge the different realities?

Modelling the model and producing the original? Conclusions

The interview passage is stored safely until this day as an audio-file, transcribed and, hence, already translated – from the oral, formally non-written Swiss German into written German. I am arguing that the strange artefactuality of a ‘key experience’ has incited a process of deep reflection about the connections between different realities (the reality of the Pantanal National Park and the reality of the immersive site in the Zurich Zoo) and how they inform each other within an ethnographic research project.

When I heard my interview-partner talking about a

key moment, I listened attentively. In the aftermath of the conversation, I still kept wondering, why he was so trustful, why he confided in me with this personal account. A key moment must be something special. Long after the interview, I realised that the story was also an instrument, a help to lend credibility to the genesis of the Pantanal. It proved its authenticity. Yet: The narrative of the key moment brought something different to the fore: The story is not fully consistent with what is shown in the Zoo. The key moment was linked to helping animals survive the fight against other animals and it also showed that local humans eat local animals. The account did not make propositions about how members of the Zoo fight illegal animal trade in Brasil, nor was the illegal international animal trade clearly to be identified on the ship.

Thus, only over time I came to the conclusion that the account had been inserted to increase credibility and, thus, somehow stood out. It hadn't been sitting in the interview from the beginning as the artefact I came to identify through my analysis. The 'key moment'-narrative stuck with me until this day and turned into an important artefact in regards to my research question: *how might we live together?*

I realised that it served as a kind of bridge intended to connect two different worlds. But it did something more: It allowed to deconstruct the Zurich Pantanal as a model of the South-American original. On the contrary: It was modelled as the better version of a reality, it was intended as a model *for*. It therefore became visible as an original and as another artefact at the same time.

Certainly, the narrative was very personal. It relied on an experience, an event that stuck with its narrator. Until today, I continue wondering what this account did. While I go on analysing the words, I keep the tone of the voice in my mind, the expression of suspense my interview-partner held while speaking. Re-reading the transcript is accompanied by memories of the 'oh, really?', the 'mhm-mhms', the 'wow's!' I had uttered while listening carefully. I realised that part of what connected the two rather different realities, was the fact that my interview-partner had been, personally, bodily, in both worlds. He knew how a station of the *policia ambiental* looked like – and he himself had contributed to reconstructing a similar

one after the 'original and model' in the Brazilian Pantanal. So, as I already said, I began to assume that the artefact of this key moment connected two realities to a heterotopia, another space. But the narrative keeps forcing me to think more precisely about the two Pantanals and what they do to each other. While I did - and still do – try to consider them individually, it becomes clear that they are also connected. Slowly, the two separate entities begin to blur, they become part of a story that seems important to both of us, me and my interviewee.

Is it true, what he told me? What did he leave out? Didn't I know better, from my standpoint as a sociologist? Did he represent others than the interests of the institution of the Zoo? "Every society can generate their new heterotopias", writes Foucault (2005, 13). With his ruptured narrative, - definitely an artefact - my interlocutor had made a confession. His key moment stands for some of the ambivalences we are living with. Whom should we care for? Be it animals or humans, can we care for animals *and* humans? Who comes first and which entity is connected to which? It is this very moment, while I write this, that I realise how the artefact contributed to enact novel realities by leaving it open, which site, which Pantanal might be an original or a model for the other.

Bibliography

Alho, CJR (2008), Biodiversity of the Pantanal: response to seasonal flooding regime and to environmental degradation, *Braz. J. Biol.*, 68(4, Suppl.): 957-966.

Bruner, Jerome (2003), Making stories. Law, literature, life. Harvard University Asia Centre, Cambridge, Mass.

Joris, Antonio, A.R. (2013), 'Rethinking Brazil's Pantanal Wetland: Beyond Narrow Development and Conservation Debates' *Journal of Environment and Development*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 239-260.

Foucault, Michel (2005), *Die Heterotopien. Der utopische Körper*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main.

Foucault, Michel (1993), *Andere Räume*. In: Barck, Karlheinz u.a. (Hg.), *Aisthesis. Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik*, reclam, Leipzig, p. 34-46.

Gisler, Priska (2015), *Vogel flieg oder stirb. Die Empirie der Freiheit im Zoo*. Ullrich, Jessica (Hrsg.), *Tierstudien*, Vol. 07/2015, p. 92-103.

Law, John (1994), *After Method. Mess in social science research*. Routledge, London and New York.

Por, F.D. (1995), *The Pantanal of Mato Grosse (Brazil). World's Largest Wetlands*. Springer Science and Business Media, Dordrecht.

Schulz, Christopher et al. (2015), "Prospects for Payments for Ecosystem Services in the Brazilian Pantanal: A Scenario Analysis". In: *The Journal of Environment Development*, March 2015, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 26-53.

REFERENCES

[1] This concept originates in the geo-sciences and refers to the samples usually taken to underpin visual evidence. S. also Johannes Bruder in this volume XXXX..

[2] http://www.zoo.ch/xml_1/internet/de/application/d297/d1862/d2512/d2391/f1705.cfm.

[3] „We are hibernating! An artistic and social-scientific research on the human-animal-relations in Zoos“, project funded by the SNF from 2012 – 2016 (Priska Gisler (head of project), with Luzia Hürzeler (artist & PhD-student) & Julia Siegmundt (PhD-student)).

[4] This question is not even restricted to a constructivist *Science Studies* perspective. Also Por (1995) in his biological classic „The Pantanal of

Mato Grosso (Brasil). The World's Largest Wetlands“, asks has it, asking with the title of chapter 13 „How many Pantanal?“ in the title of Chapter 13 (p. 34ff.).

[5] <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pantanal>.

[6] <https://soc.as.uky.edu/compassionate-science-edward-lo>.

[7] I.e. deforestation (17% of the Pantanal and 63% of the surrounding uplands) with modification and loss of natural habitats due to cattle ranching, unsustainable agriculture, mining, environmental contamination (including mercury, pesticides, urban sewage), non organized tourism, fire, disturbances at the upstream region modifying hydrological flow, erosion, weak implementation and enforcement of legislation are the major issues to face conservation action and sustainable use (Alho, 2008, 957).

[8] <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/Global/international/planet-2/report/2009/1/amazon-cattle-footprint-mato.pdf>

[9] On the interest-conflicts in environmental politics between wealthy farmers of the Uplands and the inhabitants of the Pantanal Lowlands, see also Schulz et al. (2015).

[10] http://www.zoo.ch/documents/Faktenblatt04_Pantanal.pdf.

[11] I owe many thanks to Johannes Bruder and Felix Gerloff for their comments on this paragraph..