

Chapter 18

Interpreting the YouTube Zoo: Ethical Potential of Captive Encounters



Yulia Kisora and Clemens Driessen

Abstract YouTube hosts a vast number of videos featuring zoo animals and humans actively reacting to each other. These videos can be seen as a popular genre of online entertainment, but also as a significant visual artefact of our relations with animals in the age of humans. In this chapter we focus on two viral videos featuring captive orangutans interacting with zoo visitors. The interpretations of ape-human interactions arising from the extensive number of comments posted to the videos are ambivalent in how they see the animals and their assumed capabilities. We argue that the YouTube Zoo could figure as a snapshot of human-animal relations in late modern times: mediating artificial conditions of animals suspended between the wild and the domestic, while offering a screened account of a deeply surprising interaction. The chapter shows the potential of close interactions between humans and animals to destabilise or reinforce the neat divisions between the human and the animal. It also shows the ethical potential of these interactions to either reinforce or question common practices of dealing with wild animals.

18.1 Introduction

The very first video posted on the video sharing platform YouTube was uploaded on the 23rd of April 2005, at 8:27 pm (CET) by Jawed Karim. He named it: 'Me at the zoo'. In this video, Jawed was filmed standing in front of an elephant enclosure in San Diego zoo, saying: "All right, so here we are in front of the, uh, elephants, and the cool thing about these guys is that, is that they have really, really, really long, um, trunks, and that's, that's cool, and that's pretty much all there is to say". The elephants in the background remain seemingly unimpressed with Jawed or his comment, as they casually consume hay scattered next to the fence separating them from the visitor area. Nothing else happens in this video, similar to many other online mementos of

Y. Kisora (✉) · C. Driessen
Wageningen University & Research, Wageningen, The Netherlands
e-mail: Yulia.kisora@wur.nl

© The Author(s) 2021
B. Bovenkerk and J. Keulartz (eds.), *Animals in Our Midst: The Challenges of Co-existing with Animals in the Anthropocene*, The International Library of Environmental, Agricultural and Food Ethics 33,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63523-7_18

zoo visits that can be found on the internet. Nonhuman animals (hereafter “animals”) are lying down or pacing, serving as an exotic background to a family and friends’ day out.

As an alternative to this somewhat dull representation of captive animal lives, YouTube hosts innumerable videos of ‘funny zoo animals’, featuring lions and otters, polar bears and lamas, chimps and giraffes and many others. Different as these animals are, the videos follow a similar plot: animals and humans actively react to each other in an apparently unexpected and highly entertaining manner. It triggers viewers’ curiosity and entices them to come forward, comment and vigorously defend ‘the right’ interpretation of what is happening in the videos. Some videos go ‘viral’, gain millions of views, shares and comments, reaching viewers across continents and over the years. With the global reach of YouTube of 1.9 billion monthly active viewers in 91 countries (in September 2019) these videos have become, without a doubt, a popular genre of online entertainment.

Yet they are more than that. In line with literature (Driscoll and Hoffmann 2018), films (Bousé 2000; Burt 2002) and videogames (Driessen et al. 2014) YouTube videos can be seen as a curious artefact of our relations with animals, an emerging cultural genre imbued with power to (re)configure the ways we see and relate to animals. Or, as philosopher Vinciane Despret argued, “the proliferation of these videos attests not only to new habits but to the creation of a new interspecific ethos, of new relational modalities, that at the same time construct knowledge” (Despret 2016, 195).

The fact that some of these videos take place in a zoo deserves a closer examination due to a heavily laden history of zoos as places of human-animal engagement. Defining human against animal and culture against nature has been one of the most powerful ordering practices in Western culture. Metropolitan zoos have played a crucial role in this process of self-definition. As Anderson (1995) argued, “zoos are spaces where humans engage in cultural self-definition against a variably constructed and opposed nature” (Anderson 1995, 276). In the interpretation of critical scholars, zoos are hosting disaffected visitors staring at pale representations of animals, thereby reinforcing essentially violent, unjust and unequal relationships between humans and animals (Acampora 2010; Malamud 1998).

To (ethically) analyse human-animal relationships (in zoos and beyond), we commonly rely on binaries such as human/non-human, wild/domestic, natural/unnatural etc. (Bovenkerk and Keulartz 2016). However, these notions can be contested by drawing on what are in practice messy engagements, calling for more contextual ethical analysis (Palmer 2010). In this case, zoos can be investigated as spaces productive of peculiar types of interactions, resulting from the proximity between humans and what are generally considered to be ‘wild’ animals (Kiiroja 2016; Park et al. 2016).

If we believe that YouTube as a medium has something to offer in terms of ethics and production of knowledge about (zoo) animals we need to look closely at the character of the documented interaction between human and animal. If human-animal relationships are produced and re-configured in the process of visual representation (Burt 2002), what can YouTube videos tell us about the ways we relate to animals, especially in relation to traditionally meaningful categories of animal/human and

wild/domestic? And what does the phenomenon of these videos' immense online popularity mean for early twenty-first century mediated wildlife and for the figure of the animal in contemporary society?

In an attempt to answer these questions, this chapter discusses two YouTube videos together with multiple comments of their viewers. The videos feature zoo orangutans and have jointly gained more than 70 million views and 22k comments, indicative of their global reach and capacity to trigger reactions of the online public. They document one interaction (not compilations thereof) so we were able to relate the comments to the interaction, and they have inspired multiple interpretations. We have paid special attention to the conversations in the branches of comments, treating them as a 'focus group' of a kind. As Wemelsfelder et al. (2000) have shown, it can be a suitable approach to interpret animal behaviour qualitatively by arranging for their interpretations to be shared and discussed. Here we tentatively extend this approach to the YouTube comments section, not to establish the true interpretation of the meanings of certain animal behaviours or to assess their welfare, but primarily to show how processes of interpreting can be thoughtful and deliberative, drawing on a range of considerations, and having particular implications for discussions on human-animal encounters and zoos.

We have attempted to present an overview of YouTube viewers' narratives related to human-animal relations, focusing on the comments that explicitly attempt to interpret orangutans' behaviour. Below, we will highlight the details of the filmed interaction that grasped attention of the viewers and prompted them to discuss the featured beings as animals, either as representatives of species or as particular individuals. Based on that, we will discuss the ambivalence of zoo orangutans' status in relation to categories of human/animal, culture/nature, domestic/wild, and the ethical implications this ambivalence seems to carry.

As social scientists we believe there is no such thing as a neutral, 'merely descriptive' position with regard to contested phenomena and institutions such as the zoo. Besides concerns about malpractice and the welfare of zoo animals, there is a broader debate about the legitimacy of holding wild animals captive, involving a range of arguments that have been extensively put forward elsewhere (Acampora 2010; Bovenkerk 2016; Keulartz 2015). Being aware of the critiques, in our research we try to look at the practice without condoning or promoting it, or trying to offer 'recipes for justifying moral positions and producing logically straightforward moral arguments' (Driessen and Heutinck 2014, 6). Like Irus Braverman in her in-depth investigation of workings of the institution of captivity 'Zooland', we would like to position ourselves 'on the fence': being driven by curiosity and ambivalence regarding what happens in zoos, without seeking to revert to judgments or position ourselves as inherently pro or against the institution itself (Braverman 2012). With Braverman we are aware that this is not only a shaky but also not a neutral position, as it—quite literally—is a position afforded by the institution of captivity and the fences it erects. Nevertheless, we feel that this vantage point can be productive to get a sense of the intricacies and ambivalences in the relationships between animals and humans that emerge under captive conditions.

The videos we focus on are available on Youtube under the respective titles ‘Clever orangutan makes a fair-trade with human’ and ‘Monkey sees a magic trick’. We strongly advise you to watch the videos now and come back to reading once you have done so.

18.2 Interpreting the YouTube Zoo

The video ‘Clever orangutan makes a fair-trade with human’ was posted on YouTube by Vitaly R. in August 2016. Within less than a year it gained 6,982,528 views and almost 4000 comments. Later the video was probably sold and re-posted from the account of Rumble viral, a ‘live viral video tv show’ on YouTube, and racked up as many as 25,882,723 views and 7,208k comments (as of December 2019). In the beginning of the video, a man throws something to an orangutan, who is sitting across the moat with his hand open in a begging gesture. The man then stretches his arm towards the orangutan, asking him (in Russian) to give something in return. The orangutan looks around, reaches for a melon rind on the ground and throws it directly into the hands of the human. As the man thanks the orangutan in English, the cameraman suggests the man to throw the item back to the orangutan. After the man does so, the orangutan catches it, but immediately tosses it into the bushes. The description goes: “During a trip to Bali, Vitaly R. decided to throw a few treats towards an orangutan. To his surprise, his newfound friend decided to repay him with a treat of his own!”

The first detail that has drawn attention of the viewers is the fact that the orangutan



glances sideways before throwing the rind. Visitors feeding animals is considered by the zoo community as a ‘perplexing’ problem (Bitgood et al. 1988). No wonder, that in the very beginning of the video, we see and hear a passing zookeeper asking Vitaly not to feed the orangutan. The camera tilts, and we see Vitaly disappointedly walking away from the moat, but the cameraman encourages him to proceed ‘Let’s do it, they are gone’. Vitaly quickly looks around before throwing his item to Jacky. Although there is no sign saying ‘don’t feed the tourists’, Jacky also looks to the left and to the right before launching the item. The commenters pick up on these ‘furtive’ glances:

- LOL I love how the orangutan also looks around to see if the guards are watching before he throws the banana’. (User Adolf)
- Watching if there’s no snitches or zookeepers around. (User rondle berik)
- Exactly, they would have ruined the fun (User Anthony O’Brian)

The discussion of these glances speculates on a broad variety of assumptions about orangutans’ cognitive and emotional processes. Is it merely mirroring of Vitaly’s behaviour? Is he aware of the illegitimate character of their interaction? Or is he mocking Vitaly’s behaviour, in an act of meta-communication about the meaning of throwing the rind? Soon enough via several commenters ‘an orangutan’ becomes a personality: commenters identify him as Jacky, a male orangutan who is 30-something years old and resides in Zoo Bali. We also learn that throwing items at visitors is a habit that Jacky might have adopted from keepers who would ‘chuck’ (in words of one of the viewers) food at him. He learned to use it for his own means, namely, to communicate his discontent with visitors passing by or taking photos while not giving anything in return. The story we are looking at turns from ‘a zoo visitor feeding a zoo animal’ to ‘Jacky throws stuff at visitors to tell them they are not welcome’ and even ‘Jacky throws stuff at visitors when they are not looking to entertain himself’.

i had an encounter with that same monkey when i was in bali..... so he was throwing poo (with excellent accuracy) but he would ONLY throw when we weren’t looking. so funny. one point i turned around as he was throwing it, he had his arm in the air, stretched above his head, filled with poo.... but because i was looking he relaxed it behind his head as if nothing was happening..... very funny. (User matt ward)

Throwing objects at visitors is an issue more widespread among zoo chimpanzees and is generally considered to be a sign of stress (Martin 2008). We can speculate that zookeepers may have tried to prevent Jacky from throwing things at the visitors (at least a few viewers recall being warned about Jacky’s habit by the zoo staff). Yet, as we’ve seen, some commenters have instead interpreted the habit as a specific communication medium between Jacky and the visitors. Understood in a context of a complex interaction with layered meanings, it actualises anecdotes that distinguish Jacky from other animals in zoos and give him a biography and an individual character.

One of the dominant interpretations of Jacky’s behaviour in the video, as well as the description of the video itself, emphasizes the economic nature of the exchange

between the human and the orangutan. Viewers assume that what Vitaly threw was a treat, as Jacky immediately ate it. The item he throws back looks to many as a banana, so the situation reminds of a treat for a treat fair deal. Yet when Vitaly returns ‘the banana’, Jacky tosses it into the bushes (which viewers ascribe to a deliberate intention, not a failure to throw properly), effectively stopping the interaction. Viewers wonder if it was Vitaly who failed to understand the meaning of the situation and respond accordingly and was therefore ‘punished’ by Jacky with stopping the exchange:

He [Vitaly] should have just kept the fruit and pretended to eat it throwing it back was kinda of an insult he was honestly paying for the treat he was giving (User MrSnapy)

Who is more fair in this case? (User La Nomia)

The second video with a (taxonomically misleading) title ‘Monkey sees a magic trick’ was published on December 2015 by Dan Zaleski (US). The video gained more than 3,000,000 views within three days after the original publication date, and became a headliner on news outlets such as the Daily mail, Time, Metro etc. As of December 2019, it has 56,480,311 views and 14,926 comments, making it one of the most popular zoo animal videos in YouTube history. The video starts with a close-up of a young orangutan behind glass. We see a man sitting down on a concrete step next to the glass. The orangutan (female orangutan from Barcelona zoo named Jinga, as we later find out from the comments) makes herself comfortable, as she sits down and puts one of her hands underneath her chin. The man places a cup on the step and demonstratively lowers a lychee into the cup, as the orangutan follows it with her eyes. The man then closes the cup and shakes it behind the step, removing the lychee. He then demonstrates the empty cup to the orangutan. She looks at it intently for 3 s and bursts into open-mouth laughter, falling on her back (ROFL-type, in YouTube vernacular). The camerawoman and the man are laughing out loud. After 15 s the orangutan sits up straight again, while the man puts the lychee back in the cup and the woman behind the camera comments: “You’re crazy guy”. The video ends as the man lifts the lychee again and the orangutan follows it with her eyes, seemingly eager to watch the trick anew.



Jinga's response to the 'magic trick' has proven to be puzzling for the viewers. Her visceral reaction seems to suggest, for many, that she understands the trick and finds it amusing, which leads them to praise her 'almost human' intellectual capabilities. For others, the primitivity of the trick makes the one who falls for it 'stupid'. Alternatively, other viewers observe kind-hearted and polite nature of Jinga in the fact that she appreciates the trick despite its basic level. In other words, the interpretation of the situation goes on to represent Jinga not only as an individual of a certain species with certain capabilities, but as a relational being joyfully engaged in a social situation.

- The best part is the obliging, polite attitude of the orang to watch the trick, like a loving grannie with a 7-year old grandson. (User anthro2)
- My thoughts exactly. The orangutan was thinking "I'm not stupid, but I'll laugh at this to make you happy" (User Mind Speaker)

And again, in a fierce debate on possible explanations of the orangutans' behaviour, personal knowledge of Jinga as an individual comes to play an important role. A commenter who introduces herself as a Barcelona zoo keeper describes her as an extraordinary intelligent and fun-loving personality.

She was born in the zoo six years ago. Her name is Jinga and she definitely understands each situation and game you show her. When she plays with her little brothers she always makes the same funny face and she starts rolling on the floor. she is legit having fun here... Normally they aren't that intelligent but this one right here is by far the most intelligent member of the group, smarter than her mother even. She can do leggo and a lot of things and she is always the first to understand and solve problems or games that we show her! (User Maria Castilla)

As we have seen, the two videos feature different interactions and evoke various interpretations speculating on mental and emotional capabilities of orangutans. This raises the question of how we can make sense of the videos and viewers' reactions to them if we see them as a distinctly telling type of engagement with the animals. We suggest

that the YouTube Zoo could figure as a deeply ambivalent phenomenon indicative of a new phase in human-animal relations in late modern times: mediating artificial conditions of animals suspended between the traditional categories of human/animal, nature/culture and wild/domestic. This screened account of a deeply surprising interaction may not merely contribute to the commodification of an encounter but also has an ethical potential to transform our view of animals and our ways of relating to them. We will discuss this in detail below.

18.3 YouTube Orangutans Unsettling Binary Concepts

Apes are among the most charismatic animals, appreciated by zoos for their ability to attract visitor crowds (Carr 2016). This is of course not accidental, considering that, as Corbey puts it, “our fascination with apes is only rivalled by our rebuff of apes: <humans tend to feel somewhat baffled by the paradoxical experience of recognizing something human in them, while at the same time tending to deny any identification with these beastly creatures>” (Corbey 2005, 7). Whenever an act of interpretation of ape behaviour occurs, it is not only scientific accuracy that is at stake. YouTube videos trigger comments that expose a constant and unsettling negotiation of categories or, if you wish, social orderings, in which we try to fit orangutans. Interpretation of animal behaviour is indeed an exercise in negotiating the human-animal divide, with both scientific and ethical implications.

Although none of the commenters interpret the actions of the orang-utans in the video as explicitly aggressive or dangerous, some of them point towards the alleged physical strength of the animals and graphically describe vicious ways in which they would have used it if given a chance. Some of these comments might have a note of irony to it, especially in the case of Jinga, whose peaceful outlook contradicts the alleged bloodthirsty intentions. Jacky’s carefully calibrated strength does not appear to indicate aggression either. Seemingly puzzled by observing the somewhat weird, not easily explainable, but apparently peaceful interactions that the wild animals engage in, viewers warn each other that the glass wall and the moat separating animals and zoo visitors are the only boundaries that keep the former from ripping various body parts (the arm/neck/head/ears etc.) off the latter. “Be careful though, these ones can bite your face off” warns user Robin.

It is not surprising that some viewers see in Jacky and Jinga nothing more than ‘just animals’, given the long-standing tradition of Cartesian understandings of animals as mechanical and subsequent reductions of animal behaviour as instinct-driven. Reproducing the rather low opinion of animal emotional and mental capacities, which can be considered widespread in our species (De Waal 2019), they focus on significant absences and deficiencies in capabilities, which makes orangutans less than human. Along these lines, interpretations that put forward explanations more complicated than those based on instincts and aggression are dismissed as amateurish and fallacious. Jinga’s laughter is considered to be an anthropomorphic projection; the orangutan is not laughing, some viewers insist, but gapes ‘its’ mouth in terror,

triggered by something ‘it’ cannot explain. It only looks like laughing to humans not trained in interpreting orangutan behaviour, they conclude. Probably unknowingly, viewers comply with the canon of animal sciences that demands a strict separation of vocabularies for referring to human and nonhuman animal behaviour. Those who dare to speak about animal behaviour in terms of intentions and feelings risk being accused of anthropomorphism (in the past this even happened to Darwin himself) (De Waal 2019).

YouTube comments suggest that seeing captive animals might normalise the captivity for some viewers. While academic literature discusses various justifications for animals being held in captivity (Bovenkerk 2016), the one that seems to play out most in the comments is based on the assumed superiority over animals that gives humans the right of doing what they see fit. In this moral stance, the difference in cognitive capabilities justifies the difference in the treatment of human and non-human animals. Comments justifying the captivity for human entertainment tend to interpret the behaviour in a rather simplistic way, presenting an animal as an aggressive beast operating on instincts. Seeing Jacky and Jinga as, first and foremost, animals, triggers discussions of many ways in which animals are less than humans and how that is exactly why they are kept in zoos. Rationality, consciousness, technology and language skills are mentioned as uniquely human capabilities that orangutans (in this context repeatedly referred by the commenters as ‘monkeys’) wouldn’t even dream of having. Thousands of comments attest animals (the species is often not mentioned) as aggressive and ‘stupid’, which explains the strict division between ‘us’ on this side of the cage and ‘them’ behind the bars. Importantly, in line with this reasoning it is human entertainment as the goal of the captivity that gets picked up and justified, as the viewers seem to be oblivious to the conservation claims of contemporary zoos. The animals’ inferiority not only justifies the captivity, but also attests to the inability of animals to fully comprehend the lack of freedom and thus suffer from it.

An animal does not have the same level of intelligence as us. They (and that includes monkeys) are incapable of forming complex thoughts and consider variables. They act solely on instinct. Saying humans do that too is cliché and just not true. Some act on instinct more than others, but everyone will consider the variables at some point again. These animals don’t mind, as long as they have food, space, toys and the chance to socialize. (User MetroVerse)

Yet contrary to the mid-twentieth century way of looking at animals as displaying primitive behavioural patterns as units of evolution, there has been a recognition of a need for a broader vocabulary (Despret 2016). Unease about mechanistic descriptions of apes’ behaviour has been expressed by, among many others, famous field primatologists, such as Jane Goodall, Diane Fossey and Barbara Smuts, as well as more traditional primatologists with a preference for experiments and observation in controlled environments, such as Frans De Waal. It has become apparent that sometimes, especially in the case of apes, denying any similarities may be more unscientific than acknowledging them (Weiss et al. 2012). In fact, the fear of anthropomorphism itself has been charged as a construct culturally specific to Western science (Allen et al. 1994). Mechanomorphism (or anthropodenial) (De Waal 2019)

is beginning to be recognised as a fallacy no less serious than uncritical anthropomorphism. Similarly to this development in primatology, and in contrast to some commenters describing orang-utans as primitive and less than human, others highlight their intellectual, emotional and moral capabilities. Although some viewers might attribute fairness, sense of humour and self-awareness to orang-utans lightly, or even as a joke, in many cases these hypothesised explanations cannot be easily dismissed as anthropomorphist projections, since many of them seem to be in line with research on orangutan minds. Jacky's 'furtive glances' can actually be explained by his awareness of himself and others (Shillito et al. 2005). His fair trade—by calculated reciprocity, readiness to exchange goods and services “based on weighing costs and benefits when giving or returning favours and keeping track of them over time” (Dufour et al. 2009, 172) or, indeed, perception of fairness (Bekoff 2004). Jinga's reaction to the magic trick might have something to do with her understanding of object permanence (Rooijakkers et al. 2009), while laughing-out-loud can be a play reaction (Davila Ross et al. 2008), indicative of what humans would call ‘having a good time’. Indeed, “the knowledge of animals survives in places where academics would never want to tamper” (Hearne 1994, 176)—even on YouTube.

‘Almost’ human behaviour and a looming realisation that they are “smarter than we think” (as User Dario Pavlovic puts it) seem to destabilise some viewers' views on what orang-utans are. They recall our common evolutionary background, wonder whether the distance between species is actually as big as usually thought and contemplate whether supposedly ‘unique’ human qualities are actually unique. That leads to a discussion of orang-utans in terms of categories such as ‘a beast’, ‘a thing’ or ‘a person’, exemplified in the following branch of comments.

- I wouldn't hug that thing, pffft LMAO, I'm dying. (User Truth)
- It's not a “thing” it's a person (User Golvan)
- It's certainly an intelligent beast, but I wouldn't call it a person. (User Truth)
- Person definition: a human being, adult or child (User Robin)
- Fine, a non-human person then (User Golvan)

As the renowned primatologist Jan van Hooff once admitted, “studying apes creates an ‘empathic unrest’ because they evoke ‘the subjective appreciation of animals as experiencing, judging, and striving beings’, begging interpretations of their behaviours in terms of subjective valuations and calculated intentions” (Van Hooff 2000, 126, cited in Corbey 2005, 7). Starting to wonder about subjective experiences of orang-utans and meanings of their behaviours, some YouTube viewers seem to fall prey to the same uncomfortable condition as primatologists, closely observing their subjects. Arguably, they may be just about to display ‘the nobler instincts of inquiry’, with the absence of which Malamud so poignantly charged zoo visitors (Malamud 1998, 225). In this process, the human-animal divide starts to shift: while for some the category of an animal pre-determines their explanation of orang-utans' behaviour as instinctive and primitive; for others the observed behaviour and exposed capabilities serve as a springboard for seeing beyond the human-animal divide and recognising Jacky and Jinga as non-human persons. The status of orang-utans as non-human persons seems to make the spectator position less comfortable. As the

intellectual, emotional and social capabilities of the animals come to the fore, the viewers also start to question the legitimacy of their captivity: ‘animals this smart’ or ‘animals who can laugh’ cannot be held captive.

They're unnervingly smart, and seem to understand us better than we'd like. Makes me feel like a creep watching them, because just a short time with them and you realise they're pretty much another person. (User Tails Clock)

If they can understand and emote like that with are they locked up for our pleasure? (user Marie Watson)

While zookeepers may routinely treat their animals as persons and individuals (Park et al. 2016), zoos in general seem to have a complicated relationship with portraying their animals as persons to the public. For example, Artis Zoo in the Netherlands made headlines in 2016 when its director announced that their animals are not going to be given public names anymore so as to escape humanising them: “Giving animals a name blocks our educational message. (If) the public focuses on the name, we will not be able to tell other stories. Also: they are not domestic animals, they are wild animals”.¹ In general, zoos have become cautious of any practices that might make their animals seem a ‘human in an animal skin’ (Mullan and Marvin 1999), trying to avoid charges of anthropomorphism and Disneyfication that can undermine the scientific image of contemporary zoos (Carr 2018) as well as their credibility as conservation and education actors. Contemporary zoos have been fighting for distancing themselves from expositions of curiosities, aiming to gain the status of a scientific institution. It has become important for them to use the scientific discourse in talking about their animals, presented as wild ambassadors of species (Anderson 1995; Braverman 2012). Thus, close interactions with animals have become a thing of the past with many zoos (Carr 2018). Similarly, seeing Jacky and Jinga as wild animals, YouTube viewers disapprove of such intimate encounters. They argue that it would be right for the orang-utans to interact in the nature with their conspecifics rather than with humans.

At the same time, in contrast to the dominant zoo discourse that frames animals as species ambassadors and genetic material to conserve (Anderson 1995; Braverman 2012), animals in the YouTube videos are boisterously described by commenters as subjects with biographies and personalities. While the focus on species aspires to nurture conservation awareness, talking about zoo animals as individuals seems to generate an interest in the animals as subjects, with intentions towards and experiences of their situation. These interpretations de-centre the experience of the human (‘we are in front of, uh, elephants’). Instead, they foreground the animal’s experience (what is it like for the animal to live in this situation?), their perspective (what is he or she thinking or feeling about this interaction?) and their capabilities (what do they know, and what are they capable of?).

This raises the question, whether recognising orangutans by name disturbs their wild image, and whether it can indeed be disruptive for conservation narrative that orangutans as species are part of. The ‘wild’ imagery of zoos has been subjected

¹The translation from Dutch is ours, source: <https://www.metronieuws.nl/binnenland/amsterdam/2015/11/dieren-in-artis-nu-zelf-een-naam-geven>.

to criticism, as they have been ‘exposed’ as a purely cultural institution (Anderson 1995; Grazian 2012). Based on this, critics have argued, the educational promise of the zoo to teach their visitors about nature does not hold true. While it is hard to contest that the zoo world has everything to do with our culturally established ideas about nature, we might argue that abovementioned critique of zoos might result from a rather rigid understanding of culture and nature as two distinct poles, a view that Sarah Whatmore has famously criticised in her *Hybrid Geographies* (2002). It can be argued that in the age of Anthropocene the infamous zoo fence in practice may not be so strict and impermeable. With the ever more intensive active biopolitical management of wildlife in conservation practices (Biermann and Mansfield 2014; Srinivasan 2014), in situ and ex situ conservation can be seen as a gradual rather than absolute distinction (Bovenkerk and Keulartz 2016). Especially so for orangutans, who increasingly live in institutionalized conditions also in what used to be their home range (Parrenas 2018).

The peacefulness of the interactions and the positive experiences (in the case of Jingga—even fun) that the orangutans seem to enjoy while being captive, together with a belief that apes are ‘intelligent enough’ to enjoy interactions with humans, justifies their captivity as a better way of living than outside of captivity under the conditions of poaching and habitat loss. These interactions are not deadly for them, as interactions in the wild would be, viewers claim, demonstrating familiarity with orangutan conservation discourse, with a hint of western superiority (the locals don’t know how to deal with the local wildlife) and critique of capitalism (big corporations are ruining the habitats).

- Yes but still better than having to survive their homes being felled and then being stoned by villagers scared of them. At least here they are safe and looked after. (User ladyjbiritsh)
- Sad to see that adorable creature in a cage but glad to see it laughing, that was really funny. I would rather like to see something like above than the animal being poached (User Melina)

In line with the conservation discourse, the commenters urge each other to check the household products for the presence of palm oil, a leading cause of orangutan extinction. The imagery of Jingga, conducive to this type of responses, bears similarity to imagery of orangutans used in Greenpeace promotional videos. For example, in the animated video “Rang-tan”, part of the campaign #DropDirtyPalmOil, a child finds a young orangutan in her own bedroom. The story of disturbance caused by the Rang-tan in the girl’s bedroom (“She throws away my chocolate and howls at my shampoo”) is mirrored by Rang-tan’s story of humans destroying her home (“He destroyed all of our trees for your chocolate and shampoo”). The video ends with Rang-tan and the girl embracing, as the girl promises to ‘spread her story far and wide’. What seems to be implied here is that we, as urban dwellers, are ignorant of our involvement in suffering of wild animals and responsibilities to change that. The context of Jingga’s video is more complicated and multi-faceted than that of the animated video, and we can wonder if it conceals the uneven power relationships of having wild animals in captivity, separated from their authentic nature and environment, replacing it with

joy from observing a de-contextualised ‘funny’ animal. Or can it still present an opportunity to relate and recognise the responsibility we as urban dwellers have for orangutans as species?

To sum up, YouTube frames orangutans as beasts and non-human persons, wild animals and individuals. These orderings expose the shifting understanding of orangutans in the context of opportunities of wider publics to be exposed to intimate lives of wild animals via online resources. Apart from a site of mindless entertainment, YouTube can function as a platform for discussing the latest developments in ethology, and extend understanding of our responsibilities towards wild animals and their (captive and wild) environments. In the last section before drawing conclusions, we would like to tease out the entertainment value of the videos and their potential to enable a more explicitly moral gaze.

18.4 The YouTube Zoo: Increasing Encounter Value or Enabling a Moral Gaze?

Zoo-based animal celebrities have played a double role for the image of zoos in the last few years. On the one hand, they undoubtedly increase the ‘encounter value’ of captive charismatic animals, thereby contributing to the appeal and economic viability of the zoo and animals as ‘lively commodities’ (Barua 2015; Collard and Dempsey 2013; Haraway 2010). Knut the polar bear, famous enough to share a *Vanity Fair* cover with Leonardo di Caprio, made millions of euros for Berlin Zoo (Giles 2013). On the other hand, zoo celebrities have opened a gateway for many uncomfortable discussions about certain practices of zoos and their justifiability in general. The case of Marius in Copenhagen Zoo can be seen as a spectacular demonstration of how conservation logic and popular culture logic collided and caused a public shock. While for the zoo the giraffe seemed to have been a representative of a gene pool and hence killable as not having enough value, for the public an animal, with a name and personality, could not be killed. YouTube videos of Jacky and Jinga, while functioning as a viral online entertainment phenomena, also seem to trigger a moral gaze—that is, questioning the conditions of captivity that made them possible in the first place.

While, as we’ve mentioned earlier, ethologists are fighting over the correct interpretations of apes’ behaviour that would put them not too close to the humans, but not too far either, popular culture has always been quick to capitalise on tensions between closeness and distance for comic effect. Morphological and psychological proximity to humans have accounted for apes’ popularity as entertainment and especially comedy performers: “The intelligence, enthusiasm, and attractiveness of young pongids (chimpanzees, gorillas, and orang-utans) has for decades made them popular performers in a variety of entertainment fields (Morris and Morris 1966, cited in Allen et al. 1994). Thousands of laughing emojis posted in response to the

videos represent the same-old human reaction to apes, “a sign of recognition but also of unease with the uncomfortable closeness” (De Waal 2019, 17).

Jacky and Jinga do not disappoint their viewers. “My favourite video ever”, they exclaim, “this video made my day!” The videos seem to therefore promote zoos as places where animals are having fun, and animals are fun themselves. It would probably not be wrong to assume that for some viewers the videos might become a reason to visit a local zoo in search for interaction. As we read the comments in which commentators lament that they didn’t get to see orangutans being so fun, we can’t help but recall the infamous regret of Berger that animals in zoos are generally disappointing (Berger 2013). Unlike the disinterested, mechanically scanning animals described by Berger, the YouTube orangutans are readily responding to human actions, thereby satisfying what the visitors are truly looking for—an opportunity to be reacted to by the animals (Rosenfeld 1981, cited in Woods 2015). Given that, the videos present a dream-coming-true visit—not only seeing, but also being seen by the other. As Cahill argued in his YouTube bestiary, “this desire for animal attraction frequently serves as a narcissistic affirmation, that each of us merits the rapt attention of animals. It is not enough to reduce animal beings to their “to-be-looked-at-ness” as displays in a zoo, we must also force them to take interest in us” (Cahill 2016, 277). Yet there seems to be more going on than tickling human narcissism.

In the YouTube videos it is the orangutans who seem to have the upper hand: Jacky chucks whatever he is being ‘fed’ in the bushes, and Jinga does not perform for the public, the public performs for her. This switch of roles seems to suggest that the joke is on us, humans: we are the ones, who are less fair and have rather primitive ideas of what other animals, and orang-utans specifically, might be capable of. Similar to animal trainer and philosopher Vicky Hearne’s account of orang-utan comedians, we can suspect that what is mocked here is the ‘importance and state’ of humans rather than behaviour of the animals. Or, as Vinciane Despret noted earlier in relation to YouTube animal videos in general, we are laughing not at animals but at ourselves, as the animals do something surprising, something we thought they were unable to do (Despret 2016). In addition, the frame of captivity creates a bittersweet impression for some viewers: they are entertained by the animals, and amazed by their very being, and find it disturbing to notice their captive condition. As some commenters reluctantly note, humans involved proceed to see the next exhibit, while the animals are left behind. The lack of symmetry in these relationships (Driessen et al. 2014) puts the viewers at unease, contributing to the empathic unrest.

18.5 Conclusion

The videos function as an online artefact of human-animal relations in the age of humans, highlighting the ambiguous nature of the encounter and its potential to expose existing assumptions about animals inherent in human-animal relationships. To conclude, we shall elaborate on how the videos trigger the shifts of established categories that frame our relationships with animals and what role zoos play therein.

Firstly, the tensions that arise in the comments in regard to the attribution of cognitive and emotional capabilities to Jacky and Jingga reflect ongoing negotiations of how people understand the human-animal divide. In line with the long-standing tradition of anti-anthropomorphism (in turn critically labelled as mechanomorphism) and overall sobriety in sciences interpreting animal behavior, some viewers interpret orangutans as lacking complicated capabilities and therefore merely less than human. Others, however, employ a broader vocabulary to tease out the meanings and emotions behind the actions and reactions of Jacky and Jingga. This emerging genre of Youtube animal videos, powered by ubiquitous access to cameras and endless sharing possibilities, seems to have remarkable potential to flesh out emotional and cognitive capabilities of animals. Jacky, fully aware of zoo rules and demonstrating accurate aiming skills and grasp of a social situation, and laughing Jingga who seems to love being entertained, provide a powerful demonstration of mental prowess and individual character. With the arising empathic unrest exemplified by many online commenters, the videos help establish practices of interpreting animals as intelligent individual characters who can have meaningful encounters with us. At the same time, these entertaining videos can be seen to justify the existing uneven power relationships and normalise them. The vicarious encounter between the orangutans and the viewers thus appear as deeply ambivalent, as it both reinforces and destabilises a human-animal divide (Oakley et al. 2010). Secondly, the comments reflect a tension between the tendency to comprehend orangutans as wild animals and the proximity of the encounter that seem to push them more in the category of familiar individuals. We've argued that while it is a tendency of zoos to portray their animals as wild, seeing orangutans as individuals might be indicative of a recognition of muddled boundaries between nature and culture and therefore raising a necessity for rethinking our ways of relating to animals. It can also result in stripping the context and flattening the conditions that made captivity possible. Yet at the same time it may position orangutans more firmly in the web of responsibilities experienced by humans and therefore contribute to their conservation.

Finally, we would like to reflect on the role of videos for our view of zoos. Zoos have undergone a significant historical transformation, from private animal collections of curiosities and exotic beasts, to centres of family entertainment with far-reaching conservational and educational aspirations. This transformation is reflected in the way zoos represent their animals—from captive beasts or humanised chimps drinking tea (Allen et al. 1994) to naturalised ambassadors of endangered species (Braverman 2012). Can these YouTube videos be seen as an online remake of the chimp tea party, a throwback to the past, when zoos were more overtly about entertainment? Or can the celebrification of animals, or appreciating them as particular individuals, be a way of entering a discussion on how captivity and its conditions need serious revision/justification? The videos seem to play along increasing the encounter value, while triggering a moral gaze. This emphasises how the morality of keeping animals captive in zoos is something that is not self-evident and needs to be discussed. It also emphasises that looking closely at captive animals and what their interactions with us may mean may not just be entertaining, but required, on moral and political grounds.

Looking closely at human-wildlife encounters of the kind found and recorded in the zoo could be also relevant in relation to semi-domesticated or acculturated groups of wild animals, that are not confined in an institution, but increasingly folded into practices of encounter and value (Barua 2015). More and more research on animal capabilities and the increasing emergence of difficult cases in conservation practice due to climate change and other human-induced planetary changes (Palmer 2010; Parrenas 2018), shows that the ethics of relating to non-human animals in the age of humans can not be seen as a self-evident set of rules. Instead it requires an empirical investigation, in which encounters can play a role, when we make an effort to engage in and interpret them.

References

- Acampora, R.R. (ed.). 2010. *Metamorphoses of the zoo: Animal encounter after Noah*. New York: Lexington Books.
- Allen, J.S., J. Park, and S.L. Watt. 1994. The Chimpanzee tea party: Anthropomorphism, orientalism, and colonialism. *Visual Anthropology Review* 10 (2): 45–54. <https://doi.org/10.1525/var.1994.10.2.45>.
- Anderson, K. 1995. Culture and nature at the Adelaide Zoo: At the frontiers of “human” Geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 20 (3): 275–294. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/622652>.
- Barua, M. 2015. Encounter. *Environmental Humanities* 7 (1): 265–270. <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3616479>.
- Bekoff, M. 2004. Wild justice and fair play: Cooperation, forgiveness, and morality in animals. *Biology and Philosophy* 19 (4): 489–520. <https://doi.org/10.1007/sBIPH-004-0539-x>.
- Berger, J. 2013. Why look at animals. In *The animals reader: The essential classic and contemporary writings*, ed. L. Kalof and A. Fitzgerald, 251–261. London: Penguin.
- Biermann, C., and B. Mansfield. 2014. Biodiversity, purity, and death: Conservation biology as biopolitics. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (2): 257–273. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d13047p>.
- Bitgood, S., J. Carnes, A. Nabors, and D. Patterson. 1988. Controlling public feeding of zoo animals. *Visitor Behaviour* 2 (4): 6.
- Bousé, D. 2000. *Wildlife films*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Bovenkerk, B. 2016. Animal captivity: Justifications for animal captivity in the context of domestication. In *Animal ethics in the age of humans*, ed. B. Bovenkerk and J. Keulartz, 151–173. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Bovenkerk, B., and J. Keulartz (eds.). 2016. *Animal ethics in the age of humans*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Braverman, I. 2012. *Zooland: The institution of captivity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Burt, J. 2002. *Animals in film*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd.
- Cahill, J.L. 2016. A YouTube bestiary: Twenty-six theses on a post-cinema of animal attractions. In *New Silent Cinema*, ed. P. Flaig and K. Groo, 263–293. Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315819297>.
- Carr, N. 2016. Ideal animals and animal traits for zoos: General public perspectives. *Tourism Management* 57 (C): 37–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2016.05.013>.
- Carr, N. 2018. Zoos and animal encounters: To touch or not to touch, that is the question. In *Wild animals and leisure: Rights and welfare*, ed. N. Carr and J. Young. London: Routledge.
- Collard, R.C., and J. Dempsey. 2013. Life for sale? The politics of lively commodities. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 45 (11): 2682–2699. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a45692>.

- Corbey, R. 2005. *The metaphysics of apes. Negotiating the animal-human boundary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davila Ross, M., S. Menzler, and E. Zimmermann. 2008. Rapid facial mimicry in orangutan play. *Biology Letters* 4 (1): 27–30. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2007.0535>.
- De Waal, F. 2019. *Mama's last hug: Animal emotions and what they tell us about ourselves*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Despret, V. 2016. *What would animals say if we asked the right questions?*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Driessen, C., K. Alfrink, M. Copier, and H. Lagerweij. 2014. What could playing with pigs do to us? Game design as multispecies philosophy. *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* 9 (30): 81–104.
- Driessen, C., and L.F.M. Heutinck. 2014. Cows desiring to be milked? Milking robots and the co-evolution of ethics and technology on Dutch dairy farms. *Agriculture and Human Values* 32 (1): 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-014-9515-5>.
- Driscoll, K., and E. Hoffmann (eds.). 2018. *What is zoopoetics? Texts, bodies, entanglement*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dufour, V., M. Pelé, M. Neumann, B. Thierry, and J. Call. 2009. Calculated reciprocity after all: Computation behind token transfers in orang-utans. *Biology Letters* 5 (2): 172–175. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2008.0644>.
- Giles, D.C. 2013. Animal celebrities. *Celebrity Studies* 4 (2): 115–128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2013.791040>.
- Grazian, D. 2012. Where the wild things aren't: Exhibiting nature in American zoos. *The Sociological Quarterly* 53 (4): 546–565.
- Haraway, D. 2010. When species meet: Staying with the trouble. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28 (1): 53–55. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d2706wsh>.
- Hearne, V. 1994. *Animal happiness. A moving exploration of animals and their emotions*. New York: Skyhorse.
- Keulartz, J. 2015. Captivity for conservation? Zoos at a crossroads. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 28 (2): 335–351. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10806-015-9537-z>.
- Kiiroja, L. 2016. Semiotics in animal socialisation with humans. In *Animal umwelten in a changing world: Zoosemiotic perspectives*, ed. T. Maran, M. Tonnessen, and S. Rattasepp, 182–204. Tartu, Estonia: University of Tartu Press.
- Malamud, R. 1998. *Reading zoos: Representations of animals and captivity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Martin, A.L. 2008. Functional analysis and treatment of human-directed undesirable behaviors in captive chimpanzees. Thesis Georgia Institute of Technology.
- Mullan, B., and G. Marvin. 1999. *Zoo culture*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Oakley, J., G.P.L. Watson, C.L. Russell, A. Cutter-Mackenzi, L. Fawcett, G. Kuhl, J. Russell, M. van der Waal, and T. Warkentin. 2010. Animal Encounters in Environmental Education Research: Responding to the “Question of the Animal”. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 15: 86–102. <http://cjee.lakeheadu.ca/index.php/cjee/article/view/826>.
- Palmer, C. 2010. *Animal ethics in context*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Park, J., N. Malone, and A. Palmer. 2016. Caregiver/Orangutan relationships at Auckland Zoo. *Society & Animals* 24 (3): 230–249.
- Parrenas, J.S. 2018. *Decolonizing extinction. The work of care in Orangutan rehabilitation* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Roosjakkars, E.F., J. Kaminski, and J. Call. 2009. Comparing dogs and great apes in their ability to visually track object transpositions. *Animal Cognition* 12 (6): 789–796. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10071-009-0238-8>.
- Shillito, D.J., R.W. Shumaker, G.G. Gallup, and B.B. Beck. 2005. Understanding visual barriers: Evidence for level 1 perspective taking in an orang-utan. *Pongo Pygmaeus. Animal Behaviour* 69 (3): 679–687. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2004.04.022>.

- Srinivasan, K. 2014. Caring for the collective: Biopower and agential subjectification in wildlife conservation. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32 (3): 501–517. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d13101p>.
- Weisberg, Z. 2019. The problem with the personhood Argument Zipporah. *ASEBL Journal* 14 (1): 33–36. <https://www.sfc.edu/uploaded/documents/publications/ASEBLv14n1Jan19.pdf>.
- Weiss, A., M. Inoue-Murayama, J.E. King, M.J. Adams, and T. Matsuzawa. 2012. All too human? Chimpanzee and orang-utan personalities are not anthropomorphic projections. *Animal Behaviour* 83 (6): 1355–1365. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anbehav.2012.02.024>.
- Wemelsfelder, F., E.A. Hunter, M.T. Mendl, and A.B. Lawrence. 2000. The spontaneous qualitative assessment of behavioural expressions in pigs: First explorations of a novel methodology for integrative animal welfare measurement. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 67 (3): 193–215. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0168-1591\(99\)00093-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0168-1591(99)00093-3).
- Woods, B. (2015). Good zoo/bad zoo: visitor experiences in captive settings. *Anthrozoos* 15 (4): 343–360.

Yulia Kisora studied humanities, animal sciences and cultural geography. Her multifaceted educational background was applied in her work as an education officer in zoos in Russia and Finland, as well as a junior lecturer in cultural geography at Wageningen University. Her current research interests are located in the productive intersections between natural and social sciences: animal geographies and animal ethics in the context of urban wildlife.

Clemens Driessen studies the ways in which the lives of animals, plants and humans are intertwined in our technological culture. Often in collaboration with designers, artists, and sometimes with reluctant nonhumans, he seeks to reimagine meaningful relations to build a more-than-human world. He is based in the Cultural Geography group at Wageningen University, the Netherlands.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

