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LCC 4100

03-12-07

Animals: Spatial Reflections

In this world we share our space with the creatures and organism that inhabit it. They have a place in this world just as we do. This shared space contains many umwelts that eventually intersect forming complex relations between organisms. Interactions between humans and other predatory animals can sometimes be dangerous. For the majority of these encounters the human is the predator atop the food chain. For us to enter the umwelt of the shark is an entirely different situation. Danger and fear are strongly linked with the departure from our own umwelt. For mankind the underwater domain is one of mystery that is shrouded in folklore and myth. Science today is beginning to explore depths that man has never visited before. Man is not adapt to swimming underwater and requires the use of many technologies to enter it for any sustained time. We are truly stepping into the umwelt of the nautical animal when we enter the water. We are unnatural in this environment and attempt to realize it through our own anthropological lens. How then are we seen to these animals that we encounter? Do they fear us or even look at us? I believe that through the exploration of the

perception of these animals and the different ways that we identify and interact with them we can learn even more about ourselves.

The art piece that I put together is titled *God Created the Devil*. This video piece has many levels of meaning to it. The main theme is the juxtaposition of man and shark within the context of spatial relations and how the fear that we have of sharks reflects the fear of our own animalistic nature. We have a fear of sharks mostly because of what they represent to us. Fear of the unknown callused killer embodied within a strange form which we cannot communicate with. This fear due to the lack of communication is something that humans place onto the animal within our own empirical lens. The shark seems to exist without reason and is a killing machine. Laycock advises that the perception that we have of the animal stems from our own ventriloquism (AO 274). This is a wonderful analogy and brings to mind the puppet and its master. The puppet can only have thoughts and meaning by the master placing his own thoughts onto the puppet and vocalizing them himself. "It is we who make it appear that the voice we offer on behalf of the animal is the animal's own, that what we say is what the animal *would* say if it only had a human voice. This, Dogen perceives, is delusion---taking our own image, our own self-representation, for the presentation of the animate subjectivity" (AO 274). Any sort of emotion that we consider animals to have must first be defined through our own terminology. The viciousness that we see in the shark is only a "projection of our own sensibilities" (AO 274). It is a reflection of our own senseless killing and our own death machine that consumes animal and man. In most cases we are the ones to be

feared and this fear is projected onto the animal as if they were a human. This is not to say that they are incapable of emotion or subjectivity, but that we are unable to consider these without injecting our own projected meanings.

When man enters the world of the shark it must be on the sharks terms and not on our own. Our world is ordered according to our own stipulations. Cities have roads with traffic laws. Buildings have codes. Clothing is worn by all. The world of animals is one that we cannot access on the same level that we can access our own. Heidegger suggests that the main reason for this is the lack of language: "Because plants and animals are lodged in their respective environments but are never placed freely into the clearing of being which alone is "world," they lack language. But in being denied language, they are not thereby suspended wordlessly in their environment. Still in this world "environment" converges all that is puzzling about living creatures" (AP 19). The environment connects the world of animals and men without the constraints of language. Within the waters of the shark the laws which we create and impose through a social contract are meaningless. The idea of the social contract is described by Thomas Hobbes as evolving from pragmatic self-interest (wikipedia.com). This self-interest leads to people ceding their individual rights in order to create a sovereignty that in return offers a more functional society (wikipedia.com). Because of the wordlessness of the animal, we cannot fit the shark into our own social contract. Our perceived space is different than theirs. This being, what kind of social contract do we have with these animals? Acampora suggests that the only way to explore this connectivity is through a "level of bodiment" (AO 119).

We must meet the animal and explore it in a non-humanistic way. “Typically, phenomenologies of intersubjectivity are humanly intellectualized and thus limited to the level of interpersonal mentality. As a result, personhood becomes something that only humans can have, and mind is characterized as Cartesian (that is, something separate or separable from the body)” (AO 119). Through examining their existence in their space we have a chance to see them and watch them looking at us. This type of encounter allows for emotions to take over the process of merely thinking about the animal and transforms into an experiencing of it. “The ‘abyssal’ dimension of this experience with the other consists not in the fact that the other (as with Nagel) is cognitively allusive or recessive, generating for example ‘the problem of the minds’ – but rather that the other, by addressing me, invokes an obligation, an infinite obligation, that exceeds knowledge ‘as such’” (AP 131). By considering the other (and it addressing us) we are caught contemplating the idea of who we are through the role of the other. Through encountering the animal we incite the “ritual reenactment of a problematic internal relation to our own ‘animality’” (AP 132). Acampora states that the perception of the animal changes within this occurrence from attention to contention and causes a friction and an exchange between man and animal (AO 127): “These levels of experience are dimensions of somatic society both perceptually and pragmatically conceived” (AO 128). This idea of a somatic society refers to the physical society that is able to shed the barriers of language. When I see an animal in the park and it looks back at me there is an exchange that is greater than the mere visual element and the

moment is “charged with pragmatic concern or regard (AO 127). Within this moment there is an exchange of respect and wonder for the other through visual assessment. This visual assessment and respect is not limited to contact of man and animal. Once I was driving down the highway and saw a man doing construction on an overpass. Language was not possible due to the fact that I was in a car and he was a long way away from me. But, in a split second I saw him seeing me looking at him. Mind you, I did not merely see him. There was an exchange of respect and assessment within a split second where we both were recognizing the involvement of the other. The friction caused by the sharing of physical space makes this type of exchange possible. Though we would consider the world of the shark different from our own there is a connection between the two and in this collision we can find that there exists a perceptual process that frees us from the barriers of language. Without projecting humanistic feelings onto the animal an exchange can happen.

We meet these animals in their world through the terms of the formed body and begin to realize that the body holds within it great significance. The physical form is a way of experiencing the animal and thus knowing. This type of knowing comes from Heidegger’s idea of phenomenological knowledge; an experiential way of knowing derived from contact with the other. If the form of the body can bring knowing, then the alteration of form represented by meat brings about a type of unknowing. Yet, within this unknowing a new form of knowing is found. Dissection leads to knowledge. The internal represents consumption of knowledge. But meat represents undoing of form and thus a lack of knowledge.

This change in form brings about a new form (meat) that can hold new meaning. “[Francis Bacon] said: ‘Well of course, we are meat, we are potential carcasses. If I go into a butcher’s shop I always think it’s surprising that I wasn’t there instead of the animal’” (PA 86). The meat that makes up animals looks just like the meat that we are made of. The animal can be broken down and transformed into meat. With the broken down form we are able to succinctly see the similarities between ourselves and them and relate their unbecoming and death to our own. The death of one animal is then used to sustain life in another. We are then faced with the decision of what to eat. “Assimilation of organic matter to flesh requires consciousness” (COT 238). The process of digestion is one that calls for us to take in the other and to internalize what the other stands for. Hagel uses digestion to parallel self-reflection and writes that, “The perpetual action of life is thus Absolute Idealism; it becomes an other which, however, is always sublated. If life were a realist it would have respect for the outer world: but it always inhibits the reality of the other and transforms it into its own self” (COT 218). “Hagel describes reflection as digestion and digestion as the ‘organism’s reflection into itself’: its ‘uniting of itself with itself’” (COT 218). When consuming meat we are literally making it a part of our body and through this process, the action of digestion, are creating a complex relation of sustaining self by absorbing the other and thusly assimilating the other as a part of self. “Digestion is the means by which the ego takes in the negative or other, through the ‘conversion’ of ‘externality’ into a ‘self-like unity’” (COT 221). Derrida has a different take on the subject of sublimation of knowledge through digestion. He

claims that the other is giving of itself and thus passing on knowledge as a type of learning through eating. “[O]ne eats [the other] regardless and lets oneself be eaten by him’. To ‘eat well,’ therefore, is always to remain responsible to the others with and on whom one dines” (COT 206). This responsibility and respect for the other gives us a sense of proper relations between humans and animals. This proper relation to the animal brings about a strange dichotomy in which we must respect and still dismember the animal. The image of meat provokes humans to confuse attraction and repulsion towards the unformed (PA 87). There lies within each of us a need to investigate and visually ingest while our social restrictions simultaneously hold us back in horror. We eat meat everyday and yet out of context are taught to cringe at it. This confusion causes the viewer to merely take in the image and not associate meaning directly. But, as Baker suggests, “[man] cannot avoid drawing meat back into meaning. Whether or not this invites the moralizing dangers of ‘good conscience’, as Derrida believed, it certainly does reinstate a sense of a ‘proper’ relation between humans and animals” (PA 89). The “proper” relation between humans and animals is a hierarchical relation in which humans are above animals, and yet, there exists a sense of reverence for the “offering up” of the other for consumption. The animal is to be respected for its gift of life through consumption.

When applied to my work in *God Created the Devil*, I think that the mangled carcasses of humans and then sharks serve this purpose of meat as unmeaning. There is a shock in seeing these pictures flash up on the screen. They then recess into a pixilated form that is not distinguishable. This reflects the

duality of human nature to want to be repulsed and at the same time there is a desire to see the image. By distorting the picture quickly I am playing with these two desires and disallowing the ability to further examine the photo. This exposes the desire to look at the picture and is an attempt to call this desire into question. This pragmatic ordeal is juxtaposed with pictures of mangled sharks that for most are considered socially acceptable to look at and study. Children are exposed to dissections at young ages and are taught that it is a part of the learning process and needed to gain knowledge. The picture of the boy and grandmother touching the inside of a shark represents the internal as knowledge, and separates the two portions of the video that represent meat as unknowing. The pictures of meat that still retain their original form are mutilated and thus carry with them implied meaning. We know that the human photos have been attacked by sharks but not the circumstances surrounding them. Sharks are seemingly opened up to examine their insides. The meat on the skillet, on the other hand, is a mere chunk of flesh without form. Through its lack of form meaning is taken away from it. The meaning is then reasserted through my eating of the shark out of the context of the movie. Through the production of meat and the process of getting the meat to my skillet there is an obvious injection of meaning that cannot be escaped. This meat was caught on a boat then sent to a processing plant. They cut it up and package it. It is then sent to my local deli and then purchased by me. I brought it home and then open it. I have been distanced from the point of origin and know it as meat only. The label on the package is indicative of where it came from and what its previous form was. But for me this is still only meat.

Through watching the video I am forced to call into question its origins and am repulsed at the un-pixelated photos of mangled sharks. The “pixelation” for the photos of the shark rests on the skillet in front of me. Both the pixelation and the meat are very humanized representations. Pixelation refers to a very technologically driven algorithm derived from human perspective. So to, is the chunk of processed meat in front of me. The idea of me eating shark after being bitten by a shark adds to the complexity of this relationship. This is not revenge, this is the cycle. The consumption of this meat is representative of the consumption of knowledge and the all consuming human nature. “We may surmise that the (external) animal we eat stands in for the (internal) animal we must overcome. And by eating, of course, we internalize it” (AP 139)! My bite occurred as an “exploratory bite” from the shark. It seems ironic that we would represent consumption as knowledge while the shark literally relies on putting things into its mouth to gain information about objects in its environment. Through my actions of eating the shark I am not just symbolizing the taking of knowledge from the shark, but also the giving of knowledge from the shark. Its death provides me with nutrients and completes the proper relation between man and animal.

For the beginning and the end of *God Created the Devil* I play with the idea of looking at the shark and the shark looking at us. The opening scene is one that all will recall from the movie *Jaws*. This is a camera moving through the water from the perspective of the shark. This instantly thrusts us into the body of the shark. We are literally looking through the eyes of a shark. What does the

shark see? It sees the ocean and its plant life. Then it sees a human swimming on the surface. But the human is pixilated and not easily recognized to the shark. But we, through the eyes of the shark see it for what it clearly is: a human. The human is attacked. The human is being “devoured” by the shark and its “gaze” (AP 131). This gaze is objectifying the human and we are trapped in it. Yet, through taking on the point of view of the shark we are injecting our own humanistic thoughts and views on the shark. The shark cannot possibly be thinking what we are thinking when looking through its lens. This happens to evoke the truth that we are injecting “our own ventriloquism” onto the animal. At the end of the video we see a human swimming through the water rather awkwardly. The human is jerky and not fluid. He is out of his element. We hear the voiceover from the beginning. “It is as if God created the Devil... and gave him jaws!” This voice over is changed to say, “It is as if God created gentlemen... and gave him jaws!” The human has become the devourer. “...[I]t may be that the scene of a man’s or woman’s encounter with an animal is, all too often even for philosophers, the site of a ritual reenactment of a problematic internal relation to our own ‘animality’” (AP 132).

For us as humans it is pertinent to embrace our own confused sense of animality in order to fully realize ourselves. The environment that we inhabit is a shared space and reflective of our need to internalize knowledge while remaining an enigma. “We might wonder here just what ‘real space’ is or could be.... [T]he circumstances that would change if irreality did not mark or taint the observational media. The real space of encounter... is live space – that ‘living

room' which permits genuine con-frontation complete with all its motile possibilities of adversary, avoidance, and free association" (AO 127). Through the objective eyes of the animal encounter we can begin to think about how our anthropological lens can be broadened to bring about new meaning and self realization.

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