THE PURSUIT OF HIPPO-NESS:

HIPPOPOTAMUS AND HUMAN

by

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between human and animal is a complex and strange one, and many have written and theorized on the matter over the centuries. Animal theory has become ensconced in a debate that has evolved with public discourse and now exists in a realm that has become clouded with misperceptions. In this thesis, I explore ideas about human-animal relationships through the example of the hippopotamus and provide historical and cultural context for a reading of my accompanying film, *The Pursuit of Hippo-ness*. Through both the film and the paper, I aim to raise questions about how we see and interact with the hippopotamus, drawing mainly from individual stories to reflect a multiplicity of an animal that is often seen in a negative light. By raising these questions about how we perceive animals, we should begin to recognize the impacts that it can have on conservation when some animals are seen as inferior in terms of their "value." Being cognizant of these prejudices or highly misconstrued understandings of animals, particularly those with negative connotations attached, we should begin to recognize the intrinsic value of the animals and the way in which our lives are intertwined with theirs.

INTRODUCTION

"I don't think most people think about hippos too much," states Stuart Feldman early in my film. "Hippos are not on top of mind or awareness for the average person, and so I don't think they give a lot of thought to it. We do, but they don't."[i] You would expect someone who specifically collects hippos, of all things, to think about that animal frequently, far more than the average person. Significantly, it does seem that fewer people think about hippos in comparison to other animals, such as elephants and rhinos, and when they do think about the hippo, they usually have a misconstrued version of the animal. When I met an entire society of people who adore this "grey, lumpy animal," it really enticed me to know more about an animal that I, myself, had never really given much thought. The bigger draw, though, was the group of people themselves, the ones who do think about hippos and are all defined by them in some way. My film is every bit as much about people as it is about "nature," exploring the strange relationship between human and animal through a number of individual stories that each illustrate a different way to look at the hippopotamus, and ultimately, contribute to shape a multifaceted, thus more complete, conception of this animal.

There are multiple ways in which we classify animals, particularly in manners that illustrate their relationship to humans. One such model categorizes animals according to the steps of removal from human: "self, pet, livestock, 'game' and wild animal".[ii] Another model contends that there are three *kinds* of animals: individuated animals, family pets that are "altogether too close to human subjectivity"; classification animals, "seen to serve the purposes of state, of myth, and of science" or "whose fixed

symbolic meanings serve exclusively human interest"; and lastly the animals "which operate at the greatest distance from humans, in 'pack modes'", what Deleuze and Guattari call "more demonic animals … that form a multiplicity, a becoming."[iii] This system is a fluid one, so any given animal can certainly be treated in all three ways.[iv]

The hippopotamus, too, can fit into any of these categories, as illustrated by the unique examples presented in my film. Each story of human-hippo relationship exhibits a different way to see the hippopotamus. "Whilst film often depicts the reinforcement of the bonds between human and animal, it also multiplies the different ways of seeing the animal, which is a mode of fragmentation too."[v] Considering this multiplicity of the hippo and the impossibility of defining the animal or human relationship with the animal in any single term, it becomes more of a quest to at least attempt to understand and appreciate what might be called hippo-ness. This shift from seeing the hippopotamus in a prescribed and often derogatory dimension to one of a multifaceted nature opens the door to a more ethical mindset in which we can see the many possibilities of the animal and recognize our role in its conservation.

HIPPO IN A CHINA SHOP

In early 2013, the Birmingham Museum of Art featured a delightfully odd exhibit, with a title to match: "Hip, Hippo, Hooray." It consisted of a collection of fine European porcelain dinnerware, from plates and platters to an exquisite tea set and ice dome, all of which don't necessarily seem strange in themselves. The distinguishing factor for the collection was the subject matter painted on each piece. It featured perhaps the most unlikely animal to ever grace a dinner service: the hippopotamus. It was, indeed, a strange pairing to have such an unwieldy animal on such a delicate medium as porcelain. "The Hippopotamus Service" was eye-catching, to say the least.

Towards the end of the exhibit's run, the museum arranged an event featuring the three main figures behind the creation of the collection: the owner, the photographer, and the artist. Sarah Galbraith, the photographer, had traveled the world to take photographs of hippos to use as reference images for the dinner service. Her story was fascinating, almost a safari story, but not quite. Rather than trekking through rough terrains of Africa in a Land Rover to snap stills of wild hippos, she was jet-setting across the globe to find captive specimens of hippopotami to photograph; in fact, she had set out to document nearly every captive hippo in the world. By the end of her venture, she had visited over 100 zoos in 33 countries, photographing upwards of 300 hippos.[vi]

Her images would then be sent to Richard Cohen, the New York-based porcelain and hippo collector who commissioned the unique dinner service from Royal Copenhagen. Richard would select his favorite photos, touch them up, and then send them on to Danish artist Jørgen Steensen, who painstakingly painted the hippos onto the

dinnerware molds, totaling 144 pieces.[vii] Every piece in the collection is unique and has its own hippo or group of hippos painted onto it; no two are alike. On the reverse of each piece is the name of the hippo in the scene, as well as the name of the zoo and the city where that particular hippo resides. Jørgen, however, did not just simply paint the hippo photographs as received. With each painting, he transposed the hippos from the zoos to scenes of the African savanna. The resulting images are quite gorgeous and pristine, resulting in a more picturesque image of the "wild" that is more palatable than the experience of trekking through "rough and frightening" terrain to see the animals in their natural environment.

The idea behind the Hippopotamus Service was based on historical examples of Royal Copenhagen porcelain, and it used the famed Flora Danica pattern which is "one of the world's most prestigious" dinnerware collections, dating back to the late 1700's.[viii] In the original Flora Danica line, native species of Danish plants were catalogued on a collection of dishes, an unusual encyclopedia of botany. Similar collections featuring native fauna were also created in the same vein.[ix] When Richard set out to make his Hippopotamus Service, he desired an encyclopedic collection to rival those of the past, but one that contained an animal that he long revered and found to be under-appreciated.

"There can hardly be a single animal that has figured less prominently in the history of porcelain than the hippopotamus," writes art historian Samuel Wittwer. "The eighteenth-century animal services, for instance, feature the elephant and the rhinoceros, but not the hippo."[x] It's interesting to note that even three centuries ago, the elephant and rhinoceros were eclipsing interest in the hippopotamus. What's more interesting is the

frequency in which the mention of elephants has appeared in my research for the hippopotamus. The two share what seems to be a long-running relationship that I will repeatedly return to in this paper.

Early descriptions of the hippopotamus incorporate the elephant for comparative reasons. From these descriptions, it is evident that elephants were at least familiar enough to use as a reference for a lesser-known animal. "The hippopotamus is gregarious in its habits, like the elephant. […] The hippopotamus, though not so tall as the elephant, is probably quite as bulky."[xi] These descriptions also serve as examples of the way in which hippos are painted in sometimes-inferior terms to the elephant. In my interviews for the film, people gave similar responses, using the elephant as a way to help describe the hippo, sometimes in disparaging ways. "A hippopotamus," noted one participant, "is like an elephant in a nightmare."[xii] As innocuous as it might seem, this imagined inferiority of the hippo might have more troubling implications.

A trip to the Akeley Hall of African Mammals at the American Museum of Natural History further underlines a persisting preference for elephants in our culture. An entire herd of elephants marches down the middle of the room, the center of the constructed realm. "As 'one of the most splendid of all animals past or present,' Akeley and Osborn chose the elephant as the presiding metaphor for Africa and African Hall."[xiii] Meanwhile, in the lower corner of the vast hall is a single hippopotamus specimen, hidden in the back behind a herd of hoofed animals, sharing the space with some rather large birds as well. Far in the distance of the painted backdrop is a herd of hippos. An

animal that is said to be gregarious like the elephant stands woefully separated from its herd, while the elephants are on parade in a family unit, front and center.

It is quite interesting to offer a comparison between Akeley Hall and Richard's Hippopotamus Service because the two are similar in many ways. On the surface, each one has animals removed from their habitat and transposed into romantically painted African scenery. Like the dinner service, the dioramas feature picturesque landscapes as backdrops to the animals. They both enable viewers to see the animals without having to brave the vast unknown that accompanies that experience. Both men had a highly curatorial hand in selecting the animals that would go into the collection. Richard would select the photographs he deemed superior to grace the porcelain collection, while Akeley sought out perfect specimens that could serve as an exceptional image of that species. "The elephants are balanced, symmetrical, and synchronized. Their *elephant-ness* harmonizes them into an archetype, what the Museum calls the *real thing*. For Akeley, like Audubon, the *real thing* meant perfection."[xiv]

In his career as a collector, Richard has put a similar emphasis on acquiring perfect examples for his collection. He also enjoys the idea of reuniting separated items:

> When I was writing the preface to my book on porcelain collecting, I was thinking about how very chaotic the world is. How there is not much order to it. But when we collect things, it is something we can control […] I don't just try to complete a set, I try to make it the best possible set. To bring things that are separate – together – is the big thing for me. Maybe it has something to do with separation anxiety as a child, who knows, but I believe my compulsion to collect is to be in control by bringing things together that belong together and to do it in the best way possible.[xv]

Jim Mason writes that the desire to bring order to this perceived chaos has roots in the agrarian world. It is also this worldview that he designates as the cause for "the process

of reducing these large animals from spirit-powers to slave-commodities" in Western culture.[xvi] The effect is one that he argues has a major impact on our psyche:

> This forces Western culture to try to have it both ways: Animals are to be down, inferior, and insignificant, yet they are to be handy, potent, and significant when we need them to enliven the messages in our art, language, and religion. Our dominionist culture denigrates animals, yet our brain/mind needs them as fertilizer.[xvii]

In more recent years, we have increasingly become removed from "nature," in both a figurative and literal sense, evidenced by the rise of zoos and animal toys.[xviii] Alexander Wilson describes the process in which animals have disappeared as companions and workmates in our lives, except as subservient pets.[xix] These pets, for Deleuze and Guattari, are "the most contemptible kind: 'individuated animals, family pets, sentimental, Oedipal animals each with its own petty history, "my" cat, "my" dog. These animals invite us to regress, draw us into a narcissistic contemplation'."[xx]

THERE'S A HIPPO IN MY HOUSE

Richard holds the hippopotamus in high esteem with a long-held love for the animal, connecting with the species on a personal level that draws from childhood experience. In my film, he mentions the memory of hearing his first-grade teacher read a story about "Veronica" the hippo; he hints that his initial draw to the animal might have been influenced by the fact that he was always a heavy kid. His current perception of the animal certainly seems to have been influenced by that early childhood encounter. "To me, a hippo is an individual animal, it's a personal thing. It's great to see them in the herds and all that, but I look at them as individuals like people."[xxi]

Richard's idea of the hippo seems to exhibit elements of both the "individuated animal" and the "classification animal," containing pieces of both sentimentality and symbolic meaning. His idea of the hippo is reflected in his decision to inscribe the names of each hippo on the backs of his dishes, noting where the animals live, and going to great lengths to send Sarah to obtain photographs of nearly every captive hippo in the world. "According to Hegel," writes Akira Lippit, "the act of naming transforms animals from independent beings into idealized beings: language, in essence, nullifies animal life."[xxii] Richard describes each piece of his named Hippopotamus Service: "My private fantasy imbues each piece of the collection with its own unique soul." First introduced to hippos through "Veronica," an idealized being, Richard now holds a similarly idealized view of the hippo. His own interactions with live hippos seem to reflect that, as seen in my film. His primary encounter with hippos in Africa are captive ones, domesticated house pets that enjoy sweet tea and coffee. He describes his visits to see the two hippos

named Jessica and Richie, fulfilling his fantasy of playing with a baby hippo (one named after him, no less). These examples seem to be the very definition of individuated animal steeped in sentimentality, reflecting that "narcissistic contemplation" that Deleuze and Guattari describe.[xxiii]

At the same time, Richard's interaction with hippos also seems to illustrate that third "kind" of animal described by Deleuze and Guattari, the one that exists in "pack mode" and forms a "becoming".[xxiv] The story in my film about Richard and the hippos at the zoo, where he "bonds" with them and is described as "communicating" with them, illustrates an example of becoming-animal. Steve Baker writes extensively on this theory proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, describing it as a way in which human and animal can transcend their previous forms, creating a "reality" based on alliance in which there is "no longer man or animal, since each deterritorializes the other".[xxv] Baker describes it as a creative opportunity to think of oneself as the other. "'We do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity.' The animal shows the human how not to be a subject, how to operate other-than-in-identity."[xxvi] The trigger for becoming-animal can be anything, including art, in which both artist and audience is "inhabited by becomings-animal".[xxvii] So the Hippopotamus Service might cause the audience to be "swept away, suddenly, unexpectedly" into becomings-animal.[xxviii]

It should be noted that for a contemporary audience, Richard's intention to emphasize the individual in his Hippopotamus Service might get lost in translation. Although Richard may recognize the individual attributes and names of certain hippos in his collection, the audience likely will not acknowledge each animal as unique. "Most

forms of contemporary animal representation, whether or not in lens-based media, fail effectively to communicate an animal's individuality, singularity or particularity," writes Steve Baker.[xxix] Almost all viewers of the art will not be able to make distinctions of any kind between that particular animal and others of that species.[xxx] The individual hippo depicted on each piece of the dinner service begins to lose its identity, particularly when the set is displayed together. The Hippopotamus Service exists as a collective; it is a unit of unique pieces that derives its identity from being an assembly. "For Deleuze and Guattari the pack 'is the path becoming-animal takes', and the assertion that 'every animal is fundamentally a band, a pack' does not exclude the human."[xxxi]

Within this idea of the pack, it is important to note the fluidity of its workings: "wherever there is multiplicity, you will also find an exceptional individual, and it is with that individual that an alliance must be made in order to become-animal."[xxxii] Deleuze and Guattari give the example of *Willard* (1972) to illustrate this alliance, noting that the titular character, Willard, befriends a rat that he saves, named Ben. They explain that Willard becomes-rat through an alliance of love with Ben.[xxxiii] The story begins to sound similar to that of Richie the hippo, who was saved from death by a South African family shortly after his birth. Richard, the hippo's namesake, experiences his fantasy of playing with the hippo on a mattress, and his alliance with Richie seems to allow a becoming-hippo experience. So in this case, Richie might represent that exceptional individual in the pack.

Jessica the hippo, who shares a similar standing as Richie, is introduced in the nature show clip: "They kill more people in Africa than any other mammal, BUT Jessica

is different."[xxxiv] Jessica communes with both wild hippos and her "owners," so she simultaneously fills multiple roles, and as a result of straddling that line of "wild" animal and pet, she could "snap" at any moment. Deleuze and Guattari further write about the example of *Willard*, saying that the alliance of love between Willard and Ben shifts to an alliance of hate. Willard is eventually eaten by Ben and the pack of rats, similar to the way yet another hippo is described by Richard. In the case of the third captive hippo that he mentions, the hippo chops its "owner" in half, illustrating the way in which the alliance that enables becoming-animal might change.

This idea of pack life is seen in another aspect of Richard's life: his involvement with the International Hippo Society, informally known as the "Hippolotofus."[xxxv] The group consists of a large number of hippo enthusiasts who love the hippopotamus on a similar level and who all collect hippo memorabilia en masse. While Richard might be "one of a kind" as Bonnie describes him, an example of the "exceptional individual," he is nonetheless still a part of the pack.

HIPPO MANIA

The Hippolotofus is primarily a group that communicates online, but they meet in person during a reunion event each year. Their primary means of communication is through their message board, which other similar groups have used as a mechanism to find people with shared interests, including other animals or any topic that might band people together. The hippo society consists of members from all walks of life, bringing with them their own ideas based on individual socioeconomic, geographical, political, and religious backgrounds. They are all, however, united on a single front and largely base their relationship with one another on a shared love of the hippopotamus. This love for the hippo manifests itself through their vast collections of hippo items. One member says "I love the hippo as long as I can own it."[xxxvi] For the Hippolotofus, the hippo seems to be a "classification animal," providing a symbolic meaning for its members. Some members note the hippo's "smile" as a source of attraction, while others describe a connection to its perceived boldness and aggression, again illustrating the multifaceted "nature" of the hippopotamus.

People in the group first found an interest in hippopotami through a number of different ways: from a trinket gifted to them by a loved one, a popular culture reference to the animal, or a personal experience with the animal at the zoo. This resulting infatuation is by no means a modern phenomenon. Similar reactions were common in the Victorian era, when it was highly favorable to commune with and collect nature. "Natural history was a popular craze."[xxxvii] Nothing epitomizes this craze more than the animal "stars" of the London Zoo, among of which was a popular hippopotamus named

Obaysch, "the first hippo seen in Europe since the time of Roman circuses."[xxxviii] The 1840s and onward marked a large shift in the way the London Zoological Society operated. Before, they had been established in opposition to the private menageries and circuses, placing a larger emphasis on science and research rather than spectacle. After the shift, "the Zoo embraced the commodity-value of its animals" and became more of a capitalistic entity.[xxxix] "Zoological and botanical parks flourished as thousands flocked to marvel at rare and unfamiliar species brought from the corners of the Empire. Thus, the stage was set for the adulation of Obaysch, an enthusiasm that amounted to hippomania."[xl]

Obaysch the hippo was a major figure of the time and attracted droves of people, spawning a trade in hippo memorabilia, inspiring writers and musicians, and garnering ample coverage in the press. Obaysch even sat for portraits with artists such as John Wolfe, who painted several animals from the zoo into wild scenery remarkably similar to the scenes on the Hippopotamus Service commissioned by Richard:

> Often, like Stubbs and John Frederick Lewis before him, he visualized the zoo's animals, studied at first hand, as though they were still in the wild. His landscapes were based on travelers' accounts of real habitats, but sometimes had the effect of photographic studio backdrops […] Nature was demythologized, but simultaneously glamorized for the pleasure of the viewer.[xli]

The paintings heightened the experience that zoo-goers were meant to encounter during a stroll through the park. The animals were presented for the public's pleasure, no longer for any sort of real scientific quest.

It's interesting to note the similarity between Obaysch and another hippo that would become a local celebrity in America nearly a century later. In 1953, the Oklahoma

City Zoo used a popular Christmas song to raise money for its first hippo. The idea of "nature as commodity" is so perfectly embodied by that song: "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas." While Christmas represents an important religious time for many, for others it has become one of the most capitalistic times of the year. In the song, a young girl pleads for a hippopotamus "to play with and enjoy."[xlii] Taking a step beyond the playful lyrics of the song, the Oklahoma City Zoo was able to capitalize on the popularity of the tune to literally buy a hippopotamus for Christmas.[xliii] Just as droves showed up in London to see Obaysch when he first arrived, thousands of people lined up to see Mathilda the hippo when she made her debut in Oklahoma City. In both cases it was the same: "Civic triumph and imperial excitement join around the claims of science to foster an attention to the hippo which is fetishistic, revelling in the hippo's newness."[xliv] Jones further discusses that shift of the exotic animal to fetishized goods:

> The act of looking at animals 'strange to our clime and notions' was an activity consciously infused with a sense of not only the peculiarity of the viewed object but also a sense of the appropriateness of the viewer's gaze. Many zoo guides insisted, or at least implied, that the animal was there to be looked at, to be consumed, as a sign of pleasurable difference. Furthermore, it is evident that in common with all fetishised goods the zoo animals were supposed to express a value which the visitor, as consumer, might then enjoy.[xlv]

Within the Hippolotofus group, this experience is something that several members have described. During their reunions, there is often a stop at the zoo, where members have been known to spend lengthy bouts simply gazing at the hippos. The zoo's decision to later include their animals in photographs and then on film would further the complexity of the viewer's gaze that was previously established:

> Thus in film the already edited life of the captive animal was edited even further. The fact that the Zoo incorporated different ways of seeing animals not just in its encouragement of film, but also through photography and painting, reflects a more general fact that the history of the visible animal is the product of a mosaic of institutions, technologies and cultural practices, all of which interconnect in various ways.[xlvi]

My own film presents a similar mosaic history of an animal that is very much the product of these various interconnecting parts. Zoos, cartoons, nature films, advertisements, games, books, and art have all played a major role in which we perceive the hippopotamus and have led to a largely misconstrued version of the animal. *The Pursuit of Hippo-ness* presents many of these representations of the hippo through a television motif, including a PSA that specifically alerts viewers to question what they watch on TV, which should spur my own audience to begin questioning what they see in my film. The pairing of these images along with a grimmer picture of the hippopotamus in the "real" world creates a tension of sorts. Jonathan Burt writes about the tension that exists in animal films:

> My main proposal is that animal imagery does not merely reflect human-animal relations and the position of animals in human culture, but is also used to change them. Indeed, it is this transformative aspect that reveals broader cultural tensions and anxieties about our current treatment of animals and why it is never easy to characterize animal films as merely optimistic or pessimistic, escapist or engaged.[xlvii]

In the end of my film, the members of the Hippolotofus shift their focus from the items that they collect to offer the sentiment that the objects are no replacement for the animals in the wild. Members share their stories of encounters with wild hippos that they describe as magical moments for them. David Soto points out that many would view the hippopotamus as a "big, fat animal that doesn't do anything." He doesn't see the animal

that way. For those who don't share David's adoration for the hippopotamus, perhaps his endearing hippo trinkets and images become a means for him to show others how to look beyond a superficial reading of the animal. These images of the hippopotamus, however strange, allow a more accessible way for others to see the possibilities of the animal beyond a judgmental manner, thus potentially leading to a greater appreciation and perhaps a more ethical mindset in terms of how we treat them.

TAILCOATS AND TUTUS: HIPPOS DRESSED UP

As much as the public adored Obaysch the hippo, he would eventually fade from the limelight to make way for the next new and exciting animal. "Even Charles Dickens decided that Obaysch was receiving too much attention and wrote an article in *Household Words* purporting to give equal time to the other zoo animals."[xlviii] It should be no surprise that an elephant would be the one to dethrone Obaysch. *Punch*, a British humor magazine, "recorded" Obaysch's reaction to the unfavorable news of being replaced:

> I'm a hippish Hippopotamus
> and don't know what to do.
> For the public is inconstant
> and a fickle one, too.
> It smiled once upon me,
> and now I'm quite forgot;
> Neglected in my bath,
> and left to go to pot.[xlix]

This turnover in public interest resembles the modern trends of nature programming, in which animals experience cycles of popularity.[l] And in this case, again, it's the elephant eclipsing interest in the hippo. It wasn't just any old elephant that ousted Obaysch, either. It was the world-famous Jumbo, who would later be purchased by P. T. Barnum for his famed circus. While Obaysch has almost entirely faded from any public memory, Jumbo's legacy lives on through legend and daily speech. "His name became part of our language, all but replacing "mammoth" as a synonym for immense."[li] And in another strange convergence of stories, before his endeavor of constructing Africa Hall, Carl Akeley was the taxidermist who mounted Jumbo's hide for display after the elephant's

death.[lii] Obaysch received no such gesture, though his image does live on through the photographs tucked away in the London Zoo's archives.

Before Obaysch was surpassed in popularity by Jumbo, the hippo did have another form of influence that would have a longer-lasting, albeit ambiguous effect. During the height of his fame, Obaysch inspired a composer to pen "The Hippopotamus Polka," a song featured prominently in my film's soundtrack. The song, like many references to Obaysch, would also eventually slip into obscurity, but the cover art is thought to have inspired 20th century animators. The artwork for the sheet music features an upright hippopotamus, dressed in formal tails dancing with a young lady. The humorous depiction is rumored to have led to the idea of dancing hippos in the popular 1940 Disney film *Fantasia*, which is still a popular work that showcases one of the most iconic hippos of modern times.

Disney's *Fantasia* has been a particularly large source of inspiration for many in the Hippolotofus group. The film features a ballet number with a variety of African megafauna, including a troupe of dancing ostriches, elephants, hippos, and crocodiles (or are they alligators? more on this later). At the forefront of the "Dance of the Hours" is Hyacinth the Hippo, dressed in a pink tutu and dancing en pointe. The choreography for Hyacinth as she emerges from her pool was borrowed from a George Balanchine number, so the animators paid a tremendous amount of attention in constructing a very proper form of expression with comically proportioned animals. "'The whole incongruity of the thing,' said Walt, 'is the elephants and hippos doing what graceful people do. Of course, they can use natural props like their trunks.'"[liii] The result is another example of nature

brought to order, although the scene occasionally devolves into chaos as the dancers give way to their animal instincts.

It seems fitting that many of the Hippolotofus members have chosen Hyacinth the Hippo as a mascot of sorts. For the most part, Hyacinth is presented as a graceful and rather charming figure in the sequence, even more-so than the elephants. The elephants are literally tossed aside in one scene while Hyacinth floats above in a symbolic elevation of status. She is the object of desire, a voluptuous and coy figure. "Whether the creators of the film were aware of it or not, these animals were not entirely unlike the hippopotamus goddess of ancient Egypt," writes Boria Sax. The goddess the author refers to is Taweret, who "was generally depicted with the head of a hippopotamus and the body of a pregnant woman."[liv] So in this regard, Hyacinth could be thought of as the "mother figure" for the Hippolotofus.

Dreamworks Animation would later reintroduce the hippo to a broader public eye 65 years later in its *Madagascar* series with Gloria the hippo, who is a similarly curvaceous female who flaunts her figure. Compared to so many of the other representations of hippos in modern culture, Gloria and Hyacinth are remarkably different. A quick survey of other examples reveals much more common themes associated with hippos, such as gluttony ("Hungry, Hungry Hippos") or ferocity, which I will explore later.

As hippo researcher Dr. Rebecca Lewison argues in my film, much of our cultural identity with hippos comes from these representations of hippos through cartoons, stories, artwork, and collectibles. "Animals have an image problem," writes Randy Malamud.

"The consequences of mis-perceived images is a range of misperceptions about how this planet functions, and the cause of these misperceptions arise from our culture."[lv] John Berger writes more about this cultural representation of animals:

> Children in the industrialized world are surrounded by animal imagery: toys, cartoons, pictures, decorations of every sort. No other source of imagery can begin to compete with that of animals. […] In the preceding centuries, the proportion of toys which were animal was small. And these did not pretend to realism, but were symbolic. […] Thus the manufacture of realistic animal toys coincides, more or less, with the establishment of public zoos. The family visit to the zoo is often a more sentimental occasion than a visit to a fair or a football match. Adults take children to the zoo to show them the originals of their "reproductions" and also perhaps in the hope of re-finding some of the innocence of that reproduced animal world which they remember from their own childhood.[lvi]

"Our nostalgia for childhood sometimes leads us to lament that joyful time when every creature shone with new creation," writes Paul Shepard.[lvii] During this period when children experience animals as new creatures, he says that "All creatures are equally real and magnetic: pets, zoo animals, creatures of film and storybook, those of nursery rhyme and bedtime story. […] Every animal for the child is 'made up'; none is more synthetic than another, biological or mythological."[lviii] These ideas of the hippo, Lewison says, have only obscured the fact that we know so little about these animals in the wild.[lix]

FORMIDABLE BEASTS: A GREAT MISUNDERSTANDING

"Hippopotami are said to feed upon fish which they take upon the cataracts of the Nile and other places; but probably this needs confirmation, as so much of the natural history of this beast remains involved in all the obscurity of the regions they inhabit."[lx] This text could have easily been written yesterday, but its source is a book by Rev. W. Tiler, just a decade before Obaysch would make his debut in London. Hippopotami are actually vegetarians, as we now understand. Many people, however, are still unaware of what hippos really feed upon; for all they know, it could be anything and everything as "Hungry, Hungry Hippos" would have them believe. They might expect that hippos have a large appetite, but an appetite for what? The idea of the hippo's voracious appetite is found in a number of children's entertainment samples. "Imagine what would happen if a hungry hippo gobbled up Ms. Jones on the class trip to the zoo, and then took over teaching the class!"[lxi] reads the description of *A Hippopotamus Ate the Teacher*.[lxii] As silly as the idea of the hippo eating the teacher seems, it's remarkably similar to a very early natural history idea that the hippo might seek human flesh if driven to hunger:

> As the hippopotamus lives upon fish and vegetables, so it is probable the flesh of terrestrial animals may be equally grateful: the natives of Africa assert, that it has often been found to devour children and other creatures that it was able to surprise upon land[lxiii]

The absurd representations of the hippo's appetite isn't restricted to supposed cravings for flesh. The opening song in my film begins with "Here's the biggest eater of the zoo. At one meal, he eats 24 pounds of asparagus, 32 pounds of hay, and 10 gallons of ice cream: He's the hippopotamus."[lxiv] Sure, such examples from our culture are fun and

silly forms of entertainment for children, but it could have an impact on how they grow up thinking about animals, potentially as naive as the misconceptions dating back centuries ago. The song goes on to say "A hippo isn't handsome. He isn't cute at all."[lxv] This line proves the song to be further problematic, as it instills in children a prejudice that may persist into adulthood.

The misinformation doesn't stop at just children's media. Dr. Lewison says there are several wide-spread myths about the hippo that seem to be propagating online.[lxvi] Even some well-respected factual entities, such as *National Geographic*, have helped to perpetuate some of these myths through social media. One of the largest myths, and one that has become a personal pet peeve, is the idea that hippo milk is pink. It consistently appears through Twitter accounts toting "fun facts," retweeted by many people each time. Even *National Geographic* is guilty of listing this as an update on their Facebook page. Lewison says this idea likely comes from some confusion with the fact that hippos secrete a reddish substance from their skin.[lxvii] This is also the same trait that led to the blood-sweating hippopotamus imagery from early circus advertisements describing the traveling menageries of exotic beasts.

Returning once more to Rev. Tiler's accounts of the hippopotamus, we see the idea of the fierce beast that is often still associated with the animal today:

> Supposing this to be the Behemoth of Scripture, as there are very plausible grounds to believe that it is, and as intelligent naturalists conclude it to be, the word Behemoth, the beast, or brute, by way of eminence, is a most fitting appellation, and it may be the name that Adam gave it. The hippopotamus is only found in the great rivers of Egypt, where, also, the crocodile, probably the leviathan of Scripture, is also found. These are, incomparably, the two most formidable creatures in that portion of the world…[lxviii]

Many have speculated, as Rev. Tiler has, that the Behemoth referred to in the Bible was a hippopotamus. Boria Sax posits that our conception of the hippopotamus was firmly implanted by the descriptions of the Behemoth.[lxix] It's interesting to note here, also, the kind of company associated with the hippo. In this description, the hippo is tied to the crocodile by definition of its danger to humans: two frightening African beasts that pose a large threat to our safety. With that connection in mind, it is interesting to note the sequence in *Fantasia* where these sinister characters dance intimately together. That relationship is explored rather humorously in the ballet starring Hyacinth Hippo and Ben Ali Gator. A keen observer would note here, though, the error in nomenclature, since hippopotami actually inhabit the landscape with crocodiles, not alligators, which are primarily an American species. That simple oversight has led to added confusion for the two species, which are commonly mistaken for one another. Once again, a sign of misunderstanding of an often maligned species.

This categorization and relationship of the formidable beasts appears in other works from the same time period as the natural history writings of Rev. Tiler, but in a different medium:

> Images of a natural world at war with itself are a striking feature of English art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, paradoxically co-existing with the visions of harmony inspired by natural theology. […] Rubens's grand and arresting pictures of the hunting of exotic and dangerous animals such as wolves, hippopotami, crocodiles and the big cats - often foregrounding internecine struggles between the animals themselves - were known to British art lovers, from the originals or from engravings.[lxx]

Viewing the "Dance of the Hours" in *Fantasia* with this context, the sequence begins to play out as an allegory of this paradoxical vision of nature, with the hippopotamus and crocodile in an ambiguous relationship with one another. Simultaneously at war and peace, the wanting looks of the crocodiles seem to hint at both a literal and erotic appetite for flesh. This text also illustrates the realm in which the hippopotamus has historically existed in human consciousness: the same realm occupied by other fierce "beasts" such as big cats and wolves, both species centered in heated conservation debates today and having similar crises of identity as the hippopotamus: a vegetarian who shares company with the predators.

It is important to note the idea of hippos sharing a similar space in our minds as other "dangerous" animals such as wolves. Wilson writes, "As a figure of the primitive, the wolf has been invested with the most savage and barbarian characteristics. […] The wolf has been shunted to the margin physically as well as culturally."[lxxi] He further writes that the wolf lives at one extreme of human contact, while pets live at the other, which sounds similar to the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari in their writings on animals.[lxxii] This classification of the hippo further illustrates an example of the hippo's standing as a "pack" animal mentioned earlier. "Those they admire, which operate at the greatest distance from humans, in 'pack modes', are what they call 'demonic animals'. The wolf is their most frequent example."[lxxiii] It is this type of animal that "most exemplifies the potential for becoming", writes Baker.[lxxiv] So while we may demonize these animals, they offer a better opportunity for becoming-animal because of their distance from humans, which might be an attracting feature for the members of the Hippolotofus. At

the same time, though, we have created these myths of the "fierce beast" as a means of further distancing ourselves from our own animalistic ferocity:

> "Man has always been unwilling to admit his own ferocity, and has tried to deflect attention from it by making animals out to be more ferocious than they are." What happens, she says, is that we confuse the symbol (the wolf for human ferocity) with the thing symbolized.[lxxv]

When we assign such features to animals, we should always stop to think about not only what it says about us, but the effect it could have on the animal when the symbol overtakes the symbolized.

PERPETUATION OF MISINFORMATION

The idea of the ferocious beast persists today and is an apparent source of frustration for the members of the Hippolotofus. "I understand a hippo is dangerous," says David Soto in defense of hippos.[lxxvi] He says it's the first thing he hears from people when they find out that he collects hippos. Dr. Lewison echoes that people are quick to point out the popular notion of hippos being the most dangerous animals in Africa. For most people, the animal is inseparable from a reputation that dates back centuries, a reputation continued through our cultural representations:

> One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of "the mysterious Orient."[lxxvii]

This stereotyping of the "other" is at odds with the idea of multiplicity. It is at least encouraging to note that some members of the Hippolotofus seem to look past that idea of the "beast." Bonnie Hewett describes the endearing features of a hippo in the film right after mentioning that they're, of course, not cute and cuddly animals.[lxxviii]

These mixed ideas about animals represent centuries of philosophical readings of nature that are often at odds, creating or perpetuating misconceptions about animals:

> The earliest texts bearing on animals exhibit sensitivity to the fundamental kinship between humans and animals, and the most influential philosophers in antiquity show a remarkable knowledge of the capacities of animals. But in Greco-Roman times there was also a fundamental shift in thinking about animals, away from a sense of kinship and toward a capacities-based approach according to which animals were denigrated in relation to human beings. […] This entire trajectory of thinking

> culminates in the confusions and misconceptions that characterize contemporary debates about animals.[lxxix]

Steiner further argues that in order for us to rethink the moral status of animals that we must first "understand the sources of our own anthropocentric prejudices." These prejudices often manifest themselves in ways that are damaging to the species in question, so it is not simply a matter of innocent misunderstanding.

In a Postmodern reading of the natural world, this damaging effect on animals becomes much more of a concern, as our fates are intertwined with that of animals:

> 'the cartesian dualism which has fundamentally structured the modern world is in the process of being replaced by what is, in the broadest possible sense, an ecological sensibility'. In this 'more holistic' new perspective, notions of order, reason and the body are, she contends, being expanded 'through a growing understanding of the creative complexity of the world, and of the creatures amongst whom we move and in whom we have our being - as do they in us'. […] It is striking to find an account of the postmodern which alludes so directly to animals, and which proposes that the future of the human in the postmodern world is so intimately and creatively bound up with that of the animal.[lxxx]

The characters in my film are all defined by their relationship with the hippopotamus, though they are all vastly different in the ways in which they interact with the animals, each case revealing its own unique way in which people define and are defined by the animal. In one example of the intimate bind that ties human to animal, Bonnie remarks in my film that the hippo is interchangeable with who she is and that she can't imagine her life without hippos. It's unclear whether that might mean the symbol of the hippo or the hippo itself, but regardless, it should alert us that our fate is bound with that of animal.

With this "ecological sensibility" in mind, one would think that conservation groups would be more in-tune with that idea. However, on the African Wildlife Foundation website, the example of the hippopotamus page exhibits perhaps a more outdated mode of thinking.[lxxxi] The page features a prominent statistic at the top alerting people of the number of human deaths caused annually by the animal. It is the only animal on their website that is handled in this manner. On the elephant page, in the same spot, it instead lists the percentage of elephants poached each year. Other animals on the site get a similar note as their headlining fact. Why is the same information not provided on the hippo's page? Further down the hippo page, their site reads "Did you know? Hippos are widely considered to be the most dangerous animal in Africa and are responsible for many deaths."[lxxxii] On the Elephants page it reads: "Did you know? Elephants are a common sight at the Ngoma Safari Lodge in Botswana."[lxxxiii] There is clearly a disparity here. The African Wildlife Foundation does at least provide some redeeming messaging in their email newsletter: "The illegal wildlife trade is a booming, multi-billion dollar business. While the world has been focused on the plight of elephants and rhinos, other species have been suffering in the shadows."[lxxxiv] It indicates, at least, that they're cognizant of the effect that playing favorites can have on the conservation world.

During my interview with Dr. Lewison, she noted how easy it was for people to find interest in other animals that she's worked with, such as sea turtles, that pose no threat to humans and that have been largely represented as lovable animals. She also shared information that illustrates the unintended effect on one species that the

conservation of a different species can have. As a result of tighter restrictions on the harvest of elephant ivory, an increase in hippopotamus hunting occurred as a replacement.[lxxxv] However, it takes far more hippo tusks to come close to an elephant tusk. Hippos share a similar conservation status as the elephant,[lxxxvi] but elephants garner more attention. I am in no way lamenting any measures taken to help save elephants, but it's vital to recognize the impact that prioritizing one species over another can have.

> The problem of infringing on one species while protecting another has been "solved" by arguing that animals have both intrinsic and instrumental value. The first is of a higher sort. Intrinsic value implies something above utility. All creatures have intrinsic value, but some, being more sentient (like us), have greater intrinsic value than others. Thus an elephant has more intrinsic value than a fish.[lxxxvii]

Going through the list of threatened animals on conservation websites such as the "Edge of Existence", it is rather alarming how little we know about many of them, hippopotami included. The pygmy hippopotamus is not even remotely on most people's radar, despite the pygmy hippo's much higher ranking as a species of concern in terms of conservation status: endangered.[lxxxviii]

The case of the pygmy hippopotamus further illustrates the potentially damaging effect of the stories attached to animals. On a website entitled "Edge of Existence,"[lxxxix] a site operated by the Zoological Society of London, they specifically focus on threatened species of the world. On the page for the pygmy hippopotamus, it includes a human legend surrounding the animal:

> Pygmy hippos feature in many folktales. One suggests that the pygmy hippo finds its way through the forest at night by carrying a diamond in its mouth, which lights its path. The hippo is said to hide the diamond by day where it cannot be found. According to folklore, if a hunter is lucky enough to catch one at night, the diamond can be taken.[xc]

So here we see that not all stories are as harmless as we would like to think. Hunting, along with habitat loss, is one of the leading concerns for the animal.[xci] It is not clear whether this legend actually has any bearing on the animal's status, but it does show another example of human mythology filling in the knowledge gaps for an animal that we know little to nothing about. In order to ensure these animals' future on the planet, we need to be in the habit of questioning the ideas we've attached to them, particularly those that are as potentially damaging as the folklore attached to the pygmy hippopotamus.

COME ON AND JOIN THE LOT OF US WHO LOVE THE HIPPOPOTAMUS

Part of my goal for this film was to bring awareness to a species that needs the attention, while raising questions about how we perceive the hippopotamus and nature in a larger context. In building interest for the animal, I've used some of the same elements that I'm critiquing, though hopefully in a way that will make the audience begin to question them. Primarily in question is a largely idealized human-hippo relationship, as examined through several case-studies of ownership, while also being intercut with a television motif, reflecting a postmodern use of pastiche.[xcii] Also in the mix is a less fantastic world in which the human-hippo relationship is defined more by conflict.

At the start of the film, I establish the Western idea of hippos primarily through clips gleaned from popular culture, many of which are highly recognizable and ones that I've already mentioned, namely "Hungry, Hungry Hippos," *Fantasia,* and the more recent *Madagascar* films. On the surface, we think we know the hippopotamus. However, through the use of some highly unusual characters, both human and animal (though the distinction between the two begins to blur), I aim to provide a more complex idea of the hippo that offers a glimpse of its multiplicity. The idea of becoming-animal, among other postmodern theories, supports the notion of micro-narratives over the grand narrative.[xciii] There are perhaps as many narratives of the hippo as there are items in the collections of the Hippolotofus.

In an attempt to understand some of our ideas of the hippo, John Voeller proposes the concept that the hippo's lack of strong features makes it easy for us to project our own ideas onto the animal, resulting in many, many representations of that "grey, lumpy

animal."[xciv] These countless renderings of hippopotami can be seen in the vast collections of the Hippolotofus throughout the film. Several members of the group are artists, themselves adding to the growing number of hippo artifice. As the hippopotamus becomes more threatened in the wild, these items become more meaningful in their fetishistic role.

Several people in the Hippolotofus group have remarked that they'd probably have a real hippo if it weren't for its gargantuan size. The closing song in my film echoes that desire, but the singer must "settle for a toy, or a trinket I'll enjoy, or a hippo in a picture frame."[xcv] Because the logistics of owning a hippo are so far-fetched, the items in their collections begin to have a far greater fetishistic value when compared to an animal that could easily be domesticated. While Richard can live out his fantasy of playing with a baby hippo on a mattress, most others cannot, so they must rely instead on their collection to fulfill that desire. "The truth is that most of us will never experience the earth's endangered animals as anything more than beautiful ideas," writes Jon Mooallem. "They are figments of our shared imagination, recognizable from TV, but stalking places - places out there - to which we have no intention of going."[xcvi] Richard, even with the means available to do so, mentions his lack of desire to return to the "rough and scary" place that is Africa.

Dr. Lewison primarily serves as a source of tension amidst all the fantastical and often out-of-touch representations of hippos in the film. She provides valuable insight into the current situation that we've placed the hippopotamus in and brings experience from working with other animals to underscore the preferential treatment we give to

certain species. Dr. Lewison also serves the important task of bridging the conversation from the collecting world to the conservation world. At the end of the film, she makes a call to action for collectors to become the champions that hippos need. While it may be read on the surface that the Hippolotofus need to be the champions, that's just a part of the puzzle. Those "collectors" also might mean zoos, and in a sense nature filmmakers as well, myself included. My entire film exists as a collection itself - a menagerie of people, animals, and ideas about both. It's almost become an obsession for me to find yet another hippo story, despite an overabundance of material for the film. There are potentially endless stories to be told, just in the human-hippo relationship, let alone any other animal out there.

The more I researched the hippopotamus, the more apparent it became that I was on a potentially never-ending pursuit to understand an animal that seemed to have countless ways of looking at it. My initial goal was to help bolster conservation through a better understanding of the animal, but it was proving impossible to really understand the hippo. The resulting film is one that is meant to accompany many more stories of the hippo to further illustrate the multiplicity of the animal. In this sense, the goal of conservation shifts emphasis from understanding to appreciation of the animal: not our idea of the animal, but the animal for what it is. In describing the postmodern animal in the conservation landscape, Steve Baker writes:

> She explains that her concern 'is not to make us care about animals because they are like us, but to care about them because they are themselves'. […] Vance too is concerned to find space for the human experience of 'delight' and 'wonder' at the animal, and to argue that a proper 'ethical behaviour toward the nonhuman world is a kind of joyfulness, an embracing of possibility'.[xcvii]

My film might evoke that "delight" and "wonder" of the hippopotamus for the audience, in an attempt to create a more ethical mindset toward the animal, not necessarily in any singular definition but one of many possibilities. By the end of the film, I hope that the viewer sees the television motif in a different manner as the familiar clips of the hippo play in a new context, paired with the song asking them to join "the lot of us who love the hippopotamus."[xcviii] So in this sense, the ending of the film is a call to action for anyone who will listen. The question is as always, though, *will* anyone listen?

Our ideas of nature are fickle ones, both in the ways we conceptualize the wild and the ways we think we should preserve it. Mooallem's outlook on conservation is grim and perhaps uncomfortably realistic given our current trajectory. But he also commends the ones who persist and adapt with the evolving public discourse in their attempt to save what many would like to think as the un-savable. Mooallem's book is rather similar to my film and my own experience of making the film:

> This book is about finding yourself straddling those two animal worlds - a little kid's and the actual one - and trying to understand both. Or at least it's about me trying to understand them, at first naively and with vague unease, and, eventually, with a mostly futile compulsion to reconcile the two. One of those worlds is real. One is imaginary. But, frankly, for most of us, they both may as well be abstractions.[xcix]

The process of making my film was partially a personal attempt of understanding nature, the "real" and "imaginary." Mooallem writes further that "maybe we never outgrow the imaginary animal kingdom of childhood. Maybe it's the one we are trying to save."[c] I hope that my film might help others, as it has with me, to better understand the disconnect between wild animals and our imaginary versions of them in an effort to

"connect more with actual animals in the wild that are still here but might not be in generations to come."[ci] Otherwise, all we'll be left with are the menageries of an imaginary animal kingdom.

Paul Shepard hints that it may come down to a matter of how we perceive the animals: "Our acceptance of multiplicity can do for the world's animals what all the laws, humane societies, zoos, and films cannot."[cii] Regardless, there is no quick fix to a problem in which *everyone* plays a part:

> But the true vocation of humankind, to puzzle out reciprocity, requires no "solution," but instead an ongoing participation. Bystanding is an illusion. Willy-nilly, everybody plays. This play contains that most intimate aspect of the mystery - our own identity - signified in finding ourselves in relationship to the Others.[ciii]

Ultimately, we will each choose the way in which we partake in this "play," defined by our relationships with animals. I, for one, will continue to do my part in the best way I know how - through film, a menagerie with one of the largest possibilities for change.

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