

“Keine Welt”: Reading Rilke’s “Panther” in the Anthropocene

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In 2006, the German television channel ZDF aired an hour-long documentary about Oliver Kahn, the celebrated goal-keeper for the German national football team. In the final sequence, Kahn is seated by the window of a crowded restaurant.¹ The interviewer hands him a sheet of paper and asks him to read it out loud. The text turns out to be Rainer Maria Rilke’s iconic zoo poem, “Der Panther”:

Der Panther
Im Jardin des Plantes, Paris

Sein Blick ist vom Vorübergehn der Stäbe
so müd geworden, daß er nichts mehr hält.
Ihm ist, als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe
und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt.

Der weiche Gang geschmeidig starker Schritte,
der sich im allerkleinsten Kreise dreht,
ist wie ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte,
in der betäubt ein großer Wille steht.

Nur manchmal schiebt der Vorhang der Pupille
sich lautlos auf —. Dann geht ein Bild hinein,
geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille —
und hört im Herzen auf zu sein.

The Panther
In the Jardin des Plantes, Paris

His gaze has from the passing of the bars
become so tired, that it holds nothing more.
It seems to him there are a thousand bars
and behind a thousand bars no world.

The supple pace of powerful soft strides,
turning in the very smallest circle,
is like a dance of strength around a centre,
in which a mighty will stands numbed.

Only sometimes the curtain of the pupils
soundlessly slides up—. Then an image enters,
goes through the limbs’ taut stillness—
and in the heart ceases to exist.²

¹ *Oliver Kahn und die Dinge des Lebens*, dir. Marin Martschewski (ZDF/3sat, 2006). The clip in question is available on YouTube with English subtitles: <https://youtu.be/-7TBpkKi_SE>

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *New Poems [1907]. A Bilingual Edition*, translated by Edward Snow (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), pp. 72–73. Translation slightly modified.

The interviewer then prompts Kahn to comment on the poem. At first, Kahn remarks that “it must be a terrible thing for an animal like that to be trapped inside a real cage — for in this case of course the cage is a real one.” The interviewer then suggests that Kahn himself is also trapped inside a cage of sorts, to which Kahn responds: “Yes, I was just about to say. The question is: what is my cage? My symbolic cage?” He offers a series of different suggestions: the physical goal, or the penalty area; or perhaps the cage is psychological, the product of internal and external pressures that hamper his sense of freedom. “In that sense,” he concludes, “the poem is wonderfully apt.”

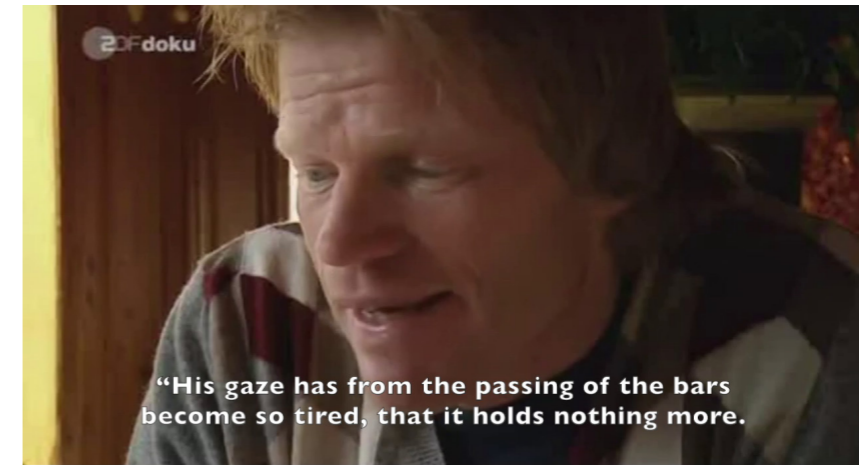
The first thing to note about Kahn’s interpretation is the distinction he draws between the real and the symbolic cage. The implication is that to interpret a poem such as this, one must move from the literal meaning to the metaphorical or symbolic meaning, and, moreover, that this entails a shift from the animal to the human. The real panther at the Jardin des Plantes is trapped inside his cage and gradually grows numb to the outside world, but the true significance of the poem lies in its metaphorical applicability to the reader. Clearly, this was also the filmmaker’s intention: to prompt Kahn to reflect on his own situation and to read the poem as referring to himself rather than merely to the plight of an animal in a zoo over a century ago. This, of course, is how animals have traditionally been interpreted in literature and art, namely as symbols and metaphors for something other than themselves, almost invariably some aspect of the human.

In recent years, in the context of the ‘animal turn’ in the humanities and social sciences, literary scholars have begun to work against this tendency of interpreting nonhuman animals ‘out’ of texts, insisting instead that these animals are not (or not ‘just’) metaphors or symbols, but are also literally to be read as referring to themselves. If on the first reading the panther is ‘really’ a stand-in for the poet

or human condition, on the second, the poem testifies to the inhumane treatment of animals in zoos around 1900. While the latter is of course an interesting and important reading, we must also be careful not to succumb to a naïve literalism that would seek to disavow or suppress the metaphorical significance of textual animals. Rather, the task must be to unpack the complex interplay between the literal and the figurative, and the ways in which these textual animal presences come to signify in ways that gesture beyond the human, toward a less narrowly anthropocentric conception of the world. This is one of the principles of what I call “zoopoetics.”

The tension between literal and symbolic meaning is central to Rilke’s poetics in “The Panther.” The poem is usually numbered among Rilke’s so-called Dinggedichte, or “thing-poems,” in which he tried to give expression to nonhuman entities, both animate and inanimate, in an ‘objective’ manner. The ambition was for the poems to be not simply representations of something else, but rather things in themselves. Thus, while “The Panther” is certainly inspired by Rilke’s visits to the Jardin des Plantes and his observations of the panther there, ultimately, it is the poem itself that is the panther. That is to say, it does not refer to an external reality in the form of this or that particular panther, but rather it refers only to itself. In this way it creates its own space.

In practice, this involves a strict coherence between the form of the poem and its content. At a thematic level, the poem describes the panther’s movements, first back and forth along the bars, and then, in the middle stanza, the movement becomes circular—ein Tanz von Kraft um eine Mitte. This, already, is a hint that the form reflects the content, since this description forms the middle of the poem itself, and hence, by extension, the “dance of strength” can be read as referring to the poem as a whole, whose regular, iambic rhythm and ABAB rhyme scheme reproduce the panther’s ceaseless pac-



Still from the video “Oliver Kahn und die Dinge des Lebens”, dir. Marin Martschewski (ZDF/3sat, 2006). <https://youtu.be/-7TBpkKi_SE>

ing. The first and third stanzas centre on the panther’s gaze. In fact, the gaze is the subject of the first sentence: we are seeing the inside of the cage from the panther’s perspective. The monotony of the panther’s experience is emphasised through the repetition of the word “Stäbe” [bars] in lines 1, 3, and 4, as well as the rather inelegant internal rhyme of “tausend Stäbe gäbe”.

We may also begin to notice that while “sein Blick” refers on a literal level to the panther’s gaze, as we read it also becomes possible to interpret it as the reader’s gaze, which is likewise scanning these bars. This effect is reinforced by the preponderance of parallel vertical ascenders at or near the end of each line: It, tt, ll, etc. These could be said to mimic, at a material level of the words on the page, the sight of the bars, endlessly passing before our eyes. The only lines that do not end in ascenders of this sort are the second and fourth lines of the final stanza. It is surely no coincidence that these lines describe an image traversing the barrier of the bars and entering the panther’s eye. The horizontality of this movement is further emphasised by the two dashes, one in the middle of a line and the other at the end. The last word in the second

line, “hinein”, rhymes with “sein”, which is the last word of the poem, but also the first. In this way the reader is sent back to the beginning, in a further mimicry of the panther’s endless circling dance. The final line of the poem is also catalectic (or, technically, brachycatalectic): i.e. it is missing the final two syllables necessary to complete the iambic pentameter. Thus, the intrusion of the outside image interrupts the flow of the poem, yet it does not offer a way out.

In this sense, the poem in fact seems to invite an autobiographical reading: as you read, you become the panther and the real cage gives way to a symbolic cage around the human reader. It is open to interpretation what exactly this cage is, but it seems that it is one that we have constructed ourselves. It is language, or society, or whatever it is that prevents you from being truly free. You go to the zoo and find that you are the one in the cage.

Returning to the principles of zoopoetics, we must note that the symbolic meaning does not replace or destroy the real existence of the cage. In fact, we must show how the cage is both real and symbolic— material and semiotic. Moreover,

this is true whether the encounter with the panther takes place in the poem or at the zoo: even the real panther in its real cage exists within a cultural framework, which is to say within a symbolic system, and as such has both a material and a semiotic component. In other words, there is no escape from the cultural frameworks of significance and domination that allow this encounter to take place. Which brings me, finally, to the question of the Anthropocene. Within literary animal studies, as I have said, the main point of criticism of traditional modes of reading animals in texts is that they ignore the specificity of the animal itself, and instead see only a version of the human everywhere. In this tradition, the whole world serves as a mirror designed to amplify our anthropocentric narcissism. Yet, now, in the age of the Anthropocene, Man really does encounter himself everywhere he looks: there is no aspect of life on this planet that does not in some way bear the imprint of human activity. Perhaps it is necessary, then, to affirm what formerly would have been seen as an anthropocentric fallacy, namely the tendency for humans to look at animals and see only themselves.

This, in turn, has implications for how we read the lines: "Ihm ist als ob es tausend Stäbe gäbe / und hinter tausend Stäben keine Welt." From the panther's perspective, the world seems to end at the bars, making any encounter with the outside world, including with the human spectator, impossible. From the reader's perspective, we may also interpret these lines as a version of Jacques Derrida's (in)famous assertion that "there is nothing outside the text."³ Which, moreover, would be consonant with Rilke's poetics of the Dinggedicht: rather than referring to an external reality behind the bars of the poem, the poem constitutes its own world, hermetically sealed from the outside. There is no 'real' panther in this text, there is only language. Conversely, the poem suggests that, trapped inside its cage, the panther at the Jardin des Plantes is not a 'real' panther either. This view is supported by much existing zoo

criticism. John Berger, for instance, in his famous essay "Why Look at Animals?" writes that zoos cannot help but disappoint because the animals we see there are mere shadows of themselves—they are, to use Rilke's term, "numb" compared to their full-blooded cousins in the wild.⁴ But in a time of widespread habitat loss and mass extinctions, it is increasingly the case that there is literally "no world" beyond the bars for these animals to inhabit. How might the zoo of the future attempt to come to terms with this new reality?

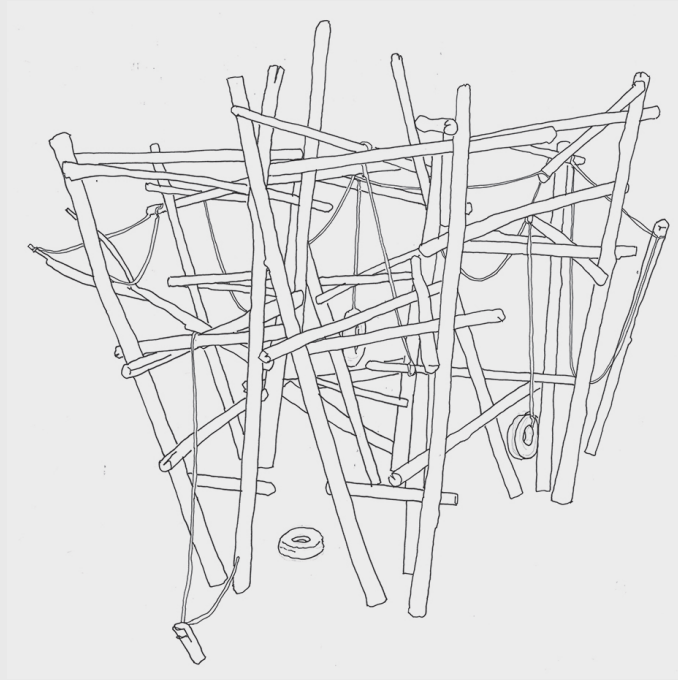
Let us return once more to the poem and note the use of the subjunctive: it is *as if* there were a thousand bars; just as it is *as if* there were no world beyond them. What is the function of this turn to the subjunctive? First of all, it ascribes an inner life to the panther: "it seems to him...". At the same time, it implies an interpretation on the part of the (human) observer, to whom it seems that to the panther it must seem is if there is no world, and so on. Thus, it establishes an imaginative and empathic connection, first between these two observers' perspectives, and then also to that of the reader. It is what allows Oliver Kahn to see that poem as a "wonderfully apt" description of his own experience, just as it is what has allowed generations of critics to read the panther as a representation of Rilke himself. If all of these readings are equally plausible, it is because the "as if" acts as a catalyst for the poetic—or, dare I say it, the zoopoetic—imagination, which, even as it seems to declare that there is no world, in fact has the potential to create a world that is shared by human and nonhuman animals alike. A world that concerns us, or, as Derrida might put it, *qui nous regarde*.⁵ And in such a world, there is no place that does not see you.

You must change your life.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 158.

⁴ John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (New York: Vintage, 1991), pp. 3–28

⁵ cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, edited by Marie-Louise Mallet, translated by David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 3, 29.



The Zoo in the Anthropocene

a multi-species/disciplinary research project
by David Habets, Bart de Hartog and Thijs de Zeeuw

organised by



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Sociëteit
SEXYLAND

with support from

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Colofon

First Edition
June 2018

printed on
printed by
with generous support of

Cyclus 100/350 gram, Cocoon silk 100 gram; 100% Recycled
RUPARO
Creative Industries Fund NL

edited by
photography by
with contributions by

David Habets, Bart de Hartog and Thijs de Zeeuw
Sanne Zurné
Aldo Hakman, Barbara Visser, Arne Hendriks, VR-Gorilla, Clemens Driessen,
Govert Flint, Katharina Swoboda, Nick Shepherd, Kári Driscoll, Jos
Rademakers, Edwin Gardner, Esmee Geerken, Melanie Bonajo, Silvia van
der Wal, David Habets, Bart de Hartog, Thijs de Zeeuw, Reinwardt Academie
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