

CRUISING THE PERFORMATIVE

Selling "nature" is big business, and Sea World's growth is part of a nationwide trend in entertainment and recreation involving animals. A 1990 survey reported that more than one hundred million visitors a year are attracted to wildlife facilities, including zoos and animal theme parks (Nelson 34). Industries based on looking at animals, what I refer to as animal tourism, sell an experience of the natural through exposure to "wild" animals, whether or not the particular animals have ever lived in or even seen the mythical "wilderness" they are tied to in our imaginations.

While zoo mammals still garner the largest audiences, it is the marine facilities that are experiencing the fastest growth. Marine mammals are rapidly becoming the most bankable stars in this entertainment industry. Sea World's corporate history reflects this growth. Founded in 1964 by four graduates of UCLA, the park opened on twenty-two acres of land in San Diego. Thirty years later, it occupies 150 acres on San Diego's Mission Bay and has spawned three other Sea Worlds in Ohio, Texas, and Florida. Purchased in 1976 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., ownership of all four Sea Worlds transferred to the Anheuser-Busch Companies, Inc., in 1989 for a price of \$1.1 billion.¹

As a sign at the entrance reminds us, Sea World is "not just another park, it's another world." This world is extensive, comprising dolphin shows, walrus and seal shows, five aquariums full of sea creatures, a dolphin petting pool, the world's largest display of sharks, a penguin "encounter" area featuring 400 penguins, as well as a musical show (by water-skiing humans).

There are many additional services and products. There are nautical gift shops, places to have your picture taken with Shamu (in the form of a fifteen-foot statue or of a person dressed in a Shamu suit), restaurants, a space needle ride, a play area called Cap'n Kids World, and the Busch pavillion, where visitors can sample a wide variety of Busch products. Souvenir shops are plentiful and feature stuffed versions of Shamu, commodifications of the personification of the natural.

All of this is set in a beautiful park, carefully groomed, squeaky clean, wholesome, and full of carefully tended plants and animals. "Family entertainment at its best," is what the brochure for the theme parks promises. The same threats of violence that are banished from the human/animal interactions in the shows are also absent here. A small-town sense of safety, scale, and simplicity governs the physical design. Sidewalks wend gracefully from exhibit to exhibit, trash is immediately whisked away. The city of San Diego, set off from the park by a very long access drive, is not even visible from the complex. Urban components like crime, dirt, pollution, noise, and different groups of people with competing needs are not found here. Park-goers represent a relatively homogeneous population in terms of class background, although there is some variation. More important to this homogeneity, perhaps, is the shared sense of a community goal among all of the visitors—to play, to have fun, to escape from daily routine. A day at Sea World is a vacation day, a day of animal tourism. A nostalgia for a simpler, safer, small-town past is transmuted into a nostalgia for an Edenic community of animals and people that co-exist in harmony.

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The guarantee of education underlying all the fun allows guilt-free pleasure and a justification for the steep entrance prices. Adults enter for \$23.95, children under twelve for \$17.95, while toddlers are free. This brings the price for a day's entertainment for a "typical" family of four to \$83.80, plus the cost of lunch, snacks, and the requisite souvenirs. All attractions and exhibits in the park, with the exception of the two rides, are free once the entrance fee is paid. Even so, taking the mythical family of four to Sea World for the day is easily a \$100 proposition.

The corporate structure of the Sea World empire is further emphasized by the presence of various major corporations who "sponsor" particular shows or exhibitions. For example, the Penguin Encounter is "presented by ARCO." Public relations information notes that Sea World's relationship with these firms involves participation in national and regional consumer promotions, and mutual institutional advertising programs. Other sponsors include Southwest Airlines, Adohr Farms, Pepsi, and Kodak. In these mutually beneficial institutional advertising programs, the affiliates garner good will for their support of conservation programs, but even more importantly they get to be associated with the very positive and powerful image of Shamu.

The Nature of Culture

The Shamu show constructs a notion of family which binds all animals and all humans together in a vision of harmony. The diversity of shows and exhibits at Sea World, which include penguins, walruses, seals, porpoises, dolphins, and reef-dwelling animals emphasizes this idea of a family of diverse species coexisting in the ocean world. This represents a sort of horizontal unity. A vertical unity between animals and humans is complementary, and leaves us on top, just like parents are in positions of control within a family. The specific values associated with the family paradigm and promoted during the show include trust, affection, mutual respect, and a high degree of individuation. What is not allowed is a visible show of force, aggression, competition, or violence of any kind. However, the lines of command remain clear even though unarticulated or covered over by assertions of mutuality and equality. Humans must control the nature that they display.

Celebrating Shamu

"I Love Shamu" reads the bumper sticker I bought as a souvenir. Note that it doesn't say: "I Love Sea World." Shamu, like a movie star or any well-known public figure, is a character, a personality, a locus onto which we can project our fantasies. She is the only animal at the park to be so personified, blazoned on T-shirts and mugs, reproduced in cuddly form in Shamu stuffed whales (available in graduated sizes and costs, from three inches to four feet long). Although other animals at Sea World have names, only Shamu has been accorded emblematic status. Her picture dominates every piece of literature coming out of sea world, the sleek black and white torpedo form lending itself well to abstraction and to graphic reproducibility on everything from brochures to shopping bags to corporate stationery.

Of course, like "Lassie" who was played by a series of collies, Shamu isn't really just one whale. There is a "Shamu" at each of the four Sea Worlds.²

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Training, "Naturalism," and Performance

Everything we see in Sea World is presented as "extensions of natural behaviors." "Natural" can refer to behaviors occurring in a natural vs. manmade setting, i.e., in "the wild," or it can refer to behaviors occurring in manmade settings but without instruction from humans, such as leaping, swimming, etc. Some of these behaviors are marked as "bad," like fighting, and are prohibited. Other behaviors are deemed "good," but in need of tight control, like breeding.

The term "natural" can also refer to behaviors that are directly contradictory to "instinct," but which still involve an action that occurs in the wild. For example, the tiger can be taught to leap ("natural") through a burning ring of fire (the "natural" instinct would be to move away from fire, not toward it). Using this range of conceptual flexibility which emerges in the show's discourse of "natural" behavior, it is difficult to think of anything that an animal could possibly do that could *not* in some sense be considered, and presented as, "natural." If Shamu could be taught to speak English, that would be "unnatural," since orcas don't speak English to each other, but even that could be framed as an extension of a "natural" vocalizing ability, an "inborn" ability that would be necessary for any sound making at all.

Ideological and Physical "Extensions"

The "natural" is both cultivated and disciplined in the training process. Animals are trained through operant conditioning. Behaviors are isolated, shaped, and linked into sequences with rewards, tactile or food, given for proper performance. Punishment for incorrect behavior or for noncooperation is the withdrawal of the trainer from the interaction. Shaping, as the word implies, involves the gradual refinement of a behavior, like the development of height in a jump, or making the pathway of a body rotation in the air perfectly round. For example, teaching an animal to jump over a rope suspended above the water requires first training him to swim over, not under the rope in the pool, then over the rope floating on the water's surface, then over the rope as it is gradually raised higher and higher into the air.

Within the industry, however, the rationale for new behaviors is presented not only in terms of developing new performance material for the shows, but in terms of satisfying the whales' psychological needs for stimulation. The familial discourse emerges here too, with the whales positioned as children and the trainers as parents or teachers. The familial discourse of playful stimulation smooths over the fact that ultimately the "extending" of behaviors is done to benefit Sea World both by providing new performance material and by cultivating whale tractability.

Another way the meaning of "natural" actions is extended or reframed is through anthropomorphism and mimicry choreographed into the show. Although the amount of this material has declined as the shows have moved away from narrative/character entertainment shows to the educational format, it still figures prominently. The most obvious examples are those behaviors named after human actions, like moving a flipper back and forth upon the command to "wave good-bye." Like the caption of a photograph, these linguistic frames anchor the meaning of the visual display and guide the audience's reading of the polysemic movements and postures.

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The animals also mimic human behavior in a follow-the-leader style. For example, during the ballet duet, the trainer might duck down shooting her legs straight up in the air and wiggle them. The whale will imitate by diving and waving his or her tail back and forth above the water too. In these mimicking actions the analogous nature of the bodies is highlighted, head, "arms," middle body, and "legs" can function in similar ways.

But ultimately the meaning of the action ("look, he's waving to us") and its fascination for the audience depends on the dissimilarity between the animal and ourselves. Part of the pleasure of this type of activity is, I think, generated precisely by the acknowledgment of the difference between the whales and ourselves, in terms of body construction and dimension, and the simultaneous closing of that gap momentarily through the performance of anthropomorphically framed behaviors. The whale doesn't have legs, but uses its tail as if it were "legs." The "as if" of the construction is the linkage that gives the action its specific intelligibility within the show and also produces the specific pleasure, the laugh of recognition for example, that the action evokes. The "as if-ness" also puts the actions into a performance category that separates "natural" behavior from its "extensions," in this case an extension of the meaning of the behavior.

This is balanced by an opposing emphasis on the whales' non-anthropomorphic behaviors, the spectacular display of their strength and mass which far exceeds our own, yet which appears harnessed to our uses and pleasures via their apparently willing cooperation as performers. However, there have been telling moments of disruption in this willing partner discourse. A few years ago a couple of bad accidents tarnished Sea World's image, endangered its staff and animals, and caused a whole revamping of training style and attitude at Sea World.

In 1988, serious injuries resulted when whales turned on two trainers,⁴ and in the following year two performing whales collided and began fighting. One bled to death after the fight.⁵ The incidents received not only regional but national press attention. These two incidents blow the willing partner and familial discourses wide open and reveal the hierarchies of force and domination that such ideologies naturalize. The whales exhibited "natural behavior" in fighting after an accidental collision which bore hallmarks of aggression. However, this was forbidden natural behavior as it threatened the economic stability of the park. The investment in the two animals was huge, as was their earning power. The aggression also contravened the familial discourse of peaceful unity among animals and particularly between humans and animals.

When directed against the trainer this aggression exposed the crux of the shows: absolute obedience to trainer commands, presented as pleasurable for the whales. This loss of control was obscene, as obscene as the site of pristine azure pools polluted with blood. The problematic of the natural as that which is ultimately subordinate to human cultural practice became insupportable in those moments. They threatened the stability of the Sea World conglomerate built on such a problematic, and required a great deal of "spin control" from the public relations office which isolated these events as accidents not symptoms.

Ultimately this subtext of danger, of nature as "wildness," is necessary to the successful functioning of Sea World, but it must not be allowed to erupt into visibility.