

INTRODUCTION

Seeing animals as they are, without ulterior motives of possession or power or gain – economic, scientific or even artistic – is liberating to the one seeing, possibly also to the seen. To see something, it is not enough merely to look. Seeing allows us also to be seen, opens us up to the possibilities of what we look at, and how we might respond. If we *see* with our whole being, we are likely to find the essence of whatever creature we come upon. Binoculars or microscopes may not help, but empathy does: the heart must be involved as well as the mind.

Our ancestors *saw* the animals they drew on their cave walls, and though they hunted them, they also revered and then came to worship them. Animals were gods, messengers from another world – and look what we are doing to the gods now. Maybe we should look again, and learn to see.

Because we too are animal, the way in which we treat animals reflects how we treat ourselves. If we lock them up, exploit them, treat them with cruelty or indifference, we are doing this to ourselves and to each other. Containment takes many forms, and one of the most damaging aspects of lack of freedom is loss of desire. A contained animal, whether it is

behind bars in a zoo or shut up in a flat all day, faces no danger, has no choices to make, can do nothing but repeat the same movements, over and over, round and round. Having lost the ability to explore and to face the unexpected, it will eventually – because animals are realists – become dulled and dispirited, turning in on itself. It becomes, like many of its human counterparts in a regimented urban environment, depressed.

Being outside with a dog that is free, in a field, on a hillside, in woodland, observing it as it surveys its surroundings, ears pricked, eyes searching, nose twitching at the myriad signals it picks up while deciding what to do next, where to wander or dash – this is a sight that makes us too feel alive, helps us to see the world with an intensity that is largely absent from the daily round. It awakens our animal nature and produces a sense of wellbeing, a hint that perhaps all's well with the world after all – after all we humans have done to wreck it. Looking at a dog on a television screen, or even at your own curled up on the hearthrug, does not have this effect. In order to empathise with a dog (or any creature), you need to be out there with it as it sniffs and stalks and suns itself, doing what it was born to do when in control of its own life, however fraught and short that may have been.

Seeing is very different from watching. To *see* one must accept whatever one is watching, whether animal, fellow human being or anything else, in its own reality rather than through the filter of one's preconceptions or needs. No one could quarrel with bird-watching, which besides being a tranquil hobby provides useful information on numbers and rarities, but it may add up to little more than trainspotting, notation rather than involvement. Can one be involved with a bird in the wild? Perhaps not, but one can see it as bird, not breed, an individual embarking on its perilous voyage across continents, risking the hazards of exhaustion, lack of food, bad weather and predators, its odds against survival so heavily stacked. Or with numbers of birds? You can watch a murmuration of starlings, and wonder at the why and how, but if you are not moved – by its calligraphy, its choreography, whatever image comes to mind – something is missing.

Identifying with animals does not, emphatically, mean treating them in a sentimental, indulgent way. Killing with kindness is arguably more offensive to an animal's integrity than killing it as a sacrifice or simply to eat. The anthropomorphism that led ancient man to see animals as equals added to their dignity; dressing them in tutus does not. Animals have a



Starlings make moving pictures in the sky, but the stills take on different forms.

natural sense of dignity, which is not to say that they have no sense of fun, but that they will try at all costs to preserve their self-respect, and we should in turn respect this. Making fun of animals, as distinct from having fun with them, is a betrayal of their trust in us.

Learning what we as humans have done both to earn and destroy that trust throughout our short history together is a useful mental exercise, but it has to be transformed into a leap of the heart if we are to appreciate the essence of animals, and why they matter to us.

* * *

The exchange of greetings between the San people of the Kalahari translates as 'I see you'. It's a lesson we could learn, since in the rush of modern life it is very easy *not* to see, and not seeing becomes a habit – in fact one is advised to avoid eye contact in order to keep out of trouble in cities. But having myself abandoned the press of city life for a rural backwater in Brittany, I still at times do not see, hurrying to let out the chickens in the morning without pausing to notice the bantam cockerel: his dazzling flame-coloured feathers cascading from the neck and merging with the russet ones that fall over his back, the tiny powder-puff of white between this and the high spout of his tail, at first glance

black but on closer observation deepest blue-green. And these are only the externals. What about acknowledging his status as cockerel, his need to climb higher than all the others and crow, yet his solicitousness for the flock as he calls them to share a cache of juicy worms; he's a cocky gent, this fine bantam. The close observation often doesn't take place, his beauty and his characteristics are taken for granted – and I am the loser.

Seeing, rather than merely looking, means focusing on the object not as object but as fellow subject, as individual: this cockerel, this cockroach, this dog or dogfish, by chance alive in the world with me at this moment, each of us personifying and perpetuating the life of our own unique species. It may not, probably won't be a communication, but something takes place that immeasurably enriches the seer, a word that once meant receiver of divine inspiration.

* * *

What of the animals, what do they see? Science can tell us about the physical structure of eyes, about numbers and ratios of rods and cones, peripheral sweep and night vision, and we can therefore surmise many differing abilities over a range of species, from owl to mole to bat (not blind at all). But the mechanics of sight is not our subject; to look is not necessarily to see. Animals use their eyes in tandem with smell and hearing, all three closely linked to intuition – and all with the urgent, primary focus of avoiding danger and finding food. These senses are as superior to those of humans as our language is superior to theirs. Uncluttered by the judgements and controls imposed by our rational 'modern' brain, animals react instinctively, picking up on the emotional energy of other beings, animal and human, and instantly aware of any threat. Such intuitive sensing has become blunted in so-called civilised adult humans though it remains stronger in young children and people who live close to Nature. We get a glimpse of this on the rare occasions when we 'sense' danger – though it may not be visible – and before the mind has even registered it, the adrenaline pumps in, the pulse quickens, the mouth goes dry and we are on alert, a survival instinct that links us to our animal forebears.

As to what animals see when they look at us, we can only imagine. Are we no more than blurred outlines, objects of fear or affection, providers of food and shelter? That many animals recognise humans, even after long periods apart, is irrefutable. Donkeys have been known to greet former

owners after more than twenty years, and the video of the lion Christian, bought in Harrods and released into the wild in Africa, falling into the arms of his rescuers several years later, is an all-time YouTube favourite. How much is visual, how much response to voice, how much sensing or just memory click we cannot know, although animal behaviourists are busy working on it. In most cases, the animal in question has known the person from infancy and has imprinted on him or her. And what of that imprint? This is surely a most intense sort of seeing, an indelible modelling on the parent, whether the biological parent or a surrogate, that lasts a lifetime.

It's humbling to imagine how we appear to animals. A while ago I stopped on the edge of a small town in Brittany where a travelling circus was parked; how bizarre, how delightful to come across a couple of llamas, a camel and several miniature ponies, tethered and grazing outside a supermarket. But the delight turned to dust when I came to the lions, cooped inside a metal trailer, listless and immeasurably sad. I cannot forget the way they looked at me, looked *through* me, with dignified disdain, as if I were beyond fear or hatred, merely of no interest – this torpor the deepest wound of incarceration. It may be misleading to anthropomorphise, to imagine how we would feel if we were an animal bred for the savannah spending our life in a trailer, yet how else can we be aware of what we do to animals or wonder why we do it?

Another big cat, the elusive and solitary leopard that occasionally turns to human prey – the 'man-eater' of many a tale – appears to *see* humans. Peter Matthiessen relates that 'a leopard will lie silent even when struck by stones hurled at its hiding place – an act that would bring on a charge from any lion – but should its burning gaze be met, and it realizes that it has been seen, it will charge at once'. Many animals are reluctant to meet the gaze of humans, and even dogs may become uncomfortable and look aside. Dogs, and surprisingly horses too, are able to distinguish between a loving and a hostile look, and this account of a visual conversation between J.R. Ackerley and his dog Tulip shows how powerful the communication can be, though here it is the man who is discomfited: 'The tall ears are erect now, the head drawn back, the gaze level. I meet it, in spite of myself. We stare into each other's eyes. The look in hers disconcerts me, it contains too much, more than a beast may give, something too clear and too near, too entire, too dignified and direct, a steadier look than my own. I avert my face.'

We don't know for sure whether animals pine for a lost Eden, but many people have addressed the possibility. An abandoned wolf cub, reared as a pet, becomes uneasy and begins to stare into the distance, then one day it vanishes; the Chippewa Indians described this as 'the sickness of long thinking', the yearning to return to the wild. Laurens van der Post similarly writes that horses have 'a sadness glowing at the far end of the long look' and are 'haunted by dreams of their birthright of freedom exchanged for a mess of oats and the security of luxurious stables'.

The eyes of the equines often have what we describe as sadness, for just as our eyes are a window to the soul, so can animals' eyes be expressive in ways that we may interpret through human emotions. As D.H. Lawrence put it, 'Elephants in the circus have aeons of weariness round their eyes.' 'Eyes, always eyes' writes John Berger, as he observes the apes in a zoo in Basel; and it was the eyes of London Zoo's perhaps most famous inhabitant, the gorilla Guy, that captivated his audience – eyes that were sad, yes, but intense and lit with intelligence, eyes that seemed to communicate with humans from a deep well of shared wisdom.



'Eyes, always eyes'. The status of this western lowland gorilla is as emphatic as its presence: its scientific name is Gorilla gorilla gorilla.

* * *

In general, people today have become accustomed to seeing animals not as they are. In books, films, cartoons and advertisements, quadrupeds in human clothes walk on two legs and are attributed with human speech and emotions; they are people substitutes, often caricatures. This may appear harmless, just another of the 'legitimate' uses we in our arrogance find for animals. But at best it is tinged with ridicule, and at times comes perilously close to abuse, of dignity and of character.

We have got used to seeing animals on screens and behind bars, their jaws and claws safely contained, their nature and needs denied. Dogs are on leads; horses harnessed; cows live on production lines; and chickens whose pumped-up Page 3 breasts are now brazenly displayed on plastic trays in the supermarket have never known what it was to scratch the earth, eat worms or establish their rightful pecking order. Most of these animals are no longer visible to the vast majority of humankind, hurrying about its business on tarmac and concrete.

The aim of this book is to encourage the reader to slow down and notice animals, go out and look for them and look again, in order really to see them – not as mere objects for our use, nor as subjects of study, but as individual creatures who share with us the mystery of life on Earth. Being conscious of the part animals have played in the history of human beings, from very earliest times up to the present, may open one's eyes to what is easily overlooked in our largely urban lifestyle, namely their importance to humans on so many different levels, from the strictly practical – and what can be more practical than providing us with nourishment – to the mythical and artistic. For if we don't *see* animals, we are unlikely to give them the respect they deserve, and if we can't find a way to live at peace with them, how can we be at peace with ourselves?