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Pineal/Perineal: The Anthropological Divide at Monkey Hill

Corey Ratch

In 1927, the French decadent, writer, and philosopher Georges Bataille visited the London Zoo, and found himself stationed before an uncanny and unnerving spectacle known as Monkey Hill. Despite the seemingly ordinary nature of a visit to the city zoo, the experience would inspire some of his most impassioned and maniacal early writings. Bataille's visual encounter with the exposed posteriors of the male baboons would affect him deeply and color his future writings on the perceived differences between human and nonhuman animals, a recurring theme in his work. In an essay he wrote in 1930 entitled "The Jesuve," he attempts to pinpoint his obsession with what he calls the pineal eye, a symbol for him of humanity's differentiation from lesser primates. Reflecting on his visit to the zoo, he writes, "it would have been impossible for me to speak explicitly of it, to express totally what I felt so violently in early 1927 (and it still happens that I bitterly feel it) in any other way than by speaking of the nudity of an ape's anal projection, which on a day in July of the same year, in the Zoological Gardens of London, overwhelmed me to the point of throwing me into a kind of ecstatic brutishness."¹

¹ Georges Bataille, "The Jesuve," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 78.



Figure 1: Monkey Hill, London Zoo. Raphael Tucks & Sons, *At the Zoo, Series II*, 1930. Artwork and photograph in the public domain. Information licensed under CC0. <https://www.tuckdbpostcards.org/items/92804-monkey-hill-baboons-shown/>

The scene for this momentous event could only have been Monkey Hill, a large display opened at the London Zoo in the 1920s and populated by hamadryas baboons captured in Africa. The zoological display of Monkey Hill was constructed so as to allow a clear and unobstructed view of the baboons, while strictly demarcating the space between the nonhuman animals and the human patrons of the zoo (fig. 1). This architectural division was representative of divisions that emerged in Western Europe and had been historically maintained in both philosophical thought and zoological practices. The dynamics of human-animal dichotomy are present in Bataille's own writings, including those writings inspired by his time at the London Zoo. This paper examines the architectural space of Monkey Hill and shows how Bataille's writings on the baboons reinscribed the human-nonhuman binary of Monkey Hill's architectural divisions, but in a bodily register in which the upper parts of the primate body—the mouth, the face, the pineal gland—came to represent humanity, and the lower parts—the ano-genital or perineal regions—became symbolic of a base and contemptible animality associated with the baboons. In the zoo, divisions between humans and other animals are often part of the display. Zoos manage the line between those seen as worthy of subjecthood and self-determination and those who are not, despite profound morphological and genealogical similarity. I argue that Monkey Hill, and the waterless

moat that divided the baboons from the zoo's human visitors, operated as an architectural management device, a concrete manifestation of a vast complex of discursive and ontological relations. This spatial division was emblematic of the ways that distances have been maintained between humans and other animals, as well as between humanity and its own animality, especially in Europe.

The monumental enclosure of Monkey Hill opened in May of 1925, as both a spectacle for visitors and for the benefit of scientific observation by the zoo's primatologists. With the Scientific Revolution and its promise of the universal betterment of humanity came a simultaneous program of imperial exploration, conquest, and terror. This history saw humans displace many nonhuman animals around the world from their homes and place them in the zoos of Western Europe. Monkey Hill's first baboons were taken from Ethiopia (often referred to as Abyssinia in England during the colonial period), and likely traveled from the ports of Djibouti, through the Suez Canal, and finally the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean. They arrived in London through a company owned by George Bruce Chapman, a circus owner and dealer in rare animals.² The display was arguably a part of the market for "mediated realities," which, beginning in the late eighteenth century, endeavored to teleport their audiences to another place. The new home for the baboons was an enclosure sixty feet wide and one hundred feet long, consisting of two giant artificial mounds of ferrocement and a number of large rocks. Zoo officials used trapdoors for limited management of the baboons' movement, including at night, when the baboons were wrangled into sleeping quarters contained within the rockworks. During the day, high-powered lights simulated sunshine. The large, artificial habitat was encircled in the front by a waterless moat eighteen feet wide and twelve feet deep, allowing for clear viewing while preventing escape by the baboons and entry by human spectators.

Given the particularly close genealogical heritage shared by human and nonhuman primates, displays of unclothed apes in zoos, shocking or fascinating as they may be, can help affirm the assumed distance of civilized humanity from the animal kingdom. In zoos, the management of this difference is worked out in material, spatial terms. Monkey Hill was situated within the larger Mappin Terraces, whose ambulatory construction and broad views were highly influenced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century panoramas.³ These exhibits' massive width likely filled the viewer's entire visual field; perhaps a visitor could believe themselves carried away on safari or, as in a nearby enclosure, to visit polar bears stationed on a glacier. The enclosure's design

² Malcolm Peaker, "London Zoo's Monkey Hill (1925-1955) Revisited," *Zoology Jottings*, accessed January 26, 2024, <https://zoologyweblog.blogspot.com/2016/05/london-zoos-monkey-hill-1925-1955.html>.

³ Peter Guillery, *The Buildings of London Zoo* (London: Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, 1993), 58.

was influenced by similar displays in Germany, particularly the work of Carl Hagenbeck, another seller of animals to zoos across Europe. Hagenbeck was both an innovator in zoo design and largely responsible for the popularization of the so-called “human zoo,” or ethnological exhibit, in Germany, marking a disturbing link between speciesism and the virulent scientific racism of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries.⁴ In Hamburg in 1897, to alleviate the problem of exotic animals dying in captivity, Hagenbeck opened a space designed “as the world’s first cageless zoo, showing the animals in natural surroundings, separated from the spectators by unjumpable ditches instead of bars.”⁵ Starting in 1902, many of the buildings of the London Zoo were overhauled under the guidance of Scottish zoologist Sir Peter Chalmers Mitchell. In a nod to Hagenbeck, Mitchell advocated a move to more open-air structures.⁶

Despite these innovations in “open-air” design, which forgo the more obviously oppressive and dismal character of cages or fencing, the spaces of the London Zoo nonetheless necessitate forced containment, including Monkey Hill. These forms of material containments bring to mind what German media theorist Bernhard Siegert calls the “ontic operations” of “cultural techniques of hominization.” One of these techniques, as Siegert details, is the making of various animal enclosures.⁷ As Siegert puts it, these concrete operations work to “mark the distinction between inside and outside, civilization and barbarism, an inside domain in which the law prevails and one outside in which it does not.”⁸ Although many contemporary zoos do important work in animal research and rehabilitation, their history as institutions shows them to be places

⁴ “Human zoos” had been popular in London since the mid-nineteenth century. See Nadja Durbach, “London, Capital of Exotic Exhibitions from 1830 to 1860,” in *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires*, eds. Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Éric Deroo, Sandrine Lemaire and Charles Forsdick (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 81. Human zoo exhibitions prior to the opening of the London Zoo most likely inspired a keener interest in apes during the period. Racist displays of this kind, such as the exhibition of Sarah Baartman, who was first brought to London in 1810 as the “Hottentot Venus,” were similarly couched in the seemingly innocuous exercise of scientific inquiry and based in Enlightenment modes of knowledge production. See Gilles Boëtsch and Yann Ardagna, “Human Zoos: The ‘Savage’ and the Anthropologist,” in *Human Zoos*, 114.

⁵ R.A. Marchant, *Man and Beast* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), 87.

⁶ The concern for the admittance of light and air into environments at the London Zoo led to new projects over the next decade, such as the Gorilla House, chronicled in a 1936 film by László Moholy-Nagy. See David Ashford, “Gorillas in the House of Light,” *Cambridge Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2011): 201-223.

⁷ Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 9. Siegert does not disregard the ontological aspect of power, but says that cultural techniques move “ontology into the domain of ontic operations,” which I relate at times in this article to a process of reification.

⁸ Siegert, *Cultural Techniques*, 12.

of management and coercive power through forms of containment that mark this divide. One legacy of the British Empire is the forced displacement of both human and nonhuman populations around the world, killing and separating families and forcibly kidnapping human and nonhuman people for enclosure and display in zoos and exhibitions. The London Zoological Society was an important part of this legacy, an outgrowth of the British colonial enterprise, conceived in 1825 by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, a colonial administrator involved in the founding of Singapore.⁹

Zoos are a site in which colonial and epistemological power intersect. Following the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, epistemological legitimacy became bound up with the role of the scientific practitioner as an individual, a recognized subjectivity, a person, against a world filled with objects for that person's observation and mastery. This person is historically a white male, a "master subject" or "dominator identity" constructed against women, racialized people, and animals as the epitome of neutrality and objectivity.¹⁰ According to historian Harriet Ritvo, Enlightenment modes of knowledge saw animals "significant primarily as the objects of human manipulation."¹¹ In practical terms, Ritvo writes, "advances in such fields as stockbreeding, veterinary science, and weapons technology made actual animals easier to manage. Nowhere were these developments more striking than in England."¹² One of Thomas Stamford Raffles's goals was to create a scientific institution in England that would put animals to use as objects of knowledge, a goal stated emphatically in a prospectus Raffles and Sir Humphry Davy published in 1825.¹³ Construction on the zoo would begin the following year.

Roughly a hundred years later, in May 1925, ninety-seven hamadryas baboons were delivered to the London Zoo from Africa and put under observation at Monkey

⁹ Kevin YL Tan and Lim Chen Sian, *Raffles' Letters: Intrigues Behind the Founding of Singapore* (Singapore: National Library Singapore, 2013), vi.

¹⁰ Kay Anderson, "Culture and Nature at the Adelaide Zoo: At the Frontiers of 'Human' Geography," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 20, no. 3 (1995): 277.

¹¹ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 2.

¹² Ritvo, *Animal Estate*, 2.

¹³ The prospectus reads: "It has long been a matter of deep regret to the cultivators of Natural History that we possess no great scientific establishments either for teaching or elucidating zoology, and no public menageries or collections of living animals where their nature, properties, and habits may be studied.... Should the Society flourish and succeed, it will not only be useful in common life, but would likewise promote the best and most extensive objects of the Scientific History of Animated Nature, and offer a collection of living animals such as never yet existed in ancient or modern times...animals to be brought from every part of the globe to be applied either to some useful purpose, or as objects of scientific research, not of vulgar admiration." Stamford Raffles and Humphry Davy, quoted in Peter Olney, "London," in *Great Zoos of the World: Their Origins and Significance*, ed. Solly Zuckerman (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979), 38.

Hill. Zoo officials attempted to heed the advice of Carl Hagenbeck's heirs in Germany to exclude female baboons from such exhibits. Given that the males were larger, with big fangs and larger pink buttocks, it was also thought they would be a more appealing spectacle. The original order had called for male baboons only, but for reasons unknown, six of the ninety-seven were in fact females. The results of this mix proved catastrophic. The baboons had no prior relationship with one another, and were thrown into a space roughly one percent the size of their usual roaming grounds, leading to an eruption of violence. In two years, almost half of the baboons were dead, including most of the females. The first few years of Monkey Hill saw the deaths of sixty-two males and thirty-two females. Although only eight of the males died from direct violence, the males killed thirty of the females in fights of a "sexual" nature.¹⁴ By the early 1930s, fifteen baby baboons had been born: fourteen were quickly killed, either having been caught up in fights, accidentally strangled by mothers, or kidnapped and strangled by rival males. Thirty more females were brought in, but these died as well, almost all by acts of violence. By the end of the 1920s, nearly two-thirds of the males and over ninety percent of the females were gone. Ironically, this orgy of violence was permitted within what was ostensibly a larger program of didactic enrichment in the "civilized" metropolis of London. The constructed environment of Monkey Hill became not just a place for innocuous public entertainment and scientific research, but a confined space for the viewing of a kind of artificial madness, of spectacular violence and sex, including masturbation, infanticide, necrophilia, and instances of cannibalism.

Nonhuman primates occupy a unique position in relation to humans. The English word 'ape' has long stood, as Boria Sax put it, to designate anything "almost 'human' but not quite."¹⁵ Donna Haraway has cast simians as liminal characters that appear "precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed."¹⁶ They are hybrids, she says, with the potential to destabilize normative narratives and binaries.¹⁷ Anxiety that these hybrid characters may be closer to us than we would like has required the continual maintenance of a divide between us and them, as a means of distancing and exclusion. Kay Anderson has highlighted the production of alterity in the zoo, observing that "western metropolitan zoos are spaces where humans engage in cultural self-definition against a variably constructed and opposed nature, with

¹⁴ Solly Zuckerman, *The Social Life of Monkeys and Apes* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), 219. Zuckerman notes, morbidly, that many of the dead females showed significant damage to their perineal regions.

¹⁵ Boria Sax, *The Mythical Zoo: An Encyclopedia of Animals in World Myth, Legend, & Literature* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 6.

¹⁶ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 152.

¹⁷ Haraway, *Simians*, 2.

animals as the medium."¹⁸ The apparatus of the zoo operates by preparing bodies for viewing within a frame: the cage, enclosure, or environment. These enclosures and the views they offer belie a complex of relations, a world of practices and material arrangements for the management of animal-objects who stand as the antithesis to civilized humanity. In his book *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben refers to instances of this difference management as the work of an "ironic apparatus" he calls the "anthropological machine."¹⁹ At Monkey Hill, the ditch separating human spectators from baboons manifested what Agamben has described as "the caesura [...] between man and animal."²⁰ The apparatus of the zoo orients bodies inside and outside, enacting the anthropological difference of human and animal. Monkey Hill, with its moat between baboons and human spectators, became a veritable anthropological machine in action.

Despite efforts to maintain distance, humanity's proximity to other apes has manifested in forms of pithecophobia—*pithekos* being Greek for monkey or ape—tied to the realization of our shared history with other primates, what Jacques Derrida has called the Darwinian trauma.²¹ Even though, like most apes, baboons share over ninety percent genetic similarity with humans, they have an especially bad reputation. While revered by the ancient Egyptians, they have often been targets of derision in other cultures. Technically classed as monkeys as opposed to apes, and possessed of a doglike appearance, they have been described in the United Kingdom as "hideous," "repulsive," "God-forsaken," and degenerate.²² Anatomist, primatologist, and President of the London Zoo Solly Zuckerman referred in his early writings to the perception of baboons as "extremely disgusting with reputations as agents of destruction who have been reputed to tear open the stomachs of young lambs to obtain curdled milk."²³ This poor reputation helps to mark them as unworthy of just consideration, cast as criminal based on their perceived non-adherence to protocols of decorum. The French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon's multi-volume *Natural History* (1775) illustrates baboons' disregard for the social and moral commandments of Western bourgeois society. Leclerc describes a baboon that was insolently lascivious and satisfied its strong desires in public. It seemed also to make a parade of its nakedness, presenting its posteriors oftener to the

¹⁸ Anderson, "Culture and Nature," 276.

¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 29.

²⁰ Agamben, *The Open*, 79. Here, as in the title of his book, Agamben uses the gendered term "man" to refer to humanity generally.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 136.

²² Ritvo, *Animal Estate*, 34.

²³ Zuckerman, *Social Life*, 193.

spectators than its head; but it was particularly impudent in the presence of women, and plainly showed its immoderate desires before them by an inexpressible lasciviousness. The magot, and some others of the monkey kind, have likewise the same strong inclinations, but as they are less in size, and not so petulant, they were more easily corrected; whereas, the baboon is not only an incorrigible animal, but intractable to the utmost degree.²⁴

The baboon as illustrated by Buffon is an intractable character, one who cannot be reasoned with, who cannot be disciplined, who cannot be reached. These so-called uncivilized elements are, however, present in humanity as well, often repressed, but nonetheless expressed throughout history. Zuckerman and Leclerc cast the capacity for base sexuality and horrific violence, like that seen on Monkey Hill, as beneath the dignity of cultured Western European sensibilities. Yet their expression by humans always waits just behind the curtain that divides the human from the animal.

Those passions, and the filth often associated with the lower body or even the body generally, are the animal natures that became largely denied. As Raymond Corbey argues, "in the modern era, European citizens looked upon themselves as 'civilized' and behaved as such. Decent people had to behave, dress, eat, defecate, make love, and so on, in a proper manner, and had to control their 'animal' impulses. [. . .] They associated peasants, the working classes, non-Western peoples, and various infamous professions and undesirable humans, with animals and animality, with 'untamed,' 'still uncivilized,' and 'low' nature."²⁵ Like the gargoyle, grotesque, or babewyn, baboons are seen, as art historian Michael Camille put it, as "all body and no soul, pure projectors of filth."²⁶ Like most animals in Eurocentric traditions of thought, they have been seen as pure flesh, pure carnality, empty shells, to be justifiably manipulated and exploited.²⁷ Baboons have been characterized as thoughtless animals

²⁴ Comte de Buffon, *Natural History Vol. 3 and Vol. 4* (London: T. Bell, 1775). Zuckerman, following Darwin's own observations, tells us that *presenting* or "turning the hinder ends of their bodies towards their fellows," including humans and other animals, is very common among both male and female monkeys and apes. See Zuckerman, *Social Life*, 142. This activity is not altogether uncommon among humans as well, in various cultural and sexual contexts.

²⁵ Raymond Corbey, *The Metaphysics of Apes: Negotiating the Animal-Human Boundary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 23-24.

²⁶ Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1992), 78.

²⁷ The characterization of nonhuman animals as empty and thoughtless was most famously espoused by the philosopher René Descartes, whose likening of all animals to clockwork automatons is well known and has had far-reaching historical effects. See René Descartes, "Discourse on Method," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 140.

devoid of discipline and moral character, unaware of themselves and thus not subject to the internalized discipline and shame that the human, self-reflexive soul affords. Even Michel de Montaigne, one of the few staunch champions of nonhuman animals in the European philosophical tradition, sees nonhuman apes as especially unpleasant: “Those that resemble us most are the ugliest and most abject of the whole band: for in external appearance and shape of the face, it is the apes [who resemble us most].” He quotes Cicero, quoting Ennius: “How similar the simian, ugliest of beasts!”²⁸ Montaigne makes this point less to denigrate nonhuman animals than human ones, which he sees as especially ugly, justified in covering their own horrid, “defective” nakedness. For Montaigne, the offensive genitals must be hidden especially, lest the sight of them, ironically, cool lustful passions.²⁹ Given this apparent shame, it is remarkable to see in Zuckerman’s writings the intense attention afforded to the ostentatious display of the ano-genital region of the baboon. This display is disconcerting not only because of the sheer, manifest nakedness of it, but also, given a proximity proffered by our shared primate heritage, a reminder of our own embodiment as animals, our own sexual and excretory functions and capacity for nakedness.

Reminders of our animal embodiment have often been placed at a distance from what is considered proper and civilized, a filth from within that must be disavowed. Julia Kristeva sees abjection, and specifically the excremental, as that which is tossed out of society—a filth that “relates to a *boundary* and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin.”³⁰ Seemingly, the cage or enclosure is the boundary that separates this filth from societies where humans dwell. As Agamben has explored in *Homo Sacer*, this play of inclusion and exclusion is not as clear as it might seem. At Monkey Hill, primates brought to the city are paradoxically both inside and outside of the laws that enable societies to function. They are situated in the cultural-technical-social space of the city, yet within this space, still another space excludes them from freedoms and protections that many (though not all) of the human citizens of that society enjoy.³¹ This state of exception is not so much an inside and outside, but the *threshold* that divides them.³² In other words, an enclosure or habitat like Monkey Hill, and especially its moat-like architectural gap

²⁸ Michel de Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond,” in *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 356.

²⁹ Montaigne, “Apology,” 357.

³⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 69-71.

³¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 18.

³² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 19.

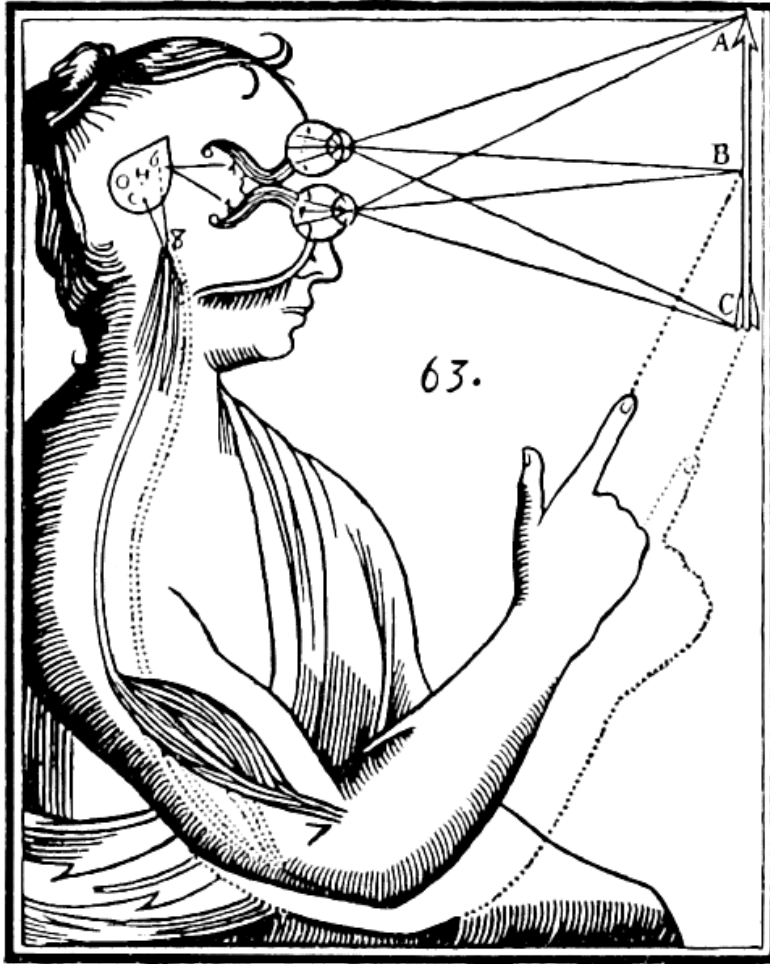


Figure 2: Reproduction of an original diagram of the pineal gland and its relation to the optical faculty. René Descartes, "Treatise On Man," 1664. Artwork in the public domain; reproduction provided by Wikimedia Commons.

dividing the baboons from the public, marks the threshold of civilized, human society, of an artifice of "culture" on one side and a carefully-prepared "nature" on the other.

In 1929, Secretary of the Zoological Society Peter Chalmers Mitchell worried about the impact of the Monkey Hill baboons' lack of shame and self-regulation, concerned "that the tendency of the baboons to copulate in

public might have a 'demoralising' effect on visitors."³³ Anxiety, shock, or disgust surrounding the viewing of primates in zoos, and especially baboons, is a commonly observed phenomenon. An anonymous author from the early twentieth century says of baboons: "We approach the imprisoned baboon with the same feeling of repugnance that would be excited by a debased and brutal maniac."³⁴ Accompanied by a philosophical account of their second-rate morphology, Bataille would ultimately express his distaste for the baboons as well. In "The Jesuve," he writes of the pineal eye, a take-off of René Descartes's research into the pineal gland as the place in which the human soul and body are connected, the corporeal seat of humanity's non-corporeal, transcendental character (fig. 2).³⁵ Like Descartes, Bataille relates the pineal eye to the transcendental, to the ideal, to restricted identities. For Bataille, the pineal

³³ Jonathan Burt, "Solly Zuckerman: The Makings of a Primatological Career in Britain, 1925-1945," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 37 (2006): 299.

³⁴ Quoted in Boria Sax, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust* (New York and London: Continuum, 2000), 49.

³⁵ René Descartes, "The Passions of the Soul," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 340.

eye, situated at the top of the human skull, is the utmost symbol of human beauty and vertical erection, in contrast to the ugly, hunched, and irritating physiology of the lesser apes.³⁶ He calls the body “a tube with two orifices,” the buccal—that is, of the mouth—and the anal, one above, one below. Setting up a boundary between the two, Bataille relates the former to humanity and latter to animality.³⁷ Each function as outlets for forceful expulsion. According to Bataille, because humans have become fully erect, the anus has now been tucked away in the buttocks and the anal energies redirected to eruptions of the face: laughter, screaming, sobbing, coughing, spitting, sneezing, and so on.³⁸ The juxtaposition for Bataille between man and baboon, between the face of man and the anus of the ape, establishes a strict line of separation between high and low.³⁹ The demarcation associates the filth of the lower body and the baboon’s animalistic nakedness with a violation of propriety, a nakedness Bataille first tried, but found impossible, to observe with detachment.⁴⁰ Looking at the baboons’ backsides—the perineal antipode to Descartes’s pineal—Bataille was scandalized by what he perceived as the base horror of animality, personified by the baboons, where the animals’ inner digestive faculties seem exposed, like a morphological error, the inside turned outside. Recalling his encounter, the tone of his writing is almost fanatical: “Today as I write, what I imagine of the pineal eye attains, through the course of a certain disorder, a brutality of erection so terrifying that I cannot imagine the enormous anal fruit of radial and shit-smearred raw pink meat (the one that struck me so in London) other than as an ignoble skull that I would smash with an axe blow, a rattled grunt deep in my throat.”⁴¹ For all of Bataille’s fascinations with excess and scenes of vileness, filth, and dismemberment, his rearing and comportment are still those of a Western European bourgeois gentleman-intellectual. Some twenty-six years later, he maintained that the “monkey’s ugliness disturbs us: it never ceases haunting us,” as if to recall that traumatic event in 1927.⁴²

³⁶ Bataille, “The Jesuve,” 74-75.

³⁷ Georges Bataille, “The Pineal Eye,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 88.

³⁸ Bataille, “The Jesuve,” 77.

³⁹ The privileging of the high over the low abounds in the Western cultural tradition, from the Acropolis and other high points in cities being seen as desirable or sacred; to the juxtaposition of Heaven and Hell or the celestial and the earthly; to the Great Chain of Being in which entities are hierarchically ordered from God down to the lowliest beasts. As explored here, the highest points of the vertically-oriented human body such as the richly expressive human face and the human brain are privileged, associated with the soul and humanity’s rational faculties.

⁴⁰ Bataille, “The Jesuve,” 75.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴² Georges Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, ed. Stuart Kendall, trans. Stuart Kendall and Michelle Kendall (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 73.

Monkey Hill was finally closed in 1957, but negative views of baboons and other primates lived on through newspaper coverage, popular culture, and in the early decades of the field of primatology, where baboons and other primates were seen to operate purely on competition, dominance, and patriarchal violence.⁴³ An article in *The New Scientist* magazine on January 24, 1957 seemed to trumpet with some relief the end of “the sadistic sociality of the totalitarian monkeys of the Old World, ... a state of affairs more shocking than might be thought possible outside Rome in the days of Caligula.”⁴⁴ But was it the baboons who were the totalitarians? For all the condemnation of the moral depravity of baboons, for all their uncivilized barbarity, it is hard to say if the humans of England, with their history of colonial theft, confinement, and exploitation, fare much better.

Monkey Hill is one of many historical sites in which animals, including and perhaps especially primates, became the limit against which civility and a full humanness was measured. The tension between these two poles—human and nonhuman—was cast across the architectural divide at the Hill. It is ironic that scenes of such cruel debauchery and violence were permitted within the apparently civilized bounds not only of the city of London, but a zoological organization tied to the lofty humanist endeavors of Enlightenment science. Accounting for these tensions, I suggest, involves acknowledging the ways in which the modern European subject was constructed, at least in terms of mainstream public discourse and conduct, as necessarily apart from this animalistic violence and sexuality. However, the paradox of attempting to provide a “natural” environment for the baboons inside a decidedly urban techno-cultural space also set the stage for new encounters that would not only unsettle visitors, but disturb the clarity of the human-animal divide. Georges Bataille’s obsessive reaction to the encounter at Monkey Hill played upon the same derogatory assumptions about baboons described throughout this paper, centered on the

⁴³ Feminist and queer biologists and primatologists have since shown that even in nonhuman societies, kindness, patience, and cooperation are vital in group dynamics and social functioning. The research of Sarah Blaffer Hrdy has helped to debunk the sexist “myth of the coy female” that arose, she argues, out of the Victorian values of Darwin’s time. See Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, “Empathy, Polyandry, and the Myth of the Coy Female,” in *Conceptual Issues in Evolutionary Biology*, ed. Elliott Sober (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 132. Barbara B. Smuts has challenged prevailing ideas about male dominance and female subordination, arguing that the relationships between male and female baboons were more nuanced and cooperative than previously believed. Her observations suggest that females had more agency and control over social interactions than earlier theories proposed. See Barbara B. Smuts, *Sex and Friendship in Baboons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 6-7. Joan Roughgarden has also looked to challenge a longstanding, totalizing emphasis in Darwinian evolutionary biology on “struggle” and competition over cooperation and kindness. See Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 162.

⁴⁴ “Riot Days in Monkey Hill,” *New Scientist*, January 24, 1957 (reproduced January 21, 1982), 180.

physiological, the soulless, and the sexual, the consequences of which were practices of denigration and exploitation such as those at the London Zoo. But while Bataille's case shows the typical revulsion at the baboons, it also shows something of an identification in his recognition of what he calls their "nudity." The spectacle of the naked anus of the baboon seemed to penetrate Bataille to his core, transgressing the carefully managed bounds of the human, affecting perhaps a cross-species sexual continuity, which caused in him an eruption of profound, vertiginous dissonance. This dissonance, borne of morphological similarity and familiarity, may be at the heart of much of the discomfort concerning the baboon body. Despite concerted efforts by zoos, this episode in the history of Monkey Hill points to a moment of failure in efforts to fully maintain the divide between human and nonhuman primates, whether those divides be philosophic, scientific, or architectural.

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