At the Mall with Fish

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> [T]heme parks and tourist attractions are never mere entertainment and recreation. No matter how much Sea World's operatives insist on the innocence of entertainment, it represents and shapes the world in ways that have implications.
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> —Susan Davis, *Spectacular Nature*

I FIRST BEGAN TO VISIT AQUARIUMS WITH MY CHILDREN WHEN THEY WERE VERY YOUNG, usually as a way of filling in the day with something colourful and exciting, and perhaps educational (I vaguely hoped). Once my children stopped being children I found that I was still seeking out aquariums, particularly when I was travelling, because they intrigued me. My fascination became an obsession and over the years I have visited literally dozens. I have been to the 'fish house' at the London Zoo (built in 1853 to educate the citizens of the world's then most powerful nation about the reaches of its empire), and the equally antique aquarium at Amsterdam's Artis Zoo, as well as large modern aquariums in all inhabited continents. A brief list includes Monterey Bay (California), New Orleans, Toronto, Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland, Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila, Taiwan, Tokyo, Durban, Cape Town, Rio and Sao Paulo. At every aquarium I visited, I couldn't help but wonder about the crowds of people I shared my visits with. What did *they* get out of visiting aquariums? Was it just another day out? Just another

way of overcoming boredom? Or was it something more than that? And if so, what? These questions began to take on urgency for me when I started to fill-in long plane rides to these far-flung destinations by reading about the current state of the ocean. I ploughed through the writings of scientists like Calum Roberts, Sylvia Earle, and Carl Safina, who all paint a similar picture of a vast species rich space that is in its death's throes before our very eyes that no one seems to be noticing. People seem to regard the ocean as a limitless resource that can simultaneously feed hundreds of millions of people, absorb all our waste products, and offer up oil and precious minerals to support our industries, all without cost or consequence to its multiple and varied ecosystems. The more aquariums I visited the more I wanted to know whether their exhibitions could help to change this way of seeing things. I wanted to know if they enabled people to relate to aquatic life in a deep-feeling way, by which I mean in a way that would make them willing to act in a more environmentally conscious and responsible way.

Figure 1. Monterey Bay Aquarium (Photo by author).

If, as the saying goes, we only care for what we know about then the fact that most people probably only ever encounter marine creatures on ice at their local fishmongers or in batter on their dinner plates and therefore tend to think of them exclusively as food, is obviously a problem from the perspective of conservation. It is evident, too, in the public debates about marine conservation (on topics such as shark culls, no take zones, catch sizes, and so on) that there is a deep ambivalence in the way most people think about aquatic life. We seem not to even be able to empathise with marine life—it wasn't until 2002 that we finally accepted that fish do indeed feel pain, thanks in large part to the research efforts of British bioveterinarian Lynne Sneddon, though our approach to them continues to *not* reflect this knowledge (as fishing, fish farming and aquarium practices can

all attest). Even when it is recognised that protections are needed we seem not to be able to divorce that thought from the entrenched idea that sea life is either something to be eaten or something to be feared or both. Somewhat surprisingly, this outlook is reinforced in the emerging field of blue cultural studies, which similarly tends to regard aquatic life as primarily a food resource and eating aquatic life as a viable form of relating and caring.[1] I do not share this view, as I have argued elsewhere, so my concern here is to look at other pathways to relating and caring that are not premised on the consumption of aquatic creatures and that could conceivably lead to a strong form of deep-feeling I believe is necessary to engender conservation thinking and acting.[2] Hence my interest in aquariums.

It is my sense that most people only ever encounter actual *living* marine creatures at an aquarium. This obviously excludes snorkelers and SCUBA divers (they are, however, a very small percentage of the population), but, even then, none but the most avid divers would ever see anything like the variety of species and ecosystems that can be seen at an aquarium in the course of their lives. As such, it seems not unreasonable to speculate that aquariums could have the potential to catalyse new forms of relating and caring. In examining aquariums from a cultural-studies perspective I want to ask several interrelated questions at once. I want to know if seeing living aquatic creatures inspires feelings of attachment and care; I also want to know if these feelings differ from the feelings generated by seeing aquatic creatures on a plate. Similarly I want to know if seeing living aquatic creatures is more or less affecting when they are seen 'in person', so to speak, as opposed to when they are seen on a screen in a David Attenborough or Jacques Cousteau documentary.[3] Obviously enough I cannot hope to answer all these questions here, so I will restrict myself to just one question: I want to know how aquariums 'work' (in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's sense of that word) as cultural institutions.[4] Using language that could have been drawn from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (but wasn't), Davis offers an answer to this question in her ground-breaking book *Spectacular Nature* that I find helpful as a starting point. She says the aquarium functions as 'a kind of machine that structures vision in

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[1] See for example the recent collection of essays *Sustaining Seas*, edited by Probyn, Johnson and Lee, which nowhere contradicts this view.

[2] As I have argued elsewhere, I disagree with Elspeth Probyn's (2016) thesis that it is only by eating fish that humans can be induced to care for fish (one wonders at a model of care that can encompass killing and eating the thing one is supposedly caring for) (See Buchanan, 'Must We Eat Fish?').

[33] It is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting here that the next generation of aquariums may well consist of robotic creatures 'swimming' in tanks, which may be welcome on one level because it means real creatures will no longer have to be captured and displayed, but unwelcome on another if it means people never encounter 'real' aquatic life, assuming that an encounter with the real is necessary to produce feelings of attachment and care. See <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jul/13/robot-dolphins-the-cruelty-free-20m-animal-you-cant-tell-from-the-real-thing>.

[4] Cf. 'Given a certain effect, what machine is capable of producing it? And given a certain machine, what can it be used for?' (Deleuze and Guattari 3).

highly specific and thoughtfully determined ways' (Davis 95). Aquariums, she says, are in the 'feelings' business: they have to generate feelings of excitement and interest and they have to avoid 'boredom, uneasiness, anxiety, disgust, and pity' (Davis 161). That is to say, nature isn't intrinsically appealing—in the sense of compelling people to part with their money—all by itself, it needs to be framed in very particular ways to produce that interest.

This framing operates on a number of different levels, in the architecture, in the lighting, the background music, the captioning of exhibits, the species selection, and so on, but it all serves a singular purpose: to transform nature from something that one may or may not choose to look at into a compelling spectacle. The aquarium is the product of both a highly selective approach to the types of creatures it puts on display and a highly inventive approach to creating new and interesting ways of displaying those creatures (Davis 19). As Hayward rightly argues, aquariums have a paradoxical aesthetic in that as far as possible they seem to want to solicit an experience that feels unmediated, but in order to achieve that they need to deploy a fantastic range of mediating techniques (as I will discuss in more detail below). This feeling is also paradoxical, in a different way, she argues, because its central goal seems to be the reaffirmation of an anthropocentric worldview (Hayward 164).

Documenting and deconstructing the techniques and technologies used to package nature, as I do in what follows, is, I want to argue, an important and necessary step in coming to understand how the aquarium machine works when it is working. It does not answer all my questions, of course, but it can help set the stage for finding those answers. We can begin to draw the diagram of the machine (as Deleuze and Guattari insist is necessary if we are to understand its operation) by reviewing its history from the perspective of desire. As Bernd Brunner shows in his charming history of aquariums *The Ocean at Home*, without actually putting it this way, the aquarium brings together two trajectories of desire that were either current or reaching their apogee in European and North American society in the 19th and 20th centuries: the desire to collect and the desire to display. Although they are obviously related, these two desires are not identical because one does need to collect in order to want to display (as conspicuous consumption makes apparent), nor does one need to want to display in order to collect (as hoarding makes apparent). Aquariums made visible what had hitherto been invisible and in doing so created a new world of opportunities for collecting which Victorians of means keenly accepted. The depths of the ocean were unknown and largely unknowable until the middle of the 19th century because the requisite technology needed to breathe and see underwater was lacking. These two desires (collecting and displaying) began to manifest themselves in a variety of ways from the late Renaissance onwards when cabinets of curiosities became fashionable among the wealthy, more or less in step with the European exploration and

conquest of the non-European parts of the world, when sea-going vessels would bring back all manner of natural wonders.

Over the years, these catch-all cabinets of curiosities gave way to more specialist and specialised passions and interests. In the 1700s beachcombing and shell-collecting became fashionable, as did the keeping of exotic birds and ornamental poultry (Brunner 21). From there it was a small step to collecting and displaying live marine creatures and plants. In actual fact, though, we need to go much further back, because fish have been collected and kept in ponds and glass-sided tanks in Europe since Roman times and in China since at least the 10th century. However, it wasn't until the late 1700s that people began to deal seriously and effectively with the technical problems of keeping fish alive in tanks in the home; and it took until the mid-1800s before those technical problems (aeration and nutrition were the most pressing) were sufficiently attenuated (not to say resolved) for aquariums to become vogue amongst the middle and upper classes of Europe and North America (Brunner 31-3). This coincided, happily enough, with the burgeoning of popular and essentially amateur interest in science—Charles Darwin is the most renowned example—which ennobled collecting as something other than the whimsical acquisition of nature's marvels.[5] Ironically, it was one of Darwin's most vocal opponents, Philip Henry Gosse, who popularised amateur marine science, and the corresponding desire to collect and display marine creatures.[6] He is also credited with endowing the Latin word 'aquarium' with its current meaning (Brunner 39). He was so successful in conveying his enthusiasm for aquariums that in later life he came to lament the devastation of England's coastal areas caused by avid collectors following in his footsteps and strip-mining the sea shore for specimens to stock their tanks (Brunner 139-40).

In the early days of collecting and keeping marine creatures it was essentially a private passion—the collections were shown to friends, but they were not made public as such. It was not until the mid-1800s that public aquariums appeared. The first public aquarium, the Fish House at the London zoo, consists of several banks of the kind of fish tanks one might find in the home of a genuine aquarium enthusiast, each measuring approximately two or three metres across, with larger

[5] I must note here that I use the word 'nature' in a variety of ways throughout this piece without offering a single clear-cut definition. In part this is because it is a highly contested term and I don't think any single definition would suffice; relatedly, the literature surrounding the term is too large to engage with meaningfully here. My use, though, owes a great deal to Raymond Williams' well-considered ambivalence toward the two extremes of the debate—i.e., either everything is nature or only the non-human is. Both positions are useful and problematic, he argues, suggesting that there is no real advantage in resolving this debate (Williams 67-85).
[6] Shortly before *On the Origin of the Species* was published, Gosse published a book in which he argued that fossils were placed in rocks by God in order to create the impression that the earth had a longer history than it really had. Apparently, this was a step too far for most people and despite his renown Gosse became something of a laughingstock and his career languished. Hill 2019: 28.

'habitats' built around the edges. For decades this was the benchmark for what a public aquarium should look like and it was widely emulated around the globe. Paris had its own version, which is said to have inspired Jules Verne's 1870 novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (Elias 33).[7] From their earliest days, public aquariums have been caught in a bind which they cannot easily escape, and it has shaped their development in a very particular fashion. They are businesses first and foremost, so they depend on numbers through the door for their existence, and, in this respect, they are in exactly the same business as theme parks, movie theatres, television, and the internet—namely, the so-called 'attention economy'. Their commodity is 'nature' and its appeal is uncertain and inconstant.[8] We may be fascinated by nature, or at least tell ourselves that we ought to be, but generally speaking we do not hesitate to put our own interests ahead of the other-than-human plants and animals with which we share this planet. Evidence of this is not hard to find, although in the case of the ocean it typically remains unseen. Some species, such as the majestic bluefin tuna, have seen their populations dwindle by as much as 99 percent in the past few decades, and there are dozens more that have literally disappeared (Roberts 3). Then there are the ongoing disasters of algal and jellyfish blooms, acidification, coral bleaching, the spread of deoxygenated 'dead zones', rising water temperatures and the incredible volume of biological and non-biological pollutants and rubbish that has been pumped into the ocean without a second thought.

[7] It is interesting to note here that the first film version of Verne's novel, which was made in 1915 but wasn't released in Europe until after the First World War, inspired the surrealists with its otherworldly imagery. Indicatively, Breton's 1937 work *L'Amour Fou* (*Mad Love*) includes an underwater still of a coral reef in the Bahamas, which he mistakenly labels as a section of Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

[8] For example, The Sea Life franchise, which manages 53 aquariums (as of 2020) all over the world, is a subsidiary of the Merlin Entertainment Group, which also owns Madame Tussauds, Alton Towers and Legoland among other properties.

Figure 2. Shinagawa Aquarium (Photo by author).

Environmental devastation is a measure not only of environmental neglect, but also of environmental indifference, and it is precisely that indifference which aquariums try to counter (for their own commercial reasons) by pretending they are something other than what they are, namely the continuation of the very system—i.e., capitalism—that has caused catastrophic damage to the environment over the past several hundred years. One of the acute contradictions of aquariums, as Davis astutely points out, is that as commercial enterprises they are both part of the system that is destroying the environment and—potentially—one of the key voices raising the alarm about the scale and pace of the destruction of the environment (Davis 18). That one of the world's largest public aquariums (the Dubai Aquarium and Underwater Zoo) should be found in the middle of one of the world's largest shopping malls (the Dubai Mall) is, in this regard, both unsurprising and emblematic of the cultural role of aquariums today and the attitude most people have toward fish. Fish are commodities that we either consume literally as food or figuratively as living spectacles. It may not be going too far to say that there is in fact no real distinction to be made between the mall and the aquarium given that the latter is itself basically just 'a mall with fish' as one of Susan Davis's students pithily put it. Underwater life is 'the story that helps keep us shopping' (Davis 2). Like the traditional shopping mall, which is a hybrid space that while privately owned is generally treated as a public space, like the village high street it replicates and replaces, the aquarium is a privately owned

'public' space to walk through, to spend time in, and consume images. As Davis writes, when 'I looked at Sea World as a corporately produced public space, I saw a business offering a blend of information about marine animals and their environment in a commercial form that increasingly claimed the legitimacy of the traditional public education domain' (Davis 14).

Although Davis conducted her field research more than 25 years ago, her insights continue to resonate today because the underlying logic of aquariums as commercial enterprises has not changed. That being said, there is scope to revisit her many excellent questions and astute analyses of aquariums because they have gained in urgency in the intervening years. The one that resonates the most insistently today (in my view) is one that has a relatively minor place in Davis' overall schema, indeed it is almost an aside. She asks, is it not 'preposterous to locate a nature theme park' in a social and political context that is actively dismantling environmental protections? Her point of reference is the US in the mid-1990s, but the global environmental situation has only worsened since then (as the unprecedentedly hellish bushfires in Australia and the US in 2020 amply demonstrate to everyone but the respective national leaders). By situating the aquarium in the political economy in the way she does, Davis pinpoints a key contradiction in the aquarium assemblage that demands further thought: '[I]f a visit to Sea World expresses concern about the environment (as Sea World's advertising proposes), Sea World's affluent audience acts on this sentiment in a thoroughly private and corporate context, and one where the definitions of nature and environmental problems seem reassuringly separate from other political issues' (Davis 17). If environmental problems are treated simply as either technical problems for which technical solutions will one day be found (for example, giant booms to gather up floating plastic) or community problems for which community solutions can be found (for example, 'take three for the sea' campaigns), and not as the direct result of capitalism as a 'form of life' then the best we can hope for are cosmetic changes to the way we do things, such as putting the label 'sustainably sourced' on seafood sold at supermarkets or 'this drains to the sea' stencils on storm drains.[9] And I'm sorry to say this exactly how the aquariums I visited frame the expected response to the multiple acknowledged threats to the future of aquatic life. Individual citizens are called upon to act with the help of private corporations which are depicted as benefactors donating money and expertise to help the cause.

As may be expected, satisfying the commercial imperative of the aquarium to draw in a steady stream of customers is achieved by a variety of means: imaginative design, cultural tie-ins (*Jaws*, *Finding Nemo*, etc.) and perhaps most importantly the lure of providing education. Davis scathingly describes Sea World's

[9] I take the notion of capitalism as form of life from Grove (Grove).

educational efforts as 'edutainment', a judgement that could be generalised to encompass all aquariums. While the displays are framed as educating and improving, their actual educational value is dubious because the image of aquatic life they offer is highly distorted. Here it is perhaps useful to speak in terms of trends—not just in the sense of passing fashions, but in the stronger sense of emerging archetypes of design. The history of aquarium design has followed five main trajectories: firstly, the aquarium tanks have gotten larger, thus enabling them to accommodate a greater variety of species, including the larger species such as the misnamed Whale Sharks (which are neither whales nor sharks), White Pointers and Hammerheads, and even some species of marine mammals such as Beluga Whales and Sea Lions; secondly, the tanks have been shaped so as to foster the impression that one is actually inside the tank, or at least more fully immersed in the viewing experience than one can be when confronted by a flat screen; thirdly, tanks have been created that specifically enable spectators – especially children – to touch certain non-dangerous creatures such as sponges and starfish; fourthly, thematic framing has been added, such that the newer aquariums resemble theme parks; and lastly, perhaps fulfilling Guy Debord's prophecy that the image will eventually replace the thing, aquarium tanks are being replaced by flat screens displaying digital animations of aquatic life. The final form of nature will be, as *Blade Runner* predicts, animation and animatronics.

Enlarging the exhibition was initially accomplished arithmetically by increasing the number of tanks. Now, though, in modern aquariums, enlarging the exhibition is accomplished geometrically by increasing the size of the tanks, which today are built on the scale of arenas. The largest aquarium in the world, the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta, built with a $250-million donation from Home Depot co-founder Bernie Marcus, features as its showpiece a 24-million-litre tank.[10] The aforementioned Dubai Aquarium and Underwater World in the Dubai Mall in UAE is the next biggest with a tank of some 10 million litres. Turkuazoo aquarium in Istanbul, also located in a shopping mall, as it happens, has a 5-million-litre tank viewed by means of an 80-metre tunnel. Monterey Bay Aquarium on Cannery Row in Monterey, which was initially funded by David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, and therefore spared some of the commercial pressures of other aquariums, boasts two enormous tanks, one of 1 million litres and another of 4.5 million litres. These vast tanks reconstruct ocean habitats on a cinematic scale—and, indeed, replicating the cinematic experience does appear to be their intention. Often these huge tanks, which can measure more than 30 metres across and 10 metres high, are surrounded by banked theatre style seating so spectators can tarry awhile. Typically, aquarium spectators move through the displays at a speed comparable to that of art gallery visitors—which is to say rapidly and

[10] The statistics relating to the size and scale of public aquariums are drawn from this helpful site: <https://www.touropia.com/largest-aquariums-in-the-world/>.

almost without pause, except briefly to snap a quick selfie or two—so these spaces allow for a more contemplative and in my own case at least enchanted viewing experience. Aquariums are moving pictures and their effect can be mesmerising, especially if one takes the time to get lost in the view.

In 'The Age of the World Picture', Martin Heidegger writes: 'everywhere and in the most varied disguises the gigantic is making its appearance. In so doing, it evidences itself simultaneously in the tendency toward the increasingly small'. He explains this paradoxical claim as follows. 'The gigantic presses forward in a form that actually seems to make it disappear—in the annihilation of great distances by the airplane, in the setting before us of foreign and remote worlds in their everydayness, which is produced at random through radio by a flick of a hand' (135). Both of these trajectories—the becoming gigantic that is also a becoming microscopic—can be observed in the history of the development of public aquariums. The larger the tanks have become—and as I've just indicated some are indeed gigantic—the smaller they make the oceanic space they are endeavouring to represent seem. The microcosm does not merely stand in the place of the macrocosm, it annihilates it.

This is not, however, a matter of a triumph of the simulacrum over the real thing (as Jean Baudrillard might frame it). As Davis argues, nature simulations are as old as history itself, and as such they are not troubling in and of themselves; 'it is the uses to which nature simulations are put that we should worry about, the stories about environmental crisis that are left untold and the limits on our ability to imagine solutions' (Davis 238). In dialectical fashion, she argues that it is what is invisible in aquariums that should concern us because what we do not immediately see 'are the selective ways nature is shaped into something that can be looked at' (238). This selectivity, in turn, erases the long human history of the exploitation and despoliation of aquatic environments. Aquariums are pristine, apparently paradisiacal spaces, in which 'nature' has been both contained and managed, thus offering an uplifting vision for the future that—completely falsely and unrealistically—suggests we can 'fix' the messes we have created by the application of technology and 'know-how'. In other words, it encourages the view that the microcosm of the aquarium is in fact the 'truth' of the macrocosm—it is in this sense that gigantic displays make the ocean disappear.[11]

[11] Elias makes a similar point, though her argument is historical rather than conceptual. She writes: 'By 1921, Western perceptions of the underwater were shaped by aquariums, which were understood as optical devices for visual entertainment that brought pleasure and wonder by miniaturizing the sea on land' (Elias 126).

Figure 3. Monterey Bay Aquarium (Photo by author).

No matter how large the tanks become, however, they can never escape their apparent two dimensionality so long as they retain their flat screen design. This 'produces a sense of emotional distance and remoteness that even the transparent medium of glass cannot rectify' (Elias 52). If we take literally Rebecca Stott's description of aquariums as 'theatres of glass' then we can perhaps make a parallel between the viewing situation of theatre patrons and aquarium visitors (Stott 31). Both are confronted with an impenetrable 'fourth wall' separating them from what they are viewing, a situation that serves to remind them that what they are viewing is just 'make believe' and not something they have to take seriously or engage with. While this may be fine for certain types of theatre, for the aquarium viewer it undermines the idea that what they are witnessing in the tanks is 'real', that it is actual 'nature' and not just a theatre of glass. Consequently, at the heart of the development of aquariums for the past fifty years has been this basic situation of viewer and viewed and the need to make that feel as real as possible.

In theatrical terms aquariums needed to find a way of breaking down the proverbial fourth wall and immersing the viewer in the display and not the tank itself. The late Kelly Tarlton, a marine archaeologist, diver, and entrepreneur, was the first to experiment with a tunnel design in his Underwater World Aquarium in Auckland (now part of the global Sea Life franchise) to allow spectators to pass underneath and through aquariums, rather than move around them. He also pioneered the use of a travelator or conveyer belt to move spectators through the space, which solved two separate problems, the logistical problem of throughput, and the ambulatory problem of walking or moving without looking where one is going (this latter problem has become especially acute in the age of the smart phone!). Tarlton's idea has now been emulated all over the world. Each new

iteration is bolder in both scale and ambition, again following a geometric rather than arithmetic progression. The Shanghai Ocean Aquarium has a stunning 155 metre tunnel, which is almost double the length of the Turkuazoo aquarium's similarly impressive 80-metre tunnel, and it completely dwarfs the 35-metre tunnel at Spain's L'Oceanogràfic, which is the largest in Europe. The experience of walking through these tunnels is similar to watching a film in an Imax style cinema—there is a gigantism of the literally moving image which is both overwhelming and reality-distorting. The curvature of the tanks diffracts the light and distorts one's view—making some creatures seem bigger than they are and others smaller than they are. The tank above looms so large it is impossible not to think this is what it must be like to walk on the floor of the ocean and yet one is dry.

In more recent times aquariums have attempted to negate the fourth wall by framing their tanks with design elements adopted from theme parks. A favourite strategy, used in several aquariums I have visited (UShaka Marine World is the most sustained example), is to style the interior as though it were a sunken ship. The aquarium tanks are seen through the portals or holes in the ship's hull, thus creating the illusion that spectator and spectated upon share the same fluid space. Another favourite is to create a 'jungle scene', particularly for freshwater species from the Amazon in South America, replete with all the Indiana Jones style signifiers one would expect and the proverbial tank of flesh-eating piranhas. The tanks are usually positioned in such a way that one views them from above, as though one had stumbled upon a river or lake in the furthest recesses of the Amazon forest. But one cannot help but think that contextualising the displays in this way can only reinforce the view that the displays are simply that, something to be looked at for the sake of a moment's wonder, and not as representatives of a rapidly disappearing 'wild' world.

But this is far from the most disturbing development. In recent times, the tanks themselves have begun to disappear, to be replaced by screens displaying either recorded live-action video or computer generated animations. The most extreme example of this, I've seen, is the Taiwan National Aquarium, which has an entire building devoted to digital displays—or, to put it another way, it has an entire building which is completely absent all forms of aquatic life. While that is the most extreme example I have seen, it is now quite common to encounter digital displays that take the place of what would once have been live animal displays.

Figure 4. London Sea Life Aquarium (Photo by author).

One finds it hard to believe that animation can ever build the same potential for affective relations that actual animals do, but then again it is abundantly clear to any aquarium visitor that the displays that excite the most interest from children are the movie tie-ins: clown fish (Nemo) and yellow tailed blue tangs (Dory) are particularly popular in this regard.[12] It is not uncommon to hear a chorus of 'Nemo!' from school groups as they approach the tanks where the clown fish are housed. In many cases, the clownfish, particularly, are displayed on their own, giving them both a prominence and conspicuousness that is not in keeping with how things are in their natural setting. To be sure, this is a general feature of all aquariums, which as Ann Elias argues, want their displays to be visible to their paying customers, rather than camouflaged as the creatures themselves would typically want to be, but in the case of 'famous' species singled out for special treatment it makes it appear they are the only species worthy of attention (Elias 143).

This manner of foregrounding select species is reminiscent of shopwindows and the way they present merchandise in an eye-catching fashion (Elias 156). In this way, the screen of the aquarium functions much as the TV screen does, as a

[12] Even home tanks have been influenced by these films, as this website selling tanks and related equipment amply attests: <https://www.reefsaltwateraquarium.com/what-types-of-fish-are-in-finding-nemo/>.

mechanism for driving sales. One might respond to this by saying it is only by breaking the spell of the screen that a 'reenchantment with the ocean environment' as (Melody Jue puts it) can happen (Jue 64). But this is a double-edged sword. *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Finding Dory* (2016) are probably the two most widely known films about life underwater and for many children they are the only representation of aquatic life they are familiar with, so the popularity of these films *is* the reason the children are at the aquarium in the first place. But it is perhaps also the reason the children leave without thinking about the actual fish. It is clearly the case, too, as John Berger said of zoos, that at least one of the reasons adults take their children to aquariums is 'to show them the originals of their "reproductions"', but whether this necessarily induces a deep-feeling for the oceanic originals is not clear (Berger 23). Certainly if the gift shops can be taken as symptomatic, then the over-representation of these two species on their shelves is a powerful indicator of the importance of the connection between visual culture more generally and aquariums.[13] My impression watching children encounter clown fish and yellow tailed blue tangs in aquariums, seeing them shout excitedly in recognition that they've seen Nemo and Dory, and quickly take pictures of them, is that they do not experience this as 'touching the real' (as Slavoj Žižek might put it). If anything, it seems to take them deeper into the virtual world—I would suggest that Nemo and Dory function as territories (in Deleuze and Guattari's sense) that enable the children to exercise their imagination in relation to what they have seen. But this in no way means they connect their interactions with Nemo and Dory to large issues about the current plight of all aquatic life (Buchanan, *Assemblage Theory* 60-2).

[13] Sometimes this is taken to absurd lengths, as it is at Sydney's Sea Life Aquarium, which uses the children's TV character Peppa Pig as its mascot, ostensibly because it has a dugong named Pig on display.

Figure 5. Auckland Sea Life Aquarium (Photo by author).

It is hard not to be pessimistic about what can be achieved by aquariums as cultural institutions in terms of building support for environmentally progressive political action, but it may be that they are our best hope. This in turns raises the question of what might be done to make them 'work better'? How can the deadlock of the commercial imperatives of the attention economy be broken in such a way that a genuinely holistic view of aquatic life can be presented, fostered and promoted for all our benefits?

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