

The Art of Watching

Looking at Animals Looking at Us

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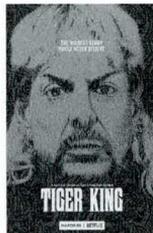
EARLY IN JANUARY, a few days into the New Year, I sat with four students on the ninth floor of a Twenty-Third Street Manhattan building. I have two dominant memories of our week together: The first is of the forbearance with which they withstood my raging head cold; the places they found to look while I filled tissue after tissue, stuffing various pills, sprays, and lozenges into my face, inflicting on them a six-day wrath that should have been mine alone. Grumpy and overmedicated, midweek I told a colleague, because she asked, that I felt like a jungle cat was sitting on my face.

The second memory is of a student's perturbed expression, the way he stopped speaking one morning, midsentence. The group had traveled to New York City, most of them for the first time, from around the country: Kentucky, Minnesota, Colorado, Maryland. Having paused, my student turned to the window. After a long beat I heard it too—the emergency siren that had broken his line of thought. We laughed about the fact that my limbic system had long stopped registering such things, or I laughed. They appeared a little sad for me, unconvinced that desensitization was something to be desired, or boasted about.

BY THE TIME I heard about Netflix's *Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem, and Madness*, in mid-March, early January belonged to a past life. The recommendation came during my first virtual cocktail hour, three people in three different boroughs. For the occasion I had peeled the Canadian-flag sticker back from my laptop's camera lens—another first. The sticker was a paranoid gesture

more legible as a futile act of protest: I might stare into this thing all day and night, but I'll be damned if it looks back at me. Check it out, my friend said of *Tiger King*, it's wild, we're loving it. The next day a second recommendation appended one of many check-in emails, then a third rave arrived. It was the show to watch, addictive, a perfect escape. Alone in my Brooklyn apartment, separated from my partner by two hundred miles and a growing logistical quagmire, escape was much on my mind.

The world was closing in on itself, unit by unit. Still, there were signals, devices, briefings, shows to binge. Mostly, in my new world, there were sirens. At first I wasn't sure I was hearing right. Perhaps this new strain of dread had reattuned me to what was always there. But they grew louder, closer, more numerous. I looked online to confirm my own senses, the way each keening pinned me to the wall. I have been inside an ambulance with someone in respiratory failure. I know what slow suffocation looks like, how brutally vulnerable a body can be. I clung to my screens but began policing news consumption, identifying stories to avoid. That where to look was one of the few choices still



Tiger King
Directed by Eric Goode and
Rebecca Chaiklin
Netflix, 2020
8 episodes

available concentrated whatever I had been before into a thing that existed mainly to take other things in. Attention became both more precious—to spend it wisely was a form of salvation—and superfluous, hard even to give away. All the time the sirens pealed, a reminder of the outside world, the body I still had; of hideous suffering, what someone else was poised to lose.

MY PARTNER AND I agreed to try *Tiger King*. We would watch in tandem, from our respective citadels. I knew less about the show, a seven-episode docuseries, than I did about the haste with which people were choking it down. Speed of consumption now certifies a viewing experience, as does its amenability to the joyless-camp factory that is social media, where almost anything—but especially content designed with feed-combustion in mind—can be memed, owned, repurposed as an inside joke. Everyone was inside now. The need to watch a lot of something and then make fun of it appeared vital and universal, a rare source of unity. Thirty-four million people saw *Tiger King* in the first ten days after its release. Asked during an appearance on One America News Network what he was “binge-watching” during the global pandemic, Donald Trump Jr. said he finished *Tiger King* in two sittings. “I’m just really disappointed that I didn’t know you could get a tiger for two grand,” he said. “That would have been pretty cool to have a tiger hanging around the house.”

Codirectors Eric Goode and Rebecca Chaiklin spent five years filming “Joe Exotic,” the Oklahoma big-cat zoo operator who had been filming himself for much longer than that. The show’s most persuasive subthread presents Joe as a would-be reality-TV star: His existence seems prefab, almost too perfectly aligned with the social and moral rot that powers and is perpetuated by so much docu-tainment. A gift for extremity, malignance, and spectacle links Joe and the genre he seeks to master. Rather than pierce his persona’s anarchic force field, *Tiger King* celebrates it, giving Joe the kind of depraved reality-show treatment that helped invent him. He is depicted as both venal buffoon and ruthless businessman, ringleader of a profitable shithole

estate that houses dozens of tigers, lions, and the unnatural hybrids he has bred between them.

Joe tells his staff of drifters and eccentrics that visitors to his exotic-animal emporium come to see him, not the tigers. The show appears to share this idea, treating as incidental the astonishing cats Joe cages, breeds, pimps for photo opportunities, and executes at whim. Though no less exploitative or tragic, the relationships that most interest Goode and Chaiklin have a more clickable appeal: Over the course of the show, Joe cycles through three teenaged husbands; an obsession with a Florida big-cat activist named Carole Baskin begets a plot to kill her. But Joe is the opposite of wild: Wholly ordinary, he is loyal foremost to himself, whatever will bring him the next hit of dollars, attention, notoriety.

Even when the tigers of *Tiger King* are in sight, the eye can’t quite meet them. The incongruity of their presence in Joe’s fallen world, and the show about that world, is so potent it blurs the frame. Not unlike the customers desperate to commune with the cats, I longed to see them clearly. I also wished to be seen, for the reciprocity John Berger describes, in “Why Look At Animals?,” as central to the “existential dualism” that first characterized the bond between human and beast. Accepting that dualism—that animals “were subjected *and* worshipped, bred *and* sacrificed”—allowed for the possibility that they also observe their human observers, contain secrets addressed just to us. Rejection of it “is probably an important factor in opening the way to modern totalitarianism.” To transform an animal into spectacle, as we have done systematically and almost without exception, is to disappear it. To look at caged wildlife is to see “something that has been rendered absolutely marginal; and all the concentration you can muster will never be enough to centralize it.”

In a boom time for ghastly numbers, *Tiger King* offers a truly depressing one: There are now more tigers living in captivity in the United States than exist anywhere in the wild. Indeed, we gawped at Joe Exotic while captive in our homes, a direct result of our persistence in encroaching on wild animals, our inability to hold them in view. Watching the latest in the

growing line of light-nihilist entertainment, the word often invoked in discussions of the novel coronavirus came to mind: *insidious*. It's the same word my mother used to describe her lung disease, the way pneumonia could hide while it took hold, leaving just enough room to be ignored, plausibly denied; so that by the time you grasped the full state of things you were already on the floor.

IN THE STREETS, the faces of my neighbors had disappeared. We peered out from behind masks that troubled our breathing and hid our weak attempts to smile. At my local park, children inscribed koans and exhortations on the asphalt with pastel chalk. *This is Hard, Huh*, went one written in pink and blue block letters. *People Vegan Please*, read another. In the mornings I walked this park with my dog, dancing around the locals with whom I would usually chat. In some cities a dog was a sheltering person's only ticket out of the house. Foster applications were up by hundreds of percent.

The president held evening briefings in the two-hour range. Confined to the White House, unable to hold his signature rallies, Trump preened and bullied in the press room, spreading misinformation, trashing state leadership, and badgering reporters. He had perhaps never come closer to his vision, expressed to top aides before he took office, according to the *New York Times*, that each presidential day should play out like "an episode in a television show in which he vanquishes rivals." In late March, on the day that COVID-19 deaths passed one thousand in New York state, Trump bragged about his briefings' ratings on Twitter. The people still loved to hear him talk, and "the Lamestream Media is going CRAZY." In episode five of *Tiger King*, "Make America Exotic Again," Joe runs for governor of Oklahoma. He calls himself a libertarian without knowing what that means. When his drugged-out husband shoots himself, Joe leverages the death for a campaign boost. "He's not afraid to say what he wants to say and do what he wants to do," says one admirer, presumably among the 664 who voted for Joe Exotic in the primary.

By the time it was reported, early in April, that a tiger at the Bronx Zoo had been diagnosed with the coronavirus, I was newly familiar with the Mayo Clinic's diagnostic criteria for panic attacks. A spate of *Tiger King* pieces appeared around that time, dissecting its appeal, challenging its handling of the facts, indicting the framing of Carole Baskin as the villain of the piece. Nearly a thousand New Yorkers were dying each day. The briefings continued, clips of which I watched sideways but whose import always hit straight on. Like Joe Exotic, they made me ashamed to be a person who looks at things. They left no doubt as to the villain's identity.

"**GIVE THIS MAN** the Nobel Prize," my friend wrote in mid-April, after I sent him a video in which an out-of-work Scottish announcer narrates his two dogs' mealtime like it's a high-stakes sporting event. I sent out that video again and again. I watched it on repeat, my first laugh in weeks. I want to say Berger got pets wrong, that he passes too coolly over the "one way in which animals, instead of disappearing, continue to multiply." For Berger the codependency between human and pet blinds the relationship on both sides: The human imagines his pet sees him the way he wants to be seen; the animal is conditioned to confirm this impression. But because she is a good dog—perhaps the best—it is evidence of my pet's autonomy that beguiles me most. Do I imagine it? Is this imagining pleasant but otherwise worthless, a bit of well-wrought anthropomorphism in the midst of a lethal plague?

Getting a dog made me visible in a way I had not been before. People stopped in the street, said hello; strangers smiled. Her presence seemed to verify me in the public sphere. More than ever, watching her sprint through the park each morning is the best thing I see all day. A close second is the faces on the way there and back, obscured but unbroken. We are learning to talk through our masks, to find the eyes above them. The rule of distance brings with it a sense of reluctance, the suggestion between strangers that we both wish it otherwise. We may, we may not. That there is room to imagine lights a small flame in a sea of dark. ■

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