Home Is Where the Zoo Is
*Mixed Messages in* *We Bought a Zoo, Madagascar 3, and Life of Pi*

*We Bought a Zoo* [Motion picture]. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

*Madagascar 3: Europe’s Most Wanted* [3D; Motion picture]. USA/Taiwan: Dreamworks.

*Life of Pi* [3D, Motion picture]. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

Introduction

Popular depictions of zoos and circuses provide a snapshot of contemporary understandings of our relationships with nonhuman animals. *We Bought a Zoo* (2011), *Life of Pi* (2012), and *Madagascar 3: Europe’s Most Wanted* (2012) collectively represent both a shift in human-animal relationships and the maintenance of the status quo encased in conventional zoo and circus practices. The result is a staging of the unresolved and competing ways Western culture currently views nonhuman animals, as alternative perspectives are starting to take hold that compete with traditional, culturally deeply ingrained ideas, animal practices, and economies. Thus, the films discussed here capture the tension between the idea that nonhuman animals “naturally” belong in zoos and circuses, and the paradoxical need to justify it at the same time. All three films focus on charismatic animals as their subject matter. *We Bought a Zoo* and *Life of Pi* predominantly explore human stories, identities, and emotional development against the zoo as backdrop and charismatic animals as foils. *Madagascar 3* especially focuses on the idea of the zoo as “home” for the very humanized, animated protagonists and reflects, with very mixed messages, contemporary debates around our use of nonhuman animals in zoos and circuses.

Mullan and Marvin pointed out that “…people regard the zoo as an easily understood and essentially unproblematic institution, and the zoo visit as an unproblematic event” (cited in Malamud, 1998, p. 5). As Malamud (1998)
succinctly put it, zoo visitors “see what they want to see, rather than the thing itself” (p. 134), an “Emperor’s New Clothes” effect. Accordingly, the idea that zoos and circuses are entirely “natural” homes for animals is featured in all three films, albeit with different, even unexpected, and contradictory outcomes. Moreover, the juxtaposition of different technologies employed in each film to represent the animal protagonists highlights the mixed messages that characterize contemporary sentiment toward nonhuman animal use and calls the film industry’s own “natural” use of nonhuman animals into question.

**Life of Pi**

Ang Lee describes the gist of his adaptation of Yann Martel’s novel of the same title as “really portraying the journey of a person in relation to nature and to the self” (“Ang Lee’s Pedigree,” n.d.). This journey is both literal and metaphorical, as Pi, a sixteen-year-old boy, ends up alone in a lifeboat with a tiger named Richard Parker after the ship carrying his family and a number of animals from the Pondicherry Zoo sinks. The film portrays Pi’s negotiation of the ornery situation at hand. Both survive, as Pi sets territorial boundaries and uses circus training methods to subdue the tiger. However, it becomes evident that the narrative is the retelling and recasting of deeply traumatic events that include and follow the shipwreck. The story filled with nonhuman animal characters, most notably Richard Parker, thus becomes a “better story” than Pi’s actual, gruesome experiences with human castaways.

Lee’s cinematography puts the viewer in awe of nature. The lifeboat, for example, seems suspended in space, as the ocean meets the sky in a reflective display that leaves doubt as to where one begins and the other ends. The lifeboat containing the boy and the tiger suggests a microcosm that represents the need for balance in nature and harmonious interspecies relationships. Correspondingly, the opening credits portray the Pondicherry Zoo, home to the Patel family, as a safe haven and natural habitat for all species, who seemingly intermingle freely, as shots of bars and cages are largely absent. Indeed, Pi achieves a symbiotic relationship on the lifeboat by mastering the tiger through reward and punishment in an imaginary circus show. Mastery merges with stewardship once the training has succeeded. As Pi comments, “Tending to his needs gives my life purpose.” Thus, “Pi’s ark” represents the continuing shift in zoo culture since the twentieth century; mastery gives way to the idea of stewardship, conservation, and communication (see Franklin, 1999, p. 49).

Nonetheless, Pi’s attempts to communicate with Richard Parker are ultimately frustrated; the tiger does not talk back. This disconnection between Pi and Richard Parker, both in the zoo and the lifeboat “ark”/“circus,” reflects, in part, the debate surrounding captive animal entertainment. Unlike the