

# The Troubling Sense of Elephantswans

Year: 2000  
Level: First Years, Autumn Semester 1  
Unit: 33062 Foundation Studies 1  
Duration: 7 days  
Dates: April 17, May 1\*, 8, 15, 22, 29, June 5

\*Visit Featherdale Wildlife Park, Doonside.

## Origin

This project was initially prompted by popularity, based on the fact that the most popular artist nominated by first year fine art students was Salvador Dali. This was ascertained by looking through all the questionnaires submitted at the point of interview, where each applicant was asked to 'name two artists whose work you like'. With rare exception Dali would always be a perennial favourite amongst the students, as indeed he was for me when I was an art student. This raised some interesting questions as to why? What was his appeal? And the project in part explored this. By building the project around Dali's curious 'surreal' paintings, I anticipated that the subject matter would be inherently interesting to the majority and create an interest in the project different from the usual bewilderment at the abstruse nature of most of our offerings.

## Premise

The premise was a simple one: to make a monster, and to arrive at this outcome through a sequence of processes staged to facilitate the 'monstrous'. The project was arranged in 'six courses' and given as 'a recipe for disaster'. There was a great play with words and word puns throughout the project, this 'mutation' of language attempting to match the mutant or metamorphic nature of the subject in question.

The lecture that introduced the project linked up a number of key references that the students were encouraged to become conversant with; an understanding of the advent of surrealism and the surrealists and what prompted a fascination with irrational states and a desire to disturb and unsettle: the uncanny terrain of dreams. A key image of Goya's "The sleep of reason gives birth to monsters" was seminal, as was his famous image of an elephant startled by a group of men, themselves startled by the strangeness of the creature arguing over "Who will fasten the bell?" I showed a series of slides of 'odd' things, including Meret Oppenheim's famous fur covered cup, saucer and spoon, Beuys attempting 'to explain painting to a dead hare', Rauschenberg's goat tyre (monogram), images by James Ensor, Fuseli and the likes of Man Ray, Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, Rene Magritte.

I played some musical extracts along the way commencing with "Teddy Bear's Picnic" this innocuous little children's song whilst ostensibly quite amusing is in fact quite sinister. To parallel the disturbed space of the nightmare I played some death metal recordings: "Morbid Butchery" by Mortician and prior to this offered a lullaby to 'lull' or 'lure' the audience into the ensuing nightmare (Manuel De Falla's 'Nana', one of the 'Seven Spanish Folk Songs'). I also, by way of contrast, played Rameau's 'Les Sauvages' for solo harpsichord – to give a paradoxical baroque refinement to the notion of the 'savage'. I completed the lecture with the gruesome 'impure orgies' by Impaled Nazarene.

The initial point of departure for the project required students to generate a set of Rorschach patterns and in talking about Rorschach in the lecture I offered what I considered to be a musical equivalent: a symmetrically rendered poem of Captain Beefheart (Don Van Vliet): 'Sam with the showing scalp flat top particular about the point it made'. The strangeness of the tale being told (not quite making sense) being conducive to multiple interpretations (as with the interpretations of dreams). I brought in a few objects to further illustrate the interpretive symmetries of Rorschach: a cow vertebrate that looked like a figure of an angel, a flattened tin elephant and a wood carved figure from Papua New Guinea.

I talked at some length about Dali's 'Paranoiac Critical Method' via the simple duck/rabbit ambiguity whereby perception can alternate between two readings of equal value. The title 'elephantswan' derives from an image in a Dali painting that is both elephant and swan (one can optionally switch between the two). This inherently destabilises the image and heightens the consciousness of pattern recognition and its underlying basis in cognitive acts. The play between cognition and re-cognition emerges out of this hesitant state of apprehension that is encapsulated in the question: 'What is it?'

Louis Sass' insightful 'Madness & Modernism' linked in well with Dali's eccentricity (apparent 'lunatic' behaviour) and was referenced in relation to the susceptibilities of a heightened reflexivity in damaging 'reason'.

A segment of the lecture engaged with Stephen J. Gould's fascinating account of the discovery of the Burgess Shale: 'Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shelf and the nature of History'. I explained his theory of contingency and showed several images of bizarre creatures fossilised within the shale, as improbable as any fanciful creation of the imagination. I used these images in contrast to 'fabulous creatures' once thought to have existed, whilst in fact inhabiting the realm of myth (the sense of the monstrous again foregrounded). Two further objects: a segment of ginger root and an odd shaped rock were then used to exemplify the formation of a morphology predisposed in its ambiguity and relative amorphousness to assume character and become creature-like.

John Berger's powerful essay 'Why Look at Animals?' (in his collection: 'About Looking') was a key text that all participants were required to read, as pre-emptive to a scheduled visit to Featherdale Wildlife Park in Doonside (referred to as 'F(e)ather Dali's Wild Laugh Bark). I talked about the 'disappearance of animals', the relationship between captivity and captivation: the fascination with so-called 'wild' animals (fellow creatures) and the equivalent fascination with an artwork (that holds one 'captive'); the potency of the encounter with a captive animal being the reciprocity between 'watching' and 'being watched' (eye contact with an 'alien other').

Each student having generated 10 Rorschach patterns then selected three to work from, these would be the ones that could be most read into in terms of 'creature potential'. The suggestive silhouettes were progressively 'illuminated' in various ways to make available more and more information about the initial obscure 'sighting'. From the 'fixed' sighting, speculation could then proceed around questions of physiology (fizzy-o logic): how does the creature move? and what does the creature eat? Audio embellishments could then be explored: what sounds might this creature make? This in turn could lead to considerations of habitation and behaviour (timidity or temerity, nocturnal or diurnal?) The final stage involved letting all the 'creatures' loose in the studio to see what might happen, when, as it were, they were 'let off the leash'.

**"So geographers in Afric maps, with savage pictures fill their gaps  
And o'er inhabitable downs, place elephants for want of towns."  
Swift**

THE TROUBLING SENSE OF  
***ELEPHANTSWANS***

-- *A RECIPE FOR DISASTER* --

FIRST COURSE

April 17th

***THE SYMMETRY OF RAW SHARK***

In which questions of forecasting arise, fishing for the monstrous,  
Splashing about in the deep, Rorschach testing, holding patterns,  
Making darkness visible, prognostications, incubations,  
Dali's delusional delights and doubling up,  
Method and Madness and the P.C.M.

SECOND COURSE

May 1st

***DALI COMES TO DOONSIDE***

In which a visit is arranged to a local zoo and the question is asked:  
Why Look At Animals?  
Clues to oddness, the strangeness of fact.

THIRD COURSE

May 8th

***THE FIZZY-O LOGIC OF BODY PARTS***

In which our sleepy reason gives birth to monsters,  
Materialising monstrosity, born in captivity,  
Questions of nutrition: feeding the preternatural.

FOURTH COURSE

May 15<sup>th</sup>

***UTTERANCE AND NON UTTER SENSE***

In which creatures mutter and field recordings are attempted  
and cacophonous mumbblings are deciphered.  
rumouring manoeuvres.

FIFTH COURSE

May 22<sup>nd</sup>

***STRANGE SIGHTINGS***

In which the behaviourists move in,  
Comings and goings, habits, rabbits and (r)habitation.  
The borrowing of burrows, nocturnality  
And the night bumps.

SIXTH COURSE

May 29th

***MANAGING MENAGERIES BADLY***

In which the neighbourhood of Z is "terrorised".  
An exercise in decaptivation.  
The fine art of awryness.  
Things go from bad to worse....

## ***RECOMMENDED READING REFERENCES***

(Underlined titles held in closed reserve Ward Library)

### ***Fabulous creatures***

- Aristotle "History of Animals" (Biological treatises) Uni.Chicago Press 1952  
Pliny the Elder "Natural History, a selection" Penguin classics 1991 (Books 8-11)  
Seneca "Phaedra" (from "Four Tragedies and Octavia") Penguin Classics 1966  
(p.139-40)  
Borges, Jorge Luis "The book of imaginary beings". Avon books 1970  
Poe, Edgar Allan "The sphinx" (from: Complete Tales) Penguin 1987  
Shelley, Mary "Frankenstein" Macmillan 1995  
Wells, H.G. "The Island of Doctor Moreau" Duffield and Green 1933  
Clark, Anne "Beasts and Bawdy" Dent 1975  
Gould, Stephen J. "Wonderful Life: The Burgess shale and the nature of History" Hutchinson 1989
- Berger, John "About Looking" (essay: "Why Look at Animals" p3-28 1977) Vintage books 1991  
Budiansky, Stephen "Covenant of the wild, why animals choose domestication." Weidenfeld 1994

### ***Rorschach***

- Klopfer and Davidson "The Rorschach Technique, an introductory manual" Harcourt 1962  
McCully, Robert "Rorschach Theory and symbolism" Williams & Wilkins 1971

### ***Paranoiac Critical Methodology***

- Nadeau, Maurice "History of Surrealism" (Chapt 15: Dali and Paranoia-Criticism) Cape 1968  
Ades, Dawn "Dali" (Chapt 4 The Paranoiac-critical method)  
Finkelstein, Haim "Salvador Dali's Art and Writing 1927-42" (part 4 Under the sign of the Angelus)  
Moorehouse, Paul "Dali" (pages 13-25: The Paranoiac-Critical method)
- Sass, Louis "Madness and Modernism" Harvard Uni. Press 1992  
Sutherland, Norman "Irrationality: the enemy within" Penguin 1994

### **Theories of Monstrosity**

- Cohen, Jeffrey (ed) "Monster Theory, Reading Culture" Uni.Minnesota Press 1996  
Todd, Dennis "Imagining Monsters" Unl.Chicago Press 1995  
Bann, Stephen (ed) "Frankenstein, Creation and Monstrosity" Reaktion Books 1994  
Thomson, Philip "The Grotesque" Methuen 1979  
Halberstam, Judith "Skin shows, Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters" Duke Uni. Press 1995

### **Goya**

- Bareau, Juliet "Goya's Prints" British Museum Publication 1981  
Goya "Goya, Truth and Fantasy: the small paintings" Yale Uni. Press 1994  
Sanchez, Alfonso "Goya, complete etchings and lithographs" Prestel 1995  
Sanchez, Alfonso "Goya and the spirit of enlightenment" Bullfinch Press 1989

## PRELIMINARY DIRECTIVES

***The following work will need to be completed for presentation and assessment/discussion on Monday May 8<sup>th</sup>***

1. *Using the black ink-blot technique as demonstrated, produce 10 chance Rorschach patterns. These should be created on A4 sheets of loose leaf blank white paper. 5 image patterns should be created by folding the paper along its vertical axis and 5 created by folding the paper along its horizontal axis. Experiment with various dilutions of the ink to achieve a variety of outcomes from stark sharp jet black silhouettes through to subtle gradations of grey tones. You should produce many more than 10 initial patterns, varying the technique each time and then select the 10 most interesting ones.*
2. *From these 10 patterns select 3 as prototypes for further development. Your selection should be based on those patterns that in their morphology (shapes) and ambiguity are most suggestive of creatures of various kinds.*
3. *Using your journal, write a description, each in turn of the 3 Rorschach patterns. These descriptions should be as detailed as possible, let your imagination run free with the suggestions triggered by the patterns. There should be lots of speculation about what it is exactly that is going on in the patterns, the potential is there from the clues and hints in the various silhouetted shapes that comprise each pattern to “report” on what you see, what you perceive to be happening. Particular attention should be paid to shapes that can be read in a number of different ways as **either/ors** (the “this-and-that” potential: I could read it as this or I could read it as that, where a shape can be both this-and-that)*
4. *Develop from the 3 patterns that you have selected and written about a series of studies : works on paper that explore the various silhouetted shapes. Imagine a spotlight that casts the silhouette of the pattern, moving around in amongst the shapes illuminating and revealing the detail of what is there, and what is going on. The original outline of each shape should be carefully retained throughout this process and should remain unchanged throughout. It is the content of each shape that is to be “made sense of” and how the various components of the pattern interact. You should attempt to work with the pattern in its entirety, where possible accounting for all the shapes within it.*
5. *The context or situation in which the elements in each pattern are made visible needs to be considered: the pattern as a pictorial illusion, and your visual studies should locate your “creatures” spatially, exploring and clarifying figure/ground ambiguities (what is in front, what is behind, what overlaps, what is hidden, what is connected, what is separated).*
6. *The primary objective of the visit to Featherdale Wildlife Park on Monday May 1<sup>st</sup> is to observe the behaviour of creatures held in captivity and to correlate this experience with the “captivity” (captivity) of pictorial space, that is a space limited, bounded, contained and observed through a frame, a physically “unentered” space. John Berger’s essay “Why look at animals” is a key point of reference for the visit to the wildlife park, in raising awareness of a number of issues that have a direct bearing on this project, in particular the way in which “wildlife” is rendered “pictorial” (reduced to a picture), marginalised and disengaged (the stare of indifference), the altered behaviour of the captive. The second objective of the visit is to use this “meeting with remarkable creatures” (the strangeness of fact) as an “advisory session” that will assist in vivifying your own imaginary constructs (the wisdom of animals).*

Check list of what you need to have completed and bring to the studio on Monday May 8<sup>th</sup>

- 1) *Ten Rorschach patterns on A4 sheets*
- 2) *A detailed written commentary on three of the ten patterns*
- 3) *The enhanced visualisations of the 3 patterns – as exploratory studies (works on paper) that begin to clarify your reading of the silhouetted shapes (what’s what).*

- 4) *To have visited Featherdale Wildlife Park and have read Berger's essay "Why look at animals" and to become conversant with Salvador Dali's "Paranoiac-critical methodology" (references held in closed reserve Ward library)*

### SAM WITH THE SHOWING SCALP FLAT TOP

Sam with the showing scalp flat top particular about the point it made.

Why when I was knee high to a grasshopper  
This black juice came out on a hard shell chin  
And they called that tobacco juice  
I used to fiddle with my back feet music for a black onyx  
My tar room absorbed every echo  
The music was bird like  
The music was bird like  
I usually played such things as rough neck and thug  
Opaque melodies that would bug most people  
Music from the other side of the fence  
A black swan figurine lay on all colour lily pads  
On a little conglomeration table of pressed black felt  
With same coloured shadows  
It seemed knobkneed and whatnots  
The long hall way rolled out into odd ball odd  
Beside the flypecked black doorway  
That looked closed on the tar latticed street  
Up a rod iron fire escape  
Rolled out a tiny wooden platform with  
Dark, hard, dark rubber wheels  
Rolls screet  
Rolls screet  
Rolls screet

Sam with the showing scalp flat top particular about the point it made

*CAPTIVE VIEWING*  
OR  
WATCHING THE WATCHED WATCHING

**On secrets and the abyss of non-comprehension.**

“The animal scrutinises us across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. This is why the human can surprise the animal. Yet the animal – even if domesticated – can also surprise the human. The human too is looking across a similar but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension. And this is so wherever looking takes place. The human is always looking across ignorance and fear. And so, when the human is being seen by the animal, it is a seeing, as his surroundings are seen by him. The recognition of this is what makes the look of the animal familiar. And yet the animal is distinct, and can never be confused with the human. Thus, a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power but never coinciding with it. The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to the human.”

**On the disappearance of animals : The ideology of spectacle.**

“As spectacle, animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are. Yet in the same ideology nature is also a value concept. A value opposed to the social institutions which strip humans of their natural essence and imprison them. Nature thereby acquires the meaning of what has grown organically, what was not created by humans, in contrast to the artificial structures of civilization. At the same time, it can be understood as that aspect of human inwardness which has remained natural, or at least tends or longs to become natural once more. According to this view of nature, the life of a wild animal becomes an ideal, an ideal internalised as a feeling surrounding a repressed desire. The image of a wild animal becomes the starting point of a daydream: a point from which the day-dreamer departs with their back turned.”

*These two quotes from Berger's "Why look at animals" raise pertinent issues about the relationship between humans and animals and contend that the nature of this relationship has altered in certain significant ways that are indicative of a deteriorating condition within those societies that have witnessed, what he refers to as the "disappearance of animals."*

*What is wild? "Living in a state of nature; not domesticated; native, not refined by culture, savage, turbulent, crazy, untidy, disorderly, untamed. An uncultivated, uninhabited region."*

*What does it mean to bewilder? "To lead astray or into confusion; to confound; baffle, in a state of mental confusion."*

*"Wildness" is defined negatively in a way that implies disorder or more importantly disobedience in the sense of being untamed and non-compliant with the rules that*

*govern human behavior. To be “wild” is to behave unpredictably and instinctively and this is viewed as potentially threatening and thus requiring constraint, to control and prevent uncontrollable situations from arising. In this context it is interesting to note the uncontrollable condition of the dream state.*

*What is captive? “To seize; taken prisoner by force, surprise or stratagem. To captivate: to capture the fancy of, to fascinate, to capture: all of a sudden, without warning, startling.”*

*“Capturing” as well as being a physical act of detention also operates as a visual metaphor in relation to fascination (fascinate: to deprive of the power of movement, by a look, to bewitch, to enchant) we are susceptible to “captive viewing”. What is it that engages and focuses our attention to this almost mesmerised degree. What is exactly going on when we say that something “captures our imagination?”*

*Berger refers to anthropomorphism (projecting human characteristics and behaviour onto associated animals and then using them as metaphors to evoke such behaviour) as integral to the relationship between humans and animals, as an expression of their mutual proximity to one another. “Anthropomorphism was the residue of the continual use of animal metaphor. In the last two centuries, animals have gradually disappeared. Today we live without them. And in this new solitude, anthropomorphism makes us doubly uneasy” Why are koala’s cuddly? Why are owls wise? What is diabolical about the Tasmanian devil? In your wanderings observe your own metaphoric projections characterise (or typecast) each animal.*

*From the Latin Specere : to look, we derive a whole cluster of words, all related to this common origin: spectacle, spectator, spectacular, specimen, species. All imply something displayed, something on show. A specimen is an individual example on show.*

*“Looking” generally in this context implies a safe viewing distance, a spectator is normally someone who pays-to-look at, rather than participate in an event. What happens to experiences when they are experienced or viewed from the side-lines?*

**TAKE NOTE OF THE FOLLOWING**

**WATCH YOURSELF WATCHING**

**WATCH THE WAY IN WHICH THE WATCHED WATCH**

**WATCH THE WATCHERS WATCHING**

**ASK YOURSELF THE QUESTION: WHAT DIFFERENTIATES THE “HUMAN” FROM THE “ANIMAL” IN THESE OBSERVATIONS AND NOTE EXPERIENCES OR BEHAVIOURS THAT MIGHT BE USEFULLY DEPLOYED IN YOUR OWN SOON TO BE CREATED CREATURE**