Irus Braverman has written a wonderful monograph that explores the operation of zoos—insti tutions that manage to be utterly familiar while retaining an aura of mystery. It will undoubtedly be a popular addition to many academic disciplines, and here I accentuate why it should be avidly read by what at first might seem to be the unlikely audience of Surveillance Studies scholars.

Based on interviews with zoo directors, administrators and curators, the book is reminiscent of studies of theme parks. But where theme parks are unabashedly about consumption aligned with corporate profit, zoos are now justified by the higher calling of conservation; something that extends to rescuing individual animals, species, and entire habitats. Braverman gives the book’s last words to zoo spokesperson Steve Wing, who underscores this difference: ‘We’re not like Pepsi or Coke. We’re all in it for the sake of the animals. And when we know something—we share’ (194).

Notwithstanding this noble endeavor, the ethics of maintaining animals captive is hotly debated, and Braverman deftly avoids become embroiled in these controversies. Her concern is not whether zoos are good or bad, but how they work. She identifies seven interrelated technologies of zoo governance that also reveal her Foucauldian orientation; naturalizing, classifying, seeing, naming, registering, regulating and collectively reproducing zoo animals. Each technology receives a chapter-length analysis. Running throughout the book are also some of the central themes in the study of surveillance, including the power of classification, bureaucracy, identification, the panopticon, dataveillance, the creation of a field of visibility, and how all of this might be connected with an ethics of care.

Broadly speaking, zoos produce and rely on two different forms of knowledge, and each is connected to distinct regimes of visibility. The first project is visceral, and aims to create a spectacle for public consumption. The second project is bureaucratically rational, focused on generating the types of systemic knowledge and visibility that can enhance the day-to-day administration of zoos.

Managing animals starts with assigning them names. The zoo’s ‘edutainment’ function results in animals being given public names such as ‘Ling Ling’ the panda. In contrast, the zoo’s bureaucratic knowledge project sees animals assigned alpha numeric identifiers and scientific classifications, such as the magnificent name for the western lowland gorilla; ‘Gorilla-gorilla-gorilla.’ As with humans, the issue of how to categorize animals can be complicated, controversial and contested.

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1 Editor’s Note: an earlier version of one of the chapters was published as Braverman, Irus (2012) Zooveillance: Controlling Zoo Animals to Conserve Surveillance & Society 10(2): 119-133.
Zoos must also reliably connect named animals to their individualized bureaucratic files. This can involve banding, RFID implants or photographing species that are too small or abundant to identify individually, such as insects. This identification project has resulted in animals sometimes having mind-bogglingly comprehensive personal dossiers. Braverman describes, for example, the reports on ‘Timmy’ the gorilla’s life after he was transferred to a new zoo:

Just for the first month of his stay in Louisville, Timmy’s report includes thirty-three pages of data, documented in eight-point type size. The report records the minutia of Timmy’s feeding habits, his relations with other gorillas, and with each of the keepers, and the basic medical details of his everyday management. (117)

This documentary mania can commence prior to birth, through the use of sonograms, and extend after death, in the form of autopsy reports.

As zoos have become more circumspect about removing animals from the wild, they have become more dependent on acquiring animals from other zoos. That, combined with their global conservation ambitions, has contributed to zoos developing computerized and networked zoo management systems. These allow for a form of dataveillance where a widely distributed network of zoo professionals can immediately analyze the biographical, medical and genealogical records of zoo animals dispersed across North America.

The public, however, sees little of this documentary infrastructure. Instead, visitors are witness to a multi-layered project of visibility designed to foster a conservation ethos. Braverman’s unpacking of this project provides ample material to satisfy postmodern sensibilities attuned to the ontological grey areas in any discussion of ‘the real’ or ‘the authentic.’ This includes ‘naturalized’ habitats fashioned out of plastic rocks, debates over whether zoo animals are or are not ‘wild,’ and an industry that breeds feed animals, such as rodents, to whom sentimental views about nature do not typically extend.

Animals are exhibited in environments meticulously crafted to enhance a particular ethos of seeing. This can involve rocks that are heated electrically to draw reclusive reptiles out into the open, sightlines that isolate one exhibit from another, enclosures explicitly crafted for photography, layouts that encourage animals to nest in public view, and pathways built to progressively expose animals as one approaches an exhibit.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this project of public visibility are the assorted phenomena that must be hidden from view because they might complicate or undermine the impression of naturalness that zoos seek to foster. This includes concealing old or infirm animals, limiting the evidence of human presence in exhibits, and not showing audiences the back-region enclosures where animals can spend the majority of their time. It is in such starkly instrumental spaces that animals receive medical or dental attention, and where they often reside at night. Interestingly, many animals prefer such locations to their faux ‘naturalized’ habitats. In one back region Braverman observed that zoo handlers had placed a television and aquarium for the viewing pleasure of the animals—pointing to a different dynamic of watching at the zoo.

This focus on vision and monitoring also involves situating zoos within Foucault’s conceptual oeuvre. Braverman presents zoos as involving attributes of panoptic surveillance mixed with forms of visibility that are more akin to the dynamics of exhibitions, where phenomena are displayed for the pleasure of a mass audience. This heterogeneous visibility helps to manage animals but also seeks to discipline humans into proper human/animal relations.
However, the main concept she takes from Foucault’s theoretical project is that of ‘pastoral power.’ Braverman accentuate how such power involves zoos instituting an ‘ethics of care’ that displays an inherent tension between caring for animals in captivity and caring for their counterparts in the wild. As authors working in Surveillance Studies have occasionally appealed to a comparable ‘ethics of care’ for the surveillance of humans, it is prudent to remember that in zoos such care cannot be disconnected from the almost God-like powers that handlers have over their charges; ‘to exercise care one must necessarily exercise a certain degree of power over the subject of care’ (42).

The book points to numerous practical and theoretical connections between watching animals and watching humans, not the least of which is that surveillance technologies developed for animals ‘can easily creep into more problematic human contexts’ (103). Consequently, Zooland presents an opportunity to start a dialogue between Surveillance Studies scholars and those who study how nature and animals are monitored. Expanding our interdisciplinary connections in this way can help to ensure we are not held captive by our established analytical frameworks.