

Escapology 101

Description

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Biologists and animal behaviourists refer to their study of escape responses as *escapology*. Fish, cockroaches and higher animals move at speed in a direction away from an immediate threat from a predator, but not always, and not directly.

The direction of the escape travel depends on the lay of the land, the position of likely refuge, and tricks to appear unpredictable. Random escape trajectories that at times move the prey *towards* the threat serve to confuse the predator. According to a journal article on the subject,

> â??A small proportion of towards responses may introduce some unpredictability and may be an adaptive feature of the escape system â?¦ unpredictability (and hence high variability) in trajectories may be necessary for preventing predators from learning a simple escape pattern.â?• (2463).



Thatâ??s a photograph of an adult Wildebeest and calf running from a chetah. Hereâ??s all three in the same frame. (Itâ??s difficult with an iPhone in a moving jeep.) Cheetahs are clever, and will hunt collaboratively. One cheetah will chase the prey to within close range of another.



Human animals are even more complicated. As hunters we corral, lay traps, herd, confine, shoot and tag. We deploy ever more sophisticated tools and technologies to capture prey and to avoid the risks entailed in raw pursuit. Such tactics apply whether the prey are non-human animals or other humans.

Polite society in tranquil mode deploys games, entertainment, political acts, and certain institutionalised practices as means to vent our propensities to chase, capture, evade and escape. Thatâ??s the nature of *contest* (agon).

<Escape> codes

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Iâ??ve been thinking about city codes, and cities as coded environments. Citizens and property owners manage spaces, rooms, buildings, streets, public and private places, zones, and regions by explicit and implicit access codes.

I started this post with the theme of escape, but what is it that people want or need to escape from â?? prisons, labyrinths, cul de sacs, locked rooms?

Iâ??m drawn to the sociologist Michel Foucaultâ??s generalisation of the notion of capture. I think his concept of *confinement* shifts the discussion closer to the urban condition and how spaces restrict and enable.

Confinement

Foucault claimed that in the â??modernâ?• era, human societies transitioned from brutal, cruel, chaotic and unpredictable behaviours to those in which institutions, laws, and other ordered practices held sway.

I think he steered clear of talking about this transition in terms of causes, but itâ??s obvious to think not just that human societies raised their moral consciousness over time, but we realised inevitably that well-ordered societies are better at supporting commerce, trade, and prosperity than the arbitrary circulation of tyranny and brutishness. (Think of Westeros and The Seven Kingdoms â?? even Kings Landing â?? as fictionalised exemplars of this brutish pre-modern condition.)

Foucault focussed substantially on the practices of confinement: not just prisons and cages, but less draconian sites of containment such as hospitals and schools, in fact any institutional setting where bodies, individually or in groups, are corralled, contained or isolated, willingly or not, for long or short periods of time.

Confinement is a spatial term, but we can think of other organisational strictures, such as routines, habits and practices, and even the deployment of clock time â?? being a slave to the clock. Foucault

also wrote about wearing uniforms and other means of formalising behaviour and identity.

Parents and carers require their children to practice a musical instrument every day, soldiers march and undergo regular duties, and would-be athletes train, not just to develop skills, but such regimes instil individual and social order.

Instead of â??running amuck,â?• joining lynch mobs, or chasing one another across the savanna (or like the Wildlings of The North â?? beyond The Wall) it serves us better to be organised, routinised, and confined in ways that are polite and civil.

If I understand him correctly, Foucault provided an interesting take on modernity, as he didnâ??t put democracy at the forefront of human liberty, but institutions and other practices for the circulation of power.

In this light, perhaps ***escapology*** serves as leitmotiv for the desire to unleash ourselves from social conventions, strictures and norms. But Iâ??ll investigate that later. In the mean time â?¦

Game of Thrones

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Thereâ??s a moment in series 8 episode 6 where the Highborns of Westeros attempt to resolve who will now rule over the Seven Kingdoms: â??We have to choose someone.â?•

After a few failed resolutions, Samwell Tarly the bookish member of the group says, â??Why just us? â?¦ The decision about whatâ??s best for everyone should be left to well â?¦ everyone.â?• After an embarrassing silence thereâ??s derision from the rest: â??Maybe we should give the dogs a vote as well,â?• â??Iâ??ll ask my horse!â?• Then they move to a decision based on entitlement and beneficence.

Indeed, the romantic and bloody fantasy of GOT wouldnâ??t work if the aim was escape from feudal despotism toward modernity (including democracy). The best the residents of The Seven Kingdoms could hope for was benevolent, just and fair dictatorship.

Iâ??m sure I read in one of the many online reviews of the series, that aspirations for social transformation in this mythical world never rise above the escape from oppression that the (real-world) *Magna Carta* offered.

In conclusion to this rambling post, and to return to the animals on the savanna: as far as we know, non-human animals donâ??t seek revenge. They fight for food or in self-defense. Itâ??s the human animal that needs confinement.

Bibliography

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6. Foucault
7. freedom

Date Created
May 25, 2019
Author
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