

Experiencing nature: Rainbows, Nénette, and Swimming

Rainbows

If a rainbow appears in the sky and no one is around to see it, the rainbow does not appear in the sky. Rainbows are perceptive entities; they need to be seen to exist.

If no one looks at a rainbow, there is only sunlight, clouds, and condensed moisture in the atmosphere. Eyes make rainbows. Nature needs company.

In addition to the gaze, rainbows need rain and sunlight. In Portugal, during rainbow weather, children sing the rhyme “Está a chover e a fazer sol e as bruxas a comer pão mole” [It rains and the sun shines, witches eat soft bread]. I remember singing it many times and I also remember not understanding what it meant. I guessed that the rainbow and witches went well together as magical presences and that witches, being old and sloppy, had lost their teeth so the only thing they could eat was bread soaked in rainwater. Of course, witches are not old and sloppy. They are amazing people who know and care for nature and really enjoy life. These lyrics need to be improved. I’d propose “Está a chover e a fazer sol e as bruxas a beber álcool” [It rains and the sun shines, witches drink alcohol].

While clouds, wind, rain, and the sun have been used as allegories and metaphors for many things, rainbows resist symbology. They function only as an allegory for allegory itself. They also make fun of the sublime, of the aesthetic appropriation of meteorology. Imagine Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* facing a rainbow instead of clouds. Romanticism would have been a more progressive movement if rainbows had replaced tempests and deluges. It is hard to manipulate or dramatize a rainbow. It will always remain a trippy, childish, and psychedelic figure. A queer companion.

Nénette

I wish Nénette had rainbows to keep her company when her days are too hot, too cold, or too boring. Nénette was born in Borneo, Indonesia, in 1969. In 1972, when she was three, she was captured and sent to Paris, where she has been living ever since. In 1973, they forbade the capture of wild individuals like Nénette. Who knows where she—who would not be called Nénette, for starters—would be if the law had been in place an year earlier.

For her fiftieth birthday, she received a beautiful cake with cream and strawberries, which she ate all by herself, the pleasures of being a middle-aged female. You live in a jail and they bring you cake. On other days, she eats fruit and vegetables, five times a day, it’s a healthy diet. Nénette has four offspring: Doudou, Mawa, Tubo, and Dayu. They are all dead now. Most of her group and family members are separated. Despite establishing strong

social bonds and lifelong relationships, Nénette and her kin are often sold, exchanged, and loaned to various other places, which means they never see their life partners again. It must be hard.

In 2014, Nénette started to paint. She paints with both her hands and mouth and sometimes she also uses the stones of fruit, especially mango pits. The paintings, abstract combinations of patches of color, are so popular that she has made 12,000 euros from selling them. The money was used by her keepers to improve her enclosure. Maybe she would have preferred a new house in a retirement compound in the jungle in Borneo.

Nénette is an orangutan. She will never return to the wild. She is too old, has osteoarthritis in her hips, and has appropriated several human traits that she might miss, such as drinking tea and flipping through magazines.

Swimming and cinema are aligned

I first learned about Nénette, who lives in the Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes in Paris, when watching a film by Nicolas Philibert. The film shows zoo visitors reflected in the glass of Nénette’s enclosure. They can be heard making both intelligent and imbecilic remarks.

Films and zoos have many things in common. They bring what is out of reach close, they turn bodies into ghosts, they pretend that spectacle is better than learning, and they immerse you while keeping you afloat.

Recently, while thinking about other forms of immersion, it occurred to me that the history of cinema and the history of swimming are also aligned. Up until the nineteenth century, people would only swim out of necessity, either to save themselves or others, or as a therapeutic exercise, which is also a form of salvation. Tourism and leisure brought many people close to the beach and the sea. During the same period, public swimming pools started being planned, transposing the sea to the city, just like the cinema offered a mode of travel to those who could not leave their homes. Swimming pools and movie theaters flourished at the same time as exceptional places of immersion. The twentieth century loved experience and intensity, and the cinema and swimming (in the sea or in a pool) were excellent ways to attain it.

Both offer fleeting moments of wonder, whose iridescent colors and permanent inaccessibility—you cannot enter a film, just as you cannot breathe underwater—are the closest we can get to human-made rainbows. They promise a feeling of wonder and make you understand that nature is all there is and all there will ever be.