

# ZOO LOCK DOWN



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a film by Andreas Horvath

AT, 2022

Running time: 72 minutes  
Format: digital  
Screen ratio: 16:9 (4K, 2K)  
supported by: Salzburg Stadt, Salzburg Land

Direction,  
cinematography,  
editing,  
sounddesign,  
music: Andreas Horvath

## Synopsis, English

The zoo in Salzburg, Austria is open to visitors 365 days a year. In the spring of 2020, when the first Covid lockdown brought life almost to a standstill, the zoo had to close its doors to the public for the first time in its existence.

Like actors in a theater, it is the animals at a zoo that attract the audience. Unlike actors the animals don't play roles. They are just being themselves and their home transforms into a stage every day. When the paying visitors fail to appear because the *spectacle* is canceled, a unique opportunity unfolds for an intimate and at times surreal look at the zoo's inhabitants.

## Synopsis, German

Der Zoo Salzburg ist 365 Tage im Jahr geöffnet. Im Frühjahr 2020, als der erste Covid Lockdown das öffentliche Leben praktisch zum Stillstand brachte, musste auch der Zoo das erste Mal in seiner Geschichte geschlossen bleiben.

Die Tiere sind die Publikumsmagneten im Zoo. Ihre Gehege verwandeln sich täglich in Bühnen, aber anders als Schauspieler spielen sie keine Rollen, sie sind nur sie selbst. Wenn das Spektakel abgesagt wird, weil die zahlenden Gäste ausbleiben, ergibt sich die Gelegenheit für einen — mitunter surrealen — Blick hinter die Kulissen.

## The Film Verdict: Zoo Lock Down



Courtesy of KVIFF

**VERDICT:** Andreas Horvath's observational documentary offers a different, meditative view of animals in captivity, whose uneventful lives without a human audience inevitably recall our own experience with the pandemic.

[Deborah Young](#)

July 9th, 2022

Guess who had a very cool time during the coronavirus lockdown? According to Austrian photographer and documaker Andreas Horvath in his revealing new doc *Zoo Lock Down*, reports that the captive residents of the world's bio parks went into shock and depression over the lack of human visitors have been grossly exaggerated. Far from moping despondently at the sudden lack of attention, the wonderful animals in the Salzburg Zoo seem to have had a ball having the place to themselves, with just their feeders and their medics in attendance to serve them. Though the whimsical behavior and photogenic looks of his subjects may have helped Karlovy Vary regular Horvath to a place in the Proxima competition, it is the startling clarity of his closeup photography that offers new perspectives for film audiences and makes this interface between the natural world and man-made manipulation riveting.

*Zoo Lock Down* is the definition of a one-man-show, with Horvath directing, producing, lensing, editing and composing all by himself; he also recorded the soundtrack of roars, chirping and jaws snapping shut (there is no human dialogue). It is a step outside his usual role as an explorer of people in eye-catching docs like *Helmut Berger, Actor* or his 2019 fiction film *Lillian*, based on the true story of a woman who decides to walk from New York back to Russia across the Bering Strait.

Turning his skills as a photographer on the deserted zoo, Horvath (always off-camera) views the world through the animals' eyes. A silver fox watches the zookeeper who arrives with scoops of dry food; a minute later, two huge bears come out of their cave to sequester the cardboard box that has been left behind. It's springtime 2020, and signs announce the zoo is in lockdown.

As the camera roams around, it gives a sense that the zoo is enormous and the compounds vast. The music and sound design can be amusing, but at the same time they communicate a vague sense of menace.

The cinematography brings out the camouflage properties of the animals and the intricate visual textures of grass and branches around their faces. Yellow monkeys with black hands go about their activities in families, like the ring-tailed lemurs with funny faces who bounce off the back of a rhino without the larger animal noticing. Pink flamingos wait out a rainstorm inside a hut; a leopard sleeps serenely in a tree. A brave zookeeper descends into a tank of piranhas to clean it as they gather to watch him. The prehistoric muzzle of a crocodile is so immobile it seems made out of papier-mache, until it abruptly shuts its mouth.

Truth to tell, nothing very out of the ordinary occurs, until the rhino scene introduces a touch of the surreal: a team of vets labors over a sedated male and female rhino in a complicated operation of in vitro fertilization, an arduous and amazing thing to watch. This, too, happens in lockdown.

Then one day the sound of squalling babies and shrieking kids rises on the soundtrack, mingled with their mother's voices, all off-screen. Animal vacation is over; the zoo is open again. Whether the lions and pythons are relieved or dismayed there's no way of knowing. Staring into the camera lens, their unfathomable expressions can be interpreted any way the viewer wants, like Greta Garbo staring into space at the end of *Queen Christina*.

A final clue to Horvath's respectful approach is that the name of each animal appearing in the film appears in the end credits, from the lone crocodile to the bevy of pink flamingos.

*Director, screenplay, producer, cinematography, editing, music, sound: Andreas Horvath*

*Venue: Karlovy Vary Film Festival (Proxima competition)*

*No dialogue*

*73 minutes*

(...) it is the startling clarity of his closeup photography that offers new perspectives for film audiences and makes this interface between the natural world and man-made manipulation riveting.

— The Film Verdict

Horvath's "Zoo Lock Down," crystalline style, engaging content, pure pleasure.

— David Sterritt

Quite beautiful (...) and beautifully done — observed, edited, everything (...) I very much liked it and was duly impressed.

— Jon Jost

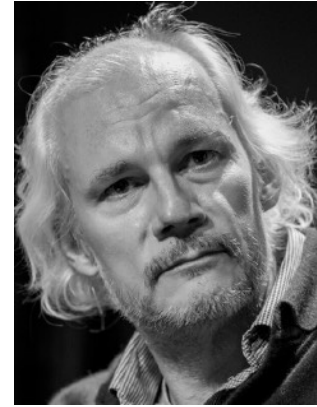
The film certainly has its own dramaturgy, but is strongest on the observation and acoustic accents. This world without human voices seems quite natural and it is beautiful in its sounds and its fullness!

— fipresci.org

Microstories from the pavilions, enclosures, and terraria, told with Horvath's typical sense of humor.

— Karlovy Vary International Film Festival





## **Andreas Horvath**

is an award winning filmmaker and photographer. He was born in Salzburg, Austria in 1968 and studied photography in Vienna and multimedia-art in Salzburg. Horvath's films premiered in Cannes, Venice, Locarno, Rotterdam or Amsterdam. They won best film awards at festivals in Karlovy Vary, Chicago, New York, Haifa, Orenburg or Minsk. He is a recipient of the Max Ophüls Prize, and the Outstanding Artist Award of the Austrian Ministry of Culture.

Horvath's film *Helmut Berger, Actor* premiered in Venice in 2015 and was chosen as the „best motion picture“ of that same year by cult director John Waters. Horvath's first fiction film *Lillian* was produced by fellow Austrian filmmaker Ulrich Seidl and has garnered over a dozen awards since its 2019 premiere at the „Directors' Fortnight“ in Cannes.

As a photographer Andreas Horvath published black and white photo albums about Yakutia, Siberia and rural America. His work has been shown internationally at solo and group exhibitions. Horvath served as a jury member at Karlovy Vary IFF, Warsaw IFF, Belgrade IFF, Visions du Réel, Chicago International Documentary Festival among others.

### **Filmography:**

1999 – *Poroerotus* (documentary – 45 min.)

2002 – *The Silence of Green* (documentary – 48 min.)

2004 – *This ain't no Heartland* (documentary – 105 min.)

2006 – *Views of a Retired Night Porter* (documentary – 38 min.)

2009 – *The Passion According to the Polish Community of Pruchnik* (documentary – 30 min.)

2010 – *Arab Attraction* (documentary – 118 min.)

2011 – *Postcard from Somova, Romania* (documentary – 20 min.)

2013 – *Earth's Golden Playground* (documentary – 106 min.)

2015 – *Helmut Berger, Actor* (documentary – 90 min.)

2019 – *Lillian* (fiction film – 128 min.)

2022 – *Zoo Lock Down* (documentary – 71 min.)

# SCREENDAILY

Interview with Andreas Horvath by Laurence Boyce

**1) *What inspired the idea to make a film about the inhabitants of a zoo during lockdown. Was there an inciting incident or moment that sparked something within you to create the film?***

Years ago I heard about the zoo in Buenos Aires. After 140 years of existence it had to close. The zoo was owned by the city and for a long time the question of what to do with the animals apparently was just not solved. Many animals were left in limbo in a closed zoo. I saw photos and wanted to document the absurdity of this situation on film, but I was involved in another project at that time and could not pursue this further. When the first lockdown came in 2020, I knew, now was the time to pick up the idea of animals at a closed zoo again.

**2) *Ostensibly the film is an observational documentary. But there's a narrative that builds up, at least in my mind: ideas about human hubris (working with nature at a time when nature seems to be against humanity), layers of irony with animals being kept in a cage and no-one there to see them, and the relationship between human and animals. When you approach the material do you have certain ideas in your head already, or do things start to build through the process of filming and editing?***

Yes, it started as an observational documentary. I always try to approach this with an innocent and open mind and really just collect material at first. Preconceived ideas and expectations can be detrimental at this stage. It is mostly during the process of editing that different layers suggest themselves and begin to inhabit and enrich the original material. That's when the film veers off the pure documentary genre. It is the most interesting production phase for me.

The zoo is a curious microcosm. There is so much more going on than just keeping it open to visitors: research, studies ... but also manipulating nature: artificial insemination for example. For many species, like the rhinos, the zoo has also become a safe haven where at least they are not threatened by poachers or trophy hunters. The zoo can be a refuge for endangered species or an elderly home for old animals that probably would long have died in the wilderness.

When you get a sense of the artificiality and the scientific effort behind the scenes in a zoo you are easily reminded of a science fiction film. Humans, or their automated apparatuses, dictate when the lights or sprinklers are turned on and off. When talking about the end of his film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Stanley Kubrick explained that the higher entities behind the black monolith put the protagonist in a sort of a "human zoo" in order to study him. Kubrick compared the neoclassical

bedroom in the final scene to the spaces humans design for animals at a zoo, when humans try to recreate their natural environment. The bedroom looks a bit idiosyncratic, almost as if someone with a lot of knowledge and good intentions still didn't get it quite right. The human design of the animal quarters at a zoo, the installations, the murals, remind me of that. I often wondered: how do animals perceive the naturalistically painted landscapes in their own homes. It takes a purportedly higher entity to run a zoo. But what do humans really know about the mindscape of a lion, a caiman or even a grasshopper?

**3) *Can you tell us a little about the sound design and music. It helps to add to the slightly ominous tone that the film sometimes has.***

The music and sound design underscore the ambivalence of what I talked about. There is a constant sense of foreboding in the air. In a zoo the animals are like actors on a stage for us to watch. The absence of the visitors, of the excitement, of the screams of children, establishes an almost Brechtian alienation effect: When animals look directly into the camera, they are addressing us, the viewers in the cinema.

The Salzburg Zoo is a very romantic site and provides many animals with a luxurious home. Some of the compounds are so large that visitors complain they cannot even see the animals. But there is no denying that the animals are leading a life in captivity.

**4) *Whilst I mentioned that there is a sense of the ominous, there's also a light humour that runs throughout. A man washing the piranha tank for example flirts with the absurd. Were there any moments in general during filming that surprised you? Were there any of the zoo inhabitants you felt particularly drawn to?***

I think you have to love them all. Of course, watching apes might be more rewarding at first, because we feel so close to them that it seems easy to interpret their behaviour. But the more time you spend with any animal, the deeper you delve into its world and you begin to discover things that were not so obvious at first.

I asked the zookeeper if it wasn't dangerous to swim with the piranhas. He claimed to be not afraid, adding maybe you should not wear anything red as this might arouse them. When we finally filmed the scene he was wearing red bathing trunks.

**5) *I'd like to ask about practicalities. How receptive were the zoo to your initial approaches to film there, especially in light of the situation at the time? It seems that you were given a lot of freedom. Have they seen the film yet?***



They haven't seen the film yet, because I am still working on it. But we are planning a screening for the staff after the premiere in Karlovy Vary. I asked for permission to film at other zoos which was denied. The people at the Salzburg Zoo were immediately very receptive and helpful.

**6) *For much of your career as a filmmaker and artist, much of the work you do is solitary – for example, you're credited with doing everything on this film. What are the pros and cons of projects when you find yourself working alone? Do you ever prefer collaboration?***

I started with photography and at some point film just became a natural extension of this way of working for me. I do enjoy the freedom of taking as much time as I need for my films and experiment without having to justify each new move or direction the film might take. If I am not alone, at least I want to keep the team as small as possible.

**7) *You're returning to Karlovy Vary, and you have a storied history there – a former award winner, you've worked with the Future Frames people, etc, etc. Tell us about your relationship with the festival and what you're looking forward to with having the World Premiere***

Since 2006 I come back to Karlovy Vary frequently. It is one of my favourite festivals. There are many people on the team who I have known from the beginning. This is unusual. Festivals often have a high fluctuation of staff members. I think this stability shows in so many respects. It is a very generous and relaxed atmosphere. Even though so many people convene here you find time for private meetings. And I love how the general public, not just the industry, is taking part in it.

**8) *Do you have any idea for what your next film project may be?***

No, but last year I composed the music for Patrycja Planik's (the lead actress of my film LILLIAN) first feature film FAGGOTS. It won the Audacity Award at the Oldenburg Film Festival and many other prizes since. It was the first time I composed music for someone else's film and a very gratifying experience for me. I thought I might explore this further in the future.