

Why not look at animals?

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NECSUS 4 (1): 107–125

DOI: 10.5117/NECSUS2015.1.PICK

Abstract

Revisiting John Berger's seminal essay 'Why Look at Animals?' (1980), this essay inverts Berger's title in order to explore instances where the visibility of animals is at stake and where seeing is linked to forms of surveillance and control. In the context of advanced optical and tracking technologies that render animals permanently visible, the possibility of *not-seeing* emerges as a progressive modality of relation to animals that takes seriously the notion of animal privacy and the exposed animal's resistance to the human gaze.

Keywords: animal privacy, animals, Bear 71, John Berger, wildlife surveillance

There're fifteen remote-sensing cameras in my home range, plus infrared counters and barbed-wire snags to collect my hair. I suppose it's like most of the surveillance that goes on today – it's partly there to protect you, and partly to protect everybody else *from* you. – *Bear 71*

They'd be able to tell something called your 'pattern of life'. – Edward Snowden¹

First, there is the ambiguity of the title that promises reasons for why we should avoid looking at animals, while at the same time suggests, non-chalantly, that there is really no harm in looking – so why not look? Like John Berger's essay 'Why Look at Animals?' (1980), of which this is a revisiting of sorts, I offer no panacea for the perils of looking. In the case of animals, there is never the threat of a pillar of salt, but there is, under new legislation that prohibits the taking of unauthorised images, the threat of 'domestic terrorism'.²

Looking in film is historically tied to issues of identification and power. In the 1970s, coinciding with Berger's writings on animals, Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory and the apparatus theory of Jean-Louis Baudry and

Christian Metz mobilised psychoanalysis to demonstrate the ‘crucial importance of the cinema as an apparatus and as a signifying practice of ideology, the viewer-screen relationship, and the way in which the viewer was “constructed” as transcendental during the spectatorial process’.³ Berger’s critique of animal imagery recalls Mulvey’s analysis of woman as the object of the ‘male gaze’ and ‘bearer of the look’.⁴ Like Hollywood women, the male/humanist gaze renders screen animals ‘absolutely marginal’.⁵ There is no scope here to pursue a detailed comparison between Mulvey and Berger, whose differences are perhaps not ocular but oral – film animals are not merely subdued but *made edible*, a complete form of violent appropriation.⁶ As a corrective to the male/humanist gaze, one can conceive of a range of alternative gazes: the female, queer, or the animal gaze. In another sense, though, looking as such is implicated in relations of power. Where looking is mutual – where the look is returned – it is still about self-recognition; but with counter-gazes, too, it is the former object of the look that is empowered. All looking is thus prone to be transactional and adversarial.

Inverting the question posed, if not quite answered, in Berger’s essay allows me to explore instances where the visibility of animals is at stake and where seeing is inextricably linked to forms of surveillance and control directed at animals. In responding to the anti-imagist position of Berger’s essay, I am concerned with the implicit connections between looking and extinction, where rare or endangered animals are fatally observed, and where animal sighting acts as a lure and reward against the backdrop of animal vanishing. As I will note in this essay, Berger’s disaffection with animal imagery can give rise to an extinctionist impulse that desires the end of images, or even the end of the debased modern animal. Yet the sheer diversity and complexity of animal imagery suggests that modes of looking, seeing, and recognition are possible that reconfigure the connections between visibility and ethics in favour of animals.⁷ When confronting advanced optical and tracking technologies that render animals permanently visible, the possibility of *not-seeing* emerges as a more progressive modality of relation to animals.

Not-seeing complicates the act of seeing, making seeing tentative and uncertain. Not-seeing does not merely alter the optics of the human-animal encounter but mitigates human desire to make animals unconditionally visible. By not-seeing I do not mean to endorse the censorious attitude to images promoted by Berger, harking back to some bygone (if still violent) interspecies relation; nor does not-seeing bolster ideas about animal mystery that mythologise animals in the human imaginary. Not-seeing in

the sense I am using it here connotes the mundane, civic notion of animal privacy that denies human eyes and their technological proxies unlimited access.

In thinking about animal privacy, I find Lori Gruen's understanding of the concept of dignity as applicable to nonhuman animals very productive. Gruen argues that dignity, commonly used to support human exceptionalism, is relational and contextual; it is upheld or withers away for animals and humans alike in the thicket of mutual contact. 'In saying that dignity is a relational concept', Gruen explains,

I'm not saying that it is subject to the whims of the perceiver or that dignity is merely a subjective or social projection about the worth of another. Rather, I'm trying to capture both the contextual nature of the notion and the broader normative implications of the recognition of dignity or the failure to recognize dignity on the valuer, the community of valuers, as well as the individual whose dignity should be respected.⁸

Viewed relationally, animal dignity can be violated even if it is not something animals consciously care about:

Dignity is akin to fragility; we do not worry about the fragility of a delicate glass until someone who tends to be careless starts to drink out of it, and it looks as if it will break. Similarly, nonhuman dignity may only come into question when animals are part of a human social world in which questions of dignity arise. Whether or not an animal herself cares about her dignity is not the point.⁹

Animals can be seen to possess a private realm of existence – not simply as a matter of rights, but in their proximity to and entanglement with humans. As Gruen suggests, the element of threat brings the concept into sharper focus. Privacy has to do with the recognition of another's separate existence at the moment of its impending infringement.

1 Berger's humanism

Berger's essay is a key text on the modern visual animal. His argument, or series of arguments, concerns the extreme marginalisation of animals under industrial capitalism. The essay's central paradox is that as animals become further marginalised in everyday life they proliferate in image form. Increasingly remote, animals show up, literally, as visual representa-

tions. Such images are faint reminders of the fundamental encounter between humans and animals that Berger sees as the origin of signification and human identity.¹⁰ The once intimate contact between man and animal rooted in the exchanging of looks and confirming man's proximity to animals across the 'narrow abyss of non-comprehension'¹¹ is reduced to a simulation – the ghost of an encounter – diminishing both modern man and the modern animal.

This brief summary does not do justice to the intricacies of Berger's text, nor to some of its inconsistencies. Jonathan Burt has challenged a number of Berger's key assumptions about images, animals, and modernity.¹² Burt's objections revolve around three main areas: the understanding of what (animal) images are and how they work; the lack of historical rigour in the periodisation and formulation of modernity; and a deep-seated humanism and anthropocentrism that move the essay away from its preoccupation with animals to the subject of man. I pick up on some of Burt's objections to suggest that thinking more positively about the desire to look at and produce animal imagery is a more promising nexus for debating the fate of visual and real animals, especially when, in privileging premodern encounters with animals, Berger himself turns a blind eye to the trappings of power that render such encounters problematic.

Berger's historical understanding is flawed since

the alienation and marginalisation of animals take place within a historically defined context whilst the period of integrated relations between humans and animals is timeless, and by implication beyond historical investigation.¹³

The charge of nostalgia could be levelled at Berger, for whom pre-industrial relations between humans and animals embody unity and authenticity, whose rupturing can only be viewed through the prisms of alienation and loss. As he writes,

[t]he treatment of animals in 19th century romantic painting was already an acknowledgment of their impending disappearance. The images are of animals *receding* into a wildness that existed only in the imagination.¹⁴

Other images and gazes follow:

[p]ublic zoos came into existence at the beginning of the period in which was to see the disappearance of animals from daily life. The zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see them, is, in fact, a monument to the impossibility of such encounters.¹⁵

The zoo animal, Berger notes, fails to live up to its spectacular promise. Although zoos display real, not represented, animals, zoo animals are '[l]ike an image out of focus.'¹⁶ 'Zoos, realistic animal toys and the widespread commercial diffusion of animal imagery, all began as animals started to be withdrawn from daily life.'¹⁷ Berger knows that this diffusion of imagery was not compensatory but 'belonged to the same remorseless movement as was dispersing the animals'.¹⁸

Burt's second objection is relevant here. In the nineteenth century, he writes, there

is a significant shift in the visual status of the animal as it becomes the focus of welfare concerns and legislation from the 1820s onwards in Britain.... This is not, as Berger would have it, a shift from an integrated relationship to an alienated one between human and animal, but rather reflects the beginning of the institutionalisation of animal-centred issues.¹⁹

This way of looking at animals ushers in a new awareness of animal suffering and is a catalyst for welfare reforms. At the same time, however, systemic violence against animals in this period is intensified, recodified, and legitimated by being moved out of sight, conducted behind closed doors, and, as it were, shrink-wrapped. As Timothy Pachirat has argued, modern sensibilities entail the visual 'distancing and concealment of morally and physically repugnant practices rather than their elimination or transformation'.²⁰ This view of the civilising process retains Berger's dialectic of disappearance.

The dispersal of animals is concomitant with their passing from the linguistic to the visual order. Like Lévi-Strauss ('animals are good to think') and Jean-Christophe Bailly, whose 2007 essay 'The Animal Side' is closely affiliated with Berger's, animals' uncanny reflection of man opens up the space of signification constitutive of human identity. As visual images, animals can no longer fulfil their ancient role as symbolic enablers who call man into being. When 'the linguistic animal is replaced by the visual animal',²¹ alienation and spectacle ensue. Visual images for Berger are simply incapable of staging an authentic encounter between humans and animals. At this point, the essay's concern subtly shifts from the fate of

animals to the fate of man, and man's self-alienation, revealing the fundamental humanism of Berger's project:

[t]he thrust of the essay, which appears to be so much on the side of animals, then becomes less concerned with the welfare of animals and their mistreatment under capitalism, and much more focussed on shifts in the psychology of man's self-confirmation as a being in the world.²²

Berger protests the marginalisation and violation of animal life, but also, his chief worry is 'man'. The commitment to 'man' and 'animal' precludes any attention to women or female animals, whose role in agriculture, ancient and modern, is indispensable. While he recognises the corrosive influence on both humans and animals of the modern assault on biological life, Berger never questions the transparency and legibility of human identity. His critique of capitalism is unaccompanied by a rethinking of the human. As Richard Iveson points out,

amidst the vast array of contemporary studies deconstructing the 'normalizing' function of various cultural formations... the machinations of one particular norm remain all too often unthought.... Such is the normalizing anthropocentrism which unthinkingly identifies the machinery of the already-there with *human* language, *human* culture, and *human* history.²³

The ethical lacuna of Berger's text originates in the 'already-there' of human identity and its attendant exceptionalism. Early on in the piece, the authentic relationship between a peasant and his pig is rescued from sentimentality by the coexistence of affection and violence:

[a] peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant, and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an *and* and not by a *but*.²⁴

'Note again', comments Burt,

that the killing of animals is not in itself problematic, providing it is done in a world in which an intimacy exists between man and animal. This is good killing and is contrasted with the attitude of modern alienated man.²⁵

Intimacy is achieved in the act of killing, which, besides its terminal consequence for the pig, assumes (much like the production of images) un-

limited access to animals. The relation is made good by the sheer fact of *contact* as a remedy for alienation.

In 'The Eaters and the Eaten' (1976), Berger had already anticipated the suspicion of idealisation of peasant life (quickly dispatched in René Clément's *Forbidden Games* [1952], where peasants eat their bread close to their chest, but alienation is rife between families, generations, peasants and clergy, and even between God and man), yet the impression is difficult to avoid that rural life is held up as a bulwark against bourgeois estrangement. The difficulty lies in Berger's use of the imaginary peasant as a symbol of the uninterrupted human-animal relation.

A whole series of problems follow from this, which increasingly confirm the suspicion that this text has a working ideal of human-animal relations that ultimately benefits man to the detriment of animals.²⁶ The old question *Cui bono* calls out the arguments about 'good' instrumental relations in which animals are, as if by chance, always the losers.

2 Berger and surveillance

By the time Berger published 'Why Look at Animals?' another repository of animal images was accumulating at the juncture of scientific research and wildlife conservation. Originating around 1960, at the unlikely intersection of wildlife management and military surveillance technologies, the use of miniaturised radio tags and collars to keep track of individual animals became virtually a *sine qua non* of wildlife research.²⁷

Animal disappearance in the literal form of species extinction was to be combatted by the use of radiotelemetry and satellite tracking devices. But, as Etienne Benson shows in *Wired Wilderness*, the interplay of forces and stakeholders reveals a 'messier, and far more conflict-ridden history of the role of science in modern wildlife conservation'.²⁸

The rise of wildlife tracking technology coincided with Cold War politics and benefitted from a range of funding sources, including the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). To secure AEC funding, studies involving the capture, irradiation, and release of wild animals went ahead despite scientists' objections concerning the dangers of DNA contamination.²⁹ Criticism also grew of the knowledge that radiotelemetry could validly provide. Was tracking an observational or experimental technique? The technology was touted as producing new insights into animals' 'patterns of life', but in 1965 a reviewer for the National Science Foundation proclaimed that the studies were descriptive and provided little more than natural history.³⁰

A handful of scientists also had ethical concerns about the impact of trapping and tagging on delicate animals, particularly birds. One biologist, William Cochrane, believed that fitting grouse with transmitters was ‘traumatic’:

[y]ou see yourself interfering with his life. Then he’s gone. You don’t think of him as a living being. He takes on a different place in your mind. He becomes a data machine – where he is, how fast he’s going.³¹

Although Cochrane is not worried about the privacy of animals, his concern is with individual animals, or with animals *as* individuals. ‘Traumatized’ birds might provide faulty data, but Cochrane’s “squeamish”³² attitude implies the difference between data extracted from animals and something like an internal sphere of an animal’s experience that the basic methodology of wildlife surveillance is neither equipped nor adept to ‘see’.

As professional wildlife surveillance technologies descend from the ivory tower into the public domain via television, film, and crittercams, the question arises to what extent is limitless access conducive to the goals of wildlife conservation and animal welfare and flourishing. Perhaps ironically, breathtaking images transmitted by the latest tracking devices claim to provide an individual animal’s view of the world.³³ ‘With the aid of advanced technology, humans had now been granted the ability to see the world through the eyes of a whale, a shark, or a seal.’³⁴ But what the privileging of the first-person perspective occludes is how images are procured in the first place: the trapping and continuous tracking of animals, subject to the desires of humans (and to the durability of the device). The use of the indefinite article, ‘a whale, a shark, or a seal’, repeats the logic of data extraction that troubled Cochrane. Moreover, rather than offering, even in the form of a simulation, an animal’s individual experience, these images in fact rehearse early cinema’s phantom ride – the mounting of a camera on a moving vehicle for the production of thrill. They no more tell us what it is like to be a whale than the phantom ride tells us what it is like to be a train. Used in this way, and despite its approximations of an animal’s perspective, tracking technology remains deeply anthropocentric.

Linda Kalof writes that ‘[l]ooking at animals in the postmodern world of cyberspace completes John Berger’s lament that animals have been rendered absolutely marginal.’³⁵ This risks collapsing all online animal imagery – from ‘live’ crittercam footage to undercover animal rights exposés and the perpetually towering mass of cat videos on YouTube. Doing so, for Burt, implicitly valorises linguistic over visual representation and ignores

the nuanced possibilities of visual media. Undoubtedly, the high volume of Internet pet videos is deflating, not least in the disconnecting between inedible companion animals and edible farmed ones. While images of animals in cyberspace seem to support Berger's thesis by virtue of their virtuality, inventive uses of new media engage with the paradox of animals' visible disappearance without simply rehearsing the gesture of marginalisation. Significantly, the preference for real over visually-reproduced animals 'implicitly assumes the possibility of being able to look at animals beyond the filters of any cultural construction'.³⁶ Berger's pastoral bond between peasant and pig (authenticated by the act of killing) suggests that meaningful distinctions should be drawn not between 'real' and 'virtual' but between the kinds of relationships that different culturally-mediated encounters encode and the logic of domination that cuts across embodied, linguistic, and visual encounters alike.

3 Not-seeing *in Bear 71*

Jeremy Mendes' and Leanne Allison's *Bear 71* (2012) illustrates the contextual and relational valence of animal privacy through the appropriation and repurposing of wildlife surveillance footage. *Bear 71* is a 20-minute interactive web documentary (i-doc) set in Banff National Park in the Canadian Rockies. The 'multi-user experience' launched at Sundance alongside the installation *Bear 71 Live*; it allows users to navigate a digital grid recreating the park's terrain, clicking to view footage recorded by the park's trail cams. The self-directed sections are interspersed with narrative segments of the eponymous bear's life and death, from being snared, darted, collared, and tagged, until her fatal collision eleven years later on one of the railway lines that fragment the park. Users enter the network as one tracked animal among others: '[i]f a user accepts, the site will use your webcam to observe you and broadcast video of you to other viewers by posting them to the "surveillance wall".'³⁷

The participatory element enhances the experience of being surveilled and helps probe the relationship between humans, technology, and the natural world.³⁸ The minimalist interface (designed by Mendes) and embedded footage from the park's motion-activated cameras (selected by Allison) accompany the bear's first-person narration (written by J. B. MacKinnon and narrated by Mia Kirshner).

Bear 71 distinguishes itself from the mainstream natural history film in a number of ways. It replaces spectacular landscapes empty of humans with

grainy footage that reveals human presence, including roads, underpasses, and holidaymakers. Posthumous first-person narration and interactivity stage a questioning of the desire to look, which most natural history films strive to fulfil without querying. While mainstream wildlife films go to great lengths to avoid disturbing their animal subjects, the question of privacy never comes up. In the BBC recording of highly elusive Arctic whales, for example, the

use of sophisticated aerial technology... is justified as it doesn't disturb the animals; yet the question of whether it is appropriate to film animals in this way at all is not raised. Underpinning such action is an assumption that animals have no right to privacy, and therefore the camera crew have no need to determine whether those animals assent to being filmed.³⁹

Brett Mills explains that in humans privacy pertains to location (the home) and activity (birth, death, or sex).⁴⁰ The camera's presence in these spaces or moments must be justified. With animals, on the contrary, success is proportional to the degree of difficulty that filming the animals presents. Inadvertently, then, technological solutions to the problem of 'capturing' animals confirm animal privacy as a form of resistance.

Bear 71 is about the rightfulness of unfettered visual access; it questions the unquestioning nature of mainstream wildlife films – that is, it takes animal privacy seriously. The film's mixed spaces – not the unpopulated Arctic, but the overlapping habitats of humans and bears – lend themselves to an ethical framework in which privacy is less a matter of abstract rights than a reality born of the interactions between creatures. 'Because animal ethics has tended to emerge from or extend traditional approaches to ethics,' writes Gruen in *Entangled Empathy*,

the arguments used to promote animal liberation or animal rights focus on individuals in isolation from the larger political and social structures of power that undergird the domination of animals as well as oppression based on race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality.⁴¹

Ecofeminists like Gruen 'pay attention to [the] context'⁴² in which moral questions arise. Indeed, *Bear 71* is rich in particulars that furnish the drama's geopolitical, economic, and social contexts. The level of detail in the bear's narration also helps to offset the documentary's otherwise heavy-handed anthropomorphism.

Bear 71's aching, sardonic account thwarts the pretences of scientific

observation. It is neither the authorial voiceover of wildlife documentaries nor the fairy tale trope of talking animals. Kirshner's highly personalised telling sits more provocatively in the tradition of dead narrators. 'The dead narrator has the potential to overturn every category used to talk about the narrator.'⁴³ Moreover, the expanded knowledge of the dead narrator resonates with modern surveillance technologies that see and hear everything. Whether modelled on artificial or on ghostly intelligence, the dead narrator is not simply human or humanised but a narrative construct.

The experience of watching *Bear 71* – from the opening sequence of the bear's violent collaring until her death in defence of her cubs – is disquieting. Although she makes much of the tension between doing what comes naturally and responding to the park's manmade conditions, Bear 71 avoids simple binaries of then and now, the wild and the urban, which are too deeply entwined to be told apart:

it's hard to say where the wired world ends and the wild one begins. Most birds can see ultraviolet light. Some frogs can hear sounds nearly twice as high as human ears can pick up. A platypus can basically *smell* electricity.

Nonetheless, Sarah Jaquette Ray sees a 'mismatch' between the i-doc's diegetic 'wilderness tropes'⁴⁴ and digital layout. Ultimately, Ray argues, the

webdoc can be understood as advancing a more nuanced picture of how these hybrid geographies and naturecultures may point to a broader critique of network systems and call for an ethic that accounts for them, rather than engaging in nostalgia for a pre-industrial or even pre-human past.⁴⁵

The tension within the film between transcendent views of 'unmanned' nature and the unnatural spaces of Banff national park gives way to Donna Haraway's posthuman 'naturecultures' and Sarah Whatmore's post-wilderness 'hybrid geography':⁴⁶

Whatmore suggests a hybrid, relational view 'spun between people and animals, plants and soils, documents and devices in heterogeneous social networks which are performed in and through multiple places and fluid ecologies'.⁴⁷

Images of pristine, empty nature are justifiably suspect, even if the critical pendulum swings too unreflectively in the other direction. New materialist ontologies that highlight the enmeshment of human and nonhuman

agents are an important corrective to transcendent conceptions of nature, but they risk political and ethical vacuity by downplaying the overdetermined relations rooted in violence against animals. By distributing agency flatly across the network, issue hierarchy and power can be subsumed under the vital flow of 'relations' and 'contact'.

My main concern, however, is not with the film's mediated environments but with the kind of seeing explored in both its 'multimedia form and its storyline content'.⁴⁸ Banff's animals must adapt to ever more intrusive incursions by humans and technology. Bear 71 is well aware of the tragic ironies of constant observation. She sees tagging and tracking in the name of conservation as inseparable from other stressors: encroaching urbanisation of a growing population of tourists and residents, road and rail infrastructure and traffic, and sinister multinationals.

That snare had a breaking strength of two tons. The dart was full of something called Telazol, brought to you by Pfizer, the same people who make Zoloft and Viagra. Next thing I know, I'm wearing a VHF collar and have my own radio frequency. They also gave me a number. I'm Bear 71.

At the outset, then, access to the bear's whereabouts and exploits is not benign. It is a mark of human power over animal life, but it also exposes the limits of transparency; seeing everything all the time is blinding. Bear 71 is deprived of the ability to live without being seen, but she *can* be misunderstood. This is made clear when the bear recounts, triumphantly:

This one hot summer afternoon, a ranger was keeping tabs on me at Johnson Lake. I was observed to sniff the rope swing, and then I jumped in the water for a swim. I remember thinking, put *that* in your in your notebook. Go ahead and analyze *that*.

And elsewhere,

the forest has its own language. Maybe you can learn it with hidden cameras and test tubes, but I doubt it.

The looking that the film enables is not synonymous with Berger's inter-species estrangement or the fallacies of transparency. Bear 71 looks and speaks back. Her images are made available to us in the form of a violation, not simply voyeuristic, and without the pleasures of mastery.

The film's assemblages of park footage, digital animation, and images created and displayed every time users activate their webcam are not iterations of Berger's alienation argument. The first-person perspectives

(of user and bear) bind human and nonhuman in an age of mass surveillance. The text's political import is clear: 'I suppose it's like most of the surveillance that goes on today – it's partly there to protect you, and partly to protect everybody else *from* you.' Despite sophisticated technology and constant monitoring, grizzlies have fared poorly in this wired wilderness. They are not unlike displaced indigenous people or victims of war.

Think of us as refugees, I guess. There used to be Grizzlies all across the Canadian Prairies, and now there aren't any. Not one. We've been pushed into the mountains.

In one sense, the bear speaks and acts while remaining partly inscrutable, what Ray calls 'disanthropocentric anthropomorphism'.⁴⁹ In another sense, we are in the presence of an animal who shares a common predicament with surveilled, criminalised, and forgotten human others. Kirshner's choice as narrator is not accidental in this regard. Kirshner is the director and co-author, with MacKinnon, of the *I Live Here* project, collecting the stories of displaced and marginalised people.

It is glib to say that the criticality of *Bear 71* stems from its self-reflexivity. The way in which viewers/users are wired into the network, invited to look and to empathise, urged to consider the film's central character as the victim of unfettered looking, is not exhausted by reflexivity's routine gestures of implication and the exposure of artifice. Without disparaging technology, *Bear 71* questions the cultural taking for granted of animals' visual access, and so advances not-seeing as a modality of relation to wild animals.

Berger's animals and the technological animals of the wired wildernesses are both abstractions and specimens for man to endlessly exploit. Alongside Ray's astute observation that *Bear 71* makes a general claim about 'the costs of our otherwise out-of-sight, out-of-mind networks of consumption',⁵⁰ we come to see *Bear 71* as *this* bear in *this* place during *that* stretch of time. She is never fully absorbed into the visual repository of digital images within which she functions as statistical data. Scientific indifference to individual animals is further critiqued by the film's cyclical structure, ending where it began, with *Bear 71*'s cub, *Bear 107*, tagged and tracked. Not simply reducible to a fable or number, the bear's singularity accrues in the wider political and economic context of Banff national park – its historic displacement of the Nakoda peoples, the role of Big Pharma, or the overdependence on grain for animal agriculture.

4 Conclusion

In legal parlance the ‘ratchet effect’ describes a ‘unidirectional change in some legal variable that can become entrenched over time, setting in motion a process that can then repeat itself indefinitely’.⁵¹ Though the effect is meant to warn against the difficulty to scale down or roll back controversial legislation, such as the NSA’s telephone metadata collection, it is interesting to consider it in other areas where surveillance and other technologies are applied, including wildlife conservation. If true, the ratchet effect suggests that certain practices, once unleashed, accelerate and multiply in ways that make them difficult to reverse or control. One might be reminded here of the cumulative principle in Walter Benjamin’s ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ – the continuous pileup of catastrophes called ‘progress’ on which the angel of history’s eyes are fixed, and which blows him further and further into the future.⁵²

Looking back at her fatal train accident, *Bear 71* offers dryly:

There’s no real mystery to how accidents happen. Things that are unstoppable are a problem when you need them to stop.

Technologies like trains, cars, and their vast infrastructures, as well as mass surveillance networks, similarly intensify in a kind of ratchet effect. The intensification of wildlife surveillance continues regardless of whether or not it achieves its stated objectives, typically framed by the rhetoric of security and health. Like the NSA’s mass surveillance programme, wildlife surveillance entails disciplining impulses that tend toward proliferation and intensification over and above the protection of individual freedom. Legal scholars debate the validity of the ratchet effect, perhaps because the term describes a phenomenon that is itself extra-legal: the tendency of power to self-perpetuate. Aligned with power, the law will ‘naturally’ widen and deepen its disciplinary reach.⁵³

Ray concludes that because *Bear 71*

explores how humans interact with animals in an age of networks, satellites, and surveillance, the user comes away from the experience not simply regretting this entanglement as a loss of nature to a globalising and increasingly populated world, but with an acknowledgement that a new ethical orientation is needed precisely because of that entanglement.⁵⁴

It is less clear what this new ethics means or how it might look. I have suggested that thinking about animal ethics and politics in an age of mass surveillance orients us toward privacy. The question of privacy arises not in a vacuum that sees humans, animals, and technology as mutually exclusive; it is precisely the networked environments that Ray describes in which animals, humans, and the tracking apparatus convene that make privacy a matter of consideration and concern. Taken seriously, animal privacy prods the limits of the desire to look and outlines other, less acquisitive modalities of sight that forgo the automation and acceleration of the technologically-ratcheted human gaze, and, as it were, *hesitate* in the face of the animal.

Berger might wish to quell the flow of animal imagery, but if images cannot be extinguished perhaps animals can. Randy Malamud posits that zoo animals are better off dead: 'extinction (which is, of course, part of the cycle of evolution) may be a more natural path than interventions by zoos'.⁵⁵ Such extinctionism harbours its own zoocidal inclinations, while also assuming that extinction is 'more natural' and thus preferable.

There are other ways of troubling acts of seeing. If Berger's problem is the weakening effect that looking at animals in modernity has on the human observer, Simone Weil tackles looking in the opposite way. She actively seeks to deplete her own observational powers. In *Gravity and Grace*, Weil is emphatically suspicious of the mastery of the gaze. She writes, '[m]ay I disappear in order that those things that I see may become perfect in their beauty from the very fact that they are no longer things that I see.'⁵⁶ Weil imagines vision untangled from power by removing herself from the ocular equation.

Initially, the camera might seem like the perfect embodiment of un-mooring vision from the vestiges of a dominant humanity, since the camera sees the world mechanically and unintentionally, as the world might see itself. Bazin gives this the name of 'the world in its own image'.⁵⁷ In fact, the world in its own image aptly describes the state of total, fully automated surveillance of nature. Weil's seeing the world as if she were not there to see it strikes me as subtly but significantly different from Bazin's myth of total cinema. Weil's main concern is not with producing complete, fully automated seeing but with the mitigation – or, in Weil's term, 'decreation' – of self. Weil, then, is preoccupied not with the possibility of a transcendental perspective but with the radical suspension of subjectivity for the purpose of – and this is where the idea of privacy returns – protecting the integrity of the things that are seen; seen, as it were, beyond the purview of power, beyond the grasp of the surveying eye/I. Rather than

liberating the image by doing away with human presence, Weil's phrasing, in the triple repetition of 'T', betrays her frustration with the intransigence of the human observer. No naive 'view from nowhere', Weil complicates modes of subjectivity and spectatorship that seek to surveil and consume others – acts of looking that, for her, are precisely antithetical to the 'conservation' of the object.

Bear 71 grapples with human presence in its staging of the tension between the elaborate networks of surveillance technology and wildlife conservation, in the increasing human encroachment on animals' habitats that produce hybrid geographies, and, most importantly, in the present context – in the film's insistence on the participation of the human observer who looks at animals, perhaps wishing she could see animals as if she were not there to see them, yet patently refusing the illusion of wildlife surveillance that this has indeed been achieved.

Within the refusal of human absence is also a tacit acknowledgement of animal privacy as distinct from the 'pattern of life' configured by wildlife data collection. The private lives of animals place a limit on the connectivity that enmeshes humans, animals, and technology in our co-constructed environments. It may be time to debate not only animal agency but the 'balance between security and freedom' (deemed appropriate for humans) for the animals we watch at will. In the midst of the technological illumination of life there persists a zone of concealment that shields animals from unrestrained visibility. It is the animals' way of refusing our overtures and resisting the gaze.

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Notes

1. Knefel 2014.
2. In "Ag gag" laws: The Battle for Animal Welfare is a Battle over Information', Siobhan O'Sullivan writes that so-called ag gag laws 'seek to outlaw undercover surveillance by animal rights activists inside factory farms, under threat of harsh punishment'. In the United States ag gag laws expand on the earlier Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA), 'signed into law by President George W. Bush on November 27, 2006. The law was pushed through Congress by wealthy biomedical & agri-business industry groups such as the Animal Enterprise Protection Coalition (AEP), the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and the Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF), with bipartisan support'. Center for Constitutional Rights: [http://ccrjustice.org/learn-more/faqs/factsheet%3A-animal-enterprise-terrorism-act-\(aeta\)](http://ccrjustice.org/learn-more/faqs/factsheet%3A-animal-enterprise-terrorism-act-(aeta)) (accessed 5 March 2015).
3. Creed 1998, p. 80.
4. Mulvey 1989, p. 19.
5. Berger 1980, p. 24.
6. Women can be made edible too, when, as the saying goes, a woman 'looks good enough to eat'.
7. Nora Alter takes "vision" to mean "sight as a physical operation" and "visuality" to mean "sight as a social fact" (Alter 1996).
8. Gruen 2014, p. 234.
9. Ibid., p. 237.
10. Berger 1980, pp. 2-3, 5.
11. Ibid., p. 3.
12. Burt 2005.
13. Ibid., p. 204.
14. Berger 1980, p. 15.
15. Ibid., p. 19.
16. Ibid. But zoo displays are not always live. In the aftermath of Israel's bombing of Gaza's zoos in 2008-2009, some of the wild animals who died in the attacks, too difficult to replace under Israel's ongoing blockade, were stuffed and presented as taxidermy. For a reading of the role of looking at animals in war zones that references 'Why Look at Animals?', see Salih 2014.
17. Ibid., p. 24.
18. Berger 1980, p. 24.
19. Burt 2005, p. 212.
20. Pachirat 2011, p. 11.
21. Burt 2005, p. 208.
22. Ibid., p. 208.
23. Iveson 2014, pp. 142-143.
24. Berger 1980, p. 5. The scene resembles opposition to industrialised slaughter by author Michael Pollan, chefs Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Jamie Oliver, and theorists Kathy Rudy and Donna Haraway. For these writers, killing animals for food is not a

problem as long as animals are seen, and seen to (treated well), before their death. The 'humane meat' movement presents itself as an antidote to alienation and promotes hands-on, intimate methods of killing as more deeply relational. See for example Rudy 2011 and Stanescu 2013.

25. Burt 2005, p. 208.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
27. Benson 2010, p. 2.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 45.
31. Cochrane qtd. in Benson 2010, p. 31.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
33. 'National Geographic's Crittercam is a research tool designed to be worn by wild animals. It combines video and audio recording with collection of environmental data such as depth, temperature, and acceleration. These compact systems allow scientists to study animal behavior without interference by a human observer. Combining solid data with gripping imagery, Crittercam brings the animal's point of view to the scientific community and a conservation message to worldwide audiences.' <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/crittercam-about/> (accessed 3 March 2015).
34. Benson 2010, p. 192.
35. Kalof 2013, p. 163. For a more hopeful analysis of looking at animals online see Kamphof 2013.
36. Burt 2005, p. 213.
37. <http://foryourconsideration.ca/bear71/> (accessed 28 February 2015).
38. Similar concerns about the encounter of humans, animals, and technology are at the heart of Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005), of which *Bear 71* is a kind of counterpoint.
39. Mills 2010, pp. 195-196.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
41. Gruen 2015, p. 25.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
43. Bennett 2012, p. 117.
44. Ray 2014, p. 243.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
46. On post-wilderness see Cronon 1995, pp. 69-90.
47. Ray 2014, p. 243.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
51. Givens 2013.
52. Benjamin 1999.
53. To get around ag gag laws, animal activists now use drones to surveil animal facilities. While the use of drones by activists might be tactically sound, it should be recognised as part of the technological ratchet effect I am discussing, and as such it is open to similar critiques of animal privacy, militarism, and the disciplining gaze.
54. Ray 2014, p. 251.
55. Malamud 1998, p. 45.
56. Weil 2002, p. 42.
57. Bazin 2005, p. 21.

