

Looking at Animals Through Webcams

by Finch and Bluebird, October 2016

As we were putting together our Haunted Objects show at Peridot Green, we encountered two separate people working in the theme of webcams trained on animals. We included a selection of Joe Moore's voyeuristic quasi-photographs, and asked Stephanie Lam to summarize her article on the subject.



In 1980, John Berger compellingly asked the question, "why look at animals?" In this thoughtful and rather melancholy essay, he proposes that our desire to look at animals and to possess their surrogate forms rises in direct correlation to their disappearance

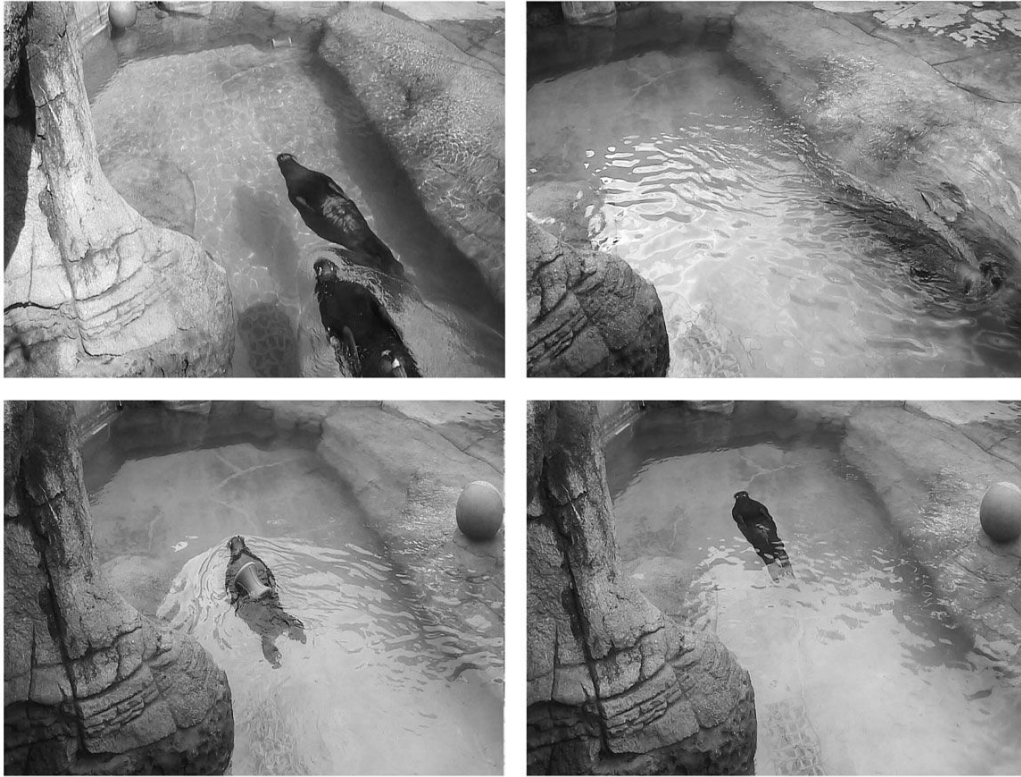
from everyday life. The stuffed animal, the cartoon animal, the caged animal are in a sense different means -- or even media -- by which we draw animals nearer into our worlds, domesticate them, and render them familiar. For Berger, the sad fact of the wild animal's disappearance is also the sad fact of the impossibility of a thoroughly wild encounter, an encounter of equals that confirms our parallel lives. Relegated to the status of pets, research specimens, units of food, or token representatives of their kind, today our encounters with animals are for the most part prescribed, utilitarian, and economic. The animals that hover at the periphery of the human, the sly and shy ones, have learned to harvest our scraps, to adapt to our noise, and to travel in shadow. The fact that we even have a category of animal called "urban wildlife" indicates that the distance between the domestic and the wild exists along a spectrum. Even when animals are physically distant, there are ways of drawing them closer visually and imaginatively. There are ways of making them present in our interior lives and everyday realities via stories and images.

For Berger the 19th century zoo was the preemptive space where the urban individual could gaze upon the animal, but what a sorry exchange that always proved. Who hasn't been to a zoo where the monkeys are withdrawn, hippos hidden, and the elephants reluctant? For the brief moments when we stand before them, we expect them to perform the best versions of themselves, to exemplify their type, to be raucous with action. Perhaps zoos underwhelm because they promise the possibility of a singular, unique encounter. We want that orangutan to recognize us, to see us. Is there any feeling as utterly dejecting as being snubbed by an animal? It's hard not to take such things personally. The alternative to this non-contact is the wildlife documentary which, with its bevy of cinematic devices and tools, brings us intimately into animal habitats and creates for viewers the illusion of absolute and seamless access. It's fair to say that this mode of looking at animals is now the norm, and one can't help but wonder how such genres condition our expectations.

Live-streaming nature cams are a kind of 21st century hybrid environment, something between the zoo and the nature film. But as real-time and authorless media, they allow space for true contingency. Life is full of moments where anticipation and boredom coincide. The live cam makes us feel these twin effects fully when nothing happens but potentially anything could happen. Nature cams tap into our desire to see and to know

animals as they truly are. Even the most domesticated animal seems wild when we observe them without their knowing (Can the same be said of people? Do animals have private lives? Do they have privacy?). These days we use mechanical eyes, fiber optic cables and screens to bridge the distance between the human and the animal. We surveil animals because we care. We watch them because we want to be intimate with their bodies and behaviours. It seems both sinister and utterly touching to want to know animals without them knowing about us.

The zoo and other apparatuses of observation, as Berger reminds us, are ways of compensating for the animal's general invisibility and marginal status. With the rate of species extinction today, it's hard not to see these animals against the backdrop of their disappearance and to feel a preemptive pang of loss. And yet the sight of an elephant at a watering hole brings joy for countless numbers of users who frequent these websites. The online forums on live cam sites alone speak to the genuine excitement and specialness of these encounters. Even if these encounters are unreciprocated and utterly mediated, they affect us nonetheless. They show us, however briefly, that animals do live real and parallel lives.



Further reading:

Berger, John. [*Why look at animals?*](#). London: Penguin, 2009.

Lam, Stephanie. [*It's About Time: Slow Aesthetics in Experimental Ecocinema and Nature Cam Videos*](#). From [*Slow Cinema*](#), University of Edinburgh Press, 2015.

Peridot Green Q07: *Haunted Objects*