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Animal Big Brother

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The chances of encountering a wolf in Switzerland are vanishingly small. The mountain ranges, forests, and pastures are simply too vast, and the animal is too timid and shy. But if you do get lucky enough to spot one, you can be sure that someone else is watching too.

Swiss forests are rife with electronic eyes: camera traps, thermal sensors, and night vision cameras are watching 24/7. Installed by the state-run wolf management agency KORA, these surveillance devices check the progress of the rebounding wolf population. A tight-knit network of automated cameras takes up to 1,000 images of the predators annually, providing information on their conditions, movements, behaviours, and changes to pack sizes. Subsequently, the images are fed into scientific models and public databases in order to examine the wolves' conservation status and inform environmental policies.[1]

In the context of conservation, images of animals captured by surveillance technologies are often described as key data, necessary to monitor and protect various populations. European conservation laws even require a system for the 'surveillance of the conservation status of endangered species'[2] like wolves, lynxes, and bats. And why not? Wolves were trapped, poisoned, and shot for centuries because their prey and habitat clashed with the interests of livestock farmers and timber industries, and these electronic observers are now offering care through their protective gaze; what's more, they appear ethically valuable and scientifically effective. Eventually, the more scientists know about wolves – the more data are collected about their population size, lives, habits, and needs – the easier it seems to find arguments for their conservation. Yet I wonder: do wolves enjoy being observed 24/7? Does the human desire to protect them justify an animal *Big Brother* setting? And if so, what kind of conservation and coexistence is supported by the constantly blinking eyes of surveillance?

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At a first glance, surveillance technologies like camera traps, thermal sensors, and night vision devices seem to capture simply what's in front of them. Sitting in camouflaged cases clamped on tree trunks and fenceposts, their photographs serve as evidence of the presence of wolves and other animals: images are taken and ecological data generated whenever the camera sensors are triggered by a certain level of movement, body heat, or sound. A wolf passing by could activate them, as could a tree swaying in a storm or a hiker peeing in the bushes. However, as Jennifer Gabrys argued in her book *Program Earth*, capturing environments through sensors like surveillance cameras is 'not just a process of generating information, but also a way of informing experience.'[3] Thus, the experience of looking at wolves through the lenses of surveillance technologies isn't only informed by what's depicted but also by the devices' engrained functionalities, aesthetics, and histories – and these are inevitably militaristic, violent, and alienating.

Let's consider night vision images as an example. KORA operates a public online database with over 5,000 surveillance images of wolves roaming through Swiss forests. Browsing through the photographs reveals that at least every second image was taken with a night vision device during pitch-black night-time. Reflecting on Gabrys's argument about how surveillance technologies inform experience, these grainy, wide-angle, black-and-white images of wolves aren't *only* of wolves. Rather, they're of wolves in the context of an imminent visual language that's tightly intertwined with the history of war, crime, and violence.

Developed by the German Army during World War II, night vision came into heavy use during the Vietnam War and spread quickly into various governmental and private applications from there. As a result, we're now frequently exposed to night vision images of all sorts; the technology illuminates soldiers in war coverage, makes illegal migrants glow at the border, and captures burglars in supermarkets. Inevitably, the extensive militaristic usage dictated its narrative as a means of control, penalization, and policing. Therefore, it's hardly surprising that any random subject captured by and framed through night vision will most likely be read as potentially dangerous foe, sneaky intruder, or simply a suspicious Other – even if just a wolf in its habitat. In this way, night vision and other surveillance technologies contribute to feelings of alienation and keep reproducing the militaristic system they belong to, whether they're deployed in a forest for ecological research or on the battlefield.[4]

Again, Swiss landscapes offer a poignant example. Here, surveillance data produced by KORA aren't just used to quantify and protect wolves anymore. Instead, they seem to be complicit in the growing perception that the wolf population is a serious threat to homes, children, and livestock, which, statistically speaking, is not the case at all. Nevertheless, populist politicians, eager to please anxious voters, promise to upgrade the purpose of the ubiquitous surveillance system from conservation to punishment. Today, wolves recorded in close proximity to Swiss settlements one too many times, or killing too many sheep, can be shot. It therefore seems that surveillance initially installed in the name of animal welfare is 'like most of the surveillance that goes on today – it's partly there to protect you and partly to protect everybody else from you',[5] as it was put by an off-camera voice in *Bear71*, a documentary about the surveillance of Canadian grizzlies that could just as easily be about Swiss wolves.

Unfortunately, corrupt conservation like Switzerland's isn't rare. When animals are surveilled and their movements tracked, authorities begin to draw boundaries and discipline all bodies that cross them. Surveillance and punishment go hand in hand, as Michel Foucault once wrote[6] and as surveillance within conservation expands, punishment and violence within conservation expand too.

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In Switzerland, the major monitoring strategies for wolves involve camera traps, night vision devices, and thermal imagery as well as the collection and analysis of hair, faeces, and DNA samples.

2
European Union, 'Council Directive 92/43/EEC, On the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Flora and Fauna', *Official Journal of the European Communities* No L 206 (July 1992): 12, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:31992L0043&-from=EN.

3
Jennifer Gabrys, *Program Earth. Environmental Sensing Technology and the Making of a Computational Planet* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 10–12.

4
Indeed, many surveillance technologies used for ecological research are the product of war and conflict. For example, the US military developed the first acoustic sensors to detect movement along trails during the Vietnam war, while radio telemetry (which revolutionised the tracking of wild animals in the 1950s) benefitted from Cold War spying and eco-drones owe their existence to the development of aerial reconnaissance systems for contemporary warfare.

5
Jeremy Mendes and Leanne Allison, *Bear 71* (National Film Board of Canada, 2012), 20 min., https://bear71vr.nfb.ca/.

6
Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York City: Pantheon Press, 1977).



Noémie Goudal, *Les Mécaniques I-III*, 2016, C-Print, 168 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Les Mécaniques I-I, 2016,
C-Print, 168 x 200 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



Les Mécaniques I-II, 2016,
C-Print, 168 x 200 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

Examples are plentiful. In Scotland, the aggressive sounds of surveillance drones are used to keep wolves away from the grazing territories of sheep. In Kenya, elephants with GPS collars are punished once they cross a virtual geofence before they get too close to farmland. In Australia, endangered great white sharks, equipped with acoustic tags, get killed if they move too close to bathing beaches. Meanwhile, night vision and thermal cameras are routinely deployed in various African and Asian countries in order to combat poachers with sniper rifles. Cambridge researcher William M. Adams has noted that once animals and humans can be surveilled and tracked, 'their boundary crossings become not only something that can be, but must be, managed.'[7] What emerges are thus new forms of violence across spaces and species, legitimised and emphasised by surveillance. Experts call this intense militarisation of ecological matters 'war by conservation'.[8] Ultimately, it's rather hard to imagine how surveillance technologies that are so deeply entangled in militaristic histories and violent practices can be productive in the cause of animal protection.

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There are some bizarre shimmers of hope though. As recently expressed by researchers, a new type of wildlife surveillance might have the potential to facilitate empathy and care by making us look at animals differently.

The most promising of these technologies don't look *at* the animal but *with* it. In an attempt to show animals as subjects of experience and agency – rather than as suspicious Others – they turn the camera around. By putting a recording device on animals' heads or backs, spectacular wildlife documentaries like *The Blue Planet* and technologies such as SheepView360° and Crittercam provide perspectives and GoPro-esque experiences from the animals' points of view. Through shaky lenses, we dive with whales and run with bears. We see what a lion sees while hunting cattle in Kenya and what a penguin sees while diving into the freezing waters of Antarctica. It's an authentic gaze and an unusual perspective that tries to subvert the inherent power structures of surveillance, in which vision 'is always a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices',[9] as Donna Haraway put it. While surveillance cameras in Swiss forests let humans stalk wolves through militaristic lenses, Crittercam and SheepView360° are trying to make human and non-human agents see together in full colour HD.

Does this mean that KORA should strap Crittercams on the backs of wolves instead of capturing their bodies with camera traps? Could such an embodiment of an animal's perspective create more empathy and lead to better conservation laws?

Following Haraway's thoughts, devices like Crittercams do at least offer the possibility of recognising that life experiences go beyond the human. In her view, images taken by a Crittercam demonstrate that humans, animals, and machines all play an active, partial part in sensing the world. As a consequence, a Crittercam's pictures can be used to develop 'the loving care people might take to learn see faithfully from another's point of view, even when the other is our own machine.'[10] This is where the boundaries between gazes, subjects, and objects become blurry and 'the viewing of others becomes becoming with others.'[11] From our sofas and kitchens, we crawl with alligators through swamps and dive with whales through plankton blooms in order to realise that our experiences are deeply interlocked with the animals we watch at will and the devices we deploy for this task.

Maybe Crittercam images hold a promise to shift human-centred perspectives by providing a breathtaking view from an animal's back.[12] But let's be realistic: the animal still has to pay a price. Because, as scholar Anat Pick noted, '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.'[13] In order to make us see, understand, and maybe empathise, animals have to carry a bulky Crittercam-backpack that narrows their range of motion and grinds their skin around the clock.

Art critic and novelist John Berger described such a compromised form of knowledge production in his influential essay 'Why Look at Animals'; he wrote that 'animals are always the observed....They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them.'[14]

It should be clear by now that our urge to look at animals like wolves through a never-ending expansion of surveillance affects their physical well-being. But it influences another critical dimension that's not often talked about: privacy. One might dare to ask if we, as human animals, would like to share rare views of our private lives through a GoPro strapped to our heads in order to be protected? Would we agree to a conservational *Big Brother* setting that broadcasts every detail of our lives? Our movement, meals, showers, kisses, sexual intercourses, conversations, and every visit to the lavatory? Don't we run into an ethical problem of animal privacy, where the human desire to make animals unconditionally visible ignores questions of non-human dignity? Shouldn't, as Anat Pick has asked, the private lives and experiences of animals 'place a limit on the connectivity that enmeshes humans, animals, and technology in our co-constructed environments'?[15]

Finally, does this mean that not looking would be a better option to avoid violence and the intrusion of privacy? And if so, would it be responsible to look away in a day and age of mass extinction and environmental crises?

Probably not – and this is where we come full circle – because today, the legal protection of animals like wolves depends on data generated by

7
William M. Adam, 'Geographies of Conservation II: Technology, Surveillance and Conservation by Algorithm', *Progress of Human Geography* 43, no. 2 (2017): 340–343.

8
Rosaleen Duffy, 'War by Conservation', *Geoforum*, no. 69 (2016): 238–248.

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Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14, no. 3 (1988): 585.

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Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 583.

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Gabrys, *Program Earth*, 64.

10
Marek Jancovic, 'Animal Technics: On Borders and the Labour of Knowing the World,' *Fotomuseum Winterthur, Situations*, August 6, 2021, https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/situations-post/marek-jancovic/.

11
Anat Pick, 'Why Not Look at Animals?', *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 4, no. 1 (2015): 114, https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15175.

12
John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals?', in *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 1980), 16.

13
Pick, 'Why Not Look at Animals?', 122.



Gerard Ortín Castellví,
Reserve, 2020, stills.
Courtesy of the artist.



Christoph Miller

surveilling them in various ways. Historian Mark Barrow observed with bitter irony that 'endangered species must in effect become partially domesticated, subjected to continued human surveillance, manipulation, and control to ensure their continued perpetuation.'[16] Without surveillance and quantification of their populations, ecologists and environmentalists don't have the necessary arguments to protect them. In order to live, animals have to become data machines, fully transparent and manageable entities. In such a system, one in which complex experience is streamlined, reduced, and converted into crystal clear data points, animals suffer and their most intimate moments are stolen. We have to challenge the very idea of conservation through surveillance, whether it's done with a GoPro or CCTV.

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There's no doubt that ecological data could provide powerful tools in the struggle for animal protection. But the intrusive ways and militaristic modes in which these data are produced through surveillance, subsequently turned into evidence, and used to legitimise violent environmental policies has to be reimagined.

Some early efforts are underway. Projects like the feminist marine science lab Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR) are trying to develop data-gathering devices that aren't deployed in centralised, all-encompassing, and omniscient ways but in humbler manners, and this by recognising 'that we – as members of larger groups of humans and others – are not singular nor superior in our knowledge, perspective, experience, or social position, and that we are connected to others whether we want to be or not.'[17] Referring to feminist standpoint theory, CLEAR understands that 'there are many ways to know things, many different forms of knowledge, and recognizes the limits of a single way to know things.'[18] As a consequence, surveillance data can't be the only and superior sources of knowledge when it comes to conservation science and policies. There has to be space for other representations of experience – and for other ways of looking – that urge us to stop picturing what Haraway described as 'animals as screen or a ground or a resource.'[19] One example of this is CLEAR researchers recording how they feel while processing data as a way of keeping knowledge embodied and showing how their research and their ethical commitments influence each other. Another example would be that the lab regularly welcomes artists and curators in order to complement scientific views with different ways of looking.

Today, it remains unclear if and when such grassroot efforts will spread from niche to state-run conservation. However, it's obvious that conservation practices interested in the well-being of animals can no longer afford to deploy a way of looking that falls prey to the violent modes of surveillance.

After all, looking doesn't have to be 'something that one body does to another',[20] as described by scholar Lauren Collee. There is 'another way to think about technologies of vision too. Like other senses, vision is inherently *relational;* it comprises moments of encounter between multiple subjects, and therefore multiple subjectivities.'[21] Looking at a wolf in such a relational way might allow us to rediscover an age-old wisdom: looking into the eyes of a wolf is a unique experience that changes one forever. When glances meet across species, windows can open up and transformative moments can happen. Looking can enable us to develop instincts to care, connect to our environment, and be transformed by it. Today, there's no doubt that we have to look, but we have to do so differently; and we badly need technologies, values, and conservation laws that enable this way of looking.

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16
Mark V. Barrow Jr., *Nature's Ghosts: Confronting Extinction from the Age of Jefferson to the Age of Ecology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 344.

17
Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research, 'Lab Book, A Living Manual of Our Values, Guidelines, and Protocols', *Civic Laboratory*, December 30, 2017, https://civiclaboratory.files.wordpress.com/2017/12/clear-lab-book.pdf.

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Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research, 'Lab Book'.

19
Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', 592.

20
Lauren Collee, 'Camera Traps. Why Do We Overlook the Surveillance of Nature?', *Real Life* (August 6, 2020): para. 29, https://reallifemag.com/camera-traps/.

21
Collee, 'Camera Traps', para. 29.