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Webcams to Save Nature: Online Space as Affective and Ethical Space

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Abstract This article analyses the way in which websites of conservation foundations organise the affective investments of viewers in animals by the use of webcams. Against a background of—often overly—general speculation on the influence of electronic media on our engagement with the world, it focuses on one particular practice where this issue is at stake. Phenomenological investigation is supplemented with ethnographic observation of user practice. It is argued that conservation websites provide caring spaces in two interrelated ways: by providing affective spaces where users’ feelings are evoked, articulated and organised; and by opening up ethical space where the beauty of animals appears as an incentive to care. As an alternative to thinking of on- and off-line places as clearly delineated and of bodies and technologies as separate entities, the analysis focuses on trajectories of engagement that cut through these in various directions. In actual acts of looking and being affected, users, animals, places and technologies are intimately entwined. The article further suggests how focussing on trajectories of involvement can be developed to evaluate various websites and their user activity in relationship to clearly defined goals, e.g. conservation goals.

Keywords Affective space · Ethical space · Nature conservation · Phenomenology · Webcams

1 Introduction

Looking up from my deskwork, I see an antelope. Gracefully it approaches the waterhole, visible in the window. The wind ruffles the yellow grass. Then everything is quiet again, except for this one creature, drinking now, going about its life as I go about mine. Later, as I take another break to stretch my back, my eyes wander over a bird nest. As I watch the light change over the mother stork, patiently tending her eggs, I notice some excitement on

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the forum attached to the website that offers me this view. Hatching time approaches, within hours probably. Reluctantly I click the view away and decide to check back as soon as I can.

It must be experiences like this that nature conservation foundations have in mind when they link web cameras to their sites. Thus there appear on our screens, as if through electronic windows: a waterhole in one of Botswana's savannah's, a barrier reef in Belize, a river frequented by grizzlies in Alaska and many bird nests, displaying bald eagles, osprey, swifts and storks taking care of their young. The websites speak of offering "time and place to develop a unique bond" with animals, of providing the opportunity "to relate to", for instance, a bald eagle couple "in some of the most intimate moments of life—creation and nurturing of a new generation", about a "lifeline" to the natural world for "increasingly urbanised" viewers.¹

In short, these websites aim to get users involved, personally and intimately, in the lives of animals, to make them feel the significance of nature and to evoke active awareness of conservation values. The traffic generated by the most popular of them, with lively virtual communities developing around a nest or drinking place, warrants serious consideration of the attraction of these websites.² Interestingly, the explicit ethical goals of these sites stand in stark contrast to dark forebodings that are expressed, both in everyday conversation and in academic debate, of electronic communication on our engagement with the world.

In this article I will analyse the way in which conservation websites evoke and organise the affective investments of viewers in animals. More specifically, I am interested in how the webcam functions here as a medium to connect people to remote places and the beings that inhabit them. Viewing animals is part of a long tradition in our culture in which animals serve as mirrors to human culture and identities, representing a fearsome or desirable otherness. However, my focus here will be on the basic perceptual and affective relationships between viewers, animals and technology. The perspective is phenomenological and will largely disregard the semiological understanding of animals.³

2 Webcams as Media of Connection

By means of a real-time connection, webcams allow users to visually be in different locations at the same time. Technically speaking, they are telepresence media.⁴ The past decade

¹ Quoted from the National Geographic WildCam project (WildCam). Retrieved May 27, 2009, from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/field/grants-programs/wildcam-program.html>; the Hancock Wildlife Foundation (HWF). Retrieved May 27, 2009, from <http://www.hancockwildlifechannel.org/index.php?topic=cam-sites>; Wildlife Focus. Retrieved May 27, 2009, from <http://www.wildlifefocus.org/index.htm>. Also of interest is <http://www.Africam.com> (Africam).

² Wildlife Focus is still under construction. In spring 2009 HWF's bald eagles received 240.000 unique visits a day, lasting on average around 15 min (*Times Colonist*, May 5, 2009. Retrieved June 16, 2009, from http://www.timescolonist.com/story_print.html?id=1564751&sponsor=). Africam had over 30.000 registered users in September 2008 (Celebration Forum post. Retrieved September 9, 2009, from http://www.africam.com/wildlife/congrats_africam_30_000_users). WildCam's Grizzlies received over 3 million internet visits over the summers of 2006 and 2007 (Project description. National Park Service. Retrieved September 10, 2009, from http://www.nps.gov/partnerships/wildcam_grizzlies.htm).

³ Ihde (1990, p. 29) makes a helpful distinction between microperception and macroperception. The first refers to "what is immediate and focused bodily in actual seeing, hearing, etc.", the second to the cultural, hermeneutic dimension of any act of perception. The focus here is on microperception. For relevant macro-perceptual accounts, see Malamud (1998) and Berger (1980).

⁴ As Lévy (1998, p. 39) emphasises, telepresence is more than the transmission of representations. The telephone, for instance, does not just convey a representation of the voice, it carries the voice or 'audible body'. Similarly, webcams carry our eyes over the globe. With minimal possibilities of altering remote environments, Campanella (2000, p. 30) suggests, webcams can be seen as providing "low-telepresence".

has seen the rapid development of a range of applications: trafficcams, skicams, beach and barcams check road congestion, the depth of snow on the hills, the height of waves for surfing, or the crowd at our local bar. Webcams are used for scientific observation and for surveillance purposes. David Lyon rightly proposes taking ‘surveillance’ in a wide sense, between control and care (Lyon 2001, p. 3). Webcams serve both objectives or mixtures of them. In this way, cams guard our safety and possessions, but also our children and their caretakers while we work through so-called nannycams and cameras placed in daycares. Webcams have become common in online chat, for keeping in touch with loved ones far away and for online prostitution. In general, they fit in with lives that are increasingly spread out over various separate locations and serve our practical and emotional relationships with these places.

Public cam sites, such as conservation sites, appear first of all as a new medium of visual representation. The more commercially oriented ones trumpet the privileged views they offer in comparison with older media such as television or film, of animals in remote natural habitats, live and unedited. Still, webcams do more than show events in another physical location. Through a rigid real-time connection, marked by the timeline that accompanies the image, they link users to these events, uniting them, as it were, in the same temporal space. Their effect is affective as well as informational. Users feel ‘cut off’ when a cam is not working. Conversely, even when visuals are low, because of nightfall or a fogged lens for instance, the connection is experienced as ‘alive’.

The kind of connectedness provided by webcams is a matter of some debate. Loosely basing his ideas on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Virilio (2002) points to webcams as yet another step in the abolishment of real space effected by electronic media. For Virilio ‘real space’ connotes perceptual and bodily engagement with a lived-in environment in which viewer and viewed become a part of each other. Real-time electronic accessibility, on the other hand, provides only shallow immediacy and leads to a loss of physical and metaphorical distance to remote objects (Virilio 1994, 1995). The replacement of embodied seeing by ‘vision machines’, which do the seeing for us in places where our body is not, disorients our being-in-the-world, and this Virilio fears will have grave ethical consequences.

Similar forebodings are expressed by Vivian Sobchack in her essay ‘The scene of the screen’, a phenomenological questioning of the experience of presence as informed by new visual technologies. Electronic imagery appears as “just there”, she contends, cut off from its real referent (Sobchack 2004, p. 159). Space, as presented by the electronic screen, becomes a site for play and display, inviting a free floating of affect. As a result, electronic presence tends to liberate spectators from the pull of “moral and physical *gravity*” (Ibid. p. 154).

Clearly, what conservation websites aim for is in many ways the opposite of what these writers fear. Through the webcam they seek to make users bond with real places and animals. They aim to anchor viewers’ affective investment and direct it to real places, before and behind the screen. In that, I hope to show, they are not without success. The webcam does not just draw up places into a simulated realm, it also provides, as Thomas Campanella has put it, “points of contact between the virtual and the real”, “spatial ‘anchors’” in what is sometimes experienced as the “placeless sea” of cyberspace (Campanella 2000, p. 27).

How new media affect our engagement with the world is a vital question, but it cannot be answered by taking an overarching perspective on media and the culture in which they function.⁵ Media operate differently in different contexts of use and to different effect. Media and users are not fixed and separate entities that work on each other externally. They form

⁵ In Sobchack’s work, the essay mentioned above stands out from her other work that is much more sensitive to particularities of media use. Her lucid phenomenological analyses of film experience are a major inspiration for the present article.

“assemblages”⁶ of technologies and bodies in contexts of ‘doing something’. An approach that focuses on the dynamics of single user-practices suggests itself as more fruitful. Such an approach directs investigation to flows of user engagement. It does not compare on- and off-line spaces as distinct realms, but asks about trajectories and halting places, about the merging of on- and off-line events, and movements back and forth between bodies and technologies.

The question of space, of intensities and trajectories of involvement, and of places where these find anchor, is pertinent here. Space is not a phenomenological constant, not even within one viewing practice. It is dynamic. Both as perceived and as the space of perceiving, it gives way to feelings of proximity and distance, but it is also shaped by these. Caring for places and living beings in them is itself a territorializing force that shapes assemblages of media and users (Macgregor Wise 2004, p. 438). It is possible for me to feel closer to a place or person seen by cam than to those physically nearby. Webcams, Macgregor Wise argues, can play a role in global networks of care and open new extensions of being-with.

Care is particularly relevant to conservation websites. I will describe how these sites provide ‘caring spaces’ in two ways. Firstly, they offer users an ‘affective space’ where love of nature is organised online. Secondly, they can open ‘ethical space’ where care for animals is awakened as a personal obligation of viewers. Tensions between virtualisation and realisation, if we still want to use these terms, re-surface as tensions between affective space and a space that is also ethical.

Investigating particular practices requires that phenomenological analysis should focus not just on the medium as phenomenological object, but also on experience in its possible and actual varieties. Phenomenological analysis therefore needs to be informed by ethnographies of viewing practices.⁷ I will sketch out the core cases studied below.

3 Case Material

Conservation sites form part of a range of cam sites that focus on animals, including zoomcams, barncams and cams showing private pets.⁸ I concentrate here on websites that show animals in their natural habitat, place the cam view within the wider aim of conservation and combine it with interactive features. The more elaborate of these typically involve a link to one or more webcams that broadcast animal lives in real-time, 24/7. They allow for user activity with regard to the cam view by options to post highlights, to comment in a guestbook or, more often, through a forum. Through the use of FAQs, blogs by specialists or the forum, these websites provide users with opportunities to browse for information on the animals viewed.

The sites also invite concrete support, ranging from donations, to the buying of branded T-shirts or mugs, to becoming actively involved in the work of the foundation or in conservation efforts at home.

Prime examples are the site of the Hancock Wildlife Foundation (HWF), National Geographic’s WildCam, the Osprey and Bald Eagle webcams of the Blackwater National

⁶ The term ‘assemblages’ originates from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Currier (2003) offers a clear overview of the implications of this notion for the dynamic and closely intertwined relationships of bodies and technologies. In this perspective bodies appear as “collections of disparate flows, materials, impulses, intensities and practices, which congeal under particular and specific conditions, in complex relations with the flows and intensities of surrounding objects, to produce transitory but functional assemblages” (p. 326).

⁷ Hine (2000) provides an introduction into the ethnography of online practices.

⁸ Searching under ‘animals’ in portals like Earthcam.com offers many examples.

Wildlife Refuge in Cambridge (Maryland) and the webcam of the Stork Centre in Vetschau (Germany).⁹ I have included Africam.com, which connects to webcams in South African game reserves as well as to the Blackwater cams. Africam's link with conservation is indirect, being based on the reserves' policy of conservation through tourism. Yet with the first cam up in 1998, it is the longest standing website, and has a vibrant community of users.

Observations from the participatory study of these websites are used to analyse and describe viewer experience and to support or confront phenomenological observations on the potential of these sites to open up multiple 'caring spaces'.

4 Affective Space

4.1 Affectivity and Conservation

Matthew Hills uses the term 'affective spaces' for fan websites as spaces where "fan sentiment can be shared, mirrored and reaffirmed..." (Hills 2001, p. 149). The websites of conservation foundations operate similar to and, to an extent, also as fan sites. Users deeply admire the animals viewed and form strong emotional attachments to them.¹⁰ Some user habits remind directly of fan behaviour, such as expressing a love for animals in usernames like 'EagleSpirit', 'savenature' or 'Cheetah Man' or in ID icons that display animals.

Fan feelings are often considered to be excessive and artificial, geared more to the imaginary than to the real. They indicate a kind of involvement belonging to unsophisticated audiences—young adults, seniors or members of lower classes—that are easily taken in by the media and the dynamics of commercial popular culture. Insofar as a love for animals is similar to fandom, it could be argued, this is hardly a sound basis for engagement with a real world, let alone a moral one. More extended theoretical interest in fan feelings has made it clear, however, that there is ample reason to take them seriously as a form of involvement in the world (Grossberg 1992).

In general, affect signals the intensity things have for us. Different from desire, which is geared towards objects by which it could, in principle, be satisfied, affect is dispersed throughout our lives. It is 'realised' in differences between what does and does not matter, in the flow of our energies in one direction or another and in getting involved in various activities. As Grossberg shows, affect is not an arbitrary energy, but operates within and produces "mattering maps" that direct our investments in the world (Ibid., p. 82). These maps mark out places where we anchor ourselves into the world and find relatively stable moments of identity. Affect makes us belong.

Conservation websites, considered as affective spaces, are not just online places that users visit. Feelings for animals, evoked by the cam, to a significant extent 'take place' and are organised online, as will become clearer below. The view forms a core around which other involvements form.

One significant difference seems to separate the love for animals from fandom: the object of the one belongs to popular culture, the other to nature. However, this distinction is questionable. The way nature appears to human viewers is always a product of culture. Love for animals even plays prominently in popular culture, as in hit movies like *Born Free*, *Free Willy* and *Gorillas in the Mist*. Moreover, animals' habitat and lives are permeated by human

⁹ <http://www.friendsofblackwater.org/camhtm2.html>; http://www.storchennest.de/en/index_423.html. See note 1 for other URL's.

¹⁰ Love for animals and love for viewing animals are not identical. In cam viewing they conflate to such an extent that I will use them here interchangeably.

culture. The animals viewed by webcam hardly live in ‘untouched’ nature, which is becoming quite rare on our planet. They live in refuges or urbanised environments where their preservation requires human intervention.

As a part of culture, even popular culture, conservation websites do have imaginary aspects. Camera views tend to shut out roads or nearby buildings. By focussing on natural beauty, such views conjure up the idea of existent, though remote, paradises. This can be counterproductive with regard to conservation insofar as it tells viewers that nature flourishes undisturbed somewhere in the world. WildCam’s claim to bring viewers to “Earth’s last remaining wild places”, accompanied by the flashy visuals that form National Geographic’s trademark, is a prime example. Yet most sites also provide pictures and information that plant these Gardens of Eden firmly in the real world.

Ideally, the love for animals cultivated by conservation sites does differ from fandom in that it reaches beyond the particular animal as a fan-object and evokes care for its well-being and ultimately for that of an entire species or ecosystem. In the light of conservation issues, the affective spaces generated should open up ethical space as well. I will first describe how the websites operate as affective spaces. To illustrate the dynamic approach I am suggesting four points are of special interest. Conservation websites offer easy access to animals, and subsequently a space to articulate and affirm evoked affects. They further provide a focal point for sharing a love for nature and provide opportunities to further develop attachments and link them to other interests.

4.2 Conservation Websites as Affective Spaces

4.2.1 *Realising Affect*

Through the webcam, conservation sites allow users not just to discuss their love of animals, but to access and ‘realise’ it on the spot. The cam imagery stands within an online space that opens up to scenes of real animal life with only a few mouse clicks. I will come back to the realism of the view later. Important here is that, because the time of the events viewed and the time of the viewing keep the same pace, events and the daily activity of regular users intertwine. Webcams allow for relations of co-presence. Desk workers make small escape visits to check, for instance, how the eagle parents they are following are doing. Users keep their favourite cams on while doing other chores. The webcam thus provides access to animals, and the feelings for them, as an integral part of the life of users. Regular users often profess having rituals of checking cams, which turn views into places to return to as part of daily rhythms.¹¹ In this way attachment to the animals viewed, which may begin as fleeting, is reinforced.

Affective investments are particularly stimulated by the slowness and mundaneness of the scenes that are usually visible on a cam. While some viewers find this boring, regular users are captivated. The close-up view of a bird sitting on a nest, day after day, the minute portrayal of simple physical activities like taking a mud bad or a drink of water, evoke recognition of these activities in the bodies of viewers. No narrative tensions lead away from this visceral layer of seeing, which is involved in all of our perceptual understanding of the world, but seldom presented this unadorned. This point, as will be explained, plays a pivotal role in possible ethical relationships between users and animals.

¹¹ “First thing in the morning I check you and last thing at night” a user mentions about Africam ([Armitage 2003](#), p. 231; cf. p. 226). Off-line roles transfer to on-line relationships, as with the user that mentions feeling like a fledging eaglet’s grandmother, crying when it took to the sky (*Ibid.*, p. 98).

Many users indicate that they have always loved animals. Wildlife Focus is certainly right in claiming that the opportunity to connect with nature is decreasing for most people. The cam remedies this to an extent. One can see this as a token of diminishing material resistances.¹² No travel is needed, no climbing of trees. In the present context, it also serves as a reminder of disappearing possibilities.

4.2.2 *Articulating and Affirming Affect*

Affect motivates our choices, but usually we do not choose our affects. Often, we find ourselves ‘being affected’ by something experienced as coming from elsewhere. Or as J.-F. Lyotard, whose philosophical work revolves around this moment, phrases it, something ‘arrives’ or ‘touches’.¹³ Something that registers as affect comes with an excess of feeling. To put it dramatically, we are temporarily overwhelmed and lose ourselves in being touched.

Several of the websites’ interactive features channel user affect, first of all by offering ways to articulate it. The simplest of these is by repetition, as in the possibility of posting highlights of scenes viewed. The vast number of these, often from quite commonplace scenes, points to the importance of this function for users. In posting a highlight, the touch accompanying the viewing is reversed into a screen grab, which is uploaded and subsequently appears on the screen a second time, cut out of the flow and stabilised. The original formlessness of an affect is transformed into an image, whose main function is not to represent the touch—this can never be done, and users frequently upload scene after scene—but to testify to it, for oneself and for others.

Other such testimonies are exclamations, which abound on the forums. Both the highlights and exclamations articulate the feelings of the users who post them but also serve as signposts for possible feelings to other users, including passive users or ‘lurkers’. More generally, they propagate the significance of what goes on on these websites to a wider audience.

For individual users, seeing their own testimonies holds up a mirror with which they can identify. One can recognise oneself as being touched, and as someone who is touched by these kinds of things.¹⁴ This takes place in an environment where this affect is shared and legitimised as essential for the future of the natural world. In this way, affects are tied in with more stable identities, such as an animal or nature lover, and already existing ones are re-affirmed.

4.2.3 *Sharing Affect*

Forum functions let viewers actively discuss observations, responses and ideas with like-minded—or like-feeling—viewers. Operating in real-time, they extend relations of co-presence to other viewers and allow them to watch together. Vibrant forums, like those

¹² Material resistance does play a role in cam viewing in the resistance of the technology that translates into broken connections, waiting times or choppy views. All of these remind viewers of actual distances to be bridged.

¹³ The event of something ‘arriving’ is a recurrent theme in Lyotard’s later work, for which he uses various terms: event, touch, the sublime, matter. See especially Lyotard (1991).

¹⁴ Lacan (1977, pp. 1–7) has made clear that identity formation, a process that continues into adult life, is relational and involves both other people and external images that serve as ‘mirrors’. These provide the subject with a stable point of reference and a unity that is not experienced inside. Lacan’s work is most relevant for investigating online places as sites where part of us is formed.

of Africam and HWF, have users that form relatively stable relationships over an extended period of time.

Through users' watching together, cam views and the places they connect to frequently become 'our' nest or waterhole. Eagle or stork chicks born one spring are 'our' chicks. 'Our' here signals a proximity not measured in miles but in personal and shared involvement. It shrinks the world, not as Virilio has it, by making it accessible, but by feelings of connectedness. These feelings can bring about an awareness of the actual distances involved, which separate viewers from the view and from each other, and lead to sadness about how far away the real place is and to a longing to be there. Two occasions typically inspire this: the experienced beauty of animals or places, and accidents that make people want to help or at least be physically closer to tragedies they are already emotionally a part of.¹⁵ Instead of a general abolishment of distance through media, cases like these show a dynamic interplay between various experiences of distance and proximity.

Feelings of friendship or solidarity among users often lead to a mixture of on- and off-line relationships. Sections of Africam members organise real-life 'meets'.¹⁶ HWF closes the eagle nesting season with a 'fledge fest', where users meet and organise volunteer work for the off-line period.

Affective proximity works in two directions. Users feel that places, animals or a community of fellow viewers have special meaning for them, but also that they belong to a place or group. The object of affect becomes part of them, so much so that when a cam is discontinued, a piece of the self goes missing.¹⁷

Sustained relationships between viewers can result in deeper involvement in conservation. It can also turn viewer communities into a way of being, for which wildlife is the pretext, as is signalled by sections of Africam users who speak of 'Africamming' mainly as a social practice. Websites differ in the prominence given to the one or the other. Here, as in the next point, it becomes clear how the approach I propose can serve to evaluate websites as to their effectiveness in the light of specific goals. In the scope of this article, I cannot do more than give a few suggestions that need further elaboration.

4.2.4 *Developing Affect*

What matters to people links to other things that matter. Conservation websites help shape "affective alliances" (Grossberg 1992, p. 84). By the links they offer to other cams, they point from the love of one animal to other animals. They refer to other interests through the information provided and the ads that appear on the site. National Geographic and Africam bring in travel. Crucial on the forums, besides friendship, are feelings of curiosity: wanting to know more about animals seen.¹⁸

¹⁵ A third is nostalgia, as with migrants that use Africam as a memory trip home.

¹⁶ The 'meets' section on Africam's forum signals get-togethers in Western Europe and the United States, as well as in Africa.

¹⁷ Cf. user comments in Armitage (2003, pp. 198f, 226, 234, 236). Users jokingly, but significantly, speak of withdrawal symptoms when sites are down.

¹⁸ Both in the information provided and in user posts, HWF and Vetschau's Storkcam strongly focus on conservation. HWF allows users to post relevant news articles from their local area, which makes conservation even more concrete. Africam and WildCam are more oriented to leisure activities. WildCam also strongly emphasises interest in scientific research on animals. User posts on Africam spontaneously mention as interests in the site: love for animals and nature (almost half of the users in a given section), travel or substitute travel and meeting and making friends (both around 28%), education (22%), relaxation, spiritual experience. Cf. Armitage (2003, pp. 222–240). See also the forum thread on Africam: <http://www.africam.com/wildlife/hasafricaminspireyou>.

The forums and other forms of information about animal behaviour provide users with opportunities to cultivate their affinity with animals. Many viewers remark how much they learn about animals. Of special interest is information that sharpens observational skills. The HWF and Vetschau's Stork Centre actively involve viewers as 'citizen observers' that participate in knowledge gathering through the cams. Greater perceptual acuity and, to a lesser extent, the knowledge of animal behaviour can carry over quite naturally to viewers' relationship to their local environment. Through the desire that cam views stimulate to see and understand better, users become more open to what goes on in their own backyards.¹⁹ Involvement in a cam site does not automatically lead to local action, nor does it prevent users from becoming involved locally. Where on- and off-line situations are similar enough, perceptual skills, roles and identities established online can transfer to local environments.

Websites offer various other roads for turning affect into action. From the perspective of 'moral gravity', as put forward by Virilio and Sobchack, the value of certain kinds of action could be questioned. A reflex to donate in response to seeing a cute animal lacks in moral weight, even by more lenient standards.²⁰ Yet donations are not bad in themselves. Foundations also collect funds for specific purposes. Money that is donated can provide effective support and be a sign of serious engagement.²¹ The direction of affect and action seems important here: are they aimed at the well-being of animals or at other objectives?

This issue surfaces specifically where foundations invite support for the cam site itself. Wanting to keep up the cam is not necessarily unethical: it depends on the extent this desire is tied in with users' personal pleasure as opposed to the wider significance of the cam. Affective spaces can become goals in themselves. The possibility is intrinsic to affectivity, which is, in Lyotard's words, 'tautegorical': the feeling of a touch and of my being touched at the same time (Lyotard 1994, p. 8). In this way, affectivity orients us in the world and towards it. But without linking to other realities, the interactivity of online environments can result in a free spinning of affectivity. It can simply feel great to love the animals viewed and to express this in a variety of forms. This can be called virtualisation, but that obscures the problem. Affects articulated are real enough as felt events and so are online communicative relationships. The main problem, from the perspective of conservation, is that of direction.

Tensions between the website as a place in and for itself and animals' interests surface in actual practice when the camera breaks down or the lens clogs up. In the case of nestcams the situation can often only be remedied by disturbing the nest. In the cases studied, viewers, though disappointed, always favoured the interest of the animals and, while being kept informed in other ways, directed their viewing elsewhere.

Affect is a force that makes us belong, that signals what matters and where to direct our energies, and this makes places where affects are organised of great interest to any desire to improve the world. I have described how cam sites as affective spaces can stabilise and cultivate a love for animals and link it to related interests and activities. The involvement of active users in these sites makes it problematic to speak of technology and users as clearly separated. To a considerable extent, users' feelings take place online, where their identities are formed as well. Affects flow through bodies and technologies in different directions.

¹⁹ This is mentioned with some frequency by users of Africam and HWF.

²⁰ Sobchack (2004, p. 154) refers to participating in online petitions as watered down political involvement that quickly discharges moral burdens we may feel.

²¹ Vetschau's Stork Centre invites donations for research into nest fungi that kill many chicks, even under the eyes of viewers.

Affective spaces can become places where affects linger. I come now to the way in which the sites studied can evoke specifically ethical affect.

5 Now You have Experienced the Wild...

5.1 Ethical Space

“Now you have experienced the wild . . . help save it”, runs the caption of the view, broadcasted by Wildlife Focus from a birdfeeder in the Ecuador rainforest. It posits an intimate link between visual experience and the responsibility to act on behalf of animals seen that underlies all conservation cams. In order for this to work, and for cam sites to open ethical space, two conditions have to be met. Firstly, viewers need to experience the animals and places seen as part of a shared world in which they bear, in principle, responsibilities for the things and living beings seen. Secondly, the imagery must activate this latent responsibility as a personally felt inclination to care.

I borrow the term ‘ethical space’ from Sobchack’s phenomenology of film experience (Sobchack 2004, p. 255). Film, according to Sobchack, is “an act of seeing that makes itself seen...” (Sobchack 1992, p. 3). Watching a film, we recognise this act in our bodies as an expression of seeing. We see events as presented by the film, but also the seeing of it as embodied by the camera eye and its movement. The seeing is inscribed in the visual material in zooms, slow motion, distance to the object, the shakiness of the camera etc. Normally this is not explicit, but in documentary footage, the act or attitude of seeing can surface and become an object of ethical awareness.

For Sobchack this happens specifically when we look at death because this look breaks a cultural taboo and needs to justify itself. Reflecting on the seeing of filmmaker and film, a process largely taking place on the level of feeling, viewers also become aware of their own attitude towards what is seen. Am I recoiling or conversely, being mesmerised? The visual site in the film material that marks the attitude towards what is seen becomes ethically charged, and viewers are confronted with their moral relationship to the viewed. The space shown by the imagery and the lifeworld of viewers are conjoined as ‘ethical space’.

The reflexivity that Sobchack lays bare for film experience is also present in cam viewing, although more diffusely. The cam view does not directly express a human act of seeing. It is, as Virilio has it, ‘machine vision’. Yet as a product of human culture, the webcam does embody and express an attitude, in which cam users partake, with or without explicit awareness. As such it can and needs to be scrutinised as to its ethical potential.

With the question of ethical affectivity, analysis hits a complexity that up till now has only been latent. Phenomenological analysis can bring to light potentialities in media and the structure of experience. Ethics, ultimately, demands that these be actualised. Ethnographic observation can investigate user behaviour and examine users’ testimonies in an attempt to understand their feelings, but it does not penetrate souls. A further problem, one that cannot be dealt with within the scope of this article, is the complex relationship between ethical feeling and ethical acts. Users may feel well disposed towards objects but fail to act on it for many reasons. One of those reasons is certainly distance, and media can promote feelings of distance, even when they bring objects close. In what follows, I describe the particular realism of webcams and examine the ethical ambiguity of cam viewing. I will explain how conservation sites aspire to spark moral relationships to animals, not by showing death, but

by the beauty of natural life. I will clarify the phenomenological basis that appears to be presupposed here, and which shows that this aspiration is not altogether futile.

5.2 A Shared Visual World

In all cam viewing, different visual layers, viewing positions and attitudes are present at the same time. Viewers never coincide with the camera eye. They remain embodied perceivers seated in front of a computer, at least marginally aware of the local environment. On the screen they are represented by the cursor, swirling about in a web space, propelled by various feelings.²² The difference in viewing positions makes room for different ways of viewing and creates a latent reflective space in which users are aware of their own viewing. As mentioned, regular users tend to develop intimate and extended relations with particular cams and with animals shown. I will concentrate here on this level of viewing.²³

Reality as experienced through media is never just given. It is an effect and as such has to be understood in relation to other media and their use. The trust placed in webcams partly relies on our familiarity with personal camcorders and CCTV as technologies that are normally situated close to their object and that can provide visual evidence of it. Central to the realism of cam imagery, as compared to television and nature documentaries, is its mechanical, relentless pace, either in regular updates or video stream. The view is unedited, the content, most of the time, as undramatic as real life itself. The webcam thus does not simply connect viewers to 'raw reality'—it signifies that it does. With the imagery changing perpetually, if only slightly, a fact emphasised by the running timeline, looking away means missing something. Viewers are positioned as eyewitnesses to events, with nothing left out, and, as it were, held captive in that position.

The view is not continuous with directly perceived environments. The remoteness of viewed places is emphasised by the small size and graininess of the view that opens up within a much clearer website. Yet animals viewed are brought up very close, on personal computer screens that for many viewers have become intimate places, where significant parts of their daily activity and relationships to the world take place.

Cam sites underscore the realness of views by providing facts about the installation of the camera and its technical features, and, importantly, by updates on local weather conditions that communicate a feeling for what the place viewed is like right now. More directly, reality is signalled by the timeline, which allows the viewer to compare the time difference between the place viewed and the place of viewing. Cams are vulnerable to technical failure and wild-life cams even more so. Often located in remote spots, they are susceptible to interference due to extreme weather or animals and not easily reached for repairs. Comparing times is therefore a normal part of cam viewing, constituting a quick check of whether the cam is functioning properly. Together with natural indicators of time, such as the difference between day and night, winter and summer, it offers a sense of the physical spatial relations involved in the viewing. The view and the place of viewing are brought into relation as part of one global visual world.²⁴

²² McPherson (2002, p. 460) characterises the sensation of this movement as 'volitional mobility'. Yet, clicking the cursor also expresses an intensity of interest that links my body through the index finger with objects in a way that is not only arbitrary but also commits me.

²³ For a detailed account of the visual layers of cam viewing, their various temporalities and the attitudes these entail, see Kamphof (2009).

²⁴ That updated weather information and the timeline are important to viewers is substantiated by the complaints when these features go missing on websites. From a phenomenological perspective, the imagery hovers without them. Its location and status become uncertain.

Though the realness of events viewed is integral to cam viewing, as an effect the ‘charge’ of it can wear off. Several factors remind users of the reality of the view and their viewing. The real-time aspect of viewing tends to translate into extended periods of waiting for events to unfold—most of the time no animals visit the waterhole, and nesting evolves over a period of months—signalling that reality cannot be fast forwarded. Communication with other viewers and with people directly involved with the physical place further stress the reality of events seen. These often centre on the interpretation of what is seen and also on what is not seen. An impala limping across the screen calls up questions about whether it will be okay. Parent birds that fail to show up for hours are located by those that can see the actual place. In other words, the shared reality of viewers’ immediate surroundings and the cam place is marked by what is seen, but very much kept alive by what is not seen.

5.3 Cam Viewing, an Ethically Ambiguous Attitude

Turning now to the viewing attitude, webcam viewing is at the least ethically suspect. Forming active assemblages with the technology, users partake in the machine’s vision, without, however, coinciding with it.²⁵

The technical possibilities of webcam vision are hailed on websites as the ‘newest’, as the ‘cutting edge’, breathing an atmosphere of the triumph of technology over wild nature.²⁶ Users affirm this on the forums by frequently expressing appreciation of the ‘amazing’ or ‘awesome’ access offered.

Cam vision in our culture is further linked with ethically questionable voyeuristic desires to spy on what is hidden without revealing oneself—a possibility greatly enhanced by vision machines that alleviate ethical qualms.²⁷ In the visual material, voyeurism is marked by the cam view that opens up in the screen as a small peek hole. Webcams also tie in with power relations characterizing voyeuristic and surveillance practices.²⁸ As might be expected, the camera often takes an overview perspective. Real-time transmission ensures that nothing animals do escapes human vision. Though a generous step up from zoos and laboratories—animals are ‘captured’ in their natural habitat and mostly left undisturbed—the viewing is still akin to long-standing ‘imperialistic’ attitudes to animals in our culture (Malamud 1998).²⁹ Observing and fact gathering too need to be seen in their relation to power, as means of scientific control—even if, as in conservation, it is allegedly for the good of nature.

Yet there is another side to this. Surveillance signifies not only control, but also watching over vulnerable others. Cam viewing is similarly double sided. In the context of the violence that human viewing tends to provoke for animals, hiding the human eye in a machine also signals a retreat of the viewer. Next to joy of access, the viewer sentiment most frequently expressed on the websites is gratitude—towards those involved in installing the cam, but more crucially also towards the animals. Where viewers feel the urge to thank the animals,

²⁵ In Virilio’s work this is mostly ignored, as if technology in itself determines its use.

²⁶ This holds especially for Wildlife Focus, Africam and WildCam. The rhetoric is absent or subdued on HWF and other birdcams.

²⁷ A full mutual relationship with animals is only possible when animals can look back.

²⁸ Conservation webcams often serve various functions at the same time: monitoring wildlife, scientific observation and connecting with the general public.

²⁹ Referring to animals as ‘cute’ seems to express this. Malamud (1998, pp. 225ff) makes a strong case for the detrimental effect of voyeuristic spectatorship on human–animal relations. His study concentrates on zoos. Webcam sites, though sharing characteristics with zoos, also open other possibilities.

an act that makes no sense in any direct way, awareness of the moral relationship involved in viewing surfaces explicitly.

Meticulous perceptual attention to the daily existence of animals draws users outward to beings that they, rather than grasp, increasingly respect and admire. The mechanistic qualities of the cam, as opposed to all-too-human editing and narrative in nature documentary, provide a road to another kind of attention than scientific control, one marked by patience, absorption in detail and wonder. This is certainly the tone of many user comments that refer to animals as ‘miraculous’ or the experience of watching them as ‘humbling’. The linking of embodied human seeing with machines thus does not have only one outcome. Where empathy is evoked most intensely by watching body action, slow careful watching also translates into bodily felt and affective relations of co-presence and co-life.³⁰

I am particularly interested in the last possibility because of its potential to open viewers’ affectivity as ethical care, one of the chief aims of the websites. Through the pace of the imagery, viewed animal behaviour engages with the bodies of viewers in feelings of recognition and difference. In line with a long philosophical tradition that emphasises the differences between humans and animals over the continuities, Merleau-Ponty indicates that we do not understand most gestures of animals (Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 214). Yet it is precisely Merleau-Ponty’s attention to the fundamental role of the body in our perceptual understanding of and our general being-in the world that can shed light on animal viewing and the way it engages the affectivity of users. Here I follow the way in which Sobchack develops this perspective in her sketch of a phenomenology of interobjectivity (Sobchack 2004, pp. 286–318).

As a body-subject I am both material object and feeling subject. As such, I am “passionately intertwined” with the world (Ibid., p. 286). Passion is used here in two senses: as the capacity to suffer and as active devotion. Suffering, I am confronted with my own existence as a material object, acted on by external forces. Yet I also feel this subjectively and because of this can recognise the vulnerability of material existence in other beings and even in things.

Passion is also a passion for someone or something, a “corporeal and affective adherence to others and the objective world” (Ibid., p. 288). Passionately reaching out to the world, I try to feel the materiality of other things and beings as my own, to mimic them in my body, as it were. Ethical and aesthetic sensitivity are shown here to be closely related. They are two sides of our own reversible being-in-the-world, as both subjective objects and objective subjects (Ibid., p. 295).

Looking at animal movement, responses to heat and cold, air and water, and many basic life-sustaining activities, there is much that we can empathise with in animal behaviour. We take animal gestures as expressions of ways of being-in-the-world and seek to comprehend these in our own material existence. Where we cannot follow, we try to extend our sensitivity. While I have no feathers, I can imaginatively feel what it is like to shake them after long periods of sitting still. I cannot run on all fours or crouch, nor do I know the feeling of hooves in the sand, but I can reach out to other forms of bodily existence. Perception always already does this. Yet in a situation of close and slow focus, such as provided by the webcam, this becomes more explicit. Animal communication is often harder to understand, and much discussion on cam forums centres on it, with users trying to watch more closely and extend their familiarity with the life they see.

Surveillance as ‘watching over’ colours space not just as space within reach of my desire and manipulative control, but as space where I am responsible for my seeing and for what I see. Viewing all aspects of one animal’s life impels to become sensitive to its existence and

³⁰ This effect of visual material is borne out by the study of mirror neurons (Iacoboni 2008).

needs. It reminds us that seeing everything belongs to an intimacy that commits to objects seen.

Being responsive to the needs of other beings actualises space as ethical space in which I acknowledge obligations to what I see. In many situations the actualisation is sparked by the threat of harm to things around us. When I see someone on the verge of crossing in front of traffic or when I notice a plant or object almost being crushed, watching over this person or object means I cannot refrain from acting without feeling ethically at fault. In the information they provide, conservation websites do bring up the threats to animals and their environment. In the cam imagery, however, they focus on life, passionately recognised, in Sobchack's sense of passionate, as a shared and vulnerable material existence.³¹

5.4 Beauty

Conservation cams do not avoid death. Accidents happen; rivalry and preying are facts of animal life.³² Structurally, however, in focussing on nesting places, feeders or waterholes, they emphasise life. While being practically motivated (where else do you see animals linger long enough to watch them closely?) the choice is also ideological. Conservation sites seek to evoke admiration for the richness and beauty of natural life, as an incentive to care. It is the beauty of animals and nature that is most frequently mentioned in user comments.

The experience of beauty at play here is different from the one described in formalist aesthetics as a pure, playful delight in form. It is not disinterested towards the real existence of its object, but conversely, includes gratitude for precisely that existence.³³ It is closer to the beauty we discover in beings and places that are dear to us, such as the beauty of our children, our friends and pets, or of places we call home. It expresses a personal connection felt as a joy in co-presence that makes the world good to live in.

One could ask whether a feeling so personal and particular is helpful for involving people in conservation issues. Does it not make consumer objects of certain beautiful animals while excluding others? This is not necessarily the case, however. Experiencing something as beautiful, we are drawn out of ourselves, feeling in awe of what we see—a feat of aesthetic experience Sobchack captures by speaking of 'adherence' to the world. The beauty at issue here is not the opposite of ugliness but of indifference. Elaine Scarry aptly describes beauty as a heightening of our perceptual attention (Scarry 1998, p. 55).

As such the experience of beauty may start off as admiration for, say, one eagle couple, experienced in their overwhelming particularity; but from here, given time and space, it leads to an attentiveness to other members of the same species, other animals, even natural life as a whole.³⁴ In the same way a visit to an art gallery opens our eyes to forms and colours around us on the street, careful perceptual attention to the beauty of one animal can form a core from which feeling radiates outwards. Instead of disinterested, beauty is generous.

³¹ The current grainy quality of webcam imagery makes the image palpable as itself an ephemeral object and enhances this experience.

³² For example, sibling rivalry is common and fierce among eaglets. During the spring of 2009, viewers of HWF's Hornby cam witnessed the accidental death of an eaglet named Echo, and Vetschau's audience had to deal with the death of stork chicks from aspergillosis.

³³ Disinterest is the main trait that separates pure aesthetic experience from consuming objects merely for sensual pleasure and from the feeling for the ethically good, according to Kant (*Critique of Judgment*, Part 1, §2).

³⁴ This specific course of transfer is strengthened by the way animals are presented on the websites, on the one hand, as individuals in their unique particularity, and on the other hand, as representing a species or eco-system.

Beauty, Scarry argues, incites, even requires, acts of replication (Ibid., p. 3). When we experience something as beautiful, we want to express it, copy it in creations of our own, continue it in some way. The apparent urge of users of cam sites to repeat views in screenshots and exclamations can be seen in this light. But Scarry points to another kind of replication, too, one that implies an intimate link between beauty and feelings of care. “Beauty seems to place requirements on us for attending to the aliveness ... of our world, and for entering into its protection,” she writes, though focussing on art, in a way most pertinent for conservation cams (Ibid., p. 61). With Sobchack, she affirms how the experience of beauty entails a sense of the material vulnerability shared by the beautiful object and our own bodily existence, which translates into feelings of care (Ibid., p. 46). An Africam user seems to sum this up when she says how the magnificence of seeing animals go about their lives is crucial “for the seeds of compassion it sows” (Armitage 2003, p. 4).

6 Conclusion

As a force in the formation of mattering maps, the beauty of animals, experienced through the intimate connection provided by webcams, can be a potent ally for conservation aims. It does not solve the problems of conservation. Webcams allow for different viewing attitudes, and one can close one’s eyes to beauty as well as to the obligations it issues forth.

Like other affects, such as feelings of sensual pleasure and curiosity, experiences of beauty can circulate for their own sake. Beauty as joy in the co-presence of real beings with whom we share a vulnerable material existence can also point outwards. In its potential to intimately connect remote real places and viewers, the webcam is an interesting medium in a globalizing world. Taken simply as a technical feature this potential is empty. It is actualised in active assemblages of users and technology, of which I have presented one poignant example. On conservation websites, it is enhanced by the interactive features of these sites and the space they offer to articulate, anchor, share and develop user affect.

The way in which this ‘takes place’ is shaped by characteristics of the websites, but also by the sensibilities and combined actions of users.³⁵ I have concentrated here on active participants in the websites, their apparent behaviour and on some of the predominant sentiments expressed in user comments. Various configurations of mattering can form. Conservation websites can further the transition from feeling to act by offering concrete options for shared and sustained involvement and by welcoming user initiative. From the perspective of conservation ethics, clear links between global and local conservation efforts could help to bring issues closer to viewers’ homes in more than one way. When one compares the websites studied and their apparent user activity on- and off-line, HWF and the Storkcam seem more successful here than National Geographic’s WildCam and Africam, which leave conservation quite abstract and forfeit some of the webcam’s potential to help build active global networks of care.

These networks do not so much stretch out between remote places. They spring forth from a specific configuration of the in-between of technologies and bodies. Conservation websites considered as affective and ethical spaces can only be properly understood when the intimate, dynamic and always practical relation of users and technology is recognised.

³⁵ Initiators of most of the websites were overwhelmed by the quantities of user activity. Websites are changed by and in answer to their use. Powerful determining dynamics are also those of corporate interest. Organisations, for instance, mostly do not control the ads that appear on their web pages that nevertheless help shape their sites.

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