

Ways of Seeing Animals

Documenting and Imag(in)ing the Other in the Digital Turn

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Introduction. Looking at animals: when visual nature questions visual culture

- 1 A topos of Western philosophy indexes animals' irreducible alienation from the human condition on their lack of speech. In ancient times, their inarticulate cries provided the necessary analogy to designate non-Greeks as other, the adjective "Barbarian" assimilating foreign languages to incomprehensible birdcalls.¹ To this day, the exclusion of animals from the sphere of *logos* remains one of the crucial questions addressed by philosophy and linguistics.² In the work of some contemporary critics, however, the tenets of this relation to the animal "other" seem to have undergone a change in focus. With renewed insistence that difference is inextricably bound up in a sense of proximity, such writings have described animals not simply as "other," but as our speechless others. This approach seems to find particularly fruitful ground where theory proposes to explore ways of *seeing* as constitutive of the discursive structures that we inhabit. Indeed, in shifting our attention from language to sight, we are reminded of the silent ways in which animals do relate to us: because, while they do not speak, they see like us, and look at us.
- 2 This visual encounter is at the heart of John Berger's 1977 essay "Why look at animals?"³ Analysing our relationship to the animal, Berger reminds us of the almost uncanny recognition that arises when our gazes meet:

The same animal may well look at other species in the same way. [...] But by no other species except man will the animal's look be recognised as familiar. [...] The animal scrutinises him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. [...] The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension. And this is so wherever he looks. He is always looking across ignorance and fear. And so, when he is being seen by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him. His recognition of this is what makes the look of the animal familiar. And yet the animal is distinct, and can never be confused with man.⁴

- 3 The animal's gaze is unique in reminding humans of the distance that separates them from their surroundings, precisely because its compelling alterity cannot be compensated by verbal communication: "[b]etween two men the two abysses are, in principle, bridged by language." Paradoxically, the animal's silent gaze sets it apart from the rest of the natural world, as an entity that does have something to tell us: "The animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man."⁵ Jean-Christophe Bailly seems to reach a similar conclusion in *Le Parti pris des animaux*, when the very fact of animals' speechlessness becomes a reason to listen to what is being said within their silence.⁶ The stakes of such an effort are not foreign to philosophy, quite the contrary. Like Berger, Bailly suggests that this silent message represents, not the opposite of *logos*, but a hidden side of it. Berger's use of the word "secret" thus finds a resonance in the title of a chapter from *Le Parti pris*, "Les animaux sont des maîtres silencieux."⁷ And in Derrida's *L'Animal que donc je suis*,⁸ the experience of seeing oneself seen by an animal becomes the very locus from which a new form of thinking might emerge—a battleground on which contemporary philosophy is called upon to reinvent itself.⁹ Here again, the effort finally to acknowledge the animal gaze¹⁰ is bound up in the critical reappraisal of the way centuries of Western philosophy situated nonhuman living creatures with regard to *logos*. The essay explores the irreducible sense of otherness felt when caught in the stare of a cat, at the same time as it deconstructs the philosophical fallacy whereby "the Animal," as a linguistic category in the singular, glosses over the multitudinous variety of animal existences the better to essentialise and unify, by contrast, its human other.¹¹
- 4 In exposing the intellectual subterfuge inherent in this naming of "the Animal" as other, Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction provided fertile theoretical ground for the academic approaches to nonhuman animals that were developing at the time, building on cross-contributions from humanities and natural sciences and in parallel to animal activism.¹² Pushing back against the limitations that human exceptionalism imposes on our understanding of the world, critical animal studies take in their stride the unmaking of "the Animal" as a simplifying logocentric category, and aim to explore the epistemological potential of non-anthropocentric viewpoints.¹³ In questioning our use of *logos* in the face of animals they acknowledge the existence of nonhuman perspectives to be seen and thought with.¹⁴
- 5 The critical relevance of animal gazes, and their capacity for challenging our logocentric dominion over all species, explain why scholars working in critical animal studies have been in a position to make more and more significant contributions to academic fields dedicated to theories of visuality and practices of seeing—from cultural and media studies to film. If those silently staring "animots" have something to teach us, it is reasonable to assume that their gaze will be critical to analysts of visual culture. And indeed, the attempt to apprehend animals' ways of seeing is identified by W. J. T. Mitchell as one of the missions of visual culture studies. Delineating the ambitions of the field, the critic states: "Visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision. The question of visual nature is therefore a central and unavoidable issue, along with the role of animals as images and spectators."¹⁵
- 6 Animal vision is a crucial object of study in our efforts to understand visual culture, in that it points to areas of exploration beyond the rejection of the "naturalistic fallacy," and the uncovering of the social and technological determinisms at play in vision. Far

from resting with the assurance that vision is a cultural phenomenon, we must consider “the seeming naturalness of vision and visual imagery as a problem to be explored.” Questioning visual practices as they unfold within culture, we must conduct “an investigation of [vision in its] *non-cultural* dimensions, its pervasiveness as a sensory mechanism that operates in animal organisms all the way from the flea to the elephant.”¹⁶ Any account of visual culture will open up a dialogue with explorations of “visual nature.” In deconstructing the seeming self-evidence of our ways of seeing, we should not just use the tools afforded by the technological and political structuring of vision but recognise the critical potential that lies in the existence of other visual animals, phenomenologies of seeing, and visual habitats.

- 7 Most crucially perhaps, a renewed understanding of visual nature provides other means of apprehending visuality as a collective frame of experience. This might not be intuitive in a theoretical context that tends to associate real concern for the politics of visuality with the acknowledgement of the visual field as a cultural field. To reclaim nature for critical thinking, we must stop rejecting it as a conceptual scarecrow.¹⁷ The visual nature which Mitchell commends to our attention is not a convenient metaphor that legitimises a certain distribution of the visible¹⁸ in the name of biology. It does not step back from political and ethical analyses of visuality, the better to focus on the singularity of sensation and cognition. The animal gaze sheds light on “the visual construction of the *social*,” because animal life is intrinsically social, and because the shared visual worlds that it produces coexist and tangle with ours.¹⁹ Visual nature must therefore be envisaged in its commonality: in examining it we explore variants in visual apparatuses *across species*, and modes of visually being *as species*.
- 8 Mitchell’s complex understanding of visual nature as a range of phenomena entwined with cultures and societies, with techniques of representation, and the experience of encountering otherness, indicates that animals’ ways of seeing speak to the audio-visual world we have been building as a species. It points to their relevance with regard to a long and often debated practice of audio-visual representation—that which consists in “documenting” events and our fellow creatures, capturing images and sounds of the reality that surrounds us and editing them into footage that might help us make sense and retain something of it. “Visual nature” constitutes a particularly fruitful ground from which to look at the documentary mode, in part because of its embattled status within the critical tradition devoted to the genre. Though the production of factual footage of nonhuman animals dates back to the very beginning of film,²⁰ such images and subjects were long excluded from any critical discourse on the documentary—a fact which contemporary critics have attempted to bring to light and explain.²¹ While the specific qualities of wildlife films have led some to contrast them with human-centred strands of the genre, and to challenge their generic status altogether,²² others have pointed to the ways in which such productions do open up avenues of reflection for documentary studies more generally.²³
- 9 This makes particular sense in the case of wildlife programmes which, through changes brought in by technology and the media industry, tend to remain faithful to a British²⁴ documentary tradition of bringing “natural history” to the small screen. This focus on “nature” as apprehended through a scientific lens means that wildlife documentaries present under a different light the sort of issues explored by academics and filmmakers as to the status of the documentary genre. Among other things, they resonate with the “logical impossibility” of documentaries as audio-visual constructs that “seek to reveal

the real without mediation”.²⁵ Their preoccupation with nonspeaking animals provides a perspective on the articulation and tension of documentary image and voice.²⁶ Their representation of “nature” echoes documentary’s constant reappraisal and redefinition of what is undeniably “there,” the “real” to be caught on screen. Their status as popular TV formats provides insights into recent forays that other documentaries have needed to make in the context of a more entertainment-oriented, ratings-driven production culture, bringing up issues of the genre’s social function and future. And finally the status of wild animals as documentary subjects, the issue of their awareness or agency in front of our cameras,²⁷ and our ability truly to document their lives all resonate with the ethics of the documentary as an exercise that brings together subjects behind and in front of the camera.

- 10 Mitchell’s thesis states the intellectual risk involved in failing to also consider the animal as spectator. To Bailly and Berger, our obfuscation of its gaze raises doubts as to our ability to be with the other at all. In their essays, the lack of a visual encounter with the animal resonates with the disappearance of wildlife on a larger scale.²⁸ Bailly’s book opens with a reminder of the quick extinction of species,²⁹ while Berger’s analysis exposes the development of a rational, capitalised relationship to animals which ultimately absentified them. Zoos are an emblem of this disaster: zoo animals do not look back, because their gaze has lost all pragmatic import. The question, if we are to envisage the dialectical complexity of “visual nature,” is this: what do we make of our visual bond with animals beyond our species? How do we deal with the incompressible alterity that they bring into our visual experience? If we content ourselves with turning them into disciplined objects of scientific observation, we break down the back and forth movement of the gaze. By treating animals as natural objects, and remaining ourselves as impregnable, cultural subjects of the gaze, we miss the secret they keep for us.³⁰ Mitchell’s insistence that we recognise the entanglement of “visual nature” with visual culture resonates with such concerns, partly because the threat of disappearance itself reminds us of the kinship that ties us to other animal species, sharing in the same organic condition,³¹ and depending on finite ecological milieux. In their strange familiarity, animals’ eyes remind us of the ultimate process of alteration that awaits all living things.³² The visual entanglement of their fates in ours gives another dimension to our own mortality. It turns our human narratives of irreducible singularity in the face of life and death, into explorations of the intricate patterns that bind all individual lives together.
- 11 The objects of visibility I propose to examine are two series produced by the BBC’s Natural History Unit: *Planet Dinosaur*³³ and *Spy in the Wild*.³⁴ Such nature documentaries offer a privileged point of entry to consider our visual encounter with animals. Investing spaces that are complementary to *loci* such as zoos and reserves, they embody the entanglements of technology, scientific knowledge, and raw sensory experience, that make up the visuality we live in. They constitute a point of focus, within our visual landscape, for the dialectics between visual culture and visual nature—and the ways this has been affected by technological innovation, most recently in the digital era.³⁵ And like the long tradition of wildlife programmes they continue,³⁶ they represent a specific apprehension of the epistemological interrogations, technological practices and ethical issues involved in documenting part of the world. While evidencing our interest in animals as natural “objects” of study, they take the encounter with them as an opportunity to question our status as visual subjects, both singular and collective. This we can infer from their efforts to immerse us within a natural world: *Spy in the*

Wild, by placing us in the eye of animatronic creatures, and *Planet Dinosaur*, by building around us a lost world that speaks to the extinction event we are going through.³⁷

- 12 In this paper, I explore what visual nature might have to say to visual culture. I do so by addressing the contradictions inherent in the treatment that natural history programmes such as *Spy in the Wild* and *Planet Dinosaur* offer of the animal gaze. On the one hand it seems that the scientific discourse and technological apparatus that were to bring us closer than ever to wildlife fail to do so. Instead of documenting an authentic experience of alterity, the programmes produce a record of humans' inability to be with their animal counterparts visually. Any intimacy seems impossible when the rhetoric of anthropocentric assimilation ensure that we evade the animal's gaze in its proximity and radical difference and forget that animals as visual subjects speak to our condition as visual beings. Yet there are points in the viewing when spectators do encounter otherness, in that the animal's gaze produces an alteration in their vision. This arguably happens in places when the documentary's scopophilic, oculo-centric project to make them see more of the other and better than ever before falls through. By failing to guarantee the viewers' sovereignty over the visual field, these passages from the series suddenly open up spaces in which they might be seen by the other, without attempting to bridge the "abyss" of their own non-comprehension. Such moments demand that spectators let themselves be troubled, as visual beings, by the existence of entirely different ways of seeing: that they agree to be possessed by the animal gaze, haunted by the existence of viewpoints that they cannot phenomenologically inhabit, and could not possibly comprehend.

Documentary ambition: of Nature and the Machine

- 13 Nature documentaries of the kind produced by the Natural History Unit emblemise the increasingly privileged status of visual technologies in fulfilling our epistemological ambition to account for the natural realm.³⁸ From such series to other *loci* of visual culture that make the findings of natural history accessible to the public—such as natural history museums and books on wildlife—technological innovation has become so central that it is often presented as the driving force behind attempts at representing nature.³⁹ Commenting on Frédéric Rossif's *La Fête sauvage* (1976), Berger reminds the reader that "each of these pictures lasted in real time less than three hundredths of a second, they are far beyond the capacity of the human eye." To him this evidences a concern for animals as *objects* of interest within the field of "our ever-extending knowledge."⁴⁰ In exploring how we document animal life, we are not so much asking how we look at animals, but how ever-more sophisticated cameras look at them for us.⁴¹
- 14 Both *Spy in the Wild* and *Planet Dinosaur* make this interface a crucial point of their pitch, and present immersion as the visual frontier they intend to engage with. *Spy in the Wild* embraces the double demand of the closest possible intimacy with nature and the use of state-of-the-art technology by mounting some of its cameras onto animatronic creatures, to be sent as spies amongst animal populations. The trailer for BBC One exclusively focuses on this feature, by combining images of the "spy" creatures interacting with animals with a voiceover comment: "A team of spy creatures is on a mission to uncover the secret lives of wild animals. Their hidden cameras capture extraordinary behaviour. [...] Maybe they're more like us than we ever thought

possible.” Playing in the background, The Police’s “Every Breath You Take” (1983) is instantly recognisable: the viewer anticipates the lyrics “I’ll be watching you.” The series’ commitment to working with the latest in tech and science⁴² is clearly embedded in the ambition to produce the most authentic form of immersion. This explains the effort to camouflage the cameras. Much emphasis is put on the challenge of having the creatures adopted by wildlife. In the first episode a pup has been designed so that he will be welcomed by a pack of wild dogs:



Fig.1: Ep. 1, “Love,” 3’24.



Fig.2: Ep. 1, “Love,” 3’34.

- 15 In the first minutes of “Love,” “[Spy pup] makes a submissive gesture and wags his tail.” Once the pack adopts him, “he [...] gains the most intimate view of wild dogs ever seen.”
- 16 In episode 3, spy meerkat is said to have been “made to smell like the colony” for they “don’t welcome strangers.” (2’39-2’40).



Fig.3: Ep. 3, “Friendship,” 3’04.



Fig.4: Ep. 3, "Friendship," 2'42.



Fig.5: Ep. 3, "Friendship," 3'02.

- 17 In those passages, the play of shot-reverse shot between images of and from the spy creatures serves as a visual corollary for the interaction the series is seeking to elicit between wildlife and the machines. The crucial role this visual exchange is meant to play in enabling our feeling of immersion is made clear by the positioning of the cameras within the creatures' eyes. The intention is not simply to capture images the sort of which we would not have seen, but to put us in a position visually to interact with the animals as their robotic homologues.⁴³
- 18 In its exploration of immersion, *Planet Dinosaur* brings the dialectics of nature and technology to a head. After the inaugural *Walking With Dinosaurs* (1999),⁴⁴ it is one of the few programmes dedicated to dinosaurs as animals since the development of animatronics and computer-generated imagery (CGI) made it possible to present them along the generic lines of wildlife documentaries. The animated sequences focusing on predation, confrontation or offspring care, the voiceover commentary, and the alternation of narrative passages and summaries of the state of scientific research, all signal to the viewers that this is just another nature documentary series.⁴⁵ By contrast, the use of the familiar syntax and iconography reminds an audience of non-paleontological experts and fans of *Jurassic Park* of enduring perceptions of dinosaurs as semi-mythical monsters, "terrible lizards," according to the name Richard Owen gave them in 1842. In this, *Planet Dinosaur* works to counteract what Mitchell's *Last Dinosaur Book*⁴⁶ identified as a collective, unconscious resistance to the scientific findings accumulated since the "Dinosaur Renaissance" of the 1960s. In this it seeks to embrace the scientific outlook which has ensured the flagship status and enduring popularity of many natural documentary productions from the Natural History Unit.⁴⁷ Focusing on palaeontological evidence indicating a close parentage between dinosaurs and birds, Mitchell quoted Bakker's suggestion in *The Dinosaur Heresies* that we describe Canada

geese as “migrating dinosaurs.”⁴⁸ The graphics of *Planet Dinosaur* on the contrary intend to usher dinosaurs into a more familiar animal kingdom. The intro to the episodes indicates that “with the most extraordinary fossils [...] and using the latest imaging technology, cutting edge research has allowed us to probe deeper and reveal more than ever before.” The statement accompanies a sampling of the series’ science-inspired images, complete with CT scans and molecular analyses of specimens.



Fig.6 : Episode intro. 0'40

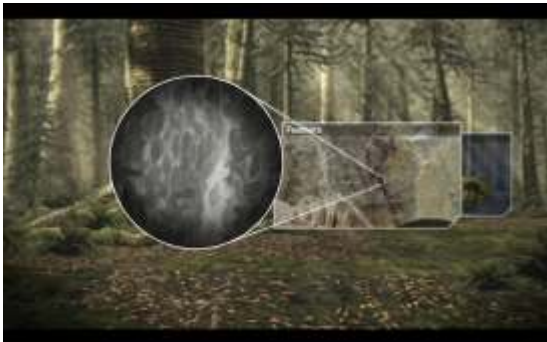


Fig.7 : Episode intro.0'52. Microscopic analysis of fossil feathers



Fig.8 : Episode intro. 0'54. Comparison with modern bird feathers



Fig.9 : Episode intro. 0'56. Similarities in pigment structures.

- 19 In that context, the immersive strategies made available by CGI animation—from close-ups on dinosaurs' eyes to the production of a sense of scale—have a less sensationalist function than they might in fiction features. If technology was bound to play a major role in fleshing out extinct animals,⁴⁹ its most explicit function here is to give life to what palaeontological research and imaging have to offer—and to immerse us in the ecosystems they depict.



Fig.10: Ep. 4 "Fight for life," 9'49. Camptosaurus eye.



Fig.11: Ep. 4 "Fight for life," 9'49. Allosaurus eye.



Fig.12: Ep. 5 "New giants," 1'27. Argentinosauros.



Fig.13: Ep. 1 "Love," 15'11.

An immersive sense of scale: a giant *Argentinosauros* as seen in *Planet Dinosaur* (fig.12) and an elephant as seen by spy tortoise in *Spy in the Wild* (fig.13).

- 20 By gearing the dialectics of nature and the machine towards immersion, both series overtly index their documentary ambition on the possibility of a visual encounter with the animal realm. In doing so they seem to look for a compromise between the sort of close, singular interactions sought out by "observational" documentary filmmaking⁵⁰ and the call for non-interference more typical of natural history productions.⁵¹ Yet our ability to meet the other's gaze depends on more than the generation of a visual world that will surround us in the viewing experience. It hinges on our posture as spectators, on the way we are invited visually to apprehend those surroundings. Yet, by immersing their viewers as spies, as would-be zoologists or palaeontologists, as admirers of technological prowess, both programmes risk missing the animal as subject, rather than object, of the gaze.

Missed Encounters: Absentifying the Other

- 21 Despite their documentary ambition to bring us as close as possible to their subjects, both series confront us with moments in which the dialectics of nature and technology obfuscates the animal gaze. In those moments the visual encounter breaks down: the other's ability to look back is denied.
- 22 In *Spy in the Wild*, the encounter mostly falls through when the series' obvious fascination with machines overrides the concern for animals. Rather than a medium through which the other might be reached, the animatronic creatures turn out to be the main focus of the series. This is confirmed by the progression of the series, the finale of which is dedicated to the animatronics designed for the production.⁵² Other episodes use a smaller proportion of footage from the creatures than of the creatures themselves. While viewers were promised a companionship with the machine that would immerse us in nature, the sequence of episodes ultimately invites them to focus on the robots that humans built instead. In the process, the possibility of any visual reciprocity is lost. The visual setup of the whole series was intended to rely on non-interference and actual interaction between animals and animatronics. In fact, the footage used is overwhelmingly produced by non-animatronic, human-operated cameras. And the creatures' very status as "spies," though presented in playful fashion, points to the aggression and power-play implied by their presence within the pack. What *Spy in the Wild* achieves is anything but a technological actualisation of a "fly on the wall" documentary approach. Another sign of this would be that, while the observational approach would normally aim to capture something of the documentary subject's individuality, such a sense of individuality is extended much more clearly to the animatronic creatures themselves than to the animals on film. Viewers are meant to become invested in the adventures of each "spy." But the animal subjects themselves are presented in the manner classically derived from natural history's taxonomic approach, whereby species are examined one at a time and each animal filmed for its representative status – to the extent that footage of different individuals might routinely be edited together as if it were showing only one.⁵³ The viewer is not truly introduced to what could be an animal viewpoint; indeed, she is rather invited to marvel at how convincing our decoys look and thus fail to acknowledge the violence inherent in our voyeurism.
- 23 The incapacity for the other to look back is immediately evident in the case of dinosaurs, which have been extinct for 66 million years. This choice of subject ties in with the visual treatment of contemporary wildlife: in a context when the 6th massive extinction event has become a matter of public awareness, the reference to dinosaurs has taken a new meaning, for their fate was sealed by the 5th.⁵⁴ This is all the more relevant to filmmakers working on such wildlife documentary programmes as *Planet Dinosaur*, as the productions of the Natural History Unit normally combine educational and civic ambitions by developing a conservationist or preservationist message.⁵⁵ Of course the makers of a series on dinosaurs would be hard pressed to advocate for the preservation of their subjects. Yet the overall episodic structure and the narrative arc completed in the last minutes of the finale do foreground the idea of extinction. Though the title "The Great Survivors" might seem deceptive at first, it antiphrastically brings to mind the notion of the dinosaurs' final demise, to which the closing minutes of this last episode are indeed devoted. The voiceover narrates:

Planet dinosaur was an incredibly diverse and varied place, with these creatures able to colonize every continent on Earth, continually evolving and changing. Their dominance of life on Earth was absolute. [...] Yet they were doomed. Their downfall was caused by an asteroid smashing into the Earth. Travelling twenty times faster than a speeding bullet, fifteen kilometers across, it slammed into the Gulf of Mexico. The impact released more energy than a billion atomic bombs; the initial impact triggered wildfires massive earthquakes and tsunamis (Ep. 6 “The Great Survivors,” 23’40-24’23)

- 24 The presentation of dinosaurs as colonial rulers that “conquered every continent, dominating life on earth more than 150 million years, the most successful animals the world has ever known” (“The Great Survivors,” 27’47-28’10), and the military rhetoric that compares the asteroid to weapons (“bullet,” “bomb”), propose a decidedly anthropocentric reading of the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event. The series appears to viewers as a *carpe diem* from those animal others who once reigned supreme, and whose disappearance paved the way for the rise of new dominant species. Our interest in dinosaurs, this suggests, partly hinges on the fact that they represent the inexorability of extinction.
- 25 Yet the *memento mori* with which we are presented here makes for far more comfortable viewing than a true confrontation with our contemporaries, and what their fragile presence might tell us. The focus on animals long extinct sets on a metaphysical plane what could or should be a matter of pragmatics and ethics: encouraged to make “kin”⁵⁶ across millennia, it is as if we can disregard the creatures that are dying out around us. Using a similar documentary framework, and thereby putting on a par creatures that never shared ecosystems with us and contemporary animals, suggests that our position with regard to both is the same. The military and colonial rhetoric both fosters a sense of proximity with a previous animal “Empire,” and retrospectively naturalises human will-to-power and its terrifyingly destructive potential by comparing its effects to those of “an unprecedented extraterrestrial impact” (“The Great Survivors,” 28’08). But the Cretaceous is not the Anthropocene: we know that while dinosaurs never wielded weapons of mass destruction, today’s process of extinction does lay responsibility at our door.
- 26 The focus on animals for whose extinction no one can be held accountable resonates in a disturbing fashion with the manner in which *Spy in the Wild* plays with its running metaphor of information warfare, glossing over vanishing ecosystems, the human species’ aggressive takeover of the Earth, and its utter disregard for most forms of life. When it comes to filming animals, treating science as detached from any pragmatic or ethical stakes seems to turn it into an instrument of destruction by omission.⁵⁷ By looking at animals as our ontological other, as reminders that we too are finite, we miss our encounter with them as ethical others, kin towards which we have a responsibility.
- 27 Part of the implication in this is that we would rather discipline⁵⁸ animals as visual objects—including when it comes to collecting images of dying species⁵⁹—than truly expose ourselves to them as visual subjects. The subjugation of fauna to the scientific gaze precludes any visual interaction: it becomes an object of study, and we the agency by whom the visual field will be organised. This reproduces within visuality the asymmetry whereby only we have access to *logos*: the aim of the disciplinary gaze is to capture animals into fields of discourse in which they have no part. One such field is natural history, built on the practice of observing, naming, and classifying organisms in their living environment.⁶⁰ By popularising natural history, both series contribute to

ordering the world in anthropocentric fashion.⁶¹ Another form of discourse, though not similarly scientific in its ambition, equally appropriates its objects to anthropocentric modes of making sense. It ties in with the series' production of narratives that always circle back to the human species. This is what transpires from the pitch of *Spy in the Wild*. The last sentence of the trailer, "Maybe they're more like us than we ever thought possible," subsumes all curiosity for other ways of being under the overriding need for anthropocentric or anthropomorphic assimilation. The series as a whole makes good on that promise: before the finale, each episode centres on a "human" trait discovered in wildlife: "Love," "Intelligence," "Friendship," "Mischievous." In this process of appropriation, the potential of the animal's gaze *qua* other is eroded. It seems that what we were looking for in seeking them out was little more than a lifeless reflective surface, a mirror in which to catch a reflection of ourselves.

- 28 Yet despite the impression that they often preclude visual reciprocity, both series produce moments in which the confrontation of animals and technology unexpectedly forces an encounter with forms of visual otherness. Instead of keeping us in our position as visual subjects, such moments let others' eyes, whether technological or biological, decentre our gaze and *alter* it.

Altering the gaze: imaging and imagining otherness

- 29 The most immediate way in which wildlife documentary series might contribute to altering anthropocentric vision precisely has to do with their interest in the disciplinary eye of natural history. In both cases, the intention seems to have been that technological sophistication serve the purposes of science in expanding viewers' knowledge of the natural world. Each in their own way, however, the series confirm that visual discipline can never be enforced in a way that will entirely account for visual practices within a certain field. In this instance, the reliance on an "objective" eye—that of the camera—fails to rationalise the objects under study. Rather, it points to what any lens leaves to the imagination. This is especially the case in *Planet Dinosaur*, the graphics of which point to a sea-change in our representation of prehistoric creatures. This contrast, though based on empirical data, emphasizes the degree to which our scientific understanding of dinosaurs interacts with forms of visual creativity beyond the photographing of fossils.⁶² The episode entitled "Feathered dragons" focuses on the confirmation by recent research that a number of dinosaur species were covered in feathers. But while the adjective of the title deconstructs an outdated image of reptile-like giants, the noun keeps the viewer firmly rooted in the realm of fantasy from which that image emerged, in the absence of more empirical information. In the same episode, the relative distance between images and commentary reminds the viewer of that same interplay of scientific observation and visual licence. At one point she is told that a similarity in pigment structures gave a key to one of the great mysteries of palaeontological research: that of colour, and indeed the *Sinornithosaurus* on screen is brownish-red, as the science indicates ("Feathered dragons," 23'25-24'10). Earlier, while the commentary stated "We don't know for sure if such a huge dinosaur like *Gigantoraptor* would have or need feathers," ("Feathered dragons," 14'04-14'10), the production team seems to have made an imaginative judgement call, providing the giants with wings. Throughout the series, reminders of what palaeontologists do *not* know indicate that the eye cannot just be disciplined: that

imagination is vital to knowledge, and that the very organicity of research and technology hinges on this interplay between observation and speculation.

- 30 What this fictionalisation of the objective eye suggests is that nature documentaries are perfectly poised to show how the “seeming naturalness”⁶³ of the visual questions some assumptions about visual culture. *Spy in the Wild* and *Planet Dinosaur* point to the existence of other phenomenologies of seeing and produce the possibility of an “altered” vision, mainly by redefining the companionship between our eyes and the camera. This first depends on the decentering of the anthropomorphic eye, whose centrality and command over the visual field heavily relies on the uniqueness and mechanical sophistication of the camera lens to embody its own supposed independence from the limitations of physiology. The use that both series make of visual technologies challenges the notion that such mechanical extensions of ourselves only serve to bolster the powers of human vision or secure our position as visual subjects. In this dialectic of visual culture and nature the human experience of vision is troubled: we find ourselves altered, obliged to imagine other ways of seeing.
- 31 The decentering of the anthropomorphic eye is perhaps most evident when the viewer becomes, despite her best efforts, the objects of the animals’ gaze. By sending the animatronic creatures as our spies we put ourselves in a situation where we could actually escape our objects’ gaze. Yet particularly striking are the shots in which the animals look for *us* within their robotic companions. The monkeys’ gestures, as they go directly for the camera inserted in the creatures’ eyes, suggests they are aware of another’s presence there.



Fig.14: Ep. 4 “Mischief,” 55’56. A chimpanzee pokes at spy bush baby’s camera



Fig.15: Ep. 4 “Mischief,” 56’02. Collective curiosity.

- 32 In those moments they are not simply interacting with the creatures as we expected them to do but looking for whoever might be behind the camera; and our very refusal to show ourselves points to us as the “other” they are attempting to reach. Moreover,

our visual instruments themselves contribute to decentering us as spectators: instead of working as extensions of our viewpoint, the automated creatures become visual subjects with whom we visually interact as *objects* of the gaze. The higher proportion of images of the creatures, rather than from them, means that the viewer constantly finds herself in the field of their camera-eye. This aspect of her visual relationship to them takes pride of place in the finale, where she witnesses the companionship that developed between humans and creatures in the making of the series. The footage of spy Orang-Utang casually sitting in a motor-board (“Meet the Spies,” 2’04-2’23), or of Antarctic scientist Frédérique Olivier talking to the spy Adélie penguin in her care (“Meet the Spies,” 8’24-8’51), elicits a familiarity bordering on the uncanny. It testifies that the robots did not remain the visual tools they might have been meant to be but came to embody a visual other on set. More than a narcissistic fascination with our creations, these moments suggest that when humans forget to rationalise and discipline their field of vision they no longer treat individuals as specimens, but invest even lifeless objects with agency, imagine them as subjects, and care for them as such.

- 33 In their reluctance simply to act as visual tools, and their tendency to take on a life of their own as eyes, cameras trouble the spectator’s vision: they decentre her gaze from without by creating a visual world in which others become subjects. This effect is compounded by a process of decentering from within. The viewer’s companionship with the camera eye denies the assumption that her eyes must be perfected by their technological extensions, that by assimilating to that more sophisticated visual apparatus, we can hope to command a better view of the world. This deconstructs the sovereignty of the anthropomorphic eye by challenging its cultural perfectibility through technology. In the same way that animatronic creatures uncannily blur the ontological frontier between biological and artificial life forms, the immersive viewpoints that cameras offer us alter our vision rather than simply enhance it. The clearest sign of this, in *Spy in the Wild*, lies in the footage that is least used: the one the creatures shot. The few snippets that can be seen suggest why little of it might have been usable: as soon as the creatures come “alive,” the interaction with their animal peers makes for rapid, unpredictable movements that make the images hard to process. This is the case, for instance, when spy baby alligator is carried in its “mother’s” mouth to the nearest river, or when a chimpanzee licks the camera of spy bush baby.⁶⁴



Fig.16: Ep. 1 “Love,” 11’32. Spy baby alligator is picked up...



Fig.17: Ep. 1 "Love," 11'39 carried in the mouth pouch...



Fig.18: 12'05 ...and dropped into the river.



Fig.19: Ep. 4 "Mischief," 56'00. A chimpanzee tastes the camera lens

- 34 In many ways therefore, the creatures do not provide us with an insider's look, but with footage that is blurred, imperfectly framed at best, a challenge to our visual system. Such footage deconstructs the human ambition of achieving technological and epistemological mastery over images, and over the other via images. Animal viewpoints represent a phenomenological other: we will never experience what it is to see "like" that.⁶⁵ In this the technological eye conspires with "visual nature" to alter us: our gaze is troubled, not by a questioning of its seeming self-evidence, but by the haunting presence of *other* unique, similarly evident and effortless ways of seeing.
- 35 The cinematography of *Planet Dinosaur* also deconstructs the cultural perfectibility of the human eye by dialectically referring to visual nature. This is what transpires from the series' immersive strategy, especially when it implies the contamination of a potentially flawless visual universe by the imperfections of embodied vision. Our immersion in the prehistoric universe does not suppose our presence as organic visual beings: rather, the graphics assimilate our position to that of a camera lens. This is

particularly clear in moments when the imperfections of the technology remind us of its presence: here, the lens receives a spatter of blood, there it catches the sun in pursuit of a microraptor or sees the light for the first time as a hatchling and produces a flare.



Fig.20: Ep. 1 "Lost world," 25'43.



Fig.21: Ep. 1 "Lost world," 25'54.

Materialising the camera: blood gets on the lens as Spinosaurus and Carcharodontosaurus fight over a carcass.



Fig.21: Ep. 1 "Lost world," 15'32. Ouranosaurus in a clearing.



Fig.22: Ep. 2 "Feathered dragons," 19'38. Microraptor in flight



Fig.23: Ep. 5 "New giants," 3'04. Hatching of an Argentinosauros egg, from the inside.



Fig.24: Ep. 2 "Feathered dragons," 8'12. Undergrowth

Embodying the camera and materialising its limits:lens flare effects across *Planet Dinosaur*

- 36 A CGI universe could have done away with the cumbersome imperfections of material vision, it need not have displayed any of the same flaws: but the fleshing out of dinosaurs demands the fictional "embodiment" of visual apparatuses. Only the familiar defect of an overexposed camera lens could lend phenomenological credibility to the creatures it captured. Immersion is not produced by using visual technology as an extension of our visual organs. It emerges from the lending of material weight to weightless, dematerialised images, from the uncanny meeting of our technological and physiological eyes in their imperfect "otherness," as it troubles what could have been "flawless" images.

Conclusion

- 37 A first look at the two documentary nature series that are *Spy in the Wild* and *Planet Dinosaur* seemed to make a visual encounter with the other improbable. Their stated ambition to appropriate or intrude on the animals whose secrets they were to uncover for the viewer, their strategic use of technology to assert mastery over the visual field these animals belonged to, apparently precluded any chance of visual interaction with the other. Yet wherever it fails to achieve this visual colonisation of the other the photography of both series produces a dialectics of documentary and fiction, of scientific endeavour and imaginative creativity which does open our experience of vision to the possibility of seeing otherwise, and of seeing as other. In this the series show that vision can be altered by the intrication of visual culture and visual nature. Tangling the perspectival lines and planes of our visual field with the intangible threads of other visibilities, they give us a reason to look at animals: that in encountering them we might recall the precious, fragile possibility of other ways of seeing.
- 38 By focusing on natural history programmes we can therefore hope to learn from the deployment of nonhuman gazes at the crossroads of different cultural phenomena and fields of study. In bringing together the “necessity for the animal to be seen”⁶⁶ and the possibility for them to look back, this paper looked to critical animal studies to understand how the representation of nonhuman animals may tell something about the ways in which human animals relate to the world and represent it to themselves. In this instance, the examination of two wildlife series suggested that critical animal studies can shed light on some of the contemporary issues facing the documentary genre.
- 39 Despite their idiosyncrasy among factual audio-visual productions—or maybe because of it—natural history programmes do resonate with some of the questions raised throughout the history of the documentary genre. This is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the ethical conundrum they raise through their treatment of animals’ gazes. The ability for documentary subjects to be shown as *subjects*, to appear as willing agents in the process of representation, partly hinges on their ability to look back: to see that they are being seen, and consent to it. This in turn ties in with a political and pragmatic question at the heart of documentary filmmaking: that of how viewers might respond to the reality represented to them, and what they might be called to do in light of what they have seen.⁶⁷ In the cases of *Spy in the Wild* and *Planet Dinosaur*, the choice of subject puts these ethical and pragmatic challenges under a different light. Ethically, the fact that animals can look at their human counterparts is both undeniable, as Derrida and Berger would remind us, and difficult to truly acknowledge on film. After centuries of philosophical and epistemological unwillingness to consider what animals’ gazes might mean, it is not surprising to see that our use of technology and media legitimises erasing them—for instance, when “non-invasive” filming methods are backed up by military rhetoric, and supposed respect for the other’s space and privacy made subservient to a colonial need to appropriate their image. Politically and pragmatically, the focus on wildlife raises the matter of extinction,⁶⁸ and how documentary material might communicate its urgency to audiences: there again, the issue could hardly be more pressing, or vital to those involved.

40 As objects that are factual, science-oriented, expository in tone and ecologically aware, but also meant for popular consumption, commercial in nature, and ratings-driven, natural history programmes do speak to the issues raised by documentaries and provide some insights as to the future of the genre. They offer a window into the world of television, and the manner in which the pervasive mode of entertainment affects the representation of factual material, including in the face of the direst, most threatening issues. Their approach also points to the persistence of privileged discourses of knowledge in the way we relate to companion species and leads us to consider different avenues for approaching nonhuman creatures as subjects. In the end it may be that such programmes do bring their viewers into contact with alterity—albeit accidentally—and encourage them to see and feel beyond themselves: by presenting them with bodies that are not only and familiarly cultural, social, and human,⁶⁹ but whose troubling, stubborn visual presence and perception signal human animals' connection with creatures beyond their own species.

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NOTES

1. Jean-François Mattéi, *La Barbarie intérieure* (Paris: PUF, 2004).
2. See the philosophical fortune of the concept of mimicry, from Descartes' *Discourse on the Method* (1637), which states that the mimicry of articulate language designates animals as physical machines, to contemporary reevaluations of imitation and language learning in animal species. Susan Hurley and Nick Chater, eds., *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science*, vol. 1: *Mechanisms of Imitation and Imitation in Animals* (Cambridge [Mass.]: MIT Press, 2005).
3. John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," in *About Looking* (1980, New York: Vintage International Edition, 1991).
4. Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," 4-5.
5. Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," 5.
6. "[A]voir des choses à dire n'est pas nécessairement parler et les animaux, c'est presque leur définition, n'ont pas la parole. Il ne s'agit d'ailleurs pas [...] de la leur donner [...], il s'agit d'aller au-devant de leur silence et de tenter d'identifier ce qui s'y dit." Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Le Parti pris des animaux* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2013), 8.
7. Bailly, *Le Parti pris des animaux*, 79.
8. Jacques Derrida, *L'Animal que donc je suis* (Paris: Galilée, 2006).
9. "L'animal nous regarde, et nous sommes nus devant lui. Et penser commence peut-être là." Derrida, *L'Animal que donc je suis*, 50.
10. The essay partly reframes the history of philosophy itself as an exercise in not acknowledging the animal gaze, and the experience of alterity that it holds: "depuis cet être-là-devant-moi, [l'animal] peut se laisser regarder, sans doute, mais aussi, la philosophie l'oublie peut-être, elle serait même cet oubli calculé, il peut, lui, me regarder. Il a son point de vue sur moi [...] et rien ne m'aura jamais tant donné à penser cette altérité absolue du voisin ou du prochain que dans les moments où je me vois vu nu sous le regard d'un chat." Derrida, *L'Animal que donc je suis*, 28.
11. This leads Derrida to coin the portmanteau "animot," which homophonically stresses the intrinsic diversity of animal existences by mimicking the French plural "animaux," while visually reminding readers of its own status as a word, a linguistic construct to be questioned.
12. See Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000); Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), and *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Charlie Blake, Claire Molloy and, Steven Shakespeare, eds., *Beyond Human: From Animality to Transhumanism* (London: Continuum, 2012).

13. See Steve Baker, "Guest Editor's Introduction: Animals, Representation, and Reality," *Animals & Society* 9, no. 3 (2001): 189-201, and *Artist/animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Nigel Rothfels, ed. *Representing animals* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002); Randy Malamud, *An Introduction to Animals and Visual Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Laura McMahon, ed. *Screen*, "Animals Dossier" 56, no. 1 (2015); Núria Almiron, Matthew Cole, Carrie P. Freeman, eds. *Critical Animal and Media Studies: Communication for Nonhuman Animal Advocacy* (London: Routledge, 2016); Claire Parkinson, "Animal Bodies and Embodied Visuality," *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, "Matter Matters" 46 (2018): 51-64, and *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters* (London: Routledge, 2019).
14. Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman, "The How and Why of Thinking with Animals," in Daston and Mitman, eds., *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005), 1-14.
15. W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* 1 no. 2 (2002), 170.
16. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 171.
17. In that sense the word "nature" is not banned from our critical vocabulary altogether, but brought under erasure, deconstructed as a convenient linguistic trope for "the Other," in similar fashion to "the Animal" in Derrida's *L'Animal que donc je suis*.
18. On the politics inherent in the distribution of the sensible, see Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2000).
19. Critical animal studies teach us this through their choices of subjects, which run as a continuum through the multiple configurations of animal existence surrounding us—from animals bred in captivity for purposes of conservation, or within the food or medical industries, to pets and companions, amateur and professional actors on screen, the anthropomorphic creatures of popular culture, and wildlife. The caution against essentialising the latter as a supposedly more authentic example of "the" animal condition comes as a vital reminder in the context of documentary productions which will, by definition, present the representation of factual subjects as a claim on "the real." See Baker, "Guest Editor's Introduction: Animals, Representation, and Reality."
20. Stephen Rust: "from the beginning of filmmaking, nonhuman animals have played an integral and (until recently) underappreciated role in the development of motion picture." Stephen Rust, "Ecocinema and the Wildlife Film," in *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment*, Louise Westling, ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 2013, 226-239), 228. Laura McMahon points out that from the work of Eadweard Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey to YouTube, "the ontologies and histories of animal life and the moving image are deeply interlocked." McMahon, "Introduction," *Screen*, "Animals Dossier" 56, no. 1 (2015): 81-87, 81.
21. In 2006 Derek Bousé commented on the "systematic exclusion" of the wildlife genre from academic inquiry in general and documentary studies in particular, noting for instance that Paul Rotha's *Documentary Film* (1952) unhesitatingly excludes wildlife films from the genre of documentary. Derek Bousé, "Are Wildlife Films Really 'Nature Documentaries'?" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15 (1998): 116-140, 117. That same year Jan-Christopher Horak remarked that "within classical documentary forms, animals have seemingly remained ghettoized in the scientific and educational sphere." Jan-Christopher Horak, "Wildlife Documentaries: from Classical Forms to Reality TV," *Film History* 18 (2006): 459-475, 460. In "Deaths, Transfigurations and the Future" John Corner states that "a whole range of non-fiction film-making about aspects of reality [...] has been placed on the edges, if not beyond, the sphere of 'documentary proper' largely because it does not concern itself with the 'human social subject' and the 'social issue' in the way that many other dominant models have done." He quotes as an example the "minimal attention, at least until recently, paid to wildlife filming in the publications and conferences of

'documentary studies'." John Corner, "Deaths, Transfigurations and the Future," in *The Documentary Film Book*, Brian Winston, ed. (London: BFI, 2013, 110-116) 111.

22. Both John Corner and Brett Mills point out that analysts of the documentary genre have excluded natural history from the field of documentary studies on the grounds that the issues underlying the filming of wildlife are too far apart from the social and political stakes that documentary productions usually raise. See Brett Mills on Bill Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010): "Bill Nichols' [...] assertion that documentaries 'are about real people' excludes the nonhuman, unless a very inclusive definition of 'people' is proffered." Brett Mills, "Towards a Theory of Documentary Representation for Animals," *Screen*, "Animals Dossier" 56, no. 1 (2015): 102-107, 104.

23. Mills's intervention in the *Screen* "Animals Dossier" intends to "point to the ways in which attention to the representation of nonhumans might be fruitful both for documentary studies and in broader debates about animals." Mills, "Towards a Theory of Documentary Representation for Animals," 103. On wildlife documentaries specifically see Gregg Mitman, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Harvard UP, 1999), Derek Bousé, *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Cynthia Chris, *Watching Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). The cultural status and medium of natural history programmes such as those produced by the BBC represent a further challenge to their receiving proper critical attention. See for instance Horak, "Wildlife Documentaries: from Classical Forms to Reality TV"; Richard Kilborn, "A Walk on the Wild Side: the Changing Face of TV Wildlife Documentary," *Jumpcut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 48 (2006); Claire Molloy, "Being a Known Animal," in *Beyond Human: From Animality to Transhumanism*, 31-49.

24. "The British tradition of natural history film has come closer to fulfilling Marey's dream of 'animated zoology' and has generally remained closer to the idea of 'nature documentary' than to 'wildlife film' *per se*. There has tended, for example, to be more emphasis on research and scientific inquiry *a la* Kearton than on entertaining narrative. [...] The American tradition comes closer to the definition of [...] 'classic' wildlife film, and therefore farther away from documentary." Bousé, "Are Wildlife Films Really 'Nature Documentaries'?", 126.

25. John Ellis, "Documentary and Truth on Television: The Crisis of 1999," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, John Corner and Alan Rosenthal, eds. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005, 342-360), 342.

26. See Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), and "The Voice of Documentary," in *New Challenges for Documentary*, 17-33; John Corner, "Documentary voices," in *Popular Television in Britain: Studies in Cultural History* (London: BFI, 1991, 42-59), and *The Art of Record: A Critical Introduction to Documentary* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996); Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2000). On the treatment of voice in wildlife documentaries specifically see Bousé, "Are Wildlife Films Really 'Nature Documentaries'?", Claire Molloy, "'Nature Writes the Screenplays': Commercial wildlife films and ecological entertainment," in *Ecocinema theory and practice*, Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, eds. (London: Routledge, 2012, 169-188), and Mills, "Towards a Theory of Documentary Representation for Animals."

27. See Mills, "Television Wildlife Documentaries and Animals' Right to Privacy," *Continuum* 24, no. 2 (2010): 193-202; Molloy, "Being a Known Animal," and Parkinson, *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters*.

28. This represents a preoccupation for the documentary genre in general, and for wildlife films in particular. See Stephen Mills: "The wildlife filmmaker is in a moral bind. [...] He makes his living out of nature; nature is disappearing. If he says too much about that, he loses his audience. If he does not, he loses his subject." Stephen Mills, "Pocket Tigers: The Sad Unseen Reality Behind the Wildlife Film," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 21, 1997, 6. For an analysis of that phenomenon, and a comparison with the practice of documenting Native American cultures as

they were disappearing in North America, see Horak, “Wildlife Documentaries: from Classical Forms to Reality TV.”

29. Bailly explicitly refers to the Sixth or Anthropocene extinction—the ongoing anthropogenic extinction of species in the Holocene period: “face à l’hypothèse / désormais tout à fait fondée / d’une planète sans singes / et sans animaux sauvages.” Bailly, *Le Parti pris des animaux*, 22.

30. For a reminder on critical reassessments of scientific distancing, which disqualifies other discursive approaches as “sentimental” but actually turns the scientific object into a means for the researcher’s ends, see Parkinson, *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters*.

31. This shared condition, which encompasses our capacity to suffer and die, constitutes the basis on which Derrida posits that philosophy’s understanding of animals might shift. Following in Bentham’s footsteps, as he asked not whether animals could *reason* but whether they could *suffer*, Derrida finds in our common organic vulnerability a ground on which to develop another approach to sameness and otherness—one defined not by the power extended by *logos*, but by the dispossession that life itself entails. “Pouvoir souffrir n’est plus un pouvoir, c’est une possibilité sans pouvoir. [...] Là se loge, comme la façon la plus radicale de penser la finitude que nous partageons avec les animaux, la mortalité qui appartient à la finitude même de la vie, [...] à la possibilité de partager la possibilité de cet impouvoir.” Derrida, *L’Animal que donc je suis*, 49.

32. This shared organic condition is also the basis on which Donna Haraway defends the development of “compost-ist” thinking and storytelling over “post-humanist” theory, in *Staying With The Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham [NC]: Duke UP, 2016), 1-3.

33. Nigel Paterson and John Hurt, *Planet Dinosaur* (London: BBC Worldwide, 2011).

34. John Downer, *Spy in the Wild* (London: John Downer Productions and BBC Worldwide, 2016).

35. This is also a feature of animals’ presence in cinema, though series apprehend the issue from the angle of popular culture, and privilege science communication and entertainment over experimentation and aesthetic merit. For analyses of animal representation in film, see Jonathan Burt, *Animals in film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), Raymond Bellour, *Le corps du cinéma: hypnoses, émotions, animalités* (Paris: P.O.L., 2009), and Anat Pick, *Creaturely poetics: Animality and vulnerability in literature and film* (New York: Columbia UP, 2011).

36. “[N]atural history film,’ the term still preferred in Britain today, was already commonly in use by 1913 in both the United States and the United Kingdom.” Bousé, “Are Wildlife Films Really ‘Nature Documentaries’?,” 125.

37. Gerardo Ceballos, Paul R. Ehrlich and Rodolfo Dirzo, “Biological Annihilation Via the Ongoing Sixth Mass Extinction Signaled by Vertebrate Population Losses and Declines,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 114, no. 30 (2017).

38. The interface between critical animal studies and media or film studies has shown the extent to which the capture of animal life on film has been associated with the development of the moving image from its very inception—to the extent that some of those earliest filmmakers, such as Etienne-Jules Marey, were also natural scientists.

39. Since its creation in 1958, the BBC’s NHU has played a role in this by commissioning documentaries that make the most of our technological ability to capture nature. David Attenborough recounts: “I became Controller of BBC Two in 1965. [...] I wanted to indulge my [...] passion for natural history. When BBC launched colour TV in Britain, I could think of no subject better suited to showing off the new technology.” Sir David Attenborough, “Where the Wild Things Are,” in *Made in the UK*, ed. Jana Bennett (London: BBC, 2008), 48.

40. Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” 16. Similarly, Gregg Mitman’s analysis that motion picture technology was propelled by the urge to “reveal living processes and movements unobservable to the human eye” is embedded in his exploration of the wildlife documentary genre, *Reel Nature: America’s Romance with Wildlife on Film* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Harvard UP, 1999), 8.

41. This feature of wildlife productions is also brought forth by commentators when it comes to situating them within the the documentary tradition. See Bousé, “Are Wildlife Films Really

‘Nature Documentaries’?”, and Horak, on the use of long telephoto lenses and fast and slow motion, among “other optical tricks [...] that [afford] the audience views of animals they would not see in such detail in nature.” Horak, “Wildlife documentaries: from classical forms to reality TV,” 461-2.

42. This is central to the ambition of John Downer Productions, as their website states: “If you see an eyeball to wingtip shot of a flying bird, a shot from a camera on a bird’s back, a ‘Spy’ perspective or a moving track around an animal frozen in time, you can be sure JDP created it first.” Accessed February 08, 2020, <http://jdp.co.uk/about-us>.

43. In highlighting this immersive use of technology the series seems to depart from the usual practice of filming wildlife through telephoto lenses, and to look to a documentary approach defined as “observational,” where the camera places the viewer close to the subject, as a “vicarious witness to ongoing events.” Corner, *The Art of Record*, 28. That might appear as a corrective to what Bousé exposed as the “false intimacy” elicited in viewers of wildlife programmes by the seamless use of “helicopters, zoom lenses, infrared cameras, and other technologies.” Bousé, *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 28; and Rust, “Ecocinema and the Wildlife Film,” 232.

44. For an analysis for the role played by the “*Walking With* subgenre” in renewing the conventions of natural history on British TV, see Kilborn, “A walk on the wild side: the changing face of TV wildlife documentary,” in which the critic argues that “The success of [...] *Walking with Dinosaurs* [...] is in part explained by how it combines the educational natural history attraction of *Life on Earth* with the imaginative, gripping appeal of films like Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park*” (np). In a case-study on the series, Bettina Von Stamm explains that *Walking with Dinosaurs*, also a commission of the NHU, combined about 80% of CGI and 20% of animatronic models, at a time when the latter were still more suited to closeups. Bettina Von Stamm, *Managing Innovation, Design and Creativity* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 34.

45. The list of recognisable features espoused by *Planet Dinosaur* actually includes some of the more problematic aspects of wildlife productions exposed by animal and documentary scholars as well as activists, such as their exclusive focus on “charismatic” species considered more attractive to human audiences, and their tendency to narrativise, dramatise, and insist on sensationalist forms of violence and predation, in order to compensate for how “boring” wild animals actually are. Jeffrey Boswall, “Wildlife filming for the BBC,” *Movie Maker* (September, 1973): 590-632, 592. On this see also Bousé, “Are Wildlife Films Really ‘Nature Documentaries’?”, Horak, “Wildlife Documentaries: from Classical Forms to Reality TV,” Rust, “Ecocinema and the Wildlife Film,” as well as Phil Bagust, “‘Screen natures’: Special effects and edutainment in ‘new’ hybrid wildlife documentary,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2008): 213-26, and Mills, “Television Wildlife Documentaries and Animals’ Right to Privacy.”

46. W.J.T. Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1998).

47. See Mills: “[W]hile factual television’s claims to the ‘truth’ have been repeatedly problematized and queried, ‘In nature documentary, with its history of association with the biological sciences and tradition of apparently “recording” unmediated behaviour, residual truth claims have persisted’ (Bagust 2008, 217). The genre therefore often maintains a privileged position of authority, especially in comparison to other forms of television.” Mills, “Television wildlife documentaries and animals’ right to privacy,” 193. In “Towards a Theory of Documentary Representation for Animals” he states that “Scientific discourse permeates both the wildlife documentary and the ways in which it is assessed [...] If documentary claims to assert truths about the world, it can do this most successfully and convincingly by suggesting that scientists confirm its content,” so that “[a] theory of documentary representation for animals [...] needs to be attuned to the ‘supremacy of science’, which dominates how nonhumans are represented in factual media.” Mills, “Towards a Theory of Documentary Representation for Animals,” 105, 107.

48. “[L]et us squarely face the dinosauriness of birds [...]. When the Canada geese honk their way northward, we can say: ‘The dinosaurs are migrating, it must be spring!’” Robert T. Bakker, *The Dinosaur Heresies* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1986), 462.

49. The phenomenon that marked the end of the dinosaurs’ dominance among terrestrial vertebrates is known as the Cretaceous–Paleogene (K–Pg) extinction event. It took place approximately 66 million years ago. See Steve Brusatte, *The Rise and Fall of the Dinosaurs* (London: Macmillan, 2018).

50. Historians of the documentary genre differentiate between the classic “expositional” and “observational” modes, with the latter emerging in the 60s in reaction to the perceived authoritarianism and didacticism of the former. See Corner, *The Art of Record*, Brian Winston, *Lies, Damn Lies and Documentaries* (London: BFI, 2000) and *Claiming the Real II: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London: BFI, 2009). In his analysis of wildlife productions within the generic context of documentary, Bousé states that “[c]onceptually, technically, procedurally, and formally, if not also thematically [...] the leading models of documentary filmmaking simply may not apply to films with wild animals as subjects”; “observational cinema” is among the “reigning models of documentary” he quotes in that respect. Bousé, “Are Wildlife Films Really ‘Nature Documentaries?’” 121, 123.

51. See especially Mills, “Television Wildlife Documentaries and Animals’ Right to Privacy.”

52. Such “behind the scenes” moments have actually become a regular feature of the Natural History Unit’s production, and crucial to their documentary agenda: “if documentaries necessarily make a truth-claim in order to be understood as such, this claim must somehow be rendered within the programme or presumed to have been part of its production process. [...] One of the key ways in which many BBC wildlife programmes make this claim is via their accompanying ‘making of’ programmes.” Mills, “Towards a Theory of Documentary Representation for Animals,” 104. In the case of *Spy in the Wild* this insistence on how the images were captured, and on the scientific expertise that legitimises the series’ representation of nature, is made more striking by the choice to turn the cameras themselves into decoy animals. The morphological proximity between the animal subjects and the recording devices quite literally means that the metadiscursive passages in the series shift our attention from the gaze of nonhuman animals to the eye of the camera.

53. For illuminating critical analyses of such representational tropes of wildlife documentaries, and the treatment that scientific discourse allows of subjects as specimens, see Mills “Towards a Theory of Documentary Representation for Animals,” and the introduction to Parkinson’s *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters*.

54. See interventions such as biologist and filmmaker Jeff Corwin’s, in the *LA Times*: “The fifth extinction took place 65 million years ago when a meteor smashed into the Earth, killing off the dinosaurs and many other species and opening the door for the rise of mammals. Currently, the sixth extinction is on track to dwarf the fifth.” Jeff Corwin, “The Sixth Extinction,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/nov/30/opinion/la-oe-corwin30-2009nov30>, accessed July 15, 2020.

55. See Mills, “Television Wildlife Documentaries and Animals’ Right to Privacy,” and “Towards a Theory of Documentary Representation for Animals.” For analyses of the development and limitations of the conservationist and preservationist agenda in wildlife documentaries more widely see Horak, “Wildlife Documentaries: from Classical Forms to Reality TV”; Kilborn, “A Walk on the Wild Side: the Changing Face of TV Wildlife Documentary,” and Rust, “Ecocinema and the Wildlife Film.”

56. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying With The Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham [NC]: Duke UP, 2016).

57. On the use of science in wildlife documentaries, and its compatibility or incompatibility with preservationist or animal rights agendas, see Kilborn. “A Walk on the Wild Side: the Changing

Face of TV Wildlife Documentary,” Mills, “Towards a Theory of Documentary Representation for Animals,” and Claire Parkinson, *Animals, Anthropomorphism and Mediated Encounters*.

58. On the correlation of the scientific and the disciplinary gaze, see Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (1975, Paris: Gallimard, 1993), and the reflection he inspires with visual culture scholars, especially Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham [NC]: Duke UP, 2011). See also Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

59. Horak convincingly argues that contemporary impulses to document nature seem to transfer any preservationist agenda to a “virtual” plane: “an appeal to viewers to participate actively in preserving the natural environment is a narrative element in many modern wildlife documentaries, but these are usually depoliticized, calling for individual action, rather than social struggle [...] Animal film producers are seemingly preparing the public for the day when all wildlife will merely be seen in zoos, wildlife reserves, aquaria or virtually as moving images.” Horak, “Wildlife Documentaries: from Classical Forms to Teality TV,” 460.

60. On the ideological underpinnings of natural history, and taxonomy as a disciplinary gesture, see Tim Dee, “Introduction,” in *Animal. Vegetable. Mineral. Organising Nature: A Picture Album* (London: Wellcome Trust, 2016), 4-7.

61. Hence Mills’ critique of the unquestioned influence exerted by natural history and its taxonomic approach: any documentary representation of animals should challenge “the assumption that [science] is the only, or even the best, discourse to employ.” Mills, “Towards a Theory of Documentary Representation for Animals,” 107. See also Carol Kaesuk Yoon, *Naming Nature: the Clash Between Instinct and Science* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 7.

62. On the constant companionship of paleoartistry and illustration with paleontological research, see Zoë Lescaze, *Paleoart: Visions of the Prehistoric Past* (New York: Taschen, 2017).

63. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing,” 171.

64. On a similarly interesting failure to produce and appropriate a chimpanzee’s view of the world, see Claire Molloy’s account of the BCC’s *Natural World: the Chimpcam Project* (2010). The aim of the project was to edit a film shot by chimpanzees, but despite the training the animals were given the audience were ultimately presented with “a montage composed of close-ups of chimp eyes peering into the camera, chimp lips licking the protective lens cover, and images of the enclosure partially obscured by the haze of chimp saliva that covered the camera lens for much of the one minute sequence that was edited and set to music by humans.” Claire Molloy, “Being a Known Animal,” 32.

65. On the unassimilable phenomenology of animal vision, see Simon Ings, *A Natural History of Seeing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

66. “[A]t the heart of the documentary project is the necessity for animals to be seen.” Mills, “Television Wildlife Documentaries and Animals’ Right to Privacy,” 195.

67. On the social function of the documentary genre see Corner, *The Art of Record*; Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*; Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. On the wildlife subgenre specifically, see Mills, “Towards a Theory of Documentary Representation for Animals,” Kilborn, “A Walk on the Wild Side: the Changing Face of TV Wildlife Documentary,” Horak, “Wildlife Documentaries: from Classical Forms to Reality TV.”

68. “In crass contrast to the insatiable fascination that viewers bring to the experience of viewing wildlife films, the rate at which animals are becoming extinct is accelerating.” Horak, “Wildlife Documentaries: from Classical Forms to Reality TV,” 460.

69. In that sense natural history productions deviate from the model envisaged by documentary scholars such as Bill Nichols: when the latter identified the body as the “primary referent” of the genre, he defined the underlying question of documentary as “how to represent the human body

as a cinematic signifier,” therefore excluding other ways of existing as bodies in the world. Bill Nichols, “History, Myth, and Narrative in Documentary,” *Film Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1987): 9-20, 9.

ABSTRACTS

This article looks at contemporary visual material aimed at documenting animal life. Focusing essentially on two television series produced by the BBC Natural History Unit, *Planet Dinosaur* (2011) and *Spy in the Wild* (2017), I explore the stories that such recent visual productions tell about our capacity to apprehend and represent otherness. A connection immediately appears between the documentary ambition that underpins the series and the latest forms of visual technological innovation. From the use of high and ultra-high definition, to the production of animatronic creatures sent out to “spy” on animals in their habitat, the series highlight the new modalities of seeing produced by the digital era, and the opportunities that such modalities open up for the exploration of natural history. By staging the encounter between two figures of the Other—the animal qua “natural” creature on the one hand, and the machine as a product of culture on the other hand—those productions uniquely question the ways in which we apprehend and produce images of alterity. In doing so, they immediately remind us that in imaging and imagining otherness we always run the risk of obfuscating or overlooking it. This is especially the case when the documentary manifests its own anthropocentrism—whether it tends to assimilate the Other and bypass its singularity or chooses to focus on the modalities of human knowledge more than on the animals themselves. In contradiction to this appropriative logic, however, the series do seem to allow for the emergence of visual forms of otherness. They do so precisely when their images contribute to destabilising the sovereign, inquisitive gaze that initially appeared as crucial to their documentary ambition. Alterity then finds its place in our world, in so far as the gaze lets itself be *altered*—by the uncanny quality of digitally generated images, which our sensory system struggles to process, but also by the reciprocal contamination which those images evidence between documentary and imaginative representation, science and fiction.

INDEX

Keywords: nature documentary, visual culture, immersion, anthropocentrism, anthropocene

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