DARK EDEN

Transdisciplinary Imaging at the Intersections of Art, Science and Culture

CHAPTER 37

Wilderness Transcended (Poetic Capacity of Wildlife Webcams in the Time of Pandemic Isolation)

Szilvia Ruszev

Figure 1: Screenshot from *Wayward Space,* Szilvia Ruszev 2020. (1)

In these wearing times, dealing with the immediate and more oblique consequences of a pandemic, evident categories like time, space, and the self have been shattered. The Dark Eden descended upon us as a sticky and murky state of mind. Space shrunk into a mere extension of our own body; time is stagnant in its constant repetition. Is this kind of stasis how eternity can be experienced in Dark Eden?

In the confinement of the pandemic one might feel trapped between two worlds, between the sprawling nature unattended by human and the ubiquity of the virtual saturated by images. There is no possibility for immediate connection to any of these worlds. Dark Eden is a lonely place, a spectral garden with glimmering pixels desired and dreaded at the same time.

This present time unleashed and intensified emotions that have been present yet unattended in the worldly pre-pandemic setting. The acknowledgment that we entered the Anthropocene bears an urgency to face our responsibility. Frozen in pandemic isolation, grief becomes apparent. One might feel abandoned and expelled from Eden, yet at the same time silenced by guilt for abandoning Eden, while trapped in the digital mediations of Dark Eden.

Figure 2: Screenshot from *Wayward Space,* Szilvia Ruszev 2020. (2)

> In the experience of deep sadness, the world itself seems altered in some way: coloured by sadness, or disfigured … [This originates] in desolation, in the sense that the world is frozen and that nothing new is possible. This can lead to terrible paroxysms of destruction, attempts to shatter the carapace of reality and release the authentic self trapped within; but it can also lead away from the self altogether, towards new worldly commitments that recognize the urgent need to develop another logic of existence, another way of going on. (3)

Parallel to the enfolding pandemic, almost immediately, there has been a steady stream of reflections. Numerous of these deliberations point out the twofold character of what seems to be a common emotionality–grief and hope co-exist. The experience of deep sadness, on the one hand, grieving the loss of the world as we knew it, affected by the suffering and destruction. On the other hand, the experience of hope is not the belief 'that everything was, is or will be fine, rather 'an account of complexities and uncertainties, with openings' as Rebecca Solnit describes it. (4)

How is this pandemic emotionality–in a constant oscillation between grief and hope–entangled with the mediated visuality of Dark Eden? Irmgard Emmelheinz writes:

> The Anthropocene has meant not a new image of the world but rather a radical change in the conditions of visuality and the subsequent transformation of the world into images. These developments have had epistemological as well as phenomenological consequences: while images now participate in forming worlds, they have become forms of thought constituting a new kind of knowledge—one that is grounded in visual communication, and thereby dependent on perception, demanding the development of the optical mind. (5)

Figure 3: Screenshot form Live Video Feed: Riigimets, RMK Hirvekaameera. (6)

In the pandemic stasis predetermined by the Anthropocene, I discover wilderness webcams as an expression of the changing condition of visuality. I find a strange comfort in looking at wilderness webcams. They offer the possibility of a poetic viewing mode in which the human gaze turns these images into a cinematic metaphor, an embodied narrative that is able to deal with grief and hope at the same time.

Grief and hope, projected on the images of shattered spacetime constellations and images of wilderness webcams. In the interactive web-based project *Wayward Space* (7), I place a shrunken universe in the middle of the Dark Eden. I wander in emptied, distorted and displaced territories. I am dispossessed, floating in the debris. The only liveliness to accounter is the residue of a wilderness webcam. Its gentle presence is soothing.

The temporal and semantic stasis of wildlife images allows for a poetic mode of viewing that transcends the material image and turns it into an affective membrane that resonates with the uncertainty of the present moment. From the viewer's confinement, reality becomes framed by the camera. Sight is the sense that perceives most of what comes in through countless virtual channels. Our other senses are blunted by isolation and susceptible to confusion. The constant stream of incoming images virtualizes the missing. The longing for something to happen in front of our eyes; the sensationalism and poetics of the gaze turns scopophilia into semantophilia. Wilderness becomes a public space negating human existence, amplifying the feeling of loss and grief, yet offering connection.

Figure 4: Screenshot from Live Video Feed: Live Camera in The Tokachi-Obihiro Airport, Hokkaido in Japan (8)

Could this be a contemporary mode of looking, specific to the time of confinement applicable to other live video feeds? What is the specificity of the live video feed, and specifically wildlife webcams? How does the notion of wildlife expand to other kinds of live video feeds dislodged by the pandemic isolation?

The colonization of our minds, consummated by highly manipulative and attention-seeking images, is accomplished in their forced agendas of crisis, their anti-aesthetic news character, and their persuasive and over-interpretative nature that doesn't leave any open space for the privacy of a mental image. The affect these images carry is an augmentation of fear and paranoia that are the antidotes of a poetic and caring gaze. The isolation in which most of us exist amplifies the predominance of mediated visuality. As Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska point out, 'mediation is an intrinsic condition of being-in, and becoming-with, the technological world.'(9) In this sense, events that are looked at are, 'to differing extents and in different ways, performed through their mediation.'(10)

As a networked medium, the live video feed has become the cinematic sensorium of the post-human individual. As Steven Shaviro's quite radically states: 'The mediasphere is the only 'nature' we know.'(11) What the mediasphere consists of is the networked media environment that has become, as he states, part of what is perceived to be reality. In times of global confinement, the mediasphere is not only complementing but substituting physical reality and with it, nature. What can we say about the mediated visuality of the live video feed? And what does it mean to being-in and becoming-with the technological world, and yet at the same time the performed emergence of a wilderness webcam?

Images produced by webcams, especially by video surveillance, have long been remediated by artists conceptualizing them in the context of emerging media. In these cases, the process of remediation changes the conditions of visuality, infiltrating or re-performing the mediation of the original media.

Some artists use CCTV cameras to produce artwork performing in front of them. Artist Jill Magid collects the materials for her 2004 film *Evidence Locker* exclusively shot by surveillance cameras in Liverpool, for which she staged events. The Surveillance Camera Players, an artist collective inspired by the anti-surveillance manifesto *Guerilla Programming of Video Surveillance Equipment*, have performed Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and other famous plays along with several political actions between 1996 and 2006 in front of CCTV cameras.

Other artists appropriate images from surveillance cameras to contextualize them in their own artistic work. Harun Farocki used footage generated by security cameras in prison. *I Thought I was Seeing Convicts* (2000) was filmed at the maximum-security prison in Corcoran, California, and shows violent encounters between

prisoners and the guards. Farocki proposes a comparison between vision and death by drawing attention to the position of the guards' guns shooting into the yard as equalling the line of sight of the camera. Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group Archive* contains among its files a film called *I Only Wish That I Could Weep* created between 1999 and 2002, which explicitly uses footage from a surveillance camera. It consists of a time-lapse of several afternoons, captured when the monitoring guard decided to turn the camera away from the designated target to film the sunset.

Some artists devote their time to find decisive photographic moments in the never-ending stream of everyday life banalities. In his project *9-eyes* (2018–), John Rafman extracts and collects photographic moments from google street view. Pierre Derk's video installation, *Screening Reality* (2013), consists of a rectangular grid of 23 different live streams projected against a large white barrier. The soundless feeds come from various unsecured IP cameras that Derks found through Google searches or on previously published web databases, and they cover a wide range of domains. Some are owned by businesses or municipalities for security purposes, while others are installed for private use within bedrooms and living rooms.

The web-based immersive project *Bear 71* (2012) created by Jeremy Mendes and Leanne Allison, follows a female grizzly bear monitored by the wildlife conservation offices from 2001 - 2009. In this case, the feed of the wildlife webcam camera has been appropriated, storified and given a human voice.

Conceptualizing the feed of surveillance cameras as art projects predisposes the poetic gaze. The images of the surveillance cameras are appropriated and transposed into a different viewing mode. Semantophilia is enacted.

Wildlife or nature webcams are using the apparatus of surveillance. The view of the wildlife webcams recalls the privacy of the surveillance cameras, turned onto the intimacy of other species' living environments. Although in the case of wildlife webcams, their existence falls under the functionality of monitoring and management, the intrusion can't be questioned.

The transactional value of wildlife webcams can be found in the meditative quality of their deceleration. Since the pandemic started, wildlife webcams have been recommended even more often in popular media outlets for their soothing qualities and as a possible escape from the unbearable circumstances of reality. But besides their meditative qualities, wildlife webcam video streams can become a media membrane for different kinds of emotional responses triggered by the contemporary state of the world. Wildlife webcams can become a projection surface for the complex emotionality of deep sadness, guilt and hope resonating simultaneously.

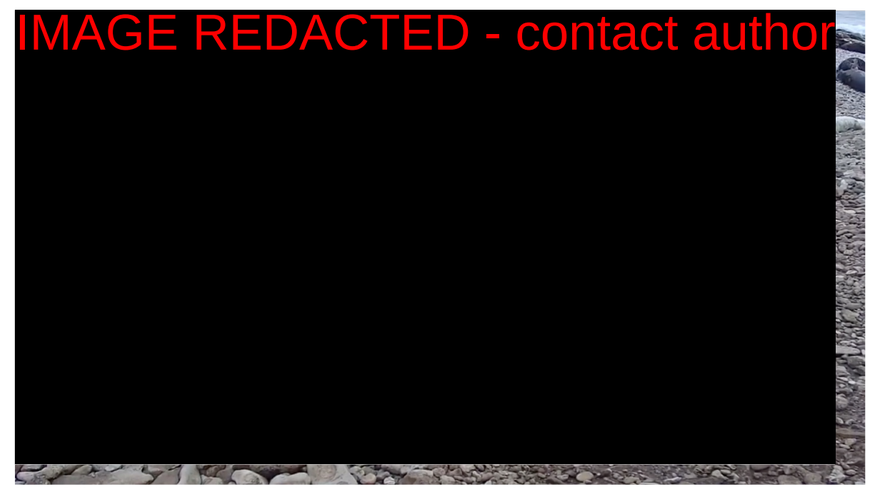

Figure 5: Screenshot from Live Video Feed: Grey seal monitoring camera. (12)

The technological affordances and the specific materiality of the webcam image creates a ‘cinematic mode of existence’, a term coined by Paula Albuquerque in her book *The Webcam as an Emerging Cinematic Medium.* She writes: ‘Video surveillance, as a networked mass medium, transforms urban space by creating a cinematic mode of existence.’ (13) It is especially fitting in the case of wildlife webcams. In that sense, all webcam media, be it for private, corporate, or scientific purposes, is on the spectrum of video surveillance incorporating both the principles of panopticism and cinematography. Whether a webcam aspires to observe, monitor, or surveil, it is most of the time non-consensual and creates a power relationship of control between the observer and the observed. The interconnection between the cinematic and the surveillance *dispositif* has its influence in both directions. On the one hand, similar technologies have been involved in producing entertainment and exercising power within the social body. On the other hand, any camera that sets a particular viewing perspective and framing mediates reality and offers a fictionalization of it.

Contemporary media strives to reach an ever-higher resolution using higher frame rate, compression, and bandwidth, expanding colour resolution to HDR, in order to be able to capture reality in its fullest detail. Merging the captured image with computer-generated imagery that already left the uncanny valley creates a remediated hypercinema. In the background of this media acceleration, wildlife webcam images represent a low-resolution aesthetic from an early digital era. Using Hito Steyerl’s words, the wildlife webcam image is a:

> poor image, a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution. (14)

Wildlife webcam images don't try to hide their identity as a poor image. It is part of their ontological meaning —to capture a sight in its wholeness, timely endurance, and full spectrum of light changes. The visual accessibility of the image depends on the light given by the natural cycle of day and night. The most magical moments are the ones of transition, the moments of slowly moving twilight that challenges the camera apparatus to reveal itself by clumsy adjustments. Dusk deprives the image of colour. What stays is a gradient grey of ghostly movements. What counts is movement, the change of pixel content, the minor gesture of the moving image. Laura Marks talks about the ‘flash of unmediated quietly existing life’.(15) But life revealed through the cyclopean eye of the camera doesn't care for us. Nevertheless, under the never-ending gaze of the camera, everyday life gets a ‘simulacral quality’(16), as Laura Marks points out.

The lack of editing and the fixed camera position accounts for different time perception. Time is represented by the embedded numbers running like a code on the image. The steady and predictable change of the numbers doesn’t reflect the perceived time of the image. While the code consistently points at the present moment, the image of the webcam opens up a vast and unperceivable time plateau - the time of nature is geological and cyclical. The viewer's subjective time interferes with the geological and the cyclical to create a pulsating, dynamically changing perception of time. At a certain point, a wildlife webcam might become a durational art or reminiscent of the slow hyper-controlled motion of Butoh dancing. During the pandemic, the endless time of the wildlife webcam parallels the endurance of the hardship, pain, and exhaustion of the felt solitude.

The embodied consequence of solitude is a strange type of sensory deprivation where the range of impulses reaching our senses become radically reduced not only in its quantity but also in its modality. Trapped in the endless maze of zoom-calls, eyes and ears are strained to impossibility, whereas the rest of the body and senses tire in hunger. Nature webcams specific materiality, their life as poor images, nurtures an impressionistic aesthetic, a tactile quality that reaches out to those abandoned senses, especially haptics. The specific materiality of the webcam can also be contextualized within what Laura Marks calls ‘analog nostalgia’. (17) She writes:

> Paradoxically, the age of so-called virtual media has hastened the desire for indexicality. In popular culture, now that so many spectacular images are known to be computer simulations, television viewers are tuning in to ‘reality’ programming. Internet surfers are fixating on live webcam transmissions in a hunt for unmediated reality. Among digital video makers, one of the manifestations of the desire for indexicality is what I call analogue nostalgia, a retrospective fondness for the ‘problems’ of decay and generational loss that analogue video posed. (18)

The hyper-indexicality of the liveness of the feed defies the ontology of the digital image. The content becomes context; the visual becomes abstract in its durationality.

Live wildlife webcam’s ontological rootedness in surveillance technologies on the one hand and the specific cinematic mode of operation on the other opens up a field of contradicting affects. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes: ‘Crisis is new media’s critical difference. In new media, crisis has found its medium, and in crisis, new media has found its value’.(19) Contemporary networked media can only exist in the context of crisis followed by the lurking affect of surveillance that Patricia Pisters points out to be paranoia and aggravation. (20)

Figure 6: Screenshot form Live Video Feed: Kasutaja Kasmu Meremuseum, Kasmu Meremuuseum (21)

On the other side of the spectrum, nature images evoke the idyllic; it’s their ontological meaning. Idyllic refers to a hyper-happiness, to a short period of time when everything is wonderful. Idyll describes a pastoral interlude or a poem set in nature — an idealized, or *idyllic*, version of nature. Fantasies of the bucolic, ideal country life are becoming more prevalent in urban constellations where the pandemic stripped layers of everyday liveability. But the idyllic immediately falls under the shadow of the Anthropocene, announcing an unavoidable collapse of the future. The camera has been turned on and abandoned by the human, looking at nature deprived by the human. Human absence is painfully inscribed to the image both by the gaze of the camera and the gaze of the viewer.

In the process of subjectification and fictionalization, the live feed of the nature webcam turns scopophilia, the pleasure of looking into semantophilia, the love of meaning. From the point in which it functions as a ‘peeping whole’, the webcam turns into a surface on which the mental images of the viewer can be inscribed back. At this moment, nature webcam images become a cinematic metaphor. The intimacy of the non-human offers a playground for meaning-making for the human observer. The live feed's temporal synchronicity offers an unexpected intensity to address the paralyzing and yet aggravating state of the world.

Intensity, stasis and durationality–strangely converging capacities under the shadow of Dark Eden, conditioned by the complex relationship to the Anthropocene–are grown together into a cinematic mode of viewing. The liveliness of the wildlife webcam is perpetuated by the act of mediation while I enter virtual and disfigured spaces, unmediated and static, grieving, longing but ultimately open for hope.

Notes

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Author:
Szilvia Ruszev is a media artist and scholar working across media. She is interested in montage theories, sensual knowledge and politics of post-cinema. Her award-winning work has been part of numerous international film festivals and exhibitions such as Karlovy Vary IFF, TIFF Toronto, Berlin IFF, Siggraph, Codame and Femmebit.