

# Courtney E. White

## Editor's Introduction: The Wild Image

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What does it mean to call an image “wild”? Moving image technologies have always been fascinated with recording (or creating) what we might call *the wild*, and animals, often those species that can be described as *wildlife*.<sup>1</sup> Moving image scholars have often proceeded from John Berger’s essay “Why Look at Animals?”<sup>2</sup> a meditation on the disappearance of animals in daily life during modernity, in thinking through relationships between animals and cinema.<sup>3</sup> As Anat Pick has noted, in Berger’s essay, “[t]he disappearance of animals takes several forms, some of them paradoxically those of enhanced visibility,” which surely helps to explain why “Why Look at Animals?” has become so influential amongst film scholars.<sup>4</sup>

Animals, if not the sole subject matter possible for discussions about wildness, thus nevertheless rest comfortably at the center of those discussions. As this issue of *Spectator* was being prepared for press, two particularly salient examples of what we might call “wild” images manifested themselves, perhaps unrelated except for the common threads of animal subject matter, winter landscapes, and social media virality. They seem, therefore, useful to opening a discussion of what wild images might be.

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015, news aggregator Drudge Report claimed that actor (and, as of this writing, Academy Award frontrunner) Leonardo DiCaprio had been raped by a bear during a scene in Alejandro G. Iñárritu’s *The Revenant*.<sup>5</sup> The rumor inserted itself nicely into a prerelease discourse that emphasized the long and purposefully difficult shoot—in particular, Iñárritu’s insistence on shooting in frigid, remote locations using only the limited natural light available in winter.<sup>6</sup> *The Hollywood Reporter* had already reported that crew members were calling *The Revenant* “the worst experience of their careers” due to (among

other things) the weather, the production running months over schedule, and Iñárritu’s belief that the use of green screen or CGI would have resulted in a poor film.<sup>7</sup>

The bear rape rumor was quickly dispelled. Iñárritu reportedly laughed and said he wished he had thought of shooting such a scene.<sup>8</sup> DiCaprio called the rumors “absurd.”<sup>9</sup> A spokesperson for Twentieth Century Fox, which distributed the film in the United States, told *Entertainment Weekly* that there was “clearly no rape scene with a bear,” noting that a rape would not even be physically possible because “the bear in the film is a female who attacks [DiCaprio’s character] because she feels he might be threatening her cubs.”<sup>10</sup> Sexual anatomy issues aside, the bear was entirely computer-generated.<sup>11</sup> The rumors may have been, as the Fox spokesperson said, absurd—but they were also valuable. As Anne Helen Petersen soon argued, the viral spread of the bear rape rumor “was worth more than any number of billboard buys,” noting that it was “just one of several narratives intended to emphasize just how terrifying the film truly is.”<sup>12</sup> The general sense of horror surrounding the film was, then, a selling point.

As *The Revenant* lumbered along its awards season trek, a very different kind of animal/camera interaction went viral: a traffic camera trained on a highway outside Montreal captured a snowy owl in flight. Brief video clips (some containing slow motion replays) and screenshots of the owl were released, showing the young female owl appearing to look directly into the camera in what we might describe as a fly-by photobombing. Robert Poëti, a member of the Assemblée Nationale Québec, posted about the owl on both Twitter and Facebook.<sup>13</sup> As of this writing, his Facebook post had garnered more than 22,000 “likes” and had been shared more than

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25,000 times.<sup>14</sup> One website speculated that the snowy owl's popularity must have caused "intense jealousy" in "the previously famous traffic-camera bird, I-95 Pigeon."<sup>15</sup>

What makes *The Revenant* terrifying and the traffic camera owl delightful is, arguably, the same quality: wildness, captured on camera in very different ways. *The Revenant*, a narrative fiction film backed by serious industry credentials (Iñárritu won the previous year's Best Director Academy Award for *Birdman*, which was also awarded Best Picture), was consciously crafted to convey this sense of wildness, which it equates with brutal, unforgiving nature—nature itself (the landscape), its nonhuman inhabitants (such as the bear) and human nature (particularly the European descendants) are consistently shown as essentially savage, and not in the noble sense of the word.<sup>16</sup>

The traffic camera owl, conversely, is a peaceful wild image. The automatic nature of the traffic camera—its method of recording is perhaps the epitome of passive—confirms the owl's status as a wild subject. Even those of us aware that nature documentaries occasionally purposefully mislead us through editing can understand the owl's engagement with the camera as completely coincidental, though we may wish to believe otherwise. However, her brief gaze directly into the camera allows for a reading in which she is not indifferent to the recording apparatus or, by extension, to the people behind it. *The Revenant* is staged and framed, or perhaps we should say constructed, to *depict* wildness; the traffic camera, by virtue of its constant immobility, is focused on a boring stretch of highway and constructed to capture mundanity. What could be more mundane than a daily commute along an apparently straight stretch of road? Nevertheless, it is able to capture wildness.

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The authors included in this issue take up wildness explicitly and implicitly, through fiction and documentary, across nations and time periods, engaging not merely with wildlife but with domesticated animals, landscape, and environments both natural and built. Though they take varying approaches, the essays are additionally linked by their insistence on textual analysis of images

considered wild. First, Graig Uhlin pushes against the conventional understanding of wildness which often conflates it with wilderness; rather, he argues, we should understand wildness as a "quality linking together the human and the non-human." Through the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and analysis of water imagery in the Breton films of Jean Epstein, Uhlin demonstrates how the filmmaker can engage artistic and expressive gestures to convey this quality.

Taking landscape and environment to a different hemisphere, Eleanor M. Huntington analyzes three Australian-produced family films concordantly with Australian governmental policy. The three films (*Babe*, *Happy Feet*, and *Red Dog*) utilize different animal protagonists and different landscapes; though only one of the films is explicitly set in Australia, Huntington's analysis shows how the politics of each film and the politics of a contemporary, postcolonial, multicultural Australia are mapped onto each other, thus instructing young viewers in good citizenship. Moving to more adult subject matter, Isaac Rooks examines what he dubs "animal POV" shots in horror films with animal antagonists, a technique that he argues "presumes to...represent a wholly other way of being and perceiving." Building from the work of Berger, Jacques Derrida, Akira Mizuta Lippit, Carol Clover, and others, Rooks contextualizes these shots within the histories of both the horror genre and of cultural fascination with animal gazes.

Our final two articles focus more narrowly, each concentrating on a single documentary but continuing an exploration of what it means to gaze at/be gazed at by animals. Matthew I. Thompson's focus is perhaps more aptly described as minute, as he examines the insect documentary *Microcosmos* as a continuation of observational practices begun by "influential entomological thinkers" Étienne-Jules Marey and amateur scientist Jean-Henri Fabre. Through close reading of Fabre's prose and Marey's photographs as attempts to "bridge the perceptual gap" between human and insect, Thompson demonstrates how the "apparently contradictory" approaches are reconciled in *Microcosmos* to create a wildlife documentary that, in his words, "makes a little space for the semiotic agency of the insects themselves."

Finally, Luke Kuplowsky also takes up questions of perception, representation, and recognition in his

analysis of Kazuhiro Soda's *Peace*, an observational documentary that weaves together storylines about humans, feral cats, and their mutual co-existence. Drawing from Jacques Derrida, Paul Valéry, Jean-Luc Nancy, and others, Kupolowsky explores the cinematic cat, an animal he describes as one

whose filmed presence has often been "loaded with an excess of meaning," and ways in which Soda's respectful documentary observations might mingle with Derrida's linguistic play and Nancy's theories of community to provide insight into human/cat coexistence and community.

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#### Notes

1 Important scholarship on the wildlife genre includes Cynthia Chris, *Watching Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Derek Bousé, *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Gregg Mittman, *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Wildlife on Screen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

2 John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *The Animals Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings*, ed. Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), 252-261.

3 For example, see Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Jonathan Burt, *Animals in Film* (London: Reaktion, 2002); and Anat Pick, *Creaturally Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). As I completed work on this introduction, the recently published *Animal Life & The Moving Image*, edited by Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon (London: Palgrave/BFI, 2015), arrived on my doorstep, a volume curated "in response to a recent surge of interest in the question of the animal across the arts, humanities, and the sciences" which further underscores the connection between animals and moving images. As its editors remind us, "Beginning with the protocinematic sequencing of animal motion by Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey in the nineteenth century, the ontologies and histories of animal life and the moving image are deeply interlocked" (9). We think first of Muybridge's horses, but he also studied the motion of undomesticated species such as baboons.

4 Pick, 103.

5 Drudge Report, "DiCaprio Raped by Bear in Fox Movie," last modified December 1, 2015, <http://drudgereport.com/now3.htm>.  
6 This particular discourse began even before filming was complete. See, for instance, Mike Fleming Jr., "Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu On The Universal Themes Of 'Birdman' And His Next High Wire Act, 'The Revenant,'" Deadline, last modified February 3, 2015, <http://deadline.com/2015/02/birdman-alejandro-gonzalez-inarritu-the-revenant-1201365129/>.

7 Kim Masters, "How Leonardo DiCaprio's 'The Revenant' Shoot Became 'A Living Hell,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, last modified July 22, 2015, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/how-leonardo-dicaprios-revenant-shoot-810290>.

8 Steve Pond, "'The Revenant' Director on Leonardo DiCaprio's 'Bear Rape' Scene: 'Why Didn't I Think of That?'" The Wrap, last modified December 18, 2015, <http://www.thewrap.com/the-revenant-director-on-leonardo-dicaprios-bear-rape-scene-why-didnt-i-think-of-that/>.

9 Marc Malkin, "Leonardo DiCaprio Talks 'Absurd' Bear Rape Rumors, Eating Bison Liver and Oscar Buzz," E! Online, last modified December 17, 2015, <http://www.eonline.com/news/724787/leonardo-dicaprio-talks-absurd-bear-rape-rumors-eating-bison-liver-and-oscar-buzz>.

10 Sara Vilkomerson, "Fox Responds to Reports of Bear Rape in *The Revenant*," *Entertainment Weekly*, last modified December 1, 2015, <http://www.ew.com/article/2015/12/01/revenant-bear-rape-scene>.

11 Jason Guerrasio, "How That Infamous Bear-Attack Scene in 'The Revenant' Was Made, and Other Secrets of the Movie Revealed," Business Insider, last modified December 26, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-revenant-filming-secrets-2015-12>.

12 Anne Helen Petersen, "Can 'The Revenant' And 'Hateful Eight' Use Old Hollywood Tricks To Make Movies Feel New?" Buzzfeed, last modified January 10, 2016, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/annehelenpetersen/the-revenant-and-hateful-eight-old-hollywood-tricks#.gpdXWIVNg7>.

13 "Snowy owl spotted soaring by Montreal traffic camera," CBC, last modified January 7, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/snowy-owl-flying-transport-quebec-traffic-camera-1.3393343>.

14 The original post can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/robertpoetiplq/posts/72855253941707>. I would be remiss if I did not mention that part of the snowy owl's viral appeal may be due to the popularity of the fictional Hedwig, a snowy owl who is the companion and pet of Harry Potter in both the books and films.

15 John Metcalfe, "A Snowy Owl Photobombs a Montreal Traffic Camera," Citylab, last modified January 8, 2016, <http://www.citylab.com/weather/2016/01/a-snowy-owl-photobombs-a-montreal-traffic-camera/423216/>.

16 One could, of course, argue that the bear is merely protecting her cubs, but the fight is so long and so deliberately visceral that there seems nothing "mere" about it, though the bear is not anthropomorphized.