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### **published in**

Versatile Camcorders  
2021

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Jancovic, M. (2021). Filming Animals: Portable Cameras in Animal Media Practice. In W. Gerling, & F. Krautkrämer (Eds.), *Versatile Camcorders: Looking at the GoPro Movement* (pp. 205-218). Kulturverlag Kadmos.

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# Versatile Camcorders

## Looking at the GoPro Movement

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02



# Filming Animals: Portable Cameras in Animal Media Practice<sup>1</sup>

MAREK JANCOVIC

## Introduction

Intactae fueratis aves, solacia ruris, adsuetum silvis innocuumque genus, quae facitis nidos et plumis ova fovetis, et facili dulces editis ore modos; sed nihil ista iuvant, quia linguae crimen habetis, dique putant mentes vos aperire suas.<sup>2</sup>  
(Ovid, *Fasti*)

EXT. NIGHT. Fade-in to a low-angle wide shot of a dark park. The light-brown façade of a historical building visible in the distance appears greenish. The camera tries to make the most out of the low-light conditions but the colors are off and much of the image is black. It wobbles forward, close to the ground. The ominous shadows and stark tree silhouettes are practically a set from Hermann Warm. The camera lands on the ground with a small rumble. A grey blob emerges from the shadows in front and quickly approaches the now motionless device. It swells to a monstrous size, its two twiggy legs pausing right in front of the lens (fig. 1). Sudden downward pivot, everything is black. An unseen man yells "Hey! Hey!" A split second of confusion, lift-off. The wind pummels the mic while we witness a short but intense 15-second glide through the air, the historical quarters of Le Suquet appearing below in harsh contrast. A bird's legs, tail, and belly enter the frame from the top in extreme close-up just before it lands somewhere high up. It puts the camera down, towering over it, and immediately lets out a remarkably goat-like bleat. Picks it up again with its beak, rotates it to the side. A few caws. The image moves in and out of darkness. Finally, the camera operator appears: white feathered head, distinct and in focus. After stealing a glance at the camera, the face quickly retreats into the darkness, leaving a tiny slice of the Château de la Castre's tower with a barely vis-

<sup>1</sup> Fragments of this text have previously appeared in the essay and installation "Animal Technics: On Borders and the Labour of Knowing the World," Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2018, <http://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/situations/154932>.

<sup>2</sup> "You were chaste once, you birds, a rural solace, you harmless race that haunt the woodlands, who build your nests, warm your eggs with your wings, and utter sweet measures from your ready beaks, but that is no help to you, because of your guilty tongues, and the gods' belief that you reveal their thoughts." (Translation by Anthony S. Kline)



Fig. 1: Still from “Seagull stole GoPro.”

ible French flag billowing against the black sky. Two more squeals, some chirping and cawing in the background. Fade to black.

It could be mistaken for an enigmatic piece of video art, but in reality this is SEAGULL STOLE GOPRO, an amateur video uploaded to YouTube in June 2011. “Seagull stole my video camera in Cannes, France. I found it on the castle wall, where I had to climb,” the description explains.<sup>3</sup> The moody nocturnal setting certainly does set it somewhat apart, but Lukas Karasek’s video otherwise follows all the conventions of the genre it is clearly a part of. It shares a niche of the viral visual economy with “Seagull Theft - With Telemetry in 4K, Coney Island Seagull Steals GoPro! or GoPro STOLEN by a SEAGULL!! - Unique San Francisco sunset.” Some of these titles are more phatic than others, some tout technological advancements, others advertise the locale. Some are branded with a Go-Pro vanity card and published directly on the company’s channel, others refrain from specifying brand names; a handful include animations and visualized data, some a soundtrack, some explicative subtitles, others are completely plain.

Sara Swain called this genre “accidental animal videos.”<sup>4</sup> I prefer to call them “spontaneous,” since many of them clearly cajole, invite, or encourage animals to participate in their making. A few openly show food being planted strategically, others are more apologetic about this apparent manipulation. YouTube user Viva Frei writes under his video

<sup>3</sup> Lukas Karasek: “Seagull Stole GoPro,” YouTube, 23.6.2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIuSB3Fsstg> (last seen: 20.12.2018).

<sup>4</sup> Sara A. Swain: *Feral Ecologies: A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Media*, Doctoral dissertation, York University 2016.

"A BIRD WITH A GOPRO!!" from June 2018: "A seagull stole my GoPro. Yes, it had some food on it. But this was epic BEYOND BELIEF! And the part where the seagull stopped flapping its wings and flew over the pond... INTERNET HISTORY I SAYS!!! Enjoy! And be sure to like, share, comment & subscribe!"<sup>5</sup>

Although he has posted exhilarating and widely-viewed recordings made by squirrels in recent years, Viva Frei's seagull video is unlikely to make Internet history this late in the game – such videos are now common and our "semiotic skills"<sup>6</sup> develop quickly. His enthusiasm reflects the video's significance for personal memory more than for audiovisual history, but also speaks to GoPro's implicit promise to open a passage between those two. A big part of what constitutes the thrill of publishing a seagull video, after all, is not just that the footage is exceptional, but that "I" was among those present at its inception. The GoPro's ease of operation and availability potentially extend this "I" to everyone. Videos with animals – especially videos made by animals – account for only a small fraction of the content showcased on the company's platforms, but they nonetheless serve an important role in advertising the versatility of its cameras. Not only do they let GoPro demonstrate in a number of different outdoor settings new features like OverCapture, which makes it possible to selectively and gradually change the image format from spherical to rectangular in post-production, producing genuinely new cinematic effects and transformations in perspective. They also help the company diversify its market segments by experimenting with narrative formats with social appeal for which extreme sports would be less suitable – for example, mid-length documentaries like "GoPro Cause: The Last of the Rhinos" which addresses wildlife conservation concerns.

Thus, even if Viva Frei's seagull video adheres to an already familiar formula, the large catalog of similar moving images certainly does merit our attention.

### Defining a new genre

Octopuses, macaques, turtles, and many other animals have also made their mark as amateur operators of GoPros in recent years, occasionally creating recordings so riveting and affectively engaging (to humans) that

<sup>5</sup> Viva Frei: "A BIRD WITH A GOPRO!!", YouTube, 10.6.2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQ9J1OA2FXA> (last seen: 20.12.2018).

<sup>6</sup> Donna J. Haraway: *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis 2007, p. 254.

they easily compete with professionally opulent nature documentary footage. As a variant of the phantom ride, recordings made in this way are paradoxically banal *and* spectacular. They present a somewhat exceptional case of cross-species authorship and creative labor, where what we would call camera work is performed by animals, and the editing, post-production, and distribution is done by humans. It is somewhat ungainly to label a sly seagull's stunning aerial journey "cinematography" and evaluate it as such, because cinematography as cultural practice, aesthetic ruleset, art, and learned skill used to be the exclusive domain of humans. It is strange to think of praxis or practice, words so deeply rooted in the theory of human action, in relation to non-human animals. But it is precisely the concurrence of cheap portable recording equipment and free distribution platforms that has made visible just how prevalent, mundane, and ordinary non-human media practices are.

Videos co-authored by animals generally have a somewhat conventionalized three-act structure. They tend to begin with a short exposition – the animal approaches the device – followed by a prolonged peripety – the animal interacts with the device, usually suddenly grasping it and scurrying or flying away. At times, this is accompanied by agitated human attempts at preventing the impending theft and, naturally, the animal's refusal to indulge human codes of appropriate media conduct and legal fancies like property rights. Finally, they commonly end with a quick and cathartic dénouement – e.g. the device falling down from a tree or being discarded and then retrieved by its owner. This dramaturgy is accompanied by a number of typical stylistic elements: rapid and jerky motion, blurring of the image, bewildering falls and whirls, unusual angles and volatile framing, and thuds, pops, cracks, and other aural cues that indicate non-fictional and spontaneous recordings. Editing is rare and usually serves to excise the "boring" parts between the animal's abandonment of the device and its discovery. Spontaneous animal recordings are thus firmly placed in the company of other amateur footage made with action cameras and smartphones,<sup>7</sup> although – especially when made by non-flighted critters – they tend toward low-angle perspectives that are already traditionally associated with the beastly and libidinal.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Florian Krautkrämer: "Revolution Uploaded. Un/Sichtbares im Handy-Dokumentarfilm," in: *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 11 (2014), pp. 113–126.

<sup>8</sup> Jessica Ullrich: "Anything can happen when an animal is your cameraman.' Wie wir Tiere ansehen: Crittercams in der Gegenwartskunst," in: Chimaira – Arbeitskreis für Human-Animal Studies (ed.): *Tiere Bilder Ökonomien. Aktuelle Forschungsfragen der Human-Animal Studies*, Berlin 2013, pp. 267–293, here p. 276.

As Swain notes, these dramaturgical and stylistic tendencies are coherent enough to approach the systematicity of a genre.<sup>9</sup> This, in turn, presents compelling problems for media theory. Florian Krautkrämer has written about the difficulties of applying image theories developed for fiction film to handheld non-fictional footage.<sup>10</sup> Spontaneous animal recordings complicate things further, beyond the realm of form and aesthetics: since they are co-authored by different species, they force us to take animals seriously as a productive force in the history of the moving image. But if animals can become active creators (in addition to being engaged and curious spectators<sup>11</sup>), in what ways do we need to recalibrate our often unabashedly anthropocentric theories of media? When Christine Brinckmann made a distinction between an anthropomorphic and technomorphic camera, filming animals were enough of an aberration that they could be left out.<sup>12</sup> Now, a zoomorphic point of view not only unmistakably claims a position next to the anthropomorphic, but is, in fact, increasingly central to our understanding of the world. Where animals cross paths with technology, new networks of knowledge, new forms of labor, and new mechanisms of power take shape. Animal-made videos may not immediately seem like an avenue for political action, but GoPros are indeed a major component of emerging epistemic regimes important to both science and governmental control. I would argue that animals' gradual move closer to the center of visual culture is intricately entangled with other transformations in our shared understanding of the space in which political power operates, and of the place of humans and non-humans in it.

### Updating augury

Unsurprisingly for a camera designed not to be held in human hands,<sup>13</sup> it appears almost as though it were one of the GoPro's affordances to at-

<sup>9</sup> Swain: *Feral Ecologies*, op. cit., p. 100.

<sup>10</sup> Krautkrämer: "Revolution Uploaded," in: *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 11; Florian Krautkrämer: "GoPro-Vision und involvierter Blick: Neue Bilder Der Kriegsberichterstattung," in: Marie-Hélène Adam, Szilvia Gellai, and Julia Knifka (eds.): *Technisierte Lebenswelt: Über den Prozess der Figuration von Mensch und Technik*, Bielefeld 2016, pp. 209-226.

<sup>11</sup> Marek Jancovic: "Videos for Cats, Animal Spectatorship and the Future of Media," in: Fred Truniger and Wolfgang Brückle (eds.): *Display / Disruption / Disorder*, Zürich 2021 (forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> Christine N. Brinckmann: *Die anthropomorphe Kamera und andere Schriften zur filmischen Narration*, Zürich 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Winfried Gerling, Susanne Holschbach and Petra Löffler: *Bilder verteilen: fotografische Praktiken in der digitalen Kultur*, Bielefeld 2018, p. 133.

tract and be examined, appropriated and used by animals. We might even speculate that the more prominent, widespread, and popular recording made by animals become, the more likely it becomes that we will get to see GoPro cameras adapted specifically for use by animals. Due to this seeming interfaceability, animals are increasingly operating such portable devices in the service of humans. Since 2016, vultures equipped with GoPros and GPS trackers are used by the Peruvian environment ministry to discover and monitor illegal waste dumping sites. In 2017, stray dogs wearing “smart vests” were trialed as a means of patrolling Bangkok neighborhoods. The vests were equipped with bark-activated cameras, delegating the autonomy for initiating the recording (and thus for data management) to the dogs. Elsewhere, dogs with GoPros strapped to their heads are training computer vision software to model dog behavior - in order to make robot dogs.<sup>14</sup> In Sam Easterson’s much-analyzed video *A SHEEP IN WOLF’S CLOTHING* from 1998 (the year of Google’s founding) sheep would run away from a conspecific intruder equipped with a camera. Two decades later, camera-carrying sheep work for Google as amateur cartographers, mapping the Faroe Islands.

With remarkable mutual transitivity, portable video devices and animals co-emerge as technologies of surveillance, governance, policing, and knowledge production. One of the more extreme examples of the penetration of the machinic into the beastly is the rhinoceros: to inhibit the skyrocketing poaching, some South African reserves have started drilling holes into the animals’ horns and fitting them with cameras and GPS devices. Exacerbating “the implicit connections between looking and extinction,”<sup>15</sup> portable media are literally embedded and embodied in the animal. A bizarre twist on Cartesian animality, in which the rhinoceros a living recording apparatus, occupies the perverse task of livestreaming its own extinction as a last resort to prevent it.

None of this is, historically speaking, “new.” Portable photographic machines and animals - birds, in particular - have been used as media of warfare and data transmission for over a century and half. Aside from the animals used throughout history as carriers of incendiary devices, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, for example, brought forth an intricate animal-based information network. Photographer and microfilm inventor René Dagron utilized his microfilm compression technology together with

<sup>14</sup> Kiana Ehsani et al.: “Who Let the Dogs Out? Modeling Dog Behavior from Visual Data,” in: *Arxiv.org*, 28.3.2018, <https://arxiv.org/abs/1803.10827> (last seen: 20.12.2018).

<sup>15</sup> Anat Pick: “Why Not Look at Animals?” in: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 1/4 (2015), 107-125, here p. 108.



carrier pigeons to establish a communication channel to Paris during its siege. Swain points out how thoroughly intermedial this assemblage was: its functioning depended on pigeons acting in tandem with trains, telegraphs, magic lanterns, microphotography, and hot air balloons.<sup>16</sup> Analogously, the GoPro needs to be understood within a larger lattice of other miniature and energy-efficient devices that record and transmit electromagnetic radiation, such as GPS, GSM, and GLS receivers.

We may also recall early forms of aerial photography developed by Julius Neubronner at the beginning of the twentieth century. Neubronner attached aluminum harnesses fitted with time-delayed cameras to pigeons to obtain what would now be fashionably called “drone’s eye views.” The present-day use of GoPros in similar contexts at first appears simply like a continuation of these historical practices. But it seems to me that when coupled with location tracking, environmental sensors, and other data gathering techniques, the animal’s epistemic status changes drastically. The efficacy of Dagron’s pigeons depends on secrecy: to succeed as a medium, the birds must avoid being intercepted or killed by Prussians. In contrast, when animals wear GoPros and telemeters, visibility is essential to their labor and to the surveilling power operating through them: the Peruvian vultures and the vest-wearing dogs are prominently publicized through social media and news outlets. And where nineteenth-century warfare demanded that the homing pigeon perform as a transparent communication channel, simply carrying information from one point to another, then twenty-first-century telemetry depends on animals and their technics to actively produce information in the first place. ‘Marine Skins’ are being developed for oceanic animals to log environmental data, and living bees have wireless sensors glued to their backs to fulfill the recent human fantasy of a living “Internet of Things.”<sup>17</sup> But if telemetry was often deployed in the name of wildlife conservation and protection in the past, it is now increasingly vital for humans. Animals have become “sentinels for human and environmental health.”<sup>18</sup> We have realized that the animals’ own proclivities and aptitudes – for instance, seagulls’ and vultures’ scavenging habits or migratory birds’ navigational skills – can be useful not only in revealing the political, social, and ecological crises of human making. In some cases, they also begin to offer viable technological solutions to them. The image and data-generating work

<sup>16</sup> Swain: *Feral Ecologies*, op. cit., pp. 259–263.

<sup>17</sup> Vikram Iyer et al.: “Living IoT: A Flying Wireless Platform on Live Insects,” in: *Arxiv.org*, 22.12.2018, <https://arxiv.org/abs/1812.09419> (last seen: 28.12.2018).

<sup>18</sup> Swain: *Feral Ecologies*, op. cit., p. 60; also Alexander Pschera: *Das Internet der Tiere: der neue Dialog zwischen Mensch und Natur*, Berlin 2014.

animals do for us – a type of labor we commonly attribute to “cultural” and “cognitive” workers when it is done by humans – is crucial for our understanding of the chaotically drifting climatic borders, the changing chemical composition of the environment, the patterns of self-preservation, migration and evolving survival strategies. Facing an increasingly inscrutable climate, we have thus returned to ancient Rome and its augury: to divine Jupiter’s fickle will and make sense of our world, we look to the birds, hoping their machine tongues will reveal the gods’ minds.

### The self

On the example of carrier pigeon photographs, Peter Geimer shows how conventional anthropic media-theoretical notions like gaze and authorship cease to function when applied to animal-made imagery.<sup>19</sup> Neubronner’s photographs show sceneries that the pigeon would have left behind its back, Neubronner himself was absent at the time an image was taken, and the camera, in a corporeal sense, did not gaze at anything at all.<sup>20</sup> One of the more memorable viral photographs of recent years demonstrates that these conceptual impasses are far from settled: the notorious case of the “monkey selfie” taken by a Celebes crested macaque in 2011 lays bare how animal recordings also frustrate anthropocentric legal doctrines. After being published on Wikipedia, wildlife photographer David Slater claimed the copyright in the photographs and was later sued for it by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). The controversy centered around whether the image was copyrightable at all and if so, whether the rights belonged to the monkey or to Slater, who set up the camera so it could be operated by the macaques.

Although the parties settled in 2017, the appellate court – unusually – refused to dismiss the case. Instead, in a scathing decision against PETA, it ruled that the organization cannot litigate on behalf of animals and reaffirmed that animals have no entitlement to copyright.<sup>21</sup> It is baffling why instead of envisioning new and sustainable forms of protection for

<sup>19</sup> Cf. also Florian Leitner: “On Robots and Turtles: A Posthuman Perspective on Camera and Image Movement after Michael Snow’s *La Région Centrale*,” *Discourse* 2/35 (2014), pp. 263–277, here p. 265.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Geimer: *Bilder aus Versehen: eine Geschichte fotografischer Erscheinungen*, Hamburg 2010, pp. 325–329.

<sup>21</sup> United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit: *Naruto v. Slater* (No. 16–15469), 23.4.2018, <https://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2018/04/23/16-15469.pdf> (last seen: 20.12.2018).

animal and collaborative interspecific labor, PETA believes it is desirable to wrest non-human creations into the confines of copyright restrictions – the very same genus of monopolistic, private, and monetizable property rights that create the ideal economic incentives for the destruction of animal habitats, including those of macaques *and* humans. But the much more important lesson to draw is, as Swain points out, that animals are always involved in the processes of their own representation.<sup>22</sup> Instead of wondering whether the image is copyrightable and by whom, perhaps the question we should really be asking is: when the animal takes a picture of itself looking directly at a camera, what does this action tell us about both the camera and the animal? What wall is being broken, and by whom? We carelessly call these photographic objects “animal selfies” as if the human narrative of the self wasn’t utterly inapplicable to the circumstances of their creation.

Geimer’s media-archaeological analysis of avian photographs is useful because it highlights this perpetually ambiguous nature of animal recordings without falling into the anthropomorphizing trap of equating the camera with the visual system of living beings. But his historical case study does not neatly translate to more recent animal interactions with portable media. Formally, there is little that distinguishes Neubronner’s pigeon photos from a rapacious bird’s GoPro video. At the same time, we must take care not to overlook the praxeological difference between a pre-arranged recording and one taken by an animal spontaneously. James Leo Cahill interprets animal recordings as manifestations of a “post-cinema of animal attractions.”<sup>23</sup> He includes in this category closed-circuit and surveillance footage, recordings made by humans in which animals appear purposely or interject themselves unexpectedly, and recordings made by animals (voluntarily or not). I believe we need a label more fine-tuned than the nebulous collective term *animal videos*, given that each of these disparate modalities of recording follows an idiosyncratic cultural logic.

“Animal-borne imagery” is a taxon occasionally used in this context. It applies to projects like the University of Georgia’s Kitty Cams (which monitors outdoor activities of cats through video and radio), the previously mentioned SheepView360° (with its slogan “explore the Faroe Islands as an animal”) or Google’s DogView (which maps areas around the city of Ōdate, Japan “from the perspective” of an Akita). Such initiatives of course fail in their promise to make us see the world through animals’

<sup>22</sup> Swain, *Feral Ecologies*, op. cit., p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> James Leo Cahill: “A YouTube Bestiary: 26 Theses on a Post-Cinema of Attractions,” in: Katherine Groo and Paul Flaig (eds.): *New Silent Cinema*, New York 2015, pp. 263–93.

eyes. The images, after all, are made by machines from a vantage point external to the animal's body and adjusted to represent the world in ways that remain legible to humans. Anat Pick maintains that animal-borne imagery and tracking sustain a deep anthropocentrism,<sup>24</sup> though numerous other authors positively evaluate the nascent glimpses of non-human perspectives in such recordings.<sup>25</sup> Jessica Ullrich, for example, in her analysis of art pieces that make use of animal-borne "Cittercams," delineates the ethical boundary in technological terms: in contrast with film and television footage, she highlights the absence of image stabilization in contemporary video art projects.<sup>26</sup> Ullrich reads the chaotic anarchy of non-stabilized animal recordings as an inscription of animal physiology and liveliness, and therefore as a new mode of encountering the world. (Interestingly, with the introduction of electronic image stabilization features like "HyperSmooth" – which is turned on by default on the GoPro HERO7 – these new sensory, aesthetic, and political potentials of shaky video might also soon become a historically localized experience.)

But as a conceptual category, "animal-borne imagery" nonetheless levels the concrete differences between animals who had cameras affixed to their bodies by humans and those that seize them on their own. Donna Haraway foregoes this issue of intentionality by invoking a post-humanist relational network:

Hermeneutic potency is a relational matter; it's not about who 'has' hermeneutic agency, as if it were a nominal substance instead of a verbal infolding. Insofar as I (and my machines) use an animal, I am used by an animal (with its attached machine). I must adapt to the specific animals even as I work for years to learn to induce them to adapt to me and my artifacts [...]. If those animals are wearing something of my making, our mutual but unidentical coadaptation will be different.<sup>27</sup>

Although the tricky parameter of volition carries its own set of problems, I believe we cannot simply subsume animals' conscious actions under a "dispersed and hybrid actor network, transcending nations and species, in which meaning is no longer controlled by an individual and becomes

<sup>24</sup> Pick: "Why Not Look at Animals?" in: *NECSUS* 4, op. cit., here p. 110.

<sup>25</sup> Leitner: "On Robots and Turtles," in: *Discourse* 2/35, op. cit.; Cahill: "A YouTube Bestiary," in: Groo, Flaig (eds.): *New Silent Cinema*, op. cit.; Heather Davis: "Future Animals," in: Fotomuseum Winterthur (ed.): *Beastly/Tierisch*, Leipzig 2015, pp. 114-129; Swain: *Feral Ecologies*, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Ullrich: "Anything can happen", in: Chimaira (ed.): *Tiere Bilder Ökonomien*, op. cit., pp. 286f. Compare this with Rabih Mroué's analysis of amateur recordings from the Syrian civil war, as discussed by Krautkrämer: "Revolution Uploaded," in: *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 11, op. cit. in which the use or non-use of a tripod marks a line of political allegiance.

<sup>27</sup> Donna J. Haraway: *When Species Meet*, op. cit., p. 262f.

fluid,"<sup>28</sup> as Florian Leitner has suggested. This would amount to ignoring what animals themselves attend to, disregarding their manifest interest in human-made objects. Artist Emilio Vavarella's 12-minute video *ANIMAL CINEMA* (2017), assembled from YouTube footage filmed with several generations of GoPro cameras, is very clear about preserving this distinction: what counts as "animal cinema" are videos made by animals *autonomously*.

Neubronner's pigeons, the Peruvian vultures and the multitude of crustaceans, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and mammals with radio and video transmitters glued to their bodies appear as components of media; following their own trajectories, no doubt, but nonetheless machines whose technical operation (the transport or production of information) is preordained. Contrarily, when animals seize recording devices of their own accord, even when this interaction is orchestrated or premediated by humans, something else is at play. The animal *apprehends* the device in a phenomenological sense. It turns from object to subject of media, casting itself in a part normally retained for humans. "That the [animal] grabs the camera suggests that it was for a moment meaningful to it. This appropriation in turn suggests that the camera has qualities that we have not acknowledged or have simply forgotten."<sup>29</sup> The GoPro handled by a seagull or squirrel – as opposed to one attached to them – momentarily becomes an interface between a human and non-human *Umwelt*. Humans can often be heard in the background of spontaneous animal videos, yelling at them to leave their devices alone. It is in these "flashes of actual wild life, moments where nature and culture play while flummoxed humans helplessly stare on,"<sup>30</sup> the moments when animals choose to disobey us, Vinciane Despret and Heather Davis argue, that we are forced to acknowledge their agency.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, recordings spontaneously made by animals are not merely an issue of authorship or copyright, nor only of mutual adaptation, but also of praxis. When animals snatch the electronics that are as much part of their environment as they are of ours, it is neither a glitch, nor happenstance, nor lucky accident, nor an experiment under human control. It is an animal's conscious and directed action.

<sup>28</sup> Leitner: "On Robots and Turtles," in: *Discourse* 2/35, op. cit., p. 265.

<sup>29</sup> Swain: *Feral Ecologies*, p. 148.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>31</sup> Vinciane Despret: *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* Minneapolis 2016, pp. 180–182; Davis: "Future Animals," in: Fotomuseum Winterthur (ed.): *Beastly/Tierisch*, op. cit.

## Dirt archives

“On the coast of Norway, Kjell Robertsen uses some bread to get some GoPro close-ups of seagulls. Over 5 months later he found his camera so we can all see what happens when you accidentally make a *seagull drone*.”<sup>32</sup> This short introduction describing one of the 2017 GoPro Awards winners underscores another pertinent aspect of animal-made images: their embeddedness in the environment. GoPros recuperated out of the mud of a pigpen or crashed drones sunk in bodies of water appear to carry a story simply by being lost and found. They seem shrouded in mystery, since they lied in waiting in animals’ “secret” quarters.<sup>33</sup> Thanks to the material constitution of solid-state semiconductor memory with its fair resistance to decay, they can protect and later divulge these secrets. Secrecy is the great framework through which our audiovisual culture interprets animal lives. Their “secret life” is stressed in the titles and marketing of recent animated films, nature documentaries, and photo-books. “GPS tags reveal the secret life of urban seagulls,” heralds a recent article in *The Guardian* reporting on a study in Cornwall. “This study demonstrates that gulls behave as individuals and there can be no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to managing their populations.”<sup>34</sup> It says a great deal about human society that the seagull’s GPS-mediated emancipation into personhood - beginning with the recognition that they have individually characteristic behaviors - is articulated in the same sentence as the need to control biopolitically the population it constitutes. The seagull as an urban *citoyen* is thus not, as the headline implies, simply discovered as if it had always been there, but very much first produced through GPS monitoring.

Our ongoing small renaissance in nature documentaries is both contingent on and feeds the “human desire to make animals unconditionally visible.”<sup>35</sup> As if in enemy territory, the devices used in some of the most popular recent BBC Natural History Unit series are called “spy cams.” Like National Geographic’s Crittercams, this professional film and broadcasting equipment shares many material characteristics with the GoPro: they are miniature, portable and highly durable. The allure of

<sup>32</sup> GoPro: “GoPro Awards: Seagull Theft - With Telemetry in 4K,” YouTube, 11.12.2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeB90B9\\_\\_xM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeB90B9__xM) (last seen: 20.12.2018), my emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. also Leitner, “On Robots and Turtles,” in: *Discourse* 2/35, op. cit., p. 274.

<sup>34</sup> Ornithologist Viola Ross-Smith quoted in Steven Morris: “GPS Tags Reveal the Secret Life of Urban Seagulls,” in: *The Guardian*, 14.7.2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/jul/14/gps-tags-reveal-the-secret-life-of-urban-seagulls> (last seen: 20.12.2018).

<sup>35</sup> Pick: “Why Not Look at Animals?” in: *NECSUS* 4, op. cit., here p. 108.

their clandestine recordings is undeniable, but contrary to the specious rhetoric of secrecy, the images tend to be quite quotidian. (This is not to say they are boring, since “familiarity in no way diminishes potency,”<sup>36</sup> as Haraway concedes.)

The value of these secrets in the visual economy is therefore high only insofar as they can cease to be secrets, maybe because they were never very well-guarded to begin with. Yet the more interesting and provocative images to think about are those that will never be seen. Setting aside for a moment the urgent problem of electronic waste accumulating around the planet, there is a growing corpus of recordings made by animals that are lost to us: a large archive of stolen GoPros and *unfound* footage hidden in the forests, percolating in the lakes and the rivers, cached under the soil and in the seas.<sup>37</sup> It is useful to keep in mind that animals are capable of both making moving images as well as preserving and destroying them (fig. 2). This applies not only to the lice, insect larvae, and rodents who like to feed on the cultural memory entombed in our archives.<sup>38</sup> Animals inspect and take apart the recording and storage media they find in their world and save parts that appear useful to them or deploy them as tools, toys, ornaments, or building material. “Technological modernity is a multispecies affair,”<sup>39</sup> Swain reminds us. This realization resonates nowhere more clearly than in the wild archive of natural *and* technical history built and embodied by superb lyrebirds, whose mating calls famously include the noise of portable media like camera shutters.



Fig. 2: Still from “FOX KILLS AND EATS my gopro” uploaded to YouTube by TheOpenLens on July 19, 2014, showing a fox dismantling a HERO3+.

<sup>36</sup> Haraway: *When Species Meet*, op. cit., p. 258.

<sup>37</sup> I have Winfried Gerling to thank for this intriguing thought.

<sup>38</sup> Miles Ogborn: “Archives,” in: Stephan Harrison, Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift (eds.): *Patterned Ground: Entanglements of Nature and Culture*, London 2004, pp. 240–42.

<sup>39</sup> Swain: *Feral Ecologies*, op. cit., p. 150.

## Conclusion

In this article, I situated the GoPro camera and other portable video equipment - the Wolfcams and Armadillocams and Nestcams and Den-cams and Crittercams and Kittycams and Spycams and Sheepviews and Dogviews - in a larger field of transformations and practices in order to show that, as I believe, we are witnessing not only a profound disruption of audiovisual codes, but also of human subjectivity as it is understood in relation to animals and technology. Besides the appearance of new production methods and genres of moving images, one important adjustment we must address is our obsolete definition of who can count as an "author" of technical recordings. I have argued for the importance of distinguishing between voluntary and passive animal recordings and suggested to call the former "spontaneous" rather than "accidental" in order to emphasize how such images "are made 'accidentally' *on purpose*."<sup>40</sup>

Animals who encounter technological objects, whether they are GoPro-stealing seagulls or parrots operating an Alexa with voice commands, are relentlessly expanding the domains of activity historically thought of as predominantly or exclusively belonging to humans. With wireless and cellular connectivity, algorithmic content analysis and editing, automated uploading features and integrations with platforms like YouTube, we can soon expect to see videos made by animals and post-produced and published by machines entirely without human intervention.

<sup>40</sup> Gerling, Holschbach, and Löffler: *Bilder verteilen*, op. cit., p. 143, my translation and emphasis.