Bee Movie
Visual Ethics

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Abstract

Bee Movie is a short film that invites questions for conversations on visual ethics. The viewer is invited into a world of circular, tragic and absurd questions concerning what a filmmaker, an abstract writer, a journal editor, and a film viewer ought to do when observing the apparent reality of a bee's circular attempts to escape a pond. As a filmmaker and abstract writer, one does not want to tell the viewer and reader how one feels about this bee, bees, insects, ponds, water, life, death and circles. And one feels obliged not to explain the context through which the film came to life as the bee was engaged in efforts that might be narrated as lifesaving but also as another complex of efforts entirely. As an open image, without our textual dissection (or, at least, with a dampening of that dissection to an abstract and with a few questions and challenges), we regard Bee Movie as inviting questions about the ethics of the use of images as pedagogy. Whatever we thought about whether and how to share this film, we find ourselves in 359 other relationships, and always back again to what we assumed might be the starting position.

Keywords

visual ethics – pedagogy – text – absurdity

FEATURE   This article comprises the film 'Bee Movie' (2022), which can be viewed here (and here).

– This article is part of the special topic 'Visual Ethics', edited by Jayne White, Dean Sutherland and Marek Tesar.

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The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.

DOROTHEA LANGE, *LA Times*, 1978

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Bee Movie is a short film that invites questions for conversations on visual ethics. The viewer is invited into a world of circular, tragic, and absurd questions concerning what a filmmaker ought to do, what a writer ought to do, what a journal editor ought to do, and what a film viewer ought to do when observing the apparent reality of a bee's circular attempts to escape a pond. As filmmakers and writers, we do not want to tell the viewer and reader how we felt and feel about this bee, and about bees and insects and ponds and water and life and death and circles. And we feel obliged not to explain the context through which the film came to life as the bee was engaged in efforts that might be narrated as lifesaving but that might also be another complex of efforts entirely. As an open image, without our textual dissection (or at least, with a dampening of that dissection to a few questions and challenges), we regard *Bee Movie* as inviting questions for questions for questions about the ethics of the use

of images as pedagogy. Wherever we thought we were in our conversations about whether and how to share this film, we found ourselves in 359 other relationships, and always back again to what we assumed might be the starting position. Go figure.

We want to resist a necessity or urge to tell the viewer how we felt and thought about the bee, nor how the viewer should feel about the encounter. We are concerned about the function of particular kinds of visual images, and their presentation, in leading the audience in regard to environmental and pedagogical messages and concepts. Fact-based documentaries, for example, are often frightening in their rendering of narratives wrapped in data. They can also be read as paradoxically unhelpful. The viewing of the crisis on a screen might be seen as actually *doing* something about it (see, for instance, *An Inconvenient Truth,* 2006, and *Climate Change by the Numbers*, 2015). In other words, an ethic of contribution made possible by the sense of 'viewerly' accomplishment produces a possible satisfactory paralysis – not a paralysis in the face of the immensity of ecological crises, but paralysis caused by the idea that watching the film was sufficient as something to do. While such didactic film and photography has a place for sure, that is a certain place with certain limits and horizons. There is a resonance here with the work of Biesta (2015) on the functions and limits of measurement in education systems. The point, and the resonance, is not to abandon measurement or didactics. Rather, the point is to remain critical of their application, and to be open to what might be beyond their limits and horizons. *Bee Movie* peers past and over those limits and horizons.

We keep in our mind that the focus of the special issue is ethics – so why is it important not to create a clear position around a bee circling in a pond in its final moments? This is not a new problem. The documenting of crises, cruelties, and pain through photographic media is ongoing. If we were to layer our interpretation over the video it would immediately disintegrate all the opportunity to tangle with the ethical concerns that the image potentially can produce, both in the making of it and in the receiving of it. [If for instance, we were to labour on the Sisyphean absurdity of the bee's movements, but we won't do that here]. There is a tension here between morality and ethics that recognises the complexity of enduring concerns around how to be with bees beyond simple equations of good and evil.

By design, this work is bound up in a multiplicity of double binds. We don't want to explain the context of how the video came into being because doing so leads to a reception of the film that assumes a 'position' or it relegates the conversation to one about 'technology' – the "what equipment did you use to get that shot?" question. This is not to say that discussion around the mechanics of

photographic media / cinema does not contain ethical contemplations. Dziga Vertov understood in the nascent years of the medium. "Only with cinema can we think of a mode of 'seeing' that is not attached to the human eye. Cinema, then, offers something like a 'percept': a reception of data that is not located in a subject" (Vertov, 1984, pp. 14–15).

The infamous *Napalm Girl* photograph from the Vietnam War is an exceptional and potent example of this ethics of technology in action. When Nick Ut (the photographer) was asked by *Vanity Fair* many years after photographing Kim Phuc running burning from her village "how he captured the image," he responded to both the human experience of being in the moment and as a technician describing his craft, saying.

> I picked up my Nikon camera with a 300mm and started shooting. As they got closer I switched to my Leica. First there was a grandmother carrying a baby who died in front of my camera. Then I saw through the viewfinder of my Leica, the naked girl running. I thought, "Oh my God. What happened? The girl has no clothes." I kept shooting with my Leica M2 with my 35-mm. f2 lens.
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> HARRIS, 2015

The photographer challenges the ethics of the context by refusing to answer the question as it is meant. Is explaining camera position, lens size, and framerate (for example) meaningless to the encounter of recording an event – or part of it?

A further complication for the ethics of the visual in pedagogy is a concern from the filmmaker around the aestheticization of images that lure readers into the frame through the composition of a 'beautiful photo' or through the affective qualities of the still or moving image. Artist Richard Mosse, who photographs striking images on infrared film stock, of the ongoing conflict in the Congo, argues that "Beauty is one of the mainlines to make people feel something. It's the sharpest tool in the box… If you're trying to make people feel something, if you're able to make it beautiful, then they'll sit up and listen" (Mahoney, 2015).

Gilles Deleuze spent more than 800 pages over two volumes circling "affect" and "sensation" in cinema (see *Cinema 1*, 1997, *and Cinema 2*, 2005). He was interested in the physiological transmission of affective cinematic connections into potential emotional responses. These transmissions could manifest in as many ways as cinema is made and received. He cited a tangible example of cinematic affect as Joris Ivens' film *Regen / Rain* (1929). The film is determinedly

poetic and not concerned about logical temporal or spatial connections (continuity in industry terms). "The rain we see in the Ivens film is not one particular rain which fell somewhere, sometime. These visual impressions are not bound into unity by any conception of time and space" (Deleuze, 1997, p. 111). Rather, its montage of images is sutured by the rain – an incoming storm; the storm rains down upon the city; the storm dissipates and leaves the city. "Rain as affect" (Deleuze, 1997, p. 111). (John Rachman contemplated Deleuze's project in this way. "To extract sensation from representation, making it a matter of experimentation rather than judgment, is also to free the art of seeing from its subordination to prior concept or discourse" (2000, p. 129). In this context, Peter Canning notes, also in relation to *Cinema 1* and *2*, "ethics means discovery, rediscovery of the virtual; invention, reinvention of the possible" (345).

In the case of *Bee Movie,* the subject of the image would seem acutely relevant. But then, in relation to the current ecological emergency, experienced alongside non-human neighbours, it doesn't really matter what individuated, atomised, isolated 'thing' we film, because all things have relevance in this context. A shot of a bee circling on the surface of a pond is but one sliver of an ungraspable crisis. Timothy Morton describes Climate Change as a hyperobject. We can't individually or collectively understand it, but we can aesthetically feel it and therefore potentially think about the world differently through encountering it. "Reasoning on and on is a symptom of how people are still not ready to go through an affective experience that would existentially and politically bind them to hyperobjects, to care for them. We need art that does not make people think (we have quite enough environmental art that does that), but rather that walks them through an inner space that is hard to traverse" (Morton, 2013, p. 184).

As practitioners, telling people what to think about the images we produce and aim to make, produces limitations to the potential for those images to evoke ethical and critical questions that are not immediately obvious. The purpose here is not to tell people to not say how they felt in relation to producing a particular image – or not explain the context. We are interested in the possibilities that are present when you do not frame or explain the intention behind the composition.

In an apparently progressive and modern educational system, not explicating a position and a view and a message can be challenging. Educators and filmmakers may feel the onset of another form of paralysis, a sense of failing to engage in the 'proper' work of educating the world. Rancière's (1991) work on education and emancipation provides something of a lifejacket in which to float, and circle around, in this sea of meaning and meaninglessness, resisting an urge to be positioned as the master of the subject of *Bee Movie.*

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