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## The Eye of the Beholder: Applying Visual Analysis in an Historical Study of Lynxes' Representations in the Bavarian Forest Region

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Yes. They will forget. That is our fate, nothing can be done. What appears to be serious, significant, so very important—when the time comes—will be forgotten or seem so trivial.

—A. Chekhov, *Three Sisters*

### Introduction

Wild animals occupy a special place in the human psyche: our oldest companions on the planet, their wilderness often served as a backdrop to highlight people's humanity. One of the earliest examples of art, cave paintings of game and hunters, is repeated century after century in different forms, media, and connotation. What has largely remained

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the same is fascination with the wild, a hope to tame—when not in flesh, then in image. John Berger notes that looking at an animal, having it in one's proximity—even in the form of a still image—offers a person some sort of consolidation to the inescapable feeling of “loneliness of man as a species” (1991, p. 6). This “great divide” separating humanity from our natural environment commenced eons ago with the first instances of domestication and the beginnings of agriculture. This was exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution and aggravated to an extreme degree by capitalism's voracious greed for extraction and profit, marginalizing animals by reducing them to a mere commodity: a raw material, a fodder, a plaything, a spectacle. Never in the history of the planet were people so outnumbered by species that are raised specifically for consumption—and our appetites grow still.<sup>1</sup>

In qualitative academic research, employing visual analysis methods often evokes associations with a rather niche application. Rarely do they compose the cornerstone of an investigation in fields outside of, for example, media studies, art history, or *Bildwissenschaft*<sup>2</sup>—in short, outside of disciplines that *literally* characterize, situate, and interpret images. However, while by no means a universal tool to fill the gaps in all academic enquiry, employing visual analysis builds up on a rather prosaic act of seeing and making sense of the outside world, imaginatively. Visual analysis is necessarily a creative process, and as a research method it opens up the possibility of forming conclusions from one's personal interaction with what is seen. To borrow the words of Murray Bookchin, who wrote under the pseudonym Lewis Herber, a task of enriching academic research to make sense of phenomena, whose comprehension might stall

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<sup>1</sup> For the progression of numbers in the past several decades, see, for instance, an article by Alex Thornton “This Is How Many Animals We Eat Each Year” at the World Economic Forum website.

<sup>2</sup> *Bildwissenschaft*, like visual studies broadly, is a discipline that tries to understand and interpret the significance of imagery. Originating from German-speaking academic circles, *Bildwissenschaft* employs a variety of methods (often interdisciplinary) to analyse a vast variety of visual sources. Moreover, it focuses predominantly on the visual properties of an image rather than its other characteristics (i.e., its history or the political, economic, or social conditions of its making). For a fuller explanation of differences between *Bildwissenschaft* and other visual studies, see Jason Gaiger, “The Idea of Universal *Bildwissenschaft*”, *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics*.

when traditional methods applied, “calls for imaginative departures from conventional approaches” (2018, p. 17).

In this chapter I reflect upon employing visual analysis to corroborate an historical narrative, tracing the development of human–wildlife relationships in the Bavarian Forest region. Using the example of Eurasian lynx, I closely study their visual representations in the span of the past 50 years. Unlike many other large carnivores, lynxes with their reticent, somehow shy appearance tend to be viewed favourably and are generally considered a charismatic species.<sup>3</sup> The local population has been progressively more accepting of lynxes’ presence.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to answer the question: how these changes are visually represented in the local media? Critically analysing representations of lynxes helps us understand how this fluctuating dynamic has been visually captured over the years.

The task appears simple and complex at the same time. Its simplicity lies in the fact that, in principle, media reflects general public attitude, and since the trajectory of lynxes’ dispersal in the area can be considered a success story, one expects the local media to have a generally positive coverage. At the same time, as famously noted by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky (2002), media have the capacity to form popular opinion based on the assumption that they truthfully represent the opinion of the public. The capacity of media to affectively inform people’s opinions makes it a powerful instrument to propagate a certain agenda. Moreover, local media sources commonly evoke a feeling of proximity: since physically they are often located in or very close to a place that they cover in their reports, they appear more accessible and trustworthy than regional, state, or international media. The way local media cover a sensitive topic, such as the return of large carnivores, can

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<sup>3</sup> Charisma here, as Jamie Lorimer explains, is a set of characteristics that have a popular appeal for circulation in the media and, by extension, markets. Aesthetic charisma, he continues, “describes the visual appearance of a species in print, on film, or in the spectacular encounters of ecotourism” (2015, p. 40). An animal whose look people tend to view favourably can become the face of a campaign and thus lend its attractiveness to the campaign itself.

<sup>4</sup> It is, however, worth noting that the presence of large carnivores is still a contentious issue. For a more detailed account of the tortuous path of the resettlement of large carnivores in the Bavarian Forest region, see Ulrich Schraml (2019) *Wildtiermanagement für Menschen* (in German).

have a direct impact on the general acceptance of this species. And since photographs may tell a story of their own depending on their interpretation and intentionality, critically analysing their content uncovers a wider web of relationships, interests, and attitudes.

Regardless of where, discussions around the reintroduction or return of large carnivores are typically laden with conflicting opinions. In the Bavarian Forest region, the slow resettlement of lynxes has been amply documented by local news outlets: from fearful to tamed, from welcomed to despised—the articles have followed the furtive movement of the lynx through the forest and at times in proximity, often fatal, to human settlements. Through this coverage lynxes' imagery slowly started to make its way into people's homes: not necessarily welcome as creatures of flesh and blood, these large cats entered collective cultural memory (Kuhn, 2007), enriching the vernacular with ecological jargon and, for once, ushering the possibility of coexistence of humans and wild beasts.<sup>5</sup> While overall attitude towards lynxes' presence in the Bavarian Forest region has improved dramatically over the past several decades, analysing how lynxes have been represented could shed light on whether images illustrate this changing dynamic. Andrew Isenberg (2002, p. 60) once said that “[our] representations of wildlife are inescapably expressions of human values”, and visual analysis allows looking behind a textual narrative to discern whether what we *see* of the wildlife corresponds to what we *understand*.

This chapter is organized in the following order: a general introduction to visual analysis that talks about why visibility is such an intrinsic part of human experience and what makes it conducive for research purposes; the following section deals specifically with wildlife photography, its affective quality that sets it apart from a visual representation of inanimate nature; the section on methodology tackles the procedural part of conducting visual analysis—the what, how, and why of applying this method; in the empirical section, two photographs of lynxes are analysed; the discussion section covers the applicability of the present findings in similar kinds of research on studying animals' visual representation in

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, a volume edited by Marco Heurich and Christof Mauch, *Urwald der Bayern: Geschichte, Politik und Natur im Nationalpark Bayerischer Wald* (2020, in German).

the media; and finally, the chapter ends with a conclusions section where merits and challenges of the method are discussed.

## Seeing as a Creative Process

As a species, we largely make sense of the world through the act of seeing: we intake, comprehend, store, and represent reality imaginatively rather than linguistically. By no means a “truthful”, or in any way precise, visual perception is a bridge between the outside world and ourselves (Barry, 1997). Walter Benjamin once said that “[d]uring long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity’s entire mode of existence” (1969, p. 5), yet what stretches further both through time and geographical terrain is the fact that principally humans perceive in images. The unprecedented proliferation of social media and streaming platforms testifies to a predominance of visual media. The entire fabric of certain types of contemporary work, leisure, entertainment, and education, to mention but a few, is woven in glaring threads of alluring, ever-changing images. Imaginary thinking is a *lingua franca* that makes a conversation, however restricted, possible across different scales, contexts, and geographies.

Visual analysis, broadly defined as a collection of methods to interpret and understand imagery, has been employed widely in studies of art and art culture, and more recently in other fields of inquiry as well. However, as Stephen Spencer notes, despite the growing popularity of visual analysis methods, social sciences have been rather reluctant to recognize and apply them as valid information sources on a par with text. He emphasizes the potentiality of visual methods to “provide a deeper and more subtle exploration of social contexts and relationships” (2010, p. 1) while at the same time acknowledging that within some strands of social sciences visual analysis might have limited applicability. It is the ability of visual analysis to show the familiar from an unfamiliar angle, coupled with the recognition of actors—producers, subjects, and “consumers”—of visual material, which affords this sort of research a novel, creative twist. With that in mind, Spencer also warns that visual analysis should

not be viewed as a scholarly silver bullet, a sort of innovative instrument that can singlehandedly substitute all other methods of inquiry.

In historical analysis, engaging with the visual might uncover how a certain subject has been portrayed and perceived throughout the years. By its nature, an historical study requires looking at a phenomenon as it unravelled over a period of time. Photographs are momentous, but a compiled body of several of them taken at different points could tell a story beyond a text, enrich textual description or give it more depth. Apart from a natural improvement of technology, looking at photographs could illustrate the development of a photographed subject: what is depicted in an image and how, which details are present and whether they change over time, what is brought to the foreground, what is obscured, and the reason for either method. Taking a photograph, especially with the proliferation of smartphones, has become a routine occurrence, and while the mechanics of taking a picture might, by and large, be the same, *what* we tend to photograph, which instances we deem worthy of preserving for future use and reflection, differ.

The affective faculty of imagery and its expository significance for academic research has been noted by many. For instance, in *Camera Lucida* (1981) Roland Barthes's describes images that impel shifts in people's psyche that can later be translated into actions for a cause. More recently, Susan Sontag analysed the participatory competence of photographs, both taking and seeing. Images here serve as a sort of language through which both the producer and the consumer of a photograph enter a dialogue, creating a narrative that spans over time and space. Still images, Sontag contends, allow a way of examining reality that is otherwise impossible since a human's focus tends to wander. While appreciating this gift of a fixed gaze, she acknowledges that perceiving something in complete immobility is unnatural to our senses: "Life is not about significant details, illuminated in a flash, fixed forever. Photographs are" (2005, pp. 63–64).

Visual analysis of large carnivores can demonstrate how they were perceived at a certain point in history. For instance, in early modern English heraldry, Kathryn Will attests (2016), animals represented a set of highly specified characteristics, attributed to each beast and, by extension, to a person whose property a said beast visually inhabited. More

contemporarily, as in cases with the reintroduction of large carnivores across the globe, their images go through a rigorous process of selection in order to convey a specific, interest-laden message. Varying from proponents of their return, employing images of large carnivores playing and tending for one another, to photographs depicting an attack on livestock or a blood-stained muzzle below a pair of empty glowing eyes, used by those whom proximity to carnivores appears rather perilous, these pictures hit every point on the gradient of attitudes. Canons of photography change over time, but their main purpose—that of an affective illustration—withstand the caprices of fashion.

A question might arise: how much background knowledge is necessary to conduct visual analysis? A trained eye, it can be argued, might see something inaccessible to a layperson, yet the methodological and conceptual innocence of the latter might offer insights to which a trained eye could be blind. An image is such a medium whose interpretation easily differs from person to person. Often even the intentionality of a maker can be misinterpreted by a viewer, endowing an image with a whole new meaning. However, the specific positionality of an image-maker should not be overlooked: although what they try to convey might be taken in a million different ways, it is the unique moment of their engagement with a subject that then turns into a visual material in the examination. Susan Sontag confirms this influence of image production by saying that, “[in] deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects” (2005, p. 4). A photographer snatches a moment in all its intricacy that afterwards starts living a life of its own.

Perceiving an image, intending to understand it, and take it in amounts to an act of profound retrospection. Visual analysis is a highly reflective exercise where a viewer must confront their situatedness to see something in an image that lays way beyond the apparent. By acknowledging their positionality, the viewer enters a dialogue with an inanimate representation of reality, getting a glimpse of the world that feels like it is more available, more accessible than it is in reality. Committing to visual analysis is not just confrontation of personal ethical and intellectual baggage, but also a manifestation of a certain degree of trust in one’s ability to contemplate, discern, and appreciate “the immediacy of the

moment” (Grady, 2008) and all its history, in making and being. As a tool, the applicability of visual analysis depends on the kind of research question one wishes to ask—and some answers might well be found in the visual.

## Wildlife Photography

Wildlife photography takes a somewhat privileged position in nature photography. Not only does it try to depict living creatures who, at any point, might flee the frame, but also, as in the case with large predators, it attests to exceptional patience and physical ableness of a photographer. Juha Suonpää, a researcher and himself an avid photographer, speaks about the derivative value of a photograph that correlates to the amount of effort a photographer must put in to “snap” that one prized (sometimes literally) shot. He concludes that, “whatever animal is rare, timid or exceptionally spectacular is considered to be especially valuable when captured on film” (2000, p. 59). This statement speaks to what Robert Castel and Dominique Schnapper discuss when they describe how, for a photograph to attain deeper meaning, they must demonstrate “weighty, imposing subjects” (1990, p. 120).

Wildlife photography as an art form has its canons—tropes, repeated scenarios, preferred angles, and such—that in turn aim to represent an animal in its natural environment *authentically*. There are, of course, other forms of wildlife photography that take place in zoos and enclosures. In such cases, its mobility restrained and behaviour rather predictable, an animal going about its everyday life offers a wide array of photo opportunities that can be easily transformed into a collection of spectacular images. Tamed to a degree, an animal nonetheless appears unquestionably wild not only because its look corresponds to what people tend to have in mind when they think of wildlife. In a sense, wildlife photography engenders the source of its own proliferation: since very few people have unmediated access to wild animals in their most agitated states, the imagery comes chiefly from the creative representative work of wildlife enthusiasts whose choice of subjects and



compositions becomes the subjects and compositions inhabiting people's imaginations.

For instance, Kelly Enright (2012) observes that in wilderness accounts of many scholars and explorers in the first half of the twentieth century in the United States, the idea of what one would encounter in the jungle often preceded an actual departure: the conceptualization of what wilderness entails was projected on what was yet to be seen. As a result, many such writings reinforced the mythical appearance of the wild—and this work of imagination translated to an array of ecological practices, both in conservation and representation. An eternal debate on which nature should be protected (and, by extension, which species, large and small) always reflects human values—and these values are often informed by imagery, manufactured on purpose or incidentally. When it comes to wildlife photography, Derek Bousè notes that, “animals in the wild rarely appear as majestic (or as *cuddly*) as they do on the screen” (2003, p. 124, original emphasis), yet the sheer volume of dramatic shots—especially of large predators—makes it hard to believe that those animals can be anything but stunning, always.

While looking, perceiving, and appreciating the look of an animal, a viewer bases their judgement, at least in part, on pure viscerality, on the feeling of interacting with a beast in a rather unmediated way. In the process, personal history, experiences, and professional occupation of an observer can surface without one's active will—after all, none of us can help knowing what we know. What triggers a certain association often bypasses consciousness, and that is what makes interpretation an act of art rather than simple calculation. Close analysis of an image could enrich a narrative in a way unattainable by the means of text alone: while inherently subjective and rather indiscriminate as to what kind of background knowledge a person possesses, visual analysis opens up an opportunity to create a story, compellingly different from what a photographer might have intended. Certainly, text might have just as many readings as an image, yet most text has some sort of a structure that makes its interpretation a more orderly affair.

## Methodology

Unlike most other research methods, visual analysis is an activity that we all engage in constantly across our personal and professional lives. Saturated with images, everyday life offers innumerable opportunities for engaging with the visual. Employing visual analysis for research purposes does not differ drastically from observing the outside world by means of seeing—rather, the differences lay in the level of consciousness, as well as rigour, depth of critical reflection, and purposes towards which the act is targeted. Applying visual analysis in research necessitates the creation of a mental space where a person is invited to derive information using a regular yet often overlooked medium—the visual. Exploring possibilities of visual analysis makes an important contribution to our knowledge because, building on an everyday activity of seeing, it propels one to question their first visual impressions, to look more intently in order to really see.

Before attempting an historical study of photographs, one is inevitably confronted with several logistical issues: which images to pick, how to access them, which timeframe is sufficient to show an historical progression, how many photographs constitute a minimum necessary sample. There is no one universal answer and addressing these issues already constitutes the first step of the research process. Just like any other method of investigation, visual analysis aims to answer a specific research question. Therefore, first and foremost, one needs to think about what interests them in a matter, and depending on the answer, select a research method that is best suited to tackle the issue. John Grady (2008) suggests that a good starting point is to ask oneself whether the images, however many, produce sufficient information necessary to answer a research question. Since images often offer an innumerable number of interpretations, it is crucial to limit oneself with a clearly defined framework of a research question.

When analysing a photograph, Annette Kuhn (2007) outlines a four-step procedure, each addressing a specific part of the production, reception, and study of an image: (1) subject/s; (2) context of production; (3) technology and canon; (4) audience. These parts are not clearly separated and often blend into one another, allowing the forming of

a coherent narrative rather than a check-list. To conduct a visual analysis of animal imagery, Matthew Brower (2011) expands this process by pointing to a question of whether the animal portrayed is, in fact, a living animal or a diligently reconstructed stuffed replica. While in present times wildlife photography predominantly showcases living creatures, in its inception this genre of visual representation did not shy away from depicting corpses propped to look alive<sup>6</sup> or to paint zoo animals as if they roamed free.<sup>7</sup> Keeping these components in mind when attempting visual analysis helps to navigate an image and produce insights that might be overlooked from cursory contemplation.

In principle, photographs of wild animals—including lynxes—fall into one of two broad categories: the authentic ones, acquired by luck or through the medium of a camera trap, and the “staged” ones, where the animals look majestic and wild, although snapped in the (dis)comfort of an enclosure or another kind of confinement. The arranged characteristics of the second kind of photographs are rarely recognized, for the underlying idea of an image is to convey the wildness of a beast—or rather to project what the wildness of a beast constitutes in human imagination (Fudge, 2002). To borrow Roderick Nash’s apt observation, wilderness and its inhabitants are currently gaining popularity, yet in people’s struggle to see the wild, the wild is under constant human encroachment and runs the risk of “being loved to death” (2001, p. x): to capture an animal behaving naturally, it must be under continuous, incessant surveillance.

At its core, the wildlife genre has an underlying assumption that the scenes portrayed are unmediated representations of animals as they are in their natural environment—even when in reality each snapshot comes as a result of a lengthy production process (Chris, 2006). To help situate an image within a broader historical background, titles and accompanying

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<sup>6</sup> Contemporary hunting photography inherited some of this lore whereby fallen animals, when photographed, are portrayed as if still alive and even at times in motion. See, for example, Kalof and Fitzgerald “Reading the Trophy: Exploring the Display of Dead Animals in Hunting Magazines” (*Visual Studies*, 18(2), 112–122, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> One of notable exceptions from this rather commonplace practice was a German artist, Wilhelm Kuhnert, who habitually painted wild animals in situ. His elaborate drawings of animals informed not only the imaginative perception of African wildlife, but also filled pages of many scholarly publications of the time.

captions might serve as guides. Admittedly, there is no clear consensus on whether they should be considered when analysing a visual representation of an animal. Titles are more universal when considering a work of visual art and captions almost always accompany a publication in a periodical. However, it is important to keep in mind that not all visual materials come with a textual description (including, for example, a person's own photography). They can provide important insights into the context of an image, but at the same time there is a possibility of involuntarily adopting certain judgements passed on by whoever created a caption. The literature on the matter in the majority of cases appears to leave it to the discretion of a researcher.

Wildlife imagery and the context of its production offer insights into broader social and historical changes. For this chapter, I selected two photographs of lynxes from a local newspaper, *Grafenauer Anzeiger*. The newspaper primarily covers local affairs of the districts *Freyung*, *Grafenau*, and *Waldkirchen*, and its headquarters are located in the same town as the administration of the Bavarian Forest National Park. For years, *Grafenauer Anzeiger* has been reporting on matters of the national park as well as at times serving as a means of communication between the locals and the national park staff. This proximity has naturally allowed the newspaper to take a close look at the national park's affairs and report on them sooner and in more detail than other newspapers.

The first of the selected photographs (Fig. 10.1) dates back to 1973, shortly after the reintroduction of lynxes to the area. Vanished from Bavaria for more than a hundred years, lynxes were secretly brought from the mountains of Slovakia, soon after the establishment of the first national park in Germany. The second photograph (Fig. 10.2) appeared in an online publication of *Grafenauer Anzeiger* from April 2016 to illustrate a report on a traffic collision with the lynx portrayed. While more visual material could be employed for the purposes of this chapter, after careful consideration a number of similar photographs were disregarded to keep the chapter succinct. These two photographs seem ample enough to illustrate the applicability of visual analysis in observing changing attitudes towards lynxes in the area. When analysing the photographs, captions proved to be an excellent complementary source of information.



**Fig. 10.1** One of the first photographs of lynxes in an article covering plans for their return (Source: *Grafenauer Anzeiger*, 6 October 1973)

## Seeing the Lynx

The October edition of *Grafenauer Anzeiger* contained one of the first photographs of lynxes in the Bavarian Forest National Park (Fig. 10.1). The title reads simply “Soon to be released in freedom: lynxes in the National Park”.<sup>8</sup> In the photograph, two animals are depicted sitting very close to each other on what appears to be a large boulder. The one on the right, whose fur is ornate with more dramatic shadowing, is located closer to the camera; it squints. The one on the left sits slightly to the

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<sup>8</sup> “Bald in Freiheit enlassen: Luchse im Nationalpark”—my translation.

side: we see more of its elongated, so unmistakably feline body. Advanced understanding of lynxes' morphology would be required to guess the gender of the two individuals, but since the animals form an apparent pair, it could indicate the duty of proliferation bestowed upon them by their status of harbingers of the large carnivore's return. Conversely, the lynxes could also be siblings transported in a pair for company and comfort. The camera catches a human figure behind a wooden fence—in the background and out of focus. The person nonetheless is a part of the composition, which indicates that the photograph was taken amidst people. The lynxes appear calm, human presence does not seem to bother them much. Both attentively look at one thing on a far side behind the camera; the camera angle takes the shot from a lower angle. The lynxes look imposing, yet one cannot help but see them as enclosure lynxes.

This photograph is interesting to look at because, as described previously, it corresponds to the strand of wildlife photography that tries to depict the wilderness by showing a captive subject. There are no cage bars that are normally associated with enclosed animals, yet the visible part of the fence and a significantly more elevated position of a person behind leave no doubt that lynxes are photographed while under a vigilant eye and, subsequently, control of humans. With many a debate that the establishment of the Bavarian Forest National Park and the following reintroduction of lynxes instigated, the photograph serves as a sort of reassurance that the animals would not cause much trouble—they sit, docile, free yet tamed. The photograph has a certain visual appeal with animals glancing to the right as if following the flow familiar to a western viewer.<sup>9</sup> This direction is described by some as the “gaze in the future”—a fitting visual accompaniment for a report on further plans to bring in new species to the national park.

The photograph also exemplifies a sort of commodification of wild beasts: living in an enclosure, lynxes have relatively sufficient room to prowl, play, and hide. However, an enclosure serves as a spacious yet restricted stage where visitors of the national park can marvel at lynxes, behaving *as if* in their natural element. To be fair, enclosures in national

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<sup>9</sup> For more detail on the validity of culturally specific positioning in visual media, see Bode et al., “Left-Right Position in Moving Images: An Analysis of Face Orientation, Face Position, and Movement Direction in Eight Action Films” (*Art & Perception*, 4(3), 241–263, 2016).

park management practices across the globe often represent a necessary trade-off—sensitizing people to the presence of often problematic species and attending to educational purposes of teaching about animals' characteristics<sup>10</sup>: they are frequently one of the few possible ways of reintroducing/providing more roaming range for certain animals. Based on the caption, the two lynxes in the photograph were not destined to stay in an enclosure forever; however, an enclosure as a manifestation of wider human–wildlife relationships speaks to the fact that even the perceived wilderness of an animal can become a commodity, a spectacle. Not solely by the means of visitation and wonder, people consume animal objects through imagery, both making and as postcards, photographs, promotional material, etc.

Based on the analysis and literature review, it is possible to think of visual representations of large carnivores in three complementary ways: (1) awesome and fearful; (2) tamed and disciplined; (3) problem species. Throughout the years, all three have been employed by *Grafenauer Anzeiger* to depict how general predisposition towards lynxes' presence in the area has been progressing. For instance, in the beginning, there was much uncertainty, for lynxes had been absent from the forest for more than a century and, as often lamented in reports dealing with clashes between people and wild beasts, knowledge of how to coexist did not withstand the test of time. In the meantime, farmlands and road networks had expanded dramatically, and locals were not necessarily convinced that the animal could survive in the altered cultural landscape. Figure 10.1 might be interpreted as putting forward an image of lynxes as both fearful and tamed—their posture invites admiration yet the surroundings indicate that, as impressive as the animals appear, they have been put safely under human management.

Much in the same vein, more recent photographs of lynxes portray animals that are free to wander but at the same time are subtly domesticated. An online issue of *Grafenauer Anzeiger* from April 2016 contains a photograph of the lynx Patrick (Fig. 10.2). The caption under the

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<sup>10</sup> “Problematic species” is an interesting concept because it speaks to broader human attitudes towards animals and nature in general: there is no intrinsic “problem” with a certain species—rather, it is the degree of its living and predation habits negatively affecting people’s interests that renders an animal a problem.





**Fig. 10.2** Lynx Patrick (Source: *Grafenauer Anzeiger*, 13 April 2016)

photograph reads: “Lynx Patrick was photographed with a tracking collar in the winter of 2015/2016 in Farrenberg bei Finsterau (administrative district Freyung-Grafenau). On March 24, he was run over on B12 close to Philippsreut (administrative district Freyung-Grafenau) and then died”.<sup>11</sup> Unlike the lynxes in Fig. 10.1, this one had a name, which lends a feeling of proximity and familiarity; he was not just a lynx, but lynx Patrick. The frame includes a boulder on which Patrick is resting and bare, snow-covered trees. Set against the backdrop of the overcast winter sky, the colour palette of the photograph appears rather monotonous with the only colourful element being Patrick himself and the tracking collar adorning his neck. Patrick is looking to the viewer’s right; he seems to be unaware of or ignoring the camera. As in the previous photograph, the angle here is from a slightly lower position. Patrick is figuratively and thematically in the centre of the image.

<sup>11</sup> “Luchs Patrick, der mit einem Sender versehen war, im Winter 2015/2016 aufgenommen am Farrenberg bei Finsterau (Landkreis Freyung-Grafenau). Er wurde am 24.März bei Philippsreut (Landkreis Freyung-Grafenau) auf der B12 überfahren und kam dabei ums Leben”—my translation.



A barren, almost featureless background makes it easy to concentrate on a smallish, yet central animal figure. All of the elements of the photograph that have any motion to them (the many angles formed by conjunction of sprawling twigs, the curvature of rocks, the thick framing line of a naked tree, the overall movement from the top left of the photograph where the highest point trespasses the limits of the frame to the bottom-middle right where some other vegetation, out of focus, softly encloses the field of view) are at the fore, and Patrick is crowning the composition. The undeniable centrepiece, whose posture and diverted face give a sense of disinterest, almost palpable feeling of separation, Patrick looks to me as if informed of his soon fatal encounter with a human artefact, a car. He is free in his element yet is also clearly tamed—the collar betrays Patrick's otherwise supposed wilderness. Animal collars are inextricably objects of domination: they control, signify belonging, identify, and locate. Collaring wild animals has a number of practical and scientific reasons, yet *visually* a collar turns an animal into a pet. What a name does in a text, so a collar does in an image: Patrick stands for wilderness made a domestic matter.

In the forty years separating the photographs lynxes have established themselves as quite a regular species in the Bavarian forest. Still observed by very few outside of enclosures, they are monitored and—like Patrick—some tagged with a tracking collar. There are sightings of lynxes provided by camera traps that at times make it to the pages of local and regional newspapers. Progressively, as technology improves and more people engage in wildlife photography, the depictions of lynxes appear more “heroic”: whereas in the beginning, it seemed like the purpose of a photograph was to familiarize a viewer with the look of lynxes, more recently an image tells a story. To reiterate the point, Patrick is not just a lynx, but a named lynx whose life was followed and whose death was featured. In the photograph, Patrick does not look in the camera<sup>12</sup>; he is present yet detached. As we learn from the caption, Patrick was run over. The photograph transmits the feeling of separation quite well.

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<sup>12</sup> Eye contact is a common occurrence in wildlife photography and documentaries, serving to make a viewer feel a sense of connection and intimacy with an animal portrayed. See, for example, Bousè (2003).

## Discussion

Representation is never neutral and, as such, visual representation of animals has often been employed as a sort of leverage point, an emotional trigger aimed to deliver a certain message. J. Keri Cronin notes that, “images of nature are always already bound up in political, social, cultural, and environmental processes” (2011, p. 19). The history of humanity is intertwined with the life paths of our animal companions: enchanted by their unpredictable and, therefore, mysterious behaviour, people have been watching wildlife in the hope of glimpsing behind animals’ impervious gaze (Peterson, 2013). Following the overarching momentous nature of photography, visual representation of wild animals affords a close-up look that is impossible for the vast majority of people (Bousè, 2003). It is this closeness, this manufactured intimacy<sup>13</sup> of contact that makes wildlife photographs so powerful—when wild animals enter our mental space, it takes less strain to feel affected by and affectionate towards them (Serpell, 2004).

Historically, visual representations of charismatic animals have often been employed by different organizations to evoke an emotional response in viewers. These images in the context of the *return* of the animals, i.e., in an allusive acknowledgement of their nativity to the land and human-afflicted temporal absence, imply something similar to what Bernhard Gissibl described as remorse over an implied loss of peaceful coexistence between animals and humans. Framing this process in terms of “return” (unlike, for instance, invasion or colonization), signifies that for a while animals inhabited this area—and if humans did too, then at least for a time they managed to live there together. However, Gissibl continues, “[h]umans and wild animals coexisted in dynamic adaptation, and hunting was the main way of human interaction with them” (2016, p. 36). The story of large carnivores in Bavaria, as with many other stories from all around the globe, went along similar lines: predators embodied

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew Brower tackles this issue in his book *Developing Animals: Wildlife and Early American Photography* (2011). There he talks about how wildlife photography necessarily erases humans and the visible results of their activity from the frame so as to heighten the “wild” nature of a subject exposed. The authenticity of an animal is therefore a result of embellishment and manipulation on the part of a photographer or composition.

peril for humans, and humans retaliated—often, to the complete decimation of a competing species. Paradise was never on offer, yet as a mental image or a conservation strategy, it stands for a fine destination indeed.

As demonstrated by the examples in this chapter, the progression of an historical narrative can be traced in visual material. By closely observing the differences in photographs of lynxes in the media, we can engage in the process of trying to understand what messages are being put forward by employing certain portrayal canons and the choice of photographed subject/s. While it is possible that more photographs could paint a fuller picture of the changing attitude towards the presence of lynxes in the area, the two photographs in Figs. 10.1 and 10.2 offer an insight into the applicability of visual analysis as a research method in an historical analysis. A close reading of a photograph can engender material that an accompanying text might not necessarily transmit. At the same time, having background knowledge and analysing captions helps contextualize the photograph itself. Combining the two strategies could open access to a rich source of data, although, as mentioned previously, one should study imageries without relying too much on the seeming factuality of a written text: being informed should help one see details that might otherwise go amiss and not create a tunnel vision of what one expects to see.

## Conclusions

Visual analysis has indisputable merits for a wide range of scholarly examination, beyond those dealing specifically with aesthetics. As a method of inquiry, it invites a researcher to engage with imagery to piece together information via one of the most common practices of all—seeing. Images often serve to accompany or illustrate a written narrative, but just as often they represent their own source of research data. As discussed previously, many decisions need to be made to produce a visual artefact: photographs, for instance, snap a photographer's momentous interaction with an object in a frame, yet they are also a product of all the thought work, editing, and narrating that come before, during, and after the click

of the camera. Comprehending an image requires an equal amount of decision-making—to truly see, a viewer must recognize what they are looking for in the image and try to solve this sort of puzzle, where each piece carries its own significance. In the case of scholarly research, this translates to being conscious of the kind of question one is trying to answer and consider whether imagery suffices for the task.

In an historical study, visual analysis can create a space for more direct involvement with a slice of the past. Engaging with a long-gone moment by means of seeing is one of the closest experiences to an unmediated interaction; one observes as if being present in a moment, yet the still nature of imagery allows us to take time to scrutinize every little detail to form a conclusion, to narrate a scene. Again, people derive a great deal of understanding of the outside world by taking in and processing imageries, and when one comprehends an historical image, the past comes to life. Text of any sort necessarily conveys the predispositions of an author that, in many cases, is precisely what makes them an excellent source of information. In other instances, however, images can aid overcoming this innate subjectivity for they might have a higher degree of independence from the author's intentions. Certainly, like any other medium, images are far from objective, yet, depending on a research question, they might offer more possibilities to form one's own opinion on a matter.

At the same time, there are certain challenges and limitations to employing visual analysis as a research method in an historical study. As demonstrated in this chapter, certain insights require reading captions to grasp the idea of a photograph more accurately: in many cases an accompanying text could help to situate an image and have a fuller understanding and appreciation of it. While it is always beneficial to have a theoretical understanding of canons of photography and their affective faculties, images do not always fall neatly into one category. A wider spectrum of photographs of the same event might mitigate this issue, yet it is equally important to avoid selection bias by intentionally choosing images that fit a historical narrative. Additionally, depending on the timeline of research, finding suitable imagery can itself become a treasure hunt: while in the past century, and specifically after the advent of smartphones, photography as a means of recording a moment has been

dramatically increasing both in volume and subjects photographed, some events and processes of earlier history might have a more modest visual output.

Visual analysis highlights an inevitable degree of creative constructiveness in a research process. While interpreting a photograph, a viewer might possess sufficient background knowledge to situate themselves in very close approximation to the inhabitants of an image, yet as Rasmussen (1962) points out, the atmosphere *inside* of a photograph—its sounds, smells, almost imperceptible movements, the play of light—is not easily, if at all, translatable through visual representation alone. While many conclusions derive from trying to interpret the intentionality of a visualized message, one can *imagine* what it could have been like to be in the frame—the sensual experiences that Rasmussen mentions—and corroborate or accentuate their impressions based on their knowledge of the image, its making, or its other properties. As a research method in an historical study, visual analysis could give depth to a narrative, illuminating details overlooked or mentioned in passing in a text. The interpretive richness of visual analysis broadens research material by inviting creativity in the process of contemplation. At the same time, it is crucial to always be mindful of what end visual analysis serves: a research method is like a tool, and the success of its application depends on the intended task and one's willingness to learn.

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