

CERI LEVY: THE BIRD EFFECT

Ceri Levy is a film-maker, writer, curator, and activist. Levy began his career making music videos and is perhaps best known for his (2009) film Bananaz which documents the cartoon-band Gorillaz. His forthcoming film is The Bird Effect (2013) which examines human-bird relations. Working with Chris Aldhous, Levy co-curated the exhibition The Ghosts of Gone Birds to raise money for Birdlife's Preventing Extinctions Programme. The exhibition has been shown in Liverpool, London, Brighton, and Swansea. The exhibition also led to an ongoing collaboration between Levy and Ralph Steadman which culminated in the publication of Extinct Boids. Steadman and Levy currently working on their next book for Bloomsbury (which will be published in Spring 2014) entitled Nextinction. The book focuses on a number of bird species on the verge of extinction.

Interview Questions by Matthew Brower

Matthew Brower: You've described starting The Bird Effect thinking bird watching was slightly ridiculous, and over the course of making the film had shifted to an activist engagement with bird conservation. Do you see this shift as related to the power of birds to affect humans, or is it related to the difficulty of watching and the power of mimetic desire – that the things that other people want become desirable because they are desired?

Ceri Levy: Making observational documentaries is all about being able to adjust when the initial idea changes and hopefully blossoms into a bigger and better film as one explores the chosen subject. Reality dictates the film's path and one has to be adaptable in altering the film's course. I

may start out at point A, but could end up at points Z, Q or W. That's often why my films take so long to finish, as I have to continue filming until a natural end comes about.

The Bird Effect started out as an idea to film the pastime of birdwatching, morphed into looking at how birds affect a wider spectrum of people, and has ended up with birds and their world affecting and changing me as a person and the course of the film. I have moved from watching birdwatchers, to becoming a birdwatcher and now find myself as an active conservationist, all because of the power of birds. I look back at my diaries and see where it all began and I find the evolution of the project as remarkable, and the revolution within my own mind as a staggering alteration.

Extract from my diary.



Ceri Levy

Painted Illegal Trapping Hide by Lucy McLauchlan. Malta 22nd April 2012 © Ceri Levy

In 2005 my wife and I went back to an old childhood haunt of mine, The Isles of Scilly. I had not been there since I was a teenager but I am so glad that I returned. It turned out to be as magical a place as I remembered it had been when I was a kid, and the truth is, if not for Scilly, I would not be where I find myself today. It gave me the gift of a germ of an idea, which has snowballed into being something altogether more wonderful.

October 16th 2005

Today, as we were walking round the Garrison, which surrounds the Star Castle, on top of the main island of St. Mary's, we stopped and looked at this little bird hopping in a tree in front of us.

I had no idea what it was. But it was a pretty enough creature. Then before we knew what had happened we were surrounded, and then removed from our position by a group of people with tripods, cameras and binoculars. "It's here!" Within seconds we were at the very back of the group of pushy people and we distanced ourselves even further. We had heard about these people... the locals had warned us. This army descended upon the islands every October; apparently these were twitchers! (I would discover the difference between a twitcher and a birder or birdwatcher at a later date.) We asked one of the slightly less excitable members of the group what the bird was. A something war ball. We shrugged, walked away none the wiser and carried on ambling



Ceri Levy

Steppe Eagle in Kazakhstan, Memorial to the Unknown Bird. Live electric cables kill many large birds throughout the country. Kazakhstan Steppe10th May 2013 © Ceri Levy

round the island.

Later that day back in the safety of our hotel's Elizabethan dungeon bar we met Kevin and Sonia, who were birders and were also staying at the hotel. They invited us out for a days birding with them. Kevin explained to me that the bird we had seen was a Black Poll Warbler, an extremely rare visitor to these Isles that would have been blown off course during its migratory flight. In his eyes the excitement of the bird still burned brightly and I marked down this passion within him for future reference. The next day we all went out and had a wonderful day's birding in the rain, getting thoroughly drenched, but a fun experience, if at times slightly comedic. We learnt the art of standing in neck high gorse and bracken and the skill of silence,

something I have always struggled with! It gave me ideas to explore for a possible documentary down the line. It seemed like this bird watching stuff could make an instantly funny programme! Little did I know that it would consume me and develop new passions within me and take me far away from what I would initially set out to do. To quote Kenn Kaufman from Kingbird Highway, "The most significant thing we find may not be the thing we were seeking." And that is how things seem to be with The Bird Effect. The more I learn, the more my parameters have changed. I see people involved with so many aspects of birds and I find the majority of them inspiring. With each day I immerse myself into the world of birds and nature. I seem to have been deaf and blind to nature,



Ceri Levy

Malta 24th April 2012 © Ceri Levy

and now it's like being able to see in colour and hear in stereo. It's all shiny new but this world has always been there... It's just me who has been missing for too many years.

As time passed I began to look at birds in a different way and started to marvel at just [how] much passion they engendered in people and ultimately in me. These are powerfully emotive creatures that inspire many to work on their behalf. Perhaps because they do the one thing we cannot mimic with our own bodies, i.e. fly, they are treated with a reverence and wonder by so many, and an unbreakable bond is formed between viewer and subject. In my case this has grown into a genuine interest to learn more about birds and wanting to inform

people that there is much to be done if we are to continue to live in a world, which counts birds amongst its most populous inhabitants. In one way or another I have become a conservationist. Having recently completed a book with Ralph Steadman, entitled *Extinct Boids*, we have begun to term ourselves as Gonzovationists. Who knows whether it will catch on but the world needs more of them.

Birds are desirous creatures that can really only be captured for a moment in time. They spend time fleetingly with us and are gone all too soon. The only way to keep them is to shoot them with gun or camera, although I prefer the memory of place and moment as my connection with a particular bird. My first Montague's Harrier was in Norfolk

on a blistering and bright spring day on a path between a searing yellow rape field and a blood-red poppy field. The bird arrived over a row of trees glinting in the sun and it was almost a religious experience as it deigned to appear and perform for a few moments of time.

Brower: What is the film trying to achieve?

Levy: The further I delved into the bird world the more hooked I became. I discovered that so many of the world's birds were threatened in one-way or another. The film tries to record my journey visiting all types of people from artists, writers, conservationists and scientists, and record their response to birds and just what it is that birds provoke in so many of us.

Birds have inspired me to do something on their behalf and have taken me halfway round the world in support of them, visiting programmes that are trying to save certain species from extinction. Having spent years touring and filming with bands I have always had wanderlust, and birds have filled the same space for me that music and musicians have always inhabited. For many birdwatchers this isn't the case and they are quite happy to see what appears in front of them. And that sums birds up. There are so many ways to interact with them. From travelling to see great rarities or a country's indigenous species, to just immersing oneself in the wonder of one's own local patch and get to know how cyclical life is. It's a less glamorous but equally worthwhile way of watching birds and anything that attunes us with the natural world is ok by me. There is no wrong way to watch birds.

I got immersed in the story of birds and I found I had gone to the bird side! I look at some of my early footage now and I can see the camera shake as I am caught in two minds of filming the bird watchers or trying to see the Radde's Warbler for myself, and the more recent the footage I've shot the quicker the camera drops down as I do indeed choose to see the bird! I came to realise that a film about birdwatchers was not what I

wanted to make... I needed a new perspective, and on my wanderings through a space birdidity, I discovered ideas, people and various organisations that I wanted to champion, and to present in my film to a different audience than is normally associated with wildlife films. From the work that *BirdLife Malta* do[es] to protect birds from illegal hunting to the RSPB and their investigations unit, to Birdlife International and their *Preventing Extinctions* programme. So many worthwhile works in progress that don't get an airing with the general documentary watcher. I began to realise that these could feature quite nicely within *The Bird Effect*. Also I became interested in how people are affected by birds directly, and so I ask the simplest question of the majority of my subjects. What has been the bird effect upon them? And more often than not the answer comes back "I wouldn't have been the same person without birds."

Brower: Who do you think is the target audience for this film?

Levy: Tough question. I never try to make a film for a specific audience. I make them for myself and for my friends. I believe that if my closest friends can enjoy the movie then there is a good chance that other people will. One thing I would say is that *The Bird Effect* won't be a normal wildlife film. Birds will feature very little in it as this is all about their effect on people. I suppose I hope that in some small way the film can inspire people to pick up the baton for birds and for nature. It's really not so hard to support our wildlife and people can elicit change if they can be bothered. I genuinely feel that many people don't do anything, purely because they just don't know what's going on and the problems that face so many species today. Perhaps some will know a little more after seeing the film.

Brower: The intensity of human-bird relations has historically been potentially dangerous to birds; ignorance, fear, and greed have had



Ceri Levy

One of the few success stories in Malta. A Marsh Harrier that has been rehabilitated about to be released. Comino April 26th 2012 © Ceri Levy

disastrous results, but so have attraction and desire. I'm thinking here about millinery feathers in fashion and egg collectors, in particular here where a professed admiration or love for birds has led to mass slaughter. Why is it so difficult for us to get this relationship right?

Levy: Our relationship has always been a strange one with birds. We go too far so often and balance has never been part of the picture. Birds have often been persecuted in one way or another. Birds of prey have suffered most, but then look at the mighty sparrow in the First World War, which was persecuted as there was a fear the bird would eat all the wheat fields and destroy our grain

supplies and was considered as an enemy of the people. Every parish would have its own sparrow-shooting club to deal with the flocks of birds. And Mao did the same with the Great Sparrow War in the late 1950's, calling on the people to destroy the bird, again to save grain. Millions of birds died.

This was printed in a Shanghai newspaper in 1958 under the title, *The Whole City is Attacking the Sparrows*.

On the early morning of December 13, the citywide battle to destroy the sparrows began. In large and small streets, red flags were waving. On the buildings and in the courtyards, open spaces, roads and rural farm fields, there were numerous scarecrows, sentries, elementary and middle school

students, government office employees, factory workers, farmers and People's Liberation Army shouting their war cries. In the city and the outskirts, almost half of the labor force was mobilized into the anti-sparrow army. Usually, the young people were responsible for trapping, poisoning and attacking the sparrows while the old people and the children kept sentry watch. The factories in the city committed themselves into the war effort even as they guaranteed that they would maintain production levels. . . . 150 free-fire zones were set up for shooting the sparrows. The Nanyang Girls Middle School rifle team received training in the techniques of shooting birds. Thus the citizens fought a total war against the sparrows. By 8pm tonight, it is estimated that a total of 194,432 sparrows have been killed.

In 1959, scientists discovered in autopsies that only a quarter of the material found was human food; the other three quarters were harmful insects. Meanwhile, locusts and other insects that would have been kept at bay if the sparrows had survived were destroying grain crops. A famine occurred and millions of people died. Nature had its revenge and the war was over.

History is littered with stories of the mishandling of our relationships with birds and we never seem to understand when we have gone too far and created an imbalance. And birds are often the greatest indicator of problems in the world, hence the Canary in the coalmine, and it's the same with habitat issues. If we take notice of what the birds are telling us, we can make various alterations to our world that would be beneficial to all, birds, other creatures and man too.

Brower: Steve Baker has suggested that art is one of the few vehicles for making animal[s] visible within contemporary media culture. Do you agree with his argument and is it part of your motivation for using contemporary art to support your activism?

Levy: I have a real issue with the compartmentalising of art today. Wildlife is often treated as a secondary and unworthy subject for artists and I don't know why. So many artists who work with animals are often termed as wildlife artists and are treated as artists who don't necessarily belong in the higher echelons of fine art. It is a snobbery that needs to be addressed. If we can't draw on the natural world around us to create art there is something intrinsically wrong with our society. I have often felt that many people involved in the presentation of art have always wanted a separation between "the people" and "fine art." I have always moved towards a blurring of these boundaries, which will hopefully be removed forever. Art creates a dialogue that no other medium can and is quite probably more in vogue and more necessary than at any other time in our short history.

Brower: Are there any artists whose work has particularly engaged you?

Levy: Too many! I spend every day looking at art and amaze myself at how many wonderful artists there are that I am discovering for the first time. I have been lucky enough to work with many truly inspiring artists over the course of *The Bird Effect*, and every one of them has been a privilege to work with.

One of my main recent adventures was taking eighteen artists to Malta to take part in one of *BirdLife Malta's Spring Watch* camps, which are organised to try and protect birds from being illegally shot by the 46,000 Maltese hunters. It is an invigorating as well as a heart-breaking experience and many of the artists were moved by their time on this strange and often murderous island where gunshots ringing out through the landscape is the norm. One of the highlights for me was when we commandeered an illegal hunting hide on a sunny Sunday and Lucy McLauchlan painted it in her own inimitable style. We had to keep a keen eye out for hunters returning in case we were attacked, or worse, shot at by irate gun-

slinging bird hunters. Both had happened to me before in this treacherous place. We managed to complete the task and I would have loved to see the hunter's face the next day when he discovered what had happened while he was away. Ironically the paintings are still there now, which just goes to show the power of art.

Brower: Historically, art has had a complex relationship to birds. While Audubon killed everything he depicted as part of a campaign to assert dominance over the North American continent, his images have become rallying points for pro bird activism. *The American Acclimatization Society* was inspired by Shakespeare's work to release European birds in North America displacing native species. Do you foresee any dangers with bringing increased attention to bird life through art?

Levy: Highlight any issue and there are new potential dangers that could come to light, but bringing attention to issues that need to be dealt with is important. I have just returned from the Kazakhstan Steppe where I wanted to film the Sociable Lapwing on its breeding ground, as it was the first twitch I filmed when I set out on my journey and which starts the film off from the perspective of a birdwatcher, and I had wanted to end my travels and the film with the same bird but from the angle of conservationist. It is a critically endangered species, which was believed to be in trouble because of problems on its breeding ground, most notably from eggs and nests being trampled underfoot by grazing sheep and cattle. But research undertaken by BirdLife International, the RSPB and their Kazakhstan partner, the ACBK, is proving that the main issue for the decline in numbers is hunting along the Middle Eastern flyway. So now the work begins to discover a way to halt this problem before it is too late for this innocent creature.

While I was there we came across a Steppe Eagle lying at the base of a concrete

pylon, which carries the overhead electricity cables with the top line being live. So when a large bird descends often its wing tips touch two cables and results in instant death. Kazakhstan is covered with pylons in all directions and is the size of Western Europe. We made a short tour of the immediate area and found a *Hooded Crow* and a *Rough Legged Buzzard* in a similar state, indicating the size of the problem. I think art, film, music and words can help encapsulate these issues and help us understand many of the problems birds face. In Kazakhstan it's simple, what's needed is insulation not termination. We need to redress the balance.

Margaret Atwood told me that of all the charities in the world, something like 96% of them, raise money for human causes, 2½% goes to domestic animals and the other 1½% goes to the natural world. It doesn't really matter whether these figures are totally correct or not. It gives an image of the overall picture and we need to change what is an arrogant use of funding for charities. Are we more important than the world, which nourishes us?

Brower: Birdwatching appears to be part of a larger shift towards a non-interventionist ethic in Western human-animal relations. This move to non-intervention has been a significant benefit to many animal populations. However, it has also put stress on traditional human ways of life predicated on subsistence hunting. Do you see birdwatching as a model for the broader range of human-animal relations?

Levy: I don't think we live in an age of non-intervention as you call it. Invariably non-intervention is leading to the demise of many species. We are living in the greatest age for extinction in modern history. The principle of non-intervention, by which I presume you mean letting nature get on with being nature is fine, but the reality of the practicality of this is all too clear. Habitat destruction, change in agricultural policies and hunting are all

reasons why species are disappearing at an alarming rate. We need intervention more than ever to correct many situations, and animals can be brought back from the brink of disappearance, handled correctly. Then we can work on non-intervention.

Birdwatching in the twenty first century is in its infancy. Technology plays more and more of a part in birdwatching, and also in conservation, and is improving our knowledge and our communication capabilities about problems that face many birds. Satellite tagging is becoming more and more successful and I am sure will lead to greater banks of data which will ultimately help many endangered species and not just birds, as we discover where problems occur for many migratory species.

Brower: You also co-curated *Ghosts of Gone Birds*, an exhibition which featured over a hundred artists and which aimed at highlighting the dangers of extinction threatening birds today. Could you tell us something about the curatorial rationale for the exhibition? Any sound pieces included there?

Levy: I worked up a long wish list of artists that I wanted to be a part of the show and was lucky that over 90% of them agreed to take part in it. I also wanted to make sure that I mixed the types of artists involved and varied the worlds that they came from, thus creating a real multimedia event that allowed artists who would not normally show together...[to] be united because of the diversity of the birds that they represented. I also had the rule of serendipity as one of my main criteria. I decided never to approach anyone cold and waited for someone to introduce me to a particular artist. It is amazing how many artists came to the show from that route.

There were several sound pieces in the show including *The Sound Approach* who re-created the sound of a fifteenth century extinct Lava Shearwater, and Justin Wiggan who created a piece entitled *Myth not Legend*, which he states is "about the loss of

our husbandry of creation, the miscalculation of care and lack of understanding." In his piece, bird song has been slowed down to sound like whale song and whale song has been sped up to sound like birds.

Brower: Until the development of field guides and the production of techniques for sight records, ornithology was based primarily on the use of the shotgun – what's shot is history what's not is mystery – does the development of birdwatching out of these earlier practices suggest that other problematic forms of human-animal relations might similarly be redirected?

Levy: I can only really speak about the bird world, as it is the area I have really been analysing but the shotgun is still used way too much in the name of sport, and hunting is my real *bête noire*. A friend of mine, Paul Jepson, is working on creating an atlas of the legal and illegal hunting of migratory bird species, which sets out to determine the hot spots for hunting. So far the estimates suggest there are millions of hunters in Western Europe alone, and the indications are that along each migratory flyway there is a corridor of guns that birds have to brave as they fly to and from their breeding grounds. Paul is really asking whether there is a "freeway flyway" available through which migratory birds have safe passage and for me if there aren't any then that is what I feel we need to create to give the 21st century a chance of an abundance of birds in our world.

Brower: Do you think the willingness of artists and musicians to participate in your art projects is based in part with their identification with birds as creative producers?

Levy: Birds inspire so many creative people and, as I said earlier in the interview, it may be because of their antipathy towards us and that they can fly that makes them so wonderful to create work about. They are

poetic creatures that almost work in an ethereal space to us. Inhabiting our world, but also inhabiting some other, unseen space, a place we can only glimpse through birds and one that we can never exist in.

Brower: What are [you] currently working on?

Levy: I am currently working on editing *The Bird Effect*. After my last film, *Bananaz*, about the band *Gorillaz*, I swore that my next project would not eat up so much time – it took 7 years to shoot and 2 years to edit – and yet here I am, 5 years down the line of this film and with over 150 hours of footage to sift through. Will I never learn? I doubt it, and I think that’s why I love making documentaries.

I am also working on organising a show based on the subject of the illegal hunting of birds, tentatively entitled *Interpreting Danger*, and am sure that now is the time for the issue to have a proper airing. So many people within the bird world and the conservation world have known about the problem for many years and for them it has been a relentless slog trying to change views on illegal hunting. That is why I think it is the right thing to do to give artists a platform to create work about this. I believe that the general public ha[s] no idea of the extent of the damage being caused by hunting. Since I have been discovering the regularity of the killing of an inordinate amount of birds throughout the world, I have been bowled over by people’s reactions and know that this is the moment to open the debate. There are photos of mist nets stretching over 700kms along the Egyptian coast to capture migratory species; lime sticks secure songbirds to their shafts in Cyprus and Southern Spain, and there are millions of hunters across the world with their guns pointed to the sky waiting for that rarity to fly past and to gun it down. Yes, there are many “responsible” hunters in this world but life in our skies is being decimated, and whatever small part I can play in bringing the subject before a larger audience is my path forward. Birds have brought me great joy and taught me so

much that I never knew about this world we live in. It is right that I try to give something back to them.

Ceri Levy is a film-maker, who started out making music videos before moving into the world of documentaries. His works include *Bananaz*, a film about the inner machinations of the group *Gorillaz*, and the forthcoming *The Bird Effect*; he is also co-curator of *Ghosts of Gone Birds*, and therefore a crucial cog in the birds’ creation myth. See more at: <http://www.bloomsbury.com/author/ceri-levy#sthash.1TA020bm.dpuf>

Matthew Brower is a lecturer in Museum Studies in the Faculty of Information and the Curator of the University of Toronto Art Centre. As curator of UTAC, he has curated shows on Canadian painting, the Malcove Collection of historical art, and the work of conceptual furniture maker Gord Peteran. He co-curated *The Brothel Without Walls*, an anchor exhibit for CONTACT 2010: Pervasive Influence. Drawing on Marshall McLuhan’s insights, the exhibition brings together nine Canadian and international artists whose work explores how photography informs and transforms human behavior. He is also co-curating an exhibition on the articulation of a feminist aesthetics of beauty in the photo-based work of Suzy Lake for CONTACT 2011.