

Fatal attraction; Ecocritical reflections about the need to cultivate the meaning of wildness¹

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Recently deceased environmental philosopher Val Plumwood, who addressed the issue of our relationship to nature repeatedly, has noted that a “subjectively centered framework capable of sustaining action and purpose must [...] view the world “from the inside,” structured to sustain the concept of a continuing, narrative self; we remake the world in that way as our own, investing it with meaning, reconceiving it as sane, survivable, amenable to hope and resolution.”² Humans transform the neutrality of space into a meaningful, understandable and inhabitable *place*, or, to use a phrase of Paul Ricoeur: through interpretation they turn their mere environment into a ‘World’. Humans invest meaning in their relationship with their environment, so as to create a meaningful, morally ordered world in which humans can live alongside other creatures of the earth. Sometimes, however, nature itself seems to breach this order of the human-centered worldview and presents itself in its ‘wildness’ – questioning the order that we normally take for granted, and somehow putting the anthropocentrism of everyday life in perspective. According to Plumwood, “the lack of fit between this subject-centered version and reality comes into play in extreme moments” (p. 131). Although, on an every-day practical level, the wildness of nature can be annoying or even dangerous to humans, on a more fundamental level many humans feel deeply fascinated by the strangeness of nature as well, precisely *because* of the fact that nature as it shows itself in ‘extreme moments’ offers a fascinating contrast with the human-centered moral order in the world..

Even though an ever-growing number of people live in the city and will probably not have direct encounters with wild nature any strict literal sense of the word (pristine, untouched nature), the concept of wildness remains one of the prominent terms in contemporary moral discourse.³ Many postmodern city dwellers seem to suffer from a lack of those strange and unruly aspects of life that do not have a place in modernity; some of them see ‘wild nature’ as a place outside their cultural sphere where they suspect to encounter a transcendent ‘surplus of meaning’ that is lacking in everyday urban lives. This ‘pining for the wild’⁴ has led many to acquire a highly romanticized image of what wild nature is like. Their idea of wilderness derives not so much from actual personal encounters with wild nature, as from mediated nature experiences such as television documentaries on *National Geographic Channel*, and adventure movies such as *Out of Africa* and *Indiana Jones*. As soon as people are confronted with actual wildness, their romanticized and moralized ‘Walt Disney’ vision of nature is often being put into question and a more disturbing image of the wild comes to the fore. When wild nature conveys itself to us as strange, indifferent and unruly, it somehow seems to question the human-centered moral order that we normally take for granted.

1. An earlier version of this paper – entitled ‘How to appropriate wildness appropriately’ – was presented at the 2006 Joint ISEE/IAEP Conference, held from May 30th to June 2nd 2006 in Allenspark, Colorado. The author wishes to thank Pieter Lemmens, Ned Hettinger, Hub Zwart en Ton Lemaire for their useful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2. Val Plumwood: ‘Being Prey’, in: *The Ultimate Journey: Inspiring Stories of Living and Dying*. Travelers’ Tales 2000, p. 131.

3. In this paper, I will use the term wildness in line with William Cronon’s use of the term: “*Wildness* (as opposed to wilderness) can be found anywhere; in the seemingly tame fields and woodlots of Massachusetts, in the cracks of a Manhattan sidewalk, even in the cells of our own bodies.” (William Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, Norton 1995, p.89)

4. I borrow this term from Glenn Delière (Delière 2007).

In stead of referring to an ‘objective’ feature of pristine nature, the concept of wildness often rather expresses a moment of fundamental cultural criticism.⁵ As such, it plays a role in philosophical debates, but also in popular culture, where it appears in all kinds ‘genres of imagination’: movies, novels, documentaries, plays etcetera.⁶ Some writers and moviemakers question the dominant romanticized view of wild nature by telling stories that somehow show a different harsher face of nature. In encounters with the wild and unruly, humans can sometimes experience the misfit between their well ordered human-centered self-created worldview and the otherness of nature, and have to face, what Plumwood calls, “the view from the outside” (p.131).

In this paper, I want to present three recent movies that somehow try to confront us with this ‘view from the outside.’ Doing so can help us to better understand our contemporary wilderness fascination. But before that, let me start by briefly recounting Val Plumwood’s personal encounter with such a “view from the outside”.

Val Plumwood on the ‘view from the outside’

Val Plumwood is a widely recognized within the environmental ethics community as one of the leading figures that have helped shape the field, notably with regard to ecofeminist thought and thinking about the culture-nature-divide.⁷ Plumwood was also to some extent well-known to the general public, mainly because she was a survivor of a crocodile attack. Twenty-three years ago, in 1985, Plumwood was canoeing in Kakadu National Park in Australia, when she was attacked by a crocodile. The animal attempted to drown her in a ‘death roll’ up to three times in succession. Plumwood miraculously survived and managed to get back to the ‘civilized world’ – alone, seriously injured and miles from help – using her extensive bush-experience. The event got much media attention.⁸ Plumwood’s story was told in television interviews and documentaries, making her into somewhat of a public figure.⁹ The experience of 1985 changed Plumwood’s life forever. It led her to rethink the relation between humans and wild nature. Finding the exact wordings for the meaning of the event

5. The term wildness is even being used in environmental debates in the Netherlands, where the landscape is thoroughly anthropogenic. The term does not refer to a quality of ‘untouched nature’ but to recently created wetlands. Here, the reference to wildness seems to serve primarily a *moral* function: it is used to stress the moral significance of those aspects of nature that somehow resist the domesticating forces of culture (cf. Drenthen 2004).

6. To name but a few: books like *Into thin air* and *Into the wild* by Jon Krakauer, video documentaries like ‘Grizzly man’ (2006) and ‘Touching the Void’ (2003), and movies like ‘Gerry’, ‘Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner’, (2001), ‘The River Wild’ (1994), ‘Into the wild’ (2007) all seem to somehow give voice to a shared fascination of the general public with the encounters with wild nature. For a list of environmentally relevant films, see: <http://www.esf.edu/ecn/films.html>, a website hosted by Dr. Mark Meisner, assistant professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

7. As Val Routley, she published together with her former husband Richard Routley (Sylvian); her two major books are ‘Feminism and the Mastery of Nature’ (Routledge 1993) and ‘Environmental Culture: the Ecological Crisis of Reason’ (Routledge 2002).

8. Many of these fatal or near-fatal encounters somehow seem speaks to the public’s imagination, as became apparent in September 2006, when another famous Australian, ‘Crocodile hunter’ Steve Irwin, died by the sting of a sting ray.

9. *Living on* (2005), “a documentary exploring the ways in which four survivors have had to reinvent themselves after a brush with death”, and ‘Nightmares of Nature: Man eaters’, an episode of a 1997 BBC/National Geographic series “about animals dangerous to man and the truth behind the world’s most terrifying creatures”. Her experience also inspired the filmmakers of the 2007 Australian horror movie *Black Water* (ABC-interview with director Andrew Traucki on <<http://www.abc.net.au/atthemovies/txt/s2218911.htm>>), although Plumwood herself probably would have been very unhappy with the way that her story was appropriated.

took her some time.¹⁰ It was not until 1996 that she recalls her experience in her own philosophical terms.¹¹ In the essay, Plumwood stresses that the realization of one's own edibility to other animals, radically changes one's perspective on life. First, the realization that we are "part of the food chain" leads to a moral lesson: we radically belong to nature and we share a sense of life with other beings that should make us susceptible to the fact that other beings are also more than "merely meat". But besides from changing our view of other animals, on a deeper philosophical level, these kinds of experiences can also radically shift our ideas about ourselves and about the nature of subjectivity as such:

"The course and intensity of terminal thought patterns in near-death experiences can tell us much about our frameworks of subjectivity. A subjectively centered framework capable of sustaining action and purpose must, I think, view the world "from the inside," structured to sustain the concept of a continuing, narrative self; we remake the world in that way as our own, investing it with meaning, reconceiving it as sane, survivable, amenable to hope and resolution. The lack of fit between this subject-centered version and reality comes into play in extreme moments." (Being Prey, p. 131)

Somehow, the experience of wild nature, confronts us with a "view from outside", that morally challenges the everyday normality of our "view from within". The experience of "being prey" breaches the comforting moral order of our humanly centered world.

"In its final, frantic attempts to protect itself from the knowledge that threatens the narrative framework, the mind can instantaneously fabricate terminal doubt of extravagant, Cartesian proportions: *This is not really happening. This is a nightmare from which I will soon awake.* This desperate delusion split apart as I hit the water. In that flash, I glimpsed the world for the first time 'from the outside,' as a world no longer my own, an unrecognizable bleak landscape composed of raw necessity, indifferent to my life or death." (p. 131-132)

This view from outside can be seen as threatening to the human-centered moral order. Accepting and acknowledging this view can be difficult, especially for those who grew up with the idea that humankind is different from and superior to the rest of nature. In Western cultures, there is a strong tendency to somehow 'neutralize' these kinds of experiences, and downplay the potentially disturbing insights by means of the standard "master narrative" (in which the relation between humans and nature is seen as one of mutual domination). The two most important master narratives are the heroic narrative (in which humans victor over nature after an heroic struggle) and the horror story or monster myth (in which humans are confronted with the horror of that which they cannot dominate). According to Plumwood, mass media often impose stereotypes on experiences like hers and thus suppress alternative interpretations of such events.

"I had survived the crocodile attack, but still had to survive the contest with the cultural drive to represent such experiences in terms of the masculinist monster myth: the master narrative. [...] To the extent that the story is crucial, by the same token the narrative self is threatened by invasion and loss of integrity when the story of the self is taken over by others and given an alien meaning. This is what the mass media tend to do in stereotyping and sensationalizing stories like mine, and this is what is done all the time to subordinated groups, such as indigenous peoples, when their voices and

10 "A crocodile attack can reveal the truth about nature in an instant. But putting that insight into words can take years" (Val Plumwood, 'Being Prey', UTNE-reader, July/August 2000)

11. Val Plumwood herself did not write extensively about the event until in 1996. In that year, she wrote 'Being Prey' (*Terra Nova* 1/3); a few years later, she published an abridged version of this paper in: *The Ultimate Journey: Inspiring Stories of Living and Dying* (Travelers' Tales 2000), an adapted version of which appeared in *UTNE-reader*, July/August 2000 Issue. My citations will refer to the later version in Travelers' Tales.

stories are digested and repackaged in assimilated form. As a story that evoked the monster myth, mine was especially subject to masculinist appropriation. The imposition of the master narrative occurred in a number of different forms: in the exaggeration of the crocodile's size, in the portrayal of the encounter as a heroic wrestling match, and especially in its sexualization." (p. 138-140)

Only years later, Plumwood succeeded in retelling her story in a more appropriate way:

"For a long time, I felt alienated from my own story by the imposition of these stereotypes and had to wait nearly a decade before I felt able to repossess my story fully and write about the experience in my own terms." (p. 141)

Only in the form of this newly discovered narrative, the experience of a "view from the outside" bears potential of revealing fundamental insights into our own nature and our relations with the rest of nature:

"Confronting the brute fact of being prey, together with the astonishing view of this larger story in which my 'normal' ethical terms of struggle seemed absent or meaningless, brought home to me rather sharply that we inhabit not only an ethical order, but also something not reducible to it, an ecological order. We live by illusion if we believe we can shape our lives, or those of the other beings with whom we share the ecosystem, in terms of the ethical and cultural sphere alone." (p. 142)

In Plumwood's reading, these fatal or nearly fatal encounters with large predators somehow question the centrality of humans in the world, but also the sphere of morality itself.

"Coming to terms with the ethical challenge of other large predators is part of coming to terms with this paradox and with the ethical and the ecological collide; we are forced to face an ecological challenge to the realm of ethics and to try to respond with something more ethical than condemnation or revenge. This is part of the mystery and fascination of our relation to large predators. [...] In terms of virtue ethics, the existence of free communities of animals that can prey on humans indicates our preparedness to share and to coexist with the otherness of the earth, to reject the colonizer identity and the stance of assimilation, which aims to make the Other over into a form that eliminates all friction, challenge, or consequence. [...] Thus the story of the crocodile encounter has, for me, come to have significance quite the opposite of what is conveyed in the master/monster narrative." (p. 145)

According to Plumwood, these extreme experiences reveal to us how we humans normally relate to nature in every day life. Typically, our lives are governed by a 'view from within': we appropriate reality, we "remake the world", "investing it with meaning, reconceiving it as sane, survivable, amenable to hope and resolution" in order "to sustain the concept of a continuing, narrative self" that provides us with a basis for (ethical) action. In extreme moments, "the lack of fit between this subject-centered version and reality" leads to a breach in our moral worldview by an ecological "view from the outside", a world of "raw necessity" that is "indifferent to my life or death".¹² The "view from the outside" questions the moral

12. Plumwood died on February 29th 2008 at her house in the Australian outback. One could say that the media coverage of her decease somehow again stressed the importance of the theme that played such a major role in her life. Initially, the police reported that her cause of death was a bite of a poisonous Eastern Brown snake. This telling detail somehow must have contributed to the speed with which the news spread: here was a woman who had – against all odds – survived a crocodile attack, just to be bitten by a snake 23 years later. Others stressed that death by a snakebite could somehow be considered as an appropriate – albeit premature – way to die for someone who was as committed as Plumwood to the idea that we should transcend the traditional nature-culture-divide. To some of her friends, her death did not come as a surprise. Two years earlier, Plumwood was bitten by a poisonous spider but initially did not bother to phone an ambulance, instead calling a friend to say she was feeling a little odd. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 3, 2008) Two days after the report of her decease, it

outlook itself! Somehow, these kinds of experiences lead to an ethical problematization of ethics itself!¹³ Therefore, I believe that Plumwood is right in suggesting that environmental ethicists should reflect more deeply still on the nature of these encounters.

Plumwood's account of her crocodile encounter provides us with an excellent first hermeneutical entrance into the kinds of extreme experiences that only few of us will ever actually encounter, but that nevertheless somehow reveals a moral lesson for all of us. As Plumwood herself points out, we must hope that humans can learn the moral lessons from these kinds of encounters without actually experiencing them themselves. For that, it is important that we somehow invest in narratives that tell these stories more eloquently.

Plumwood interpretation of the 'view from the inside' bears strong resemblance with the way in which some hermeneutic philosophers conceive moral subjectivity. According to philosophical hermeneutics, moral meanings of nature only come into play as soon as humans start articulating their relationship with the world. In this process, they transform the neutrality of space into a meaningful *place*, that is, through interpretation they make mere 'Umwelt' (environment) into a 'Welt', that is: into a meaningful and inhabitable world that we can live in, to use a phrase of Paul Ricoeur.¹⁴ From a hermeneutical perspective, moral meanings exist only within the realm of cultural interpretations: meaningful (moral) experiences have to be actively appropriated, in order to be able to articulate their exact meaning: they have to be interpreted as part of a complex, integral web of references.¹⁵ This also applies to the moral experiences of nature. However, there is something peculiar with experiences of *wild* nature that seems to go beyond this hermeneutical framework. The word 'wildness' refers to the sphere that lies beyond culture, a part of the world that is not subject to human intervention and that is not (and can never be made) our home. In a manner of speaking, wilderness is the inhuman *per se*, the non-place (a-topos): wilderness is where culture is not, it is the outside of culture.¹⁶ Does this mean that wildness cannot be part of a meaningful world? Yes and no.

turned out that she had died of a natural course after all. Hardly surprising, this rectification did not get nearly as much attention as the original news.

13 Cf. Drenthen 1999

14. Ricoeur is quoted in Paul van Tongeren: 'The Relation of Narrativity and Hermeneutics to an Adequate Practical Ethic', *Ethical Perspectives*, Vol. 1, nr. 1 (1994), p. 62: "The explanation offered by hermeneutics is directed towards being at home in the world. Ricoeur writes, 'To understand a text is at the same time to light up our own situation or, if you will, to interpolate among the predicates of our own situation all the significations that make a *Welt* [world] of our *Umwelt* [environment].' In hermeneutical ethics, moral experience interprets itself (for example, by interpreting texts). It does this to reach, through the appropriation of meaning, a morally meaningful and inhabitable world."

15. In order to understand the meaning of a text, readers cannot simply refer to the originally intended meaning — contrary to what romantic hermeneuticists believe —, the meaning of a text transcends the author's intention. Hans-Georg Gadamer has shown that meanings do not exist 'out there' — waiting to be discovered — but exist only within an interpretative framework that always has to be renewed in time and place. The world of meaning necessarily is a world that is being experienced and interpreted, a world that we have to make our own. It makes no sense to ask what the 'true' meaning of a particular experience would be besides the cultural interpretation because this question itself would be nonsensical: we always already live in an interpreted world. This does not render a hermeneutical outlook anthropocentric *per se*, because we should not understand the process of interpretation as a process of *constructing* meaning. According to Gadamer, meanings are being discovered in response to particular experiences of the world, experiences in which the world presents itself as somehow meaningful, though usually, at first it is not clear what particular meaning is trying to present itself. Therefore, we have to actively appropriate meaningful (moral) experiences in order to be able to articulate their exact meaning.

16. But only in a particular sense of the world: wildness as a concept is, of course, part of the human world. Also, our human existence is intertwined with natural processes on all levels, most of which we do not control. It is only from the perspective of a subject that tries to interpret the world (phenomenological-hermeneutics), that

There are, of course, many practical reasons why people need to find ways to relate that which lies outside the boundaries of culture. On a more fundamental level, however, wilderness (everything transcending the confinements of culture) has to play a part as well. People must be able to articulate the meaning of that which *lies outside* of their cultural habitat – mountains, forests, swamps, badlands, deserts, ocean and sea – or which is *out of control* by culture – storms, floods, earthquakes etc. Throughout history and in different cultures we can find all kinds of interpretations of the wild as the outside of culture – in stories, folk tales, songs and myths. The wildness of nature can be seen as sacred, as evil and chaotic, as unspoiled and pristine, as immoral, sublime etc. Mostly, wildness is interpreted as somehow the opposite of culture: the sphere of the amoral versus the moral (Greek: *physis* versus *nómos*), chaos versus order, eternal versus temporal, inhumane versus humane. In all of these culturalizations, the ‘outside’ of culture is given a place and meaning within the framework of references that makes up culture. In a way, all interpretations that seek to articulate (and determine) the meaning of wildness can be seen as *appropriations*¹⁷ that transfer the wild as radical other-than-culture into the realm of the symbolic cultural, i.e. symbolic order. Appreciating the meaning of the wild, in a sense, *implies* a certain act of ‘appropriation’, because the mere idea of meaning makes sense only in the symbolic order of culture. To articulate the meaning that wildness has for us, we have to somehow make it ‘our own’.¹⁸ However, the plain fact that to appreciate wildness it has to be ‘appropriated’ does not tell us which appropriations are appropriate and which are not.

Although we can define wilderness as that which is not culture, this formal definition does not signify the *meaning* of wildness. Wildness as a meaningful concept plays a role *within* culture. Elsewhere,¹⁹ I have shown how the concept of wildness, nowadays, ultimately is a deeply paradoxical *moral* concept, that refers to (the value of) that which lies beyond culture and cannot be hermeneutically appropriated, whereas at the same time, *as a concept* of meaning it lies within cultural sphere itself and thus in itself consists of an appropriation of the wild. Wildness is a border concept that stresses the value of the world that lies beyond the

wildness conveys itself as a “view from the outside” facing the “view from within” that is constructed to “sustain a sense of self”.

17. I borrow the term ‘appropriation’ from Nietzsche, for whom the world as a whole is a struggle of mutually conflicting interpretations that try to overpower each other (cf. Drenthen 1999). Seen from this perspective, *each* interpretation of the world is an act of appropriation. Note that, conceived this way, ‘appropriation’ is not necessarily violent in a literal way. Cf. Plumwood’s statement: “to sustain the concept of a continuing, narrative self; we remake the world in that way as our own, investing it with meaning, reconceiving it as sane, survivable, amenable to hope and resolution”.

18. Of course, this notion of appropriation is rather ‘massive’. I use the term to stress the paradoxical nature of those interpretations that aim at expressing the meaning of an ‘outside’ of some kind, by ‘bringing it home’. Even Plumwood’s account of the meaning of the ‘view from the outside’ can be seen as an attempt to put to words the meaning of this outside, and thus introduce it within a (albeit a widened, less human-centered) moral framework again. The terminology of appropriation is not meant to play down the difference between more or less violent acts of appropriation of nature. The violence of a chain saw that clear cuts a forest to turn it into a parking lot differs radically from the merely symbolic act of appropriation of a poet who gives voice to the meaning of an encounter with nature. In the former case, the appropriation is aimed at overpowering the friction of nature – destructing the unruly. In the latter case, the poet tries to ‘bring home’ that which escapes our world; he tries to articulate the strange in human terms without of losing its otherness. The poet will stress that each wording is merely an attempt to give voice to a meaning that lies ‘beyond’. Nevertheless, I want to maintain the terminology of ‘appropriation’, because it can serve the therapeutic purpose of reminding us not to forget about the difference between the familiarity of our words and images and the strangeness of that which these words and images try to express. The term appropriation stresses that we should be aware not to project our own agenda on nature while pretending to give voice to nature itself.

19. Martin Drenthen: ‘Wildness as a Critical Border Concept; Nietzsche and the Debate on Wilderness Restoration’, *Environmental Values*, Vol. 14, nr. 3 (2005) p. 137-337.

realm of culture, and thus gives wildness as culture's antithesis a place within the cultural arena of values.

Plumwood rightfully criticizes the dominant narratives of the west for being unable to address the moral lessons that can be learned from our encounters with the wild. However, we should not blind us for the existence of alternative narratives about extreme human-nature encounters that are less superficial, sensationalist and stereotypical. I believe that there are reasons to believe that there is far more public interest in the moral lessons that flow from these encounters, than the dominant narrative suggests. The mere fact that the dominant master/monster narrative cannot fully account for the moral lessons that could be learned from them does not mean that these questions do not somehow concern the public. There seems to be a genuine moral interests in these fatal encounters – albeit often dormant or suppressed – a moral fascination that is in need for a more appropriate, more adequately interpretation than the dominant master/monster narrative can provide.

In this paper, I start with the assumption that the deep public fascination with extreme human-nature encounters somehow is in need for explanation, that there exist some alternative narratives about extreme human-nature encounters that better reflect this public fascination, and that discussing these narratives can help us to better understand this fascination.

In this paper, I will discuss some recent examples of stories about fatal of near-fatal human-nature encounters that are more intelligent and that more or less explicitly raise some of the moral questions that are not unlike those that Plumwood herself is addressing. In order to get a clearer view of the contemporary wilderness fascination, I will discuss three recent movies in which extreme encounters with wild nature plays a central part, that resist the standard master narrative. I will discuss how these movies criticize the dominant view of wildness; how they present an alternative account of wildness, and how they deal with underlying moral issues. I do not pretend that these movie pictures are by any means representative of the contemporary views of today's public. I do, however, believe that they provide the public with some interesting alternative narratives of the wild that make it possible to understand the contemporary wilderness fascination and the moral questions connected with it.

A new fascination for wildness?

Throughout history, many people have been fascinated by wild nature and have dedicated their lives to develop a meaningful and intense relationship with it (although, the dominant current western culture has been rather hostile towards wilderness). In most traditional wilderness tales, wild nature confronts us with the most profound aspects of human existence. Most of these narrations of the wild are fairly old – remainders of a 'primitive', more 'enchanted' worldview that has gradually disappeared out of modern life in the last century – but some of these ancient narrations of nature appear to have preserved their appeal to the modern mind even today (as is evident in some contemporary cultural undercurrents like the New Age movement).

However, in the modern worldview there seems to be no real place left for wild nature as a spiritual place, and therefore we often witness is a strong sense of ambivalence surrounding the old wilderness stories. Although many people feel inspired by these tales, most feel too detached from nature to 'endorse' these old tales without reservation. Nevertheless, many modern humans remain deeply fascinated by wild nature, and long in it a contrast to the modern, overly regulated urban life. This contemporary wilderness fascination is apparent in the growing interest in extreme outdoor experiences but also in the almost religious inspiration underlying some forms of current environmentalism. And yet: most of the time,

we are very aware that ‘true wilderness’ hardly exists anywhere. This awareness of detachment somehow seems crucial if we are to understand today’s fascination with wildness. The past few years have produced various movies that explicitly address the problematic relation between modern humans and wild nature in a non-trivial manner, and try to clarify our contemporary fascination for wildness. In this paper, I will discuss three examples, all of which are dealing with encounters with wildness. The first one is *Gerry* (2002) – a movie directed by Gus van Sant about two friends who get lost on a hike on a wilderness trail, and are confronted with questions about the meaning of life and death. The second example is the movie *Into the Wild* (2007), after the 1996 book by journalist and mountaineer Jon Krakauer, which tells the haunting and tragic story of Chris McCandless, a young man who sought the confrontation with Alaskan wilderness in a quest for purification and personal renewal. The third example – and the one that I will discuss most extensively – is the 2005 movie documentary *Grizzly Man*, by Werner Herzog, which tells the ill-fated story of Timothy Treadwell, a young American who devoted his entire life to protect the wild grizzlies in Alaska and eventually got killed by the object of his love and devotion. What these works have in common is the central theme of modern humans who are fascinated by wild nature and seek experiences unknown to the overly cultivated life (psyche) in modern societies. The other connecting theme, however, is that this idealization of wildness is in itself deeply problematic. Real encounters with wild nature can become fatal, which in turn fascinates us, postmodern subjects, as I will try to show hereafter. Therefore, the subject of this paper is twofold: first I want to show how wildness can still fascinate us as a counterforce against the overly-civilized world; second, I show how this wilderness fascination itself has become utterly reflexive, and refers to moral meaning of wildness that is both deeply paradoxical and utterly dark.

As mentioned earlier, I believe that these different works of imagination can be seen as part of a renewed attention for (the meaning of) wildness in contemporary culture. Today’s interest in the theme of wildness resembles the 19th Century romanticism. The romantic soul had a yearning desire for wildness as a ‘pure’ counterforce against corrupt and perverse civilization. The romantics depict wild nature not just as pristine and beautiful, but also as the unspoiled counterpart of modern culture. “In wildness is the preservation of the world”, Thoreau said: for the romantic soul, wildness represents a revitalizing source for our culture, perceived as something that is cut off from its own roots: the experience of wildness can bring about a moral and spiritual renewal that can cure us of our cultural ills. Wildness is seen as representation of a deeper, more natural moral order, in which humans can make contact with a deeper morality. As such, wildness is contrasted with a social order perceived as corrupt; it is seen as a source for renewing our morality. Writers as diverse as Tolstoy, Thoreau, and Jack London all emphasized that in wilderness we can become better human beings. Just like the romantics, many contemporary wilderness stories, too, see wildness as a counterforce against a corrupt and overly civilized culture.

But both the romantic and contemporary wilderness fascination also has a much darker character. Just as romantic aesthetics gushed about death and decay, so do some contemporary wilderness stories focus on the antihuman, dangerous, amoral and alien aspects of wildness. The Romantic Movement, with its emphasis on the moral character of nature, was a reaction against the anthropocentric Enlightenment view of nature as meaningless or evil. The rise of romanticism coincided with the fact that historically, human life experienced an ever lessening danger of being overruled by the forces of nature because of a rise in technological dominance. In contrast, traditional forms of anthropocentrism were partly the result of the fact that the human world was under a constant threat of being overrun by the forces of nature. To make possible a human world governed by moral laws, humanity had to conquer wild nature

– with its own harsh ‘laws’– first. Wild nature should be domesticated, because otherwise it would defeat us. The romantics did not experience this ancient fear of being overrun by nature anymore and therefore aimed to exceed the old dualistic view of nature as the ‘enemy’ of morality. They tried to show that the human moral world had its roots in a deeper moral order of wild nature.²⁰

In their emphasis on the radical alienness of nature, however, some contemporary imaginations of wildness seem to be far more radical than most romantic narratives. Some of the more interesting contemporary wilderness tales depict wild nature as an explicitly *amoral* realm, that is radically different from and hostile towards our human-centered, moral world, even when though – and that’s the common theme – wildness is still conceived of as a source for self renewal. In the new imagery of wilderness, the wild is again being conceived of in clear contrast with the human world of morality. This does not mean, however, that wildness is seen once more as simply an enemy, as was the case in the dominant anthropocentric master narrative of the wild. The current relationship between the human ‘morally ordered’ world and the ‘amoral’ realm of the wild is seen as more complex and deeply ambiguous. Wildness is considered to be something special precisely because of its inhumanness and its amoral character. Wildness represents the ‘pre-moral’ context in which the moral sphere of the human world comes to the fore. But – paradoxically – wildness is at the same time viewed as the sphere out of which morality can be criticized; that is: the amoral character of wild nature itself is somehow considered to be morally meaningful.

Contemporary wilderness stories seem to play on a different conceptual level than those of the Romantics. Romanticism tried to correct a mistaken anthropocentric interpretation of nature as evil (versus the morals of humans) by replacing it with a new interpretation of ‘true’ nature (as itself being a moral order). Instead, the modern wilderness stories reflect on a more fundamental level on the problematic aspects of our relation with wildness, more particular of the romantic view of wild nature. In the works that I will discuss below, the fascination with wildness plays on two levels. First, there are the main subjects of the story who have a certain fascination with wildness (or, as in the case of *Gerry*, a total lack of that). On a second level, however, these modern wilderness tales are about *our* fascination with *their* wilderness encounters, and more in particular, with the tragic twist that all of these stories have. We seem to be fascinated with wildness’ hash face, as it shows itself when humans meet a bad ending in wilderness. This wildness seems to remind us of a deeper moral truth underneath our need for moral meaning and purpose.

The contemporary wilderness tales that I will discuss below are deep and disquieting. As one film critic remarked about *Grizzly Man*: “what shocked many viewers was not the outcome of the film, but the dark view of the narrator and film's director, Werner Herzog.”²¹ In the following, I will analyze more precisely this contemporary conception of wildness as the inhumane that is both amoral and morally pregnant. I will do so by showing in more detail the meaning of wildness in three examples of modern wilderness imagery.

Gerry

The movie *Gerry* by Gus van Sant (2002) is about two friends – both named Gerry - who set out for a hike on a ‘wilderness trail’ through a desert. Judging from their casual clothing and the fact that they don’t bring with them any water, food and survival gear, they appear to go for a nice stroll – apparently unaware that hiking through the desert can be perilous. Soon

20. Some argue that Western culture should learn a great deal from other culture, that are less alienated from nature.

21. *KQED, Arts & culture*, March 27, 2006. <http://www.kqed.org/arts/movies/index.jsp?id=5380>

after having started their walk, they encounter a family that is also walking the trail. The Gerry's appear to dislike the idea of hiking on a 'wilderness trail' made especially for tourists and abruptly decide to leave the track. After a short but ecstatic run through the unfamiliar landscape they lose all sense of direction. The rest of the film we witness both men trying to find their way back to the car.

Gerry is a movie almost without dialogue (the first words are spoken after 20 minutes or so) and the few words that are said do not really seem to matter. The two men only talk about trivial matters (mostly about television show), in which they do not really seem to be interested themselves. Because of the absence of words, most interpretation is left to the imagination of the viewer. Nevertheless – or maybe *because* of this silence – the story is absorbing. As they desperately try to find their way back, the two Gerry's gradually start to realize that they are in serious trouble. With each additional step in the wrong direction, their despair grows and eventually they are confronted with their own egos and with each other.

The most impressive aspect of the movie, however, is that gradually, the viewer's perception of time and space changes. The movie does not explicitly tell us that we are far from the inhabited world. Instead, it conveys the *experience* of remoteness. With each subsequent footstep of the main characters, our sense of time and space gets more disrupted. The viewer becomes aware of the insignificance of these young men in this overwhelmingly grand scenery. We are confronted with stunning pictures of a sublime desert landscape that is both overwhelmingly beautiful and shockingly indifferent towards the fate of these two human beings. At the same time, what both guys have to *say* – their interpersonal communication – remains utterly trivial compared to the eternal silence of this inhumane world. Wild nature is totally indifferent towards the humane fate – a fate that appears insignificant compared to the serene but hostile grandeur of the inhumane surroundings in which they find themselves. When, at the end of the film, one of the Gerry's dies – or is he killed by his companion? – it is portrayed almost as a natural phenomenon. In the wilderness, morality is out of place, so it seems.

Gerry has been criticized by many because it would lack a clear narrative structure, and would be nothing more than just an empty shell with beautiful pictures. I believe that this criticism is misplaced, because this movie precisely criticizes, so it seems, both the human need for entertainment (in the form of the commoditization of nature in wilderness trails and recreation areas) and for clear narrative structures and human values. It shows the grandeur of wild nature, a grandeur which is deeper and more profound than mere human values, although it also stresses that this wildness is utterly indifferent towards the fate of humanity and as such ultimately a-moral.

Implicitly, the movie seems to criticize the careless attitude of the main characters towards nature as the location for a nice, amusing stroll (a distraction from everyday boredom) for its failure to appreciate the radical otherness and inhumanness of wild nature. At the same time, this criticism cannot be articulated in moral terms, because in the realm of the wild, straightforward morality is precisely out of place.

The lack of narrative in the movie, so it seems, is not accidental: the lesson from the wild cannot be told in human concepts – it is the *silence* of nature that is most telling. The fascination with wild nature that the film carries across to the viewer reflects a critical stance towards the humanly centered moral world as such. It conveys an utterly reflexive moral meaning that questions morality itself. But although the experience of the wild is morally meaningful, it cannot provide us with a explicit wilderness *ethic*. The experience of the wild raises a silent protest against the moral arbitrariness of the modern world, but it offers no alternative.

Into the wild

Whereas the main characters in *Gerry* face the harshness of the inhumane wilderness involuntarily and in silence, the story of *Into the Wild* is about a consciously sought confrontation with the inhuman. And it is in this context that he wild gains a more explicit moral dimension.

The 2007 movie *Into the Wild* (after the 1996 book by journalist and mountaineer Jon Krakauer) is a work of non-fiction. It reconstructs the story of Chris McCandless, a 23 year old man from a well-to-do family, who after graduating from the university, attempt to leave behind “the lie” of the shallow, corrupt, and narrow-minded life of his parents. He left his friends and family, changed his name and gave away all of his money, and traveled through the American wilderness. After two years, he hitchhiked to Alaska, where he planned to spend the summer alone in the wilderness. His dead body was eventually found dead by a moose hunter. Both movie and book retrace McCandless’ quest for truth and self-knowledge, a quest that ultimately led to death, and search for clues explaining the drives and desires that propelled him. In the book, Krakauer also shows how this kind of wilderness ideal is deeply rooted within American culture.

The movie differs from the movie in some relevant respects. For one, the movie highlights more the coming-to-age aspect of Chris’ quest for purification in Alaska. The film is structured as a road movie – ecstatic music score included.²² As a result, however, there is less emphasis on the ambivalence in the ideal of a ‘life in truth’ in the wild. The movie suggests that the wilderness for McCandless is merely a place where one can be joyful without the responsibilities and hassle of modern social life. We witness the protagonist hiking and canoeing through deserts, canyons and forests in sheer bliss, in the meantime reading works of Leo Tolstoy, David Thoreau, John Muir and Jack London. We watch him meeting different people from the American counter culture movement, who he tells about his dream of going to Alaska, but what Alaska really stands for, is not explicitly explained. Being a road movie, the film conveys the sheer ecstatic experience of McCandless in the extraordinarily beautiful American wilderness, but the lack of silence and the emphasis on the social aspects of McCandless’ quest prevent us from really understanding the ‘call from the wild’ that he was experiencing.

In the book, more emphasis is put on the counter-cultural meaning of McCandless’ Alaskan ideal as a counterpoint to modern life, both a counterweight and a refuge. In the book, the Alaskan wilderness is not merely positive; Krakauer argues that McCandless was also consciously seeking a sense of risk, challenge and friction. Inspired by his famous authors, McCandless believed that mankind has lost track of the essence of life in its urge for safety and control; only by seeking the confrontation with wild nature – without safety net, as it were – could one experience the essence of life again. For that reason, McCandless did not take a map with him (a decision that would later proof to be fatal). The book explicitly addresses McCandless’ call form the wild: he shows that nature for McCandless is never merely positive, but explains the appeal of fascinating ambivalence of wildness as a counterforce, as friction and as challenge. For that reason, I will mostly refer to the book.

Krakauer portrays Chris McCandless as an idealistic young man, who was unsatisfied with the bourgeois world in which he grew up. McCandless is presented as a person with a sense of unease towards the civilized world, a world in which all experiences are regulated to the point that one can hardly experience anything at all. In an effort to leave the confinements and

22. One could say that the movie suffers from a lack of silence. Only in the scene where Chris arrives in the Alaskan wilderness for the first time, the viewer is confronted with the overwhelming silence of nature, only to be reassured with a nice music soundtrack a few moments later.

boredom²³ of the well-organized, highly regulated ‘civilized’ world behind, McCandless was looking for a challenge in wild nature. This challenge should enable him to sense life in all of its intensity, to live life to the fullest and at the same time be confronted with his true inner self.²⁴

Immediately after graduating from college, McCandless left his family and his home town, and tried to invent a new life for himself. He chose a new name to free himself from his past. He also tried to free himself from the material bounds of modern society: he gave away his savings to charity, abandoned his car and most of his possessions, and burned all the cash in his wallet. Unencumbered by money and belongings, he would be free to experience the purifying encounter with wild nature. In April 1992, after having spent some time in different alternative communities, McCandless decided that in order to fully live up to his ideal he would have to make less compromises. He hitchhiked to Alaska to spend one summer there, alone in the wilderness, living from the land without help from others and without the aid of modern equipment.

At first sight, the story of Chris McCandless is just an illustration of the fact that the ideals of Thoreau today still have a certain appeal. But on second thought, McCandless did more than just repeat Thoreau’s Walden experiment. Thoreau was looking for a way to sustain his livelihood by living with and from the land, and in doing so finding spiritual and moral redemption. McCandless, too, tried to sustain himself in nature, and sought self-knowledge in a confrontation with wild nature. But McCandless’ departure from culture was far more radical. From Thoreau’s hut, the nearest town –Walden – was just a few miles away. In contrast, McCandless was trying to leave behind the human world more drastically. He distanced himself from the inhabited world literally and completely – in the Alaskan outback²⁵ – as well as symbolically – McCandless was craving a blank spot on the map. He wanted to be as far from civilization as possible. That is the reason why, according to Jon Krakauer, McCandless even left a map behind:

“[H]e was looking for a blank spot on the map, and in this day and age there are none, and so he created one, by leaving a map behind. Similarly, he did not take a large caliber rifle; he did not have much of all, because he did want to make the game more fair. Give the wilderness a fair shot, that was what he was up to.”²⁶

He did not want to be assured from the start that he would come out as the winner in the ‘game between humans and nature’. McCandless consciously sought a confrontation with wild nature in all its harshness. Krakauer explains the background of this:

“Long captivated by the writing of Leo Tolstoy, McCandless particularly admired how the great novelist had forsaken a life of wealth and privilege to wander among the destitute. In college McCandless began emulating Tolstoy’s asceticism and moral rigor to a degree that first astonished, and then alarmed, those who were close to him. When the boy headed off into the Alaskan bush he entertained no illusions that he was

23 Cf. the key scene *Gerry*, where both main characters break away from their every-day lethargy in an intense and ecstatic run through the desert.

24. Jon Krakauer explains that McCandless reminded him of his own youth. In his bestselling book *Into Thin Air*, about his experiences during a Mount Everest climbing expedition (again with fatalities), he explains that for him – too – extreme experiences in wild nature confront us with a kind of truth that urban life cannot offer. Krakauer clearly distinguishes the kind of longing for a deeper truth in a life in the wild from the mere thrill-seeking of bungee jumpers and other adrenaline junkies. The bungee-jumper is merely interested in the subjective ecstatic experience of an adrenaline rush, whereas alpinists and wilderness seekers are taking real risks, not out of stupidity (although Krakauer admits that, looking back, he was never fully aware of the full meaning of the risks he was taking) but out of an interest in an intensity that is lost when life is insured.

25. Although Krakauer points out that, for Alaskan terms, McCandless was at a very ‘civilized’ part of Alaska. If he just would have had a detailed map, he would probably have made it back alive.

26. From Jon Krakauer’s radio interview with host Terry Gross on *Fresh Air* which is distributed by National Public Radio and produced by WHY FM in Philadelphia.

trekking into a land of milk and honey. Peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation were precisely what he was seeking. And that is what he found, in abundance.”²⁷

McCandless was looking for the edge: balancing on the small border between being defeated in the harshness of wilderness and being able to make oneself a home in wild nature. He resembles Thoreau in that he, too, is looking for personal transformation and spiritual renewal in nature, but he differs radically because he is not looking for a life in harmony with nature, but a life that *takes up the challenge* of the wild. He seeks to experience the resistance of nature against our attempts to control it – in short: to experience the wildness of nature.

As a preparation for his stay, McCandless collected useful knowledge of local plants and animals that could help him survive the Alaskan wilderness. And he indeed succeeded in doing so for four months. A small mistake would eventually prove him fatal in the end: McCandless died because he ate a poisonous plant (that up to that point was not known to be poisonous), causing him to throw up his food. Eventually, he died of hunger. His dead body was found by a moose hunter later in the season. He also found a note, written in neat block letters on a page torn from a novel by Gogol: "S.O.S. I need your help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out of here. I am all alone, this is no joke. In the name of God, please remain to save me. I am out collecting berries close by and shall return this evening. Thank you, Chris McCandless. August ?"

Krakauer feels the need to defend McCandless against people who accuse him of making stupid mistakes, because he was not paying enough respect to nature:

“A lot of people have criticized McCandless, especially Alaskans. They say he didn’t respect the land enough. He was too cocky; he didn’t give it the respect it deserves. They say he did not take enough gear, enough equipment and enough food. All he had was a ten pound bag of rice and a 22 rifle and not much more. So in one sense, that was a mistake. But I don’t see it quite the same way, because he was looking for a challenge, and in his mind any challenge in which the outcome is assured isn’t a challenge at all. Why do it if you know you can succeed?”²⁸

The critics of McCandless seem to equal respect for wild nature with respect for a worthy opponent, an enemy for whom one should prepare oneself. From this perspective, McCandless overconfidence can be labeled as hubris, because he did underestimate the forces of nature. But as Krakauer points out, this account is missing the point. McCandless was not so much worried about being defeated by his opponent; instead he was worried that the confrontation with wildness would be too easy, would not be fair enough. Wilderness deserves ‘a fair shot’. It is in a ‘fair confrontation’ – in taking up a challenge the outcome of which is not assured – that one can sense what it is to be alive.

Into the Wild was both a worldwide bestseller and movie blockbuster. Apparently, Chris McCandless’ tragic tale appeals to contemporary imagination. I believe Krakauer’s story presents us with a narrative that somehow also help us understand *our own* – commonly felt and deeply ambiguous – position towards wildness.

The first way in which we can understand the public appreciation of this story is fairly straightforward: it shows that we are still to some degree drawn to the ideal that also captivated McCandless (and Krakauer): that wild nature somehow can serve as a critical moral ‘reference point’. Chris McCandless sought a confrontation with wild nature to free himself from the ‘corruption of mankind’. Wildness serves as a moral counter ideal against a particular bourgeois idea of culture; the idea of wildness functions to criticize a particular corrupt morality. The wilderness experience is seen as the source of a different morality – a

27. Jon Krakauer: *Into the wild*. New York: Villard / Random House 1996; author’s introduction.

28. Radio interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air* (See: <http://outside.away.com/disc/guest/krakauer/bookintro.html>)

‘wilderness ethic’, if you will. Many of us are fed up with our comfortable overly-assured lives in suburbia every once in a while. The story of McCandless reminds us of the dream of escaping this regulated, dull life and experience a deep sense of wonder and excitement.

McCandless’ particular version of such a wilderness ethics does not seek to live life in harmony with the moral laws of nature. Instead, for McCandless, ‘wilderness should be given a fair shot’: the outcome of the confrontation between humans and nature should not be assured beforehand. McCandless’ endeavor of living in the wild wants to stop avoiding risks and take up the challenges that life has to offer. What motivates McCandless is cold be called a morality of transgression: in the encounter with wildness, he seeks to transcend the boundaries of the safe, well-ordered human world. McCandless’ wilderness ethic coincide with an ambivalent attitude towards nature: on the one hand an effort to hold one’s ground in wild nature, on the other hand a willingness to look for the edge, to take up the challenge, and risk a fatal outcome.

Into the Wild does not merely present a man and his ideas about wilderness, but tells the tale of the life that is inspired by them in a particular narrative structure, of which McCandless’ tragic ending is an important part. I believe this last aspect is crucial for understanding the public’s shared fascination with the story of *Into the Wild* as well as with McCandless’ fate.

This fascination of we have with the story about McCandless has to do with the radical but paradoxical nature of his venture: his intriguing desire to become one with wilderness and leave the confinements of humanity behind ultimately results in his death. Being prepared to face death in the wild seems to be the ultimate consequence of the desire of communion with wild nature. It is this radical consequence of his critique of morality that seems to lie at the heart of the contemporary perception of wildness.

Both *Gerry* and *Into the Wild* suggest a ‘wilderness ethic’ that somehow takes the idea of wildness as a point of departure for a moral critique of morality itself. Such a paradoxical ethic is ultimately doomed to fail, because a critique of morality can, in the end, only be a moral critique. The escape from morality cannot be successful. These stories appeal to us for they show how wild nature can be moralized on the one hand and remain aware of the amoral (or should we say hyper-moral?) character of the wild world on the other. As soon as the moral stance of the wilderness ethic is made explicit – as in the story of Chris McCandless – the paradox sharpens: McCandless’ wilderness ethic is deeply paradoxical, because it articulates a new morality of wildness and at the same time summons us to transgress morality itself. The latter paradox is important if we are to understand the public appreciation of these narratives.

The appeal of the tragic story about McCandless is that his fate somehow mirrors the deep problematic nature of our shared longing for the wild. Given that we conceive of morality as the attempt to bring order to nature (as Nietzsche does), than the issue of McCandless’ wilderness ethic is not so much to find a new morality in the wild, but to transcend morality as such, and this transgression is only possible at the expense of, what Plumwood calls, a “concept of a continuing, narrative self”. Perhaps the public fascination with this story depends on our implicit knowledge of the impossibility to really escape the human life that all of us every now and then crave to leave behind. We seek wildness out of a desire to transcend morality, but this commitment to wildness itself will always be just another moral enterprise. Somehow, the tragic tale of Chris McCandless reflects both these aspects simultaneously. Together, McCandless’ quest for liberation and his tragic ending somehow reflect the more fundamental problem underneath of our shared longing to escape our human-centered, moral world. The fatal ending of the protagonist reminds us of the impossibility of realizing our shared ideal, without betraying the ideal itself.

This paradoxical notion of wildness – that implies a moral interpretation of wild nature on the one hand, and aims at transgressing morality on the other hand – can also be discerned in the third example that I want to discuss: the 2005 documentary *Grizzly Man*, another wilderness story with a bad ending.

Grizzly Man

The documentary *Grizzly Man* was released in 2005 and was to be a huge success worldwide. It won numerous awards worldwide for best documentary in 2005 and 2006, but – more relevant for our discussion – it raised a lot of media attention and started all kinds of passionate discussions amongst viewers. The heart of the film consists of footage shot by Timothy Treadwell, who lived among wild bears of Alaska for 13 summers. In *Grizzly Man*, Treadwell's fascination with wildness is being analyzed through interviews with various people. The movie, too, enables us to have a closer look at the contemporary fascination with wildness.

German filmmaker Werner Herzog took Treadwell's hundred hours of videotape and fashioned a most intriguing portrait of the 'grizzly man'. In the movie, he talks to friends and experts about Treadwell's ideas and motivations and seeks to understand both Treadwell's fascination for the bears as well as the various underlying views and attitudes toward wildness.

Again, the movie can be interpreted on several levels. We can look at the way in which the main character displays a particular relationship with wild nature that is interesting and thought-provoking. But the story about Treadwell can be interpreted as a narrative about human-nature relationships – an environmental tragedy – to which viewers have to relate themselves. In this and the following section, I will start by discussing Timothy Treadwell's relationship with grizzly bears, and several criticisms of Treadwell's ideas as they come forward in the movie. I will then move on to interpret the narrative of the movie from the viewers' point of view.

Timothy Treadwell was a failed actor who, after a troublesome personal episode in his life, decided to leave the 'civilized world' and move to the Alaskan wilderness. For thirteen summers, he camped in Alaska's Katmai National Park and Reserve, living amongst wild grizzly bears; during the last five summers, he videotaped his Alaskan experiences extensively. The rest of the year, while not in Alaska, Treadwell visited schools and tried to educate the public about wildlife and to protect the bears and their habitat. In the early autumn of 2003, the pilot who was supposed to pick up Treadwell and his girlfriend Amie Huguenard, found their dead remains: they had been decapitated and eaten by a grizzly bear.

The movie focuses on the ambiguity of Treadwell's fascination with wild nature. At the beginning of the film, he is portrayed as a committed but fairly straightforward environmentalist who was fascinated and intrigued by wild grizzly bears and who felt it as his personal mission to try and protect these bears and their habitat. What made his approach special was his conviction that it should be possible to live among the bears strictly non-violently, without using arms.²⁹ Treadwell was brave enough to live amongst wild animals

29. Treadwell was one of only a few people who lived among bears unarmed. A few weeks after Treadwell, Russian biologist Vladimir was eaten by one of the bears that he lived amongst in a Russian wilderness park. Years earlier, the same thing happened to a Japanese photographer in a Russian wilderness reserve. At present, the Belgian train conductor Rudy de Bock is the one of the last persons who still try to live in a peaceful coexistence with bears: a few months each year he camps on Kodiak Island (Alaska). In a Dutch newspaper interview, De Bock mentions that the local residents of Kodiak Island place bets on whether he will survive next

without a gun, living in their habitat with only small means of keeping his ground. Treadwell gradually succeeds in gaining the respect of the native grizzlies, and seems to be very aware of the constant danger of living around these dangerous animals.

An important difference with McCandless is that Treadwell was not particularly interested in seeking a challenge in nature. For sure, Treadwell was taking risks in his relation with grizzlies, but these were not crucial to his project. He wanted to save the bears, and believed that living together with grizzly bears does not have to be dangerous, provided one knows how to pay these animals the proper 'respect'. The risk involved in living with grizzlies was merely the inevitable prize of having a close relation with them. Whereas McCandless was interested in wildness as friction and challenge, Treadwell sought a mutual understanding between bears and humans. It is telling that Treadwell did not hunt for a living, but brought along his own food from outside.

Treadwell's courage and commitment compel the viewer to feel admiration and respect towards this 'grizzly man'. Does he not live up to an ideal of living in harmony with nature, that all of us find somehow appealing? There seems to be some kind of communication going on here, there is some kind of reciprocity in the relation of Treadwell with the bears: both are engaged in some kind of inter-species communication – an exchange of signs and signifiers – there seems to be a 'merging of horizons', maybe even harmony.

As the film progresses, more and more doubts come in and the straightforward story of Treadwell as a courageous and committed environmentalist becomes more ambivalent. At the end of the movie, the viewer is left with questions regarding the appropriateness of Treadwell's approach. There appears to be something fundamentally wrong with Treadwell's moral attitude towards the bears.

One of the problems with Treadwell's view is his presupposition that there do not have to be any limitations in his attempt to live in harmony with wild animals. He believed that the kind of interspecies communication between himself and wild grizzlies can be expressed in terms of 'friendship.' We should, however, be careful how to interpret interspecies relationships.

Relationships between humans and animals can never be entirely symmetrical, because there are essential differences between species that cannot be ignored. Philosophical anthropologist Helmut Plessner shows how living organisms distinguish themselves from dead matter by their ability to 'mediate' their relation to their environment – living organisms somehow constitute an 'inside' and an 'outside' – they define their environment, as it were. Different types of organisms differ in their ability to 'mediate' their relation with the 'external world'. Plants somehow merely 'mirror' their outside; animals have a more active relation towards their relation with the world, which grants them with a degree of freedom that plants do not possess which enable them to plan and to anticipate changes in their surroundings. Humans, according to Plessner, are reflective to the third degree: they have a relationship to their relationship to the world, usually called 'culture', which enables them not only to anticipate and plan their relation to their surroundings, but also reflect upon this relationship. These differences make a difference in the possibilities of inter-species communication.

As an animal, a bear can actively relate to his surrounding, planning and anticipating his surroundings and his possibilities. The bear's 'language' consists of a repertoire of possible actions, of signs that can be explained in terms of those actions, and of anticipations of future actions. A bear's life is about eating and surviving, and his signs signify food, eating, food competition, maybe even year cycles et cetera. To a bear, the world is a 'stage' on which he can express his expressive potential – nothing more, nothing less. Those things in the world

summer. Recently, he decided to henceforth take more safety precautions like bringing along pepper spray and an electric fence. (*De Volkskrant*, Februari 4, 2006, Magazine p. 22-27)

that do not somehow resonate with the bear's expressive repertoire are not really part of this 'Umwelt'.

At first glance, a similar thing is true for humans. However, humans have the capacity to reflect upon their relationship with their world. To humans, the world is present as such, humans, they can decide how to intervene but can also thematize their actions in the world. This enables another understanding of reality. The meaning of human 'friendships', for instance, depends on such a shared conception of the world and on what two people 'have' with each other.

For sure, Treadwell is able to interact with bears and foxes on their terms. It may be commendable to seek a reciprocal, nonviolent relationship with animals. Even though there is a mutual understanding between grizzlies, foxes and humans, (there is certainly some form of communication – both seem to mutually exchange information about mutual expectations and future behavior), the relationships between Treadwell and the bears are thoroughly asymmetric and these cannot be properly called a 'friendship' at all, because friendship presupposes a relationship to the world that a grizzly bear or a fox are incapable of. The differences between humans and bears are more than just accidental.

Treadwell appears to have a far too humanized image of the bears, as he attributes all kind of human qualities to them. He gives them pet names like Mr. Chocolate, Aunt Melissa and Sergeant Brown. He considers them to be his 'friends' and even declares his love for them.³⁰ He tries to communicate with them by mimicking their sounds (although it is dangerous to do that because one can never be sure of the exact meaning of these sounds) and sometimes he even tries to cuddle with these animals, even though – as biologists point out – bears themselves do not allow other bears to touch them.

This attitude is not only careless and dangerous, but can also be seen as inappropriate, for it fails to recognize that grizzlies are wild animals that are very different from us. One of the moral problems with Treadwell's approach is that he fails to recognize the fact that wild animals have an inevitable otherness, even though the otherness and wildness of bears at the same time seem crucial for Treadwell's (and ours) fascination with them.

As any form of anthropomorphism, Treadwell's view is in danger of projecting one's own preconceptions on a wild animal. As Werner Herzog puts it:

“What haunts me is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, I discover no kinship, no understanding, no mercy. I see only the overwhelming indifference of nature. To me, there is no such thing as a secret world of the bears. And this blank stare speaks only of a half-bored interest in food. But for Timothy Treadwell, this bear was a friend, a savior.”³¹

Treadwell's anthropomorphism shows most clearly, when he seems to be unable to come to terms with certain acts of the bears that we would consider 'immoral' if they were human acts. Male bears sometimes kill cubs to stop the females from lactating, and thus have them ready again for fornication. To Treadwell, this harsh reality of wild nature did not fit into his sentimentalized view. Everything about the bears should be perfect.

Treadwell's sentimental and anthropomorphic image of the grizzly – so Herzog suggests – has a misanthropic background. The movie depicts Treadwell as someone who not only wanted to

30. One telling example in the movie is when Treadwell is talking in the camera about Grinch, a female grizzly of about five years of age with an aggressive attitude – “If I turn around too much, she'll bite me” – when all of a sudden the bear turns against him. Treadwell manages to prevent a life threatening situation from getting out of hand and ends the encounter with a declaration of love:

“Hi. How are you? How are you? Don't you do that. Don't you do that! Back of! I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you. I'm sorry.”

31. One could criticize in turn that Herzog's account of the bears does not recognize that these bears have a world on their own. He appears to conceive of wild nature as merely residue: nature is that which is left if we would remove all that is typical for human from the organic world.

escape the narrow mindedness of his parental social background, but was also unable to deal with the fact that his professional career had turned into a dead alley. His love for the grizzlies seems to mirror his inability to come to terms with the problems of adult life. Nature stands for everything that he does not like about human civilization. Such a perspective on things runs the risk of projecting one's own unease with the human world of overly complicated, arbitrary social rules and regulations on an idealised version of that in the outside sphere. Certainly, Treadwell's ideal of an Alaskan 'Garden of Eden' sometimes tends to romanticize nature and trivialize the differences between the human and the nonhuman. Unlike McCandless, Treadwell does not consciously seek a confrontation with the wild, but hopes for a peaceful communion between bears and humans. As a result of this, his image of the grizzlies (or of the Alaskan wilderness, for that one) often seems to be thoroughly anthropomorphic, if not anthropocentric.

In certain scenes, Treadwell comes to the fore as frustrated man who left the human world behind out of disappointment in what life had to offer and looked for a substitute for the company of mankind in a relationship with grizzly bears. Treadwell had a lot of conflicts with the park service. Once bears get acquainted to humans being around, it will be difficult to prevent all kinds of conflicts between humans and animals. Therefore, in the interest of the bears, the park service prohibits intimate contact between bears and humans. Treadwell was in constant violation of this rule. He believed, however, that his presence was needed to protect the animals, effectively making him the hero of his story.³²

In one scene, Treadwell lashes out at the park service, because they don't protect the bears well enough: they do not consider poaching to be a big problem and even allow hunting out of economical reasons. However, as grizzly expert Larry Van Daele points out, the population of grizzlies in Katmai National Park is in no way under threat:

“Here on Kodiak Island we have about 3,000 bears. Each year we harvest about 160 of those. Through our research, we found that you can harvest about 6% of the population annually and still have a healthy group of bears.”

One could argue that Treadwell's concerns for the bears have more to do with sentimental reasons, then with a genuine concern for the survival of the species. In Treadwell's experience, he is the hero in an environmental epic.

In sum, there are a lot of reasons for having second thoughts about Treadwell's ideas about the grizzly bears. With this sentimental approach to bears, Treadwell fails to appreciate the grizzlies for the wild animals that they are. They are reduced to victims of the evil in mankind. In the same move, humans are made the locus of everything that is bad in the world.³³ His sentimental ideal of bears clearly functions as a counter-ideal against human culture, irrespective of whether this view can stand up in view of the facts.

In the movie, Treadwell's rosy picture of nature is also criticized by Sam Egli, the helicopter pilot who was called out to assist on the cleanup after the Treadwell tragedy. Egli seems to take the classic anthropocentric view, where wild nature should be met and respected as an *enemy*. According to Egli, Treadwell was foolish because he underestimated this enemy.

“Treadwell was, [...] acting like he was working with people wearing bear costumes out there instead of wild animals. Those bears are big and ferocious, and they come

32. “If he could just watch me here, how much I love them, how much I adore them, how respectful I am to them. How I am one of them. And how the studies they give me, the photographs, the video... And take that around for no charge to people around the world. It's good work. I feel good about it. *I feel good about myself doing it.*” (emphasis added)

33. Herzog notices that: “Treadwell speaks often of the human world as something foreign. He made a clear distinction between the bears and the people's world which moved further and further into the distance. Wild, primordial nature was where he felt truly at home”. But we should also notice that Treadwell could feel *at home* in primordial nature, because his idealistic projection transformed it into something else.

equipped to kill ya and eat ya. And that's just what Treadwell was asking for. He got what he was asking for. He got what he deserved, in my opinion. [...] I think Treadwell thought these bears were big, scary looking, harmless creatures that he could go up and pet and sing to, and they would bond. As children of the universe or some odd. I think he had lost sight of what was really going on."

Egli criticizes Treadwell's underestimation of nature and his wish to become a bear as foolishness, as showing an immature attitude towards ferocious animals. Treadwell's naive, all-too-human image of nature is being criticized as a symptom of his inability to appreciate human life. His commitment with the grizzlies seems to rely on a very inappropriate interpretation of these wild animals: in his view, bears are idealized and moralized, as if they are, – to quote one of his critics in the movie – humans in bear costumes. But Egli does not criticize Treadwell for disrespecting wild nature, but for disrespecting humanity and reason. Strikingly enough – and in as far as this account of Treadwell's view of nature is accurate – Treadwell's vision shows some clear resemblance with the traditional anthropocentric view towards nature that Egli seems to hold. In this view wild nature should be measured from culture; it is an obstacle that has to be vanquished – an inappropriate form of wildness 'appropriation', because as obstacle, wildness is being reduced to that which *we* are not. Egli seems to regard nature as just the antagonist of the moral order; nothing but the opposite of humanity – leaving no room for any positive quality. Treadwell's account mirrors this anthropocentrism; his idea of wildness is an idealist projection of all those qualities that he misses in humans. Both views conceive of nature as just the opposite of humanness; Egli and Treadwell only differ in their evaluation of it. The wildness that Treadwell desires is merely an expression of his need to make up for a deficit.

However, it would be unjust to regard Treadwell merely as a crazy man and reduce his engagement with the grizzlies to sentimental escapism. After all, he *did* manage to survive amongst the grizzlies for thirteen long summers, he *was*, to a large degree, able to have some form of inter-species communication, and – on top of that – he did spend a lot of effort in explaining to people why these animals should be protected.

But we should also seek a more nuanced approach to Treadwell if we want to explain why his tragic story has such a strong appeal to us. Our fascination with Treadwell's story is more than malicious pleasure in the bad fate of a sentimental idiot, or a form of sensation-seeking. Treadwell's fascination with wildness is partly our fascination as well, somehow, and showing that Treadwell's attempt to humanize bears is mistaken, does not take away the fascination for his quest. The narrative that Werner Herzog has crafted from the video footage is not a comedy about an environmental nutcase but also conveys a different story. Treadwell's story fascinates us, because his venture refers to a value of wildness that goes far beyond the sentimental love for an individual bear.

Crossing the border

Grizzly Man does not primarily address the question whether Treadwell's image of the grizzly bears is actually correct. Rather, it addresses a question about Treadwell's *moral commitment* with wildness. The main topic of the movie is about Treadwell's commitment for the bears gradually shifting from an environmentalist project into a more spiritual quest. The movie questions the idea that wilderness can be a place for humans to dwell. Treadwell wanted to blend seamlessly into the world of the grizzlies, of to the point that he wanted to become 'a bear amongst bears.' At the core is the question how appropriate it is to try and cross the

borderline between the human realm and that of the wild bears. In a voice-over at the start of the movie, Werner Herzog articulates his point of departure:

“What Treadwell intended [with his filming], was to show these bears in their natural habitat. Having myself filmed in the wilderness of jungles, I found that, beyond the wildlife film, in his material lay dormant a story of astonishing beauty and depth. I discovered a film of human ecstasies and darkest inner turmoil. As if there was a desire in him to leave the confinements of his humanness and bond with the bears, Treadwell reached out, seeking a primordial encounter. But in doing so, he crossed an invisible borderline.”

In the film, different people comment on Treadwell’s ideas and his relationship with the bears. Ecologist Marnie Gaede underlines that there seems to be kind of a religious notion underneath Treadwell’s attitude towards the wild grizzlies:

“He wanted to become like the bear. Perhaps it was religious, but not in the true sense of religion. I think perhaps he wanted to mutate into a wild animal as he says in this last letter. He says, ‘I have to mutually mutate into a wild animal to handle the life I live out here.’ I think there’s a religious sense in that in the sense of connecting so deeply that you’re no longer human. And that is a religious experience. [...] Here’s another example: ‘There are many times that I feel death is the best option. My work would be much more seriously looked at and possibly make the difference that in living, I can’t do.’ I think that was sort of a paradox for him. That he felt not worthy enough to get his message across at times. And so, maybe, in the drama of death his message would be more poignant and reach out to more people.”

Is this the kind of wilderness ethic we saw earlier – implicitly in *Gerry* and in amore explicit manner in *Into the Wild*: the idea that wildness somehow represents a value that transcends human moral affairs in a radical way? If it is, than ‘the drama of his death’ would not only be a *means* to reach other people, but maybe even a realization of the ideal of transcending humanity and becoming one with the bears in a very literal way?

However, there are serious problems connected to such an ideal, or rather: to the way Treadwell tries to live up to it. The problem with the wilderness ethic is not that it fails as a result from the adherent of that ethic being eaten, but also because the ideal itself is fundamentally flawed. In the documentary, the idea of unity with the wild as a moral ideal is itself being criticized by different people. Earlier mentioned biologist Larry Van Daele, for instance, criticizes Treadwell’s ideal of becoming like a bear amongst bears, as giving in to the ‘*siren song*’ that it is possible to become one with wild nature:

“One of the things I’ve heard about Mr. Treadwell – and you can see in a lot of his films – is that he tended to want to become a bear. Some people that I’ve spoken with would encounter him in the field, and he would act like a bear, he would ‘woof’ at them. He would act in the same way a bear would when they were surprised. Why he did this is only known to him. No one really knows for sure. But when you spend a lot of time with bears, especially when you’re in the field with them day after day, there’s a siren song, there’s a calling that makes you want to come in and spend more time in their world. Because it is a simpler world. It is a wonderful thing, but in fact it’s a harsh world. It’s a different world that bears live in than we do. So there is that desire to get into their world, but the reality is we never can because we’re very different than they are.”

For the biologist, science represents a means of sanitizing one’s mind. The scientific view is – so to say – a way of making sure one is not being deceived – or deceiving oneself – by wishful thinking. There are far too many profound differences between bears and humans that we can know of, as to make the ideal of unity with the bears feasible.

Of course, Treadwell himself was also aware of the differences between grizzlies and humans. On many occasions, he emphasizes that these bears can kill and will kill you if you do not pay attention to their rules. Early in the documentary he shows evidence of this awareness in an impressive speech:

“I must hold my own if I’m gonna stay within this land. For once there is weakness, they will exploit it, they will take me out, they will decapitate me, they will chop me into bits and pieces. [...] Most times I’m a kind warrior out here. Most times, I am gentle, [...] I’m like a fly on the wall, observing, noncommittal, non-invasive in any way. Occasionally I am challenged. And in that case, the kind warrior [...] must become a samurai. Must become so, so formidable, so fearless of death, so strong that he will win. [...]. Even the bears will believe that you are more powerful. [...]. And if I am weak, I go down. I love them with all my heart. I will protect them. I will die for them, but I will not die at their claws and paws. I will fight. I will be strong. I’ll be one of them. I will be... the master.”

However, Treadwell believed – and ever more often – that he, as a ‘master’, was able (and qualified), eventually, to *command* the respect of the bears. A few days before his death, his over-confidence shows clearly:

“I have lived longer with wild brown grizzly bears, without weapons, and that’s the key, without weapons, in modern history than any human on earth, any human. And I have remained safe. But every second of every day that I move through this jungle, or even at the tent, I am right on the precipice of great bodily harm or even death. [...] But let me tell you, ladies and gentlemen. There is no, no, no other place in the world that is more dangerous, more exciting than the Grizzly Maze. Come here and camp here. Come here and try to do what I do. You will die. [...] They will get you. I found a way. I found a way to survive with them. Am I a great person? I don’t know. [...]. I’m just different. And I love these bears enough to do it right. And I’m edgy enough and I’m tough enough. [...] And I’m never giving this up. [...] Never. This is it. This is my life. This is my land.”

In the end, Treadwell seemed to be unable to endure the alienness of nature any more, to keep the awareness alive of the unbridgeable gap between him and the bears. He mistook a feeling of affinity for friendship.

Van Daele’s cognitivistic criticism seems to imply a *moral* criticism too: it is intellectually unjustified – and therefore blameworthy – to forget about the apparent differences between humans and bears.

One particular interesting comment, that I want to reflect upon here, is from Sven Haakanson, curator of Kodiak’s Alutiiq Museum and native inhabitant of Alaska, who articulates this moral criticism more explicitly. When asked about his thoughts about Treadwell, he answered:

“I see it as something that’s both... It’s tragic because [...] he died and his girlfriend died because he tried to be a bear. He tried to act like a bear, and for us on the island, you don’t do that. You don’t invade on their territory. You... When you’re in their territory, you know you’re there. And when you’re nearby, you make sure that they know you’re around. You know, for him to act like a bear the way he did, would be... I don’t know. To me, it was the ultimate of disrespecting the bear and what the bear represents. [...] I think he did more damage to the bears than he did... Because when you habituate bears to humans, they think all humans are safe. Where I grew up, the bears avoid us and we avoid them. They’re not habituated to us. If I look at it from my culture, Timothy Treadwell crossed a boundary that we have lived with for 7,000

years. It's an unspoken boundary, an unknown boundary. But when we know we've crossed it, we pay the price."

Haakanson addresses the problem of Treadwell's quest to place himself in the world of the bears, to try and live as a bear amongst bears: there is something fundamentally wrong with that idea. His criticism does not focus on Treadwell's bear image being inadequate but rather on a moral argument. Treadwell's quest of wanting-to-be-like-a-bear is criticized in moral terms, as the ultimate form of disrespect towards the bears. Apparently, there *should be* distance between humans and bears, not just because of safety reasons, but out of respect 'for what the bear stands for'. Haakanson stresses that in our dealings with the wild, some things should be taboo. The distance between humans and grizzlies is real and the gap cannot be crossed without infringing the natural moral order of things. 'The bear stand for' something sacred that should not be touched. For that reason the gap between bears and humans should be respected from both sides. It is wrong if people like Treadwell pretend to bridge the gap.

For Haakanson, Treadwell's quest is typical for the 'modern city folk' way of dealing with nature. To illustrate his point, he tells an anecdote about his museum, which had recently been 'raided by tourists out of control'. Exhibited in the museum was a stuffed bear. A group of tourist deliberately cut off a paw from the bear, apparently because for them it was something worthwhile having: "Somebody wanted it so much, they cut the paw off." This event seems to be a perfect metaphor of what is wrong with Treadwell's approach to wild grizzlies. In the native view, a taboo regulates the relation between humans and the wild: do not cross the borderline between humans and bears. Both bears and humans should keep distance from one another, because the gap between both worlds is more than merely factual. There is also a symbolic gap between both worlds. Mixing up these two spheres is considered to be an infringement of the way things should be. On the other side of the gap exists an alien, sacred world of its own, inaccessible to humans, but with its own reason. In this native view, wildness is seen as something radically strange outside the cultural realm that is dominated by humans, but exactly in its strangeness it is morally meaningful. Through the taboo itself, though, the *meaning* of wildness is 'appropriated' within a symbolic frame of reference – as something sacred to be respected.

The main difference with Treadwell's view seems to be that in this native interpretation of the wild, the inevitable distance between both worlds is being acknowledged, whereas in Treadwell's view both get entangled and the difference between both worlds disappears. For the native Alaskans like Haakanson, wild bears do not just represent something valuable that is to be protected, but something sacred. The bears themselves may not be holy animals, but the natural order of which they are part is something to be respected in an absolute sense. The taboo grants wild nature a critical function *within* culture; wildness functions as a critical outsider that offers a measure to culture. In contrast to Treadwell's inappropriate ecocentrism, we could typify this view as a more fitting form of ecocentrism. The value of wild nature is recognized, but in the act of 'appreciation', the otherness of the wild is still being acknowledged.

Can this native criticism account for the appeal of the tale of the Grizzly Man has on Western, urbanized postmodern viewers?

Partly it can. I believe Treadwell's failure is interesting to us, because his inability to endure the alienness of wild nature is in a sense just an extreme example of a problem that is inextricably linked to the attempt to articulate the value of wildness as radically opposed to the human realm. All moral interpretations of wildness have to deal with the tension between the need to 'appropriate' the meaning of wildness and the desire to simultaneously acknowledge the radical wildness as something essentially *beyond* 'appropriation'. Being an appropriation of the alien into the realm of the symbolic, each interpretation of the meaning of

wildness is in danger of totalizing the image of wild nature in a way that suits one's own plans and schemes. If we do not endure the inevitable distance between wild nature and our *image* of nature, then our love for wild nature can easily turn into a kind of narcissism, as is obvious in the case of Treadwell. Only if we take seriously the inevitability of epistemological anthropocentrism will we be able to avoid a short-circuiting of our interpretation of the meaning of wildness. The awareness of the unbridgeable gap between nature and ourselves seems to enable us to distinguish between different degrees of appropriateness regarding the way we cultivate the meaning of wildness.

This leaves us with the question of whether the native view can still serve as an example to 'us', post-modern city dwellers. I don't think it can. This has to do, in my opinion, with the fact that our own fascination for wilderness follows from reasons totally different from the one's 'traditional' cultures have.

How to appropriate wildness appropriately

Haakanson, the native Alutiiq, refers to an ancient cultural border that regulates the relationship between cultures inside and outside. The taboo on crossing the border between the human realm and that of the bears instructs us to not to enter the other side, but to respect wilderness as a sacred realm beyond. Like the biologist, the helicopter pilot, the ecologist and the director, the Alutiiq offer us an interpretation of the meaning of wildness, an interpretation that in the end presupposes an act of 'appropriation': the alien is being introduced into a web of meanings. What distinguishes this interpretation from others is the realization of a *surplus* in meaning. The biologist knows of the 'siren song' to become one with the bears but tries to resist it because he considers it to be a fallacious idea. The native Alaskan view, however, recognizes the value of wildness that is transcending the mere cultural meaning. The sacred – 'what the bear stands for' – signifies a transcending realm that exceeds our merely symbolic order. Nevertheless, it is an 'appropriation', to the degree that it – to quote Ricoeur again – transforms mere 'Umwelt' (environment) into a meaningful, inhabitable *world*, or – the use the wordings of Val Plumwood – the "view of the world from the outside" is being translated into a "view of the world from the inside". These kinds of 'appropriations' of the wild enable people to articulate and appreciate the value of wildness as something beyond the merely human world. It enables the Alutiiq to feel at home in the Alaskan peninsula, to dwell, that is: to *place* the Alaskan nature in a meaningful world and at the same time acknowledge the beyond of culture as well.

But the moral framework of a native Alaskan is profoundly different from that of post-modern city dwellers.

Many native peoples living in fairly natural environments do not share the kind of fascination with wildness of which contemporary wilderness tales like *Gerry*, *Into the Wild* and *Grizzly Man* testify, for they do not share the sense of alienation with nature that is presupposed in the wilderness concept.³⁴ For them most meaning of nature can be articulated in a cultural form – signified by the taboo on entering the realm of the bears. The Alutiiq do not need an articulation of the meaning of wildness beyond the realm of culture, because the concept of the sacred provides a means of articulating wildness as a dimension that transcends the confinements of culture, that is to say, paradoxically, as a *surplus* of meaning that defies incorporation in the cultural sphere. With this taboo, it is acknowledged that at the other side

34. See, for instance different 'Third and Forth World' critiques on the wilderness idea in: *The Great Wilderness Debate*, edited by M. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott (Athens, 1998),

of the border there exists a world in its own right. The wild world is given its due, although the possibility of ever becoming one with this realm is excluded from the outset.

However, what is considered to be taboo by the native Alaskan has become more or less folklore for most post-modern city dwellers. The dark character of the contemporary postmodern fascination with the wild proves that we have developed an awareness – and now more than ever, or so it seems – of the limitations of recognizing wildness by cultural means. Whereas the Alutiiq know how to accept the taboo and endure the distance to the sacred realm of the bears, we post-modern – i.e. post-traditional (Anthony Giddens) – subjects only experience arbitrary injunctions and regulations of one particular culture. That does not satisfy the postmodern, pluricultural mind: it does not feel at home anymore in *any* culture so as to feel satisfied with one particular interpretation of the meaning of wildness.

According to Nietzsche, (post)modern mankind – ‘hybrid Europeans’ – resembles the person who stands in front of his wardrobe, sees all kinds of costumes, but is unable to consider one of those costumes to be a fitting one for him.³⁵ It is on the basis of this cultural identity crisis that we seek an immediate confrontation with wildness. Unable of finding a ‘suitable’ cultural costume, we seek encounters with wildness beyond culture and without cultural mediation. The modern mind wants an instant fulfillment of his desire for wildness; it cannot accept the existing cultural codifications of the wild because it is looking for a meaning – a home if you like – beyond all culture.

The trouble with wilderness, however, is that without mediation, it can never be our home. Wilderness is the alien, the non-place per se, the world as it is before we transform it into something familiar and meaningful. The contemporary wilderness tales that we have analyzed here all clearly show how attempts of transgressing the human sphere will eventually fail. What encounters with wildness *can* accomplish, is that they enable us to look at our cultural identity from a critical distance, and perhaps even confirm our feeling that we are not at home in our cultural identity. But wilderness will never deliver us from our homelessness.

One could say that the post-modern longing for wildness ‘from the rebound’ is just another symptom of today’s moral crisis. The post-modern wilderness lovers merely suffer from their inability to commit themselves to any particular interpretation of nature. Post-modern man is too much of a relativist and constructivist to allow himself to be disciplined by any moral tradition that interprets nature in moral terms; he lacks the will and strength to really commit himself to any to any ‘culture of nature’. If post-moderns expect that nature somehow will reveal its moral meaning beyond interpretation ‘spontaneously’, then this longing for the wild will inevitably lead to disillusionment. True, each particular moral interpretation only articulates certain possible meanings and excludes others, but without interpretation there can exist no moral meaning at all. The attempt to leave behind interpretation as such can therefore never be an answer to the moral crisis. In that case, the post-modern longing for ‘that which is not yet interpreted’ can eventually only lead to a further disenchantment of nature, and to a decrease in sensitivity towards those moral meanings that all kind of traditional moral traditions of nature have articulated before. If the longing for the wild signifies a total inability to acknowledge those moral meanings of nature that have been handed over by us in history, then it is merely a symptom of the ever increasing moral indifference towards nature and there is not much to be won.

35. Friedrich Nietzsche: *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 223:

“The hybrid European—a tolerably ugly plebeian, taken all in all—absolutely requires a costume: he needs history as a storeroom of costumes. To be sure, he notices that none of the costumes fit him properly—he changes and changes. [...] Notice too the moments of despair because ‘nothing suits’ us—. It is in vain we parade ourselves as romantic or classical or Christian or Florentine or baroque or ‘national,’ *in moribus et artibus* [in morals and arts]: it does not “cloth us”.

But it might well be possible to interpret the contemporary fascination for wild nature differently as well: not merely as a symptom of a crisis, but as a new emerging answer to our problematic relation to nature. In such an interpretation, the new fascination for wildness emerges from an increased sense of unease with the modern attitude towards nature, in which all of our efforts are directed at dominating and domesticating nature. In this reading, post-modern man is longing for a new and deeper relation to nature that is being determined by a deeper, more radical ethic. The present longing for wildness could then be interpreted as a newly emerging answer to today's moral crisis – a new attempt to convert the awareness of the problematic character of each particular moral conception of nature into a new 'super'-morality of nature. Seen from this perspective, the longing for wildness can even be seen as a sign of a growing sensitivity towards the meaning of nature, an emerging new 'wildness ethic', if you like. In this interpretation, the post-modern wilderness ethic is aimed at acknowledging that which at that which 'transcends' each particular moral interpretation, but somehow shows itself through that interpretation. If the post-modern longing for the wild emerges out of dissatisfaction with the poorness of existing interpretations, and a desire to 'free' nature from moralizing and reductionist frameworks, then the new wilderness ethic will seek a way to deal with the existing traditions and articulations of nature more creatively.

Conclusion

The concept of wildness as something meaningful does not make sense outside the context of an worldview – Plumwood's 'view from the inside'. Wildness (as expression for something meaningful 'from the outside') can never be articulated purely, without interpretation. For that reason, we do not have an objective criterion on the basis of which we can decide what view on wildness is the most appropriate. But as a critical border concept, wildness enables us 'to leave the confinements of our humanness' and to transcend cultural norms. It is in this critical sense that experiences of wildness seem to play a key part. Which interpretations of the wild are 'appropriate', may depend on the question whether or not they can acknowledge nature's alterity. The movies *Gerry* and – to some degree – *Into the Wild* succeed in bringing across the 'call from the wild', *Grizzly Man*, confronts us with the dangers of identifying it. The narratives of such fatal encounters with wildness, however, remain deeply fascinating for the thoroughly homeless postmodern soul. Although the quest to become one with the wild must ultimately fail, it is exactly in this *failure*, in this tragic fate of modern man, that we can discern a last trace of the sacred: the grandeur of the wild in its sublime indifference compared to which human affairs seem insignificant and futile. These contemporary, disquieting, 'unheimlich' wilderness tales show us who we really are: thoroughly moral beings, meaning seekers, condemned to live in a meaningless universe: natural aliens.³⁶

36 Cf. Neil Evernden: *The Natural Alien. Humankind and Environment*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1985

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