

# Fatal attraction

## Wildness in contemporary film

(to appear in *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 31, nr. 3 (Fall 2009), p. 297-315.)

Martin Drenthen\*

The concept of wildness not only plays a role in philosophical debates, but also in popular culture. Wild nature is often seen as a place outside the cultural sphere where one can still encounter instances of transcendence. Some writers and moviemakers contest 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 world view and the otherness of nature, and in doing so face, what Plumwood calls, “the view from the outside”. Three films – *Gerry*, *Into the Wild*, and *Grizzly Man* – deal with contemporary encounters with wildness. What these works have in common is the central theme of modern humans who are fascinated by wild nature and seek experiences unknown to those limited to the overly cultivated life (psyche) in modern society. Another connecting theme, however, is that any idealization of wildness is in itself deeply problematic. All three films have fatal endings, which in turn fascinates the contemporary viewers. These films show, first, that wildness is conceived as a moral counterforce against the overly-civilized world; and, second, that fascination with this wildness has itself become thoroughly reflexive, and refers to a moral meaning of wildness that is both deeply paradoxical and utterly dark.

### Introduction

Many people feel deeply fascinated by the wildness of nature because in extreme moments nature offers a fascinating contrast with the human-centered moral order in the world. Therefore, even though ever more people live in cities and will probably not have many direct

encounters with wild nature in any strict sense of the word (pristine, untouched nature), the concept of *wildness* remains a prominent term in contemporary moral discourse. Instead of referring to an objective feature of pristine nature, the concept of wildness often rather expresses a moment of fundamental criticism towards human culture as such.

Notably, many city dwellers suffer in their everyday urban lives from a lack of those aspects of life that can evoke a surplus of meaning. Wild nature is seen by many of them as a place outside the cultural sphere where one can still encounter such instances of transcendence. This urban longing for the wild has generated highly idealized images of wild nature. But when these people are confronted with actual wildness and wild nature conveys itself as strange, indifferent and unruly, the idealizations get put into question and more disturbing images of the wild come to the fore.

The concept of wildness not only plays a role in philosophical debates, but also in popular culture. It appears in all kinds genres of imagination: movies, novels, documentaries, plays etcetera.<sup>1</sup> Some writers and moviemakers question the dominant romanticized view of wild nature by telling stories about the harsher face of nature: how encounters with the wild and unruly, sometimes convey the misfit between a well ordered human-centered self-created world view and the otherness of nature, and humans face, what Plumwood calls, “the view from the outside.”<sup>2</sup>

According to philosophical hermeneutics, moral meanings of nature only come into play as soon as humans start articulating their relationship with the world. Humans invest meaning in their relationship with their environment, so as to create a meaningful, morally ordered interpretation of the world in which humans can live. In this process of interpretation, the neutrality of space is transformed into a meaningful *place*; *mere environment* is transformed into a *world* we can live in, to use a phrase of Paul Ricoeur. Thus, from a hermeneutical perspective, moral meanings exist only within the realm of cultural interpretations: in order to articulate their exact meaning, (moral) experiences have to be actively appropriated and interpreted as part of a complex, integral web of references. The same 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. Sometimes, *nature itself* seems to breach the human-centered world view – questioning the order that we normally take for granted, and somehow putting the anthropocentrism of everyday life in perspective. The word *wildness* refers to the sphere that is not subject to human intervention and that is not (and can never be)

domesticated. Wildness is the outside or the other of culture.<sup>3</sup> Does this mean that wildness cannot be part of a meaningful world? Yes and no.

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, wildness (anything transcending the confinements of culture) has to play a part too: people must be able to articulate the meaning of that which *lies outside* of their cultural habitat (*wilderness*: mountains, forests, swamps, badlands, deserts, oceans) or which is *out of control* by culture (*wildness*: storms, floods, earthquakes). 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. But most often, wildness is interpreted as somehow the opposite of culture: the sphere of the amoral versus the moral, chaos versus order, eternal versus temporal, inhumane versus humane, *physis* versus *nómos*. 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 this sense, all interpretations that seek to articulate (and determine) the meaning of wildness can be seen as *appropriations*<sup>4</sup> that transfer the wild as radical other-than-culture into the realm of the cultural, i.e. symbolic order – we have to make it our own.

However, the formal definition of *wildness* as that which is not culture does not yet signify its *meaning*. *Wildness* as a meaningful concept plays a role *within* culture. Elsewhere<sup>5</sup> I have shown how the concept of *wildness*, nowadays, ultimately is deeply paradoxical: *as a moral concept* it refers to (the value of) that which lies beyond culture and cannot be hermeneutically appropriated; *as a concept of meaning* it lies within cultural sphere itself and thus implies appropriation of the wild. *Wildness* is a critical border concept that stresses the value of that which lies beyond the realm of culture; but as culture’s antithesis it has a place within the cultural arena of values.

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. Some of the more interesting one’s depict wild nature as an explicitly *non-moral* realm, that is, as radically different from and sometimes hostile towards our human-centered *moral* world, yet also a source for moral self-renewal. But whereas the romantics thought of wild nature as a moral order, the new imagery of wildness seems to play on another conceptual level and problematizes our conceptions of wildness – including the romantic view – on a more fundamental level. Some of the more

interesting movies appear to criticize the dominant environmentalist view of nature, and yet, were highly appreciated by many environmentalists.

In this paper, I discuss three contemporary movies that deal with encounters with wildness. They all criticize the dominant view of wildness, present an alternative account, and discuss the underlying moral issue. The first, *Gerry*, is about two friends who get lost on a hike on a wilderness trail. The second, *Into the Wild*, tells the tragic story of a young man who died while seeking purification in the Alaskan outback. The third – which I discuss most extensively – is *Grizzly Man*, a documentary about a young American who devoted his entire life to protect the wild grizzlies in Alaska and eventually got killed by them. 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 in modern society. The other connecting theme, however, is their depiction of the problematic nature of any idealization of wildness: encountering wild nature can be fatal. This darkness of nature in turn fascinates the contemporary viewer. I show that contemporary viewers are fascinated with these stories because they remind them of a deeper moral truth underneath the need for moral meaning in the wild.

It is possible to interpret these movies on two levels. First, we can try to understand the leading characters, who all share a certain attitude to wildness. On a second level, however, we can consider these movies as narratives that confront the viewer with their own fascination with nature's harsh face. The subject of this paper is thus twofold: first I want to show how wildness can today still fascinate as a counterforce against the overly civilized world; second, I will explain how this fascination itself has become utterly reflexive, and refers to moral meaning of wildness that is both deeply paradoxical and utterly dark.

The contemporary wilderness tales that I 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. In the following, I will analyze more precisely this underlying conception of wildness as both non-moral and morally pregnant.

## **Gerry**

*Gerry* (Gus van Sant, 2002) is a movie about two friends – both named Gerry – who set out for a hike on a 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 expect a nice stroll – apparently

unaware that hiking through the desert can be perilous. Soon after having started, they encounter a family that is also walking the tourist trail. They 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 almost without dialogue and the few words said do not really seem to matter. Both men only talk about trivial matters that do not really seem to interest them. In the absence of words, most interpretation is left to the imagination of the viewer. Maybe *because* of this silence, the story is absorbing. As they try to find their way back, the two Gerrys 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 immersive aspect of the movie, however, is that gradually, the viewer's perception of time and space changes. The movie conveys an *experience* of remoteness. With each subsequent footstep of the main characters, the sense of time and space gets more disrupted. The viewer is 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 men have to *say* to each other remains utterly trivial compared to the eternal silence of this nonhuman world. The serene but hostile grandeur of these surroundings is totally indifferent toward the humane fate. The viewer becomes aware of the insignificance of these young men's fate in this overwhelmingly grand scenery, so that, near the end of the film, when one of the Gerrys dies – or is he killed by his companion? – it appears almost as an indifferent natural event. There is no point being outraged: in the wild, morality is out of place, so it seems.

*Gerry* has been criticized for its lack of a clear narrative structure: it would be nothing more than just an empty shell with beautiful pictures. I believe that such criticism is misplaced because the movie precisely criticizes, in my view, 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 perspectives and values. It shows that the grandeur of wild nature is deeper and more profound than merely human, although it also stresses that this wildness is utterly indifferent towards the fate of humanity and as such ultimately amoral.

Implicitly, the movie seems to criticize the careless attitude of the main characters toward wild nature as the location for a nice, amusing stroll (a distraction from everyday boredom), and for their failure to appreciate the radical otherness and indifference 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 is not accidental. The lesson from the wild cannot be told in human words: it is the *silence* of nature that is most telling. The fascination with wild nature that the film projects reflects a critical stance toward the humanly centered moral world as such. It conveys an utterly reflexive moral meaning that questions morality itself. The experience of the wild raises a silent protest against the arbitrariness of the modern human-centered world. But although the experience of the wild is morally meaningful, it does not provide an explicit wilderness *ethic*.

### **Into the wild**

Whereas the main characters in *Gerry* face the harshness of nature involuntarily and silently, the movie *Into the Wild* (Sean Penn, 2007) is about a consciously sought confrontation with wild nature. It is in this context that wild nature gets a more explicit moral dimension.

The movie *Into the Wild* is based on the 1996 book by journalist and mountaineer Jon Krakauer – a work of non-fiction.<sup>6</sup> It reconstructs the story of Chris McCandless, a twenty-three-year-old man from a well-to-do family, who after graduating from the university, attempted to leave behind the shallow, corrupt, and narrow-minded life of his parents. He changed his name, gave away all of his money, and traveled through the American outback for two years. He then hitchhiked to Alaska, where he intended to spend the summer alone in the wild. He did not make it back. His dead body was eventually found by a moose hunter.

Both movie and book retrace McCandless' quest for truth and self-knowledge that ultimately led to his death, and try to understand his drives and desires. The movie differs from the book in some respects. For one, the film is structured as a road movie – ecstatic music score included<sup>7</sup> – and frames Chris' quest for truth as a coming-to-age story. It shows wild nature mostly as scenery: deserts, canyons and forests are extraordinarily beautiful, joyful places, where one can hike and canoe in sheer bliss, without the responsibilities and hassle, while reading Tolstoy, Thoreau, Muir and London. In contrast, the book is more reflexive and focuses on the ambiguous meaning of McCandless' *call from the wild*. Krakauer argues that Chris was consciously seeking a sense of risk, challenge and friction in the Alaskan outback. Inspired by his favored authors, McCandless believed that humankind had 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 he still experience the essence of life. For that reason, he did not take a map with him – a decision that would later prove to be fatal.<sup>8</sup>

Both book and film portray McCandless as an idealist who was unsatisfied with the bourgeois world in which he grew up. He despised the civilized world that is regulated up to the point that one can hardly experience anything at all. In an effort to leave the confinements and boredom of this “civilized” world behind, he was looking for a challenge in wild nature. This challenge is supposed to 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.

McCandless cut the material bounds with modern society by giving away his savings to charity, burning the cash in his wallet, and abandoning his car and most of his possessions. 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, he 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 wild, living from the land without help from others and without the aid of modern equipment. At first sight, McCandless’ story merely mirrors that of Thoreau, who sought to sustain his livelihood by living with and from the land, and in doing so find spiritual and moral redemption. McCandless, too, tried to sustain himself in nature and find self-knowledge. However, his departure from culture was far more radical. From Thoreau’s hut, Walden, the nearest town, was just a few miles away. In contrast, McCandless distanced himself from the inhabited, human world literally as well as symbolically. For that reason, Jon Krakauer, author of the book, believes, McCandless even left a map behind:

He 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.<sup>9</sup>

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

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 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.<sup>10</sup>

McCandless was looking for the edge: balancing on the small border between being defeated in the harshness of unbounded nature and being able to make oneself a home there. He sought personal transformation and spiritual renewal, but not – as Thoreau – in a life in harmony with nature, but in a life that *takes up the challenge* of the wild. He wanted to experience nature resisting our attempts to control her. As a preparation, he did collect useful knowledge of local plants and animals that could help him survive and he succeeded in doing so for four months. A small mistake would eventually prove him fatal: he died because he ate a poisonous plant that caused him to throw up his food. Eventually, he starved to death. His body was found by a moose hunter later in the season, together with 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 ?<sup>11</sup>

Krakauer defends McCandless against those who accuse him of 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?<sup>12</sup>

Chris' overconfidence would be hubris, an underestimating of nature's force. These critics of McCandless seem to equal respect for wild nature with respect for a worthy opponent, an enemy for whom one should prepare oneself. But as Krakauer points out, this criticism 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. Wild nature deserves a fair shot; only by taking up a challenge the outcome of which is not assured can one sense what it means to be alive.

*Into the Wild* was both a worldwide bestseller and movie blockbuster; its tragic tale appealed widely to a commonly felt and deeply ambiguous position towards wildness.

The first way in which we can interpret the public fascination for this story is fairly straightforward. Many are still drawn to the ideal that also captivated McCandless (and Krakauer): that wild nature poses a critical moral reference point vis-à-vis the all-too-human.



McCandless sought a confrontation with wild nature to free himself from the corruption of mankind – for him, wildness was a moral counter ideal against a particular bourgeois idea of civilization; and the idea of wildness enabled him to criticize moral corruption. Wildness is a source of a different morality that puts in perspective the human-centered morality of everyday life. Many people feel fed up every once in a while with their comfortable overly assured lives in suburbia. The story of McCandless reminds them of the dream of escaping this regulated, dull life and experience a deep sense of wonder and excitement.

However, *Into the Wild* does not just present McCandless as a role model; its moral objective is more complex. Most people would not be willing to follow McCandless' example or would shy away from the challenge. Still, the *story* fascinates many of them too. There is another, more interesting way to interpret the public's fascination with these stories. To understand the viewer's fascination with the story, it is crucial to reflect on the narrative structure of McCandless' story, especially its tragic ending.

Both *Gerry* and *Into the Wild* somehow take the idea of wildness as a point of departure for a moral critique of the all-too-human. *Gerry* opposes the wild with the human realm of moral judgments as such. As soon as this moral stance is made more explicit – as in McCandless' story – the paradox is sharpened. McCandless' ethic implies, 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 consciously risk a possible failure. His moral ideal is to stop avoiding risks – refuse insurances like rifles and maps – and take up the challenges that life has to offer. The real issue of McCandless' ethic is not so much to find a new morality in living with wild nature, but being prepared to confront the realm that withdraws itself from being understood by our moral categories – to transcend morality as such.

But this moral ideal is deeply paradoxical, for it says that the boundaries of the well-ordered *moral* world are to be transcended: it articulates a new morality of wildness whereas at the same time it summons us to transgress morality itself. McCandless was motivated by a *morality of transgressing the moral domain*. Such a paradoxical ethic – a *wild ethic* if you will – is ultimately doomed to fail, because any critique of morality will, in the end, always be a *moral* critique.<sup>13</sup> Even though we seek wildness out of a desire to transcend morality, this commitment itself will always be just another moral enterprise. The escape from morality can therefore never succeed completely – it could only succeed at the expense of a “concept of a continuing, narrative self”.<sup>14</sup>

The fatal endings in these stories can be seen as narrative means to represent the impossibility of any attempt to transcend the confinements of humanity. The public's

fascination with fatal wilderness stories reflect a faint suspicion that longing for the wild is deeply problematic, that the desire to leave behind the all-too-human life (that all of us every now and then feel) is ultimately impossible, because the motive for that desire would itself still be utterly human.

Due to its narrative structure, the tragic tale of Chris McCandless can reflect both these aspects simultaneously: McCandless' quest for liberation *and* his tragic ending *together* 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 this ideal, without betraying the ideal itself.

## **Grizzly Man**

The 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 movie about a fatal wild encounter: Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man* from 2005. This movie, too, enables us to have a closer look at the contemporary fascination with wildness.

*Grizzly Man* was a huge success worldwide. It won numerous awards, stirred a lot of media attention and started hot-tempered discussions among viewers, many of them passionate environmentalists. The heart of the film consists of footage shot by Timothy Treadwell, who lived among wild bears of Alaska for thirteen summers. German filmmaker Werner Herzog took Treadwell's one hundred hours of videotape and fashioned a most intriguing portrait of the Grizzly man. Herzog does not merely tell the story about Treadwell's fatal bear encounter; he also talks to friends and experts about Treadwell's ideas and motivations in an effort to understand Treadwell's fascination with the bears and his underlying view and attitude toward wildness. In the process, Herzog does not shy away from voicing his own vision.

Again, this 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 also 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 first discuss Treadwell's relationship with bears and several criticisms of his ideas as they come forward in the movie. I then reflect on the public's fascination with this narrative.

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 outback. For thirteen summers, he camped in Alaska’s Katmai National Park and Reserve, living among 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 educated the public about wildlife. In the early autumn of 2003, the pilot who was supposed to pick up Treadwell and his girlfriend Amie Huguenard, found their dead remains: 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 one could live among the bears strictly non-violently, without using arms. He lived in their habitat and gradually succeeded in gaining their respect.

Treadwell seemed well-aware of the constant danger of living around these dangerous animals. However, Treadwell was not particularly interested in seeking a challenge in nature (an important difference with McCandless). For sure, he 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 would 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 prompts the viewer’s admiration. Does he not live up to the ideal of living in harmony with nature, that so many find appealing? There seems to be some kind of reciprocity going on in the relation of Treadwell with the bears: both are engaged in some kind of inter-species communication – an exchange of signs and signifiers. To some extent, there seems to be some merging of horizons, maybe even harmony between them.

As the film progresses, however, the straightforward story of Treadwell’s committed environmentalism slowly becomes more ambivalent. At the end of the movie, the viewer is left with uneasy questions: there appears to be something fundamentally wrong with Treadwell’s moral attitude towards the bears.

One of the problems that the movie addresses is Treadwell's far too humanized image of the bears: he gives them pet names like Mr. Chocolate, Aunt Melissa, and Sergeant Brown and declares his love for them. He communicates with them by mimicking their sounds and even tries to cuddle with these animals, but he ignores the fact that we never can be sure of the exact meaning of these sounds and forgets that bears themselves do not allow other adult bears to touch them.

Treadwell's anthropomorphic view is also reflected in his ideas about communication with wild animals. For sure, it may be commendable to seek a reciprocal, nonviolent relationship with animals. And there is certainly *some* form of communication between Treadwell and bears or foxes – both seem to mutually exchange information about mutual expectations and future behavior on their terms. But relationships between humans and animals can never be entirely symmetrical. There are essential differences between species that cannot be ignored.<sup>15</sup> To a bear, the world is a stage on which he can express his species specific expressive potential – nothing more, nothing less. Those things that do not somehow resonate with the bear's expressive repertoire are not really part of his "Umwelt". A bear's "language" will reflect its repertoire of possible actions and anticipations; its "signals" will mostly signify food, mating, order of dominance, food competition, maybe even year cycles. At first glance, a similar thing is true for humans. However, since humans have the capacity to reflect upon their relationship with their world, to them, the world is present *as such*. This also reflects on the meaning of human concepts: human friendship rests on a shared conception of the world. Since grizzlies or foxes do not have a "world", their relationships with people cannot properly be called friendship (irrespective of the value of such a relationship).

Treadwell's anthropomorphism shows most clearly when he is unable to come to terms with certain acts of the bears that would be considered immoral when done by humans. Male bears sometimes kill cubs to stop the females from lactating, and thus have them ready again for fornication. To Treadwell, this harsh reality did not fit into his sentimentalized view of bears. Everything about the bears should be perfect. 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.<sup>16</sup>

In the movie, Herzog suggests that Treadwell's sentimental anthropomorphism had a misanthropic background: his love for the grizzlies would merely signal his inability to come to terms with the problems of adult life. His unease with the human civilized world of overly

complicated, arbitrary social rules and regulations is projected upon an idealized Garden of Eden with bears and humans living peacefully together. As a result, his image of the grizzlies (or of Alaskan wild nature, for that one) often seems to be thoroughly anthropomorphic, if not anthropocentric and trivial.

Treadwell's view also caused him to run into conflicts with the park service, which prohibits intimate contact between bears and humans, because once bears get acquainted to humans, it will be difficult to prevent conflicts between humans and animals. Treadwell believed, however, that his presence was needed to protect the animals. This view effectively made Treadwell the hero of his own environmental epic story:

*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.*<sup>17</sup>

A skeptic could argue that Treadwell's concerns for the bears have more to do with his own sentimental reasons, then with a genuine concern for the survival of the species.

In the movie, Herzog lets Treadwell's rosy picture of nature be criticized by Sam Egli, a helicopter pilot who was called out to assist on the cleanup after the tragedy. Egli is presented as a classic anthropocentric who respects wild nature merely as an *enemy*. According to Egli, Treadwell was a fool who underestimated the enemy:

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.<sup>18</sup>

Notice that Egli does not criticize Treadwell for disrespecting wild nature, but for disrespecting humanity and reason. Strikingly enough, though, both their vision show clear resemblances. For Egli, nature is just an obstacle, nothing but the opposite of humanity: with no room for any positive quality. Treadwell's idea of wildness, on the other hand, is an idealist projection of all those qualities that he misses in humans: wildness is merely an expression of his own spiritual needs. Both views are anthropocentric and conceive of nature as the opposite of humanness, both reduce positive wildness to that which *we* are not; the only difference lies in their evaluation of it.

In sum, the movie raises a lot of second thoughts about Treadwell's ideas about bears. With this sentimental approach, he fails to appreciate the grizzlies as the strange wild animals they are. They are reduced to victims of evil humankind. In the same move, humans are made the locus of everything that is bad in the world. For Treadwell, the wildness in bears clearly

functions as a counter-ideal against human culture, but in this particular case, the problematic nature of that view is in plain sight.

However, the interpretation presented so far cannot really explain why this story has such a broad appeal – especially among environmentalists. The public’s fascination cannot be reduced to the malicious pleasure in the bad fate of a sentimental idiot (*Grizzly Man* is no comedy), or a form of sensation-seeking (it is no horror movie either). The discovery that Treadwell is somehow mistaken does not take away our fascination with his quest. A more nuanced approach should help us understand what it is in this tragedy that fascinates contemporary viewers.

We could start by recognizing that Treadwell’s fascination with wildness is partly *our* fascination as well, and then move on to see what more the narrative evokes.

### **Crossing the border**

*Grizzly Man* does not primarily address the question whether Treadwell’s image of grizzly bears is actually correct. Rather, it questions Treadwell’s *moral commitment* with wildness, notably the shift of his original dedication to protect the grizzly habitat into a more spiritual quest for friendship with the 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 this point of departure:

[In his material,] 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.<sup>19</sup>

In the film, many people comment on Treadwell’s ideas and his relationship with the bears. Friend and ecologist Marnie Gaede underlines that there seems to be kind of a religious meaning involved:

[In his 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.<sup>20</sup>

Is this the kind of wild ethic we saw earlier – implicit in *Gerry* and more explicit in *Into the Wild*: the idea that wildness somehow represents a value that transcends human moral affairs in a radical way? If so, then the “drama of his death” would not only be a *means* to reach other people, but maybe even a realization of that ideal: a transcending of 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 wild ethic is not that its adherents get eaten, but rather that the ideal itself is fundamentally problematic. In the documentary, the idea of unity with the wild as a moral ideal is itself being criticized by different people. Park biologist Larry Van Daele, for instance, criticizes Treadwell for giving in to the illusion – a *siren song* – that it would be 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.<sup>21</sup>

For biologists such as Van Daele, the scientific view provides a means to sanitize one's mind of anthropomorphisms and make sure one is not deceiving oneself with wishful thinking. We know of far too many profound differences between bears and humans 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 film, he articulates 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.<sup>22</sup>

However, Treadwell believed – and ever more often – that he, as a “master”, was able (and qualified) 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.<sup>23</sup>

In the end, Treadwell seemed to be unable to bear the alienness of nature and recognize the unbridgeable gap between him and the bears. 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. He articulates his 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. [...] 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. [...] 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.<sup>24</sup>

Haakanson’s criticizes Treadwell’s bear image not for being inadequate but rather on moral grounds: Treadwell’s quest of wanting-to-be-like-a-bear is criticized as the ultimate form of disrespect towards the bears. Haakanson stresses that the distance between humans and grizzlies is real and the gap cannot be crossed without infringing the natural moral order of things. There *should be* distance between humans and bears, not just because of safety reasons, but also out of respect for what the bear stands for. The bear represents something sacred that should not be touched: in our dealings with the wild, some things are taboo.



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."<sup>25</sup> Exhibited in the museum was a stuffed bear. A group of tourist deliberately cut off a paw from the bear: "Somebody wanted it so much, they cut the paw off."<sup>26</sup> 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 with bears and orders not to cross the borderline between their world and ours. Bears and humans should keep distance from one another, because the gap between both worlds is not merely factual but also a symbolic. On the other side of the gap exists an alien, sacred world of its own, inaccessible to humans, but with its own reason. Mixing up these two spheres is considered sacrilege. The world of bears is radically strange, but in its strangeness it is morally meaningful.

For Haakanson, wild bears do not just represent something intrinsically valuable that is to be protected, but something sacred as well. 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. One could argue that through the taboo itself, the moral *meaning* of the bears is "appropriated" within a symbolic frame of reference. The taboo grants wild bears a critical function *within* culture. But in the act of appreciation, their otherness and wildness is still being acknowledged: wildness functions as a critical outside that offers a measure to culture. In contrast, Treadwell claims to respect the bears as well, but he betrays their otherness because of his anthropomorphism.

### **How to appropriate wildness appropriately**

Can the native criticism account for the post-traditional urban viewer's fascination with the tale of the Grizzly Man? Does it provide an appropriate interpretation of the contemporary "call of the wild"?

Partly it does. The native criticism resembles the lessons about wild ethics that we saw earlier. Treadwell's failure to endure the alienness of wild nature is just an extreme example of a problem that all face once we articulate the value of nature's otherness. 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 wild as something essentially *beyond* appropriation. Each interpretation of the moral meaning of wildness has to

appropriate the alien into the realm of the symbolic, and is therefore in danger of totalizing the image of wild nature in a way that suits one's own plans and schemes. If we do not recognize the inevitable distance between wild nature and our *image* of it, then our love for the wild can easily turn into a kind of narcissism. The case of Treadwell reminds us that only if we take seriously our inevitable epistemological anthropocentrism will we be able to avoid short-circuiting our interpretation of the meaning of wildness.

This awareness of the unbridgeable gap between nature and ourselves could help distinguish between different degrees of appropriateness in the way we cultivate the meaning of wildness. The concept of wildness as something morally meaningful 'outside' does not make sense outside the context of a worldview: it is a thoroughly hermeneutical concept that can never be articulated 'purely', without interpretation. For that reason, there is no objective criterion with which to decide what view on wildness is the most appropriate. But as a critical border concept, wildness enables people to leave the confinements of their all-too-human view and to criticize and transcend cultural norms. Therefore, the appropriateness of interpretations of the wild may depend on the degree to which they acknowledge nature's alterity.

It is, however, hard to imagine that the native taboo will be regarded as a suitable model by most city dwellers in postmodern, post-traditional societies.

The native taboo that prohibits the crossing of borders between humans and bears out of respect for the sacred realm beyond refers to an ancient cultural border that regulates the relationship between culture's inside and outside. As a traditional interpretation of wildness, the native Alaskan view on bears yet again appropriates the alien into a web of cultural meanings. What distinguishes this appropriation from many others is its reference to a *surplus* in meaning. The modern biologist, for instance, resists the *siren song* of becoming one with the bears merely as a fallacious idea. In contrast, in the native view, the bear represents a sacred realm that transcends our merely human moral order: that's why these worlds should not be conflated.

Yet, even this interpretation translates the "view from the outside" into a "view from the inside" – to again use the phrase of Val Plumwood. Although this particular appropriation of the wild articulates and appreciates the value of wildness as something beyond the merely human world, it also enables the Alutiiq to feel at home in the Alaskan peninsula. It helps them *place* the Alaskan natural surrounding in a meaningful image of the world and yet acknowledge its otherness. This is why most native peoples living in fairly natural environments do not share the kind of (post)modern fascination with wildness of which contemporary tales like *Gerry, Into the Wild* and *Grizzly Man* testify: they do not share the

sense of alienation with nature that is presupposed in the concept of wildness.<sup>27</sup> For them, most moral meanings of nature can still be articulated in a cultural form – e.g. the taboo on entering the realm of the bears. The Alutiiq do not need a meaning of wildness as a sphere beyond culture, because their cultural concept of the sacred already provides a means of articulating the dimension that transcends the confinements of the human world, that is to say, paradoxically, the *surplus* of meaning that defies incorporation in the cultural sphere. The taboo acknowledges that at the other side of the border there exists a world in its own right, that we can never become fully one with.

The postmodern fascination for wildness differs radically from the respect for sacred nature in most traditional cultures. In today's post-traditional societies, most taboos are considered as arbitrary societal regulations – just folklore – that do not restrain, but rather pose a challenge. According to Nietzsche, (post)modern humankind resembles a person who stands in front of his wardrobe, sees all kinds of costumes, but is unable to consider anyone of these to be a fitting one for him.

“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—.”<sup>28</sup>

This cultural identity crisis would explain the postmodern pining for the wild. Postmodernity has developed an awareness of the contingency of any moral interpretation and thus also of the limitations of morally recognizing wildness by cultural means. A taboo about wildness would therefore probably not satisfy the modern mind, because it cannot accept any existing cultural codifications of the wild. In stead, it is pining for a meaning beyond all cultural interpretation. Unable of finding a suitable articulation for the moral meaning of the wild, post-modern subjects long – from the rebound – for encounters with wildness beyond or without cultural mediation. The trouble with wildness, however, is that its moral meaning can only be articulated through such appropriations: without interpretation through culture, wildness as such will never be a meaningful home.

One could therefore argue that the post-modern longing for wildness “from the rebound” is just another symptom of today's moral crisis. Many of today's wilderness lovers cannot commit themselves to any *culture of nature*; they are too much of a relativist and constructivist to be disciplined by any moral tradition that interprets nature in moral terms. But although each particular moral interpretation will only articulate certain possible meanings and exclude others, *without* interpretation no moral meanings exist at all. Those

who expect that nature will somehow reveal its moral meaning beyond interpretation spontaneously, will inevitably get disillusioned. The post-modern longing for that which is not yet interpreted would then merely signify our inability to acknowledge those moral meanings of nature that have been handed over by us in history. There is not much to be won there.

But it could also be possible to interpret the contemporary fascination for wild nature not as a symptom, but as a new emerging answer to our problematic relation to nature. In that case, the new fascination for wildness would be a sign of increased sensitivity towards the moral meaning of wild nature and of unease with the attitude of domination and domestication of nature. It would reflect the emergence of a post-modern wild ethic that acknowledges the moral value of that which transcends each particular moral interpretation but is somehow evoked by certain interpretations. In an effort to free nature from debasing moral frameworks, the new wild ethic seeks a way to deal with the existing articulations of the meaning nature more creatively.

## **Conclusion**

Movies of fatal wilderness encounters such as *Gerry* and – to some degree – *Into the Wild* succeed in bringing across the call of the wild; *Grizzly Man* confronts us with the dangers of identifying that call. These movies show that wild nature has a grandeur and sublime indifference compared to which human affairs seem insignificant and futile. Although the quest to identify and become one with the wild must ultimately fail, it is exactly in the tragic failure to grasp its moral meaning that post-modern subjects can discern a last trace of the sacred.

The contemporary dark wilderness tales that we have discussed, all clearly show how attempts at transgressing the human sphere eventually fail. But these narratives can also bring into focus *that which lies beyond* these failed attempts to grasp the meaning of the wild. In this sense, these narratives can be seen as last postmodern attempts to articulate the sacredness of wild nature. If this interpretation has any credibility, then the movies discussed here are not hypercritical nihilist visions on human-nature relationships, but instead postmodern religious celebrations of the sacredness of wild nature.

\* Department for Philosophy and Science Studies (ISIS), Faculty of Science, Radboud University Nijmegen, P.O.Box 9010, NL-6500GL Nijmegen, The Netherlands; email: m.drenthen@science.ru.nl. Drenthen's research topics include ethics of place, environmental hermeneutics, the value of wildness, ethics of ecological restoration, and Nietzschean environmental philosophy. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2006 Joint ISEE/IAEP Conference, May 30<sup>th</sup> to June 2<sup>nd</sup> 2006 in Allenspark, Colorado. The author wishes to thank Pieter Lemmens, Ned Hettinger, Hub Zwart, Ton Lemaire, Glenn Delière, Nathan Kowalsky and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

### **Endnotes:**

1. For a list of environmentally relevant films, see: <http://www.esf.edu/ecn/films.html>.
2. Val Plumwood, "Being Prey," in: D. Rothenberg, and M. Ulvaeus (eds.), *The New Earth Reader. The Best of Terra Nova* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), p.79.
3. In a sense, of course, wildness *is* part of the human world: our existence is intertwined with natural processes on all levels, most of which we do not control. For that reason, the idea of wildness as the inhuman has been contested. However, seen from the perspective of a subject who interprets the world, wildness conveys itself as an "outside", in contrast with the "view from the inside" that is constructed to sustain a sense of self (cf. Plumwood, "Being Prey", p.79).
4. This notion is not meant to play down the difference between more or less violent acts of appropriation of nature. Draining marshland literally destroys the wild and unruly, whereas – in contrast – the merely symbolic act of appropriation of a poet attempts to give voice to a meaning that lies "beyond". Still, the term appropriation is to remind us about the difference between the familiarity of our words and images and the strangeness of what they try to express.
5. Martin Drenthen, "Wildness as a Critical Border Concept; Nietzsche and the Debate on Wilderness Restoration," *Environmental Values* 14/3 (2005) p. 317-337.
6. Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (New York: Villard / Random House, 1996).
7. In the scene where Chris arrives in Alaska for the first time, the viewer is confronted with an overwhelming silence of wild nature, only to be reassured with a nice music soundtrack a few moments later.
8. Actually, McCandless stayed at a very "civilized" part of Alaska: if he only would have had a detailed map, he would probably have made it back alive.
9. From Jon Krakauer's radio interview with host Terry Gross on *Fresh Air* which is distributed by National Public Radio and produced by WHYY FM in Philadelphia.
10. Jon Krakauer, "Author's Note" in *Into the Wild* (no page number).

11. *Into the wild*, p. 12.
12. Krakauer, radio interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*.
13. Cf. Martin Drenthen, "The Paradox of Environmental Ethics. Nietzsche's view of Nature and the Wild," *Environmental Ethics* 21(1999): 163-175.
14. Cf. Plumwood, "Being prey", p.79
15. For an extensive analysis of the way different types of organisms 'mediate' their relation with the "external world" differently, see: Helmut Plessner Plessner: *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975).
16. Werner Herzog, in the voice over of *Grizzly Man*. We could in turn criticize Herzog for not recognizing that bears do have a world on there own. For him, wild nature as merely that which is left if we remove all that is human.
17. *Grizzly man*, from original video footage, filmed by Treadwell himself. Emphasis added.
18. *Grizzly man*, from an interview with Werner Herzog, filmed after Treadwell's death.
19. *Grizzly man*, voice over.
20. *Grizzly man*, from an interview filmed after Treadwell's death.
21. *Grizzly man*, from an interview filmed after Treadwell's death.
22. *Grizzly man*, from Treadwell's original video footage.
23. *Grizzly man*, from Treadwell's original video footage.
24. *Grizzly man*, from an interview filmed after Treadwell's death.
25. *Grizzly man*, from an interview filmed after Treadwell's death.
26. *Grizzly man*, from an interview filmed after Treadwell's death.
27. See, for instance different 'Third and Forth World' critiques on the wilderness idea in M. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott (eds.), *The Great Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998)
28. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, (transl. Helen Zimmern), aphorism 223.