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Understanding the Meaning of Wolf Resurgence. Ecosemiotics and Landscape Hermeneutics

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We have entered the era of the Anthropocene, so it goes. More and more people are becoming aware the planet we live on is increasingly changed by human activity. When in 1980, Caroline Merchant (1980) talked about the 'death of nature', and criticized the death of the *concept* of nature, she did not foresee nature itself disappearing. In 1989, conservationist Bill McKibben (1989), in one of the first public books[1] on global warming, proclaimed "the death of nature" and stressed that nature no longer was a force independent of humans but instead was deeply influenced by humans, this caused a shock in public debate. In 2000, Nobel Prize Laureate Paul Crutzen and his colleague Eugene Stoermer proposed using the term Anthropocene for the current geological epoch – which was then still considered a controversial position (Crutzen & Stoermer 2000).

Today, saying that we entered the Anthropocene sometimes almost feels like a truism. An increasing number of people are coming to terms with the fact that humans are the major force of environmental change on the planet. What is more, whereas earlier in the debate on the Anthropocene the context was that of a threatening global ecological crisis, today the tone of the debate seems to have shifted. Although today many still stress the challenges that the new era presents, others are arguing that the end of nature can be a liberating experience that offers new opportunities. The authors of the Ecomodernist manifesto (Asafu-Adjaye et.al, 2015) "reject" the idea "that human societies must harmonize with nature to avoid economic and ecological collapse" and instead rely on technologies to help us "decouple human development" from ecology. They argue that it is up to humankind to decide which parts of nature are useful to us and save those ecosystem services that we consider worthwhile protecting. According to Mark Lynas, author of the book with the telling title *The God species* (Lynas 2011) and one of the co-authors of the manifesto, "the essential truth of the Anthropocene is this: neither God nor Gaia is in charge. We are. We now get to decide

1. The scientific community had been talking about climate change much earlier, obviously.

everything from the pH of the oceans to the temperature of the biosphere to the very composition and future evolutionary path of life on Earth" (Lynas 2015).

The ecomodernists clearly advocate the idea that humans are in charge, that is: that humans not only need to, but can and should control nature by means of technology and economic valorization. I argue, though, that ecomodernism is utterly based on a mistaken idea that the increased human influence on the planet leads to an increased control of nature. Whereas ecomodernists set out to decouple the human and the natural world, in fact both worlds get increasingly intertwined. Ecomodernists fail to see that increased human influences make the planet less predictable and controllable. Moreover, they fail to acknowledge that humans are not the only agents in world of the Anthropocene, there is other nonhuman agency too.

When McKibben recognized that pristine, untouched nature hardly exists anymore, he did layout two possible responses to this situation: the first, "the defiant reflex", was to develop better ways of managing the world, the "more humble" response would be that humankind would learn that it doesn't need to be in control. I believe that this second option is much more appropriate in light of what we know about our current ecological condition. It may be true that we live in a world that is increasingly changed by human activity but we humans are not the only agents in the world of the Anthropocene (although it may be that we are the only species able to recognize that fact). We still share that world with other species, species that have their own agency. This becomes clear in the case of resurging wildlife in Europe.

The European landscape is rapidly changing due to human impacts. Humans have transformed the European landscape for many centuries, by farming, building infrastructure and cities: cultivating the land and domesticating other species. More recently, humans are having another kind of impact: in an effort to compensate for centuries of environmental decline, national governments and NGO's attempt to increase the size and connectedness of natural areas in Europe (Coleman & Aykroyd 2009). The concept of rewilding is becoming more influential in European nature conservation. Most often, the term refers to the return of habitats to a 'natural state', or to "the mass restoration of ecosystems" (Monbiot 2013), or to the deliberate release of 'missing' species into the wild. For others, rewilding refers to "action at the landscape level with the goal of reducing human control and allowing ecological and evolutionary processes to reassert themselves" (Klyza 2001, 285), some use the term for the reversal of human 'domestication'.

Rewilding projects typically start with the designation of new, large-scale habitat

areas, and the reintroduction of extirpated species. The establishment of large-scale wilderness areas is meant to create stable refuges for biodiversity, whereas the European ecological network Natura 2000 connects existing natural areas so that species can migrate more easily and biodiversity loss due to fragmentation is counteracted. But although rewilding starts with human actions and policies, these only form the starting point. Rewilding impleis an invitation to non-human nature to respond to our initial actions. Rewilding therfore can better be thought of as the attempt to re-open the communication between humans and non-human species and to acknowledge the need to renegotiate the use of shared space between them.

But wild nature doe not just result from human nature policies, it also resurfaces spontaneously (Höchtl et al. 2005, Hunziker 1995). As the European human population decreases and people are moving to the urban centers, rural regions get abandoned. As soon as the human influence on the landscape becomes less dominant, non-human species take the opportunity to occupy new habitats. But the resurgence of wild species is not limited to rural, fairly uninhabited zones. In some urban zones, too, urban adapters such as fox and stone marten increasingly roam the city centers and suburbs. Lynx, bison, beaver, and wild boar are already repopulating areas they had disappeared from centuries ago. The number of beavers showed an 14055% increase since 1960, European bison 3084% since 1960, Grey seal 893% since 1977, Pyrenean ibex 855% since 1960, Southern chamois 537% since 1970 (Deinet et al. 2013). A recent study found that today Europe has twice as many wolves as the contiguous United States, despite it being half the size and more than twice as densely populated (Chapron et al. 2014). Large carnivores are re-populating Europe's humanly-dominated landscapes. Apparently, Europeans somehow manage to coexist with species that only recently were hunted down and extirpated. Although rewilding projects occasionally meet local resistance, particularly in areas with a long cultural history, mostly they are applauded by the general public.

The changes to the European landscape have had several effects on animal behavior. These changes are meticulously studied: ecologists and natural scientists study the changing patterns of animal behavior and take note of shifts in habitat distribution and food webs. In response to the omnipresence of humans, wild animals get more and more used to humans and change their behavior accordingly. Sociologists, anthropologists and cultural geographers examine shifts in human perceptions and use of landscapes, and study changes in power relationships on the land as a result of landscape change. The animal world as well as the human world is changing, and both changes are related.

One of the most spectacular examples of these landscape changes is the return of the wolf (*Canis lupus lupus*) in Europe. Wolves are returning to landscapes where they had disappeared for many decades, they are recolonizing parts of the European landscape that not just bear the marks of human presence, but that are thoroughly humanized. Wolves are discovering how to live close to human civilization. Conversely, humans living in these cultural landscapes have to learn what it means to live in increasingly hybrid landscapes, in which wild and tame get intertwined.

Contrary to widespread traditional ideas about the relation between culture and nature, there is no clear separation between humanly dominated, domesticated cultural land and untouched, pristine natural wildernesses. In the long debates about the Anthropocene, many authors have convincingly shown that humans have had an extensive impact on landscapes for ages already, even long before today's agricultural practice.[2] Yet, recently, we seem to witness a proliferation of *hybrid* landscapes, as more non-human species are recolonizing humanly dominated territory. This process does not only have material aspects, but can also be studied in terms of semiotic communication. As human and nonhumans live together ever more closely, their respective spheres of significance are becoming increasingly entangled too. Changes in the landscape change the relation between humans and non-human animals, and both nonhumans and humans need to respond to the new situation. For humans, these changes may challenge existing notions of moral environmental identity, among other things, and call for a revision of existing understandings of the world they inhabit and of the creatures that they share their world with.

Ecosemiotic Approach to Landscape Change

An ecosemiotic analysis may contribute to a better understanding of changing landscapes and changing human-animal relationships. An example of such an approach can be found in Timo Maran's article about the appearance of the golden jackals (*Canis aureus*) in Estonia (2015).[3] Maran sums up nicely what is the methodological starting point of an ecosemiotics approach to species management:

"1. Natural processes, nonhuman animals and human social groups are all considered

2. Ellis & Ramankutty (2008) show how most of the biomes of the Earth have been impacted by human activities.

3. Another great example is Morten Tønnessen's ecosemiotic analysis of Norwegian wolf management (Tønnessen 2010, Tønnessen 2011).

as agents that are able to initiate change and that can be influenced by the change initiated by other parties.

2. All living parties (species, different social groups) are considered to be semiotic subjects. Semiotic subjects seek to understand their environment. In doing this, semiotic subjects have abilities of modeling (that is, making sense of surrounding environments, processes and actors on the basis of analogical relations and self-modeling).

3. The process of species management is seen as a dynamical interaction of selfmodeling and modeling processes between different human parties and biological species. In this process, different means of communication, translation and persuasion are used." (Maran 2015,3)

Maran analyzes the development of the discourse about the appearance of a new species, the golden jackals, in the Estonian landscape, with the aim of helping species management and communication about human-animal interactions to better deal with changes in the "encounter of different semiotic subjects"(2015, 3). Maran shows how the discourse evolved when the new species entered the Estonian landscape, reflects shifts in the interactions between the jackal and humans. It appears that the golden jackal's semiotic activity played an essential role in the development of the discourse, but at the same time, he notes that "human cultural models also influence the interpretation of a new species to a considerable degree" (2015,1). In order "to improve human communication about new or invasive species," Maran suggests "to raise awareness of the underlying cultural models and to use integrative communication as the developing discourse is dynamical and constantly changing for all interest groups" (2015,1).

A semiotic analysis like the one presented here can contribute significantly to a better understanding of changing animal-human relationships. It can help explain the interrelation between the way that animals make sense of their world and the way that people think of these animals, and point to changes in the semiosphere due to recent environemntal changes. A semiotic analysis may even explain how certain cultural ideas about animals and their place in the landscape have become problematic in light of recent environmental changes. Yet, it can be questioned whether this semiotic explanation alone is enough to arrive at an adequate normative assessment of the situation. The strength of an ecosemiotics approach lies in its ability to make a relational analysis of the semiosphere, but in its 'explanatory' form of understanding also lies its limitation. And although the ecosemiotic analysis does include the first person perspective of both human and non-human beings, the very 'impartiality' of its

approach also inhibits an adequate understanding of the normative issues at stake for us humans.

There is a relevant difference between the kind of semiotic understanding of signs that humans share with other animals, and the typical hermeneutic interpretative understanding of meanings that is typical for humans.[4] Animals understand the world as correlate of their sensory apparatus; they understand functional relationships between their own sensory existence, and their surroundings, and thus form a representation or model of the world. Conversely, their communication forms consists of 'exchanging signs that represent aspects of their relationship to their environment. Human understanding of meaning, in contrast, transcends this mere 'instrumental' relationship. Human interpretations of world do not so much *re*present, but rather *present* a world; and thus they transform a simple environment ('Umwelt') into a world 'that one could inhabit', to use a phrase by Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1991, p.149).

The question of moral meaning necessarily presupposes a human perspective, as Bernard Williams has convincingly argued.[5] This does not mean, of course, that the non-human perspective on the world is irrelevant, morally or otherwise. It simply means, that the question of the moral significance and meaning of a specific situation, is a question that is addressed to us humans, as members of a human language community embedded in a cultural tradition. Taking seriously the moral dimension of a siuation requirs that we do take seriously that specific human understanding of the world. The question why and how *non*human perspectives on the world should matter to us, is itself a thoroughly human question of meaning.

Environmental hermeneutics is the approach in environmental philosophy and ethics that seeks to do justice to the central role of interpretation in the (normative) relationship between humans and their environment. According to hermenutics, all understanidng is self-

4. Aristotle already made a similar distinction between the kind of knowledge that humans share with animals that refers to pleasure and pain, and other meanings directly related to actions and sensory experiences, and the typical human knowledge or logos, that is interested in ethical meanings and assessments regarding "the just and the unjust", "good and evil" . "Whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state." (Aristotle, *Politics* Book 1, Chapter 2).

5. Williams 1985, p. 119-119. Also see Tongeren & Snellen 2014.

understanding. From a hermeneutic perspective, the very idea that meanings can exists outside the realm of human understanding and interpretation is by itself incomprehensible. Meaning is tied to the perspective of historical beings that are 'suspended in language', beings that are capable of understanding meanings.

The changing role of animals in hybrid landscapes does not only raise questions that demand an explanation, but can also appear to us as a menaingfull situation that beckons to be understood. The answer to the question what is the meaning of the resurgence of wild wolves in our landscapes, and how one should respond to it, is a question that is as much about the wolf as it is about ourselves. Therefore, a full understanding of the meaning of changing landscapes and the resurgence of predators requires that the semiotic explanatory approach is complemented by another, more interpretative, hermeneutic approach.

In this chapter, I show how the work of Paul Ricoeur can help shed light on the relation between an ecosemiotic and a hermeneutic approach to landscape change. Ricoeur distinguishes two approaches to reading texts: a 'structural analysis' of a text that seeks to understand the internal structure of a text by examining the relationship of textual elements to each other, and a hermeneutic interpretation of the text, that begins with the dialectic between reader and text, and seeks to understand the text as "a world that one might inhabit". I will first present Ricoeur's distinction a bit more in detail, and will then show how it can help think through the how a semiotic analysis of wolf resurgence can and must be complemented by a hermeneutic inquiry into the meaning of the return of the wolves.

Ricoeur on Reading Texts

In his essay "What is a text? Explanation and understanding" (Ricoeur 1981), Ricoeur sets out to show that explanation and interpretation are not opposite modes of understanding, , but rather that they are complementary ways of approaching a text, both of which are legitimate responses to the nature of a text. What sets a text apart from other forms of language use, is that a text is "a discourse fixed by writing" (Ricoeur 1981, 146). Ricoeur explains what is a text by comparing written texts with the use of language in speech. According to Ricoeur the significant difference between texts and speech is that in speech, a speaker can accompany his signs and explain himself, whereas texts (and other text-like 'things') are not self-explanatory and therefore require interpretation. When language is transformed into a *text*, Ricoeur argues, it assumes a life of its own, or to use a typical Ricoeurian phrase: "the text has emancipated

from its author".[6] Without an external authoritative source to turn to regarding the meaning of a text, a reader can only revert to the act of reading the text itself. Moreover, a text is also emancipated from the world; in a text the relation with the world is also "interrupted". Whereas in speech, a speaker can literally point to the things he is talking about; a speaker presents to an interlocutor a 'real' world of which both speaker and interlocutor are part, a text brings forth a world of its own, an imaginary world that is a closed structure of references. The reader is needed for that text to become 'alive' again, if only because gaps in the text's internal references must ultimately be filled by the imagination of the reader in order to make sense.

Because of this emancipation from author and world, a text can approached in two distinct ways: "We can, as readers, remain in the suspense of the text, treating it as a worldless and authorless object; in this case, we explain the text in terms of its internal relations, its structure. On the other hand, we can lift the suspense and fulfill the text in speech, restoring it to living communication; in this case, we interpret the text. These two possibilities both belong to reading, and reading is the dialectic of these two attitudes" (Ricoeur 1981, 152). Explanation and interpretation are therefore not opposite modes of understanding, but rather different, complementary ways of reading a text that both have their own role to play in the act of reading. When linguists and other structuralist set out to *explain* how a text 'works', how it is internally structured, and how the different language elements in a text are related , they focus on a 'structural analysis', their text "has no outside but only an inside; it has no transcendent aim, unlike a speech that is addressed to someone about something" – a kind of reading that "is not only possible but legitimate" (Ricoeur 1981, 153). The second approach to reading, in contrast, does not seek to explain how a text is internally structured, but rather, asks what the text has to say about the world, what is its meaning *for the reader*. According to Ricoeur, "it is this second attitude that is the real aim of reading. [...] If reading is possible, it is indeed because the text is not closed in on itself but opens out onto other things" (Ricoeur 1981, 158). Only in this second approach, can "texts speak of possible worlds and of possible ways of orienting oneself in these worlds" (Ricoeur 1981, 177). If the reader answers to the 'invitation of the text', then the 'refiguration of the world by the text' can brings about an active reorganization of the reader's being-in-the-world. It is through the

6. Contrary to romantic hermeneuticists, Ricoeur holds that the meaning of a text does not coincide with the intention of the author, if only because some texts accommodate much richer readings than the author intended..

texts one reads and by imagining oneself in the meaningful worlds that are being opened by these texts that one gets to know 'oneself as another' (Ricoeur 1992).

Understanding the meaning of a text thus requires an openness to the world as presented by the text, and a willingness to 'place oneself' – for the time being – in that world: text, world, and reader are engaged in a dialectical relationship. Yet, understanding meanings requires an active appropriation by the reader. Texts may appeal to us with a claim to significance, but their *meaning* only becomes clear once we attempt to interpretatively appropriate or "bring home" what it is that beckons to be understood.[7]

In other words: good reading requires an openness for the 'strangeness' a text ('*distantiation'*) and a willingness to abstract from the context of one's particular life. but it also demands involvement, actively participation and a willingness to bring to bear the meanings of words and concepts that play a role in his own life ('*appropriation'*). Ricoeur argues that both modes of reading are intertwined and presuppose each other: explanation implicitly rests on a background hermeneutic understanding of the text as somehow worthwhile analyzing. At the same time, a serious hermeneutic interpretation cannot do without a systematic process of explanation, because it brings into play the 'objectivity' of a text, conveying certain structural features of the text that need to be acknowledged if an interpretative appropriation of a text is to do justice to that text.

Hermeneutic Interpretation of Landscape Change

Ricoeur's view on the dialectic between these two ways of reading can be helpful in thinking through what a critical understanding of the meaning of a landscape might entail. Although there are of course many differences between landscapes and texts,[8] to understand our interpretational relationships to landscapes as *reading practices*, emphasizes the fact that when landscapes present themselves as somehow significant, they still need interpretation. Landscapes do not 'speak' to us, rather they beckon to be interpreted. Their meaning is not merely 'out there' waiting to be discovered, they have to be *appropriated* by us as interpreters (Drenthen, 2011). To understand what a particular place means to me, I need to appropriate it, make it my own, and in our attempts to understand what these environments mean to us, we

7. But this does *not* imply, of course, that we the meanings we encounter are made or constructed by us, the world outside exists, and throws its questions at us. See Drenthen 1999.

8. One obvious difference is that a text is fixed, whereas landscapes are constantly changing. The analogy should not blind us to the dynamics of landscapes.

always take ourselves along. And yet, in doing so we also need to do justice to the landscape itself. Just as a structural analysis of a text, an ecosemiotic reading of a landscape may focus on the internal physical and semiotic relationships within that landscape. Such an analysis can focus on the other, non-human semiotic perspectives that are present in the landscape, on the relationship between different significant elements in that landscape and on the changes of these through time. Doing so can reveal the complex context of our own understandings of the world. and remind us that our human perspective on the world is not the only one.

Yet, we are ultimately thrown into our own symbolic understandings of the world, our human (all-too-human?) perspective. A hermeneutic interpretation of the landscape, on the other hand, will set out to examine how we interpreters can 'appropriate' the landscape, can interpret and understand the landscape as a place that one can inhabit. Hermeneutics assumes that humans are meaning seeking beings, and the world they inhabit is a reflection thereof. We live in a world that is always already interpreted, that is: the meanings and interpretations of our world are no secondary addition to an otherwise "objective" reality, but rather *form the very fabric* of the kind of world that matters to us. A *critical* hermeneutic understanding of a landscape, however, aims to find an deeper understanding of oneself-in-place that incorporates a structural landscape analysis.

The world that appears to us as meaningful is a world that we managed to appropriate, make our own. But every now and them an environment presents us with issues that breach our world view en that need to be acknowledged in our interpretations of the world.[9]

We interpret the world by 'appropriating' it through our pre-understandings – bringing the phenomenon 'home', as it were –, and yet, in an attempt to do justice to our experience of meaning, we also need to distance ourselves from our pre-understandings and expose ourselves to what the 'text' of the world itself has to say to us. Because of this the dialogical relation between self and world, each hermeneutic understanding of the world also implies a form of self-understanding: how we interpret the landscape reveals as much about the world as it does about ourselves. And therefore, as soon as radical landscape change forces us to revise our understanding of a landscape, our identity is at stake as well.

O'Neill, Holland and Light point out that "people make sense of their lives by placing themselves in a larger normative context, and that this is one of the reasons why *environments*

9. As John Berger puts it: "What we habitually see confirms us. Yet it can happen, suddenly, unexpectedly, and most frequently in the half-light of glimpses, that we catch sight of another visible order which intersects with ours and has nothing to do with it." (Berger 2001: 10)

matter to people too: because environments embody just such contexts for self-understanding" (2008, 162-164). But given the complexity of the landscape, and the dialectic between reader and text, the landscape can give rise to different normative interpretations of the meaning of a landscape, which might play a role in many environmental conflicts. Environmental conflicts are not merely between different interpretations of an environment, but often also between different notions of personal identity and sense of place (Drenthen 2009a, Drenthen, 2013; Deliège & Drenthen, 2014). That is why different landscape readings can easily give rise to deep and seemingly irresolvable conflicts about the landscape, especially when existing landscape interpretations are challenged by rapid landscape change. This is the case even more so when we are confronted with changes that are not initiated by us, but where nonhuman nature itself spontaneously changes and forces us to redefine our place. Interpreting a place requires an active appropriation and investment of self, but also a willingness to let the text tell me something about myself that I did not know before. We must therefore understand how places have always already contributed to who we are, learn to understand ourselves *through the landscape that we find ourselves in* (Drenthen, 2011*)*, and then move on to produce more adequate interpretations of the meaning of the land to enable more adequate practices.

A critical landscape hermeneutic will stress that each narrative interpretation of the landscape has to do justice to the text itself, and thus include a relational analysis of the landscape text. When landscapes change, they force us to reconsider the old ideas we have about these landscapes. If the landscape changes, and relationships between different species change, one could argue that the structure of a text changes, the text itself changes, which forces us to re-read the landscape text and acknowledge the structural changes that have taken place. This way, an ecosemiotics analysis of changing landscapes can provide a criterion for ethical debates on landscape conflicts.

Environmental hermeneutic seeks to better understand the meanings at stake in these conflicts of interpretation, and is engaged in finding ways to further the dialogue. Finding a new relationship to a text does not merely involve acknowledgement of the structural composition of the text, it also involve a change in the way that the reader is involved in the reading of the text. A critical environmental hermeneutics will therefore have to explicate the interpretational base of our being-in-the-world by articulating those pre-existing meanings and interpretations that already play a role in how we act and think, and in doing so force us to have a second look at them. Some of our previous interpretations of the land may prove to be inadequate or outdated once we properly reflect upon them.

A hermeneutical environmental *ethics* will ask in what sense these old interpretations can still be considered adequate articulations of how the world we find ourselves in beckons to be understood, or whether we should seek new articulations. Rearticulating these meanings can be laborious, but plays a critical part.

The task of a hermeneutical environmental ethics, then, is to articulate and make explicit those interpretations and meanings that are already at work in our everyday practices, to bring them to light and make them explicit, and to confront existing meanings and interpretations with other, less obvious interpretations. Doing so will increase our sensitivity for the many different meanings that can be at stake in our dealings with a particular place.

Conversely, changes in the relation between humans and nonhuman species also urge for drastic rethinking of existing ideas. A case in point is the return of wolves, who are recolonizing thoroughly humanized lands. The conflicts between those who want to welcome the return of resurging wild animals and those who feel they should be stopped are also not just about wolves, but also about different notions of environmental self.

In the following section, I will give a brief impression of how a hermeneutic of wolf resurgence would proceed, and how it would incorporate elements of a structural analysis.

A Hermeneutic Analysis of Wolf Resurgence in the Netherlands

The resurging of the wolf in Western Europe is one of the most spectacular examples of spontaneous rewilding. The wolf was exterminated in most parts of western Europe in the 19th Century. Populations only existed in more remote areas in Eastern and Southern Europe. But in the last decade, wolf populations again are spreading across Europe. Italian wolves have moved north to the French, Swiss and Austrian Alps; Eastern European wolves have established themselves in former East Germany, and are moving westward.

In early 2015, the first wolf entered the Netherlands. It crossed the border from Germany and roamed the Northern parts of the Netherlands for four days, walking for 200 kilometers, mostly through meadows and small woods, but also next to roads and highways.

The return of the wolf immediately made headline news. Initially it was met with a mixture of fascination, excitement and anxiety, however, when the animal passed through commercial zones and occasionally through towns, many had a growing sense of unease. Clearly, the animal did not show the kind of shyness and fear for humans that the expert had predicted. Was this really a wild wolf, or might it be a wolf-dog hybrid? And might an animal with no fear of humans pose a threat? Policy makers started making contingency plans –

tagging the animal, scaring it away, releasing it in less populated areas – but before these could be put into practice, the wolf disappeared again. After four days in the Netherlands, the wolf went back to Germany, and disappeared from sight.

Interestingly, the debate about the appearance of the wolf did not only concern existing ideas about wolves, and about what would be an appropriate relationship between humans and non-human nature, but also specifically about the relation between the Dutch and their landscape.[10] It turned out that the different views on whether or not people should welcome the wolf and should learn to share living space with them, were deeply intertwined with different notions of the nature of the Dutch landscape as well as different notions of environmental identity. Moreover, the wolf's arrival appeared to challenge existing notions both of the specific cultural nature of the Dutch landscape and of what it means to live in a cultural landscape.

In the following section I will discuss at least four different interpretations of the meaning of wolf resurgence as they surfaced in the debate: the wolf as an intruder, as an innocent victim and friend attempting to return to where it belongs, the wolf as a normal animal and an object of management and the resurging wolf as a symbol for the return of self-willed nature.[11] Some of these wolf images, so I will argue, are dependent on specific understandings of the relation between humans and nonhuman nature, or culture and wild nature if you will, views that are no longer adequate in light of the recent developments. As a result of changes in the relational role of wildlife in the hybrid landscapes of the Anthropocene, existing wolf images are called into question, and as a result also existing identities are challenged.

Wolf Haters

One of the most prominent responses to the arrival of the wolf was disbelief, followed by anxiety and hostility. Many argued that the Netherlands is much too small and too densely populated for wolves to settle. Some even made the stronger claim that a proper wolf would never *want to* come to a place like the Netherlands, therefore there must be something wrong

10. In the following I focus on contemporary imagery of wolves in the Netherlands as it played out in public debates in media in 2012-2015. Of course, older and more general cultural meanings attached to wolves are still at play as well. For a concise review of the cultural and historical meanings attached to wolves ('cultural semiotics') in Europe, see Tønnessen 2010: 56-64. Also see Drenthen et al 2015.

11. See Drenthen 2014 for a more elaborate version of this analysis.

with it. The image of the wolf as a 'wild' animal and intruder that does not belong to present-day cultural landscapes is persistent (Skogen et al. 2008, Tønnessen 2010), despite convincing evidence that wolves are not confined to wild places such as old growth forests, but are perfectly able to flourish in cultural landscapes, and have done so for many centuries, as long as there is enough prey and there are enough hiding places. This image of the wolf fits too perfectly into a worldview for which the separation of wild and culture is of crucial importance. In this view, cultural landscapes derive their meaning and value from their (human) history of cultivation, from having been appropriated from (a-historical) nature. The Dutch seem to take pride from the idea that their landscape is human made. "God created the world, Netherland was made by the Dutch," so a Dutch saying goes. To cultivate a landscape is to 'humanize' it, to establish meaning, and bestow sense upon the world. The implication of such a view is that cultural landscapes and wild lands are separate realms of reality.

In this view, there is no problem as long as wolves remain in the outside world of wilderness. But as soon as they appear in *our* world, they are seen as intruders. In other words, a structural analysis of wolf behavior challenges the existing self understanding of wolf haters, and calls for a revisions of deeply seated ideas about the relation between self and wildness.

What is most disturbing thing about wolves for those who fear its arrival appears to be that the wolves themselves, through their behavior, seem to undermine the very distinction between wild and cultivated land that is so important to the defenders of cultural landscapes. By challenging the very difference between wilderness and culture that is so important to the identity of heritage protectionists, wolves present a threat to the kind of environmental identity that relies on the neat separation of both domains. The hostility towards wolves is a response to the threat of a particular normative worldview.[12]

12. The situation in the Netherlands seems rather different than that in Norway. Tønnessen notes that in Norway, it is the "idea of the changing landscapes as symbolic of rural troubles and the loss of traditional livelihoods that is fuelling, reinforcing, the wolf's negative symbolicity and the apparently never-ending conflict on wolf management." (Tønnessen 2011:73). In contrast, in the Netherlands, most of the opposition against wolves in the Netherlands is unrelated to any perceived threat to livelihoods, but rather stems from a vague sense of fear for the life of one's children and pets. This fear is not based on any actual experiences but fuelled by the traditional worldview where wild humans have to fenced out nature in order for humans to flourish.

Wolf Lovers

Not all people opposed the wolf's return, many feel that wolves deserve our respect and we should seek to coexist with them. But some go one step further and claim to have a deep emotional connection to them. In their eyes, the return of the wolf – this beautiful, intelligent and highly social animal – is a blessing for a country where nature has almost disappeared. These wolf lovers typically talk of wolves as the victims of a hostile human culture that seeks to subdue nature. In contrast to morally corrupt society, wolves represent authenticity, pureness, honesty, grace, and innocence: "I'd rather have a wolf as a friend"; "a wolf is honest, people lie and deceit"; "humans are the real beasts". What is striking, though, is that many self-declared wolf lovers compare wolves to their own domestic dog, and thereby systematically embezzle the basic fact that wolves are predators. Unlike domestic dogs, wild wolves need to stalk their prey, use their social skills and intelligence to hunt and kill.

The problem with this perspective is not just that it is naive, but rather that it conceives of wolves as isolated individuals, not as functioning members of an ecological community. This perspective ignores any ecological as well as ecosemiotic understanding of the wolf's place in the landscapes they inhabit. This lacking recognition of the structural role of wolves might also be the reason why initial public support for wolves can quickly evaporate and turn against the wolves as soon as conflicts appear. As long as we live separate lives, we might try to ignore their presence, fence them off or claim to love them. By failing to recognize wolves as 'emplaced' parts of an ecosystem, as inhabitants of the same landscapes that we live in, this perspective fails to see what is the ethical challenge in wanting to coexist with wolves

If we do not recognize wolves as real animals living in the ecological, semiotic and social context of our landscapes we are not doing justice to the text.

Wolves as Manageable Objects

Both wolf haters and wolf lovers seem to have difficulty acknowledging the wolf in all its relevant features as part of a living landscape. For this reason, many feel that the most important thing that can help further the debate is to separate fact from fiction, and to fight prejudices and preconceptions about the wolf that are not based on facts. The assumption of this 'wolf management' approach is that if we see wolves objectively, as 'normal' animals, seek a sober and balanced, rational and realistic understanding, it should be possible for a modern rich country such as the Netherlands to change its policies in such a way that humans

can coexist with wolves. Such an approach makes ample use of existing ecological as well as ecosemiotic knowledge about wolves. Wolf managers rightfully assume that it is possible to correct false ideas about the wolf. However, by stressing the 'normalness' of the wolf, they also implicitly seem to assume that one can abstract from interpretative understandings of wolves. Such a normalization strategy of wolf perception management fails to recognize is the fact that perceptions of wolves are situated within a broader context of cultural ideas and normative worldviews regarding the relation between humans and non-humans. Wolves have been invested with meanings that cannot be changed at will. The attempt to manage wolf perceptions rationally and detached from emotion can be criticized for being insensitive to the many meanings wolves have – beit as evil or charismatic animals, independent and autonomous or unruly and scary. Wolf management suggests that wolves can and should be turned into 'manageable 'objects'. Could it be that the wolf management approach implicitly shares the assumption of both wolf haters and wolf lovers: that unruly wildness – as that which resists hum an orderings – does not have a role to play in the Dutch landscape? Underneath the managers' approach to conflicts between wolves and humans is a hidden assumption that the integration of wolves into our society will be possible without radically altering the deep-felt believes about the human-nature relationship.

Wolves as Symbols of the Unruly Wild

In response to the reflex of control, some people stress that the resurgence of wolves confront us with the need to update our ideas about our place in the natural world and urge us to put in perspective how we take for granted human power over nature. The successful resurgence of wildlife in Europe can be attributed to a shift in the dominant attitude of Europeans towards nature from hostility to tolerance. Swedish biologist Guillaume Chapron argues that "the European model shows that people and predators can coexist in the same landscapes," he said. "I do not mean that it is a peaceful, loving coexistence; there are always problems. But if there is a political will, it is possible to share the landscape with larger predators" (cited in Conniff, 2014).

Resurging wolves confront us with our desire for control, not only control over nature, but also control over our own nature. Yet, the wolf's wildness is disquieting and uneasy to some, and fascinating to others (Drenthen 2009b). Resurging wolves force us to rethink what it means to live in a living wild landscape. If we want to find an appropriate *habitus* that allows us to live together with wolves, we will require some degree of management and

control. But respecting nature's autonomy also implies a willingness to live with wild creatures, not just when they are charismatic and cute, but also when they are a nuisance. Without practicing tolerance, – the virtue of enduring those things that are difficult to endure – wildlife management will inevitably incarcerate wildness. Wolves force us to recognize that in our desire for control, we lose sight of the unruly in nature, the unruly that we fear and that fascinates us. They confront us with our limitations and finitude, put at stake the image we have of ourselves, but that at the same time also remind us of our deep and profound fascination for the vitality of nature.

The uneasy truth of the resurging wolves is that we have forgotten what it means to live in a world that remains to be wild. The possible return of wolves in landscapes where they were thought to have gone extinct forever, challenges existing notions about ourselves. We have to relearn *who we are* in a world that is still – to a large degree – uncontrollable and wild.

The real hermeneutic challenge of wolf resurgence is that we humans have to learn to deal with unruly animals, because we do share a world, and all traditional attempts to clearly divide to human from the non-human were based on a violent separation between the human and the non-human world. If we really want to live together with the wolf, we need to recognize that in ecological terms we are just one species among other species, but also that there are difference that cannot be bridged. We cannot love wild wolves the same way as we love our pets. If we as modern society want to live together with wild wolves and share the same environment, we will have to learn to deal with the unruliness which is intrinsic to wild animals, become more tolerant to the possible threats and discomforts that the presence of these animals can bring, but also enter in a form of interspecies communication in which we teach the wolves where to live and where to stay out. We have to respect the animals, but resist our romantic longing for a harmonious coexistence without tensions. If we acknowledge that we want to live together with wolves, then we also need to acknowledge the difference between humans and wolves, and keep distance from one another.

Conclusion: the Role of Semiotics in Landscape Hermeneutics

For Ricoeur, the world of the text is fundamentally different from the 'real world' that the speaker can point towards and that both speaker and listener live in. A written text, in contrast, opens a world of the text that exists only insofar as it is interpreted by a reader. Similarly, landscape can bring to mind entire worlds: long-gone worlds of traditional farming,

where humans and the land lived together in mutual dependence, or worlds in which humans had to fight against nature to carve a place for themselves in a hostile environment. These worlds only come into existence by the active interpretative act from us – the readers and interpreters of this 'text' – and yet these meanings are not freely invented, but result from a serious attempt to understand the meaning of the landscape as a story of what it means to live on this land.

But in a sense, the world of the landscape text is also very 'real' in a literal sense. Forrest Clingerman (2004) has noted that, in this respect, the landscape is a very special kind of text, because the world that it is brought forth by the landscape-text *is* the real world (in a very specific sense at least). One could say that a structural analysis of the landscape focuses the attention on these 'real' features that the reader can 'point out', and to the 'reality' of the world of the landscape-text, in which the readers finds himself, without lifting the need to interpret.

Similarly, a semiotic understanding of the resurgence of wolves can call our attention to how we relate to other species, and how these species relate to us. Such an analysis can bring into play the 'objectivity' of those non-human beings with which we share a place.

Living together with wolves obviously requires that we take note of their way of understanding the world, so that we can take into account their needs and behaviors, and that we are prepared to engage in forms of interspecies communication. If we want to live together with wolves in a mixed community, we have to learn from and about wolves, and wolves must be able to learn from us how they can live together with us. An ecosemiotic analysis scan help see the possibilities and limitations of the interspecies communication, help us understand how our actions not only have meanings for ourselves but also have significance for the non-human organisms around us, and make us aware how our actions have changed the world of wolves. The merit of such a semiotic approach is that it shows clearly see what the field of significance in which we humans find ourselves. The ecosemiotic work of Morten Tønnessen (2011), for instance, clearly shows how the semiotic relationships between humans, wolves and sheep have shifted and changed. A critical hermeneutics must take account of those views.

Yet, in the end, the 'impartial' perspective of the semiotic analysis has to be integrated with an overall hermeneutic partial human perspective on the meaning of wolf resurgence, in which all the objective features are put into a narrative interpretative context and get to *mean something*. It is through narratives that we can connect our fate with that of wolves in the landscapes we inhabit. Environmental hermeneutics is engaged in the moral conversation

about what the current situation means to us humans, and what this situation requires from us. And that conversation is a matter of humans amongst each other. An ecosemiotics understanding of the role of wolves in the landscape can make clear *what* are the challenges, and *how* they can be met, but a hermeneutic of wolves is needed to find a reason *why* we should response to them.

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