

# How to appropriate wildness appropriately

Reflections on the need to cultivate the meaning of wildness<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction: setting the problem

From a hermeneutical perspective, moral meanings exist only within the realm of cultural interpretations. In order to understand the meaning of a text, readers cannot simply refer to the originally intended meaning — contrary to what romantic hermeneuticists believe —, the meaning of a text transcends the author's intention. Hans-Georg Gadamer has shown that meanings do not exist 'out there' — waiting to be discovered — but exist only within an interpretative framework that always has to be renewed in time and place. The world of meaning is a priori a world that is being experienced and interpreted, a world that we have to make our own. It makes no sense to ask what the 'true' meaning of a particular experience would be besides the cultural interpretation because this question itself would be nonsensical: we always already live in an interpreted world.

This does not render a hermeneutical outlook anthropocentric per se, because we should not understand the process of interpretation as a process of *constructing* meaning. According to Gadamer, meanings are being discovered and described in response to particular experiences of the world, experiences in which the world presents itself as somehow meaningful, though usually, at first it is not clear what particular meaning is trying to present itself. Meaningful (moral) experiences have to be actively appropriated, in order to be able to articulate their exact meaning. They have to be interpreted as part of a complex, integral web of references.

This also applies to the moral experiences of nature. Moral meanings of nature come into play as soon as we start articulating our relationship with world. In this process, we transform the neutrality of space into a meaningful *place*, that is, through interpretation we make mere 'Umwelt' (environment) into a 'Welt', that is: into a meaningful and inhabitable world that we can live in, to use a phrase of Paul Ricoeur.<sup>2</sup>

However, there is something peculiar with experiences of wild nature that seems to go beyond this hermeneutical framework. The word 'wilderness' refers to the sphere that lies beyond culture, a part of the world that is not subject to human intervention and that is not (and can never be made) our home. Wilderness is the inhuman per se, the non-place (a-topos). Wilderness is where culture is not, it is the outside of culture. Does this mean that wildness cannot be part of a meaningful world? Yes and no.

Although we can define wilderness as that which is not culture, this formal definition does not signify the *meaning* of wildness. Wildness as a meaningful concept plays a role *within*

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1. I wish to thank Pieter Lemmens for his useful suggestions and critical support.

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

culture. Elsewhere<sup>3</sup>, I have shown how the concept of wildness, nowadays, ultimately is a deeply paradoxical *moral* concept, that refers to (the value of) that which lies beyond culture and cannot be appropriated, whereas at the same time, *as a concept* of meaning it lies within cultural sphere itself and thus in itself consists of an appropriation of the wild. Wildness is a border concept that stresses the value of the world that lies beyond the realm of culture, and thus gives wildness as culture's antithesis a place within the cultural arena of values. In this paper I want to analyze some contemporary artworks in which experiences of wildness come to the fore as somehow morally meaningful.

Each culture has to relate practically to that which lies outside the boundaries of culture: nature, in its sense of wilderness. Besides this practical need of finding an appropriate attitude towards wild nature, there is also a more fundamental problem: i.e. the fact that wildness – everything transcending the confinements of culture - has to play a part in the realm of moral meaning as well. People have to articulate the meaning of that which *lies outside* of their cultural habitat – mountains, forests, swamps, badlands, deserts, ocean and sea – or which is *out of control* by culture – storms, floods, earthquakes etc. Throughout history and in different cultures we can find all kinds of interpretations of the wild as the outside of culture – in stories, folk tales, songs and myths. Wildness can be seen as the sacred, as the evil and chaotic, as the sphere of the unspoiled and pristine, as the immoral, the sublime etc. Mostly, wildness is interpreted as somehow the opposite of culture: the sphere of the amoral versus the moral (Greek: *physis* versus *nómos*), chaos versus order, eternal versus temporal, inhumane versus humane. In all of these culturalizations, the 'outside' of culture is given a place and meaning within the framework of references that makes up culture. In a way, all interpretations that seek to articulate (and determine) the meaning of wildness can be seen as *appropriations* of wildness that transfer the wild as radical other-than-culture into the realm of the symbolic cultural, i.e. symbolic order. Appreciating the meaning of the wild *implies* appropriation, because the mere idea of meaning makes sense only in the symbolic order of culture. Thus, appropriating wildness is the only means of articulating the meaning that wildness has for us. However, the plain fact that to appreciate wildness it has to be appropriated does not tell us which appropriations are appropriate and which are not. In this paper, I want to address the problem of how to appropriate wildness appropriately. I will do this, by analyzing the ways in which wildness is being depicted in some recent works of art.

### **A new fascination for wildness?**

Throughout modern history, there have been people who were fascinated by wild nature and who dedicated their lives to develop a meaningful and intense relationship with it. Most of their stories focus on the fact that encounters with wild nature confront us with the most profound aspects of human existence. Folk tales speak of telling encounters in wild nature – with Gods, fairies and trolls – or report about experiences in the wild that fundamentally influence ones personal identity. Most of these narrations of the wild are fairly old – remainders of a 'primitive', more 'enchanted' worldview that has gradually disappeared out of modern life in the last century. Although some of these ancient narrations of nature appear to have preserved their appeal to the modern mind even today – as is evident in some contemporary cultural undercurrents like the New Age movement – nevertheless, in the modern world there seems to be no real place for wild nature as a spiritual place. However,

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

more recently, there seems to be a revival of the cultural interest in (the moral meaning of) 'wildness'. Modern humans are deeply fascinated by wild nature in contrast to the modern, overly regulated urban life – a fascination that is apparent in the contemporary interest in extreme outdoor experiences but also in the almost religious inspiration underlying some forms of current environmentalism – yet at the same time, most of the time, we are very aware that true 'wilderness' hardly exists anywhere.

The past decade has produced various works of art that explicitly address the problematic relation between modern humans and wild nature and try to clarify our contemporary fascination for wildness. In this paper, I will discuss three examples, all of which are dealing with encounters with wildness. The first one is *Gerry* (2002) – a movie directed by Gus van Sant about two friends who get lost on a hike on a wilderness trail, and are confronted with questions about the meaning of life and death. The second example is the book *Into the Wild* (1996), written by journalist and mountaineer Jon Krakauer, which tells the haunting and tragic story of Chris McCandless, a young man who sought the confrontation with Alaskan wilderness in a quest for purification and personal renewal. The third example – and the one that I will discuss most extensively – is the 2005 film documentary *Grizzly Man*, by Werner Herzog, which tells the ill-fated story of Timothy Treadwell, a young American who devoted his entire life to protect the wild grizzlies in Alaska and eventually got killed by the object of his love and devotion. What these works have in common is the central theme of modern humans who are fascinated by wild nature because it confronts them with experiences unknown to the overly cultivated life (psyche) in modern societies. Their fascination with wildness, however, is also deeply problematic and their encounters with wild nature can even get fatal, which in turn fascinates *us* – postmodern subjects –, as I will try to show hereafter.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe that these different artworks can be seen as part of a renewed attention for (the meaning of) wildness in contemporary culture. Today's interest in the theme of wildness resembles the 19<sup>th</sup> Century romanticism of which transcendentalists like Henri David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson the most well-known representatives (but see also our Dutch poets like Frederik van Eeden). Like Thoreau and Emerson, today's stories about wildness depict nature as the pristine and the beautiful, but also as the unspoiled counterpart of modern culture. In wildness resides the preservation of the world: for the romantic soul, wildness represents a revitalizing source for our culture, perceived as something that is cut off from its own roots: the experience of wildness can bring about a moral and spiritual renewal that can cure us of our cultural ills. The romantic soul has a yearning desire for wildness as a 'pure' counterforce against corrupt and perverse civilization.

Although there are clear similarities and continuities between the romantic wildness of Thoreau and wildness as a contemporary fascination, there is also a striking difference: the latter has a much darker character, and focuses on the potentially fatal aspect of our encounters with wildness. Contemporary wilderness stories also show wild nature as beautiful and pristine but at the same time emphasize its dangerous and life threatening aspects and dimension of alienness. In Thoreau's work, wildness represents a natural *moral* order, in which humans can make contact with a deeper morality. Wildness is contrasted with a social order perceived as corrupt. It is experienced as a source for renewing our morality, so as become better human beings. In contrast, in contemporary imaginations, wildness manifests itself as an *amoral* realm, radically different from and hostile towards our human, moral world, although – and that's the common theme – wildness is still conceived of as a source for self renewal.

The Romantic Movement, with its emphasis on the moral character of nature, was a reaction against the anthropocentric Enlightenment view of nature as meaningless or evil. The rise of

romanticism coincided with the fact that historically, human life experienced an ever lessening danger of being overruled by the forces of nature because of a rise in technological dominance. In contrast, traditional forms of anthropocentrism were partly the result of the fact that the human world was under a constant threat of being overrun by the forces of nature. To make possible a human world governed by moral laws, humanity had to conquer wild nature – with its own harsh ‘laws’ – first. Wild nature should be domesticated, because otherwise it would defeat us. The romantics did not experience this ancient fear of being overrun by nature anymore and therefore aimed to exceed the old dualistic view of nature as the ‘enemy’ of morality. They tried to show that the human moral world had its roots in a deeper moral order of wild nature.

In the new imagery of wilderness, the wild is again being conceived of in clear contrast with the human world of morality. This does not mean, however, that wildness is seen once more as simply an enemy, as was the case in the traditional anthropocentric view of the wild. The current relationship between the human, moral world and the amoral realm of the wild is seen as more complex and deeply ambiguous. Wildness is considered to be something special precisely because of its inhumanness and its amoral character. Wildness represents the ‘pre-moral’ context in which the moral sphere of the human world comes to the fore. But – paradoxically – wildness is at the same time viewed as the sphere out of which morality can be criticized; that is: the amoral character of wild nature itself is somehow considered to be morally meaningful.

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

The contemporary wilderness tales are deep and disquieting. As one film critic remarked about *Grizzly Man*: “what shocked many viewers was not the outcome of the film, but the dark view of the narrator and film’s director, Werner Herzog.”<sup>4</sup> In the following, I will analyze more precisely this contemporary conception of wildness as the inhumane that is both amoral and morally pregnant. I will do so by showing in more detail the meaning of wildness in three examples of modern wilderness imagery.

## **Gerry**

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

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

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

*Gerry* is a movie almost without dialogue (the first words are spoken after 20 minutes or so) and the few words that are said do not really seem to matter. A lot is left to the imagination of the viewer. Nevertheless – or even *because* of this – the story is absorbing.

Gradually, the two Gerry's realize that they are in serious trouble as they desperately try to find their way back. With each additional step in the wrong direction, their despair grows and eventually they are confronted with their own egos and with each other.

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

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

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

## **Into the wild**

While the main characters in *Gerry* face the harshness of the inhumane wilderness involuntarily, the main character in Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* (1996) consciously seeks such a confrontation with the inhuman. And it is in this context that he wild gains a more explicit moral dimension.

Contrary to *Gerry*, *Into the Wild* is a work of non-fiction. It attempts to reconstruct the story of Chris McCandless, a 23 year old man from a well-to-do family, who hitchhiked to Alaska in idealistic attempt to live life as a latter day Thoreau, but whose body was eventually found dead by a moose hunter. In *Into the Wild*, Jon Krakauer retraces Chris McCandless' quest for self-knowledge, a quest that ultimately led to death, and searches for clues explaining the

drives and desires that propelled him. In addition, Krakauer shows how McCandless' ideal is rooted deeply in American culture.

Krakauer portrays McCandless as an idealistic young man, who was unsatisfied with the bourgeois world in which he grew up. In the book, McCandless is presented as a person with a sense of unease towards the civilized world, a world in which all experiences are regulated to the point that one can hardly experience anything at all. In an effort to leave the confinements of this highly regulated, highly civilized, human world behind – inspired by his heroes Jack London and John Muir – McCandless was looking for a challenge in wild nature. This challenge should enable him to sense life in all of its intensity, to live life to the fullest and at the same time be confronted with his true inner self.

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

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

“[H]e was looking for a blank spot on the map, and in this day and age there are none, and so he created one, by leaving a map behind. Similarly, he did not take a large caliber rifle; he did not have much of all, because he did not want to make the game more fair. Give the wilderness a fair shot, that was what he was up to.”<sup>5</sup>

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

“Long captivated by the writing of Leo Tolstoy, McCandless particularly admired how the great novelist had forsaken a life of wealth and privilege to wander among the destitute. In college McCandless began emulating Tolstoy's asceticism and moral rigor to a degree that first astonished, and then alarmed, those who were close to him. When the boy headed off into the Alaskan bush he entertained no illusions that he was 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>6</sup>

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5. 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.

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

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

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

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

"A lot of people have criticized McCandless, especially Alaskans. They say he didn't respect the land enough. He was too cocky; he didn't give it the respect it deserves. They say he did not take enough gear, enough equipment and enough food. All he had was a ten pound bag of rice and a 22 rifle and not much more. So in one sense, that was a mistake. But I don't see it quite the same way, because he was looking for a challenge, and in his mind any challenge in which the outcome is assured isn't a challenge at all. Why do it if you know you can succeed?"<sup>7</sup>

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

*Into the Wild* was a worldwide bestseller. Apparently, Chris McCandless' tragic story appeals to contemporary imagination. Can it help us illuminate our contemporary fascination with wildness? I believe Krakauer's book mirrors our deeply ambiguous position towards wildness.

The appeal of the story shows that we are still fascinated by the romantic idea that wildness can serve as a sort of a moral guidance. Chris McCandless sought a confrontation with wild nature to free himself from the evils in mankind. Wilderness serves as a counter ideal against a particular bourgeois ideal of culture; the idea of wildness functions to criticize a particular corrupt morality. At the same time, this wilderness experience is seen as the locus of a different morality – a wilderness ethic if you will.

The strange and fascinating aspect of with McCandless' wilderness ethics, however, is how it differs from the romantic moralization of nature. According to McCandless, the outcome of the confrontation between humans and nature should not be assured because 'wilderness

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7. Radio interview on *Fresh Air*.

should be given a fair shot'. He does not seek to live life in harmony with the moral laws of nature; central to his endeavor of living in the wild seems to be a morality of transgression that calls us to stop avoiding risks and take up the challenges that life has to offer. Given that we can conceive of morality as the attempt to bring order to nature, than McCandless' wilderness ethic calls for a transgression of morality per se.

McCandless seemed to be involved in a transgression of much more radical kind: of transcending the boundaries of humanness in his encounter with wildness. Seen from this perspective, the issue is not whether or not it is possible to find a new wilderness ethic, but whether it is possible to transcend morality at all.

*Into the Wild* presents a fascinating and paradoxical 'amoral morality' of wilderness. The affirmation of the (moral) value of something beyond the sphere of human valuations – a topic that remained only implicit in *Gerry* – here becomes more explicit. Wildness is being affirmed as an antagonistic force against the dominance of human morality. But in the explication of this moral, the paradox sharpens as well. Chris McCandless' wilderness ethic is a deeply paradoxical figure, because it articulates a new morality of wildness and at the same time summons us to transgress morality itself. These two aspects coincide with an ambivalent attitude towards nature: on the one hand an effort to hold one's ground in wild nature, on the other hand a willingness to look for the edge, to take up the challenge, and risk a fatal outcome. The story of Chris McCandless shows a tendency to moralize wild nature on the one hand and the awareness of the amoral (or should we say hyper-moral?) character of the wild world on the other.

It should not be overlooked that the success of the book is partly due to McCandless' fatal accident. I believe this last aspect is crucial for understanding the public's shared fascination with McCandless' fate. This fascination has to do with the ultimate consequence of his venture: his intriguing desire to become one with wilderness and leave the confinements of humanity behind ultimately results in his death. Being prepared to face death in the wild seems to be the ultimate consequence of the desire of communion with wild nature. It is this radical consequence of his critique of morality that seems to lie at the heart of the contemporary perception of wildness. But this paradoxical wilderness ethics ultimately is doomed to fail: we seek wildness out of a desire to transcend morality, but this commitment to wildness itself will always be just another moral enterprise.

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

### **Grizzly Man**

In 2005, German filmmaker Werner Herzog released a documentary that was to be a huge success worldwide. Not only did it win numerous awards worldwide for best documentary in 2005 and 2006, but for a documentary it raised a lot of attention and started all kinds of passionate discussions amongst viewers. The heart of the film consists of footage shot by Timothy Treadwell, who lived among wild bears of Alaska for 13 summers. In *Grizzly Man*, Treadwell's fascination with wildness is being analyzed through interviews with various people. Indirectly, the movie enables us to have a closer look at our own fascination with wildness.

Timothy Treadwell was a failed actor who, after some unpleasant personal experiences had led to a feeling of estrangement, or even an identity crisis, decided to leave the civilized world and move to the Alaskan wilderness. For thirteen summers, he camped in Alaska's Katmai National Park and Reserve, living amongst wild grizzly bears. The rest of the year, he was involved in educational projects, trying to educate the public about wildlife and to protect the bears and their habitat. During the last five years, Treadwell videotaped extensively. 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.

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

The movie focuses on the ambiguity of Treadwell's fascination with wild nature. At the beginning of the film, he is portrayed as a committed but fairly straightforward environmentalist who was fascinated and intrigued by wild grizzly bears and who felt it as his personal mission to try and protect these bears and their habitat. What made his approach special was his conviction that it should be possible to live among the bears strictly non-violently, without using arms.<sup>8</sup> Treadwell was brave enough to live amongst wild animals without a gun, living in their habitat with only small means of keeping his ground. Treadwell gradually succeeds in gaining the respect of the native grizzlies, and seems to be very aware of the constant danger of living around these dangerous animals. Treadwell's courage and commitment compel the viewer to feel admiration and respect towards this 'grizzly man'. Does he not live up to an ideal of living in harmony with nature, that all of us find somehow appealing?

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

One of the problems is that Treadwell's image of the bears seems to be thoroughly anthropomorphic at times. Treadwell appears to have a far too humanized image of the bears, as he attributes all kind of human qualities to them. He gives them pet names like Mr. Chocolate, Aunt Melissa and Sergeant Brown. He considers them to be his 'friends' and even declares his love for them.<sup>9</sup> He tries to communicate with them by mimicking their sounds (although it is dangerous to do that because one can never be sure of the exact meaning of these sounds) and sometimes he even tries to cuddle with these animals, even though – as biologists point out – bears themselves do not allow other bears to touch them. This attitude is

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8. Treadwell was one of only a few people who lived among bears unarmed. Merely one managed to survive up till now. A few weeks after Treadwell, Russian biologist Vladimir was eaten by one of the bears that he lived amongst in a Russian wilderness park. Years earlier, the same thing happened to a Japanese photographer in a Russian wilderness reserve. At present, the Belgian train conductor Rudy de Bock is the last person who believes in a peaceful coexistence of people and bears. He still camps on Kodiak Island (Alaska) for a few months each year. In a Dutch newspaper interview, De Bock mentions that the local residents of Kodiak Island place bets on whether he will survive next summer. Recently, he decided to henceforth take more safety precautions like bringing along pepper spray and an electric fence.

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

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

not only careless and dangerous, but also inappropriate, as it fails to recognize that grizzlies are wild animals that are very different from us. The encounters between Treadwell and the bears are thoroughly asymmetric. Although, on a basic level there is certainly some form of communication – both seem to mutually exchange information about mutual expectations and future behavior – the kind of meanings these encounters have for Treadwell do not seem to matter for the bears. 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>10</sup>

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

Treadwell’s sentimental and anthropomorphic image of the grizzly also turns out to have a misanthropic background. The movie depicts Treadwell as someone who not only wanted to escape the narrow mindedness of his parental social background, but was also unable to deal with the fact that his professional career had turned into a dead alley. His love for the grizzlies seems to mirror his inability to come to terms with the problems of adult life. Nature stands for everything that he does not like about human civilization. It’s a projection, a counter ideal against the human world of overly complicated, arbitrary social rules and regulations.

In certain scenes, Treadwell comes to the fore as frustrated man who left the human world behind out of disappointment in what life had to offer and looked for a substitute for the company of mankind in a relationship with grizzly bears. Treadwell had a lot of conflicts with the park service. Once bears get acquainted to humans being around, it will be difficult to prevent all kinds of conflicts between humans and animals. Therefore, in the interest of the bears, the park service prohibits intimate contact between bears and humans. Treadwell was in constant violation of this rule. He believed, however, that his presence was needed to protect the animals, effectively making him the hero of his story.<sup>11</sup>

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

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

Treadwell’s concerns seem to be more sentimental, then stemming from a genuine concern with the survival of the species.

In sum, there are a lot of reasons for having second thoughts about Treadwell’s ideas about the grizzly bears. With this sentimental approach to bears, Treadwell fails to appreciate the grizzlies for the wild animals that they are. They are reduced to victims of the evil in

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

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

mankind. In the same move, humans are made the locus of everything that is bad in the world.<sup>12</sup> His sentimental ideal of bears clearly functions as a counter-ideal against human culture, irrespective of whether this view can stand up in view of the facts.

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

“Treadwell was, [...] acting like he was working with people wearing bear costumes out there instead of wild animals. Those bears are big and ferocious, and they come equipped to kill ya and eat ya. And that's just what Treadwell was asking for. He got what he was asking for. He got what he deserved, in my opinion. [...] I think Treadwell thought these bears were big, scary looking, harmless creatures that he could go up and pet and sing to, and they would bond. As children of the universe or some odd. I think he had lost sight of what was really going on.”

Egli criticizes Treadwell's underestimation of nature and his wish to become a bear as foolishness, as showing an immature attitude towards ferocious animals. Treadwell's naive, all-too-human image of nature is being criticized as a symptom of his inability to appreciate human life. His commitment with the grizzlies seems to rely on a very inappropriate interpretation of these wild animals: in his view, bears are idealized and moralized, as if they are, – to quote one of his critics in the movie – humans in bear costumes. But Egli does not criticize Treadwell for disrespecting wild nature, but for disrespecting humanity and reason.

Strikingly enough – and in as far as this account of Treadwell's view of nature is accurate – Treadwell's vision shows some clear resemblance with the traditional anthropocentric view towards nature that Egli seems to hold. In this view wild nature should be measured from culture; it is an obstacle that has to be vanquished – an inappropriate form of wildness appropriation, because as obstacle, wildness is being reduced to that which *we* are not. Egli seems to regard nature as just the antagonist of the moral order; nothing but the opposite of humanity – leaving no room for any positive quality. Treadwell's account mirrors this anthropocentrism; his idea of wildness is an idealist projection of all those qualities that he misses in humans. Both views see nature as just the opposite of humanness; they only differ in their evaluation of it. The wildness that Treadwell desires is just a wish to make up for a deficit. In Treadwell's experience, he himself is the main character.

However, it would be unjust to regard Treadwell as a crazy man and equal his approach of the grizzlies with sentimental escapism. After all, he *did* manage to survive amongst the grizzlies for thirteen long summers.

Moreover, such a view would be unable to explain why Treadwell's story has such a strong appeal to us. Treadwell's fascination with wildness is partly our fascination as well, somehow, and a reference to the fact that bears cannot be humanized unpunished cannot counter the apparent appeal of Treadwell's quest. If our common fascination for Treadwell's story is more than malicious pleasure in the bad fate of a sentimental idiot, or a form of sensation-seeking – and I believe it is – then we should try another interpretation: maybe, Treadwell's story fascinates us, because his venture refers to a value of wildness that lies far beyond that of the sentimental love for an individual bear.

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

## Crossing the border

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

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

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

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

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

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

"One of the things I've heard about Mr. Treadwell, and you can see in a lot of his films, is that he tended to want to become a bear. Some people that I've spoken with would encounter him in the field, and he would act like a bear, he would 'woof' at them. He would act in the same way a bear would when they were surprised. Why he did this is only known to him. No one really knows for sure. But when you spend a lot of time with bears, especially when you're in the field with them day after day, there's a siren song, there's a calling that makes you want to come in and spend more time in

the world. Because it is a simpler world. It is a wonderful thing, but in fact it's a harsh world. It's a different world that bears live in than we do. So there is that desire to get into their world, but the reality is we never can because we're very different than they are."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I see it as something that's both... It's tragic because [...] he died and his girlfriend died because he tried to be a bear. He tried to act like a bear, and for us on the island, you don't do that. You don't invade on their territory. You... When you're in their

territory, you know you're there. And when you're nearby, you make sure that they know you're around. You know, for him to act like a bear the way he did, would be... I don't know. To me, it was the ultimate of disrespecting the bear and what the bear represents. [...] I think he did more damage to the bears than he did... Because when you habituate bears to humans, they think all humans are safe. Where I grew up, the bears avoid us and we avoid them. They're not habituated to us. If I look at it from my culture, Timothy Treadwell crossed a boundary that we have lived with for 7,000 years. It's an unspoken boundary, an unknown boundary. But when we know we've crossed it, we pay the price."

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

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

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

Can this native criticism account for *our* fascination with the tale of Timothy Treadwell?

Partly it does. I believe Treadwell's failure is interesting to us, because his inability to endure the alienness of wild nature is in a sense just an extreme example of a problem that is inextricably linked to the attempt to articulate the value of wildness as radically opposed to the human realm. All moral interpretations of wildness have to deal with the tension between the need to appropriate the meaning of wildness and the desire to simultaneously acknowledge the radical wildness as something essentially *beyond* appropriation. Being an appropriation of the alien into the realm of the symbolic, each interpretation of the meaning of wildness is in danger of totalizing the image of wild nature in a way that suits one's own plans and schemes. If we do not endure the inevitable distance between wild nature and our *image* of nature, then our love for wild nature can easily turn into a kind of narcissism, as is obvious in the case of Treadwell. Only if we take seriously the inevitability of epistemological anthropocentrism will we be able to avoid a short-circuiting of our interpretation of the meaning of wildness. The awareness of the unbridgeable gap between nature and ourselves seems to enable us to distinguish between different degrees of appropriateness regarding the way we cultivate the meaning of wildness.

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

## Conclusion

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

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

The native does not share the fascination with wildness as it appears in contemporary wilderness tales like *Gerry*, *Into the Wild* and *Grizzly Man*. To him, all meaning of nature can be articulated in a cultural form – signified by the taboo on entering the realm of the bears. The Alutiiq do not need an articulation of the meaning of wildness beyond the realm of culture, because the concept of the sacred provides a means of articulating wildness as a dimension transcending culture, that is to say, paradoxically, as a *surplus* of meaning that defies incorporation in the cultural sphere. With this taboo, it is acknowledged that at the

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

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

According to Nietzsche, (post)modern mankind – ‘hybrid Europeans’ – resembles a person who stands in front of his wardrobe, sees all kinds of costumes, but is unable to consider one of those costumes to be a fitting one.<sup>13</sup> It is on the basis of this cultural identity crisis that we seek an immediate confrontation with wildness. Unable of finding a ‘suitable’ cultural costume, we seek encounters with wildness beyond culture and without cultural mediation. The modern mind wants an instant fulfillment of his desire for wildness; it cannot accept the existing cultural codifications of the wild because it is looking for a meaning – a home if you like – beyond all culture.

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

The narratives of such fatal encounters with wildness, however, remain deeply fascinating for the thoroughly homeless postmodern soul. Although the quest to become one with the wild must ultimately fail, it is exactly in this *failure*, in this tragic fate of modern man, that we can discern a last trace of the sacred: the grandeur of the wild in its sublime indifference compared to which human affairs seem insignificant and futile. These contemporary, disquieting, ‘*unheimlich*’ wilderness tales show us who we really are: thoroughly moral beings, meaning seekers, condemned to live in a meaningless universe: natural aliens.<sup>14</sup>

How, then, are we to decide what articulation of wildness is the most appropriate one? Because the concept of wildness as something meaningful does not make sense outside the context of an interpreting worldview, wildness (as expression for something meaningful) can never be met in a pure form, without interpretation. For that reason, we do not have an objective criterion on the basis of which we can decide what view on wildness is the most appropriate. But as a critical border concept, wildness enables us ‘to leave the confinements of our humanness’ and to transcend cultural norms. It is in this critical sense that experiences of wildness seem to play a key part. The measure of how to appropriate wildness, then, may lie in the question of whether or not we are able to acknowledge nature’s alterity.

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

“The hybrid European—a tolerably ugly plebeian, taken all in all—absolutely requires a costume: he needs history as a storeroom of costumes. To be sure, he notices that none of the costumes fit him properly—he changes and changes.

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

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