

*“The beastly familiarity of wild alterity:
Debating the ‘nature’ of our fascination
with wildness”*

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ABSTRACT. This article discusses the ‘nature’ of our contemporary fascination with wildness, in light of the popular documentary “Grizzly Man.” Taking as its central point of departure the film’s central protagonist Timothy Treadwell’s fascination with wild grizzlies and director Werner Herzog’s condemnation of it as gross anthropomorphism, this paper will explore the context and basis of our contemporary fascination with wildness in terms of the current debate raging within environmental philosophy between the social constructivist or post-modern position as exemplified by Martin Drenthen and the feral humanist position as articulated by Paul Shepard. The former argues that this fascination with wildness is reflective of certain historical and cultural trends within contemporary western society, while the latter argues that it is reflective of our primordial human heritage.

KEYWORDS. Nature/Culture division, the Alterity of wildness, “Grizzly Man,” Werner Herzog, Timothy Treadwell, Paul Shepard, Martin Drenthen

I. “GRIZZLY MAN” AND THE DILEMMA OF MODERN EXISTENCE

Perhaps one of the most provocative and widely discussed nature documentaries of the last decade has been Werner Herzog’s 2005 film “Grizzly Man,” which recounts the life and ultimately gruesome end of the recovering alcoholic, self-educated naturalist, and environmental activist Timothy Treadwell, who spent thirteen summers in the Alaskan wilderness living in close and intimate proximity to wild grizzlies, only to end up killed and eaten by a bear. To date, “Grizzly Man” has enjoyed both considerable critical and financial success, winning awards for best documentary not only from the Sundance film festival, but also respectively from the Toronto, San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles Film

Critic associations, and grossing more than seven million dollars in box office and rental revenues. In part, this success is easy to understand, for besides Herzog's admittedly considerable talent as a filmmaker, few films have been able to capture and present so accurately the contradictions, paradoxes, and ambiguities of our contemporary attitude towards wildness as "Grizzly Man." For at the heart of the film is an impassioned debate between Herzog and his deceased subject, Treadwell, on the nature of our fascination with wild nature. The argument pits Treadwell's impassioned fascination with wild grizzlies and his unreserved, almost ecstatic commitment to his life in the wilds of Northern Alaska with Herzog's barely disguised and brusque dismissal of this as simply a naïve anthropomorphic projection of an idealized state of nature. Consequently, "Grizzly Man" touches on one of the central paradoxes of our contemporary attitude to wilderness, in that it evokes not only our fascination with wild species and wilderness but also our distrust of this fascination.

The majority of the film is directly taken from the over one hundred hours of footage shot by Treadwell himself during his last five summers in Katmai Nature Reserve in Alaska, much of which involves Treadwell directly addressing the camera, often declaring his admiration and indeed love for the Grizzlies and his almost unreserved joy at his wild existence, both of which he holds as directly responsible for saving him from the dead-end, self-destructive existence that he lived in the more civilized climes of California. Indeed, on camera, despite his often overly theatrical and melodramatic tone, Treadwell's fascination with these wild beasts is so palpable and powerful that it is indeed often infectious. This is further re-enforced by Treadwell's cinematography, as rarely has the haunting beauty and grandeur of the wild been so vividly and evocatively conveyed as by Treadwell's footage of it. Indeed, in almost every frame, the mesmerizing splendour of the Alaskan wilderness, which provides a backdrop to most of Treadwell's wild soliloquies, seems to supply a powerful testament and tacit endorsement of his delight and fascination with wild nature that it is difficult not to share.

However, interspersed throughout the film, delivered as voice-overs, are Herzog's various narrative interjections, in which he voices not only his general disapproval and disdain for Treadwell but also his own competing vision of wild nature. At one point in the film, for instance, Herzog notes that, in contrast to Treadwell's "sentimentalized view" of nature, he believes "that the common denominator of the universe is not harmony, but chaos, hostility, and murder." In fact, all throughout the film, Herzog makes little effort to disguise that he believes Treadwell to be a naïve, emotionally unbalanced, and deluded individual whose difficulties in dealing with the problems of adult life in contemporary society led him to seek solace in the escapist fantasies of paradisiacal image of nature and that Treadwell's fascination with wild grizzlies, Herzog suggests, borders on outright identification and really is just an anthropomorphic projection. Indeed, right at the beginning of the film, Herzog frames for the audience Treadwell's story and the underlying moral they should derive from his life when he states in his characteristic monotone that he, upon viewing Treadwell's footage, had seen

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 bounds of his humanness and bond with the bears, Treadwell reached out, seeking a primordial encounter. But in doing so, he crossed an invisible borderline.

Couched in these terms, under Herzog's direction, Treadwell's life becomes a dark existential parable on the dangers poised by our wilderness fascination, with Treadwell cast in the role (so familiar to cinematic devotees of Herzog) of a social misfit and outcast who attempts to find meaning and realize his impossible dreams against the implacable backdrop of an essentially hostile and indifferent world only to be completely destroyed.

Many reviewers have commented upon Herzog's objectivity and rationalism – and even commended him for these – this despite the

emotional vehemence of Herzog's language and the fact that much of the film appears to display his editorial heavy handedness, a fact to which Herzog has readily admitted (Malarky 2005, Robinson 2005).¹ Part of this may be due to the lifeless, deadpan way in which Herzog delivers commentary, which often masks the fervour and hyper-inflated rhetoric of his prose; his expressionless tone is suggestive of an underlying objectivity. The impression of Herzog's rationality, however, is more likely derived from the fact that his suggestion that Treadwell's fascination with his grizzlies is due to naïve and gross anthropomorphism is largely in agreement with the prevailing current of modern thought.

For at the heart of the modernist paradigm, so central not only to the scientific method but also our contemporary intellectual milieu, is the attempt to provide a de-anthropomorphized account of reality. This view, which arguably owes its origins to the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and receives its best-known articulation in the writings of René Descartes, seeks an impartial and certain account of reality by attempting to account for the essence of the real solely in terms of mathematical quantification, with all remaining qualities seen as the sole properties of our first-person subjective awareness. This leads to a complete ontological division between the human mind and the rest of existence and completely negates our subjective awareness of the external world from having any relevance to our objective understanding of it, as our perception and evaluative appraisals of the external world are seen as purely a reflection of our own interior states. Thus, whereas earlier pre-modern societies had seen the human mind, to some degree, as enmeshed in and related to the world and our external environment as redolent with meaning, the modernist paradigm stripped the external world of any evaluative dimension, as whatever value or meaning we may once have found and possibly still do find in our external environment is strictly speaking simply a reflection of our own interior states. Consequently, any meaning or perception of kinship we may find in the external world is by definition, according to the modern paradigm, deemed anthropomorphic, and based

on our own ill-disciplined and muddle-headed confusion of external and internal realms. Therefore, it seems that given the modernist mind-set, Treadwell's fascination with wild grizzlies and sense of affinity with wild nature is by definition anthropomorphic, and Herzog's charges against him carry such clout with modern audiences partially because it recruits and marshals this deeply-entrenched tenet of modernism.²

Nevertheless, despite Herzog's best efforts Treadwell's life and project does not come off completely bereft of dignity and worth. Even leaving aside the fact that the account of Treadwell provided by those who were most directly acquainted with him in the wild provides a very different picture of him than that of Herzog,³ many reviewers have noted that they could not help but feel some degree of affinity with his fascination with the wild, through it ran against their better judgement. For perhaps, as Arthur Lovejoy observes in the seminal text "The Great Chain of Being," despite the dictates of the modernist paradigm, most people have "manifestly continued to find something solid and engrossing in the world in which [their] own constitution [are] so deeply rooted and with which [they are] so intimately interwoven" (Lovejoy 1936, 27).

Thus "Grizzly Man," while arguably a terrible documentary, is nevertheless a great film. Its power rests on the fact that it so poignantly illustrates this central dilemma of modern existence, which is that while many of us feel an almost deep-seated fascination with wild species and a sense of affinity with the wild, our deeply held allegiance to the modernist paradigm would seem to render this fascination intellectually suspect. This dilemma is particularly deeply felt and pressing in the context of modern environmentalism, where, in the attempt to protect and preserve wilderness and wild species from anthropogenic destruction, many environmentalists have sought to appeal to and enlist this feral fascination. Thus, the question which presents itself is just what is this fascination with wildness and wilderness and upon what grounds does it rest?

In the following paper, this question will be examined and addressed in light of the thought of two important environmental thinkers, the

postmodern environmental philosopher Martin Drenthen and the feral humanist Paul Shepard, the former understanding this fascination with wildness as a distinctly contemporary phenomenon, arising out of our contemporary dissatisfaction with modern life, while the latter sees it as far more primordial and the result of the human mind's evolutionary history.

II. MARTIN DRENTHEN ON THE MIDAS TOUCH OF CULTURE AND OUR 'CONTEMPORARY' FASCINATION WITH WILDNESS

In his paper "How to Appropriately Wildness Appropriately," the Dutch philosopher Martin Drenthen employs a postmodernist and social-constructivist interpretation to the questions raised in "Grizzly Man," particularly that of Treadwell's fascination with wildness. While the postmodernist school of thought is a broad intellectual camp including a wide range of theoretical perspectives often contradictory to one another, it is perhaps possible to characterize it roughly as an attack on one of the central tenets of modernism, the possibility of achieving true, certain, and objective knowledge of the external world irrespective of our subjective, cultural, and historic prejudices. Yet such a perspective, often dubbed "the view from nowhere," postmodernists argue does not exist, as our perspective of reality is already thoroughly culturally and historically situated. For to comprehend and articulate what this reality might be, we must necessarily rely on the linguistic categories and symbolic network of our culture and these inevitably differ not only according to historic periods, but also from culture to culture. Thus, it is argued by many postmodernists that what we understand to be real or natural is dependent on the historic period and culture we inhabit, as nature or the real does not exist in its own right as independent of us (or at least we have no access to this) but is inevitably a reflection of our situatedness in a particular culture and historic period. Consequently, informed by this perspective, social constructivism aims to examine any knowledge or evaluative claim not in

terms of how accurately it reflects the objective nature of the real, which is impossible, but rather how it reflects the broader cultural and historic context in which the claimant is situated. The implications of this, many critics of social constructivism have pointed out, is that reality itself becomes a neutral backdrop and blank slate upon which individuals, informed by the linguistic and symbolic dynamics of their culture, posit meaning and imply that the real is nothing more than a cultural or social construction.

While largely endorsing the social constructivist approach, Drenthen however appears to want to argue that the meaning of wildness occupies a somewhat unique place within the symbolic order of culture. For wildness, according to Drenthen, is commonly understood as that which lies outside of and is antithetical and other to culture. As such, “wilderness,” Drenthen declares, “can never be our home,” which, according to him, is by definition cultural. How then do we articulate the meaning of our encounters with wildness? For, to do so would require that we articulate this meaning in terms of the symbolic order of our culture and have thereby already appropriated wildness within the cultural realm. The solution lies, according to Drenthen, in understanding wildness as a ‘critical border concept’ whereby wildness is understood to signify the value of all that lies outside the symbolic framework of culture and is always resistant to complete cultural appropriation and articulation. Consequently, wildness as a critical border concept alludes to the resistance of the real to absolute comprehension and articulation, and as such, according to Drenthen, it not only alerts us to the limitations and insignificance of human existence, but it also affords us perhaps the last and only possible glimpse afforded to us postmodern individuals of what Kant termed the sense of the sublime, in that, confronted by the magnitude of the vastness and immense indifference of reality, infinitely beyond our total comprehension, we gain a sense of absolute and transcendent greatness.

Drenthen interprets “Grizzly Man,” and particularly the legitimacy of Treadwell’s choice to attempt to live amongst grizzlies in the wild, within

this theoretical context. For Drenthen, Treadwell is an example of what he deems a particularly contemporary phenomenon and terms “the new fascination with wilderness” (Drenthen 2006, 2). This contemporary fascination is a historically contingent moment that arises out of the common perception of life within contemporary society as overly regulated, meaningless, and artificial and seeks in the encounter with culture’s antithesis, wildness, a touchstone of authenticity and transcendence and a revitalizing antidote to the discomfort, discontent, and ennui experienced in contemporary culture. Consequently, the modern fascination with wilderness rests upon our conception of wilderness that represents the idea of world devoid of the dictates and difficulties of our cultural world. And herein lies, according to Drenthen, Treadwell’s tragedy.

Largely sharing Herzog’s interpretation of Treadwell, Drenthen argues that Treadwell’s life in the wild was primarily an escape from the human world, motivated by his inability to deal with the problems and dissatisfactions of life in contemporary society. Treadwell’s fascination with grizzlies and wild nature, according to Drenthen, was really simply a counter-ideal, whereby the grizzlies and wild nature stood for everything that Treadwell did not like about human society, yet paradoxically embodied these cultural ideals in a more perfect way. Thus, according to Drenthen, Treadwell inappropriately appropriated wildness, as in seeking to live in the company of wild grizzlies, he anthropomorphically projected onto them the very cultural ideals (harmony, unquestioning acceptance, and companionship) that he found lacking in the human world, overlooking their radical alterity and difference and ignoring the fact that wildness could never be a place for humans to inhabit meaningfully.

Consequently, according to Drenthen, while the modern wildness fascination as exemplified by Treadwell may alert us to our dissatisfaction with contemporary culture, it cannot ameliorate this dissatisfaction for us but merely illustrate to us the fundamentally tragic condition and fundamental alienation of postmodern humanity. As Drenthen writes:

The narratives of such fatal encounters with wildness ... remain deeply fascinating for the thoroughly homeless post-modern soul. Although the quest to become one with the wild must ultimately fail, it is exactly 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" (Drenthen 2006, 16).

Thus, Treadwell's plight and fascination with wild nature, according to Drenthen, presents us with a metaphysical catch-22. While we yearn for a deeper meaning and significance to our existence, one that transcends the arbitrary machinations of the cultural symbolic order, as postmodern souls we are also all too well aware that this is impossible, as meaning can only be found with the symbolic domain of culture.

Certainly, there is some validity to Drenthen's assessment of our current postmodern predicament. In some sense, we do feel ill at ease with our culture and experience a sense of emptiness, fuelled by our inability to connect legitimately with a realm or ground of illumination outside that of our culture. Furthermore, Drenthen does alert us to the fact that there always exists an undeniable degree of difference and alterity between ourselves and other wild species and that our fascination with other wild species can easily translate into a complete identification and denial of their difference. Yet it is to be wondered whether Drenthen's careful attempt to disclose the historic and cultural antecedents of our contemporary fascination with wildness does not itself overlook and take as unproblematically given the very ontological dualism that lies at the heart of our modern mindset. For surely his conception of wildness in terms of absolute alterity seems to be just as historically and culturally contingent as he argues our modern fascination with wildness to be. Indeed, it is difficult not to discern in Drenthen's work the heavy influence of Cartesian dualism. For, Drenthen seems to offer us a rearticulation of traditional Cartesian dualism, albeit one in which the foundational status of the cogito has been replaced by that of language or the symbolic order, with

all meaning consigned to the realm of culture and decreed a social construction, and all that which that lies outside relegated to the category of wildness. Indeed, the human condition, according to Drenthen, seems cursed by a ‘Midas touch,’ in that while we need and long for connection to something outside of culture, this is impossible, for anything we touch, perceive, and comprehend turns into culture. Little wonder then that we find ourselves in this postmodern predicament, as given Drenthen’s terms, it is difficult to see how we could not be essentially homeless, as all attempts to find meaning in wildness and meaningfully inhabit it are essentially a misappropriation of its ‘true’ meaning as radical alterity.

Yet, while for the sake of argument, we may perhaps grant that Treadwell’s fascination with wild grizzlies and his life in the wild did border on complete identification and ignore the difference between humans and other species, we may still ask whether Treadwell’s case is really emblematic of our fascination with wildness or simply an extreme manifestation. What about the work of people such as Jane Goodall, Diane Fossey, and Farley Mowatt, all of whom, like Treadwell, spent years living in close proximity with the wild animals they studied and whose fascination with them is readily admitted in their writings – is their fascination with wildness just as much a misappropriation of the meaning of wildness as Treadwell’s? One suspects that in so far as none of these three would be likely to see wildness as absolute alterity, it would be.

Indeed, it almost appears that Drenthen holds that the most appropriate appropriation of wildness is to remain completely in such cultured realms as the city, for it seems that any attempt by us to seek contact with wildness will inevitably sully its pristine alterity and absolute difference. In fact, at the end of his paper “Wildness as a Critical Border Concept: Nietzsche and the Debate on Wilderness Restoration,” Drenthen cites with approval the Dutch conservationist Thomas van Slobbe’s planting of a circular hedge around a piece of wilderness, which effectively prevented any human being from then on ever being able to enter into and experience it (Drenthen 2005, 333-334). Thus Drenthen declares Van Slobbe has

tangibly illustrated his conception of wildness as a critical border concept in that by creating this “empty place” outside the human order, wildness is incorporated inside the symbolic order of culture but this is achieved by symbolizing the non-human realm that lies outside of culture, which can never be entirely appropriated by humans and the cultural order. Yet, there is something completely abstract about this conception of wildness, indicative not so much of the sensibilities of even an arm-chair naturalist than of the semantic virtuosity of a postmodern theorist. Indeed, to put it quite frankly, there does not seem to be anything particularly wild about Drenthen’s conception of wildness, in that his definition appears to be both remarkably expansive, his conception of wildness seeming to include everything from mountainscapes to lunar ones and polar bears alongside the Ebola virus, yet paradoxically remarkably empty as well in that as soon as one attempts to articulate or comprehend it, it ceases to be wild. In fact, it is to be wondered whether or not Drenthen’s conception of wildness is not Lyotard’s notion of the Inhuman dressed up in feral clothing.

Moreover, and perhaps more problematically, given his hermeneutical methodology, there is something about Drenthen’s formulation of our fascination with wildness that simply does not ring true with our own experiences of wildness. While Drenthen appears correct in stating that part of our fascination with wilderness and wild species consists in its alterity to the human realm, when we reflect on our own experiences of this fascination with wildness, we also find, one suggests, an uncanny sense of kinship and familiarity that one suspects that Drenthen’s ontological dualism might deem too unseemly. For caught in the gaze of a mountain goat as the dawn climbs over the Alberta Rockies, for instance, surely intertwined with our awe at its alien alterity is also a sense of affinity, which is inexplicably a part of our fascination with wildness. It is the attempt to do justice both to this sense of affinity that we feel with wild nature, along with an acknowledgement and respect for its alterity, which informs the theoretical perspective of the next thinker we shall look at, Paul Shepard.

III. PAUL SHEPARD ON WHY WE POSTMODERN SOULS STILL FIND WILDNESS SO FASCINATING

Having died nearly a decade before its release, Shepard understandably never addressed “Grizzly Man” in his writings. Nevertheless, few thinkers have thought so deeply and profoundly on the wild nature of human nature and its relationship to the wild world as Paul Shepard. Shepard argues that our fascination with wilderness and wild species is a reflection of humanity’s evolutionary heritage. He posits that not only did human morphology, physiology, and all our more overtly physical properties evolve from that of earlier species and within the non-human wild world, but so too did that which we hold most precious about our humanity, the human mind. Quite simply, he holds that the human mind evolved within the natural world and that the evolutionary emergence of mind, far from removing us from the natural world and our external environment, meant that we evolved more fully into it (Shepard 1978, 3). For Shepard argues what evolved in humanity was not an abstract computation device, capable of an infinite series of rational calculations, but rather an encoding classificatory system connected with speech, instinctual drive behaviour and visual consciousness, which used the perceived perceptual order found within the external world as a model for conceptual relations. Consequently, Shepard sees a consideration of human mental evolution as overturning the very foundations of Cartesian dualism and solipsism, by demonstrating how human subjectivity and consciousness is informed by our perception of the external world. Thus, Shepard starts at the opposite end of the spectrum from Drenthen, focusing not on our modern fascination with wildness and wild species, but rather on our primordial one.

For in the countless cave paintings left to us by primeval humanity, their fascination with the wild non-human world that surrounded them is evident in the vivid testament they left behind. Indeed, compared to the ‘stick-figure’ representations of humanity, the depictions of wild animals nearly leap of the wall in their lifelike rendering. The vast preponderance

of these vibrant animal images over the more crudely rendered human ones, archaeologists have established, is not the result of any utilitarian concerns (as the vast majority of these images are of animals these Palaeolithic people did not hunt) but reflects rather their fundamental fascination with the wild species they shared their world with.

Similarly, anthropologists have also observed among hunting and gathering people whose life ways most closely approximates that of our primordial ancestors a similar fascination with wild species. Numerous ethnographic case studies of foragers have commented on their abiding and indeed consuming interest in the natural world and their keen attention to behavioural nuances of natural species and their almost compulsive attention to delineating and categorizing the differences and similarities that exist between species. Indeed, in their study of the !Kung knowledge of the animal behaviour, Nicholas Blurton-Jones and Melvin J. Konner comment on how much of the conversation revolves around detailed and lengthy descriptions of the peculiar traits and behaviour of animals observed during the day. Indeed they record one light-hearted anecdote of a hunter who claimed to be so engrossed in observing the courtship of a pair of gemsbok that he simply forgot to shoot at them (Blurton-Jones and Konner 1978, 337-338). In fact, biologists have often noted that the sophistication of gatherer-hunter's taxonomical schema and ethological observation is equal in breadth and complexity to that of modern science and frequently consult such groups in the course of their research.

Indeed, so great is this fascination with wildness routinely displayed by hunter-gatherers that it often seems to border on complete identification. Foraging cultures often describe themselves as being in a kinship relationship to different wild species and in their discursive practices, myths, and rites often seem to imbue other species with human-like thoughts and minds. For instance, among the Inuit of Northern Canada, the polar bear is often spoken of as kin and addressed as brother and in the cultural rites and in rituals the behavioural patterns of the polar bear are often enacted. Indeed, their mythology often traces the ancestry between

bear and humans to a common mythic ancestral theriomorphic being, who could easily change from bear to man and vice versa, and whose deeds are enacted in ritual dance. Moreover, when hunting the polar bear, the Inuit hunters will often declare that they are attempting to think like a bear, and when the animal is killed, the same rites and ceremonies are applied to it as when someone dies in camp (Saladin D'Andlure, 183-187). Nor do the Inuit seem alone in this: countless ethnographic monographs of hunter-gatherers testify to similar practices among foragers (Ingold 1996, James 1994, Mathias 1988).

This animistic aspect of hunter-gatherer thought has often been traditionally understood as displaying a complete mystical confusion between human and the natural worlds. For in speaking of other wild species as kin and interpreting their environment and other animals as imbued with human thoughts and emotions, the thought patterns of hunting peoples appeared guilty of the grossest degree of anthropomorphism as it seemed to violate the very ontological boundary between external and internal worlds that lies at the heart of modern thought.

This traditional view of foraging thought was decisively challenged and discredited by the Belgian-born anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in his seminal text *The Savage Mind*, in which he argued that the savage mind, or non-Western, pre-literate thought, is not categorized by lack of intellectual perspicacity, an ignorance of the difference between humans and other animals, or a confusion between internal and external worlds. Indeed, humans, Levi-Strauss argues, have always possessed the same degree of mental acuity. For according to Levi-Strauss, the difference between our own modern thought and that of foragers is not lack of intellectual acumen or ability, but rather the level to which it is applied. For unlike modern thought, which forswears the legitimacy of knowledge derived from the senses and aims at understanding the universe in terms of a micro-constitutional level never perceived by human beings, foraging thought seeks to comprehend by “systemizing that which is immediately presented to the senses” (Levi-Strauss 1962-1966, 11). Arguing that

human thought is primarily analogical rather than logical, Levi-Strauss posits that humans discern a pattern in their world by categorizing objects perceived in their external environment according to a taxonomical schema of oppositional pairs of similarities and differences, whereby reality is seen as a underlying continuum of similarities and differences. The system most conducive to this binary ordering of semblances and contrasts, Levi-Strauss suggests, is the natural species scheme. For natural species, because of their evolutionary history, share not only certain homologous features with others of their genus, order, etc., but possess certain species-specific behaviours and traits, and therefore, according to Levi-Strauss, “the diversity of species furnishes man with the most intuitive picture at his disposal and constitutes the most direct manifestation he can perceive of the ultimate” continuity and discontinuity of reality (Levi-Strauss 1962/1966, 137). Indeed, both because of this perceptual continuum of similarity and difference and because this system of classification rests upon a singular homologous structure, Levi-Strauss suggests that analogous reference can be made between diverse sets found at different points in the taxonomical schema and analogies furnished by the natural world used to elucidate human cultural relationships and subjective qualities.

Thus, while hunter-gatherers are perfectly aware of the differences that exist between themselves and other animals, they are also aware of certain underlying similarities, which underscores the legitimacy of analogies taken from the non-human natural world to inform the human world. For instance, the Inuit, while completely cognizant of the difference between themselves and polar bears, also see certain similarities, in that polar bears, like humans, are not only capable of standing on two legs, but also construct winter shelters and hunt seal using similar hunting tactics as the Inuits. Consequently, feeding young Inuit hunters the flesh of a polar bear is said to improve their hunting prowess (Saladin D’Andlure 1994, 183-187). Similarly, many African tribes use the hard shell of the tortoise as a metaphor to describe the opaque and oblique aspects of the human soul, or the liveness and elegance of a young girl compared to that

of an antelope (James 1994, 201). In light of this, therefore, Levi-Strauss argues that foraging or savage thought is not so much anthropomorphic as zoomorphic, in that it does not so much project human qualities on to those of animals but uses animal qualities as a means to articulate human ones. Nor is foraging or savage thought a fossilized residue and cultural anomaly, for according to Levi-Strauss, the savage mind is fundamentally the same as our own (Levi-Strauss 1962/1966, 268).

Largely in agreement with Levi-Strauss's analysis of foraging thought as well as his contention of its underlying universalism, Shepard argues the human mind's evolutionary history is reflected in both this fascination of hunter-gatherers with wild species as well as the propensity of foraging thought to use the ontological plurality perceived in the external environment as a means to articulate their interiority.

Much of Shepard's account of the evolution of consciousness and the human mind is taken from Harry J. Jerison's book *The Evolution of the Brain and Intelligence*. In this book, Jerison traces the rudimentary beginnings of consciousness to the evolution of the earliest mammals within a nocturnal niche or adaptive zone, the adaptive demands of which required the neuronal elaboration and integration of perceptual systems, providing the capacity to temporally integrate sensory information from several sensory modalities and to construct what Jerison terms a "perceptual world" in which time is related to space, thereby allowing past experience to be neuronally encoded, reviewed, and projected to imagine future events. It is this capacity to construct a perceptual world, rather than any degree of abstract reasoning or calculation, that Jerison sees as the defining criterion of biological intelligence and argues that this goes far beyond that of straight stimulus response commonly attributed to all non-human animals, in that sense stimulus no longer simply triggers innate stereotyped behaviour patterns but is instead modelled in terms of objects in a spatial map, allowing organisms to adjust their behaviour in light of past experience and future consequences (Jerison 1974, 17-18).

Shepard suggests that there are several important consequences of this conception of the evolution of biological intelligence. First of all,

while neither Shepard nor Jerison suggests that this capacity to model perceptual worlds is uniformly present throughout the mammalian class either in character or degree (as both argue that biological intelligence differs among species in terms of the degree of its complexity and perspicuity and has a species-specific character dependent on how these various sensory neuronal systems are elaborated and integrated), they do however argue that the human consciousness and intelligence is not a biological anomaly or aberration but rests upon the evolutionary development and amplification of this capacity to construct perceptual worlds (Jerison 1974, 22). For the key, they argue, to the evolution of the human consciousness and cognition and the species-specific character of our perceptual world is language, which emerged from the neurological elaboration and integration of primarily visual and auditory sensory systems, providing visual images to be attached to an 'auditory set' or word, providing events or objects far distant in space and time to be labelled and recalled, allowing for a significant expansion of the perceptual world of humans to a degree unparalleled in the natural world (Jerison 1974, 423-432). Secondly, if we grant Shepard's and Jerison's hypothesis that the development of human consciousness and cognition corresponds to evolutionary expansion of the capacity to construct perceptual worlds, then a fundamental implication of this, Shepard argues, is that our cognition is essentially perceptually based and that our subjectivity is primordially informed by our inherence in the sensible world, a position which seems to bear certain broad affinities with phenomenology and particularly the thought of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty seeks to overturn the Cartesian solipsistic conception of subjectivity, in which our sense of self is conceived of as primary, foundational, and transparent to itself and our perception of the world is seen as largely irrelevant to cognition and simply the extension of our conscious inner states. In contrast to this Cartesian conception, Merleau-Ponty argues that perception is the original modality of cognition and consciousness and that our conception of the

self is both logically and developmentally dependent on our perceptual encounter with the external world. Recruiting the insights of the phenomenological tradition, Merleau-Ponty argues consciousness is always intentional, in that consciousness always ‘intends’ or refers to and is about objects. In other words, consciousness is always consciousness about or ‘of’ something or other. I am never just simply conscious. I am always conscious of this or that thing. Consequently to be conscious necessarily implies a consciousness of things other than the self or to have a world of which one is conscious.

According to Merleau-Ponty, this notion of consciousness as intentional implies neither the sovereign activity of the meaning-giving Cartesian subject who imposes order and meaning on the world nor the passivity of empiricism in which objects unproblematically and transparently reveal themselves and impose themselves on the mind. Instead, this notion of consciousness as intentional avoids this simple dichotomy of activity and passivity and is rather an ambiguous juncture of the two. Indeed as Merleau-Ponty writes: “The world is already constituted, but never completely constituted: in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities... There is, therefore, never complete determinism and never complete choice, I am never a thing and never complete consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962, 453). For our perception of things is always essentially partial, never total. Consequently, in our perceptual engagement with objects in the world, we project around this object potential perspectives of this object. Yet this is not simply a licence for unhindered projection, as there is always a possibility that a new perception of object may disrupt, transgress, and disrupt this projection. Consequently, our perception of the object and the object itself are co-constitutive of each other. In this sense, we neither find a pre-existing meaning in the world, nor impose meaning upon it in terms of the meaning-giving dictates of the Cartesian cogito or the symbolic order; rather, meaning arises from our perceptual engagement and inherence in the world.

Merleau-Ponty expands these insights to include an understanding of consciousness as intentional, as rooted in the basis of our having a sensible body, arguing that these physical embodied sensations are intentional. In opposition to the Cartesian conception of a disembodied and rational subject, Merleau-Ponty develops what he refers to as the perceiving or body subject, which he argues is more primary and fundamental than Descartes' cogito. For, Merleau-Ponty seeks to demonstrate that, prior to the Cartesian cogito, there is already a pre-personal, pre-reflective body-subject that has a hold on the world and itself in terms of its perceptual and sensory engagement of the world, which enables the subject to be at home in and find meaning in the world. If Descartes sought to establish the 'I think' of the cogito as the foundation of all knowledge, Merleau-Ponty illustrates how neither reflective thought nor the 'I' of the cogito is primarily given but is instead derived from this pre-personal and pre-reflective engagement of the body-subject with the world. While not denying the reflective capacities of the human subject, which he identifies with language, for Merleau-Ponty, both language and the reflection it affords are still derivative of this pre-reflective perceptual inherence in the world.

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty argues against Descartes' assumption that the 'I' of the cogito is foundational and transparent to itself. Merleau-Ponty argues that consciousness of self is not implicit in the genesis of consciousness, but develops slowly through our original perceptual engagement with the world. Recruiting the insights of infant and child-development studies, Merleau-Ponty argues that the infant is not born into the world with a clear sense of its being an individual but rather with no sense of any distinction between itself and its wider environment. In essence, the infant perceives itself as the sum total of all it perceives. Gradually, through its perceptual engagement in the world, the child begins to develop a bodily-schema and a sense of self through a series of identifications and differentiations between itself and objects and others in its perceptual field. Yet, while we gradually achieve a sense of individual identity, Merleau-Ponty

argues that this accomplishment is never total or absolute and that there continues to remain an essential ambiguity and indeterminacy between the boundaries of the body-subject, others, and the world.

This argues against the Cartesian solipsistic conception of consciousness as an exclusively interior phenomenon hermetically sealed off from the external world, as according to Merleau-Ponty consciousness is not an exclusively interior phenomenon cut off from the world but rather a relationship to a world which transcends and is outside of us, and any attempt to inspect the content of consciousness is inevitably a reflection on the content of the world. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “there is no inner man, man is the world and only in the world does he know himself” (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962, xii). Furthermore, because consciousness of self is not primordial but developed through a dialectical relationship between self and not-self, the self experiences itself as an entity existing in *relationship with other* entities. For from the start, the solipsistic self-sufficiency of the ‘I’ is compromised, in that development of subjectivity inevitably involves our perception and awareness of others and the world. This means not only is there a fundamental opacity in our consciousness of self (just as there is with our perception of objects and others in the world) but also the perception of the other and the world is already and always intertwined with my conception of self. Indeed, because of this, “subjectivity is always intersubjectivity.”

This alerts us to an important difference between Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of otherness or alterity and inter-subjectivity, and that is prevalent within contemporary discourse. There is a strong tendency within the current discursive milieu, as exemplified by Drenthen’s conception of wildness as a critical border concept, to conceive of the other or alterity as absolutely beyond the conception of the subject and to see even the attempt by the subject at comprehending the other as intrinsically a denial of difference and an act of domination, as it is held to reduce the other in the subject’s framework of meaning and signification. Merleau-Ponty, however, insists that absolute alterity is impossible (if not unthinkable as

ironically Drenthen's own critical border concept illustrates) and that an appropriate treatment of alterity consists in the recognition that the other is always intertwined within subjectivity, rather than obscuring this fact by positing an absolute asymmetry between the self and the other. For according to Merleau-Ponty, the other is already encroaching upon us, though not reducible to us. Indeed, it is because our consciousness of self is already intertwined with the presence of the other that we are open to the possibility of being enriched and changed by our encounter with the other. The other alerts me to new perspectives not only on myself but on the world which we share. "There is no privileged self-knowledge, and other people are no more closed systems than I myself... I misunderstood another person because I see him from my own point of view, but when I hear him expostulate (or witness his behaviour) I finally come round to the idea of the other person as a centre of perspectives... . In this bipolar phenomenon, I learn to know both myself and the other" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/1962, 338). In other words, it is fundamentally through my encounter with the other that in a sense I can both know myself and become more than myself.

While Merleau-Ponty's discussion of otherness was largely preoccupied with alterity within its human context, Shepard expands on Merleau-Ponty's insights into alterity to include our relations to non-human otherness as well. As, Shepard suggests, in our perceptual encounter with other wild animals, we are given access toward different kinds of being-in-the-world that, while manifestly different from the human one, are not, he insists, entirely foreign to us.

For Shepard argues that any cogent treatment of non-human alterity must take into account the apparent paradox that in some ways, other species are both similar to humans but also very different. Yet this is only a paradox if one assumes (as Drenthen appears to) a fundamental dualistic ontology in which the entire non-human world is seen as one monolithic ontological unity. However, as naturalists are fond of pointing out, the entire natural world does not comprise one species; rather it presents

a system of difference and relatedness. Thus, the human being is an animal and as a result of its evolutionary heritage shares many similarities to varying degrees with other animals, in terms of basic anatomical plan, patterns of behaviour, and in some cases (as Shepard and Jerison demonstrate), a basic pattern of sentience. Yet, there are profound and obvious ways in which we differ from all other species. We have, for instance, our distinctive anatomy, highly evolved sentience, and language. Consequently, in our encounter with non-human otherness, Shepard argues, we are confronted by an essentially ambiguous sense of both affinity and disjuncture that can never be nor should ever be definitively settled. For in their similarity to us, Shepard argues, wild animals demonstrate to us that we are neither homeless nor alien to this world but fundamentally belong to and are a part of it, while their difference to us alerts us that there are different perspectives and ways of being in the world beyond simply human perspectives. Thus the encounter with non-human others informs humans that we are both of the world and simultaneously not the world and there are horizons of significance beyond our own perspective.

Shepard argues that without this regular perceptual and tangible encounter with non-human otherness, we lose sight of our connection with this world and the fact that there are horizons of meaning beyond our human and cultural world. Without the continuing presence of wild non-human otherness we become entrapped within the narcissistic dimensions of our all-too-human world, left to languish in and bemoan our alienation and ennui. For left solely with our own symbols and signification to contemplate, with no connection to a world outside, we very easily succumb to the sense of homelessness, alienation, and despair of which Drenthen speaks. Yet while accurately diagnosing our postmodern condition, Drenthen errs in assuming that there is no cure or escape. For it is by virtue of our encounter with the non-human other that we comprehend not only that we belong to a world but that it is rich beyond our imaginings.

Consequently, in so far as Treadwell was unable to distinguish the difference between human and ursine worlds, it is probable that

Shepard would have severe misgivings over Treadwell's project. However, in his desire to connect with wild, non-human otherness and dissatisfaction with the purely human world, Shepard would see the primordial stirring of deep enduring human need. Furthermore, it is likely that Shepard would see Herzog's and Drenthen's confidence and certainty over where this 'invisible' boundary lies as too sure by half. For perhaps Treadwell's story reveals us as we truly are. Highly sapient, conscious, wild primates, who evolved in the natural non-human world in the company of wild others whose disappearance leaves our world increasingly impoverished. For faced with a world in our own image without wild others to alert us to a world outside our human one, we find ourselves like Narcissus transfixed by our own image as the world fades slowly away.

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NOTES

1. In an interview with the San Francisco Chronicle, Herzog confessed to being both bemused and irate with his deceased subject and stated that he had conceived his documentary as an argument or more specifically as a rant against Treadwell and his sentimental and 'disneyfied' views of nature. This view, Herzog argues, is typically held by Americans, and treats wild animals just like humans and holds that human beings and wild nature can live in harmony (Malarky

2005). Moreover in an interview the *Los Angeles Times*, Herzog suggests that this view is not just restricted to Americans in general but environmentalists or as Herzog refers to them, “tree-huggers,” who he claims are “one of the biggest embarrassments of our civilization.” He goes on to note that “it’s so deeply embarrassing when I see a tree-hugger, I just pray for the ground to swallow me. That is how our relationship with nature has gone awry” (Robinson 2005). It seems, therefore, that Herzog had a specific moral which he wants to impart in his film about the dangers of our sympathies with wild nature, particularly when so many of the interviews included seem in almost total uniform agreement with Herzog’s narrative agenda.

Indeed, some of the interviews seem deliberately staged, specifically those concerning an unbelievably squeamish coroner. If this is the case, it would certainly not be the first time that Herzog has done so. In one of his documentaries, “The White Diamond,” for instance, a Guyanese villager, interviewed next to a thunderous waterfall, states in somewhat mystic overtones to the camera “I cannot hear what you say for the thunder that you are” – a line that had previously been used in another film of Herzog’s, “Cobra Verde,” several years previously (Zalewski 2007).

For his part, Herzog appears to be undisturbed by such allegations, arguing that documentaries should not concern themselves with “the truths of accountants” but have a deeper obligation to uncover “ecstatic truths” (Herzog 1999). In fact, Herzog has readily admitted that he, to put it in his euphemistic terms, “intensifies” his documentaries (Zalewski 2007).

2. Of course, it should be noted that this charge of anthropomorphism is generally solely levelled against positive rather than negative assessments of nature. Indeed, Herzog through his various narrative interludes seems every bit as guilty of anthropomorphism as Treadwell, as he often ascribes emotive terms such as hostility and murder to wild nature and wild species, without inviting a similar charge. Why, however, Herzog’s rather caustic and violent view of wilderness escapes this censure and is deemed objective, lies outside the parameters of this discussion, though it perhaps invites further examination.

3. The picture that emerges, however, from those more directly acquainted with Treadwell and his thirteen summers in Katmai, is quite different than that offered by Herzog. John Rogers, the owner of Coastal Bear tours and long-term acquaintance of Treadwell who knew him from his earliest days in Katmai, notes that:

[Treadwell’s] knowledge and understanding of bears was equal to the experience of any commercial bear viewing manager or bear specialist in Katmai National Park, better than most. Just a handful of determined people ever get to the level of mental and physical comfort that allows them to camp in such a harsh environment, where bear activity is widespread. Out of this handful, not many embark on lengthy camping expeditions in bear country such as Katmai; Even fewer, camp alone. This level of comfort can only be achieved through an exceptional understanding of bears. Timothy Treadwell reached this level. (Rogers)

A point with which the Alaskan conservationist and filmmaker Joel Bennett, who shot three films with Treadwell, concurs noting that “there is no question that he had a remarkable repertoire with bears and remarkable ability for them to tolerate him...but just so people don’t get the wrong impression, Tim definitely knew there were bears out there that were bad medicine” (quoted in Medred 2003).

Indeed, far from the naïve delusion nature enthusiast Herzog portrays, Rogers notes that contrary to his media image, Treadwell was not one to blithely walk up to a bear. He was cautious even fearful, around bears he did not know, but he developed relationships and mutual trust with a few individual bears over the years. I watched him sitting on a beach with as a trusting mother came by and stopped a few feet from him to play with her cub without a care for Tim's presence" (Rogers).

In fact, Rogers notes that it was because of Treadwell's knowledge of grizzly behaviour as well as the bears' familiarity with his presence, rather than any naïve romanticism or death wish, that Treadwell, after many years, eventually stopped using his electric fence and pepper spray. (A mundane, pedestrian fact, that it appears Herzog neglected to mention in his rush for a deeper ecstatic truth.)