Competing Visions of Nature: The Construction of Narrative in *Grizzly Man* and the Problematization of "Connectivity Thinking"

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Abstract

This paper approaches Werner Herzog's 2005 documentary *Grizzly Man* through a narratological lens, analysing how the documentary contests the nature-culture divide by constructing a multi-faceted narrative that allows a variety of different perspectives on nature to co-exist. In the first section, the paper engages with Erin James' concept of Anthropocene Narrative Theory (ANT), which argues that there is a reciprocal relationality between our current geological epoch—the Anthropocene—and narrative. ANT is used to illustrate how the documentary intentionally plays with this link between the Anthropocene and narrative, constructing a site of contestation in which different people's perspectives

on nature come together, reminiscent of the diversity of natural ecosystems themselves.[1] In the second section, the analysis focuses on how *Grizzly Man* problematizes Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose's concept of "connectivity thinking"—a term that highlights the importance of storying nonhuman worlds in an open way that engenders connection between the human and the nonhuman—by warning of the limits of translating this sort of thinking beyond the realm of narrative, into real-life interactions with nature.

1. The abbreviation "ANT" is used by James herself and should not be confused with the same abbreviation used in the foreword to this issue, where it refers to Bruno Latour's "Actor-Network Theory."

Introduction

Herzog's 2005 *Grizzly Man* portrays the life and death of Timothy Treadwell, a self-proclaimed animal activist who became a national celebrity in the United States of America during his lifetime due to his involvement with grizzly bears. Treadwell would camp for months at a time in Katmai National Park, Alaska, in order to be in proximity to the bears. Herzog became fascinated with Treadwell, calling his story one of "human ecstasies and darkest inner turmoil" (*Grizzly Man* 4:05-4:07). He made *Grizzly Man* after the bear enthusiast's death on 3 Oct. 2003, when Treadwell and his girlfriend Amie Huguenard tragically lost their lives in a bear attack in the Alaskan federal reserve. At the heart of Herzog's documentary is a compilation of over one hundred hours of camera footage that Treadwell himself filmed during his last five years camping in Katmai National Park (*Grizzly Man* 3:34-4:31). This footage is embedded into a minutely constructed narrative that contains a panoply of different voices commenting on Treadwell's story. This multiplicity of different perspectives reflects not only Treadwell's relationship to grizzly bears, but also offers a meditation on human-animal relations and nature itself.

The term "nature" has been heavily contested, as has the nature-culture divide. Literary scholar Timothy Morton, for instance, maintains the slipperiness and abstractness of "nature" as a signifier (41). Philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek has even gone so far as to say that "nature does not exist" ("Ecology without Nature"). In the documentary, the term "nature" is largely used in connection to grizzly bears and to Treadwell's time spent in Katmai National Park, signifying animals and lands that are far removed from human civilization in the story-world of the documentary. In this vein, this paper will analyse how the storying of the documentary paints a kaleidoscopic portrait of nature, the latter reflecting the intrinsically slippery and ambiguous ontology of nature that the documentary itself seeks to portray. Herzog's documentary has been analysed by a multiplicity of scholars in view of its challenge to the nature-culture divide, which is the still widely-spread, preconceived notion that there is a dichotomous relationality between nature and culture. My paper adds to this existing

research by specifically focusing on how the documentary deliberately deploys and constructs narrative in order to question the nature-culture divide, demonstrating that the ways in which we narrativize nature are just as crucial as the content itself. As such, this paper emphasizes that the boundary between nature and culture is in itself ambiguous, and not as clear-cut as we might have imagined it.

In the first section, my analysis will focus on the ways in which *Grizzly Man* narratively constructs an ambiguous depiction of nature. I will do so through the lens of Erin James' conceptualization of Anthropocene Narrative Theory (ANT), a strand of narrative theory positing that there is a reciprocal relationality between our current geological epoch—the Anthropocene—and narrative, so that we should consider how narrative is shaped by the Anthropocene, and vice versa. My analysis will illustrate how the documentary intentionally plays with this link between the Anthropocene and narrative, constructing a site of contestation in which different people's perspectives on nature are allowed to thrive.

In the second section, I will show how *Grizzly Man* problematizes what Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose call "connectivity thinking," a term that emphasises the importance of storying nonhuman worlds in an open way that engenders meaningful encounters between the human and the nonhuman (85). The documentary warns against the limits of translating this sort of thinking beyond the realm of narrative, into real-life interaction with nature.

The Construction of Narrative in *Grizzly Man*

In James' conceptualization of ANT, she states that "the Anthropocene, by definition, is a concept that hinges upon humans writing the world," and is therefore akin to the way in which narrative works to construct worlds in which readers can immerse themselves (27). She goes on to say:

> An Anthropocene narrative theory thus understands all narratives as containing environmental insight, as all narratives both are produced and interpreted in specific

> worlds and communicate specific ethics, values, and behavioural norms related to living in a world. All narratives are thus not only rich representations of alternate worlds to which readers imaginatively transport themselves when they read but also important tools by which we 'try on' various worlds and their ethical systems. (37-38)

In other words, ANT considers narrative not only as a mirror that reflects our current way of living in the world, and the environmental biases and ethics that we have, but it also views narrative as a crucial tool for imagining new worlds and ways to inhabit them. This creative potential that ANT detects in narrative can be said to contain what Frederic Jameson calls a utopian impulse, namely a critical awareness of the flaws of our current world and a corollary desire driving us towards imagining alternate realities (xiv). This utopian impulse in ANT can serve as a tool to productively rethink and rework our own relationality with nature.

Editing Choices and Narrative Construction in *Grizzly Man*

Herzog's editing choices build a narrative that brings together different perspectives on nature in a way that does not place one person's perspective over the other's. Instead, the different voices in the documentary complement one another, painting an ambiguous picture of nature. In light of ANT, the documentary can then be said to build an imaginary that plays with human-nonhuman relations and turns them into a site of contestation. The documentary thus displays a multiplicity of different people's opinions/attitudes towards nature, allowing them to engage in conversation without judging and/or discrediting any perspective. This coexistence of different perspectives constitutes a "mutual flourishing" (Kimmerer 49) that is inherently opposed to the binary logic of the nature-culture divide and thereby contests it. I will now analyse two particular moments in the movie in which the sequencing of footage illustrates my argument.

The first example is the interview with Willy Fulton towards the beginning of the documentary. Fulton, the pilot who found Treadwell's and his girlfriend's remains after they were both killed by a bear (Fig. 1),

Fig. 1. Willy Fulton recalls the day he found Treadwell's and Huguenard's remains (*Grizzly Man* 11:01).

narrates and leads us right to the spot where he and a rescue team encountered the bear who killed Treadwell and describes how they shot it. He says: "That wound up being the bear they found [Treadwell] in" (*Grizzly Man* 14:32-14:28). After this unsettling, hair-raising testimony during which the audience travels both mentally and physically to the place and time of Treadwell's death, there is a hard cut to a clip of Treadwell with a bear in the background (Fig. 2). In it, the bear enthusiast says: "I'm here on camera with Olie, the big old bear. The big old grumpy bear" (*Grizzly Man* 14:30-14:34).

Treadwell's language and light-hearted tone of voice here are endearing, as is the fact that he gave the bear in the background a nickname. The contrast between Fulton's testimony and this clip of Treadwell is salient, with the caption in Figure 2 adding yet another layer of tragedy. This sequence of clips creates a striking contrast, bringing together two extremely discrepant interactions between two different humans and grizzly bears. However, the sentiment that is conveyed to the audience through this moment in the documentary is not one that invalidates or ridicules Treadwell. Instead, the tragic, brutal reality of

Fig. 2. Clip of Treadwell filming himself with a bear in the background (*Grizzly Man* 14:35).

Fulton's testimony of Treadwell's death coexists with the latter's warm attitude towards the bear, like two sides of the same coin. The editing here is crucial, forging a narrative where the two perspectives do not exclude each other, but rather complement one another in the vein of a worldbuilding that confronts the audience with a kaleidoscopic portrait of nature. The viewer is faced with this tension without being offered a resolution. This particular representation of nature inherently contests the dichotomous logic of the nature-culture divide. According to ANT, "narrative [is a form of] worldbuilding for some purpose" (James 29), and the purpose here is to reconstruct the ambiguity of nature, the co-existence of brutality and softness, within the documentary's narrative.

Another crucial moment occurs a bit later in the documentary, where there is a hard cut between the interview with Sam Egli, one of the rescue workers who helped haul Treadwell's remains out of the dead bear, and the interview with ecologist Marnie Gaede. In his interview, Egli faces the camera and states:

> [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 something odd. I think he had lost sight of what was really going on. (*Grizzly Man* 19:58-20:14)

Egli's view on Treadwell's attitude towards the bears is critical. His condescending tone and choice of words during his interview frame Treadwell as delusional for thinking that he could bond with an animal like a grizzly bear. This almost patronising comment stands in contrast with ecologist Marnie Gaede's interview, who was friends with Treadwell. She reflects on him in the following way:

> 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 his last letter. He says, 'I have to mutually mutate into a wild animal to handle the life I live out here.' And 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. (*Grizzly Man* 20:33-21:04)

Where Egli detects delusion, Gaede sees the spiritual, transcendental experience of connecting with a being whose ontology is other than one's own. Treadwell's own understanding of his 'mutation' here also signals an understanding that he lacks the ontological body to cohabitate with the Alaskan wilderness and the bears. The mutational shift he makes to connect to the bears is therefore both unnatural (because mutation implies straying from a normative path) and natural, since mutations are recorded biological phenomena.

Once again, there is an intentionality in Herzog's choice of placing these two interviews right after one another. Two contrasting views on human-animal relations and on nature at large are put together, which makes for an ambiguous narrative. The possibilities of kinship between humans and grizzly bears are explored here, with two very different people offering two discrepant accounts on what they conceive to be possible in terms of human-nonhuman kinship.

The Use of Voiceovers in *Grizzly Man*

Herzog's strategic use of voiceovers is another technique that contributes to the narrative ambiguity of the documentary. The filmmaker uses this cinematographic tool in order to provide commentary at numerous points throughout the documentary, offering context for certain parts and sometimes even voicing personal interpretations of certain occurrences. An example of this can be seen when Herzog chimes in via voiceover to comment on the previously mentioned tension between Egli's and Gaede's views on nature. Over footage of Treadwell interacting with a fox, Herzog says: "I, too, would like to step in here in [Treadwell's] defence, not as an ecologist, but as a filmmaker. He captured such glorious, improvised moments, the likes of which the studio directors with their union crews can never dream of" (*Grizzly Man* 22:37-22:58). Through this comment, Herzog positions himself within the tension between Egli's and Gaede's interviews. His comment here can be said to align with Gaede's perspective in the sense that he takes on a (generally) positive stance on Treadwell. Yet, he adds another dimension to her observation, asking the audience to look at Treadwell's story anew yet again, this time from an artistic/cinematic perspective. The narrative is thus broadened into yet another dimension, offering another narrative strand and integrating it into the world that the documentary is building. Whereas Egli's and Gaede's interviews once again point to the ambiguous ontology of nature, Herzog invites us to take a moment to eclipse these philosophical considerations and instead bask in the aesthetic beauty of Treadwell's footage.

Another example of Herzog's strategic deployment of voiceovers occurs later on in the documentary, when he comments on footage of Treadwell being upset about the death of a fox, resulting from an attack by another animal. The filmmaker remarks that this incident does not fit in with Treadwell's "sentimentalized view that everything out there was good, and the universe in balance and harmony" (*Grizzly Man* 1:09:59-1:10:27). He goes on to say: "[Treadwell] seemed to ignore the fact that in nature there are predators. I believe the common denominator of the universe is not harmony, but chaos, hostility, and murder" (*Grizzly Man* 1:10:52-1:11:07). Here, the director posthumously

enters into conversation with Treadwell, with their contrasting views on nature forming a central and recurring tension that runs throughout the documentary. Both men fundamentally disagree with one another when it comes to their perspective on nature, with the tension between their opposing stances remaining a constant source of conflict. This seemingly paradoxical contradiction should be seen as two components complementing one another, in the vein of what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls a "mutual flourishing" (49). Kimmerer's expression originally refers to the workings of natural ecosystems. She advocates for a respectful, non-exploitational human attitude towards nature, pointing out that flourishing is not an individual endeavor but is necessarily interdependent with other humans and ecological systems. Kimmerer's expression fittingly describes the mutual flourishing of different worldviews and attitudes that is depicted in *Grizzly Man*. In the documentary, difference is incorporated and taken seriously in a manner that reflects the very diversity of natural ecosystems themselves, thereby constructing nature as a slippery concept and challenging the nature-culture divide.

The Problematization of Connectivity Thinking in *Grizzly Man*

In this second section, I will show how the documentary problematizes Van Dooren and Rose's concept of "connectivity thinking" (77). With this concept, the theorists advocate for a narrativization of nonhuman worlds into stories that have a certain openness to them. They argue that such narrativization can be defined by a "mode of knowing, engaging, and storytelling that recognizes the meaningful lives of others and that, in so doing, enlivens our capacity to respond to them" (Van Dooren and Rose 77). According to the theorists, these lively ethnographies can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. This can bring readers closer to nonhuman worlds in the way that it builds a sense of kinship in humans with their nonhuman co-dwellers on this planet. "Connectivity thinking," then, is corollary to this mode of storytelling of "multispecies stories in which entangled becoming across all of the kingdoms of life is an unavoidable reality" (Van Dooren and Rose 86-87). In other words, "connectivity thinking" arises when we, as humans, become aware of

our mutual relationality with nonhuman others, promoting an empathetic and engaging mode of knowing and relating to other species.

In the case of *Grizzly Man*, the depiction of Treadwell's life and death reveals the limitations of Van Dooren's and Rose's concept of "connectivity thinking," even as the documentary promotes a narrative of openness and plurality that both constructs and deconstructs the stable concepts of nature vs. culture we hold in our minds. *Grizzly Man* illustrates that "connectivity thinking" is only possible to a certain extent, and cannot really transcend the conceptual realm, especially when it comes to the real-life implementation of human-nonhuman relationalities that can potentially become dangerous to humans, such as with grizzly bears. This view is shared by the interviewees Fulton and Egli, and most prominently by Herzog himself. Although the documentary fosters a narrative where different views are levelled equally, it can be argued that the filmmaker's voiceovers work as a driving force for the narrative. They work as a common thread, taking a central role in the documentary, as they function as a direct channel to the filmmaker's position. And Herzog, in turn, maintains that human-nonhuman kinship is possible in theory, but is not always translatable into real-life. At the very beginning of the documentary, Herzog makes the following statement via voiceover:

> Having myself filmed in the wilderness of jungles, I found that beyond [Treadwell's] wildlife film, in his material lay dormant a story of astonishing beauty and depth. […] 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. (*Grizzly Man* 3:34-4:31)

This idea of an invisible borderline between the human and nonhuman world is a recurring theme in the documentary. From the very beginning, Herzog seems to set up Treadwell's tragic death as the inevitable conclusion of a transgression of this border, thereby suggesting that there is a limit to translating human-animal kinship beyond the

conceptual realm (into real-life interactions with bears). Although the documentary allows for different perspectives on human-nonhuman relations to flourish, its director argues that the human-animal kinship that Treadwell saw between his beloved grizzly bears and himself was, ultimately, a violation of a natural order that separates humans from at least some nonhuman beings. As mentioned earlier, Treadwell considered himself to be forced to 'mutate' in order to connect to the bears. He was, then, aware of this order to some extent, but transgressed it regardless.

In another moment at the end of the documentary, Herzog dwells on Treadwell's tragic death via voiceover:

> And what haunts me, is that in all the faces of all the bears 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 only speaks of a half-bored interest in food. But for Timothy Treadwell, this bear was a friend, a saviour. (*Grizzly Man* 1:36:22-1:37:20)

This statement closes the arc established at the beginning of the documentary and acts almost as a conclusion on the director's part. After presenting the audience with all this footage of Treadwell and the other interviewees, Herzog upholds his argument, introduced at the very beginning of the documentary, that there is an "invisible borderline" between the human and the nonhuman world (*Grizzly Man* 4:28-4:31). Once again, he problematizes the notion of "connectivity thinking" by voicing his perspective that there is no possibility for an emotional connection nor a sense of kinship between the human and (what he considers to be) the inherently predatory and brutish nature of the bear. Although this absence of detection of any sort of emotion in the bears is a matter of personal interpretation on Herzog's part, it is true that an awareness of the connectivity of all life on Earth is not synonymous to a world in which human-nonhuman relations equal a

kinship that can be lived out. This point is most prominently, and tragically, illustrated by the death of Treadwell himself.

Lastly, Herzog's aforementioned point is strengthened through an interview with Indigenous Alutiiq PhD candidate and curator Sven Haakanson, who works at Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak, Alaska. He states:

> [Treadwell] tried to act like a bear, and for us on the island, you don't do that. You don't invade on their territory. […] 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 […] the ultimate disrespecting [of] the bear and what the bear represents. […] I think he did more damage to the bears than he [protected them]. 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 lived with for 7000 years. It's an unspoken boundary, an unknown boundary. But when we know we've crossed it, we pay the price. (*Grizzly Man* 29:16-30:31)

Haakanson gives voice to an "indigenous cosmovision" (Adamson 597) which considers grizzly bears to be an indelible part of the Alaskan landscape. The coexistence of the Alutiiq people with these animals on the same land for millennia is not based on seeking out a human-animal kinship. Instead, this coexistence is based on respect for the bears, their place in the natural order of things, and their territory within the land. Herzog's argument of a border being crossed is thus given legitimacy by the fact that the Alutiiq people have been sharing this same stance for millennia. The interview with Haakanson adds a certain nuance to Herzog's argument by not necessarily opposing the human and the bear, but by seeing them as part of the same picture, even though their existences remain separate. In view of this, Van Dooren's and Rose's conceptualization of "connectivity thinking" is

once again problematized by the documentary, illustrating how a real-life implementation of human-nonhuman kinship is not always possible. Haakanson points out the serious danger of humans interacting with grizzly bears and uses the notions of 'respect/disrespect' for the way in which the Alutiiq people relate to these animals. His argument could even be seen as questioning the conceptual validity of "connectivity thinking" as a whole, seeing as the notion of respect differs from the notion of kinship that pertains to "connectivity thinking." Haakanson centres an esteem for the bears as co-dwellers of the same land, while at the same time keeping a distance from them as beings with ontologies of their own that are not accessible to humans and should therefore not be sought out.

Ultimately, the connectivity between humans and nonhumans is a fact of life we, as humans can, and maybe even should, be aware of on a conceptual level, but that does not need to be corollary to the living out of this connectivity in real life, nor necessarily even to a feeling of kinship with all forms of nonhuman life. The notion of respect, such as Haakanson lays it out, might be a better alternative to conceptualize the way in which we as humans could start relating to our nonhuman co-dwellers on this Earth.

Conclusion

In this article, the construction of narrative in *Grizzly Man* was analysed in view of ANT, arguing that the director's editing choices build a multi-faceted narrative that brings together a variety of different people's perspectives on nature in a way that does not put one worldview over the other, but rather lets them coexist in a spirit of "mutual flourishing" (Kimmerer 49). These deliberate editing choices in combination with Herzog's intentionally placed voice overs over Treadwell's footage work together in order to create a kaleidoscopic narrative that reflects the variety and richness of nature itself.

The second section looked at the way in which the documentary problematizes the notion of "connectivity thinking." Through Herzog's voiceovers and an interview with indigenous Alutiiq PhD candidate Sven Haakanson, the documentary highlights how the

concept of "connectivity thinking" is, to a certain extent, limited to a conceptual realm rather than being a viable way of interacting with the non-human world on a practical level. Instead of kinship and connectivity, Haakanson introduces the notion of respect for the bears that the Alutiiq have lived by for millennia.

Ultimately, Herzog's *Grizzly Man* is a testament to the richness and complexity of human-nonhuman relations. The genius crux of the documentary lies in the fact that it gives voice to a multiplicity of different perspectives while at the same time not shying away from critiquing an overly idealized vision of nature that disregards its dangers, such as Treadwell himself upheld. The documentary opens up the question of how far human-nonhuman kinship can go, which has served this paper as a base to critically assess the concept of "connectivity thinking." At the end of the film, the viewer is left with the ambiguous tension that the documentary sets up and maintains throughout its entirety. It is this careful, nuanced, and therefore rich crafting of narrative that this article ultimately pays homage to.

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Biography

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