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Seeking Peace, Finding the Violence of the Real: Traumatic Ecologies and the Post-Political Present

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“I will die for these animals, I will die for these animals, I will die for these animals.” (Herzog 2005)

This essay is about the nature that does not exist, because “‘nature’ qua the domain of balanced reproduction... is man’s fantasy” (Žižek 2008: 442). Its focus is ecology and, importantly, about the ways that our particular methods of understanding and engaging with nature determine what type of ecological subjects we become. Here I use two “texts” – Werner Herzog’s film, *Grizzly Man*, and John William’s novel, *Butcher’s Crossing* – to explore how Žižek’s analysis of the trauma and violence of the Real provides a powerful tool to disentangle the interwoven threads of fantasy and reality. In these works, two questions keep resurfacing, reappearing: what reality does one live in and how that “one” can “find peace” within a destabilized world? The protagonist in each text embarks on a journey to understand himself through a deep immersion in nature.

Analyzing the quests in *Butcher's Crossing* and *Grizzly Man* through the lens of the psychoanalytic "passion of the Real," this essay examines the delusions of nature and how these will persist unless we give up our absolute embrace of the Real of nature. Our analysis will tease out a second element from these stories, one useful for understanding the contemporary ecological situation. Today, some agents (political or otherwise) insist on a return to the "naked, classical" nature that pre-dates human intervention, others relate to nature only in its potentially catastrophic dimension (that is, in fear of or insistent action against the always-imminent-but-never-present disaster of a nature "out of whack").

Both Will Andrews in *Butcher's Crossing* and Timothy Treadwell in *Grizzly Man* seek to escape the confines of what they consider an unnecessarily violent society. They flee in search of a nature free of the negative influence of civilization. Andrews, a nineteenth century Harvard student, becomes disenchanted with his studies after hearing Ralph Waldo Emerson lecture about the beauty of nature. Andrews feels something is missing from his life, convinced that he has yet to understand the "secrets" of his existence. In the epigraph to *Butcher's Crossing*, presumably similar to the lecture Andrews attends, Emerson writes, "at the gates of the forest, the surprised man of the world is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish...." Upon witnessing "sanctity which shames our religions, and reality which discredits our heroes," we are compelled to give up the accepted social distribution of place and role and accept that a much greater force now judges us. A force that "dwarfs every other circumstance, and judges like a god all men that come to her" (Williams 2003: Unpaginated). Yet in this description, nature's authority derives from little more than its very being *nature*, which a priori justifies its actions. But the authority derives not just from its *being* nature but from its being *sanctified*: its wholeness. Is this not still the case in the contemporary folk-scientific reaction to severe weather events? Faced with devastation from inexplicable tornados or hurricanes, people resort to explanations along the lines of "Mother nature sure is angry!" Sarah Palin's much derided comment is, for many, a truth: sometimes nature is just hugging us closer. The underlying logic of this anthropomorphism of nature is that rather than being contingent happenings over which we maintain little control, disasters happen when nature holds us at a distance. It is a strange inversion of "love thy neighbor as thyself": love nature as thy neighbor. We

treat nature not as the large, complicated assemblage that it is, but as an “individual” that we need to maintain a friendship with. This “friendship” is complicated by the hierarchical relationship implied by “mother”: not just nature-friend, but nature-mother. It is precisely the belief in nature as an idealized entity with its own human-will or divine-will (Nature *qua* divinity will be our focus below) that can justify *inaction* in the face of global warming. The fault lies not in intervention, but in how much “Mother Nature” is displeased by any number of things we do or thoughts we have. Humans are thus *infantilized*: the angry children striking out at their overbearing and difficult to understand nature-mother. The infantilization eliminates human agency in relation to nature: we are powerless to truly alter nature’s view of us. We will always be children: our mother will remain in control.

However, the “problem” of ecology is not a disconnect – a distance – between human subjects and nature but, instead, “this very ‘relationship of faith with reality itself’” (Žižek 2008: 445). When we picture nature *qua idealized completeness*, “it is enough to see the natural world to which my mind is connected: green grass and trees, the sighing of the breeze, the rising of the sun... can one really imagine that all this will be disturbed?” (445). From Emerson, Andrews decides the secret to a fulfilled life lies in finding the right relationship with “nature.” Yet precisely what this would be, Andrews “tried to shape in his mind.” It is “an urge that he had to speak” that remains hopelessly incomplete. Indeed, “whatever he spoke he knew would be but another name for the wildness that he sought What he sought was the source and preserver of his world, a world which seemed to turn ever in fear away from its source” (Williams 2003: 21). This mystical relation to nature cannot be spoken but must be *experienced*. His solution, then, is leaving for the “wild” West in search of an Emersonian experience that might fill the gap in meaning he feels so deeply. Andrews is fixated upon finding the “truth” of nature and the source of his existence. The journey he begins is a spiritual one, whose goal is to acknowledge and understand the power of God. Yet nature itself stands in as God, one that controls the world through natural cycles and processes. The conservative ecological position above operates on precisely this level: engagement with ecology becomes a passive messianism, waiting in vain for some action that will “fix” nature’s anger.

Like Will Andrews, Timothy Treadwell seeks to find in nature what is missing

from his life. A college dropout as well, Treadwell tries his luck in the acting world. He reinvents himself in Los Angeles with a new accent and persona, but faces the failures and inadequacies that caused him to leave college – social awkwardness, rejection, and career failure. Lost in addiction, he takes what seems the only out from this devastating cycle – escaping to nature. What starts as an interest in bears gradually encompasses his entire identity: Treadwell moves in to a national park to live closer to a group of bears. He sees himself as not only the protector of the bears, but as *one of* the bears. In his mind, rather than a dangerous, coexistent entity, bears become his loving community. He exclaims, “I’m in love with my animal friends! In love with my animal friends. I’m very, very troubled. It’s very emotional. It’s probably not cool even looking like this. I’m so in love with them, and they’re so f—ed over, which so sucks” (Herzog 2005). Treadwell sees society as a dark, destructive force encroaching upon the bears. Yet these bears live in a national park and are protected from poaching: Treadwell’s supposed heroism is not just unnecessary, but delusional. He superimposes himself into the subject position of the bears so much that he can no longer delineate between the properly human and the nonhuman dimension. In his view, communication *works*, he looks just like a bear, and has been accepted into their social order. We see Treadwell chasing a fox that has stolen his hat: he runs after it, chiding the fox for putting the hat in its den. Yet the fox does not hear him, nor do the bears. Treadwell engages in a becoming-animal, but his mistake lies in imagining that at the end of this process lies a peaceful and utopic interrelation with these animals.

Treadwell constructs a fantasy that increasingly circumscribes his relation to the entire exterior world. When a group of hunters appear, he empathizes more with the bears than the men. At the surface, the difference between him and the hunters is clear – one group is killing animals to make a profit; the other is giving up the world of humanity to live in harmony with bears. But they are also engaged in a parallel endeavor: Treadwell and the hunters both encroach into a natural environment they cannot understand and do not quite *belong* in. And it is here that the impossibility of Treadwell’s identification as bear becomes clear: instead of escaping the society of humans for one of the bears, he merely sits at the limits of both, excluded from any proper belonging in either. He finds comfort in his fantasized belonging, but like “every utopian fantasy construction[, it] needs a ‘scapegoat’ in order to constitute itself”

(Stavrakakis 1999: 100). Despite his best efforts, Treadwell's imaginary completeness as protector, as *bear*, is impossible. He creates scapegoats out of the wildlife patrols, park rangers, and poachers – all of whom not only stand in the way of his authentic relation to “nature,” but, in his mind, actively seek to destroy it. One particular manifestation of this paranoia is his ambiguous relation to homosexuality. Treadwell battles against the imposition of the homosexual label from mysterious others, even while stating, “I've always wished I was gay, it would have been a lot easier. You know,



Figure 1: Treadwell and Hunters/Tourists

it's just Bing! Bing! Bing! - gay guys, no problem. They go to restrooms and truck stops and perform sex, it's like so easy for them and stuff” (Herzog 2005). Life is easier, in other words, for anyone who is not him: Treadwell's persecution is unique and continuously recreated by newer cruel figures. This deeply hysterical reaction expresses itself in a constant, but misdirected, fear. But Treadwell disavows his responsibility for the situation of the bears and the broader social problems – animal exploitation under capitalism, his failure to “fit in,” etc. He blames those other individuals who threaten his symbolic completeness and the sanctity of his nature-friends. His position is inherently conservative, in part, because Treadwell refuses responsibility – his “unconditional autonomy” – and the acceptance that it is also he, and not the hunters or park rangers, that is “ultimately responsible for [his] actions and being-in-the-world” and the variety of

structures that make up this world, “up to and including the construction of the capitalist system itself” (Žižek and Daly 2004: unpaginated). If the fault always lies elsewhere, then this obligation to act meaningfully is constantly deferred – we see the very same reaction to the Occupy movements: “Why do you need to Occupy the streets, you could go elsewhere?” “Why do you need to Occupy academic spaces, you could go to the streets?” etc. Both Andrews and Treadwell become obsessed with finding and understanding the “Real” of nature; to experience nature devoid of its “covering.” Yet both quests largely refuse actual agency to change the world. In other words, they seek nature *qua nature* devoid of human intervention. Yet they seek it both on a social level and in the form of their own relation to nature – a nature *without* themselves.

We can refer to the driving element of both journeys as a “passion of the Real” (Badiou’s *La passion du réel*) – the desire to experience reality unmediated by any social relation. And the overriding thematic of our time is precisely this passion “in contrast to the nineteenth century of utopian or “scientific” projects and ideals, plans for the future....” (Žižek 2002: 5-6). Indeed, “the twentieth century aimed at delivering the thing itself the direct experience of the Real as opposed to everyday social reality – the Real in its extreme violence as the price to be paid for peeling off the deceptive layers of reality” (5-6). In the Lacanian perspective, Treadwell’s and Andrews’ goal to grasp the “truth” of existence – the Real of it – is an impossible one, in part, because the formation of subjectivity occurs in the face of a *lack* of certainty. The subject with language is always incomplete, in a sense, because “Language *divides up* the world in particular ways to produce for every social grouping what it calls ‘reality’” [my emphasis]. Because of this division, “completeness or closure is impossible. There is always, inevitably, something that is missed out, something that cannot be symbolised, and this is one part of what psychoanalytic theory calls ‘the real’” (Edkins 2003: 11). The square root of -1 is a simple example: inside our mathematico-logical system, we cannot deduce the result of square-rooting -1. Instead, we use *i* as a symbolic placeholder. But the symbol *i* designates not so much a discrete entity as a gap, a nothing-space. And in this way, “the real ... has to be hidden or forgotten, because it is a threat to the imaginary completeness of the subject” (11). It would be impossible to live in a world with such gaping inconsistencies, so the subject covers them over with ideology, which acts as a mediator between the subject and the social world. And in this

same way, it is the ideal of nature as balanced, complete sphere that serves as a symbolic shell for the violent contingencies that compose it.

While Andrews and Treadwell seek a more harmonic relation to the natural world, it must be stated that this idealized nature does not exist, and “with our gaze firmly fixed on capturing an imaginary ‘idealized’ Nature, the controversy further solidifies our conviction of the possibility of a harmonious, balanced, and fundamentally benign ONE Nature if we would just get our interaction with it right” (Swyngedouw 2001: unpaginated). Their search establishes an irresolvable dilemma: how to pinpoint “where Nature’s rightful point of benign existence resides[?]” (Swyngedouw). It is this question to which neither Treadwell nor Andrews can adequately respond because it has no “correct” answer: they insist upon completeness that neither the natural world nor reality possesses. And it is the oscillation around this point that proves most problematic. Instead, “one should thus learn to accept the utter groundlessness of our existence: there is no firm foundation, a place of retreat, on which one can safely count. ‘Nature doesn’t exist’” (Žižek 2007: unpaginated). And further, one should accept there is no “big Other” that might guarantee the meaning of our actions in relation to nature – some higher entity in the social world that ultimately decides whether our choices are justified. The virgin nature, devoid of all human contact, is a grand fantasy: nature is always conceived and framed through human interaction with, and intervention into, the natural world. There are certain inevitabilities about our being-in-the-world that always already stain our interaction with nature. And the political problem of these “inevitabilities” appears clearly in the various green movements, like deep ecology, that seek a more “harmonic” relationship with “true nature”: they are unable to reach the point of pure relationality due to one of humanity’s basest needs: food. The killing, not just of animals, but plants themselves is already an intervention, and it is merely one of many. Is not the most extreme example of this quest for an interaction with nature that is *unstained* by human involvement the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement? Its proponents are so in love with the natural world that they believe no more children should come into existence: that humanity should breed itself out to save the Earth. In truth, the lesson of ecology is exactly the opposite: it is not too many humans intervening that is the greatest threat. Instead, “‘Nature’ on Earth is already so “adapted” to human interventions, human ‘pollution’ is already so completely included in the shaky and

fragile balance of 'natural' reproduction on Earth, that its cessation would cause a catastrophic imbalance" (Zizek 2008: 442). There cannot be an ecology *without* humans.

And it is this incompleteness that becomes increasingly clear: as Andrews gets closer and closer to the buffalo hunt, which he hopes will finally provide him with the meaning-creating experience of authentic nature, he feels no more certain than before. After a violent snowstorm forces his hunting party to stay at their camp longer than planned, Andrews leaves his protective sleeping bag and sees *nature*. "When he came from under the snow, his eyes were still closed; he opened them upon a brilliance that seared them over for an instant with a white hotness When at last he was able to look around him, he viewed a world that he had not seen before" (Williams 2003: 183). After Andrews has faced the uncaring, insensitive violence of nature embodied by the snowstorm, he awakens to a world different from the one of his imagination. He no longer sees the idealization he hoped for, but instead, he finds a foreign object and feels no closer to understanding himself. However, it is this "white hotness" that is key: the encounter with the Real is marked by excessive violence. This violence appears vividly in a buffalo hunt that descends quickly into orgiastic violence. The expedition leader, "already withdrawn and spare with words, ... became with the passing days almost totally intent upon his kill" (159). And this extreme violence is not at all an exception: it is the horrifying norm, which Andrews cannot bear. He "could hear the sound of his rifle steadily and monotonously and insistentlly pounding at the silence, and pounding at their nerves until they were raw and bruised" (159). The image recalls a jackhammer pounding at the ground: the gun thrashes against his fragile world itself.

Instead of providing him clarity, the violence of the slaughter "pounds at his nerves." He is no longer confident in the validity of his original intentions, nor that he still *wants* to discover nature's truth. One should follow the text closely here: his hunt leader is not some crazed lunatic, hiding his real motives all along. In fact, precisely the opposite: he is just another hunter hoping to score a big haul of skins. It is Andrews who refuses to acknowledge the simple truth of "hunting," instead seeing its frightening manifestation as an awful aberration. And here we return to the ecological dilemma: the point is not that there are a few evil individuals destroying the environment who we can clear away so mother nature will hug us closer again. It is our culture itself that has

molded itself inextricably within nature: hunting, resource extraction, pollution, geological sciences, etc. In the words of Paul Crutzen, we have entered the age of the anthropocene: humanity's impact on the environment is so great that we are fundamentally remodeling nature. The pounding of the gun barrel is indeed violent, but perhaps the largest violence lies precisely in the knowledge of our *real* control over nature.

Treadwell's experience of disappointment parallels Andrews': he returns year after year to the refuge of the bears, yet comes no closer to harmony. On the outside, he seems peaceful, but his angry tirades and an extended monologue about homosexuality indicate that unanswered existential crises still dominate his daily activity. For Treadwell, the encounter with the Real is even more violent: instead of watching two bears fight from the sidelines, he, as a self-proclaimed member of the bear community, is brutally mauled by one of the large males. While the irony is nearly overwhelming, the incident depicts a limit to and the brutal violence of this confrontation with the Real of nature. It is impossible to be sure what was racing through Treadwell's mind during this fight: whether he experienced the same horror viewers do; or, on the contrary, whether it the most fulfilling moment of his life – when things finally began to “click.” Re-watching the footage of the final moments of his life, Herzog admits that “what haunts [him] is that in all the faces of all the bears that Treadwell ever filmed, [he]

discover[s] no kinship, no understanding, no mercy... only the overwhelming indifference of nature.” For Herzog, “there is no such thing as a secret world of the bears” into which Treadwell was slowly gaining access. Instead, the bear’s “blank stare speaks only of a half-bored interest in food.” Perhaps, then, in the brief interval between his resistance and his death, Treadwell was forced to acknowledge that the world of nature is no less catastrophic than the civilized world he hoped to escape. Maybe at this second, he understood that, in Herzog’s words, “the common character of the universe is not harmony, but chaos, hostility, and murder” (Herzog 2005).

Yet for Treadwell, the bear was a Christ-like figure, saving him from a society that refused to “accept” him, with his pseudo-“homosexual” lisp, peculiar antics, etc – “A friend, a savior” (Herzog 2005). The viewer cannot help wondering if fighting the bear was merely the final step in the integration of his human world and the bear world he imagined – his becoming-bear. From Treadwell’s perspective, it could very well have been the moment he was finally recognized as part of the bear population. But we have to maintain the difference between Treadwell’s distinctly “personal” relation to the event and our outside perspective: what he might have realized is not what the gruesome scene presents. In the uncaring mauling, we see the violent *reaction* of nature to the meaning and completeness Treadwell longed to find. If the viewer held out hope for Timothy Treadwell’s successful integration, this is the moment when that hope is



Figure 2: Treadwell's Final Seconds on Camera

decisively dashed. And the point here is precisely not that Treadwell or Andrews did or did not uncover the Real of nature; nor that they discovered its hidden meaning. Instead, “One should be Hegelian here: what if the very experience of reality as a seamless Whole is a violent imposition of ours, something we ‘project onto it’ ... in order to avoid directly confronting the totally meaningless ‘infinitely variegated manifold of particular phenomena”? (Žižek 2008: 443). When Andrews’ eyes are “seared over” by a “white” force, it is precisely this experience of nature *devoid* of our forced imposition of meaning.

Thus, contra the attempt to find reality through an escape into nature, the key to “peeling off the deceptive layers of reality” lies in understanding the violence of the Real. This experience is profoundly *political* because it is part of the change in subjectivity required for a radical act. After all, radical leaps in subjectivity cannot happen directly: in the first move, “the abstraction... the blindness to the other’s suffering and pain, has first to be broken in a gesture of taking the risk and reaching directly out to the suffering other...” And is not the moment of the mauling by the bear the ultimate example of identification with the Other in all of its violence? That identification appears extremely violent precisely because it “shatters the very kernel of our identity” (Žižek 2004: 249). We can read the final battle of *Grizzly Man* as Treadwell reaching out to the suffering other – the bears, which he believes it is his job to protect from society’s abuse. And it is not just that Treadwell views himself as one of the bears, but I believe, identifies with *the* bear that is attacking him. We find in this final, horrifically violent moment, Treadwell as a bear mauling Treadwell as a man. Consistently failing to find acceptance within human communities, he finds a final acceptance into the basest of rituals – animals fighting over food. The bear that was attacking him did not set out with any particular intent to do him harm, in the way that Treadwell thinks other humans constantly do. The bear is merely looking for food and it is Treadwell, self-appointed protector of the bears, who is in his way. He finds acceptance, here, in their common *animality* – in their common desire to acquire sustenance.

When the bear attacks him viciously, we should see this in very much the reverse: Timothy not as the object of the action, but as the actor. In this moment, it is Timothy striking at himself, at Timothy-as-man. This “self-beating” is a liberatory gesture because it frees him, finally, from the very constraints that tie him to society – his

“humanity.” In his perspective – in the way that the bear treats him as “just another bear” – he is recognized, for a brief moment, as part of nature. This is, after all, the main goal of his living with the bears: to finally be recognized and accepted inside a community. To be accepted, and to find acceptance, he has to reduce himself to the non-human. Treadwell’s absolute “scatological (excremental) identification” with the figure of the animal, “is equivalent to adopting the position of the proletarian who has nothing to lose.” This form of self-beating is critical to politics because to engage fully in revolutionary action, the subject has to cut ties to its prior forms of existence. It has to free itself from the limits of *possibility* that those previous forms establish. Indeed, “the pure subject emerges only through this experience of radical self-degradation, when I allow/provoke the other to beat the crap out of me, emptying me of all substantial content, of all symbolic support which could confer a modicum of dignity on me” (252). We see a version of this in the recent Occupy Wall Street protests, when occupiers allow themselves to be beaten, pepper-sprayed, or thrown around by police officers. The point is not that these are examples of passivity, but instead, like the famous office beating scene in *Fight Club*, in the face of such absolute acceptance of violence the violent acts lose their effectiveness. By reducing themselves to the position of those with nothing to lose, any political change becomes possible: “the true goal of this beating is to beat out that in me which attaches me to the master” (253). But there is a difference between this and Treadwell’s end: in the moment before he dies, Treadwell becomes “merely” an animal fleeing the attack of a much larger, more powerful foe. It is not that Timothy has somehow beaten out of himself this connection and reached the “true” nature. Returning to *Swyngedouw*, we find once again exactly the reverse: nature overcomes human intervention. The Real of nature that Treadwell thought he was reaching emerged in its violent force to say one thing forcefully: Nature swallows up humanity.

What is most compelling about Treadwell’s final moments is that he has plenty of time to escape, but stays still, attempting to stop the bear with language. Based upon a tape recording, we can hear him documenting the bear’s arrival, narrating his own final moments. Paradoxically, in the moment in which the “raw” animal instincts, which he has been developing since his time in the wild began, break down, Treadwell returns to language to stop the bear. Instead of some Emersonian, Transcendental moment in

which Treadwell breaks through the barriers between man and animal, he spews forth a language the bear cannot understand. He is not lost in translation: there is no translation. Treadwell's fantasy is so all-encompassing that he ignores the one simple truth: the bear cannot and does not care to understand him. This bear, which the park had tagged only as "Bear 141," appears in the final moments of Treadwell's videotape, standing and looking around blankly. The "indifference" of nature that Herzog refers to is not just about how little nature *cares* about humans – we might say that it does not care at all, it has no capacity for "caring." The failure of Treadwell's language to stop the bear is also a failure to adequately understand the natural world *through* language – to understand the aspects of it that exceed that linguistic capacity. It is language at the limit point of its potentiality and nature's final "indifference" to human language.

Treadwell's end comes at the startling realization that his social fantasy is



Figure 3: Bear 141

incomplete. In his final moments, while the bear momentarily releases him from its jaws, he shouts to his girlfriend to run away. The transferal is important: his attention shifts from the bear to the woman in his life; his pleas move from the animal to the person who understands them. In this moment as well, Treadwell traverses the fantasy of idealized nature by re-avowing his subjective responsibility for how he experiences the world (McGowan and Kunkle 2004: 168). He understands his ethical obligation as assisting those he can: not the bears, who never needed his "protection," but the

woman he endangered by bringing her into the wilderness. Yet Timothy does not run away, even though he has a chance. Why? The situation here is structurally parallel to the pill scene in *The Matrix*. One pill will allow Neo to return to his comfortable life inside the simulation; the other will cause him to wake up from it. After learning that the existence he had previously lived was a lie, he cannot return to it. Timothy's confrontation with the bear is his pill selection scene: does he run away and return as a failure to his old world, accepting that his dream of perfect coexistence with nature is impossible? Or does he engage the bear in combat, fully accepting his "simulation" – the fantasy of bear-ness he has created? In fact, he opts for the third "pill": he accepts that the very distance between human and animal is of his own creation, yet he remains passive in the face of this extreme violence. He fully acknowledges the violence of the Real.

Unlike Treadwell, Andrews refuses to embrace the violence of his contact with the Real of nature, and in this refusal, he finds no "secret lesson." His life feels empty when he returns to his home in Butcher's Crossing. Even Francine, the lusted-after object of his sexual desire, becomes nothing more than an empty body in his mind. Andrews "turned ... to the bed where Francine lay, he stood above her He had not seen her before as he saw her now, caught in the ugliness of sleep; or if he had, he had not let his eyes stay upon her" (Williams 2003: 271). What Andrews finds in the morning is the "Real" of her body devoid of any fantasmatic covering. He sees *just a woman* with "lusterless" hair, not the idealized dream he originally sought. It is not merely disappointment that he feels, but disgust: the Real of her body is ugly to him and he must look away. This is the psychoanalytic point about desire: once you get too close to the objet petit a, desire becomes fear and disgust. And is it not the case that the ultimate instance of this is "the option we get on hardcore websites to observe the inside of a vagina from the vantage point of a tiny camera at the top of the penetrating dildo? At this extreme point, a shift occurs: when we get too close to the desired object, erotic fascination turns into disgust at the Real of the bare flesh" (Zizek 2002: 6). And so too, Andrews "could hardly recall, now, the passion that had drawn him to this room and this flesh He went quietly across to the door and did not look back" (Williams 2003: 272-273). As at the buffalo slaughter, Andrews is once again faced with the direct engagement with the "real" of existence he originally sought. He has an opportunity to

acknowledge that things do not exist in the same idealized way that they do in his mind. This is, after all, the “truth” that he sought: the incompleteness of any fantasy. But he refuses to face this reality. Instead, he runs away to search for a new answer to his life. The ending of *Butcher’s Crossing* makes clear that this cycle will continue endlessly: the Emersonian ideal will come up short precisely because nature is not a complete entity. The inevitable distance between the fantasy of nature and the Real means that until Andrews can accept this incompleteness, he will forever seek perfection in nature and will be perpetually disappointed.

These two finales gain a secondary power when read in the context of the contemporary ecological debate. Nearly everyone now recognizes that catastrophic global warming is real and coming: nonetheless, they refuse to take the actions necessary to stop it. An *Onion* article from December 5, 2011 pointed out very clearly this truth: “Report: Global Warming May Be Irreversible By 2006.” Instead of acting to stop these changes, it is easier to rely upon tropes about the “natural world” with its strange cycles and oscillations. Though Will Andrews’ survives longer than Treadwell, it is unclear that he has really *done better* in his retreat back into searching for meaning. After all, he moves from one place to the next, never satisfied, always on the lookout for another distraction from his own boredom. His search becomes little more than “vegetat[ing] in the eventless utilitarian-hedonist survival of what Nietzsche called the ‘last men’” (Žižek 2010: 272-273). This is why his experiences *feel* so empty: sex becomes mechanical and stripped of what makes it pleasurable; the buffalo hunt become horrifying, devoid of the meaning he expected to find; and school become tedious and repetitious, incapable of showing him the truths he so desires. In Treadwell’s final moments, we are forced to wonder if he wasn’t “more alive” than Andrews ever will be. In a very real sense, “What makes life ‘worth living’ is the very excess of life: the awareness that there is something for which we are ready to risk our life (we may call this excess “freedom,” “honor,” “dignity,” “autonomy,” etc.). Only when we are ready to take this risk are we really alive” (Žižek 2003: 95).

Treadwell is willing to give up his very existence for the cause of the *bears*. And here, his engagement with the bear had political *dimensions* because a true act involves the sacrifice of the safety of our modern condition without knowledge of whether or not this act will be successful. Yet even if it was proto-political, it is hard to call Treadwell’s

death a truly political gesture. And here it is crucial to distinguish between a narcissistic, self-destructive act and one that is *truly* political. The difference between these two is also the difference between the “acting out” against state power by teenage gangs on one hand and the mass mobilizations by workers organizations in Egypt. Treadwell’s sacrifice failed as a political act precisely because it remained too hopelessly particular: a single man in a national park getting mauled by a bear is hardly unique. To put it crassly, that sort of thing happens frequently. But nonetheless, his absolute fidelity to this truth provides an – admittedly extreme – model for what might be called for in order to radically transform the present ideological coordinates. For Badiou, this is the point: only in the procedure of a truth can the individual “go beyond the Statist constraints of mere survival by becoming a part of the body-of-truth, or the subjectivizable body” (Badiou 2011: 11). To fully acknowledge the odds against success and nonetheless insist that the “impossible” *is* possible is what makes a new act truly radical. This is Treadwell’s lesson.

To return to ecology, what is necessary to break free from the present position of ecology as ideology, from our cynical disavowal of responsibility for climate change, is this undying intensity. For Badiou and Žižek, the name of this idea now is “Communism.” Regardless of what we call it, given the rapidly advancing changes to our modes of life, we might say that today, more than ever, “the true danger is... precisely, that nothing will go wrong” (Žižek 2008: 447). The discussions that happen in climate treaties and state legislative battles are little more than pseudo-activity aimed at ensuring the status quo remains the *same*. The yearly summits among members of the United Nations about the climate are farcical examples: each year countries appear, acknowledge the same disagreements as before, and then depart, agreeing to meet up again next year. Even the “actions” which pundits applaud – the Kyoto treaty and now the new Durban Platform – are little more than nonbinding commitments which countries “forget” each time banks need to be bailed out or some other crisis arises. America and China, the world’s largest polluters, refuse to meet even the proposed cuts. There is a necessity, then, to shake ourselves free from the “decaffeinated reality” that has been established by ideology: to refuse the ecological consensus. And this must begin, precisely as Treadwell and Andrews demonstrate, by refusing the notion of an ideal nature. What this helps us to understand is “that humanity has nowhere to

retreat to: not only is there no “big Other” (self-contained symbolic order as the ultimate guarantee of Meaning); there is also no *Nature qua* balanced order of self-reproduction whose homeostasis is disturbed, nudged off course, by unbalanced human interventions” (442).

Our response needs to find the critical middle between the absolute engagement of Treadwell and the awareness of Andrews: we have to be willing to give ourselves over absolutely to the possibility of a change that seems impossible, but only when this action is tempered, first, by a refusal of any meaning-ensuring big Other and second, by a firm engagement with the Real of nature itself. Among other things, this would mean insisting, against those who argue the United States should not meet emissions caps until other nations do, that the fault lies entirely with us. Not just because the United States is historically the largest producer and exports much of its environmental destruction to the Global South, but because our ethics need to take responsibility for our own actions, not disavowing that responsibility to some Other. It also means rejecting the shallow “Toms shoes” approach to ecology: recycling a few bottles but continuing to use high polluting technologies misses the point entirely. Until individuals begin to take responsibility as well and refuse the capitalist insistence to buy back into a system of production that gave rise to this “tragedy of the commons,” no true change will occur. These actions will always be, in some ways, violent. But, perhaps *Fight Club* is an ironic inspiration here: a little violence can be a good thing.

By viewing the journeys of the protagonists in the novel *Butcher’s Crossing* and the documentary film *Grizzly Man* through the lens of the psychoanalytic “passion of the Real,” I have argued that the distorted fantasies of Treadwell and Andrews about finding completeness in the magic of nature will remain harmful delusions until they – and we – confront and acknowledge the violent nature of reality. Both works emphasize that we cannot avoid this encounter: rejecting it and covering it up with fantasies of perfection and hopes for a different future merely delay the pain of the realization and harm us repeatedly and for longer periods of time. Both works offer up a potentially different lens through which we can evaluate our own realities and provide a compelling example of how continuously avoiding the difficult understandings in life can cause us to waste time seeking out delusions which, as we will inevitably learn, can never be more than delusions. When we begin to think about how this relation to nature is, in itself, political,

we gain crucial new insights into the debates over ecology today. Otherwise, and by the time we finally know the catastrophe will happen, it will, by definition, be too late.

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