

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Nine, Number One

## ***Cadere and the Weal***

**Rebecca Weisman**

All images are stills from the film *Cadere and the Weal*, 2014.

[CLICK HERE](#) to view the full video (9 min 16 s).

Credits: Rebecca Weisman (director, camera, editing); Meara McGinniss (costume design, the huntress)



*Cadere and the Weal* takes up the question of animal subjectivity and is one of a number of video shorts by Rebecca Weisman that explore dark ecological thought<sup>1</sup>, the Lacanian Symbolic-Real exchange, sexuality, and [\*jouissance\*](#) in connection to nature to provoke a psychoanalytically-oriented conversation about [ecology and environmental collapse](#). The Lacanian notion of the Real, which emerges from our conscription into a Symbolic social structure, is particularly important to this work. What a romanticized and aestheticized form of environmental art misses is the very thing that it is trying to capture in/of nature. The Real is what erupts from an otherwise over-determined sense of life. What is problematic in our concepts and representations of nature is precisely this over-determination that tries to supplant the unconscious, irrational or uncontrollable messiness of nature rather than see the interdependence between them. In a recent lecture, theorist Elizabeth Grosz (2014) unpacked the dimension of animality/humanity as an unexamined philosophical thread—a categorization that is all too often designated through terms that consider “reasoning” and “language” to be sole determining factors, a kind of anthropocentric imperialism. The division between human and animal is upheld in spite of ever-increasing research on the emotional, linguistic, and complex social behavior of animals. Yet there is something we reserve by maintaining this distinction, something of the other (in us), which as it turns out, is also elicited through the uselessness of art itself. In *Chaos, Territory, Art* Grosz writes,

Art is of the animal. It comes not from something uniquely human – reason, recognition, intelligence, or sensibility – nor from any of man’s higher accomplishments – a special inclination to the aesthetic or the ethical, to beauty or goodness – but from something excessive in the world, from what is unable to be predicted, from the animal. What is most artistic in us is also the most bestial. Art comes from that excess, in the world, in objects, in living things, which enables them to be more than they are, to give more than themselves, their material properties and possible uses, than is readily given in them. (Grosz, 2008, p. 63)





Even in Bentham's turn towards suffering as the requisite for rights, we are all too often trapped in a hierarchical categorizing of degrees of suffering, and unwilling to blur entirely that line between us and the Other who does not exist.<sup>2</sup> In order to examine our perverse relationship to nature is it really nature that we must make more humane? Or is it humanity that must become more like the animal? If we consider acts of the animal-as-animal to be also creative acts can we retain for ourselves the thing that is excised by utilitarianism (the Real)? Grosz continues,

Art is of the animal to the extent that creation, the attainment of new goals not directly defined through the useful, is at its core.... Art, the excessive composition of material elements that are always more than material, is the major – perhaps the only– way in which living beings deal with and enjoy the intensities that are not contained within but are extracted from the natural world, chaos. (Grosz, 2008, p. 65)





In *Cadere and the Weal* a young huntress stalks an imaginary squirrel, her object of desire. The fake-alive-undead squirrel hides in its imaginary cave in tense juxtaposition to the longing and wandering of the huntress. The squirrel's imaginary status (a taxidermied approximation, living in a surreal make-believe "hole") is conjured up via the huntress-as-subject. It is *her* construction, *her* hunt, *her* vision of the other. Yet when she tries to seize the moment, drawing her bow and marking her target, the animal is transformed into its real-dead iteration, exposed to time and immanent decay. What is the position of the two different squirrel corpses, one retaining its stuffed likeness, preserved in its squirrely-ness, the other allowed to rot and dissolve? They seem to occupy a space carved out by Žižek's notion of the "undead," a kind of interim space of interrupted symbolic representation. In reference to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Žižek describes the position of "ein *Untier*, an inanimal, in a strict symmetry to inhuman." He continues, "What we get here is the opposite of inhuman: an animal which, while remaining animal, is not really animal - the excess over the animal in animal, the traumatic core of animality." (Žižek, 2006, p. 22) Yet for our furry corpses one seems to beget the other. The seemingly undead squirrel is trapped within an imaginary-symbolic no-man's land, both within the mind of the huntress and within the confines of the filmic construct. The "trauma" as such comes with the break in this fragile language, when what was once animated, albeit in an undead way, is allowed to truly be seen in all its deadness.





The huntress' kill is rife with failure. "Cadere", a reference to Julia Kristeva's text on abjection, is latin meaning "to fall" and also the root of the English "cadaver" (Kristeva, 1982). We might understand the fall of the huntress (her own imaginary wound unraveling) as the moment when the real of the animal corpse erupts. Kristeva writes,

The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3)



Is it possible that only in our own unraveling as certain kinds of subjects, our own failure, that nature emerges? And vice versa, can abjection, *death* itself, be the only moment of the real left to us to experience? She continues,

There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until,



from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver... the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3)

Is it wrong to feel a moment of freedom in this? Is this not *jouissance*, that frightening and yet pleasurable leftover thing? The huntress dances, despite, no, *because of* her failure as subject. And finally,

That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present, or that I hallucinate so that I might, in a present time, speak to you, conceive of you—it is now here, jettied, abjected, into "my" world. Deprived of world, therefore, I fall in a faint. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection... Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4)







And yet this aspect of nature that we seek to capture is so easily reabsorbed, or repositioned as a “beyond”, something to be worshipped, ritualized, fetishized, and thus displaced. It seems inevitable. And yet when we’ve brushed up against it, and perhaps returned, we’ve been changed by death. We are marked subjects. The “weal” references Marian Engel’s novel about the wound left on a woman’s back by a bear with whom she has a failed sexual encounter. Utterly unromantic in her portrayal of nature is Engel’s novel “Bear”, a strange fictional tale of Lou, a researcher and librarian sent to an island to catalogue documents, who then becomes involved in an emotional and sexual relationship with a bear. The theorist Catriona Sandilands provides an exciting reading of this text as an investigation into the “natural” boundaries between the woman and the bear. The woman tries to speak and name the bear but continues to run up against only the bodily presence of the Bear and the incommensurability of their relationship, indeed “they are Others to each other.” (Sandilands, 1999, p. 182) Through their sexual union Lou risks death, survives, and is in a sense reborn as a redefined, reconfigured subject. Her brush with the Real of her Other leaves her somehow more herself, rescued from the illusory wholeness of a symbolic life full of cataloguing and naming, and thrust into an incomplete place of desire “to become.” (Sandilands, 1999 p. 182) Sandilands writes,

It is Lou whom we are to understand as most affected by the encounter with the Other. Unsticking herself from the bloodsoaked sheets of their failed (not insignificantly) penetrative sexual encounter during which the bear wounded her, Lou noticed that she was different. She seemed to have the body of a much younger woman. The sedentary fat had gone, leaving the shape of her ribs

showing. Slowly, she turned and looked over shoulder in the pier-glass at her back: one long, red, congealing weal marked her from shoulder to buttock. I shall keep that, she thought. (p. 183)



Lou carried the scar of a traumatic encounter with the Other, an encounter that transgressed the human/nonhuman animal boundary but could not bring either to fit in the other's world. The bear, unnamed and unnameable, appears in Lou's world as a significant and active presence, but this presence is not human, not translatable into human speech. His desires leave noticeable marks on Lou's life and body, but his motives remain enigmatic. And it is the very strangeness of his presence, the scar left by the impossibility of the encounter, that causes Lou to change; ultimately, it is not his conversation but his Otherness that propels her to a sense of incomplete selfhood, to a desire to become. So too our huntress is caught in this in-between, this unraveling and continual becoming. Only through this failed search (for the squirrel, for nature, for herself) is she able to come even the minutest amount closer to that boundary between herself and the Other.





---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Dark Ecology” is a term coined by philosopher Timothy Morton that plays on and problematizes the “Deep Ecology” movement popularized in the 1970’s. Morton’s work asks us to question our own unresolved relationship to the idea of “the environment” and invokes Descartes, Hegel, and Lacan to discuss what might be left out when we assume only a Romanticized (and Symbolic) relationship to nature. For further reference see Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, Harvard University Press, 2009 and <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.in>

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Bentham’s famous indictment of slavery was also bound up in a defense for non-human animals: “It may come one day to be recognized, that the number of the legs, the villosity of the skin, or the termination of the os sacrum, are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate. What else is it that should trace the insuperable line? Is it the faculty of reason, or, perhaps, the faculty of discourse? But a full-grown horse or dog is beyond comparison a more rational, as well as a more conversable animal, than an infant of a day, or a week, or even a month, old. But suppose the case were otherwise, what would it avail? the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?” (Bentham, 1907, XVII.6 footnote). This point is well taken up by Grosz and problematized in its leveling of difference, an erasure of otherness that is however compelling and seemingly necessary.

### Artist's Statement:

My experimental multi-media practice uses video, sound, performance, and installation grounded firmly in discourses of critical theory to create rigorously conceptual as well as viscerally pleasurable experiences that call into question issues of subjectivity, the body, language, systems of power, and environment(s). My work examines subconscious and psychological spaces in order to challenge notions about the stability of personal identity, "Nature", and time, often asking the viewer to travel on a journey where the need for literal meaning is temporarily suspended and the internal logic of the self or site is allowed to emerge from hiding. Through putting text and electronics in an environment the work examines how that environment is altered or mediated by these representative technologies, and how meaning is created or dismantled. I live and work in Vermont, a site that offers a fluid context in which to investigate boundaries—between self, nature, and others--and how technology renders these boundaries permeable and transgressible. I use many mediums/media in site-specific installations and films, often self-producing shows in unlikely venues and locations: [the Oregon desert](#), [vacant parking lots](#), [a Vermont mountaintop](#), [my home](#).

After several years of teaching at college level (courses in Experimental Film, Video Art, Installation, and Art History at Saint Michael's College and Burlington College) I recently was offered the position of Director for the Institute for the Arts, Global Center for Advanced Studies which has allowed me to deepen my passion for teaching students to engage critically with theory within a conceptual art praxis. I am most interested in showing work within communities that support this kind of practice, most recently [Misbookings](#), an intervention performed at the Deleuze, Guattari, and the Arts conference at King's College, Ontario, [Excavations](#), a site-specific sound and architectural projection at the Design Center, Goddard College, and [Ethan Allen Nights](#), a film and sculptural installation at McCarthy Art Center, Saint Michael's College. I hold an MFA in Interdisciplinary Art from Goddard College.

### Bibliography

Bentham, J. [1789] (1907) *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Retrieved on 10 December 2014 from [www.econlib.org](http://www.econlib.org).

Grosz, E. (2008) *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Grosz, E. (2014) *Derrida and the Animals*. [Lecture] 4th Derrida Today Conference. Fordham University, New York, May 2014.

Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Sandilands, C. (1999) *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and The Quest for Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.



Zizek, Slavoj. (2006) *The Parallax View*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

