

ANIMAL VIEWING IN POSTMODERN AMERICA:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE YELLOWSTONE WOLF WATCHERS

by

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## GLOSSARY

## SCOPOPHILIA

Literally, the love of looking. Scopophilia is generally used to refer to the predominantly male gaze of Hollywood cinema, which objectifies women into objects to be looked at (rather than subjects with their own voice and subjectivity). The term is heavily used in feminist film criticism. The scopophilic drive is a constituent of the polymorphous sexuality of the infant, one which is gradually "trained" and normalized but one which may become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other.

## VOYEUR

Function: *noun*

Etymology: French, literally, one who sees, from Middle French, from *voir* to see, from Latin *videre*.

- 1 : one obtaining sexual gratification from observing unsuspecting individuals who are partly undressed, naked, or engaged in sexual acts; *broadly* : one who habitually seeks sexual stimulation by visual means;
- 2 : a prying observer who is usually seeking the sordid or the scandalous.

## SYMBOLISM

Function: *noun*

- 1: the art or practice of using symbols especially by investing things with a symbolic meaning or by expressing the invisible or intangible by means of visible or sensuous representations: as a : artistic imitation or invention that is a method of revealing or suggesting immaterial, ideal, or otherwise intangible truth or states b : the use of conventional or traditional signs in the representation of divine beings and spirits;
- 2: a system of symbols or representations.

## MYTHOLOGIZE

Function: *verb*

- 1: *obsolete* : to explain the mythological significance of;
- 2: to build a myth around : MYTHICIZE.

*intransitive verb*

- 1: to relate, classify, and explain myths;
- 2: to create or perpetuate myths.

## NOSTALGIA

Function: *noun*

Etymology: New Latin, from Greek *nostos* return home + New Latin *-algia*; akin to Greek *neisthai* to return, Old English *genesan* to survive, Sanskrit *nasate* he approaches.

- 1: the state of being homesick: HOMESICKNESS;
- 2: a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition; *also* : something that evokes nostalgia.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the American relationship with wildlife by way of a case study of the Yellowstone wolf watchers. The American relationship with nature and animals changed at a never before seen rate during the modern era because of capitalism and industrialization. Our relationship with animals is now idealized and distorted, and we constantly mourn their loss from our everyday lives. Although we keep the animal in a state of perpetual dying by representations in mass media globally, zoos, parks and pets, these actions are more to further enforce their marginalization and subjugation to human authority. The Yellowstone wolf watchers seek out their contact in the more authentic setting of Yellowstone National Park, even though this is not the definition of wilderness they believe it to be. Even though the wolf watchers are under the same cultural influences that occur throughout society and result in their scopophilic fascination with wolves, this voyeurism also facilitates a contribution to a unique scientific study of this historically mythologized and only recently reintroduced animal.

## INTRODUCTION

The fascination with animal viewing in America arises from the historical relationship between human and animal and the uniquely American relationship with wilderness. Industrialism and capitalism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century drove the animal from the everyday lives of the masses. In the present post-modern age, as animals make a final exit from our lives, they also linger “in a state of perpetual vanishing” as representations in mass media, pets or managed nature the world over (Lippit: 1). The dedicated wolf watchers of Yellowstone National Park represent a symptom of the larger mass mourning of the animal in the post-industrial age. Increased affluence and spare time allow wolf watchers to escape their everyday existence and the pressures of civilized life in the nostalgic search for wilderness: an attitude that is really a conceptual entity of 19<sup>th</sup> century America ideologies (Cronon: 69-90). This present-day phenomenon reveals the motivations behind animal voyeurism with regard to wolves particularly and animals generally. This attitude illustrates why we watch creatures further down the evolutionary tree who are called our “related others” (Nichols: 202).

## THE ANIMAL: FROM MYTHIC TO MARGINALIZED

Animals began as “messengers and promises” and finally became commodities (Berger 1991: 2). Animals were once with us at the center of our world. We depended on them daily both “economically and productively,” for “food, work, transport, [and] clothing,” and we existed side-by-side with them (Berger 1991: 1). Different writers see our separation from other animal life as beginning with either language, agriculture or urbanization. Language came to separate *us* from *them*; by labeling nature we could have dominion over it. Yet symbolic thought and language, that which separates *us* from *them*, was ironically “born of their relationship” to us, and language remains infused with their presence (Berger 1991: 7). Art and literature worldwide all now attest to the integral role of animals in shaping human society but further speak to the nature of the relationship. Cave paintings, Egyptian tombs, Native American art, Chinese zodiac and medieval art and literature such as Indian fables, children’s stories and fairytales mythologize animals worldwide. (For additional examples see Roy G. Willis’ *Signifying Animals: Human Meaning in the Natural World*). After the development of language humans asserted dominion over nature through domestication, but animals remained at the center of our world. We still felt *part* of nature, not *apart* from it because the invention of the word and concept of “Nature” had not yet separated us from everything else.

Greek philosophy and Judaeo-Christianity, which gave rise to western science, encouraged the separation between humans and *other* nature; it relied on *us* being different to *them* (Wilson: 121). Ever since, this thinking has justified our treatment of animals and cemented human superiority in our thought. Dominion allowed for marginalization and mistreatment. Civilization, it seems, has always been in opposition to nature. Even early societies had similar concerns to modern ones. Roman poetry first began to vocalize a yearning for pastoralism and the purity of nature from the time of the first urbanized culture (Braudy: 281). Later, English romantic poets, such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, John Keats and Robert Burns, wrote of a longing for nature and popularized nature as moral authority and the sacred sublime (see Geoffrey Harvey's *The Romantic Tradition in Modern English Poetry: Rhetoric and Experience* for additional examples). Romantic paintings also acknowledged the approaching disappearance of the animal.

While humankind steadily lost its innocence, those values seemed to appear, or we began to see them, in animals, and this projection of what we had lost provoked a kind of nostalgia. This transference took animals into our receding past (Berger 1991: 10). Nature was increasingly romanticized into a primitive power in opposition to civilization. With each further removal of animals from our inner circle, our mourning increased. As Freud and Jung discuss in their works *Mourning and Melancholia*, and *Approaching the Unconscious*, respectively, the mourning is for ourselves and our loss, "for the self-a self that had become dehumanized in the very process of

humanity's becoming-human" (Lippit: 18). If humans and animals were one before, it is the removal of the animal that led to human differentiation and dehumanization at the same time.

During the last two centuries the departure of animals intensified as part of modernity. The more people separated themselves from nature, the more animals fell below us and went from the realm of nostalgia to marginalization (Berger 1991: 10). Industrialization marks a drastic change in the treatment of animals. Darwin, of course, greatly altered our perception of the human relationship to animals with revelations on common ancestors, but, during the industrial age, the human-animal relationship changed forever. We moved away from dependence on animals for transportation, clothing and agriculture. Machines drove us away from horse-drawn ploughs and carriages. Animals, once essential for our societal development, companionship and agriculture, left our lives (Berger 1991: 10). Falling numbers of agriculturalists practiced animal husbandry and provided meat to the rest of society. The masses no longer directly depended upon animals as "companions or workmates-except non-autonomously as pets" (Wilson: 127). Lippit goes so far as to say "Modernity can be defined by the disappearance of wildlife from humanity's habitat and the reappearance of the same in humanity's reflections on itself: in philosophy, psychoanalysis, and technological media..." (3).

At the beginnings of modernity, peoples collected animals with a gun for museums and later alive for placement in zoos. These actions were a reaction to the loss of the animal, but, by collecting, owning and displaying

them, people also emphasized their dominion over all other animal life and transformed them into spectacle (Berger 1991: 24). Leisure pursuits became associated with interactions with animals, if only through looking. Bird watching was established as another form of collection for the elite; those capitalists who now had the time, money and desire to escape modernity, already felt removed from nature and sought to recapture the connection (Audubon Society, 1886). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century animals were increasingly exploited as pets for sport and for science. Animals no longer shared our work but they did become a basis for our leisure.

Pets now depend on humans and do not exist as independent beings. They are bred for the social and physical characteristics that facilitate the attribution of human traits. Domestic pets provide emotional support, social integration, esteem strength, and practical help such as protection (Daston and Mitman: 121-126). Pets stand-in more for other human relationships, not just our lost contact with nature.

Animals made a final exit from our lives but lingered in zoos, parks, media screens and re-presentations everywhere, or loitered as humanized animals that we now call "pets" (Lippit: 1; Berger: 12). This transformation was not to make up for the loss but to further enforce it (Berger 1991: 24). Seeing the animals rather than having contact with them reinforces the separation and marginalization; consequently, the isolation of humans is increased. Animals are kept and caged apart from our immediate physical world. Now our relationship with nature continues to be distorted because

we idealize it, especially because animals exist in a state of “perpetual vanishing” (Lippit: 1). The mythologizing and marginalization of animals created nostalgia for them. We now possess nostalgia for species we once feared such as the wolf.

## THE CIVILIZING OF AMERICA: ANIMALS AND THE NATIONAL STORY

The American idea of wilderness and nature as we know it today became established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it still reflects the values of the culture which created it. The American relationship to wilderness makes animal-centered groups like the wolf watchers uniquely American. Like nature, wilderness does not exist outside of the cultural construct (Cronon: 25). As Aldo Leopold discussed, we created the artifact of nature out of the raw material of wilderness (Leopold: 264).

As a frontier, wilderness was a savage world prior to civilization. The frontier of the Wild West and its transformation (the so called "civilizing" by Euro-Americans) began the American national story and allowed the Manifest Destiny of the United States to be fulfilled. The Enlightenment Idea of progress moved forward at the expense of land and indigenous peoples (Cronon: 137). Settlers arrived looking to be "astonished and rejuvenated" by nature; so, today, America is built on the myths and stories of nature (Braudy: 280). American settlers subdued the land with labor, and land was quickly cleared so that wild animal numbers fell while domesticated animals increased (Cronon: 154). Progress fully succeeded, and the frontier diminished almost to extinction when railroads and telegraph wires finally connected East and West (Turner: 1).

White men began to lament the loss of nature in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the frontier "disappeared." The simultaneous "civilizing" of America through the pacification of both native peoples and lands was well underway.

Organizations such as the Sierra Club (founded in 1892) were formed to preserve natural areas as people observed them disappearing (Merchant: 142). As the frontier disappeared, the perception of wilderness changed from the uncivilized wild needing to be pacified into a place to facilitate the illusion of escaping the numbing effects of civilization or the troubles and fears of the civilized world. Wilderness became a getaway as people looked for ways to retreat from the confines of civilization and the disadvantages that arrived with the industrial age, such as overcrowding and pollution (Cronon: 77).

It was no coincidence that Yellowstone National Park was conceived at this time, in 1872, when free land, something thought to be limitless in America, seemed spent and the human relationship with animals had changed drastically. (*The Act of Dedication* signed by President Ulysses S. Grant created Yellowstone in 1872). The Park became a demarcated wilderness for tourists; it included wild animals but not Native Americans, who were henceforth excluded. Yellowstone, as a national park, is an institution where animals are contained and displayed.

The conservationism and preservationism movements, which appeared by the end of the late 19th century, were a reaction to the loss of the frontier and disappearance of wilderness (Meyer: 267-284). The movements marked a turn to stewardship, not conquest (Division of Forestry, 1886; Reclamation Act, 1902). Conservationism was a utilitarian approach to nature led by Gifford Pinchot, first Chief of the United States Forest Service.

Preservationism, spearheaded by figures such as John Muir of the Sierra Club and Aldo Leopold of the Wilderness Society, was a move to preserve pristine areas and led to the 1916 National Parks Act. The Theodore Roosevelt Administration (1901-9) aided both initiatives. The movements were a reaction to increased industry, capitalism and the obvious degradation of lands. Unfortunately, mostly urban people benefited, since rural people rarely needed to escape into a national park and access and cost was often prohibitive. Famous landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted (the architect responsible for Central Park and Yosemite) was one of the first prominent people to recognize that it was necessary to make National Parks accessible and available to all. He implemented this conviction in his landscape designs (Cronon: 91-113).

When conservationism failed, it re-emerged as environmentalism in the 1960s. Environmentalism was an ethical and scientific movement in opposition to industry as well as another attempt to rectify the worsening situation relating to the lost wilderness (Cronon: 263). The loss of land and animals was generated from obvious habitat changes and visible environmental degradation such as the DDT issue, which Rachel Carson drew attention to with her book *Silent Spring*, in 1962. Widespread concern and this growing social movement led to the first Earth Day in 1969 and the formation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1969. The more global result was the widespread social movement that is now considered environmentalism.

Animal welfare legislation and advocacy groups also proliferated towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Humane behavior within society is not just actions but also “being seen to behave humanely” as well as “the mark of a more civilized society....[it] is the way in which a society displays its humanity....[the] appearance and treatment of the animal body became a barometer for the moral health of the nation” (Burt: 36). The laws generally surrounded what the public could or could not see and often tempered the widespread vivisection that had been taking place within the biological sciences (Burt: 37). What has been termed acceptable, or not, in legislation is still up for debate today (e.g. factory farms, scientific research, zoos, racing). Perhaps the most famous legislation today, because of the frequent controversy, is the Endangered Species Act (ESA), enacted in 1973. Animal welfare legislation was also eventually applied to film with the Cinematograph (Animals) Act of 1937. This law was enacted after much animal death in the name of science or entertainment, such as the *Tiger and Buffalo Fight*, in 1884.

## THE YELLOWSTONE WOLF WATCHERS

The wolf watchers of Yellowstone National Park were interviewed as part of the documentary filmmaking process in the summer and winter of 2006 for my thesis film *The Wolf Watchers (Young)*. *The Wolf Watchers* examines the motivations behind watching wolves in Yellowstone and the dedication this effort requires. The impetus for the film was to examine the motivations behind animal viewing in general as an essential step towards producing films with specific environmental effects in mind. The wolf watchers I studied do not themselves represent a scientifically determined sample but rather an opportunity for subjective observation in support of my premise about why we look at animals in the post-modern era.

Complete removal of the Rocky Mountain gray wolf from the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem occurred as part of the “civilizing” of lands during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The elimination of the wolf took place at the urging of ranchers. Successful reintroduction in 1995 followed listing of the animal as an endangered species (Endangered Species Act, 1973). Scientists, environmentalists, ranchers and hunters represent some of the broad categories of interested parties now with strong feelings on the subject. Consequently, the wolf “issue” is frequently featured on the front pages and within editorial sections of local newspapers. The issue also often receives national or even international press coverage. Population statistics showed delisting from the Endangered Species Act to be viable before the 2007 proposal. Politicization of the issue delayed the change in status (Bangs).

The political discussion has far outweighed the ecological one because the wolf is mythologized (Bangs). The wolf watchers became manifest at a time when animals had made a final exit from our lives and our relationship to them had become one of idealization and distortion. Our culture is one that now wishes the wolf restored (in certain places!). This change in attitude is a reflection of the animal's spiritual value, not its instrumental value or value as a commodity.

People visit from all over the world to view these wolves. Interviews reveal that most watchers come upon the Yellowstone wolf packs somewhat accidentally during a visit to Yellowstone National Park that did not include the intention of watching the wolves. All visitors to Yellowstone appreciate the wolves and can easily locate them by finding the wolf watchers. Some visitors now arrive with wolf watching in mind as the pinnacle of the Yellowstone experience. Many become addicted and emotionally affected in some way. Devotees often pass their interest along to children or grandchildren, but it is the post-retirement-aged watcher who visits most frequently. Money and time are prerequisites for full time or frequent wolf watching. Some visitors have the time and money to visit frequently but "others save all year to visit" because the urge to watch is so great (Yeager). The watchers are white middle- or upper-class Americans who do not work on the land themselves but live in towns and cities. Many of these fans travel great distances and spend several months a year standing scope to eye, from dawn to dark, watching the Yellowstone wolves. Many watchers

choose Yellowstone for their annual holiday and most visit with their spouse, as Jim Barton and Frank Yeager do. Some, like Steve Watson, facilitate their viewing by leading trips for new or experienced wolf watchers.

A few watch every day year-round after moving to the area to be near the wolves. After visiting for the duration of school holidays over the period of a few years, Laurie Lyman and her husband, Daniel, both retired from teaching. The couple bought a house in Silver Spring, a town right outside the Park's northeast entrance. The Lymans now live in a community in which only a handful of people brave the winter months as they watch wolves virtually everyday. Laurie e-mails approximately two hundred people daily about the activities of the wolves.

Rick McIntyre is the original and much-respected wolf watcher who developed the radio contact system and wolf watching protocol. He is someone who instructs all the other watchers. Although many people watch the wolves, it is only Rick who records actual events in the Park with the help of a dictaphone. Other watchers pass information along to Rick and help with spotting as well as the physical placement of watchers. Many know most of the wolves' identification numbers or can recognize them by sight. Rick moved to Yellowstone National Park after working on grizzly bears in Alaska. This relocation was in anticipation of the successful return of the wolf in 1994, and he watched the reintroduction of the original transplanted wolves. Rick has observed and recorded all the drama ever since, acquiring over 5000 pages of notes on the wolves' movements and behavior.

Information from these notes makes it into the Yellowstone National Park annual wolf report. He never misses a day of watching, and has “wolf watched” in the Park every day for nearly 6 years. As Rick puts it:

I wouldn't want to do anything else, especially since we see wolves pretty much everyday, and everyday there's the possibility of seeing something really important. So I wouldn't want to miss anything.

When he acts as a ranger in the summer, Rick is the only watcher who is paid for his time.

Increased emotional attachment occurs because the watchers possess in-depth knowledge of the history of each pack and most of the individual wolves since the 1995 reintroduction. This information is written up in the annual report each year ([www.nps.gov/yell/naturescience/wolves.htm](http://www.nps.gov/yell/naturescience/wolves.htm)). Individual animals and knowledge of them engender empathy, as all advocacy groups or filmmakers confirm (Daston and Mitman: 191). This emotional connection and the drama between and within packs in Yellowstone were necessary to build the following these particular wolves enjoy today (Mitman: 4).

The drama that unfolds is compelling viewing. The strictly designated geographical boundaries of Yellowstone National Park artificially increased pack densities following reintroduction and intensified the usual inter- and intra-pack dynamics, thus inspiring the wolf watchers who actually got to see wolf behavior daily. This high visibility was never expected (McIntyre). The number of wolves present is as important as their visibility, which results

from a combination of both the wolf's willingness to appear near the motor vehicle thoroughfares and the lack of dense forested vegetation cover. Open valleys facilitate spotting. The pack society seems familiar because wolves most resemble a pet dog, so their activities appear even more familiar. The wolves fascinate the watchers, who believe they have an increased level of understanding of what they view. Laurie summarizes their experience:

It's the individuality of the wolves, and that fighting spirit and how they come together to overcome either the environment or other packs...my focus is on behavior and how they live in the wild.

## THE ANIMAL: THE LOSS OF THE LOOK

The watchers seek out the wolves' eyes looking back at them. Watchers collectively speak of looking into the wolves' eyes and the emotional reaction this action elicits. Berger believes that the ultimate consequence of this marginalization of animals is the loss of the "look," which he defines as "the look between animal and man, which may have played a crucial role in the development of human society and with which, in any case, all men had always lived until less than a century ago, has been extinguished," and lost to capitalism, never to return (1991: 26). Sight was the basis of our relationship, according to Levi-Strauss, since "it is only because man originally felt himself identical to all those like him. . . that he came to acquire the capacity to distinguish *himself* as he distinguishes them" (101). In the absence of language, the look was our communication with animals, a shared view of the surrounding environment. Now, even that is gone along with the physical animal (Berger 1991: 3). So, now we seek out the look of the animal, their eyes looking back at us, even though neither understands the other. So, in the absence of language and mutual comprehension, we find ourselves alone. Searles calls this the "existential loneliness" of the human situation (Searles: 122).

The zoo exemplifies the marginalization of animals and the loss of the look through their captivity in a completely artificial environment. The physical closeness of animals and their obvious loneliness and boredom emphasize the distance. The point is, obviously, for people to look at

animals, but nowhere in a zoo will a visitor encounter *a look*; instead, they will experience just a “sideways” glance at most from an indifferent, bored animal (Berger 1991: 26). So, we search out the returned look in more authentic settings, like a National Park or on screen; places where an animal is not so obviously physically marginalized. We search where images emphasize the look of the animal, such as fictional narratives that often emphasize an understanding between animal and protagonist (*Flipper*; *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*). We also look in nature and perceive the understanding and meaning Laurie believes she sees in Yellowstone:

When you look into the wolf's eyes, there's something there that's like a magnet to me. Maybe it is the wilderness or wildness in all of us, but I think it's something that we all need ...and it's also a simpleness.

We *see* subjects we do not *know*, like the wolf, but this lack of knowledge does not stop wolf watchers from searching for answers and looking into the wolves' eyes in Yellowstone and seeing “wildness” or “comprehension” looking back at them (Lyman; Watson). In wildlife film we can make the animal return our look, which is a commonly used technique. This is not the authentic exchange the wolf watchers desire.

Burt sees the significance of the eye close-up in wildlife film as playing on “psychological and social aspects of vision.” It is a technique that tries to reflect understanding (39). The look across a screen is actually our social contract in the absence of language and seeks meaning rather than

accepting mutually incomprehensible looks as the basis of the relationship.

This is the

same look the wolf watcher searches for in Yellowstone, wishing to observe a connection with the wolf. The difference is us looking at nature from *within* it, or *outside* of it. That is, human beings excluded from the definition of "nature" or nature as "Everything," including the human species and man-made environments.

## ANIMAL VOYEURISM

We look at animals to not only understand them, but, more importantly, to understand ourselves. As Levi-Strauss put it, "Animals are good to think" (89). We look to images of the wolf to provide information on not only the wolf, but also, to provide information on ourselves (Grosz: 278). We believe that sociobiology holds the key to human social behavior; as a result, we look to social animals for explanation, including the justification for sexual behavior (Grosz: 278). Watchers use their personal experiences and the language of white Western culture to impart meaning, whether describing wolf behavior or explaining why they watch the wolves. They believe the wolves are "understandable" because of their human-like social characteristics. As wolf watcher Jim Barton comments, "We can learn from the wolves as far as social structure and...the way we treat each other, and that's why I like it."

Wildlife film has institutionalized this tradition of explanation through anthropomorphization. Repeatedly, implicit comparisons to human behavior are used to enable viewers to more easily understand analogies. Therefore, wildlife film explains behavior by social phenomenon, not biological behavior, with terms like "mate selection" and "bonding," a protocol that the wolf watchers follow (as do Disney True-Life Adventures programs and programs such as *Living with Wolves*). The important moments of our lives such as birth, mating, and death are therefore inserted into every wildlife film. Wildlife filmmaking has historically used allegories of animal behavior as

lessons in sex and parenting (Disney True-Life Adventures). The fascination with animals became a "pervasive fascination" with animal sex as mirrored in other film genres and corresponding sciences (Chris: 125). Humankind looks to animals to "provide models and formulae by which he [i.e., the animal] comes to represent his [i.e., the human's] own desires, needs and excitements" (Grosz: 278).

Laura Mulvey, in her now-famous 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, identified three forms of looking, or gazes, in cinema: the look of the camera, the audience's look at the image and the looks between characters within the discourse and back at the audience (18). The look of the camera is camouflaged in the interests of authenticity and suspension of disbelief, but it is always apparent due to the confines of the frameline and the camera's mechanical gaze (Nichols: 79).

Related to these analyses of the gaze are the different kinds of gaze within the animal-human interaction that often emphasize either understanding or separation, like Burt's feelings of the eye close-up in film or Berger's look, or lack of the look, from the caged zoo animal. The gaze upon a subject, in general, is never innocent; it is based on preconceived ideologies, knowledge, experiences and expectations (Nichols: 76). The gaze is a source of pleasure. Scopophilia is literally the pleasure of watching and, as such, takes others, such as animals, as objects and subjects them to a controlling and curious gaze (Mulvey: 3). Therefore, most importantly, watching exercises a power, which confers pleasure. Both feelings "entwine

themselves around fulfillment and knowledge." There is "identificatory pleasure" (Nichols: 203). Watching represents the "desire to know and possess" (Nichols: 209).

Nichols goes further, comparing pornography and ethnography. He illustrates that "ethnography is a kind of legitimated pornography, a pornography of knowing" which can be extended to viewing the animal *other* and wolf watching. Catherine Russell sees the zoo gaze "somewhere between the excitement of sexual spectacle and the otherness of the ethnographic subject." Russell sees the zoo as an intermediary zone that lies between the pornographic and the ethnographic gazes, "in a triangular relation to them" (119). Pornographic viewing suggests an aggressive underlying motivation to animal filming and "motifs of violence which, in turn, associates the act of seeing with extreme manifestations of desire" (Burt: 42). Therefore, like adult films, there will always be the obligatory scenes in productions about wildlife. In wildlife film these include mating and dying scenes.

The various gazes the animal is subjected to are the same as those watchers who are excited by explicit human behavior use; none is unique to the animal (Burt: 44). Burt points out that Muybridge's novel studies of movement using film in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century "elided the human and animal body under a similar visual structure: the voyeuristic, eroticized and objectified gaze" (105). The impact comes from the animals' sheer closeness to us, while still indecipherable: that is the potential for understanding while

so distant, and their relatedness to us that makes them this desirable other (Doane: 75).

The spectator, or watcher, projects onto the subject. We fill in the gaps. We add knowledge that is not present in the image. Therefore the spectator is an active partner of the image (Aumont: 56). We project onto the wolf all our preconceived ideas of the wolf. The viewer recognizes and recalls and in taking such an active role the viewer becomes the most important part of the exchange (Aumont: 56). The viewer looks from behind a scope, the gaze is dominant and possessive, and the observed animal is objectified without having any control. The voyeurism depends on the gap between subject (wolf) and voyeur to create the necessary desire arising from separation or distance.

In this context, the scope, like a camera, regulates the relationship of spectator and image. The scope is used to bridge geographic distance and the limits of the human eye but accentuates the eye's tendency to fragment, objectify and estrange, creating separation (Wilson: 122). The spectator eavesdrops on nature; consequently the wolf watcher is an animal voyeur.

Wolf watcher Laurie Lyman addresses this by saying:

I want to see into their world...sometimes I watch them up to five miles away, but that's OK, I am looking into their world. Not bringing them into ours... [but] you've got more of the kind of zoo mentality and again bringing them into our world versus using a scope to look into their world.

## ESCAPE FROM CIVILIZATION

Today, the increase in national park visitors experiencing their annual brush with nature out the window of a RV epitomizes the ambivalence of Americans to modern life, like those 19<sup>th</sup>-century malcontents before them (Mitman: 25). Nature is universal, neither conservative nor liberal, neither Republican nor Democratic; animals have no race, culture, or class. Yellowstone is a refuge that provides an emotional escape from civilization. For the wolf watchers, Yellowstone removes thoughts of the watchers' normal life and their modern urban lifestyle, making the experience "more wild" and "more real." Yellowstone, they feel, is the "real world" (Lyman). Viewing nature in Yellowstone National Park provides a respite from the fears of everyday life through readily accessible wolf viewing; viewing is assured in the Park with the artificially contained dense packs and radio collars. We like our nature to be delineated from non-nature (culture), and we require park boundaries to do this. Therefore, watchers feel like they are within nature when surrounded by the officially designated park landscape. Laurie made the choice to live 10 miles away from wilderness. Does that make the town that is her new home, Silver Spring, wilderness? Or do you cross into wilderness at the gates of Yellowstone?

Contradictorily, it is traditionally the elite who both benefited from new technologies and modernization *and* have the desire and financial means to escape from modern society. Today the retirement age of the core watchers indicates attempts to fill a void within their own lives now that their careers

are over and they have time readily available. Wolf watching becomes another career:

..to find something like them, at this time of my life...its like a new beginning...its like I've got this whole new focus now, and I am able to spend the time out here, that's the key thing ... its like a gift (Lyman).

The escapism sought is akin to those who watch soap operas and use the drama of another's existence to escape their own. Yellowstone National Park offers drama and enthralls viewers. The wolf pack drama reads very much like a Shakespearean play, unfolding in sight of the watchers. Laurie speaks of the "continuous saga" of death, mating, birth, and dispersion that each pack exhibits and how caught up in it the watchers become. They become so involved that the loss of an individual wolf you followed closely can be unbearable and akin to losing "a member of your own family"! When the Druid Peak Pack, which people had observed for 10 years, was fatally attacked by another pack and the alpha female and others were killed, Laurie was affected enough to question whether she could continue to watch wolves.

Anthropomorphization and attaching oneself to the wolves in a one-sided exchange results in a relationship the watcher is completely emotionally invested in, similar in many ways to Timothy Treadwell's connection to bears in *Grizzly Man* (Herzog, 2005). The relationship swings even further the other way. The level of excitement increases throughout the wolf-watching crowd whenever the wolves exhibit any behavior, however

mundane. Actions considered entirely uninteresting if performed by a human take on a whole new level of significance, the excitement from which spreads throughout the watching crowd. These moments provide a return on the emotional investment and happen frequently enough in Yellowstone to enthrall observers. Wildlife film could be said to perpetuate this response by carefully explaining the significance, using creative license and anthropomorphization, of every onscreen action. The result is complete absorption in the whole experience and a release from the watcher's usual everyday existence.

WILDLIFE FILM VERSUS WOLF WATCHING:  
THE AUTHENTIC SPECTACLE OF WILDLIFE

Wildlife film came about at a time when animals had departed from everyday existence and the frontier was gone. Wildlife film itself played a major role in the development of motion pictures. Wilderness and wildlife was sought out, often in foreign lands, and wildlife film became another way to prove manliness. Films were either the nostalgic search for a more primitive past, such as Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*, or a more adventurous, hunting style form like that of the Johnsons. Martin and Osa Johnson, a husband-and-wife filmmaking team, produced films such as *Cannibals of the South Seas*, *Simba: King of the Beasts* and *Congorilla*, which also played upon the primitiveness of the lands and people they portrayed. Wildlife films now exist as "documents of a culture that's trying to come to terms with the end of nature" (Wilson: 155). Images, in general, play a central role in the formation of ideologies and so were integral in establishing our relationship with animals (Nichols: 12). In the modern age images are often the sum total of someone's knowledge, and so film itself has influenced the construction of the concept of the animal (Burt: 10). Burt points out that it is those same driving forces of film, technology and mass culture which drove animals out of our lives in the first place. Now, film is "one more symptom of the disappearance of the animal in modernity" (Burt: 26). Wildlife film superficially brings us closer to nature while also distancing us from it (Wilson: 122). The watcher seeks to close the distance.

The wolf is a classic example of a mythologized wildlife film protagonist and a species, which, throughout history, has been infused with many anthropomorphic characterizations and symbolism (Wilson: 127). Except for artificial restorations, animals left our everyday lives and departed into history to merge with all that is primitive and lower on the evolutionary tree. The wolf itself is a good illustration of this progression. (Wilson: 127). Over time, we invested the wolf with all the worst primitive instincts: it is savage and cruel, everything uncivilized; it is culturally and physically marginalized, as Estes illustrates in *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. Jesus warned against wolves in the Bible (Luke 10:1-20). In the middle ages the thick forest separating communities was filled with "wolves, witches, darkness and danger" (Merchant: 46).

Children's tales depict the wolf in the same way, such as Aesop's fables, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Three Little Pigs*, and *Peter and the Wolf*. Disney True-Life Adventures and Disney features went a long way to establish animal hierarchies like "The Big Bad Wolf," a common Disney antagonist. Wolves in motion pictures originally appeared as prey to hunt; then, with the turn to fang and claw programming in the 90s, along with many other animals, they continued to be called threat (*Shadow Stalkers*). Society continually refers to wolves as the primitive other.

"Capturing" the animal on film transforms it into spectacle, the object of desire; usually, this action serves as a "desire for knowledge" in documentary (Nichols: 77). Onscreen, a self-contained world is revealed and

unwinds irrespective of the audience, thus inducing a sense of separation and voyeurism, the ultimate illusion of a private world just for the viewer (Mulvey: 3). The absence of human life (visually) in most natural history stories further idealizes nature and pushes it more into our idealized past, so that “the life of a wild animal becomes an ideal” (Berger 1991: 15). The collective realization that traditional animal representations distort animal life leads watchers to the authentic experience of Yellowstone rather than documentary images of the wolf or the reintroduction of animals back into their lives via pets or representations. The image of nature conveyed in wildlife film is rarely the serene experience one normally experiences in nature.

Many writers and filmmakers discuss the relationship between reality and representation: the image is always illusory to varying degrees. (From photographic representation to impressionism, even the photograph will only ever be a 2-dimensional representation of the reality). Although each illusion is a reality itself, it is not the authentic seemingly not constructed experience the wolf watcher seeks. It has long been noted that mechanical reproductions reduce the aura of nature, most famously observed in Benjamin's *“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”* Film conveys science well, but it can never convey the actual experience of nature because of the current conventions used within the genre. These established conventions arose from playing the ratings game and following the

sensationalist style prevalent within television. Established norms within genres make

conventions hard to break away from when the audience expects them. Critic Robert Warshow observed that a genre need not be representative of reality but "to previous experiences of the type itself: it creates its own field of reference" (Warshow: 85).

Both wolf watchers and wildlife film emphasize social dynamics, but the performance billed as behavior in film is constructed from multiple camera angles and various television conventions (Wilson: 123). Laurie wishes to see authentic behavior, not manipulated recordings: "They're doing it [surviving] in the wild here [Yellowstone]...it's the real world out here." However, many watchers who place themselves physically and psychologically within the Park contradictorily describe it nostalgically as wilderness (a contradiction essential to their watching pleasure) and then later as a "science room." A certain degree of separation perceptually becomes essential on the part of the wolf watcher to mentally retain its purity and "authenticity."

These watchers are under the same contradiction flaunted by most wildlife film that the nature being shown is nature as it really is (Nichols: 27). The national park they use is not real wilderness but a managed resource. Watchers look for wild wolves and nature uncontaminated by human presence for more authentic escapism, but, ironically, they contaminate it themselves by the very motivation and action of watching. Laurie observes,

"This to me is the real world out here...when I'm here is when I feel whole."

Watching nature from within (from the real world) has both a scientific and

therapeutic benefit that watchers use to further the escapism above and

beyond that of a documentary.

## CONCLUSION

The wolf watchers remain under the same widespread misunderstanding within society regarding the relationship between people and animals. Cronon observes that our sense of nature is an outgrowth of the American ideal of wilderness which has led nature down a narrow path. Cronon means that nature is everywhere, not just in allocated "nature areas," and includes humans and the human environment. The real importance of this approach is that "nature is not so natural," it is a human construction, which is entangled with human history and ideologies (Cronon: 25). Most of what we call nature is not wilderness. Watchers seek pristine nature, the authentic spectacle of wildlife, in a continued nostalgic search for our own pre-civilized, primitive and innocent past. They seek an escape from modern civilization. Yellowstone, however, is essentially a zoo, or, in their own words "a science room" where chosen creatures are restored or preserved for our enjoyment and use as a resource for voyeurism, profit, tourism and scientific study (Lyman). Yellowstone is a place where wilderness was constructed and now includes the wolf. Watchers still choose the comparative authenticity of Yellowstone over representations. Nature now symbolizes something we lost and the animal as sign at once venerated and exploited leads us to search for this knowledge in Yellowstone National Park and in carefully demarcated and signed "nature." (Burt: 29).

Symbolism provides meaning that words alone cannot, so that, like art, the wolf is now defined not by what it is, but by what it says to us and

how its existence is defined in our present culture (Berger 1972: 21). The recognition and knowledge the watchers feel come from familiarity with the wolf as a symbol (Wilson: 127). The wolf watchers seek out the wolf, not other park species like elk or bison, because the wolf is this idealized, symbolic species we now observe it to be. It embodies our nostalgia for the lost Wild West and wilderness, which arises from our political and cultural representation of the wolf and its triumphant return to the wild. The wolf best illustrates primitiveness (the uncivilized) and furthers the escapism of Yellowstone. Essentially, the watchers do not visit to see the wolf; they wish to see the symbol the wolf now represents. Watchers do not *know*, and cannot know, the wolf; they know only the symbolic wolf. Many watchers verbalize this wildlife nostalgia by describing the wolf as a symbol of wildness:

You have to accept the wildness in them, we don't attach ourselves to them like pets, because then you have lost the wildness in them ...I think there's a bit of wilderness or wildness in all of us and the wolf takes us back to that, take our heart back to that (Lyman).

Yellowstone as science lab or laboratories along with wildlife films and zoos, are sites of voyeurism. We look to the *other* to understand ourselves and search longingly for a mutual understanding leading to a mutual exchange. We mourn the loss of animals and the loss of nature. The wolf watchers are a recent phenomenon in a long line of evidence supporting this search. In a world where we think of nature nostalgically (and incorrectly) as the *other*, the wolf watchers seem to have simply found their way to feel part

of the world and nature. They also have found a way to exercise the denial this worldview entails.

The scopophilic obsession of the wolf watchers may appear like an extreme manifestation of wilderness nostalgia and voyeurism, but these non-professionals are contributing to science in ways only extremely well-funded long-term observations could achieve previously. Watchers use large amounts of their personal energies, time and money on a behavioral study in a way that most funded individuals do not. The cost of having a large group of scientists in the field all day, every day, for 12 years is often completely prohibitive. The long-running Meerkat Kalahari project, now famous as the source for the Animal Planet series *Meerkat Manor*, is, nevertheless, an Oxford University ecological study first and foremost. This long-term study is not driven by a group of non-professionals. Accordingly, the unintended consequence of the wolf watchers of Yellowstone National Park is that they are facilitating an unprecedented behavioral study. This study is also excitingly that of a species reintroduction and compiles extensive data at the individual level. The watchers even do this without scientific training, but with (and in spite of) a passion rooted in the cultural motivations covered in this paper.

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