

## Terrifying beauty

### The truth and complexity in the beauty and horror of nature

Hanne Van Dyck

“It is in vain to dream of wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bogs in our brain and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream.”<sup>1</sup>

From all the landscapes, mountaintops are predestined to rule. Men can measure the size of mankind and the reach of their power against them. Mountain climbing can be seen as a way to overpower these giants. Although man are smaller in size, their willpower and spirit can get them to conquer the highest peaks. In Eastern culture the ego is not to be worshiped, a mountain represents the cosmic relation between the massive mass of stones that attempt to touch heaven and the tininess of people. Some years ago, she was driving through the mountains for months on an old Russian motorbike. This experience was accompanied by the constant presence of a vivid picture of herself hanging off a cliff-edge, waiting to be eaten by vultures. But the changing of density of the air, the feeling of completeness and the panoramic views overpowered the negative thinking. It is the fear that makes something beautiful into something sublime. It makes reality much bigger than it is.

Her biggest fear is the fear of a dark forest. The indefinite boundless wood, the animals it hosts and the sounds that ignite her imagination. Her fear for a dark wood has always been there and has been triggered by a nocturnal trip to the woods of her youth. Although she knew the way by heart and she didn't go far, it was four hours later when she arrived home. It was as if she experienced a perpetual delirium caused by her fear of these dark woods. Her fear of the dark disappeared by understanding that this wilderness only exists within herself. It is our imagination and therefore our mind that is the biggest source for fear.

To her, the surface of the ocean was just a beautiful layer to hide horrible sea creatures. Some of them were born while dreaming at night, others while dreaming during the day. She never realized they were imaginary creatures. On top of this her mother told her that all the sewage ends up in the ocean. Thinking about how this water could turn into tasting like salt really made her stomach twist of disgust. She was twenty-one when she experienced her first fearless swim in the ocean. By taking a diving course, she overcame her fear of opaque water. Being surrounded with water and letting her breath control her movements helped her overcome claustrophobia. An encounter with a shark became something that made her day. Looking at the sea now shows the complexity of the universe instead of fearing it's hidden world. It shows her that all is connected, we are all stardust. “Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour and is not reminded of the flux of all things?”<sup>2</sup> Just like the stars that only appear at night, so is her fear.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, august 30th 1865

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson in “Nature”

I am not looking for a way to merge with nature. I don't want to go in search of the miraculous like Bas Jan Ader. I don't want to become a bear like Grizzlymen<sup>3</sup> or carve a mountain after my image, like the sculptor of Mount Rushmore<sup>4</sup>. I am drawn by virgin nature and the idea of something pure. Which not necessarily means I am dreaming of utopia. While making images of nature during travels, all signs of human life is being zoomed out of my frame. My pictures are denying the fear of the non-existing dream. They are images made from very safe places (like wildlife pictures taken out of a safari-jeep with a zoom). I create my own twisted memories and non-places. In this way I take home exactly what the commercials promised me.

When coming home from travelling, I can feel homesick for weeks. Especially when I have been lying under a palm tree. After climbing a mountain or walking through the desert, coming home is a bit less of a struggle because the experience happened rather in real life than in my head. There is so much comfort in paradise. The empty beaches are our modern myths. It's a way of dealing with our fears of being attracted to the unknown and inexplicable. By seeing a beautiful ocean sunset it is proven that paradise exists.

But just like a dream, an image is never reality. Utopia exists, given it's a non- place with a mixed reputation. "It is an ancient search for happiness, freedom and paradise. A fantasy of some exotic place away from our social burden, an island of cliché."<sup>5</sup> There is a lot of truth and complexity in the beauty and horror of nature and for me it's an interesting journey to research how I relate to the landscapes I encounter. It's a question of attitude. The beauty of nature overpowers me. But what is nature anyway? And who really cares about this constant search for the boundary between culture and nature?

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<sup>3</sup> "Occasionally I am challenged. And in that case, the kind warrior must, must, must become a samurai. Must become so, so formidable, so fearless of death, so strong that he will win, he will win. Even the bears will believe that you are more powerful. And in a sense you must be more powerful if you are to survive in this land with the bear. No one knew that. No one ever friggin' knew that there are times when my life is on the precipice of death and that these bears can bite, they can kill. And if I am weak, I go down. I love them with all my heart. I will protect them. I will die for them, but I will not die at their claws and paws. I will fight. I will be strong. I'll be one of them. I will be... the master."  
(From Grizzly Man by Werner Herzog)

<sup>4</sup> "I want, somewhere in America on or near the Rockies, the backbone of the Continent, so far removed from succeeding, selfish, coveting civilizations, a few feet of stone that bears witness, carries the likenesses, the dates, a word or two of the great things we accomplished as a Nation, placed so high it won't pay to pull down for lesser purposes. Hence, let us place there, carved high, as close to heaven as we can, the words of our leaders, their faces, to show posterity what manner of men they were. Then breathe a prayer that these records will endure until the wind and the rain alone shall wear them away."

<sup>5</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist/ Olafur Eliasson. *The Conversation Series*. Verslag der Buchhandlung Wather Köning, Köln

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