

TechnoNature: Wilderness and Simulation on the 'Last Frontier'

Amy Clary
amyclary@alumni.bates.edu

Ask the hundreds of thousands of tourists who visit Alaska's Denali National Park and Preserve every summer about their expectations and they will answer in no uncertain terms: they expect to see grizzly bears, Mount McKinley, and wilderness. Visitors absorb ideas about Alaska from popular media and culture, especially television programs, films, and photographs depicting mountains, tundra, and charismatic megafauna.¹ Even though the widely-circulated images of Alaska lead tourists to expect a wild and empty land unspoiled by the trappings of the twenty-first century, nearly every aspect of their Alaskan wilderness experience is mediated by technology. From the glossy photos in the Alaska Airlines in-flight magazine to the line of rented RVs with license plates proclaiming Alaska to be the "Last Frontier," Alaska's image as a wilderness outpost is carefully managed and mediated. Those who come to Alaska in search of wilderness find machines, publications, and products all promising to deliver wilderness—or at least a reasonable facsimile.

In the summer of 2006, some tourists had a new technological innovation to thank for bringing Denali's wildlife even closer: the "Tundra Wilderness Tour" camera bus. Passengers on these buses look for wildlife not by looking out their windows, but by staring at TV screens near their seats. Bus drivers are tasked with spotting animals and filming them with a high-quality zoom lens, then beaming the images back to the passengers nestled comfortably in their seats.² Instead of relying on their eyes to discern a distant wolf lying still in the midday sun or a grizzly bear methodically feeding on soapberries, the passengers sit back and watch the spectacle of the wild on video monitors close enough to touch.

From the delighted reactions of those tourists willing pay over \$90 for these subarctic video safaris, there is little doubt that they regard the new Denali camera-buses as wonderful innovations. Less certain, however, are the cultural implications and long-term material consequences of such technologically-mediated wilderness experiences. While it may not seem that the average American's family vacation to a national park has any bearing on the future of wilderness in the U.S., the hundreds of thousands of people who flock to Denali each year do in fact have the potential to determine the material condition of that land for years to come. Because national wilderness parks like Denali only remain wild through legislation, the protections afforded Denali's wilderness landscape and other wild public land are subject to change according to the desires of the American electorate. That is to say, such places are protected only because American politicians and their constituents allow them to remain so.³ For that reason, the stakes of reading mediated wilderness experiences are high. Acknowledging that popular attitudes toward wilderness are largely engendered by technologically-mediated wilderness experiences is a step toward understanding—and perhaps intervening in—the ways in which wilderness is valued or devalued in contemporary American public policy.

The goal of this essay is not to argue for or against the reality or authenticity of wilderness or mediated wilderness experiences. It is, instead, to examine how technologies of mediation and reproduction shape and perpetuate American attitudes toward wilderness. In particular, the essay will consider how technology enables and encourages scopophilia, defined by Freud as “pleasure in looking,”⁴ which privileges the act of looking at wilderness over experiencing it through other senses such as hearing, smell, or touch.⁵ For instance, nature and wildlife photography has long fed the seemingly insatiable hunger for visual experiences of the outdoors. In the process, photography serves a dual purpose for wilderness: it kindles popular

fascination with the natural world by making wilderness images readily accessible at the same time as it obscures the material condition of wild landscapes by replacing them with technologically-simulated images. By influencing public attitudes about wilderness and wildlife, such images and technologies can influence public land-use policy decisions.

Of course, images are not always what they seem, thanks in part to the ever-present play between a representation of a landscape and its physical condition. This is not to say that one real and the other is not, simply that there is always a gap between the representation and its subject, and that that gap invites interpretation. Recognizing that there is often more to an animal, a landscape, or a story than appears in a representation is crucial to making informed conservation decisions. Dr. Frederic Cook's famously faked 1907 photographs "proving" his now-discredited claim to have summited Mount McKinley remind us that photographs can reflect the photographer's and the viewer's desires or expectations more than they do the physical condition of their subject.⁶

The importance of wilderness photography in popular culture raises a question: Why is seeing a wild landscape privileged over hearing, smelling, or touching it? In Denali, as elsewhere, most of the technologies that mediate wilderness intervene in the act of *looking*. Getting a better view of an animal or a mountain becomes the primary goal, sometimes at the expense of other senses. The camera bus, for instance, privileges the act of looking at the wild scenery at the same time as its noisy engine deprives tourists of the opportunity to hear the sounds of the landscape.

The idea of scopophilia, or visual pleasure, may be useful in exploring how and why visual technologies have become integral to so many wilderness experiences. In her discussion of film, feminist critic Laura Mulvey uses Freud's formulation of scopophilia as a component of

human sexuality that is related to imagining other people as objects.⁷ In other words, Freud connects the sexual pleasure derived from looking at others with a feeling of control over the object of the gaze.⁸ Mulvey describes how mainstream Hollywood narrative cinema satisfies the scopophilic urge by satisfying patriarchal desires to look at and control women's bodies. In the process, women's desire for visual pleasure is rendered invisible.⁹

The desire to *see* wilderness and wild animals at the expense of hearing, feeling, or touching them, may be related to the power relationship inherent in Mulvey's visual pleasure of narrative cinema. For instance, Mulvey characterizes the cinema as allowing audience members to indulge in voyeurism by constructing a "hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy."¹⁰ Inherent in this voyeuristic fantasy is Freud's notion of the viewed person as a passive object of the voyeur's active gaze.¹¹

The gaze of a wilderness tourist is akin to that of a moviegoer. Take the passengers on Denali's camera bus, for instance. As the bus carries tourists into the park, the mega-zoom lens on the video camera beams images of distant wildlife to the monitors mounted throughout the bus. The scenery appears to "unwind magically" as the camera rolls along; the viewed animals behave as though they have no idea that they are being watched. Like moviegoers, or peeping Toms, tourists are able to indulge their scopophilia while believing that they are the ones in control of the encounter, that they are the ones with the active gaze while the animals and the landscape are passive objects.

While the camera bus enables all the passengers to simultaneously view the same image, more common vision-enhancing technologies produce more private viewing experiences: cameras and binoculars. Given the ubiquity among national park visitors of digital cameras with

zooms, it is fair to say that both cameras and binoculars allow viewers to individualize their viewing pleasure. Tourists can frame the view to their own liking, deciding which element to focus on and which to ignore. The ability to zoom in on landscape elements is granted by technology; the decision to focus on one element and not another (the mountain and not the meadow, or the bear and not the squirrel) is informed by popular representations of wilderness.

Before investigating how popular representations of wilderness shape the viewing practices of camera-wielding tourists, it is important to recognize that the cultural preoccupation with scopophilia reinforces the longstanding cultural tendency to identify women with nature. Mulvey's feminist reading of cinematic visual pleasure is applicable to an ecocritical examination of wilderness-mediating technologies because in the popular imagination, women and nature are consistently positioned side by side as joint objects of the scopophilic drive. The scopophilic tendencies of contemporary culture, enabled as they are by myriad consumer technologies, are troubling in that they perpetuate the objectification and exploitation of women and landscapes.

Recognizing the history of women's identification with the environment, and their shared position as objects of a controlling gaze, does not suggest that women and the environment share any immutable qualities. Carolyn Merchant writes, "concepts of nature and women are historical and social constructions. There are no unchanging 'essential' characteristics of sex, gender, or nature."¹² Similarly, using Mulvey's feminist formulation of scopophilia in film studies to better understand the scopophilia of wilderness tourism does not validate repressive, essentialist notions of women as "earthy" or of the landscape as feminine.

It does, however, raise the question of how the photos taken by wilderness tourists are informed by popular representations of wilderness. If, according to Mulvey, in a movie theater,

the “conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world,”¹³ what are the analogous conventions that guide wildlife photography? To start, the “illusion of looking in on a private world” created by cinematic technology is created just as effectively by a still camera. When, for example, a visitor to Alaska’s Katmai National Park stands at the Brooks Falls viewing platform and photographs a bear eating a salmon, she is momentarily creating a private world where nothing exists except her gaze and the viewed animal. The resulting photos and their professionally-shot ilk are so widely circulated that the material bears fishing at the falls are almost redundant. This is why the rare photo showing the throngs of tourists and professional photographers mobbing the carefully-managed bear viewing platform are slightly jarring: they shatter the illusion that the scopophilic relationship of the viewer to the bear is private. The idea that one’s photo of the bears should resemble popularly-published photos of the same subject determines the sort of “private world” the tourist creates with her camera. Like “the most photographed barn in America” in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, the bears at the falls are always already photographed.¹⁴

Wildlife photography is one of the most pervasive, and therefore one of the most significant, ways in which the wild is mediated by technology. Just as the visitors to national parks expect to see scenery as depicted in promotional photos, viewers of wildlife photography harbor largely unexamined assumptions about what constitutes a “good” wildlife shot. Those assumptions can, in turn, affect the material condition of the animals being photographed. For instance, wildlife photography (and more recently, videography, as in the controversial work of Timothy Treadwell) has been used for conservation purposes, convincing the public that certain threatened species need to be saved. However, alongside the potential of wildlife photography to benefit its subject lies the destructive potential of representation as Baudrillard understands it.

Baudrillard's assertion that "perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images, murderers of the real, murderers of their own model . . ." ¹⁵ is a reminder that photographic images of wildlife pose a risk to the animals' wildness and materiality.

Wildlife photographer Stephen Krasemann's alleged bear baiting is one example. In her book *The Essential Grizzly: The Mingled Fates of Men and Bears*, co-authored with her husband, Doug, ¹⁶ Andrea Peacock describes how Krasemann published photos of wild bears eating at a bird feeder. Krasemann's neighbor claims that one of the photographed bears, having grown accustomed to seeking food from humans, was later killed. ¹⁷ Whether photographers like Krasemann stalk animals in their habitat or introduce non-wild foods to their diets, the subjects of wildlife photos are physically affected by the process of representation.

Some of the photographers profiled by Peacock see their work as materially benefiting their models' wild counterparts by increasing interest in wildlife conservation. This idea points to technology's ability to insinuate wilderness conservation into the popular consciousness by replicating enticing images of wild animals and landscapes. At the same time, those representations replace their material referents in the popular imagination, thus obscuring the material condition of wild land and its inhabitants. As wilderness in the U. S. dwindles to the point where it can only be found in carefully-managed parks and preserves, the question of how representations of wilderness affect our treatment of material landscapes, and how technology affects those representations, becomes even more urgent. While the technology that increasingly mediates wilderness experiences may titillate, enthrall, and enhance visual pleasure, it may cloud as easily enhance our vision.

In fact, in a world saturated with technological representations, perhaps a clear and unmediated experience of wilderness is impossible. Perhaps even the desire for such an

experience marks its impossibility. Baudrillard writes, “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience”¹⁸ For Baudrillard, desiring a “true . . . lived experience” of wilderness and condemning the camera-bus as a poor substitute signals the impossibility of such an experience. After all, representations of wilderness are inescapable in the contemporary cultural landscape, and those simulated images cannot help but shape our response to the limited material wilderness that remains.

Given the pervasiveness of wilderness representations flourishing in contemporary culture’s “euphoria of simulation,”¹⁹ attempts to define authentic wilderness become irrelevant. What pertains, instead, is the question of how to treat the material landscapes whose fates are determined by politics and public opinion. One strategy is suggested by Mulvey’s declaration, which launches her feminist analysis of narrative cinema: “It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article.”²⁰ Perhaps ecocriticism can follow feminism’s lead by destroying the easy scopophilic pleasure of popular images of wilderness rendered ever more accessible by technology. Such an intervention may make viewers aware that a zoom lens beaming a grizzly bear onto a tour bus screen, a staged photo of a clean and fluffy wolf, and a seductive image of a never-before-seen landscape obscure as well as reveal their subjects’ material condition. A skepticism of visual pleasure can lead us to better appreciate the complexity of the natural world in an age of simulation. It may even lead us to set aside scopophilia in favor of the new pleasures of touch, sound, and smell. Intervening in the pleasure given by technologically-mediated representations of wilderness may allow scholars and environmentalists to shape not only the American cultural landscape, but the material one as well.

Notes

¹ Throughout the summers of 2005 and 2006, I informally asked hundreds of Denali visitors about their expectations of the park, and almost all of them expected to see wildlife (particularly bears), Mt. McKinley, and wild landscapes. Sometimes those expectations were shaped in part by friends who had previously traveled to the area, but most of the visitors I spoke with formed their impressions from movies, television, and photographs published in popular magazines.

² Natasha Rasheed, "Denali Tourists in for a Change." *KTUU.com*, 16 Feb. 2006, <<http://www.ktuu.com/cms/anmviewer.asp?a=3629&z=1>> (10 April 2006).

³ Thanks to naturalist Kevin Clement and Park Ranger Clare Curtis for articulating this idea so well.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 1962 (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 23.

⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1992), 158-166.

⁶ Bradford Washburn and Peter Cherici, *The Dishonorable Dr. Cook: Debunking the Notorious Mount McKinley Hoax* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 2001).

⁷ Mulvey, 160.

⁸ Freud, 58.

⁹ Mulvey, 165-6.

¹⁰ Mulvey, 161.

¹¹ Mulvey, 161.

¹² Merchant, xvi.

¹³ Mulvey, 161.

¹⁴ Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985 (New York: Penguin, 1999), 12. The “most photographed barn in America” and the salmon-eating bears of Katmai National Park belong to the realm of the hyperreal, defined by Baudrillard as “that which is always already reproduced” (146).

¹⁵ Baudrillard, 10.

¹⁶ Doug Peacock has achieved near-mythic status in some environmental circles as the model for Hayduke in Edward Abbey’s eco-defense novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

¹⁷ Doug and Andrea Peacock, *The Essential Grizzly: The Mingled Fates of Men and Bears*, (Guilford: Lyons-Globe Pequot P, 2006), 52.

¹⁸ Baudrillard, 12.

¹⁹ Baudrillard, 148.

²⁰ Mulvey, 160.