SIGNS OF WILDNESS: CODES OF THE “PRIMITIVE” IN MASCULINE COMMODITY CULTURE

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SIGNS OF WILDNESS: CODES OF THE “PRIMITIVE” IN MASCULINE COMMODITY CULTURE

A Dissertation Presented

By

MATTHEW P. FERRARI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2014

Department of Communication
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By

MATTHEW P. FERRARI

Approved as to style and content by:

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DEDICATION

To my sons, Henry and Ezra.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank my advisor and committee chair, Shawn Shimpach, for his patience, encouragement, and willingness to read final revisions while on a family vacation. Shawn was always forthcoming with important insights, though never insisted on one type of project. In a study spanning many apparently disparate texts and sites, I am especially grateful for his persistent reminders throughout the process not to lose sight of the forest for the trees.

I also want to thank my other committee members, Anne Ciecko and Asha Nadkarni. In particular, as this research inevitably moves into its next stages, they have each offered invaluable perspectives on occasional points of critical, historical, and theoretical elision to consider.

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ABSTRACT

SIGNS OF WILDNESS: CODES OF THE “PRIMITIVE” IN MASCULINE COMMODITY CULTURE

SEPTEMBER 2014

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This project broadly examines articulations of the “primitive” emerging from various sites of popular cultural production, considering their operation within the wider “semioscape”– defined by Thurlow and Aiello (2007) as “the globalizing circulation of symbols, sign-systems, and meaning-making practices.” Taking my lead from Kurusawa (2002, 2004), Torgovnik (1991, 1998), Chow (1995), and Di Leonardo (1998), who have demonstrated the importance of the “primitive” as an interpretive discourse, I add to this body of thought by extending its scope into the realm of popular media and cultural production, examining cases within film, television, advertising, sports, and associated lifestyle commodities. I pose these general questions: How does the “primitive” contribute to the way meaning and usefulness is produced for certain commodities, and how has this changed over the last few decades? Is the “primitive” now an “empty” signifier with respect to the “non-western?” Does the greater proliferation and ease of othering via digital economies render discourses of primitive alterity less problematic? What prospects do these signs of wildness hold for masculine gender formation, shifting environmental awareness, and politics of cross-cultural consumption? Ultimately, the larger aim is to promote dialogue towards a critical re-mapping of the terms of the
“primitive” as a resilient semiotic resource for commodity cultures vis-à-vis global information economies.

I argue that these signs of wildness serve, as they often have in the past, to activate values about the “human” via transgression, transformation, and transcendence; but that these signs have more recently shifted as expressive resources, now altered by digital technologies, new media ecologies, and creative “knowledge communities” resulting in a pronounced fragmentation, mutability, and wider distribution in response to greater “noise.” Thus, I argue, our informational capitalism is exponentially more prolific at contriving and disseminating various transgressions for us, engendering a schizoid state of consumer appeals via a wider romantic-naturalist discourse of limits and potentials which appeals to the terms of the “primitive.” Finally, the easiness and disposability of such hypothetical transgressions makes conditions for corporate image-makers more desperate and frenetic, propelling an increasingly unstable and unpredictable semiotic state of affairs where signs of wildness take on special currency.
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INTRODUCTION

New Signs of Wildness

“I sometimes feel myself more animalistic every once and a while. There are times I look at it that way. The only thing is, I feel like it’s a stereotype. When people say animalistic, they think kind of savage and primal and stuff.” (College student, “traceur,” personal interview, September 14, 2013.)

“Primitive” is now a dirty word. This is not without justification of course, but the political caution surrounding the term does little to undermine its recent growth and intensification within the popular imaginary. The opening quote, from a white male college student responding to my questions about practicing parkour (discussed in Chapter 6), highlights this dynamic. Scholars and college students alike are often reluctant to use the term, yet when called upon to articulate certain kinds of experience or creative forms of human expression, recourse to cognate terms is apparently necessary. This dissertation, then, sets out to understand the “primitive’s” stubborn persistence and contemporary status within the popular imaginary. It is hopefully the start of a larger conversation towards critically re-mapping the “primitive” as a resilient semiotic resource for cultural producers, especially in terms of its greater mutability, disguised forms, and fragmentation within a global information economy. This project examines articulations of the “primitive” emerging from sites of popular cultural production, closely reading representative texts while at the same time keeping in view their place in the wider “semioscape” – what Thurlow and Aiello (2007) define as “the globalizing circulation of symbols, sign-systems, and meaning-making practices” (p. 308). Two larger claims are offered from this analysis. First, the “primitive” still operates through many of the same problematic terms and enunciations (despite some scholars’ assertions suggesting
otherwise). Second, proposing a crucial qualification to the first claim, desires for the “primitive” and their uptake by cultural producers are (re)articulated quite differently within an “informational capitalism” (Fuchs, 2010), which I elaborate on below.

The word “primitive” initially went into quotations for researchers in the so-called “human sciences” for good reason: to acknowledge the term’s troubled history as a construct – as an invention of the Euro-Western imagination for the purposes of self-examination, and for its work in the symbolic subjugation of (and thus aiding in the actual subjugation of) colonized non-Western populations (Torgovnik, 1991). Yet the representational problems of “primitive others” (Fabian, 1983; Rosaldo, 1993), including those cultural terms often mobilized in close association with it (e.g. wild, animal, savage, exotic, bestial, etc.), are also what make it so alluring as a communicative resource across many arenas of cultural production. The social creation of a “primitive,” much like that of something as “natural” (See Evernden, 1992), offers the chance for “temporal estrangement” (Kurusawa, 2004), distanciation or detachment from which to (re)view the present, as well as prospects for the future. And while those sensitive to the historical and representational problems of casting something as “primitive” or “natural” often consciously side-step (or at the very least qualify) its terms, popular commodity production is far less encumbered by this politics of representation. Thus, as much as this representational discourse has a sordid history of being abused in the service of Eurocentric knowledge production with very real, material implications for those constructed in its terms, I maintain that this should not prevent writers and critics of the socio-cultural from naming and interrogating its workings in the popular imaginary. Indeed, the “primitive” is very much alive and well.
This dissertation considers recent representational discourses of the “primitive” across several interrelated sites of cultural production, examining their complex semiotic configuration in terms of what I consider to be a wider historical lineage drawing on signs and tropes of wildness. Along the way I also consider some of the political prospects implicated by these discourses, with a particular focus on gender and environmental politics. It takes its lead especially from the work of Kurusawa (2002, 2004), Torgovnik (1991, 1998), Chow (1995), Di Leonardo (1998), and others who have demonstrated the importance of the “primitive” not only as a symbolic, discursive resource, but also as a hermeneutic or interpretive tool offering an indispensable mode of cross-cultural critique for social theorists and researchers. I add to this body of thought by extending its purview further into the realm of popular cultural production, addressing the evident social “uses” and constructions of the “primitive” and the “natural” by examining specific cases within arenas of film, television, advertising, and sports – all areas of mass cultural consumption and proliferating commodity signs which are presently under-examined along these specific lines of analysis.

While scholarly work on the “primitive” is quite extensive and diverse, traditionally it has been conducted in a very discipline-specific manner. As might be expected, for example, art historians, anthropologists, and literary critics have each approached it differently (see Chapter 3), their questions and concerns emerging from specific intellectual traditions and particular cultural sites of knowledge production (i.e. mediums, text types, or more or less bounded human societies). However, in the 1980’s and 1990’s, with the acceleration of cultural pluralism brought about by globalization, further aided by the growing imperative for more interdisciplinary scholarship, we saw
the emergence of several important studies that fearlessly yet tactfully approach the “primitive” from a wider cultural vantage point. Mariana Torgovnik’s *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives* (1991), and *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (1998), explore “our” (i.e. Western) fascination with the “primitive” across the fields of literature, art, psychology, and cultural studies. Similarly, Michaela Di Leonardo’s *Exotics at Home: Anthropologies, Others, and American Modernity* (1998) explores the place of the “primitive” and exotic “others” in American culture from the standpoint of feminist anthropology. Rey Chow’s *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (1995), is another significant example of a study which extends the scope of studies of the “primitive” into the realm of popular cultural production, and in particular considers its intersection with wider conditions of mass mediation. However, with the exception of Chow’s work on Chinese cinema, there is very little examination of how the discourse operates systematically within and across popular media and culture. I hope to begin to remedy that blind spot here by starting a critical dialogue on the topic.

The more recent work of Fuyuki Kurusawa also significantly informs my approach. Kurusawa’s article, “A Requiem for the ‘Primitive’” (2002), and his subsequent book, *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross-Cultural Critique of Modernity* (2004), both contend that while the “death” or “eclipse” of the “primitive” in its former social evolutionary sense should be welcomed, we need to be careful in our post-“primitive” age not to lose sight of the construct’s importance for “the self-critique of modern ways of thinking and acting” (2002, p. 2). In its present state, Kurusawa argues the “primitive” “condition has come to stand as empty signifier revealing little or nothing
about non-Western cultures;” however, despite this, he believes that its terms are still an important (cross) cultural hermeneutic which we should not dispense with (ibid, p.15). While Kurusawa’s emphasis is different than my project, his broad overview of the discursive construction of the “primitive” at different moments in the history of Western thought helps me in understanding its conditions in the present moment. However, this research also presents a challenge to his contention that the “primitive” is now an “empty” signifier with respect to the “non-western.” Echoing an earlier point, however much we may have eclipsed the former, anthropological “primitive,” its varied mythical registers in popular culture are not an altogether empty signifier given the repertoire of images it draws from and the specter of former primitivisms these images implicate. Thus I assert here that – in a qualified agreement with Kurusawa and Torgovnik that these are now more “free-floating” signifiers – it is precisely these signs’ advancing mutability and increasingly fragmentary proliferation vis à vis new digitalized (media) terrains that makes their racist and colonialist specters equally if not more urgent to attend to amidst their production and consumption, representation (encoding) and interpretation (decoding) (Hall, 2009/1980). That is, primitivisms which appear to be untethered in their partial or fragmentary forms and representations from actual peoples, “traditional” or indigenous populations (and associated cultural specificities involving race, class, and ethnicity), may in fact be in more urgent need of questioning insomuch as the detethering acts as an unacknowledged permission or excuse by dint of expressive license and partial incorporation.

Indeed, Torgovnik (1991) contends that, as much as it may be important to signal the term’s flexible construction and troubled history, the act of placing the “primitive” in
quotations might just serve to “relieve writers of responsibility for the words they use” (p. 20). Further, that by using quotations, she feels that writers “try to wish away the heritage of the West’s exploitation of non-Western peoples, or at least demonstrate political correctness” (ibid). This recalls my opening point that the “primitive” is now a dirty word (and really, it has been for quite some time). I agree with Torgovnik in her concern that reactionary political correctness can hinder simply addressing something in the popular imaginary (and arguably still in some pockets in academe committed to social-evolutionary perspectives). And yet her own disclaimer strikes me as an equally facile attempt at deflecting potential political pitfalls, for I really see no other way to establish the distinction between an earnest or literal stance towards the term (i.e. in its more etymological sense of that which is taken to be original, basic, or primary to a certain society), and “primitive” as the construct of a wider western social imaginary, one freighted with a troubled historical specificity that should always be kept in view.

For similar reasons, other key terms of analysis in this study which operate in close association with, or as the “primitive” or primitivity (e.g. wild, exotic, nature/natural, savage, primal, bestial, etc.), need to be treated as historically charged social constructs, while at the same time not losing sight altogether of those (often non-human) referents which give them meaning – however ephemeral these might be. In short, my primary concern here is not with identifying or defining something as literally primitive, primal, natural, or wild, but rather with how commodity signs (and thus also commodity forms) are constituted by a popular imaginary “in terms” of the “primitive.” Still, in setting out to examine the workings of any symbolic discourse, one is necessarily making assumptions in the very naming of terms constituting those discourses (especially
insomuch as they are veiled, implicit, encoded, or naturalized). So, drawing upon social semiotics, cultural studies, and critical discourse analysis (and several other methodological orientations presented later), I treat the “primitive” and the “natural” as semiotic or symbolic resources mobilized within individual texts and wider genres serving to generate “a field of possible meanings, which need to be activated by the producers and viewers” (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001, p.135). I count myself among them. But, I also try to look for evidence not just within texts, but also their defining contexts, “inter-texts,” institutions, and in the ways in which they are taken up (interpreted, used, or consumed) socially.

While the studies mentioned above are important to this project, especially in that they show the way for examinations of the “primitive” as a popular phenomenon – as “a general marketable thing” (Torgovnik, 1991) – the structural conditions of cultural commodification, and the more torrential circulation of commodity signs associated with digital technologies and the global information economy, have changed and intensified greatly in the last few decades or more since they were written. Although, as highlighted above, there is ample evidence that the “primitive” is less symbolically tethered to an “anthropological primitive” (i.e. “indigenous,” “tribal,” or “non-Western” peoples) for some time (see Chapter 3), I contend here that advancements in digital technologies, the widespread growth of the internet, along with associated forms of “convergence culture” (Jenkins, 2004) and new genres and styles emerging in response to these technologies, have resulted in a pronounced fragmentation, mutability, and wider visibility of signs of “wildness.”
A wider semiotics of “wildness” in the popular imaginary is informed by the unstable codes of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. The manner in which we interact and identify with these signs, simultaneously as consumers and producers of culture, has direct repercussions for social and sexual power relations and the perpetuation – or potential short-circuiting – of associated values and ideologies. The notion of “the wild” implicates far more than just a certain kind of location or geography; “wildness” is also a cultural label designating any number of things considered to be somehow outside the parameters of the “civilized,” the “domestic,” the “rational” (Evernden, 1992; Corbett, 2006). Thus the “wild” and its associated signs and symbols serve to activate values and beliefs about human transgression, transformation, and even transcendence. To be sure, the forms these beliefs take are culturally and historically specific. But, we can generally point to certain tendencies within the “Western” history of discursive “nature” – or what may be thought of as “textual Nature” – such as its close associations with the “primitive,” the “bestial,” the “corporeal,” and the “feminine,” which reflect, according to Kate Soper, “a history of ideas about membership of the human community and ideals of human nature, and thus function as a register or narrative of human self-projections” (1995, p. 10). When put into practice, these semiotic resources tend to be structured around certain organizing dualisms, which can be broken down along these lines:

**culture / nature**

reason / nature
male / female
mind / body (nature)
master / slave
reason / matter (physicality)
mind, spirit / nature
freedom / necessity (nature)
universal / particular
human / nature (non-human)
Yet there is meaningful variation and ambivalence to be found in how these dualisms are, past and present, put to use in the service of human interests and ideologies. For example, while Plumwood’s breakdown above places “male” to the side of “reason” but not “nature,” “civilized” but not “primitive,” “self” but not “other,” throughout the course of this study I will periodically undermine and complicate this overly neat (if useful) breakdown by presenting counterarguments in the examination of cases from popular cultural discourses, such as those which I will argue operate within a wider “male animal ideology” (Bordo, 1999). This study thus aims not merely to describe, but to critique the discursive enactments of such gendered dualisms through a wider analysis of how they are taken up within the contemporary popular imaginary. More specifically, in order to chart the wider contours of ideological discourses of the “natural” and the “primitive” (which operate symbolically in tandem with each other) I examine illustrative cases of their semiotic production within contemporary media and culture; namely, I look across multiple sites of visual-discursive production within the contexts of film and video, “reality” television, mediated sports, advertising and promotional culture, and kinesthetic physical cultures and practices visible in the digital/virtual realm and in person. The overall conceptual plan of this study, then, is to theorize the present discursive condition of the “primitive” and the “natural” within the popular imaginary, with a particular focus on how these discourses implicate and inform a politics of contemporary gender and environmental consciousness from a cross-cultural perspective.
I hope to add to and update this body of work theorizing the “primitive,” one emerging from the so-called “human sciences” (Kurasawa, 2002), by putting more recent texts and their sites of cultural production in dialogue with it. I approach these texts as expressive forms, but also in their value as products to be consumed (if not always bought in sold in the literal sense), which brings me to the next important intersection of this study: the commodity sign/form, and the conditions of cultural commodification vis à vis global information society.

How do discourses of the “primitive” contribute to the way meaning (and usefulness) is produced for commodities? This is one of the larger questions motivating my research. One contention I make is that the “primitive’s” signs of wildness have shifted as expressive resources now filtered by digital technologies, by new media ecologies, and by creative “knowledge communities” and their labor. On the one hand, many of the themes and associations through which the “primitive” operates are now much more mobile, fragmented, and untethered from the original contexts and referents which made their uses so troubling. While, on the other hand, these historical referents are still decidedly intact and perceptible. Or, as James Clifford once put it, “the ‘exotic’ is uncannily close” (1987). The proliferation of ever more fragmentary signs of wildness explored here can also be productively related to the present moment’s emergence (or an anticipation of) what Serge Elie labels a “post-exotic conjuncture” (Elie, 2012, p. 1213). That is, the “exotic” is now closer than ever (or perhaps more appropriately, more ubiquitous than ever); at least, there is not a cultural outside we can point to quite so easily within the global commodity spectacle (to borrow Debord’s popular conception),
even if there still are very clearly centers and peripheries in terms of geopolitical exigencies and crises. Hal Foster (1985) made a similar observation in 1985, observing that, “in a social order with no outside (and which must contrive its own transgression to redefine its limits), difference is often fabricated in the interests of social control and commodity innovation” (p. 167). Nearly thirty years on I would respond to Foster’s prescient point by proposing that our digital / informational capitalism is exponentially more prolific at contriving and disseminating various transgressions for us, engendering a schizoid state of consumer appeals via a wider romantic, naturalist discourse of limits and potentials – one drawing many of its symbolic resources from the “primitive.” The ubiquity, easiness, and disposability of such hypothetical (commercialized) transgressions makes the conditions for corporate image-makers more frenetic, even desperate, resulting in an increasingly unstable and unpredictable semiotic state of affairs within which signs of wildness take on special currency.

Though Foster and Clifford are responding specifically to postmodern upheavals in the art world and anthropology respectively, Elie’s recent point that we are witnessing “the emergence of a socio-cultural ‘transmodernity’” involving “technological ascendency and thus historical trend-setting” points to conditions informing the many reiterations of the “primitive” addressed here. According to Elie (2012) the “Post-exotic” conjuncture can be understood as:

[A] historical phase that transgresses the established classification of the world into totalising polarities (eg West/non-West, a semantic proxy for the metropole–colony relationality), or into ranked trichotomies (First, Second, Third Worlds), and their one-way knowledge and power flows, which materially construct domains of peripherality and symbolically reproduce relations of subordination (p. 1213).
Moreover, and apropos of this study, Elie argues that within this “transmodernity” the “‘exotic’ periphery permeates the centre’s civilisational norms, as well as corrodes its political and economic hegemony” (ibid). These observations provide a way to conceive of the larger geopolitical, economic, and socio-cultural conditions from which the texts and images examined here emerge from. Since I seek to trace the contours of a particular discourse (albeit one that intersects with many others) across different sites of cultural production, though generally unified in that they are all mediated sites, I will continue to introduce different contextualizing theories as each site calls for (e.g., anthropology, sociology of culture, gender and masculinity studies, film and media studies, environmental studies and eco-critical perspectives, performance studies). But before going any further I wish to ground some of these terms of analysis in a concrete example, and propose and additional conceptual qualification of the “primitive.”

Adidas’s “Battle Pack” marketing campaign (See Figure 1), set to coincide with the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, provides a useful recent example, enacting in one short television spot many of dualisms offered above, and offering an inroad to begin answering the question posed moments ago: How do discourses of the “primitive” contribute to the way meaning (and usefulness) is produced for commodities? Most principally, I will argue, by re-asserting the “human” (species) through (symbolically) transcending it. However, there are many qualitatively different avenues projected culturally as possibilities for transcendence via ascriptions of the “primitive,” variously implicating symbolic processes of social transgression and regression via physical aggression or submission. In semiotic terms, I contend the advertisement articulates a form of techno-primitivism relying on 3-D animation conceived as the continuous
transmogrification through a constellation of formal associations between human and animal, human and machine, individual and community, self and other.

In Chapter 5 I look in greater depth at this techno-primitivistic tendency in the promotional imaginary of commercial sports. For the moment, however, I want to suggest that the Battle Pack ad as emblematic of my larger argument that the confluence of the popular and the “primitive” is now best characterized as a decidedly technological “primitive.” In this respect I adopt Mark Selzer’s (1998) definition which understands the formation as: “a simulated primitivism mediated through and through by technologies of reproduction” (p. 81). While the terms of nature and wildness (as primitivity) have in the past often served a primitivisms’ aim to distance the human from the machine – to critique the synthetic and hyper-civilized through temporal detachment – in a techno-primitivism the appeal to signs of wildness are as much or more often an affirmation of the machine (though still often quite ambivalent, especially in the complicated imaginary of advancing sports techné). Selzer contends that, in a modern techno-primitivism, “the call of the wild represents not the antidote to the machine culture but its realization” (ibid). I adapt the notion of the techno-primitive broadly here, and in particular want to propose using it as a lens for making sense of not just new visual imaginings of the “primitive” (e.g. Battle Pack ad), but extending it to think about new iterations of the “primitive” that are increasingly made possible through, and mobilized by (high) technological rationality and associated economies. That is, all the cases of the “primitive” examined in this study are in some sense simulations, strategic mobilizations of the primitive’s particular symbolic resources, which are now more dependent upon
digital technologies, global media flows and associated economies for either their rendering and/or their enhanced mobilities and circulations.

Figure 1: Chronological screen captures from Adidas “Battle Pack” television commercial, blurring formal associations between human and animal, human and
machine, individual and community, self and “Other.” Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--CeaG_rH64

Figure 2: Detail from Adidas “Battle Pack” ad (screen capture)

Figure 3: Adidas “Battle Pack” banner, suggesting a transnational ideology of male animality blurring the “natural” and the “artificial” via the high-tech

**Summary of Chapters**

Most of the primary analysis of this dissertation occurs in Chapters three - six, organized broadly by their institutional context. This is not to suggest a comprehensive assessment of each site’s relationship to signs of wildness; rather, this was merely the most useful way of organizing an approach to the topic which sees the whole as greater
than the sum of the parts. In Chapter one I review some of the recent methodological concerns in cultural studies addressing the notion of “texts,” textuality, and textual methodologies. I also provide an in depth review of the critical concept of ideology, and in particular consider its relationship to processes of naturalization, essentialism, and commodification. Lastly, I present some of the principle questions concerning the fields of environmental communication, green cultural studies, ecomedia and ecocinematic approaches as they relate to this study.

Chapter two presents a wider review of literature on the “primitive” than presented in the introduction. This chapter outlines the clear historical tendencies and patterns of the “primitive” as a discursive category. In particular I attempt to delineate the terms of a masculine versus a feminine primitive since this study emphasizes (if not exactly confines itself to) formations of the masculine primitive in cultural production. I also consider the primitive’s symbolic work during the colonial era, especially in terms of racial and ethnic difference. Another important delineation is to understand distinctions between internal (socio-psychological) vs. external (geographic, racial, ethnic) primitivisms. Lastly, I consider the notion of primitivism in its sense as visual phenomenon, one involving a “cross-cultural gaze” and the commodification of otherness / alterity rooted in the circulation of goods across cultural borders.

In Chapter three I describe and evaluate a distinctly technological primitivism in the promotional imaginary of sport. The first section considers briefly the recourse to the “primitive” and the “natural” in literature on sport, pointing to some key instances in which writers have both tried to avoid the de-temporalizing and essentializing use of the categories, but have also at times demonstrated the necessity of invoking it. The bulk of
the chapter focuses on the case of mixed martial arts (MMA, or cage fighting), examining the semiotic usage of signs of wildness in terms of the sports’ strategic technological minimalism. The last section of the chapter extends the terms of analysis to sports advertising more broadly, where I position the way in which sport advertisements utilize a certain rhetorical appeal to nature which is different from the most common use of it in ads, “nature as backdrop” (Corbett, 2006). I argue that, more commonly in the case of sports than other commercial arenas, nature is drawn upon as a symbolic resource in more open (and less disguised or contextual) ways, such that the commodity sign works in close association with notions of one’s natural prowess or inner wildness. This is often conducted in terms of a male animal ideology (Bordo, 1999) through association with primitivity and/as nature, through technological means, resulting in a simulated primitivism – a primitivism mediated through technology, or techno-primitivism.

In Chapter four I examine a distinct grouping of outdoor-centered television in terms of its affinity with the historical gender ideal understood as “the masculine primitive” (Rotundo, 1987). In particular I look at Survivorman, Man vs. Wild, Dual Survival, Man Woman Wild, Mountain Men, and Last One Standing in terms of what I characterize as pieties for the masculine primitive, which I then set against their parody in Wildboyz, and other sites in television and advertising which can be read as destabilizing and deconstructing such an ideal. I also relate this parodic deconstruction to hegemonic, “exemplary,” or normative masculinities associated with the ideal. Finally, I briefly consider a few explanatory routes for understanding this (sub)generic grouping – one which seems to have flourished in the past decade – along several lines, but especially eco-critical views. I propose that this sort of “Man vs. Nature” programming can be
understood in terms of the cultivation of a personalized relationship with “nature” and the “wild” during a moment of heightened environmental awareness if not panic associated with global warming and ecological catastrophe. I also suggest that this facilitation of a personal relationship with constructed “nature” might allow one to feel connected to the topic without requiring them confront, or be made to feel uncomfortable with, their own complicity in actual ecological matters (since it is bad business), thus failing in what might otherwise appear to be a progressive, eco-consciousness raising subgenre.

Chapter five considers desires for the “primitive” in yet another cultural arena – the international “art” or “festival” film. Here I focus on three films, *Buffalo Boy* (2004), *Blissfully Yours* (2002) and *Tropical Malady* (2004), considering them primarily on the textual level in terms of their formal affinities with traditional ethnographic modes of representation, and in terms of how these modes implicate wider discourses of the “primitive.” I also look closely at the work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, positing it formally as a kind of cinematic description, which is then linked to questions on the locus of ethnographic knowledge production. In considering what we might understand as the ethnographic-ness of an art film within a wider cinematic context, I also briefly juxtapose the art film with the popular Thai action film, *Ong Bak: The Thai Warrior* (2003). These films are also considered in terms of their relationship to a wider art film institutional apparatus, for example, looking at the Global Film Initiative’s (GFI) liberal humanistic ideals of “promoting cross-cultural understanding,” and cross-examining those ideals with research which problematizes the location of ethnographic knowledge production. This chapter presents a conceptual tension: On the one hand, I problematize a certain kind of art film ideology and its implications as a cultural arena of commodified
“tradition” – a sort of cine-tourism with implicit culture “collecting,” veiled in the ideals of a classical humanism (like National Geographic). While on the other hand, I also propose that a more explicit acknowledgment of art film ethno-graphics, evident in institutional developments like the GFI, might be seen as an aid to short-circuiting primitivism’s essentializing and universalizing operations by providing a basis for greater socio-historical grounding and contextualization. I close by proposing that the scope of an art house “ethnographies” lens can be productively extended to include a wider range of films, such as, for example, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), which implicates a related politics of popular primitivisms.

Chapter six examines the urban physical practice known as parkour, especially in the tension between naturalizing statements and claims made constituting its apparent “philosophy” of practice, and parkour’s evident relationship to the usefulness of kinesthetic action forms in commodity culture. I draw evidence from many of the statements and discussions of parkour available online, which are placed in dialogue with corporate / commercial and independent texts and images which constitute so much of the practice’s global discourse. I also draw from my own interviews with practicing “traceurs” from a large public university’s student parkour organization. I present parkour as a contemporary case which draws on a “pre-modern” imaginary of a “natural” humanity, understanding itself in certain forums as a “human reclamation” response to hypermodernity, despite certain evidence of the practice as an outgrowth and partial reflection of our post-industrial information economy (i.e. digital, inter-textual, urban, and inter-medial). That is, this chapter makes the case that Parkour should also be
considered in terms of its status as an enactment of sensational kinesthetic tropes prefigured in martial arts and action cinema, video games, and even comic books.

I also consider parkour’s semiotic approach to blurring the continuum between animal and human (or between human and non-human) an aspect of popular primitivism(s) taken up in other chapters. Finally, as a primarily urban (and suburban) practice, Parkour is also be discussed as a form of creative defiance not just of modernity per se, but urban modernity in particular and the global metropolis as an especially charged locus of meaning for primitivism’s role in critiquing civilization by way of an introjected “nature.”

In my concluding chapter I summarize and synthesize the arguments across the different sites, suggesting some of the general contours of what might be understood as a moment of intensified “commodity naturalism,” coterminal with new forms of techno-primitivity found in masculine commodity culture. I also contend that the various primitivisms examined here are unified in their shared enactment of a social imaginary of resistance through transgression. In the sites where the “primitive” is able to operate outside of, or even successfully disrupt, the commodity form, it might offer possibilities for resisting capitalist depredations. Thus I propose that the prospects for furthering greater environmental consciousness, eco-centric and eco-critical ideals might be promoted within certain art film modes, and in the expressive physical practice of parkour itself as a creative rejection of the logic of urban spaces and structures, though not when performed in response to or in the service of spectacular action commodities. While, conversely, I see little prospect for such radical political projects of resistance in the techno-primitive imaginary of commercial sports, or for that matter in reality
televisions’ modes of primitivism. Finally, this research contends that, under the torrential conditions of our global informational capitalism, the convergence of advanced digital technologies with the semiotic resources of the “primitive” are engendering a moment of techno-primitive proliferations informing the production of masculine-targeted commodity sign/forms.
CHAPTER 1
THEORY AND METHOD

Multiple Sites and Texts

In trying to adequately understand what might be thought of as a social imaginary of wildness as its own recognizable discourse, one that structures or processes certain dimensions of popular cultural production, mediation, and consumption, it is necessary to look across a range of signifying “texts” and related social practices. This requires considering the meanings made at the intersection of multiple sites, along with the use of multiple or mixed methods. I examine discourses of the “primitive and “natural” as visual discourses operating within sports advertisements, for example, but also related verbal discourses in advertisements, or as employed by athletes, journalists, commentators, and fans. Then, for example, resituating the analysis to expressions of “masculine primitive” ideals in reality television, which may initially appear related to the discourse of wildness in sports media and practice only insofar as they both emanate from screens, in order to demonstrate how they intersect in their shared, if variable enunciations of a “male animal ideology” (Bordo, 1999) with its accompanying myth themes and narratives. Thus, it is necessary to tack back-and-forth between the various sites, but also between varying modalities of expression since much of the complexity of understanding a discourse requires attending to its articulations at different points within a wider network or field (Rose, 2001). So, for example, a verbal discourse of wildness may be related to a visual discourse, but necessitates different interpretive methods. The former implicates a social modality, while the latter is also social, but it must also consider technological and compositional modalities (Rose, 2001). Thus the choice of methods will, to some extent
at least, follow from the specific demands of the site of analysis, but will still fall more or less under the broad designation of Cultural Studies.

The methodological orientation of this dissertation draws primarily from humanities-based textual methods, cultural studies (CS), and to a lesser extent qualitative methodologies originating in the ethnographic and participant observation approaches associated with anthropology. Because this study is unified more around a set of interrelated themes than by any single text-type, medium, or genre, my methods must adapt to, and follow from the texts (and contexts), sites, and discourses being analyzed. To do so, I analyze discourses found in relevant film and television programming, advertising, websites, and articles. The chapter on Parkour will utilize qualitative observations and interviews with actual parkour practitioners. But the range of textual methods, broadly named cultural studies, will span semiotics and iconography, rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis, ideological criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, visual methods, and critical discourse analysis.

“Textual analysis” encompasses a wide range of methodologies related to the analysis, criticism, and interpretation of texts and the sociocultural formations from which they emerge and are consumed. In recent years the status of the “text” and textual methodologies has come under increasing scrutiny (Couldry, 2000). In large part this is a result of developments in the technological landscape and the ever-increasing rapidity and vastness of textual production, distribution, and channels of access. Critical concern over the status of the “text” and the implications of this status for related methodologies also grows out of an evolving cultural and academic politics of knowledge-production and meaning-making activities. There are great implications for cultural production,
reproduction, and cultural access in terms of valuations of how texts ought to be treated, where they are located, how they are defined, studied, appreciated, and critiqued.

Janet Staiger (2005) outlines the trajectory of textual methodologies in terms of their movement from “text-activated,” to “reader-activated,” to “con-text activated” approaches. Nick Couldry (2000) writes at length on the necessity of “questioning the text” for any thoroughgoing assessment of where cultural studies (CS) has been, where it might presently be located, and prescriptions for where it “ought” to be headed. Couldry (2000) argues that, living in an age of massive textual proliferation, texts ought not to be taken in isolation, and that a text cannot be taken as “a discrete object,” as “coherent in itself” (p. 76). It is fine, Couldry argues, to pick a single text from the field and “read” it, as long as this individual reading is duly acknowledged and tempers any wider knowledge-claims, that the reading not be pitched as representing generalizable knowledge of the social, as has often been the case. The threat from the other end of the spectrum, Frow and Morris (1996) explain, is the notion of the text as “nothing more than pure relationality,” a magnitude of ontological instability yielding intellectual paralysis from the sheer expanse of possible textual designations (as cited in Couldry, p.78). Instead, Couldry calls for “some notion of text which is tied to how things function as texts for actual readers,” adopting Bennett and Woollacott’s (1987) notion of the “reading formation” (pp. 82-83). Thus, appropriating the concept of the reading formation –“the processes which lead to certain complexes of meaning, and not others”– Couldry believes that Cultural Studies must “start from the actual complexity and fluidity of the textual environment, and from there the question of how certain texts come to be closely read as texts –how textual events, as we might call them, occur” (2000, p. 83).
Couldry advocates a middle-ground methodology between the radically destabilized text as “pure relationality” (much like deconstructionist and post-structuralist views which take everything as text or discourse) and an “expert reader” formalism positing textual unity and closure at the expense of contextual and political-economic (i.e. material) complexity. “Some texts we may read closely,” but this should be accompanied by “studying how people actually negotiate the textual environment,” and not merely “consigned to the ‘too difficult’ bin” (ibid, p. 78). In general, Cultural Studies eschews the close textual readings concerned with form and aesthetics in favor of reading a range of texts as constituting some piece or aspect of a wider “semiosphere” or “mediasphere” (or even “mediascape” to borrow Appadurai’s similar term). Hartley claims that “we cannot do textual analysis. . . by starting out from the individual text: we have to take account of the pervasiveness, the endless circulation of meanings” (1996, p. 2).

This project will take its theoretical and methodological lead from the work of Couldry (2000), Hartley (2002), Staiger (2005), Frow and Morris (1996), which directs us to be formalists only insomuch as it provides inter-textual data for comprehending larger social issues and discourses. At the opposite end of formalism, as suggested above, is a kind of discursive free-play, a danger Stuart Hall has described as “a totally open discursive field” (Hall, 1986), not unlike Frow and Morris’s notion of text as ultimately only a “pure relationality.” Most importantly here, though, discourse productively becomes a broad linguistic concept for thinking inter-textual relations. Discursive flows or fields run through (textuality) and between texts (inter-textual) and across media (transmedia) and media consumption contexts (events, reception registers, partial attentions, etc.).
Yet structuralism’s influence on text-based study has inspired its own demise in the theoretical operations of post-structuralism and deconstruction, opening the possibility for the reduction of everything to “discourse” or “text” (see Stam, 2000). This can have the debilitating effect of neutralizing political critique by unseating all claims to knowledge, fixity, or the “real” social and environmental world. Thus new metaphors and descriptive concepts have been developed to more precisely articulate the complex interrelations of texts, meanings, discourses, and their material basis in the world. In an age of globalization and transnationalism, many of the concepts formulated for dealing with complex articulations between text, discourse, and economic and social bases, originate in concerns for the flux of cultural, political, and literal geographic borders. Intertextuality alone is insufficient in this moment of more urgent “border thinking” (Mignolo, 2002), thus the mobilization of concepts like hybridity, heteroglossia, dialogism, polyphony, accented, liminality, third-space, and so on.

This also brings us to the method known as “discourse analysis,” influenced largely by the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault’s (1969 / 2002) notion of “discursive fields” emphasizes the pervasiveness of meanings that run throughout various cultural contexts, situated and embodied experience (i.e. practice), in private and in public. In this sense, multiple discourses run through or interpenetrate a single text or textual “formation.” Discourse analysis and post-structuralism emphasize textual “indeterminacy,” the “play” of signs across texts and discourses.

It is also important here to consider discursive continuities across a variety of generic media forms, or “intermediality” (Young, 2008). As an example, consider the film Casino Royale (2006) (the first Bond film starring Daniel Craig) and its spectacular
opening chase sequence, one that many critics felt was overly long and indulgent. Judgments on the place of the sequence in the film would be incomplete without consideration of a vital intertext, the emerging urban sport, or expressive practice known as Parkour (or a related variation of it, “Free Running”). While the opening chase sequence may have felt indulgent to many critics, especially considering the precedent for this in the Bond franchise as a whole, the scene is more fully contextualized in terms of the renewed action realism enabled by disciplined parkour practitioners (also known as “traceurs”). Considering the text in isolation forecloses consideration of this crucial intertext (a text within a text). Yet when considered within a discursive network of related texts, not least of which is of course the Bond franchise’s motif of privileged white, hyper-masculine global mobility, coupled with the specter of the “primitive”, of urban vs. rural and Western vs. non-Western antagonisms, the configuration of Bond chasing Sebastien Foucoun’s (a French African) character from a village setting to the steel skeleton of a high-rise construction site takes on greater meaning than when evaluated only in terms of aesthetic or formal unity. Still further inquiry reveals parkour’s “philosophy,” I contend, relies upon a romantic primitivist discourse associated with myths of an original animal prowess in association with a loss of the “human,” that can be (re)accessed through parkour’s physical practice. This topic us taken up at greater length in Chapter 6.

Considerations of hybridity and textual indeterminacy are also integral to film studies. When considering films that circulate in festival and “arthouse” arenas, for example, there is often an “ethnographic” function which goes unacknowledged in criticism and reception (See Martinez, 1992). How a film text means in its social,
cultural, or national place of origin (in so much as this can be specified) often differ vastly from how it means elsewhere. Political economic issues related to financing (co-productions, for example) influence the conditions of production (setting, actors, budgets, etc.). Festival jurists and critics, star actors and directors, internet buzz and fan cultures, are all part of a vital discursive braid in structuring which film texts make it into circulation, and which are screened out.

In his book *Textual Poachers* (1992), Henry Jenkins draws on the work of De Certeau to expand theories of how texts get taken up by fans in various ways. In addition to the metaphor of “poaching,” he borrows the concepts of “scriptural economies”, “nomadic reading” practices, and the difference between strategies and tactics in the media landscape. These “scripts” are idiosyncratically reworked and repurposed by fans, poached and pieced together differently, attended to wholly or partially. Jenkins (1992) also highlights that while there is much work on the fan, there is very little work on the other degrees of engagement along a continuum from fanaticism to apathy or complete disregard.

Finally, our definition of texts, Couldry argues, must always be rooted in the concrete circumstances of their use and function. What constitutes a text for someone? Where do they draw boundaries and discern texts to function? And, Couldry draws from Staiger, what is the function of the “textual event?” This has resulted in new designations such as “textual space” (Barthes), “textual environments” (Couldry), mediaspheres and semiospheres (Frow and Morris), and in short, a shift from the focus on texts per se to textuality –the manner in which something gets taken up and interpreted as a text for readers in relation to its wider textual environment. We do not need to discard close
textual “readings” as an important component of Cultural Studies, but in isolation it is a wholly inadequate tool for comprehending our postmodern text-saturated world.

**Ideology, Naturalization, and Commodification**

The primary analysis of visual and verbal cultural texts throughout this dissertation relies on several theories of ideology, and in particular the implications of certain ideological forms or “enunciations” (to borrow a term from Eagleton, 1991) for discursive processes of naturalization, popular notions of what constitutes “nature” or the “natural,” and their expression through motifs of primitivity. Thus, in this section I review several of the most significant thinkers on the topic of ideology, discourse, and power, including Eagleton, Williams, Marx, Barthes, Foucault, and others, taking a special interest in their conceptions of how ideology relates to the processes of naturalizing and universalizing phenomena in social life. This review anticipates the primary analyses below, especially chapters looking at signs of wildness in sport, “reality” television, and advertising, which I will argue activate naturalizing myths and symbols in tandem with certain ideological and economic interests. Additionally, by adopting some of the key analytical tools from Marxian political economic analysis, I am better able to consider the role these ideologies play in the production and consumption of commodities. Lastly, recent thinking on these concepts updates them for transitions from an industrial economy, to a post-industrial service economy, to the present global information economy of our digitalized era (see Fuchs, 2010, 2011), which will also be presented briefly.

Terry Eagleton (1991) usefully delineates some of the key definitions of ideology. His elaboration of the distinctions between the epistemological vs. the political and
sociological senses of ideology are important to my analysis here, though to some extent this study will generate interpretations implicating all three dimensions of ideology. One dominant tradition has defined ideology in terms of “true” vs. “false” consciousness or cognition (i.e. epistemological), while another has focused instead upon the operation and function of ideas in social life (i.e. sociological), rather than in terms of questions about their reality (ibid). The epistemological view bears a close resemblance to that of myth, understood as “systematically distorted communication,” or “socially necessary illusion,” whereas the sociological and political view defines ideology as “the process of production of meanings, signs, and values in social life,” or as “the conjuncture of discourse and power” (ibid, pp. 1-2). Raymond Williams (1976) understands the former view, drawing from Marx and Engels, “as illusion, false consciousness, unreality, upside-down reality” (p. 156). For Marx and Engels (2009/1846), then, ideology is “nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas” (p. 9). For the purposes of this analysis, the sociological and/or political sense is perhaps more important, understood as “the medium in which men and women fight out their social and political battles at the level of signs, meanings, and representations” (Eagleton, p. 11). As this last definition indicates, the concept of ideology encompasses other key concepts utilized in cultural criticism, in particular the concepts of myth, symbol, reification, and discourse.

The link between power and ideology is also important to establish here. According to Eagleton, Foucault effectively replaces ideology with “discourse,” taking a more expansive view of the concept, its relationship to power understood as much to be bottom up (stemming from individuals) in movement as it is top down (from institutions).
Power, in the Foucauldian sense, “is not something confined to armies and parliaments: it is, rather, a pervasive, intangible network of forces which weaves itself into our slightest gestures and most intimate utterances” (ibid, p.7). This view extends the conception of ideology to everyday social life, where performative acts or utterances can reveal the “microstructures” of ideology (ibid). Foucault’s model of discourse empowers one to consider how systems of representation operate in certain times and places. Rather than viewing power as centralized, a Foucauldian model approaches the workings of power in terms of its circulation by way of discourse. Power then is distributed across networks of institutions and individuals, and is capillary rather than centralized, both constituting and constituted by its subjects. Foucault (1980) explains that, “these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated not implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse (p.93). A discourse thus crucially informs the workings of power, simultaneously constituting and constituted by its subjects, through narratives, symbols, representations, and “knowledge” which people internalize and use in monitoring their own identities (i.e. “biopolitics”) (ibid, 1980). For example, one discursive/ideological formation I will contend later on currently informs contemporary masculine gender formation is an ambivalent (masculine) primitivism, or discourse of the male-animal.

The efficacy of ideological forms (or discourses, as I use them more or less synonymously) lies in their ability to exist as merely “common sense” in social life. Here we arrive at a significant point of overlap in the social operations of ideology, naturalization, and myth. Ideologies make beliefs appear natural, inevitable, self-evident, and often universal (Eagleton). If an ideology is successful, then it has naturalized its
ideas or beliefs, requiring “as tight a fit as possible between itself and social reality, thereby closing the gap in which the leverage of critique could be inserted” (ibid, p. 58). The notion of ideology’s defining operation of foreclosing (or forestalling at least) critique through its “processing of reality” (ibid, p. 58) to render a social or cultural abstraction as “natural,” and thereby occluding the interests and history of that social reality, underwrites the traditions of Marxist cultural criticism. Thus, in another sense, whenever something can be understood to inhabit the role of social “norm” or “ideal,” as “legitimate,” “true,” or “natural,” ideological interests are involved, and some form of power or control is being maintained and enacted through discursive networks.

Ideology and discourse, however, need to be further clarified as not to appear totalizing. Drawing on deconstructive theories of discourse, Eagleton points out that Marxist orthodoxy – the idea that if an ideology was aware of its own terms and underlying interests, then it would cease to be an ideology (i.e. assuming false consciousness) – is “an overstatement” (p. 60). That is, a full naturalization theory of ideology fails to acknowledge the possibility that ironic distance – or other “metalinguistic states” – may actually be strategically incorporated into the ideological form as part of its conditions of possibility (ibid). In this regard, in Chapter 3 I examine what the more abundant circulation of parodies of masculine primitive ideals in recent years might be seen to signal ideologically for masculine gender formation, and whether the ironic distance represents a potential for breaking down certain kinds of “official” masculinity, or whether its role is as much still to naturalize and inoculate against counter-hegemonic gender ideals. Along these lines, Slavoj Žižek (2012/1994) contends that ideologies are capable of “accommodating” skepticism through a reconfiguration of
their discourses (p. 311). Zizek submits that, “In contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian, . . . cynical distance, laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally” (ibid, p. 311). Thus, somewhat paradoxically, an ideology’s discursive processes of naturalization and universalization can incorporate, or work in tandem with, moments or conditions allowing subjects to stand outside an ideology’s discursive form, an accommodation which may actually help further secure and reinforce an ideology’s position in the social world. This complex dynamic will be crucial in this study’s mapping and interpretation of motifs of primitivity in later chapters, especially in analyzing the tensions between parodies and pieties of “masculine primitive” ideas in certain areas of cultural production.

As the foregoing review indicates, “ideology” implies more than just the things in themselves (re)presented by cultural “texts” and lived social practices. Ideology is not just “interested” language or discourse, “coextensive with everything,” otherwise it would carry no weight as a critical and interpretive tool (Eagleton, pp. 8-9). It is, rather, an issue of context. Ideology is thus “less a matter of the inherent linguistic properties of a pronouncement than a question of who is saying what to whom for what purposes” (ibid, p. 9). Defining any linguistic form as ideological necessarily denotes a power relationship, and theories extending from the Marxist tradition of ideological criticism emphasize structural power imbalances whereby “reality” is “distorted,” “mystified,” or otherwise made illusory by “ruling” or “dominant” ideologies backing a certain set of material interests. However, as suggested above, for an ideology to function it must find a close fit with people’s social reality, and so by most recent definitions it must be more
than simply “imposed illusions” (ibid, p.15). This brings us to the issue of ideology’s role in the socio-cultural processes of naturalization, universalization, and reification.

As introduced above, most conceptions of ideology address the discursive strategies that render an idea, belief, or cultural practice “natural,” self-evident, or even universal. This involves uncoupling cultural ideas from the specific historical and material circumstances in which they arose. This can be understood as ideology’s “dehistoricizing thrust,” which involves a “tacit denial that ideas and beliefs are specific to a particular time, place, and social group” (ibid, p. 59). This is also understood as the reification of social conditions, whereby linguistic forms and social phenomena lose sight of the empirical social world from which they emerged, and are falsely taken as “natural,” or as “nature.” In another sense, ideologies involve human interests that, consciously or unconsciously, and for better or worse, are served by being protected and sustained through a symbolic process of concealing their full historical specificities and implications to everyone and everything they may impact. Quite crucially to this study, the naturalizing effects of ideology can be linked to theories and concepts of the “primitive” (see Chapter 2 for more on this). For example, Fabian (1983) argues that the term “primitive” is in fact “the key term of a temporalizing discourse” (p. 82). To be naturalized, according to Fabian, means “to be separated from historic events meaningful to mankind” (ibid, p.13). As we will see, however, the “primitive,” depending on the context and forms of its social deployment, is equally capable of naturalizing culture as it is denaturalizing it to starkly different ends. The “primitive,” like rhetorical appeals to “nature” and the natural in ideological discourses, is not always used as a conservative, reactionary, or repressive device, but also for liberatory and pro-social interests.
Drawing in the work of Paul deMan, Eagleton maintains that the central purpose of critical, “deconstructive” thought is in exposing the materially interested union of the figural with the literal through which unequal power relations are perpetuated (ibid). This, perhaps the most important purpose of the tradition of ideological criticism, also helps us to point up some of its limitations. According to deMan (1982), what we understand as “ideology” is “precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenanism” (p. 11). Eagleton translates this as ideology’s fundamental project of bridging between “verbal concepts and sensory intuitions,” or what he articulates as a “spurious naturalization of language” (1991, p. 200). However, Eagleton challenges deMan, Barthes, and others on their assumption that all ideologies work through naturalization, and in this suggests the importance of distinguishing processes of naturalization from universalization. While related, naturalization and universalization have some important differences that will later come to bear directly on this study’s analysis:

Naturalizing has an obvious link with universalizing, since what is felt to be universal is often thought to be natural; but the two are not in fact synonymous, since one could regard some activity as universal without necessarily judging it to be natural. You might concede that all human societies to date have displayed aggression, while looking eagerly to a future order in which this would no longer be so. But there is clearly a strong implication that what has been true always and everywhere is innate to human nature, and so cannot be changed (ibid, p. 59).

Sociobiological and social evolutionary discourses, addressed at greater length below, often function to naturalize certain kinds of human behavior, such as competition and aggression, by rooting them in the timeless domain of our biological prehistory. While popular discourses that naturalize human aggression, especially those employing biologically determinist ideologies (often unconsciously), may be true to social life as it
appears to be now, they may not allow for—or implicitly deny—alternative possibilities. That is, certain ideological discourses might be “true in what they affirm but false in what they exclude” (ibid, p. 16). Furthermore, ruling or dominant ideologies not only actively inform human hopes, desires, and expectations, but they are also capable of obstructing possibilities for alternative beliefs and worldviews required for the transformation of social reality. In the Chapter 5 this dynamic is significant for making sense or Parkour’s prospects for transgressing the “modern social order,” as its philosophy might have one believe, or whether it is already too much a product of market discourses and commodification.

An ideology’s possible operation in appealing to “nature” and the “natural” in its promotion (and tacit denial) of certain values, beliefs, and social practices also shares much in common with the role of myth and symbol in society. For Barthes (1972/1957), myth is an ideological form serving to make history into Nature by associating it with signs which appear to be fixed and unchangeable. By another important definition, “social myth” “comes into play when . . . social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality, and sanctity” (Malinowski, 1926, as qtd. in Baird, p. 70). Or, as Barthes explains it: “We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature. . . . Myth is depoliticized speech” (1972/1957, p.129). In other words, we can do this because it has always been done—it is “natural.” The category of (wild) “nature” and notions of what is “natural” are often complicit in—even directly equated to—the operation of myth in the popular imaginary. Myths in all cultures thus “are crucial in defining what is natural, normal, and legitimate” (Burstyn, 1999, p. 22). Evernden (1992), further explains the role of “nature” as (commodifable) sign:
Nature has become a powerful part of our vocabulary of persuasion. But even that puts it too mildly, for it is often treated as the very realm of the absolute. To be associated with nature is to be placed beyond human caprice or preference, beyond choice or debate. When something is “natural” it is “the norm,” “the way,” “the given.” This use of “nature” affords us a means of inferring how people ought to behave – including what objects they ought to associate with, that is, buy (pp. 22-23).

According to Mircea Eliade (1963) myths, through their ritual enactment, often function to authorize (natural and social) phenomena, like human violence, by transporting participants to a “primordial” or “sacred” time (pp. 18-20). The social power of myths also lies in their ability to offer justifications for how, often “through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution” (ibid, pp. 5-6). Outlining here the role of naturalizing and naturalistic social myths, and their complicity in propagating ideological discourses of the “primitive,” provides an important basis for the primary analyses in later chapters. The final discussion in this section extends the notion of ideology and naturalization by defining some crucially affiliated concepts from critical political economy.

By this point it should be fairly clear that this dissertation is organized around the analysis of a wider discourse of wildness in the popular imaginary, one which is mobilized heterogeneously across a variety of visual and verbal texts, which can then be “read” or decoded in terms of ideology. However, while ideology informs these text’s meanings, we are limited at this stage without appropriate tools for making sense of them as things which are either intentionally produced as commodities, or that get appropriated as commodities (commodified) in the marketplace. Or, for that matter, tools for understanding the interaction between semiotic resources and the forms commodities
take, the kind of labor involved in their production, and the subjectivities and institutions involved with their use and circulation. By commodity I mean, in the most basic sense, any object or thing with economic value (Appadurai, 1986). Value, it should also be noted, is not inherent to that object or thing, but is determined by subjects and their social relations (ibid). Since this study centers upon the contemporary circulation of a particular grouping or constellation of signs, Baudrillard’s notion of the “commodity sign” is good starting point. In his famous essay, *Toward a Political Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981/1972), Baudrillard does not want to do away with the concept of ideology, exactly, but qualifies the Marxist critique of ideology as failing to “unravel ideology as form,” and instead only “as content, as given, transcendent value” (p.144). Baudrillard is challenging the easy (if instructive) distinction often made from an orthodox Marxist position between a commodity’s “exchange value” and its “use value” by collapsing them under a larger sense of the commodity “as code.” He argues that the code is the crucial determinant, and that it is erroneous to separate the commodity sign (the dynamics of which are determined by a larger code) from the commodity form, arguing that “signs can function as exchange value (the discourse of communication) and as use value (rational decoding and distinctive social use)” (ibid, p.146). It is worth mentioning that the criticism of Baudrillard here is, generally speaking, that his view is overly totalizing and determinist, allowing little room for subjects’ to resist or step outside of the capital’s control (see Poster qtd. in Baudrillard, 2001), but the importance of this contribution to thinking about the commodification of culture is hard to overstate. Writing in the 1970’s about “consumption” as the term defining “the stage where the commodity is immediately produced as a sign, as sign value, and where signs (culture)
are produced as commodities” (ibid, p.147), he seems to have anticipated the expansion and intensification of global information circulation and exchange economies of the digital age. Looking ahead briefly to an illustrative case, consider many of the MMA t-shirts’ visual-rhetorical appeals to “nature” through signs of wildness, in which one overlays themselves with and thus to some extent enacts a social performance by self-identificaton vis a vis motifs and iconographies of wild nature in association with corporeal identity (see chapter 3). These shirts’ social use value is as much about acquiring certain cultural significations and symbolic capital through distinction (involving a wider male animal ideology) as it is about use value (i.e. warmth, UV protection, social propriety). What is for sale here? What has been commodified? Where is the surplus value being extracted from? In addition to circulating, perpetuating, and profiting from a problematic ideology, the relationship between labor (consumer subjects) and capital (corporations) is also modified such that the wearer of the MMA branded shirt can be understood as doing labor for the brand (as well as promoting the wider industry or institution), and continuing the ongoing production of the commodity “as sign” and sign “as commodity.”

While Marx was himself less interested in questions of “use value,” which he saw as outside of political economy’s critical purview since it (use value) is required for a thing to even be considered a commodity and thus presumed, critical cultural studies scholars are quite interested in the relationship between use value and “commodity fetishism” (Prodnik, 2012). Use value, the thing deemed to have social value, relevance, or meaning (and by which markets determine the “exchange value” in relation to “labor value” with “surplus value” the difference or profit), is the domain of ideology (i.e.
religion, politics, arts, etc.), included in the idea of “superstructure” and was determined by the ruling class. Thus “use value” gets to matters of a commodity’s “contents” and how meaning is produced for commodities through the social construction and enactment of symbolic “codes” (ibid). Commodity fetishism (not in the religious or anthropological sense) is akin to the workings of ideology and naturalization, and can be understood, according to Jhally (1987), as “a theory of mystification.”

[F]etishism consists of seeing the meaning of things as an inherent part of their physical existence when in fact that meaning is created by their integration into a system of meaning. . . . Commodity fetishism consists of things seeming to have value inherent in them when in fact value is produced by humans: it is to naturalize a social process. Thus things appear to have value inherent in them. The essence however is that humans produce value” (pp. 29, 39).

If we consider the notion of “fetishism” (or naturalization) for commodities accruing (however partial) meaning through discourses of wildness, Baudrillard’s semiotics of consumption offers another useful interpretive tool related to notions of “personalization,” individuation, and “difference.” He argues that, “in order to become an object of consumption, the object must become a sign . . . It is in this way that it becomes personalized” (2001, p. 25). Signs enter into a wider “series” of signs, themselves signs among others in sea of signs, organized by the “codes” of commercial discourses. Part of the characteristic of “series” is that, while signs interrelate to each other through codes, they are always competing for “difference” or “distinction” amidst the “sea” of other signs that threatens to drown them out; as such, the sign allows for personalization, as the commodity/sign “is never consumed in its materiality, but in its difference” (ibid). While I am less interested in totalizing claims about the “death” of the real, the link between signs working immaterially through difference, and the dynamic by which a greater
profusion of commodity/signs implicates a “violence of the image,” or a “violence of transparency,” has special relevance for the study of signs of wildness in the digital age (Baudrillard, 1996, p.4). That is, Baudrillard posits that the predominance of the image (vis a vis consumerism) contributes to a wider collapse of public and private realms, in which the private becomes visible, and where the internal is more often externalized. As discussed further in Chapter 2, the “primitive” as sign of what was traditionally repressed (instinct, id, inner-wildness, sexuality, etc.), is more likely to become externalized and visualized via commodities / signs. The spatialized conception echoes Foster’s (1985) prescient point about a “social order which seems to know no outside (and which must contrive its own transgressions to redefine its limits), difference is often fabricated in the interests of social control as well as of commodity innovation” (Foster).

While this is not an altogether new dynamic, the digital realm has, I maintain, restructured and increased the flexible adaptation and application of signs of wildness drawn from a wider (and pre-existing) code of commodified alterity / difference. For the purposes of this study, then, clarifying the principle that the sign itself can be understood as also the “use” value (i.e. as socially useful or relevant) and thus also the commodity form itself, is important for understanding how digital technologies have informed and redefined signs of wildness within a global informational economy.

I argue digital technologies have facilitated a qualitatively different circulation and signification of wildness, especially in terms of a greater fragmentation, fluidity, and flexible semiosis, which further removes them from earlier (and more immediate, grounded) contexts that largely defined their “use” value.
Environmental Communication, Green Cultural Studies, and Ecocinema Perspectives

The fields of environmental communication (EC), green cultural studies (GCS) (Hochman, 1998), and more recent approaches designated as ecomedia (Cubitt, 2005) and ecocinema studies (MacDonald, 2004; Rust, et al., 2013) provide an important theoretical forum for interrogating “nature” as a vital symbolic resource in a variety of popular cultural contexts. Scholars working in EC have taken up questions of how nature imagery is deployed in adaptable and often ideologically contradictory ways in advertising discourse, especially as it relates to ideologies of environmental exploitation, cultural and national identity, and issues of race and gender (e.g. Corbett, 2007; Hansen, 2010; Cox, 2010; Meister & Japp, 2002). In explaining why images of nature— and our cultural notions of whether something is “natural”— are so frequently exploited in advertising and popular culture discourses, Anders Hansen (2010) asserts:

Referencing or using nature thus offers potentially rich interpretive flexibility (to the extent that we as members of a culture have access to the repertoire of meanings culturally and conventionally associated with nature), while at the same time appearing to render things ontological, permanent and beyond questioning. References to nature or what is regarded as “natural” are key rhetorical devices of ideology in the sense that they serve to hide what are essentially partisan arguments and interests and to invest them with moral or universal authority and legitimacy (p.136).

That is, nature is a social creation, rhetorically manipulated according to human needs in order to “justify social patterns,” market imperatives, and perhaps most crucially, in order to disguise or conceal this very constructedness. Because of this semiotic flexibility, popular associations and conceptual understandings of nature, and the manner in which they are represented in the social world, have, according to Kate Soper (1995) “very definite political effects” (p.9). In particular, she emphasizes, effects such as the
naturalization of social and sexual power relations, which is especially relevant to the study at hand. As I detail further in Chapter 2, symbolic appeals to nature are often aimed towards fulfilling or shoring up masculine ideals, in terms of the “male animal as ideology” (Bordo, 1992), and the related notion of the “masculine primitive ideals” (Rotundo, 1987). Furthermore, Soper posits that “‘nature’ in human affairs is a concept through which social conventions and cultural norms,” such as violence and aggression, for example, “are continuously legitimated and contested” (ibid, p. 33). In short, “We never speak about nature, without at the same time speaking about ourselves.” (Kate Soper, 1995, p. 73)

EC and GCS share the same goal of increasing our critical understanding of the processes of communicating nature and the environment. I turn to GCS especially for its vicinity to cultural studies’ theoretical legacy of successfully deconstructing the category of the “natural.” The legacy of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and other Frankfurt and Birmingham school theorists paved the way for cultural studies’ fundamental critiques of capitalist conditions of relying on ideological processes of naturalization and reification, what Hochman (1998) aptly describes as “that situation where culture replaces nature as the realm of the given, the unchangeable” (p. 6). GCS is organized around critiquing representations of nature.

The task of green cultural studies is the examination of proliferating cultural representations of nature –i.e., lexical, pictorial, and actual manipulations of plants, animals, and elements– for their potential to affect audiences affecting nature-out-there . . . Attention to the actual and representational way nature is treated provides insights into overarching theories and strategies of power as they impact on people (ibid, pp. 2-8).

Environmental communication scholars have made important observations on the psychology of advertising’s appeals through “nature.” Drawing on the work of Pollay
(1989) and Lasch (1978), Julia Corbett (2006) explains that successful advertising acts upon personal dissatisfactions and insecurities, not necessarily one’s actual needs. Corbett suggests several recurring patterns or tropes in which advertisements employ depictions of the natural world. Nature is frequently used in ads as “green product attributes,” where the goal is to persuade consumers that the product exists in a more harmonious relationship with the environment. This is closely related to “green image” ads, or “green washing,” in which the objective is to draw a direct link between the organization and a pro-environmental consciousness. But the most common use of nature in ads is with nature serving “as backdrop” (ibid, pp. 149-150). Because of this formal arrangement, nature is less likely to be appreciated in itself, but functions symbolically in a larger rhetorical action where the “advertisers are depending on qualities and features of the nonhuman world to help in selling the message” (ibid). Nature-as-backdrop ads in particular tend to “associate material goods with non-material qualities” that may be lacking or absent from people’s lives (ibid, p. 166).

For example, consider a typical SUV advertisement, where one might see the vehicle in slow motion tearing aggressively through a snow-covered mountain landscape. The backdrop of a pristine natural environment lends seductive appeal to the truck as a commodity empowering one to escape domestic confinement (if need be) and experience the beauty of remote landscapes, all from a position of relative safety and comfort. “Nature” is not the thing for sale here, but is merely a semiotic resource giving the product greater meaning through association. A GCS perspective here might also draw from a political economic standpoint to point out that the image of “nature” is being used to help sell something (i.e. helping to engender a “use value” for SUV’s) that contributes
to a larger fossil fuel and consumerist economy responsible for despoiling nature.

Interrogating and short-circuiting such cultural constructions of nature is a crucial task of GCS, as the symbolic exploitation of nature can have a reciprocal relationship with its material exploitation, each form empowering and perpetuating the other (Hochman). Again, interrogating and short-circuiting these marketplace uses of nature as a flexible semiotic resource is a crucial task of GCS:

[Most] crucial for green cultural studies are the capitalist / communist / technical dominations of worldnature that are informed by a textual nature prone to represent nature unimaginatively and flatly, as a two-dimensional backdrop to human drama. Material and representational domination is reciprocal and double. Each stands to aggravate or potentiate the other, reifying nature as a realm fit primarily for multiple manipulations and annihilations (Hochman, 1998, p. 6).

Hansen (2002) generated a useful list of categories for comprehending the use of nature imagery in television advertising, highlighting, among other things, “nature as threat” and nature as “challenge/sport/manhood/endurance” (p.14). In Chapter 3 I present a series of examples from popular sports which can be included in these groupings, and in particular I add additional specificity to the way in which nature is used “as primitivity” in the service of a wider “male animal ideology.” That is, one under-examined configuration in advertising and promotional culture which I see in the arena of commercial sports is the equation of man “as nature” (through the guise of man as primitivity), and thus a naturalization of “man as threat” (apropos of Soper’s point above). Hansen (2010) points to this when he explains that:

The occasional image of ‘nature as threat’ or vengeful is . . . closely allied to, but slightly distinct from, a related image, namely, ‘nature as challenge’. This is an image which emphasizes the testing qualities of nature, and it serves by extension to demonstrate the manhood, stamina, or physical prowess of characters, or the reliability, sturdy quality, and durability of products (p. 145).
However, nature as a semiotic resource is increasingly fragmented and untethered, thus making it easier to use in expressive ways that articulate subjects not just in nature, but as nature/wildness themselves. This depends on the context, of course, and especially the rhetorical uses of “nature” as a symbol. Adapting Panofsky’s (1982) notion of “open” vs. “disguised” symbols, if nature is serving as backdrop it is more likely a “disguised” use, hidden in plain sight by operating within the codes of realism. Often, when nature is now more often directly intermixed with the human, graphically combined through overlay, compositing, or other more “open” symbolic modes of associational editing, I contend this requires adding additional designations to Hansen’s list: man as “nature,” thus man as “threat” etc.

As referenced above, the new interdisciplines of ecomedia and ecocinema studies adapt environmental studies and ecocritical lenses to the cinematic and televisual realms. Some of the foremost debates in these new fields question whether, for example, ecocinema scholars should direct their focus towards movies which are explicitly about the environment (e.g. environmental documentary, experimental films), or as a wider hermeneutic that departs from an assumption that all films (i.e. even commercial entertainment, and perhaps even more so!) can be seen to implicate ecological concerns (Rust, et al., 2013). Rust and Monani (2013) argue for the latter approach, contending that all “cinema is a form of negotiation, a mediation that is itself ecologically placed as it consumes the entangled world around it, and in turn, is itself consumed” (p. 1). MacDonald (2013) argues that certain kinds of films – those properly situated outside of mainstream commercial filmmaking (i.e. avant-garde, experimental, modernist, art house) – are more likely to engender the experience of “immersion within natural
processes,” and to promote the “qualities of consciousness crucial for a deep appreciation of and an ongoing commitment to the natural environment” (p. 19). Similarly to the films under discussion in Chapter 5, he locates this potential in certain kinds of cinematic techniques, such as long-take durations, extreme long-shots which undermine human predominance, and related techniques which frustrate traditional narrative resolution. As MacDonald sees it, “the job of an ecocinema is to provide new kinds of film experience that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship,” those which are “the inverse of the fundamentally hysterical approach of commercial media, and advertising in particular” which he views as in perfect alignment with industrial captialism’s exploitation of the environment (ibid, p. 19).

Cognitivist film theorist David Ingram takes issue with the view that “eco-aesthetics,” of the modernist sort addressed by MacDonald, necessarily promote greater sensitivity to or awareness of the environment. He states, that although the “modernist techniques of defamiliarization, distanciation, and cognitive dissonance can encourage new perceptions that may in turn take on an explicitly ecological dimension,” this may also be “wishful thinking,” as this view relies on assumptions about how a viewer will take up the text. This position echoes a social semiotics approach, exemplified by Barthes (1972/1957) wonderful reminder that “a text’s unity lies not in its origins but in its destination” (p. 148). In Chapter 2, and again in Chapter 5, I propose a related problematic in the connection between ethnographic films and the location of ethnographic meaning. Similar to MacDonald’s argument that the eco-aesthetics of a film are only one factor in determining whether a more pro-environmental or eco-centric consciousness is engendered in viewers, some scholars in visual anthropology have
argued that ethnographic meaning-making should be located at the moment of reception, and not in the film itself as the “container” for meaning (Banks, 1992; Martinez, 1992). This implicates similar kinds of films, those international art films, which I will propose viewing as both ecocinematic and quasi-ethnographic (or ethnographically inflected), posing questions about their potential to promote both greater cross-cultural awareness and greater eco-consciousness, or alternatively, the equally real prospect that they might reinforce a “primitivist fantasy” through a kind of ideological “patronage” typical of the “ethnographic turn” in the art world (Foster, 1995).
CHAPTER 2
PRIMITIVITY, NATURE, AND COMMODIFICATION

Revisiting The Uses of The “Primitive”

There is a large body of thought and scholarly literature devoted to examining the many iterations of the “primitive” – a multitude of primitivisms if you will – viewed most centrally through movements in the expressive arts, but also within socio-political movements drawing some significant inspiration or influence from the concept of the “primitive.” As with any ideology, primitivism’s terms are often partly concealed or mystified, and so part of the critical project here is an attempt at (re)assembling those terms within particular contexts so their ideological form and social potentials might be more clearly appreciated. Or, at the very least, to provide another lens for viewing these cultural texts and their social sites of (re)production. An obvious risk here is in (further) reifying through naming the very thing I set out to expose for critical interrogation.

Recalling Torgovnick’s point again that placing the term “primitive” into quotation tries to “wish away the heritage of the West’s exploitation of non-Western peoples,” and also possibly “relieves writers of responsibility for the words they use” (1991, p. 20), one goal here is to meet that responsibility head on by presenting a more thoroughgoing review of the history and uses of the “primitive.” Furthermore, the discursive formation and enunciations of the “primitive” in the present can then be more justly situated and analyzed in terms of their historical continuities and disjunction, and not as ahistorical contemporary phenomena.

The general scholarly consensus is that forms and expressions of the “primitive” are in evidence dating back to antiquity, and possibly even further, but that its greatest
influence within social discourses coincides with the epoch of the “modern West,” beginning in the 16th century. (Kurusawa, 2004). An exhaustive view of this body of literature is not possible here, but since the later chapters will focus on textual, descriptive, and critical interrogations of several key sites and cases of contemporary primitivisms, an overview of the idea’s wider historical permutations is helpful in contextualizing the discourse within the present moment. First, however, it is helpful to provide some initial definitions for the term.

By definition “primitive” means primary, original, or first. As a symbolic discourse with a wide and varied history, Fuyuki Kurusawa explains in his article A requiem for the “primitive” (2002) that primitiveness can be understood as a construct that “represents a related set of beliefs and values generated to explain rhetorically what Euro-American societies have become in relation to their pasts and futures” (ibid, p. 2). Kurusawa also contends that as a conceptual tool for the human sciences, at present “the ‘primitive’ is dead and buried,” yet still persists, “unfortunately, yet resiliently, surviving in the popular cultural imaginary” (ibid, p.2). Other scholars position the larger symbolic work of the “primitive,” and its more particular discursive enactments or enunciations of primitivisms, as discourses generic to any culture upon arrival (however partial or imaginary) at a state of civilized social order (Lovejoy & Boas, 1935/1965). As a dialectical, binaristic discursive form, which is perhaps also the root of the concept’s greatest abuses, the “primitive” implies and, indeed cannot function without the concept of the “civilized.” Primitive and civilized are, of course, relative terms, and operate as flexible discursive categories that can be adapted to a wide range of human interests. Stanley Diamond explains in his book, In search of the primitive (1974), that the idea of
the “primitive” is “as old as old as civilization because civilized peoples have always
been compelled by their conditions to seek out an understanding of their origins and roots
and human possibilities” (p.203). Diamond articulates here the more romantic view of the
“primitive” (which is crucial to this study, and will be explored further below),
explaining that it represents “the search for the utopia of the past, projected onto the
future, with civilization as the middle term” (Ibid, p.208).

The sense of the “primitive” which opens the way for questions of “human
potential” is of particular relevance to this study, and also strongly implicates romantic
primitivisms which are more often decoupled from material questions of power and
authority through the appropriation of metaphysical, mystical, and theological terms and
symbols. In fact, it is useful to recite several of Diamond’s (1974) articulations of the
“primitive” here, as, for example, the “puzzled search for what is diminished by
civilization,” as the “attempt to define a primary human potential,” as the search for
“different ways of being human,” or as the discourse through which we pose the
fundamental question, “what part of our humanity we have lost?” (p. 119-121). All are, in
a partial sense at least, accurate articulations of wider historical uses of the “primitive,”
but they are also apolitical in their effacement of the “primitive’s” historical complicity in
racial, sexual, and cultural subjugations through processes of symbolic “othering”
(Spivak, 1987). This particular historical usage of the “primitive” which Kurusawa
(2002) argues is now dead, refers to the crucial role the category played for the Euro-
Western “human sciences” – especially anthropology – and affiliated colonial projects, in
defining non-Western “Others” (and thus crucially aiding in the perpetuation of their
subjugation). This important use of the “primitive,” what Kurusawa aptly describes as a
form of “symbolic domination through representational means” (p.2), has arguably been dismantled by critical anthropology’s crisis of representation and postcolonial critique:

In other words, the production of primitiveness as a knowable object over which cognitive control could be established by Euro-American human sciences was a form of symbolic domination through representational means, and, as such, legitimized (and in many cases paved the way for) colonialism’s political, economic, cultural, and social technologies of ruling (ibid, p. 3).

The uses of the “primitive” I examine in this study still share with the colonial, anthropological “primitive” many of the same terms and valences, most significant of which is the category’s temporalizing function. In his important book, Time and the other (1983), Johannes Fabian explains that the “primitive” is fundamentally a temporal – and temporalizing – concept. Scholars and researchers now generally accept (where evolutionary anthropologists failed to) the “primitive” as “a category, not an object of Western thought” (ibid, p. 18). That, discourses utilizing terms such as primitive, savage, tribal, traditional, third world, etc., do not actually study the “primitive,” but rather “in terms of the primitive” (ibid). And yet it is precisely because of this adaptability that the “primitive” persists within the popular cultural imaginary. The persistence of the “primitive” is, I argue, vitally linked to its temporalizing function, which significantly informs its terms and parameters as a symbolic resource across the sites of cultural production examined in this study.

However, in charting the concept’s historical stages of development through to its supposed “death,” Kurusawa (2002) argues that the “primitive” still remains one of our most powerful and useful tools for negotiating questions of cultural alterity, and that rather than dispensing with the category altogether, we should apply it to our own condition. He explains:
Indeed, though surviving in a small pocket of scholarship committed to the evolutionary paradigm, the idea of equating indigenous societies with a primordial human condition has been largely and convincingly laid to rest at the beginning of the 21st century. The argument that the “primitive” does not correspond to any ‘actually existing’ cultures in the past or present, that it is a signifier without a referent, hardly needs to be restated today . . . . A more interesting line of inquiry, I would argue, consists in turning the gaze on ourselves to study primitiveness as a shifting construct discursively produced by the Euro-American human sciences over the course of the Modern era (ibid, p. 2).

In many respects, this points to the central aim of the research at hand. If colonialism and anthropology’s use of primitive “alterity” is “dead” (which I highly suspect it is not, or at least only partially so), how then is the discursive construct still alive and well within the popular imaginary? Diamond’s (1974) articulation of the primitive as a wider, more universal human response to the “sickness of civilization” (p. 129) – and the accompanying sense of primitivism as a kind of “humanism” equipped to both diagnose and remedy those sources of “loss” (or “lack”) of human potential – coincides with the popular manifestations under study in later chapters here. The “death” of what is better understood as the anthropological “primitive” can be traced back to Franz Boas’s paradigm-shifting writings, such as The Mind of Primitive Man (1911), which introduced the idea (and methodological orientation) of cultural relativism, undermining the period’s racist assumption that all societies will naturally progress in a linear manner through (natural) time from primitive to civilized. This was a key turning point from prior social evolutionary models then informing anthropology, which operated from the perspective that “primitive” peoples were simply further back in evolutionary time – if not natural time – while on the universal trajectory towards civilization. This assumption underwrote the era’s problematic linking of race to cultural development. Fabian (1983) explains primitivism’s role in supporting racist worldviews as a
problematic rooted in its symbolic work of naturalization. That is, Anthropology’s evolutionism is based in a, “radical naturalization of time,” or a “dehistoricizing of time” in which natural time is rendered equal to evolutionary time (ibid, p.16). “To be naturalized,” Fabian explains, “means to be separated from (historic) events meaningful to mankind” (ibid, p.13). However, though the eventual “death” of the “primitive” within the so-called “human sciences” can be tied to this turning point, as this study aims in part to demonstrate, the discourse’s currency and resilience within the popular imaginary is another matter.

Central to the discourse on the “primitive” versus “civilized” is the deployment of self/other binaries. Anthropology’s classical disciplinary orientation towards studying the non-western “Other” in terms of a civilized/primitive dichotomy operated to justify colonial and missionary civilizing projects. The influences of Darwinism and social evolutionist systems of thought are implicit in early theories of “primitive” societies (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Crawford & Turton, 1992). Torgovnik (1990) argues that Freud’s Totem and Taboo also played a part in constructing the belief that the “primitive” represented “a necessary stage of development through which every race has passed” (p. 8). Curiously enough, anthropology’s interest in the primitive “other” at the turn of the century corresponded to a rise in statistical studies about normalcy and averages emerging from American social science and humanistic thought, creating an unprecedented level of public and private consciousness about where the individual fit within the modern masses (Igo, 2007). That is, a growing desire for comprehending what “we” are ran concurrent with, and was reinforced by, social-evolutionist notions of what we are not.
Returning now to the wider viewpoint suggested at the outset, Kurusawa (2004) posits the present “death” of the primitive as only the most recent episode within the “primitive’s” overall “series of narratives,” usefully delineating three moments of historical rupture: “the shock of the new” (16th- late 18th centuries), “the taming of the primitive” (late 18th – late 19th centuries), and “the return of wildness” (late 19th – mid-20th century) (p. 3). While Kurusawa is concerned with the role of the “primitive” within Western modernity, others, like Lovejoy & Boas (1935) and Torgovnik (1991) point to motifs of primitivity as far back as antiquity. For example, Odysseus’s travels in The Odyssey serve to construct perspectives on cultural alterity through a narrative of comparative contact between the poles of civility and savagery. His encounters with the Cyclops, located in a nameless, wild land, (i.e. “nature”/wilderness, thus chaos), helps define the civilized Greek polis (i.e. city state, rule of law/language, thus cosmos) by contrast, while also serving to critique the “soft” men of a “hypercivilized” land (ibid, p. 23-25). This highlights a crucial ambivalence often present in primitivist discourses throughout history: the ability to construct cultures in both pejorative or laudatory ways, depending on the material interests of those with the ability and power (i.e. knowledge) to effectively employ the discourse. Often this ambivalence within the discourse operates simultaneously, and may appear to benefit one “culture” or population at the expense of another, part of an ideological design to sanction through concealment certain assumptions about the “human.” For example, Hayden White (1978) points to the myth of the “Noble Savage” as an important instance of this dynamic, suggesting that the ideological benefits of this historical case of primitivism is more complicated that it first appears. That is, as a fundamental contradiction in terms (noble and savage), the very
idea of “nobility,” and its associations with the civilized social order of the West, appears to be implicitly undermined in this construction:

[T]he idea of the noble savage represents not so much an elevation of the savage as it does a demotion of the idea of nobility . . . to attack the European social system of privilege, inherited power, and political oppression. On the literal level: the concept asserts the nobility of the savage, on the figurative level, the concept of nobility is implicitly characterized as savage . . . This also works to undermine the general notion of humanity which informed and justified European’s spoliation of any human group standing in the way of their expansion, insomuch as the very concept of a limited humanity is thrown into question by the phrase, noble savage – noble implies a certain order of humanity, savage implies less than (ibid, pp. 191-193).

Thus, while this primitivism may, on the one hand, be viewed as a radical social critique of the idea of white, Euro-Western “nobility” and its imperial legacy, on the other hand it assumes an incomplete, partial, or less developed state of the “human” taking the form of a non-Western “other.” However, what happens with this ambivalence in discourses of the “primitive,” which I discuss further below, as its uses are increasingly untethered from an anthropological “primitive”? On this point, Kurusawa (2004) contends that “the discursive constructs of the primitive were not solely colonialism’s handmaidens,” and, that “rather than being overdetermined by the Western project of subjugation of colonized peoples . . . the ‘primitive’ was a complex and ambivalent figure that could serve to estrange, relativize and interrogate Western modernity from the outside” (p.3-4). Is it possible for the “primitive” to function now only as a mirror for the social criticism of our present state of globalized, hyper-modernity, without the specter of social evolutionary complexes serving to sustain false assumptions linking race to cultural development? This question begins to make more sense when applied to the concrete cases of later chapters, and once the terms of the present moment’s “eclipse” of the primitivism is better qualified.
“The shock of the new” (16th- late 18th centuries) refers to the new cultural perspectives from the initial European wave of expansion and encounters with the “Other.” Kurusawa (2004) views Montaigne as the first Western thinker to articulate the terms of this larger episode of primitivism:

[I]t was Montaigne who first seized how the shock of encounter with a new and previously unknown culture completely altered the existing intellectual landscape. Far from trivializing primitiveness as an amusing oddity to be incorporated into Europe’s expanding cabinet of curiosities, Montaigne pioneered the use of a cross-cultural perspective to problematize the false universalism and moral absolutism of European civilization. . . . Montaigne enlisted the figure of the American ‘savage’ to contend that Europe had been corrupted by its veneration of the artificial and its consequent estrangement from the wisdom of nature (p. 5).

This moment of cross-cultural contact informed the intellectual debates of the era, especially within the now well-charted political philosophies of Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu. In particular, Rousseau’s Discourses (1750) mounted the most direct attack on the emerging Modern social order, utilizing “primitiveness as a fundamental motif through which to pass judgment upon civilization,” while for Hobbes (1651) the New World was understood as the “state of nature,” famously likened to war and violent anarchy in which life could only be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (ibid, p.6).

“The taming of the primitive” (late 18th – late 19th centuries) corresponds to the emergence of biological and social evolutionary theory, and the arrival of anthropology and sociology as formal disciplines. This moment is characterized not by the “primitive” as a critique of West, but instead for its vital role in shoring up the West’s sense of its own (racial) superiority in which, as discussed briefly above, “the ‘primitive’ was viewed as a slowly dying museum of our social origins” (ibid, 9).

Finally, in “the return of wildness” (late 19th – mid-20th century) the “primitive” was “reconstructed as a political outside of bourgeois culture” (ibid, 10). In addition to
the new oppositions to evolutionary theory by Boas and others, Kurusawa highlights the emerging influence of new critiques of the modern self, in particular those of Freud and Nietzsche, both of which implicated civilization’s suppression of one’s “natural instincts.” Nietzsche utilized the “primitive” to critique mass society’s artificiality through which the human animal is domesticated, and ruled instead by a “herd-instinct” (ibid). His antidote was the figure of the Übermensch, who, as Kurusawa puts it, “represented a revival of this predatory animal, a return to our bestial origins in order to revive modernity’s putrefying corpse” (ibid). Freud’s contribution of psychoanalytic theory informed a wider tendency for thinking an internal, or psychological “Other.” That is, uses of the “primitive” as a discursive construct began to indicate an internalized or socio-psychological primitive, rather than an earlier “external” primitive, located “out there” in geographic space, and back in (symbolic) time, which was the highly problematic “object” of early work in anthropology and turn of the century social-evolutionary discourses (Fabian, 1983; Kurasawa, 2002; White, 1978).

According to Hayden White (1978), 20th century primitivism quite often functioned as a social critique of (over-) civilized society’s potential threat to, or diminishment of, masculinity. In this, primitivism was responding to a desire to “escape the obligations laid upon us by involvement in current social enterprises” (ibid, p.170). Torgovnik (1996) echoes this, contending that, during the 20th century primitivism went from being a discourse of evolutionary distancing used to justify the imperialistic subjugation of other populations, to a “medium of soul searching and self-transformation” for the modern Western subject (p. 13). This de-territorializing of the “primitive” evolves and by the end of the 20th century we arrive at what can be
characterized as “postmodern primitivism” (Geertz, 2004, p.59). Torgovnik (1991) describes the situation thusly:

In the deflationary era of postmodernism, the primitive often frankly loses any particular identity and even its sense of being ‘out there.’ It merges into a general marketable thing – a grab bag primitive in which urban and rural, modern and traditional, African, South American Asian, Middle Eastern merge into a common locale . . . What’s primitive, what’s modern, what’s savage, what’s civilized increasingly becomes hard to tell. For every 3rd world object exported to the west, one arrives there too. While the primitive has always been a construct or fantasy of the west, it used to be much more convinced of its veracity – convinced of the illusion of otherness it (primitivism) created” (p. 37).

This de-territorializing of the “primitive” towards the end of the 20th century anticipates the present moment in which, I contend, signs of wildness and popular primitivisms arguably circulate now in greater numbers and intensity, but do so in more fragmentary and fleeting way amidst the clutter or “noise” of an image-saturated information economy. However, these postmodern primitivisms still often carry with them the specter of former modes of enunciation, especially those associated with 19th century gender ideals directly informed, among other things, by the emergence of (social) Darwinism, in addition to colonial era primitivisms involving problematic associations between race and “nature” as primitivity. The next section, then, reviews how primitivisms have been variously cast according to the terms of gender, race, and their symbolic operation in tandem with discursive nature, wildness, and (human) animality.

**Gender, Race, and Nature as Primitivity**

Questions of how, and for what reasons, discourses of “nature” and the “natural” are utilized in the popular imaginary are central to this study. Yet the interrelatedness of the categories of the “primitive,” the “natural,” and their implications for problems surrounding modern gender formation clearly requires some unpacking. In her important
book, *What is nature: Culture, politics and the non-human*, Kate Soper (1995) directly correlates the discursive function of “nature” in society with the “primitive” as a conceptual hermeneutic insomuch as nature is socially understood “as primitivity.” “Nature,” she explains, is a crucial category through which our status as humans is continually negotiated.

I argue that Western configurations of nature – notably its association with the ‘primitive’, the ‘bestial’, the ‘corporeal’ and the ‘feminine’ – reflect a history of ideas about membership of the human community and ideals of human nature, and thus function as a register or narrative of human self-projections (Soper, 1995, p. 10).

As the image of “nature” becomes the measure through which we draw boundaries and limitations around our “humanity,” it also becomes an indispensable source for challenging its status amidst the perception of growing distance from what we believe to be our “field of significance,” or “species being” constituting us as “human” (Corbett, 2006; Marx, 1844/2004). Constructions of “nature” in terms of the “primitive” suggest its importance as an interpretive concept, but one that is not without its potential ideological and political problems. Nature in its policing role is the “other” to the “human” and “civilized.” Perhaps it goes without saying that, and recalling here problems of the “primitive” addressed by Fabian, constructions of “nature” can function to “naturalize” (or normalize, essentialize, universalize) what may otherwise be more clearly viewed as highly contingent and (self)interested phenomena.

Making distinctions between “nature” and Nature (that is, constructed, discursive “nature” emerging in social practice, versus the non-human environment which scientists study) becomes important when considering how the former may impact the latter, and visa versa. Nature and Culture are clearly both highly equivocal categories that, in
general, require very careful analytical attention. However, the foregoing distinction is intended to clarify that I am treating “nature” in the primary analyses of later chapter as a primarily ideological principle, while also being cautious not to lose sight of its non-discursive referents. Significantly, the position humans take (consciously or not) with respect to their status in, as, or apart from Nature is relevant to the discourses analyzed here. A “naturalist” approach views the distinction between human and animal, or human (i.e. culture) and nature, as a continuum, or matter of degrees, whereas a “culturalist” position sees the boundary as absolute, rooted in the sui generis symbolic capacity of humans (Soper, 1995, p. 81). The former is a position often held by some environmentalists and “deep ecologists” as a basis for appreciating our interconnectedness and co-dependence on the environment. The latter, postmodern view of “nature” as a social construction concerns itself centrally with the ideological functioning of the discourse, with special concern for social and sexual hierarchies. For the purposes of this study, many of the sites addressed strategically blur the boundaries between human and animal (especially when gendered masculine) for creative or promotional reasons, presenting what might be thought of as a kind of artificial “commodity naturalism” which, I will argue, through its material and behavioral repercussions largely negates the potential for positive environmental or ecological impact. And yet, other sites present different versions of commodity naturalism that are more likely to promote values of ecological integration.

In fact, the task of work in the fields of Green Cultural Studies, Environmental Communication, Eco-criticism (and affiliated disciplines) is to present interventions and critical challenges to disrupt many of the negative flows and feedback loops between
these two poles (insomuch as they can be demarcated, but which Soper argues we should try not to lose sight of one for the other while also necessarily blurring them). So, when we seek to revitalize our “humanity” within/through “nature”, and depending on what forms this takes, what might the social implications be? We would do well to keep in mind the extent to which “nature” is that vital category through which we measure, “police,” and question our own human status. Soper (1995) explains:

‘Nature’ may be viewed as a register of changing conceptions as to who qualifies, and why, for full membership of the human community; and thus also to some extent a register of Western civilization’s anxieties and divisions of opinion about its own qualities. . . . What is ‘proper’ to humanity, that is, has been thought in relation to a number of excluded dimensions, of which the ‘primitive,’ the ‘animal,’ the ‘corporeal’ and the ‘feminine’ are the most notable. . . . But this, I shall suggest, is a history of exclusions that reveals a profound uncertainty about the policing exercise itself: a desire to re-find humanity in the very dimensions of being from which it has sought to discriminate itself (pp. 73-74).

Thus the desire for the “primitive,” in its many forms and associational guises, would appear to operate in tandem with the fluctuations in our boundaries of the “human,” operating either to re-inscribe boundaries or to challenge and extend them. The question arises at this point, for me at least, as to whether and what extent the impulse to extend, transgress, transcend, or otherwise push (human) limits is predicated on imaginary (romantic) versus actual (e.g. technological) resources perpetrated by the logic of capital, a question which I will return to later on.

What Soper articulates as a “desire to re-find humanity” calls to mind older theological discourses concerned with salvation, but which starting in the 19th century and now by the 21st century have receded if not altogether vanished, at least from mainstream public culture. This has arguably been replaced by a more generalized human “problem,” secular and atheistic, though I would contend not without recourse to
metaphysical and mythical tropes similar to older theological modes of policing the human. In this vein, White (1978) suggests that the 19th century’s most influential thinkers – Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche – looked for solutions to the recurring question of the “loss” of the “human” in modern civilization (or more specifically, for them, alienated labor, repression of instinct, and artificiality associated with massification respectively, if reductively) exclusively in terms of “the reexamination of the creative forms of human vitality” (ibid, p.179). And, that each resorted not to metaphysical solutions, but to conceptions of a “primal,” “primitive,” or pre-civilized humanity which was variously imagined in the adaptable figure of the “wild man” (ibid). Turning now to the manner in which the “primitive” and its key associations take on particular gendered and racial forms, the ideological role of the “primitive” and the “natural” in policing the “human” perhaps puts it too apolitically, for as suggested already, the discourse’s adaptability has meant that dominant interests (i.e. white patriarchy) determine whether the form it takes is denigrating or ennobling along these lines.

Some of the primary analyses further on, especially when looking at reality television, rely on narratives of the physical trial, quest, or proving ground that appeals as an opportunity to re-access “origins” often in a kind of romantic or nostalgic primitivism. As we will see, when primitivisms are gendered male, they frequently rely on the tropes involving the “male animal,” the “wild man,” or “natural man” (Faludi, 1999; Bordo, 1999; Bederman, 1995, Studlar, 1998). While the “primitive” and “nature” have historically been constructed in close association with the feminine, they have also taken a particular character and coding in terms of a “masculine primitive” (Rotundo, 1987) In general terms, Western thought has equated women with re-production and thus nature,
while men are equated with production and thus culture (Soper, 1995). At certain times, however, cultures of masculinity have seen fit to appropriate signs of nature, often as a defensive reaction against the perceived threats of feminization, alienating forms of labor, over-civilization, and other threats to normative masculinity (Bederman, 1995; Bordo, 1999; Rotundo, 1993). In this respect, the “primitive” has historically served very different social and ideological functions for men than it has for women. Cultural configurations of the “primitive” have, by and large, served primarily to empower white men of European descent while diminishing the status of women, non-Western populations, and people of color. In short, for white men the “masculine primitive” is more often cast as an ennobling ideal, while for most if not all other populations the construct functions through a powerful symbolic “othering” complicit in a long history of racial and sexual prejudice.

Mariana Torgovnik (1990) discusses the gendering of primitivism in the literary work of D.H. Lawrence and his regendering of the primitive between 1913 and 1925. For Lawrence, the feminine primitive involved “degeneration, a cautionary tale for the modern West,” whereas the masculine primitive was “the primitive as regeneration, as the last best hope for the modern West” (ibid, pp. 159-160). The feminine primitive was linked directly to “primitive” societies and death and disease, while the masculine primitive was associated with bodily potential and notions of the “true” self, linked to “a lost awareness of the body” (p. 160). Lawrence’s regendering from a feminine to a masculine primitive occurred in The Plumed Serpent, which grew out of his travels to Mexico and the Southwest. Setting the book in the mythic frontier as place of wildness
where men could regain contact with their true wild “nature” was a common theme in frontier mythology, literature, and western films.

Gaylyn Studlar (1998) similarly links symbolic masculine regeneration in the popular silent westerns of Douglas Fairbank’s to a quality of “nostalgic” primitivism. In films like *The Good Bad Man* (1916), *Wild and Woolly* (1917), and *The Mollycoddle* (1920) Fairbanks plays characters who are “‘mollycoddles,’ men who are soft, squeamish ‘sissies,’ overcivilized, morally passive, physically weak, and, at their worst, thoroughly effeminate” (ibid, pp. 66-67). In Fairbanks’ “athletic centered” films like *The Lamb* (1915) his characters are transformed by physical regeneration through such activities as boxing and Ju-jitsu lessons in order to tap into their “‘primitive, manly instincts’” (ibid, p. 68-69). More often than not these transformations involved traveling to the Western wilderness, the space designated by “character builders” of the progressive era believed man’s “‘natural’ primitive urges could find expression” (ibid).

Race and sexuality are another intertwined, historically troubled, dimension of the “primitive,” that requires attention, especially in terms of their workings as objects of desire, and as supposed resources for regeneration (especially masculine). The coding of the “primitive” along lines of race and sexuality is endemic to the category, especially since the colonial era, within Modernism (in the sense of arts movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries) and through to the present. Bell Hooks (2006/1992), in her oft-cited essay, *Eating the Other*, offers one of the most incisive critiques of the desire for the “primitive” in contemporary culture. She contends that, at the end of the 20th century, desire for the “primitive” becomes especially complicated when greater sensitivity to cultural diversity and an increasingly multicultural social world has fostered within white
“youth” a “desire to move beyond whiteness,” which often manifests itself in the desire to “consume” the dark skinned Other in physical, sexual terms, but also more generally within the wider commodity culture. She explains:

The commercial nexus exploits the culture’s desire (expressed by whites and blacks) to inscribe blackness as “primitive” sign, as wildness, and with it the suggestion that black people have secret access to intense pleasure, particularly pleasures of the body. It is the young black male body that is seen as epitomizing this promise of wildness, of unlimited physical prowess and unbridled eroticism. It was this black body that was most “desired” for its labor in slavery, and it is this body that is most represented in contemporary popular culture as the body to be watched, imitated, desired, possessed (ibid, p. 376).

Hooks contends that this “revival” of desire for the “primitive,” which takes a “postmodern slant,” is not simply about possessing or dominating the Other, but is perhaps more significantly about seeking out a “conversion experience” in order “to be changed in some way by the encounter” (ibid, p. 368). This highlights a general feature of primitivisms, the quest for transformation, revitalization, or redefinition imagined to be found within – or accessed through – consummation with forms of wildness, “primitive” alterity, and “Nature” in general. Hooks also argues that in some of these articulations of desire for the “primitive,” the sex act – fucking – and the quest for transformation through pleasure often becomes the Other, which then conceals or submerges desire’s location in race, ethnicity, and skin color, suggesting the “deep structure” of racism (ibid, p. 367). Hooks focuses on the desire for the “primitive” expressed in white male youth, but argues that the processes of commodifying a symbolic imaginary of primitive alterity works in multiple directions, and is often enacted by members of the historically “othered” groups themselves. For example, black men who use racist tropes identifying the black male “as animal” (ibid, p. 378). This is similar to the notion of the “primitivist perplex” in which marginalized populations strategically “self-other,” self-indigenize, or
self-primitivize; having internalized the colonizer’s view of them, they enact this view of themselves arguably as a (however misguided) “survival strategy” (Prins, 2002).

Ultimately, Hooks resorts to similar terms in order to explain the desires motivating the commodification of otherness: that the fascination with the “primitive,” with special concern here for race and sexuality, has to do with the West’s own “crisis in identity” in which young people especially are “afflicted by the postmodern malaise of alienation, no sense of grounding, no redemptive identity” (ibid, p. 370). The basis of primitivism here once again somewhat hard to pinpoint, sourced to notions of “alienation,” “grounding,” and “redemption” (with echoes of the “salvation” from 19th century discourses), which imply romantic notions of (inner) wholeness and (self) connection to “nature” as the fantasies sustaining primitivist discourses in the popular and commercial culture.

The historical shift to a psychological “primitve” (in the popular sense) invoked here – from an external (anthropological) to an internal “other” – carries particular implications with respect to masculine ideals and gender formation. White (1978) locates this shift from the 19th century to the mid to late 20th century primitivisms:

In modern times, the notion of a “wild man” has become almost exclusively a psychological category rather than an anthropological one . . . What was once thought of as representing a peculiar form of humanity, a pre-social state or a super-social state, as the case might be, has become a category designating those who, for psychological or purely physical reasons, are unable to participate in the life of any society, whether primitive or civilized. In modern times the concept of wildness, when applied to a human group, tends to be conflated with popular notions of psychosis, to be seen as a form of sickness or to reflect a personality malfunction in the individual’s relation to society, rather than as a species variation or ontological differentiation (p. 179).

Once again we see a distinction between the “primitive” as a powerful discourse of “evolutionary distancing,” one which Western civilization has historically used to define
itself and justify the colonial oppression of countless populations, and a socio-psychological primitivism more closely associated with the alienated Western subject’s romantic or nostalgic impulse to re-access their “natural” or untamed selves (Fabian, 1983; Torgovnik, 1990; White, 1978). Further, that primitivism “simply invites men to be themselves, to give vent to their original, natural, but subsequently repressed desires, to throw off the restraints of civilization and thereby enter a kingdom that is naturally theirs” (White, 1978, p. 171). White’s examination of the perdurable “wild man” figure through the course of Western history, whether internal or external in (supposed) origins, highlights a consistency in its uses as a device of fictional or philosophical discourse: its unity lies in its role for thinking the tensions between naturality and artificiality, and varies depending on the moment’s moral anxieties and the interests of its purveyors. In medieval times the “wild man” figure served as a moral sign-post of what to avoid, as the path to damnation; while in the modern era, especially since the 19th century, it has more often served as a tool for the social critique of dehumanization associated with any number of oppressive forces (ibid).

It is important here to make better sense of the “wild man” figure by going beyond its importance as a symbolic resource, and seeking out some of its intersections with concrete social practices and institutions. Borrowing anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s concept of a “double bind” – when subjects receive opposing messages for behavior – Susan Bordo (1999) proffers the existence of a “double bind” of masculinity in which men are torn between acting the “gentleman or beast.” In practical terms, these are the contradictory messages and expectations we impose on boys, telling them to be “animals” or “beasts” in the arena of competition, and civilized gentleman outside those
arenas – part of the enduring if mutable operation of “the male animal as ideology,”
directly associated with modern sporting traditions functioning as a privileged site of
masculine regeneration and recovery (ibid, p. 245). Male animal ideology is a direct
response to anxieties over “the repressive effects of civilization and its softening of men,”
which responds with “fantasies of recovering an unspoiled, primitive masculinity,”
carrying with it “a flood of animal metaphors” (ibid, p.249). The challenges of
successfully negotiating this double bind in practice have very real implications for social
and sexual power relations. Bordo explains that:

[W]e fabulously reward those boys who succeed in our ritual arenas of primitive
potency, and humiliate the boys whose sexual aggression quota doesn’t match up
to those standards. But at the same time, we want male aggression to bow to
civilization when a girl says “no” and to be transformed into tender passion when
she says “yes” (ibid, p. 242).

Bordo sees this double bind enacted and inscribed throughout public culture and media.
In particular she problematizes the “warrior male” of football and boxing, “the primitive
male animal,” citing Joyce Carol Oates’ articulation of this complex, who reminds us that
that, “boxing excessively rewards men for inflicting injury upon one another that, outside
the ring, with less “art,” would be punishable as aggravated assault, or manslaughter”
(ibid, p.236). These displays of aggression excite “because they break with taboos of
civilization, act out the (forbidden) aggression in all of us” (ibid, p.237). The boxer
becomes “conduit for all suppressed aggression, vestigal repository of primal
masculinity” (ibid). Male animal ideology saturates dimensions of the popular imaginary,
helping to structure the production of masculine commodity signs devised around generic
binary tensions between primitive and civilized, wild and tame, gentleman and beast, and
of course, good and evil. So the “wild man” figure as a fictional device can be rationally
understood as part of the wider operation of male animal ideologies. Here I link the challenges of this double bind to the larger ambivalence exhibited throughout history within constructions of the “primitive” (as the symbolic locus for opposing life forces of salvation or damnation, regeneration or degeneration). While at times the symbolic uses of the “primitive” have been more one sided, during the Victorian era of rapid industrialization and urbanization we witness prominent examples of this double bind opening up. For example, Gail Bederman (1995) posits Tarzan in terms of this double bind, the gentleman-beast par excellence (not unlike Fairbank’s The Good Bad Man) who combines “the ultimate in Anglo-Saxon manliness with the most primal masculinity violent yet chivalrous; moral yet passionate” (p. 221). As I will discuss in the later chapters, and as clearly indicated by Bordo, male animal ideology is alive and well, informing social practice and the commodity spectacle.

Thus, the masculine primitive—or the “beast” side of the double bind—is naturalized by competitive sports, mythologized in fiction and literature, and mostly taken as “common sense” in daily life. Ideals of masculinity are systematically produced and reproduced through modern competitive sporting institutions (Connell, 1987). By naturalizing an ideal of masculinity as aggressive in terms of sexual and physical prowess, as primitive nature, innate, inborn, latent, essential, that “boys will be boys,” by extension we naturalize and justify the masculine domination of women. Finally, insomuch as nationality and its projects are gendered masculine, a masculine primitivism can even be seen to undergird hegemonic masculinities and national and cultural hegemonies.
According to R.W. Connell (2005), “masculinities come into existence at particular places and times, and are always subject to change” (p.185). The masculine primitive, then, requires further grounding and qualification here. Anthony Rotundo, who first placed the two terms together, the masculine primitive emerged primarily for white, middle-class men in mid-19th century America as one of three ideal types of manhood (p.36). Citing evidence from written correspondences, literature, speeches (e.g. Theodore Roosevelt, it is a good thing to “make the wolf rise in a man’s heart”), and a variety of other primary historical materials, Rotundo explains that: “Suddenly, natural passions and impulses had become a valued part of man’s character” (p.40). This ideal arose during the convergence of certain historical circumstances. Namely, the dissemination of Darwinian thought (and a concomitant “Social Darwinism” which sought to re-locate understandings of social dynamics in biological terms), widespread rural to urban migrations, a changing sexual division of labor, the introduction of intercollegiate sports, new scientific understandings of the human body and its norms, and last but not least, the emergence of Anthropology – a “science of humanity” circulating new ideas about human origins and cultural diversity based in the study of colonized non-Western populations. This ideal was rooted in a belief that “men – more than women – were primitives in many important ways,” and while the forces of civilization might weaken or conceal this, all men “shared in the same primordial instincts for survival” (Rotundo, p.40). Viewing man as the “master animal” within the natural order, this gendered primitivism emphasized the importance of cultivating a “natural” physical strength and vigor, and the ability to access instincts for survival in the modern world.
Although this masculine ideal has adopted various guises over time, its underlying structures are relatively stable, arguably rooted in a patriarchal masculine impulse towards consolidating definitions of ideal manhood when perceived to be threatened or attenuated. Leo Braudy (2010) maintains that “much of human ritual and social organization” is obsessed with defending clear distinctions between masculinity and femininity, which may suggest “a deep-rooted human (or masculine) fear that they are arbitrary enough to be constantly in danger or erosion or forfeit” (p. xv). So one way to shore up masculinity is to base it in something ostensibly “natural,” biological, ancient, timeless; that is, buried in the deep recesses of a primitive pre-history, which, despite having no literal access to it, is strategically supported by popular naturalistic mythologies and a facile public acceptance of certain components of evolutionary theory. The popular belief in a partial, “lost,” latent, or “inner” masculinity is crucial to understanding any cultural expressions of a masculine primitive ideal. The role of the “primitive” in masculine gender formation, as suggested above, is in aiding the construction of a naturalistic myth of a “real,” “true,” “deep” or essential masculinity – one innately there to be accessed or re-created – rooted in imaginary origins.

Whether it is discussions of “true” masculinity, the “natural man,” “the wildman,” the “deep masculine,” or the “man-the-hunter” thesis, these are all various configurations of primitive masculinity involved in the political project of assigning actual or idealized male behavior to innate, biological, or so-called “natural” origins, and thus rendering it more immune to political critique. And where a “feminine primitive” in cultural discourses has tended to configure women negatively as “victims” of their biological nature as child-bearers, the masculine primitive enacts myths of men, as Leo Braudy
apty explains it, as “free to express their biology, often in elaborate rituals of competition” (2003, p. xv). Historically, notions of “true” masculinity are “tinged with, even steeped in, nostalgia for a lost masculinity,” and that this “powerful form of masculinity is perpetually nostalgic in its judgment and standards” (ibid, p.6). Thus, the “masculine primitive” is merely one name for a cultural discourse observed by social historians to function as a gender norm or ideal, but it is also socially enacted or performed, and thus an agent in our modern gender formations.

While the nineteenth century social conditions factoring into the emergence of the masculine primitive have changed greatly, most have not simply disappeared, but rather intensified, transformed, or become more familiar through a repetition of these cultural tropes in literature, film, and television. Even though social Darwinism is not exactly in favor, it still carries great resonance in popular culture. A “survival of the fittest” mentality has considerable purchase as common sense wisdom. Connell explains that belief in “real men,” “natural man,” and the “deep masculine” are a “strategic part of the modern gender ideology” (2005, p. 45). Along these lines, Kimmel argues that the present-day search for the “deep” masculine is “historically anachronistic, echoing late nineteenth century masculinist complaints against the forces of feminization” (1996, p.332). Thus, even though this particular masculine primitive ideal emerged most prominently over a century ago – one positing men as naturally aggressive and competitive, as “natural” warriors and hunters because of an evolutionary imperative to adapt and survive, where this exemplary form of masculinity is one that can (when called upon) willfully summon the primordial instinct from which man’s physical strength and
vitality flows, and where “true” and “deep” masculinity is possibly imperiled by the feminizing forces of civilization – it is still with us today in modified forms.

And yet I will argue in chapter 4 that, due to the repetition and popular saturation of certain expressive tropes of primitive masculinity, this ideal is increasingly familiar and un-tethered from its earnest 19th century origins, and is thus more available to parody and other forms of critique. However, within what I characterize as the “Man vs.” subgenre of reality television, exists one of the most conspicuous cultural sites for earnest (and reverent) expressions of this form of masculinity, which we might understand as privileged cultural site (but surely not the only one) exhibiting the “willful summoning of past styles of cultural behavior as a way of dealing with the present” (Braudy, 2003, p. 86). While a significant portion of the gender imaginary expressed in contemporary popular cultural production is now much more expansive and diverse, the “Man vs.” subgenre of reality television is part and parcel with historical patterns in which forward looking ideals and values are interwoven with the impulse to, as Braudy puts it, “repeat compulsively an array of archaic gestures from the past” (2003, p. 87). The primary analyses of contemporary primitivisms in chapters 3 and 4 are especially focused on an argument about the more recent ambivalence and evident destabilization of the ideological conviction of present in former masculine primitive complexes. While chapters 5 and 6 turn toward less clearly gendered enunciations of the primitive, masculinity is still in the foreground in discussions of both “arthouse ethnographies” and parkour. The next section shifts towards a related theoretical framework for interpreting various sites of contemporary primitivisms – the notion of the “ethnographic” as a hermeneutic (instead of as a field method) for interrogating the workings of the cross-
cultural gaze underwriting so many of these discourses. The literature reviewed in the next section is especially important for chapter 5’s discussion of an international art film mode of address, but its terms also extend to the sites of analyses in other chapters as well.

**Primitivism and the Cross-Cultural Gaze**

Cultural Anthropology is traditionally defined through its ethnographic project of studying the internal dynamics of more or less discrete social systems. It is necessary to consider how the ethnographic impulse, while formalized and theorized as a field research method within academe, also coincides with the commercial and mass appeal of experiential knowledge of other cultures. The representation of one culture for another – a common, if overly reductive definition of ethnography (Nichols, 1994) – historically has operated along a continuum between science and commerce, with the ambiguous category of “art” mediating between the two extremes. As a distinct field method (participant observation) with associated philosophical and interpretive frameworks specific to anthropology departments in the West, ethnography has classically denoted the interpretation of the non-Western for the Western, or the interpretation of the primitive to the civilized, and in particular for a community of academic practitioners (ibid). The history of complicity of commerce in aiding anthropology’s disciplinary legitimacy in and around the turn of the 20th century is also well documented, involving the problematic legacy of ideals of ethnographic scientism under the auspices of a commercial interest in viewing forms of cultural “otherness” (Griffiths, 2002).

Alison Griffith’s (2002) analyzes this phenomenon in relation to the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, where the “Midway” became one of the first touristic
thoroughfares to explicitly accommodate science (“ethnological concessions” as Griffiths puts it) and entertainment, as “an interstitial space that defied easy categorization, sanctioned by science but designed by commerce, the Midway was the offspring of two very different visions of ethnography: ethnography as scientific research and ethnography as popular attraction” (p. 61). Griffiths’ study, addressing “the enormous public fascination with images of alterity that seemed to permeate turn-of-the-century popular culture” (p. 170), is concerned primarily with mapping the constellation of both popular and “high” cultural imagery that she understands as proto-ethnographic cinematic forms and their associated viewing experiences. She examines “life-groups,” three-dimensional re-creations of indigenous scenes, displayed at the Museum of Natural History, early travelogue films, Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows, and live exhibits of native groups at fairs and expositions all developing a formal language of verisimilitude that lead to the eventual establishment of the early ethnographic film genre. By problematizing the apparent ease with which ethnographic and scientific educational imperatives became conflated with voyeuristic pleasure and entertainment value, Griffith’s study serves as a useful model for examining quasi-ethnographic dynamics found in the contemporary popular imaginary.

Another prominent example of popular, commodified alterity is National Geographic magazine. Lutz and Collin’s (1992) important analysis is a touchstone study for understanding the durable human interest and marketplace for exotic images of different life worlds. As part of an American lineage of commodified imagery of non-western places and peoples in complicity with 19th century imperialism and colonialist projects (both abroad and at home with Native Americans), National Geographic became
the institution par excellence. The industrial revolution and the rise of mass media brought the collapse of space and time, where film, photography, and print could now offer unprecedented levels of (virtual) access the remote cultures and landscapes. These new technologies functioned, as Griffiths (2002) puts it, as an “epistemological mediator between the world of the spectator and that of the subaltern,” in which turn of the century film and photography “functioned as powerful vehicles for the dissemination of racist and colonialist ideology” (p. 249).

Lutz and Collins (1992) are primarily concerned with understanding how National Geographic discursively constructed (in visual and verbal terms) the non-West; or, as they explain, examining “the imaginative spaces that non-Western people occupy and the tropes and stories that organize their existence in Western minds” (p. 2). They also consider the interpretive possibilities prompted by National Geographic, and whether or not these may reinforce “American illusions of cultural superiority and paternalism,” or alternatively, promote “engagement with the subject photographed, an identification across cultural boundaries, the awakening of a curiosity that may be politically invigorating” (ibid, p. 11). National Geographic’s prominence is now diffused if not largely supplanted by peripheral media, and in particular, travel and adventure television. Yet the terms of Lutz and Collins’ analysis are highly relevant to this study, since part of what my undertaking here is to extend theorizations of commodified forms of alterity, and affiliated desires for the “primitive,” by expanding the view to cover new dimensions within the popular imaginary. Chapter 5 of this study, which will consider the notion of the cross-cultural gaze within the context of the international “art” or “festival” film, turns on some important lessons to be learned by National Geographic and the larger
problematic of portraying the life worlds of Others: despite the best intentions of artists, producers, and distributors, “semantic instability” at the point of reception/consumption brings with it the clear possibility of reinforced stereotypes of the former anthropological mode of primitivism.

*National Geographic* has exhibited the tendency historically to portray an image of the native as either out of time, in the past, or as ahistorical. The magazine reflects an ideology of social evolutionism, which:

> [E]ntails a law of progress that allows us to know our past through the present of others, the know the present of others through our own past, and to know their future through our own present. Stages of human social organization are passed on the way to a specific goal—a goal synonymous with the contemporary Western social system. . . . These ideas are hegemonic— in Western textbooks, in American official political discourse, and in *National Geographic* (pp. 239-240).

One of the core challenges Lutz and Collins’ face in their analysis of *National Geographic* is that in representing the “primitive,” there is the dual potential to both attract and repel readers (again, the ambivalence of the “primitive”). Related to this is the central question as to whether the magazine either reinforces stereotypes of native peoples as simple, closer to “nature” (or as more “natural,”) sexualized, “savage,” innately violent or peaceful, or conversely, whether it promotes empathy and identification across cultural boundaries in the service of greater cross-cultural understanding and informed global citizenry. In some cases they found “frame breaking” in which readers place themselves in the picture and imagine their reactions to experiencing a given life world. Ultimately though, they argue that the “imaginary tourism” which the magazine affords readers trades in exotic imagery that inevitably brings hierarchy and cultural “ranking” into play (ibid, p. 276). *National Geographic’s* brand of universal or “classical” humanism in effect argues “that people are basically the
same under the veneer of culture . . . which both denies fundamental differences and reifies the cultural boundary that it depicts” (ibid, p.278).

These cases make clear that, depending on the term’s usage, the “ethnographic” encompasses more than just a field method proper to the human sciences. Rather, it can also be understood as an epistemic standpoint and an interpretive tool for points of cross-cultural contact and border crossing (lines which have admittedly become harder to trace in an increasingly globalized, convergent, and transcultural world). Treating the ethnographic as a hermeneutic for examining feature films, as I do in Chapter 5, is not altogether new. In 1953 Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metraux edited a collection called *The Study of Culture at a Distance*, in which Mead, Metraux, and Gregory Bateson among others, consider the prospects of using feature films as inroads to national and cultural understanding. Of Bateson’s analysis of a Nazi propaganda film, Mead (1953) claims that it “represents an initial effort by a cultural anthropologist to apply anthropological techniques to the examination of a fictional film” (p.302). However, applying an ethnographic lens to feature films is different than claiming certain feature films have an implicitly “ethnographic” function. Chapter 5 proposes that there exists a certain “art film” mode of address that shares certain textual and imagistic affinities with the genre of intentional, or disciplinary ethnographic film and video. In other words, the project of positing “arthouse ethnographies” is to apply the critical discourse of one cinematic genre to another – to one not typically subject to such an analytical lens.

In her important book, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, Fatimah Rony (1996) looks comparatively between feature narrative films and classical “ethnographic” films, arguing for an expanded definition of “ethnographic” as a
hermeneutic, rather than as strictly a field method and mode of writing. She aims to show that so-called “ethnographic film” actually “moves across genres, how it is defined by an incessant movement between science and art, reality and fantasy . . . these films explode the seemingly mutually exclusive boundaries between science, art, and entertainment” (p. 16). Relating to the foregoing discussions of our larger terms, the “primitive” and the “natural,” Rony observes that the representational role of much of the classical modes of visual ethnographicizing is equivalent to dehistoricization (ibid, p.78), which she understands as “taxidermic” and (cultural) “salvage” oriented paradigms of representing others.

While the “ethnographic” has thus never been the exclusive province of anthropologists, the discipline’s “crisis in representation” spurred an active seeking out of alternatives to traditional modes of representing “others.” This has produced stylistic and formal inroads for modes of visual, filmic representation not traditionally associated with the discipline’s field method. Bill Nichols explains the shift:

Ethnographic film no longer occupies a singular niche. Other voices call to us in forms and modes that blur the boundaries and genres that represent distinctions between fiction and documentary, politics and culture, here and there. (Nichols, 1994, p. 64)

Anthropology’s “crisis in representation” turned traditional modes of representing “others” upside down and cleared the way for new approaches, such as, autoethnography, shared anthropology, indigenous media, autobiography, and other representational schemas which are fundamentally organized around the ideals of dismantling power hierarchies of representational authority, myths of scientific objectivity, and also striving to acknowledging the positionality of the speaker/filmmaker. Nancy Lutkehaus and Jenny Cool (1999) address how this “crisis” impacts the visual in anthropology:
This postmodern, postcolonial, and postfeminist erosion of paradigmatic authority posed significant challenges to anthropology – a discipline grounded in the enlightenment project of rationality and objectivity and intimately bound to the history of Western imperialism. . . . Those who take this view would put an end to anthropology’s cross-cultural tradition, arguing that the most valid cultural representations are those made by indigenous ethnographers (or image makers) working in and on their own cultures (pp. 116-117).

Lutkehaus and Cool point to the most recognizable trend in ethnographic film in response to the crisis of representation: “putting the camera into the hands of the proverbial non-Western Other” (ibid, p. 127). However, even this approach has been criticized, since it is unreasonable to assume that simply because one is a member of a group with an emic (i.e. an inside) view that they can accurately represent or speak for the group as a whole (Prins, 2002). Thus much of the issue centers on the representational problem of generalizing about a culture, which inevitably succumbs to degrees of homogenizing and essentializing.

Before anthropologists began passing the camera over, ethnographic film deployed narrative devices common to literature and fiction filmmaking. One thinks, of course, of films like Flaherty’s Nanook of The North (1922), and even more recent work, such as Gardner’s Dead Birds (1965). Reflexivity became one mode of solving the problems of narrativizing and dramatizing subjective historical experiences that may not have been there to begin with, or were superimposed or projected by anthropologists and filmmakers. Jay Ruby (2000) interprets the representational problem in terms of “the literary devices of the passive third person” which effectively “cause statements to appear to be authorless, authoritarian, objective, and hence in keeping with the prevailing positivist/empiricist philosophies of science” (p.155). Reflexivity corrects these problems.
by “making awareness of self public,” acknowledging the position and possible bias of the observer (ibid, p.159).

Thus far we’ve addressed two attempts at mitigating the problems of speaking for or representing “others;” one is to allow them to speak for themselves, the other is to be reflexive so as to acknowledge the constructedness and subjectivities both in front of and behind the camera. Another proposed solution to present here is Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1991) concept of “writing against culture,” a form of what she calls “tactical humanism.” Abu-Lughod argues that the “culture” concept and its discourse of self/other, insider/outsider, is at the root of problems of cultural representation. “Culture,” she explains, “is the essential tool for making other” (ibid, pp. 146-160). Drawing from Edward Said’s call for doing away with “Orient” and “Occident” altogether, and Arjun Appadurai’s contention that “‘natives’ are a figment of the anthropological imagination,” Abu-Lughod advocates for writing “ethnographies of the particular” (ibid). She proposes this approach to avoid generalizations of culture that produce “effects of timelessness and coherence to support the essentialized notions of ‘cultures’ different from ours” (ibid). Of adopting humanist conventions, Abu-Lughod claims:

For those who live “outside” our world . . . we have no discourse of familiarity to counteract the distancing discourses of anthropology and other social sciences. . . . Ethnographies of the particular could provide this discourse of familiarity, a familiarity that the humanist conventions favored by the unprofessional always encouraged (ibid, p. 158).

Abu-Lughod is careful to highlight where humanism goes wrong, but that it may be perhaps preferable to the “anti-humanist’s” “new forms of writing – dialogue, collage, and so forth . . . that ask their readers to adopt sophisticated reading strategies” (ibid).

While “humanism continues to be, in the West, the language of human equality with the
most moral force . . . It is a language with more speakers (and readers), even if it, too, is a local language rather than the universal one it pretends to be” (ibid).

One important problematic here then begs the question, what are the formal terms for drawing distinctions between “ethnographic films,” and films which we might position as “ethnographic,” ethnographicizing, or merely approached interpretively through an anthropological mode of analysis rooted in ethnographic observation and writing? Crawford and Turton’s wonderful edited collection, *Film as Ethnography* (1992) is organized around many of these questions. Marcus Banks (1992), attempting to outline the features that mark off anthropologists from other human observers, poses the question: “Which films are ethnographic films?”

Anthropologists are less intrusive than other visitors (by their participation and linguistic fluency); they tend to ignore the rich, powerful, well-known in favor of obscure corners of obscure countries; they follow action and record masses of data; they are concerned with following the minutiae of daily life, with gossip and apparent trivia; they believe in getting to the heart of things, of moments of revelation; they believe in waiting. It is for these reasons as I wrote above of observational cinema having a mimetic quality and it is thus that the preferred form of ethnographic film is one of the variants of observational cinema (p. 124).

An important link to make at this point is between the art film mode of cinematic address, the “art cinema,” and related designations like “foreign film,” “world” or “global” cinema. David Bordwell’s (1979) well known argument that the “art film” as a generic mode of production with its own set of storytelling conventions and accordant viewing “procedures” points to the “loosening” of the “cause-effect linkage of events” as one of its key features (p. 717). The films under discussion in Chapter 5 share many other “art film” narrative conventions outlined by Bordwell, such as: an emphasis on realism, naturalism, unconventional “plot manipulations,” “authorial expressivity,” “drifting episodic quality,” “maximum ambiguity,” and so on (ibid, pp. 716-721). Banks’
contention that “ethnographic film” is a “variant of observational cinema” links the two genres in terms of representational modality, if not institutional parameters. Still, the art film mode of address, I argue, is often tacitly “ethnographic” or cross-cultural in its inevitable border crossings, which, especially when combined with observational modes of cultural representation organized around principles of realism and naturalism, opens the doors for ideological discourses associated with the “primitive’s” dehistoricizing thrust. I also propose here (but more so in Chapter 5) that more frequently applying an ethnographically informed hermeneutic in certain instances to global cinema circulations can be an important corrective to all too often unexamined values wrapped up in the cross-cultural film viewing.

David Andrews’ (2013) recent book, *Theorizing Art Cinema: Foreign, Cult, Avant-Garde, and Beyond*, provides a very recent case of this sort of conceptual elision. Often, upon discovering a new book on a topic of interest, I look through the table of contents to see if it is asking the questions I want to ask on the subject. To be sure, a book’s index does not necessarily represent well the discussions contained within (never judge a book by its index?), but the subject terms (or lack thereof) can be revealing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there were no entries on: culture, nature, ethnography / ethnographic, other / othering, cross-cultural, alterity, primitive / primitivism, postcolonial, subaltern, multicultural, difference, cosmopolitan(ism), humanism (or liberal), romantic(ism), orientalism, transnational, or traditional, to name the key terms I most often scan for. There were also no entries on: taste, standards, audience, spectatorship, or cultural capital. I did see, however, entries on the “exotic,” “foreign film,” and “class distinction.” Understandably, this reveals as much about Andrews’
disciplinary research orientation as anything else, but also a current reminder that
discipline of film/media studies is arguably not often enough in dialogue with the critical
cultural concerns of anthropology. Apart from a useful (though somewhat dismissive)
discussion on the shift in classificatory terminology from “foreign films” to “world
cinema,” which addresses the “hints of exoticism and neocolonialism that animated
‘foreign films’” (ibid, p. 57), Andrews is apparently little with the politics of representing
cultural “others” which is part and parcel to global mediascapes.

Andrews’ discussion on the shift in classificatory schemes, from “foreign” to
“world” films, presents it as an existing “impasse” in which, despite the update to
“world” “in accord with a more postcolonial climate,” scholars soon found “world” was
also being used ethnocentrically, still functioning in practice as “foreign” did to designate
as “other” any non-Hollywood films (ibid, p. 71). Historically, “foreign film” was a
designation that began after WWII, referring primarily to European films, and was useful
for marketing purposes by effectively “dividing the world into an ‘us’ and a ‘them,’ with
the ‘us’ often identified with English speaking audiences” “and the ‘them’ referring to an
exotic, unfamiliar world that might be interesting for ‘us’ to see” (ibid, p. 68). Here
Andrews draws on Lúcia Nagib’s (2006) critique, “Towards a Positive Definition of
World Cinema,” who argues:

Despite its all-encompassing, democratic vocation, [world cinema] is usually not
employed to mean cinema worldwide. On the contrary, the usual way of defining
it is restrictive and negative, as “non-Hollywood cinema.” Needless to say,
negation here translates a positive intention to turn difference from the dominant
model into a virtue to be recued from an unequal competition. However, it
unwittingly sanctions the American way of looking at the world, in which
Hollywood is the centre and all other cinemas are the periphery (as cited in
Andrews, p. 70).
Andrews (2013) responds, “in all of this, I agree with Nagib,” but then later states that, “because ‘world cinema’ was a classifying tool, it could never be correct in the eyes of film scholars who find classification itself problematic” (pp. 70-71). Andrews agrees with Nagib, but also does not appear to find fault with the term “world cinema” as long as we simply try to look at “global art cinema precisely and with respect for its great diversity,” so as not to “reinforce art-cinema ideology in an exploitative way” (ibid). I agree with Andrews here, who usefully acknowledges some important contours of the problem, explaining that:

> After all, theorists of art cinema cannot simply ignore the value-oriented mechanics of art cinema – for regardless of whether we like it, art cinema relies on (sub)cultural hierarchy everywhere. It cannot exist without aspiration, distinction, and all the value-added details that so often ruffle cultural feathers – and whether scholars use a term in a certain way or not is entirely irrelevant to the ongoing reality of these hierarchical dynamics (ibid).

But even as he invokes the core problems of art-cinema ideology, he offers little in the way of a specific methodological or theoretical solution, and instead ends his discussion with a few more general prescriptions offered on his way to more or less dismissing those who took issue with “world cinema” as a classifier to begin with. He states:

> Thus film scholars faced a choice: they could continue abandoning useful terminological tools in the interest of progressive politics, or they could invent a flexible, respectful, contextualized way out of the impasse that was created and exacerbated by cultural liberalism. This film scholar chose the second option (ibid, p. 72).

The second option proposed here is not altogether clear, nor do the two appear to be mutually exclusive, but this is as much as he addresses the “value-oriented mechanics of art cinema” with respect to questions of difference, “(sub)cultural hierarchy,” and distinction. Andrews’ larger evasions and defensiveness to those (apparently vexing) art cinema scholars more critical of issues of representation across cultural differences,
might be productively taken as evidence of the necessity for greater attention to the
“contextualizing” art cinema.

On addressing the potential problems of art cinema ideology, I would propose
another avenue is to think of it in terms of what Hal Foster (1995; 1996) articulates as the
“ethnographic turn” in the art world at the end of the 20th century. While Foster is
addressing the world of fine art and not cinema when he poses the question, is the artist
now “an ethnographer?” (1995), clear parallels exist between these two realms of cultural
production. In particular, Foster points to the recent ethnographic turn’s reliance
“primitivist fantasy” in which “the other, usually assumed to be of color, has special
access to primary psychic and social processes from which the white subject is somehow
blocked” (ibid, p. 175). Further, that the institutional dynamics through which art works
are commissioned, financed, or in (international) co-production with “the artist as
ethnographer” constitutes, as Foster puts it, acts of “ideological patronage” (ibid). In this
scenario the source of the subversion or political transformation of dominant culture is
located “elsewhere,” “in the ethnographer paradigm, with the cultural other, the
oppressed postcolonial, subaltern, or subcultural” (ibid, p. 173). Thus, films produced and
directed by “local” or indigenous filmmakers that are partially or wholly financed by
outside, Euro-Western entities, as many of the films discussed in Chapter 5 are, implicate
these terms of ideological patronage predicated on cross-cultural consumption and forms
of commodified alterity. This is not confined to the art film world, but is also clearly an
exploitative dimension of the “tele-tourism” (borrowing Henry Jenkin’s term, 2006)
analyzed in Chapter 4 as well.
Without reference to Foster’s notion of an ethnographic turn in which the artist takes on the role of quasi-ethnographer, Lucas Bessire (2003) is arguably interrogates the same type of ideological dynamic in his discussion of the production and reception of *Anatanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001) (Again, one of the limitations of separate disciplines and objects of study not operating in dialogue with each other). Bessire draws comparisons between audience and critical responses to the film with those of Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* produced eighty years earlier (also a depiction of an Inuit life world). He cites similarities in the narrative themes of universalism and a common humanity (read: timeless) across borders invoked by film critics and audiences – implicating the terms of a romantic primitivism – regardless of the identity of the filmmaker (and also points to similar responses in films like *Dances with Wolves*). While *Anatanarjuat* was Inuit produced, written, directed, and acted, the larger institutions and symbolic currency through which it found great success relate to Foster’s concept of ideological patronage, whereby, “if the invoked artist is not perceived as socially and/or culturally other, he or she has but limited access to this transformative alterity, but that if he or she is perceived as other, he or she has automatic access to it” (1996, p. 173).

Bessire describes the dynamic involving a primitivist discourse in both the film’s narrative mode or textuality (observational, docu-drama), and the popular (western) response, as “passing primitivism” (2003, p. 834). Prins’ (2002) idea of the “primitivist perplex” is another way to explain the ambivalent dynamic in which disempowered or marginal populations are encouraged to self-represent, but often end up producing narratives and images which accord with the dominant group’s view of them. As we will see, this notion of self-primitivizing is not confined to indigenous or “tribal” populations,
but can also be extrapolated to other “imagined communities” (borrowing Benedict Anderson’s notion), like national ones, as Chow (1995) proposes of Chinese 5th generation filmmakers. This perplex is one form of a narrative of “self-othering” (Foster, 1995), and while not exclusive the “primitive” and its terms, is an important symbolic resource used in response to desires for distinction, authentication, and individuation.
CHAPTER 3

SPORT

Recourse to the “Primitive” and “Natural” in Sport Studies

The project of writing social histories is by definition concerned with de-naturalizing social phenomena which become codified in popular thought as somehow outside of history. This is ostensibly what Allen Guttmann is attempting when he explains, “sports as we know them today are not the natural, universal, transhistorical physical activity forms they are commonly thought to be, played in roughly the same way by all peoples in all periods of human history” (1979, p.33). Though Guttmann still finds necessary recourse to notions of a socio-psychological strain of primitivism, an atavism, one suggesting buried origins and instincts to be accessed and satisfied through sport, especially with regard to his discussion of football and combat sports. That, although the structure and organization of football has all the hallmarks of modern society – rules, regulations, records – “the emotional function of the game may be primitive, even atavistic” (ibid, p. 125). Football and rugby, for example, are imagined to provide a necessary “outlet to the primitive desire to bang into people” (ibid, p. 130). Or, as Michael Novak proposes in *The Joy of Sports* (1976), these physical forms “announce the continuity between contemporary man and his most ancient ancestors” (p. 85). These points are significant in understanding how a creative marketing imaginary (if not the social historians of sport) regularly perpetuates a belief in sports’ social and emotional function as linked to something “natural, universal, transhistorical,” where discourses of the “primitive” and “natural” become key symbolic resources. Writers attempts to articulate the origins of “modern sport” is always somewhat cautious and necessarily
open-ended, as may be expected for our inability to access the distant recesses of human history (or psyche for that matter); thus much of this discussion often ends up taking an evolutionary or socio-psychological character employing conjectural, primitivistic tropes involving the recurrence of something ancient in the modern. Joyce Carol Oates, for example, engages in a not uncommon form of romantic primitivism in her collection of essays, *On Boxing* (1987). Oates uneasy affection (or at least a personal familiarity, understood partly in terms of her relationship with her father) for pugilism leads her to go to some lengths in attempting to inoculate the reader against this primitivism, explaining that, “because boxing is a story without words, this doesn’t mean it has no text or language, that it is somehow ‘brute,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘inarticulate’” (ibid, p. 11). She is duly respectful of the boxer’s art form as accumulated cultural knowledge, and not “his merely human and animal impulses” (ibid, p. 15). But the conflation of human and animal here is in itself revealing, and later she resorts to language that romantically naturalizes the sport. Boxing, Oates proposes, “inhabits a sacred space predating civilization,” rooted in “man’s greatest passion” for war (ibid, p. 21, 33). These loaded terms fit with a larger male animal ideology in their maneuver of resituating boxing from the realm of culture into the shady discursive terrain of “nature,” and outside of history. Of the boxing spectator, and perhaps in defense of her own complicity as voyeur, Oates contends that, “the instinct to watch others fight and kill is evidently inborn” (p.42). But she deploys this problematic trope most conspicuously when she suggests that, indeed, because of our status as a wealthy, advanced civil society, boxing’s existence (presumably for both participants and spectators here) might be best explained in the desire “not merely to mimic, magically, but to *be* brute, primitive, instinctive, and therefore innocent” (Oates,
p. 43-44). Thus, much like Guttmann, despite attempts elsewhere to avoid naturalizing discursive maneuvers and terms, Oates still clearly resorts to enunciating a romantic primitivism.

I present these particular instances to highlight how two highly influential social historians of sport, and one of our luminary writers, evince caution towards primitivizing tropes of wildness (“primitive” is a dirty word) while simultaneously appearing to need them; or, perhaps these are merely indulged as an expression of frustration for having no other way to explain the supposed “mysteries” of their topic. When this evident impulse, desire, or for whatever reason, an apparently necessary recourse to the “primitive” and “natural” is manifested in the less fettered (by history or politics) commercial realm, combined with the fragmentary and ephemeral digital torrent which now informs sports’ promotional aesthetics, signs of wildness (in tandem with their dualistic counterparts) proliferate to new levels, and possess different qualities than before. While there are a number of other conditions influencing this proliferation, another important element is the emergence of new “lifestyle” sports (e.g. extreme sports) and fitness subcultures (and “crazes”) accompanying the new information economy.

The first case study in this chapter looks at Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), also known as cage fighting. I consider it along several lines, but primarily in terms of a promotional imaginary that draws semiotic resources from an imaginary of the “primitive,” in this instance particularly rooted in a popular social Darwinist impulse to naturalize fighting. This naturalizing discourse can be linked to a lingering “moral panic” surrounding the sport, especially as it expands globally, which also helps us to understand the appropriation of a visual and verbal semiotics of wildness in this cultural context. I
also consider the MMA’s naturalistic myth-themes and narratives, how they turn on symbolic transformations oscillating between dualisms of wild and tame, and the use of strategic self-othering devices. The final section of this chapter extends the discussion from MMA to consider similar questions from the promotional imaginary of sport more generally. Here I propose that a conceptual fragmentation of dualisms is increasingly visible. I tie this, in part, to the confluence of advanced digital imaging technologies, and the proliferation and greater circulation of image repertoires made available by the internet, facilitating more experimental and unfettered play of semiotic fragments. I contend that this has resulted in a more developed techno-primitivistic imaginary (especially in sports advertising), which, if not exactly implicating an entirely new class of semiotic admixtures, does indicate an increasing ease and readiness to blur dualisms between the synthetic and natural, primitive and post-human, within the codes of realism. Thus, I propose understanding these cases as part of a new “dark techné” (Ferrari, 2010) in the promotional imaginary of sports, one more ready to evince a larger sense of the contradiction between market growth and the public’s embrace of commercial sports’ intensifying spectacles, and the simultaneous suspicion and need for distancing from its high-technological transgressions (e.g. P.E.D. scandals) – teleology of technological excess destabilizing the status of the “human.” These cases arguably represent a new, uneasy confluence between a prior techno-primitive imaginary (i.e. gothic, Victorian) with a distinct set of semiotic resources, which are mobilized and admixed in bolder but often strikingly realistic ways, echoing the larger point of this dissertation that semiotic repertoires of the “primitive” are increasingly intermingled with the (high-)technological
and the digitalized – especially as the task of differentiation amidst the ever-expanding signal “noise” in screen worlds grows still taller.

**MMA’s Technological Minimalism and Approximated Reality**

MMA’s overall social trajectory, from its tabooed status as “human cockfighting” towards broader social acceptance, directly informs its promotional imaginary. In perhaps the best analysis of the development of MMA, Van Bottenburg and Heilbron (2006) propose explaining the emergence of MMA as a process of “de-sportizing” traditional martial arts, such as Karate, Ju Jitsu, Tae Kwon Do, Judo, Wrestling, and Boxing, eliminating (or at least reducing) their accompanying rules, regulations, and organizing bodies in order for promoters to produce a more realistic fighting spectacle. After promoters realized the limited market for such an extreme, fringe spectacle of violence, the sport – spearheaded by the UFC promotion – then underwent a (partial) re-sportization, adopting much stricter rules and regulations in order to gain mass-market acceptance. Thus MMA developed from an initial “de-sportizing” of traditional martial arts (“no-holds-barred” fighting) (ibid), through to a “re-sportized” status involving official sanctioning bodies, strict rules and regulations, more mainstream commercial sponsorships, and the most elite levels (i.e. high-tech) of athlete/fighter training and development (Ferrari, 2013). This sport-spectacle also contains a strategic “technological minimalism” (Downey, 2007), and an ontological status as “mixed” (and inter-cultural), comprise its organizing principle – a desire to (re)produce some archaic notion of “real,” “pure,” or “natural” fighting. Thus MMA’s social history and technical development carries disruptive implications for the fences we ensconce demarcating categories of “primitive” and “civilized.” Of interest to this study is the marketing imaginary
underwriting a sport-fighting spectacle perceived to be more “real” or “natural,” and all of the socio-biological or evolutionary notions wrapped up in such popular notions.

The emergence of MMA as a martial art in its own right is rooted in the desire to answer longstanding questions about which “traditional” martial art is most effective in “real” combat. In the decades leading up the emergence of MMA and the UFC, sentiments among traditional martial arts practitioners and instructors revealed a common belief that excessive rules and regulations limited their respective combat forms. There was the sense that “overly tight regulation forced fighting styles too far away from their origins: as exercises for real fighting. A street fight did not stop if someone scored a point or a particular throw was used” (Van Bottenburg and Heilbron, 2007, p. 267). The popular success of martial arts films narrativizing this question beforehand (e.g. Bloodsport, 1988) may have played some part in the original conception of the UFC by a PPV (Pay Per View) executive and a movie producer. MMA was – at least as incarnated (and not codified) by the UFC – born in the commercial imperatives of televised spectacle. Van Bottenburg and Heilbron (Citing Elias, 1971) link the history of sportization the “civilizing process,” requiring the “pacification of everyday life” where physical violence is permitted only in socially sanctioned forms (2006, p. 263). The success of the civilizing process demands physical violence is rendered socially, even morally, reprehensible, with modern sport comprising one important cultural exception (often understood as a “release” valve for “primitive” impulses and instincts, as Guttman and Oates’ earlier point suggest). If the link between the sportization of physical combat and the civilizing process is accepted, it follows that MMA’s initial de-sportizing involved, in some sense, a regression from the social values of civil society, encouraging
a socio-psychological marketing imaginary rooted in its appeal via signs of wildness, where the symbolic boundaries between human/animal, civilized/primitive, culture/nature, and wild/tame are strategically breached. Additionally, Masucci and Butryn’s (2013) recent finding – that newspaper coverage of the UFC (formed in 1993) has often been characterized by “moral panic” – also supports this view.

The visual spectacle of an MMA fight is also integral to encouraging a myth of the “real” or “natural.” The image of minimally clothed men (and now with increasing visibility women too) punching, kicking, and grappling on the ground to the point of either submission or unconsciousness surely suggests a pre-modern, animalistic struggle for survival. After all, one principle way humans are distinguished from animals, Turner points out, is our need to “cover nature (genitals) with culture (the loin cloth)” (2008, pp. 5-6). Yet as Downey (2007) argues, drawing from Marcel Mauss (1973), one should not “assume that the (nearly) naked human body is not already a technological artifact, shaped by cultural training techniques and subject to social dynamics” (p. 203). That is to say, despite outward appearances – those leading to its now famous labeling by John McCain as “human cockfighting”– MMA is “more technically sophisticated than instinctually savage” (Downey, 2007, p. 202). Downey’s argument is that MMA has worked to create “the closest approximation of ‘real’ fighting permitted under the law” but that it is not “real” or “natural” in any absolute sense (2007, p. 206). That the categories of the “natural” and the “real” are “suspicious” to Downey reinforces the necessity of critical inquiries into how these myths manifest themselves not only in MMA, but other areas of cultural production (p. 207). Yet it is worth pointing out the extent to which these highly equivocal categories necessarily frame such an analysis to
begin with, as the operative discursive construct offered up by the popular commercial imaginary as a foil for Downey to argue against.

MMA’s realism extends from its technological minimalism, the minimization of cultural artifice in its sport-form (e.g. small gloves) that may inhibit “real” or “natural” fighting. It is worth examining this principle a bit further here. Technological minimalism in this instance means that MMA is intentionally less mediated by gear or other artificially introduced technical apparatuses that would mitigate the diversity of available fighting styles, but that help also in determining the (graphic) qualities of the spectacle.

For example, the cage is not in itself more “natural” than the boxing “ring” per se, but it is at least partly in place to allow for a wider range of martial arts, in particular grappling forms (e.g. jujitsu, judo, wrestling), which a traditional boxing ring does not account for in its strategy of containment. In boxing, for example, fighters are coached to “cut off the ring” using more technical footwork and movement to gain a strategic advantage through the ring’s rectilinearity. While certain fighting styles benefit from a cage, it is still a form of artificial containment, and quite significantly here, one with powerful symbolic associations implicating the categories of wild vs. tame (or domestic). However, some fighters and commentators have expressed frustration with the now institutionalized format of three 5-minute rounds (or 5 rounds for title fights) since, in a “real” fight, there would be no rounds. Incorporating a one minute rest between rounds allows fighters to recover, extending the amount of damage they can incur and inflict, extending the duration and enhancing the overall potential for violent spectacle, a choice clearly rooted in business imperatives and not the dictates of what constitutes “reality” Still, approximated “reality” is more than sufficient for the UFC to use the tagline, “as real as it
gets.” This realism arguably makes MMA more susceptible, or available, if you will, to a
the mobilization of symbolic resources for suggesting itself a cultural practices that
promises access to something ancient or original to our human “nature.

**Sporting Nature(s) in MMA**

Masucci and Butryn (2013) contend that a key dimension still largely missing
from the scholarly work on MMA are analyses of its media representations, including
assessments of the social implications associated with the UFC’s successful branding and
*commodification* of violence. While most modern sports exist as a social context for
transcending or escaping the mundane through forms of symbolic-ideological experience,
I make the case here that MMA’s particular sport form, its cultural origins, and the
contested conditions of its social emergence combine to produce a distinctive symbolic
economy of masculine regeneration through appeals to nature and wildness. One sees t-
shirts, logos, and multi-media incorporating fragmentary plant and animal features, such
as wings, thorns, fangs, eyes, claws, and horns. Formally speaking, at times these images
work within the codes of realism, aiming for verisimilitude, while at other times they are
more figurative. Images from both ends of these poles also interact within the same visual
text or composition. But more broadly, they all involve a strategic semiotics of self-
othering as a lifestyle or identity marker involved in a process of both social
individuation / distinction, as well as a community by affiliation. Evident in MMA
culture is the desire to “other” oneself through appeals to wildness, but also signs of the
artificial and technological operating in a dialectical tension; depending on the
configuration of symbolic resources, I argue, as I do elsewhere in this dissertation, that
the terms of this “othering” might be productively understood along these lines:
transgression or regression of the social/civilized imagined in terms of the “primitive” and “natural”; and/or a (metaphysical/spiritual) transcendence vis-à-vis the body/corporeal. The body is here is understood as a techno-primitive (i.e. both “nature” and “culture”) complex or condition, which, as I discuss further on, is uniquely bound to the institutional history of MMA as a distinct social practice.

When “nature” is deployed in visual forms in order to generate associations between masculine-centered combat culture and notions of the “natural,” violence and aggression are symbolically authorized or naturalized. The cultural concepts of “nature” and the “primitive” on display in MMA (and sport in general) are an under-examined site in which narratives of acceptable human behavior are put forth; where the symbolic meanings of images are incorporated into value systems, and worldviews are directly affected. Consider several initial examples. Frankie Edgar, a popular UFC (The Ultimate Fighting Championship) lightweight, enters the arena for UFC 112 in Abu Dhabi wearing an Affliction brand t-shirt featuring elaborate blue wings extending from his chest over his shoulder and down to his mid-back (Figure - ). The wings are arranged on the shirt roughly corresponding to the wearer’s physiology – where wings might fall on a human – suggesting a theriomorphic (i.e. human-to-animal, rather than anthropomorphic, animal-to-human) metamorphosis. In the image, depicting Edgar reacting just moments after beating B.J. Penn for the lightweight title, we see the t-shirt, and below this on his shorts are a Venum brand logo featuring the stylized figure of a snake with exposed fangs.
As another example, consider versions of both the Strikeforce and UFC logos, configured graphically as two outstretched wings flanking a large “S”, and two gloved hands protruding under the brand name, with blood splatter anchoring the background (Figure). This logo would be displayed in television advertisements, worn on clothing, and emblazoned at different locations during events.
A cursory internet search for MMA logos and apparel, or at a site FighterStyle.com, reveal this profusion of fragmented nature imagery. And while nature symbols are certainly not the only type of imagery on display here, their visibility through repetition and ideological function(s) warrants further examination.

The pattern within this discursive dimension of MMA’s visual culture is for nature imagery to be represented in fragments rather than wholes, depicted as central or framing visual motifs within the graphic design of logos, apparel, and advertisements. It is worth noting here that, in these instances, animal and plant imagery stand in not as individuals or wholes, but as “species representatives,” functioning as “shorthand symbols” for human values (Corbett, 2006, p. 207; Hansen, 2010 p.138). The iconic elements of animals (and plants to a lesser extent) signify defense and aggression mechanisms in the natural world, combined in expressive ways with other graphic elements, and of course, a brand name.

Julia Corbett (2006) poses the question, “When do wildlife make the news?” They do, she submits, “either when someone is making claims about them, or when the boundaries (symbolic or real) between humans and wild animals overlap” (p. 204). The advertisements and images analyzed in this section are just such cases of blurred symbolic boundaries between humans and animals (or culture vs. nature), yet ones which did not make the news. Tapout’s (an MMA apparel company) television commercial “Eye of the Storm” (2008) capitalizes on a popular socio-psychological imaginary of the male inner “animal,” the eye configured as window to the immeasurable, unknowable potential prowess lurking within (Figure). In visual terms, the commercial positions the
viewer in a first-person perspective across the cage from a fighter, bobbing and weaving in slow motion towards the camera, fists raised in attack readiness. As we converge with the fighter, moving gradually from long-shot to extreme close-up, the view closes in rapidly onto a single eye. From here the framing is static, but the human eye actively transmogrifies through a sequence of four distinct types of animal eyes, and then with a satellite view of a swirling “eye” of a hurricane in perfect graphic match over the eye. The final image cuts back out again to medium close-up in order to show the Tapout brand MMA gloves.

Figure 6: Tapout MMA advertisement, “Eye of the Storm,” screen captures

In the “Eye of the Storm” commercial, human physiognomy is not attached to an animal (anthropomorphically), rather animal qualities are attached to a human (theriomorphically). The commercial represents an explicit theriomorphis, a wilding, animalizing – or re-naturalizing – impulse that lies behind so many of the brand’s t-shirt graphics and the types of symbolic iconography they mobilize. To seamlessly
superimpose photo-realistic images of animal eyes on a human face blurs the human-animal distinction and activates a far-reaching ideological discourse of humanity vs. nature. These images have the function not only of assigning the natural world with certain meanings, but in reflecting entrenched cultural beliefs of our own relationship to nature. Moreover, “Eye of the Storm” is one example signaling a new stage of techno-primitive enunciations, facilitated by digital technologies, but also a wider untethering of the “primitive’s” symbolic repertoire in the information age.

And yet, the “primitive’s” (arguably) older, social evolutionary valences might be in the background for the human sciences, but they are still regularly activated, as in ads like this. “Eye of the Storm” represents an admixture of symbolic resources mobilized to romantically “other” hypermasculinity in terms of both an animal and a racialized other, invoking the specter of a long and dubious historical pattern of the white Western male’s reliance on, and desire for, “primitive alterity,” through which to (re)define their masculinity against (Hooks, 2009/1992). These are historical discourses invoking a lost “primitive” prehistory as a means of critiquing a supposed present condition of over-civilization, which have been complicit in supporting white supremacy and maintaining hegemonic masculinity (Bederman, 1995).

The postmodern discourse of the “primitive,” and by extension “nature,” is largely detached from grounded (geographic) cultural populations “out there,” but is now instead, recalling Torgovnik, “a grab bag primitive” (1990, p.37). In the case of the Tapout commercial, the “primitive” is put to use in suggesting a male “animal” and inner (read socio-psychological) wildness as something to be “tapped” or “unleashed”. That wildness, aggression, and violence are part of our “nature,” are “natural,” yet also
mysterious, unknowable, and in the realm of metaphysics. It is not surprising then, that in discussions of fighters, and athletes in general, there is always talk of one’s “heart” or “spirit.” “Nature” stands in for the unquantifiable or imaginary dimension of human (athletic) performance. When so much of modern sport has become quantification through excessive statistics, historicizing (i.e. temporalizing) canons of great athletes/moments/events, and high-tech enhancement (i.e. P.E.D.’s, equipment, spectator viewing ecologies), “nature” stands in for what cannot be measured or quantified.

The UFC now attracts large corporate sponsors, such as Bud Light, Harley Davidson, and Burger King, to name a few of the more ubiquitous sponsors. Beyond these, a host of brands selling gear and fan apparel have emerged, most notably: Tap Out, Bad Boy, Affliction, Venum, Dethrone, Xtreme Couture, Hayabusa, and Form, to name a few. All of these brands produce MMA imagery in the form of graphic design and advertisements, and they are displayed perhaps most prominently on t-shirts during fighters’ ritualized pre-fight walk to the cage, in post-fight interviews, press conferences, weigh-ins, and related media. The MMA t-shirt – often produced as part of a sponsorship deal for fighters, but available for purchase by anyone – might be the most common social performative marker of MMA fan identification. The choice to wear, or “sport” fragmented “nature” is part of the same symbolic imaginary expressed in the Tapout commercial, but qualitatively different in being an embodied (i.e. worn) tableau. T-shirts operate in material culture where its images work within the context of social relations; it operates as “a sign vehicle whose functions not only express selves, but the social and political fields in which it exists” (Cullum-Swan & Manning, 1994, p. 417).
In wearing an MMA t-shirt with thorn, wings, fangs, or animal eyes, one is, in a sense, self-primitivising or self-othering, and possibly expressing a common-sense notion of themselves on a continuum with other animals in nature, not categorically separate. Some are less fragmentary and suggest the “male animal” more openly, like the Hayabusa shirt produced for popular UFC fighter Forest Griffin (See Figure).

Figure 7: Hayabusa t-shirt for Forrest Griffin

This recalls the distinction between a “naturalist” view, which views the distinction between human and animal as a continuum, and a “culturalist” view which sees the
difference as absolute, rooted in the symbolic capacity of humans (Soper, 1995, p. 81). According to some environmentalists (see Chapter 1) a naturalist perspective is something to be encouraged to promote greater ecological (self) integration and awareness. This brings us to an overarching question I will return to towards the end: does MMA’s type of appeals to wildness promote a kind of naturalist stance in individuals? This also calls to mind the crucial distinction between, on the one hand, invoking “nature” as a metaphysical (or spiritual) concept for thinking the “human;” or, on the other hand, as a “realist” concept referring to the (actual) natural world. Or as Soper defines the latter, “the structures, processes, and causal powers that are constantly operative within the physical world” (Soper, 2000, p.125). Insomuch as MMA’s self-othering mobilizes a kind of mythic transcendence of “nature” (i.e. metaphysical) over realist discourses, some might argue for increasing the potential to promote unsustainable human-ecological relationships, such as through the violence and aggression of combat / war.

An MMA t-shirt can also productively be considered as an analogue to the myriad tattoos “worn” by fighters. The t-shirts are often graphically similar to fighters’ tattoos, and with fighters as commonly tattooed as not, the t-shirt’s visual iconography affords the fan greater symbolic vicinity to fighters’ specific version of corporeality or embodiment. Consider the graphic similarities between Edgar’s Affliction t-shirt (Figure) and the back tattoos of other UFC fighters Benson Henderson and Max Holloway (see Figure). The MMA fan is thus enabled to ascribe or overlay themselves with a similar set of naturalizing signs and symbols others often inscribe directly into their flesh. Recalling another discussion on the use of “nature as backdrop” in commodities (Corbett, 2007),
Similar to the manner in which an SUV advertisement offers a the “vehicle” as a way to reconnect with the “wild” from a position of relative safety, the t-shirt might be thought to offer the MMA fan access to a vicarious corporeal re-wilding through the safety of the t-shirt as kind of second skin. That is, a t-shirt is easier to take off than a tattoo.

Figure 8: Tattoos of Max Holloway (top) and Benson Henderson (bottom)

Yet the MMA t-shirt affords a different use and function for nature imagery than the more common, “nature as backdrop” mode commonly used in advertisements. One way to understand this difference is through Panofsky’s (1982) distinction between “open” versus “disguised” symbolism (as cited in Van Leeuwen, 2001). Open symbolism
occurs when the visual motif is not represented naturalistically, or is decontextualized, as in the case of an MMA t-shirt relying on an expressive, graphic amalgam of motifs drawing direct visual analogies between the wearer and the “natural” world. Disguised symbolism, on the other hand, is when a visual motif is represented naturalistically, following laws of realism or verisimilitude. A typical “nature as backdrop” ad, such as the SUV or pharmaceutical advertisement, elides the symbolic role of “nature” or environment in its narrative by appearing incidental or merely contextual, and is thus more likely to be disguised to the uncritical viewer. A brand like Tapout, while also selling utilitarian MMA gear, specializes in selling t-shirts whose primary use value is to confer a form of symbolic capital via distinction / alterity, of an ideological and lifestyle value connoting both physical aggression and defensiveness. As a part of the larger capitalistic spectacle of commodified “nature,” MMA’s construction of it is quite distinct from the predominant nature as backdrop format. While the SUV promises access to the wild/wilderness, it does not necessarily promise access to an inner wildness, inner animal, or romanticized origin state(s) associated with an ideal masculine primitive.

What does the coupling of nature imagery with modern sport–our predominant cultural sites of socially sanctioned aggression–accomplish symbolically and rhetorically? Using GCS’ critical imperative of examining representational “nature” for impacts upon material (i.e. actual) nature as a guide, what human values do nature/naturalizing images in sports advertisements (taking the MMA t-shirt as, in effect, also an advertisement) promote, and to what potential ends? This marketing imaginary appears to be in alignment with popular or common sense notions of human aggression and violence as “natural,” and also that it operates in response to consumer desires to
access or somehow consummate this knowledge. It is less a question of whether aggression is indeed innate, but rather, to more fully appreciate what symbolic or discursive regimes the marketing imaginary is operating through. To be naturalized is “to be separated from (historic) events meaningful to mankind” (Fabian, 1983, p.13). Thus to posit the human body, its power and prowess, within the timeless domain of “nature,” as these visual discourses imply, is arguably to naturalize it. Grace Jantzen points out that, “in the discourses of modernity, aggression has been taken as “natural,” an innate feature of what it is to be human” (2002, p. 5). Countering this naturalization, Jantzen argues that (drawing on Bourdieu) violence has “colonized our habitus,” and through prevailing Western “master narratives”, be they theological (original sin), psychological (death drive), biological (testosterone), or political (competition, resources), they “render it theoretically inevitable and practically repeated” (ibid, pp. 5-8). The naturalizing imagery in MMA (and the wider sports imaginary) can also be understood in terms of such master narratives – as reinforcing a habitus of violence. In fact, biological evidence alone for male aggression is by no means conclusive, and studies even suggest that the social pressures related to cultural definitions and social narratives of ideal masculinity are more closely linked (behaviorally) with male aggression (see Kimmel, 2000, for a detailed synthesis of this research). Jantzen (2002) argues that most of the dominant western narratives (or “master discourses”), and as I attempted to tease out in the literature of sport, reductively assume rather than prove that human violence is intrinsic, instinctive, or simply human nature. In the process these narratives continually naturalize violence, and thus society is held in the “grip of a dominant symbolic system without bringing it to critical scrutiny” (Jantzen, p. 6).
And yet we might still see this signs of wildness through tattoos and t-shirts and other ascriptions of the “primitive” as more complicated. Theriomorphic wing tattoos (see figure) for example suggest either a biological wilding or a theological/mythological one (as in angel’s wings). That is, symbolic transformation may not be signified in this instance via regression “as nature,” so much as transcendence from it. And there are still other techno-primitive configurations that serve to wild the male body, not through “nature” necessarily but through “machine” techne. UFC fighter Kid Yamamoto’s biomechanical tattoo is one such example (see figure). Both tattoos, however, whether through collapsing human and animal, human and divinity, human and machine, operate through the terms of a techno-primitivism, itself functioning variously as wider system of authentication through (self) othering / alterity. And the techno-primitive, unlike nostalgic modes of primitive regeneration, involves as much a metaphysics of the machine as it does of man as nature.
The owner of Bear Essential Combat MMA gym, Bear St. Clair, articulates a related popular belief when he claims: “it’s a primordial thing, and if you get down to the basic instinctual thing of what we are, we are animals. Combat and territory and superiority and genetic selection and survival is ingrained in every single last one of us” (as cited in Mayeda, 2008, p. 122). MMA’s promotional imaginary exploits naturalistic / naturalizing mythologies, suggesting the sport’s ambiguous social status, but also its historical lineage to myths of spiritual (masculine) regeneration via “nature.” Myth, we recall, tends to be found where “social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality, and sanctity” (Malinowski, p.107). Or, more simply, when we want “transform history into nature” (Barthes, 1957, p.129). In other words, we can do this
because it has always been done – it is “natural.” I’d like to further consider here, for the specific context of MMA, what Varda Burstyn (1999) aptly labels the “symbolic-ideological experience” (p.24) of modern sport.

One style of symbolic transformation in MMA is suggested through fighters’ nicknames. Fighters are often metaphorically substituted by – and at times, metonymically associated with – wild nature or other aspects of our imaginary of primordial origins. For example, there is Randy “The Natural” Couture, Anderson “The Spider” Silva, Andrei “The Pitbull” Arlovski, Dan “The Beast” Severn, Ben “Manimal” Wall, Dave “The Caveman” Rickels, or Derrick “The Black Beast” Lewis (See Figure), to name a few. In some sense these need to be understood as part of fighters’ overall branding and self-promotion strategy, much like professional wrestling. This is clear in some of the more tongue-in-cheek cases, like Dave Rickels, who uses props and costumes to aid the transformation (See Figure). Yet for others it appears that, given the actual seriousness of earning a living by fighting in a cage, these symbolic ascriptions are treated more seriously than in something like professional wrestling. (See Figure).

Animals, beasts, and other natural phenomena are common motifs in mythological traditions. In this respect, Dorothy Norman (1969) argues that heroes are frequently revealed/made through their triumphant confrontation with animals (natural and supernatural), but also transformed, where the figure bonds, merges, or acquires some of the animal’s powers (pp. 56-58). That is, defeating “nature” then allows the hero to wear the beast in some expressive manner. Thus fighters and fans alike “sport” these symbolic “natures” in a number of different ways (Ferrari, 2013). Burstyn (1999), in
making the argument that sport be seen as “secular sacrament,” posits the athlete as “the living mythic symbol bearer” (p. 18)

Figure 11: Dave “The Caveman” Rickels, Bellator MMA (screen capture)

Figure 12: Derrick “The Black Beast” Lewis, twitter homepage (screen capture)
This popular imaginary extends to other key parts within the wider cultural arena of MMA. There is the journalist who characterizes the fighter as a “wild man” (Walshaw, p.50). “Animals MMA” identifies one martial arts academy in Yonkers, NY, with a banner inviting you to “join the pack!” There is the iconography of the cage (as suggested earlier), literal and symbolic container for wildness, and technological mediator of wild nature. Accompanying the cage, there are many reflexive body performances and rituals invoking wild “nature.” For example, there is Quinton Jackson’s trademark wolf howl while wearing an oversized chain-link around his neck. B.J. Penn licks his gloves after a victory, as a cat might clean its paws. Rashad Evans and Jon Jones’ have a ritual of crawling into the cage on all fours (See Figure #). All signify an affinity with wild nature.
Symbolic transformations in MMA are enacted through a promotional imaginary that manipulates binaries symbolically in the manner typical of myth. Such mythmaking encourages perceptions and categorizations of difference, from good to bad, human to superhuman, natural to supernatural, human to animal (i.e. non-human), secular to sacred (Burstyn, 1999). While all modern sports arguably supply society with a powerful
“strategy for regeneration and renewal” (Mrozek, 1985, p. 26) through their marketing and myth-making, MMA more openly condenses and expresses many of these principle binaries in its promotional imaginary. Myths in all cultures “are crucial in defining what is natural, normal, and legitimate” (Burstyn, 1999, p. 22). And yet, somewhat paradoxically, the transgression of such socially constructed parameters of the “natural” and “normal” also become integral to strategies of self re-creation, regeneration, transcendence, even salvation (Soper, 1995).

Soper (1995) articulates the socio-historical processes for defining the “human” as a series of “exclusions.” She explains, “what is proper to humanity (…) has been thought in relation to a number of excluded dimensions, of which the ‘primitive’, the animal, the corporeal, are the most notable” (1995, p. 74). And yet, as mentioned earlier, these excluded dimensions become the fertile ground upon which people seek spiritual regeneration:

Civilized thinking no sooner constructed its own ‘humanity’ by way of a contrast with wild bestiality and primitive savagery than it discovers within the excluded domain of the ‘natural’ its own intrinsic nobility. . . nature has served both as a conceptual tool through which humanity thinks its difference from the rest of animality and as an assertion of its communality with it (Soper, 1995, pp. 78-81).

Most significant for consideration here for MMA is myth’s dual purpose of justifying and rejecting society, for myth articulates the basis of civilization, but also the supposed dangers in too much of it. The “primitive” serves as a tool in MMA discourse for rejecting social norms and building myths of origins for human violence.

Barthes (1957) points out that the “knowledge contained in a mythical concept” – as in hero forms, for example – “is often confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations” (p.119). But it is still possible and instructive here to delineate some of
MMA’s different “styles of heroic masculinity” (Burstyn, 1999, p. 36), for example, along the lines of race and class. Consider the case of former UFC middleweight champion Rich Franklin who fits the style of middle-class hero. Before Franklin became champion he was, as one journalist put it, “a mild mannered high school math teacher” whose “life would have amounted to nothing more than PTA meetings and grading papers” (Anderson, 2010, para. 2). Another explains how Franklin “pulls off the Clark Kent outside the cage, Superman inside” (Dure, 2010, para. 7). Or, simply, “Rich Franklin, former math teacher – current badass” (Childs, 2009). The general fascination with Franklin’s story, the “nice guy teacher turned MMA fighter” (McClintock, 2011), is nearly always expressed through good/bad, nice/mean, domestic/wild, gentleman/beast binaries. In Franklin’s symbolic transformation, as with many fighters whose personal backgrounds seem generally incommensurate with their status as cage fighters, there are clear echoes of myths where heroic masculinity is revealed through a confrontation with the wild/nature –through the challenge of being forced from a domesticated (tame) occupation to a wild one (e.g. hunting, survival, combat) (Womack, 2003, pp 190-191).

Franklin exemplifies a type of MMA heroism where being “intelligent”, and having “civilized” skills is a remarkable and hero-structuring dynamic when opposed to the wild/natural imaginary of cage fighting. This heroic style, involving adaptability and interchangeability between realms tame and wild, is evident with many other fighters. Shane Carwin, a UFC heavyweight, is almost always depicted through his dual identity as civil engineer and fighter, and a related pattern is evident when commentators and journalists commonly highlight fighters with higher education degrees.
These transformations echo one of the most common myth-themes, “the quest,” in which the hero leaves his everyday (civilized) life under the threat of some natural or man-made calamity (Slotkin, 1973). According to Slotkin, this is perhaps the most important of American myths, in which the hero mediates “between civilization and savagery,” and is fundamentally a “lover of the spirit of the wilderness, and his acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit and her avatars” but also bring about his “initiation into a new life or higher state of being or manhood” (pp. 21-22). Not surprisingly, this theme is also at the root of the western genre’s mythic impulses.

Another heroic style is linked to working class and military ideals. This style is less associated with intelligence or technologies of civilization, but instead expressed along “the carnal plane” of muscularity, physical bravery and sacrifice (Burstyn, 1999, p.37). Notable examples here might include: Clay “The Carpenter” Guida, former union framer; Forrest Griffin, former Police Officer; and Brian Stann, former U.S. Marine and Silver Star recipient. Fighters transformed in this style are more likely to be characterized through more ambiguous metaphysical, romantic categorizations, in terms of their “heart,” “spirit,” and “will” rather than in terms of intelligence, technique, or strategy. In discussions of fighters in general, though, there is often talk of one’s “heart” or “spirit.” A metaphysical construction of “nature” substitutes here for the unquantifiable, ineffable, or imaginary dimensions of human physical potential. When so much of modern sport has become quantification through statistics, historicizing (i.e. temporalizing) canons, and high-tech enhancement (i.e. P.E.D.’s, equipment, spectator viewing ecologies), “nature”
stands in for human potentialities and what cannot be measured or quantified, becoming a crucial part of the symbolic-ideological experience for athletes and fans (Ferrari, 2009).

However, with styles of heroic transformation based in naturalistic myth, there is an associated possibility for symbolic incarnation as the beast, bad boy, wild man, monster (i.e. psycho-path), and related terms complicit in social myth-making associated with a wider “male animal ideology” (Bordo, 1999). Often these myth-images and artifacts are used for positive idealization, but also occasionally for negative attribution and symbolic othering. For example, Clay Guida’s fighter prowess is partly substantiated, in his own words, as a “blue-collar work ethic” (i.e. hard work, sacrifice) (as cited in Lee, 2010), but is transformed by UFC commentator Joe Rogan in terms of socio-psychological forms of wildness. Rogan says of Guida (and Diego Sanchez), “you couldn’t ask for two more psychotic dudes to fight each other –this is a dog fight man” (Rogan, 2009). Rogan often labels the fighter a “wild man” (especially those who tend towards “brawling” over the implementation of a strategic “game plan” and calculated technique), a designation that, as White (1978) explains, “in modern times the notion of the Wildman has become a psychological category rather than an anthropological one. Wildness now tends to be conflated with notions of psychosis” (pp. 178-179).

Other fighters inspire distinct combinations of heroic forms and symbolic transformation. Anderson “The Spider” Silva is known to wear masks, literally and symbolically (Wayne, 2011). Silva manages to encompass the myth of (super-human) “artist,” predatory (non-human) animal, and debased fantastical creature (sub-human). Silva, one of MMA’s best pound-for-pound fighters, is often elevated to “artist-as-hero” status. In accordance with a key heroic principle ascribed to great artists – the successful
mastering and then strategic flouting of an art’s standard forms and conventions – Silva has effectively transcended his medium, thus aiding in fans and spectators’ spiritual “revivification” (Norman, 1969). One journalist, invoking several contrasting forms of MMA symbolic transformation, claims Silva “is not some sociopath committing acts of violence in a locked cage for money. He is an artist who creates his work live and under the most hostile circumstances possible” (Rios, 2013, para 6). Another writer describes Silva’s performances as “a living art installment” (Hunt, 2013, para 13), while also constructing the fighter through analogy to a wild predator relying on “his superior reactionary skills and general prowess before finishing off his prey” (para 10). So when Silva was improbably defeated for the first time in over six years, his style of flouting rudimentary principles of striking defense, occasionally viewed as a sign of “disrespect” for his opponents, but also comprising his main “artistic” tactic – the “clowning” and “showboating” by which he lured opponents into his counter-striking style – he went from hero to hero-buffoon, from god to “troll.” Icarus burnt by the sun. One journalist exclaims of the loss: “Silva is also a straight-out troll. He has more ways to show he’s bored by or disdainful of an opponent than most of his rivals have techniques” (Marchman, 2013, para. 2). But, “Silva had finally trolled too hard” (Marchman, 2013, para. 16). Using trolls – as one creature of myth understood as “nature-beings,” associated with darkness, as “human-like” but not fully human (Lindow, 1978) – has problematic racial implications, and stands as another significant example from a wider naturalistic symbolic imaginary associated with MMA.

Thus, symbolic transformation in MMA often negotiates the more socially ubiquitous heroic styles in configuration with naturalistic myths that rely on constructed
“nature” in terms of ‘primitivity’ and wildness. We see in these myth-narratives variations on the hero quest involving the hunt (a direct confrontation with the wild), where variations involve, on the one hand, the possibility for spiritual regeneration, and on the other hand moral danger through the attenuation of humanness. As Slotkin (1973) explains it: “Through the ordeal and discipline of the hunt and its culmination in violence, the hero has achieved a regeneration of the spirit . . .” (p.551). However, by becoming “assimilated” to the wild, the hero “runs grave moral risks:” “He may partake so much of the flesh of wild, hunted things that he becomes like them” (ibid, p. 552).

Delving further into MMA’s range of naturalistic myth-artifacts and images further reveals this ambivalence between the hero’s potential for spiritual regeneration or salvation by merging with “nature,” and their potential for becoming too much the “beast,” involving socio-biologically inflected notions of latent animality.

**Myths of Natural Process**

The casual, biological determinist worldview expressed by Bear St. Clair earlier underwrites MMA’s socio-psychological imaginary, as it does more generally for popular social Darwinist modes of interpreting human behavior. Certainly the most high profile purveyor of this naturalistic mythology is UFC president Dana White, who proclaims: “Fighting – I don’t care what color you are, or what language you speak, or what country you live it, we’re all human beings and fighting’s in our DNA. We get it and we like it” (as cited in Martin, 2010, para 7). MMA’s commercial viability may not depend on this popular belief, but its marketing and promotional imaginary certainly benefits from creatively communicating it. For example, primitivism’s “backwards looking habit of mind” is evident in one of the UFC’s recent commercials for *The Ultimate Fighter 15*
reality TV show (TUF). Playing on the well-known “March of Progress” scientific illustrations, a linear visual depiction compressing millions of years of human development, *Evolution* (Zuffa, 2012) depicts the progress from ape, to cave man with a club, to the final image of a modern day MMA fighter in the cage (Figure ).

![Figure 16: “Evolution,” promotional trailer for TUF 15 (screen captures)](image)

Or, take for instance the trailer for *The DNA of GSP* (2013), a documentary on UFC fighter Georges St. Pierre (Figure #). The film’s topic is introduced by cross-cutting between slow-motion footage of GSP fighting in the cage, with that of two wolves fighting, accompanied by a voice-over stating: “for the wolf, it’s live or die, and for us in the ring, it’s live or die” (Svatek & Manchester, 2013).
MMA’s imaginary of wildness is also evident in the names of its television programs, like *UFC Unleashed*, or Bellator MMA’s *Fight Master*. And in the names and marketing imagery of myriad MMA schools, such as the “New Breed” academy, with a cobra in its logo; “Predator MMA”; “Evolve MMA”; “Tiger MMA”; “Wolflair MMA” (See Figure). The fighters themselves often qualify the ineffable aspects of their own martial prowess by deploying naturalistic myth-artifacts. Johnny Hendrix explains how he goes into “beast mode” (as cited in Daniels, 2013) during fights. Forest Griffin says of the basis of his will to fight: “That’s just the way I am. I’m just a dog” (as cited in Borchardt, 2013). Vitor Belfort announces that his next opponent, Luke Rockhold, will be “fighting a lion” in the cage (as cited in Hall, 2013).
Our relationship to animals is established and perpetuated through master narratives dating back to classical Western thought and literature. One important sense of the “primitive,” Torgovnik explains, “begins with the discontinuities separating human bodies, animals, and inanimate things – and seeks to bridge the gap” (1997, p. 7).
Animals are capable of embodying desirable qualities, such as power, strength, speed, bravery, and spirit (Magdoff & Barnett, 1989). Hence their common use in advertisements, from cars to sports teams. Animals are thought to have been the first subjects in painting, and possibly even the first metaphor (Berger, 2009). John Berger locates the human desire to look at animals in their position at the “intercession between man and his origins” (ibid, p. 253). Animals serve as a central value concept, often configured symbolically in opposition to “the social institutions which strip man of his natural essence and imprison him” (ibid, p. 257). We use animals and nature symbolically to communicate human values, and while people tend not to take them (too) literally, they still have the discursive function of naturalizing certain kinds of behavior, and elevating those capable of successfully performing it into the realm of the mythic and timeless.

Masculinist cultural appropriations of “nature” and the “primitive” are often a defensive reaction against the perceived threats of feminization, alienated labor, over-civilization, and related challenges to hegemonic masculinity (Bederman, 1995; Bordo, 1999; Rotundo, 1993). The “masculine primitive” (Rotundo, 1993) – or what Susan Bordo (1999) labels “male animal ideology” and “primal masculinity” – creates a problematic “double bind” between social expectations of wildness and civility, a particular challenge for young men to safely achieve and regulate. The “double bind” of masculinity – the contradictory messages we impose on boys telling them to be “animals” or “beasts” in sport and competition, yet civilized gentleman outside those arenas – is associated with “the male animal as ideology” (Bordo, 1999, p. 245). Bordo links this ideology directly to modern organized sports, seen as a direct response to anxiety over “the repressive effects of civilization and its softening of men,” which responds with
“fantasies of recovering an unspoiled, primitive masculinity,” and carries with it “a flood of animal metaphors” (Bordo, 1999, p.249).

One of the more contested issues surrounding the study of social mythologies is whether their narratives, artifacts, and images more often serve as a cultural means to explain and celebrate natural phenomena (i.e. scientific or empirical realities), or instead to rationalize, justify, and naturalize particular social (e.g. economic) interests and ideals. Social myths, of course, rely on language, with which we can effectively “create nature” (Evernden). Regarding this conundrum, Everden (1992) asks a crucial question: “If our use of language has allowed us to conflate social norms and nature, then what might we be obscuring? Are we destined to always mistake our cultural norms for ‘nature’” (p.27)?

There is still a great deal of ambiguity and disagreement on the question of the innateness of human aggression and violence. Famed sociobiologist E.O. Wilson (1996) submits that while many species, including humans, “are capable of a rich, graduated repertoire of aggressive actions,” what is most determining is “the environment: frequent intense display and escalated fighting are adaptive responses to certain kinds of social stress” (p.88). It should be no surprise then that MMA promotional narratives often embellish certain kinds of social stressors, like manufactured personal attacks (e.g. “trash talk”), or providing for family members, where often no other motivation is offered except that the opponent is taking money from their pocket, food from their table. In fact, questions surrounding fighter pay, potential fighter unions, and the troubling –though by no means unprecedented– financial logic of the UFC’s contract and pay structure are coming under increasing critical scrutiny lately. And, as noted earlier, the biological evidence alone “cannot be used to justify extreme forms of aggression, bloody drama, or
violent competitive sports practiced by man” (ibid, p. 88). That is, what genes “prescribe” for certain is only “the capacity to develop certain behaviors and . . . the tendency to develop them in various specified environments,” but not specific human behaviors like aggression (ibid, p.89). And while the human “urge to affiliate with other forms of life,” positively or negatively, “is to some degree innate” –and even that a genetic bias towards aggression is evident, especially in males– there is no conclusive evidence that “it constitutes a drive searching for an outlet” (ibid, pp. 7, 87). Rather, our social environment, its institutions and sanctioning mythologies, (re)produces a “naturalistic fallacy,” one “which uncritically concludes that what is, should be” (Wilson, p. 93).

Institutions of masculinist cultural (re)production, especially those focused on physical violence, are responsible for perpetuating such popular notions. McBride (1995) finds that “male territorial games” – a designation perfectly suited to MMA, though not a sport he addresses specifically – in fact produce and legitimize the mythical origins of their own violence:

As the ground on which a masculinist culture is renewed, male territorial games are the reenactment of an originary violence which establishes the parameters of the patriarchal order. The practice of male territorial games produces its antecedent, creates the memory that founds the present on a legitimized past. It is a reinscription of a founding violence, of a violence that founds itself, which is legitimated precisely because of its iterability. The violence of male territorial games is justified, not because it has always been that way, but rather it has always been that way because it is so now (pp. 110-111).

**Spiritual Regeneration and Market Logic**

Sport, Burstyn (1999) explains, is “remarkable for its ability to express two apparently contradictory sets of qualities: on the one hand, modernity, abstraction, efficiency, science, concept, and mind; on the other, the past, archaism, worship, emotionality, sex, and the body” (p. 21). This chapter has focused more on the latter, but
future research would benefit from developing a synthesis of the two interrelated poles of MMA – the interdependent forward and backward-looking public discourses.

In this vein, future scholarly work on MMA might also consider how the UFC’s forward-looking global expansion (one might call it a “territorial business game”) has given MMA a bright future as a socially legitimate (though not socially uncontested) global sport, but with the aid of a backwards-looking rationalization and naturalization of its originary violence based in a naturalistic fallacy. Arguably MMA promoters like Dana White have benefited from the symbols and rituals that help enact a mythic sanctioning of their violent commodity, giving MMA (and associated forms of violence) its own version of primeval origins rooted in human biology. It makes sense then that the U.S. Marines formed a promotional partnership with the UFC, with military combat increasingly harder to romanticize (read “sell”) in its frightening state of high-tech distancing and associated cowardice (e.g. drone warfare), MMA’s naturalistic mythologies, and glorification of an old-world style of one-on-one dueling between “warriors,” are an ennobling symbolic association to buy into.

Yet, as Eliade (1963) argues, myths not only explain and describe origins, they also function to provide spiritual renewal and rebirth. I would ask in these instances where myth and metaphor purportedly describe natural phenomena or processes (violence, aggression, combat), where does this leave traditional martial arts’ holistic, spiritual, and eco-centric ideals? That is, how well does the current MMA marketplace discourse fit with martial arts’ traditional ideals, which are often thought to help people “become more moral, more non-violent, more peaceful, and less aggressive” (Becker, p.20)? It is well established that many traditional Asian martial arts took direct inspiration
from nature, most notably in the imitation of animal movements, a legacy still preserved in the names of moves (and entire styles) in Kung Fu, Tai Chi, and Karate. Traditional martial arts are intertwined with holistic, eco-centric philosophies thought to foster self-awareness of one’s place and interconnectedness within the natural world. According to Becker (1982), martial arts “are held to confer on the practitioner a sort of wisdom or knowledge of the processes, nature, and flow of the universe, with which the martial arts are said to harmonize the practitioner’s own actions” (1982, p.24). MMA’s promotional imaginary, as I’ve sketched here, points to how the nature-spirituality dimensions of such ancient practices have been translated and transformed within the contemporary Euro-Western marketplace. But does MMA’s growth justify the hope that more people will be influenced by traditional martial arts’ eco-centric ideals or spiritualism?

Some fighters are known to meditate in nature, like UFC star Jon Jones who has a preflight ritual of “finding some running water” outside and drawing power from its “limitlessness” (Wildmind Meditation, 2011; Levaux, 2012). Some fighters have recently participated in public campaigns for PETA, like Jake Shields’ leading role in the organization’s video game, “Cage Fight: Knock Out Animal Abuse” (Simon, 2013). Peta’s campaign posters are revealing in how fighters’ social status can be used to promote eco-centric ideals because of a symbolic vicinity to wild nature (and at least in part due to their celebrity), as social-symbolic mediators between the tame and the wild, civilized and primitive. One poster states: “I’m living proof that you can run further, train harder, and pack a meaner punch without eating animals. I’m Jake Shields, and I’m a vegetarian” (PETA2, 2010) (Figure).
In a separate campaign, fighters Norman Wessels and Tito Ortiz speak up against the circus and dogfighting (respectively): “I choose to be in the ring, animals don’t. Boycott the circus. Leave wild animals where they belong –in the wild” (PETA2, n.d.). A poster with fighter Richard Quan proposes tattooing as an alternative to wearing animals skins: “Ink not Mink: Be comfortable in your own skin, and let animals keep theirs” (PETA Asia-Pacific, 2012).
While other athletes and celebrities have participated in similar PETA campaigns (especially in the wake of the Michael Vick dogfighting scandal), the recruitment of MMA fighters benefits both MMA and PETA in distinct ways. Participation (humane)izes the fighter (cage fighters can be vegetarians?) by contrasting them with wild nature, highlighting fighters’ individualism (choice, free-will, subordination of instinct), and might even aid in improving the sports’ overall social status. While for...
PETA, the fighters’ symbolic affinity to forms of (socio-psychological) wildness undermines the “human” in those people who would act contrary to the campaign’s values. On yet another register, fighters as symbolic intermediaries between the wild and tame might be thought to have special knowledge of, and access to, wildness, having triumphed in their confrontation with the wild through the (symbolic) quest or hunt, and thus (as is the general operation of social mythologies) lending credibility to the campaign’s moral policing and social construction of the “human.” So, finally, shall we take the view that MMA cultivated its own mythic promotional imaginary out of social need, to benefit fighters and fans, to provide a form of human revivification or spiritual regeneration? Or, does the specificity of these naturalistic mythologies, their relationship to a specific sport form, favor the view that MMA’s still tenuous social status requires the undergirding of myth to continue its rapid economic growth? Either way, MMA stands as a distinct cultural site for the (re)production of myths and narratives which articulate human-on-human violence as inevitable – as merely “human nature.”

**Techno-Primitivism and Sports Advertising**

This techno-primitivism is not confined to MMA, but extends in revealing ways to other dimensions of the wider imaginary of commercial sports. Viewing this wider context is important in making sense of how the use of constructed versions of “nature” are rhetorically distinct in the desire and commodity use value they imply. I locate this in a crucial distinction between the wider use of “nature as backdrop” (Corbett, 2006) in advertising and promotional discourses, and rhetorical appeals to “nature” as the thing in-itself for sale. That is, sports is much more likely to draw on signs of wildness as a semiotic resource, not merely as a backdrop to lend value through association or context,
but as integrally sutured to the commodity sign/form itself. I present several examples in this section which help clarify this distinction. For example, the commercials – “Alter Ego” and “For Warriors Only” – made for Nike’s line of “Pro Combat Apparel,” function symbolically to problematize the merger of artificial tools and technologies with the natural technical means of the body (See Figure). These commercials present a highly ambivalent view of the convergence of high-tech gear (the synthetic) with the body’s “natural” (technical) means. This is accomplished by visually constructing the elite athlete to embody a version of “primitive alterity” or otherness utilizing digital technologies in more seamlessly blending the signs of synthetic and the natural.

Additionally, as suggested at the outset of this study, I contend that the promotional imaginary of sport reflected in this section constitutes one of the most important commercial site for comprehending techno-primitivism for the information age.

In Nike’s “Alter Ego” commercial, Minnesota Viking running back Adrian Peterson’s skin is monstrously inscribed (through digital overlay) with the pattern of the Pro Combat apparel worn under his uniform (Figure #). The image is a striking digital fusion of the artificial and the “natural,” or the technological and the human, and the message is just that – technology so similar to nature that the boundaries are blurred. If we did not first see the “deflex” pattern of the Pro Combat protective padding on Peterson, the mirrored pattern on his skin would otherwise register as a kind of reptilian armor. The image of Peterson registers as a human-nonhuman hybrid species. Football as a visual spectacle, much like MMA (though for different reasons), lends itself to primitivism’s organizing conceptual tension of people looking back to origins to understand their present and potential future. Guttmann affirms this, explaining that football “announces
the continuity between contemporary man and his most ancient ancestors;” and in a virtual echo of the commercial’s images, football’s “elaborate gear seems to emphasize both the primitive and the futuristic” (1978 p.125). It is not surprising then that the commercial enacts a tone of otherworldliness typical of the science fiction genre.

The commercial’s mise-en-scene has a deep, inky, gothic tone with snow falling on the field of play that, as rendered in high contrast black and white, might as well be ashes from the apocalypse. Elite athletes glorified here as subjects on the margins of humanity, pushing the limits of human potential in institutions that turn on apparently primal mode of embodiment. This encompasses a lot things, but here especially the fetishism of (Nike’s) technology, the breathing of life into “dead” technology so it becomes more than its mere instrumentality or functional logic (high-tech underwear in this instance). Always in tension in this scenario is the dystopian view of nature’s technology as irrational, dark, monstrous, Frankensteinian, animal, libidinal, and in some sense alive, versus the utopian views of technology as rational, light, functional, contained and controllable, or comfortably “dead” (Rutsky, 1999).
The commercial’s title is more appropriate and revealing than one might initially imagine. “Alter” is the Latin root of alterity, or “otherness,” which implicates the “primitive” as the category par excellence for constructing cultural otherness. “Primitive alterity,” Kurasawa explains, “has been pivotal in the process of Western modernity’s constitution,” and its primary role in the “symbolic domination” of others (Kurasawa, 2002, p.3). The “Ego” in “Alter Ego” points towards an internalized/inner wild “other,” understood historically in relation to the shifting of primitivism’s focus from the anthropological subject, out there in space and time, to the socio-psychological primitivism associated with modern alienation, the repressive complexes of the civilizing
process, and a desire to reclaim one’s buried inner “nature” (White, 1985). “Alter Ego” can still, however, be seen to invoke the racial, colonialist primitivism that some have argued is now a thing of the past (Di Leonardo, 1998; Torgovnik, 1990; Kurusawa, 2004). The advertisement employs a somewhat disguised symbolism of “nature” as primitivity through an image of animal-techné skin on a black body. The image and narrative together function as a glorifying and aggrandizing masculine primitive, implicating a wider 20th century “return of wildness” (Kurasawa, 2002), in this case manifested as sports advertisings’ response to a consumer desire to engage in a male animal ideology. Yet at the same time as “Alter Ego” is glorifying via a masculine techno-primitive rooted in physical prowess and domination, it also evokes a dystopian questioning of the dangers of unfettered technological improvements of “natural” human performance. We see this ambivalence reflected in another Nike commercial for Pro Combat Apparel, “For Warriors Only.”

“For Warrior’s Only” articulates more explicit or open symbolic analogies between “natural” and “human,” animal and athlete, than “Alter Ego,” but reflects a similar ideological imaginary. Where “Alter Ego” uses sophisticated digital compositing techniques to realistically render human skin into the form of a Nike product, “Warriors Only” uses rapid cross-cutting between images of nature and athletes to generate associative meanings about technology’s place in enhancing our natural physical endowments – about the increasingly apparent ambivalence we feel with respect to performance enhancement technologies and their dual status as natural and artificial (Figure #).
The commercial begins with a rapid-fire cascade of still images that later constitute the climax of the commercial. The images flash at such a fast rate as to only allow the most minimal visual registration. These include masks and headwear functioning as a cultural mimesis of nature; the masks mimic a scorpion, a Venus fly trap, and a gazelle. Next we witness a slower but still rapid sequence through a series of professional athletes putting on Nike pro combat apparel in a stark, non-descript concrete industrial corridor. Following this literal “gearing up,” a sequence of rapid cuts shows the athletes enacting the physical forms and motions typical of their sports, baseball and football. Next images of the athletes enacting their kinesthetic forms are intercut with images of the athletes with masks, without them, and then with actual images of a scorpion, Venus fly trap, and a gazelle. The sequence also includes one athlete wearing a head piece made of barbed wire, associated with containment, defensiveness, and danger,
which does appear to be given any juxtaposition to a nature image unlike the other masks. The barbed wire does, however, like the other nature motifs, reference thorns, fitting into a category of “nature as threat” (Hansen, 2010).

The visual analogy made by the athletes wearing masks resembling an actual referent in the natural world can be understood as the athletes acquiring, or accessing, a similar order of “natural” physical endowment as the wild species being depicted. That they are viewed putting on their Nike apparel before acquiring an order of prowess equal to the natural world suggests the synthetic or cultural mediator (i.e. the apparel) as the source of enhanced powers. In other words, Nike is fetishizing its products through direct associations with the forces of “nature.” Again, this case stands as a quite open visual analogy of human to nature, whereas the more common use of “nature as backdrop” in advertisements functions in a disguised or contextual manner. This tendency for deploying more open “nature” symbolism in the social arena of sports is significant, indicating that the marketing imaginary for sports constructs “nature” quite differently than other commodity forms. Consider another example from Nike, the “Hypervenom” line of soccer sneakers and cleats (See image #). That is, the sports marketing imaginary on display here employs nature imagery in ways that express a more vexed or uneasy questioning of our human status, physical potentials, and perhaps even a sense of estrangement from “true” or “whole” selves vis a vis the aspirational technologies of sport.
Figure 22: Nike “Hypervenom” web ad (screen capture)

We see this dynamic at work in a range of product advertisements where access to an idealized, nature-inspired prowess and predation is the predominant commodity sign, this also the promised reward/”use” of product ownership. That is, the confluence of the high-tech and the “primitive” becomes the commodity form insomuch as this is constructed / consumed as sign.

Consider another example: the recent trend of barefoot running, for which a number of barefoot-like shoes are being produced. In contrast to the SUV ad (see Chapter 2) that utilizes deep focus shots and sweeping views of expansive nature, a New Balance print ad for its “Barefoot-inspired Minimus Zero” line of running shoes depicts nature at the ground level, in shallow focus, precisely where the shoe’s soles strike the ground. “Like Barefoot, Only Better,” the ads proclaims (See Figures). While both examples of
“nature as backdrop” advertisements are selling the promise to provide a particular kind of access or escape to “nature,” one works through providing high-tech empowerment to access “nature” while safely distanced and protected from it in the comfort of the SUV’s domesticated interior. While, on the other hand, the shoe utilizes an appeal to nature through the (relative) minimization of (shoe) technology, enhancing nature (the foot) just enough so as not to lose “connection” with it. The technological minimalism of the “barefoot” running shoe in these ads also suggests through digital augmentation / overlay that the power to connect with wild nature is the power to realize our own natural “forces” (i.e. the pink flash of energy at the “connection” with the earth), and this is accomplished through limiting our (im)mediation with it. This is similar to MMA’s promotional imaginary rooted in a technological minimalism, although in this case gendered marketing in terms of the feminine.

Figure 23: New Balance “Minimus,” “Like Barefoot Only Better” ad (screen capture)
Figure 24: New Balance “Minumus,” “Connect More With Minimus” ad (screen capture)
The irony of the Minimus shoe and its advertising logic is unmistakable though: Run the “natural” way, like our ancestors must have, but use the most recent shoe technology to do it. “Like Barefoot, Only Better.” Or, we might also say, “Like Nature, Only not.” The distinction between how these two ads use “nature” rhetorically in similar yet different ways becomes important when, further on, we consider the distinct manner
in which “nature” often functions semiotically “as primitivity” in certain forms of cultural production. “Nature” is more likely to function rhetorically “as primitivity” when it is valued as a challenge one might seek out (for example, with the help of running shoes). Where the Minimus shoe buyer wants a product to strategically minimize the technological mediation of their (re)encounter with “nature,” the SUV buyer is arguably responding to a qualitatively different desire—to hyper-mediate the encounter with “nature” to the extent of dominating the landscape. In this latter instance, the goal is to avoid the challenge of nature, while simultaneously extending and expanding the fundamental, or “natural,” human necessity of mobility. In the SUV add, “nature” is not the thing in itself for sale, exactly, but is a symbol giving the product greater meaning through association. While with sports gear presented here, often “nature” is not only at the heart of the commodity sign, but also becomes the use value and commodity form itself. People are buying into an idea of accessing their own “nature,” in which the marketing industry is appealing to the notion and promise of wholeness via imagined prowess and idealized embodiment, something perpetrated by the larger capitalist commodity spectacle.
CHAPTER 4

TELEVISION

Reality TV’s Parodies and Pieties for The Masculine Primitive

In recent years, reality television has become an important site for projecting a cultural vision of masculinity defined by idealizations of man’s struggle against nature. We might call it the “Man vs.” subgenre, one that privileges the articulation of a socio-historical gender ideal known as the “masculine primitive,” (Rotundo, 1987) operating under the broader umbrellas of “travel and adventure” and “animals and nature” reality television. This grouping of shows relies most centrally on the spectacle of male bodies mobilized in outdoor spaces dealing with themes of survival, isolation, and forms of “primitive” contact, labor, or performance; of challenging the boundaries and habits of those bodies in extreme, exotic, and threatening places and situations; of escaping the modern socially disciplined body to one more “natural” or untamed by contriving survival scenarios which subject it to challenging environmental elements, plants and animals, climate extremes, sometimes “native” peoples and sometimes one another. I am referring to programs like Survivorman, Man vs. Wild, Dual Survival, Going Tribal, Tribal Life, Last One Standing, Man vs. Monster, Yukon Men, Extreme Survival Alaska, Man Woman Wild, Wildboyz, and Mountain Men, a few of the more obvious examples spanning the last ten years. I argue that this generic grouping, and the performances herein, exhibit characteristics similar to the historical “masculine primitive” ideal that emerged in mid-19th century America amidst rapid industrialization and urbanization, and is fundamentally rooted in a deep reverence for wild nature as the sacred space of masculine regeneration in the modern age. Unlike the techno-primitivism in sport
discussed in the previous chapter, this cultural site invokes the “primitive,” in different
terms, implicating certain competencies and knowledge perceived to be outmoded and
unnecessary in modern life. Thus I choose to place these shows in dialogue with a
historical gender ideal from a moment when these concerns began to manifest themselves
more readily in popular discourses, coinciding with a shift to a more urban industrial
economy from a rural agrarian one. In terms of larger patterns of uneven geographical
development, this moment in the American context (early to mid-19th century) might be
seen as a comparable in some senses to the cultural response to the nostalgic primitivism
evident in some East and Southeast Asian cinemas (discussed in Chapter 6), national
contexts which have undergone a much more recent industrializing process (Chow,
1995). Although in this instance (reality tv), the “primitive,” is encoded in terms of a
particularly masculine atavism.

As a brief introduction, consider the depiction of masculine primitive ideals in
Mountain Men (History Channel). The cast of social actors is established in terms of a
pious belief in ancient, outmoded ways of life associated with wild “nature” and living
apart from civilization (in time and space). As Eustice Conway explains, “These mountains are my life. This land is my life. I live it, live with it, breath it. I live like people have lived for hundreds of thousands of years.” Or Marty Meierotto, who says, “I’m a man who has to be in nature because that’s the only place I feel like I’m whole.” Rich Lews exclaims, “I’m not a people person. I’m not gonna conform to society” (“Into the Wild, 2013). Mountain Men’s opening voice-over establishes its cast in terms of isolation and confrontation with wild nature, but also as a threatened group faced with rarefied daily obstacles: “America’s mountains are a natural barrier. Here, man’s ambition collides with the ultimate power of nature. Some men seek to live here, beyond the bounds of civilization. They fight to survive, battling ruthless predators. And relying on ancient skills, to feed, clothe, and sustain their families. The last of their kind, they are… Mountain Men” (2013). Finally, the titles alone for the show’s “web exclusives” suggest an array of masculine primitive values: “A Dying Breed,” “Hard Living,” “Facing Danger,” “Skills to Pass On,” “Loving the Wild,” “Self-Reliance,” “Alone in the Wild,” “Country vs. City,” “Man vs. Bear” (2013). And yet, within the “Man vs.” subgenre – or perhaps just standing alongside it in mimetic play – there are, as I will discuss, significant contradictions and disruptions of the ideal articulated through forms of de-mythologizing parody.

This chapter examines the discursive boundaries and limitations of masculine primitive ideals by examining both their “pieties and parodies” across several key shows. In doing so, I posit this socio-historical ideal – and its related terms – as a fruitful, if
under-theorized basis for generically organizing and interpreting a particular vein of reality television production and its ideological implications for contemporary gender formation. I first present an analysis their earnest, reverent expression of these ideals in *Man vs. Wild*, (with *Survivorman* an important inter-text) *Dual Survival*, and *Man Woman Wild*, which are then set against parodies of the “travel and adventure” and “animals and nature” subgenres. *Wildboyz* and other pertinent examples are posited as “tricksters” exposing the authoritative ideological construction of primitive masculinities as exemplary forms. I also propose several explanations for the apparent surge in production of “Man vs.” themed programs.

**“Born” Survivors**

For Bear Grylls, the ex-British Special Forces survival expert and host of *Man vs. Wild* (or *Born Survivor: Bear Grylls* in the UK, 2006-2011), his show’s dramatic staging of an ostensibly one man vs. nature survival narrative provoked its own separate man vs. society narrative when it was revealed that certain survival sequences were staged, and the show’s “born” survivor even slept in hotels at night, and not on location as suggested. Apparently viewers took the show’s title(s) and stated premise too literally, expecting an authentic picture of one man’s battle to survive in true wilderness isolation over a continuous period of days. The term “wild” signifies location, geography, but more importantly for reality television producers, it signifies danger and the opportunity to sell dramatic risk-taking. Perhaps the most common role of “nature” in western cultural narratives lies in its qualities to test humans, wherein “nature” enables conflict in the form of a bodily threat or challenge (Hansen, 2010). Quite often, these “tests” function as a means to demonstrate an exemplary masculinity through physical prowess (stamina,
endurance, toughness, aggression), but also knowledge and technical expertise. The masculine primitive ideal in programs like *Man vs. Wild*, *Survivorman*, *Dual Survival*, and *Man Woman Wild* is expressed in the physical performance of survival prowess. But, a successful performance is contingent on the authenticity of the test—a real threat to survival through true wilderness isolation. And, as the public controversy surrounding *Man vs. Wild* appears to suggest, the sufficiency of wildness as a test of manhood lies in the conditions of one’s isolation within it.

Each episode of *Man vs. Wild* begins with Grylls parachuting into some exotic location with only a few items to help him “survive” (usually a knife and canteen, but with some variation depending on the specific location and survival scenario). Dropping in from the sky is just one of the show’s gimmicks for enhancing the impression of wilderness isolation, a formal device making it easier for the viewer to sympathize with Grylls’s test. A related device is to only depict Grylls alone. We never see him receiving any kind of support or aid from the camera crew. Additionally, the sense of duration is manipulated such that this self-proclaimed “real life Robinson Crusoe” (qtd. in Kelly & Greenhill, 2007) appears to be out in the elements continuously for full days and nights. Working in the codes of realism, these formal devices establish and intensify the sense of Grylls’s isolation and wilderness hardships.

Grylls’s survival performances emphasize his (supposed) embodiment of a masculine primitive ideal. Many of the “tests” wild nature offers Grylls, as we will see, would merely be outdoor “recreation” were it not for exigencies of the show’s “survival” format. Given the dramatic conceit of dropping into the wild with a few essentials, Grylls is reliably compelled to demonstrate pre-modern methods of survival. In one episode,
before descending a rock face, he exclaims, “I’m going to try to attempt this without any ropes or any other modern rock climbing aid” (Grylls, 2007). Grylls often cites the influence of indigenous populations from the each episode’s specific region, taking on some of their symbolic status (as “closer to nature,” and thus a strategic symbolic othering by association). Grylls explains, “This area was once home to many native Americans. I’m using some of their survival techniques to turn this driftwood into a raft” (ibid). After citing some gruesome statistics on whitewater rafting deaths on the river over the last thirty years, Grylls undertakes the challenge without modern aids, and as is typical, highlights the physical toll on his body. He says, “My knees are taking a real pounding here” (ibid). In addition to depicting Grylls’s physical durability, this “true” survivor is also successful in the hunt – shown tracking, killing, cleaning, cooking, and eating small game – and is more than willing to consume a host of wild plants and insects (like grubs, an excellent source of protein), highlighting the often sensational grotesqueries requisite of pre-modern survival methods. Through these performances, Grylls becomes a symbolic intermediary between civilization and the wild. He is, after all, a “born” survivor – it is in his (biological) “nature.” So when it was revealed that, during the show’s filming, he was actually sleeping in hotels at night, controversy ensued.

One of the show’s producers divulged that some scenes were artificially staged or enhanced when, for example, a smoke machine was used to exaggerate the extent of poisonous gas from a volcano Grylls traversed (Daily Mail, 2007). Another example is the “wild” bronco Grylls attempted to lasso in one episode, the horse later revealed to be on hire from a local trainer (Kelly & Greenhill, 2007). Producers responded to the
criticisms by re-editing some episodes and issuing a statement claiming all future episodes would be “100% transparent,” but that for reasons of health and safety, some aspects of the show could not always be “natural to the environment” (qtd. in Martindale, 2007). *Born Survivor*’s original UK broadcaster, Channel 4, said in a statement that the show “is not an observational documentary series, but a "how to" guide to basic survival techniques in extreme environments. The programme explicitly does not claim that presenter Bear Grylls’s experience is one of unaided solo survival” (BBC News, 2007). The controversy resulted in a new disclaimer opening each episode: “The crew receives support when they are in potentially life threatening situations,” and “occasionally situations are presented to Bear so he can demonstrate survival techniques” (Grylls, 2008). Not surprisingly, among fans of survival television, *Survivorman*’s Les Stroud was then touted as the more authentic survivalist through reference to the insufficient wildness of *Man vs. Wild*’s studio wilderness.

I argue that programs like *Man vs. Wild* and *Survivorman* re-enact two powerful, interrelated myths regarding the supposed origins of proper manliness. First, an American myth of geographic mobility in which the re-creation of men, or masculine regeneration, is made possible through isolation in the wild (Kimmel, 1996). In this way, these programs invoke the “frontier fable,” with the pioneer (e.g. Les Stroud as Daniel Boone) elevated as the embodiment of the masculine primitive ethos. In this scenario, man going “into” the wild is perhaps as much about his leaving key relational “others” behind who are perceived to erode or blur the rigid binary on which the modern gender order relies for its stability – namely “civilization,” the domestic sphere, and the feminine/feminizing associations therein. Second is the belief that “real” men have certain kinds of technical
competencies, especially those that require the body’s natural physical strength and vigor and do not rely on short-cuts or aids afforded by “modern” technologies. That a problem appears to arise for the viewer (or journalist) when core values of the masculine primitive are revealed to be artificially “presented” or staged by producers, and thus not fully experienced, is indicative of the ideal’s agency in the popular imaginary.

As might be expected, the fan discourse of reality television’s survival shows takes up the project of evaluating how well each show lives up to a masculine primitive ethos, and for that matter, goes some way in defining its social parameters. The notion of Grylls’s or Stroud’s degree of isolation in the wild directly implicates the level and quality of fan engagement. On a forum like Survivalistboards.com, where presumably participants have made their own forays into survivalism and thus draw directly on that knowledge and experience, discussions of survival television focus on debates about authenticity and the particulars of survival scenarios. One participant echoes an earnest masculine primitive ideal, with women’s inclusion merely a secondary or bracketed possibility, stating:

A ‘real’ survival show would pit a man (or woman) against the elements with nothing but the clothes on his/her back with no tools. That would impress me. Build shelter, hunt/trap/fish, make fire, heal thyself, etc. with nothing but your hands and whatever nature provides” (SirThrivalist, 2012).

As indicated above, Les “Survivorman” Stroud is often lauded by fans as the more authentic survivor than Grylls. Stroud himself agrees with this assessment, stating, “They’re right. What I do, I do for real. To really show survival, I had to go out and do it alone” (qtd. on Fox News, 2011). By having a public debate on whether Grylls or Stroud is the truer survivalist, fans have a chance to assert their own masculine (or feminine) values – whether “primitive,” “marketplace,” or otherwise.
This dynamic is not exclusive to survival shows, but rather, is a general part of what Justin Lewis refers to as “the popular epistemology of TV viewing” (qtd. in Murray & Ouellette, 2004, p. 288). The *Man vs. Wild* controversy, though extending a set of value judgments from a specific cultural context, is rooted in the more general condition all reality television currently finds itself in – that of a “postdocumentary culture” where “traditional codes of documentary realism intermingle with genres based in celebrity and artifice” (ibid). Some dimension of our viewing pleasure clearly resides in the game of judging a program’s relationship to “real” life, regardless of the mode or format. “Just as with fiction,” Lewis argues, “the notion of the authentic or real is an evaluative and interpretive tool in making sense of factual entertainment” (ibid, p.290). We know television is always parts real and unreal, authentic and artificial, but how we make use of the relationship between television and reality is based in specific cultural contexts.

Where men are predominately the “born” or “natural” survivors in these shows, modifying the format to include traditional “others,” or contrasting survival abilities, is revealing in how these shows configure a mythic quest for manhood and its ideological implications. After the initial success of *Man vs. Wild* (i.e. *Born Survivor*) and *Survivorman*, several variations on the theme emerged. For example, *Dual Survival* (Discovery) uses a similar format, but adds a man vs. man conflict involving two protagonists with often radically opposed survivalist philosophies.
Dave, a former Army sniper, explains his philosophy in agonistic, defensive terms, with nature cast as the adversary, believing that “The elements are your enemy, and only the strong will survive” (Canterbury & Lundin, 2010). While his counterpart Cody, a “primitive living skills expert,” articulates his survival philosophy in terms of ecological integration, awareness, or harmony. Cody says, “I pay attention to mother nature, because she’s the boss. So I’m trying to think with her, not against her” (ibid). *Dual Survival* is designed to encourage viewers’ identification with (or rejection of) distinct (re)iterations of a masculine primitive ideal and its different styles of embodiment. Cody’s nature-spirituality and adoption of archaic lifestyle practices, like insisting on being barefoot even when placed in an arctic climate, leads Dave (a self-proclaimed “common sense kinda guy”) to denounce Cody’s methods as “bush hippy logic and mother nature stuff that I don’t get” (ibid). Cody’s explanation of his chosen methods indicate a form of nostalgia for “primitive” ways of life. As he says, “I do it to
feel more connected to the planet. I do it because hundreds of thousands of people before me could and did” (ibid).

Figure 28: *Dual Survival*, program introduction (screen capture)

*Dual Survival* stages a drama of contrasting and competing survival prowess and their particular effectiveness, similar in some respects to the terms of comparison applied to Grylls and Stroud materialized in public discourse. While Dave and Cody work
together fairly well, and both are depicted as generally inhabiting and fulfilling the masculine primitive ideal, their contrasting styles of enacting it creates channels for judgment not available in the solo format, extending the possibilities for viewer engagement and identification. Cody’s “bush hippy logic,” nature-spirituality, and insistence on foraging over hunting often serves to position Dave by contrast as the more realistic, manly (i.e. predatory) survivor. On the other hand, Cody’s insights and wisdom often render Dave more shallow and out of touch (i.e. harmony) with nature. Clearly the producers design is to highlight the different approaches, heightening the man vs. man in order to create an additional layer of narrative tension, beyond the man vs. nature format which eventually demands that they reach points of agreement and cooperation in order to survive. Cody’s primitivism follows a more peaceful, Arcadian, 1960’s-inflected strain privileging integration with the environment rather than war with it, while Dave’s enactment suggests a social Darwinism (in the popular sense) more in line with survival of the fittest mentalities and ideals of rugged individualism associated with defenders of unfettered free market capitalism. Ultimately they both succeed in their “test” in nature – they are both sufficiently “wild men.” As we will see, however, other variations on the “Man vs.” subgenre negotiate the performance of survival prowess and sufficient wildness somewhat differently, through more stark contrasts between the (white) manly ideals and their (symbolic) “others.”

*Man Woman Wild* (Discovery) articulates how including women as “others” within a symbolically masculine primitive domain (e.g. wilderness) can serve to exempt men from needing to attain sufficient wildness (through success in isolation) required for the successful performance of a masculine primitive ideal. On the surface of it, these
variations on the “Man vs.” theme originate in the market logic of expanding audience appeal. From a producer’s perspective, *Man Woman Wild* finally offers women viewers a character to more easily identify with, or gain access to, the masculine primitive domain. But ideologically, this scenario affords the opportunity for masculine re-creation through a dynamic Kimmel explains as “the successful symbolic reclamation of manhood possible only via the failure of traditional others, the exclusion of the other from that same mythic quest” (Kimmel, 1996, p. 234).

The opening voice-over in *Man Woman Wild* establishes a binary distinction between men and women with regard to wilderness survival. Ruth, the show’s female protagonist, opens with the question:

What happens when you drop a husband and wife into some of the most remote places on the planet? Fortunately, my husband Myke is a survival expert. He survived in some of the most dangerous places in the world. Myke’s going to teach me how to stay alive in the wild (Hawke & England, 2010).
At the outset, it appears Ruth is to be included in the “quest,” that she might be allowed to cultivate and then demonstrate sufficient survival prowess, even possibly attaining through a symbolic conferral of the (masculine) primitive ideal her own recreation. But the opening montage reminds us that Ruth is not a “born” survivor like Myke, further establishing her as the “other,” with much to surmount in her quest. Some of the telling images include the following: Ruth recoils in horror from a snake, where Myke shows fearlessness; in disgust, she refuses to eat some creature while he does so decisively; Ruth awkwardly wields a shotgun and then struggles to manage its “kick” when fired. These opening images establish Myke as the one in possession of key features of the masculine primitive ideal – as one “naturally” strong, decisive, fearless, and skilled. While the viewer might hope for Ruth to achieve this ideal, well into the second season, Myke is still clearly ensconced as masculine primitive representative, as intermediary between primitive and civilized, with Ruth depicted as still unable (or unwilling) to adapt as effectively as Myke. Where Myke’s role is to be the decisive and imperturbable body, rarely showing fear, weakness, or uncertainty (“the first thing we need to do is assess our situation by getting to a good vantage point, and then let’s make a plan”), Ruth’s role is evidently to bring the hardships of wilderness survival to more vivid life for the viewer through effusive complaining, squeamishness, and general discomfort (“So, I climb up that rattlesnakey, crevicey, hideous rock?”) (ibid).

Ultimately, Myke is depicted to be more “at home” in the wild, and Ruth, even after numerous adventures, performs a form of gendered wilderness incompetence – making for great drama, of course – but therefore not in possession of the innate or “natural” wildness available to Myke.
In one episode, Ruth is sick from dehydration (having been unwilling to drink her own urine as Myke did), so Myke calls in first-aid support from the crew (located miles away) earlier than planned, though he is still apparently capable of continuing on, and expresses some disappointment for not enduring to reach their planned destination. Ruth’s “failure,” and in general, her inability to perform survival prowess on par with Myke, exempts him from the same masculine primitive ideals (i.e. the prowess and skills) expected of Grylls, Stroud, or Cody and Dave of *Dual Survival* in gender isolation. Indeed, Myke’s greatest challenge is apparently the encroachment of “culture” (i.e. the feminine and domestic sphere) upon his place in/as wild “nature.” This comment from each episode’s introduction indicates that his survival prowess is limited once the symbolic space of the “wild” is breached to include an unknown variable from the domestic sphere: “My military skills will go a long way, but there’s no field manual for surviving with a spouse” (ibid). Ruth’s mere presence and the symbolic fixity of her role as “other,” even over the course of two seasons, casts Myke in terms of naturalistic myths of primitive masculinity rooted in biological difference. Furthermore, the social actors’ relatively fixed symbolic status renders Ruth only capable of miming, but never fully inhabiting in her own right, Myke’s masculine primitive survival prowess – a device that engenders a form of inadvertent parody. According to Taussig (1993), “parody is where mimicry exposes construction” (p. 68). We might conclude of *Man Woman Wild*, then, that Ruth’s hopelessly subordinate status in the duo (at least in terms of certain masculine primitive ideals) – her default role of parodying Myke’s successful performance of primitive masculinity through an incompetent if entertaining mimesis – facilitates the commercial enactment and commodification of an outmoded style of masculinity that
reifies harsh wilderness as the privileged domain of men, which is fundamentally articulated through the cultural terms of gender essentialism. However, when viewed within the wider scope of masculine primitive performances on reality television, and when considering the extent to which these ideals are parodied and transgressed by (and for) its supposed subjects (i.e. heterosexual white men), the terms of their flexible construction and instability as a symbolic commodity becomes more transparent.

**Trickster Cousins**

The masculine primitive ideal is at its core an equation of manhood with a certain kind of embodied (physical and technical) prowess. As we saw with reality television’s so-called “born” survivors, this ideal is performed in terms of a decisive, brave, and durable body, but also one possessing certain kinds of knowledge, mental toughness, and technical skills. Ruth (*Man Woman Wild*) was predictably the only survivor not fully living up to (i.e. not permitted to) the ideal expected within the “Man vs.” subgenre. In most respects the masculine primitive ideal is part and parcel with exemplary masculinity, or what can also be labeled “official” masculinity, which Horrocks (1995) explains as “resolutely heterosexual and butch” (p.173). However, I turn now to parodies of the genre and its ideal that, while still relying on a spectacle of masculinity in the wild, effectively talk back to it. Where Ruth’s role was, I argue, to provide an unambiguous “other” whose counterposed failure served to symbolically affirm Myke’s (and the male viewer’s) embodiment of the ideal, and even mitigate its standards, what happens when men are “others” to their (own) ideal within the same (more or less) generic and thematic format?
*Wildboyz* (MTV), a *Jackass* spinoff featuring Steve-O and Chris Pontious, arguably accomplishes this (see Figure 30), operating as a general parody of the wildlife-adventure genre. That is, utilizing Denith’s (2000) definition of genre, *Wildboyz* works (to a great extent, at least) through the “imitation and transformation” of another “cultural production or practice” (p. 9) Relatedly, I treat *Wildboyz* here in terms of parody’s “critical intertextuality,” or what Gray (2006) understands as a form that “reveals the hidden tricks and assumptions of its target genre(s)” (p. 4). Establishing the meaning of the “Man vs.” subgenre can only be accomplished by looking at the discursive continuities and differences across its different programs, which is the basis of genre theory. As Berry (1999) explains, a genre’s meanings “exist only intertextually, in relation to conventions, forms, and motifs found in related texts” (p. 7).

Figure 30: *Wildboyz* first and second season DVD covers
*Wildboyz* is aware of the typical earnestness and seriousness that suffuses the genre they mimic – of the genre’s general reverence for other cultural traditions (e.g. Grylls invoking Native American tradition) and the natural environment (e.g. Cody’s earnest reverence for nature). The show’s scenes involve the formal interplay between a classic, omniscient voice-over narration (by a British actor, no less) providing factual information (“The long neck women of Mehong Sun wrap heavy brass coils about their necks, a tradition once believed to prevent them from marrying into other tribes.”), and the gross body, juvenile shtick of Chris and Steve-O (“Holy crap, we’re in the middle of nowhere Thailand now! Oh yeah these women look great with long necks!”) (*Wildboyz*, 2006). The narration provides relevant cultural context and factual wildlife information (along with the local experts who serve as tour guides), referencing the generic form, but also pronouncing the incompetence and childish antics of the hosts. Chris and Steve-O only demonstrate enough knowledge of local culture and wildlife to deliver their usual puerile quips (“This animal here is Central America’s Jaguarundi, and these are our jaguar undies.”) (*Wildboyz*, 2004). And ultimately, their mocking of a wild man style or ideal of masculinity (“Nobody’s more of a ‘wilderman’ than old Steve-O”) is usually accomplished by exhibiting anything but the decisive, brave, and imperturbable body in possession of manly knowledge, mental toughness, and technical competence (ibid).

Historically, maturity in men is often established (rhetorically, at least) through the physical enactment of technical competence (Moss, 2011). Unlike typical wildlife television guides who facilitate the genre’s infotainment (e.g. *The Crocodile Hunter’s* Steve Irwin), where the successful negotiation and mastery of exotic, often dangerous wildlife by white men becomes the genre’s symbolic currency, in *Wildboyz* it exists as a
structured absence. Exotic wildlife, the untamed wilderness, the symbolic space where boys can be tested and possibly prove manhood, here becomes the playground or stage upon which white (adult) male bodies refuse to obey and enact this old ideal. By and large they evince no forms of nature spirituality, no special knowledge to negotiate its mysteries, nor the proper style of bravery and requisite physical powers through which to successfully implement that knowledge. Instead, they invoke these ideals by imitating the wildlife-adventure infotainment format, acting within its symbolic spaces and settings, only to fail in the performative motifs vital to their affirmation. Yet there is some symbolic blurring, and *Wildboyz*’s formal intimacy with the genre’s ideals is not only disruptive or transgressive of the exemplary masculinities enacted as masculine primitive ideals – it is also complicit in some crucial ways.

Like proper “wildmen,” Chris and Steve-O do masochistically seek out physical punishment, taking the pain, and certainly present a spectacle of toughness and durability (extending their corporeal daring from *Jackass* (MTV)) just like the genre’s earnest “born” survivors. But for the *Boyz*, this arguably serves not to demonstrate some (imagined) nobility of violence and its concomitant pain, nor to invoke its power to confer manly status. They take pain not in order to master or sublimate it in a demonstration of mental toughness and self-discipline, but instead to turn it on its head through histrionic reaction – to transgress this criterion of heroic masculinity. Thus they render their bodies as variations of the grotesque and absurd, as “other” to the classical, obedient, disciplined body. Still, as Cynthia Chris (2006) rightly points out in her discussion of the program, the *Boyz* often painful contact with “the wild” still functions primarily as a “disposable backdrop backdrop for the exhibition of white, masculine
physical prowess and cultural mobility” (p. 120), as it generally does for Grylls, Stroud, and the rest. The “disposability” of nature, related to infotainment’s obvious bias towards entertainment, is indicative of a much larger social problem involving the denial of environmental devastation and the human place (and complicity) within imperiled ecosystems, resulting in televisual media’s general strategic avoidance due to the discomfort it might provoke in the viewer/consumer. But, *Wildboyz* should not be taken as simply another gendered cultural artifact behaving according to the genre’s wider history of reverent quests for masculine (re)creation/regeneration through wildlife “tests” and encounters—as another recuperation of archaic masculine forms and styles— if only because its ironic playfulness, goes so far in unmasking internal contradictions found in masculine primitive ideals.

Consciously or not, Chris and Steve-O’s goofy failure to achieve and revere certain masculine primitive ideals, especially within the specific generic form and symbolic settings of those ideals cultural (re)iteration, exposes their construction. Their role within the genre is that of “The Trickster.” Through their incompetence, they mock manly competence. They are brave if only to expose the equally real masculine potential for basic cowardice and childlike perturbability. And they are generally irreverent towards nature and its mysteries because the ideal tells them they ought not to be. Although, they do end each episode with this telling disclaimer, “Nobody’s wilder than *The Wildboyz*. But the truth is we love animals and would never hurt one” (2004). This reminds viewers that the indignities they inflict upon animals and themselves is only their version of a parodic critique serving to comment on humanity’s troubled historical relations with wild nature. The figure of the trickster, Wicks (1996) explains, “Reminds
us of our need to temper seriousness with sarcasm and irony;” but perhaps more importantly, to help “ensure that the leadership doesn’t get too deeply entrenched in the seriousness of its positions” (pp. 72-73). Furthermore, the trickster archetype, according to Kipnis (1991), can serve to diffuse differences and confrontations through its “ritualized form of irreverence” (p. 144). I see the impious Wildboyz, then, as the trickster cousins of Bear, Les, Myke, Dave, and Cody, and reality television’s other would-be avatars of reverent masculine primitive performances. Although such parodies of masculine primitive ideals may not be as abundant as their earnest, more reverent counterparts, the use of parody to disrupt and expose this particular style of official masculinity is evident elsewhere.

What Kimmel (1996) calls “the search for the deep masculine,” the sense that “we have lost our ability to claim our manhood in a world without fathers, without frontiers, without manly creative work,” (p.232) represents a core part of the “Man vs.” subgenre, if not its organizing principle. But there is plenty of evidence from the popular (Euro-Western) media imaginary beyond Wildboyz to suggest that this search is – in most respects at least – a fool’s errand. During its nineteenth century formation, the masculine primitive ideal was responding to the moment’s shockwaves of industrial modernity – large rural to urban migrations, new scientific revelations about human origins and cultural development, and other key historical factors. In short, it was a new ideal. In the twenty-first century, earnest or romantic invocations of primal masculinity are increasingly easy to dismiss (or parody) as outmoded, unproductive, or unnecessary. And yet pieces of the ideal persist, even thrive in our ever-expanding wilderness of cable television. Kimmel argues that this contemporary search to shore up the boundaries of
masculinity through the various concepts (“true” “natural” “deep” “wild” “primal”) constellating around masculine primitive ideals, indeed echo the “late nineteenth century masculinist complaints against the forces of feminization” (ibid). But, he explains, “It is also developmentally atavistic, a search for lost boyhood, and effort to turn back the clock to the moment before work and family responsibilities yanked men away from their buddies” (ibid). “Man vs.” reality television, both its parodies and pieties, certainly reflects this search. Besides Chris and Steve-O’s “bromance,” by its fourth season, Man vs. Wild producers invited actor / comedian Will Ferrell to join Grylls for a special episode, Men vs. Wild, set in Norway (Grylls, 2010). Ferrell was there, in part at least, to promote his film Land of The Lost, thematically related in its configuration of men demonstrating (in)competencies within a fictionalized primordial setting. Producers surely sensed Grylls’s serious survival lessons needed some levity. The “coupling” played perfectly into Ferrell’s now standard performance of a buffoon alpha male. The iconic man-child feigned rugged fearlessness despite being wholly ill-equipped for the conditions, a dynamic which bolstered Grylls’s prowess while also parodying the entire masculine primitive survival project through Ferrell’s comical incompetence.

Such parodies are visible elsewhere, like the many Old Spice commercials playing on masculine primitive ideals, such as the male animal (Centaur: “Double Impact, it’s two great things: a moisturizer and body wash. I should know, I’m two great things: a man…” Woman: “And a provider.”) (2008). Or the inner-wildman “other” (literally removing an “outer” domesticated layer to reveal a wildman “rocker” within – “Somewhere in there, there’s a man in there”), inoculating against the potential emasculation of brand identification with bath products (2011).
Figure 31: Old Spice, “Double Impact” Minotaur, print ad.

Figure 32: Old Spice, “There’s a Man in There,” print ads.
The recent “Mountain Man” commercial for Dr. Pepper 10, “The Manliest Low-Calorie Soda in The History of Mankind,” employs a similar parody of masculine primitive ideals, overtly expressing the notion of emasculation in advanced technological society (Wall, 2013). As Dr. Pepper’s official description for the soda claims, “Before we had tablet computers, computers, power steering, and vegans – men had non-ironic beards, hawk friends, and the ability to live off the land with nothing more than a Dr. Pepper Ten” (ibid). A mock disclaimer for the soda parodies contemporary social prescriptions for sensitivity to human impacts on wild nature when used for commercial purposes by reiterating (the silliness of) manliness as the demonstration of competence within its (nature’s) own standards: “Disclaimer: No animals were harmed in the making of this commercial. They were only impressed. Really, really impressed” (ibid).

Figure 33: Dr. Pepper 10, “Mountain Man” ad (screen capture)

Some may also recall the episode of The Office during which the suburban Michael Scott attempts being a “Survivorman.” Michael subscribes initially to the
serious, existential masculine primitive view – the confrontation with “wild nature” being a sacred rite promising manly (re)creation– saying, “Dwight will be driving me deep into the Pennsylvania wilderness where he will then leave me to either die or survive. This is a very personal, private experience in the wild that I wish to share with me, myself, and I. When I return, I hope to be a completely changed human being” (ibid). After his inevitable failure, he takes a comically dismissive view of the whole enterprise, saying, “I don’t need the woods, I have a nice wood desk. I don’t need fresh air, because I have the freshest air around – AC” (ibid). These send-ups of masculine primitive ideals suggest the discursive limitations of such binaries to begin with, and they are also indicative of the now well-established understanding of their status as performative tropes, as fantasies, in spite of their earnest cultural origins and ongoing appeal.

Developing a Personal “Relationship” with Nature

Parodies and pieties for masculine primitive ideals on reality television remind us that the “primitive” has now become, as Torgovnik puts it, a “general marketable thing,” “a grab bag primitive” (1991, p.37). She explains, “What’s primitive, what’s modern, what’s savage, what’s civilized, increasingly becomes hard to tell. . . . While the primitive has always been a construct or fantasy of the West, it used to be much more convinced of its veracity – convinced of the illusion of otherness it (primitivism) created” (ibid). Studlar (1998) understands this cultural dynamic as a form of “nostalgic” primitivism while MacCannell argues that the “primitive” does not actually “appear in these enactments of it,” but instead, “the ‘primitivistic’ performance contains the image of the primitive as a dead form” (1992, p. 19). Donna Haraway similarly echoes this sentiment, arguing that the growth and intensification of our (in)human intimacies and interfaces
with scientific and electronic technologies (to the extent of becoming prosthetics) render the central binaries of our classical Western episteme altogether blurry. “It is irrational,” Haraway claims, “to invoke concepts like primitive and civilized . . . The dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilized are all in question ideologically” (1991, p. 169). Yet perhaps this growing alienation and a global state of environmental panic are generating renewed attempts at rehabilitating our sensitivity to the natural world, to relearning states of (im)mediacy that necessitate (discursive if not literal) distance from the so-called artificial and the synthetic, and renewed contact with the natural world.

While parodies of the masculine primitive highlight its own construction, and also the “irrationality” of taking it too seriously, its earnest expression persists – even grows – within the context of reality television. Les Stroud said of the survival shows now so common on cable, “The reality is, with everything going on in the world, the genre’s exploding” (qtd. in Strauss, 2010, para. 3). Extending Stroud’s vague explanation, Strauss claims that “A decade of cataclysmic events – 9/11, the global economic meltdown and disasters ranging from Hurricane Katrina to the Gulf of Mexico oil spill – appears to be energizing interest in the peace of mind that comes with survival skills” (ibid, para. 4). Media historian Jan-Christopher Horak draws a similar conclusion. Tracing the history of visual wildlife media over the last eighty years, from classic documentaries to current proliferations within reality television’s “animals and nature” subgenre, Horak (2006) argues that there is a correlation between the genre’s overall growth in popularity and an increasingly irrefutable state of global environmental peril. In its early 20th century
inception, the classic wildlife and travelogue documentaries accommodated previously unmet consumer desires to experience remote wildlife and exotic cultures. Whereas today, Horak argues, much of the televisual wildlife presented can be seen as a form of “virtual rescue from the uncomfortable reality of the natural world” (ibid, p. 473). That is, “animals and nature” reality television may be less about satisfying a curiosity for the exotic and more about enabling the viewer’s sense of progress in developing a personal relationship with “nature,” while simultaneously serving to insulate them from its ongoing devastation by humanity. Conveying serious concern for the present state of environmental devastation, especially through the documentary presentation of urgent scientific evidence, is apparently too much reality for corporate media’s risk-averse production mentality and so remains largely repressed. Thus reality television’s commitment to “infotainment” results in the continual blurring of fiction and reality in which wildlife (and the human cultures so often problematically associated with it) is consumed merely as image, backdrop, dramatic device, or prop, and not conveyed as part of a larger, imperiled ecosystem.

Still, the proliferation of “Man vs.” programming cannot simply be explained away as a response to “cataclysmic events,” or understood merely as a marketplace response to human alienation from the natural world – as an exploitation of consumer desires to develop personal relationships with “nature” from the uncomplicated distance of superficial infotainment. It is more complicated than this, and certainly must include the now more than century old masculinist discourses in which, as Kimmel puts it, manhood is retrieved through “confrontation with nature” (1995, p. 119). The “Man vs.” genre, insomuch as one can be fruitfully demarcated, exists largely as the renewal and
reiteration of much older “fantasies of masculine retreat and re-creation” (ibid, p. 115). articulated through masculine primitive ideals. A political economic view could also be linked to the foregoing argument: the need for cheap programming to fill the growing number of cable channels and time-slots resorts to the time-tested desires of men wanting to affirm their manhood through the approval of other men (and women), especially in a moment of economic decline which makes it all the harder to acquire the markers of a successful marketplace masculinity. After all, demonstrations of successful masculinity are perhaps most centrally, according to Kimmel, “A defense against the perceived threat of humiliation in the eyes of other men” (ibid). When one is unable to achieve (one’s own sense of) a successful marketplace masculinity (i.e. accumulation of wealth, status, and power), the masculine primitive contains within it the ideological (or mythical) antidote: the marketplace (as enervating, feminizing, domesticating, and over-civilizing) only weakens the “natural” man, subdues his “primal” potential, and attenuates his inner wildness and survival instincts which, in the final analysis, is all he really needs. An obvious irony, then, is that within the lengthy history of masculine primitive ideals – a proffering of strategies for gaining manly affirmation through resistance to an overly “civilized” or market-defined identity – is also a history of those ideals’ creative incorporation into that very same marketplace. Coinciding with the emergence of the nineteenth century masculine primitive ideal was its reflection in myth and literature. As Kimmel explains it, “If middle-class men were unable to venture to the west, or even a local pond, the tonic virtues of the wilderness could be brought to their homes; they could escape through fantasy” (ibid, p. 120). And while the tricksters’ parodies of “born” survivors may indicate the “softening” of exemplary or hegemonic masculinities over the
past few decades, this does not mean the “harder” masculinities are gone. The successful commodification of masculine primitive ideals seen in the “Man vs.” genre of reality television also reaffirms and perpetuates such socio-historical standards of masculinity.

**Full Contact Culture**

*National Geographic* magazine was for much of the 20th century the dominant means by which Euro-American society was able to find imaginary (visual and literary) engagement with the non-Western “Other” of second and third world and tribal societies, and romantic views of foreign landscapes. Documentary film, ethnographic film, “art” cinemas, and fine art provided other significant modes of access, but none with nearly the institutional scope and popularity as *National Geographic* had in its heyday. Now, with the rise of cable television, and later the emergence of “reality” television programming, we are witnessing the reformulation and proliferation of new forms of televisual engagement with the “other,” both literal and symbolic, confronting (Western) self and (Non-Western) other.

While these shows are loosely unified through corporeal travel and engagement with the culturally and environmentally exotic within a discourse of authenticity, I wish to focus on just one of them, *Last One Standing (LOS)* (*Last Man Standing* in the UK), by placing the show in dialogue with another related show, *The Ultimate Fighter (TUF)* (*Spike Network*) in order to address some of the overarching themes from this reality TV subgenre of intercultural contact in terms of both the culturally integrative and disjunctive workings of globalization, of authenticity and simulation, and of the masculine primitivism informing both shows. Authenticity is central to the concept of a masculine primitivism, as it suggests a buried, innate, natural, or essential male vitality which is
suppressed by the artificiality of disciplinary society. I place these two shows in dialogue with one another to show how each trades in a different version of the masculine primitive in attempting to evoke or simulate the experience of authenticity as an essential masculine prowess or untapped potential of the body, one sociopsychological in location (The Ultimate Fighter), the other cultural and racial in location (Last One Standing).

Last One Standing places six social actors from developed Western nations (US, UK, and Australia) and drops them into tribal, indigenous, or traditional communities from South America, Africa, and South Asia, where they spend a brief period training in one of a community’s traditional forms of combat or physical competition, and then finally compete in official contests against locals. Whoever wins the most throughout the show, or makes it the furthest in these traditional, often ritualized competition is “the last one standing.” The show emphasizes the trials of adapting to foreign athletic forms and their associated customs. The Westerners’ identities are established partly in terms of nation, but more significantly in terms of their own athletic backgrounds and

Figure 34: Last Man Standing, UK promotional image
areas of physical expertise. They are each representatives of a Western sporting background originating in, or “sportized,” through capitalistic systems of exchange: there is a fitness guru, an endurance athlete, a BMX racer, a “strongman,” a rugby player, and a kickboxer. The show trades in idealized native imagery we might associate with the classical humanist worldview of *National Geographic*, emphasizing the brightly colored and exotic world of the “other,” while eliding most traces of conflict or contact with the developed world. The Western social actors are displaced in space and also in symbolic time. Quite simply, they are taken out of their comfort zone (voluntarily of course) and asked to subject their bodies to ancient physical art forms and lifestyles (they live with the community too) cut off from “civilization” as we know it.

In a strange analog to LOS, *The Ultimate Fighter* (TUF) takes 16 promising young mixed martial artists and cloisters them in a house, disallowing visits or phone calls with family or friends at the risk of disqualification. Their sole task is to train with world famous “mixed martial arts” (known simply as MMA) coaches and fight each other to see who will become the next “ultimate fighter,” and awarded a six-figure contract with the *Ultimate Fighting Championship* (known simply as the UFC, the company which produces and sponsors TUF), the mixed martial arts world’s preeminent brand. The debut of *The Ultimate Fighter*’s (which I’ll refer to as TUF) reality show in 2005 is credited with almost single handedly bringing MMA in general and the UFC in particular from relative obscurity, an extreme violence masculine niche sport, to what is now becoming mainstreamed, having surpassed boxing and professional wrestling in total revenues in 2006, not to mention inspiring a generation of young men to take up MMA. TUF is an inter-genre mix of the *Real World* format, extreme sports, and
competition reality show. While LOS combines the adventure travel format, competition reality format, with extreme sports and a very limited quasi-ethnographic lens. While technically it is a competition format, the only prize is the glory of, well, being the last one standing. Drama from both shows stems largely from social actors’ isolation from their social worlds as they knew them, in exchange for tests of the body’s limits, habits, potentials, and “ultimate” prowess.

The social actors in TUF and LOS participate in a mythic discourse of the wild man in touch with his primitive masculinity in ways that reflect both earlier 19th century and later 20th century primitive imaginaries. First, LOS emphasizes the cultural isolation of the tribal setting, presenting a picture of being cut off from civilization, and thus in an ambiguous historical present, out of time. As far as the show is constructed for the viewers, this historical present is a backdrop and context only in so much as it challenges the normal habits of the athletes. Upon first visiting the Kalapalo tribe of Brazil where they learn their “sacred sport of wrestling” an athlete claims, “I really felt like I was a step back in time.” In this way LOS participates in an older primitivistic imaginary, one oriented in social evolutionist and colonialist thought, as opposed to the current thinking on primitive cultures, the view that environmental and cultural forces affected social development differently in different places, rather than any innate inferiority of racial difference.
As the show’s voice-over narration states, they must “accept the challenge of traveling around the world to compete against the most remote tribes on earth, on their terms. But will their Western skills count for anything?” This sentiment is expressed by Rake in an episode where the westerners learn Senegalese wrestling. After getting hurt in training, Rake states, “I feel weak, I thought I was strong. I feel unskillful, even though I thought I was skillful.” This is a recurring motif throughout the series, for the western athletes to reflect on how contact with foreign forms of athleticism and competition have put their “natural” strengths and prowess into perspective.

The show promotes a sense in the viewer of first contact and total isolation: “The Kalapalo still live as hunter gatherers. During the times that they stay here, they will be completely cut off from the outside world. . . . The Kalapalo use wrestling as a replacement for warfare. No outsider has ever been permitted to join. . . . While they are
here, the athletes will be living with the villagers” (2007). We are given no sense for the geographic remoteness of the tribe or any other likely influences from capitalist society. Yet by the very nature of basing a reality show on indigenous performance and their contact with privileged westerners, they cease to be “primitive” in any actual sense, though in all likelihood they have been in contact with Western civilization for decades. The point is that the show enacts a form of nostalgia for the “primitive.” We are viewing “the commercialization of ethnological performance and display, co-developed by formerly primitive peoples and the international tourism and entertainment industries” (MacCannell, 1992, p.). As McCannell says of such ethnological commodities, “the primitive does not really appear in these enactments of it. The “primitivistic” performance contains the image of the primitive as a dead form. . . . The primitivistic performance is our funerary marking of the passage of savagery” (1992, p. 19) At this point in time a show like LOS works on a mythology of the primitive, the noble savage, in order to suggest a “common humanity” between “us” and “them.” In a globalize economy where privileged people from the first world may travel (mostly) freely, this is one scenario for acting out our desire for masculine primitive origins. As the narrator explains, “He has made his mark playing gentlemanly sports like cricket and croquet. Richard is here to prove he’s tougher than his privileged background might suggest.” And, indeed, for the most part the westerners fair well in these sports; after a little training they compete on par with the locals.

LOS also deploys conventional themes of anthropological study in so much as they can be related to their athletic competitions. One reliable tension on the show is between the westerners who embrace the local spiritual customs and those who are
skeptical. For example, Rajko tends to embrace or submit his senses more fully to the rituals which are so foreign: “like his Kalapalo opponent, Rajko makes noises mimicking the aggression of the jaguar.” In Senegal, Rajko “has no problem getting religion,” while Brad typically stays within a rational, secular mindset. In the case of the Senegalese “magic expert” who makes a potion for the athlete’s protection, Brad says, “spirituality is a very real thing. I don’t want to go in pretending like I worship the same gods. I don’t want to fake the funk.” Most of the local sports exhibited in LOS are sacred to their community, with attendant rituals, or at least this is how they are performed.

For the viewer LOS mimics the same desire reflected in both National Geographic and earlier ethnographic commodities for a less mediated experience with the primitive while upholding a safe distance and sense of superiority, yet here it is strikingly gendered masculine in terms of aggression and ability to subject oneself to a host of exotic physical trials. The Western athletes in LOS become surrogates for a Western audience. We might say that whereas in the modernism of National Geographic, the Westerner – fieldworker, journalist, or photographer – was rarely pictured in the image, the desire for intimacy with the “other” was encoded rhetorically through tropes of pictorial isolation, romanticization, and idealization, what we have now in our postmodern hyper-reality is the “realization” of that desire in the form of a simulated primitivism.

As suggested at earlier, the impulse towards finding and representing the authentic in different phases of primitivism is central to both of these shows and links them where they are otherwise in so many ways different. The authentic in LOS is configured as rare access to ancient fighting traditions like the Kalapalo wrestling, Zulu
stick fighting, Sumi kick fighting, or Javanese martial arts, which are authentic insomuch as they have not been integrated with other modern, commodified athletic forms. This is emphasized by the shows rhetoric of privileged access and isolation from the outside world. While in the case of TUF, the inception of MMA came about from the appropriation of multiple ancient and sacred martial arts from around the world (most notably Brazil, Japan, Thailand, and Greece) upon which they were turned into an amalgam or hybrid form adapting to a “no hold barred” format designed to the dictates of optimal viewing pleasure and profits. This has been theorized as a process of “de-sportization,” meaning that there was “a reduction of rules and restrictions in pursuit of greater authenticity, blurring the boundaries between martial arts and real fighting” (Van Bottenburg & Heilbron, 2006). This “de-sportizing” effectively heightened the violence of the spectacle for commercial purposes, providing access to “normally” (normal a key adjective here, in the sense of MMA falling outside the sociopsychological parameters of normalcy, i.e. the “wild man” as western self, not anthropological, non-western “Other”) forbidden or unavailable forms of physical combat (ibid). Both LOS and TUF (and MMA events in general) are predicated on exploiting unprecedented access to a masculine based primitivism. In LOS the unprecedented access is in the form of the culturally “pure” athletic traditions, (like the purity idealized by the colonialist and their fear of racial mixing), the authenticity is located in an older primitivism which sought to find the “missing link” between the civilized world and animals. The idea that we may still find the authentic and reinvigorate ourselves with it might be characterized as a form of “imperialist nostalgia” (Rosaldo, 1993), or a “nostalgic primitivism” (Studlar, 1989). TUF and MMA on the other hand may in fact be as authentic if not more than the combat
and athletic forms in LOS. MMA developed within the brand of UFC so as to appeal to an existing fight aesthetic, and I would argue that the literacies, tastes, and expectations for good fight originates in constellation of media precursors, most notably video games and martial arts films. We might almost go so far as to say that the UFC co-opted “pure” martial arts and conformed them to a fit a fantasy of fighting that never existed prior except in motion pictures and pixels and memories of fights behind the school. The timely confluence of the film *Fight Club* and the subsequent associated fight culture of imitators and “mash-up” video producers along with the incredible popularity explosion of UFC and MMA in general are not isolated incidents, but a larger pattern of domestic, popular masculine primitivism.

TUF is also a narrative of cultural isolation or containment. In LOS this isolation is one of geographic and cultural vicinity, in TUF it is a kind of symbolic domestic containment in which “wild men,” a domestic primitivism if you will, are confined to four walls and a gym with ample stuff to bludgeon, not least of which is their roommates. In the most recent TUF, season 6, the house the fighters live in is a tidy container, and by the end its beds have been pissed in, doors smashed in, and walls punctured. The house as symbolic architecture of the private, domestic, and even feminine, is nearly ravished but still manages to contain them until they graduate from fight boot camp and can go test their mettle in a public space. It’s hard at this point not to tie TUF in with the “fight club” phenomenon, if we can call it that. By this I mean the movie, but also the proliferation of fight mash-ups on the web, the proliferation of imitators, and hyper-realistic virtual fighting on video games. As Tyler Durden says in *Fight Club*, “we’re a generation of men raised by women. I’m wondering if another woman is really what we need.”
CHAPTER 5

FILM

Art Film / Ethnography

“Tradition is now often preserved by being commodified and marketed as such. The search for roots ends up at worst being produced and marketed as an image, as a simulacrum or pastiche – imitation communities constructed to evoke images of some folksy past.” (David Harvey 1990)

As I suggested at the end of Chapter 2, Anthropology’s “crisis” in representation led to a thorough critical deconstruction and interrogation of the practices of representing or “writing” other cultures for Western audiences. The circulation of the global art film has been much less frequently subjected to these same terms of analysis: the politics of primitivizing and the related notions of self-othering or self-indigenzing modes of representation. Anthropology’s “crisis” (in particular that of visual anthropology) has now spent several decades toiling over the politics of representing “them” to “us,” and in more recent years sorting through the problematics of “indigenous media” and autoethnography (Banks & Morphy, 1997). In the context of anthropology, questions of intercultural, cross-cultural, and trans-cultural representation are foregrounded, while they have historically taken more of a back seat to concerns with the auteur/authorship, formal expressivity, or questions of nationhood in the arena of “art cinema.” More recently, however, film studies scholars have begun to utilize the concept of “transnational cinema” studies (now further established by the introduction of a journal of the same name), in response to, among other things, the “limiting imagination of national cinema” (Higson, 2000). The transnational concept can be understood to remedy former approaches in several ways. It is proposed as a “subtler means of understanding cinema’s relationship to the cultural and economic formations that are rarely contained within
national boundaries” (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p. 9). This approach is ideally also better suited to respond to questions of power and representation in transnational exchanges, and, quite significantly here, “the politics of difference that emerge within such transnational flows” (ibid). Thus, one of the overarching goals of this chapter is to present several case studies from a site which extends our understanding of the following issues: how contemporary desires for the “primitive” often rely on the strategic flows across national and cultural borders; how these crossings are aided by institutional frameworks and their accompanying representational modes and genres; and lastly, how a politics of taste and consumption informs enunciations of the “primitive.” I focus my discussion on three “art films” (See Chapter 2 for an initial qualification of this label), *Buffalo Boy* (2004), *Blissfully Yours* (2002) and *Tropical Malady* (2004), considering them primarily on the textual level in terms of their formal affinities with traditional ethnographic modes of representation, and how these modes implicate wider discourses of the “primitive” (See Appendix A for an extended documentation and examples of visual comparisons between art house “ethnographies” and disciplinary ethnographic films). I also look closely at the work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, positing it formally as a kind of cinematic description, which is then linked to questions on the locus of ethnographic knowledge production. In considering what we might understand as the ethnographic-ness of an art film within a wider cinematic context, I also briefly juxtapose the art film with the popular Thai action film, *Ong Bak: The Thai Warrior* (2003) that articulates Thai nationhood and cultural tradition in the mode of a “primitivist fantasy” of rural Thailand. I also consider these films’ relationship to a wider art film institutional apparatus, for example, looking at the Global Film Initiative’s (GFI) liberal humanistic
ideals of “promoting cross-cultural understanding through the medium of cinema,” cross-examining those ideals with research which problematizes the location of ethnographic knowledge production. Another larger analytical goal here is to suggest that a more “ethnographic” art film mode of address involves an appearance or institutionally informed aura of “decommodified authenticity,” which can be productively associated with a humanist cinephile viewer. I accomplish this by relating Holt’s (1998) influential study on cultural consumption patterns in correlation with varying levels of cultural capital. In the context of the art film, primitivism is less digitally fragmented that it was in the arena of sport, but is allowed to pass under cosmopolitan guises and elite taste cultures. Finally, situating this primitivism within the larger discussion, I propose that the art film mode of primitivism might offer distinctly different possibilities for transgressing and re-asserting the “human” than those evident at other sites under discussion. On the one hand, I problematize a certain kind of art film ideology as its own brand of commodified “tradition” – a sort of cine-tourism with implicit culture “collecting,” veiled in the terms of a classical humanism (like National Geographic). While on the other hand, I also propose that a more explicit acknowledgment of art film ethno-graphics, evident in institutional developments like the GFI, and textually in the work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, might be seen as an aid to short-circuiting primitivism’s essentializing and universalizing operations by providing a basis for greater socio-historical grounding and contextualization. This discussion also implicates larger debates occurring in eco-media / eco-cinema studies on the prospects for different kinds of textualities and audience engagements in shifting or expanding eco-critical consciousness and environmental awareness. I close this chapter, then, by extending the scope of art house
“ethnography” to a wider range of films implicating a related politics of popular
primitivisms, and linking this to the studies overarching concerns with the meaningful
clash of nature and culture.

**Buffalo Boy and the Global Film Initiative**

“Seven continents. 6 Billion people. 192 Nations. And one language we all share. The
Global Film Initiative proudly presents – ‘Global Lens.’ An exceptional series of ten
feature films from the developing world that span the globe, and unite us all. To see these
films is to see the world. Promoting cross-cultural understanding through cinema.”

“Every person has a voice. Every voice tells a story. And every story reveals a world. For
the past three years, the GFI has presented an extraordinary series of films from the
developing world. This year, global lens 2006 showcases 8 more. Unique voices. Diverse
stories. Global visions that continue to unite us all. Official Selections of the worlds most
prestigious film festivals (Cannes, Toronto, Rotterdam, London, Seattle, San Sebastian,
Fajr, Melbourne, Rio De Janeiro, Jerusalem, Sydney, Tribeca, etc.). Winners of over 30
international awards. Global Lens 2006. Seeing these films is a passport to the world.”
–Narration to trailer for Global Lens 2006.

If cross-cultural communication has always been at least implicit in the art films’
workings in foreign viewing situations, it is now explicitly embraced in a form of
ideological and cultural patronage with organizations like the Global Film Initiative
(GFI). While this sort of cultural patronage is no doubt well intended, this humanistic
halo has the potential to overshadow a politics of difference involved in the GFI’s
transnational film flows. Artistic licenses and their historical complicity in commodifying
alterity find a telling descriptive analog in the scientific licenses of classical humanistic
anthropology. The critical awareness and methodological self-consciousness stemming
from anthropology’s “crisis in representation,” and in the case here as it has manifested
itself within visual anthropology, poses the fundamental question, “representation for
whom?” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). I want to begin to draw together here the lens of
critique found in critical Anthropology with some of the scholarly literature on the “art
cinema,” and the notion of the cinephile / cinephilia as it pertains to art film spectatorship.

The *Global Lens* film series represents the overt conjuncture of the feature film mode of cultural production with the sort of cross-cultural imperatives associated with traditional humanist anthropology. Broadly defined, the purpose of ethnographic film and video (and ethnography in general) has been to facilitate the communication of one culture for another (Nichols, 1991). What film had to offer written ethnographies was conceived of as either a research aid (an extension of the field notebook) or as way of encoding a culture formally within the plasticity of the medium. In either case, the underlying impetus was rooted in the indexical nature of the medium and its ability to record a richness of detail in ways that written language could not. For the foreign art film consumer, cross-cultural communication has always been one aspect of the viewing experience, often entangled with degrees of formal aesthetic appreciation.

The case of *Buffalo Boy* and the GFI are striking evidence of what David MacDougall aptly identifies as the “complicities of style” in cinematic cultural representation along a continuum from disciplinary (read intentional) ethnographic filmmaking and spectatorship, to feature art filmmaking and spectatorship. The feature art film converging with a new degree of non-disciplinary (i.e. not originating from anthropologists or related academic practitioners using ethnographic methods) ethnographic intentionality is paralleled if not altogether prefigured in the discursive and practical broadening of the categorization of films as “ethnographic.” In a post-positivist climate associated with the interpretive turn in anthropology, ethnographic film has expanded its formal repertoire, finding productive convergences with fictional,
experimental, “evocative,” and “performative” modes (and what Jean Rouch called “ethno-fiction”), walking the line between fact and fiction. Ethnographic film originating in the scientific paradigm may be understood to work within what Bill Nichols (1991) has labeled the “discourses of sobriety,” alongside its sister genre, the documentary:

Documentary film has a kinship with those other non-fictional systems that together make up what we may call the discourses of sobriety. Science, economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion, welfare – these systems assume they have an instrumental power; they can and should alter the world itself, they can effect action and entail consequences. Their discourse has an air of sobriety since it is seldom receptive to “make-believe” characters, events, or entire worlds. . . . Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. . . . They are vehicles of domination and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will (p. 3).

*Buffalo Boy*, through its marketing and association within the GFI’s Global Lens series, as the series’ trailer indicates, actively invokes a discourse of sobriety. Marketing films as vehicles “to promote cross-cultural understanding” implies their relation to the “real” as, in some sense, “direct, immediate, transparent.” Discourses of sobriety, or discourses of the “real,” and the ease with which they are invoked across mediascapes, ideoscapes, and ethnoscapes has become an urgent issue for today’s cultural critics (Appadurai, 1996). This notion of invoking the “real” across genres has also been understood as part of a wider “documentary impulse,” referring to anxieties over the ease with which fictional modes can deploy a formal rhetoric drawing from these documentary discourses of sobriety. *Buffalo Boy* and the GFI present a unique case of the not uncommon collusion between fictional narrative storytelling conventions and discourses of sobriety. In 2014, the GFI’s mission statement indicates these humanistic ideals of utilizing “authentic” stories from the “developing world,” and in particular film as a privileged medium for cross-cultural communication:
Even today, a powerful, authentic narrative can foster trust and respect between disparate cultures and mitigate the social and psychological impact of cultural prejudice. In recent times, no medium has been as effective at communicating the range and diversity of the world’s cultures as the cinematic arts. . . The Initiative has developed four complementary programs to promote both the production of authentic and accessible stories created in the developing world and their distribution throughout the schools and leading cultural institutions of the United States (About the Initiative, 2014).

However, research presented, for example, in Crawford & Turton’s (1992) anthology, *Film as Ethnography*, complicates this idealized view of the medium’s potential to communicate culture across borders and identities. This involves debates over how ethnographic film (and ethnographically inflected film, by extension) ought to encode culture cinematically. Abu-Lughod’s (1991) conception of a “tactical humanism” applies to the GFI’s Global Lens series. With these films cast in what can best be characterized as a classical humanist mode by the GFI, as international co-productions with funding and facilitation from western organizations, does this represent a kind of popular “shared” anthropology? Or should it, somewhat more negatively perhaps, also be viewed as a form of “ideological patronage” for a Western cinema market? What do the films’ institutional framing and marketing within discourses of sobriety, cultural enlightenment, and humanistic international education obscure about their existence in webs of commodified alterity and audience predispositions? Working from a critical theoretical model of cross-cultural representation and consumption, we can begin now to look more closely at the *Buffalo Boy*, the situation of its circulation and viewing, and the marketing and discourse framing it.

*Buffalo Boy* may be productively likened to Flaherty’s *Nanook of The North* on several grounds. First, like *Nanook*, it revolves around a people’s struggle for survival
against nature. In the case of Buffalo Boy the struggle is living amidst the “harsh beauty” of the Mekong Delta (as the GFI describes it) (Figure 36), not unlike the harsh beauty of the Canadian Arctic (one is covered by warm water, the other by frozen water) (Figure 37). Like Nanook, scenes are structured in Buffalo Boy to represent an authentic view of peasant life on the Mekong Delta of the 1940’s. When Flaherty made Nanook, the Inuit were not living anymore in the traditional fashion enacted for the film. It was in this sense a pastoral, historical fiction, like Buffalo Boy. Or in other words, echoing Jameson’s point at the outset of the chapter, they are both simulacra. While the historical viewing situations vary greatly in each case, the visual-textual affinities are telling. Buffalo Boy is, like Nanook, following humanist principles of sympathetically portraying an “other” as similar to us in emotional, natural, and social terms. Like Nanook, Buffalo Boy conjoins discourses of sobriety – purporting some special access to the real or authentic – with those of fictional narrative entertainment. We find evidence of this in a publicity poster for Nanook claiming to present: “The truest and most human story of the great white snows; A picture with more drama, greater thrill, and stronger action than any picture you ever saw; A true story of love and life in the actual arctic.” Manohla Dargis’s description of Buffalo Boy mirrors this marketing of Nanook: “The world in Buffalo Boy is filled with wonder, but it is also a world filled with real desire, real death, not abstractions” (2005, para. 5). And the publicity poster for Buffalo Boy adopts a similar appeal to this brand of ethnographic humanism (Figure 38).
Somewhat more critically we might view *Buffalo Boy* as a close cousin to what Fatimah Rony describes as the “taxidermic mode” of the “lyrical ethnographic film” (1996, p.13).

It is not an analytical film organized around a single life event, ritual, or ceremony, as later structural-functionalist ethnographic films were. It is rather, like *Nanook*, illustrative of a way of life. Of the taxidermic mode Rony (1996) explains:

> Where others had portrayed natives in the flat, Flaherty portrayed natives in the round, in the mode of taxidermy. . . .The taxidermist uses artifice and reconstruction in order to make the dead look alive. Similarly, Flaherty himself emphasized that *Nanook* was made more authentic by the use of simulation: the Inuit actors were dressed in costume, the igloo was a set, etc. The “ethnographic” is reconstructed to appear real to the anticipated audience (ibid, pp.14-15).
Rony continues to critique the work of film theorists who “have exalted Flaherty as a poet who presented in Nanook not the reality of science, but the reality of a ‘higher truth,’ that of art” (ibid). The notion of a taxidermic “mode” in ethnographic representation presents a useful intersection with the larger concerns of this study: How technology is not merely working in service of contemporary primitivisms, but in some sense even defining and determining their form. According to Seltzer (1998) the logic of taxidermy is emblematic of “the simulation of life at the turn of the century,” part of a larger naturalist mode that turned on arrangements of the “machinic” and the primitive (p. 241). Taxidermy involves “the reconstruction of natural life and its model habitats, the naturalist form of representation par excellence” (ibid). Taxidermy, then, can be understood as a kind of techno-primitivism involving a “natural,” “outmoded surface”
that disguises a “technologized interior” (ibid). Where the form of techno-primitivism of the popular sport imaginary (See Chapter 4) is more explicitly visualized, enabled and articulated through advanced digital tools and techniques, art film ethno-graphics are a veiled techno-primitive complex. Still, as discussed more below, Tropical Malady is a contemporary case which presents moments of digitalized techno-primitive enhancements, propelling its primitivism through digital enhancements in rendering wilderness spirits and archaic worldviews of animism and shamanism.

If we look at what are commonly understood to be the predominant themes running throughout the history of ethnographic work (both written and filmed) we find still more parallels between the two films. Some of classic ethnography’s most reliable themes include: “life cycle, economics, land tenure, social organization of the village notables” (ibid). One of the key narrative framing devices of Buffalo Boy is the discovery of the remains of the central actor’s (Kim) father, found in the mud while plowing a rice paddy after the wet season. The story begins with the theme of the life and death (of Kim’s father) as it is defined by subsistence in a wild landscape covered with water half of the year. Buffalo Boy deals with how Kim’s life mirrors his father’s, becoming a herder in the rainy season to help lead his family’s buffalo to dry pasture land. Unlike the traditions of academic ethnography, however, Buffalo Boy and Nanook follow the lives of individuals. In this regard, Rony distinguishes between the academic and the popular imagination of the ethnographic film, citing National Geographic as emblematic of these differences. (For more on the striking visual and thematic affinities between classic visual ethnography and recent art house ethnographies see my slides in Appendix A).
Buffalo Boys’ ethnographic impulse is also evident in the GFI’s production of educational materials corresponding to the cultural content of their films. For Buffalo Boy they provide a lesson plan and discussion guide that provides a variety of contextual information: basic summary, synopsis, and character list; biography on the director; cues to approach film aesthetics in the film through narrative structure, camera placement and angle, and music and sound; and most significantly for this discussion, narrative themes organized around the most significant cultural motifs of the film, such as “life in a watery landscape,” “traditions and rituals,” and a section on “fathers and sons” (i.e. kinship). Questions of context become very important in visual anthropology, where the failures of adequate explanation leave spaces for misinterpretation or the projection of cultural stereotypes. GFI, through its explicit mission of promoting cross-cultural understanding, arguably repositions the art house film as a form of “art house ethnography.”

It is not a stretch here, then, to posit Buffalo Boy as, at least quasi-ethnographic. I argue that it becomes more so once we again ask the question, “which films are “ethnographic?” And, relatedly, when we ask whether the “container” of “ethnographic-ness” can be moved from authorial intention to viewer reaction (Martinez, 1992)? The “crisis” in representation fueled certain paradigmatic shifts in anthropological representation, such as passing the camera over, and the emergence of indigenous media. With this emergence, emphasis shifted to the analysis of how groups mediate themselves, or represent themselves, through cinematic expression. For Buffalo Boy, this leads us to finally confront the question, “Who was this produced for?” By turning now towards better defining what is meant by the designation “art film” (or “arthouse film”) within an Asian to Euro-Western production-consumption trajectory, as well hypothesizing about
an “interpretive community” (Fish, 1980) viewing a film like *Buffalo Boy*, we can more adequately begin to approach these questions.

**The Cross-Cultural Gaze and the Humanist Cinephile**

One of the central assertions of this chapter is that *Buffalo Boy*, and perhaps even the GFI’s general ideological orientation, prefigures a particular kind of film spectator. I will assert that, drawing from Bourdieu’s (1984) analysis of class tastes and lifestyles, as well as Douglas Holt’s (1998) useful study of how cultural capital shapes consumption, that the desire behind viewing *Buffalo Boy* is as a kind of humanist “cultural collecting,” (Clifford, 1988) and thus the acquisition of a certain form of cultural capital. It will also be useful to consider briefly some related views of East Asian cinema that have not drawn quite such direct links between the different cinematic arenas and their representational tendencies.

In formulating definitions for two separate forms of cinephilia one risks homogenizing and eliding fissures within, or overlaps between, groupings. This is a necessary risk in locating the viewer of arthouse “ethnographies” such as *Buffalo Boy*. Taking a cue from David Desser (2005), I propose that the humanist cinephile stands in contradistinction to a new cinephilia characterized by video/DVD collecting and home theater viewing; a cinephilia defined by various fan performatives facilitated by the internet and enhanced DVD controls for image manipulability and “backstage” access. The humanist cinephile is, of course, not fully separable from Desser’s designation of a new cinephile, but might best be understood as a traditional cinephilia populated by people who value “going out” to the theater as an adult ritual or event rather than the more personalized, interactive, or participatory new cinephile spectatorship enacted
through electronics and hyper-connectivity within the home theater. Where the new cinephile might make his way out to the cinema for cinema “events” and in general, experiential pleasure as opposed to ideational, conceptual, or metaphysical engagements through cinema.

The humanist cinephile goes to the theater for films that are not necessarily top-loaded franchises, but “small” or medium sized films, independent and “art” films distinguished by “meaningful” content and artistic expression. In another crucial sense, the humanist cinephile is more inclined to seek out films that work as a form of social, cultural, or political advocacy, and which are relatively stripped of association with commercial entertainment presenting, if not in actuality, then an illusion of de-commodification. Where the new cinephile may seek “backstage” access through new media interactivity, the humanist (i.e. traditional) cinephile seeks “backstage” access to culture. In anthropological terms, ethnographic method is predicated on discovering and then communicating this kind of “emic” –behind the scenes of culture– knowledge. Thus the humanist art film, or the arthouse “ethnography,” working within a documentary impulse or at least some claim to the culturally “authentic,” is as much concerned with cultural style (content) as film style. And one final point of specificity in this outline of a hypothetical humanist cinephile, they perhaps still privilege literature to film as a meaningful pastime, and in going out to the cinema they are more inclined to seek out films in areas outlying the commercial mainstream, in the “margins.”

In theorizing a kind of cinephile taste public, we assume that the film appeals to this public and thus becomes a commodity for it. It is of perhaps less importance here to consider the intentions of the filmmaker than it is to understand the process by which
meaning is assigned within the new context of consumption. Thus, the assertion in this case is that *Buffalo Boy*’s ethnographic-ness is better understood when it crosses borders. Yet to understand this cross-cultural consumption one needs to look both ways. As Howes (1996) argues, “when goods cross borders, then the culture they substantiate is no longer the culture in which they circulate” (pp. 3-8). To what extent then does a film like *Buffalo Boy* – ostensibly designed for the international arthouse and festival circuit – substantiate Vietnam? More or less than a popular film like *Ong Bak* (2003) might for Thailand? An art film analog to *Buffalo Boy* for Thailand might be found in the work and cinematic situation of much lauded new auteur (and incidentally, member of the GFI film board) Apichatpong Weerasethkul, whose films work in similar fashion, yet are also distinctly their own. Apichatpong is perhaps more widely celebrated in the Euro-Western art film and academic arena than he is in his home country. His feature films – *Blissfully Yours* (2002), and *Tropical Malady* (2004) – exist within a similar institutional matrix as *Buffalo Boy*. They are all international co-productions that arguably generate at least as much or more success and critical recognition in the Euro-Western festival and arthouse film circuit outside of the nations, cultures, and ethnicities they represent. The irony in this is that in some sense their success is due to the deployment or utilization—if not exploitation—of indigenous (in the sense Appadurai established—indigenizing, not necessarily referring to “first peoples”, but mythologizing and conflating national and ethnic origins) imagery and cultural materials, such as; folk lore, local histories of the marginalized and oppressed (often peasant populations), mysticism, kinship, ritual, and primarily, imagery of subsistence living, pastoral, or generally non-urbanized peoples.
It is worth discussing briefly how this cross-cultural production/consumption circuit is addressed by other scholars of East Asian cinema. Chinese fifth generation films are another parallel, re-framed within similar ethnographic terms by Chow (1995). She positions fifth generation Chinese filmmakers as enacting “a form of intercultural translation in the post-colonial age” in relation to “discourses of technologized visuality” when literature is supplanted by film, or “when visuality is to become the law of knowledge and the universal form of epistemological coercion” (1995, pp. 4, 18). Chow is perhaps one of the most important scholars to theorize East Asian cinematic self-primitivizing. She locates this in the way Chinese artists and intellectuals respond to rise of mass culture and democratization in China in much the same way as modernists in the art world, such as Picasso, Gauguin, James Joyce, and D.H. Lawrence among others, formerly drew inspiration from the non-Western to “debunk the pretentiousness of Western bourgeois society and to return humanity to its basic instincts (ibid).” Chow explains further that:

Like elite, cultured intellectuals everywhere in the world, they find in the underprivileged a source of fascination that helps to renew, rejuvenate, and “modernize” their own cultural production in terms of both subject matter and form. This “primitivism” then becomes a way to point the moral of the humanity that is consciously ethnicized and nationalized, the humanity that is “Chinese.” . . . It is precisely when the older culture turns “aesthetic” and “primitive” in the sense of an other time, that the flip side of primitive passions, in the form of a concurrent desire to invent origins and primariness, asserts itself (ibid, pp. 21, 37).


Anne Ciecko addresses this larger complex in an essay on theorizing Asian cinema when she poses the question: “What happens when Asian cinema as cultural commodity (re)produces images that the West expects and imposes on it; when it recognizes itself as
the object of the Western gaze and represents accordingly; when it perpetuates
stereotypes” (2006, p.31)? Jose Capino sees this phenomenon elsewhere and believe it to
be tremendously problematic. Capino (2006), writing about cinema in the Philippines
argues that:

The dual address of art films –which are poised to speak to local audiences about
their “true” condition but primarily in tropes and forms that are intelligible to and
expected by international festival audiences – implants a hybridity of aesthetics
and discourse at their core. . . .Phillipine art cinema’s – typical predilection for the
dense and often squalid visual field of Italian neo-realistm may be interpreted as a
negociation between, on one hand, an attempt to inscribe Phillipine social
conditions into the cinematic mise-en-scene and, on the other, an accommodation
of foreign art film’s codes for rendering the Third World’s impoverished,
exoticized “other.” Thus, in comparison to popular cinema, the hybridity of the art
film, motivated as it is by an externally-oriented mendicantism, seems less
progressive (pp. 40, 42).

In the case of Vietnam and Thailand, this self-indigenization is closely linked to
the interests and ideals of conflating and naturalizing nation and ethnicity as one entity in
the age of globalization when the rapid advance of a money economy and cultural
imports are perceived to threaten diluting if not destroying cultural integrity and
traditional ways of life. This discourse of the threat of cultural homogenization by
hegemonic forces of economic development (IMF and World Bank economic bailouts)
and cultural imperialism (Hollywood) is not unlike the “salvage paradigm” in
anthropology as justification for traditional ethnographic inquiries and cross-cultural
representation. Clearly there is great ideological and aesthetic variation between
ethnographic films and the Asian art films discussed here which participate in this sort of
self-indigenization or self-othering, but the parallels are especially instructive, and even
more pronounced in the under the auspices of an organization like the GFI.
Cycling back again to one of the originating questions of this project, “Who are these films produced for?” there are compelling reasons for arguing that these films serve outsiders more than those they represent. First, presuming that a film such as *Buffalo Boy* serves primarily to provide the Vietnamese with a way of reaffirming their sense of historical, cultural, and national authenticity, of origins and collective memory, perhaps denies their agency within the globalized spectacle. This relates to the difference between what has been labeled the “global homogenization paradigm” versus the “creolization paradigm” (Howes, 2002). The former view privileges the forces from the import of “goods and values from the West to the rest of the world” (or “first world” to “second” and “third world”). The latter view privileges the “reception and domestication” of goods, whatever their origins may be, also understood as “hybridization” (ibid). More recently, there is the prospect, as Elie (2012) contends, of a post-exotic “transmodernity.” Are these “arthouse ethnographies” merely part of the process by which the “‘exotic’ periphery” comes to “permeate the centre’s civilizational norms” (ibid, p.1213), and thus also in some sense its dominance? Or is this a re-instanciation through representational means (a primitivism) of ongoing center-periphery relations informing the larger flows of production and consumption? The case of *Buffalo Boy* may also lead us to ask, if this should be viewed as a case of self-indigenization, then does the product originate in a belief in the threat of homogenization of Vietnamese history and culture? Or does it unconsciously exploit the existence of this view in the Euro-Western humanist cinephile? In the latter case then, the film is already ideologically conformed to a Euro-Western humanist desire to protect and, less consciously I argue, consume, “collect” (in Clifford’s sense of both material and knowledge/experience “culture collecting”) or even possess
the culturally authentic and “exotic,” participating in an imagined cultural advocacy for preserving lost or threatened life worlds. With the case of a film centered on the life of Vietnamese peasants, is it perhaps also reasonable to suspect a guilt complex over U.S. colonialist and imperialist projects in general, and in particular over the atrocities of the Vietnam War? And thus the “arthouse ethnography” configured generally to suit the needs of certain liberal humanist pieties? I present these problematics by way of question since I want to also allow space for their pro-social and pro-environmental possibilities – seeing them also in terms of the wider potentials for an ecocinematic aesthetics (taken up more later). Before looking closer at Weerasethaul’s films, I want to propose that the humanist cinephile, implied in terms of both cinematic content and the institutional frameworks outline above, might be more productively understood with the aid of Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and cultural capital.

Consumer research into the links between cultural capital and consumption may also provide some useful insight into the elite, “cultured” intellectuals ostensibly comprising the Asian art film’s viewership (as Rey Chow also suggests). Douglas Holt adapts Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and cultural capital and their relationship to consumption patterns to an empirical interpretive project of consumption in the U.S. Holt offers compelling evidence to suggest that consumers with high levels of cultural capital (HCC) would be uniquely disposed to viewing arthouse “ethnographies” like *Buffalo Boy* or *Tropical Malady*. Holt (1998) explains that:

> Cultural capital is enacted in fields of consumption, not only in the arts but also food, interior décor, clothing, popular culture, hobbies, and sport. . . The habitus organizes how one classifies the universe of consumption objects to which one is exposed, constructing desire toward consecrated objects and disgust towards objects that are not valued in the field (p. 3).
In the interest of adding further specificity to the definition of a humanist art film cinephile, and with respect to a particular designation of art film, we may inquire as to the consumer dispositions of those possessing HCC. The arthouse “ethnography” requires a different level of cultural capital to be consumed “successfully.” Through extensive in-home ethnographic interviewing, Holt describes HCC tastes as defined by the following antagonisms: “material versus formal aesthetics,” “referential versus critical appreciation,” and “materialism versus idealism.” Where those with low cultural capital (LCC) prefer referential interpretations of culture, they dislike forms that “conflict with their worldview” (ibid, p.10); conversely, HCC’s, rather than desiring consumer choices likely to affirm their worldview, are much more likely to choose products that expand it. Holt’s research on the consumption patterns of HCC’s conforms to humanist ideals of seeking continual education and enlightenment. Of HCC’s, Holt argues that:

Material abundance and luxury are crass forms of consumption because they are antithetical to the ethereal life of the mind. Since HCC’s have been raised with few material constraints, they experience material deprivation differently than LCC’s. Material paucity is often aestheticized . . . into an ascetic style by HCC’s (ibid, p. 10).

Applying this preference to the worldviews of ethnographic films and arthouse “ethnographies,” we see where aestheticized poverty and romantic nostalgia for subsistence societies become a form of idealized consumption for this viewer. This position is further reinforced when we consider HCC’s vs. LCC’s attitudes towards cosmopolitan versus local oppositions in regards to taste. Two telling aspects are informant reports on travel and tastes for the exotic in food, music, and travel. Holt summarizes the differences in relation to exoticism:

The most powerful expression of the cosmopolitan-local opposition in the realm of tastes is through perceptions of and desires for the exotic consumption objects
far removed conceptually from what is considered to be normative within a
category. Both HCC’s and LCC’s enjoy variety in their consumption to a greater
or lesser extent, but they differ in their subjective understanding of what
constitutes variety. What is exotic for LCC’s is Mundane for HCC’s, and what is
exotic for HCC’s is unfathomable or repugnant for LCC’s. And while LCC’s find
comfort in objects that are familiar, HCC’s seek out and desire exotic
consumption objects (ibid, p. 13).

In general, HCC’s travel more, are less inclined to read local newspapers, are more likely
to experiment with “ethnic” cuisine, and to structure their tastes “to emphasize
cosmopolitanism, individuality, and self-actualization” (ibid, p. 12). And a final aspect of
the HCC cultural repertoire of tastes and practices is a privileging of “decommodified
authenticity” (ibid, p.14). In this respect HCC’s favor “authentic” goods, “artisanal rather
than mass produced,” and experiences and products that are “minimally contaminated by
the commodity form.” This, of course, predisposes them to structure their travel and
tourist adventures around the perceived authentic “experience” or “world.” Holt’s
research may simply confirm what we have already surmised about humanist cinephiles,
yet I find it compelling nonetheless in bolstering the point that art film viewers are likely
seeking out products and experiences with qualities which characterize both the
“ethnographic” and art film ideology.

**Apichatpong’s Sensational (In)Action as Cinematic Description**

[O]ut of the mode of story time and into that of the Descriptive mode, into the
timelessness of painting, into a place where things shine more purely because their
surfaces have been cleansed of story pressures” (Chatman 1990, p. 55).

“The Dreams. Floating. I like free forms. Images flashing by have more weight than a
coherent narrative . . . Sometimes it is beautiful to just look and not think – like when you
take a journey in a foreign land” (Apichatpong qtd. in Römers 2005, p. 44).

The existence in Thailand of an alternative film culture to popular and Hollywood
cinemas is in no small part due to the work of Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Splitting his
time between short experimental and feature length films, the director has been at the forefront of an experimental film and video culture emerging alongside mainstream industry successes in Thailand. While a Thai cinema “revival” has occurred in both mainstream and independent arenas of production and consumption since 1997 (Chaiworaporn & Knee 2006, p. 60), widespread international recognition stems largely from the festival and art-house circuit accolades of Apichatpong’s feature films, most significantly, Blissfully Yours (2002), and Tropical Malady (2004).

In these, his second and third features, we witness an aesthetic maturation marking a distinctive cinematic storytelling style with allusive narratives. Stories that are deceptively simple in their surface meaning as an appeal to the senses, they are mysterious and often beautiful works that demand from viewers an extraordinary form of personal engagement. These two films, as a core of Apichatpong’s corpus, share a likeness on two key levels that make it fruitful to examine them together: first, they are both organized around a bifurcated, two-part narrative structure; and second, they both display a primitivist “return to nature” serving as the organizing basis for much of their storytelling powers.

With regard to narrative style, Blissfully Yours and Tropical Malady share with earlier modernist and avant-garde artistic texts a desire to disrupt the canonic (Western) story form of an introduction to characters and setting, the introduction of a conflict, disturbance or puzzle, followed by a goal-oriented causal chain of action or events leading to a resolution of the conflict (Nichols 1994, p. 72). Instead of narrative action, Apichatpong creates an atmospheric pastiche drawn from traditional Thai folk shards, popular culture, personal memories and the vivification of dreams. In more reductive
terms, these films represent an interest in joining the ancient and modern – primitive and civilized – in a transcultural aesthetic amalgam. To borrow from Torgovnik (1990), they reflect the vibrancy and narrative potential found in the creative interplay between “savage sensibilities” and “modern lives.”

In this section I discuss Blissfully Yours and Tropical Malady on several levels. First, on a formal level in terms of their non-narrative impulse, perhaps best characterized as a “descriptive mode” of cinematic textuality (as defined by Chatman above) favoring atmospheric stasis over the conventional unfolding of a story. This cinematic form of description emphasizes the sensuality of symbolically charged spaces and how the characters inhabit them (and similarly, how they are inhabited by those spaces). In the strict sense these are narrative films, or, they operate as what Chatman would call a “narrative text-type” (1990, p. 6). That is, films unfold in time; the medium’s specificity is such that it requires duration for its presentation from start to finish. Exceptions are filmic “experiments” that disrupt this narrative discourse, such as video installation “loops” in which beginning and end are not plainly evident. Painting and sculpture are non-narrative text-types in the sense that, while one’s personal experience of them occurs in time, they do not “regulate the temporal flow” of narrative like film, literature, or even music (ibid, p. 7). Yet while Apichatpong’s films operate “externally” under the forward-flowing discourse of narrative cinema, their “internal” narrative action – the “sequence of events that constitute the plot” (ibid, p. 9) – is powerfully diminished through loose plotting and character development, extended shot duration and other formal devices emphasizing instead extended spatio-temporal durations opening the way for a different kind of sensory immersion. I argue that this manner of cinematic storytelling is best
articulated functionally in terms of a “descriptive” text-type—a kind of sensual or “sensational inaction cinema.” In this sense the films embody a non-narrative textual impulse (although not to the degree of formal rupture enacted by many experimental films) while still operating within a narrative discourse.

Second, I attempt to historicize these forms of storytelling by considering their aesthetic relationship to other institutional cinema contexts; namely, the category of the “art film” and its intermediate relationship between the avant-garde/experimental and Hollywood cinemas. Situating Blissfully Yours and Tropical Malady within a legacy of art film poetics is also productive in thinking about Apichatpong’s transnational cultural identity and Euro-Western aesthetic influences, and additionally, the notable border motifs evident in the recurrence of characters and symbolic spaces.

Lastly, I suggest the films’ shared storytelling impulse is rooted in a cultural re-iteration of the wider humanistic and spiritual search for origins, configured in these instances as a form of “primitive passions” (Chow 1995). Culturally specific, Apichatpong’s version of “primitive passions” suggest a submission to the senses and a “return to nature” as a means to the cessation of suffering associated with the oppressive and marginalizing forces of society. Blissfully Yours and Tropical Malady implicate the value of “traditional” forms of knowledge residing in personal re-integration with nature, evoking a close affinity with certain Buddhist ideals, of dream states associated with shamanistic worldviews, and also, I contend, engaging in a postmodern version of “primitivist fantasy” (Foster 1996, p. 175).

As Chatman explains (drawing from Aristotle), “the fundamental narrative verb is do . . . action is the fundamental narrative element” (1972, p. 97). If a film is not advancing a
plot through character action, then what remains may be characterized as a form of cinematic “description.” Chatman takes up this question at length, approaching the very possibility of a cinematic form of “description,” and in particular the possibility of “explicit description” as opposed to the “tacit description” that the cinematic image necessarily involves (ibid, pp. 38-40). That is, unlike literary narrative where plot progression may be temporarily “suspended” or “paused” for the sake of describing selected particularities of setting, atmosphere, character and so on, description in the cinema most often occurs tacitly, as a byproduct of plot action (ibid, pp. 38-43).

According to Chatman, then, explicit cinematic description occurs when story time is temporarily “suspended”, something intuitively contrary to the “temporal demands of the medium” in which “screen time moves inexorably forward” (ibid, 41-42). Thus, an explicit form of cinematic description requires formal narrative “lingering,” or “prowling” for details, either through special effects, like slow-motion, or through camera movements, shot duration and cutting that is unmotivated by plot-progression (ibid). Explicit cinematic description then requires story time to halt, while narrative discourse (or screen time) continues. Again, as Chatman argues, “film cannot avoid a cornucopia of visual details, some of which are inevitably “irrelevant” from the strict plot point of view”, but to make these details explicitly relevant requires the subordination of story time to the particularities of the image (ibid, p. 40).

This notion of explicit description in cinema is especially productive for understanding how these films tell their stories. Tropical Malady and Blissfully Yours are replete with forms of narrative pause, where images are temporally unmotivated by plot action. In such a challenging auteur cinema as this, one that so adamantly resists over-
determining interpretive maneuvers, what can be more certainly posited is an aesthetic value-system that favors the sensual cinematic description of quotidian social rhythms, the mysteries to be found in appreciating the primordial or mystical durations of “wild” spaces, overall textual openness and cultural complexity over coherent storytelling and unfurling narrative action.

Blissfully Yours (see Figure) tells the story of Min, a Burmese immigrant living illegally in Thailand, and his Thai girlfriend, Roong. The other central character, Orn, is a middle-aged woman who rents a room to Roong and helps care for Min while Roong spends her days as a factory worker painting Disney figurines. Min is a “threshold person;” an illegal alien who does not speak Thai, he is undocumented, has no position, no voice. He is liminal: “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law” (Turner 2004, p. 80). The three characters are only very loosely developed, established primarily through the subtle suggestion of loss and quiet psychic pain. Orn toils unhappily at her factory job, and Roong mourns the loss of a child, appearing to compensate for her deep sense of loss through an extra-marital affair. The first part of the film is set within the characters’ work and social worlds assigned spatially to industrial Thailand, while the second part of the film is set in the border jungle with Burma, where the characters commune with nature and escape their worldly burdens.

Tropical Malady works similarly as a two-part structure, the first part “social” in constitution, the latter part a disintegration of the social rooted in the dark, primordial dream-time of the jungle’s mystical durations. The Thai-language title of Tropical Malady, Sud Pralad, translates roughly as “strange animal” or “monster” (see Figures). Presumably the title suggests a double meaning, referring at once to the figure of the
tiger-shaman in the film’s latter part, and to a challenging narrative style that resists classification. *Tropical Malady* is a film of peculiar non-narrative textuality working to conjure primitivistic or mystical temporal orders in times when they are increasingly difficult to imagine, much less inhabit, and yet, perhaps for this acquiring greater urgency as aesthetic and representational themes in world cinema. The film demonstrates an extraordinary form of cinematic “description” by way of its suspensions of story action, in turn affecting the significance of its culturally marked spatial and environmental sites within which the narrative discourse is enacted. *Blissfully Yours* also favors a form of narrative stasis and atmospheric “lingering” over conventional causal plot development. In their eschewing of classical cinematic values, offering instead an appreciation of the unknowable, of border forms and subjects, and perhaps most substantially, other phenomenological durations, the monstrous serves as a convenient metaphor for these narrative forms.

Figure 39: *Blissfully Yours*, publicity posters
The first part of *Tropical Malady* depicts the casual development of a relationship between Keng, a soldier, and Tong, a peasant boy who works in town as an ice-cutter during the day and then returns to his parent’s farm in the evening. They meet when Keng’s patrol unit finds a dead body in the area of Tong’s farm. They begin to spend time together and a mutual attraction is evident. Their tender intimations of attraction provide the central basis for engagement in part one, framed within a style of casual, observational accounting of Thai daily life. Their flirting is erotic, but understated and even de-sexualised, resembling at times a form of animalistic curiosity, mutual exploration and companionship more than it does normative conventions of romance or relationship intimacy.

Figure 40: *Tropical Malady*, publicity posters

One hour into *Tropical Malady*, having witnessed this meandering description of two men sensuously exploring each other’s worlds in a largely social backdrop, the
screen goes black for a cinematic eternity (15 seconds), and then commences a new story of a soldier hunting a tiger-shaman in the jungle. In *Tropical Malady*’s first part, forward narrative momentum yields to a simple observational view of cultural details from Thai daily life, fundamentally organized around the pleasures of lingering looks at faces, in the quotidian rhythms of work and play, in social communion and in its other – isolation. The film’s latter portion, however, gives way to a mystical exploration of one soldier’s submission to, and transformation within, the “wild” space of the jungle and its supposedly mystical forces.

In *Tropical Malady*, the demarcation of two separate but interpenetrating stories asks viewers to produce their own synthesis. They are not exactly two halves of a unified whole, as the film remains resolutely “open” in the end, but neither are they quite sufficient on their own. The continuities and disjunctures between story parts – a dialectic of formally opposed but thematically and emotionally interrelated forces – are the basis of *Tropical Malady*’s intellectual rewards. Related to this is a formal blurring of fiction and non-fiction modes, striking a delicate balance between presenting a documentarian’s sensory-oriented description of Thai rural and village cultural life without quite becoming full-fledged documentaries, and fictional premises without the films becoming wholly fictional narrative features. And yet somehow each mode would be anemic without the other given the structural manner in which the films conflate them. Without conventional character or plot development, the descriptive quality of their life-worlds – the sensual acts they participate in, and the urban and rural environmental atmospherics they relate to – are the most tangible elements. The non-narrative description of life worlds is enacted through the use of static framings, long-take
cinematography, single-shot sequences, understated “performances” by social actors (many non-professional actors) and a sound design that renders environmental ambience on an equal (and often greater) plane as character dialogue. Characters break the fourth wall by looking at the camera, and shot durations linger without any appreciable sense of character exposition or plot action. There is almost no use of eye-line match cuts that facilitate viewer identification with characters. Additionally, characters are often framed in extreme long shot, positioning them as subordinate to their environments, something that takes on greater significance in the latter, jungle episodes of both films. And because characters are so hazily drawn and plot motivations largely absent, the inhabitation of cultural atmospherics and symbolically marked spaces acquire a schematic significance over the course of the film. For these reasons I would characterize the films as both eco-cinematic (defined in Chapter 2) and quasi-ethnographic, the implications of which I discuss further at the end of this chapter.

**Art Film Poetics and Border Subjects**

In aesthetic terms *Tropical Malady* and *Blissfully Yours* reside somewhere at the intersection of avant-garde / experimental, narrative film and documentary modes of production. The “art film” is one label, another is “modernist,” although the latter is fraught with irresolvable debates as to whether it constitutes a historical phenomenon or merely a set of aesthetic and narrative procedures (Kovács, 2007, pp. 11-14). Either way, Apichatpong’s films shares certain features of these “art film” categories. David Bordwell’s argument that the “art film” is a generic mode of production with its own set of storytelling conventions and accordant viewing “procedures” points to the “loosening” of the “cause-effect linkage of events” as one of its key features (1979, p. 717). *Tropical
Malady and Blissfully Yours share many other “art film” narrative conventions outlined by Bordwell, such as: an emphasis on realism, naturalism, unconventional plot “manipulations”, “authorial expressivity”, “drifting episodic quality”, “maximum ambiguity” and so on (ibid, pp. 716-721).

Apichatpong has admitted that his formal education at the Art Institute of Chicago – which introduced him to modernist avant-garde and experimental filmmakers such as Andy Warhol, Bruce Bailie, Hollis Frampton, and Marcel Duchamp – has influenced his storytelling mode. He explains that Tropical Malady is a “structural film”, (referring to the 1960s American experimental film movement) but “different”; “I always keep the classic experimental filmmakers up on a pedestal, but I am really losing touch with new developments in the field” (as qtd in Römers, 2005, p. 43). We can see a clear “anti-narrative sentiment” (Smith, 2000, p. 13) of structuralist-materialist filmmakers in both films. We also witness in these non-narrative forms characteristics of modernist art cinema, like the use of “pure optical and sound situations” in which images do not “imply any imminent action” (Kovács, 2007, p. 42). Storytelling for Apichatpong, like so much of modernist art cinema, is rooted in the depiction of mental states, dreams, memories or what Kovács more generally refers to as “psychic landscape” (ibid, p. 149). Yet despite the obvious affinities, these films are not plainly derivative of such earlier aesthetic movements, but a cosmopolitan admixture of materials drawn from Euro-Western film idioms and a rich mix of Thai culture collecting and subjective experience.

Another important historical frame of reference for Apichatpong’s films is that they reflect a consistent thematic concern with border forms and subject, such as: immigrants, women, laborers, homosexuality, and human / non-human boundaries, that are
characteristic of the thematic concerns of postcolonial, diasporic and “Third Cinema”
counter-discourses. Consider again Blissfully Yours’ central border character, Min, a
Burmese immigrant. Min’s deteriorating skin is itself a (corporeal) border motif; the
deterioration of his body’s physical boundary is a symbol of the deleterious effects of
national boundaries on his situation. Or, we might say that his skin is a symbolic motif
mirroring the human dissolution of national boundaries, and the national boundaries
dissolution of humans. In one especially poignant scene, Min is held in the river, floating
on his back, peeling the flaking skin from his body. The scene is ritualistic, akin to a
baptism, coding Min as a liminal entity amidst a greater rite of passage. Eyes closed, we
briefly hear Min’s inner monologue in voice-over, only to be overwhelmed by the jungle
acoustics. The rhythmic drone of insects and other jungle sounds is the film’s
predominant acoustic element. The eclipse of Min’s voice by the ambient sounds of
jungle indicate the importance not of exposing the character’s thoughts or point of view,
but instead to formally describe the interpenetrations of the internal (psychic) and
external (ecological), ascribed here more broadly within the dialectic of the “social” and
the “natural”. That is, what appears to be most important in this cinematic “description”
is not the content of Min’s thoughts, but the viewers’ awareness of his merging with the
non-human environment, and most significantly, the importance of recognizing deeper
connections between people despite differences in national and cultural identity,
endorsing an aesthetic ideal of submitting to the senses as a ritualistic means to
knowledge, healing and personal transformation, and re-asserting the “human” through a
mode of social transgression via the non-human environment.

“Primitive Passions” and Thai Tradition

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“I present nature in my films to evoke how our identity depends on clothes and other means of self-representation. In the Jungle, you don’t have to care about such things. It’s a place where your primal instincts are set free from a cage. And any reference to time is removed as well” (Apichatpong qtd. in Romers, 2005, p. 45).

Each of Apichatpong’s first three feature films, Mysterious Object at Noon (2000), Blissfully Yours, and Tropical Malady depicts forms of rural-urban tension. In the latter two addressed here, rural spaces take on the status of a sacred domain for escaping the oppressive structures of a modern social world, while in Mysterious Object at Noon, rural and village life-worlds comprise repositories of traditional cultural knowledge. Each stages rural-urban narrative tensions that problematize the globalization of Thai culture, and its corollary, the precarious status of traditional Thai cultural knowledge and values. On this latter point, Mysterious Object at Noon is more interested in the very conditions of possibility of traditional knowledge, utilizing the Surrealist game Exquisite Corpse to enact a collective storytelling project outside of Bangkok, evocatively teasing out the possibility of collective knowledge and participatory/shared national-cultural narration.

Apichatpong’s films, especially the two under discussion here, are largely organized around manifestations of nature sited to the rural, and the trope of “return to nature” that is common to many narrative traditions throughout the world. Although in this case, the centering of stories on nature and the rural must necessarily be linked to a specific discourse of modernization, rural development and a cultural “crisis” in Thailand tied to processes of globalization. For the filmmaker, the rural places depicted are of great personal significance. As a native of Khon Kaen in Northeast Thailand, Apichatpong has lived through the most rapid period of modernization and cultural rupture in Thailand. In an interview for Cineaste magazine with Holger Romers, Apichatpong responds to the question of whether or not he thinks “the rural depictions might not be perceived as
exotic to outsiders” by claiming that this is simply “the environment I grew up in – I want to capture the transformation of that rural area” (qtd. in Romers, 2005, p. 45).

On the one hand the place of nature in these stories is impossible to separate from its larger symbolic cultural status in Thailand; on the other, we must not lose sight of how they are configured in a highly personalized way (as suggested in the quote at the outset of this section). In addition to Apichatpong’s awareness of rural transformation in Thailand due to economic development, his stories are also very much interested in an artistic experimentation that interrogates how the “social” and the “natural” constitute each other, and the possibilities for communing with one spatio-temporal field at the expense of the other. Following Blissfully Yours, Tropical Malady represents a progressive deepening of this aesthetic inquiry into the possibility of a “natural”, mystical, or “primitive” order and its ability to be represented cinematically.

While these stories are highly personal, quite often explicitly depicting memories and sensations from Apichatpong’s own life, they also represent the aestheticization of tradition so characteristic of “primitive passions” – what Chow labels a distinctive “structure of feeling” – represented in other contexts (1995, p. 42). Quite crucially, far from solely being personal aesthetic explorations of authenticity rooted in “nature”, the primitivism of these films is inextricably linked to the awareness of modernization, cultural crisis and a discourse of rural transformation in Thailand. Speaking from the context of Chinese cultural transformation and fifth generation Chinese cinema, Rey Chow explains that the “politicizing of modern culture, too, is invested in primitivism. In fact, it is precisely when the older culture turns “aesthetic” and “primitive” in the sense of an other time, that the flip side of primitive passions, in the form of a concurrent desire to
invent origins and primariness, asserts itself” (Chow 1995, p. 37). And while Apichatpong’s primitive passions certainly have more bearing for a specifically Thai cultural context, this strong nature-social dialectic also exceeds such cultural specificity, as invocations of nature comprise a “form of the past used to deconstruct the present” which would appear to resonate with a Euro-Western cinephile audience largely responsible for elevating Apichatpong’s films to their current level of cultural prestige (ibid, p. 40).

Nature invoked in Blissfully Yours and Tropical Malady serves as a form of the past, or what we commonly refer to as “tradition.” In Thailand, tradition is most prominently encoded spatially through rural and village life. Craig Reynolds explains that local knowledge is central to debates in Thailand about the effects of globalization; that what is most threatened by globalization are “local customs, local practices, local culture, even local knowledge”, which was especially heightened following the 1997 economic crisis and the beginning of an age of IMF dependency (Reynolds 2002, p. 8). Debates surrounding the globalization of Thai culture took the rhetoric of an “authentic” versus a “synthetic” Thai culture, prompting the mobilization of a new conception of Thai identity know as phum panya, translated as “local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, native wisdom, local genius” strongly rooted in rural identity (ibid, p. 329). Thus Apichatpong’s primitive passions are in direct dialogue with such local conceptions of spatial and environmental significance during a moment of cultural rupture. Invocations of nature in these stories also derive from Thai Buddhism, another powerful source of relief from the anxieties associated with modernization and the incursion of a commodity culture upon traditionally agrarian life-worlds.
Buddhism is a paradigm of resistance to the, in many instances, deleterious forces of economic globalization, not only in Thailand but elsewhere in the world. A new age “reformist Buddhist perspective” has emerged in opposition to the harmful effects of economic development on traditional ways of life (Swearer et al, 2004, p. 5). Donald Swearer sees this as a “return to the fundamental verités of a simpler era believed to be embodied in an earlier historic age or represented by an idealized, mythic time of primal beginnings” (ibid). Where the spread of a money economy into traditionally subsistent areas has resulted in a shift away from traditional worldviews towards increasingly consumer-based subjectivities, Buddhism provides a spiritual model prescribing “plants, trees, and the land itself” as a source of “potential spiritual liberation” (ibid). The core Buddhist beliefs in understanding the source and nature of suffering, the virtue of compassion, and the renunciation of material wealth, closely inform the atmospheric intermingling of characters with nature defining Blissfully Yours and Tropical Malady (in the former configured as curative rituals), enacting a religious aesthetic or, perhaps even a cultural style. We witness this most overtly in Tropical Malady’s latter portion where intertitle tableau paintings of human-tiger hybrids invoke the mural paintings often found on the walls of temples, harkening back to an ancient tradition of Thai storytelling (Stephens, 2004).

Apichatpong’s films grow out of an imaginary society-nature dialectic functioning as a critique of the oppressive and marginalizing forces of economic development, nationalist immigration policies, and repressive value-systems, tending to associate liberation with the stripping of socio-cultural accretions and a return to primeval states of sensual awe, fear, and sexual pleasure. Wilton Martinez describes the concept of
the “primitive” as “both an essentialist presence – an “original” and “basic” form of life characterized by instinct and survival – and as a “lack” or regressive absence, signaled by a lack of culture, of development” (1992, p. 146). In Blissfully Yours primitivism is associated with the need for marginalized border subjects to heal through a highly eroticized integration with the “wild.” This motif runs throughout Apichatpong’s films where tensions are established between modern medicine and traditional folk healing methods, an awareness no doubt related to having parents who are doctors.

The primitivism of Tropical Malady is more rightly located in multiple appropriations of folktales and literature, resulting in a deeper mystical and magical-realist inflected storytelling project, or, what Chuck Stephens has aptly described as a “Buddhist-Surrealist meditation on storytelling” (2004). Tropical Malady is at least in part inspired by the jungle adventure stories of Thai novelist Noi Inthanon, but the seriousness and darkness of the film is rooted in an interest in dream-states and shamanistic and animistic inspired folktales, all intermingled with the specter of homosocial bonding and affection established in the film’s first part. Tropical Malady is arguably enacting a romantic-primitivism in the fantasy of ecological integration in which humans viewed as inseparable from nature. The film’s opening intertitle indicates these tensions: “All of us are by nature wild beasts. Our duty as humans is to become like trainers who keep their animals in check, and even teach them to perform tasks alien to their bestiality.”

The second half of Tropical Malady is a moving cinematic depiction of the transformation of a modern “social” subject into something resembling an animal state. And indeed, this principle is fundamental to shamanism and animism. Social integration,
As Alan Cambell (2003) explains, meant “shotguns and radios, hence an umbilical cord to the outside society to get hold of lead shot and batteries” (p. 114). As the second part of *Tropical Malady* begins, Tong enters the jungle with a shotgun, a radio and a flashlight for seeing through the darkness. By the end of his transformation these materials are meaningless. He loses one way of being by “submitting” to an *other*, ancient way of being. This transformation is configured as a dis-integration of communication between Keng and society. The radio transceiver Keng brings with him only transmits unintelligible voices overwhelmed by static. This same sound-design element is later heard coming from a firefly, and then again from a glowing tree like a supernatural antenna between nature and society. Towards the end, Keng finds his transceiver to be entirely dead. He is periodically seen peeling leaches from his skin, a sign of his physical merging with nature. He covers himself in mud to hide his scent and further erode his social status. The military “camouflage” he wore upon entering the jungle – emblematic of one socio-political institution and its uses for blending in (or “passing”) – become strange artifice by the end.

Perhaps it goes without saying that sexuality is a recurring form of “primitive passions,” something rendered quite explicitly in *Blissfully Yours* in the expression of a curative ritual. In *Tropical Malady* sexuality is at key points de-familiarized from its conventional manifestations through polymorphous perversion and human /non-human blurring by way of animal bonding motifs like licking and playfulness. Apichatpong has stated that the homo-social bonding in *Tropical Malady* is not a direct reflection on his own homosexuality, but this is surely a part of his creative imaginary. The depiction of sexuality in *Tropical Malady* turns on the diminishment of typical cues of modern
“human” affection by suggesting its as part of a wider non-human dynamic of relating sexually. That is, primitivism appears to be mobilized progressively in this respect to de-familiarize hetero-normative, human physical attraction, and to, in a sense, naturalize homo-social intimacy as something rooted in wild (i.e. natural) impulses and desires.

The temporal program of Blissfully Yours and Tropical Malady, then, subverts classical standards of storytelling action and narrative completion. Instead the films surrender to what I call a “sensational inaction,” a descriptive mode that enables the uncanny probing of “natural” and mystical durations so contrary to the postmodern pace of life with its relentless profusion of images and demeaning of stillness. More holistically, the indeterminate narrative structures find a fit here with liminal subjects, border spaces, and threshold states of consciousness. What conventional traditions of storytelling elide for the sake of order and more consolidated meanings, Apichatpong’s cinema recuperates to experience, something I argue has great significance with respect to mediated conditions of sensory stimulation, knowledge production, and spiritual life in our contemporary lives.

Rey Chow submits that “the weakening of the plot has to do with the distrust of storytelling as a means of arriving at the truth; it is the distrust of a convention because it is too conventional” (1995, p. 162). This opens the way for the descriptive lingering on characters in space, a “spatiotemporal integrity” which at times invokes a powerful realist ontology of film – a “romantic ecologism” one associates with Bazin or Kracauer – only to be complicated by formal and thematic turns toward the magical and irrational (Stam 2000, p. 78). Apichatpong’s cinematic storytelling is not simply “modernist,” “Thai,” or even merely “personal,” as it is so frequently labeled.
The breakdown and dispersal of ethnographic film practice through an intermingling with other classifications of film, together with a rise in indigenous, “third worldist,” and “diasporic” filmmaking, is what Hamid Naficy labels an “independent transnational film genre” (p. 119). Naficy’s grouping aims to rescue films from “discursive ghettos” such as the “ethnographic film,” by seeing works across generic classifications normally considered in isolation. Naficy maintains that “by problematizing the traditional generic and authorial schemas and representational practices, such an approach blurs the distinction, often artificially maintained, between types of films: fictional, documentary, ethnographic, and avant-garde” (ibid, p. 121). Apichatpong’s cinema might conveniently be placed within this sort of grouping. Thus a formal convergence between documentary, ethnographic “propensities,” and the art cinema is not that new and not so revolutionary at this stage in history.

As ethnographic visions merge with other film classifications, they meet a new viewer/readership, one that produces ethnographic meaning differently. And while the films discussed here are not scientific or didactic in the disciplinary tradition of anthropology, they still greatly implicate the political problems of cross-cultural reading. As Catherine Russell has claimed, “the history of ethnographic film is a history of the production of otherness” (p. 10), and while Apichatpong is not a self-professed ethnographer, the cross-cultural nature of his works, his relation to them, and the composition of his films’ dominant readership are significantly illuminated along the lines of “othering” and “becoming.”

By his own account he is concerned with documenting the cultural “transformation” in the rural and village areas in which he grew up, echoing “a central
premise of much of anthropology . . . that the native was already vanishing, and the anthropologist could do nothing but record and reconstruct” (Russell, p. 13). As I’ve made clear before, his exploration and representation of Thai cultural knowledge is different from the disciplinary ethnographer, yet his observational approach suggests a personal ethic of conveying an inside Thai worldview as a form of cultural knowledge, a fundamental objective of ethnography in general. This is even more pronounced since his films have found much greater purchase in cinephile circles outside of Thailand (especially in Europe) than they have within. (Which is not to say his art-scene accolades elsewhere are not a boon to other local Thai filmmakers, they are). What has been missing from the critical reception of his films is an awareness of how his films’ appeal may hinge on an ethnographic appreciation bound up in the “oscillations” of “becoming and othering” (Crawford, p. 69).

There is an idea that one reliable way of curing the colonialist, hegemonic, and ultimately “othering” ideological conventions of traditional ethnographic representation is by “handing the camera over” to the “natives,” locals, indigenous, etc. so that they may “speak for themselves” rather than us “speaking for them” (Russell, p. 11). And yet, while in some cases this has proven beneficial to local populations, it has also been criticized for perpetuating the same problems. Shohat and Stam echo this ideal of “self-representation” when they claim that “the mere desire to move beyond stereotype, however, is hardly sufficient; cultural and historical knowledge is essential” (p. 232). Russell contends, however that “the ‘authentic identity’ of the film or videomaker is not . . . a sufficient revision of ethnographic practice because differences exist within cultures and communities just as surely as they do between cultural identities” (p. 11). From a
vantage point of Western reception, foreign films made by indigenous filmmakers that tackle stories and thematics particular to their traditional societies run the same risk of stereotyping and exoticizing as did western ethnographic filmmakers. Apichatpong is caught in this insider/outsider complex as a native Thai art filmmaker working in Thailand with predominately western funding, western education and artistic influences. This is another way of saying that his personal identity is cosmopolitan (or transnational) and so is the nature of his film aesthetics, which puts him in a peculiar position to be speaking for, or speaking “alongside,” as Trinh T. Minha has described it, his native culture.

Banks (1992) asks the question of whether “ethnographicness” might be ascertained in the nature and formation of viewer response. If one can define the nature and existence of an ethnographic “response,” then the criteria required for constituting an ethnographic film are in the dynamic of product-reader relations, essentially indicating that “ethnographicness is not a thing out there which is captured by the camera but a thing we construct for ourselves in our relation to the film” (pp. 124-27). Since Apichatpong’s films are not framed as ethnographic per se, the sensuous dominates in reception. And, depending on the viewing subject, one can expect a range of readings, from “oppositional” to “negotiated” to “hegemonic” (Hall, p. 166-76). On the one hand, the “message” is a primitivist critique of the present: our contemporary ways of being and knowing in the world are inauthentic, artificial, spiritually bankrupt, commodified, virtual. These films suggest a recuperation of older ways of knowing one’s place in the world, or at least how traditional ways reflect on and effectively reformulate the new.

And yet the idea that this knowledge is intact and authentic and available in Thailand and
embodied in its subjects but is obscured for the West, is not without its potential for
reinforcing old primitivist stereotypes. An oppositional reading in a western reception
context might suppose that the threat to tradition and older ways of knowing is endemic
to Thailand as in the west. A hegemonic reading might view certain conditions of the
films as reflecting a society in which a lack of civilization or development affords the
articulation of sorts of knowledge we have moved beyond, but are somehow “natural” to
us, “universal,” buried in a primeval knowledge within the body.

One of the arguments is that Apichatpong’s films reflect an interest in juxtaposing
contemporary and traditional ways of life, which arguably enacts a “primitivist fantasy”
of ancient means to knowledge or wisdom. The structuring of narrative tensions through
a thematic of old and new (often configured in terms of a society/nature dialectic) are
generated at the experimental intersection between fiction and non-fiction forms, and also
by enacting an ethnographic mode of articulating one culture’s subaltern “other” to a
Western cinephile viewer. In the case of Apichatpong’s cinema, one could say that the
“ethnographicness” in his films is in large part a product of a cosmopolitanism that
implies a foreign (an “other”) reader. By working in a cosmopolitan film mode – not only
in the formal experimentation, but also reflected in the films’ foreign funding and
distribution channels – Apichatpong caters to a foreign audience, much like the
traditional ethnographer making films of foreign cultures for the western academic
reader.

Apichatpong’s success is then in many respects the result of delivering the exotic,
the foreign, the “other,” to the west in the form of an ethnographic or “cultural style.”
This style is defined in part by the sense in which the films’ attempt to represent a site of
authentic “Thainess,” insomuch as this site is discursively articulated (in Thai studies discourse, as well as in public life and pop culture) as rural Thai in opposition to city or cosmopolitan Thai. And yet his classification as a filmmaker is negotiated: if it can be shown that his films are intended to empower the Thai subaltern, giving them voice and directing attention to their way of life in Thailand and elsewhere, then we could label him an “indigenous” filmmaker (MacDougall, 1998, p. 96). And it is most likely this perception that enhances his reception in the west and encourages foreign funding—in some sense a kind of ideological patronage. So it would appear that the wider attention brought to Thai national filmmaking from his notoriety abroad is a greater help than any oppositional cultural critiques made by the films themselves, reinforcing the need to understand his works in their local/global implications. The ethnographic-ness of these films, and in general the reliance on documentary modes of observing culture, implicate the ideals of sharing, teaching, and communicating culture. Martinez (1992) claims that the “ethnographic film has the potential to expand students’ cross-cultural understanding and thus trigger new forms of consciousness” (p. 139). The next section considers this larger prospect with respect to that which the art film is often defined against, the “popular.”

“Art” vs. “Popular” Uses of The “Primitive”

By way of comparison I will consider whether the same assertions can be made as easily for a popular martial arts film from Thailand, Ong Bak (2004), which deploys ethnographic tropes in its own way as well. Crucial to this assertion is the (re)location of the films within a Western cinematic context, and the designation and distinction between two types of cinephile viewer. By contrasting a popular genre film, Ong Bak, which has
gradually become a cult favorite in the U.S. with arthouse “ethnographies,” we might begin to assess the potentials of art versus popular inroads to cultural communication in cross-cultural film viewing.

In the review earlier of related “ethnographicizing” tendencies of other East Asian national cinemas, we saw the importance of inventing and mythologizing origins through aestheticization of the past. Just as it would be overstepping to presume that these textual dispositions only cater to the needs of a Western cinephile viewer, they also extend to genres and modes other than the “art” film. “Popular” films also contain ethnographic tropes, or at least thematic concerns over heritage, “tradition,” origins and cultural roots often aggregated within some form of national-ethno-religious matrix. (It is also important to acknowledge that these are not hard and fast categories, and neither the institutional nor the textual separation between “art” and “popular” is always clear, and there is plenty of cross over). In Thailand, one of the most successful film exports in recent years was the martial arts series *Ong Bak: The Thai Warrior* (2003) (See Appendix A). At the other end of the supposed continuum from commerce to art, commodified to de-commodified, artificial to authentic, is the film *Tropical Malady* (2004) which won the Jury prize at Cannes. *Ong Bak* was successful in Thailand and abroad, and *Tropical Malady*, while garnering praise from local and international cognoscenti, exists under the popular radar. Each is also in its own way about Thai heritage symbolically expressed through rural and village spaces and associated values and beliefs.

*Ong Bak* narrativizes the commodification of Thai cultural heritage in a very literal way. An urban mafia ring steals religious relics from rural villages and keeps them hidden underwater in a fish farm until they can be sold. Ting, a young martial arts expert
from the countryside (referred to pejoratively by the gangsters as a “hick” in the translation) is forced to go to the city and recover a statue for his village’s religious rituals, rituals necessary for a successful harvest and cultural survival. In the case of Ong Bak, rural-urban antagonisms are arranged as such that Thai values, moral righteousness, and the salvation of the nation’s sacred heritage are attributed to a generalized rural-village tradition, as opposed to the corrupt urban gangsters that would just as soon sell the country’s heritage away for a profit. Tropical Malady on the other hand, as discussed, addresses folk heritage through the novel appropriation of traditional Thai folklore involving a tiger-shaman (a man trapped in a tiger’s body).

What we might call images of “primitive alterity” used in Ong Bak (see Appendix A) are comparatively without context, which is by disciplinary academic standards, a risk if not a failure. As Rony (1996) contends, a key tendency of ethnographic cinema serves to “situates indigenous peoples in a displaced temporal realm” (p. 8). In Ong Bak there are no markers industrial modernity in the film’s introduction, but rather a temporal isolation within an apparently pre-modern period and generic agrarian setting. Yet these images in some sense still mobilize or express group identities, and we can see why the identity mobilized by Ong Bak is so different that that by Tropical Malady. One is exclusive and one is inclusive. Ong Bak has fewer culturally localizing, and more generalizing images than Tropical Malady, and this is why the former has a wide or populous audience, while the latter has a rarefied, niche audience – the humanist cinephile interested in acquiring the authentic, conveyed through the cultural.

“Ethnographic contextualizations are as problematic as aesthetic ones,” Clifford (1988) observes. Nor are they mutually exclusive, but rather fundamentally imbricated;
the aesthetic is mobilized through the cultural and visa versa. Ethnography in the broad sense, then, is not just a field method but a stance of appropriation and classification which is part and parcel with the “systems of authenticity that have been imposed on creative works of non-Western art and culture;” it is part of a system involving “collecting and authenticating practices in contemporary settings” (ibid). Furthermore, it is “a mode of travel, a way of understanding and getting around in a diverse world” (ibid). Thus, in these senses, and those presented over the course of this chapter, it seems all too clear that the art film institution is implicated in these authenticating practices. Just as the disciplinary ethnographic film has the potential to expand cross-cultural understanding and introduce new forms of consciousness (Martinez, 2002), so too does the art film hold the potential to “promote cross-cultural understanding through film” (Global Lens, 2006). At the same time, the moments of cross-cultural contact involved in such cine-travel are ideologically unstable due to polysemic texts, diverse viewing subjectivities and dispositions, and other factors involved in ethnographic and aesthetic contextualization. Rather than mitigating or bridging cultural differences, these texts also hold the potential to promote essentialized notions of difference, reinstating older regimes of difference rooted in notions of “exotic” traditions as purer, more ancient, less dynamic, effectively excluding (or at least minimizing) local histories and narratives. Thus, within an institutional arena that often privileges aesthetic terms over ethnographic ones, an organization like the GFI might be understood as offering the potential for more robust ethnographic contextualization. For example, we see this in the GFI’s educational materials offered online, intended to accompany film viewing and ground ethnographic response in wider socio-historical and material contexts.
The central purpose of the GFI’s educational program is, according to its website, confronting “the challenge to find a ‘common ground,’ especially with those whose cultures and traditions are not our own” (The Education Program, 2014, para. 2). Despite being underwritten by ideals of cross-cultural empathy and informed global citizenry, ethnography’s terms as mode of travel and a system of authenticity are plainly evident in the GFI’s educational program. The narrative feature film is elevated as “the most successful means of ‘seeing the world through the eyes of others,’” through which “students are transported everywhere,” so as to “investigate universal and unique themes” (ibid, para. 2, 3). And yet, perhaps this is merely to make explicit what has too often been merely implicit in the context of the art film. Once this ethnographic status is embraced, it becomes easier to begin to remedy the potential slippages in audience response and interpretation rooted in stereotype and failures in socio-historical contextualization. Thus the GFI’s educational materials, while following the troubled tradition of ethnography, are endeavoring to do it responsibly by including, for example, “information about the geography, history and cultural setting,” and “post–screening resources for teachers, providing structured, theme–based discussion questions to encourage deeper understanding of the characters, stories and cultural context of the films” (ibid, para. 4, 5). Given the implied ethnographic function of many international art films, this is a step in the right direction. It is also significant as a point of reference for the privileged global mobilities now commonly seen on reality television (See Chapter 5), most of which provide far less socio-historical context (e.g. Last One Standing, Wild Boyz) at the textual level to begin with, and are thus more likely to reinforce stereotype and essentialism in line with the most damaging primitivisms.
The possibilities for ethnographic response along the continuum from “art” to “popular” is at best unpredictable, but some useful conclusions can still be drawn from the cases discussed here. GFI might be seen as evidence that informational capitalism and its facilitation of de-territorialized knowledge communities and greater access to virtual cross-cultural mobilities can work to encourage the art film’s ethnographic contextualizations and their pedagogical potentials which were previously only implicit or undertaken in more spontaneous, improvised ways by individuals and educators. On the other hand, the GFI’s catalogue of films represents but a fraction of the films that could benefit from degrees of greater ethnographic and critical-representational contextualization. To name a few cinematic examples from the past decade that could benefit from GFI’s acknowledgement of the art film’s ethno-graphics and a need for contextualization, there is, Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner (2001), Ten Canoes (2006), Cave of the Yellow Dog (2005), The Story of the Weeping Camel (2003), or Whale Rider (2002). In a documentary mode we can consider Werner Herzog’s recent Happy People: A Year in the Taiga (2010) as another example. DVD’s now regularly include extras that can aid this purpose, although these tend to offer more background about the filmmakers and filmmaking process than they do in promoting a wider understanding of a film’s socio-historical context and cultural specificity. Still, this is another instance in which primitivism’s semiotic resources are newly informed, possibly mitigated by digital, informational economies. Beyond such opportunities for greater contextualization and thus potential diminishment of the “primitive’s” symbolic potentials in the art film arena, there is a flipside to the convergence of new digital technologies with ongoing expressive utility of othering in terms of the “primitive.” A film like Beasts of The Southern Wild
(2012) is telling case for this discussion. Beasts has been subjected to a familiar critique as a racist, primitivist fantasy (Hooks, 2012), but also one indicative of the wider tendency described in this study of movement towards greater number and varieties of techno-primitive enunciations, determined largely by a new degree of ease in rendering (and distributing) techno-primitive verisimilitude via digital tools and techniques.

Beasts of The Southern Wild is one of those films that successfully bridged the realms of “art” and “popular,” and also reminds us that border crossings occur not only between nations, but also within them. Bell Hooks’ (2012) scathing critique of Beasts offers evidence that the “primitive” is alive and well in the popular imaginary, and also points to the particular romantic ecological character its enunciations often take in the elevated realm of the art, “prestige,” or “independent” film. In this film’s “ridiculous, macabre fantasy of modern primitivism” (para. 3), Hooks (2012) explains that:

Nature is the most compelling force in the world of the Bathtub. In this world there is no us-against-them mentality when it comes to human and nature. Instead there is an intimate merger so complete celebration of their collective feral animal nature binds everyone in a sacred contract; they are to resist domestication and civilization at all costs (ibid, para. 4).

Beasts’ primitivism is especially problematic in its focus on “Hushpuppy,” a 9-year old African-American girl whose survival narrative would otherwise be more urgent in its racial and socio-economic location were it not masked in a romantic version of child/female as primitive other. Here Hushpuppy is othered along several lines: as racial other, as socio-economic other, as gendered other, and perhaps most significantly in terms of the child as other. This constellation coalesces around the trope of intimacy and deep inter-connectedness with nature. This nature merger is not a romantic choice of privilege, but out of the film’s mostly unexamined and hypothetical situation of
positioning its characters in extreme geographic, cultural, and temporal isolation. The outside world (i.e. the state) bleeds over, but is rejected by those, like Hushpuppy, who live in the Bathtub, remaining defiantly outside of modern society (as other to their “natural” existence) and what it may offer (e.g. medicine, safety and security, etc.). It is this appearance of authentic integration with “nature,” the apparently “real” and visible possibilities of a more “wild” state of humanity (and one in our own national backyard no less!), and the manner of its romantic cinematic expression facilitating a virtual ethno-tourism, which is arguably so compelling. A similar argument could be made of other recent films aligning outmoded life-worlds with geographic isolation within the U.S., such as Winter’s Bone (2010) or Mud (2012).

In Beasts, interconnectedness to the natural world is uniquely facilitated by new technologies for rendering and visualizing – or (imag)ining – the “primitive.” Hushpuppy’s imagination becomes her means of surviving a harsh world, and it is the vibrant imagination of the “wild” child that the filmmakers are able to render in terms of a magical-realist art cinema (not unlike Tropical Malady). Largely left to fend for herself because of a sick and abusive father, Hushpuppy’s confusion, her physical and emotional survival is creatively conceived in terms of the primitive child’s powerful visions of giant, mythological beasts (See figure). This clearly echoes a now familiar, romantic form of modern primitivism in which the “other” is believed to have special connections and access to metaphysical forces of nature, thus offering itself as a potential source for our own revitalization / regeneration.
Figure 41: Beasts of The Southern Wild, Hushpuppy’s confrontation with the prehistoric “Aurochs”

Quite apropos to this study’s wider (media studies) scope, Hooks likens viewers (hypothetical) fascination with Beasts to those evident in television’s “everyday” survival narratives, as discussed in Chapter 5. She explains that:

It is the survivalist narrative that seems to most enchant viewers of this film, allowing them to overlook violence, eroticization of children, and all manner of dirt and filth. Just as television audiences remain glued to their seats watching the reality shows that focus on humans struggling against harsh unnatural circumstances and each other to survive, audiences of Beasts of the Southern Wild enjoy this same rush. As in these everyday television survivalist narratives, humans in the film are both at one with nature even as they are potential victims of a harsh natural world that respects no categories of race, class, or gender (ibid).

The film also enacts a version of popular social Darwinism’s “survival of the fittest” mentality which, though effectively masked in terms of the nobility and universality of the resilient human (child’s) spirit, conveys the message that “only the strong survive” (ibid), part of a larger ideological formation underwriting domination and inequality.

It should be clear by now that the semiotic terms of Beasts’ primitivism are especially problematic for how closely they resemble an earlier social-evolutionary sense
of the “primitive,” one that treated it as an “object” (anthropological or otherwise). Quite crucially here, I offer as a concluding point, that *Beasts*’ (and *Tropical Malady*’s) primitivism relies on a strategic and technologically informed blurring of the codes of realism and fantasy, documentary and fiction, in which the former appears to be the permission, justification, or mask for the latter. Because of *Beasts*’ fantastical/fictional framework, the filmmakers are apparently ideologically unfettered to indulge primitivist fantasy in an otherwise very documentarian impulse. In fact, the film derives its novelty and cultural currency by bridging this very distinction – commodity innovation through the productive use of difference – combining surrealist visual fantasy (rendered realistically with the aid of digital compositing) with an ethnographic documentarian logic of capturing socio-culturally “authentic” subjects in situ.
CHAPTER 6
LIFESTYLE & SUBCULTURE

Human Reclamation via Nature: The Case of Parkour

“In some sense, Parkour has been around as long as man's need to hunt and avoid being hunted” (Origins, n.d.).

“In a lot of ways, Parkour is a means of reclaiming what it means to be a human being. It teaches us to move using the natural methods that we should have learned from infancy” (Andy Tran, 2007).

As the opening quotes indicate, Parkour presents an interesting case study for considering the “primitive” and “natural” as a flexible symbolic resource taken up spontaneously by certain subcultures looking to explain the underlying basis or origins for what they do. It is also a distinct case of one subculture’s distinct enunciation of a (self) primitivism, reflecting again the recurring individual and social need to challenge boundaries of normative behavior, marked discursively by an association with the terms of a popular (if hypothetical) atavism. For the uninitiated, American Parkour defines the practice as:

Parkour is the art of moving through your environment using only your body and the surroundings to propel yourself. It can include running, jumping, climbing, even crawling, if that is the most suitable movement for the situation. Parkour could be grasped by imagining a race through an obstacle course, The goal is to overcome obstacles quickly and efficiently, without using extraneous movement. Apply this line of thought to an urban environment, or even a run through the woods, and you're on the right path. Because individual movements could vary so greatly by the situation, it is better to consider Parkour as defined by the intention instead of the movements themselves (Is Parkour the act or the training? n.d.).

Merriam-Webster dates the first use of the term to 2002, defining it as: “the sport of traversing environmental obstacles by running, climbing, or leaping rapidly and efficiently” (Parkour, n.d.). While Parkour is, in philosophy, not relegated to any particular landscape, it is taken up mostly in urban and suburban landscapes. It is often
associated with the behavioral notion of the “flight” response (with all of its socio-biological implications) which apparently stems from Parkour’s basic philosophy that, more important than the outward appearance of movements (though form and especially economy of movement is very important here) is the “intention” of getting from one point to another as quickly and efficiently as possible. In this respect, American Parkour qualifies their definition by stating that, “if the intention is to get somewhere using the most effective movements with the least loss of momentum, then it could probably be considered Parkour” (ibid). Thus, especially in its earlier years (i.e. early 2000’s), Parkour was often viewed in terms of a performative interpretation and enactment of a natural survival mechanism that is no longer necessary (i.e. “useful”, or having use value) in modern life.

Founded by David Belle and Sébastien Foucan in France during the late 90’s, Parkour’s philosophy and practical history can be traced further back to Georges Hébert’s “méthode naturelle” used in training the French military, which was at least in part inspired from observing indigenous populations in Africa. This came to David through his father, Raymond Belle, a French soldier during the Vietnam War looking for more efficient ways “to reach or escape” (Origins, n.d.). He drew from Hébert, who had observed tribal populations in Africa, observing that “their bodies were splendid, flexible, nimble, skillful, enduring, resistant and yet they had no other tutor in gymnastics but their lives in nature” (as qtd. in Wilkinson, 2007). This idealization of the physicality of a tribal community, their (blurred) relation to the natural world, and a partial erasure of “culture” (“no other tutor... but their lives in nature”) is characteristic of primitivism. Sebastian Foucoun, the founder of Free Running, (a similar, if now philosophically
differentiated practice), echoes this nostalgic primitivism, stating that freerunning “is more than training, it’s relearning what we’ve lost” (Foucoun). American Parkour employs the terms of a liberatory ideal as a recuperative atavism – invoking the ancestral environment of evolutionary psychology, in which one is introduced to:

[C]omplete freedom from restraining obstacles, and it is this freedom amidst the routine and regimentation of much of modern society that makes parkour very appealing. . . . In fact, it is the form of movement that our ancient ancestors may have used to hunt for food, or escape from predators on the plains of Africa. There is certainly an instinctual quality to it. . . . In practicing parkour, we are reviving and honing that ancient instinct (American Parkour, n.d.).

I chose Parkour for the concluding case study because of what can be viewed as an internal contradiction within this new (youth-centered) “knowledge culture” (Jenkins, 2004), one uniquely predicated on the immediate (in-person), often adopting a rhetorical appeal to (pre-modern) “nature” as a form of nostalgic primitivism in its “philosophical” explanation for itself. The internal contradiction, I contend, is Parkour’s configuration – possibly even a prefiguration – within a commercial entertainment (mediated) action genre. That is, parkour is a contemporary case which draws on a “pre-modern” imaginary of a “natural” humanity, understanding itself in certain forums as rooted in a primal “human reclamation” response to hypermodernity, despite certain evidence of the practice as an outgrowth and partial reflection of our post-industrial information economy (i.e. digital, inter-textual, urban, and inter-medial). Parkour should also be considered in terms of its status as an enactment of sensational kinesthetic tropes prefigured in martial arts and action cinema, video games, and even comic books. As much as it may be appealing to follow the romantic notion of Parkour as human-nature reclamation (discussed further below), it is hard to completely ignore the visual/formal affinities between the practice, how it is documented and spread online, and the aforementioned
spectacular action genres. The digital flows and spread of Parkour from the margins into the mainstream can also be posited as a form of new media labor (i.e. communication as means of production, see Jhally, 1987) appropriated for its surplus value by corporate media, functioning in this respect primarily to reinvigorate realism in action genres, especially those relying on that most integral of action film tropes – the chase sequence. This was seen most conspicuously early on in its appropriation by the Bond franchise (Casino Royale, 2004), as well as a number of other movies (District B-13, District B-13: Ultimatum, Prince of Persia and most recently Brick Mansions), and more recently has found a place in lending believability to kinetic action in video games (Mirror’s Edge, Assassin’s Creed). Parkour has also appeared in advertisements for Scion cars, the BBC, MTV, Nike, and Canon, to name a few.

Thus, recourse to “nature” and primitivising discourses are once again seen manifesting themselves for the purposes of bolstering (at least partly) an illusion of holism, of a cultural practice, genre, or textuality as “authentic” and thus capable of aiding the individual’s (hypothetical) transcendence of the capitalist commodity spectacle. While all of the sites under discussion thus far, it should be clear by now, are highly contingent and imbricated with antecedent texts, genres, narratives modes, and representational systems of authenticity, I argue that Parkour presents a special case of a new knowledge community which mimaetically draws a formal kinesthetic repertoire from forms of mediated commercial action in its (often ethical) appeal to the (im)mediate or unmediated. I treat parkour on its own professed ontological terms (i.e. those of its founders and practitioners, some of which are stated above), attempting to put these in tension with an under-examined contingency in parkour’s make-up – its commercial
precursors – that goes some way in undermining a romantic primitivism which serves as its system of authentification. However, in the interest of not making totalizing or overly deterministic (and pessimistic) claims about parkour’s status as embedded in the commodity form before it was even “parkour,” there should be room left open for possibilities and moments of transgressing or transcending the trappings and limitations of “modern” existence. So, while I draw here from many of the statements and discussions of parkour available online, placed in dialogue with both commercial and “independent” texts and images which constitute so much of the practice’s global discourse, I also chose to conduct interviews with practicing “traceurs” from a large public university’s student parkour organization. While there are many interviews and discussions online to draw from, the goal of the interviews is to further allow for the agency and subjectivity of those who practice parkour (also known as “traceurs”), which textual, institutional, and political economy modes of analysis are less well suited to accommodate.

It is necessary to consider further the way in which Parkour is filtered through an authenticizing discourse relying on appeals to the “natural,” an eco-centric position blurring the boundaries between human and animal, in order to revitalize the “human” through the transgression and/or transcendence of its own terms. Moreover, how do the terms of a kind of “nature” reclamation – recuperating an evolutionary “usefulness” as a rebuke of the potentially stifling and limiting options of being (physically) “useful” in modernity – relate to more recent discussions on the appropriation of socially “useful” or relevant things (in the political economic sense of “use” value in commodities) into the commodity form for the purposes of extracting surplus value in the marketplace? In the
case of Parkour, this implicates several forms of convergence facilitated by advancing
digital technologies and internet infrastructures over the last decade which in turn has
changed the way political economists now understand what constitutes “labor”, processes
of commodification, and the symbolic codes which help give those commodities
particular meanings.

Uncivilized in the City

In an interview for *The New Yorker*, David Belle reflects on the initial inspiration
he took from animals at the zoo, and also in terms of his own impulse to challenge
socially determined boundaries between humans and wildlife:

> It’s just intuitive. My body just knows if I can do something or not. It’s sort of an animal thing. In athletics, they have rules . . . everything has a procedure, but I never did it that way. . . . I was at a waterfall one day, and there were huge trees all around, and in the trees were monkeys. There were fences and barriers around them, so they couldn’t get out, but I went around the barriers and played with the monkeys. After that I watched them all the time, learning how they climbed. All the techniques in parkour are from watching the monkeys. (qtd. in Wilkinson, 2007)

The continuum between animal and human performance is an aspect of popular
primitivism(s) I have taken up in previous chapters, and this instance recounts the
discourse’s work in helping people think their “connections between humans/land,
humans/animals” and their “relatedness and interdependence” (Torgovnik, 1996, pp. 4).
As a primarily urban and suburban practice, Parkour should also be considered in terms
of its creative defiance of not just modernity per se, but urban modernity in particular and
the global metropolis as an especially charged locus of meaning for primitivism’s role in
critiquing civilization by way of an introjected “nature.” That is, connections between
humans and animals, and humans and the land, are diminished (or at least qualitatively
very different) in urban spaces. Much has been made by social theorists on the
transformation of human subjectivity within urban environments, especially in the wake of the 19th century’s rapid industrialization and urbanization (of the general population). Georg Simmel’s famous essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), captures well the longstanding idea (among many) that urban life poses a challenge to defining notions of the “human:”

Punctuality, calculability, and exactness, which are required by the complications and extensiveness of metropolitan life, are not only most intimately connected with its capitalistic and intellectualistic character but also color the content of life and are conducive to the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign human traits and impulses which originally seek to determine the form of life from within instead of receiving it from the outside in a general, schematically precise form (pp. 328-329).

The sense of urban civilization’s force to exclude the “instinctive” and the “human” underwrites various iterations of the “return” to the nature, but in the case of Parkour we might say that it is instead a case of being “uncivilized” in the midst of the symbolic site par excellence of civilization. Marx’s notion of alienation is also often associated with urban, industrial modernity, stemming from the newly rationalized division of labor where subjectivity is fragmented, kept from a holistic or “natural” creative relation to the world, and alienated from the fruits of that creative labor. For Weber, alienation arises due to the “iron cage of repressive bureaucratic-technical rationality” (qtd. in Harvey, 45). David Harvey (1989) articulates this sort of technical rationality in the context of the modernist architectural and urban planning imperatives associated with Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, arguing that modernists “tend to look for mastery of the metropolis as a totality by deliberately designing a closed form, whereas postmodernists tend to view the urban process as uncontrollable and chaotic, one in which anarchy and change can play in entirely open situations” (p. 44). Strathhausen,
echoes this notion, claiming that the modernist impulse is “to bring order into chaos,” an ideal which “emphasizes the rational grid underlying the modern city, a kind of hard-wired skeleton meant to provide stability and allow for some predictability in an otherwise all too chaotic world” (p. 20). Urban street movements (like skateboarding or graffiti art) or merely perspectives, emerging at other moments, can be seen as enacting a similar re-appropriation and repurposing of built environments. For example, the 19th century “flaneur” is configured as an agent capable of subverting the hegemonic rationality of capitalist modernity. Gleber (1999) notes that “the flaneur works to resist some of the constrictions of capitalist modernity. The ambivalence of his perception and the errancy of his movement redefine the characteristic mode of modernity” (p. 26). The notion of errant movement and ambivalent perception towards the urban landscape is particularly apropos. The parkourist’s perception of the urban environment is also ambivalent, approaching it as, on the one hand, an overly prescriptive and (bio)regulating plan or script when simply adhered to; but then, on the other hand, with excitement for what it might represent as a space of possibility for the playful and creative transgression (if often quite dangerous) of its rational script.

“Nature” is of course still accessible within the urban, or by a short trip outside of it. Lewis (2001) has written about the significance of the rock climber in the experience of modernity, distinguishing between a “climbing body” and a “metropolitan body,” where the rock climber must leave the urban to find the “immediate” and the “tactile,” in order to engage in what Lewis labels a “corporeal subversive politics” (p.). At the same time, indoor climbing walls are now common in urban environments. The “natural” is now intentionally, even “rationally” woven into the urban fabric in many ways. One
thinks of course of parks, zoos, aviaries, botanical gardens, aquariums, parks, natural history museums, climbing walls, and swimming pools. Clarke (2001) says of human systems such as the city, “all open systems are permeated by inputs from other systems” (p. 14). Despite the early modernist impulse to plan the metropolis as a “closed form,” it would appear the postmodernist acknowledgement of “the urban process as uncontrollable” tending towards “anarchy and change” (ibid) is more accurate in light of parkour as a formal revolt to scripted urban flow. The traceur then, by repurposing the urban scripts inscribed through the neatly demarcated foot-path, retaining wall, stairway, rooftops and railings, transgresses the logics informing them to begin with. We might go so far as to think of it as a “re-naturalizing” of the synthetic, rational grid of urban space.

In addition to a rhetorical appeal to “nature” and the “human” in discussions of Parkour’s “philosophy,” the primitivist aspiration to cast off the constraints of “civilization” is also evident in this global knowledge community’s promotional and visual imaginary. For example, the names of Parkour groups / teams and their logos are revealing. There is “The Tribe” (http://tribalmovement.com), “Urban Instincts” (https://www.facebook.com/pages/Urban-Instincts/276474142470536), “Sky Native” (http://skynative.com), “Freedom Parkour” (https://twitter.com/freedom_pk), or – New York City’s first indoor parkour community and indoor facility – “Bklyn Beast” (http://bklynbeast.com). The equation of parkour with a generalized fantasy of freedom or liberation is coupled with self-primitivizing (i.e. self-othering) discourses related to promoting a way of life – or merely lifestyle – defined in distinction to a presumed normative state as oppressed, domesticated, and quite significantly as partial or incomplete. Both of these notions – the attraction to parkour as an “other-ed” way of
being (to distinguish oneself from the masses), and a promotional discourse positing the incomplete self— are evident in interviews and the visual and verbal discourses found online.

First, the suggestion of “othering” encoded in the visual culture makes sense considering that the repertoire of movements draws inspiration from animals, such as “cat walks,” “cat leaps”, and “kongs” (or vaults, like “kink kong”), etc. (See figure).

![Figure 42: “cat walk”](image)

Recurring visual motifs in the parkour community’s graphic imaginary frequently draw on the affinities between leaping, flight, freedom, and bird’s (or angel’s) wings (as some of the graphics are less indexical than symbolic in their renderings), but also social evolutionary motifs, like the “March of Progress” illustrations (similar to the UFC’s discussed in Chapter 3) highlighting the animal-to-human continuum (See for examples Figures 43-46). Although, as a relative term, the notion of “evolution” here is upended,
used in the pejorative for evolution from ape to human, but in the initial sense of “progress” for the traceur’s movement from cat to cat-leaping human (Figure #).

Figure 43 Figure 43: parkour bird / angel motif

Figure 44: parkour adaptation of “march of progress” motif
In interviews traceurs articulated an attraction to parkour as a way of distinguishing themselves, of individuation, and implicating forms of symbolic and social capital parkour brought into their lives. One traceur proposed, “I think the reason why not everyone does it is because it’s not normal, it’s abnormal,” but that, “I like being different than everyone else, I don’t like being exactly the same” (Donald, personal interview, September 14, 2013). Another expressed his reason for starting parkour in terms of a
gradual maturation into something more meaningful, stating: “[A]t first it was to have fun and feel like a badass all the time” (Ben, personal interview, September 12, 2013), and then continued on to qualify a much more spiritual motivation (which I address later). Both of these responses reflect the apparently common desire to differentiate oneself through parkour, but the specificities for symbolic self-distinction expectedly run deeper than this when probed further.

The attraction to self-othering was a clear pattern in respondents, and though cast in slightly different terms for each, these all equated in some way to a positive valuation in parkour’s organizing basis as a practice demanding the negotiation of (both literal and figurative) limits, boundaries, and potentials. I propose this discourse of limits might be productively organized along three main lines: 1) as a transgression or regression (i.e. of the social / civilized / rational); 2) as a surpassing (or a “super”) or exceeding (or an “excess”) (i.e. of the physical / corporeal / bodily); and 3) as a transcending (i.e. to the spiritual / metaphysical). These lines will of course intersect, and in traceur’s verbal articulations, multiples are often implicated in the same sentence, but their significance becomes more plainly evident in their implicit dualisms. For example, one traceur points to transgressing an implicit (social) “rule” through parkour and its relation to the (metaphysical) “human:”

“Learning to live in a world without rules of movement is something humans have lost for the most part. Walking downtown, no one is likely to see someone walking on walls or jumping on railings . . . Restricting movement is something uniquely human” (Patrick, personal correspondence, December 13, 2013).

Here the “human” is source and symbol of its own “lost” humanity vis a vis the self-imposed “restrictions” of a rationalized (i.e. human) built environment. But via parkour, the human is imagined to be capable of transgressing its own constructs, recuperating lost
elements of itself, and becoming “whole” (or in the vernacular of an individualistic, self-improvement obsessed culture, fulfill one’s “true potential”). While the codes of “nature” and the “primitive” here informing the content of these articulations (verbal and visual) can become muddled, testament to their increasing flexibility in a digitalized information economy, in the context of parkour they arguably never get used in the service of affirming rules, scripts, and rationality associated with the urban. One exception to this might be how the natural and artificial do become increasingly blurred with an aesthetic of complexity related to high-techne.

In interviews, some traceurs’ demonstrated an eagerness to invoke a “human reclamation” view in evolutionary terms, while others were more wary of framing the practice in such a way. The former were, not surprisingly, more likely than the latter individuals to draw connections between humans and animals, and to project a sense of human degradation in the contemporary state of the “civilization” which parkour can help restore.

I always feel like a monkey, messing around . . . We build these big cities and, the more civilization we have the more we lose touch with our primitive sides, and our hunter gatherer feelings, our motion – our range of motion in our bodies. You know, people are getting fat. So, bringing that back to, like, the whole urban aspect, here’s civilization, here’s the most distant we can be to our primitive selves, where Parkour kinda shoves that all back into the civilization. So, yeah, I can live in civilization but I can also train like a monkey and feel good about it (Jayme, personal interview, September 13, 2014).

A variant of this kind of response, while similar in appreciating parkour as an attempt to recuperate a loss, located the sense of loss not in evolutionary terms, but in terms of individual development from childhood to adulthood.

I think we’ve lost from when we were kids, not even from an evolutionary standpoint what humans have lost, but if you watch the way kids are on a playground, they’re always playing around with pushing their limits and doing
weird things . . . it’s even weirder when older people do it . . . getting back the sense to explore physically, in nontraditional ways, is the thing that we lose in time with age, just living life normally . . . that’s something we try to get back (Chris, personal interview, September 12, 2013).

Curiously, this same individual, when asked whether or not he agreed with the statement that, parkour “has been around as long as man’s need to hunt and avoid being hunted,” at first agreed and then later appeared to contradict himself.

I agree. Animals do it. We idolize squirrels. Humans have molded their environment to work for them, whereas animals work for their environment. Before humans started making the environment their own . . . It was always there. It [parkour] was brought back recently by people who just thought, well maybe I can do it that way again (ibid).

But then later on in the interview explained that:

It’s kind of a romantic view of the whole thing, the ‘oh, this is our instinct to do the move. . .’ It’s not necessarily like that, but to get to the concept behind it sort of is something ancient and natural I think . . . the vaults we’ve fabricated, but the mentality behind it is kind of a natural thing (ibid).

**Between Play and Display**

“You know, you can do this stuff in real life too.”  
(“Sarah,” personal interview, September 13, 2003)

Traceurs understand parkour most often as a form of “training,” but also a “relearning” of something lost in our deep past, rooted in survival and instinct. The romantic belief here is that one can re-access something natural, but which is not necessarily needed or productive in our (post)modern worlds. More to the point, perhaps, is that the transcendence, transgression, and transformation all appear to be discursively available here: in transcending the human (and becoming super-human), of transgressing the social. However, discussions as to whether or how much parkour succeeds at being truly transgressive are common in parkour communities, reflecting a tension between its rapid commercialization and its “philosophical” and aesthetic dispositions of freedom,
play, and no limitations. And part of the “freedom” implies no rules, regulations, quantifying, or other forms of record keeping which might be seen to as complicated by its institutionalization via capitalist logics of promotion and profitability. However, I think parkour has a greater claim to being a more legitimately transgressive practice, but that contained with these desires for difference and distinction, through transgression and self-othering, are the seeds of its own undoing. That is, parkour was, almost from its inception, instantly mediatized, globalized, and taken up within commercial commodity sign – especially where the “action” genre’s commercial utility most needed revitalization – realism. Parkour enabled a degree of action “naturalism” and authenticity that the film, advertising, and video game industries recognized immediately. I would argue, however, parkour was spectacular before it even began; or rather, parkour can be considered a mimetic enactment of existing genres of action spectacle, especially those featuring shared kinesthetic repertoires. parkour’s discourse of extending limits, pushing boundaries, and a ideal of “freedom” visible to anyone and easily coopted by the corporate commodity spectacle, might in fact serve to erode or contradict the terms of (human and social) revitalization by which it distinguishes itself from other physical and kinesthetic practices (i.e. gyms, ballet, martial arts, etc). To what extent is parkour a form of expressive “play” motivated by a desire to record and witness oneself as a sensational action performer? How much does parkour owe its existence to the media spectacle’s action tropes preceding it? Is it now as much a practice to be documented in spectacular ways? Was it ever anything “other” to, our outside of, this commodity spectacle? That is to say, if we accept that the commodity sign itself often now becomes the commodity – and thus is also the commodity form– and Parkour was always and already within the
spectacular action media “code,” then even the practice of Parkour (which is regularly, though not always mediatized in some way) is itself a commodity form? In the same way that, for example, youth watching NBA basketball—in which the commodity is the sign, that of the spectacular game transmitted to a living room—might then go out afterwards and (mimetically) enact the form, becomes part of the larger commodity spectacle?

I would like to close by resituating parkour within a transmedia feedback loop of kinesthetic and kinetic imagery, considering it as an enactment of fragments from prior sources, following the deconstructionist impulse of looking inside one text for another (Harvey). I have already considered discourses of alienation, and a primitivistic stance (if not practice), as an answer or solution to alienation. The other texts within parkour I wish to address are revealed by comparing still images and videos of traceurs to those of martial arts cinema, action films, comic books, and video games. Parkour has only officially been around for about fifteen years, and most of its practitioners are of a generation weaned on action cinema, comics, and video games. The explosion of parkour, and it is nothing short of this, is arguably due to Parkour’s visual affinity with spectacular chase scenes, improbable stunts, and near—if not supernatural—physical abilities seen across a range of popular media. Comic books and martial arts and action cinema came first, promoting imaginary kinesthetic play through identification and fantasy in viewers, and most likely direct mimetic play or enactment. (If the case of this writer is at all representative, then this must be true). Video games elevated imaginary play to something closer to a virtual kinesthetic play, permitting direct control and manipulation of digital actors, almost as surrogates or avatars for gamers, permitting the virtual enactment of kinesthetic and physical fantasies. I don’t pretend to espouse a linear
or purely technologically deterministic picture of the development of parkour, but rather suggest that it exists within a dynamic web of imaginary and virtual play, and physical enactment, drawing from the kinesthetic repertoire of this televisual action spectacle. This then takes us some distance away from both the explicit and implied primitivistic myths of origin for parkour rooted in urban spaces, the symbolic architecture of modern repression, containment, discipline, and alienation.

The first mass mediated proto-parkourists might be Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. In fact a comparison of Jackie Chan’s live action stunts reveals a great affinity with contemporary parkour. Martial arts cinema has become increasingly technified since the heydays of these two, largely inspired by an interest in replicating the wuxia genre that exaggerates real martial arts forms to the point of fiction, much like video games. With the past twenty years seeing an increase in the substituting of machine technology for human technology, it appears that we are currently amidst an impulse towards reclaiming the authentic human technique of the martial artist. We see this impulse, to name a few prominent examples, in the recent Bourne trilogy, and in the work of Tony Jaa in Thailand. Leon Hunt refers to this trend as the “cult of the real,” seeing Thailand “cast as a primitive cinema.”

But one need only look at the formal aesthetics of Parkour’s documentarians to see that the traceur’s moves are captured in such a way to highlight the most improbable and dramatic of flights, moves, and impacts. Still images chosen for internet inclusion are dominated by peak mid-air moments, often shot from low angles to heighten spectacle. One wonders to what extent parkour is performed for the camera, as so much of the kinesthetic actions of video games and movies are designed this way. How “primitive”
can something ultimately be if its design is, consciously or not, an outgrowth of a network of other (digitized) kinesthetic spectacles sold around the world?
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Commodity Naturalism and Techno-Primitive Overlays

“The mentality behind it is kind of a natural thing.”
(Chris, personal interview, September 13, 2014)

It would appear that we find ourselves in a heightened moment of what I characterize as “commodity naturalism.” In this study I contend that naturalist discourses informing commercial culture, especially those employing the terms of the “primitive” as a semiotic resource, have shifted with respect to a digitalized, informational capitalism. Arguably it is the quantitative condition of a sheer increase in image generation that makes the need for “difference” and distinction even more commodifiable – more productive amidst the commercial imperative to break through the semiotic “noise.” We can productively understand this condition at the level of global commodity culture with the concept of the “semioscape,” what Thurlow and Aiello (2007) define as “the globalizing circulation of symbols, sign-systems, and meaning-making practices” (p. 308). I have proposed here that the “primitive” needs to be re-examined as a potent and problematic discursive-ideological complex articulated at several key sites across this semioscape.

In a recent special issue of Visual Communication entitled “Difference and Globalization,” Aiello and Pauwels (2014) observe, “difference is often ‘performed’ in ways that are tied to the pursuit of symbolic capital” (p. 281). The focus of this study, difference articulated through the terms of naturalism / primitivism, has considered various degrees and forms of performative othering. Relatedly, the principle of the commodity-sign (as) form helps us understand the contingencies of ideology and
commercial culture within and across these disparate sites. For example, Chapter 4 considers numerous examples indicative of a wider techno-primitive complex in the popular imaginary of sport – one which empowers forms of performative self-othering in terms of the “primitive,” primal, or natural, but also crucially in a dialectical tension (and anxiety) with the artificial, synthetic, and high-tech. In this context, as with other sites, primitivism’s semiotic dualisms are strategically manipulated around a constellation of related tensions, between human and animal, human and machine, tame vs. wild, allowing consumers to publically signal their symbolic transgression of social norms. As I discuss more below, in these instances the market is exploiting subjects’ pursuit of symbolic capital through forms of primitive alterity/otherness which promise a transgression of the “social,” promising to put one outside or above the social, while paradoxically re-inscribing them in the capitalist social order through symbolic association and corporeal disciplinary regimes.

Sometimes these forms of commodity naturalism are backed by positivist discourses, science, or other emerging knowledge communities, while at other times they are clearly stemming from romantic notions and subcultural semiotics where the only promise of improvement is in terms of identity, not corporeal fitness. And sometimes these lines are blurred. For example, commercial recuperations of the outmoded, archaic, primitive and pre-modern are evident not only in MMA and parkour, but in the barefoot running movement, the “Paleo Diet,” “Caveman Foods,” and related throwback fitness philosophies like “MovNat” (Movement Natural), “Zoo Training,” “Animal Flow,” and the now ubiquitous “Cross-Fit.” We might even see them as some version of a “return of the repressed.” This commodity naturalism is underwritten by many of primitivism’s
anti-technological, anti-civilizational ideals for re-asserting (however hypothetic or imaginary) the terms of the “human” species. In the same vein as parkour rhetoric of species revitalization, MovNat founder Erwin Le Corre explains his anti-gym practice’s philosophy as "natural training,” which, he explains, “means something the human animal would perform in nature, for their survival” (2011). These movements are all predicated on a general philosophy that our corporeal, evolutionary status is far out of (temporal) alignment with contemporary modes of existence and lifestyle practices, which clearly has some scientific validity even if it is being rapidly exploited in commercially suspect ways. And yet it should be clear by now that recuperating the outmoded and pre-modern (i.e. pre-civilized, pre-industrial) is not a new phenomenon. What has changed, arguably, are the technologies for (re)producing this constellation of discourses, and thus the quality and quantity of its (re)iterations.

The underlying structures now governing the production and consumption of commodity naturalisms result in their greater graphic and symbolic flexibility, as well as their greater proliferation of signs. The term “primal,” for example, is not just in circulation within modernist fine arts, literature, new age ritual appropriations (e.g. mythopoetic mens’ movement, 1960’s counterculture), but also to sell animal food (“Primal Pet Foods”), human food (“Primal Spirit Foods”), and cycling apparel (“Primal Wear”), among other things. Primal Wear is another revealing example of the primitive’s new semiotic mutability (See Figure). Especially in the arena of sports, the “primitive” is now often articulated via an expressive techno-primitive overlay, configured as a merger between the body and the machine. Where, in the case of food, “primal” lends the values of wholesomeness, naturalness, and even a whiff of (sub)cultural subversion by
associational brand identity, it signifies quite differently for apparel which is worn on the body, and thus more physically performative (like MMA t-shirts). “Primal” serves cycling especially well (and sports in general), a techno-cultural physical practice relying on prosthetic extension (or substitution?), fundamentally rooted in a desire to overcome (or transcend) the body’s natural limits of locomotion, while simultaneously relying equally on that same natural machinery to power the other artificial machine.

According to Seltzer, techno-primitive articulations signal an advancing “double logic” of the prosthesis, one involving both “panic and exhilaration” (1992, p. 160). Sports’ mode of commodity naturalism, I argue, reflects an internalization of the more general terms of the techno-primitive, a simulated primitivism made possible by technologies of self-(re)production, a “moment of confrontation between bodies and machines” (ibid). Though not speaking of sport per se, Seltzer explains that the techno-primitive complex involves “practices of corporeal discipline that appear at once as a violation of the natural body and its transcendence” (ibid). Furthermore, the Primal Wear jerseys are emblematic of sports’ wider strain of techno-primitivism which envisions its mode of transgression through states of excess, both natural and artificial, human and (inhuman) machine, in which an unleashing, accessing, or a tapping into interior states is imagined to be possible.
Figure 47: Primal Wear cycling jerseys
The Primal Wear jerseys depict this confrontation in their pastiche of iconographies of the natural and artificial, and occasionally quite graphically (if not grotesquely) visualize these intermingled with fleshy “human” interiors. We are reminded of Baudrillard’s point about the violence of the image, and the violence of transparency in a social order with no outside – or at least one in which the interior is more often made externally visible. This relates to a far reaching commercial ideology of untapped / unrealized human potentials, exploiting a mythic or metaphysically inflected imaginary of attainable wholeness, always projected by the commodity sign but never attained, perpetuating consumer society.

While these commodity naturalisms and techno-primitive overlays coalesce more decisively around masculine commodity culture, clearly they are not consigned to one gender construct or another. For example, the banner for UFC 175 (see Figure) is a distinct techno-primitive articulation complicating the neatness of a “masculine primitive” designation.

Figure 48: UFC 175 promotional banner (screen capture)
Still, one might be tempted to point towards an ongoing “crisis” in masculinity while offering up explanations for this recent profusion of signs that indicate a renewed, often masculine-centric desire for (and accompanying commercial appeal to) the “primitive.” The wider shift from an agrarian (rural) to an industrial (urban) economy, among other 19th century factors, marks a clear point of historical rupture (Rotundo, 1993). Then, a shift from an industrial to a service economy, understood as a move from traditional masculine labor and usefulness to the traditional feminine, marks the next historical rupture (Faludi, 1999). Even during the financial prosperity of the 1990’s (in the U.S. at least), Susan Faludi observes a wider sense in which men felt “emasculated by the very forces that elevated them” (ibid, p.43). It stands to reason, then, that masculine “crisis” extending from the same “categorical shift” in men’s felt sense of usefulness and productivity stemming from transforming institutions of work might intensify over the course of the recent economic downturn, culminating in the “great recession” which we find ourselves slowly emerging from in 2014. Thus the growth of a reality television subgenre organized around the productive utility of male bodies, privileging outmoded (i.e. exotic) or archaic forms of labor, knowledge and skills for controlling and mastering the natural environment, offer inroads for vicarious pleasure and masculine identity formation appearing as an “outside” to market-defined identity. And, ironically, in this scenario the apparent impulse in commodifying such masculine primitive ideals lies in their appeal as one possible antidote to marketplace “emasculation.”

Another larger contention from this study is that the resilience of the “primitive” as a flexible symbolic resource for the popular imaginary is rooted in the highly relative (and culturally specific) ethical dualisms from which its creative forms of human
expression emerge. Thus it is still highly generative, especially as filtered and creatively reassembled (as pastiche) within popular cultural production, if also increasingly implausible when invoking earnest and reverent modes rooted in fantasies of its historical and material authenticity. This point highlights another key recurring tension in the cases of the popular “primitive” examined during the course of this study: its own ambiguous and ambivalent symbolic relationship to its terms as a socio-historical vs. a socio-psychological mode of (self) representation. That is, referring back to an earlier distinction (see Chapter three), the terms of the “primitive” implicate questions of identity in signifying through historical association (i.e. external, historical, often geographically situated ethnic, racial, and national cultures), and through psychological association. Or, in other words, the discourse signifies through external others and internal others. However, this might be more useful for theoretical purposes than it is for practical ones, since the promiscuity of signs means that the two strains are often imbricated.

It is also worth reiterating Elie’s concept introduced at the outset by reframing it as a question: Are we indeed at a post-exotic conjuncture? This notion of spatial compression and de-territorialization can distract from the discourse’s temporal operations, however implicit they may be. I understand the exotic not only in its etymological sense, but also in the temporal ascriptions that accompany it and signify with it. One of the fundamental ideological critiques of modernist primitivism is in how it “camouflages” the historical event of imperial conquest, a breakup of other societies and cultures which are then (symbolically and materially) looted and appropriated in terms of “art, affinity, dialogue, to the point where the problem appears resolved” (Foster, 1985, p.
199). If we are operating within a post-exotic condition, would difference still be used “productively,” as the cases presented in this study are? More to the point politically, if primitivism in its earlier manifestations involved a (mis)recognition and (mis)construction of the “other,” can we now remove the “mis” and posit contemporary popular primitivism as merely recognition of “others” (cultural identities) and their discursive construction on expressive and commercial grounds? I think not. While there are many senses of the “other,” some diminished but mostly transformed, I think there will always be a need in socio-cultural discourses to construct “others,” exoticisms, and primitivisms. But, does the proliferation and ease of othering thanks to digital economies and a wider condition of cultural transparency vis à vis “noise” and overexposure make discourses of primitive alterity politically unproblematic, or at least less problematic?

Consider, for example, TNT’s cross-promotion of the 2009 NBA finals with James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), a techno-primitive intermingling of African-American athletes with the fictional Na’vi characters (See Figure). The Na’vi possess many of the qualities embedded in primitivism’s appeal to tribal, “non-western” others, including the ideals projected upon them: a group living in spiritual harmony with nature; a non-capitalist, non-exploitative social order; and an idealization of physical prowess, sensory awareness and lifestyle habitus. Furthermore, as with the social and promotional imaginary of star athletes, the Na’vi are romantically seen as recognizably “human,” but also extending those parameters in terms of kinesthetic and corporeal abilities. However, the Na’vi are very clearly a re-iteration of the noble savage type, idealized and uncorrupted by civilization. Thus, a techno-primitive articulation such as this, one equating actual dark-skinned athletes with a fictional noble savage, invokes primitivisms’ racist colonial...
politics. And while the Na’vi cannot be harmed by symbolic misrepresentations since they are a fictional, computer-generated humanoid species, might the athletes? While there is no actual indigenous population to be mis-represented or mis-constructed here (i.e. an external or geo-historical other), I contend that a techno-primitive articulation such as this perpetuates equations between blackness and wildness – between race and the primitive.

One the one hand, it is clear from this study that individuals (as cultural producers and consumers) possess a certain skepticism and anxiety about encodings of the “primitive” in its semiotic appeal to transcendental truth, “reality,” and “natural” origins located outside of ideology. It is only “kind of a natural thing,” after all. On the other hand, there is still very clear evidence of a wider popular commitment to the primitive’s terms and uses, apparently rooted in capital’s appeal to romantic narratives and ideals of liberation (i.e. freedom) and psychic wholeness (i.e., in psychoanalytic terms, a state of non-repression or de-sublimation for the individual self). I want to propose that the convergence of advanced digital technologies and the semiotic resources of the “primitive,” under the torrential conditions of our global informational capitalism, are engendering a moment of techno-primitive proliferations informing the production of
masculine-targeted commodity sign/forms. I also contend that the various primitivisms examined here are unified in their shared enactment of a social imaginary of resistance through transgression. Resistance here is also a shifting variable, and one that is often contradictory. As a discourse of resistance, primitivism (as it was especially in the modernist art world and avant-garde) is imagined to be subversive and oppositional to whatever formation is normative or “official” (Foster, 1985).
However, I contend that, due to its encodings in the commodity sign/form – due to these ideological incorporations – the “primitive” is unlikely to act as an effective tool of social transgression, and thus is less likely to perform effectively in the service of liberatory or resistant interests. In the case of contemporary gender formation and flux, the “primitive” is veiled or “passes” as subversion and resistance. Contrary to its modernist art world ideals, with respect to masculine gender formation the “primitive” often serves as a resistance to perceived threats to hetero-normative (i.e. “official”) masculinity. And yet at the same time, insomuch as official masculinity finds an ideological fit with masculine primitive ideals, in an age of transparency it is increasingly available as a semiotic resource used to parody the dominant masculine ideals, and might be optimistically viewed as an ingredient in its gradual undoing. In this initial sense, reverent or pious expressions of the masculine “primitive” are very clearly working in the ideological service of the hegemonic in gender formation, veiling itself by appearing resistant to market-defined manhood; by appearing to subvert the (statistically) homogenizing conditions of capitalism. It does so by offering a discursive “system of authenticity” (Clifford, 1988), by empowering a symbolic (though not actual) transgression of the commodity-form through transgression and/or regression via “nature.” While the irreverent or impious stances towards masculine primitive ideals enacted through parody might appear to subvert the hegemonic, perhaps these should more rightly be seen as instances where cynical distance and laughter are actually just “part of the game” (Zizek), in which allowing subjects to stand outside of ideology is part of an ideology’s wider reach and social incorporation. That is, I view such parodies as an
accommodation that may actually help further secure and reinforce an ideology’s position in the social world.

Still, in a moment of heightened environmental awareness, I want to allow that the commodity sign/form itself may hold out some prospects for engendering greater eco-critical awareness (a market environmentalism), and thus possibly represent an act of resistance to capitalist depredations. That is, it is possible that primitivism’s necessary processes of cultural appropriation and looting, of othering and self-othering via signs of wilderness, can be active agents in a larger eco-critical project. Appropriating cultural forms and constructing the “exotic” and the “primitive” to aid us in “contriving transgressions” might be a requirement of our best attempts at de-familiarizing social identities imbricated in those capitalist depredations, and in helping to confront our social and environmental responsibilities by exposing assumed dualisms between human and non-human. If, as Hobden (2013) explains, “the essence of posthumanism is to challenge human exceptionalism,” which requires some manner of dissolving symbolic boundaries between human and non-human, then many of the cultural texts examined throughout the course of this study fit this designation (p. 175). A film like Tropical Malady, for example, that utilizes formal techniques to disrupt narrative movement and promote instead deep sensory immersion in wild environments, combined with the motif of human animal blurring, accords with posthumanism’s proposition that we “see the human as ‘of nature’ rather than ‘in nature’” (ibid). Parkour can also been seen as a recasting of the human as “of nature” in its “reclamation” of “primitive” child/animal-like kinesthetic play. Elsewhere, however, as with “Man vs.” television, the human is conspicuously (performing) “survival” in (and despite of) wild nature, reinforcing this ontological
dualism not by depicting man as “of nature,” but in his (however ancient) acts of mastery over nature. Or, put another way, these programs are not questioning the boundaries of the human but reinstating them through an assertion of species dominance or human exceptionalism in line with Darwin’s survival of the fittest. Still, examples in the imagery of commercial sports culture suggest that we are okay with blurring boundaries of human and nonhuman along the lines of the machine, of kinds of superhumanism, so long as these serve instrumentally in aid of human (however diminished it might be) power, control, and mobility. These also are surely not working in the service of promoting greater sensitivity to our imperiled ecological interdependencies, but instead reinforce an image of nature as but a resource for exploiting in human interests.
APPENDIX

VISUAL AND THEMATIC AFFINITIES BETWEEN DISCIPLINARY ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM AND RECENT ARTHOUSE “ETHNOGRAPHIES”

Asian Arthouse “Ethnographies”: Cross-Cultural Understanding or Privileged Culture Collecting?

or

Positing an Ethnographic Perspective in the Cross-Cultural Consumption of World Cinema

“Tradition is now often preserved by being commodified and marketed as such. The search for roots ends up at worst being produced and marketed as an image, as a simulacrum or pastiche—imitation communities constructed to evoke images of some folksy past.”

—David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity, 1990

Key Concepts and Arguments:

- **Shifting the location of “ethnographic-ness”**
  - From disciplinary intent, training, and particular field method, towards a perspective and/or cross-cultural viewing situation.
  - Repositioning certain “art” films within a lineage of ethnographic fiction and the terms of collusion between “discourses of sobriety” and commodity forms.

- **Acknowledging visual and thematic similarities across different cinematic arenas**
  - Seeing common “ethnographic” perspectives across “art” films and “disciplinary” ethnographic films (i.e. visual anthropology proper)
  - Shared motifs include: folklore and folk tradition, life-cycles, kinship, documenting quotidian details, primitive motifs, material paucity, harsh landscapes, geographic isolation (historicaizing affect: “the ethnographic present”), aestheticizing labor, movement between panoramic view and close-up.

- **Identifying two key viewing contexts for “arthouse ethnographies” and their implications**
  - The humanist cinephile viewer (in arthouses, festivals, and museums)
  - The student (in university classrooms and film programs)

- **Textuality and border thinking between “cultural patronage” and “commodified alterity”**
  - Hybrid textuality—deterritorializations via mode of production/aesthetics
  - Postmodernity and cultural collecting and decollecting
  - Or, in positive terms, “promoting cross-cultural understanding?”
Ethnographic films and arthouse “ethnographies”

- **Nanook of The North**. Dir. Robert Flaherty. USA, 1922.
- **Tropical Malady (Sud Praed)**. Dir. Apichatpong Weerasethakul. Thailand, France, Germany, Italy. 2004.

• The “harsh beauty” of the landscape
  • High frequency of long and extreme-long shot
  • Depicting geographic isolation, ahistoricity, and subordination to the natural “world”
Primitive religion: animating animism

Tropical Malady

Thick visual description of “organic” habitation
Depicting traditional butchering of animals

- "Natural" relation to your geography
- Horizontal movement and "natural" labor from a distance
The Scent of Green Papaya: thick visual description of food preparation

1. Fry the vegetable.
2. Remember, for this dish, the oil must be hot.
3. Fry the vegetable.
4. Burn it for flavour.

Continued...

5. Add too much or it gets all soft.
6. You do the same with the meat.
7. Pat makes the boiled vegetable shine.
8. Whichever looks nice or not, we eat it.
• The aestheticization of working hands
Popular use of “ethnographic” style imagery, or, “images of alterity”

_Ong Bak: The Thai Warrior_

ANTHROPOLOGIST  →  FILMMAKER

Robert Gardner, ethnographer / filmmaker, _Dead Birds_  
Rolff de Heer, filmmaker / ethnographer, _Ten Canoes_
REFERENCES


