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Hunting for the Sublime in Steven Rinella's Memoirs and Still Lives

David Lombard

Tracking (non-)human animals in theories of the sublime

- 1 In classical theories of the sublime, not all non-human animals can inspire respect, and none seem to be considered as equal to human beings. In his influential *Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, for example, Edmund Burke differentiates the “ox,” “a creature of vast strength” but not “dangerous” and “innocent” and therefore not “grand,” from the “bull,” which is “destructive” and “seldom” and finds its “place in sublime descriptions” (60). Burke fairly consistently associates features of the natural sublime (e.g., terror, greatness, inaccessibility, rarity, danger) with *some* impressive animals, rejecting the others as somehow unworthy of this aesthetic category. As Adam Phillips summarizes in his introduction to the 1998 Oxford edition of Burke's text:

Bulls are sublime, oxen are not. Wolves are sublime, but dogs are not. Kings, and God, are sublime, ordinary people, presumably, are not, because objects of contempt and use never can be. So the horse of ordinary employment has ‘in every social useful light [...] nothing of the sublime’: but the horse described in the book of Job that ‘swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage’ is ‘terrible and sublime.’ (xxii)

- 2 On the one hand, the sublime appears, in this extract, as highly normative when it comes to classify animals based on aesthetic criteria. On the other hand, when conflated with the beautiful, Burke claims that animals can induce “a sense of joy and pleasure in beholding them” or even “inspire us with sentiments of tenderness and affection towards their persons” (39). As Emily Brady argues, this distinction also relies on the fact that some animals are “wild” and uncontrollable, and thus sublime, and the others are “domesticated,” and therefore beautiful (25). For Burke, the sublime triggers “admiration,” and the beautiful results in “love.” The former relies on greatness, and

the latter on smallness, and “we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us; in one case we are forced, in the other we are flattered into compliance” (Burke 103). In other words, while beautiful animals are *submitted* and “inferior” (86) to humans, the contemplation of sublime beasts causes terror and admiration.

- 3 Kant's *Critique of Judgement* includes several attempts to articulate a definition of the sublime or sublimity, such as the following:

Sublimity, therefore, does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, in so far as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us (as exerting influence upon us). Everything that provokes this feeling in us including the might of nature which challenges our strength, is then, though improperly, called sublime, and it is only under presupposition of this idea within us, and in relation to it, that we are capable of attaining to the idea of the sublimity of that being which inspires deep respect in us, not by the mere display of its might in nature, but more by the faculty which is harbored in us of judging that might without fear, and of regarding our vocation as sublimely exalted above it. (94)

- 4 Unlike Burke, Kant defines the sublime here as “an attribute not of nature, but rather of the mind” which “transcends the realm of sensible intuition” (Shaw 82). In that sense, the Kantian sublime can be understood as human-centered and anthropocentric (humans are superior to the “nature without” [Kant 94] them) because it is a feeling experienced only by human subjects who become aware of their moral nature through the mediation of their senses. Kantians have not reached a consensus on Kant's stance on humans' moral relationship with animals (Camenzind 2-3), and Kant also alludes to, like Burke, a categorization of animal species that should or should not be protected based on specific criteria or “on the nature of the animals in question” (Kain 228). Kant's theory of the sublime itself follows such an unclear taxonomy, which seems to betray his intention to represent animals not as moral beings but as “servants of man” (205-6) to whom man's moral duties are difficult to confirm. For example, in his reading of the *Critique*, Robert R. Clewis argues that:

For Kant, we cannot have any duties to non-human beings such as minerals, plants, and animals. [...] We can, however, have a duty to ourselves *with regard* to other beings. Nature should be treated with something analogous to the respect we give to persons, Kant claims, but we should respect fellow human beings first and foremost. (143, emphasis in original)

- 5 While Burke's essential claim is that the sublime can produce a feeling of “delightful horror” (67), the Kantian theory conveys a “kinship between respect and the sublime” (Gadris 361), as also shown in Kant's definition of sublimity above. This respect, however, is not expressed directly toward animals inasmuch as the human moral subject remains its sole target (“we [humans] are capable of attaining to the idea of the sublimity of that being which inspires deep respect *in us*” [Kant 94, emphasis added]). Although Kant's take on respect is ambiguous, American (nature) writers such as Ralph W. Emerson, John Burroughs, and John Muir interpreted Kant's definition of the sublime in a way that led them to develop senses of reverence and humility toward the natural world, and even for some of them to engage in conservationist efforts. In other words, drawing on a passage from John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra*, Brady argues that Kant influenced these writers by suggesting “that the beautiful prepares us to love nature [...] while the sublime prepares us to esteem it” (111).
- 6 Brady is one of the few contemporary philosophers who have tried to redefine the traditional natural sublime into a version that would be more attuned to climate

change and to various forms of ecological disruption such as “mass extinctions, extreme weather events, and displacement of human communities” (186). What she terms the “environmental sublime” (117) suggests a conception of ethics that is part of the aesthetic experience of the natural sublime but which differs from Kantian morality insofar as it opens the way for a human view of nature as a potential alterity or community with which moral relationships become clearly possible. In literary and cultural studies, there have been in the last fifteen years a series of similar redefinitions of the notions which foster an ecologically responsible relationship with environments such as, to name a few, the “ecosublime” (Rozelle), the “toxic sublime” (Peeples), the “organic sublime” (Outka), or the “haptic sublime” (McNee). While the first (“ecosublime”) revises traditional templates of “awe and terror” to induce a “heightened awareness of the ecological home” (Rozelle 1), the second (“toxic sublime”) gives a potentially critical attention to toxicity in the contemplation of landscapes, objects, or situations. The other two notions (“organic” and “haptic” sublimes), for their part, highlight concerns with materiality as well as the possibility of developing an “embodied” experience of the natural world, and more specifically through direct “physical contact” and bodily efforts for the latter (McNee 151). None of these updated versions of the sublime, however, seem to specifically elaborate on the relationship between human and non-human animals, yet this aesthetic and ethical relationship can also be figured in terms of the sublime.

- 7 Building on James Phelan’s understanding of any narrative as rhetoric inasmuch as its author always “communicate[s] knowledge, feelings, values, and beliefs to an audience” (18), this essay will explore representations and descriptions of (dead) animals by means of the rhetoric of the sublime in two contemporary American memoirs. The sublime therefore becomes a rhetoric (or rhetorical strategy) in these descriptions inasmuch as they associate emotions and affects such as awe and reverence with animals in order to complicate and enrich the understanding of non-human animals as a form of alterity. More specifically, this article will provide an ecocritical and rhetorical/narratological analysis of these representations and descriptions in Steven Rinella’s hunting memoirs *American Buffalo: In Search of a Lost Icon* (2008; 2009) and *Meat Eater: Adventures from the Life of an American Hunter* (2012; 2013). As the host of the television show *MeatEater*, Rinella has become a popular, although sometimes controversial public figure because of his passion for hunting and cooking/eating meat.¹ The show portrays Rinella going on hunting or fishing trips with friends and occasionally celebrities across the United States, and traditionally ends with them cooking and eating their prey. Rinella’s adventures are, however, more than what their title suggests since he and the other hunters often engage in philosophical and critical reflections on the practices of tracking, killing, and eating animals. Focused on a more personal level, the two memoirs that will be discussed in this essay include similar reflections but by means of a memoiristic prose that specifically deploys the sublime as a rhetorical strategy for representing the hunted or killed/dead animals or their corpses and bones.
- 8 Describing animals in terms of the sublime contributes to the “transformative” project of the memoir that Thomas Couser identifies in what he defines as the “stunt memoir” or “shtick lit,” which accounts for “the record of a temporary experiment in behavior or lifestyle” and questions “the basis on which the authors and others conduct their lives” (13). Indeed, some of the recounted hunts in Rinella’s memoir can be interpreted as transformative, revelatory moments which lead him to reassess his perception of

and relationship with other species. What is more, because they require the hunter's active participation in the landscape, which goes beyond the distant and safe observation of a sublime phenomenon, these hunts complicate and enrich Rinella's senses of place and self.² As a result, these "stunt memoirs" may also be considered as "eco-memoirs" that "involv[e] the writing of self into place and place into self" (Lynch 119).

- 9 The genre of the memoir also shares narrative techniques and components with the novel, of which the ecopoetic and zoopoetic potential has already been pointed out by scholars such as Pierre Schoentjes and Anne Simon (Schoentjes; Simon).³ However, the main distinctive characteristic of the memoir lies in the fact that it is inevitably human-centered and descriptive of "an extra-textual reality" in a dynamic that "is actively constructive rather than passively mimetic" (Couser 55-74), which makes it a particularly resourceful site to examine the contemporary rhetoric of the sublime. It is, of course, almost impossible not to be contaminated by anthropocentrism or anthropomorphism, although to variable degrees, but this focus on the human self in the hunting memoir is productive from a zoopoetic perspective for two reasons: first, because it is "heuristic" (Simon 72) inasmuch as it seeks analogical similarities between humans and animals but through an approach that is constructive, almost aimed at representing humans and nonhumans as "coconstitutive" (Houser 3); second, because writing about animals and the environment, even from a human-centered viewpoint, can also help explore our "self-conception as a moral participant in the natural world" (Hodge 13). What is more, a memoir on hunting can also offer a different and imaginative take on the relationship between humans and animals.
- 10 In spite of all the flaws of hunting—e.g., it can be perceived as representative of patriarchy, and as a reassertion of the human species' dominance over nature—, writing about hunting can enrich the author's environmental knowledge and ecological awareness. In his analysis of Turgenev's nature writing, for example, Thomas P. Hodge argues that hunter-writers have the ability "to choose natural details with a hunter-naturalist's expertise and to portray human beings not as outside observers but as participants—whether they realize it or not—in nature's vast totality" (7), thus challenging the nature/culture divide that has also been questioned by the concept of the Anthropocene. While Rinella's literary production may not be compared to the works of the prominent American hunter/fisherman-writers that precede him, from Aldo Leopold and Ernest Hemingway to Jim Harrison, Richard K. Nelson, Thomas McGuane, and Rick Bass, he is nevertheless an *expert* in animals, or in the ways they, for example, move and live as social beings, feed themselves, or reproduce. The social aspects of these animals even influence Rinella's view of his own culture and society, which is especially readable in his historical and critical account of the mysticism surrounding the American buffalo. As the analyses of this essay will try to show, the animal as a "still life" is capable of "generating narrative motion" even after its death, because its "stillness [...] does not exclude the possibility of an event" (Schwenger 141-43). In other words, the killing and death of the animal, which becomes a "still life" itself, are productive of transformative meaning for Rinella, which encourages him to ponder over and promote a destructive yet respectful relationship with non-human animals.
- 11 In the next two sections of this article, I will first analyze and critically interrogate how the bison in *American Buffalo* both informs and challenges Rinella's sense of

Americanness, of his identity as an American (hunter), as well as his relationship with non-human animals, and how this 'self-transformation' materializes (or becomes paradoxical) in a few other accounts of more general hunts described in his more recent memoir *Meat Eater*, which also presents the particularity of representing hunting as a form of religion. The two memoirs work together to shed light on the potential of dead animals as meaningful still lives for producing reflections on how a respectful relationship between human and non-human animals can emerge through hunting. Besides, the analyses from the next sections will point out some of the affordances and limits of the memoir (on hunting) for studying the ways the sublime keeps being deployed as a strategy for accounting for such a complex relationship between humans and animals.

“Let the buffalo roam”: awe, devotion, and respect in Rinella’s sublime still lives

- 12 Steven Rinella’s *American Buffalo* combines a historical and critical investigation of the presence of bisons in the United States with the account of his hunt of one American bison in Alaska. This project was made possible by the extremely rare permit to hunt and kill one that Rinella won in 2005. The “search” mentioned in the title is therefore a search for the animal itself but also for what it used to mean, means, and will mean for the American ethos.
- 13 Throughout the book, historical references and details complement Rinella’s narrative and rhetoric of the sublime. For example, he explains that President Theodore Roosevelt, a conservationist who also significantly increased the number of American national parks as well as “a onetime buffalo hunter and the honorary president of the ABS” (American Bison Society) stressed that “the total annihilation of the buffalo would do irreparable damage to the manly mystique of the American West and that it would have overall negative impacts on the American psyche” (14).⁴ In this short quotation, Rinella establishes the cultural significance of the animal and its contribution to the romanticization of the American wilderness or “manly mystique of the American West” as well as to the stability of the “American psyche” and self. The word “mystique” already echoes the sublime aura supporting “the crucial role of wilderness (as frontier) in U.S. history” which “helped to provide a justification for political action to save wilderness” at the time when the national forest system was created, the national park system was expanded, and women and men in the country came to gradually appreciate the idea of wilderness (Lewis 7). As historians such as Roderick F. Nash and Mark Stoll have argued, the natural sublime instilled a sense of the divine or “sacred,” especially when conflated with “deism” (Nash 44), in the presumably “untrammelled” wilderness (Stoll 37).⁵ Consequently, the natural sublime had the adverse effect of reaffirming the existing conceptual separation between nature and humanity or culture. Roosevelt’s use (and Rinella’s reiteration) of the term “manly” is also not coincidental since the notion of American wilderness as frontier has been customarily associated with American masculinity to such an extent that, as historian Kimberly A. Jarvis claims, “saving wilderness [...] was also saving American manhood and, by extension, the nation” (150). Rinella seems to partly subscribe to the natural sublime and to wilderness aesthetics, at least in his contemplation of the Alaskan natural landscape, but he does not explicitly endorse the idea that wilderness is an expression

of American manhood since his use of the word “manly” can only be read in a quote from Roosevelt. Rinella’s partial indorsement of the natural sublime, however, is more obvious and shown, for example, by his description of a scenery situated close to the Chetaslina River in Alaska, in which he writes that “something rather surreal happens” as the “sky to the north becomes completely clear” and allows him to “see the entire exposure of the mountain peaks” which “stand like enormous paperweights” and make the whole landscape “stunning” (196). Adjectives such as “surreal,” “enormous” and “stunning” evoke the breath-taking, awe-inspiring, and incommensurable features of the natural sublime and strengthens the perceived exceptionalism of the Alaskan natural environment. The image of the “paperweights” also contributes to the rhetoric of the natural sublime in a way that may echo the ineffability of the affect experienced when contemplating the “mountain peaks,” as if the landscape made written description too difficult (weighing down on paper). Rinella’s descriptions of the American buffalo, however, further complicate the traditional natural sublime by introducing metaphorical associations and discussions on ambivalent affects and feelings.

- 14 In a longer extract more focused on the buffalo, for instance, Rinella dwells on a metaphorical “game of association” which imaginatively builds on the mysticism and symbolism which have been associated with the American buffalo:

A game of association, a skull, a coin, the luck of the draw. It seems to me that each represents an important aspect of our relationship to the buffalo. The game, which allows me to see the interconnectedness of the world through the buffalo, represents the often hidden though pervasive presence of the animal in our culture. The skull, which sent me on its own journey, represents the buffalo itself, an animal of flesh and bone. The coin and its unsolved mystery represent man, particularly in the way that he has struggled to put the buffalo to use as an icon, a resource, and a trophy. The lottery drawing, which led to my own physical encounter with the buffalo, represents the forces that continue to draw us toward the buffalo, to join it in nature in the ancient dance of predator and prey. (17)

- 15 In this revelatory extract, Rinella refers to a buffalo skull he found in the Madison Mountains in 1999 (6), a coin crafted by “the sculptor James Earle Fraser” on which the buffalo is used as a symbol for Americanness (9), and the permit he received to hunt an American bison in Alaska. The “skull” is described here as a still life because it emblemizes the living animal consisting of “flesh and bone”. It is a reminder that the American bison is not *just* an iconic symbol, but a living being with which it is possible to develop an actual relationship. The coin, for its part, and the lottery drawing to a lesser extent, show the paradoxical history of the animal, one that has seen it used as an iconic symbol but also massively killed, almost eradicated for its valuable resources or for the sake of trophy hunting. Rinella also evokes his intention to engage in a “physical encounter with the buffalo” in a way that presents the animal as a source of motivation for experiencing nature as well as, more precisely, for hunting (“the ancient dance of predator and prey”).
- 16 The object or still life of the skull is evoked again in the book when Rinella discusses a popular photograph taken in a place locals called “Boneville” in Detroit, Michigan, on which a man is standing on an impressive pile of bison skulls and another man is leaning on the same pile (illustration n°1).

Illustration n°1



- 17 There is a sense of the sublime, one might argue, in the overwhelming and disorienting horror the photograph may produce. It seems almost inevitable, however, not to think about the animal genocide that it portrays with its outnumbered human perpetrators, who are the most striking elements for Rinella. “The most interesting thing about the photo,” Rinella writes, “is the man standing at the top” who “resembles an exclamation point standing at the top of a very long sentence about death and destruction” (182). This well-known photograph, indeed, evokes the eradication of buffalos in the United States, here for the sake of, as Rinella explains, producing “phosphorous fertilizer” (183). Rinella delegitimizes such a massive, rapid, and uncontrolled killing of the American buffalo, also ironically because “c carbon” was later replaced by “carbon black” as a satisfactory resource for fertilizers (183). To some extent, this sublime (and yet morbid) photograph is the starting point of a discussion on what leads humans to decide which animals should be killed or allowed to survive and, more specifically, on the ontological hierarchy that legitimizes such killings.
- 18 In his direct and colloquial writing style, Rinella debunks the disputable distinction between “smart” and “dumb” (192) species by using the example of the buffalo who was stupid enough to let himself be killed by humans. “This is a flawed way of thinking about animal behavior,” he claims, “because it operates on the assumption that animals evolved with the sole concern of avoiding human predation—the smart ones figured out, the dumb ones didn’t” (193). “Avoiding predators” may not always be the priority of every single species, he continues, and the buffalo sometimes needs to concentrate on “energy preservation and territorial defense” (193). Buffalos were eventually “wiped out” in the United States mostly because they were surprised and outpowered by the “arrival of firearms” (194). In a way, the still life of the photograph is also direct but without alluding to discrepancies between intelligent and unintelligent species: it

represents pure and simple *violence* that does not even seek to hide but, instead, exposes the human pride of accomplishing an animal genocide. Although Rinella's writing style does not (yet) draw on the rhetoric of the sublime, the sublime effect (i.e., the overwhelming horror) of the still life picture leads him to elaborate on, albeit indirectly, his intention to "(re)animalize" the buffalo, in philosopher Vinciane Despret's sense of the word, that is to make it survive if not in our memory then in our body, to allow it to become a corpse or even a person and not just a carcass (Despret 2014, 114–19).⁶ The genre of the memoir serves this purpose well in that it can "immortalize—or at least memorialize—actual people" (Couser 14), be they human, as Couser suggests, or non-human, as Rinella attempts to show.

- 19 It is only when Rinella describes the transformative moment of killing the buffalo in Alaska, however, that he introduces the affective and emotional dimensions of the sublime. In an area situated close to the Copper River, he encounters the herd from which he chooses his target. At first, he outlines the overwhelming dimension of the moment, which takes "just a few seconds, but those seconds drag along in a sort of crystal clear eternity" (201), primarily because of "the seriousness of what [he is] about to do," which "feels like a great weight" with "an inertia that carries itself forward" (202). There is already a sense of the sublime before he pulls the trigger, of an ineffable moment that verges on infinity. The instant following his shot then reveals the ambivalence of the Burkean "delightful horror":

And then there's just pure quiet. My ears buzz in the stillness of it. I eject the spent shell and chamber a fresh round. With my pack on my back, I start sliding down the hill, trying to stay on my feet, but I fall to my hip and slide the rest of the way down. The path is streaked with two long runs of red blood, the thick streak from where the bullet passed into the buffalo's side and the thinner streak from blood pouring out of its nostrils. It's both gruesome and relieving—the gore of a clean, quick kill. (203)

- 20 The words "quiet" and "stillness" echo the wilderness aesthetics customarily adopted by traditional nature writers. Rinella then conflates what could be perceived as negative ("gruesome", "gore") with positive ("relieving", "clean") affects.⁷ Ultimately, the result of the killing is positive ("relieving") for Rinella because it was "quick", and as painless as possible for the animal.
- 21 Although the outcome of this sublime moment is reminiscent of the Burkean sublime, the whole preliminary process of tracking the animal could be characterized as a "haptic sublime" (McNee) experience. As briefly explained in the first section of this article, Alan McNee defines the "haptic sublime" as a "direct physical experience and embodied understanding of mountain landscapes" that relies on intense bodily efforts and contact with the environment (4). In this case, Rinella explores the Alaskan environment by means of several sensory systems such as the haptic, kinesthetic, vestibular, and olfactive. One passage illustrates, for example, his use of the sense of "smell" insofar as he claims he has "often found elk [...] just by smelling them" and then proceeds to find the buffalo by "breathing slowly" and "concentrat[ing] on the smells and the sounds of the woods" (189). Not only does this passage challenge the Western history of the senses, which has tended to classify them as either "higher" (sight and hearing) or "lower" (smell, touch, and taste) (Howes and Classen 67), but it also shows Rinella's idiosyncratic approach to non-human animals. Rinella understands that non-human animals communicate differently, which is a major stage in zoopoetics

(Simon 78), including by means of several sensory systems, and he thus does not solely focus on sight.⁸

- 22 The climax of this “haptic sublime” moment—although the term “haptic” fails to represent the complexity of Rinella’s multi-sensorial approach—occurs after the kill of the buffalo, when he starts to experience the affect of relief. The dead animal or “still life” provides him with an “inevitabl[e] [...] sense of sorrow,” a feeling he always experiences after “killing a large animal” (204). “The animal feels so solid,” he writes, “so substantive” that he “feel[s] compelled to question what [he’s] done, to compare the merits of its life with the merits of [his] own” (204). However, he confirms that he does not regret his action, that there is “no moment when [he] wish[es] that the bullet retreat back into the barrel” (204). If regret is not part of the emotional experience, still, the dead corpse itself causes him to deploy a wide range of conflicting feelings which converge in a sublime moment:

Seeing the dead buffalo, I feel an amalgamation of many things: thankfulness for the meat, an appreciation for the animal’s beauty, a regard for the history of its species, and yes, a touch of guilt. Any one of those feelings would be a passing sensation, but together they make me feel emotionally swollen. The swelling is tender, a little bit painful. This is the curse of the human predator, I think. (204)

- 23 What he describes here as a “contemplation” (205) is an emotionally overwhelming (“emotionally swollen”) moment that involves several different affects of “thankfulness,” “appreciation,” “regard,” “guilt,” and “pain.” A form of reverence is produced by both the aesthetic appreciation of the animal and “the history of its species.” The outcome seems ambivalent, both “tender” and “painful,” in a way that triggers a reflection and predicts a transformation in Rinella’s relationship with the American bison as a species. His observation ends with a commentary on morality, as he compares his hunt with the “long-tailed weasel” that “snakes its way into a rabbit’s den and devours the blind and hairless young” and “doesn’t have to think or feel a thing,” which leads him to think that “a complete lack of morality is the only path to moral clarity” (204-205). Whether animals can serve as examples of morality is also a question raised by Despret, but it remains a complex issue that must take the ontological and behavioral particularities of each species into consideration (2014, 85). Rinella’s experience of the sublime seems to lead him to feel “guilt” and “pain,” affects that he does not reject but which confuse his moral sense. His statement on the weasel reconfirms his stance by suggesting that killing an animal for its meat is morally acceptable, although only humans seem to experience the guilt and moral burden it may induce. However, this short comment could also be interpreted as reductive and assumptive (i.e., it presupposes that the weasel has no morality and obscures the fact that humans have access to other types of food), or as an attempt to legitimize his killing of the buffalo by presenting it as inevitable.
- 24 The moment of contemplation is then “broken” by the “immensity” of the task of cutting the buffalo meat up. The term he uses for the animal now is “carcass” as he meticulously separates the parts of the buffalo’s body, which may not seem to convey a sense of respect toward the dead animal (Porcher and Despret would have used the word “deceased” [Despret 119]). The process is, however, described with so much precise, surgical detail (e.g., with “incisions,” “slices,” and specific “steps”) that it could be seen as a religious ritual that would not forgive any mistake or any waste. Again, the still life of the “skull” induces unexpected affects as Rinella writes that he is “not a particularly religious person” but he does “sense an inkling of the spiritual when [he]

look[s] at this buffalo skull" (226). The "emotion" is then "described as a mixture of gratitude, devotion, continuity, and awe" (226), a combination that is emblematic of the sublime. In addition to the customary sublime affects of "continuity" and "awe," Rinella also introduces the component of "devotion," or "dedication." "It takes a strong stomach and a lot of dedication," Rinella writes, if one wants "to do this job properly" (208). The act of slicing the dead animal body again appears as gruesome, somehow disgusting, but not in a way that repulses Rinella. In his critique of most Westerners' perception of hunting and cutting the meat up as "ugly" or "odd" (208), Rinella seems to agree with Despret's critique of the food industry which intentionally hides (e.g., the slaughterhouse is always outside of cities, and the killings never occur in plain view) and makes people forget about the way meat is produced (116). Despite a possible lack of linguistic adequacy in some of the terms he uses (e.g., "carcass"), which may not always render a sense of reverence toward the nonhuman, Rinella's commitment to the task and his convictions upon which he reflects foster responsibility and respect for the meat human predators consume. In addition, the story he tells about the killing and cutting up of the buffalo memorializes the animal and its history as a living species. This is also perceptible in another linguistic distinction between the verb "kill" and its euphemism "collect" which he makes in a commentary on trophy hunting. Rinella explains that he used to despise trophy hunting insofar as he thought it only consisted in "reducing the notion of a species down to nothing more than a large horn and overgrown hides" (241). His opinion changed through time, however, as he argues that the "buffalo hide"—or still life—he kept is a "tangible" (241) object that will remind him of this hunt, and of the sublime moments it offered. To some extent, the body skin of the buffalo also functions as a still life in Despret's understanding of the term: although its predator was, once again, man, and the genre of the memoir's approach remains mainly human-centered, focused on the author's experience, the species is remembered, historicized, and memorialized, and becomes more than a bag of meat.

- 25 The meaningful symbolism of the animal itself is undoubtedly at the core of Rinella's memoir. In the historical accounts provided throughout the memoir, Rinella relates the sublime to the meaning and symbolism that was constructed in the pioneer past about the icon of the buffalo. His "relationship to the buffalo" is described as "confused and convoluted" (254) because it exists at the intersection of what he *knows* about the history of the animal, and what he *experienced* during his hunt, or as he claims: "For the entirety of man's existence in North America, we've struggled with the meaning of this animal, with the ways in which its life is intertwined with our own" (254).⁹ This perspective on the relationship between the sublime, history, feelings, and experience echoes historian Frank Ankersmit's *Sublime Historical Experience*, in which he rehabilitates the "romanticist's world of moods and feelings as constitutive of how we relate to the past" since "how we *feel* about the past is no less important than what we *know* about it—and probably even more so" (10). In *American Buffalo*, what Rinella *knows* about the history of the animal clashes with what he *experiences*, but both are displayed by means of the rhetoric of the sublime. This opposition therefore constitutes a figurative and narrative strategy that both (de)mystifies and helps narrate (and complicate) the contradictory story and symbolism of the American buffalo. Indeed, in the background is what Rinella *knows* about the history of the buffalo, that is the arrival of the first Euro-American settlers who discovered "a landscape populated with strange and massive creatures," among which the buffalo that he describes by means of the rhetoric of the sublime: "a giant among a host of other giants" or "the continent's

greatest beast” (255). Rinella explains that these hunters began to worship the animal as a way of expressing their gratitude towards God for giving them this source of food (255). Pondering over the paradoxical nature of this relationship, Rinella refers to the animal as “a handy mirror,” a still life that creates an “event” (Schwenger 143) since he contemplates these hunters’ “innermost desires and failures” and “confounding contradictions” as Americans, which made the buffalo “almost inscrutable” or sublime (255-56). Rinella therefore perceives the sublime symbolism of the American bison as contradictory, a perception that is also critical and important for the animal’s more general history:

At once it is a symbol of the tenacity of wilderness and the destruction of wilderness; it’s a symbol of Native American culture and the death of Native American culture; it’s a symbol of the strength and vitality of America and the pettiness and greed of America; it represents a frontier both forgotten and remembered; it stands for freedom and captivity, extinction and salvation. Perhaps the buffalo’s enduring strength and legacy come from this chameleonic wizardry, this ability to provide whatever we need at the given moment. (256)¹⁰

- 26 The meaning and symbolism of the animal is at once negative—it is a reminder of the “destruction of wilderness,” and of the genocides of the buffalo, of Native American peoples, and of their culture—and positive, at least for Rinella, in that it represents notions of “tenacity,” “strength,” “salvation,” and “freedom” that are customarily correlated with the ideas of American nature *and* nation (Jarvis 150). Rinella’s exploration of the animal as an American icon, as well as his hunt of the physical animal, that is his individual *experience* of this cultural phenomenon, leads him to develop a richer and more complex understanding of its species, and of what this species means for American history and the American self. The final comment he makes when leaving Alaska while he is contemplating a young bison calf that is catching up with the rest of its herd mentions “a feeling of joy” that materializes “to words”: “I don’t want to destroy the silence, so I just think them to myself. Let the buffalo roam” (258). The articulation of the hunt in the form of the memoir results in conservation ethics, in the author’s willingness to preserve the American buffalo, which is confirmed in his note in which he lists a series of agencies and associations devoted to the protection of buffalos. The “respect” (259) that most people feel when looking at a buffalo herd is accompanied by, in Rinella’s imperative statement “let the buffalo roam,” a decision to leave the animal be and live. One may find paradoxical, however, that the specific killing of one animal led to the promotion of its conservation as a species. Rinella’s approach to hunting is complex and enigmatic, which is relatively frequent in hunting memoirs. As the next section will attempt to show, not all species receive the same attention from Rinella, but his overall practices of hunting (and, more occasionally, fishing), as cruel and gruesome as they may seem, always unwittingly reveal his commitment to developing his understanding of the non-human other and of its environments.

27

“Something that resembled religion”: more clarification on Rinella’s aesthet(h)ics of hunting

- 28 Much nature writing and many hunter/fisherman-writers still bear the mark of Burke’s theory and of its distinction between sublime and beautiful animals. The previous

section is no direct exception to this normative classification inasmuch as the buffalo is reminiscent of Burke's sublime bull and not of the ox. Rinella's other memoir *Meat Eater: Adventures from the Life of an American Hunter* partly subscribes to this aesthetic since, for example, the deer is described as more sublime than the squirrel. It is, however, Rinella's ritualistic approach to the consumption of these dead animals which evokes an aesthetic experience that resembles the sublime and fosters an original, possibly more ethical approach to hunting.

29 The main theme of the book is Rinella's relationship with the natural world, which is depicted through ten hunts from when he was ten until he turns thirty-seven and is a father living in Brooklyn and still hunting in every corner of the United States. Every chapter follows the narrative logic of the *Bildung* memoir, with stories from Rinella's past hunting as a kid and then later as an adult, and most of them end with a short section including a recipe and/or advice on how to cook the animal that was killed. Since several chapters, sometimes independently of the overall structure of the book, include passages that engage with or question the rhetoric of the sublime as an imaginative strategy for describing non-human animals, this section will examine some of them which together lead to a better understanding of Rinella's zoopoetics and aesthet(h)ics of hunting.

30 Throughout the memoir, Rinella outlines the development of his affective and aesthetic approach to hunting, which parallels his aging throughout the narrative arc, as he explains when recounting his hunt of squirrels as a ten-year-old boy:

The array of complex emotions that would later come to me whenever I killed an animal for food—gratitude, reverence, guilt, indebtedness—were still years away from developing. Instead, I felt nothing but the pure joy of accomplishment when the squirrel hit the ground. [...] I was a hunter in the American wilderness, and that was good enough for now. (38)

31 At first, there seem to be nothing but “the pure joy of accomplishment” when the squirrel is killed. The animal is food, and the conflicting sublime feelings he expresses when killing the buffalo, for example, are not (yet) part of the experience. What Rinella describes echoes the previously mentioned weasel's hunt in that hunting is “a moment of impending violence and death,” of brutality, through which one is “gifted a beautiful glimpse of life” (13) but also “happiness and clarity” as a hunter (60). The squirrel almost seems insignificant to the young hunter, who does not associate any spiritual or symbolic meaning with the small animal.

32 The kill of his first deer, however, updates his view of hunting. “To kill your first deer is a rite of passage,” Rinella argues, “and a hunter will tell his story with the same degree of passion and mystery that most guys use to describe their first sexual encounter” (65). Although Rinella claims he does not support any modern approach to hunting that is all about “kill[ing] animals in order to prove [one's] manliness and get [his] jollies” (15), this chauvinistic comment alludes to the cliché that hunting is a macho sport that only men practice. For this essay's analysis, however, the mentions of deer hunting as “a rite of passage” that is narrated with “passion and mystery” are more interesting, especially insofar as, in the case of Rinella's deer hunt, they emerge in the stories of both “the first time that [he] *didn't* get a deer” and the first time he did (65, emphasis in original). Strangely, the author uses vivid, haptic details in his description of the deer he did not kill: the deer is “walk[ing] in front of” him, he “remember[s] the slight curve of his antlers,” “how his head bobbed downward and forward a little bit with each

step,” “how the muscles in his front left shoulder flexed as he walked, and how every time they flexed, you could see one of his veins bulge beneath his skin” (66). For each detail, he repeats the verb “remember,” which underlines his attention to the physical features of the animal at that moment and not specifically his willingness to kill it. His description of the deer he killed, for its part, expands on the seriousness of hunting and killing:

It wasn't until later that I would read about how some indigenous hunters fed the hearts of their quarry to their young children, so that the children would inherit the strengths and attributes of the animals they relied on. But I did know I was holding the core of a creature, the essence of its life, and that its life was far bigger and more meaningful than any squirrel's. It was impossible not to see just how serious the business of killing was. (85)

33 Rinella's experience of deer hunting is double-edged. While it makes him realize the seriousness and moral significance of taking the life of another living being, his perception of the deer as mysterious and sublime leads him to deem squirrels as less important than deer. The characteristics of the deer (i.e., “strengths and attributes”) somehow overpower the squirrel's. In contrast with the details he provides on the deer he did not kill, this statement aligns with the divisive Burkean sublime, and poorly serves any attempt to revise it into a more ethical notion to consider human-animal relationships.

34 Further development in his aesthetics and ethics of hunting is, fortunately, offered when Rinella decides to “devot[e] [himself] to studying the animals [he] trapped” (111). Rinella mentions that he committed at some point to study the “habits” of animals, “a form of intimacy” which “inevitably breeds love and respect” (111). The two emotions of “love and respect” are introduced for the first time in this book, in relation to “the notion of value” or what “an animal life's worth” (111). His brothers Matt and Danny, he explains, managed to “transcend [...] the notion of commerce” because the value of the animals they would hunt or kill “did not change according to markets and trends”: there only was “a potent spiritual significance” in the animal's life which was “supported by the universal usefulness of its flesh” (113). Rinella's brothers' pragmatic attitude shows that the perceived mysterious or spiritual meaning of the animal does not prevent its fate, which is to be killed and eaten, an inevitable fate that is at the source of Rinella's approach to hunting. The “daily necessity” of eating the outcome of a hunt or of a fishing trip “t[akes] on a vital sense of immediacy,” which results in the “appreciation for the species that sustain us” and “blossom [...] into something that resembled religion” (116). These ritualistic and religious aspects of hunting differentiate Rinella's ethics of hunting from trophy hunting, and introduces the affects of thankfulness and respect, as in this extract in which he also tells the story of a deer hunt:

The deer was lying just forty yards away, its hide looking black and slick water. I approached its body quietly and I felt moved to do something that I'd never done before. I got down on my knees and buried my nose into the hair of its still warm neck and I breathed in its smell. I thanked it. I told it that it would be used well. And with respect. And soon. (121)

35

36 The religious references are numerous in this chapter: it is called “Communion,” Rinella compares hunting with religion, and the above-mentioned passage includes him kneeling in a ceremonial way to smell, thank, and show respect to the dead animal. The

“ethics of hunting” itself, Rinella claims, it is a “form of religion” (209), but one that is different for every hunter, with its own rules and rituals. The practice of thanking the animal after killing it, for example, which echoes some indigenous tribes’ reverence for the sacrifice of nature, is a fundamental part of Rinella’s ethics. While this practice of showing respect to the animal after killing it has been arguably considered as self-exonerating, and might be in Rinella’s memoir as well, Rinella claims that “is the only thing that seems proper” because “how else do you reconcile your happiness over an animal’s death with your sense of reverence for its life?” (224).¹¹ The perceived brutality of hunting may at first seem shocking, but Rinella suggests that the death of the animal “c[o]me[s]” from a knowledgeable predator who would utilize its body with respect” (229), therefore arguing that the death of the animal and the happiness of the hunter can coexist in a relationship that would not be based on cruelty or violence but, instead, on “gratitude” and “homage” (Simon 247).

- 37 There is, indeed, a significant difference between pure violence (e.g., the massive killing of buffalos in the “Boneville” photograph) and hunting in Rinella’s text. Hunting, like the sublime, is related to a sense of the sacred, of something inexpressible which inspires the hunter. The evocative chapter of “The Remains,” of which the title echoes the still life of dead animals, contains an imaginative elaboration on this very idea of hunting as a form of religion, which opposes a materialistic to a spiritualist vision of hunting. In this chapter, Rinella does not discuss hunting and wildlife politics but rather explores his own relationship with hunting (and not with [dead] animals). For instance, he writes about “revelations” he had when hunting despite the “cold, hunger, loneliness, and fear” he went through (230). To Rinella, hunting is “as vital to the human condition as playing music or putting words to paper,” as essential as the arts that “were making us spiritually viable” (230). As musician and musicologist Karol Beffa argues, music sometimes possess a sense of the sacred (“sens du sacré”) which verges on the mystical quality or transcendentality of the sublime (Beffa and Villani 136). Rinella argues that hunting has the same feature, one that “inspir[es] us” and makes it not a mere “act of hate” or violence, but “an act of love” (231). It should be noted, however, that, while this sublime hunting experience is spiritually revelatory for Rinella, the hunter, it is not focused on the animal, the hunted, and therefore not on its affects and emotions. If Rinella’s approach to hunting can arguably be perceived as respectful toward animals, complicated by a sense of guilt, and spiritually elevating, it has limits as to what it is willing to explore and convey about what the animals themselves feel and experience.

The sublime, (dead) animals, and the memoir: an ongoing hunt

- 38 The two previous sections have provided examples of mobilizations of the sublime in the contemporary American memoir. Steven Rinella’s hunting memoirs constitute a fertile ground for descriptions of non-human animals, and of their remains as still lives, that make use of the rhetoric of the sublime. Those descriptions either (partly) subscribe to the traditional (or Burkean) sublime templates of grandeur, awe, and terror, or introduce a more varied affective dimension that includes affects of respect/reverence, guilt, pain, and devotion. In both memoirs, such affects are both narrative and rhetorical insofar as they either support the rhetorical and narrative goals of (1)

offering a critical take on the bison's history and symbolism (*American Buffalo*) or (2) conveying the changes in the author's aesthetics and ethics of hunting that occur in the form of *Bildung* (*Meat Eater*).

- 39 Despite a few disputable aspects of Rinella's aesthet(h)ics, such as on the controversial necessity for hunting that is promoted in *Meat Eater*, the two memoirs succeed in proposing an original and timely conceptualization of or approach to hunting which does not appear as a practice that is based on cruelty. The various still lives evoked in the two memoirs—dead corpses of animals, skulls, or hides—are not mere consumable products or trophies gathered during Rinella's hunts but are objects treated as subjects, even though the animal subjects' emotions and affects are not at the core of the hunter's reflections. In other words, Rinella's thankful and respectful approach to these still lives honor the life of the animals and therefore serve as springboards for reconsidering and possibly critically interrogating the tensions that can be found in the relationships between human and non-human animals. Rinella circumvents such tensions by means of religious and spiritual connotations, as clarified by passages from *Meat Eater*, in a way that betrays a complex, at times ineffable or inexpressible relationship to the nonhuman, be it dead or not. In the few passages that deal with Rinella's contemplation of a living animal that he *did not* kill, Rinella displays physical details of the animals (the deer) or engage in a philosophical reflection resulting in his intention to let it "roam," be, and live (the buffalo), which suggest an inclination to develop conservation ethics. His descriptions of animals he killed, of the still lives or animal corpses he materially produced in flesh, bone, and blood, may be more subject to interpretation. By letting the animals live, Rinella would better recognize their subjectivity, and his discourse may at times be perceived as self-exonerating when he does kill them and express respect or guilt, or as essentialist when he affirms that it is in human's nature to hunt for food. Ultimately, Rinella does not resolve the tensions between humans and animals but evidences the intricacies of humans' insertion in the natural world as beings that kill and eat other beings' lives to survive.
- 40 Both works showcase the genre of the memoir as a resourceful site for zoopoetic scholarship concerned with imaginative representations of non-human animals, but which extends beyond the genres of poetry, the novel, or the short story, and considers minor or understudied literary works. The human-centered perspective of the memoir and its focus on an extra-textual reality makes it an audacious—because of its inevitable form of anthropocentrism—but fruitful choice to analyze the theme of hunting and the diverse aesthetic and ethical questions it continues to raise. Rinella also presents the particularity of, especially in *American Buffalo*, relating these issues to the revision of an American self that relies on an updated, more critical conceptualization of the American animal or, more largely, natural world, an analogy that will be of interest to the connected fields of American studies and environmental humanities. Rinella's memoirs, in a style comparable to Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* in their attempt to make a case for recreational hunting by rejecting the destructive practice of trophy hunting, offer compelling contemporary examples of trajectories that these important ethical issues can take in nonfiction. Besides, they show that the sublime can still be modulated to introduce, support, or bring out such questions and discussions. The two case studies examined in this essay, however, constitute a starting point for further investigation into the shifting destinies of the sublime in nonfiction, and even more in relation to the topic of hunting and to the

tensions it creates between human and non-human animals. More research dedicated to hunting for the sublime, exploring beyond classical theories and generic conventions, will be necessary to attest more fully to the affordances and limits of this aesthetic and rhetorical notion for figuring non-human animals as rightful, agentic members of the environments non/humans occupy or inhabit.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Barbara J. King's post on NPR (King). Rinella advocates that hunting is a responsible and sustainable way of finding food and has influenced or even convinced hesitant people that it is, but the debate on whether it is necessary or not to kill animals is, of course, still ongoing.
2. By "active participation in the landscape," I mean a form of what philosopher Arnold Berleant calls "aesthetic engagement," that is an aesthetic experience that "involves the dynamic presence of the body with its full range of sensory awareness" and thus not only sight but a variety of sensory systems—among which the "haptic," "kinesthetic," and "vestibular" (55-56).
3. As Simon writes in *Une bête entre les lignes*, "envisager un grand nombre de bêtes comme des êtres biographiques, c'est-à-dire comme les sujets d'une existence digne d'être narrée, les acteurs d'une « trajectoire » littéralement intrigante, mais aussi comme les parties prenantes d'une vie sociale non réservée aux humains m'a souvent conduite vers le roman et la nouvelle" (32).
4. As regards the U.S. national parks, it is worth mentioning that most of them exclude hunting except when populations need to be regulated. Rinella's hunting experience is therefore even more exceptional because he can bypass (his hunting permit allows him to kill one bison from the Cupper River buffalo herd, which is found in the wilderness of the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve) the exclusively visual and haptic sublime experience that is customary in national parks (e.g., "take only photographs and leave only footprints").
5. The rhetoric of the natural sublime that represents nature as God's creation is also deployed in countless works of American nature writing, and most famously perhaps in William Bartram's *Travels* (1791), in which he associates the adjectives "divine," "infinite," "incomprehensible" and "perfect" with nature that is "untrammelled" by man (Bartram 72; Lombard 21).
6. Drawing on Jocelyne Porcher's work, Despret distinguishes the word "carcass" (*carcasse*) from the much-preferred term of "deceased" (*défunt*), a term that is more commonly used for human corpses, which is a distinction that highlights the power of language to memorialize other living beings.
7. I understand the term "affect" here and throughout this essay as "body-based feelings that arise in response to elicitors as varied as interpersonal and institutional relations, aesthetic experience, ideas, sensations, and material conditions in one's environment" (Houser 3). As Heather Houser explains, these 'affects' can also be "narrative" when they "are attached to formal dimensions of texts such as metaphor, plot structure, and character relations" while being "at the root of our social, political, and ethical being" (3, emphasis in original).
8. Vinciane Despret calls this unfortunate human concentration on sight, hearing, or the kinetic, the privilege of the visible ("pivilège du visible"), of the audible ("pivilège de l'audible"), or of the kinetic ("pivilège du kinétique") (2021, 17-42), which are attitudes that exclude a significant number of living species or natural elements since some species (e.g., blind moles) or elements (e.g., rocks) cannot see, hear, or move. The haptic sublime might also be subject to such criticism inasmuch as it assumes that only people who are able to move and use their muscles can experience it. Rinella's use of smell, however, showcases that he does not *only* rely on haptic sensory systems when tracking animals.
9. In view of the many references to Native Americans in Rinella's memoir, this reference to "man's existence in North America" should not be understood as an act of erasure and the "we" Rinella uses, although unclear and maladroit, should include both Indigenous people and Euro-American settlers.

10. Rinella's mention of "the death of Native American culture" is an unfortunate and maladroit act of erasure. Native American culture has certainly not vanished, and the author should have used a different phrasing such as *attempted* cultural eradication.

11. The Creek-Cherokee professor of Native American literature Craig Womack argues, in an article titled "There Is No Respectful Way to Kill an Animal," that begging the animal for "forgiveness" echoes regrettable "clichés about the Native hunter who ritualistically asks for forgiveness" (23). White hunters often refer to Native American traditions when they engage in this practice or in the practice of showing respect, a reference that can be critiqued from a settler-colonial perspective. Rinella does not refer (at least not directly) to any Native American tradition in this passage, and his display of respect contrasts with the violence and brutality customarily associated with hunting. Even though the "symmetry and equity and power balance" of the human-animal relationship may be "ended" when the animal is killed (Womack 12-13), the combination of the processes of tracking, hunting, and killing the animal in Rinella's memoirs, and the process of writing about it, suggests the establishment of a human-animal (and human-dead animal) relationship that goes beyond trophy hunting because they show the author's intention to learn more about the animals' (hi)story and behaviors and to explore complex emotions of guilt and respect.

ABSTRACTS

This essay explores the avenues opened and limits set by the sublime when used a rhetorical and narratological strategy for figuring and describing non-human animals in the memoir, an understudied but promising genre for examining human/nonhuman relationships. Since few (if any) recent theories of the sublime provide a viable revision of the fraught aesthetic distinction between sublime and beautiful animals and/or between humans and animals outlined in foundational works on the sublime (e.g., Burke's and Kant's texts), this article analyzes two case studies (Steven Rinella's *American Buffalo: In Search of a Lost Icon* [2008] and *Meat Eater: Adventures from the Life of an American Hunter* [2012]) that imaginatively deploy the rhetoric of the sublime in descriptions of living animals and dead animals. In Rinella's memoirs, the described dead animals become still lifes which produce reflections on the ethics of hunting, on animal welfare, and on the tensions existing in the relationship between human and non-human animals.

Cet essai étudie les avantages et les limites du sublime lorsqu'il est utilisé comme une stratégie rhétorique et narratologique pour représenter et décrire les animaux non-humains, et plus précisément dans les mémoires, un genre littéraire qui demeure sous-étudié mais pourtant riche et prometteur pour envisager les liens entretenus entre humains et non-humains. Au vu de l'absence d'une révision conclusive des théories fondatrices du sublime (e.g., Burke et Kant) qui rendent compte d'une esthétique clivante entre animaux « beaux » et « sublimes » et/ou entre humains et animaux, le présent article analyse deux cas (*American Buffalo: In Search of a Lost Icon* [2008] et *Meat Eater: Adventures from the Life of an American Hunter* [2012] de Steven Rinella) qui déploient le sublime dans des descriptions d'animaux vivants ou morts. Les animaux morts représentés par Rinella deviennent des natures mortes (ou mourantes) qui suscitent des réflexions, à la fois chez l'auteur et chez le lecteur ou la lectrice, sur l'éthique de la chasse et du bien-être animal ainsi que sur les tensions qui persistent dans les relations entretenues entre animaux humains et non-humains.

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Mots-clés: sublime, mémoires, chasse, nature morte, écocritique, zoopoétique, humanités écologiques, sensorium, affect, bison, nature sauvage, respect, religion

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