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Painting the town green
From urban teleology to urban ecology in New York cinema, 1960-present

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New York City is perhaps the most iconic manifestation of urbanity in the 20th century. While the Manhattan skyline dominates the New York imaginary American cinema has also consistently qualified and complicated this architecturally-determined perspective by re-imagining the city in ecological terms. Over the past half-century many films set and largely produced in New York have deployed the imagery and metaphoricity of ecology to articulate urbanity, although in two distinct ways. We begin by tracing what we call an 'urban teleology' in which filmmakers re-envision the city in terms of the environmental conceits of wilderness and garden but from ideologically normative perspectives that privilege the managed urban sphere as the epitome of sociality. In contrast to this teleological model are cinematic experimentations that 're-inhabit' urban space by foregrounding New York's 'urban ecology'. As such the second part of our article is concerned with how certain modes of cinema can re-orient or 'queer' notions of urbanity through the critical lens of ecology, thus cinematically 'greening' the city.[1]

    We mobilise the practice of ecocritique to interrogate both reified and more radical figurations of 'nature' in cinema. Timothy Morton employs this method as a critical discourse that confronts the hegemony of 'nature' as a fraught ideological concept that 'is a transcendentalist term in a material mask...a Pandora's box [that] encapsulates a potentially infinite series of fantasy objects'.[2] The focus of this article – on urban space as ecologically-implicated – also challenges many eco-centric perspectives that posit humanity as opposed to nature.[3] Andrew Biro calls for 'a way of understanding ourselves as both beings who are within (or a part of) nature,

and beings who are outside of or separate from (capable of denying, transforming, and re-presenting) nature',[4] a task that we claim is accomplished by cinema. Ecologically-oriented thinking about the city seems timely given recent incursions into New York's urban space by superstorms like Hurricane Sandy, which was itself an intensively mediated event. Just as this storm breached the supposed boundary between urbanity and nature, so does cinematic representation provoke us to re-conceptualise the city's relationship to ecology.

An urban teleology of New York, in three environments

Architect and urban theorist Rem Koolhaas once observed that Manhattan's grid layout implies an 'indifference to topography, to what exists… announc[ing] that the subjugation, if not obliteration, of nature is its true ambition'.[5] For Koolhaas the grid plan was but a step towards the teleological realisation of New York's urbanism – 'a world totally fabricated by man'.[6] According to this logic the ideal city of technological artifice is one in which nature is contained within and understood in relation to a managed social sphere. A significant body of New York films produced over the past half-century (largely the product of Hollywood) subscribes to such a disposition, articulating nature as an ideological 'other' that must be isolated and struggled against in order to ensure urban hegemony. These representations attest to an urban epistemology that is teleological insofar as the historical process of fully realising urbanity requires the subordination of nature.

We propose 'urban teleology' as a concept to explain how New York cinema expresses historical trends through the metaphoricity of nature. In this scheme declining socioeconomic conditions in the city correspond to the prevalence of a wilderness environment from the late 1960s to the early 1980s and then the emergence of a scientifically-managed garden environment from the late 1980s through the 1990s. Over the past 15 years wilderness motifs can be seen to structure films that deal with New York's relation to climate change. Both wilderness and garden representational modes exhibit highly racialised, classed, and gendered images of nature; in constituting this urban teleology they position New York City itself as a frontier perched between the realisation of an idealised urban paradise and the brutal, entropic state of nature.

New York as urban wilderness

Many historical conditions contributed to cinematic renderings of New York as a wilderness space. 'White flight' to the suburbs combined with the loss of manufacturing and federal disinvestment left the city facing bankruptcy by 1975; the South Bronx, Lower East Side, and other neighbourhoods lay in ruin; the city's annual murder rate hovered around 2,000 between 1971 and 1994; blackouts, labour strikes, and infrastructural deterioration seemed to signal the city's complete collapse. A reorientation towards environment as a structuring narrative and stylistic principle is a salient aspect of Hollywood's New York. Thomas Elsaesser articulates the inefficacy of conventional heroes in 1970s New Hollywood as a 'pathos of failure' manifesting aesthetically in the 'documentary texture of a location' with the 'palpable facticity' of objects and environment being asserted over individual agency.[7] Perceptions of New York's urban environment relied upon ideological representations of the racial 'other' as predatory savage/animal, a disposition consistent with the deep-seated fears of many 'white-flighters' (Hollywood's target demographic). A palpable sense of the failure of urbanity is registered in an ideologically-conservative cycle of New York films that recast the city's vacant lots, abandoned factories, and derelict parks as the ideal locations to naturalise urban decay as the return of wilderness.

Roderick Nash reminds us that 'wilderness' is a term that designates a culturally-subjective idea rather than an objective condition, thus serving as a versatile structuring thematic with a particular salience in American frontier narratives.[8] Indeed it is through the generic language of the Western that we find the most powerful iterations of New York as urban wilderness. Films like *Coogan's Bluff* (Don Siegel, 1968), *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974), *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), and *Fort Apache: The Bronx* (Daniel Petrie, 1981) mobilise Western genre-derived master plots, character typologies, and mythologies of wilderness to reposition the city as a lawless frontier tameable only through violence. We find an exemplary instance of the importation of these generic conventions in *Death Wish*. Following the brutal rape and murder of his wife and daughter, urban developer Paul Kersey (Charles Bronson) abandons his pacifist neoliberalism for Wild West vigilantism – an attitude he adopts after a trip to Arizona reawakens his latent gun-lust and appreciation for the natural landscape. Significantly Kersey's first kill occurs in a space that is both natural and built: Riverside Park. Reclaimed by nature and harbouring animalistic gangs, such liminal spaces are the perfect settings for Kersey's frontier justice. Supporting a tele-

ological conception of urbanism, New York Westerns like *Death Wish* cast the socioeconomically-compromised city as a hostile wilderness populated by animalistic 'savages'.

Fig. 1:   *'Space for life' out West in DEATH WISH (Michael Winner, 1974),*
            http://vimeo.com/66983895

The Olde English base of 'wilderness' defines it as a place of wild beasts. Accordingly the ideologically-charged figure of the animal is central to New York's urban teleology. Giorgio Agamben has observed that '[i]t is possible to oppose man to other living things…only because something like an animal life has been separated within man'.[9] Animalisation operates ideologically in that it offers films a way to evade explicit interrogations of difference, instead representing racial difference as animalistic. The preponderance of urban animals in New York cinema is an extension of racist perceptions of the city as having 'gone wild'. Amplifying widespread, racially-tinged fears of violence, *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin Schaffner, 1968) features what viewers come to discover is a New York populated by a race of super-intelligent apes. The film also literalises the connection to the frontier by figuring a post-apocalyptic New York landscape through Lake Powell and Monument Valley, among the most iconic Hollywood Western settings.

Fig. 2:   Lake Powell as post-apocalyptic New York in Planet of the Apes.

Plagued by chronic disinvestment, violent crime, and arson, the South Bronx had become a worldwide symbol for urban decay by the mid-70s thanks in part to degrading cinematic representations offered by films like *Fort Apache: The Bronx*. Like the cavalry outpost in the John Ford Western that inspired its nickname, the 41st police precinct is under constant threat from angry natives in hostile territory. The roving herd-like gangs that lay siege to the precinct exemplify Akira Lippit's observation that

> [u]nlike human beings, whose existence is founded on the metaphysics of the individual…animal being cannot be reduced to individual identities. It is dispersed through the pack or the horde.[10]

As Andrew Light has observed of the urban wilderness 'it is not the mere physical surroundings, but the supposed claim of those surroundings on the mental states of its inhabitants, that truly matters'.[11] Ignoring the structural dehumanisation of Bronx residents the film adopts a bigoted, environmentally-determinist view wherein the populations of the city's most blighted region are radically objectified as non-human – or as film critic Richard Goldstein put it, as 'animals to be controlled, rather than human beings to be respected'.[12]

Fig. 3:   *The 'animal horde' in FORT APACHE: THE BRONX* (*Daniel Petrie, 1981*)
              http://vimeo.com/66984172

Heavily influenced by Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), *Taxi Driver* reiterates many of the same Western generic devices as *Death Wish* and *Fort Apache*. However, the film also complicates passive alignment with the protagonist's animalising racist tendencies by imagining the mean streets of Times Square, Harlem, and the East Village through the disturbed perspective of the film's psychotic protagonist Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) as a modern Sodom where 'all the animals come out at night…whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies'. Unlike previous New York Westerns that objectively render the city as wilderness, in *Taxi Driver* nightmarishly expressionistic cityscapes are extensions of Bickle's deranged subjectivity. Although he aspires to become 'a person like other people' he continually fails to establish the meaningful social relationships that would foster such humanity, highlighting his schizophrenic indeterminacy. Departing from the civilising ethos of the conventional Western hero Bickle ultimately embraces animalistic savagery in order to fulfil his apocalyptic vision that a 'real rain will come and wash all [the] scum off the streets'. The film's urban setting overdetermines his recourse to 'justified' violence, a theme common to civilising narratives of the traditional Western. Like King Kong whose visage graces his Vietnam unit patch, Bickle himself is a monster incompatible with the city, embodying a destructive force that threatens to destabilise the urban social sphere.

Fig. 4:   'King Kong Company', Taxi Driver.

Indeed New York's urban space has been routinely invaded by monstrous animal-others over the years, underlining anxieties surrounding the precariousness of the city's urban integrity. Films such as the *King Kong* remakes (John Guillermin, 1976; Peter Jackson, 2005) and Roland Emmerich's *Godzilla* (1998) feature an animal outsider that threatens the city's infrastructure and social cohesion but which is ultimately expelled by military force or human ingenuity. The city is a prime target for monsters, as Kong likes the cityscape because it reminds him of the mountainous topography of his native island, while Godzilla is able to hide in between skyscrapers in Manhattan. Although these monsters are depicted as 'other' they are uniquely suited to navigate the city's labyrinthine topography. Kong in particular is racialised, kidnapping a white woman and being gunned down in the end, re-enacting an imaginary of criminality that pervaded images of the city.

Fig. 5: 'To them [we] are the savages.' WOLFEN (Michael Wadleigh, 1981)
      http://vimeo.com/66986669

Monstrous animality is an outgrowth of anxieties over the breakdown of the urban social sphere. This breakdown also fostered transgressive social practices like graffiti and hip-hop cultures as well as queer political radicalism (to be discussed further along in this article). A select few Hollywood productions display more ambiguity regarding the moral status of animality. *Wolfen* (Michael Wadleigh, 1981) engages with but also critiques the animal-ideology of the classical Western by introducing a race of supernatural wolves that begin terrorising the South Bronx – their natural habitat – in response to proposed luxury condo developments.

Fig. 6:   *Wolfen vision.*

Unlike the animalised humans in *Fort Apache* we ultimately identify with the wolfen's goals and even assume their perspective through tracking infrared point-of-view shots. Violently defending their territory against the developers the wolfen function as what Max Page has called 'proto antigentrification activists' and thus provide a conceptual hinge between the ideologies of wilderness animality and the alternative potentialities of what we will call 'urban ecology'.[13] Although the film ambiguously asserts a mystical connection between the wolfen and a cadre of Native American steelworkers in a stereotypical 'noble savage' mode it also gestures towards a critique of Western generic conventions by aligning viewer sympathies with the perspective of the wolfen and Native American characters, equating slum clearance with the eradication of indigenous peoples. The wolfen's indigenousness and adaptability to the ailing South Bronx challenges the urban teleological view that there is a discrete nature that is 'other' to the city. Above all *Wolfen* signals that the city's destruction by monstrous nature – a governing theme of this cycle of films – is an ideological construct intended to conceal another threat: that of ecology as an alternative model of urbanity. In the next urban teleological phase this threat comes to be contained and managed through a representational mode that we term the 'urban garden'.

New York as urban garden

Jozef Keulartz characterises Ebenezer Howard's 'Garden City' design of 1898 as a disciplinary planning practice that sought to contain and control populations through 'permanent and meticulous examination'. He ultimately looks to Michel Foucault's critique of Jeremy Bentham:

> the garden city ranks alongside the panopticon as the perfect embodiment of this solution. The correspondence between the two is striking; their basic structures – the circular layout, the central space, the radial visibility – are virtually identical.[14]

It is this interest in visibility, examination, and regulation that characterises the cinema of New York's urban garden period. If Hollywood films of the late 1960s, 70s, and early 80s actively represented the violence, disorder, and decay of New York as a wilderness then a new treatment of the city's environment can be found in films arising out of the so-called socioeconomic recovery of the late 1980s and 90s. Under Mayor Ed Koch's pro-business leadership encouraging real estate development and the growth of the financial industry a shiny, global city rose from that wilderness with a new 'yuppie' class of white-collar professionals who practiced conspicuous consumption and luxuriated in a newly gentrified New York. This Edenic garden was made viable by the suppression of criminal animality, depicted in Hollywood cinema as the scientific management of New York's environments.
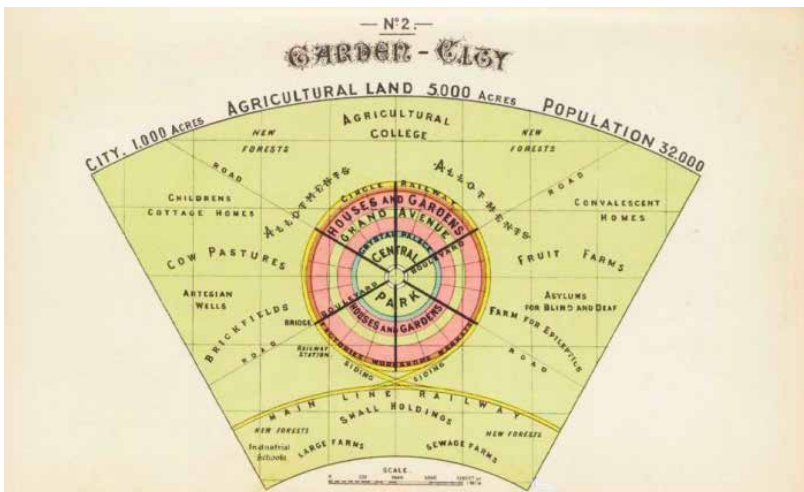

Fig. 7:   Howard's 'Garden City'.

Nowhere is the desire for idealised and domesticated nature better expressed than in the romantic comedy *Splash* (Ron Howard, 1984) in which a mermaid (Daryl Hannah) comes to New York in search of Allen Bauer (Tom Hanks), a man she twice rescued. Although ultimately incompatible with the urban environment Bauer urges the mermaid – whose real name is a series of high-pitched dolphin calls – to pick a more suitable moniker. She chooses 'Madison' after Madison Avenue (a fitting choice given her idealised understanding of humanity gleaned from TV advertising) to which Bauer smugly replies 'better than 149th Street', signalling both his privileged class and racial position in 1980s gentrifying Manhattan. Leo Braudy claims the narrative of *Splash* functions according to a 'long history of urban idealization of natural renewal'.[15] Accordingly the film ends with Madison guiding Bauer to her underwater paradise – a magical realist interpretation of the polluted East River cum Bahamian coral reef.

Fig. 8:   *The magical realist seascape in Splash.*

Leisurely garden spaces are prominent in bourgeois romantic comedies such as *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977), in which Alvy (Allen) and Annie (Diane Keaton) have their subtextual (and subtitled) exchange on her Upper West Side balcony. The film's privileged garden spaces in both Manhattan and Long Island are the tableaus that not only nurture Alvy and Annie's

relationship but also prompt their neurotic social performances. In Peter Weir's *Green Card* (1990) Brontë (Andie MacDowell) and Frenchman Georges (Gérard Depardieu) marry so that she can inherit a brilliant penthouse-garden apartment to finish scientific research and so he can get a green card. The glass-encased garden is the central narrative motivator in this film, prompting the protagonists to reconsider not only their romantic relationship, but also the use-value of the garden itself. Class anxieties ultimately manifest in neurotic and eccentric relationships and in a contained urban nature in these films, highlighting the new disciplinary regimes of the gentrified garden city.

Fig. 9:   *The subtextual power of the garden in ANNIE HALL (Woody Allen, 1977)*
          http://vimeo.com/66986848

This grooming and maintenance of garden spaces is itself metaphoric for New York's 'Broken Windows' approach to crime prevention. In their 1983 paper social scientists George Kelling and James Q. Wilson postulated 'crime, as well as fear of crime, is closely associated with disorder', urging new attentiveness to vandalism, graffiti, trash-filled streets, and broken windows themselves.[16] The renewed interest in crime prevention would culminate with Rudy Giuliani's term as mayor, where he presided over a substantial decline in the crime rate attributed to strict policing of 'quality of life' offenses and the use of scientifically-analytic methodologies like the NYPD's CompStat.[17] This new approach turned to science to clean up the urban environment. *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman, 1984) epitomises such an approach, in which the title characters act like exterminators ridding buildings of unwanted ghost-pests. These ghosts are more like pesky vandals

than hardened criminals and in one scene Peter Venkman (Bill Murray) itemises the pricing of their service for a hotel manager, declaring that they can easily go and put the pests 'right back where [they] found them'. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Steve Barron, 1990) provides yet another vision of pest-animality, featuring creatures that arise from nuclear waste to protect the urban environment. These anthropomorphised animals do not 'fit' neatly into the social sphere but nonetheless fight to preserve its status quo. The turtles are humanised animals; they are individuated subjects with distinct personalities in contrast to the monstrous others of the wilderness.

The race- and class-determined rubric of Hollywood-produced New York cinema configures the urban animal as a monstrous pest – a species facilitated by urbanisation that nonetheless threatens the social stability of the urban sphere. The subterranean mutation narratives of *C.H.U.D.* (Douglas Cheek, 1984) and *Mimic* (Guillermo del Toro, 1998) belie the essentially conservative reinscription of a strict ontological division between humankind and animality in their figurations of the pest. Playing on anxieties about subterranean inhabitation *C.H.U.D.* features homeless inhabitants of the Bowery turned irradiated zombies as the monstrous products of the secret storage of radioactive waste under the city. The unstable ontological status of the monsters is expressed in the dual interpretations of the acronym 'C.H.U.D.' offered in the film: 'Cannibalistic Humanoid Underground Dwellers', referencing the subjects of contamination; 'Contaminated Hazardous Urban Disposal', indicating the environmental source of mutation. The anthropogenic quality of subterranean animality re-emerges in *Mimic* where an experiment designed to eradicate a cockroach-borne pathogen threatening the city's children inadvertently results in the creation of a super-roach that literally mimics human features. This ironic play on anthropomorphism where the animal takes on human features to lure people to their deaths suggests that dangerous animality can reside in plain sight, promoting a paranoid perspective on urban social life. That this animality is born out of the urban space itself as a massive laboratory reflects anxieties about urban sociality and its intrinsic everyday contingency and confusion. In these films scientific management goes awry, threatening the city with hyperbolised pests.

Fig. 10:   *A monstrous C.H.U.D.*

The trope of pest-management in the New York garden recurs in Barry Sonnenfeld's *Men in Black* (1997) as secret agents 'J' and 'K' (Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones) manage and monitor extra-terrestrial populations in New York. Nature and alienness are aligned at the outset of the film with a digitally rendered micro-photographic shot of a dragonfly in the Western desert. The villain that they ultimately track is a 'bug' which poses a grave threat to the newly-regulated urban environment. Significantly that threat is now not only against the city but Earth itself and the protagonists must race against the clock to save the planet.

From global New York to the digital non-environment

Over the past fifteen years an increasing number of Hollywood CGI special effects vehicles have again reoriented the cultural perception of New York's environment to global and even cosmic scales. The films *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, 1998), *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998), *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004), and *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009) all present the threat or result of complete earthly destruction as out of the control of individual actors while centring on the iconicity of New York City to anchor the films' sprawling interconnectedness. We get a sense of a greater nature operating outside and in spite of human agency, precluding any intervention at all let alone the protection of New York's urban space. The response must be global, even cosmic, and on a massive scale to avoid the destructive forces that threaten humanity.

The Happening (M. Night Shyamalan, 2008) provides an excellent example of the new ideologies and environmental anxieties surrounding the increasing realisation of climate change. The film's threat – a botanical toxin that deactivates the self-preservation centre of the brain, causing people to immediately commit suicide – is a fittingly ironic allegory for the self-destructive behaviours of post-industrial societies in the face of climate change. Here plants strike back against humanity's destructive activities and this violence begins, of all places, in Central Park. At one point in the film a character speculates that it began in cities because it is cities that pose the greatest threat to ecology, echoing Dipesh Chakrabarty's observation that 'humans have become geological agents [only] very recently in human history'.[18] In the scale of geologic time and with human actions taking on a geologic magnitude cities come to be viewed as a very new and dangerous phenomenon. In contrast to this expanded temporality other films' representational strategies towards climate change demand the immediacy of a catastrophic event, conveying this gradual process as an imminent and visible threat.
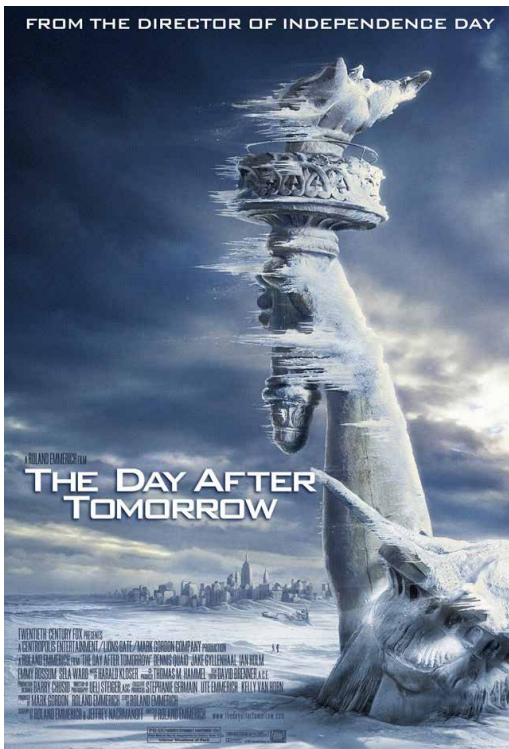

Fig. 11:   Flash-frozen New York in The Day After Tomorrow.

The Day After Tomorrow portrays the climatic destruction of New York when the city is flash-frozen, which is framed as an event resulting from the failure of scientific predictions about climate change. As *The Day After Tomorrow* focuses on climate it also features a global environmental reorientation as Americans flock to the Mexican border for refuge from the new ice age. Monsters in these films are either the climate itself or allegories for climate such as the unseen destructive force in *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), which Daniel North observes is incapable of being 'caught on camera, fully understood or reasoned with' despite the ubiquity of mediating technologies.[19]

WALL-E (Andrew Stanton, 2008) opens on a post-apocalyptic New York skyline constituted by massive piles of trash that the eponymous robot slowly and in vain 'cleans up'. Humans who have been in outer space for hundreds of years have lost all physical relation to Earth and gravity as they ride on hover chairs eating fast food. As Paul Virilio has observed of space travel, 'what is "incapable" or, at any rate, *incapacitated*, is the environment and its properties', uncannily evoking the disconnection the space travellers experience with their former earthly existence.[20] The messianic resolution of the film in which WALL-E and his ally EVE triumph over the HAL-9000-esque ship computer to bring humanity back to Earth mediates anxieties about the relation of humans to the global environment and its physicality as constitutive of humanness. Human subjects are here redeemed in their naïve ignorance, free from the ideologically-coded environments that once interpellated urban inhabitants. Appropriately it is this animated feature film that best displays the final obliteration of those physical environments, with unbridled urbanism as its cause, finally returning to the traditional opposition of nature to urbanity. In an ironic end to urbanity's drive for hegemony over nature the film's digital renderings of New York imagine urban teleological development taken to its nightmarish conclusion. The city is reiterated as a relentless affront to the environment, itself symbolised by a single plant sprouting from an old boot once discarded in the dirty streets.

Fig. 12:   Humanity's last hope in WALL-E.

This cinematic history of New York exhibits an urban teleological disposition in that it constructs an explicitly demarcated urbanity and nature irremediably opposed to one another. A specific conception of history, of the city as struggling against its own perceived dissolution, fuels this cinematic formulation of nature and obfuscates any qualitative engagement between subjectivity and environment. If we encounter a political dead-end in this first section the second half of this article attempts to illustrate an alternative conception of New York's environments, exploring how cinema can produce a singular urban ecology that is energetic, creative, and open to difference.

Queering nature, greening the city: Towards an urban ecology

Among its many virtues *Koyaanisqatsi* (Godfrey Reggio, 1982) gestures strongly towards the disruption of preconceived notions of urbanity and nature. In sequences that take us from Monument Valley to Midtown skyscrapers and vacant Lower East Side lots the film makes an audiovisual argument about the mutually-constitutive geographic, aesthetic, and ecological relationships between these very different places. We have so far argued that New York cinema exhibits an urban teleology containing an implicit desire for the victory of urbanity over nature as 'other'. Here we argue that against such an impulse to cinematically distil and purge *nature* from the city there is also a cinema that actively renegotiates the relationship between urbanity and *ecology*.

Fig. 13:   'Rebalancing' nature and urbanity in Koyaanisqatsi.

The films discussed here take on a posture of what Lawrence Buell calls 'reinhabitation', which he defines as a 'long-term reciprocal engagement with a place's human and nonhuman environments [that] welcomes the prospect of one's identity being molded by this encounter'.[21] These films actively explore New York's environments, providing a counter-hegemonic vision of an urban ecology that contests the more ideologically-fraught representations previously discussed. Alternative cinematic modes found most often in experimental and documentary works fulfil a criterion that Scott MacDonald has proposed for 'ecocinema': the provision of '*new kinds of film experience* that demonstrate an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship and help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset'.[22] We attend to the experiential dimensions of these films insofar as they challenge essentialised notions of 'urbanity' and 'nature'. In this section we move from ideologically-normative and urban-centric iterations of *nature* to a cinema that reinhabits and thereby de-familiarises the city's environments, foregrounding New York's actually existing urban *ecology*.

Fig. 14:   *The urban cloudscape in KOYAANISQATSI (Godfrey Reggio, 1982)*
          http://vimeo.com/66987125

As was explored in the first half of this article ideologies of nature have tended to corrupt more mainstream narrative representations of New York. Struggling against this social corruption, eco-feminist and environmental justice critiques of how nature is gendered and racialised have reoriented understandings of such ideologically-fraught conceptions in much 'green' scholarship over the past few decades.[23] Contributing to such dialogues Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands advocates a 'queer ecological perspective', arguing that the project of overcoming the naturalised dichotomy of nature and urbanity is tied to the contestation of hegemonic conceptions of sexuality. According to the Darwinian evolutionary reproductive economy '[h]omosexuality was simultaneously naturalized and considered "unnatural," something *deviant* from primary, normative heterosexuality'.[24] This epistemological articulation of homosexuality ran counter to the development of ecological ideas about 'healthy' ecosystems in that those that did not possess a heterosexual reproductive economy were formulated as dysfunctional and deviant. New York was no less affected by such disciplinary discourses. As Mortimer-Sandilands observes, in the popular Victorian imagination 'cities were sites of the particular moral "degeneracy" associated with homosexuality', for which projects like Central Park were a supposed panacea. She explains how Frederick Law Olmsted's vision of parks as a solution to such 'degeneracy' led to their articulation as '[spaces] of intensive moral regulation'.[25]

Later, due to what Mortimer-Sandilands calls the 'ghettoization of queer culture' gay men and lesbians began to form 'distinct and diverse patterns

of community [that came to] *organize* urban nature', going on to observe that '[i]ronically, exactly in the parks that were so frequently designed to discourage homosexual activity, gay men have found and created a form of sexual community'.[26] She calls this a *'democratization* of natural space' as communities form around and create alternative conceptions and uses of urban nature, founding a positive political project.[27] Taking on a queer ecological perspective then is an act of critical re-appropriation; a central question this section poses is whether cinema can function as a vehicle for reinhabiting urban environments in the interest of overcoming ideological codings of the urban and the natural.[28] In other words, as Mortimer-Sandilands focuses on the queering of specific urban natural settings, how can cinema itself accomplish such a queering? We go on to explore some ways in which alternative cinematic renderings of New York have accomplished a 'greening' of the urban, positing a singular urban ecology.


Fig. 15:   *'This is Walden', DIARIES, NOTES, AND SKETCHES, aka WALDEN* (*Jonas Mekas, 1969*)
             http://vimeo.com/66987210

Just as parks were re-appropriated by gay and lesbian culture and re-articulated as alternative community spaces Jonas Mekas explores Central Park as a radical, liberating space in 1960s New York. His *Diaries, Notes, and Sketches, also known as Walden* (1969) exhibits a park that is rife with possibility, constantly a source of creative inspiration and counter-cultural politics as implied by its Thoreauvian title. *Walden* presents a space with so much centrifugal energy that in one sequence a marching crowd spills out into the streets indifferent to the grid and traffic lights. The film abounds with sequences where Mekas is clearly overwhelmed by the wind in the

trees around him or the position of the sun in the sky as he seems to enter into a trance-like state:

> [t]here was a tree in Central Park that I wanted to [film]. I really liked that tree, and I kept filming at the very beginning...then I look on the viewer and it's not the same. It's just a tree standing there, it's boring.

> And then I began filming the tree in little fragments: I fragmented; I condensed...and then you can see the wind in it; then you can see some energy in it. Then it became something else. Ah, that's more interesting! That's my tree! That's the tree that I like, not just a tree that is naturalistic and boring, not what I saw in that tree when I was looking.[29]
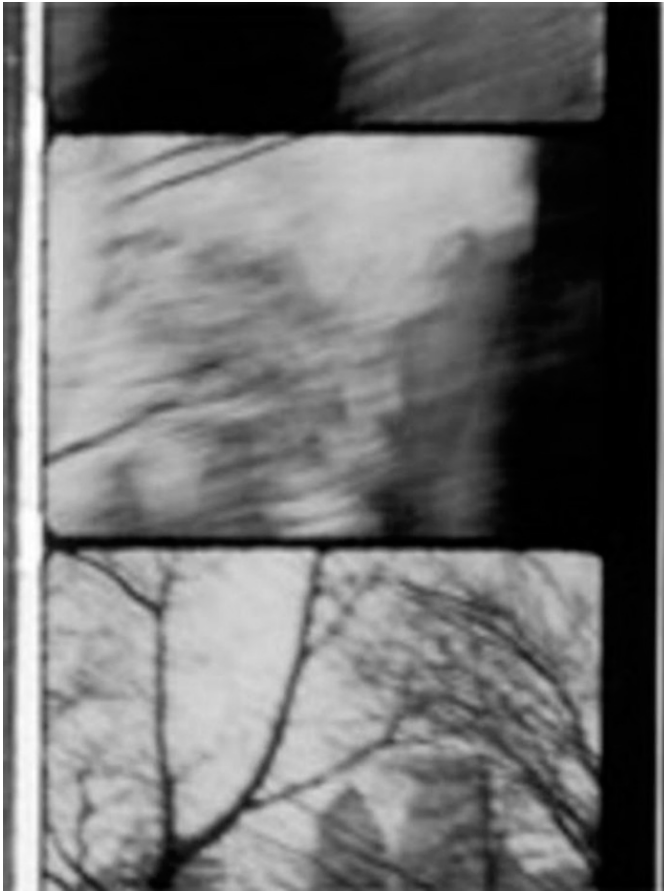
Fig. 16:   Mekas' cinematic disposition towards urban nature in Walden.

By recognising his own disposition toward ecological objects Mekas is able to cultivate an alternative aesthetic relationship between the camera and those objects, recreating that disposition cinematically. His focus on the contingency of the tree's movements suggests that he is simply recognising an agentive force already present around him. The title of his *Guns of the Trees* (1961) also implies an agentive ecological force and that ecology has its own cinematic representational strategy that the filmmaker need only recognise.

Central Park is no less transformative in William Greaves' *Symbiopsycho-taxiplasm: Take One* (1968). Greaves' concept for the film, rearticulated in its title, was derived from philosopher Arthur Bentley's term 'symbiotaxis', intended to mean the processes by which social arrangements emerge.[30] The park in Greaves' film serves to render those processes visible, underlining the hopefulness inherent in the suspension of rigid social conventions and euphoria for the transformations that suspension might activate. This condition would be born out in Greaves' cinematic meta-inquiry into the production process seen in the film's nested narrative structure. The production of his fiction film, the pretence for his inquiry, is itself documented, leading to yet another documentary layer – the crew's gradual 'mutiny' against their director, footage of which makes its way into the finished film. In *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* there is a sense that Central Park is a space of social and institutional transcendence as Greaves, an African-American filmmaker, directs actors of multiple races to play the same scene over and over in 'screen tests' running against the grain of linear character development in Hollywood narratives. This dynamic exposes social performativity, opening the door to new possibilities each time the scene is played out. That the scene repetitively performed is the dissolution of a couple's marriage – perhaps the most common social institution – underlines the ways in which the intersection of cinematic representation with the park destabilises societal norms, implying an alternative agentive force. As Greaves said in an interview

> [t]his film will tell itself. This film is about us, about the cast, crew, and onlookers, about us all as part of nature, and nature has its own story to tell. Our problem, or rather my problem, is to get out of nature's way and let nature tell her story. That's what a good director is – a person who gets his ego out of his own way, he is at best a collaborator and servant of nature…[31]

The agency of the environment is palpable in this film as characters are never fully socially-formed and all human relationships (and the film itself) conclude in indeterminacy. The park is the only identifiable agent in *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, the only stable referential field, and furthermore this field is indifferent to generic differences within the film – the park is the park in the fictional scenes as well as in their breakdown when the actors drop out of character to complain and the documentary form takes over. Central Park as the space in which all of this takes place appears in the film as persisting in spite of the various dramas that ensue or perhaps as the very 'plasm' out of which sociality arises.

Fig. 17:   *The park is the park..., SYMBIOPSYCHOTAXIPLASM: TAKE ONE*
(*William Greaves, 1968*)
http://vimeo.com/66987600

Outside of Central Park New York's environments can also be understood as generating alternative forms of subjectivity. As artist Jean-Michel Basquiat puts it in *Downtown 81* (Edo Bertoglio, 1981), the New York cityscape 'can be a jungle and [can] be a paradise too, and sometimes you can't tell the difference'. Films like *Downtown 81*, *Permanent Vacation* (Jim Jarmusch, 1980), *Wild Style* (Charlie Ahearn, 1983), and *Ghost Dog* (Jim Jarmusch, 1999) all dwell in this epistemological liminality in their repurposings of urban space. The dérives of characters like Allie (Chris Parker) in *Permanent Vacation*, Basquiat in *Downtown 81*, and Zoro ('Lee' Quiñones) in *Wild Style* along with their counter-cultural practices such as graffiti art marginalise them in the urban landscape. Yet this marginalisation also affords them freedom from the strictures of regulated sociality. Reflecting the 'forgotten' character of neighbourhoods like the Lower East Side and the South Bronx these figures

also hesitate before their own installation into a stable narrative logic and instead revel in the liminal condition of the city.

Ghost Dog (Forest Whitaker), a 'ghetto samurai', navigates Brooklyn neighbourhoods avoiding detection through his samurai tactics and solitary lifestyle, preferring his relationship to his pigeons. Like the wolfen, Ghost Dog's ontological status is in constant doubt and this fluidity of identity allows him to transcend racist stereotypes. An ironic scene in which buffoonish mafiosos discuss Ghost Dog's unconventional name explicitly parodies the heavily racialised animality of the previously discussed films. Animality has come full circle – from the ideological animalisation of deviance and criminality to animality as a vehicle for re-appropriating identity and environment.

Fig. 18:   *What's in a name?, GHOST DOG: THE WAY OF THE SAMURAI* (*Jim Jarmusch, 1999*)
           http://vimeo.com/66989282

The valorisation of transgressive subjectivity is further accented in *The Cruise* (Bennett Miller, 1998), a documentary portrait of Timothy 'Speed' Levitch, a bard-like guide for Manhattan's Grey Line bus tours. While bemoaning the power of what he calls 'the anti-cruise', or forces like the street grid and law enforcement that attempt to curtail alternative modes of being in the city, a cockroach scurries by and prompts a spontaneous reverie. Levitch exalts the survivability of the cockroach – perhaps the most iconic urban pest – and its transcendence of human institutions.

Fig. 19: *Millennial survivor in THE CRUISE* (*Bennett Miller, 1999*)
http://vimeo.com/66989355

For Levitch this cockroach stands in for the sorts of counter-cultural forces that the city tries in vain to contain or dispense with, appearing in a moment of documentary-contingency. *Dark Days* (Marc Singer, 2000) takes the issue of alternative survivability a step further as filmmaker Singer entered a well known area of the Amtrak tunnels under Riverside Park – dubbed the 'Freedom Tunnel' after graffiti artist Chris 'Freedom' Pape who painted murals there – which was inhabited by a large homeless population. Singer takes homelessness out of the realm of sociological study and offers a visceral engagement with the people of the tunnels, who even keep dogs as pets in a small pen near their makeshift homes. Their subterranean lifestyle appears less radically different than one might expect and the practicality of living such a life becomes a central subject of curiosity. Importantly it is through a mutual identification with rats as a pestilent species that the viewer is brought to empathise with the documentary subjects and to question the broader raced and classed definitions of animality that unfairly colour so many New York films. In this way Singer's cinematic reinhabitation of the city affords a new perspective and new views of urban space, challenging its normative topographical and domestic qualities.

Fig. 20:   Subterranean pets in DARK DAYS (Marc Singer, 2000)
      http://vimeo.com/66989517

Jem Cohen's filmmaking exhibits a similar appreciation for homelessness as an alternative lifestyle that activates a re-evaluation of the urban and the ecological. In *This is a History of New York* (1987) Cohen shoots in black-and-white video and attempts to uncover different historical periods in the landscape's history, observing aporias intrinsic to urban teleology in the now postmodern, post-industrial city. Cohen demonstrates that even in the space age signalled by Queens' Rocket Field the nomadic 'hunter-gatherers' from the film's earlier section persist amidst the innovation of the ideal city of the future.

Fig. 21:   Contested teleology in THIS IS A HISTORY OF NEW YORK (Jem Cohen, 1987)
      http://vimeo.com/66989645

It is significant that these films are in black-and-white – a feature that elides not only the colour green but also the ostensible boundaries separating essentialised urbanity and nature. This aesthetic enables viewers to perceive all of the interacting features that comprise the city – above ground or under – in their inextricability. Shooting in high-contrast black-and-white 16mm film the prevalence of ecology within urbanity is nowhere more visible than in Peter Hutton's *New York Portrait* trilogy (1978-1990). Hutton frames various vistas of the city in static extreme wide shots and holds the views for extended, meditatively-paced long takes. Prominently influenced by Luminist painters like Thomas Cole, Hutton crafts a series of Hudson River School-like vistas, emphasising ecological elements of the mise-en-scène such as subtle variations in light and the movement of clouds or a flock of pigeons to downplay the significance of the built environment. Throughout his films the city's iconic skyscrapers are literally marginalised along the periphery of the frame to make way for the sublimely big sky. These black-and-white images continually emphasise the activity of ecological features that saturate the city – always in motion, however slightly. Discussing Hutton's *Time and Tide* (2000) filmed up and down the Hudson River, the ecological periphery of New York City, Scott MacDonald speculates on the film's environmentalism:

> [i]t is its unusually serene pace that allows for a reading of *Time and Tide* that one can call environmentalist. Hutton's gaze is not relentlessly polemical, *except* in its duration... Asking us to look at something for sometimes ten or twelve times longer than we look at any single image in a conventional film...is a way of arguing for the comparative *importance* of what we're seeing, and of the manner in which we're seeing it.[32]

Hutton's cinema re-appropriates the crudely exploited, industrialised waterway that has fuelled New York's urbanism and forces us to confront its condition. His static camera moves with the river offering contemplative vistas that transcend the opposition between nature and urbanity.

Fig. 22:   *Big sky over the World Trade Center, NEW YORK PORTRAIT, PART II*
          (*Peter Hutton, 1980-81*)
          http://vimeo.com/66989745

Mocking the iconic verticality of Manhattan the short documentary *The Hole* (Courtney Sell and Billy Feldman, 2010) explores a neighbourhood on the border of Howard Beach, Queens and Brooklyn that has one of the lowest elevations in the city and therefore floods regularly. *The Hole* entirely de-familiarises New York, depicting the rich diversity of subjectivities that inhabit the strange neighbourhood, most remarkably an elderly African-American man named Rufus who dons a two-gun rig and playfully 'quick draws' for the camera. The idiosyncratic performativity of Rufus' display in a non-fictional context parodically overdetermines the generic tropes of fictional urban Westerns, exposing their constructed nature. Another man who likens the neighbourhood to a rural environment explains that the place 'reminds me so much of the country…and you don't find too many places like that in New York'. The aesthetic of the film, alternating between interviews and a highly subjective first-person camera perspective that peeps through holes in fences and drifts through flooded areas, effects a reinhabitation of New York that de-essentialises its urbanism. In fact this neighbourhood is both like and not like 'the country' as sewage leaks into the earth and water and people regularly dump their garbage in its abandoned lots. Further complicating this bucolic pastoralism a scene of an ice cream truck driving through flooded streets offers an intensely localised and ironic visualisation of climate change. While eerily prefiguring the devastation wrought by Hurricane Sandy this scene also reveals that the neighbourhood had already been subsisting under those conditions for years.
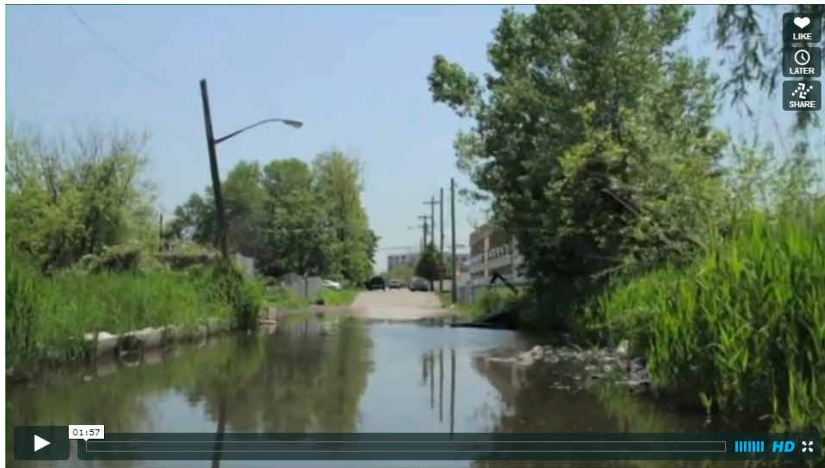
*Fig. 23:   The country in the city, THE HOLE (Courtney Fathom Sell & Billy
        Feldman, 2010)*
        http://vimeo.com/66990004

Conclusion

Perhaps the singular icon of *The Hole* is the recurrent rooster that walks
freely through various yards drawing the attention of the camera – not
to its otherness but to how it voices the alternative status of this place
without words. For Akira Lippit, reading Christian Metz, cinema shares
with animality a specific relation to language. While it is often dependent
upon it cinema also 'calls into question the primacy of language in the
constitution of the human world' much as the animal 'marks a limit of
figurability, a limit of the very function of language'.[33]
    We have argued that New York's urbanity has been cinematically marked
in at least two distinct ways: in an urban teleology that strives to ideologi-
cally essentialise and subordinate an abstract and otherised nature, and in a
reinhabitation of the city which recognises the inextricable interconnected-
ness, overlapping, and blurring of urbanity and nature in New York. We
have sought out cinematic re-conceptualisations of urban ecology that are
ecologically, politically, and socially explorative, performing a 'greening' of
the city. It is in this spirit, viewing *The Hole* as the camera curiously ponders
a distinct urban ecology, that we find a tentative destination; and it is from
listening to the ubiquitous rooster, unspeaking, that we get the sense that

this is a sincere account of a place that is uncontainable, unreadable, and multifarious – a microcosm of the city that has always harboured difference and that continues to inspire liberation from and resistance to the distinctly human dreams that founded it.

Notes

1. While the term 'greening' has taken on new valences in recent years, particularly in the domain of urban planning (see Niemelä 1999 on the need to bring the science of ecology to bear on urban environments), we view our work as an important intervention in formulating urban 'greening' as a representational paradigm. In other words re-orientations in urban planning and development should be supplemented by an epistemological rethinking of the idea of 'greening' as it is iterated in cultural forms such as cinema.
2. Morton 2007, p. 14.
3. Michael Zimmerman and Andrew Biro both consider the social implications of 'deep ecological' thinking as well as the intersecting and conflicting social politics of a wide range of radical ecological thinkers (see Zimmerman 1994 and Biro 2005).
4. Biro 2005, p. 58.
5. Koolhaas 1994, p. 20.
6. Ibid., p. 10.
7. Elsaesser 2012 (orig. in 1975), pp. 225-236.
8. Nash 1967, p. 1.
9. Agamben 2004, p. 15.
10. Lippit 2000, p. 172.
11. Light 1999, p. 138.
12. Goldstein 1981.
13. Page 2008, p. 169.
14. Keulartz 1998, p. 87.
15. Braudy 1998, p. 292.
16. Kelling & Wilson 1982.
17. CompStat is a computerised system adopted in 1994 that statistically quantifies and maps criminal activity in New York City.
18. Chakrabarty 2009.
19. North 2010.
20. Virilio 1997, pp. 128-129 (italics original).
21. Buell 2001, p. 84.
22. MacDonald 2013, p. 20.
23. For example see the anthology *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* edited by L. Coupe. On the history of radical ecology see Zimmerman 1994. For an exploration of the ideological inflections of the idea of nature in philosophy see Biro 2005.
24. Mortimer-Sandilands 2005, p. 4. The pagination is ours, applied to the PDF printout of the article.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., pp. 5-7.
27. Ibid., p. 8 (italics original).

28. Timothy Morton has observed that '[e]ocritique is similar to queer theory. In the name of all that we value in the idea "nature," it thoroughly examines how nature is set up as a transcendental, unified, independent category.' See Morton 2007, p. 13.

29. Mekas 2004, quoted in Sitney 2008, p. 91.

30. For a more substantial definition of the concept 'symbiotaxis' see Arthur F. Bentley in Ratner 1954, pp. 11-12.

31. Greaves in MacDonald 1995, p. 36.

32. MacDonald 2004.

33. Lippit 2000, p. 186, 163.

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