



# Writing Visual Culture

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Volume

# 6.0

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### **Series Editor**

Dr Grace Lees-Maffei, University of Hertfordshire

### **Guest Editor for Vol. 6**

Dr Daniel Marques Sampaio and Michael Heilgemeir

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## Abstracts

### 6.2 'Port-au-Prince is New Orleans: Race, Space, and the Spectacle of Suffering'

This essay interrogates the visual representation of the aftermath of two major natural disasters, Hurricane Katrina and tranblemandet  (the Haitian term for the 2010 earthquake). These two cities, which are linked through the history of French imperialism in the Americas, related religious practice, the legacy of slavery, and migration from post-revolution Port-au-Prince to New Orleans, drew international attention in the aftermath of their aforementioned disasters. The sheer volume of still images documenting the effects of the hurricane and earthquake –captured on inexpensive cellphones as well as professional-grade cameras (DSLRs) – lay bare the devastation wrought by tranblemandet  on New Orleans, Port-au-Prince, and their respective residents. Considering the crucial role that photography plays in representing the abject disaster victim in New Orleans and Port-au-Prince, this essay explores both how these photographs serve particular rhetorical ends and the way these images are produced and circulated.

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### 6.3 'The Neighborhood Is Dangerous, But We Got There': Urban Space, Neoliberal Resistance, and Black Representation in Isaac Julien's Looking for Langston'

Since Looking for Langston first came out, it has become a classic avant-garde film capturing the queer undercurrent of the Harlem Renaissance and displaying Black gay desire during the height of the AIDS crisis. The film also critiques neoliberal ideology of the 1980s and the ways it has defined urban space. Reaganism and Thatcherism have framed the city with its Black population as a space that threatens the social order. Building on the theories of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Stuart Hall, I argue that the city's importance is not so much as a physical space but as a site for the struggle over representation. Julien's role as a filmmaker is to create a cinematic landscape that challenges the racism of neoliberal thought and provides an alternate imagining of urban space. In Looking for Langston, he constructs a queer space that while referencing the 1920s and 1980s, could be applied to any historical moment or Black urban space. By placing desire at the center of this new geography, he questions the way space is defined through capital and posits the Black Subject as an agent of change in the struggle with neoliberalism.

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#### 6.4 'Edgelands Aesthetics: Exploring the Liminal in Andrea Arnold's *Fishtank* (2009)'

Edgelands are the semi-rural or extra-urban spaces that exist at the interstices of the built, urban environment and the wildscapes beyond. Perceived as a threat to the norm and to the stability of the psychic, social and geographical body, they are often codified as abject spaces (see Sibley, 1995 for example). However, contemporary thinking on edgelands assigns to them less negative connotations (see Shoard, 2002; Edensor, 2005; Farley and Roberts 2011), identifying them instead with notions of nostalgia, loss and "an emergent sense of uniqueness" (Chell 2013). This paper engages with the depiction of edgelands in Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank*, (2009). Arnold's deployment of film aesthetics portrays these locations as an alternative to the exclusion and alienation experienced within the domestic environment, affording a space for the dispossessed to resolve crises in their own identity. This paper will explore how the possibilities of an emergent "edgelands aesthetic" can help to engage with the alternative meanings inherent in such space and, following Naficy's theory of exilic/accented cinema, it will suggest that Arnold offers a particular version of a cinema of exile through the film's depiction of landscape, employing the cinematic chronotopes which Naficy uses to describe the accented cinema of exilic directors.

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#### 6.5 'Red Road Re-visions'

Glasgow's Red Road flats, icons first of the promise and latterly of the perceived failure of modernist mass housing, are particularly visible even as they are being demolished, having inspired numerous representations. Critiquing the cancelled plan that would have made Red Road's demolition a spectacle for the 2014 Commonwealth Games opening ceremony, this paper moves on to a range of less reductive views of Red Road, drawing on the geocritical ideas of Bertrand Westphal, who argues that places are intertextual constructions constantly in flux, which call for multifocal, interdisciplinary analysis. Westphal's ideas resonate with the recent work of geographers Jane M. Jacobs and Ignaz Strebel and architecture scholar Stephen Cairns, which treats buildings as "always being 'made' or 'unmade.'" Comparably, Alison Irvine's novel *This Road is Red* (2011) explores how Red Road has been made by interactions between subjective experiences of residents and more objective facts of architecture and engineering. The novel itself exemplifies a geocritical – or geofictional – approach in using multifocal and multimodal means of textual and visual representation, and its linkage with the municipal Red Road legacy initiative is an innovative articulation across disciplines and media. Also significant are more abrasive works, such



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as Denise Mina's crime novel *The Red Road* (2013), which likens tower-block demolitions memorably to "public hanging[s]." The essay suggests that such demolition spectacles may also be read as metaphors for the vertiginous instability of financialised housing under neoliberalism, and as signposts to the needed re-emergence of social-democratic approaches to housing.

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## 6.6 'A Disconnected Community? (Re)visioning the Heygate Council Estate Through Digital Activism'

From the wailing police sirens in *The Bill* (1984-2010), to the gun-toting bad boys in *Top Boy* (2011-2013), during the late 20th and early 21st century, London's Heygate council estate was a stage on which to enact terrifying anxieties about crime and social deviance. As if in answer to these visualizations, in 2010 the government announced a £1.5 billion regeneration project that will transform the area into a "brand-new town centre" over the next fifteen years. By demolishing the Heygate and replacing it with mixed-income accommodations, the council aim to counteract the area's association with concentrated poverty, organized crime and dependency on benefits. I propose that the dystopian vision of the Heygate in popular visual texts contributed to its notoriety in the nation's visual imagination, and consequently helped to influence its socio-spatial restructure.

This article considers the visual activism of residents who respond to the dominant visualizations of their homes with counter-narratives centred on an attachment to place. I focus primarily on the website, *Southwark Notes*, a dynamic and malleable digital text that facilitates and makes visible citizen action and a sense of creative ownership over the rapidly changing urban landscape in Southwark. The site is a practical manifestation of what I call usable memory – a place where residents reminisce about their deeply rooted past, utilizing this historical attachment to place to unite and prevent the uprooting of community landmarks in the future.

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## 6.7 'Superstudio's Dystopian Tales: Textual and Graphic Practice as Operational Method'

Written in 1971, Superstudio's 12 Cautionary Tales anticipated, with its critical attitude against the totalitarian and alienating aspects of the advanced capitalist metropolis, the debates on production, consumption and sustainability that arose following the 1970s economic crisis. Situated at the crossroads between architecture, literature and graphics, this work revealed a vision of urban reality that was both extreme and radical, and rejected what until then, had marked the body of architectural research connected with social utopias. Investigating and meditating in an unconventional way the existing network of human relations through its physical dimension – the architecture of the metropolis – Superstudio's work presented a critical theory that stood out as a negative reflection on reality, unveiling its deep and hidden contradictions through a utopian and cognitive model. It still represents one of the most interesting contributions to an alternative debate on architecture and urban planning, highlighting the importance of the dissenting role of architects and intellectuals in society.

Superstudio's 12 Cautionary Tales was instrumental in reinvigorating the discussion around architecture and city development models. Its influence survives to this day, and contributes to fully illustrating the richness and the breadth of the critical debate pertaining to growth strategies of the 1970s.

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## 6.8 'Ōtomo's Exploding Cities – The Intersection of Class and City in Ōtomo Katsuhiko's Works Before, During, and After the Bubble Economy in Japan'

In one of Ōtomo Katsuhiko's interviews held during the sponsoring events for Metropolis (2001) he stated that, characters aside, the city itself was a driving force behind his initial concept. Ōtomo wanted a city that felt "alive" on the one hand, but that he could gleefully "completely destroy" on the other. Although the artist is neither a stranger to "exploding cities" in a figurative (i.e. exploding population) nor in a literal sense, the ways he imagined his cityscapes changed bit by bit. Considering the essential position held by the apocalyptic idea as a key-image in both political and pop-cultural discourse during the Lost Decades, as the years following the burst of the bubble economy are known, Ōtomo's works open up the possibility to examine how the image of urban landscape and its destruction are interconnected with the discourse of class (or with its vanishing and re-emerging) in Japan during the 1980s and 1990s. By looking at Dōmu (1980-1981), Akira (1982-1990; 1988), and Metropolis, one can not only approach the image of the (exploding) city and its possible change over time, but also the shift in discussion of class in the once called "classless society".

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### Referees for Vol. 6

Dr Daniel Marques-Sampaio, School of Creative Arts, University of Hertfordshire

Michael Heilgemeir, School of Creative Arts, University of Hertfordshire

Dr Susan Parham, Centre for Sustainable Communities, University of Hertfordshire

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**Dr Daniel Marques Sampaio, University of Hertfordshire**

### Introduction

I

This issue of Writing Visual Culture springs from the seminar Texts+Cities: From the 1970s to the Present, which Michael Heilgemeir and I organised at the University of Hertfordshire, in January 2014. The seminar and this issue, a partnership between Photography UH and the TVAD research group, are part of our project Texts+Cities, which explores the relationships between texts and urban spaces in contemporary society. From the outset, Michael and I made the decision to restrict the scope of the project to developments taking place in the decades since the 1970s. The 1970s saw a series of key historical events that prompted a crisis of Capitalism still defining contemporary living:

- the energy crises;
- the increasing refinement of digital technologies and their introduction as lifestyle appliances, and to industries such as communications and finance;
- a new bout of globalisation that prompted an unprecedented worldwide integration of markets, politics, and values;
- and a resurgence of the power of capital.

Since the crisis of Capitalism of the 1970s, contemporary cities have provided a fertile ground for reflections on how to conceptualise the ‘urban’, so as to envisage potentially novel ways of producing effective action in them. The term “city” itself has been subjected to relentless questioning, as the classic distinction between urban and rural is being transformed radically. The logic of globalised capital extends urban sprawl further and further. It also assimilates what was once understood as the ‘countryside’, both by commodifying the experience of nature (through rural tourism, or through the gentrification of rural communities), and by integrating agricultural land into a continuum with urban-based systems of production and distribution. The same logic also produces the reverse movement, bringing consumerist versions of the countryside into the city. Economic and political ideologies shape the design, building, and inhabiting of physical spaces; historical and cultural texts and discourses are appropriated for the purposes of tourism and city branding; contemporary cities cannot be extricated from the production, consumption, manipulation, and circulation of texts in the form of data and information. At a most direct level, textual paraphernalia cover urban spaces, demanding engagement from users of those spaces. More fundamentally, cities are turning into environments that require to be explored at once physically, phenomenologically, and textually.

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Reflecting on our seminar, the contributions and discussions helped us approach a basic question: can the contemporary, shape-shifting city, be ‘read’, can it be approached as if it were a text? This question is foregrounded by some of the contributors to the present issue, who have provided an array of examinations, analyses, and interpretations of the movement from text to urban space and back. Some of the papers move within a theoretical space influenced, or at least informed, by Semiotics – film, literary, and media criticism, in particular. Another area of concern is with the radical geography of the scholars responsible for the ‘spatial turn’ in the social sciences of the past half-century (notably the works of Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey). Those authors have promoted a critical sensibility that is highly attuned to the instability of boundaries between representations and the material, physical, and social structures of urban space. Throughout the issue, the ghost of Modernism looms large, with its urban utopias in literal and metaphorical ruins. Larger still looms the spectre of Neoliberalism, a political and economic configuration that emerged in the wake of the structural crises of the 1970s, advocating free markets, free trade, and the strengthening of private property rights (Harvey 2005, 2-3). For some critics who see it already suffering its own crisis after the 2008 financial collapse, Neoliberalism is a planned effort by financial interests against the post-war Keynesian compromise that saw the creation of the welfare state (Duménil & Lévy 2004, 2011; Glyn, 2006).

## II

The issue opens with Christopher Garland’s paper “Port-au-Prince is New Orleans: Race, Space, and the Spectacle of Suffering”. Garland considers the role of photography, in the aftermath of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince, in constructing the figure of the disaster victim as “abject” (a term borrowed from Kristeva). The two cities, one in a first world country, the other one in the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, converge in this figure. Garland notes how visual representations framed the bodies of Haitians and of African-Americans in New Orleans as defined by poverty and by their race, and engaging in violence and lawlessness. In this, both Port-au-Prince and New Orleans are marked by their “otherness”: the former as an embodiment of the West’s fascination with the image of the global south as permanently on the brink of crisis. The latter, long considered one of the poorest and most unequal cities in the US, with the spectacular representation of its great catastrophe revealing not so much the differences between developed and developing worlds, but fundamentally, those between the state and its citizens.

The opening paper’s theme of “otherness” of the Black body is reflected in the second paper, by Demetrios Kapetanakos, “The Neighborhood is Dangerous, But We Got There: Urban Space, Neoliberal Resistance, and Black Cultural Production in Isaac Julien’s Looking for Langston”. Kapetanakos’ contribution explores Julien’s presentation of New York in the Harlem Renaissance of the



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1920s and neoliberal London in the 1980s as mirroring in their particular times the trajectory of the Black queer experience through the city. The analysis teases out that film's critique of the political and cultural dimensions of neoliberal ideologies of the 1980s, and their atomisation of subjectivity.

In privileging economics and individual responsibility, neoliberal ideology finds its spatialised expressions in urban sites of heightened economic activity, and in those sites where such activity can be reproduced. In this configuration, Kapetanakos argues, the image becomes a pivotal medium for the dissemination of neoliberal ideology. Thus, representations reinforcing the notion that the lives of the Black community are centred on welfare-dependency, poverty, and crime; and the early responses to the AIDS crisis, contribute to framing the Black gay body as criminal, non-productive, and amoral.

The city in this paper is the medium and expression of socio-spatial practices: at once the arena where contests over cultural and racial representations are played out, and the site in which the very subjects it disenfranchises construct their spaces of resistance.

Kapetanakos' paper examines the carving of personal spaces for otherness and resistance. Lance Hanson's paper, "Edgelands Aesthetics: Exploring the Liminal in Andrea Arnold's *Fishtank*", likewise, is concerned with "other" spaces: boundaries, thresholds, spaces at the margins. The paper takes as its point of departure the notion of an "accented cinema", a term coined by film scholar Hamid Naficy to describe how experiences of exile and diaspora are translated into cinema. Hanson sees "edgelands", interstitial spaces found in urban environments, not-quite-wild landscapes, and post-industrial wastelands, as places of otherness and "pure potential" (Deleuze), reflecting and amplifying the alienation and longing experienced by the main character in Arnold's film. The paper also identifies some forms of built environment that function not only as settings for action but also as entities possessing their own narrative possibilities. Hanson catalogues and analyses products of industry and technology, and topographic elements in the film – the shoreline, wind turbines, and wastelands – showing them as symbols of liminal spaces of contemplation, of wonder, and of the potential for escape.

The next two papers share a concern with fictional and media representations of life in housing estates designed during the UK boom in mass housing building of the 1960s-1970s. The first of these papers is Peter Clandfield's "Red Road Re-visions". Clandfield draws on Bernard Westphal's Geocriticism, a cross-disciplinary form of analysis that argues that literature – and narratives, metaphors, as well as other modes of discourse not subject to the constraints of veracity and falsifiability – do more than represent the world: they contribute actively to its shaping.

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Clandfield focuses on Red Road, the high-rise housing complex in Glasgow. The estate attracted media attention recently for the plans for its demolition through controlled implosion ('blowdown') as a set piece for the opening ceremony for the 2014 Commonwealth Games. The paper examines the overlaps between that event (which was eventually scrapped) and fictional representations of Red Road, such as Andrea Arnold's *Red Road*, Alison Irvine's novel *The Road is Red*, and Denise Mina's crime novel *The Red Road*. In particular, Clandfield discusses Mina's description of a blowdown similar to the one planned for Red Road as resembling a "public hanging" – a grim metaphor for the fate of mass public housing under the neoliberal pressures of urban regeneration.

Nicola Mann's paper, "A Disconnected Community? (Re)Visioning the Heygate Council Estate Through Digital Activism", focuses on community-initiated narratives of everyday life in the South London estate. Produced in opposition to popular culture and the media representations that portray Heygate as a hotbed of crime and deprivation, these initiatives use web-based activism to put forth affirmative stories that commemorate the residents' attachment to the place. In her analysis of these initiatives, Mann introduces the notion of "usable memory", a tactic that articulates the connectivity between shared history, and physical and social structures. The term is indebted to figures such as historian Van Wyck Brooks, anthropologist Paul Connerton, and sociologist David Harvey.

Like Peter Clandfield in the preceding paper, Mann provides a critique of the role of private developers in leading urban regeneration initiatives. Mann notes in particular the rhetoric of demonisation of life on the housing estate, which she identifies, through a discussion of statements from residents of the estate, as a product of regeneration discourses. Mann finds the catalysts and defining events of that rhetoric in the three decades of public disinvestment in council housing since the 1980s, in Margaret Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme, and in increasing privatisation – effectively, in the retrenchment of the welfare estate promoted by neoliberal policies.

The papers by Peter Clandfield and Nicola Mann on the Red Road and Heygate estates converge, albeit in ways that are specific to their particular concerns, in their analyses of how media-produced dystopian views frame those housing estates as sites of delinquency and social exclusion. In this they echo the argument made by David Kapetanakis that neoliberalism furthers the marginalisation of Black queer bodies by portraying them as unproductive, diseased, and deviant.

The contributions by Clandfield and Mann delve into the interplays between a variety of texts in the construction of a sense of place, and the dynamics that enable those texts to produce material effects on those places. Fictional accounts explore the complex social and spatial relationships in



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those estates, and digital activism initiatives from residents highlight their sense of community and shared cultural identity, in opposition to the threat posed by developers. Those views also testify to the rhetorical power of the tower blocks and sink estates of Glasgow and inner-city London as signifiers of a real or perceived failure of post-war Modernist mass housing design to live up to its utopian ideals.

The next paper, “Superstudio’s Dystopian Tales: Textual and Graphic Practice as Operational Method”, by Daniela N. Prina, also addresses issues concerning Modernism and its legacy on cities, but from a different perspective. In the papers by Clandfield and Mann, the promises and failures of Modernist utopian planners are discussed from the perspective of people who live in the very estates spawned by those planners. In contrast, Prina focuses on critics of that utopianism from within the architectural profession itself, specifically Florentine architectural practice Superstudio. In their reflections on the paradoxical role of architecture, of text and the image, and of visual communication, Superstudio’s theoretical output and speculative designs produced from the 1960s onwards absorbed a wide range of influences: Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of technical rationality; Pop Art; the technological iconography of Britain’s Archigram; and dystopian classics of literature such as Orwell and Huxley, as well as popular science fiction. The paper provides a review of Superstudio’s key projects, highlighting the continued relevance of their imaginary cities to contemporary critical architectural and urban research.

This issue’s final paper is Sebastian Klausner’s “Ōtomo’s Exploding Cities – The Intersection of Class and City in Ōtomo Katsuhiro’s Works Before, During, and After the Bubble Economy in Japan”. We move from Superstudio’s counter-utopias to the sublimation of class divisions through the othering of Tokyo’s collective capitalism in Ōtomo’s anime fiction. The theme of the city being destroyed is a well-known staple of anime and kaiju: in battling their foes, Ultraman, Ultra Seven, as well as Godzilla, have been reducing Japanese cities to rubble for some time. Klausner explores the key leitmotiv of exploding buildings and city blocks in Ōtomo’s fiction as expressing the entwinement of place, class, and visual culture in Japan. The danchi (high-rise public housing complexes that sprang all over the country to accommodate the expanding urban population) in Dōmu, and vertically structured cities in Akira and Metropolis, appear as spaces of social and urban entropy, ripe for a literal ‘creative destruction’ of Japanese society and its built forms. Despite the exoticism of his works’ science fiction/fantasy setting, Ōtomo’s concerns echo those explored in other papers in this issue: the alienation in Andrea Arnold’s *Fishtank*; Superstudio’s imagined cities, at once alluring, disconcerting, and oppressive in their revolutionary fervor, amplifying and distorting traits of existing ones to the point of ecstasy; the otherness and marginality discussed in the papers by Kapetanakis and Garland. Even the aesthetics of explosion and destruction of the city, a key trope in anime, finds a parallel in the plans for the blowdown of Glasgow’s Red Road tower blocks.

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### III

As editors of this issue, Michael Heilgemeir and I would like to thank our colleagues at the University of Hertfordshire: Dr Grace Lees-Maffei, Reader in Design History and Leader of the TVAD research group, and Dr Steven Adams, our Associate Dean of Research. Grace and Steven have been extremely generous to us in their support and encouragement. We would also like to thank Dr Susan Parham, Head of Urbanism at the University of Hertfordshire's Centre for Sustainable Communities. Susan's advice throughout the production of this issue was invaluable, and helped us enormously in shaping the project. And of course, we would like to thank the seven contributors to this issue of *Writing Visual Culture*, who have responded so readily and generously to our call with papers that move between accounts of the city from media, fictional or community voices, design disciplines, and theoretical perspectives. In this, the present issue hopes to contribute to wider debates within the arts and social sciences that relate to the overlaps, discontinuities, intersections between text and city. Our aim has been to provide an arena in which to investigate ways of thinking and inhabiting the contemporary city that are at once experiential, material, physical, and symbolic, abstract, representational, in a multilayered, multiform web.

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## 6.2

### Port-au-Prince is New Orleans: Race, Space, and the Spectacle of Suffering

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**Dr Christopher Garland, University of Southern Mississippi.**

I  
Images of Hurricane Katrina's effect on New Orleans in August 2005 and the aftermath of the January 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince demonstrate the relationship between race, space, and contemporary environmental disaster. These two urban spaces, linked through the history of French imperialism in the Americas, related religious practice, the legacy of slavery, and migration from post-revolution Port-au-Prince to New Orleans, drew international attention as news of the disasters spread through various mediums, from mainstream television news reports to online social media. This essay considers the crucial role that photography plays in representing the abject disaster victim in New Orleans and Port-au-Prince, how these photographs serve particular rhetorical ends, and the way these images are produced and circulated. And while there are other relatively recent natural disasters that have been featured in contemporary media, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami and the 2011 earthquake off the Pacific coast of Tōhoku, Japan, I am making a comparison between New Orleans and Port-au-Prince because of the specific ways both cities have been framed in terms of the superlative (even before these particular crises).

Jean-Claude Martineau contends that Haiti is the only country in the world with a last name: "poorest country in the Western Hemisphere" (Martineau 2005). New Orleans, too, has long been seen as a regional outlier. As Dan Baum states, the city has been "by almost any metric the worst city in America – the deepest poverty, the most murders, the worst schools, the sickest economy" (Baum 2009, xii). Hurricane Katrina was a Category 5 storm that New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin called the natural disaster "that most of us have long feared" (qtd in Havrilesky 2005).

One of the costliest – in terms of both human life and prop-erty – natural disasters in U.S. history, the storm created a storm surge that breached 53 lev-ees, leaving the majority of the city under water and federal agencies stumbling in their initial rescue attempts. Four and a half years later, on 12 January 2010, Port-au-Prince faced a similarly devastating natural catastrophe: a magnitude 7.0 earthquake with an epicenter just 16 miles outside the city. The earthquake, which revealed the instability of a large amount of residential and commercial buildings in Haiti's capital, resulted in a death toll that, according to the Columbia Journalism Review, ranges anywhere from 46,000 (from a United States Agency for International Development report) to 316,000, which was reported by the Haitian government (O'Connor 2012).

Christopher Garland, 'Port-au-Prince is New Orleans'  
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## 6.2

### Port-au-Prince is New Orleans: Race, Space, and the Spectacle of Suffering

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There are other reasons to compare New Orleans and Port-au-Prince. Neither the first nor the lone voice inputting post-Katrina New Orleans in conversation with post-earthquake Port-au-Prince, John Mutter, a geophysicist and professor at Columbia University's Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences, argues that the

levee failures in New Orleans turned a natural event into a true catastrophe, but the industrial canals, built for commerce through the poorest part of the city early last century imperiled people who benefited little from the ship traffic that passed through their neighborhoods. The poor construction and maintenance of levees, and the people they put at risk, are echoed chillingly by the poorly constructed dwellings of Port-au-Prince. (Mutter 2010)

Even in his seemingly well-intentioned call to arms about the threat posed by bad building practices in both Port-au-Prince and New Orleans, Mutter reiterates stereotypes about Haiti by stating that "violent unrest is never far below the surface" and implying that this potential is one of the main differences between the two cities: "we risk a situation in Port-au-Prince that is even worse than New Orleans." Even with multiple similarities, Mutter appears to assert that the latter is more "Other" than the former. This impression of Haiti as "exceptional" – with the spread of AIDS, the practice of "voodoo," and the continuation of a violent political history – is a longstanding and deeply ingrained discourse. Or, as Raphael Dalleo succinctly de-scribes the narrative of Haiti: "a dependent nation, unable to govern or even fend for itself, a site of lawlessness in need of more powerful neighbors to take control" (Dalleo 2013, 4). The ultimate "powerful neighbor" being the U.S., which, as Katrina showed in acute detail, often struggles to take care of itself.

Neither city has fully recovered from the traumatic events, and for many the stories of tranblemandeté (the Haitian term for the earthquake) and Hurricane Katrina came through a series of "professional and amateur" visual fragments freely available on the Internet: an image of unnamed people on makeshift beds and stretchers; a doctor treating lacerations on the arm of a small child; and, of course, the face-down, dead bodies on concrete, metal, and dirt. Thus, my focus on the still image over the moving image of the body has much to do with the way new media enables the rapid and relatively cheap production and circulation of the static image (via Twitter's TwitPic platform, or, for example, the attaching of digital photographs to Facebook statuses). Moreover, despite the awareness of manipulation of the image – from basic cropping to full Photoshop alterations – one only needs to visit the comments section of any news website story adorned with images to see how the notion persists of the photograph as unalterable truth,

Christopher Garland, 'Port-au-Prince is New Orleans'  
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### Port-au-Prince is New Orleans: Race, Space, and the Spectacle of Suffering

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indisputable evidence, and, most important, an objective “window into the world.”

Throughout his critique of the conditions of photographic production, Simon Watney opposes the notion of the photograph as objective truth. Watney states that we, with almost instant access to a plethora of images of both events via a Google search, need “to understand the many means by which photography punctuates the look of the world into a series of discontinuous signs—photographs—which are none-the-less endlessly offered as images of totality, merely divided into moments” (Watney 2002, 143-44). Thus, this essay also focuses on this tension between the perceived “totality” of the photographic image and the visceral effect on the viewer caused by spectacular representation of the bodies (the swollen corpse, the orphaned child) in and around these two cities. More specifically, photographs can further perpetuate misconceptions about complex moments of crisis.

Furthermore, the primary content of these images is not the all-encompassing damage wrought by a storm or hurricane, but the human subject stripped bare and made abject. The visual rhetoric of these disasters is littered with bodies: living, dead, and somewhere inbetween. In the case of New Orleans these bodies were very often black, while in the case of Port-au-Prince, they were nearly always black. What links these bodies is not just skin color, but also the fact that their struggle to survive is viewable for outsiders on laptops, cellphones, and television screens; moreover, these bodies occupy cities-as-liminal spaces where the division between life and death is much too close. Even from afar, the dying are the ultimate other; as Michel de Certeau asserts, the “dying are outcasts because they are deviants in an institution [in these cases the city space] organized by and for the conservation of life” (Certeau 1986, 190-1). At these moments, Port-au-Prince and New Orleans are united by their so-called inherent dysfunction: Dan Baum argues that one could start “thinking of [New Orleans] as the bestorganized city in the Caribbean” (Baum 2009, xi). In public discourse, the superlative is frequently invoked when describing these cities – the most corrupt, impoverished, and disempowered – and is backed up by a visual evidence: collapsed building, poorly clothed bodies, and all the other markers of the city on life support.

Moreover, the comparison between New Orleans and Port-au-Prince, which was made on platforms as diverse as *The American Conservative* and the *San Francisco Bayview*, emerged long before the devastation of the earthquake. After Katrina, Edwidge Danticat spoke of the link between Haiti’s capital and “The Big Easy,” suggesting that New Orleans looked more like Haiti than the rest of the U.S.: “It’s hard for those of us who are from places like Freetown or Port-au-Prince not to wonder why the so-called developed world needs so desperately to distance itself from us,” Danticat asserts, “especially at a time when an unimaginable tragedy shows exactly how much alike we are” (Danticat

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qtd. in Flaherty 2010). The sheer volume of images reflects the extent of the carnage and how it transformed the bodies of those caught in its wake: from the rotting corpse dangling from a gate on a washed-out New Orleans street to the bodies of Haitian children piled upon one another in the bed of a pickup truck. To discuss the spectacle of catastrophe in Port-au-Prince and New Orleans requires one to address a range of interconnected contexts, including race, geography, history, and poverty.

The comparison between Port-au-Prince and New Orleans is based primarily on two aspects: First, the physical conditions under which the two seemingly separate populations – one first-world and the other third-world – live; second, how African Americans in New Orleans were framed in similar (specifically visual) ways to Haitians in Port-au-Prince: partaking in violence and other forms of deviance and criminality, evidenced by the false reports about multiple rapes in the Superdome and numerous marauding, gun-toting gangs in Port-au-Prince. From CNN's Anderson Cooper's televised reports to online articles from New York Times writers "on the ground," Haitians and black New Orleanians alike were repeatedly described as being involved in looting; however, as Katy Welter outlines in "The Myth of Disaster Looting," this flies in the face of research regarding human reaction and response to natural disaster. Welter states that numerous studies show that "looting is rare – an exception to the rule of communities' pro-social responses to disaster. Despite fears to the contrary, disaster triggers altruism and cooperation while suppressing criminal behavior" (Welter 2012). In New Orleans city leaders did little to combat the stereotypes about individuals affected by disaster. New Orleans' Mayor Ray Nagin stated that there had been murders and rapes in the Superdome, a falsehood that was repeated over and over again in news coverage, helping fuel aggressive police tactics and fear in the city (Shankman 2010). In Port-au-Prince, audiences around the globe were told by The New York Times, CNN, and numerous other outlets that violence and looting in Port-au-Prince was "intensifying," while one of the leaders of the U.S. relief effort, Lt. General Ken Keen claimed "that the level of violence that we see right now is below and at preearthquake levels" (qtd. in Ripley 2010). While I do not mean to claim that there was no looting or other criminal activity, it is important to acknowledge two important facts: first, many people in New Orleans and Port-au-Prince were gathering goods in order to survive; second, hearsay and media hyperbole clearly contributed to a distorted understanding of conditions "on the ground" in the wake of these crises.

#### II

Photography contributes directly to the aforementioned sensationalized reportage. In a couple of highly publicized photos taken in New Orleans and published by major news outlets, whites wading through the water with goods were described as "survivors" finding goods, while blacks doing the same were "looters." Guy Uriel-Charles, a Haitian-American law professor at Duke University, gave

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that particular image as an example when comparing representations of black residents of Port-au-Prince and New Orleans, asserting that the term looter as “a description that is void of empathy for someone who is consciously or sub-consciously viewed as ‘the other.’ Tragically, it fits into the stereotype [an animal; wanton and depraved] that many have about people of African descent, be they African-Americans or Haitian-Americans” (Charles 2010). Simply put, the use of the term “looter” to accompany images presupposed criminal behavior in those traversing the wrecked streets of Port-au-Prince and New Orleans.

Addressing the way that photographs can contribute to misunderstandings about humanitarian crises, I draw on Guy Debord’s claim that images are “detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation” (Debord 1973, thesis statement 2-4). Debord’s position is that the image falsely purports to reveal “reality” when in fact it is the “concrete inversion of life”; we are lulled into contemplating the singular image as an objective record of the world rather than a fragment broken off from “life.” But this does not mean that photographs hold no intrinsic value; on the contrary, these fragments are the basis for a critique of how abjection in the global south is written for Western audiences. Specifically, visual representations of these cities in crisis make us uncomfortable because they make visible the porous membrane border between “us” and “them.” Post-earthquake Port-au-Prince reminds us of Katrina; post-storm New Orleans disclosed the sorts of governmental failure, massive divide between rich and poor, and seemingly insurmountable natural disaster that are “characteristic” of countries like Haiti, not the wealthiest country in the world. The realities of the third-world seeps into the first through events like Katrina, an uneasy reminder of the tenuous and finite nature of superpowers. Inherent in this sense of unease is a voyeuristic pleasure, which directly related to viewing the fluid border between the world’s wealthiest nation and its black sheep cousin.

After the earthquake Haiti had its other entrenched stereotypes – inherently violent, eternally poverty stricken, and essentially failed – reified through images circulated globally. What Wendy Hesford calls the “spectacle of suffering” (Hesford 2011, 19) was pushed to its limits in post-earthquake Haiti, and not just because of the ample opportunity and willingness to show the dead and dying, wrecked buildings, and other staple elements of those third-world disaster narratives favored by Western television broadcasts. Various platforms – personal and mainstream media-affiliated blogs, Twitter, and Facebook – put images of a so-called “broken Nation,” to adopt Phillipe Girard’s sensationalized term, on full display (Girard 2010). Depending on the medium, disaster in Haiti was put forth to be commented upon, shared, liked, reposted, and retweeted. This massive exposure of Haitian bodies

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(crushed by concrete, scrambling for food and water, shot by police, covered by dust and dirt, clambering across ravines filled with trash and human waste) and Western audiences' voracious (if short-lived) desire to "see more," calls to mind Frantz Fanon's reflection on the white gaze upon the black body. This gaze, Fanon asserts, "had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories . . . [and] all the time they were clamoring for more" (Fanon 1991, 91). Both beguiling and wretched, these images of natural disaster in Haiti elicited responses of pity, disgust, and voyeuristic pleasure: for Western audiences, Haiti was framed as the archetypal abject nation. Fanon's naming of a thousand "stories" could be updated for the potential of today's Internet age, where a dizzyingly number of "details, anecdotes, and stories" is the norm: social media allows stories to abound, expand, and circulate without end.

The fixing of the abject comes about through a myriad of forces: technology, economics, and access. Wendy Hesford addresses the connection between visual rhetoric and "how human rights principles are culturally translated into a vernacular that imagines audiences, particularly Western audiences, as moral subjects of sight" (Hesford 2011, 8). While Hesford's international examples range from an Amnesty International USA (AIUSA) poster featuring a photograph of a young Afghan refugee to New York Times columnist Nicholas D. Kristof's purchase of two young women from brothels in Cambodia, her description of the Western audiences as the "moral subjects of sight" calls to mind the post-disaster situations in New Orleans and Port-au-Prince. Various governmental and non-governmental organizations asked for funds through television and online charity campaigns in the days, weeks, and months following these events, and the "moral subjects" sought for these donations were the same audience who had born witness to the Haitians and New Orleanians looters. The "moral subjects" of these campaigns are asked to save Haiti and New Orleans from the innately deviant inhabitants of these failing cities. However, there is a fundamental difference between these two cities, particularly in regards to how non-residents view and experience these cities. While the earthquake in Haiti became the next chapter in the failed state narrative so commonly affixed to the country, Hurricane Katrina was written as revealing the divide between rich and poor that exists throughout the country. The hurricane wrought serious damage on large areas of the American southeast, but New Orleans became the space most readily associated with Katrina. According to a BBC report, the well-documented failure of the levee system left 80 percent of the city flooded (Murphy 2005). In the aftermath of the hurricane, race, poverty, and space (particularly the low-lying, black neighborhoods that were devastated) became intertwined with the larger structural issues (federal response, urban planning).

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Furthermore, Katrina as revelator of entrenched Southern poverty was a common – if lacking in context – trope in media reportage. For those who did ground their claims about the South – and, specifically, New Orleans’s exceptional poverty – in facts and figures, the numbers provided some context about the lives of those black bodies (living and dead) photographed outside (and, in the days during and immediately after the storm, atop) flooded homes. In *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster* Michael Eric Dyson mines the relationship between blackness, southern poverty, and Katrina: “The hardest-hit regions in the Gulf States had already been drowning in extreme poverty: Mississippi is the poorest state in the nation, with Louisiana just behind it . . . Before the storm, New Orleans, with a 67.9 percent black population, had more than 103,000 poor people [earning less than \$10,000 a year]” (Dyson 2007, 6-7).

In the aftermath of the hurricane, black poverty was made visible by the presence of black bodies in spaces that should have been evacuated. Robert Stolarik, a New York Citybased photographer, produced a number of widely circulated images of a soaked and broken New Orleans, including a bird’s eye view shot of a young black man wading through a wide flooded street flanked on both sides by cemeteries. Behind him, there is the kind of row housing associated with the “projects” of many urban areas in the south. The young man, head down and shorts hiked up in order to avoid contact with the murky water, can be read as an allegorical figure evoking the isolation and extreme conditions experienced by many New Orleanians in predominantly black neighborhoods. The effect of this is heightened by the position of the photographer who is high above his human subject, free of the carnage below.

But while images like the one described above were contained in books, featured on news websites (both broadcast television and online), and included in newspaper and magazine reportage in August 2005 and the months after, images of the black body caught in the Haiti earthquake circulated in a different, much more heavily digital manner. One significant difference between the visual representation of the earthquake and the hurricane is the growth of our online worlds. Although Facebook and other social media websites (including Flickr and other assorted online photo albums) existed in 2005, these platforms were not as pervasive or sophisticated as they are today. In a 2007 study titled “Analysis of Topological Characteristics of Huge Online Social Networking Services,” the authors claim that social networking sites “attract nearly half of all web users” (de Zúñiga et al 2012, 319). Over the last few years, with the growth of Facebook from a platform consisting of mostly American college student accounts to a rapidly increasing amount of new users from around the world, social networking sites have become an increasingly pervasive and all-encompassing part of the Internet (Garland 2013, 63). As of 2011, according to Alexa,

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a company that tracks Internet traffic, Facebook is second only to Google in regards to total users in both the United States and the wider world (Jung et al.). Twitter, which like Facebook has grown into a massive, international social media network, was founded nine months after Katrina, but five years later it served as an extremely effective means of disseminating images of the disaster in Haiti. According to a Nielsen Company report (2010), immediately after the earthquake “much of what people are learning” about the quake (and, by extension, Haiti) was coming by way of social media. The report states that preliminary “analysis of data shows that Twitter posts (“micro-blogs”) are the leading source of discussion about the quake, followed by online video, blogs and other online boards/forums.”

Additionally, hours after the earthquake struck, mashable.com, a Scottish/American news website, published a story titled, “Haiti Earthquake: Twitter Pictures Sweep Across the Web [PHOTOS]” with the author, Ben Parr, writing that there are “thousands of Facebook and Twitter updates on the disaster appearing every minute. The web has been moved by the plight of the Haitian people. Social media has quickly become the first place where millions react to large-scale catastrophes” (Parr 2010). The words, “[the] web has been moved,” suggests empathy and concern for earthquake images by those viewing the photographs, and the photographs are suitably evocative for this audience. A “first view” of post-earthquake Haiti that Parr refers to is a medium shot of the collapsed façade of what appears to be a storefront; in the right hand corner is the head and shoulders of a figure, his or her features blurred by movement. The last in the set of six images is a portrait of an older woman, barefoot and sitting atop a concrete slab, a street covered with debris from the quake. Her dress is open, and her breast is partially exposed. This photograph, one imagines, is an attempt to put a “human face” on the earthquake, beyond the broken glass and dust and mangled beams. The impassivity of the subject’s face could be read as embodying a sense of shock and resistance, a refusal to perform for the photographer. This, too, connects New Orleans to Port-au-Prince; residents are aware and resistant to their story being told from the outside, and they are acutely aware of the outsider’s gaze. In a recent interview, long-time Lower 9th Ward resident Iantha Parker, in reference to the tour buses that bring in tourists to photograph the reconstructed neighborhood, was forthright about being constantly looked upon: “Leave us alone, already” (Parker qtd. in Quinlan 2013).

#### III

Julia Kristeva’s use of the terms “the abject” and “abjection” certainly informs my reading of how Haiti and New Orleans were both written (and read) in the aftermath of these disasters: the veritable “clamoring for more” details that elicit both pity and antipathy—physical destruction, chaos, and, last but certainly not least, damaged black bodies (whether dead, injured, or in other ways traumatized). Kristeva defines abjection as the potential breakdown of the perceived distinction between self (subject)



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and object (other), and how this dissolution elicits feelings of disgust and repulsion (Kristeva 1982). What causes this reaction? Kristeva uses the corpse as the quintessential abject object – a stark reminder of one’s own mortality – but vomit, open wounds, and human waste also elicit similar feelings of abjection. That which disgusts is a trope of not only post- but also pre-earthquake Haiti poverty narratives, and also part of the mainstream media’s treatment of poor New Orleanians. For example, the media repeatedly put forth images like the “blanketed body of a dead victim who remained for days in a wheel chair,” and a Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper claimed (falsely) that somewhere between 30 and 40 bodies had been shoved into a refrigeration unit, including a 7-year-old girl who had had her throat sliced open (Campbell and Leduff 2012, 212). These scenarios demonstrated the extent to which some expected deviant behavior from the New Orleanian other.

When in contact with the repulsive other, the seemingly sterile self is struck by a sense of attraction: the corpse is the inevitable destination of our corporal state; reviled vomit and feces also come from our own bodies. My use of Kristeva’s abjection is informed by two elements: first, how she identifies the abject/abjection as that which is “radically excluded,” and, as she describes, “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.” Viewing particular “other” objects, whether on the micro (a puddle of urine in the hallway) or macro-level (dusty bodies trapped under mangled sheet metal on a city street), disgust and incomprehensibility intermingle, with clear meaning obfuscated by visceral shock and horror. With post-Katrina New Orleans, the images of “hundreds of people – most of them black – stranded and waiting for help” (Campbell and Leduff 2012, 212) evoked a sense of familiarity (Americans like us) and distance (they are American refugees). Moreover, New Orleans is Port-au-Prince not only because it elicits similar feelings of abjection, but also because Hurricane Katrina serves as a reminder of how the distinction between “us” and “them” becomes blurry under certain conditions: how natural disasters can fully reveal the dysfunctional relations between the state and its citizens.

New Orleans is also written in terms of both the superlative and in desperate need of outside intervention: the international research group, Institute for Economics and Peace, rated Louisiana as the most dangerous state in the union and New Orleans as one of the most dangerous cities in the United States. Fear seems to underscore the discourse of both cities, whether in direct reference to the residents’ criminal proclivities or as part of these cities’ so-called “character.” Shortly after the earthquake, TIME Books published *Haiti: Tragedy & Hope*. TIME’s managing editor, Richard Stengel’s introduction to the book, “To Respond and Report,” says much about the sharp edges of the white gaze:

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There is a sense of satisfaction in covering a great story, of course, especially if in doing so you can help those who have been hurt, but in the case of Haiti, that did not seem quite enough. That is in part why we have put together this beautiful and moving book, made up of striking images and insightful words. We are donating to Haitian relief \$1 for each softback and \$2 for each trade hardback. (Stengel 2010, 6)

The earthquake was a crisis that compelled Western journalists to go to Haiti and, according to Stengel, undertake “writing and reporting [that makes] the case for fixing what is broken, and in doing so, for helping thousands, millions” (6). Earlier in his piece Stengel attempts to describe the conflict that the Western journalist in Haiti faces – whether to continue reporting or to assist in whatever small way they could – by stating that “our reporters and photographers were confronted by Haitian men and women who said, Put down your cameras. Put down your pens. Do something. Help us.” Implicit in Stengel’s claim is the idea that the mass distribution of photographs taken and words written by outsiders and disseminated to Western audiences directly and positively affect those “victims” of this particular natural disaster.

But that is not the most problematic element of Stengel’s “To Report and Respond.” In the longer quote cited above, Stengel describes the book as containing photographs that are “beautiful,” “moving,” “striking,” and “insightful.” Stengel’s essay is accompanied with full-page images of the following “beautiful,” moving,” “striking,” and “insightful” images: a head and shoulders shot of a Haitian boy, perhaps five-years-old, with a large bandage covering a laceration; a double-page spread of a near-dead man being extracted from a collapsed building, his broken body atop some makeshift stretcher (a door?) by a number of men, while at the edge of the frame a group of onlookers, old and young, watch from a few feet away; in another double-page photographic image, a man and woman (the man has a young child clinging to his back) run past a makeshift funeral pyre, one of the bodies clearly visible at the base of an inferno reaching twenty feet off the street; the following two pages show a closer shot of a collapsed room where, in the bottom left hand corner of the image, a man reaches into the rubble over a dead and dust-covered corpse, the live man’s rescue attempt watched by two others wearing that omnipresent accompaniment of rescue crews, the surgical mask; the following is a medium close-up of a woman laying prone on the ground, her arms stretched out towards large broken concrete bits, while, as the accompanying caption tells us, she cries “in desperation for family members presumed dead under the rubble of a home in Port-au-Prince. Tens of thousands of the people who died will never be identified” (Stengel 2010, 15). And, it is worth noting: these images are not very different from the rest of the images in the book, which document many different stages of human misery.

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#### IV

Another TIME publication, *Hurricane Katrina: The Storm That Changed America* (2005), which, like *Haiti: Tragedy and Hope*, was published in the months following the storm landing in Louisiana, offers another meditation on the shocking image and its audience. The blurb on the inside promises the reader that within “the editors of TIME tell the full story of Hurricane Katrina through remarkable pictures, moving words and incisive analysis” (Marsalis 2005). Unlike TIME’s take on the earthquake in Haiti, the images are not described as “beautiful.” Rather, they are described as “remarkable,” assigning a term one might apply to a shooting star or medical advancement to photographs of bloated corpse floating facedown in the flooded street beneath an overpass, another swollen body laying spread-eagle in the wake of a passing rescue boat, and another laid out on a street corner, shrouded by an American flag. John Chiasson, a featured TIME photojournalist who traveled to post-Katrina New Orleans to shoot the aftermath, appears to be enamored with the experience: “Every time I turned a corner, I would see an amazing spectacle, but I hadn’t been assigned to shoot those scenes,” Chiasson said. In a quotation in large font included in the photo essay, which includes a portrait of an older black woman standing in front of her buckled home, Chiasson also stated that “[he] could have shot until my camera wore out” (Chiasson 2005, 102). Surrounded by seemingly endless abjection, photographers like Chiasson had to pick and choose whom and what they would contribute to the narrative of New Orleans as the failed American city. While mainstream media reports focused on the limits of the state as evidenced by the lack of resources and coordination in the disaster response, both the hurricane and the earthquake demonstrated the way the state shapes the (abject) subject.

There is perhaps no clearer physical reminder of Haiti’s close relationship to the U.S. than the National Palace in Port-au-Prince, which I visited two years after the earthquake. Both a symbol of national pride and reminder of American imperial ambitions in the country, the National Palace was one of the first stops for foreign visitors to Port-au-Prince (often at the urging of Haitians). Built on the site of earlier iterations of the seat of Haitian governance, the National Palace, which is twice the size of the White House, shared the French Renaissance architectural style (Châteauesque, Beaux-Arts) apparent throughout Washington D.C. The trace of France in the buildings of both the Haitian and American capitals is not the only link between the National Palace and its American counterpart. Construction was completed during the first few years of the U.S.’s nineteen-year (1915-1934) occupation of Haiti, with American naval engineers overseeing and U.S. marines contributing to the project. It is not surprising, then, that images of the semi-destroyed National Palace were such a central component of the visual lexicon following the 12 January 2010 earthquake. The crumpled cupola – the dome-like structure and centerpiece of the palace’s façade – had slid forward from the roof during the quake or one of the numerous aftershocks, personifying the palace as one of the hundreds of thousands of

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Haitians staggering under the weight of this latest tragedy. Notably, the collapsed National Palace evokes another evacuated site of humans once displaced by disaster: the Superdome in Louisiana, home to the beloved New Orleans Saints, and an eerie site of the limits and weaknesses of the United States of America. Today, the Superdome has the sponsorship of one of the world's most famous luxury brands – Mercedes Benz – and is used for games played by teams in one of the world's richest professional sports leagues, the National Football League. But it is also a space once occupied by one of the most marginalized populations in the United States: the poorest people dispossessed by Hurricane Katrina. Like the National Palace in Port-au-Prince, the Superdome became the backdrop for the spectacle of a city – and its poorest residents – in free fall.

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*Christopher Garland, 'Port-au-Prince is New Orleans'  
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## 6.2

### Port-au-Prince is New Orleans: Race, Space, and the Spectacle of Suffering

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## 6.3

### “The Neighborhood Is Dangerous, But We Got There”: Urban Space, Neoliberal Resistance, and Black Representation in Isaac Julien’s Looking for Langston

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**Dr Demetrios V. Kapetanakos, LaGuardia Community College**

*You can look to Langston Hughes’ poems, like “Montage of A Dream Deferred.” He uses the word montage, which is very interesting to me, in order to talk about Black urban experiences. (Fusco 1988, 25)*

*The crisis around race is not just a theoretical one, it’s a crisis on all levels. It’s very obvious what informs it in the age of Reaganism and Thatcherism. When you walk in New York streets and you see the number of Black people on the streets begging something tells you that there is something wrong about the system. (Fusco 1988, 34)*

The opening credits of Isaac Julien’s *Looking for Langston* describe the film as a “meditation” on the legacy of Langston Hughes. The narrative structure is non-linear, weaving various visual and audio elements of the 1920s and 1930s with the contemporary era. The writings of an older generation of African-American writers like Hughes, James Baldwin, and Richard Bruce Nugent are intertwined with contemporary ones like Essex Hemphill and Hilton Als. Over the course of forty-five minutes, the camera meanders through scenes of New York of the period, footage of various artists and poets of the era, images of Black gay men in a Jazz Age nightclub, men exploring their desires in idyllic landscapes, men about to have sex in the outdoors, a simple bedroom, and a sound stage with projections of Mapplethorpe images. Interspersing the present with the past, documentary footage with reconstructed scenes, Julien creates a cinematic landscape that excavates and presents a history and culture of gay desire from the Harlem Renaissance to the AIDS crisis that has long been invisible to the public.

*Looking for Langston* also extends beyond sexuality and presents a potent critique of the way Black bodies were inscribed within urban space at the time. The rise of neoliberal thought in mainstream politics through the 1970s and 1980s in Britain and the United States included a particular framing of the Black body as criminal, non-productive, and amoral. Cities like New York and London and Birmingham became sites of contestation over Black subjectivity between the predominantly white politicians and the Black communities themselves. Through his collapsing of time and space into this filmic representation of Black urban space, Julien reflects on the possibilities for a space of freedom and transcendence for the Black community at the contemporary moment.

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At the premiere of *Looking for Langston* at the 1989 New York Film Festival, Langston Hughes’ voice was turned off during the screening to avoid being sued by the poet’s estate. The silences only served to remind the audience of the way Black gay men had been sanitized or expurgated from the historical and cultural record. Isaac Julien presents an aspect of the Harlem Renaissance that had remained in the shadows, outside of the public spotlight. The unspoken and unseen desire of the past now confronted and resonated with the audience of the present. Depictions of the Harlem Renaissance are interspersed with the contemporary poetry of Essex Hemphill and the photographic images of Robert Mapplethorpe. The absence of Black gay men from the historical record was transformed into an existential struggle when AIDS threatened to erase their community. Challenging traditional depictions of Black gay sexuality at the height of the crisis and pushing the boundaries of Black filmmaking, *Looking for Langston* is now considered a seminal text of the AIDS crisis (Deitcher 2000, 11-12). Since its premiere, Julien’s film has gained even further admiration from academics and critics. *Looking for Langston*, a film with a Black British director exploring the African-American experience, exemplifies this critical direction capturing the complexities of Black identity through a distinctive diasporic lens (Gates 2010, 54-55). Influenced by the work of theorists like Stuart Hall, Hazel Carby, and Paul Gilroy, the field of African American Studies has become more transnational, exploring the development of race in other areas of the Black Diaspora and looking at how these analyses could shape the understanding of race in the United States.

The trans-Atlantic relationship between Great Britain and the United States is more direct in *Looking for Langston*. The film is just as much a representation of the Black subject on one side of the pond as it is of the Black subject on the other. As the film begins, the camera closes in on a funeral scene and then quickly cuts to a figure in the coffin. The viewer first suspects a stand-in for James Baldwin, who had died the previous year and to whom this film is dedicated. Instead, he/she finds Julien himself [Fig. 1].



Fig. 1. Isaac Julien, *Looking for Langston*, 1989, 35mm film. DVD. Permission granted by the filmmaker.



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His presence reminds the audience of the devastating effect AIDS could have on every gay man, even the creator of this cinematic world. It also links the struggles of the quintessential New York artists and writers to figures living elsewhere – in this case, a London-based filmmaker (Gates 2010, 55). Other visual clues point to a shift from New York to London. In one shot of two men that had just left the club, the Bankside Power Station is visible in the background. The policemen that raid the club at the end of the film wear the standard issue Metropolitan London police hats with the checkered black and white band. Finally, one of the angels overlooking the empty nightclub is none other than Jimmy Somerville, the 1980s gay British pop sensation. These seemingly small markers shift the scene across time and space, changing the statement that the film is making. By transforming New York into London, Julien points out that the very same ideological definitions and constrictions on Black culture in the American context are present in the British one.

*Looking for Langston* becomes a film about the representation of urban space and the potential it has to challenge neoliberal thought. In the epigram in the beginning of the paper, Julien notices the very real effects that these economic policies have brought on the Black community in both the United States and Great Britain. His observation of the image of the Black beggar becomes a symbolic stand-in for the entire system writ large. For him, it marks the failures of neoliberalism for the Black community. While for others, these kinds of representations reinforce how poverty and criminality are an inherent part of the Black community. With many supporters of both Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher looking at televisions and newspapers from their suburban and rural homes, these visuals become symptomatic of an urban space that housed and reproduced this kind of depravation. Although neoliberal thought consists of a carefully constructed argument based on economics and individual responsibility, the image becomes the central medium through which the ideology enters the mainstream consciousness. Julien is aware of the potential power as a filmmaker to reformulate the visuals and reveal the ways that this neoliberal discourse and policies have destroyed the Black community.

A careful consideration of *Looking for Langston* must begin with 1989, the year it officially premiered. It was an important moment marking the end of the first wave of neoliberal ideology that transformed the political, economic, and social structures of the United States and Great Britain. Ronald Reagan just completed his two-term presidency, while Margaret Thatcher was soon to be replaced by John Major as head of the Conservative Party. These two leaders oversaw the dismantling of the welfare state, the waning of union power, the privatization of state resources, and the rise of the financial and business sectors with lower taxes and laissezfaire economic policies (Harvey 2005, 51-55). Building on the work of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, this faith in free

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market capitalism was accompanied with an emphasis on the importance of individual responsibility and personal freedom in promoting these values (Harvey 2005, 65). Despite the difference in their development in the two countries, this relationship between the individual and economic success would include a strong sense of community and nation whose membership was inherently defined through race.

The American Right’s rise to prominence originates in the mobilization efforts of conservatives during the 1960s in affluent, white suburbs like Orange County, California. The inhabitants of this area fought against the Left that had obtained great legislative gains since the New Deal and had played a large role in shaping the American cultural life with the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam war movement. They believed in the combination of economic libertarianism, American patriotism, and social conservatism that was missing from the mainstream (McGirr 2002, 6). Twelve years later after being carried by this movement to the California governorship, Ronald Reagan was able to build on this support and coalesce a majority with the Christian Right that felt betrayed by Jimmy Carter’s liberal attitudes and former Southern Democrats that believed they were deceived by Lyndon B. Johnson’s passing of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964 (Harvey 2005, 49-50). Neoliberalism became the dominant ideological force in American politics, redirecting the role of government to cater to these groups’ needs and dismissing the issues facing others that did not fit into this worldview. This includes the lack of a response to the AIDS crisis in the early years, the war on drugs, and the slow dissolution of the safety net.

Meanwhile in Britain, neoliberalism tied the free market with the anxieties of the public with its economic trajectory as a welfare state and the insecurities with its national identity after the Second World War (Harvey 2005, 61-62). With the failed expansion of the welfare state under Harold Wilson in the 1960s and Britain in the economic doldrums in the 1970s, a similar anti-Left sentiment as that in the United States slowly pervaded British society. The success of trade unions, the rise of anti-Vietnam and student movements, the development of youth subcultural groups, and the increasing number of immigrants arriving in the country all shaped a pervasive sentiment of the decline of Britain. This became an increasingly central component of political discourse in the elections of 1971 and 1973 (Solomos et al. 1994, 22-23). Like in the United States, neoliberalism became the dominant ideological force in British society. Building on the same intellectual roots as Reagan, Thatcher succeeded in bridging the Conservative Party’s neoliberal economics philosophy of free-market capitalism and individual responsibility with the social conditions visible to the public.

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The discourse surrounding race within neoliberalism is similar both in the British and American contexts. It embraces multiculturalism on its own specific terms. In the United States, the “freedom and opportunity” to succeed is open to everyone regardless of race or ethnicity. However, the socio-economic conditions of certain groups make upward mobility easier. When certain racial and ethnic groups are unable to reap the rewards, it is seen as a personal or even communal failure rather than one of the system as a whole (Melamed 2011, 43). For example, America’s welfare system was seen as empowering African-Americans and women and therefore threatened the social order that privileged the traditional family. By not enabling men to make a living and provide for the household, the welfare system destroyed the heteronormative nuclear family. More and more of the poorest and most unproductive of society were locked away, as seen in the rise of incarcerations starting with Richard Nixon and continuing through the present (Duggan 2003, 15-18). The same dynamic took place in Britain at the time. Over the course of a decade, from 1970 to 1981, Black criminality changed from the notion that certain individuals participated in these illicit behaviors to a whole scale indictment of Black culture whose way of life fosters such actions. Even though studies have shown a direct correlation between poverty, racism, and criminality, the essentialization of Black culture was seen by most as “common sense,” a term repeated in neoliberal discourse over and over again (Gilroy 1991, 105,109). This sentiment took away any possible engagement of the public with the realities of people that were suffering the most under the system. It also elevated the racial divisiveness in American and British society without being accused of racism.

These parallels are important because neoliberalism reshaped the economic foundations of white supremacy and embraced a racial discourse that is similar on both sides of the Atlantic. When Julien describes the situation of African-Americans in New York, these same conditions are just as applicable to Black communities in British cities. From the beginning of his career as a member of the filmmakers group Sankofa, Julien was influenced by the work of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy (Fusco 1988, 11-12). These figures wrote with others at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham University during the late 1970s producing a series of working papers that exposed the ways that race was embedded within the ideological framework of neoliberal thought: this included *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*; *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and racism in 70s Britain*; and *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*. This work explored how neoliberal discourses on race have invaded all aspects of British society, including the media, education, and the response to youth subcultures (Lott 2015). These different elements exemplified Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s model of hegemony how at very specific historical moments, through “coercion” and “consent,” a coalition of groups is able to obtain dominance over society (Hall 1996b, 45). The Centre’s model of the relationship between race and neoliberalism found

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Julien’s discussion of New York with Fusco builds on Hall’s appropriation of Gramsci and applies it to his understanding of the relationship between cities and neoliberalism. He connects the American city with Nicaragua and Grenada where neoliberal resistance occurred against American military forces. He proclaims these places as “key sites of representation” (Fusco 1988, 34-35). This turn of phrase marks space as a fluid entity that is constantly redefined and reconfigured by various groups. Here, Julien captures Henri Lefebvre’s tripartite model of space that breaks it down into spatial practices or material space, the representation of space, and the space of representation. Spatial practices/material space refers to the real lived conditions occurring within the space; the representation of space refers to the planning and conceptualization of the space from the beginning; and the space of representation is the symbolic renderings of the space by its inhabitants (Stanek 2011, 81-82). The importance of Lefebvre’s model is its ability to capture the way space is not only a physical entity but an imagined one. It is given meaning through daily interaction with others and things within that space and through emotional, intellectual and other kinds of human responses that extend beyond that moment and place (Harvey 2006, 130-132). Above all, a critical engagement with space must be dialectical considering other places, other times, the way these conditions shape its inhabitants, and the way its inhabitants shape its meanings. It is from this dynamic that a political culture is borne (Harvey 2006, 148).

The insistence on the dialectic nature of space defined by Harvey through Lefebvre resonates with Hall’s definition of Black urban space. In his analysis of *Policing the Crisis*, Michael Keith explores how although Hall never directly analyzes the city, the framing of “law and order” in relation to the Black community transformed the meaning of urban space. The harsh police tactics of the 1970s played an integral role in criminalizing Black youth. These policies were part of a larger neoliberal project that aimed to transform economic, political, and social structures. However, the crime rate on the ground did not correspond to the racial panic brought by the depictions of urban landscapes. By building on traditional narratives of cities as a dangerous place, urban space became associated with Black crime. The realities within the space shaped the imagining of urban space, but at the same time, this imagined construction went on to shape the realities within that space. The urban landscape becomes a space of deconstruction (or of a play of language) where meaning constantly shifts and changes (Keith 2009, 540-545). In this instance, the city becomes the battlefield on which the Gramscian back-and-forth takes place. As neoliberalism aims to define Blackness in terms of pathology and criminality, the Black community transforms the city using its own vocabulary and building a political response to Reaganism and Thatcherism.

At the center of this struggle it is not so much a question of what the space incorporates but what the space means. How does one fight back against a system when one does not have access to the

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economic and even political resources to gain ownership of the space? In that spatial context, the debate over representation becomes even more important. In his argument with Salman Rushdie over the artistic merits of films like Sankofa’s *The Passion of Remembrance* (co-directed by Maureen Blackwood and Julien) or The Black Audio Collective’s *The Handsworth Songs* (directed by John Akomfrah) in the pages of the *Guardian* newspaper, Stuart Hall tried to articulate that the importance of these films lies in their ability to position Black identity within these debates about representation and then to explore the repercussions of these forms of Blackness on the public. The way they capture and speak to the larger structures of power that define the Black community at large is more important than simply trying to create an “authentic” representation (Hall 1996a, 171). Culture plays a “constitutive” role in shaping of the material lives of various groups (Hall 1996a, 165). Even beyond, these forms hold the potential to speak back to power and transcend the very material condition in which they were created.

The role of the Black filmmaker, according to Julien, is not only to respond and challenge the dominant representations of race, but to also provide an alternative way of how race could be envisioned. The language of struggle presented by the debates of figures such as Hall, Gilroy, and even Julien himself in his writings was a central issue in the debates over Black cinema between Hall and Rushdie. Both sides believed that it is not enough to simply replace negative representations of the Black community with positive ones. A truly transformative visual culture needs to respond to neoliberalism on multiple levels. First, it must challenge the construction of what it means to be Black. Neoliberalism framed Black identity as antithetical to its value system, particularly as a productive force in the growth of capital. It also completely decontextualized Black identity from the historical forces that led to its evolution. Traditional narrative structures in film and television have simply reinforced the ideological conceptions of race. At the same time, it limited the possibility of transcending the psychoanalytic relationship between the object and the spectator. One prominent example from the era described by Julien is *The Cosby Show*. The Black audience is allowed a moment of recognition with the characters on the screen, however this allegiance simply reinforces the moralistic values of neoliberal ideology (Julien and Mercer 1996, 205).

While many on the Right saw the AIDS crisis as retribution for the gay community’s sinful acts, *Looking for Langston* confronts this moralistic stance by putting these erotic images at the very center of the screen. Without a specific narrative line or even at times, a spare set, the queer space Julien creates on the screen appears as pure distillation of Black gay male desire. Even without these particular references, Julien’s portrayal of queer space is also his representation of urban space. The foundation of his vision is grounded in the historical development of a Black gay community in Harlem

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at the beginning of the twentieth century. With the mass migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, more and more gays and lesbians congregated in Harlem and created various social settings, institutions, and support networks that enabled them to thrive for most of the 1920s until the Great Stock Market crash of 1929 (Garber 1989, 318–319). A voiceover accompanied by documentary footage of the “Negro in Art Week” exhibit of 1927 explains how these individuals lost their sponsorship by white patrons because they no longer wanted to support Black artists whose sexuality was seen as a threat to the race. Despite the end of this backing, queer spaces where gay men met did not completely dissolve. Instead, they morphed into new spaces of desire that fulfilled the needs of individuals of the community. As the camera moves from setting to setting, *Looking for Langston* captures the shifting nature of queer space.

Even with the references to the Harlem Renaissance, Julien’s portrayal of these spaces transcend that particular moment in time. In the nightclub, a disco ball hangs over the bar making it just as much a period piece of the 1920s as of the 1970s [Fig. 2].



Fig. 3. Isaac Julien, *Looking for Langston*, 1989, 35mm film. DVD. Permission granted by the filmmaker.

Later, the viewer is confronted with the image of two men with their pants around their legs with the ominous verses from Essex Hemphill’s poem “i am the darker brother” hovering over: “Now we think/ as we fuck/ this nut/ might kill us./ There might be a pin-sized hole/ in the condom./ A lethal leak.” Again, the poem captures the threat of death present during the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s and 1990s that killed many Black gay men. Yet, the threat of death at the hands of homophobic strangers, policemen, gangs, etc. could have taken place at any time. The movement of the camera from scene to scene reflects how these singular articulations of desire are fleeting. The filming in black and white not only gives these recreated scenes the patina of history, but create distinct shadows in which the private desire of the characters are acted upon.



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By exploring these private moments, *Looking for Langston* becomes a meditation on the city. Historically, the anonymity and privacy within the vast urban space has allowed these erotic moments (Désert 1997, 21). The simple sets and basic set pieces become stand-ins for the greater city. This marks a shift from a more realistic depiction in his earlier 1986 film *The Passion of Remembrance*, where the urban setting alienates its Black inhabitants. Documentary footage from the early 1980s, interspersed throughout the film, shows protesters and marchers facing the police. At another point, a montage of images of suited white businessmen entering and exiting shiny modern office buildings leads to the camera panning out and capturing two Black men walking along a run-down neighborhood and discussing the lack of help in the jobs center and the menial tasks they would have to take to make a living. The visual referents of the city are clearly presented in stark segregated terms. Whereas the center of capital is the domain of the white upper class, the margins of economic, social, and political power are relegated to the Black lower class. Three years later, Julien foregoes the realism of the earlier film and creates a brand new representation of the urban space that challenges the suggested alienation and displacement of the London of *The Passion of Remembrance*. The city becomes a space that is now created by a Black gay Subject and is defined through the prism of desire rather than traditional capital.

The connection between economy, race, and morality found in urban space is upended and reconfigured where race, sexuality, and transgression become the central motifs of Julien’s cinematic representation of the city. Black Subjects are now able to enact their fantasies and to fulfill their pleasures on the screen itself. They are the ones who actively set the terms that place a value on their actions and actively define the space on their own terms. The moralistic admonishment, legal consequences, and potential for murder found in the traditional neoliberal city do not intrude on this nightclub and cemetery in the same way that a jealous lover or a broken condom could impact the physical act. When the police and hooligans invade the club in the end, all of the possible victims of violence vanish into thin air [Fig. 4].



Fig. 4. Isaac Julien, *Looking for Langston*, 1989, 35mm film. DVD. Permission granted by the filmmaker.

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Julien does not allow them to suffer any consequences from the expression of their desire. Pleasure becomes the economic currency of this space. According to the excerpt on patronage during the Harlem Renaissance presented in the film, these supporters of the Black gay artists were able to dictate the production of art. The works had to represent the patrons’ vision of Black identity. An authentic representation of the inner thoughts and desires of these individuals was not allowed. Connecting the poetry with the inner consciousness of the Black gay artist, Julien proposes a new economy. It is based not in the productive value in the accumulation of capital, but in the expression of desire. For example, Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” is adapted visually into one character fantasizing about his object of desire, Beauty. The dissemination of the poem is not placed within the marketplace and sold to the public nor does it cater to the whims of a white donor. The only value the poem holds within this cinematic space is the pleasure of the character and the viewer of the film.

The Black Subject here takes an active role in the creation of the space. This does not involve a simple act of rendering but of fully transforming the space within which this representation occurs. Julien’s “key sites of representation” is not the same as Lefebvre’s “spaces of representation.” He places his phrase within Hall’s idea of hegemony where the responsibility of the Black Subject is to fight back against the terms that have been set for him (in this case). About two thirds of the way into the *Looking for Langston*, the main white character, saunters around in his underwear, glancing and touching the hangings of Robert Mapplethorpe nudes. He works his way back to a modern chaise lounge and gives some cash to a Black man also dressed in white briefs [Fig. 5].



Fig. 5. Isaac Julien, *Looking for Langston*, 1989, 35mm film. DVD. Permission granted by the filmmaker.

Although no overt sexual act is performed, the white man is able to fulfill his desire through the act of seeing and the Black callboy is rendered passive and impotent within the power dynamic. Juxtaposing this scene, a little after, the camera focuses in on a Black spectator looking at a set of Mapplethorpe images. The privileging of viewership has completely shifted with the Black subject now holding the

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power of the gaze. His eyes are staring out to the audience and his mouth is slightly open while shots of men’s legs with pants around their ankles take over the screen. Now the pleasure is controlled in the eyes of the Black Subject, a shift from the traditional racial dynamic.

In the end, the audience is not a bystander in the power dynamics of this cinematic space. The viewer becomes complicit in the perpetuation of neoliberal discourse and the understanding of space. These same two scenes implicate the real audience watching the film. Moving through the projected Mapplethorpe images, the white guy glances and touches the scrim with the projected images. Despite the sexual undercurrent of the end of the scene, he seems absolutely chaste when he hands over the money to the callboy. He shows himself to be in control over the entire space. When the films intercuts to the Black spectator looking at the film, the lighting has gotten darker and the ominous words of Essex Hemphill’s poem “i am the darker brother” that describes a condom breaking and spreading AIDS, are voiced over in the background. The spectral eyes and mouth of the Black spectator interrupt the dreamlike quality of the previous scene [Fig. 6].



Fig. 6. Isaac Julien, *Looking for Langston*, 1989, 35mm film. DVD. Permission granted by the filmmaker.

The close-up of the eyes and the mouth force the audience to become conscious of the space between the viewer and screen—one that has been taken for granted for so long. All of a sudden, it implicates the viewer who for so long has been complicit within the power relationship. The spectator-object interaction is challenged as the voyeurism of the cinematic form is no longer a passive experience, but one where the Subject on the screen actually looks back. This challenges the description of the supporters of Reagan and Thatcher in the 1970s and 1980s voyeuristically defining the Black object throughout the media while sitting within their safe homes far from the city in the suburbs. Distance and the inability for the object of their gaze to talk back shelter their worldview. By breaking the fourth wall, Julien foregoes giving the viewer that privilege and extends his cinematic space outside into the real. It questions the limitations of each of our personal space and the way we



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### **“The Neighborhood Is Dangerous, But We Got There”: Urban Space, Neoliberal Resistance, and Black Representation in Isaac Julien’s Looking for Langston**

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have traditionally defined. Although such a combustible mix of desire and space could never be fully realized, at least Looking for Langston posits new ways to imagine the city beyond the adapted neoliberal economic and social structures.

One of the main legacies of Looking for Langston is how it offers alternate utopian vision of urban space. Building on the struggles of a Black gay subculture located in 1920s Harlem and those of their descendants threatened by AIDS in the 1980s, the fulfillment of desire could inspire other expressions of freedom without confines of capital and the constraints of neoliberalism. The film transcends the identity of the Black gay subject and the particularities of a specific time and place to offer new possibilities to communities throughout the Black Diaspora. Since the film came out in 1989, demographic shifts have transformed contemporary cities and yet neoliberal discourses on race continue to define these public spaces. The gentrification of historically Black lower class neighborhoods has lead to the suburbanization of poverty. At the same time, the language of law and order remains in place and the images of Black criminality continue to reinforce the old racial stereotypes. One just has to glance at the television and computer screens depicting the marches in Ferguson in the aftermath of the grand jury verdict of the police officer that shot and killed Michael Brown or the London uprising in 2011 with the police shooting of Mark Duggan. The same terms continue to haunt the neoliberal consciousness. Twenty five years after it first came out, Looking for Langston reminds the public that representation still matters.

Demetrios Kapetanakis, 'The Neighborhood Is Dangerous, But WeGot There' Writing Visual Culture 6 (2015)



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## Edgelands Aesthetics: Exploring the Liminal in Andrea Arnold's *Fishtank* (2009)

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**Lance Hanson, University of Wolverhampton.**

### Introduction

Andrea Arnold's *Fishtank* (2009) is a narrative of exile. Rejecting school, the confined spaces of her mother's council flat and the company of her peers, the film's sixteen-year old protagonist Mia (played by Kate Jarvis) is desperate to escape the boundaries of the world into which she has been born. Mia combines the qualities of mobility and stasis, spending much of the film walking the streets of the estate in which she lives, a flâneuse who meanders through the spaces of the quotidian: retail parks, industrial zones, and scrapyards; alongside the trafficpacked A13 in Tilbury; across the dykes and scrublands that border the river Thames. Angry, naïve, frustrated, she becomes entangled in a destructive relationship with her mother's lover Connor (Michael Fassbender) before realizing that her only means of escape from the inevitable paralysis of life on a council estate lies not in realizing her wishful ambition of becoming a dancer but in the real, spatial exile that comes with her decision to move to Cardiff with her boyfriend, Billy (played by Harry Treadaway). The film's narrative engages with the archetypal 'social-realist' theme of aspirational paralysis, its mise-en-scene recalling that genre's sense of confinement with its deployment of claustrophobic domestic space and frequent visual motifs of bars and barriers. However, it also juxtaposes restrictive space with open landscapes and those more ambiguous zones that have come to be called edgelands in contemporary culturalgeographic discourse, a term coined by Marion Shoard to refer to the semi-rural or extra-urban spaces that exist at the interstices of the built, urban environment and the wildscapes beyond. For Shoard edgelands are the "true wildernesses" of the modern age (Shoard 2002), liminal zones which, for Farley and Roberts, constitute "the fringes of English towns and cities, where urban and rural negotiate their border", an "incomprehensible swathe we pass through without regarding" (Farley and Roberts 2012, 4-5).

Locating the film on the Mardyke estate in Essex was integral to Arnold's aesthetic vision. She says that she "was looking for an estate ... that felt like an island and the Mardyke fitted that description" (quoted in *Fishtank* press book 10). Arnold's motives for an island setting are fitting for a film that deals with isolation and entrapment. Arnold is also conscious of the interplay between urban space and the edgelands that nuzzle against the borders of the built environment. For Arnold, the "wasteland behind the [Mardyke] estate" is a place of natural beauty: it is "[r]eally overgrown and full of wild flowers and birds and foxes and a really big sky" (*Fishtank* press book 10). Arnold's emphasis on the topography of the landscape is important in understanding her own construction of the "edgeland aesthetic" in *Fishtank*. This paper will suggest that Arnold offers a particular version of a cinema of exile through the film's depiction of landscape, employing the open and closed chronotopes which Hamid Naficy uses to describe the accented cinema of exilic directors such as Kusturica, Giney and Egoyan (Naficy 2001).



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These chronotopes contain their own aesthetic qualities that allow for a close topographical reading of the film's mise-en-scene, employing Martin Lefebvre's notion of "intentional" landscapes to explore the extra-diegetic voice that lingers beyond the frame. Finally, a consideration of Gilles Deleuze's concept of "any-space-whatever" (Deleuze, 1992) is useful as a means to illustrate the belief that edgelands need not be defined by their relationship to the either/or of the country and the city but are spaces imbued with an aesthetic of their own.

### Arnold and Accented Cinema

For Hamid Naficy, accented films are "products of dual post-colonial displacement", and are mainly if not exclusively independent to mainstream cinema. Characterized by "liminal subjectivity" and "interstitial locations in society and film history", they are inscribed with tensions of marginality and difference (Naficy 2001, 10,11). Accented filmmakers fall into three categories: exilic, diasporic and ethnic and although Andrea Arnold is not an "exilic", accented filmmaker in the mould of those examined by Naficy, her films explore clearly the themes of internal exile depicted in the psychological trauma of being displaced and alienated from a world in which the opportunities for betterment are narrowing rapidly. Arnold herself hails from Dartford in Kent, a part of England that she defends vehemently:

*It's brutal, it's maybe difficult, it's got a sadness to it, that particular place... There used to be a lot of industry and it's all closed down.... There used to be a big Ford factory, and great huge car parks. All those car lots are empty now and the grass is growing up in the tarmac. But it's got a wilderness, and huge, great skies. It's a mixed thing. I don't want to see it as grim. I'm fed up with that word. I think people are always looking for simplistic ways for summing things up. (Arnold quoted in Smith, 2010).*

Her frustration with such representations compels her to retain an identification with her social background, distancing herself from the middle-class milieu in which she now finds herself:

*The thing about the film industry is that it's incredibly middle-class, isn't it? ... All the people who look at it and study it and talk about it – write about it – are middle-class, so they always see films about the working class as being grim, because the people in the film don't have what they have. I very much get the feeling that I'm seeing a different place. People at Cannes kept asking me about grim estates and I thought, ugh, I don't mean that. I tried not to mean that. (Arnold quoted in Mullen, 2009 p.16).*



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Instead of being spaces of threat and social intimidation, Arnold sees these communities as cohesive: “They’re connected to the world more than in some gated, isolated middle-class place. I know where I’d rather live.” (quoted in Gritten 2009). Exhibiting unease and almost embarrassment with the film community to which she now belongs, Arnold finds herself in a position of liminality: an exile from her working class background as well as out of place in the film coterie to which she now ‘belongs’. Countering the cultural stereotypes that are associated with social deprivation, she describes the landscape in celebratory tones and in depicting the erasure of the modern by the forces of nature present in the juxtaposition of tarmac and grass she deploys edgeland semantics of deserted factories and dilapidated car-lots – spaces of loss and lost potential. These motifs find their way into much of Arnold’s early work: her short films *Dog* (2001) and *Wasp* (2003) are rich in their exploration of edgeland space, depicting the urban wildscapes of the Thames estuary whilst presenting the tensions inherent in such places: the drift towards ennui, the conflict between self and (m)other, and the all too simple surrender to the sense of futility that permeates the already-mapped out lives of the children of the estate, whilst *Red Road* (2006) depicts the eponymous Glaswegian tower-blocks not as spaces of social decay but as a dark mirror through which the spectator (and the film’s protagonist) must view their own prejudices. As this paper will explore. *Fishtank* continues these themes, presenting the relationship between space and identity as ambiguous, its liminal spaces – the traveller’s camp, the car-breaker’s yard – as symbols of renewal.

### Edgelands and the Liminal

If, as Bjorn Thomassen believes, “the modern world is characterised by a constant proliferation of empty spaces or non-spaces... whereby the liminal becomes central and establishes itself as normality” (Thomassen 2012, 30) then we must no longer relegate them to a position of subordination to the dominant modes of the rural/urban dichotomy. Edgelands are shifting and protean, consisting of such diverse sites as canal paths, wasteland, dens built in semi-rural places of abandon, container and storage yards, landfill sites, allotments, disused mines and nondescript out of town retail, industrial and commercial zones. They are places which for Farley and Roberts are supposed to remain anonymous, “not meant to be seen, except perhaps as a blur from a car window, or as a backdrop to our most routine and mundane activities” (Farley and Roberts 2012, 5); they are what Joanne Lee calls the “blank spaces on the A-Z map” (Lee 2014). For Thomassen, “liminal landscapes are found at the fringes, at the limits... they are the places we go to in search of a break from the normal. They can be real places, parts of a larger territory, or they can be imagined or dreamed” (Thomassen in Andrews and Roberts 2012). Edgeland space has become imbued with the language of otherness: Farley and Roberts perceive them as “shifting sands” of “possibility, mystery, beauty... decay and stasis... [which are] dynamic and deeply mysterious” (Farley and Roberts 2012, 6-7).



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Rather than spaces of decay and ruin, edgelands are depicted as “a new kind of frontier with an emergent sense of uniqueness” (Chell 2013). They are areas which are not merely ‘inbetween’ but which possess an essential quality of their own, a sentiment echoed by Gallent, Anderson and Bianconi who call for “an aesthetics of the fringe” in order to challenge the negative preconceptions with which edgeland space is imbued (Gallent et al 2006, 84).

In cultivating an ‘aesthetics of the fringe’, it is useful to draw on the work of Gilles Deleuze and in particular his writings on cinema. In *The Movement-Image*, Deleuze refers to “disconnected or emptied spaces” as any-space-whatevers, “amorphous” zones that “coexist independently of the temporal order” and thus can be identified as liminal and transitional spaces (Deleuze 1992, 120). For Deleuze, the physical locations of these any-space-whatevers are indeterminable: like Lee’s “blanks spaces on the A-Z map” (Lee 2014), the any-spacewhatever is without co-ordinates, unplottable, “disconnected”, empty. They form part of

*the post-war situation with its towns demolished or being reconstructed, its waste grounds, its shanty towns ... its undifferentiated urban tissue, its vast unused places, dock, warehouses, heaps of girders, scrap-irons. (Deleuze 1992, 120).*

Here then, a priori, is the language of edgelands. For Deleuze, such spaces are far from emptied of meaning: instead they exist as sites of “pure potential” and the modern world, with its emphasis on movement and stasis, enriches the any-space-whatever with qualities of “freshness, [and] extreme speed”, characteristics which are however also juxtaposed with the “interminable waiting” present in modernity’s spaces of transit(ion) (Deleuze, 1992, 120 -121). This duality exists in much of the cinema of exile described by Naficy and they are also important motifs in contemporary British films that have engaged with a variety of interstitial and liminal spaces. Edgelands zones proliferate in the films of Andrea Arnold, in particular *Fishtank* and *Red Road*, whilst Clio Barnard’s *The Selfish Giant* incorporates edgelands as a symbol of social neglect and the loss of innocence; seaside resorts and immigration camps form the locations for a group of films which deal with the liminal states of transience and transition as well as the exploitation of migrant labour: *Last Resort* (Pawlikowski, 2000), *Gypo* (Dunn, 2005), *It’s a Free World*, (Loach, 2006) and *Ghosts* (Broomfield, 2006).



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### The Aesthetics of the Edgeland

If the edgelands exists in the interstices between the country and the city (as well as within the urban landscape itself), then how do cinematic representations of such spaces differ from those of rural and urban cinema? Does the cinema of the edgelands possess an aesthetic of its own? Andrew Higson argues that within British social-realist films of the 1960s, urban space was aligned with confinement and the bleakness of everyday life whilst rural settings were redolent of escape and romantic fantasy (Higson 1984; 2006):

*the rural as pleasurable represents the fantasy wish fulfilment of the figure in the city (the individual who desires to escape). For these films are in part about the entrapment of the individual, who attempts to create his or her own space, and hence identity.*  
(Higson 1984, 15)

For Fowler and Helfield, urban cinema is equated with modernity, social development, technology and progress and rural cinema with tradition, heritage and folklore (see Fowler and Helfield 2006). Aesthetically, rural space is often captured in wide shots indicating open vistas and desolate bucolic landscapes; the urban milieu on the other hand is characterized by a miseen-scene of entrapment and claustrophobia, the cinematic frame “compressed and clogged with the detritus of city life” (Fowler 2006, 3).

According to Higson, in British social realist films of the 1950s and 1960s (so-called ‘kitchen sink’ dramas) locations situated between the urban and the rural were depicted as bleak zones of entrapment, liminal spaces between the confines of the city and the freedom of the countryside (see Higson 1984, 14-15) which presented mere stopping off points on a character’s journey to self-discovery. For Mason “anonymous transitional zones” are often used as a visual cliché, “a shorthand signification of urban decay [as]... the domain of the disempowered” (Mason 2001, 247 - 249).

And so, in the wake of the renegotiation of edgelands space outlined earlier, this paper will explore how the emergence of an aesthetics of the edgelands has influenced the way that filmmakers such as Andrea Arnold represent what has hitherto been seen as negative and sterile space, emptied of meaning and instead invested it with an aesthetic of its own (see also Gandy 2013).



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### Exile and 'Closed Form' Chronotopes in *Fishtank*

For Naficy, the accented filmmaking of the exiled director is characterized by open, closed and thirdspace chronotopic forms. The chronotope is a Bakhtinian concept that “refer[s] to certain specific temporal and spatial settings in which stories unfold.” More than generic conventions, they “provide the optics with which we may understand the films and historical conditions ... that give rise to them.” (Naficy 2001, 153). For Naficy, the chronotopes of the open cinematic form consist of external locations, open settings, natural lighting and mobile, wandering characters. Stylistically, the open form is characterized by long takes, wide shots and mobile camerawork. Films that incorporate the open forms often depict narratives of introspection and retrospection; they appear “spontaneous and accidental” and are realist in their approach. On the other hand, the closed form is characterized by interior spaces, more confined settings, and a dark lighting scheme. Barriers prominent in the mise-en-scene suggest claustrophobia and the narratives of closed form films are characterized by themes of panic, fear, and alienation. In contrast to the realism of the open form, closed forms are “self-conscious and deliberate” and more formalist in style. (Naficy 2001, 152-154). Finally, Naficy’s thirdspace chronotope combines the elements of both open and closed forms and is characterized by narratives of transition and liminality: it is the form “most characteristic of exile” (Naficy 2001, 212). It is interesting to examine *Fishtank* in the light of Naficy’s chronotopes of exilic cinema for the film seems to conflate both open and closed forms in presenting Mia as a wandering protagonist drawn to the freedoms implied by the landscape beyond the urban/domestic world in which she is confined whilst the edgeland locations are both sites of conflict and of escape and illusion.

Mia is an internal exile, without a sense of belonging. She absents herself from school, has no discernible friends and has a fractured relationship with her mother and her sister. Mia’s hoodie, love of rap music and dance as well as her urban (and frequently explicit) idiolect are all part of the semiotics of contemporary youth culture: she embodies the ‘chav’ archetype and yet she belongs to no gang. Despite her love of dance, Mia pursues it only as a solo project. In an early scene Mia observes the clumsy dance moves of a group of girls with derision, her separation from them emphasised by Arnold’s use of a shot-reverse-shot sequence which positions Mia alone in the frame. Indeed, in these early sequences, when Mia does share a frame with others of her social milieu it generally provokes a confrontation (for example when she head-butts one of the dancing girls) emphasising Mia’s alienation from within her own demographic.

The chronotopes of the closed form are prevalent in these scenes of confinement. The vacant apartment in which Mia practises her dance routine is emptied of all the trappings of domesticity, signifying her need for space and a room of her own as well as embodying her rejection of the very



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notion of 'home'. Home for Mia is the cluttered space of the flat in which she lives with her mother Joanne (Kierston Wareing) and her sister Tyler (Rebecca Griffiths). Breathing space is at a premium, with Arnold framing the domestic scenes in mid-shot or closeup to emphasise the restricted confines of the small hallways, kitchens and living spaces. Bodies are obscured by staircases, cramped corridors, and washing lines which drape across balconies. Arnold fills the cinematic frame with doorways that open on to more doorways, a mise-en-abyme which seems only to invite Mia further into a labyrinth of trapped domesticity. The motif of confinement is perpetuated by the images of boxes and frames: in one scene Mia's mother performs a dance routine in the kitchen which Mia observes through the square of a serving hatch, an ironic counterpoint to the images of the female dancers who populate the rap videos which Mia watches on television. It is not only the quadrilaterals of windows and doorways that constrain Mia and others in visual boxes: the geometric forms of the flats also become metaphors for the lives of their inhabitants – compartmentalised, nondescript containers which convey the ennui of repetition, akin to the cage which houses Tyler's pet hamster. Escape is only hinted at by the presence of the mural on the living room wall, a tropical island landscape against which the trappings of domesticity come to appear incongruous. In addition, Mia's bedroom is dressed with a blue and green colour scheme indicating a desire for the freedom of the wildscapes beyond, the painted tiger on Mia's bedroom door symbolising Mia's own fearsome character. Like the tiger, she too is trapped, restricted to prowling along the limited spaces of her given world. She is often literally "outside": much of her time in the film is spent walking through the council estate in which she lives, wandering from one place to another and preferring the noise and the traffic of the A13 rather than the confines of her own home.

### The Topography of the Edgelands Frame

Thresholds proliferate in *Fishtank*: windows, doorways, the geometric lines with which the filmic frame is composed. Mia is herself on the threshold of womanhood, and exists within the liminal zones of her world. For Bakhtin, the threshold is an interface that is "highly charged with emotion and value... whose fundamental instance is as the chronotope of crisis and break in a life" (quoted in Pidduck 2004, 26). It is thus significant that a film that explores issues of conflict should begin with a view from a window; a threshold 'charged' with the oppositions of inside/outside, observer/observed and which for Pidduck encapsulates a "certain potentiality" for the female subject who lingers at its borders (Pidduck 2004, 28). In the first shot of the film, Mia is in mid-shot, head down, breathing heavily and crouching in front of a pale blue wall which fills the screen: within this charged symbolism, she is already a fish out of water. The subsequent reverse cut is of Mia's silhouette framed centrally by a window as she looks out from this room in the upper reaches of a high-rise flat down on to the council estate that sprawls below. Beyond is the looming presence of the edgelands with its



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monolithic wind turbines and pylons rearing up against the flat horizon. Topographically, Mia is trapped between these two planes and the world beyond is out of reach both distantly and in the formal composition of the shot, with its horizontal bars and transoms obstructing the view.

The tensions between the open and closed chronotopes are evident in this shot with both escape and confinement present in the same visual plane. The topographic space within the frame reveals an uneasy perspective: two roads – an ordinary urban road and a motorway stretch off into the distance, seemingly foreshortened by the horizon that cuts across the frame. A series of electricity pylons can be discerned but these remain unfocused in contrast to the wind-turbine that is at the centre of the shot. Potentiality is blocked not just by the stunted roadways but also by the transoms that obscure the shot. Unlike the landscape revealed by the windows through which the heroines of costume drama gaze, the landscape presented to Mia is charged with connotations of entrapment. The play between open and closed chronotopes is also evident in Arnold's use of the academy aspect ratio (4:3) and hand-held, unsteady cinematography that accompanies the tight framing of her subject. Yet, despite the sense of claustrophobia and confinement that this combination of techniques might convey, Arnold sees differently. She suggests that her films are “mostly about one person... It's a very respectful and beautiful frame... [giving] them a lot of space.” (Arnold quoted in Ballinger 2013). Arnold's framing conveys a distinctive subjective vision that hovers close to her protagonist's perspective and yet is careful never fully to lose itself in it. The perceived contradiction in the chosen ratio being both restrictive and permissive seems to fit with the fluidity of Naficy's concept of thirdspace forms. The restrictions of the 4:3 ratio as well as the closed chronotopes of confinement present in the mise-en-scene are countered by the mobility within the frame which requires constant reframing, creating a tension within the formal composition of the shot.

### EDGELANDS MOTIFS IN FISHTANK

#### 1. WASTELAND

To some, edgeland spaces are deemed outside and ‘other’: its perceived threat to the norm and to the stability of the psychic, social and geographical self is predicated on their essential wildness as spaces of urban decay (see Sibley 1995 and Ma ków 2014 for example). However, edgeland space is also a stage for transformations. The artist Laura Oldfield Ford uses the term “spectral presences” to describe the atmosphere of memory, loss and otherness inherent in the edgelands (Oldfield Ford 2014), and edgeland space in *Fish Tank* is imbued with feelings of fantasy, dreams and spectrality. One of the most significant locations in the film is the travellers' site in which Mia discovers the tethered horse that comes to represent her own social, emotional and psychological confinement. In the horse, Mia sees a



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reflection of the emotional and domestic upheaval in her own life, a connection reinforced by the fact that the horse's grey coat is echoed in the urban costume of Mia's grey hoodie and tracksuit bottoms, connecting the two in their entrapment and isolation.

The travellers' site is located on a semi-rural patch of wasteland beneath a motorway flyover. It is a prohibited space, bordered by chain link fencing and metal railings that obstruct the cinematic frame. Situated as it is beneath a motorway flyover, the travellers' site is also a liminal space replete with images of both movement and stasis: movement embodied in the ceaseless stream of traffic that passes across the frame, stasis not only in the restricted movements of the horse but also in the presence of the caravan caught in a state of inertia. The juxtaposition of these two states suggests notions of possibility and of finality: escape via the motorway is at the edge of the frame but it is also out of reach. A further juxtaposition of the different forms of transport - the traditional motif of rural transport in the horse and the modernity of the automobile - suggests a moment of transition from the urban to the rural, a moment crystallised in this image of edgeland space. For Mia, it is a site of transition not only symbolically but also experientially and will ultimately provide her with a means of escape in the form of Billy who resides there with his brothers. During the scene when Mia attempts to free the horse from its chains, Arnold's subjective hand-held camera and the fragmented close-up shots of the horse combine to disconnect it from its prosaic surroundings. The setting is, for a moment, out of focus and momentarily forgotten in the intimacy of the scene; the sun blooms in the frame, the film stocks seems to slow down and the sound is muted evoking a dream-like atmosphere. There is a mystical, sedate quality to the scene that contrasts with the chaos of domesticity which characterises Mia's home life.

Naficy sees borders as spaces that "fire up the human imagination, for they represent and allegorize wanderlust, flight, and freedom" (Naficy 2001, 243). In narratives of borders and border crossings, characters occupy "a psychic and metaphoric border where the allure of escape and the pull of the permanent rub against each other" (Naficy 2001, 243). For Mia, the traveller's site is a place of escape from the failure of domesticity but her repeated return to it also signifies her own need for ritual and for routine. Neither rural nor urban, the edgeland space in this scene is a metaphor for Mia's personal sense of alienation; it seems to capture the notion of edgelands being a place that is not necessarily between other spaces but a space of itself, a place where imagination and reflection thrive, a Deleuzian any-space-whatever of "pure potential". Depicted as an almost liminal space of magic, this edgeland space replaces the trope of the forest in the folk-tale and just as the forest is a mystical space acting as a metaphor for the child's psyche so the traveller's site becomes the space which opens up the conflict between herself as child and adult, the space of transgression and transformation.



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### 2. Wind Turbines

For Farley and Roberts, wind turbines provide a new indicator of edgeland space and Arnold is deliberate in her inclusion of such objects in several shots throughout *Fishtank*. The first occasion occurs at the beginning of the film when one is glimpsed as a hazy presence in the distance. It dwarfs a neighbouring electricity pylon, a reminder of a more conventional form of energy. On the second occasion a wind turbine is revealed, its monolithic presence fills the frame and looms over the edgeland space of industrial parks and patches of semi-rural greenery. Turbines are also visible from the traveller's site and in a more jarring shot one rears over a high street scene like some Wellesian Martian, battling for space amongst the verticals of street lights which crowd the frame. This distinctive symbol of edgeland space is foregrounded in the mise-en-scene not as a reminder of neglect but as that which, as Morton suggests, embodies an "aesthetics of the sublime" (Morton 2012, 9). Farley and Roberts also hint at the sublime qualities of the wind farm when they consider "[h]ow majestic it would be... to drive past strips of white daffodils blowing in the breeze" (Farley and Roberts 2012, 193) whilst the writer Sarah Maitland observes that the wind turbine, whilst it fails to possess "the beauty of open high moor" does have "a true beauty of its own" (Maitland 2012). By drawing the spectator's gaze towards these symbols of energy and industrialisation, Arnold imbues them with a distinctive otherness which belies their reputation as blots on the landscape: instead, they become objects that provide a marker of the space beyond, their presence in the frame offering what Burke would call an example of the perpendicular sublime (Burke 1833, 83).

### 3. The Shoreline

During the scene depicting Mia's abduction Connor's daughter Keira (Sidney Mary Nash), Arnold's juxtaposition of long-shot and hand held close up combine to illustrate Naficy's open and closed forms of cinematic style, emphasising the tensions between Mia's near loss of control, her desire to break the narrow confines of her own life and her need to exact some kind of retribution upon Connor for his betrayal. Early in the sequence, a long shot of the Tilbury landscape reveals a flat horizon meeting an early evening sky weighed down with dark, scudding clouds. Lost amidst the long grass are the tiny figures of Mia and Keira. The edgeland space here dominates the frame and the duration of shots alongside the almost absence of character enhances the mood of introspection. However, the juxtaposition of freedom and confinement is reinforced by wide-angle shot which is contained within the boxed 4:3 ratio. In the next sequence, a low level camera reveals a long-shot of farm machinery busying itself in the fields before a slow camera tilt foregrounds a close-up of the long grass, once again the openness of the fields giving way to confinement. Mia leads Keira through the scrubland via a hole in the chain-link fencing (another transgression of boundaries) and the open forms of the earlier shots give way once more to Arnold's subjective cinematography, the camera tracking Mia and pulling in and out



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of focus as she follows a meandering path through the labyrinth of dykes that border the river. The use of slow motion along with Mia's pronounced breathing amplified over the soundtrack add to the eeriness of this sequence and recall the aesthetics of the earlier scene when Mia attempts to free the horse. The sense of fear and alienation, reinforced by Mia once again framed alone in the shot, again exemplifies Naficy's closed cinematic forms.

Following Mia's rescue of Kiera from the Thames, the scene concludes with a ten second, post-diegetic shot of waves crashing against the shoreline. Within the frame, Arnold combines the Thames with images of industry: pylons border the riverbank, power stations line the horizon. This contemplative moment in the film conforms to what Lefebvre calls an "intentional landscape", that which constitutes those moments in a film when landscape is framed in such a way as to distance it or even separate it from the perspective of character. (Lefebvre 2006, 9). Arnold employs the intentional mode on several occasions throughout *Fishtank*, often cutting to contemplative images which draw the spectator's attention to the presence of objects within the landscape. They may be elements of nature (a close-up of a clump of heather or gorse for example) or they may be objects of industry and technology as the example of the wind turbine shows. Arnold's deployment of these contemplative moments reinforces the mood of introspection that sits alongside the narrative, disrupting and often jarring against the cinematographic rhythms of the rest of the film. In this case, the post-diegetic emphasis on the waves lapping against the shore and the stillness of the industry behind suggest edgelands as a space of redemption. Mia does not drown Keira and her embrace of the shivering child is important for Mia's emotional catharsis. For Thomassen, the border between land and sea, is an "archetypal liminal space" (Thomassen 2012, 21) and for Andrews, the beach is a space of "death, fear, uncertainty and disorientation" (Andrews 2012, 6). However, instead of the negative connotations afforded to it by Thomassen and Andrews, Arnold draws back from the brink and locates this preeminent edge with hope and the potential at last for escape.

### Conclusion

Through the elements of a visual style which realises Naficy's notion of open and closed chronotopic forms, combined with the deployment of an "intentional" cinematic mode, we can begin to construct an aesthetics for Arnold's cinema of the edgelands which differentiates it from the conventions of either rural or urban cinema. Arnold's use of the conventions of intentional landscape which breaks temporarily from her highly subjective cinematographic style create moments of contemplation which draw our attention to Arnold's own vision of the landscape, a landscape which can be equated with notions of beauty and wonder. The formulation of an "edgelands aesthetic" is therefore useful in beginning to explore the chronotopes of edgeland



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films and how the depiction of such spaces – visually, narratively – can be examined alongside the cultural, social and political contexts in which the discourses of edgeland space have emerged. Arnold's films, like those of Lynne Ramsay (*Ratcatcher*, 1999) are seen as a development of the British genre of social realism, but Roddick argues that an evaluation of the parameters of the genre is in order, "as though any film with a back-to-back terrace (or its modern equivalent, a tower block) must be primarily about the social relations of its characters" (Roddick, 2009). Other contemporary British "edgelands" directors engaging with the interstices of the rural and the urban (directors such as Shane Meadows, Paddy Considine, Clio Barnard and Ben Wheatley) are emerging from this dominant mode of social realism and depicting urban and edgeland space as something other than (to repeat Mason's epithet) "the domain of the disempowered" (Mason, 2001). Instead, they present spaces of contemplation, of fear and wonder and of escape. The contemporary fascination with edgeland space across many disciplines suggests that this emergent aesthetic will continue to be explored.



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## Edgelands Aesthetics: Exploring the Liminal in Andrea Arnold's *Fishtank* (2009)

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*Lance Hanson, 'Edgelands Aesthetics':  
Writing Visual Culture 6 (2015)*



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**Dr Peter Clandfield, Nipissing University.**



*Fig. 1: Red Road from NW corner of site, 7 July 2014. Photo © the author.*

Glasgow's Red Road flats, built between 1964 and 1969 in Balornock/Barmulloch northeast of the city centre, have been icons first of the promise and latterly of the perceived failings of modernist high-rise housing schemes. Red Road may have become more visible in 2014 than ever, even while disappearing from the city's skyline through the demolition process that has so far removed one of the two 28-storey slab blocks and one of the six 31-storey point blocks. The visibility is both literal, as five of the remaining blocks wear bright red safety netting, and cultural or discursive, as the demolition has occasioned numerous additions to the range of scholarly, argumentative, and creative accounts of the buildings. Probably the crudest of these visions was the plan that would have seen the five red blocks subjected to controlled implosion or "blowdown" during the 2014 Commonwealth Games opening ceremony. This schemed spectacle was itself scrapped, and this essay reads its implications in the context of a range of less reductive representations of Red Road.

I draw on the geocritical ideas of Bertrand Westphal, who argues that places are intertextual constructions constantly in flux (Westphal 2011, 150). The premise is not that a place is merely a text, but that any significant place is a site where many texts – such as designs, biographies, debates – intersect and which therefore needs to be understood, provisionally, through multiple, multifocal accounts (Westphal 2011, 122). Buildings are main features that give a space definition as a place (see Westphal 2011, 5), but such definition does not account for all meanings and uses. Modernist housing schemes have been condemned as monolithic places whose designers sought to slot residents into prefabricated narratives of progress through technology, but comparing various views of Red Road indicates how even such imposing structures are subject to contingency and will inevitably generate a range of meanings, from the concrete and quotidian to the symbolic and virtual. The flexibility of literature accommodates "plural and paradoxical maps" of a particular place, diverse accounts of its



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history and its possibilities (Westphal 2011, 73), but geocritical analysis needs to recognize “that literary representation is included in the world” and to attend to places where literature meets other discourses (Westphal 2011, 116). Accordingly, I read literary representations of Red Road alongside accounts from architecture and urban studies and from visual media. Westphal’s ideas resonate with the recent work of geographers Jane M. Jacobs and Ignaz Strebel and architecture scholar Stephen Cairns, who views buildings as “always being ‘made’ or ‘unmade’” (Jacobs et al 2012, 128) and study Red Road as a site where “the technological and the human co-orchestrate the world” (Jacobs et al 2008, 167). Comparably, Alison Irvine’s novel *This Road is Red* (2011) explores how Red Road has been made by interactions between subjective experiences of residents and more objective facts of architecture and engineering. The novel itself exemplifies a geocritical – or geofictional – approach in mapping the life-cycles of characters onto those of buildings by blending fictional and documentary techniques, textual and visual elements, and metonymic and metaphorical modes. The novel is part of an array of 4 municipally-sponsored works on Red Road’s legacy, an innovative articulation across disciplines and media. I will also address, however, the value of more abrasive works, such as Denise Mina’s crime novel *The Red Road* (2013), in dramatising uncannily unresolved questions around housing.

I argue that through the interdisciplinary work Red Road has inspired, the scheme will last beyond its physical demise—and as something more than a cautionary example of failed utopianism, since even in its present near-spectral state it can be read as a signpost to the needed re-emergence of non-marketised approaches to housing.

#### **“Vertiginously Stayed”: Red Road as Ambiguous Icon**

Arguments about the relative successes and failures of Red Road as housing may outlast the flats themselves. What seems clear is Red Road’s utility as adaptable signifier and as inspiration for comparably ambitious projects in diverse fields besides architecture. A 1965 image of the first two Red Road blocks rising against a clear blue sky illustrates the jacket of *Tower Block: Modern Public Housing in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland* (1994), by Miles Glendinning and Stefan Muthesius. Analogous to Red Road in scale, the book assesses developments that shaped British urban housing after the Second World War. The idealized qualities of the cover image evoke what Anthony Vidler in *The Architectural Uncanny* calls the “therapeutic program,” linked to the visions of Le Corbusier, whereby clean-lined buildings “encouraging the ceaseless flow of light and air” were to foster individual and social well-being (Vidler 1992, 63). However, *Tower Block* is not an uncritical defence of modernist principles as put into practice. Glendinning and Muthesius point out that while design foundations for multi-storey flats as high-quality units of public housing were established in the 1950s by the modernist-inspired work of London County Council architects, initiative had shifted by the 1960s to “local



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politicians” in “Scotland and the English provinces” who prioritised quantity over quality (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994, 3). Glasgow’s particular need for housing brought the ambitious scale of the city’s high-rise programme and also many of its flaws: “Red Road... soon took on a spectacular life of its own [... as architect Sam] Bunton saw an opportunity to... ‘build the highest blocks in Europe’” (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994, 233). The scheme’s innovations fostered “calamitous overspending” in construction (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994, 234), so that it came to embody “the discrepancy between Modern ideals of technically and organisationally advanced building, and disorganized practice.” As “a gigantic project in a continual state of crisis, improvisation, and structural redesign” (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994, 318), Red Road thus also highlights the flux that both Westphal and Jacobs et al identify as built into any place.

Glendinning and Muthesius describe effects of the scheme’s design flaws: “the high proportion of children, in 31-storey towers with only two lifts, created a reputation for juvenile delinquency which blighted the entire scheme even before its completion” (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994, 321). This assessment is challenged by other accounts, including *This Road Is Red*, but it points to another iconic use of Red Road, exemplified by the cover image of the 2006 book *Spaces of Social Exclusion* (Gough, Eisenschitz and McCulloch), which shows a man leaning from a high window in one of the slab blocks as though marooned in midair. The book addresses spatial aspects of poverty in Glasgow, but not at Red Road specifically, so the cover image tends toward the metaphorical. Glendinning and Muthesius cite architectural critic Colin McWilliam’s description of the Red Road blocks as “cynical population-containers” (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994, 315), but they argue ultimately against broad dismissals of modernist approaches to housing, and the Tower Block cover image too is more metaphor than metonym, serving to evoke and reassert the ideals that inspired modernist high-rises rather than to represent Red Road itself. Overall, the book positions Red Road as a place of built-in ambiguity. Size and experimental boldness bring flaws that limit Red Road’s service life, yet these qualities also inspire much of its ongoing life in representations, an irony compounding the uncanniness that, as Vidler’s work suggests, arises from the incompletely-fulfilled promises of modernist regeneration schemes.

Encapsulating a variety of meanings and associations in and around Red Road, the final poem in Edwin Morgan’s ten Glasgow Sonnets, written in the early 1970s, attends at once to the neatness of the blocks’ form and to the risks of their ambitious scale:



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*A multi is a sonnet stretched to ode  
and some say that's no joke. The gentle load  
of souls in clouds, vertiginously stayed  
above the windy courts, is probed and weighed.  
(Morgan 1990, 292: lines 4-7)*

Hinting at the role of experimental, “stretched” design in Red Road’s problems, the lines also model the capacity, the density, of sonnets, as high-rises are compressed into fourteen lines. The phrase “vertiginously stayed” not only registers the blocks’ noticeable windsway but also plays on the Scots usage of “stay” to mean reside (as in “I stay at Red Road”) and on “stayed” in the related spatial, verbal sense of held in place – plus the temporal, nounal sense of a “stay” as a period of occupancy. The phrase expresses both the flux built into everyday life at the scheme and the impression of vertigo as a temporal as well as spatial experience: space is more than a receptacle for the progress time brings, and modernity is something much less settled than a utopian destination (see Westphal 2011, 9-10). The sonnet’s final lines weigh the notorious “stalled lifts” of Red Road against the “stalled lives” of people in old slum areas, implying that the risks of high-rises are preferable to the toxic stasis prevailing in the tenements they replaced. Now, however, the poem seems most striking as an apprehension of Red Road’s precarious place or limited stay in existence.

### Red Road and Creative Destruction

Red Road’s integral ambiguity shows in its current appearance: from a distance, the blocks in red might be new-builds or renovations, and with the netting blurring their angles, they can also resemble painterly or virtual renditions of some future addition to the cityscape. This residual utopian aspect serves their current use by their owner, the Glasgow Housing Association (GHA), as what amount to billboards, bearing banners with the GHA’s white-on-red logo, matching the netting. Another carrier for the GHA brand is a mobile trailer, “Big Red,” whose exhibits detail the GHA’s history, from the 2003 tenant vote that transferred 86,000 councilowned units to the organisation, through the further transfer, starting in 2009, of GHA units to smaller, community-based associations, to the 2011 milestone of the GHA’s programme, “Europe’s biggest housing investment,” passing the billion-pound mark. Under the motto “Better homes, better lives, a better Glasgow,” displays in Big Red depict GHA projects and happy residents. The centrepiece is an interactive exhibit where visitors can launch videos of five blowdowns from the 2000s, including one at Dalmarnock, the area redeveloped for Commonwealth Games facilities. The exercise invites identification not only with the role of demolition engineer but also with assumptions that tower blocks are categorically obsolete and their clearance necessary for a better city. Demolition spectacles thus represent the extensive regeneration



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promised, and to some extent delivered, by the GHA: ironically, the size of the obsolete blocks, and the scale of their presumed failure, converts them into dramatic vehicles for new utopian promises.



*Fig. 2: Big Red, Kelvingrove Park, Glasgow, 24 June 2012. Photo © the author.*

A similar rhetorical manoeuvre produced the plan for multiple blowdowns at Red Road to replace fireworks in the Commonwealth Games opening ceremonies. As the Observer reported on 6 April 2014, “David Zolkwer, artistic director for Glasgow 2014, said: ‘In just a few seconds the city’s skyline will be transformed forever. It’s a bold and confident statement that says ‘bring on the future’” (McVeigh 2014). Through a kind of semiotic judo, plus explosives, the large unwanted buildings, their presence potentially embarrassing to promoters of regeneration, would have converted instantaneously into signs of progress. This particularly ostentatious piece of creative destruction was endorsed by prominent politicians, but as the same Observer article reports, the plan incited strong opposition. Alison Irvine emphasised its disregard for “intricacies and complexities” of the scheme’s history (McVeigh 2014). Commentators less invested in Red Road were equally critical: Ian Jack observed that “[t]he misplaced civic grandeur that promoted the building of the flats now dresses up their demolition,” and pointed to the plan’s insensitivity to the Commonwealth context: “what will it mean to the viewer in Mumbai or Nairobi? That Glasgow is so rich and thoughtless that it will blow up sound buildings that aren’t 50 years old?” (Jack 2014). In a similar vein, former MSP Carolyn Leckie drew attention to the fact that the sixth and final remaining Red Road block still houses refugees, who would experience inconvenience during a blowdown, like other area residents, plus ideological insult: “If the flats are not fit for human habitation, then what is the message we’re sending to those residents in the remaining block?” (McVeigh 2014). Backed by a petition, the arguments of Leckie and others may have swayed Games organizers, and cancellation of the blowdowns on safety grounds was announced on 13 April.

Photographer and filmmaker Chris Leslie, whose work features in the Red Road legacy project, suggested in his blog for 3 April that the “bizarre but vastly promoted” blowdown spectacle could at



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least publicise debate on regeneration. The abandoned plan's main achievement may indeed be in helping focus attention on the politics of demolition and housing generally. Social Policy scholar Gerry Mooney relates the plan to attempts by recent UK governments "to ensure that social housing is a residual category fit only for people with multiple and intractable problems" (Mooney 2014). This assessment echoes historian Patrick Wright's 1991 critique of the Thatcherite view which, overlooking the roles of "speculators... profiteering construction companies," and design faults, constructed failings of postwar housing schemes as evidence of the "evils of socialism" in contrast to the supposed virtues of property-owning individualism (Wright [1991] 2009, 107). While Wright emphasises the way "the council tower block [has] serve[d] as a generator of infernal meanings for people who only look at it from outside" (Wright 2009, 79), the Games plan reached new levels of glibness in envisioning the blowdown as bypassing any "infernal" stage and supplying instant regenerative meanings. Building on Wright's analysis, Andrew Burke cites Thatcher's caricaturing of postwar socialist principles in terms of a "block mentality: tower blocks, trade union block votes, block schools," and argues that through this "chain of affiliation[s] among] history, spatiality and ideology," schemes like Red Road have undergone a "process of dematerialisation, wherein the concrete form of the tower block circulates as a sign and visual image" of the supposed failure of postwar social programmes (Burke 2007, 182). The Games plan, neglecting to reckon the material ramifications of a quintuple blowdown, may have taken such ideological dematerialisation almost literally, as though thirty-storey buildings really could have been made to vanish in seconds.

A postscript to Tower Block suggests that the 1993 blowdown of another iconic-butflawed Glasgow scheme, Queen Elizabeth Square in the Gorbals, during which an onlooker was killed by debris, ought to have "dealt a fatal blow to... the demolition of tower blocks as public theatre" (Glendinning and Muthesius 1994, 327). Whether or not the Games plan's failure now signals the obsolescence of such extravaganzas, its combined ambition and incoherence suggests a need for new interpretations of this genre of spectacle, to which I will return below.

### Red Road as "Building Event"

An antithesis to the blowdown spectacle is recent work by Jacobs, Cairns, and Strebel, who have made an extended analysis of Red Road's demise – a de-construction process that has also in a way re-materialised the blocks, in several journal articles and most imposingly in Cairns and Jacobs's 2014 book *Buildings Must Die: A Perverse View of Architecture*, where Red Road exemplifies buildings "in place but out of time" (Cairns and Jacobs 2014, 57, 103). While the title indicates the project's ambition, Jacobs, Cairns, and Strebel do not treat Red Road as a conveniently dead object for forensic dissection. In a 2012 essay on their methodologies, they describe their work as "an investigation into



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architecture not as a formal, fixed thing, nor even as a meaning-filled, human claimed, symbolic thing, but as a building event” (Jacobs et al 2012, 127-128): something that happens in time as well as space. Their exploration of stages in Red Road’s demise takes time and makes space to recognise its protracted “death” as a significant phase in its life, and points to its future as ongoing virtual and conceptual event.

*Buildings Must Die* emphasizes that obsolescence is “not simply a state that appears from nowhere as a categorical fact,” but a “value judgement” (Cairns and Jacobs 2014, 133). Jacobs, Cairns, and Strebel show how Red Road’s obsolescence has emerged through decisions by GHA officials, technical experts, and some residents. In a 2007 article on technological aspects of Red Road, they point to the way influential social-scientific accounts of the shortcomings of such schemes have mirrored the assumption of Corbusian modernism that “technology [... can] have a determining effect upon quality of life” (Jacobs et al 2007, 612). In a 2008 essay they examine a specific feature that has certainly contributed to Red Road’s obsolescence: the structural use of asbestos means the original single-glazed windows “cannot economically or safely be replaced” (Jacobs et al 2008, 168). Since asbestos is a safety material that has proven to make homes dangerous and unhomey, this assessment locates uncanniness built into the once-innovative technology of the scheme. Yet, the essay indicates that different decisions about technology could have produced more lastingly serviceable buildings, so that Red Road is obsolete because of cumulative, stacked (mis)judgements – a series of determinations rather than an overall structural determinism – and not because largescale council housing is inherently unviable.

The “Windows” essay is itself somewhat deterministic in its approach to its subject: “while the residents had their eyes (and narrative accounting) on what they could see, we had our eyes (and camera) on what they were seeing through” (Jacobs et al 2008, 174). Residents’ views from and about the flats are of secondary interest. This predetermined focus does not invalidate the researchers’ method; rather, it helps validate the multifocal and multimodal approach to place that Westphal advocates, and suggests the value of a complementary novelistic approach in attending to residents’ “human claiming” of the flats. So does Jacobs, Cairns, and Strebel’s commentary on an April 2005 meeting of the Red Road Save Our Homes campaign (Jacobs et al 2007, 621-625), which shows how the scheme’s obsolescence has been a contested judgement and indicates additional impetus for projects saving things – material, anecdotal, and conceptual – from the flats.



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### This Road is Red

Though occasioned by the distinctive physical presence of Red Road, *This Road is Red* (TRIR) does not concentrate narrowly on this presence. The volume itself, a standard trade paperback, functions as a playful, non-monumental representation of a Red Road block. The back cover shows half the building in a wide-angle, upward-looking photograph by Emma Lennox; the front cover has the other half as a drawing by Mitch Miller; the physical book thus resembles a tower block in miniature, and the combination of photo and drawing indicates how, like Red Road, the book holds a range of stories in a blend of discourses. Like Jacobs, Cairns, and Strebel, Irvine did extensive research around the scheme, and the text includes direct quotations from her interviews with residents along with incremental narrative accounts of fictional characters based on people interviewed. Accompanying maps and illustrations by Miller are presented not as precise renderings of the scheme's features, but as complements to the textual accounts of everyday habitation of the flats. The text consistently locates imaginative perception within Red Road, as in a quotation from resident John McNally on the view from his flat: "For... an old gas worker talking about sunsets, is there a name for it, aesthetic?" (Irvine 2011, 298; original italics). Thus, Irvine negotiates the "barrier between the observer and the observed" that Alison Ravetz has identified as a problem for efforts to understand everyday life in housing schemes (Ravetz 2001, 158). In making residents' interpretations integral, TRIR registers the role of story-making in place-making, and also the way novels can house nuance and understatement as well as imposingly imaginative visions. Westphal quotes Paul Ricoeur's observation that "'fiction alone" among representational discourses "can allow itself a little inebriation"' (Westphal 2011, 36), but Irvine's approach is sober compared with the extravagance of the Games blowdown scheme or indeed the boldness of Red Road's conception. At the same time, with the multifocal, multimodal method of TRIR de-emphasizing the author's individual vision, Red Road can be credited with helping to inspire a new kind of novel, "geo-centered" rather than "egocentered" in Westphal's terms (Westphal 2011, 111, 114, 147). The author becomes collator, convenor, organizer of the work, rather than creator or architect.

A further geocritical "vocation" is attention to the "flux of space in time," a "diachronic delving" into layers of meaning coexisting in a given place (Westphal 2011, 122). Ravetz observes that "The commonest estate biography is a hopeful beginning" followed by decline (Ravetz 2001, 190), and this pattern has traces in TRIR, which is organized chronologically with section titles referencing specific years. Yet, by juxtaposing many individual biographies, Irvine indicates that, even in its grimmest era, the 1980s and 1990s, Red Road housed many kinds of people and experience. Metonymic detail registers the lack of facilities for children, but at the same time shows their imaginative adaptation of what was available, illustrating what Michel de Certeau celebrates as ground-level everyday use of



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the environment imposed by planners and architects (de Certeau 1984, 93). Team tennis on an improvised court is a communal reinvention of an individual sport (Irvine 2011, 45), while “giant headers” is a vertiginous individual variation on a team sport, involving a football dropped from high windows and headed by a player on the ground (Irvine 2011, 45-46). A moment of reverse vertigo typifies the novel’s way of depicting social problems without reductive determinism. In a 1989 scene, Pamela, who has grown up at Red Road, awakens in a hedge after a drug-induced blackout as her name is called “from the blue sky” by childhood friend Nicola (Irvine 2011, 165). Grounded in Pamela’s point-of-view, the passage avoids looking down on her as someone irreversibly fallen, and while her addiction persists, her final appearance in 2003 has her on methadone, vowing to survive (Irvine 2011, 262).

Political perspectives on Red Road’s problems are also incorporated in ground-up ways. The most politicized major character, student Kat Fisher, works at a shop on the scheme, and her 1989 reflections on the injustice of the Poll Tax are interrupted by a knife-wielding but visibly “old and tired” man (Irvine 2011, 169); the juxtaposition casts such local crimes as an unofficial tax triggered by broader inequities. In 1995 Kat remains at the scheme, taking further robberies and other hazards in stride (Irvine 216-217). Tenacity also characterises the parallel narrative of another fictionalized resident, Kamil, who deals with perceptions of his Asian otherness by pointing out that he is Glaswegian, from the former shipbuilding area of “Govan, originally” (Irvine 2011, 186), and faces down the BNP-sympathizing ex of his girlfriend Michelle (Irvine 2011, 194). His greater annoyance is a ghost haunting his flat. His refusal to be intimidated could evoke the ideal of modern flats as ghost-banishing spaces, but the persistence of the revenant, plus worsening conditions that impel Kamil and Michelle to move away in 1997, suggests that Red Road is increasingly haunted by the ghosts of its own unfulfilled promise (Vidler 1992, 64). So does a 1994 scene where Kamil’s friends Michael, Kay, and Trish contemplate Red Road from ground level, seeing the high-rises as “gravestones” and the scheme as “a cemetery” (Irvine 2011, 211-212) and pointing to the way the buildings, in their last years, appear as their own monuments.

Yet, the novel’s most strikingly extended metaphor, illustrating one way “the body confers a measure to the world” (Westphal 2011, 64), maps buildings onto human figures with an effect that is homely rather than uncanny. In an early, 1967 scene, a resident hangs washing “at the very top of Ten Red Road,” and contemplates the adjacent, unfinished building in a metaphorical way arising metonymically from the quotidian task of laundry: “New Housing. New Glasgow. She looks at the half-finished cladding on Ninety-three Petershill Drive. Semi-clothed. A trouser halfway up a leg” (Irvine 2011, 27). As the woman and her family emerge as key characters, their story develops an extended metaphor of Red Road as maternal—or parental—space. Completion of the scheme in 1969 arrives as the woman’s husband, Jim, carves her name, Colleen, into the crust of a pie, “the roof on a house.” The two of them express



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mutual satisfaction at the “[p]rogress” the scheme embodies, and as they embrace on their veranda, Jim dwells upon “her body that was strong enough to keep them all, to house them all, to love them all. Her name forging in the oven’s heat. A new oven in the new Red Road” (Irvine 2011, 42-44). These words play with the trope of womb as oven but also recall the earlier image of a man building food, and the passage envisions Red Road as a place where gendered role divisions need not be oppressive. Such early optimism, like the echoes of the GHA’s contemporary utopian motto in the laundry passage, becomes poignant in time: the family’s original flat is wrecked by the 1977 fire in the building (Irvine 2011, 86-95), and Colleen’s health declines along with the scheme’s. However, her death in 1997 is followed by a scene where Michael and Kay introduce their newborn baby to Kamil and Michelle (Irvine 2011, 232-233), and Red Road as a nurturing space makes a final appearance in a 2009 scene where a concierge, John, assists a resident, Susie Ho, to deliver her baby in a disused office (Irvine 2011, 290-297). As sympathetic presences, the concierges in Irvine’s rendition of Red Road counter dystopian views of schemes as environments requiring aggressive panoptic security.

In a further example of the juxtaposition of contrasting experiences, though, the birth scene is followed by the death of Jim and the suicides of a family of asylum-seekers (Irvine 2011, 2011, 297). The account of the suicides, based on a 2010 case, comes from the viewpoint of another refugee resident, Mariam. Westphal notes “an author’s freedom to overthrow his own point of view through a... character with an outside perspective” (Westphal 2011, 129), and TRIR depicts Red Road’s refugees as active users and interpreters of the scheme. The most prominent refugee character, Khadra, is a Somali who arrives “six months after the attacks in the United States” (Irvine 2011, 250). Putting up with occasional Islamophobes and persisting bureaucratic obstructions to her permanent residency, she recognises ways in which native Glaswegians share her concerns about housing (Irvine 2011, 269). Through Khadra’s eyes, the novel depicts the 2007 bid by Didier Pasquette to tightrope between two Red Road blocks. She is interested, but once the artist, defeated by wind, has “disappeared and never c[o]me back,” her attention, and the text’s, moves on (Irvine 2011, 276): the spectacle is a passing anomaly. At the end of the scene, having gained permanent residence in Glasgow, Khadra looks back at Red Road as “the place where she’d endured the process that finally gave her leave to remain” (Irvine 2011, 278). For Khadra, as for other residents, Red Road’s buildings matter for their use-value as shelter. Arguably, this is the reading TRIR as a whole conveys most strongly: Red Road is a large assembly of houses, which are integral parts of the biographies of those who have stayed in them and will remain reference points as those biographies go on, demonstrating one kind of intertextual (re)construction of place.

As mentioned above, TRIR itself is part of an assembly of works sponsored by Glasgow Life, the city’s agency for culture and sport, and also by the GHA (Irvine 2011, 10). The project’s online home,



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Red Road Flats: Past, Present and Future... (<http://www.redroadflats.org.uk/>), features a white-on-red logo with all eight Red Road blocks in silhouette and roots extending below the ground, a neat image of the flats' endurance as an organic if invisible part of the city. At Glasgow's People's Palace museum, an exhibit of the same title ran from February 2013 to May 2014, and as of July 2014, was recapitulated in a gift shop display emphasising the collaboration of "adult learning staff, performers, galleries, artists, writers, universities and museums" in "supporting the Red Road community during a period of massive regeneration." TRIR itself is on sale in the shop, and the Red Road Flats website offers visual and textual resources – stories, photographs, paintings – that parallel the novel's multifocal approach. The very co-ordination and convenience of this legacy project could suggest some danger of Red Road effectively disappearing into a range of creative-industrial heritage consumer products, and a brief comparative look at another iconic modernist housing site undergoing "massive regeneration" may be useful here. Sheffield's Park Hill Flats are in throes of another kind of death: privatisation and rebuilding. The renovated section houses a sales office with exhibits on the vast structure's history and blurbs touting its rebirth as an "aspirational address." Here the curated, packaged product is the building itself, with little concession to any current idea of housing as a right rather than a commodity, or to the socialist traditions Sheffield shares with Glasgow. According to housing scholar Danny Dorling, sales of the renovated units are slow and most of the complex is empty, despite the city's "very long waiting list for [social] housing" (Dorling 2014, 82). I will suggest below that Red Road's legacy may yet help to represent a more constructive future for alternatives to neoliberal property regimes.

### **"A Modern Public Hanging"**

An alternative to potentially over-neat cultural-academic processings of Red Road materializes in recent works of crime fiction, a genre whose conventions encourage anti-decorous takes on cities. The crudest version of this approach portrays decaying housing schemes as natural environments, and partial causes, for bad acts. Hence the cover of Malcolm MacKay's *The Night the Rich Men Burned* (2014). Nominally set in Glasgow, this character-driven narrative about calculating loan-sharks names very few details of settings, but the cover features a current picture of Red Road, complete with red netting and GHA logos, against a lowering sky. The generalized relation of the image to the book's content illustrates how Red Road's reputation for danger and dysfunction is at least partly a fictional construct. Other recent appearances of Red Road in crime fiction, however, look past superficial meanings. Its use as a location for the 2006 television adaptation of Ian Rankin's 2004 novel *Fleshmarket Close* may seem another shallow appropriation of the visual impact of the buildings, since the story is set in Edinburgh and originally among much smaller blocks. Yet Red Road is a fitting location, since both original and adapted versions of Rankin's



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narrative dramatise the precarious situations of refugees in a way that complements Irvine's more understated approach. Another 2006 screen work, Andrea Arnold's film *Red Road*, views the scheme initially through the perspective of a CCTV operator haunted by personal trauma, but eventually, like *TRIR*, looks past divisions between observers and observed. As Burke argues, the film thus challenges both genre conventions and related assumptions about schemes and their inhabitants (2007, 186).

Denise Mina's *The Red Road* (2013) also looks beyond clichés, but more grimly. In another indication of the interchangeability of housing schemes for book-marketers, the cover of the first UK edition features not *Red Road* itself but three smaller tower blocks. Characteristic of Mina's work, however, is detailed attention to Glasgow as built and inhabited city, from the condition of particular streets and structures to broader patterns of development juxtaposing aspiration and desperation. *The Red Road* is the fourth volume in a series centering on Strathclyde police Inspector Alex Morrow, whose background in a deprived district of the city's southside makes her both an informed observer of the urban environment and a critical outsider in the police. The layered plot centres on a murder scene at "The old *Red Road* flats" (Mina 2013, 27). Approaching them, Morrow recalls policing excited crowds at a blowdown in the Gorbals: "It was a modern public hanging. They were there to see something bigger than them die" (Mina 2013, 106). Figuring tower blocks as scapegoats more than causes for crime and social breakdown, the hanging metaphor implies an anthropomorphic rescaling of the condemned building, whereby its destruction is hinted to represent, for onlookers, a fitting fate for supposedly dysfunctional former occupants. Morrow's examination of *Red Road* continues to blend observations on different scales, illustrating fiction's capacity for plural perceptions of place. Inside the relevant partly-dismantled block, "the rotting remains of a housing revolution," Morrow climbs to the eleventh-floor murder scene, where removal of the outer walls has created an unexpected view over the city and a "confusion of scale [which leaves] her sick." Immediately after, she registers another uncanny rescaling of the once-orderly domestic space: "The girders were whining, the whole edifice swaying slightly as it caught the wind. The building felt as if it was crumbling, a skeleton dosed in lime" (Mina 2013, 109). As her vertiginous stay continues, Morrow ponders the meaning of the murder site (Mina 2013, 110), and her perception of the block as both crime scene and corpse proves significant.

The murder results from a collision between two people driven by different kinds of homelessness. The killer, Rose Wilson, is a survivor of care-homes and sexual abuse who has been adopted into the household of an unscrupulous lawyer, Julius McMillan, and implicated in his illicit dealings. The victim, Aziz Balfour, has come to Glasgow from Pakistan, doing charity work "for the people left homeless after the 2008 earthquake" (Mina 2013, 69). He has accidentally inflicted fatal injuries on the already-ailing McMillan during an argument over the lawyer's associations with another Glasgow Pakistani, Dawood



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McMann, whose fraud and smuggling rackets obstruct Aziz's aid work (Mina 2013, 146, 202-203). As she confesses to Morrow, Rose has confronted Aziz at his office near Red Road, pursued him into the scheme, and stabbed him (Mina 2013, 260). Aziz's wife (whose first name is Mina) relays his view of Red Road – “He used to say if that was in Pakistan families would be living in it” – and his lack of fear of the skeletal structure after his experiences navigating earthquake rubble (Mina 2013, 203). Hence his attempt to take refuge in the dying building. Red Road is again figured as victim as well as setting. With the case solved but McMann set to evade justice, Morrow links the flats' future as “a cloud of grey dust and rubble” (Mina 2013, 295) with her sense of systemic disorder in the city. She opts to risk her own (career) demolition by exposing some of the high-placed corruption that is responsible for the crimes she has been investigating and implicitly for some of Red Road's fatal flaws. While there is closure to the complex crime plot, the case of the dying scheme is tied to larger questions of housing injustice that remain open.

### Conclusion

In its red netting, Red Road is vivid yet insubstantial, fragile yet imposing: a bright spectre. Westphal remarks that “Nothing is sadder than a new city turned old” (Westphal 2011, 165) but also emphasises that representations can preserve detailed impressions of specific places at specific times (Westphal 2011, 157). And even, perhaps especially, in its present condition, Red Road calls for interpretations to supplement or talk back to those already circulating. In a blog entry from January 2015, Chris Leslie notes that the scheme's pre-demolition limbo continues, as though “someone wants these buildings to remain in their current partially disintegrated state to remind Glaswegians of how lucky we are to be on the cusp of this latest round of regeneration” (Leslie, 2015). The delay allows more time for the creation of vivid representations such as Leslie's photographs, and for consideration of the meanings of Red Road's disappearance. In an essay on tower-block blowdowns in London, architectural historian Joe Kerr, noting their crowd-drawing parallels with “public executions” (Kerr 2012, 164), suggests that such spectacles are more constructively understood as, among other things, challenges to “innate belief in the stability and permanence of architecture” (Kerr 2012, 166). I would suggest that demolitions of such large, once-new housing schemes now also invite reading as metaphors for the instability, or increased risk of dematerialisation, that neoliberal property markets have imposed upon buildings, and houses particularly. A variation on this reading might focus on the labour that must occur before and after any blowdown, as a reminder of the materiality of buildings and houses. While one recent housing studies text concludes that “never again will most people think of their house as only a home” (Lowe 2011, 244), both Danny Dorling in *All that is Solid* (2014) and James Meek in *Private Island* (2014) argue persuasively that the financialisation of housing is leaving more and more people in



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precarious situations (or “vertiginously stayed”), and point to a need for increased public-sector initiatives, and a possible re-emergence of some form of council housing.

Considered more literally, Red Road’s demolition suggests a rescaling of modernist utopianism to loom less large either for ill or for good, and it is noteworthy that numerous smaller high-rises in Glasgow, as elsewhere, are set to continue in service, under GHA or other auspices. Viewing Red Road less as the remains of a housing revolution than as a group of houses also helps to indicate why the GHA’s promises, as advertised through Red Road, “Big Red,” and elsewhere, need to be taken seriously. Both Dorling (2014, 138-144) and Meek (2014, 211-218) suggest that housing associations should be regarded skeptically, as possible vehicles for privatising agendas. However, equally significant may be the GHA’s contribution to construction of Red Road’s virtual future, a collaborative, multifocal project that might be one model for non-monumental but constructive approaches to housing itself.



*Fig. 3: Red Road’s last occupied block from SW, 7 July 2014. Photo © the author.*



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*Peter Clandfield, 'Red Road Re-visions'  
Writing Visual Culture 6 (2015)*

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## A Disconnected Community? (Re)visioning the Heygate Council Estate Through Digital Activism

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**Dr Nicola Mann, Richmond, The American International University in London.**

On November 22nd 2010, the British coalition government published a proposal for a radical overhaul of the nation's council housing. Addressing the BBC's evening television audience, then housing minister Grant Shapps told viewers of controversial plans to relinquish national governmental control of funding for council housing to local governments and private property developers. Southwark council stands at the forefront of these efforts with a £1.5 billion regeneration project that aims to transform the Elephant and Castle area into "a brand-new town centre" over the next fifteen years. In addition to rebuilding the area's dilapidated shopping centre and re-routing the gyratory system, the council recently completed the demolition of its high-rise Heygate council estate. The urban renewal initiative has been controversial from the off, plagued by forced evictions and a shaky 'Right to Return' policy. As reported in the Guardian recently, "Only 212 of the 2,535 flats going up where the estate once stood will be "affordable," and only 79 will be socially rented" (Cathcart-Keays 2014). The initiative has also been tarnished by a lack of resident involvement during the planning process; indeed, while the council originally convened a Resident's Regeneration Group enabling participants to develop their own "principles for effective regeneration," contributors soon realised that their opinions had little impact on the regeneration plans, which amounted to little more than "fait accompli" (DeFillipis & North 2004, 79). For a detailed timeline of the regeneration process, see the chronology provided by the website, *Heygate Was Home*.

Built in 1974, the Heygate is one of the largest and most notorious subsidized housing complexes in Europe. The estate began its life in a respectable fashion at a time when a third of Britons lived in council homes, but this early optimism soon gave way to an image synonymous with inner-city crime, squalor, isolation, and deprivation. Planners and estate agents condemn the area as London's "Lost Quarter," while journalists invoke metaphors of disease and decay by labelling the Heygate "a sort of human dustbin," noting that, "it exemplified the notion that if you give people sties to live in, they will live like pigs" (Heffer 2010). Thus, Southwark council not only aims to create a physical architectural change through the construction of a "brand new town centre," but also to eliminate the social "pathologies" – concentrated poverty, unemployment, and dependency on benefits – attached to its once 3000 strong citizenry. But while various politicians and journalists have promoted this representation over the years, there is no greater critic of the Heygate estate than popular culture.

From the wailing police sirens in *The Bill* (1984-2010), to the gun-toting bad boys in Michael Caine's vigilante thriller *Harry Brown* (2009), during the late 20th and early 21st century, London's Heygate council estate was a stage on which to enact terrifying anxieties about crime and social deviance.

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The high-density, multi-storey ‘brick box’ design of the buildings helped to underscore the discourse of dystopia surrounding the estate. In line with much cost-effective post-war subsidized housing both in the U.K. and U.S. (see Cabrini-Green in Chicago, for example), the physical shaping of the Heygate dispensed with street level play spaces and blocks in favour of tiny encased ‘streets in the sky’. Aesthetically, these exterior hallways were the ideal backdrops for visual interpretations of a criminal underworld, inhabited by horrible hoodies, feral youth, or marauding gangs of kids; the Heygate’s exposed concrete frames and futuristic elongated walkways became telegraphic shorthand for storylines centred on gritty, urban life. The recent acclaimed Channel 4 series *Top Boy* (2011-2013) exemplifies this vision. Driven by a desire to be to South London what *The Wire* (2002-2008) was to Baltimore, *Top Boy* employs stereotypical tropes of Black urban criminality with storylines centred on weedsmoking, wanton expletives, copious drug-taking and fierce violence. For twenty-something lead character Dushane and pals, the future lies not in the promise of an education or fulfilling career but in the preordained destiny of incarceration.

To accuse destructive visual narratives like *Top Boy* of being the sole perpetrators of the rationale expressed in the regeneration project would be inaccurate. Nevertheless, a negative and restrictive representation of council housing undeniably limits not only what we see of this place, but also how we see it. In an article for *The Guardian*, for example, Heygate resident Adrian Glasspool linked the visual encryption of his home by “excitable media and film-makers who liked to use the Heygate as a set for gritty realist dramas” to its current demise, and the disempowerment and stigmatization of council residents during the transition process (Moss 2011). Glasspool states, “Suddenly the place was being labelled a problem estate. This is all part of this regeneration discourse. Because there’s nothing wrong with the buildings, they have to find an excuse to regenerate the place, i.e. knock it down and replace it” (Moss 2011). Dominant ideological constructions of tenants as socially excluded, morally corrupt, and politically apathetic validates the implementation of the regeneration project as well as providing political and public justification for shutting tenants out of the redevelopment process.

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Channel 4's use of Heygate as a backdrop for the archetypal "sink" estate in one of its current idents illustrates this dynamic [Fig. 1].



Fig. 1: Channel 4 ident (2004-2013).

Devoid of people save for the traces of human life left by a grubby washing line, Heygate's graffiti- and rubbish-laden walkways gives visual form to the suspicion that council housing is a lost cause. A slow motion camera pans over this scene, a technique that serves as a visual roll call of the design flaws associated with post-war neo-brutalist architecture; at the same time, this surveillant filmic approach also reconfirms and condemns residents as key orchestrators of this sight. By failing to articulate the government's culpability in the establishment of its problems – 30 years of government disinvestment in its housing stock, not to mention Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme and increasing levels of privatisation – such cultural narratives narrow the complexity of life in council housing. Instead, it exists as a problem in itself, and a burden to the world. Effectively, the dystopian vision of the Heygate estate in late 20th and early 21st century visual culture (cinematic, journalistic, and televisual) contributed to its notoriety in the nation's visual imagination, and consequently helped to influence, either ideologically or psychically, the current socio-spatial restructuring of our urban landscape.

In spite of years of chronic mismanagement and ravaging visual treatments, some residents express a keen historical attachment to their living environment, reminding us that while the design of the estate may have been flawed, that does not always mean that those who lived there were failures. As Heygate resident Terry Redpath states, "People took pride in their place and there was a community spirit. It wasn't badly designed and there was plenty of open space" (Tran 2011). According to a 2011 Guardian article, some Heygate residents oppose the demolition, arguing that it is unnecessary as living conditions in the flats are satisfactory (Guardian, April 15 2011). Indeed, contrary to dominant visual depictions, a Metropolitan Police report detailing crime statistics from 1998 to 2003 indicates that the Heygate experienced a crime rate a 45% below the borough



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average (Better Elephant 2014). A MORI poll questionnaire disseminated to residents at the start of the regeneration process, meanwhile, found that “70% of Heygate residents expressed a wish to move to a new home on the site of the Heygate estate” (Southwark Borough Council 1999). For some, council housing should be recognized as more than simply bricks and mortar. Rather, youth clubs, community allotments, and familiar market stalls serve as memory palaces, loaded with representational surfaces, which function as visual cues, reminding residents of their past. Moreover, for residents like Redpath, “community specific” landmarks function as sites via which to reminisce about their deeply rooted past, utilizing this historical attachment to place to unite against bulldozing property developers and the narrow ontological frameworks circumscribed by popular culture (Kester 2004). Many current council housing residents are aware that they are heirs to a legacy deemed worthy of respect and emulation, and fight to maintain their cultural identity through their opposition to the regeneration project.

Some residents utilize traditional forms of activism by taking to the streets to fight for their homes, while others turn the council’s propaganda material on its head by creating culture jam posters to vent their opposition to the regeneration process. Digital-media resources like Facebook function as extensions to and facilitators of this resistance, serving to re-connect displaced tenants on one level and as forums for ex-residents, activists, and non-profit organisations to share information and to facilitate greater awareness about the regeneration process on the other. In rebellion to some councilors and politicians who would rather that the Heygate was razed and forgotten than explored and commemorated, over the last two to three years a strategic strand of digital activism emerged in an attempt to reflect the social attachments and civic engagement that came to play a dominant role in life on the Heygate estate during its lifetime. The Original Heygate SE17 Facebook page, for instance, currently boasts 883 “Likes” from ex-residents and interested parties. Sites and groups like 35 Percent, The Elephant & Castle Urban Forest, Heygate Was Home, and Live from the Heygate join this online activist community as dynamic and malleable digital spaces, which facilitate and making visible citizen action and a sense of creative ownership over the rapidly changing urban landscape in Southwark.

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Crucially, a number of these web-based initiatives seem primarily concerned with contesting dominant stereotypes attached to the Heygate. Heygate Was Home, for example, is an archive of residents' oral testimonies, photographs and videos, proof if you like that the people who lived there did not always consider that it a waste space or an eyesore [Fig. 2].

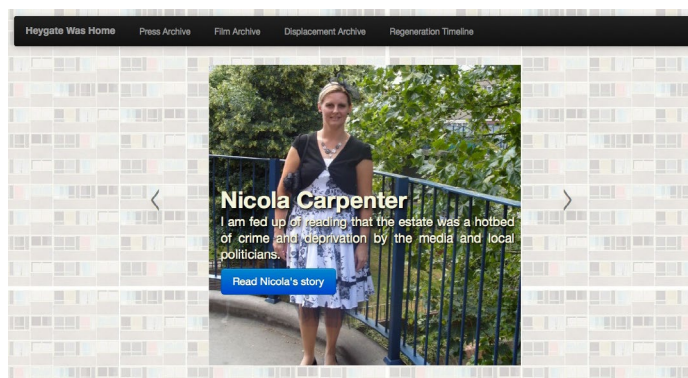


Fig. 2: "Heygate Was Home," 2014.

The simple design of the website enables participating residents to re-appropriate the estate piece by piece at the same time as it is being demolished, resulting in an active alternative online 'home' of oral and visual histories. The Elephant and Castle Urban Forest, meanwhile, charts the activities of ex-residents who, along with the Elephant Amenity Network, campaign for the retention of the neighbourhood's unusually large mature tree population. According to site, Heygate boasts 410 mature trees, valued at over £18 million using the council's (CAVAT) system. The site convenes meetings of local gardeners interested in preserving Heygate's so-called 'secret garden' via an online message board and map. The combination of face-to-face meetings with virtual exchanges publicizes information that might otherwise remain invisible without a representation online.

Much like other blogs of its ilk, Southwark Notes concerns itself with the politics of transparency – or digital whistle blowing if you will – in the form of the deconstruction of prevailing myths attached to the area. Written by a group of Southwark residents, the site provides frequent updates on the regeneration process as well as video, photographic, and poster tributes to the area. What sets Southwark Notes apart, however, is its strong awareness of the historical roots of this resistance, an appreciation illustrated in its repeated use of the elephant motif [Fig. 3]. Found centred on its namesake road intersection in South London, the original Elephant and Castle statue is symbolic of the area's extensive cultural history and utilized at every opportunity on Southwark Notes to support the idea of historical contiguity and perseverance. The name of the area can be traced back to the 15th century via its mention in *Shakespeare's Twelfth Night*, while a large elephant sculpture – not dissimilar to the



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distinctive emblem attached to the soon to be demolished Elephant and Castle shopping centre – perched atop the entrance to the Elephant and Castle Theatre until the late 19th century.



*Fig. 3: Southwark Notes & Archives Group. 2014.*

Southwark Notes' digital use of the elephant iconography extends to its employment in activist activity on the ground. In 2012, residents played cat and mouse with the council over a mural depicting the elephant, replacing it as soon as it was erased [Fig 4]. These two strands of activism, both traditional street-based activism and digital activism, unite in their use of the prolific use of the elephant image as a territorial tactic of resistance against the threat to their "homeplace" (hooks 1990, 42). By advertising the motif on the sides of buildings slated for demolition, the elephant designates that, for some, this is a site worth knowing about and identifying with, at the same time as instilling a sense of pride linked to historical attachments to the place. Much like the persistence of memory evinced via the Heygate Was Home website, the preservation of the Elephant mural is intimately tied to the idea of place-based memory; residents' personal memories interconnect with those of family and neighbours to create a spirit of shared identity through shared territory.



**LET THEM KNOW THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE:** We suggest that if you feel that this was an unnecessary, wholly unaccountable and aggressive act that you make your feelings known to those who carried it out and to CC in your email Peter John and Fiona Colley, who are the leading Council lights in the Regeneration Dept.

Write to:

Andrew Ashaye – [andrew.ashaye@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:andrew.ashaye@southwark.gov.uk)

Peter John – [peter.john@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:peter.john@southwark.gov.uk)

Fiona Colley – [fiona.colley@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:fiona.colley@southwark.gov.uk)

*Fig. 4: Southwark Notes & Archives Group. 2014.*

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This focus stems from the phenomenological principle that people and place are synergistically intertwined. As Edward Casey states in the Preface to his ubiquitous book on the subject, *The Fate of Place*, “To be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place” (Casey 1997, xi). In other words, people do not exist apart from the world but, rather, are immersed in it. On a textual and conceptual level, the lack of foreshortening in both mural and blog removes depth and temporality, thereby situating the past – or more specifically, residents’ memories of the past – firmly in the present. This is a formal manifestation of what Marianne Hirsch has termed “postmemory,” described as the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births. Moreover, the mural illustrates what Hirsch terms “written-in” memory: “The writing... is both written in memory, out of one’s memory, and written-in memory, a memory inscribed on the skin of the image itself, as a tattoo might be” (Hirsch 2002, 86).

Entombed on both wall and cyberspace, the image of the elephant can be seen as a practical manifestation of what I call usable memory – as a site where residents reminisce about their deeply rooted past, utilizing this historical attachment to place to unite and prevent the uprooting of community landmarks in the future. This term is in many ways derived from “usable past,” coined by historian Van Wyck Brooks in order to identify forbearers from American history and literature whose works could be used to interpret and understand present disruption or chaos. Brooks writes:

*The past is an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals; it opens itself at the touch of desire; it yields up, now this treasure, now that, to anyone who comes at it armed with the capacity for personal choices. If, then, we cannot use the past our professors offer us, is there any reason why we should not create others of our own? The grey conventional mind casts its shadow backward. But why should not the creative mind dispel that shadow with shafts of light? (Brooks 1918, 339)*

While Brooks’ “past” was Ralph Waldo Emerson’s humanistic New England, which the historian considered to be the model on which early 20th century U.S. culture and its literature would be built; so usable memory can be employed nearly a century later as a tactic reinforcing the importance of historical connectivity in the Heygate. When residents recount how “we” worked together to overcome past obstacles and “we” achieved unexpected successes, they emphasize this sense of productive reflection. For what binds together the memories of council housing residents is not the fact that they are contiguous in time but, rather, that they are synchronized with a whole ensemble of physical and social structures common to the community (Connerton 1989, 36). This kind of community collectivism corresponds with geographer David Harvey’s assertion that, “Community activism can be a very



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important moment in more general mobilization. In this context we have to think about the construction of community not as an end in itself but as a moment in a process” (Harvey 1997, 24). Much like the narrative temporality embodied in the mural, Southwark Notes superimposes time onto place, rendering photographs, maps, and notes on the flattened plane of the cyber interface, thereby suggesting the ways in which memory can be built into the fabric of a place. A database of oral and visual histories, Southwark Notes enables participating residents to re-appropriate the estate piece-by-piece parallel to its demolition. These counter-examples resist hegemonic interpretations of council tenants as a socially excluded ‘underclass’ by illustrating their significant innovation and creativity in the use of digital “space.”<sup>1</sup>

More broadly, digital citizenship potentially provides a unique opportunity to wrestle the hegemonic stronghold on the initiative out of the hands of council gatekeepers and the mass media, opening up the management of current and future regeneration processes to include those traditionally marginalized in policy-making – women, minority groups and working-class communities generally. The Web 2.0 of social networking sites has, of course, experienced the rise of new powerful forms of digital activism in recent years, as seen in the adoption of Facebook and Twitter as a means of mass mobilization in the context of the Occupy Wall Street, for example. While on a notable smaller scale, websites like Southwark Notes likewise generate alternative public spheres – spaces within which to ask: What do you want? Participatory venues for gathering citizen input, these virtual spaces help to demystify the regeneration process, their low-tech form enabling people inside and outside the community with the opportunity to critique its faults and partake in its management. Southwark Notes and others of its ilk become democratic forums for a mutually beneficial dialogue between academia, urban designers, and community groups about the importance of visual legacy (e.g. the preservation of community murals) in the management of sustainable and inclusive urban futures. The answers to these questions demonstrate the power of digital technologies to bond social capital within communities, in addition to bridging social capital across communities, in the form of sharing national and international experiences and strategies.

For example, over the last two years Southwark Notes, in conjunction with Heygate Was Home, has been involved in a research project on the realities of residents’ displacement. Contrary to council leader Peter John’s promise to re-house residents in new homes, only around one in five Heygate tenants actually remain in the SE17 postcode (216 tenants out of 1034) (Southwark Notes 2014). In response to a FOI request to Southwark Borough Council, Glasspool discovered that out of 596 known relocated households, around half have had to move to suburbs such as Sidcup, St. Albans, Croydon, Bexleyheath, Cheshunt, Mitcham and West Thurrock (for more information on this see the Heygate



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Leaseholder Displacement Map, created using data obtained by 35 Percent during the Heygate Estate Compulsory Purchase Order Inquiry in February 2013). In June 2014, Southwark Notes published a downloadable anti-gentrification handbook on its site, designed “to help local communities learn about gentrification and the alternatives they can fight for. Through the experiences of council tenants, leaseholders and the wider community in London, it contains ideas, stories, tools and resources” (Staying Put 2014). These resources include a guide on how to organize local groups, strategies to negotiate the council’s consultation process, and ways in which residents can tell their own stories. Indeed, as we see from the following quote, re-imagining the history of criminality attached to Southwark’s council estates is of prime importance:

*Our lived experience of crime on the Estate does not match the myth – and this is borne out by statistics. We need to counter these pernicious negative stereotypes. By listing and emphasizing the many positive features of our homes that we now enjoy, and celebrating our diverse community, we strengthen our bargaining position (Staying Put 2014).*

By examining and deconstructing differing visualizations of social housing, Southwark Notes highlights the power of digital media to produce and maintain – but also challenge and question – common notions of life at the Heygate. Collaborative, self-motivated, socio-technical innovations resist the totalizing generalizations of abstract representations of council housing by demonstrating that other sociospatial processes occur beneath, behind and in spite of dominant visual ideologies.

### Footnotes

- [1] Krista Brumley and Kevin Fox Gotham’s conceptual tool, “using space” builds upon the “navigative” possibilities inherent in Bourdieu’s habitus concept by focusing on the transitional link between socio-economic constraints and survival tactics employed by tenants in order to go about their daily lives. (Brumley & Gotham 2002).



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**Dr Daniela N. Prina, University of Liège.**

### The Philosophical Roots of Superstudio's 12 Cautionary Tales

The 12 Cautionary Tales. Premonitions of the Mystical Rebirth of Urbanism, written in 1971 by the group of Florentine architects Superstudio (formed in 1966 by Adolfo Natalini and Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, later joined by Piero Frassinelli, Roberto and Alessandro Magris and Alessandro Poli), anticipated the discussions on production, consumption and sustainability that arose following the 1970s economic crisis, and contributed to fuelling the debate surrounding architecture, urban planning and the role of architects and intellectuals in society. This project, in the guise of an illustrated literary work depicting twelve imaginary cities, was conceived in Italy within the framework of the short-lived Radical Architecture movement (1965-1975). The latter was characterised by a critical attitude towards society and architectural discipline, heterogeneous components, time-specific ideological and political orientations, and by the multitude of expressions that it has found. Superstudio was both one of the initiators and one of the most active operators within this extremely composite movement, born in the effervescent context of the Faculty of Architecture in Florence, at that time characterised by the presence of strong educational changes embracing innovative artistic tendencies, and by an open and sharp academic approach that sought to renew architecture through the introduction of new building technologies and formal languages connected to coeval artistic trends, such as conceptual and pop art. A number of Radical operators worked also in the avant-garde design and artistic scenes of Turin and Milan. The common ground for the groups and operators that took part in this movement was the adoption of a rigorous critical and theoretical attitude towards functionalism and rationalism, exerted through the abdication to concrete practice and traditional professional obligations, and the consequent adaptation of their projects to writing, photography, film, or any other kind of media combination. This approach was largely inspired by a keen interest in the philosophical theories of the Frankfurt School, and particularly by its critical position against the totalitarian and alienating aspects of the advanced capitalist society, by the aesthetic vision of Adorno, by the utopia of Marcuse, and by the theories of Pollock. The makeshift adoption of the communication strategies of the historical avant-gardes, of the literary creation, represented a method for Superstudio to go beyond the professional routine. In this way Superstudio detached itself from a "general plan" <sup>1</sup> in which, following the rules of capitalist economy, every reality was subtly and slyly planned to help the system's selfpreservation through the exertion of a total control of the consciences. <sup>2</sup> In these conditions, even art and architecture had lost their disruptive and revolutionary characteristics, being domesticated to follow the markets' requirements. Therefore Superstudio deliberately refused its social role and took architecture to be a means of communication, managing it independently from the productive cycle, through an intellectual – and not operational – practice. This choice was also motivated by the

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impossibility for young professionals to fit in a building industry that flourished during Italy's post-war reconstruction and in the subsequent years of the economic boom, but was at that time going through a phase of recession. The architects' professional role was consequently questioned, reinvented, and reinterpreted. Its shift from "specialised technician" to "intellectual-artist" marked the final disappearance of the boundaries between professional practices, establishing the synthesis between art, literature and architecture. Concrete work was converted into intellectual action: in this concept the urban project, almost an interlacing of literature and architecture, was not measured against reality but stood as a means of communication to broaden the discussion on city planning and architecture. Descriptive practice became for Superstudio a meticulous way to operate within the discipline.

### Counter Utopia as an Operating Method

Visions of the cities of the future, which typify the history of modern architecture, mostly narrate a practical engagement of architects who, feeling charged with a social and ethical mission, work for the improvement of society through an accurate and realistic planning of the urban space. Conversely, Superstudio portrayed a vision of urban reality that was both extreme and radical, rejecting what, until then, had marked the body of architectural research connected with social utopias. Indeed the 1960s were marked by the disappearance of almost all the great protagonists of 20th century's architecture and by the emergence of critical positions in the debate on the legacy of the Modern Movement. Modernist's doctrines engaging with the resolution of practical problems were definitively abandoned and consequently the images depicted by traditional architectural and literary figurations of utopias were discarded as well, in favour of those belonging to counter-utopian or dystopian narrative. Such definitions were created to indicate a literary or cinematographic genre which depicted urban and societal models that, far from representing an ideal example, showed on the contrary how the excess of

order and perfectionism and the concern to realise the most favourable living conditions, could lead to totalitarian or extremely dangerous and injurious drifts, and to the eradication of mankind's genuine human qualities (Verra 1984). This new genre used the same artifices – memories, stories, reports from the future – that defined also the traditional utopian constructions. The words of Nicolas Berdjaev's epigraph in Huxley's *Brave New World* offer a perfect definition of counter-utopia's aims:



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*Utopias seem much more attainable than one may have previously thought. And we are now faced with a much more frightening thought: how do we prevent their permanent fulfilment? [...] Utopias are attainable. The way of life points towards them. But perhaps a new century will begin, a century in which intellectuals and the educated class will find means of preventing utopias, and will return to a non-utopian society, which may be less perfect, but will offer more freedom.* <sup>3</sup>

At the origin of this turn in the interpretation of utopia were not only the most important and dramatic events of the 20th century – conflicts, failed revolutions, massacres – and the growing apprehension for a possible ecological devastation, but also a contemporary criticism of the oppressive and alienating aspects of the capitalist society. In the architectural domain, the disciplinary crisis shifted the attention towards the formal and linguistic aspects of the project and tested the boundaries between architecture and the iconography of new artistic avantgardes. Italy was one of the first European countries impacted in the 1960s by this radical review of the discipline: following the wake of earlier experiences developed by Archigram in England and by Hans Hollein and Walter Pichler in Austria, Superstudio showed a greater openness towards new forms of art and used drawings and illustrations as finished, autonomous projects that did not need to be realised to be eloquent. However the faith in an optimistic future (as mirrored by Archigram's work) that had characterised the beginning of the Sixties had vanished in the years (1963-1967) that preceded students' and workers' agitations and the advent of Radical architecture in Italy. The political and ideological climate was then marked by a rising aversion towards the advanced capitalist system. Italian Radical operators therefore resorted to old and new avant-gardes' expressive stratagems (such as manifestos, performances, etc.), pushed architectural practice beyond its concrete applications and widened it conceptually, into the sphere of a sort of architectural criticism, exploiting the possibilities offered by the intersection of visual and literary artifices. Superstudio's activity was defined by the adoption of this *modus operandi*, and by a specific interest in science fiction that had already been present in Archigram's work.[4]

To create *The 12 Cautionary Tales*, the group used a combination of fanciful images (drawing, collages and photomontages) and prophetic writings inspired by both counterutopian classics – such as Orwell or Huxley – and popular science fiction novels, making a broad use of their literary artifices, for instance, the meticulousness in the description of the imaginary realities, as well as of their most common themes: the relentless development of industrial civilisation and its continuous demands of organisation, the almost infinite possibilities of biological mutation, and the controversial relationship between man and machine. In particular, *The 12 Cautionary Tales* largely



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bore the mark of the influence of science fiction novels dominated by sociological or socio-cultural concerns, written mostly during the 1960s and published in the “Romanzi d’Urania”. [5]

This science fiction book series was the first to introduce Italian readers to some eminent authors like Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, James Graham Ballard, Philip K. Dick as well as many others. At that time Italian science fiction was indeed dominated by American and English productions, and Italian authors, hiding behind pseudonyms, generally used to anglicise not only their names, but also the topics, the plots and the language adopted in their novels, thus creating a hybrid phenomenon. Therefore, science fiction in Italy was not yet considered by critics as a new experimental genre, even if it was reputed to be a vehicle of positive values: Umberto Eco, for instance, considered it as “consumer literature” but also “allegorical literature with didactic intent” (Eco 1964, 373). Moreover, the awareness that science fiction genre was part of a new anthropological dimension internal to consumer society was also acknowledged by art critic Gillo Dorfles, who affirmed that

*apart from the literary value of various tales and novels [...] it constitutes an interesting branch of studies... because it reveals some of the most urgent aspirations and pours scorn on some of the most disgraceful faults of today's humankind. That's why science fiction could not get out of exerting back an influence on visual arts... (Dorfles 1968, 131).*

The choice of using a popular media like the science fiction tale to divulge the group's analysis was consequently not accidental, but the fruit of a conscious research that the group had realised coherently with his views, in the attempt to appeal to the widest readership possible and provoke a debate on the dramatic costs of the perpetuation of dangerous urban models. Indeed, The 12 Cautionary Tales was undoubtedly inspired by popular science fiction novels that encouraged readers to meditate on pressing ecological, social, political and technological issues: several parallels can be traced, for instance, with Jack Vance's The Houses of Izsm, Robert Silverberg's The Man in the Maze, K. Dick's Dr. Bloodmoney, Arthur C. Clarke's The City and the Stars, and Frederick Pohl and Cyril M. Kornbluth The space merchants. All these novels were published in Italy between 1965 and 1970 in the Urania series. Frassinelli owned them all, in addition to a great number of other science fiction books [6].



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### A Critical Theory of Architecture and of the Contemporary City

The 12 Cautionary Tales find their origins in the Continuous Monument, a project previously developed by Superstudio. This was a model of total urbanisation consisting of a primary element that crossed seas and mountains, not needing to deal with or to respect the environment anymore; it was an architecture that lived independently, as an indifferent sign on the ground on which it laid. This project exacerbated the potential of an architecture freed from all super structural conditionings, which realised itself as order, logic, and purity. In 1971 Piero Frassinelli started to enhance this project with a series of perspective views illustrating the interior of the Continuous Monument, yet afterwards Superstudio agreed to leave it as it had been imagined: a symbol, an endless vision. Frassinelli, though, had already begun to visualise the possible inner mechanisms within this mega structure: the depiction of the First city was thus born [7]. It was soon followed by the others, becoming therefore a separate project that marked the starting point for a series of didactic operations [8].

Superstudio's 12 Cautionary Tales presented a critical theory of architecture and of the contemporary city. It sought to stand as a negative reflection on reality and to unveil its deep and hidden contradictions through a utopian and cognitive model. In this way, the model revealed the imperfections and the treacherous deviations of a society project aiming at more rationality and progress, but also criticised the concept of rationality itself, namely the "counterfinality of reason". Defined by Horkeimer and Adorno in their 1947 text *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, it represents, according to philosopher Gianni Vattimo, the key aspect of counter utopia: "it is the discovery that the rationalisation of the world – insofar as it accomplishes its design even more perfectly and, therefore not by mistake, by accident, or a casual distortion – overthrows reason and its goals of perfection and emancipation" (Vattimo 1992, 78).

As Superstudio's purpose was both informative and moralistic, and the group wanted its voice to be heard in professional debate, it tried to give its work the widest dissemination possible. It proposed its project to a number of publishers in Italy and abroad, and it was picked up by the AD magazine in London, who distributed the English version first, with the title *Twelve Cautionary Tales for Christmas*. Premonitions of the Mystical Rebirth of Urbanism, whereas the Italian version was originally published by the magazine *Casabella* in the January issue of 1972 with the title *Premonizioni della Parusia Urbanistica*. In Italy at that time, the dissemination of the languages and practices related to the new avant-gardes was mainly led by specialised magazines of art and architecture (like *Domus*, *Casabella*, *Marcatré*, Op. cit., IN). Their objective was not limited to divulging such practices, but aimed at favouring the birth and the development of debates and networks between critics, architects, and young exponents of the contemporary artistic scene as well. Radical projects were therefore



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published by both Gio Ponti's *Domus* magazine, and especially by *Casabella*, which, as of 1971 started focusing on counter culture related subjects. *Casabella*, then under the direction of Alessandro Mendini, published *The 12 Cautionary Tales* at a time attempting to reconsider the debate on architectural problems from a different critical point of view, at least when compared to Italy's editorial reality. *Casabella* would soon become the principal instrument for the diffusion of the artistic and architectural ideas of neo-avant-gardes. According to this primary and specific role, it was also one of the rare spaces in which *The 12 Cautionary Tales* was published uncensored in its original format, displaying a complex and well-defined relationship between architecture, text, and images.

With an inflated and divinatory prose, oscillating "between the Gospel and science fiction" (Branzi 1972, 36) Superstudio's "fantasy, horror, science fiction tales" (Pettina 1982, 22) described some of the then current urban trends – exacerbating them in a dramatic, ironical and corrosive vision of the city's reality. The writing style ranged from the use of an extremely lyrical lexicon to the utilisation of intimidating expressions, with the clear aim of moving the reader's sensibility. Indeed Vittorio Gregotti wrote of the "religious terrorism of Superstudio" (Gregotti 1972, 337): this aggressiveness, typical of the languages of the avant-gardes, enhanced the communicative force of the narration. It emphasised the violent and authoritarian implications of the social organisations described in the project, which was essentially composed of three parts.

In the first one, 12 imaginary cities with an evocative name were described and illustrated. Superstudio insisted principally on three crucial themes: the city as a rational project that manifested itself through the exertion of control and totalitarian force; the consequent and machine. The physical description of the cities revolved around the obsessive reference to their size, indicated with pinpoint precision, and the use of a very specific and technical language; each story illustrated by suggestive images created through photomontages or technical architecture drawings. The combination of text and images, rather than insisting merely on the physical aspects of the cities, alluded to their functioning: it described the precise *modus operandi* that the cities imposed on themselves and their inhabitants in order to ensure their performances and consequently their endurance. This faultless self-preservation mechanism associated all the 12 imaginary realities. The cities educated and encouraged all citizens to depend on false needs, inducing behaviours abiding by the system's logic. Consequently all their necessities were satisfied; the guarantee of an apparently perfect and endless existence freed them from the damages provoked by the passing of time, thus enhancing their performances and eliminating at the same time all possible social conflicts. Death occurred only if an element escaped from the system's programmed logic: the transgression of the imposed rules, although rare, sometimes happened



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despite the city's continuous process of indoctrination and persuasion. Such rare transgressions were rectified with the exclusion, expulsion and the final and silent disappearance of dissidents. However, sometimes death was planned from the beginning, scheduled to respond to the cities scrupulous requirements. Individuals were necessary for the subsistence of the system, and this was reflected in the physical spaces that the city provided for its inhabitants as well: narrow and functional, they were conceived to facilitate the daily operations of the overall structure rather than the life and the needs of the individuals. As a consequence, the cities' development was antithetical to nature, not just human nature. Not only were men's feelings destroyed but the natural landscape was supplanted by the continuous growth of an artificial, distorted, hostile reality. Superstudio's assertions tended to reveal the treacherous deviations of a project in which not only nature and earth but also the deep psychic structures of the individual were sacrificed for the sake of necessity and survival, progress and civilisation.

In The 12 Cautionary Tales drawing and written language were considered as two equivalent logical systems; consequently, the iconographical apparatus that accompanied the written text was conceived as a parallel narration. The analytic drawings associated with the text were, in fact, fruit of exact mathematical calculations based on the cities' units of measurement. Every city had indeed its own unit of measurement in order to give the project an appearance of universality. Therefore, there was a direct correspondence between the images and the written text that suggested that those urban descriptions were potentially a feasible project. With an analogous intention, six of the cities were also depicted through more realistic and evocative images, largely influenced by the covers of Urania's novels, at that time realised by Dutch artist Karel Thole. Visual metaphors of urban tendencies ranged from excessive mechanisation to the trivialisation and homologation of architecture, to the artificial beautification and treasuring of cities [9]. These images contributed to reinforce the prophetic tenor of the written tales. These graphical representations of an extremely suggestive power were a necessary complement to the project: not only did they help the reader to visualise the cities, they also drew connections between Superstudio's work and the artistic and architectural models which had inspired them. For instance, the virtual reality of the City of the Hemispheres illustrated by a surrealistic photomontage (derived from René Magritte's painting *Les fleurs de l'abîme II*, 1928), recalled another Superstudio contemporary conceptual work, *Reflected Architecture*; reference to the "speaking architecture" of French Enlightenment was evident in the representation of the Conical Terraced City, with its ascendant power structure; the typical urban grid of American cities was reproduced to illustrate the City of Order; a similar organisation which was also applied to distribute the cosmetic structures of the City of the Splendid Houses, in which the walls of the residences



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were the support for “metal frames bearing silk-screened panels depicting any subject in bright colours [...] the most popular is famous historical building [...]” (Superstudio 1971, 742). The rhetoric of progress and mechanisation was revealed for example, through the images of the Continuous Production Conveyor Belt city, in the Ville Machine Habitée, and in the futuristic Spaceship City.

In the second part of the work, an Epilogue introduced the reader to a psychological test – as accurate as the ones which were published in popular magazines – in which extremely negative and degrading psychological profiles, accompanied by insults and sarcastic reprimands were traced depending on the number of cities that the reader had appreciated [9]. The path to spiritual and moral redemption was penned in the last lines of the Epilogue, the subsequent Post scriptum and in the depiction of a Thirteenth City, describing an alternative hypothesis to the oppressing and discouraging urban future illustrated earlier. A short Post scriptum (appearing in other versions of Superstudio's work) [10] explained the project of the 12 cities as a series of contes philosophiques, a way of critically approaching the problems of architecture as they were debated in architectural magazines, focusing on the necessary role of intellectuals and artists as guiding lights.

The Thirteenth City, added to Casabella's version [11], being written by Natalini was radically different from the other 12 cities. The only city without a name, a defined shape and a clear functioning, was described as an ideal, crystal made – like in the positive Expressionists utopias – evanescent, disappeared or invisible city. It was suspended in the sky above an immense and perhaps non-existent green field, maybe far away in time and space. It may still have been considered as an ideal model of life and society in which people could continue to believe, restart the planning process and their life project in the opposite direction, from civilisation towards nature. Like in Plato's Allegory of the Cave (Gargiani-Lampariello, 2010, 98), people who observed the city could see only its shadow under particular light conditions. Consequently, they were unable to seize the city's characteristics and to recognise its exemplary qualities [12]. Therefore, the Thirteenth City could be interpreted not as a new positive utopia, but as the allegory of a society who is unable or unwilling to seek truth and wisdom.

Superstudio's hope in the possibilities of an architecture freed from all super structural conditionings, which realised itself as order, logic, and purity, was a constant presence in the theoretical works of the group. Therefore, while The 12 Cautionary Tales shed light on the risks of an uncontrolled development of various tendencies of the contemporary capitalist civilisation, the project for an “environment” that the group presented at the exhibition “Italy: the new domestic landscape” organised at the Museum of Modern Art of New York in 1972 displayed the image of a free and pacified society. This event, organised under the supervision of Emilio Ambasz and sponsored by the most important Italian



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industries (Eni, Anonima Castelli, Olivetti, Fiat, Abet Print, Alitalia), celebrated Italian design and tried to clarify its critical and theoretical purposes as well. One of its sections was dedicated to 12 Environments, created purposely for the exhibition on the base of the "Design Program" that was sent to a number of selected participants in order to ask them "to propose microenvironments and microevents... design the spaces and artifacts that singly or collectively, support domestic life; and... demonstrate the ceremonial and ritual patterns in which they may be used" (Ambasz 1972, 139-140). Superstudio's environment was Supersurface (An Alternative Model of Life on Earth), a film of 35 mm, in colour with sound.

Referring to the last concepts developed by Herbert Marcuse in his essay *Eros and Civilization*, Supersurface described a new type of neutral environment, a space built around a network of human relations that were not alienated and in which men could finally exert their vital functions in a complete freedom of expression, without external influences, thanks to a minimalist lifestyle made only possible by a rational and equal distribution of the resources, symbolised by the Cartesian surface on which all the described activities took place [13]. This twofold vision of society and architecture, apparently in conflict, represents the two sides of the same coin: The 12 Cautionary Tales does not correspond to a reaction of discouragement to the disappearance of the illusions created by the excesses of rationality, but to a critical inner dimension of architecture itself; an admonishment to never losing a fair detachment from the political or technological instruments employed to realise the optimal, alternative plans, without being swept away from their not always unconditioned positive potentialities. The 12 Cautionary Tales, works in conclusion as a corrective to the excesses contained in the utopian aspirations. Supersurface, agreeing with Marcuse's theories, confirms the end of utopia – and the presence of architecture as a positive issue – describing it through the predictable development of a freed civilisation, the product of the improvement of perfected technology in an advanced industrial society.

### Critical Fortune and Rediscovery of Superstudio's Work

Although Superstudio gave an original contribution to the new-born science fiction scene, from a literary standpoint The 12 Cautionary Tales had no impact on the young Italian fictional panorama of the time. There has been speculation (Lang and Menking, 2003, 23-24), on the probable connection between the writer Italo Calvino – one of the few Italian novelists that showed an interest in science fiction literature – and Superstudio: The 12 Cautionary Tales was in fact mentioned in an unsigned review dated 5th December 1971 on page 29 of the weekly *Il Mondo*, whose cultural editor was at the time, Calvino himself. Calvino started to work around 1970 on his famous book *Invisible Cities* published in 1972. This work also had an enormous influence on a



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whole generation of architects helping them to envisage how cities could appear without the limitations of modern urban theory.[14]

The graphic legacy of The 12 Cautionary Tales had a stronger impact. In 1978, writer Robert Sheckley asked the group's permission to publish The 12 Cautionary Tales in an anthology on science fiction cities, later brought out with the title Futuropolis. On that occasion, Frassinelli decided to write a new Epilogue and a new tale, called The Last City, stating that the previous Epilogue

*had irreparably exceeded the events; during those months in fact, for the first time people started to speak about the N bomb (the neutron bomb that eliminates all the human beings from the explosion area leaving intact the material infrastructure) that seemed to me more a philosophical idea than a military invention; by far it exceeded the descriptions of the 12 cities that were inspired to situations much less radical than this one, so definitive (Frassinelli 1978) [15].*

Therefore, in The Last City Frassinelli imagined the ensuing consequences arising from the use of the N-bomb. While the prose was ironic, less dark than in his previously literary experiments, the contents remained extremely pessimistic. The Last City as well as the new Epilogue remained nonetheless unpublished: Sheckley indeed chose to reduce the texts space in the book, but published the illustrations of The 12 Cautionary Tales.

Being one of the most well-known Superstudio's projects, The 12 Cautionary Tales has since its conception been re-published numerous times in magazines, monographs of the group's work and in many exhibition catalogues, thus losing a part of its original force due to the displacement and the changes in the editing. Even if the influence of The 12 Cautionary Tales survives today, contributing to fully illustrating the richness and the breadth of the critical debate that surrounded the shape of the city and its development in the early 1970s, this work needs, in fact, to be fully understood, to be read in its original context, that of the architectural journals in which it was originally published [16].

The critical fortune of Superstudio's work from the architectural point of view proved to be significant and enduring. The 12 Cautionary Tales, relying primarily on a strong literary and philosophical background and on the efficiency of its language and visual communication, contributed to instilling new life to the debate on architecture and city development models. Moreover, Superstudio's contribution can be recognised as a fundamental starting point for the creation of and experimentation with a different concept of the relationship between city and architecture, from which



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recent avant-garde's experiences spread: architects such as Rem Koolhaas, Leon Krier and Bernard Tschumi were all Natalini's students while he was teaching at the Architectural Association in London, in 1970-1971.

The relevance of *The 12 Cautionary Tales* to the present, witnessed by the past years increased consideration of Superstudio's productions, relates to the association between the group's work and topical subjects: implications on current societal dilemmas are still farreaching. Worries and struggles that were present over forty years ago – from the reassessment of suburbs to the exploitation of workers to the lack and conservation of natural sources – are unfortunately still present and even amplified. The presence of these elements is already sufficient to underline the dramatic contradictions of our society, its lack of political conscience, but today, new concerns linked to globalisation issues are especially present in the field of architecture and city planning, where the dangerous stance of using a unique model, repeatable and identical everywhere is patent. The recuperation of Superstudio's avant-gardist concepts, through dedicated exhibitions and new historical and critical surveys therefore represents a revealing symptom of the state of contemporary architectural and urban research that still consider their dissenting and imaginary dimensions as vital instruments to reflect on today's consumer society, pursuing the struggle for a better world.

### Footnotes

- [1] This definition was employed by Friedrich Pollock in a 1941 essay in which he tried to underline the changes that occurred in the capitalist system during the 20th century, regrouping them under the definition of "State Capitalism" (Pollock, 1941 IX, 2, 200-255).
- [2] The topic related to the "Culture Industry" was thoroughly analysed in the third part of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The term created by Adorno underlines that the user is not the "subject" of this Industry but that, on the contrary, he has the passive role of the "object". Adorno also judges the expression "mass media" negatively: "the very word mass-media, specially honed for the culture industry, already shifts the accent onto harmless terrain. Neither is it a question of primary concern for the masses, nor of the techniques of communication as such, but of the spirit which sufflates them, their master's voice". (Adorno, 2011, 106).
- [3] The original citation in the book is in French (translation provided by the author). (Huxley2004, XXVII).



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- [4] See, for instance, the fourth issue of Archigram magazine. Archigram used however science fiction to prefigure positive utopias based on the intensive development of sophisticated technology.
- [5] I Romanzi di Urania ("Urania's Novels") is an Italian science fiction series published by Mondadori since October 10, 1952. The first issue featured the novel *The Sands of Mars* by Arthur C. Clarke. Its first editor was Giorgio Monicelli, also credited with the invention of the word *fantascienza*, meaning science fiction in Italian. From 1964 to 1985 the curators of the series were renowned Italian writers Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini, who authored a few science fiction short stories published under pseudonyms.
- [6] Romanzi di fantascienza in Studio al dicembre 2002. Archivio Superstudio. Over the course of this research, the author has had several conversations with Piero Frassinelli and Adolfo Natalini on their predilection for science fiction.
- [7] Following a usual practice inside the group, all of Superstudio's projects were presented as a collective work. However, it is important to highlight that Frassinelli, who unlike the other members of Superstudio had a peculiar background in between that of anthropology and architecture, was actually the author of *The 12 Tales* and of the iconographical apparatus of the project as well. *The 13th City* was later written by Natalini.
- [8] The other didactic projects were: *Reflected Architecture* and *Interplanetary Architecture*.
- [9] The group's criticism of the excessive tendency to consider the aesthetic aspect of the cities by developing them with the single goal of mass tourism is also visible in a mocking article, *Rescue of Italian Centers*, written with a prophetic and apocalyptic tenor: an ironic method is proposed to rescue the historical centres of the famous Italian cities of Naples, Pisa, Venice, Milan, Rome and Florence. It was, actually, an allusion to a final act of destruction that completed the process of disintegration induced by the devastating actions of time and human exploitation to which these cities had been permanently subordinated. The image of Florence's monuments submerged by water was probably inspired by Thole's cover of the Italian edition of Ballard's *The Drowned World*, owned by Frassinelli and published in the Urania Series in 1963.
- [10] For instance in A. Natalini 1979, or Gianni Pettena 1982.
- [11] In Casabella's version, the profiles are interspersed with literary quotes of authors such as Franco Ferrini, John Donne, Franz Kafka, Marco Polo, Adolf Loos.
- [12] Published in Casabella (Superstudio 1972, 49).



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- [13] The work presented in New York is part of a wider investigation on the great themes of human life that the group transformed into a project based on the Five Fundamental Acts: Life, Education, Ceremony, Love and Death. Each one of the Acts should have been described by a film – imagined first in storyboard format and later published as a series in the magazine *Casabella* – but only two of them, Life and Ceremony were realised; another two, Education and Death, were developed in alternative media. The first film of this series, *Life, Supersurface*, was shown at the MoMA exhibition, and was sponsored by Anic-Lanerossi, a brand of the Eni group that after seeing the film refused to finance the rest of the project.
- [14] A more recent study also suggests Calvino's hypothetical familiarity with Superstudio's work through the analysis of the literary relations between Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and *The 12 Cautionary Tales*. (Pisaniello 2009, 34-37).
- [15] Unpublished text sent to the author by Piero Frassinelli, from his personal archive in Florence (translation provided by the author).
- [16] To be coherent with this statement the author has deliberately avoided illustrating this article with pictures of *The 12 Cautionary Tales*.

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## Ōtomo's Exploding Cities – The Intersection of Class and City in Ōtomo Katsuhiro's Works Before, During, and After the Bubble Economy in Japan

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Sebastian Klausner

### Cities Without an End Until They are Ending

What is the quintessential city portrayed by Ōtomo Katsuhiro in his works? Searching for clues, let us turn to the first few seconds of the animated feature *Akira* (AK): A bird's-eye view of Tokyo on the date of the film's premiere, July 16th 1988, ending with a big explosion swallowing everything in sight, then jumping immediately thirty years into the future where its story takes place (AK 0:00). The scene is well known and often cited because of its links to traumatic imagery of the atomic bomb in Japan (Lamarre 2008; Standish 1998, 63). Yet this simple and powerful association somewhat obscures our vision of the city itself or how it is drawn. Up to its destruction, we only see one background plate, the lowest layer of cel animation, drawn in a forced perspective which creates the illusion of a camera tilt towards the horizon. Riekeles and Lamarre raise the issue of background plates and how they are designed to direct our attention (Riekeles and Lamarre 2012, 175). An important hint that we should follow: seen from a topdown view, a four-lane motorway situated in the middle of the screen between two rows of multistorey buildings guides our view to the top of the screen, thereby motivating the camera movement into the same direction while zooming out. The buildings left and right of the motorway are quite detailed and colourful, allowing us to estimate the size of the space we see. In contrast, the buildings surrounding them are only coloured in shades of black and brown, giving us a vague feeling of heterogeneity (different shapes and sizes alternating), chaotic patterns (black and brown lines run frantically across the screen), and endlessness (most of the buildings are cut off in some way). As the camera pulls back, the background plate's perspective is slowly turning towards the horizon, revealing more and more of the dense cityscape, while we keep following the road diminishing in size, until it vanishes into a sea of buildings. When the camera movement finally stops, we are confronted with millions of tiny dots representing buildings extending towards the horizon. Just a moment, before the explosion hits, we vaguely recognise Mount Fuji in a pale blue shade. Despite its cultural relevance (Ivy 1995, 108), it is insignificant compared to the city.

Even before we jump decades into the future where we find the prototypical postmodern cyberpunk city, Ōtomo shows us Tokyo as an endless cityscape defying a simple order and thus harking back to Ashihara Yoshinobu's famous description of the city. Even though it has a "chaotic layout" (Ashihara 1989, 13), thereby being "an ugly, chaotic metropolis", its structure is "organic and constantly in the throes of change", thus "remain[ing] a synchronic whole, tenaciously surviving by rather an amoebic adaptability" (Ashihara 1989, 43). This idea can not only be found in the rebuilt Neo Tokyo of *Akira* later on, but also in some of Ōtomo's other projects, as pointed out by Lawrence Bird with regards to the animated feature *Metropolis* (*Metoroporisu*) (MET) which Ōtomo adapted and storyboarded (Bird



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2008, 140). Other authors go even further by playing up the similarities between his urban designs as a manner of discussing class (De Domenico 2012). As Thomas Lamarre argues, Ōtomo has been dealing with youth culture and class conflict since 1979 by concentrating on “newly developed areas outside central Tokyo “and joyfully destroying them (Lamarre 2008, 133) – thereby combining three important, intertwining aspects: city, class, and explosion. Considering the significant position held by the apocalyptic idea as a key-image in the political as well as popcultural discourse during the Lost Decades (Leheny 2006, 14) (as Japan's recession following the burst of 1980s bubble economy is known), Ōtomo's works open up the possibility to examine how the image of urban landscape and its destruction are interconnected with the discourse on class (or with its vanishing and re-emerging) in Japan during the 1980s and 1990s. Given the underrepresentation of class in Japanese discourse (Slater 2010, 140), culturally and historically contextualised analysis of the manga *Dōmu* (DO I-III), and the animated features *Akira* and *Metropolis* will illuminate how the discourse on class has changed during the last three decades. One should not be bedazzled by the blazing explosions of cityscapes, misinterpreting Ōtomo's cities as endless repetitions of the same few blocks being blown up, but rather take a close look at the aesthetics of this leitmotif.

### **Dōmu – Trapped in the “Classless Society”**

As one of his first successes, *Dōmu* is a six chapter long manga first published in 1980 and 1981. After a series of mysterious deaths, the police investigate a common looking public housing complex, but cannot find any clues, while the corpses keep piling up. When a little girl called Etsuko moves in, she easily figures out the perpetrator, an old man called Chojiro, due to superhuman powers they both possess. Though still in the dark, police and other figures of authority try to keep the order intact, while Etsuko and Chojiro are fighting and destruction and chaos ensue.

Similar to the first short assessment of Ōtomo's city, *Dōmu* presents a series of panels showing a seemingly endless skyline (DO-I, 16; DO-II, 25; DO-III, 46). However in *Dōmu*, they are all centred around a type of public housing complex called danchi, which overshadows the landscape either from the front or from the back, looking massive in all cases. At one point, a character even comments on this factor by calling attention to the time it takes to get back to the front entrance (DO-II, 25). Therefore, our first glimpse at the danchi is paradigmatic. A two-page spread – a panel spreading from one page to the next, thus emphasising size and relevance – shows the top part of one building and the bottom part of another from a bird's-eye view, thereby confusing our senses and making it impossible to estimate its exact size (DO-I, 6-7). To answer why the danchi is *Dōmu*'s focal point, one has to turn to Japanese class discourse since the 1960s. Following the announcement



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infrastructure and construction started growing rapidly in the ensuing years (Kingston 2004, 122) to ensure the stability of “the expanding new middle stratum”, a phenomenon first articulated in 1957 (Hashimoto 2003, 17). To facilitate the growing number of urban population, “[c]ountless old quarters” mostly inhabited by marginalised groups “were torn down and replaced by apartment buildings” in the 1960s and 1970s (Schulz 2012, 193). This creates what Tange Kenzō called “gluey architecture”: “Rather than giving the impression of being freestanding buildings” they are “built in a uniform manner, as if to suggest that they have no value other than that of being enormous” (Tanaka 2011, 274), which is similar to the danchi portrayed here. This form of housing complex reemerged as a popular uncanny setting during the peak of J-Horror in the late 1990s to illustrate distress in familial relationships, thereby becoming a symbol of national anxiety (McRoy 2008, 76; 86-91). But in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was a symbol of progress. In this respect the question if Dōmu's complex is designed with a specific danchi in mind is irrelevant (Tanaka 2011, 284), because it represents the prototypical danchi found all over Tokyo at that time. Therefore, it is a symbol of the new “classless society”.

The idea of an all-including middle-class society based on a meritocratic system had existed since the late 1950s (Hashimoto 2003, 17). However, the discourse did not gain momentum until 1977, when Murakami Yasusuke published his short article called “The Reality of the New Middle Stratum”, claiming that 90 percent of the population identified themselves as middle-class. In spite of controversy and criticism regarding Murakami's methods and definition of class (Hashimoto 2003, 27; Lützel 2008, 77), it only became more important in the years to come. The belief in this system is based on the *gakureki-shakai-ron*, a discourse regarding the “Japanese credential society” in the 1970s and 1980s linking personal effort to academic and economic success. Based on standardised examination (later called “exam hell”), in theory every student has the same chance to be accepted into a high school and university of one's own choice, which in turn directly correlates to the company one would work at after graduation (Kariya 2010, 89). Besides the system's utter failure during the recession, indicated by the difficulty to find a (stable) job (Ambaras 2006, 197), its structure was flawed from the very beginning. While students were socially diverse at first, a complex and elaborate structure of expensive cram schools formed within a few years, thereby putting class back in school (Slater 2010, 144).

With consideration to this discourse, William W. Kelly calls attention to the common mistranslation of *churyu* as “middle class”. Its broader scope as “mainstream” gets lost in translation. It is not a term to analyse social stratification, but to bury it by transcending class (Kelly 2002, 234-236). The reason why *churyu* was widely accepted was a conservative turn in politics during the 1970s. Analysing the shift, economist Komiya Ryutarō holds a fear of the future following the oil crisis accountable for this turning point, in spite of scandals in conservative ranks. According to his article originally published in



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1979, the oil crisis had a relatively minor impact on Japan compared to the global economy. Though economic recovery was relatively fast, the crisis initially caused shock, which discredited any call for socialist economic theories, but also emphasised the need to pull together as a nation (Komiya 1989, 202-203). This is often understood as a major factor for the prominence of *nihonjinron*, the discourse regarding Japanese homogeneity. Similarly, Kotani Satoshi attributes this turn to the lack of liberal tradition in Japanese culture which forced the political left to fall back on Marxism and its radical form that were already disintegrating for some years at that time (Kotani 2004, 37). Hence, without much opposition, the discourse gained momentum despite the increasing inequality of income distribution since the early 1970s.

In this context, the *danchi* overshadowing everyone without any regards to profession or social standing says a lot (DO I, 28; DO II, 27). There are some figures representing social struggle, but they are as trapped as everyone else by the complex. It does not matter if one is a policeman, a salaryman, or a worker. Etsuko aside, anyone who enters the complex is fair game. This is especially true for those who try to embrace the hegemonic (gender) identities, but fail, as in the case of a man applying for college three years in a row, who is the talk of the town (DO I, 10). At one point, this would-be-student controlled by Chojiro first slits his own throat and then attacks Etsuko, presented on a page structured by two horizontal panels. The one on top (about one third of the page) shows only his face in the middle of the panel surrounded by his arms reaching for Etsuko, while the bottom one shows a staircase surrounded by multiple levels of corridors which head in the same direction as his arms, thereby aligning them with his body as if he were just an extension of the building (DO I, 77). He is perpetrator and victim at the same time.

Even after Chojiro is revealed to be the villain of this piece, the *danchi* continues to be prominently featured as an antagonising entity, seemingly playing with its residents (DO I, 34), trapping them (DO I, 28) and finally killing them. In the final battle Chojiro and Etsuko fight and fly all over the complex which allows Ōtomo to play with the angles we see the *danchi* from, while destroying and using it as a weapon. At first, it is only tilted a little bit one way or another (DO II, 47), then suddenly upside-down (DO II, 48-49), and finally floors switch places with walls (DO II, 50). The top horizontal panel of one page shows parts inside the complex in a point-of-view- shot, while the bottom one is a reverse shot which shows the same courtyard, but now upside-down, making the complex appear to be everywhere. Therefore, the *danchi* is a world of its own one cannot escape from.

The first time the *danchi* is introduced, we see a salaryman jumping from the building. This harks back to a media discourse that began about a decade earlier, when the *danchi* became a popular



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site to commit suicide at (Tanaka 2011, 280). It was therefore not just a symbol of the success of churyu ishiki (mainstream consciousness), but also of its demise due to the pressure it put on people. So, while criticising the Japanese system (represented by the danchi), Dōmu perpetuates the idea of “classless society” by making everyone its victim regardless of class. At the end, Etsuko can defeat Chojiro, but the danchi is still standing. Everyday life keeps going on as if nothing has happened.

### Akira – Bōsōzoku's Own Playground

Based on Ōtomo's manga by the same name serialised from 1982 to 1990, the animated feature Akira is about a teenage bike gang led by Kaneda in Neo Tokyo in 2019. When one member, Tetsuo, gets injured driving into a boy with psychic powers, he is abducted by government troops and starts developing psychic powers of his own. Once he hears about a greater entity called Akira, Tetsuo begins searching for him to find answers and more power, while government troops, resistance fighters, and Kaneda try to stop him.

After the initial explosion in 1988 described above, the movie cuts immediately to an aerial shot of Tokyo Bay (AK 0:00). But instead of the typical deep blue, the bay is utterly obstructed by newly built urban landscape. As architectural historian Don Choi pointed out, this image is eerily similar to Tange Kenzō's 1960-plan to expand the city into its bay (Choi 2008, 741). This links the movie directly to the 1960s, its discourses on churyu ishiki and on doken kokka (“construction state”). These issues became particularly relevant during the years of the economic bubble in the late 1980s, because the booming real estate speculation made it nearly impossible to buy land in Tokyo (Lützel 2008, 93). At this time the city became too expensive for (upper) middle class, thereby leaving upper and lower class to inhabit Tokyo, polarising its social composition even further (Lützel 2008, 56). But in and of itself, this futuristic vision of Tokyo Bay is just an expansion of the idea presented by the very first image of Tokyo in Akira: a never-ending metropolis, now radicalised in another dimension. In the vein of the “gluey architecture” discussed above, megastructures illuminated by neon lights shape the skyline. Each time the perspective of the city changes due to detailed multilayered cel animation, buildings reveal only more buildings. Skyscrapers literally exist on top of each other (AK 0:03; 0:42). Every camera tilt upwards is cut off before the top of any skyscraper can be glimpsed (AK 0:06; 1:55). And even during the day, the sky looks like a grey mass obscuring any difference between itself and the city (AK 0:30).

Commenting on these “soaring skyscrapers” of Neo Tokyo, Lamarre calls attention to the class struggle symbolised by the “immovable vertical hierarchies” both in a social and a structural sense of the word (Lamarre 2008, 137). In some respects, his assessment is correct. From the start, we are introduced to class struggle on television and in the streets harking back to classical 1960s



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iconography of protest, by incorporating the chanting of socialist slogans, single coloured helmets, and swaying flags (AK 0:01; 0:07; 1:18-20). In this and similar instances, such as failing class discussion by the government, the vertical nature of buildings and rooms is emphasised by panning over the background plates from top to bottom and vice versa (AK 0:07; 0:37; 0:42). But those are the most deluding forms of power existing in the movie. The government is paralysed due to infighting, and reminiscent of the loss of importance of the radical left mentioned above, the demonstrations have no impact on the story whatsoever.

One reason for this is the lack of a clear city centre to construct a hierarchy from. Except for one building during a very short period of time – the institute holding psychic children captured (AK 0:45, 0:50) –, there is no complex being staged as city centre. While the incorporation of Tange's plan can (and should) be understood as a well-crafted nod to the 1960s, his core concept also focused on urban decentralisation by means of restructuring Tokyo along a line of sub-centres to ensure “spontaneous mobility of contemporary society” (Choi 2008, 741). There are two aspects in this design worth pointing out regarding Akira. Firstly, poor and rich live side by side. The first few background plates depict damaged buildings, dark alleys, and destroyed cars in the foreground, while showing us glimpses of blue and green lit parts of the city in the background (AK 0:01-02). Interestingly, those city lights are chaotic and come from every direction. This negates an explicit urban structure along class lines. There cannot be any clear hierarchical architectural structure representing a social one, because both real Tokyo and fictional Neo Tokyo are socially polarised within district borders (Lützel 2008, 193).

alleys, and destroyed cars in the foreground, while showing us glimpses of blue and green lit parts of the city in the background (AK 0:01-02). Interestingly, those city lights are chaotic and come from every direction. This negates an explicit urban structure along class lines. There cannot be any clear hierarchical architectural structure representing a social one, because both real Tokyo and fictional Neo Tokyo are socially polarised within district borders (Lützel 2008, 193). Secondly, movement decentralises cityscape. Starting in the late 1970s, juvenile delinquency became more problematic year by year, at least in the public eye. Although “juveniles have comprised at least 40 percent, and sometimes more than 50 percent, of those arrested for penal code offenses [...] [t]he majority of these cases have involved shoplifting or other types of petty larceny” (Ambaras 2006, 195). The result is the beginning of what would later be called “youthphobia” – a term coined by Kotani regarding the overwhelmingly hysteric public reaction to youth subcultures considered to be hedonistic, egoistic, and non-compliant (Kotani 2008, 32-33). The years before, but especially following the burst bubble have seen a vast variety of youth subcultures becoming scapegoats for everything going wrong in Japan. The reason to focus on one group is its visibility at a time (Leheny 2006, 82) – and in the



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1980s, there was no one louder and flashier than bōsōzoku (speed tribe) (Sato 1991, 204).

Bōsōzoku groups are motorised gangs of teenagers and young adults trying to disrupt traffic, similar to their fictional contra-parts. Akira's protagonists are clearly part of this phenomenon or at least inspired by it as many theorists have argued by referring to their gender behaviour, attire (Standish 1998, 60; 67), and the film's overall setting (Lamarre 2008, 135). However, for this analysis, it is more important to know if there is a connection to class. Opposing Satō Ikuya's sentiment that bōsōzoku has no affiliation to class issues (Sato 1991, 137-138), Standish describes the subculture as an obviously class driven phenomenon. On the one hand, the bikers return to the "blue-collar" background they came from, once they re-enter the workforce. On the other hand, bōsōzoku's attitude towards work ethics is antithetic to the dominant meritocratic discourse, thereby causing media moral panic (Standish 1999, 58). In the movie, besides lacking any familial background (in and of itself a sign for social issues in Japanese society), the protagonists are mostly coded as working class by the school they are attending. This industrial school lacks any kind of authority, nobody seems to care if students learn anything, and it is only ruled by brutal force, seen in the use of violence as a legitimate form of punishment (AK 0:22-24). Therefore, it partially fits the description of bottom ranked high schools given by David Slater. They function as "an important link in the channeling of young people from mostly working-class backgrounds into working-class jobs, and in teaching the skills, aspirations and strategies that allow working-class youth to get by in the city" (Slater 2010, 139). This signifies an "intellectually confusing and often emotionally draining" transition from in-group class heterogeneity to class homogeneity (Slater 2010, 145), thereby emphasising the existence and importance of class in a student's life.

So, Akira's protagonists are victims of class structure, but instead of chanting socialist slogans, they are riding their bikes. Susan Napier refers to their motorcycles as "agent[s] of change, a symbol of subversive flexibility against a monolithic and indifferent state." (Napier 2005, 41) The "immovable vertical hierarchies" Lamarre talks about are reconfigured in "the sensual experience of movement" on bike and screen (Standish 1999, 65). The first driving scene emphasises this constant energetic movement on a visual and acoustic level (AK 0:03- 12). The virtual camera cannot keep up while the gang dashes away, highlighted by blurring lines of the background plates. Even though the bikes are long gone, traces of their red taillights linger on screen, as if marking the cityscape.

The perspectives of the buildings are constantly changing, thereby creating their own order of the urban landscape in a form of "(o)matsuri (festival) or kaanibal (carnival)", terms chosen by bikers "to describe the atmosphere of boso driving" (Sato 1991, 19). Though agreeing with Napier's great analysis of Akira describing the monstrous form of the marginalised Tetsuo "as a reflection of Japan's own deep-seated ambivalence at this time" (Napier 2005, 40), most of the film's urban imagery



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speaks a different language, because it is seen (or experienced) as if riding a motorcycle. As socially marginalised others, they reclaim the city in bōsō fashion.

At the end, even the second destruction of the city is linked thematically and literally to bōsō driving. Entering the white space of the explosion, we are met by flying buildings, other parts of the city, and constantly moving white lines which focus our attention on the middle of the screen and remind us of the movement on the bike. Finally, the movie cuts to a dream sequence of Kaneda and Tetsuo riding their bikes in a similar fashion as before (AK 1:47-48). After the mayhem, parts of the city are still standing, maybe a little bit damaged, demolished, and rearranged while the surviving protagonists ride their bikes right into its remains (AK 1:55). As in the beginning, the destruction does neither mean the end of the city nor the discovery of the furusato – a popular discourse which describes a longing for a long lost home sometimes linked to ruins (Ivy 1995, 103) –, but instead means Tokyo's re-formation, thereby fulfilling Ashihara's idea of "amoebic adaptability" (Ashihara 1989, 43). As one of many examples of Japanese "anti- Utopian" texts, Napier considers "the absence of any real 'home' [...] a paramount feature" of Akira (Napier 1996, 183). Kaneda and his gang are neither searching for a "lost" nor a "real" home. Instead they use the city as their "own playground", as bōsō driving is intended to do (Sato 1991, 21).

### Metropolis – Class Struggle Revisited

Based on the 1949 manga of the same name by Tezuka Osamu (itself an adaptation of Fritz Lang's movie), director Rintaro and script writer Ōtomo were influenced by many different sources and combined them in their 2001 adaptation of Metropolis, thus creating an interesting mixture of styles regarding text, tone (Napier 2005, xv), and architecture (Bird 2008, 140). While visiting Metropolis, Kenichi finds himself in a socially polarised and vertically structured city. The inhabitants of the top floors have too much, the ones of the lower levels too little, the serving robots nothing at all. Meanwhile, the tycoon Red Duke oversees everything from his gigantic tower in city centre called Ziggurat. While resistance fighters are preparing for a revolution, Red Duke commissions the most complex robot ever made, an exact replica of his late daughter. But before he can collect her, she gets lost during an accident at the lab, leaving her at the side of Kenichi to learn about her existence and the city itself. At the end, the (human) revolutionaries will fail, whereas a robot called Tima will be the reason for the self-destruction of the Ziggurat by means of her self-sacrifice.

The heavily referencing nature of the movie allows the filmmakers to link the text directly to the interwar period, thereby returning to class struggle thought in a more traditional (Marxist) manner. Within the first few minutes the viewer sees not just a nationalistic address seemingly shot on grainy



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black-and-white film and with a speech pattern reminding one of World War II propaganda (Bird 2008, 138), but also hears jazz music and talks about social issues and robot abuse, until finally, fascist troops emerge to fight everyone who oversteps their literal boundaries, when a robot who features red printing on his head and heels saying “Zone 1” is destroyed (MET 0:02-07). Later on, we will see masses of orderly marching workers (coloured red by light) in formations resembling Lang’s direction (MET 0:42) and a variety of robots, all displaying numbers on their bodies to illustrate where they belong to. Metropolis is a place where everyone has their place.

In sharp contrast to the original manga by Tezuka which focussed on a horizontally structured city with confusing order to describe postwar Japan (Bird 2008, 134), the cinematic Metropolis is vertically structured and subdivided in different levels and zones in a similar way to Lang’s movie. Everywhere one looks there are numbers and figures painted on walls and floors to describe the part one is in. To emphasise this structure, the film is vertically organised both on a narrative and an aesthetical level. Most of the time, the characters are falling down shafts, riding elevators, and climbing up ladders, but when they look up they always see the Ziggurat right in city centre. Even though Red Duke’s tower was positioned outside of Metropolis in the manga, it was moved to be the focal point of city and film (Bird 2008, 139). From the very first moment, the virtual camera moves constantly from and towards the Ziggurat (MET 0:02; 0:11; 0:24) and frames it both in the centre of the screen (MET 0:36, 0:57) and in extreme low and high angle shots (MET 0:49; 1:31), which illuminate its overshadowing nature and those “immovable vertical hierarchies” Lamarre pointed out with regards to Akira.

At first glance, this structure refers to the idea of recentralising Tokyo, that became a major issue at that time, as one can see in the Tokyo-Plan 2000 (Tōkyō kōsō 2000) (Lützel 2008, 143). Furthermore, it is a significant symbol for class regaining importance in the first Lost Decade. Though mentalities do not change that fast and there is still a dominant tendency to rather criticise groups marginalised by economic structures than to understand them, judging from books on bestseller lists, popular interest in class has been quickly resurfacing since the early 1990s, thereby following developments in academic fields (Hashimoto 2003, 36). Because (working class) belief in the meritocratic system was failing (Hashimoto 2003, 200), after the first Lost Decade, the projected self-image of an egalitarian society could not be sustained anymore and was exchanged for “[t]he label kukusa shakai (disparate society or socially divided society)” which is widely accepted now (Sugimoto 2009, 2). Commenting on this trend, Miyadai Shinji refers to a parallel shift in popular culture by adapting a concept by Uno Tsunehiro called “Battle Royale Type”. In these texts, protagonists find themselves in some form of ruthless world ruled by an iron fist that easily can be understood as the Japanese Iron Triangle of industry, state, and bureaucracy (Kingston 2004, 3). The only way to survive



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mentality and to destroy one's opponents (i. e. one's peers). According to Miyadai, this type of text could be misunderstood as neoconservative fantasies if it were not for "one difference: the keyword here is justice." For him, this change of pace in popular culture is first and foremost linked to the "homeostasis of the self", but one can easily attribute this shift to greater social issues and change in the mentality regarding class (Miyadai 2011, 246-248).

There is an underlying social rage present in *Metropolis*. Workers protest, quote Marxist ideas of revolution, and even use recurring, iconographic imagery of Che Guevara (MET 0:47- 49). This leads up to a revolution that fails miserably at the halfway point of the movie (MET 0:53-58). In the context of the story, the defeat is caused by compromise and treason, but metatextually one can trace it back to the design of the Ziggurat. Comparing the different versions, Lawrence Bird calls attention to the similarities between the Ziggurat and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building constructed by Tange Kenzō in regards to design, structure, and function as a centre of power. As a result, the building serves as a placeholder for the right wing politics of the governor at that time, the infamous Ishihara Shintarō (Bird 2008, 143). His successful campaign focused on ruling with a firm hand, by positioning himself against indecisiveness in politics under slogans such as "The Tōkyō that can say 'no'", which is reminiscent of his bestselling book "The Japan That Can Say 'No' ('No to ieru Nihon)" (Hein and Pelletier 2006, 172). Keeping this promise, he became a prominent figure of reactionary politics often criticised for sexist, racist, and revisionist remarks. In the same vein, the division of *Metropolis'* society is not just based on class hierarchies, but on "speciesist" aspects as well: Just like the upper class, workers mistreat robots on several occasions and even start their revolution by killing one. Comments on the dangerous nature of work done by robots (MET 0:04; 0:38) remind us of the 3-Ks-set suggested by Kenneth Henshall to describe the poor working and living conditions of most immigrants coming from Southeast Asia: "kitsui (tough), kitanai (dirty), and kiken (dangerous)" (Henshall 1999, 84). At the end, it is the destruction of the Ziggurat caused by a robot (and not the human revolutionaries) that breaks down the borders of the levels and social hierarchies, symbolised by an abundance of different signs contradicting one another. Now marginalised others (Kenichi and his robotic friends formerly belonging to different zones) can come together to walk side by side into the opened up city (MET 1:36-39). This is the only form of justice there can be, thereby discrediting any class discussion that ignores other marginalising factors.

### Conclusion

At the very beginning of this paper, the question of the quintessential city portrayed by Ōtomo Katsuhiro was posed. It should be acknowledged that this was the wrong question to ask or should at least have been phrased differently. There are essentials of his cities, such as the endless cityspace,



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its fascinating heterogeneity, and the reduction of Japan into Tokyo; and there are the changing parts which allow a deep look at the shifting mentality regarding class. In the early 1980s (*Dōmu*), flying around the danchi is a way to illustrate its encapsulating nature and signifies the discourse regarding class homogeneity. During the years of the bubble economy (*Akira*), the ecstatic *bōsō* driving of the youth is thematically and aesthetically interconnected with the final destruction of Neo Tokyo, which is an act of reclaiming what belongs to a socially marginalised group by reforming the city. At the turn of the century (*Metropolis*), there is the need to find an object of social rage and to destroy it, thereby pulling down class structures. Though each text criticises Japan's social system, their differences indicate changes in class discourse. If one overcomes the stage of just emphasising the repeating nature of Ōtomo's recurring motif of exploding, endless cities, one will find a chronology of how social class was thought of in the last three decades hidden in plain sight, in the way the cityscape is depicted and destroyed.



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