



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

**Lance Hanson, University of Wolverhampton.**

### **ABSTRACT**

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.



## 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 traffic-packed 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 cultural-geographic 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). 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).

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). 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-space-whatever* 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).

## 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 mise-en-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).

### **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 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 close-up 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 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 Maćków 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 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.

## 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 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 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.

Lance Hanson is researching for a PhD on haptic visibility and liminal space within contemporary British cinema at the University of Wolverhampton where he is also a visiting lecturer in Film. Currently, he is a teacher of English and Film at a secondary school in Stourbridge as well as an assistant principle examiner for GCSE English Language. Email: [l.hanson@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:l.hanson@blueyonder.co.uk).



## REFERENCES

*Fishtank* Press Book. In: Artificial Eye [database online]. London, 2009. <http://www.artificial-eye.com/database/cinema/fishtank/pdf/pressbook.pdf>.

Accessed November 17, 2014.

Andrews, H., and Roberts, L. (eds.). 2012. *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces In-Between*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Arnold, A. 2009. *Fishtank*. UK: Content Film.

Augé, M. 1995. *Non-Spaces: Introduction to an Anthropology of Super-Modernity*. London: Verso.

Ballinger, A. 2013. "Cinematography: Aspect Ratio Part 1 – Academy Ratio Back in the Frame." <http://www.moviemail.com/blog/cinematography/1646-Aspect-Ratio-Part-1-Academy-Ratio-Back-in-the-Frame/>. Accessed November 20, 2014.

Bright, D. 1985. "Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography." <http://www.deborahbright.net/PDF/Bright-Marlboro.pdf>. Accessed November 21, 2014.

Burke, E. 1833. "A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful". Baltimore: W. and J. Neal.

Chell, E. 2013. *The Soft Estate*. Liverpool: The Bluecoat.

Deleuze, G. 1992. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. London: The Athlone Press.

DeSilvey, C. 2014. "Art, Entropy and Ecology on Orford Ness." Paper presented at *Spacex: Art of the Edgelands Symposium*, Exeter University April 26.



Edensor, T. 2005. "The Ghosts of Industrial Ruins: Ordering and Disordering Memory in Excessive Space." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23 (6): 829-49.

Edensor, T., B. Evans, Holloway, J., Millington, S., and Binnie, J. 2012. "Playing in Industrial Ruins: Interrogating Teleological Understandings of Play in Spaces of Material Alterity and Low Surveillance." In *Urban Wildscapes*. Jorgensen, A., Keenan, R. (eds.), 65-79. Abingdon: Routledge.

Farley, P., and Roberts, M. S. 2012. *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wildernesses*. London: Vintage.

Fielder, A. 2001. "Poaching on Public Space: Urban Autonomous Zones in French *Banlieue* Films." In *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Studies in a Global Context*. Shiel, M. and Fitzmaurice, T. (eds.), 270-281. Oxford: Blackwell.

Fowler, C., and Helfield, G. (Eds.) 2006. *Representing the Rural: Space, Place and Identity in Films About the Land*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Gallent, N., Andersson, J., and Bianconi, M. 2006. *Planning on the Edge: The Context for Planning at the Rural Urban Fringe*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Gandy, M. 2013. "Marginalia: Aesthetics, Ecology, and Urban Wastelands." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103 (6): 1301-16.

Gritten, D. 2009. "Andrea Arnold: 'I Wish Cinema Could Be Braver.'" <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/starsandstories/6093303/Andrea-Arnold-I-wish-cinema-could-be-braver.html>. Accessed October 30, 2014.

Higson, A. (1984) "Space, Place, Spectacle: Landscape and Townscape in the 'Kitchen Sink' Film." *Screen* 25 (4-5): 2-21.



Higson, A. 2006. "A Green and Pleasant Land: Rural Spaces and British Cinema."  
In *Representing the Rural: Space, Place and Identity in Films about the Land*. Fowler, C., and  
Helfield, G. (eds.), 240-255. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Jorgensen, A., and Keenan, R. (Eds.) 2012. *Urban Wildscapes*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Lee, J. 2014. "In-Between in the Terrain Vague." Paper presented at *Spacex: Art of the  
Edgelands* Symposium, Exeter University, April 26.

Lefebvre, M. 2006. "Between Setting and Landscape in Cinema." In *Landscape and Film*.  
Lefebvre, M. (ed.), 19-59. Abingdon: Routledge.

Lefebvre, M. 2006. *Landscape and Film*. London: Routledge.

Maitland, S. 2012. "Whispering Giants." *Aeon*, September 24.

<http://aeon.co/magazine/technology/sara-maitland-wind-farms-beauty-and-justice/>

Mason, N. 2001. "Naked: Social Realism and the Urban Wasteland." In *Cinema and the City:  
Film and Urban Studies in a Global Context*. Fitzmaurice, T., and Shiel, M. (eds.), 244-253.  
Oxford: Blackwell.

Morton, T. 2012. *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Mullen, L. 2009. Estate of Mind. *Sight and Sound* 19 (10): 16-9.

Naficy, H. 2001. *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. Princeton: Princeton  
University Press.

Oldfield Ford, Laura. 2014. "Savage Messiah: Zones of  
Sacrifice". <http://lauraoldfieldford.blogspot.co.uk/>. Accessed May 25, 2014.

Olsen, B., Pétursdóttir, O., and Pétursdóttir, Þ. 2014. *Ruin Memories: Materialities, Aesthetics  
and the Archaeology of the Recent Past*. Abingdon. Routledge.



Pidduck, J. 2004. *Contemporary Costume Film*. London: BFI.

Roddick, N. 2009. "Do We Know Where We're Going?" *Sight and Sound* 19 (10): 19-20.

Shoard, M. 2002. "Edgelands." *Remaking the Landscape: The Changing Face of Britain*: 117-46. <http://www.marionshoard.co.uk/Documents/Articles/Environment/Edgelands-Remaking-the-Landscape.pdf>. Accessed November 24, 2014.

Sibley, D. 1995. *Geographies of Exclusion*. London: Routledge.

Smith, D. S. 2010. "Andrea Arnold, Fishtank." <http://filmmakermagazine.com/1403-andrea-arnold-fish-tank/#.VGjA04eIZUR>. Accessed November 2, 2014.

Thomassen, B. 2012. "Revisiting Liminality: The Danger of Empty Spaces." In *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces In-Between*. Andrews, H., and Roberts, L. (eds.), 21-35. Abingdon: Routledge.