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title: Viewing Ecology: (Re)framing Nature and (Re)mediating Life

starting questions: How to narrate stories that are not static or whole. How can the fragments, health, and autonomy of ecology be represented in ecocinema? How are the ecologies of those who are not Hollywood-humans respected in ecocinema? How is the physical landscape viewed in these transfigured narratives? How is the becoming-human of animals represented?

The cultural meanings of nature have prompted new ways to think about the environment, landscape, and its inhabitants. Ecology takes the often-static notions of nature and re-pictures it as processes of persistence, resistance, health, complexity, and change. Important to the films and criticism for this seminar, there is not just being or a becoming, but organisms and sites that engage in a series of *becomings* over time and in various ways to forge new relationships, evolutions, and endings. Culturally, for the privileged class, ecology challenges us to let go of our controls and the ideas we can control. Additionally, ecology links pollution not just to the factories but larger economic structures that make this production viable. Pollution could be the greatest teacher of ecology as it links to global, national, and natural systems to discuss the local and the specific. Pollution becomes traceable and map-able, making the continuation of racist planning practices visible and palpable for both bodies and the environment. For my own interests, I have been curious how the processes and theories of ecology, pollution, and respect for that which is not "me"[[1]](#footnote-1) has been and could be represented.

My background is in landscape architecture, and I focus on remediation ecology, animal studies, and environmental justice as much as possible in my work/design. Remediation (versus restoration) allows for a potential future that will never be static, requires patience and respect. Partly, this is because there can never be an over-arching view or singular master plan; the process is in phases, fragmented over time, and location specific. The future of a site us designed with the accumulation of histories to create a coherent and cumulative present. By not enforcing a single, memorable image, multiple realities emerge that shift and refract like a cubist artwork.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is radical for the design field, and can become a framework for ecocinema to engender political shifts in perception and values.

Remediation and shifts ultimately require some things not often mentioned: respect, patience, and something akin to love. Jennifer Ladino's article discusses this type of love: humbling, respect, admiration, and a desire to experience another (their) world.[[3]](#footnote-3) This situates nicely with Roland Barthes' *languor*: the *subtle state of amorous desire, experienced in its dearth, outside of any will-to-possess*. It is patient, waiting, it superimposes two desires (that for the present thing and the absent being) *putting absence within presence*.[[4]](#footnote-4) The presence of absence weaves back into Ladino's article: *animal reticence* is that silence that is the *tremendous presence of all consciousness that is beyond ours*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Like ecology, this *languor* respects the individual (a bear's behavior not bears in general) and respects their autonomy, which ultimately means we fail at being god.[[6]](#footnote-6) This patience, waiting, silence, lack of totalizing control, being outside one's knowledge, *animal reticence*, fragmentation of narrative, and accumulation of histories breaks the idea of solids, units, and logical progressions--this is the bud of becoming-animal mentioned through many articles that look critically at Herzog / Treadwell's *Grizzly Man*. Astrida Neimanis' article takes this *becoming* to the smallest locale possible: the molecular. The bodies of the becoming-animal are microscopic, bacteria, microbial, cellular, a pack, weather, skies, oceans, fog, seasons, or a swarm.[[7]](#footnote-7) The dynamic boundaries of autonomous individuals merge to create new futures: like *lung-becoming-smog*.[[8]](#footnote-8) There are still distinctions, but distinct separation is harder to believe. The ecology of becomings allows for *inter-species relationships and trans-species affect[[9]](#footnote-9)* as well as inter-spatial relationships and trans-environmental affects.

The above paragraph helps define becoming-animal and attempts to re-define wild: autonomy of individuals, lack of total control, and so forth. *Grizzly Man* offers a way to represent this wildness, but not of the bears but of humans. Jeond and Andrew's essay help to make visible some of the disrupted narrative structures of the film. There is a lack of separation between the one looking and the one being looked at, this happens when Treadwell is seen in the same video frames as the bears, as well as when Treadwell has a double role as the one filming and then the one being edited. Additionally, Herzog disrupts the narrative in his own way by silently editing the footage and making his presence overtly known in scenes like listening to the tapes. Additionally, it is not itself a coherent narrative and there is conflict between the original footage and Herzog's editing; Herzog was unable *to suture the grizzly man’s torrent of words into his own slick narration*.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the divergent and unsutured views of nature, place, humanity and animality the narrative fissures open, allows for gaps, fragmentations, unanswerable questions. The human-story becomes wild and sets a framework to view becoming-pollution.

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Another linkage to an ecological lens is the ecotone mentioned by Jeond and Andrew. An ecotone, not necessarily touched upon by the authors, is formed within the meeting of two biomes. This mediating space is not about confluence or convergence; it has a very specific use but no set boundaries. Being between two distinct biomes it is not just their overlap but an evolution, which makes it tense but also rich with possibility. While the local, global, national, systems, scales, etc. aid in the creation of an ecotone they are not its definition. The site is more than a sum of its parts and it is physical: dirt, muck, flesh. It is a place that is fragile, a site to find sustenance (ecologically speaking) but not a place to inhabit for very long. The ecotone works very well in the context of both films, *Sleep Dealer* and *Maquilapolis*. The border town, Tijuana, can be described through its systems and processes, and lived in its dynamically evolved location. It is formed by the economic infrastructure of the north and the political structures of the south. In this way the city itself is an ecotone, Memo’s physical body, and even the urban milpa.[[11]](#footnote-11) I was not able to get a copy of *Maquilapolis* and am basing my understanding from the article and online summaries, and cannot say if the women were an iteration of ecotone.

Pollution as a part of an ecotone is applicable as ecotones are made by the systems that move through them and formed by the biotic entities around them. Stated in a few paragraphs above, becoming pollution / becoming toxics / becoming factory is another narrative structure and how it could be representation can benefit from *Grizzly Man*. Pollution, as a force to incite change or destruction, is a lived reality that has shaped becomings of individuals (Neimanis’ molecular *lung-becoming-smog*) as well as labor and daily life. In both films, bodies engage in a series of becomings that have negative impacts on their health even though they are what will sustain their family (a risk narrative). Of equal importance, these becomings shape how the characters/people will ultimately engage their realities of oppression and deadly labor. The work of pollution and of the futures it creates is an ecology at polluted sites; abandoned mining pits that fill with water support bacteria that has not been found anywhere else on earth because those deadly metals and minerals are found above ground only in that singular location. Becoming, even when it is toxic, re-enforces the becoming/ecology of porous, swarm, weather of bodies and landscapes.

How bodies and communities become pollution is mediated by technology. There are the technologies that engender these becomings (pollution, a maquila), and the technologies that represent the realities to shift perceptions (language, films, books). Hollywood narratives traditionally represent pollution as an abjected thing white culture should keep outside and stop: *THEM!* and *Erin Brockovich*. Or, it is an anxiety or uncanniness all around, like Todd Haynes’ *Safe*. Throughout these U.S. films, the main characters’ bodies are not presented as toxic/pollution/factory and the goal is to return to something healthy and wholesome (apocalyptic/pastoral).

In the two films based/located in Tijuana anxiety over mutation, transformation, and shifts in consciousness or flesh must be addressed as real/molecular. This taking-in, folding, inserting, fungibility, interdigitation,. etc. is not necessarily viewed as natural or desirable by the people in the films and the larger world; this upset of perspective is what scribes Tijuana’s isolation and connections. These maquiladoras and sleep dealers are invisible to the larger economic and global market, the labor is invisible while enabling the privileged lives of developed countries (they want the labor but not the bodies). The description of the women miming their daily labors and the ways this echoes the movements in *Sleep Dealers* asks for some way to describe it: a ghostly labor. It handholds nicely with the deadly reality of the labor and the silent ways these death-dealers produce.

Memo’s nervousness when getting his nodes is a clear example of understanding the risks of becoming-factory but engaging with that potentially toxic/deadly reality to create a new life. This happens again when he first “plugs in” or even when he plugs-in after one of his crewmembers short-circuits and collapses, meaning a real pane of glass as fallen over fifty stories to the ground somewhere in San Diego. The meat-and-machine of Memo’s nodes and his connections to a real droid in the U.S., I argue, does not prompt a new identification. Memo, in another pane of glass, sees his droid’s reflection. While it was argued Memo collapses into his role as droid etc., he never gives the viewer a hint he identifies with the machine. In a parallel storyline, Luz does not fully identify with her storyteller-machine because she is not certain of how it works and cannot always perform the way the machine wants. In both cases, each character expands beyond their corporeal selves as they co-evolve with machinery but there is not a collapse of identity; they are not droids. This conclusion re-enforces becoming-machine and ideas of ecology because there is no split, yes/no, human/machine.The body is destabilized, opened, smog, a swarm that can *incorporate* new functions without losing the stability of being an organism.

This point is important when thinking through the performance by the maquiladora workers, which highlights the actions of their bodies that move machines and generate products. As the global north wants the labor and not the bodies, it is important for these women to show the incredible ensemble and chorus of movements of the labor of their bodies without anything tangible being produced. This patient and ghostly protest does not decry technology nor condemn, but does, importantly, upset the hero narrative and the pastoral. These women did not take on the larger economic structure to become the heroines that saved the village, the nation, or the planet. Nor do the women show any desires for the pastoral or other traditional tokens of success: ownership of land, mastery of the land, no strong male leads, etc. In *Sleep Dealers*, Memo is the male hero who saves his village thereby making him acceptable as his father's son, the protest was destructive using the tools of those who dominated him, and he returns to the land (pastoral) to farm. Luz, the girlfriend is present only to help Memo along and bends gender binaries only in ways that ultimately help him accomplish his goals. Additionally, the ways the landscape outside the city was represented as a void are problematic (Memo lives as a lone wolf on the outskirts of the city). Finally, both Memo and the pilot disengage from their previous becomings, returning to pre-modern (pastoral) ways of subsisting (the girl is absent at this time).

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*Grizzly Man* offers the next stage of becomings, the failure of becoming human. Treadwell is not the case study, but Bear 141, the creature that brought Treadwell and his female friend’s life to its end. The other grizzlies, because Treadwell opened himself to their training, were themselves trained to live with Treadwell. Bear 141 was not present for this, and because of it, subjected to the harshest of human laws: an eye for an eye. Judged by these human laws Bear 141 became human first molecularly, through the eating of Treadwell, and again when he, the bear, was shot-dead. Animals can also become factories and become pollution, for example, refuges sited on sacrifice zones or polluted dumps. Yet, in this grizzly refuge, the bears must become human to survive just as though they were in a zoo or a factory. For the bears to live outside these invisible walls can mean death (especially if they go into residential or interstate areas) and to not live by the human laws within the walls can mean death. There is a harsh reality for the body that cannot become; one who cannot evolve with the conditions set before them. Memo’s crewmember who's short-circuited did not impact as much as the death of this bear, in part because, Treadwell made clear he had no ill will toward any bear that took his life. He, on film viewable after death, pardoned the acts of this bear and yet Treadwell’s testimony, couched in his becoming-animal, did not hold in a static human-privileged world.

1. I've had the sneaky suspicion that discussions of the *other* encompasses everything that is not "me," as I can't recall a text that makes clear who isn't the other. Maybe this essay can destabilize even this, *becoming* erases the idea of a solidly founded "me" or "I." [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The words and aesthetics of these goals can be found in the works of Peter Eisenman, Alan Berger, and Robert Smithson. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jennifer Ladino, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Roland Barthes, 155-156 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jennifer Ladino, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jennifer Ladino, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Astrida Neimanis, 289, 293 - 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Astrida Neimanis, 289. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Who said this? [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jeong & Andrew, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The landscape outside of Tijuana is not necessarily considered a site, Memo lives on the outskirts of town—on the edge of nowhere. This implies the landscape that taught Memo’s father about the milpa is a negative/void. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)