

Framing the Non-human: *American Honey* as Eco-Road Movie

Katarzyna Paszkiewicz

Abstract:

This article approaches Andrea Arnold's *American Honey* (2016) as a contemporary manifestation of an eco-road movie. Although the film's expansive interest in the 'natural' environment and its non-human inhabitants aligns it with Arnold's earlier work, *American Honey* is unique for its complex engagement with the cinematic traditions of Hollywood genre films. I argue that Arnold's eco-aesthetics work to conflate the distinctions between human and non-human worlds, offering a de-romanticisation of the American picturesque vistas and exploring the intersections of human speciesism, masculinity and whiteness, as well as narratives of conquest and ownership. I focus on the ways in which the film both participates in and exceeds Arnold's previous ecocinematic approach in filming British landscape, while at the same time highlighting her distinctive contribution to the tradition of the road movie. If the conventional road movie tends to offer a sense of escape from the capitalist dystopia, *American Honey* displaces such a promise. In its complex treatment of the supposedly distinct realms of nature and culture, the film does not endorse a return to the mythical wild but, rather, draws attention to the messiness of ecological, social and economic entanglements, exposing both neoliberal and anthropocentric power structures. Ultimately, it is through the intertwining of the film's ecological orientation and its engagement with the conventions of the road movie and its antecedent, the Western, that such a critique is possible.

Keywords: *American Honey*; Andrea Arnold; eco-aesthetics; ecocinema; eco-road movie; nature; non-human; the Western; *Wuthering Heights*.

Journal of British Cinema and Television 18.3 (2021): 303–328

DOI: 10.3366/jbctv.2021.0576

© Edinburgh University Press

www.euppublishing.com/jbctv

Introduction

American Honey (2016) is Andrea Arnold's first film shot in the United States and is unique to her filmography. Indeed, with the exception of this film and Arnold's post-heritage adaptation of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, all of her other works feature the typically (social) realist urban setting of the impoverished British housing estates.

Arnold's inspiration for *American Honey* came from a 2007 *New York Times* article about the experiences of groups of young itinerant magazine subscriptions sellers, known as 'mag crews', who travel from state to state while earning less than the minimum wage. When conducting research for the film, Arnold took several road trips across the United States. Describing the film, she stated: 'It's a mixture of what I saw and learned on those travels, but also what I grew up seeing on films—the mythical America of westerns and road movies' (O'Hagan 2016). *American Honey*'s engagement with the tradition of the road movie,¹ with its iconic vast plains, endless highways, motels and mega-malls, radically departs from the trajectory of her previous films. Yet it does retain some visual and thematic elements familiar from her earlier work, such as a focus on young, poverty-stricken women living in destitute environments;² realist techniques, including hand-held camerawork, location shooting, diegetic sound, and the use of mostly unknown or non-professional performers alongside established actors;³ a sensory-driven aesthetics that combines a subjective treatment of characters with a textural approach to filming landscape; and a pronounced interest in flora and fauna.

In this article, I focus on the 'ecological impulse'⁴ in Arnold's work by examining *American Honey* as a contemporary manifestation of what Pat Brereton dubs an 'eco-road movie' (2013). In *Hollywood Utopia*, he argues that there is a 'trend of using the often contradictory therapeutic romantic power of nature to help audiences overcome the distresses of modern living' (2005: 17). In his study of Sean Penn's *Into the Wild* (2007), which Brereton reads as a countercultural eco-road movie, he addresses such therapeutic benefits of nature by focusing on the film's unique framing of landscape. While *Into the Wild* traces the 'eco-spiritual journey' (2013: 213) of its adventure-seeking male protagonist, who abandons a life of middle-class comfort to seek refuge in 'raw, unmediated nature' (ibid.: 227), Arnold's post-recession *American Honey* takes a markedly different approach. The protagonist of the film is an impoverished eighteen-year-old named Star (played by then non-professional actor Sasha Lane) who joins a group of similarly disenfranchised youths led by the pitiless Krystal (Riley Keough)

who are driving across the American Midwest in a minibus, selling magazine subscriptions door to door in suburban neighbourhoods. In contrast to the trope of the white male wanderer (Cohan and Hark 1997; Breerton 2013),⁵ she sets out on her journey not in order to abandon the middle-class milieu but to flee the hardships of her dreadful upbringing, a toxic family situation and, crucially, crushing poverty. Unlike the heroes of the paradigmatic road movie *Easy Rider* (1969), she is cast as an outsider because of her disadvantaged position within society and not on account of her countercultural values. Her journey is framed as a 'business opportunity', as Jake (Shia LaBeouf), the salesman and recruiter Star meets by chance, puts it in order to convince her to join the team. Through Star's road trip, Arnold skilfully captures the struggles of large sections of the population who have been abandoned by post-Fordist economies, depicting Star as yet another victim of the dehumanising logic of capitalism.

Although an exploration of socio-economic conditions, which has characterised Arnold's films to date, remains central to the narrative of *American Honey*, I suggest that the film offers a critical re-imagining of the conventions of the road movie not only through its treatment of the female protagonist as a precarious traveller but also through a sustained attentiveness to the 'natural' environment and the lives of its non-human inhabitants. Arnold's eco-aesthetics rely on what Sue Thornham, in reference to *Wuthering Heights*, theorises as 'the close and intensely tactile nature of its cinematic gaze, a gaze which ... is always with rather than at her subjects' (2016: 226). Also commenting on *Wuthering Heights*, Michael Lawrence addresses Arnold's 'post-humanist distribution of attention' that 'exceeds the perspective of its human protagonists' (2016: 178) and, as such, counters 'nostalgic and ultimately ideological idealisations of "white" and "English" natural landscapes' (ibid.: 177). *American Honey* constitutes a similar intervention, but one which engages with the uniquely American tradition of the road movie. I argue that Arnold's approach as deployed in filming British landscape, consisting of her close emphasis on textural detail and mobile camerawork that redirects the film's attention to the non-human in ways that go beyond human subjectivity, is key in her rewriting of the road movie, as it allows for rescaling its iconic wide picturesque views while offering a non-anthropocentric democratisation of representation.⁶ I further contend that the profoundly ecological orientation of *American Honey* works not only 'to divide our attention across human and non-human realms' (ibid.: 177) but also to challenge the cinematic romanticisation of the American landscape, which conventionally has served as a mere

backdrop for sagas of migration and heroism. Such romanticisation is informed by the long-established practice of representing ‘natural’ environments in both the road movie and the Western, two genres that clearly permeate Arnold’s film. Here she evokes idealised cinematic representations of the US landscape, with the expansive vistas and wandering protagonists typical of these narratives, which have historically been imbued with the intersecting power relations of human speciesism, masculinity and whiteness—issues that are palpably dramatised in *American Honey*. Ultimately, Arnold’s film shows that environmental critique cannot be divorced from a commentary on capitalism, patriarchy and racism. It is through the intertwining of Arnold’s ‘ecological eye’ (ibid.: 184)—visual strategies consistently employed in all her films—and her precise engagement with the conventions of the Western and the road movie that such a critique is possible.

My analysis of Arnold’s eco-aesthetics is framed within recent discussions on the ecological in film studies and the humanities more generally. In dialogue with ecological thinking in philosophy and related disciplines,⁷ film studies has become increasingly concerned with understanding cinema as a realm that can reshape our engagement with the non-human. Over the last decade, there has been growing interest in cinema’s ‘zoomorphic realism’ (Pick 2011) and its capacity to complicate the boundaries separating discrete species identities; in its potential for attuning viewers to the non-human perceptual worlds and ‘democratic reimagining of cross-species relationality’ (McMahon 2015b: 108); and in different forms of ecocinema theorised ‘as *the site* where humanity’s relationship to worldhood is re-learned’ (Landreville 2019: 4, emphasis in original). Such ecologically oriented approaches often reference the theories of Bazinian cinematic realism and Deleuzian time-image, which have been extended to the realm of the non-human due to their relevance for conceptualising cinema as a non-hierarchical opening to the world (Pick 2011; McMahon 2019). Meanwhile, several scholars writing on environmental concerns and Hollywood genres challenge an overemphasis on cinematic techniques such as the long take and slow pacing, highlighting instead the affective potential of popular cinema for promoting ecopolitics.⁸ Nevertheless, underlying some of these theoretical perspectives is an understanding of nature as an epistemologically stable realm that can be used as a place of refuge from the hyperactive pace of modern urban life—an assumption that also underpins a number of perspectives on the more experimental ecofilms. For instance, writing on James Benning’s documentary *Sogobi*

(2001), Scott MacDonald observes that the director ‘allow[s] the apparatus of cinema a moment to stand before nature ... in awe of nature’s potential for transcendence’ (2013: 33). His earlier use of the term ecocinema to describe films that provide ‘something like a garden—an “Edenic” respite from conventional consumerism—within the machine of modern life’ (2004: 109) resonates with Brereton’s conception of eco-road movies as unique ‘escapelands’ (2013: 216) that offer a retreat from Western commodity cultures. However, within post-humanist and non-anthropocentric frameworks this understanding of ecocinema is problematic because it inadvertently perpetuates the opposition between nature as an object to be looked at and the human subject—an opposition dismantled by Donna Haraway’s concept of ‘naturecultures’ (2016: 125), which underscores their inseparability in all ecological entanglements.

It is precisely these ecological entanglements that this article seeks to keep in view. It contributes to the burgeoning scholarship on the non-human and the moving image by placing Arnold’s eco-aesthetics in dialogue with scholarship on the ecocritical potential of Hollywood road movies as theorised by Brereton. Yet, while the earlier eco-road movies seem to offer a sense of utopic freedom in their promise of escape from the capitalist dystopia, I argue that Arnold’s ecocinematic ethics of representation disrupt this promise. Her complex treatment of the apparently distinct realms of the human and non-human forgoes a return to the mythical wild; rather, it draws attention to the ecological, social and economic interrelatedness of all living and non-living things, consisting of ‘infinite connections and infinitesimal differences’ (Morton 2010: 30).

While my analysis is indebted to phenomenological and haptic approaches to Arnold’s films (see, for example, Jacobs 2016), which prove particularly fruitful when thinking through non-human sentient worlds, I complement this framework with socio-semiotic modes of interpretation, articulating Arnold’s involvement with the non-human in terms of ‘aesthetic mediation’ (Guan and O’Brien 2020: 272).⁹ My reading privileges questions of the form and specificity of the film medium rather than those of embodied perceptions. Instead of taking the non-human (whether the non-human animal or ‘nature’) out of discourse as some sort of pure, pre-cultural entity, I examine both the singularity of non-human life and its ‘semiotic instability’ (McMahon 2019: 101). In what follows, I address the ways in which Arnold’s signature aesthetic and affective attunement to the non-human is central to her reinterpretation of the American road movie by focusing on three key aspects of this rewriting: rescaling the landscape; her

complex mode of looking *at* and *with* animals; and, finally, interrelating animal abuse with other forms of human oppression.

Rescaling the road movie

The poster for *American Honey* features Star with her back toward the camera and one of her arms outstretched in the air. The low camera angle reveals a vast blue sky and billowing white clouds superimposed with stars from the US flag. The poster depicts the moment in the film when the protagonist sits on top of a stolen Cadillac with the wind blowing through her dreadlocks as she screams: 'I feel like I'm fucking America'. Arnold incorporates quintessential visual and narrative elements of the road film, such as the highway, automobiles and disenfranchised characters chasing their elusive American Dream. The expansive vistas of the American Midwest which are featured throughout the film are punctuated with billboards, gasoline stations and motel parking lots filmed at sundown, evoking the paintings of Edward Hopper. At one point, the mag crew visit the Badlands National Park in South Dakota and marvel at the grandeur of the rocky canyon landscape illuminated by the sunset. In her reading of this scene, Caroline Madden observes that 'such gorgeous visions of earthly beauty ... are part of its Western-inspired romanticisation of the wilderness' (2020: 200). For Jennifer Kirby, too, 'unprocessed nature [in *American Honey*] offers a sort of sublime escapism and purity' (2019), an observation which conforms to what Brereton identifies as the road movie's romantic tradition of finding 'solace in wild nature' (2005: 110). Indeed, Arnold's protagonist, Star, seems to revel in sublime spectacles of unmediated nature. This is best epitomised in a scene near the end of the film in which she enjoys a beautiful sunrise while a large grizzly bear approaches and comes face to face with her, an image reminiscent of a similar moment in *Into the Wild*.¹⁰ Brereton suggests that the *mises-en-scène* of Penn's film and other similar twenty-first-century road movies 'speak to a new generation's need to experience nature and landscape first-hand and, like their predecessors, get away from conventional ties of family and tradition' (2013: 213).¹¹ Brereton rightly points out that in these narratives, heroes who renounce their privileged place in society and find comfort in nature are typically white males. In *American Honey*, Arnold reverses this generic trope, a move similar to the paradigm-shifting premise of *Thelma and Louise* (1991),¹² in which two women assume the roles previously reserved for male buddies or heterosexual couples (Cohan and Hark 1997: 10–12; Tasker 1993: 134). Reflecting Arnold's (social)

realist tendencies, *American Honey* complicates the forward movement of the road movie's narrative by juxtaposing images of highways and open landscapes with scenes of poverty in recession-stricken America. The quest for the American Dream as referenced in the film's poster is fractured.¹³ Star escapes poverty and abuse, only to end up in a predicament similar to—if not worse than—the one from which she tried to escape. Her trip is circular rather than linear: after travelling through luxurious villas, sprawling mansions and upper-middle-class houses, the crew end up in an impoverished neighbourhood which reminds Star of her home.

However, Arnold's profound reinterpretation of the road movie also lies in her de-romanticisation of the landscape, as well as her treatment of the supposedly distinct realms of humans and nature—a distinction which underlies the assumptions informing Brereton's reflection on eco-road movies. The multiple and changing landscapes in *American Honey* which are depicted through a car window are often (but not always) shown in over-the-shoulder shots from Star's perspective.¹⁴ Significantly, these beautiful views are visually juxtaposed with claustrophobic close-ups and medium shots of the interior of the van packed with the mag crew members and compressed within Arnold's signature nearly square aspect ratio (1.37:1) instead of the more customary 1.85:1. Kelly Reichardt uses a comparable boxy frame in the revisionist Western *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) to accentuate the restricted visual field of female pioneers, further emphasised by the women's bonnets, which similarly restrict their peripheral vision. As Elena Gorfinkel observes in her reading of the film, 'such framing also dispenses with a romantic orientation to landscape and the representation of westward expansion as a magisterial exercise in a mastery of, and a triumphalist claim to, space' (2016: 128). In *American Honey*, however, the use of this aspect ratio seems not only to compress and narrow the image, it also, somewhat paradoxically, makes the image appear taller than common widescreen formats. As Mark Kermode noted in his review of the film in the *Observer*, 16 October 2016, the frame grants additional space above the characters so that they are not simply swamped by the horizon: 'There's a lot of sky in *American Honey*, a sense of expansiveness that marries shallow-focus close-ups of pierced and tattooed skin with breathtaking vistas that seem to sweep upward towards the stars.' Indeed, the camera often arcs skyward, as in the opening scene of the film, which features an empty sky accompanied by the sounds of birds chirping and muffled traffic. The film then cuts to an image of Star scavenging for something to eat in a supermarket dumpster full of expired food. This kind



Fig. 1. Looking up in *American Honey*. (Maven Pictures/Film4/British Film Institute).

of 'looking up' can be read as a metaphor for the protagonist and her desire to escape. Jack Cortvriend argues that 'through the sound, camerawork and on-screen action, Star is likened to a bird, digging for food and soon to flee the nest' (2017: 212). However, this scene can also be understood as an effort to retrain our perception (MacDonald 2013: 34), as theorised in writings on ecocinema. The camera often tilts upward, past the iconic billboards, to reveal images of birds flying above (Figure 1). Similarly, during Star's excursions that deviate from the mandatory sales times set by her boss Krystal, the camera explores the spaces above the wealthy homes with their manicured lawns to show the tops of trees blowing gently in the wind. While in several of the scenes the camera stays close to Star, even assuming her point of view, it often momentarily swings away to view the world from an a-subjective perspective. Such moments of 'looking up' are irreducible to a single human subjectivity and illustrate what Laura McMahon calls 'an ecological attentiveness' (2014), building on Jane Bennett's call for 'a more *distributive* agency' (2010: ix, emphasis in the original).¹⁵

For Lawrence, one of Arnold's key techniques for drawing ecological attention to nature and the non-human is 'scale-switching grammar' (2016: 184), that is the combination of long shots and close-ups that help to challenge anthropocentric visibility, or at least to retrain our perception. Questions of scale are particularly relevant to ecological thinking. This is reflected in, for example, Timothy Clark's (2012) conceptualisation of 'derangements of scale' in his discussion of the representational and imaginative challenges encountered when engaging with the Anthropocene. McMahon observes in the context

of the cinema of Claire Denis that ‘an ecological attentiveness’ often emerges through a ‘rescaling of our vision’ (2014). Such rescaling is also prominent in *American Honey* – for instance, when Arnold switches from a close-up of a butterfly among the leaves of grass accompanied by the sound of crickets chirping loudly, to Star urinating, and then to the panoramic vistas of the breathtaking bare canyon. In this way, Arnold combines minuscule worldly details and an expansive scope within the same scene. This sort of monumentality of scale recalls not only the road movie’s expansive vistas but also the Western’s compelling articulation of the frontier. Barbara Klinger argues that both genres partake in an idealisation of the nation precisely through their framings of landscape. Addressing *Easy Rider*, she shows that, despite the film’s apparent countercultural tones, its beautified portrait of the natural environment articulates a vision of wilderness that is ‘carefully tied to a sense of US history’ (1997: 189). This effect is further amplified by the film’s stylistic devices, such as alternating between objective shots of motorcyclists and travelling point-of-view shots which highlight the *experience* of landscape, as well as the use of a lens flare and a 360-degree panning shot of the horizon of Monument Valley. Klinger further argues that, ‘through its vast, unpopulated, unmodernised, romantic vistas of natural Western glories, the film unquestioningly supports one of the foundations of American ideology – frontierism – a myth that had become a virtual lingua franca in traditional nationalistic discourses in the late 1960s’ (ibid.: 192). However, the wide picturesque vistas which in Hollywood road movies and Westerns emphasise ease of movement and mastery over space, are intertwined in Arnold’s film with the camera’s detailed attention to the minutiae of the ‘natural’ environment and the use of ambient sound – a textural approach that seems momentarily to arrest the forward motion of the film’s narrative impulse. Thus, while long shots capturing open landscapes and vast skies are abundant, Arnold tends to ‘rescale’ them by means of close-ups of non-human life, a visual strategy regularly adopted in all her films (see, for example, Forrest 2020: 82–122).

Arnold’s haptic attention to landscape has been addressed at length by Sue Thornham in her discussion of *Wuthering Heights*. Her analysis centres on two key aspects of the film: the use of ‘unframed landscape’ and the focus on ‘visceral textural detail’ (2016: 214) realised through intensely tactile close-up sequences. In the film’s rewriting of gendered representations of landscapes which have been historically bound up with ‘notions of knowledge, ownership or penetration, and national ... ideologies’, we can read, Thornham argues, a ‘sustained cinematic

critique of a process of Othering that operates through the distanced gaze at a feminised space' (ibid.: 226). Similar strategies can be found in *American Honey*: frequent close-ups of insects and plants foster an affective connection with the landscape that resists a more distanced, magisterial gaze. By addressing the viewer tactually through textures and 'a form of intimate witnessing rather than through the formal framings of landscape' (ibid.: 221), the film draws our attention to the materiality of land (and not merely to a beautiful landscape), that is it depicts 'not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made' (Willa Cather, quoted in Thornham 2016: 215). Thus, the non-human elements in *American Honey* are not treated simply as props, settings or backgrounds. Furthermore, the human body is also momentarily transformed into a landscape for animals, such as in a close-up of a grasshopper perched on Star's green T-shirt. The film's 'non-anthropocentric horizontalisation of representation' (McMahon 2015b: 110) is effectuated not only through the scaling of perspectives across shots but also within the space of a single frame. For instance, at some point Arnold's framing and hand-held camerawork merge the bodies of Jack and Star with the grass, underscoring the earthiness of their relationship. Arnold slows the film down, emphasising how the sun's glow creates lens flare, thereby giving the scene a literal radiance. The camera is placed on the ground and peers through the reeds, recalling the haptic muddy sequences in *Wuthering Heights*. The shot of the protagonists' hands clenching grass seems to allude to different registers of existence. This non-anthropocentric merging of human and landscape is also realised through the soundtrack, as Arnold conflates the sounds of insects and birds with the panting of the protagonists. Such scenes, as David Forrest notes, are 'both lyrical and grounded in material reality' (2020: 117). We might extend this observation and suggest that Arnold's film performs 'disanthropocentrically' by refusing 'to see the delineated shape of the human as distinct from the background of nature' (Alaimo 2010: 142), and in this way it epitomises an ecocinematic ethics of representation.

Looking at/with animals

Arnold's disanthropocentric approach and her attendant eco-aesthetics are not limited to simply creating contemplative moments that, as Scott MacDonald puts it, enable 'a deep appreciation of and ongoing commitment to the natural environment' (2013: 19). In his illuminating analysis of Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011),

John Landreville addresses the potential of an aesthetics of post-continuity for what he names, following Lauren Berlant, ‘pedagogies of reciprocity with the world’, an aesthetics which, as he claims, ‘seems the farthest thing from a redemptive environmental “mindfulness”’ (2019: 2, 8). His argument stems from a critique of the assumed transformative power of durational ecocinema and the normalised acceptance of long takes as a form of ethical signification, particularly in film theories inspired by Bazin’s conceptualisation of the long take, which he famously favoured over cinematic montage. Landreville writes:

When MacDonald applauds the calm, patience, and above all, ‘mindfulness’ of durational ecocinema it is difficult not to understand that what is privileged is a relief from the pace and expectations of contemporary life, which itself is not sufficient for an ethical-aesthetic claim capable of addressing the messiness of the imbrication of political economy and ecology. (Ibid.: 13)

Such a critique, I would argue, can be readily applied to Brereton’s approach to the Hollywood eco-road movie, which similarly privileges contemplative moments that ‘help promote deep ecological expressions of “oneness with nature”’ (2005: 91) without problematising the actual concept of ‘nature’. In his own work, Landreville draws attention to the modes of attunement and registers of reciprocity generated by camera movement and editing that delimit rather than enable ‘a deeper form of seeing’ that is said to ‘disclose an authentic and otherwise occulted, “Nature”’ (2019: 8). Although *American Honey* does not ascribe to the logics of post-continuity, the ‘pedagogy of worldly reciprocity’ (ibid.: 4) generated by the film’s highly mobile hand-held camerawork exceeds that of a purely durational attentiveness, eliciting an overwhelming affect and a sense of a deeply tactile, kinaesthetic co-habitation (Barker 2009). In her discussion of *Fish Tank* (2009), Amber Jacobs describes Arnold’s shaky hand-held camerawork as ‘creaturely’¹⁶ and compares it to ‘a dog breathlessly following to keep up with the protagonist’ (2016: 172). Jacobs writes: ‘The hand-held camera follows Mia from behind and very close to her body, so that as she walks, the viewer feels, via the shaky camerawork, the vibration of her motion, the force of her thrusting steps, the rhythm of her breath’ (ibid.). *American Honey* is characterised by a similar ‘creaturely’ aesthetics. According to Jennifer Kirby, the film delivers ‘a subjective sensory overload to produce a feeling of utopia, which is creatively deployed to juxtapose the socio-economic settings’ (2019). Thus, both Jacobs and Kirby

seem to suggest that due to Arnold's unique camerawork, her films are 'more affectively, rather than reflectively, attuned' to the world (Landreville 2019: 8). However, whereas both link Arnold's aesthetics back to the human, I would contend that *American Honey* is profoundly disanthropocentric, particularly in the manner in which the camera oscillates among divergent, human and non-human entities.

Lawrence similarly argues that in *Wuthering Heights*, 'a preponderance of unmotivated shots of the countryside and its non-human inhabitants demonstrates a post-humanist distribution of attention' (2016: 178). In *American Honey*, as well, the camera focuses its attention on several non-human animals, such as a flying squirrel living in a pocket, birds flying above or sitting on power lines and telegraph poles, and dogs roaming outside the motels where the characters stay. The soundtrack itself often incorporates animal sounds and close-ups of insects appear consistently throughout the film. For Cortvriend, these kinds of shots are instrumental in constructing Star's phenomenological perception of space, signifying 'her own curiosity about the world around her which both she (and the non-professional actress, Sasha Lane) are experiencing for the first time' (2017: 214), and allowing us to 'become attuned to what surrounds Star, what she can see, feel and hear' (ibid.: 222). However, the film does more than simply align the experience of the viewer with Star's perspective, in particular in its complex and multidimensional treatment of animals. Despite their narrative functions and undeniable metaphorical and perceptual connection with Star, animals also exceed the realm of human subjectivity and operate on their own terms. This is not to suggest that the film endorses 'the idealisation of a "prediscursive" animal' (McMahon 2019: 19), an idealisation that underpins a number of 'contemplative' and 'durational' approaches to ecocinema. As McMahon rightly points out, 'interpretation—and the various symbolic and allegorical modes mobilised by representations of animals—cannot be evacuated from the scene' (ibid.: 24–5). The non-human animals in *American Honey* are both metaphorical and phenomenologically real, while also raising questions about human violence and domination, thereby pointing to 'the messiness of the imbrication of political economy and ecology' (Landreville 2019: 13).

Arnold's focus on animals at the beginning of *American Honey*, which returns throughout the film, is particularly illustrative of her cinematic rendering of the non-human and therefore is worth exploring in detail. When Star gets back home after meeting Jake and his crew in the supermarket, Arnold introduces her home life through a montage of close-ups meticulously structured to convey her formal and thematic

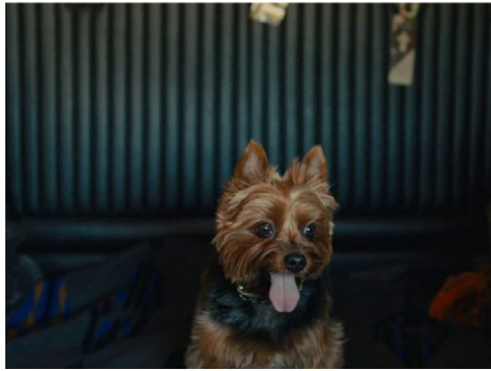
concerns.¹⁷ In a textured shot, a moth is shown flapping its wings against dirty sunlit windowpanes, with trees visible in the background. A small spider crawls along a wall decorated with hand-drawn shapes. We are shown a pair of sparkly ruby red shoes—a clear allusion to the proto-road movie *The Wizard of Oz* (1938), taken up later in the film when the mag crew arrives in Kansas City. The camera also shows images of a sea turtle and dolphins, followed by photographs of wolves, a dog and elephants against a sunset. This is followed by a wider shot that includes a photo of a tiger and another photo of a sunset. The latter image is long and narrow, mirroring the aspect ratio which frames the landscape throughout the film. In the right upper corner of the frame, a fragment of a hand-cut image of a bird is visible, which is shown fully in the next close-up, before the film cuts to another close-up with a photograph of a dog jumping on a beach. Lastly, the camera cuts to an image of tadpoles swimming in a plastic water bottle. Earlier in this sequence we are shown ants crawling over leftovers and an uncooked chicken that was scavenged from the dumpster in the film's opening scene. The chicken is perforated with a fork by Star's foster brother on a filthy kitchen floor, while he asks: 'Is it the same chicken that lays eggs?'

The preponderance of references to the non-human in this sequence brings to mind what John Berger (1980) described three decades ago as 'looking at animals', which rests on the disappearance of certain animals from everyday life and, simultaneously, their enhanced presence in visual economies as pets, toys and exhibits in zoos. Arnold juxtaposes everyday 'invisible' animals such as ants and moths with commodified or dead animals such as the packaged chicken and the exotic wildlife featured on postcards and photographs which evoke Berger's visual economies. This complex network of signifiers is woven together through a haptic, rather than an optic, approach to film-making, which gives rise to concerns beyond merely looking *at* animals, instead alluding to instances of looking *with* found elsewhere in Arnold's work (for example, the extreme close-ups of insects in *Wasp* (2003) or the tactile, textured encounters between Mia and the horse in *Fish Tank*). Drawing on Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological understanding of film viewing, Forrest asserts that 'Arnold's films evoke and maintain a material sense of "enworldedness" while also fostering a relatedness to the intimate perceptual and corporeal experiences of that world' (2020: 122). This is achieved through Arnold's 'image-led narration' and 'an intimate participatory mode of filming that evokes a sense of "being with" a protagonist' (ibid.). Yet, while this sense of 'being with' is often implicitly conceived of

as human, I would argue that Arnold's film-making transcends this focus by being particularly attentive to non-human beings and our ecological entanglements with them, thus facilitating what Landreville calls 'wordly reciprocity' (2019: 3). This involves an ethics 'not of grasping but of dwelling' (Stanley Cavell, quoted in Landreville 2019: 3), that is forging a relationship with the world that is not necessarily a matter of observing and knowing, as Berger suggests.

However, it is evident that these images also operate on a figurative level and, as such, reappear throughout Star's journey. The pair of wolves anticipates Star and Jake's intense relationship. Immediately preceding the two scenes in which they have sex, Jake makes his presence known to Star by howling like a wolf (he tells her that his father taught him to make the noise if he was ever lost in the forest). The moth against the window is an overdetermined symbol of Star's hardships and her desire to escape to a better life. In fact, the trope of trapped animals reoccurs throughout the film (Figures 2 and 3), as illustrated by a passing image of a parrot imprisoned in a cage in a motel room or a dog panting in the backseat of a truck filmed against a blue background that resembles prison-like bars (this image also recalls the opening sequence in *Fish Tank*, featuring Mia breathing heavily and set against a similar background). The photograph of the turtle, in turn, is evoked in the ending of the film when Star releases the turtle that Jake gave her back into the water. In a number of scenes, Star pauses to help animals, such as when she lets a bee out of the window, a possible reference to Arnold's *Wasp*. As Cortvriend observes in his reading of *American Honey*: 'For Arnold, animals are an analogy for Star's own isolation, escape and liberation, whilst also demonstrating Star's empathetic personality' (2017: 211). It could be further argued that it is primarily through the imagery of animals that Arnold evokes the mythical glorification of freedom present in the Western and the road movie while also rewriting one of their primary generic conventions: the representation of 'nature' as both the hero's source of inspiration and his greatest adversary (Brereton 2005: 103). The Western male hero typically sees himself 'at the apex of all other species and is often unwilling to accept his symbiotic relationship with all other life forms, including racially othered humans' (ibid.: 94). In the road movie, the hero feels 'compelled to journey back into the wilderness/desert' in order to learn how to become 'a free agent within nature' (ibid.: 92). Rather than dramatising Star's heroic agency, *American Honey* foregrounds her core ecological principles and attunement to the non-human, eschewing the 'eco-spiritual' trajectories of her male contemporaries, in which only towards the

Framing the Non-human



Figs 2 and 3. Glimpses of non-human lives in American Honey.
(Maven Pictures/Film4/British Film Institute).

end of the story is the protagonist able to ‘fully accept, appreciate, and become part of nature’ (Brereton 2013: 216).

It is necessary to recognise that these arguments must also account for limitations stemming from the problematic distinction between human and non-human worlds central to Western thought since the Enlightenment (Braidotti 2020: 29), as well as the apparent narrative and metaphorical ‘domestication’ of animals in *American Honey*—a gesture which could be read as deeply anthropocentric.¹⁸ Arnold’s treatment of the non-human, however, complicates such an interpretation. Landscapes and animals do not simply operate as one-dimensional, symbolic projections of human feelings and experiences (Brereton 2013: 214). As several scholars have noted, the film-maker’s post-human aesthetics dissolve the boundaries between human and non-human animals, often as a mechanism to equate sexual desire with animality, especially through male protagonists. For instance, Forrest

has pointed to the associations between Clyde (Tony Curran) and a fox in *Red Road* and between Heathcliff (James Howson/Solomon Glave) and dogs and rabbits in *Wuthering Heights* (2020: 117, 93), which are evocative of the visual and sonic alignment of Jake with the wolf. Yet such conflations between the human and the non-human in *American Honey* transcend a focus on carnal instincts to encompass larger questions of violence and domination. As McMahon rightly observes: ‘The semiotic instability of the on-screen animal is inextricably bound up with corporeal vulnerability (and with a history of human power over animals)’ (2015a: 87). As I show in the next section, Arnold highlights the ‘making visible of violence’ (Jonathan Burt, quoted in McMahon 2015a: 87) by cinematically ‘entangle[ing] and smear[ing] together’ (Morton 2010: 150) human and non-human worlds in ways that are deeply implicated in current philosophical debates about the ecological.

Ecological entanglements

In a critique of previous approaches to ecofilms, Landreville observes that ‘an emphasis on cinema’s capacity to “train” perception to become more “authentic” or find greater “presence” in/with Nature’, may not be enough to generate ‘any meaningful effect upon the world we inhabit’ (2019: 5). Furthermore, as Stacy Alaimo stresses in her reflections on trans-corporeality, the very concept of ‘nature’ should be handled with caution, as ‘it has long been enlisted to support racism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia, and essentialisms’ (2016: 11). Bearing these considerations in mind, I argue that, while *American Honey* is particularly attuned to the non-human, it does not uncritically invest in ‘nature’, nor does it offer the phenomenological reassurance that we can restore our broken reciprocity with the world simply by being in it in some significantly more ‘authentic’ way. Instead, the film stages broader ecological, social and economic entanglements that underlie and inflect our lives. Indeed, as Rosi Braidotti reminds us in her posthumanist approach, “we” may be in this together, but we are not all human and we are not one and the same’ (2020: 26).

These complex entanglements are well illustrated in a scene where Star realises that the kind-hearted truck driver she has been riding with is carrying a load of cattle. Kirby observes how this image equates the cows with the crew members ‘who are also packed into over-filled claustrophobic vans as they travel, in contrast to the boss Krystal who rides in a wide-open convertible’ (2019). On the level of metaphor,

this narrative detail reverses the film's earlier idealisations of mobility and the promise of freedom, drawing our attention to yet another instance of a precarious traveller and, consequently, presenting a more profound questioning of the conventions of the human-centred road movie.

However, a quick glimpse into the cow's eyes suggests something in excess of this metaphorical meaning, an excess which I contend points to correspondences, understood as both resemblance and kinship, between human and non-human beings. Or, as Amber Jacobs puts it, the scene envisages a 'mode of ethical and ontological relatedness' (2016: 163). This relatedness is enacted on the level of form and not only of narrative. The framing of Star looking at the cows and their looking back at her establishes a relationship of affinity within the space of the image. Without a reverse shot from the perspective of the animal, Star's point-of-view shot could appear to reduce the non-human to a mere object of the gaze. As Berger states, 'animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance' (1980: 16). Yet, following McMahon's reading of *Le quattro volte*, I believe this gesture is 'expansive rather than reductive, as it works to uncover commonalities across species lines' (2015b: 110) while questioning the speciesist hierarchies naturalised by anthropocentric discourse. In Bennett's words, this visual approach can be understood not as a flattening of differences, but as 'revealing similarities across categorical divides' (2010: 99). At stake in this scene is the recognition of 'creaturely' vulnerability (Pick 2011) and radical exposure to death that places the human and the non-human in the same continuum without erasing their singularity of being. Significantly, after the exchange of looks between Star and the cow, she stumbles into a blood-filled ditch and realises that the truck in which she has been riding transports animals to slaughterhouses. Star, like the cows in this sequence, always rides in vehicles driven by men, and her experience as a passenger is often fraught with danger. Like the animals, she is also destined for death. Notably, her name refers both to the cultural figure of the movie star (the protagonist, unlike Sasha Lane, will never become famous) and an astronomical object that produces light and is held in place by its own gravitational field. Star's mother, who died of a drug overdose, chose the name because 'we're all made from stars, Death Stars'. Star's narrative arc resembles Heidegger's conception of being-toward-death: she moves in multiple landscapes that are marked spheres of considerable threat.¹⁹ Yet this being-toward-death is extended to the non-human as well. The cattle truck scene gestures to the material conditions of animal beings

farmed for their meat, objectified and finally consumed. Viewed in this extradiegetic context, there is an implicit contrast between the film's earlier celebration of the ethos of mobility and freedom typical of the road movie and the 'stuckness' and eventual death of the cows transported over great distances in claustrophobic trucks. Though brief, the scene with the cows is particularly relevant to Arnold's ecological thinking, not least because it directly connects to her own worldview—Arnold is a resolute vegetarian and often speaks about animal rights in interviews (Champion 2012). The animal image functions ambiguously in Arnold's non-anthropocentric aesthetics: it envisages cows as something more than lives-to-be-dominated yet it is haunted by the death of animals off screen. By offering what Jane Bennett conceptualises as 'a more horizontal representation of the relation between human and non-human actants' (2010: 98), *American Honey* also interrogates the distribution of power within 'the violent asymmetries of species divisions' (McMahon 2015b: 114).

Not unlike in her previous films, Arnold links this reflection to the persistence of often concealed patterns of discrimination based on gender, class and race that dominant neoliberal discourse has long denied. As Kirby points out, like Star, who is eventually forced to sell her body to obtain extra money, the cows are 'trapped and appropriated into a capitalist system of production and exchange' (2019). Earlier in the film, when Star's boss, Krystal, complains that she is not earning enough money, Jake reassures her, saying: 'I'm good with the wild ones'. Star fires back: 'I'm not a fucking cow.' Krystal's Confederate flag bikini is also significant, as it marks both her superiority and untouchability. She is exposed, but not vulnerable like Star. For example, in one scene, Star, after being dressed by Krystal in a revealing outfit to boost her sales, is dropped off at an oil field to target the men working there. In another sequence, Krystal makes it clear that Star is simply a replaceable employee and threatens to leave her 'in the plains with mountain lions', with Jake emphatically adding: 'No food, no water, no money, no shoes.' When they first meet, Krystal says to Star: 'You're a southern girl, a real American honey like me.' However, the two women are far from equal. While Star's racialised identity is never explicitly referred to or dramatised in the film—which some critics condemned as 'a flagrant oversight of America's ever-present racial tension'²⁰—the entire film is rich in political undertones. The scene in which Krystal reprimands Star while wearing the Confederate flag bikini recalls an earlier scene at Star's house, when she prepares a meal for her sexually abusive foster father, Nathan (Johnny Pierce II), and the two children (a fourth plate

for herself is nowhere to be seen). At one point, Nathan complains: 'I'm so hungry I could eat a cow.' In one shot, the Confederate flag—a symbol of the country's long history of racism, slavery and white supremacy—can be spotted in the background. Adopted in the early twentieth century by the Ku Klux Klan as it waged a terror campaign against black Americans, the flag has more recently been enthusiastically embraced by many of Donald Trump's supporters. In 2015, white supremacist Dylann Roof was pictured posing with the Confederate flag and calling for a 'race war' before he murdered nine worshippers at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, only one year before *American Honey* was released. This visual detail implies that Nathan's unwanted sexual advances might be racially motivated. As Cortvriend also points out, Arnold hints here at the 'systemic abuse Star faces in contemporary American society' (2017: 210). Importantly, Jake's dream of having his 'own spot somewhere in the woods' that is 'like the 40 acres and a mule' makes reference to the post-Civil War promises of various political figures to allot plots of land to family units, including newly freed slaves. Jake's fantasy mirrors Star's yearning for her own place, 'somewhere with lots of trees' as she reveals in another scene. Star's pastoral dream is not grandiose in scale, but the film's narrative falls short of offering her a viable solution.

Thus it could be argued that *American Honey* weaves together the systemic abuse of animals with gendered, classed and racial forms of oppression without necessarily erasing the ways in which different beings are differentially exposed to suffering. Significantly, Star's vulnerability is envisioned not only through a comparison with entrapped animals, as in Arnold's earlier films, but is also filtered through the conventions of the Western and the road movie as an idealised site of American mythology, allowing Arnold to articulate a more nuanced critique of the logics and structures of capitalism. This is evidenced when Star climbs into the backseat of a convertible Cadillac with a group of elderly modern-day cowboys dressed in white who seem to be coming to her rescue. The men offer to pay for a considerable amount of magazine subscriptions if she agrees to 'go burn some steaks and have some beers' with them, because, as they profess, they 'ain't got nothing better to spend [their] time and money on'. They lead her to an elegant mansion with free-roaming horses and offer her hard liquor from a bottle with a worm inside while mocking her, sneering that 'little girls can't handle it'. As Samantha Cater observes, 'the audience is conditioned to expect a terrible outcome for Star, who has broken the tacit rule never to get into a car with strange men' (2019: 11). But just as the film leads us to believe that sexual violence

is inevitable, Jake arrives with a gun to save her. Star's performance of unnerving naivety and hardened resilience is contrasted with Jake's heroic action. Notably, it is during this sequence that she saves a wasp in a swimming pool and says 'sorry little guy' when she swallows the worm, urged on by the meat-eating cowboys. Her care for animals and constant risk-taking might be read as radical acts that allow her to grapple with vulnerability and 'occupy exposure' (Alaimo 2016: 5) in insurgent, even if problematic, ways.

There is one more instance where Star gets into a vehicle with strange men. Trying to sell magazines, she jumps into a truck in the oil field. One of the men, played by an actual oilman who Arnold met at a supermarket in North Dakota, persuades her to spend the evening with him. Star's gendered, classed and racialised vulnerability is further articulated during their subsequent sexual encounter. In exchange for \$1,000, money she hopes to use to escape from Krystal, she spreads her legs while he masturbates (an image which visually parallels, in an almost comedic way, the oil fires erupting from the surrounding pipes). It is significant that the exploitation of Star's body is set against an economic use of land for the benefit of humankind, which also underpins, although in different ways, narratives of conquest and ownership in the Western (Carmichael 2005) and the road film (Brereton 2005, 2013). As Brereton argues: 'These generic structures demand spatial and philosophical exploration of the human species and their role on the planet. In particular, landscape and the uses and abuses of it provide the feeding ground for much narrative construction' (2005: 91). By contrast, Arnold does not entertain similar discourses of 'man's' claim to own and control the land but rather dramatises the depth of entanglement between patriarchal, capitalist and anthropocentric exploitation. Star's journey is marked, from the very beginning, by limited resources (in the form of food and money), which parallels the finitude of resources on a larger scale, as represented by the uneven distribution of fossil fuels on the planet, the material and ideological effects of which have been in turn vital to the formation of the road film (Wilson et al. 2017). For Braidotti, the same Capitalocene – 'the unbridled greed of capitalist societies' (2020: 27) – that is the root cause of the current environmental emergency and of the abuse of animal life, is also responsible for exacerbating social inequalities. It is precisely such interconnectedness that *American Honey* throws into relief.

At the conclusion of the film, Star and her fellow travellers dance around a bonfire to Raury's 'God's Whisper', a song inspired by tribal rhythms and chants. The bonfire evokes the oil fires seen earlier in the

film and the whole scene hints at a kind of re-birth. While the crew members chant ‘saviour’ in unison, Star walks away from her human companions toward the lake to free the turtle Jake has given to her before submerging herself underwater. When she resurfaces, she spots fireflies in the distant night sky. This image dissolves into an unusual credit sequence listing the cast and then the film crew alphabetically by first name. Job titles and character names are conspicuously absent, which might be read as a final manifestation of Arnold’s democratisation of attention witnessed throughout the film. Jennifer Kirby examines this ending through Richard Dyer’s reflections on the affective utopia in his work on musicals, arguing that through music and dance, *American Honey* generates a ‘heightened, organic experience’ born out of ‘a sense of community and a relationship with the natural world’ (2019), and in this way it highlights what a capitalist economic reality fails to offer the protagonists. This utopia comes directly from Star’s deeply embodied, transformative journey, giving the film ‘a sense of hope without invalidating [its] potency as socio-political critique’ (ibid.). Yet, as I have tried to show, the film’s critique goes beyond Star’s subjectivity, a sense of being together with her travel companions or even her feeling ‘at one’ with nature, as articulated in Brereton’s *Hollywood Utopia* (2005). While the film’s hopeful ending does point to new forms of sociality existing beyond capitalist individualism and competitiveness, this new relationality is also framed as a broader ecological being-with. *American Honey*’s ecotopian sensibility and striking political reach lie in its connecting the social with the supposedly distinct realm of ‘nature’, or even in questioning such a distinction. That Star is a survivor²¹ of life under capitalism but also a saviour implies, in Braidotti’s words, ‘an affirmative relational ethics ... driven by environmental principles, which combine more inclusive ways of caring, across a transversal, multispecies spectrum’ (2020: 28), without disavowing our fluctuating enmeshments in ‘naturecultures’.

Conclusion

Writing amid the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, Rosi Braidotti addresses the ‘ruthless interference in the ecological balance and lives of many species’ and ‘a political economy of systemic exploitation of both human and non-human entities, downgraded to the status of “natural” (as in naturalised for the purpose of exploitation) resources’ (2020: 27). It is not coincidental, she argues, that ‘the claims of agency for non-human forces and for

Gaia as a living, symbiotic planet are echoed by a global revolt against endemic – and indeed viral – racism’ (ibid.: 29).

In throwing into relief the intersections of racism, capitalism, patriarchy and anthropocentrism, *American Honey* resonates deeply with current debates about the ecological. Arnold’s eco-aesthetics lay bare the relatedness of the human and non-human worlds, bringing to the surface the messiness of such entanglements. Her restricted aspect ratio often prompts the camera to look up in ways that are irreducible to human subjectivity. The film’s editing and camerawork facilitate an ongoing rescaling of vision by combining the picturesque views of the Western and road movie with intimate, haptic close-ups of non-human life, often effectuating a visual merging of the human/animal/landscape. Finally, the film’s highly mobile hand-held shots, which depart from the stylistic devices typical of durational ecocinema, generate an affective rather than ‘contemplative’ worldly resonance. Such an approach is consistent with Arnold’s oeuvre which, as Lawrence writes, reflects her ‘emphatically ecological eye’, producing ‘an equitability of attention which defies humanist solipsism’ (2016: 184). Yet although *American Honey*’s aesthetics and expansive interest in the non-human align with Arnold’s earlier British work, the film simultaneously operates as a complex negotiation with the cinematic past of the United States. If, as Thornham observes, the presence of non-human lives in *Wuthering Heights* is ‘so intensely realised’ that it challenges ‘the gaze at, and the exploration, penetration and ownership of, landscape’ (2016: 227), then this approach is even more fully realised in *American Honey*. In her rewriting of the Western and the road movie, two genres that are suffused with romanticised images of the sublime American wilderness, Arnold moves beyond a treatment of the landscape as a mere background to be conquered and owned or as an unproblematic site offering freedom from civilisation and social constraints. *American Honey* does not aspire ‘to present itself as a homage to raw nature and being at one with the environment’ (Brereton 2013: 217). In contrast to other eco-road movies, it does not offer an idyllic image of nature through a nostalgic framing of landscape and its inhabitants that undermines any critical positioning of the non-human as something more than an object to be contemplated. Instead, the film proposes a narrative and formal horizontalisation ‘that attends to rather than erases species difference’ (McMahon 2015b: 113). Ultimately, Arnold’s eco-road movie is cognisant of different forms of oppression, which are attended to and accounted for through its focus on the exploitation of animals and land, both of which are closely bound up with the

exploitation of the female protagonist. Rather than simply affirming the domination of humans over animals or nature, *American Honey* suggests ways in which cinema can expand its visuality beyond the anthropocentric, while laying claim for multispecies, relational ethics.

Acknowledgements

The research on which this article is based was carried out with support from the project 'Cinema and Environment: Affective Ecologies in the Anthropocene' (PID2019-110068GA-I00/AEI/10.13039/501100011033), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

Notes

1. The road movie has been widely acknowledged as a quintessentially American genre, even if it has proved to be transnational in reach.
2. While Arnold focuses on economic deprivation in all her films, she stated that she was particularly shocked by the poverty in the United States: 'It seemed more intense than in Britain. I did a lot of driving in the South, I was quite upset by what I saw, closed factories and shops and loads of drugs' (Cooper 2016).
3. Eleven out of the fifteen main cast members had never acted before. They were found at supermarkets, skate parks, parking lots and urban beaches. Lane was approached on a beach in Florida where she was enjoying the spring break.
4. I borrow this term from McMahon (2014), who discusses it in the context of the cinema of Claire Denis. See also Lawrence (2016).
5. For more on the road as a ritual of manhood in the US context, see Eyerman and Löfgren (1995: 54–9).
6. I draw here on Jane Bennett's 'vital materialist theory of democracy' as a part of a broader project to dissolve 'the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic' (2010: x) This has been instrumental in questioning the reified relations between active human subjects and passive non-human objects – an approach which has also proved particularly apt for addressing non-hierarchical attention to the interconnections across species in cinema (McMahon 2014).
7. See, for example, Stacy Alaimo's (2016) reflections on trans-corporeality and exposure, Rosi Braidotti's (2013) *zoe*-centred egalitarianism and Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of response-ability, which have all been proposed as alternatives to the logic of advanced capitalism in the Capitalocene.
8. See Kaplan (2016) on climate trauma in film; Ingram (2004) on environmentalism and Hollywood cinema; Carmichael (2005) on the Western; Brereton (2005) on the Western, road movies and science fiction; and O'Brien (2016) on the environmental sensibility of 'New Hollywood'.
9. Guan and O'Brien point to 'a commitment to post-human ontologies and affective networks, sometimes in opposition to socio-semiotic modes of interpretation' (2020: 273) in scholarly writings on ecocinema.
10. In both cases, the bear leaves the protagonist alone. This is in contrast to the events of Werner Herzog's documentary *Grizzly Man* (2005), also analysed by Brereton.
11. *Easy Rider*, *Thelma and Louise* and *Grand Canyon* (1991), among others.

12. For a discussion of Star's interaction with cars, see Cater (2019), who shows that the film simultaneously acknowledges and disavows several discourses on female victimhood.
13. The film's tagline of 'Travel across the vast emptiness of the American dream' recalls *Easy Rider*'s promotional slogan of 'They went out looking for America – and found nothing there'. Interestingly, the initial draft of the latter slogan was: 'A man went looking for America, but couldn't find it anywhere.'
14. As Forrest's (2020: 119) calculation shows, the view from the window recurs 58 times throughout the film (accounting for more than 55 per cent of the film's shots).
15. Cater observes how the wide shots of the sky are often visually bisected by power lines, pylons and telegraph cables, reminding us of human existence, in particular 'industry, progress, connections and the destruction of natural environments' (2019: 6).
16. Jacobs draws here on Pick (2011).
17. This sequence is reminiscent of similar domestic elements found in *Wasp* and *Fish Tank*. See Forrest (2020) for detailed analyses of these sequences.
18. It is also important to acknowledge the danger of essentialising women as more nurturing and 'in tune with the ecological forces of nature', in contrast to white male agency articulated as in opposition to nature, as outlined in Westerns such as *The Searchers* (1956) and *Dances with Wolves* (1990) (Brereton 2005: 110).
19. At some point, one of Star's travel companions recounts a story about a woman who was raped and murdered in the town at which they will soon arrive.
20. See <<https://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/american-honeys-primal-scream/>>
21. This is in contrast to the protagonists in the more violent endings of *Easy Rider* and *Thelma and Louise*. Interestingly, Brereton argues that in the latter film's ending, the protagonists are in tune with 'the natural eco-system as opposed to surrendering to the forces of patriarchal law and order' (2005: 114).

References

- Alaimo, S. (2010), *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Alaimo, S. (2016), *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Barker, J. M. (2009), *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bennett, J. (2010), *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berger, J. (1980), 'Why look at animals?', in *About Looking*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 3–28.
- Braidotti, R. (2013), *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2020), "'We' may be in this together, but we are not all human and we are not one and the same', *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 1: 1, pp. 26–31, available at <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/key_docs/braidotti.pdf> accessed 13 September 2020.
- Brereton, P. (2005), *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema*, Bristol: Intellect Books.
- Brereton, P. (2013), 'Appreciating the views: filming nature in *Into the Wild*, *Grizzly Man*, and *Into the West*', in S. Rust, S. Monani and S. Cubitt (eds), *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, New York: Routledge, pp. 213–31.

Framing the Non-human

- Carmichael, D. A. (2005), *The Landscape of Hollywood Westerns: Ecocriticism in an American Film Genre*, Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press.
- Cater, S. (2019), 'Riding in cars as girls: discourses of victimhood, power and agency in *Beneath Clouds* and *American Honey*', *Studies in Australasian Cinema*, 13: 1, pp. 2–15. DOI: 10.1080/17503175.2019.1578190.
- Champion, E. (2012), 'Andrea Arnold', available at <<http://www.edrants.com/andrea-arnold-the-bat-segundo-show/>> accessed 13 September 2020.
- Clark, T. (2012), 'Scale', in T. Cohen (ed.), *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, 1, pp. 148–66.
- Cohan, S. and Hark, I. R. (eds) (1997), *The Road Movie Book*, London: Routledge.
- Cooper, S. (2016), 'Arnold talks *American Honey*, *Wuthering Heights* challenges at Tribeca', *Screen Daily*, 19 April, available at <<https://www.screendaily.com/production/andrea-arnold-talks-american-honey-wuthering-heights-challenges-at-tribeca/5102764.article>> accessed 13 September 2020.
- Cortvriend, J. (2017), 'Making Sense of Everyday Spaces: A Tendency in Contemporary British Cinema', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sheffield.
- Eyerman, R. and Löfgren, O. (1995), 'Romancing the road: road movies and images of mobility', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 12: 1, pp. 53–79. DOI: 10.1177/026327695012001003.
- Forrest, D. (2020), *New Realism: Contemporary British Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Gorfinkel, E. (2016), 'Exhausted drift: austerity, dispossession and the politics of slow in Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff*', in T. de Luca and J. Nuno Barradas (eds), *Slow Cinema*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 123–36.
- Guan, C. and O'Brien, A. (2020), 'Cinema's natural aesthetics: environments and perspectives in contemporary film theory', *Screen*, 61: 2, pp. 272–9. DOI: 10.1093/screen/hjaa014.
- Haraway, D. (2016), *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Jacobs, A. (2016), 'On the maternal "creaturely" cinema of Andrea Arnold', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 13: 1, pp. 160–76. DOI: 10.3366/jbctv.2016.0305.
- Kaplan, E. A. (2016), *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Kirby, J. (2019), 'American utopia: socio-economic critique and utopia in *American Honey* and *The Florida Project*', *Senses of Cinema*, 92, available at <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2019/feature-articles/american-utopia-socio-economic-critique-and-utopia-in-american-honey-and-the-florida-project/>> accessed 13 September 2020.
- Klinger, B. (1997), 'The road to dystopia', in S. Cohan and I. R. Hark (eds), *The Road Movie Book*, London: Routledge, pp. 179–203.
- Landreville, J. (2019), 'Alternative ethics for ecocinema: *The Tree of Life* and post-continuity aesthetics', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 17: 1, pp. 1–21. DOI: 10.1080/17400309.2019.1563365.
- Lawrence, M. (2016), 'Nature and the non-human in Andrea Arnold's *Wuthering Heights*', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 13: 1, pp. 177–94. DOI: 10.3366/jbctv.2016.0306.
- MacDonald, S. (2004), 'Toward an eco-cinema', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 11: 2, pp. 107–32.
- MacDonald, S. (2013), 'The ecocinema experience', in S. Rust, S. Monani and S. Cubitt (eds), *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, New York: Routledge, pp. 17–42.

- McMahon, L. (2014), 'Beyond the human body: Claire Denis's ecologies', *Alphaville*, 7, available at <<http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue7/HTML/Article%0AMcMahon.html>> accessed 13 September 2020.
- McMahon, L. (2015a), 'Screen animals dossier: introduction', *Screen*, 56: 1, pp. 81–7. DOI: 10.1093/screen/hjv007.
- McMahon, L. (2015b), 'Animal agency in *Le Quattro volte*', *Screen*, 56: 1, pp. 108–14. DOI: 10.1093/screen/hjv006.
- McMahon, L. (2019), *Animal Worlds: Film, Philosophy and Time*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Madden, C. (2020), *Springsteen as Soundtrack: The Sound of the Boss in Film and Television*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Morton, T. (2010), *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- O'Brien, A. (2016), *Transactions with the World: Ecocriticism and the Environmental Sensibility of New Hollywood*, New York: Berghahn Books.
- O'Hagan, S. (2016), 'Andrea Arnold: "I always aim to get to the belly of a place"', *Guardian*, 9 October, available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/09/andrea-arnold-interview-american-honey-shia-labeouf-sasha-lane>> (accessed 13 September 2020).
- Pick, A. (2011), *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Tasker, Y. (1993), *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema*, London: Routledge.
- Thornham, S. (2016), "'Not a country at all": landscape and *Wuthering Heights*', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 13: 1, pp. 214–231. DOI: 10.3366/jbctv.2016.0308.
- Wilson, S., Carlson, A. and Szeman, I. (eds) (2017), *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Katarzyna Paszkiewicz is Lecturer in English Studies at the University of the Balearic Islands and researcher at ADHUC—Research Center for Theory, Gender, Sexuality. Her primary research is on popular film and women's cinema in the USA, UK and Spain. She also has an interest in questions of embodiment, affect and ecological thought in screen cultures. She has published several book chapters and journal articles on Kathryn Bigelow, Sofia Coppola and Isabel Coixet. She has co-edited, with Mary Harrod, *Women Do Genre in Film and Television* (Routledge, 2017) and wrote *Genre, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018). Her most recent co-edited collection, *Final Girls, Feminism and Popular Culture* (Palgrave, 2020), explores contemporary reformulations of the Final Girl in film, TV and literature.