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# Anamorphic Ecology, or the Return of the Possum

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how Alison Maclean’s short black and white film *Kitchen Sink* (1989) works to move the ground of public understanding about the large-scale makeovers of ecology, people and place on which a settler colonial society is founded. Reading Maclean’s film in light of the New Zealand government’s recently-unveiled world-first Predator Free 2050 campaign, the article attends to the intertwined genealogies and topographies shared by invasive animals and invasive settlers. In so doing, it develops an expanded conception of anamorphosis, taking this term to refer to distorted projections which require viewers to reconstitute – from an oblique perspective – the images they encounter. Through its concentrated slippages, the article argues, Maclean’s film anticipates not only the full-scale obliteration called forth by Predator Free 2050, but alternative responses to place which acknowledge prior and ongoing Indigenous presences. Indeed, *Kitchen Sink* itself emerges in this view as an anamorphic or “hallucinatory” element in the settler colonial image-scape.

## KEYWORDS

anamorphosis; eco-horror; image ecology; possum; settler colonialism

This article considers how moving images might work to move the ground of public understanding about the large-scale transformations of ecology, people and place on which a settler colonial society is founded. It takes Aotearoa/New Zealand as its case study and Alison Maclean's prizewinning short black and white film *Kitchen Sink* (1989) as its focal point of interest. The founding of Aotearoa/New Zealand as a place of colonial settlement in 1840 coincided with the emergence of what Geoffrey Batchen terms the "photo-scopic episteme" (29), meaning that image-making technologies have underpinned the settler project of seeking to anchor and stabilise the nation from its birth (see Collinson i). Aotearoa/New Zealand can thus be understood as a virtual territory produced and mediated in the first instance via its own projective imagework. Internationally, Aotearoa/New Zealand is vaunted – in tourism campaigns, and in a national cinematic tradition which elides feature films with tourism campaigns – as a South Seas haven boasting pristine coastlines, sublime mountain-scapes, verdant pasture and primeval native forest. However, as the New Zealand government has acknowledged in its published *Biodiversity Strategy*, despite the country's "green branding" on a global scale, "nothing since the extinction of the dinosaurs (65 million years ago) compares with the decline in indigenous biodiversity in New Zealand over the last century" (Ministry for the Environment 1, 4, henceforth MFE). The *Strategy* goes on to note that "[c]ollectively invasive pests pose the greatest single threat to our remaining natural ecosystems and habitats and threatened native species" (6). At a national level, the government's most recent response to this environmental crisis has been to launch Predator Free 2050, a world-first campaign that sets out to re-engineer local ecosystems by permanently eradicating introduced rats, stoats and brushtail possums (see Kirk; Department of Conservation, henceforth DOC). By means of this newly-declared programme of "ecocide" (Park 329), Predator Free 2050 seeks to re-image (and thus re-found or re-birth) Aotearoa/New Zealand as a pest-free paradise.

These circumstances recommend Aotearoa/New Zealand as an advanced case both for thinking about successive waves of human-wrought environmental change and for thinking about the lived and ongoing implications of distorted image ecologies. While matters of foundation, rebirth and re-imaging are at stake in its story and representational codes, *Kitchen Sink* has not yet been examined from an ecological point of view. Maclean's short film takes place in the interior world of a suburban house and has only attracted a minor amount of scholarly analysis to date. Commentators have tended to focus on the film's domestic setting and its female protagonist, emphasising *Kitchen Sink*'s postmodern re-situating of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and its expression of "the New Zealand gothic" via its infrastructure – both literal and metaphorical – of haunted drainpipes and plumbing (see Conrich; Kavka; Faber; Soila). Describing the film as "an enduring highpoint of Female Gothic exploration in contemporary world cinema," Adrian Martin has contended that *Kitchen Sink* deploys a sequence of intense visual metamorphoses before coming to an abrupt but satisfying end, achieving closure via a final struggle from which the protagonist emerges victorious (76–78). Meg Rickards notes that in psychoanalytic terms, the film's "polysemic trope of hair" provides "a structural linchpin for an otherwise abstract tale" (74).

In this article, I offer an alternative view of what Maclean's film shadows through its imagework at the same time as I probe its relationship to – and evocation of – the settler colonial context in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Specifically, I am concerned with the film's deployment of anamorphosis as a representational strategy and technology, and its suggestion that settlement needs to be understood as an anamorphic phenomenon. I begin by examining the technical underpinnings of anamorphosis as an apparatus of film, horror and settlement before turning to consider *Kitchen Sink*. My interest in Maclean's film is that it distills and projects – in a tightly compressed form – an anti-ocularism that might be felt or experienced in a range of ways (and across a range of media) in a settler place.[1] Revealing the investment of settler colonialism in deformed projections, it opens up questions of ferality, reproduction and “deathworlding” (Rose 12) which expose the inherent instability of settler ecologies and the settler image-archive. Seen in this light, the film's eco-horror anticipates not only the full-scale obliteration called forth by Predator Free 2050, but alternative responses to place which acknowledge prior and ongoing Indigenous presences.

[1] For analysis of allied representational and/or media-ecological phenomena in the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand see for example Turner; Smith (“Native Reenactments”); Message; Boswell, “Lessons from the Dodo.”

### **Anamorphosis: Film, Horror, Settlement**

Derived from the Greek *ana-*, meaning “back” or “again,” and *morphe*, meaning “shape or form,” the term anamorphosis was coined in the seventeenth century to refer to a type of optical effect which thwarts the perspectival realism associated with European image-making traditions. As Jurgis Baltrusaitis explains in his foundational study, anamorphosis is a mechanism for heightening the “fantastic” or “absurd side” of perspective (1). Instead of reducing forms to their visible limits, he notes, anamorphosis projects them outside themselves. In technical terms, anamorphosis presents a viewer with an unreadable composition. When seen from a standard or conventional standpoint, elements of the image are warped beyond recognition, appearing unintelligibly alien. Only when viewed from an oblique or awry position will such elements resolve, emerging from their own chaos and confusion. As they do so, however, the rest of the image becomes distorted as it is thrown out of viewable perspective. For these reasons, anamorphosis may be understood as being less an art of optical correction and revelation than it is an art of rupture, disintegration and incompatibility. Destabilising seemingly normative vantage points and the authority-effects associated with these, it is motion-dependent and motion-inducing. And, unlike metamorphosis, which involves a permanent and decisive change of state, anamorphosis offers no release via a final act of “becoming.” Its transformation is inescapably subject to reversion or deformation, meaning there is no outside to it and no end to it either. For a viewer, the relentless sense of things being out-of-place in an anamorphic representation instigates a nightmarish loop, eliciting the aspect of the uncanny that is driven by compulsive (that is, inescapable and involuntary) repetition (see Conley; Rickards 74; Soila).

In relation to moving images, anamorphosis is conventionally invoked in the narrow sense of a format produced by shooting a widescreen picture on standard 35 mm film (see Thomson). Such an application, however, does not

account for the fuller extent of anamorphic effects in film technologies and traditions. As Marshall Deutelbaum explains:

At one and the same time the motion picture image is both a flat, two-dimensional pattern of light and dark and an illusory three-dimensional reproduction of the scene that appeared in front of the camera. Critics and audiences almost never notice the two-dimensional pattern, responding instead to the stories that unfold in the illusory three-dimensional world. It takes an unusually assertive image – something like the bone tossed into the air in prehistoric times in [Stanley Kubrick’s] *2001* that with a cut instantaneously becomes a similarly shaped spaceship in flight – to make viewers notice a graphic element as such while a story takes place. (72)

In this understanding, filmic images are always-already anamorphic, which is to say the seemingly normative perspective they advance is a form of virtual reality-making that encourages viewers to read a reel of two-dimensional images as the more-or-less realistic expression of lived time-space. In this article, then, I develop an expanded conception of anamorphosis with respect to film, taking it to refer to distorted projections that require viewers to reconstitute – from an oblique perspective – the images they encounter.

In pursuing this analysis, I am especially interested in how anamorphosis might articulate the fulcrum between film and horror. From the time of its emergence, film has been understood as being imbued with magical powers and able to conjure up spectres, phantoms and monsters. As Brian Jarvis has explained, in the course of the nineteenth century, phantasmagoria shows and other proto-filmic entertainments “employed progressively more intricate combinations of mobile lanterns and projectors, screens and glass, smoke and mirrors to produce effects that anticipated the camerawork and editing of twentieth century cinema: fades, dissolves, cuts, zooms and superimposed images” (11; see also Botting and Spooner 1–2). There is, in other words, a foundational relationship between horror and film: by nature, cinematic technologies are amplificatory and decorporealising. From the time of its discovery, too, anamorphosis has been understood as a counterpoint to linear perspective which “has its place in the body of knowledge about the world ... and theories about the universe” (Baltrusaitis 1). Indeed, what anamorphosis reveals is that perspective is inescapably reliant on adjustments and exaggerations to remedy errors of vision and is thus based on phantoms, phantasmagoria and the necessary deformation of pictorial elements (3). Because it accentuates these effects in highly speculative ways, Baltrusaitis notes, anamorphosis has long-been associated with the irrational, the occult and theories concerning distorted truth and the nature of doubt (1). Bringing these observations together, I suggest that if horror has special resonance within an ecology of moving images, anamorphosis might be understood as its “natural” or redoubled expression.

The further key application of anamorphosis that I wish to develop is in relation to settler colonial histories. As a technical marvel or eccentricity, anamorphosis gained popularity in Europe at a time when scholars and

collectors were beginning to accumulate cabinets filled with wonders of the world: “stuffed monsters, rare objects, natural curiosities, perspective instruments, pictures by masters, everything that excited the mind and the imagination” (Baltrusaitis 26; see also Beaumont 29). In this sense, it needs to be understood as being contemporaneous with imperial expansionism and with the development of colonial cultures and imaginaries and associated techniques for “mastering space” (Ivakhiv 3). Moreover, in an anamorphic image, Baltrusaitis notes, nature and life pass through cataclysms to achieve a mysterious rebirth (2) – although such a rebirth cannot be completed because the image offers no mechanism of release. This makes anamorphosis particularly apt for expressing the order of a settler colonial place.

When would-be settlers arrive in a so-called new world land, they are disconcerted by the strangeness of what they find: impenetrable swamp-forests and unintelligible biodiversity that appears to lack key elements (such as terrestrial mammals, in the case of Aotearoa/New Zealand) while being filled with monstrously peculiar forms (large numbers of flightless birds which perform the ecological work of grazing and browsing; giant insects which assume the role of rodents; frogs whose eggs hatch miniature adult frogs rather than tadpoles; penguins that inhabit forests; ground-dwelling bats, and so on (see McDowall 4; MFE; DOC). In order to forge a future in such a land, settlers need to be able to master this space by *seeing it as another kind of potential place* – “rational, rectangularised, beholden to agriculture” (Park 307) – with such images “floating” ahead of knowledge (61). The transformative work of settlement involves reshaping the threatening, chaotic, destabilising and alien elements so that the place can be re-born as home: familiar, safe, controlled and controllable. Settlement is thus speculative and projective, and it proceeds from the perspective of settlers who are, in the first instance, “eccentric observers” (Beaumont 34) of what they encounter. If settlement is a long-term prospect and a matter of “ocularcentrism” (Ivakhiv 2), it is also immediate: here and now. For this reason, settlers must proceed by adopting an oblique angle of vision which enables them to see – in their mind’s eye – their permanently situated homeland-to-be (see Veracini 20). Baltrusaitis notes that, in relation to anamorphosis, “[p]erspective ceases to be a science of reality and becomes an instrument for producing hallucinations” (2). Extending this observation, I would suggest that the distortions of perspective that necessarily underpin the founding of a settler colonial place might be understood as hallucinatory devices.

In practical terms, hallucinatory settlement is not merely abstract or spectral but rather sows drastic and wide-scale human-wrought ecological transformation. In order to make their new homes in existing Indigenous homelands, settler populations induce ecological crisis by altering the environment, seeking to reproduce European geometries and ways of life (Veracini 22). Settlers set about felling forests, draining swamps, diverting waterways and converting wetland plains to make way for pastureland and urbanisation; they divide the land into alienable parcels comprising differentiated zones and categories of protection and development; and they implant vast numbers of new plant and animal species, unleashing feral ecologies in the process. The organisms selected for introduction in so-called new world places are those deemed “familiar,” “useful,” “missing” and

“missed” (McDowall 4–5 and vii) and they are intended to replace the “monstrous” creatures that already populate these places. Creating conditions in which endemic forms of biodiversity can no longer flourish, such superimpositions produce arenas of chaos or “agitated landscapes” (Baltrusaitis 12) whose scale and catastrophic nature may seem out of proportion to their apparent causes, and whose effects yield and bespeak disequilibrium (see Cooper and Brooking 209–10). As the ecosphere in a settler place undergoes radical transformation, and as what is ordinary shifts, existing cultural landscapes become submerged under roads, buildings, farmlands, towns, cities and reserves (Kawharu, “Introduction” 11). Newly-oblique angles of vision are required to see what is buried beneath the place that is coming-to-be, or to see the settler place as two places in one (that is, a place of long history aggressively overwritten by a place of shorter history).

On an ongoing basis, the longer history of the place is foreshortened by the virtualising imagework of settlement, which sets out to construct a singular, unified, coherent territory that will turn out to have been the settlers’ homeland all along. Such “settler holography” (Collinson and Turner n.p.) involves overlaying imported images over a pre-existing place or wrapping such images around the place. Yet the fact that the place retains its longer history gives particular weight to the reversionary (that is, collapsing or “unmaking”) phase of the anamorphic projection: now you see it; now you don’t. Despite efforts to elongate or stretch it to fit over the place, short settler history is undone by longer Indigenous histories, revealing the doubleness or splitness of the place and the logics of displacement that are at work. Anamorphosis, then, is profoundly a perspectival mode of settlement, and it accentuates the discontinuity, defamiliarisation and decomposition associated with founding a so-called new world place. It signals doubt and disturbance and it is not controllable as a trick of the artist’s trade or as a fashionable perversion or contrived effect or matter of cunning or virtuosity (Baltrusaitis 2, 12 and 19). Rather, it is a distortion that is experienced in intermittent and profoundly vertiginous ways by settler culture. For settler populations, the horror of settlement is to be returned to a state of freefall, with the solid ground of the settler endeavour shearing away or appearing to disappear. In such moments, the settler nation emerges as a fantasy or absurdity or spectral “non-place” (Beaumont 36); cataclysm is revealed as a permanent half-state; settlement becomes disintegration.

### **Screen Animal**

The characteristics of anamorphosis outlined above converge in concentrated ways in *Kitchen Sink*. Causing the fantasy world of settlement to disintegrate before a viewer’s eyes, the film’s moving imagework reveals settlement to be a profoundly anamorphic phenomenon. The film opens with a close-up shot of a brush being used to push swirling water down the plughole in a sink. A woman in her 20s or perhaps 30s has been washing dishes in her kitchen. As she finishes, she notices a dark, hairy thread protruding from the opening of the drain. She pulls at the thread, which becomes progressively thicker and more rope-like, and which is attached to something stuck in the pipe. With considerable effort, the woman manages to dislodge the blockage, which turns

out to be a baby creature covered with long, matted hair. The woman is repulsed and tries to dispose of the shaggy foetus by sealing it in a rubbish bag but it refuses to die, rapidly growing into a fur-covered man (or “manimal”). Showing tenderness towards him, the woman shaves off his fur so that his skin is clear and smooth, although she cuts him in the process. They share a bed – with the question of their sexual union left open – but the woman changes her mind as morning dawns, attempting to dispose of the manimal again. He refuses once more and they struggle violently. She retreats and he reaches out to touch her hair in a tender way. It appears that they will live romantically, erotically and/or reproductively ever after. As they kiss, however, she feels a stump of stubble sprouting on his nape, snapping at it with her finger and then tugging at it. The manimal howls and the woman screams. The camera zooms in as the woman pulls and pulls and pulls. The hair becomes an umbilicus protruding from the manimal’s skin, which becomes a navel and a birth canal and a whole landscape which looks and sounds like a volcano erupting. The film closes on this topographically unstable composition.

By the end of the film, then, *Kitchen Sink*’s imagework has gone “full circle” (Rickards 71; Maclean cited in Ruskin 64) or doubled back on itself. Formerly “homely” surroundings have been made strange, lines between life and death have been warped and the story is doomed to loop in endless replay, following the skein of the hair. In the first instance, the film’s horror turns on the “unusually assertive image” or “graphic element” (Deutelbaum 72) of the uninvited human-animal intruder whose attempted transformation into a cleanshaven romantic interest and potential sexual and reproductive partner is – to an unknowable degree – undone. This intruder is a “screen animal” (Creed 60–61; see also Veracini 86–94) in the sense that he is a fictional or artificial construction, a foil or projection. Towards the end, the film’s established viewpoint becomes inverted by means of a tracking shot that explicitly aligns viewers with the manimal’s perspective. At such a moment, as Barbara Creed notes (65), viewers are encouraged to see through the screen animal’s eyes – to identify with its desires, pleasures and pains; to feel through its body. The question of who or what the manimal in *Kitchen Sink* emblematises, however, and who or what viewers are invited to sympathise with by means of the film’s re-focalisation, remains unresolved. Or, to put it another way, if the manimal is both familiar and unfamiliar, a figure of the uncanny who recalls things that lie beyond conscious memory and who evokes new bestiaries of horror (Creed 65), just what those memories and horrors are seems less-than-clear.

To date, commentators have suggested that Maclean’s film extends storytelling traditions established by Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and the Pygmalion myth as recounted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and that it pays homage to television soaps, realist theatre and cinematic melodramas, evoking films that include *King Kong* (1933, 1976), *Alien* (1979) and *The Fly* (1986) (see Faber; Martin; Ruskin; Soila). Martin goes so far as to describe the ending as a “triumphant, ‘praying mantis’ sex murder” on the part of the woman (76). Yet these narrative and generic echoes fall short when the film is considered in its context in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Most obviously, the manimal reveals the film’s seemingly safe, domestic setting as being a fictional space created by and for settlement. According to its anamorphic logics, settlement is founded, in the first instance, on the fear that there is

something monstrously and terrifyingly unintelligible “out there.” Settlers, represented in Maclean’s film by the woman, must ward against boundary breaches in the form of corrosion, decay or intrusion, preventing the exteriorised and unwelcome element – whatever it is – from returning, because such a return will mark a reversion that unmakes whatever has been made in the space of settlement (Kavka). Yet, perversely, settlement is also founded on the desire to bond or fuse with whatever is in or from the place, forging a union that will overcome the threat of chaos at the same time as it supplies a naturalised sense of belonging or “natural occupancy” (Hardy; Kavka). Entwined fears and desires thus inform hallucinatory settlement. At just thirteen minutes long, *Kitchen Sink* is a film whose duration and pace are telling: settlement is only ever moments away from being consummated and/or from unravelling.

Following from this, a conventional postcolonial reading of the film might understand the manimal as an expression of Indigeneity or as a representation of the first people of Aotearoa (Māori or *tangata whenua*, people of the land). I will return to this question because I want to propose that the film has something significant to say about the matter of what is indigenous or endemic to the place – although not in the straightforward sense of representing an impetus to domesticate or “civilise” an element constructed as being “savage” or “wild” (see Martin; Meek; Rickards 71), or of re-staging a founding sexual union between settler and Indigene. Rather, I want to advance a reading of a different kind by taking the graphic assertiveness of the manimal literally and by approaching this from an awry or “eccentric” angle, which is what the film’s distortive imagework seems to demand. As Rickards has noted, *Kitchen Sink* raises questions about the nature of this figure’s animal nature (71). Quite apparently, the manimal does not resemble an invertebrate (such as a praying mantis), and he does not refer to any kind of national mythology about a terrestrial mammal endemic to Aotearoa/New Zealand (there was no such mythology before Peter Jackson imported and remade *King Kong* in 2004–05; see Creed; Meek; Potts 212). Indeed, from a settler point of view, the perceived absence of terrestrial mammals was the most disconcerting aspect of the country’s biodiversity – a gap swiftly plugged with an imported suite of creatures including livestock, domestic companion species, garden and woodland favourites, and wild game.

The monstrous creature in Maclean’s film, then, is not a monster *of* the place. Strikingly, he is incubated in a makeshift pouch (a rubbish bag) after the event of his birth, and his menacing foreignness is tied to his resolute furriness – facts which align him with the marsupial brushtail possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*), Aotearoa/New Zealand’s imported national monster and public object of fear and revilement. The possum’s backstory is an exemplary tale of the anamorphic horror of settlement. Deliberately and repeatedly introduced from Australia in the mid-nineteenth century, the possum was conscripted by settlers as an agent of the ecological makeover of settlement. Helping to convert “Aotearoa” into “New Zealand,” this species was supposed to support a commercial scheme in the form of a national fur industry (that is, settlers in Aotearoa/New Zealand detected an ecosystem gap that was also a profitability gap). Protected by law and by economic imperatives, the possum was nurtured in husbanding depots around the country and released into the wild to



establish free-living populations. In this, it has been a runaway – or feral – success, representing an unforeseen return on investment.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the possum has come to be vilified as a catastrophically harmful introduction (see Kirk; McDowall viii; MFE; DOC), and as Aotearoa/New Zealand’s leading public enemy, which is to say it has been subject to its own anamorphic reversion. As Annie Potts explains, “[t]o live in Aotearoa New Zealand is to experience a sustained and vigorous campaign against the brushtail possum” (201–2). Officially, possum-loathing in Aotearoa/New Zealand is founded on the possum’s reputation for destroying native flora and fauna, and government agencies promote the view that possums are ecological vandals in that they consume the country’s forests and kill its remnant native birds (see Kirk; MFE; DOC). Yet it is apparent that deeper economic factors motivate the hatred. As a reservoir and vector for bovine tuberculosis, the possum threatens the lucrative agro-industry on which Aotearoa/New Zealand is founded. Figured in the public domain as a corrosive and destabilising element, the possum has increasingly come to be demonised as an “anti-animal” (Holm) and its state-sponsored treatment has involved bounty-hunting, baiting, biochemical warfare (using aerial-dropped 1080 poison), and – more recently – banishment via the birth of the Predator Free 2050 campaign whose aim is to develop immunocontraceptive or gene editing technologies that might immobilise the possum’s reproductive capabilities and thus terminate its futurity. If the possum is a real element in Aotearoa/New Zealand, then, it is also a profoundly unreal or hyperreal one which bears culturally- and economically-constructed burdens and exposes environmental imperatives which have shifted in drastic and contradictory ways. As such, it is an anamorphic creature whose monstrosity is an expression and effect of the monstrosities associated with settlement.

### **Return of the Possum**

Understood as a possum-person, the manimal in *Kitchen Sink* would appear to function as the destabilising element in the film; he is the thing that is horrifically or monstrously out of place. At the same time, however, he exposes specific settler anxieties about the nature of the place and their aggressive transformation of it. To consider possums-as-settlers (and settlers-as-possums), the film suggests, is to trace an uncanny set of identifications, which might be sketched as follows:

1. Both possum and settler are non-endemic: they are foreigners, outsiders or aliens whose history in Aotearoa/New Zealand is short.
2. The brevity of this history notwithstanding, both possum and settler have profoundly disrupted, destroyed and reshaped existing local habitats as part of the process of making themselves at home in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Possums are close analogues to settlers in this regard, as creators of chaotic and agitated landscapes characterised by rapid deforestation and widespread loss of endemic biodiversity.
3. As territorial expansionists who have distributed themselves across available lands in Aotearoa/New Zealand, both possum and settler have been highly “successful” colonisers (Potts 211; see also Holm).

Both are resourceful and resilient and both have secured the future of their own settlement through reproductive and demographic dominance, exhibiting patterns of fecundity that have propelled them “out of synchronicity with the host community” (Frawley and McCalman 3).

4. Both possum and settler are figures associated with “death work” and “deathworlding” (Rose 82 and 12). The possum sows death in respect of native bush, native fauna and agricultural disease. Settler colonialism, too, proceeds in a death-generating vein. While settlers frame their efforts as giving birth to so-called new worlds, they are more properly invested in bringing about the ends of the worlds they encounter (Boswell, “Sensible Order” 363). In this sense, the radical disequilibrium that the settler project calls forth is necropolitical or thanatopolitical, involving modes of transformation that seek to displace and “unmake” worlds and lives (Rose 12) and include genocide, ecocide and/or “liquidation” of indigenous communities and endemic things (Veracini 35, 76; see also Smith and Turner).

[2] I borrow the notion of settler therianthrope from my colleague, Stephen Turner

The possum, then, may be understood as a double, hologram or therianthrope for the figure of the settler.[2] As an anamorphic pivot, the manimal in *Kitchen Sink* reveals a range of discomfiting similarities between invasive animals and invasive settlers. Seen in this light, the possum-person in the film represents something profoundly threatening and distressing to settler culture, which is settler culture itself. *Kitchen Sink*'s horror turns in part on the possum-person's death-defiance. As a memento mori, this figure reminds of the death that is necessarily visited by settlement, and there is no way to eradicate him or prevent his return: attempts to kill or dispose of him merely serve as mechanisms of his reanimation. In part, too, the film's horror turns on the woman's own undoing. Indeed, as she unconsciously begins twisting at her own hair midway through the film, she and the possum-person become fused. Because of this, the woman is gradually exposed as being out-of-place, and as having mistaken herself for a host in a place where she is, in fact, a guest, intruder or invader, “[v]agrant”, ‘usurper’, ‘thief’” (Smith, “Postcultural Hospitality” 76); she is aligned with the possum-person in this regard. As this suggests, the film's horror also turns in part on the fact that the woman can never not be in a relationship with the possum-person. He is both her isomorph or proxy and her “natural” partner, and birthing scenes shared between them – staged via plughole, plastic bag, bathtub, razor and pore – proliferate pointedly as the film progresses. Indeed, the possum – to a much greater degree than publicly longed-for emblems of national identity such as the kiwi – is one of the creatures with whom settlers in Aotearoa/New Zealand are most intimately and perpetually entwined. Through its economy of images, then, Maclean's film disgorges a “true” settler colonial horror story, revealing Aotearoa/New Zealand's seemingly natural landscapes as thanatopolitically distorted ecologies.

True to the workings of anamorphism, however, *Kitchen Sink* disgorges another vision of ecology and settlement as well. To bring the possum-person into focus as being “ordinary” or “not strange” is to throw the film's imagework and human-animal relations into different kinds of disarray, yielding a further or alternate horror from the perspective of settlement. In the terms of a Māori

worldview, every element in the lifeworld needs to be understood as being connected to every other element via *whakapapa* or the woven ground of genealogical connection. As Mere Roberts explains, “because there is in Māori cosmogony only one set of primal parents or ancestors (Ranginui and Papatuanuku) from whom all things ultimately trace descent, all things are related” (93). If humans and other creatures express kinship and are ordered and bound by familial ties within the larger cosmos, it makes sense to conceptualise creatures and people as “kinsfolk” (Roberts 94) who sustain and are sustained by shared ancestral landscapes. Such thinking, however, is not reducible to the conventional anthropocentric workings of settler therianthropy, which seeks out emblems of identification and creates screen animals as a matter of artifice and superimposition. Maclean’s film calls on viewers to see the hair associated with the possum-person as an umbilicus which, in turn, speaks of *whenua* – the Māori term both for placenta or afterbirth and for land or territory or ground (see Moorfield, “Whenua”). To be *tangata whenua* is to be a person of the place (that is, to be placentally connected to place or to be naturalised, at home, comfortable), while *hapū* is both the term for pregnancy (to be pregnant, conceived in the womb, expectant with child) and the term for a kinship group, clan, federation or sub-tribe descended from common ancestors (Moorfield, “Hapū,” “Whenua,” Park 319).

*Kitchen Sink* thus sets in motion a doubled arc of representations, which identifies the possum-person not with settlers but rather with the place and its Indigenous inhabitants. For this reason, the possum-person in Maclean’s film raises questions about *kaitiakitanga* (customary environmental management or stewardship). *Kaitiakitanga* seeks to maintain equilibrium in the lifeworld and to guard against unforeseen disorder, disturbance and disequilibrium (see Cooper and Brooking). As Merata Kawharu has explained, it is founded on principles that include accountability, reciprocity, guardianship and trusteeship, and it “weaves together ancestral, environmental and social threads of identity, purpose and practice” (“Environment as Marae Locale” 227). It is also based on *whakapapa* and on *tikanga*, which refers to correct or right conduct (Roberts 97). Through its moving imagework, then, *Kitchen Sink* opens up questions of perspective concerning the extension of hospitality to non-endemic organisms whose introduction has thrown local ecologies out-of-balance. Such questions have no easy answers. Yet, as Roberts notes, there is “no reason why new knowledge concerning the changing face of the biological and physical diversity of the New Zealand landscape cannot continue to be incorporated into whakapapa” (113). The brushtail possum’s own belonging would seem to be signalled in the first instance via the workings of language. In *te reo Māori* (the Māori language), the possum has come to be known as *paihamu*, a transliteration that simultaneously evokes the idea of being an “excellent forager” (see Moorfield, “Paihamu”). Through its name, the possum is woven into stories and oral traditions (*kōrero*) that refer to what happens in place and that will be passed down through generations over time. The possum also suspends normative European notions of death as termination and/or gothically-encoded haunting. From the perspective of Māori culture, passing away does not equate to being-absent from the world: “[p]resent and future circumstances are made sense of by referencing the past and therefore all contained within it – ancestors, gods and spiritual powers”

(Kawharu, “Environment as Marae Locale” 222). As this suggests, the possum cannot be erased; it will live on as part of the fabric of a place whose past remains ever-present (see Roberts 97–107).

Comments made by Kevin Prime, the environment coordinator for Ngatihine, are also instructive in considering the status of the possum in Aotearoa/New Zealand:

A pre-European Council of Elders ... would have accepted the possum as a bountiful food source, eaten its meat, brains and innards, used its fur for cloaks, used its bones for needles and adornments. ... Such a council would definitely have observed the habits of possums in relation to the moon, weather and seasons, had possum included in their hunting and harvesting calendar, caught and used possum as pets and decoys ... and declared a *rahui* when possum numbers fell below a sustainable level to allow the numbers to build up again. (3)

Prime’s striking counterfactual history of the possum’s relationship to Indigenous communities, traditions and cultural practices imagines a new past in order to call forth a different kind of future. The relationship between future and past is also expressed in *imi* views about possum control methods:

One hundred and fifty years after their ancestor Aperahama Taonui declared the land and its forests his father, Te Mahurehure of Hokianga protested the government’s plans to rid Waipoua Forest of possums by aerially poisoning it. They knew a sacred, indwelling spirit was responsible for the forest’s fruitfulness. Waipoua’s *mauri*, they said, would be destroyed, and when the *mauri* of a river, person, bird or forest goes into decline, everything does. (Park 319; see also Ogilvie et al.)

To cleanse possums in uncontrollable and wasteful ways – with no intention of utilising the “return” (that is, the gift or bounty) that they offer and represent, and at the cost of the larger life force and wellbeing of the place – emerges here as a compounding vision of chaos and disintegration. Such a prospect risks sending whatever remains since the advent of settlement spiralling down the proverbial plughole.

Considered in light of these concerns, Maclean’s film is highly ambiguous and its guest-host relations warp in alternate directions. If the woman turns out to be the element that is out-of-place – the unwelcome guest or intruder or illegitimate visitor (*manuhiri*) – this leaves open the possibility that the possum-person has access to some form of *manaakitanga* or hospitality which recognises the *mana* or authority of *tangata whenua* and which lies beyond the woman’s reach (Kawharu, “Environment as Marae Locale” 227; Smith, “Postcultural Hospitality” 78–80). Understood as a “naturalised” occupant of Aotearoa/New Zealand, the possum-person perhaps becomes a surrogate or proxy for what is endemic. As noted above, settlers desire union with Indigenous or naturalised occupants so that they can feel as though they are becoming-naturalised or becoming-endemic too. *Kitchen Sink*’s reproductive

logics, however, refuse such a union, pointing instead towards Rūaumoko, the god or ancestor of volcanoes, earthquakes and seasons, who is an unborn child trapped in the womb of Papatūānuku, the Earth mother (Reed and Calman 25). Rūaumoko speaks of a storied landscape, prior and ongoing, which is occluded by settler culture. Rūaumoko also speaks of reproductive logics which are beyond settlers' grasp. Bringing such understandings to the surface (or hauling them up in ways that break the surface), the possum-person in Maclean's film shows that the land is already-agitated or differently-agitated on a basis that exceeds the view of settlers, and that whatever is indwelling and yet-to-come (awaiting birth or rebirth) is not the fruit of settlement. The workings of anamorphosis in settler perspective, the film suggests, will be undone by a place whose longer histories undergird and engulf it.

### In/Conclusion

The striking anamorphic slippages in *Kitchen Sink's* visual rhetoric produce a succession of boundary breaches and category disturbances that require viewers to see a plughole as a lens, a blockage as a conduit, a strand of fur as an umbilicus, a follicle as a volcano, skin as land, Indigenous inhabitants as simultaneously displaced and aligned with possums as their furry replacements, hosts as guests, and possums as proxies for settlers whose own attachment to place and destructive will-to-makeover are endlessly ungrounded. These slippages of visual referent leave a viewer with an "impossible" object which reveals "Aotearoa/New Zealand" as an impossible place, and it is the possum-person – ambiguously affiliated both with settlers and with *tangata whenua* – who re-generates the impossibility. While the effects of these slippages are manifold, the irresolvability of *Kitchen Sink's* imagework makes it plain that the optics of settlement are incompatible with those of the stable spectator constructed by conventional European modes of vision (Beaumont 32). Settler technologies of perspective will turn out to be inadequate to the places they seek to reinscribe, and the seemingly-safe interior zones they produce will turn out to be both claustrophobic and already-breached.

In this sense, Maclean's film emerges as an unusually assertive graphic element in the national image-scape, simultaneously rehearsing and refusing the apparatuses and archives of vision to which settlement makes recourse. To read the film – as I have tried to do here – as an unreadable object (or as an object that defies reading) is to understand the film itself as being anamorphically possum-like in the disturbances it creates and the projections, misalignments and excesses it calls forth. To view this film is not to *see* something (a possum-monster in the kitchen, say, or a tidy parable about settlement) so much as to feel or experience the uncanny sense of *not-seeing*, or to find oneself channelled towards eccentric viewshafts that rupture conventions of seeing. The larger point made by or through *Kitchen Sink*, then, is not merely that Aotearoa/New Zealand is haunted. Rather, the film's mechanisms of haunting emerge from and refer directly to the ocular-technical, ecological and affective bases of settlement itself. For Indigenous inhabitants, the film suggests, the capacity of anamorphic perspective to describe the place is already inadequate and unhinged. Yet for settlers, there is no "outside" to this perspective; no escape from the heightened sense of their

own unintelligible alienness; no way to get clear of the proleptic promise of what is yet-to-come in a settler nation that must always picture itself as still-to-come. The loop is closed and freefall is inescapable as the images alternately resolve and collapse.

Because of this, the horror of Maclean's film seems strikingly prescient and the film's attention to the workings of anamorphism helps to explain the deeper set of problems associated with the Predator Free 2050 campaign. On one view, this campaign advances a conservation agenda that has newly-prioritised what was formerly considered monstrous and threatening: Predator Free 2050 seeks to erase Aotearoa/New Zealand's history of welcoming prospective pests and to valorise endemic biodiversity as a means of starting over. On another view, however, the campaign's promise of a disruptive and future-oriented moment of rebirth (and "proper" release) turns out to be an ordinary expression of the workings of anamorphosis. Predator Free 2050 is set to perpetuate the existing eco-horror of settlement: it is thanatopolitically-driven and distortive in aim, suggesting there is no outside to it – no way to get clear of the history that has spawned it. Indeed, the return that it bespeaks is a powerful form of settler self-revulsion.

A quarter of a century before the dawn of the Predator Free 2050 campaign, then, *Kitchen Sink* foretells Aotearoa/New Zealand's rebirth as a pest-free paradise as yet another expression of anamorphic ecology: a collapsing of what will come after with what has already come before; a form of nostalgic recourse to what will turn out to be a recursively-charged and vertiginous circuit of connections (Jarvis 16). Predator Free 2050 offers a vision that elides sterilisation and the halting of life with protecting and preserving life, and which reanimates scorched-earth colonial policies (Park 329). As such, it heralds no prospect of tidy resolution; no horizon from which to begin afresh; no way to cleanse or get clear of the horrors of settlement. Understood in anamorphic terms, Predator Free 2050 is as much about "unmaking" the settler nation as it is about "making" it (Baltrusaitis 3; Rose 12), and it emerges as a disturbance founded on and tethered to a mode of hallucination as old as the settler nation itself.

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