

## AUTHOR BIO

Wood Roberdeau, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London, where he also co-leads the Critical Ecologies research stream. His writing investigates visual art practices and philosophical post-humanism in terms of subjectivity and agency, materiality, temporality, cultivation, everyday aesthetics and geopoetics:  
[www.conceptualecologies.org](http://www.conceptualecologies.org).

# Scalar Aesthetics of Ecocinema: The Wall and The Survivalist

Wood Roberdeau

## ABSTRACT

This article concentrates on two twenty-first century examples of popular “ecocinema” in order to ask what moving images accomplish when they take on the scale effects of the Anthropocene at the level of the domestic microcosm. Both Julian Pölsler’s *The Wall* (2012) and Stephen Fingleton’s *The Survivalist* (2015) provide ample territory through which to explore questions of cohabitation and encounter, human and non-human animality, as well as the threatening but liberating qualities associated with communicating disaster, sustainability and responsibility for “end times.” Significantly, spatial and temporal delimitation is a theme common to both films and so a theoretical framework is established using examples of twentieth-century continental philosophy associated with the concept of “dwelling.” Heidegger’s investment in rootedness and belonging is read in conjunction with Levinas’s ethics of relationality and otherness; Derrida’s study of hostility embedded in hospitality and the spatial category of the “threshold” are of equal importance to my analysis. Not to be ignored is the eco-feminist stance that each film demands in surprisingly similar ways. Accordingly, the more recent work of Haraway and others is paramount.

## KEYWORDS

aesthetics; cohabitations; eco-deconstruction; eco-feminism; eco-psychology; film studies

With an aim to explore the speculative remembrance and future unfolding of contemporary ecocriticism and the moving image, this article examines two feature films and the possibility of their *poiesis*. Firstly, I turn to Julian Pölsler's *The Wall* (2012), in which a woman finds herself mysteriously confined to an alpine wilderness where she is forced into cyclical relationships with the *umwelt*; her subjective evolution and psychological confusion are enhanced thanks to lingering durational shots that follow her through landscapes (and "memoryscapes") spanning the months and seasons (fig. 1). Secondly, I examine Stephen Fingleton's *The Survivalist* (2015), a post-apocalyptic and ruminative microcosm set in Northern Ireland. Here, the volatile relationships of three protagonists inhabiting a forest can be charted across several days. Themes of cooperation and (mis)trust are tied to key actions, objects and imagery (e.g., of foraging, farming, repairing, hiding) that are closely considered in terms of experience, gender politics and sacrifice.



**Fig. 1** *The Wall*. Dir. Julian Pölsler. StudioCanal, 2012.

Today's ecocinematic moving image continues to raise questions of scale and visibility. In many ways, it acts as both mirror and prism for subjective circumstances and situations that are then projected towards more objective concerns. "The challenge for environmental thinking," writes Ursula Heise, "is to shift the core of its cultural imagination from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet" (56). Filmmakers and viewers in the Anthropocene are engaging with scalar aesthetics in new ways that intentionally and accidentally confuse and deterritorialise the local and the global. Heise's work on the effects of technological imaging and its scope for planetary thinking or what she calls "eco-cosmopolitanism" includes the argument that "developing a 'sense of place' cannot mean a return to the natural in and of itself, but at best an approach to the natural from within a different cultural framework" (45). In other words, "nature" as an object apart from "culture" connotes a disjuncture between the global and the local that perpetuates a kind of unproductive distance for ecologically-attuned action. The two films I have selected, as will be seen, suggest and problematise this "different cultural framework" for addressing the ecological, specifically through the exploration of human and non-human cohabitations.

Ecocinema addresses and experiments with what Timothy Clark calls the "incalculable metamorphosis" of scale (84). He considers scale as an

“element hiding itself in the ‘givenness’ of any phenomenon” and therefore as something that changes and surprises with perspective (84). The camera’s ability to connect with such effects often delivers an “aesthetics” of scale that arguably becomes the most accessible way for perceivers to grasp the crises and welcome the nuances of the lived environment today.

In *Ecologies of the Moving Image* (2013), Adrian Ivakhiv demonstrates how cinema is “cosmomorphic;” it operates as an assemblage of evocative images, sounds, and directives and, as such, poetically makes worlds. Moreover, “[f]ictional worlds are simplified yet intensified versions of actual cultural worlds” (6–7). Ivakhiv’s argument is largely informed by Heidegger’s philosophy of “world-making.” The advent of the cinematic moving image substantiated the claim that the world perpetuates, or “worlds,” itself. It absorbs the materiality of “earth” or the inhabited spaces of both humans and non-humans and recomposes those spaces as impactful and influential landscapes. Importantly, such scale effects do not produce artificial or wholly fictional worlds, but “altered” worlds that directly affect and develop any understanding of “reality” (25). While *The Wall* and *The Survivalist* are twenty-first century productions, their format and content point towards environmental themes to be found in twentieth-century critical theory focused on ontology, ethics and meaning. For the editors of *Eco-Deconstruction* (2018), it is continental philosophy to which one might now turn if a more relational or phenomenological emphasis between human beings and the non-human environment is desired, following the arguably less effective and more romantic versions of environmental activism that have emerged in recent years (Fritsch, Lynes and Wood 1–3). Accordingly, the spatio-temporal condition of “dwelling” can be viewed through a philosophical triumvirate that addresses compositional choices made possible by cinema’s entanglement with ecology and imagery, or, *poiesis*. Heidegger’s search for a unified aesthetics, Levinas’s ethical approach to interiority and exteriority, and Derrida’s contextualisation and definition of hospitality each inform an argument for how selected scenes deliver a powerful message for thinking sustainability in the face of environmental upheaval. Both films interrogate deep, or geological, time and its effects on mundane temporalities; that is, sensorial registers become enhanced by very different modes of attention directed at the poetics of their time and space. Emphasis is placed on the notion of “habit” or the “everyday” gesture as a constant with which the actors and directors interrogate human impact on the earth and the complexity of our animality.

### *The Wall*

Marlen Haushofer’s 1968 novel *Die Wand* (*The Wall*) is a startling and intimate example of how experimental writing and a steady stream of consciousness can produce a powerful work of fiction. It could be seen as a European counterpart to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), in which a tense contrast is established between romantic idyll and cataclysmic event. Both confirm an historical context for early environmentalist discourse that might best be described as one of trepidation and warning, in that they perform literary manifestations of scalar climate change for a non-specialist

readership. Published in the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis and its threat of nuclear conflict, Carson's book begins with "A Fable for Tomorrow," a parable in which an abundantly pastoral American town falls prey to an "evil spell" attributed to the proliferation of market-driven pesticides and their connection to agribusiness. Thusly, there is a sense of moving from harmony to disharmony, or, from a healthy ecosphere to a contaminated one as a result of humankind's irresponsibility. Haushofer's novel differs, in that it is much less didactic and, as such, arguably represents an account of environmental angst that is perhaps more fitting to the contemporary moment. *The Wall's* protagonist fears ennui and the sinister approach of something real but as yet undefinable. The *in medias res* style of the book articulates a particular subjectivity that resonates with the mental inadequacies one faces when "dwelling" in "end times." Once rooted to her local predicament, she realises: "I had achieved little that I had wanted, and everything that I had achieved I had ceased to want" (50). The (in)action of her catharsis takes place within a sort of limbo between post-war consumerist corruption and a promising but limited new world.

Pölsler's film adaptation is very loyal to the style and trajectory of the novel. It opens to the sound of crows and to a dark scene of the Woman writing her diary or "report" of her experiences. She disclaims her confusion about linear narrative and memory, and quickly communicates a central concept for the viewer: that of disorientation. The report (to which the novel itself equates) is a written account of trials and tribulations on the back of old and useless calendars that soon becomes an anchor amidst a sea of growing uncertainties magnified by a twenty-first century viewer's awareness of doomsday predictions and the shifting sands of ecological awareness. Late in the film there are clues that reveal a total period of two years (eight seasons) spent in isolation in the Austrian Alps. Like the novel, Pölsler's script jumps from past to present to future with surprising results for ecocinema that I will address in due course. For now, it is important to account for the mysterious event that is the Wall itself and what it portends.

Flashing back, the Woman arrives by car with two friends and their dog at a hunting lodge in the mountains. The two friends return to town without her, allowing her to settle in for the night; the camera fixes on the dog (Lynx) who is unwilling to leave the site. Something eventful comes during the night; this is visually communicated by a slow, rising camera shot of the lake and mountains. What could be a (super)natural phenomenon is accompanied by a thumping sound; the Woman's heartbeat or corporeal senses overtake her ability to comprehend the event. Such a combination of sound and image begins to perform a *poiesis* that is sustained throughout from this point onward.

The Wall too becomes a significant limit concept, demanding that we contemplate what exactly it forces and why it is invisible. To start, one might review Henri Lefebvre's notion of "spatial architectonics." By citing Marx's interest of a spider in its web alongside the example of how a seashell is formed, the sociologist highlights how spaces are not activated by authorial construction or original design, but rather are formed by the cooperative

energies of inhabitants and the materials of inhabitation. In *The Production of Space* (1974), Lefebvre writes:

[...] the relationship between nature and space is *immediate* in the sense that it does not depend on the mediation of an external force, whether natural or divine. The law of space resides within space itself, and cannot be resolved into a deceptively clear inside-*versus*-outside relationship, which is merely a *representation of space*. (172–173, emphases original)

Could the invisible Wall be understood as a spatial inauguration in these terms rather than as a prison that oppresses and constricts? If the spider presents a problematic for the separation of mind and body (intelligence and labour), is an ecocinematic microcosm what is needed to energise modern subjectivity? Upon discovering the Wall, the Woman is expectedly anxious but sceptical. As the film progresses, however, it becomes easier to accept that what first appears as a curse could in fact be a blessing, in the sense that it liberates spatial relationships for those trapped in the microcosm. The realisation that time has stopped outside the Wall enhances this possibility for redefined eco-social space. For Clark, spatial scale has been frequently understood as the “all-structuring grammar” of the world and, in a Derridean sense, undergoes a constant state of deconstruction (83). Environmental conditions are shown to be unexpected and uncertain with the arrival of the Wall; the Woman is freed from the systemic world and introduced to the “worlding” capacity of her newfound perspective. Clark states: “Scale effects manifest materially the priority of alterity within iteration” and therein lies “a difference of things and forces” (86). Such non-fixity suggests a volatility to dwelling in any environment. The ability to see this newly exposed reality has been granted by the Wall, in that everyday habit, as a constant choreography by which the world is ordered, sustained and survived becomes a fresh and investigative temporality.

The arrival of the Wall also invokes Heidegger’s notion of “being” or “dwelling” in the world and his famous model of the “fourfold” (simply put: earth, sky, divinities and mortals). As David Macauley notes, it “is characterised by unity-in-diversity or [...] a wholeness through difference – a notion that suggests complementarity, participation, and differentiation but also ontological parity” (300). The Woman’s confinement could therefore be thought as a return to such a lost state or environmental unity; a connection with “world” (the absolute) via “earth” (the phenomenal). Again, for Heidegger, it is thanks to the “care” we give to the earthly, material or phenomenal that allows us to engage with or experience the presencing of the worldly (*Being and Time* 63). Though anthropocentric in its argumentation, there are implications here for an unavoidable human engagement with a wider sphere and, in this case, one augmented by this fantastical, fictional or poetic context.

Kelly Oliver provides a helpful reading of Heidegger’s early work and of his thoughts on limits in particular. For Heidegger, she states, “[r]estraint is a way of preparing for the strife between earth and world, and it disposes the essential strife between earth and world. Restraint and stillness give rise to

truth insofar as they let it happen” (*Earth and World* 129). There are many moments in the film where Clark’s “scale effects” of spatial and temporal restraints or limitations (decelerations) are shown to visibly and psychologically alter the Woman and her newfound territory. This includes, for example, the framing of her small silhouette against the Wall and its Alpine backdrop that seems to simultaneously approach and retreat from the camera; or, a nightmare sequence where the Wall moves to shut her even further into the interior of the lodge itself, raising issues of survival and escape; as well as long angle shots of the Woman and Lynx together in a beautiful but terribly sublime landscape. Looking through binoculars, she observes the inaccessible neighbouring spaces and contemplates being the last human on earth. These are moments of recognition and resilience. The strife between earth and world (the phenomenal or material versus the noumenal or absolute that exists beyond perceptibility) is played out within the restrained microcosm established by the Wall. It is a strife of existence, or “being-in-the-world,” that reveals the drama of the film to be found in the Woman’s eventual acknowledgement of this Heideggerian argument; and one that perhaps speaks to the recognition and resilience needed in our contemporary age of global warming and demands for sustainable living.

Soon the Woman is astonished by the arrival of Bella the cow, a wandering farm animal also trapped by the Wall. Due to the pacing of the film, this arrival is presented as an event in its own right; an encounter with an Other is introduced into the microcosm. Writing after and, to a large extent, in response to Heidegger’s existential phenomenology, Levinas wrestled with the problem of “nature” and “ethics” in a world post-Holocaust. On this point, Herzog claims that

In his philosophy, nature most often stands for being and perseverance in being – that is, *conatus*. In other words, it is what is and wants to be [...] Ethics is a relationship with an infinite transcendence that is not found in nature and that interrupts or challenges perseverance in being. (360)

To be ethical is therefore to resist what seem to be unbreakable patterns or regimes. The introduction of another being into the Woman’s diminished world prompts the desperate act of ramming the Wall with the car in which she arrived. Unsuccessful, she then places both hands on the Wall and the camera puts the viewer in her place, as though his or her own arms are extended against unjust confinement. For Ivakhiv, this is what makes many films “anthropomorphic.” It “creates the human, the *anthropos*, as distinct from the rest of the animate and inanimate world within which it continually emerges” (10). With the arrival of Bella, a humane ethics becomes a central aspect of the Woman’s contemplative state. She becomes responsible for both Lynx and Bella, and this is what gives her a renewed sense of (shared) purpose. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas develops an ethics of dwelling that depends upon a mode of “recollection,” or, “a suspension of the immediate reactions the world solicits in view of a greater attention to oneself, one’s possibilities, and the situation” when faced by others (154). Significantly, he explores the concept of the feminine and the figure of woman as the “condition of recollection ... interiority ... and inhabitation”

(155). Rather than essentialise this figure as one gender segregated from the other, it seems Levinas attempts to dislodge the androcentric position that assumes individuals are singularly isolated in the world and therefore disposed to the oppression of others. I will return to this point in my analysis of *The Survivalist*, not least because a transcendental ethics not found in nature is surely challenged by ecocinema.

Ten days after the advent of the Wall, there is despair. Suicide or a life of labour and animal companionship are the only two options left and, thanks to her ethics, the Woman remains alive and diligent in her cultivation and dwelling for the sake of her cohabitants. Recalling Lefebvre's claims for spatial dynamism, the agricultural labour the Woman undertakes and how it is ecocritically framed by Pölsler are highly significant for what the film accomplishes overall; namely, the necessary confusion of what poets Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts identify as "progressive detachment" in genetics (164).

In their chapter "Woodlands," Farley and Roberts ascertain a positive and negative view for this biological occurrence (164–166). If, as a species, we have progressively detached from environmental intuition (such as that which "tells" a bird how to build its nest) by way of cultural evolution, then we have arrived at a broad conceptualisation of human "civilisation." If, however, we look at such development in the way the Woman does in *The Wall*, this progression can be interpreted as a regression; that is, as a loss of something inherent to our being in and part of the world. The rhythmic *poiesis* that this film exercises goes a long way towards challenging such a rigidly scientific definition of linear evolution. Further, detachment and disorientation are what Alexa Weik von Mossner might describe as the "affective state" of both protagonist and viewers (10–11). There is a tension between the jarring and the repetitious, the familiar and the unfamiliar, knowledge and vulnerability in the film.

Almost in time to reward the Woman's efforts, a grey cat arrives, adding a fourth companion to the collective. The Woman attempts deer hunting with Lynx and tries the car radio only to find static and an area map in the glove box. From here, it is as if a sense of fulfilment and dedication propels the film and allows the ecocinematic image to get to work. The first of several long, exaggerated shots depicts the Woman traversing the landscape by crossing the frame slowly from side to side. For the deer hunt, this is from left to right, then right to left in the allegorically dark and dense forest. There is an irony here, in that the moving image underscores a slow, repetitive and rhythmic movement through local territory that sits at odds with a digital culture used to slick edits and jump-cuts. Ivakhiv would assert the "geomorphic" nature of the film, in that it "deals with cinema's production of territoriality, of hereness and thereness, homeness and awyeness" (7–8). In other words, the film actively determines a re-attachment to the lived environment by means of a scalar aesthetics. The Woman discovers a lumber truck not seen before and backs away; all encounters become contingent and allude to a viewer's knowledge of the "productive friction of global connections" that arise from such encounters (Tsing 3). At several points, the camera captures a familiar figure: that of Caspar David Friedrich's

*Wanderer Above the Sea and Fog* (1818). Ridge-top vistas perform and query the anthropocentric (Eurocentric, androcentric) gaze over a wilderness from inside a metaphorical bell jar; the Woman's interior monologue tells us how "the forest lay paralysed" in the "warmth and light" on the mountain top. A bird cries overhead. Everything frozen in time is preferable to the chaotic thoughts of modernity. The Woman has a vision of a wounded and dying deer in what is an unrelentingly fixed framing, followed by a thunderstorm in the night.

During the storm, the cat is vulnerable and shares an affinity with the Woman's predicament. These scenes with the cat bring to mind Derrida's reflections on his own exposed human vulnerability when unclothed and faced with the animal gaze. He declares: "The animal [...] is not naked because it is naked. It doesn't feel its own nudity. There is no nudity 'in nature'. There is only the sentiment, the affect, the (conscious or unconscious) experience of existing in nakedness" ("The Animal" 374). The cultured or civilised world of humans involves "shame and technicity together" ("The Animal" 374). In other words, with the aforementioned "progressive detachment" in human evolution comes the burden of shame, which could be equated (poetically) with a sense of ecological loss and lack of intuition. Derrida also covers this problem in the first volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2010), in which he pits the poetic against the political, claiming that "[p]oetic majesty or the majesty of art is used against political majesty to show how political majesty is itself an art form, a performance, or a fiction" (Oliver, *Earth and World* 191). To put it another way, poiesis or visual art – in this case, the art form of the moving image – might subvert all illusions of anthropocentric power for the viewer. Indeed, as an example of ecocinema, *The Wall* achieves remarkable scenes in which the human protagonist and the other animals encounter one another at registers that evoke Donna Haraway's work on companionship, which explores "response-ability" to the planet through new forms of "conjugation" and the "sowing" of worlds through alternative models of kinship (110, 117). There is a remarkable scene of the Woman scything grass to make hay for the other animals. One could see this as a quintessential form of "peasant" labour that problematises any detachment of mind from body. Paul Kingsnorth has reflected on what effects this activity has on human perception and experience during times of environmental obfuscation:

Using a scythe properly is a meditation [...] Everything is connected to everything else, and if it isn't, it doesn't work: your blade tip jams into the ground, you blunt the edge on a molehill you didn't notice, you pull a muscle in your back, you slice your finger as you're honing. Focus – relaxed focus – is the key to mowing well. (127–128)

Pölsler's camera takes more side-to-side shots of the Woman, this time carrying hay from the fields; she again touches the Wall that now communicates a temporal division between past and present. She reflects further at the watering hole on how her own survival requires being hospitable to others; this becomes her purpose and, as such, there is the welcome loss of her own sovereignty. She is then shown eating the fruits of



her labour within her newly founded domestic space, and it is at this point that Pearl, the grey cat's white kitten, is born as dusk falls.

The structure of the narrative then shifts and presents the two-year period behind the Wall in a more disjointed manner. In the first year, the Woman arrives and adapts to her situation. At the end of her second year, she is engaged in reflection and narration. Hence, there is a deliberate confusion of space and place, as well as of past and present. For this reason, I will continue by categorising the year, the season and the site of events in the order of their assemblage:

*First year; autumn; hunting lodge in the valley:* Lynx's enthusiasm for the outdoors inspires but also frightens the Woman. *Second year; winter; hunting lodge in the valley:* Lynx has died for unknown reasons and haunts the Woman as a guardian companion. *First year; winter; hunting lodge in the valley:* much time has passed since the arrival and the "foehn" wind comes to the valley, causing events that result in the loss and death of Pearl; a moral dilemma confronts the Woman when she ponders hunting the fox that killed the white cat, again raising questions for civilisation and animality. The burden of killing is part of survival and the Woman acknowledges an early self-loathing for the need to kill roe deer for food. Bella the cow gives birth to the Bull on an especially cold night. *Second year; winter; hunting lodge in the valley:* a more experienced Woman hunts without Lynx; the camera follows her along a slow, diagonal path from foreground to background; the landscape is bleak and her loneliness is evident. *First year; spring; the Alm:* the Woman and animals migrate to a chalet and pasture above the treeline for the warmer months; she feels no need to write her report thanks to the clarity of view over vast distances. *First year; summer; the Alm:* a time of clear thinking continues; the Woman contemplates the moon through binoculars and a calmness descends within the interior of the Wall. Importantly, a series of still camera shots is included here – silhouettes of the Woman and the other animals from afar and embedded in the landscape. The Woman's voice states: "A big hand stopped the clock in my head," and "[t]he forest has put down roots in me." Her old self and her new self are contrasted, and she has been absorbed into dynamic space, no longer an "absurd" singularity in the wider world. *First year; autumn; hunting lodge in the valley:* "[t]ime is passing so quickly," she states. There is newly fallen snow and the need to gather the hay. *Second year; winter; hunting lodge in the valley:* the Woman is down from the Alm and acknowledges that an "intelligence to resist the natural course of things" is a very human trait but the "wrong path" to take. There is a slow shot of her walking diagonally in the snow from the upper right background of the frame to the lower left foreground. The viewer is reminded of the opening sequence of crows calling as a rare white crow appears while the Woman considers adapting to a "new order;" she traverses the snow in a straight line from middle foreground to middle background. The act of walking is framed as a poetic and political act (Burnside 105). *First year; summer; the Alm:* the Woman no longer cares about the Wall. It is at this stage that the question of dwelling-as-sustainability as an integral part of environmentalist discourse is foregrounded by the film. Over time, by realigning with her immediate or local environment (as demarcated by the Wall), she has achieved a functioning *permaculture* soon to be challenged. Returning to the chalet with

Lynx, she encounters a man slaughtering the Bull with an axe; Lynx attacks him and is also slain. The Woman shoots the Man dead in return, with no further dramatisation of his presence. *First year; autumn; hunting lodge in the valley*: the Woman harvests; but now she is with only Bella and the grey cat. *Second year; winter; hunting lodge in the valley*: memories of the first year and the routine of domestic tasks have become twin pillars of the Woman's existence. She runs out of writing paper for her report as the crows can be heard returning. The film ends with the White Crow waiting for her outside, understood to be outcast from the murder of crows.

The above synopsis demonstrates how the film might be interpreted as both anthropomorphic (subjective) and geomorphic (objective). Throughout, there exist relational scale effects among objects or materials (resources), a human protagonist, and her non-human but more than mere animal companions that suffer and thrive alongside her. For Ivakhiv, this would make *The Wall* “animamorphic,” in that it produces an entangled but “sensuous texture of what appears to be life” (8). In a way, the unexpected transitions among scenes and seasons communicates a devolution of human space and time to a much deeper space-time – this zone connects firmly with the problems posed by the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch and our ability to grasp it as such – complicit within it and unable to escape. Moreover, it is indeed remarkable that the Woman and her companions construct their new domicile co-dependently. This female survivalist, along with her cats, cow, bull and faithful dog, “become with” one another in ways particular to a certain type of knowledge that exists outside of androcentric planetarity (Haraway 55). For Catriona Sandilands, this knowledge is best described by the appearance of the “political animal,” or, that which “signals the sociality of our animal-ness, the place where nature – ours and Others – appears in political discourse” (205). Yet, once established by the film, this discourse is abruptly interrupted by the strange appearance of that male survivalist the Woman is forced to kill. Her lone existence in a world turned wilderness sounds an alarm for what Greta Gaard refers to as a “feminist ethical approach to climate justice” (20). If, she writes, “first world overconsumption” is “produced by masculinist ideology,” then the domestic sustainability of women has been insufficiently examined in relation to climate change (20). She continues, “women are indeed the ones most severely affected by climate change and natural disasters, but their vulnerability is not innate; rather it is a result of inequities produced through gendered social roles, discrimination, and poverty” (23). It is this peculiar relationship between gender politics and contemporary ecocriticism that creates a link to my second and more recent example of ecocinema.

### *The Survivalist*

Fingleton's debut feature film *The Survivalist* (2015) illuminates and rightly complicates many accepted principles within Leftist environmentalism; not least that of sustainable cultivation for green futures. I will focus on how the film uses temporality and relational discomfort to suggest not a clearer way to greening but a necessarily opaque and entangled path; one that leads to a

much needed and darkly ecological twenty-first century counterweight to what might be called twentieth-century “cultures of repair.”

The setting in the film is entirely interstitial, taking place between the aftermath of an unidentified apocalyptic event and the abrupt introduction of a final chapter. As such, the opening credits are what provide viewers with a minor contextual indicator: a graphic in which two timelines depart together and then diverge; a red line represents world population growth and a blue line represents the rise and drastic fall of oil production. Incompatibility and abuse are suggested between the world of humans and the world of things; indeed, the sequence reminds us of the charts and diagrams found in *The Limits to Growth*, published by the Club of Rome in the early 1970s (Meadows). We are then quickly dropped into an unfamiliar space-time, and it is Fingleton’s decision to inhabit this state and to test its durational limits that sets *The Survivalist* apart from other popular outputs that address anthropogenic fallout. The way the lived environment is visually manipulated and how key infra-ordinary moments are underscored allow the film to be introduced to a theoretical framework for dwelling that might reveal its latent significance for the contemporary discourse of “dark ecology.”

In opposition to the “negative” or reparative “feedback relations” of deep ecology, Levi R. Bryant has argued for a “black ecology” that functions thanks to an acceptance of “positive feedback relations” or those contingent modes of construction and destruction that push the Earth towards necessarily uncertain futures (290). Additionally, Timothy Morton has defended the “temporal undulation” of “hyperobjects” while Ben Woodard has plumbed the depths of a “new geophilosophy,” ungrounding us by identifying surprising tensions between “deep time” and “quotidian time.” It is alongside these variations of speculative realism that we might locate the complexities of *The Survivalist*; its human themes of community, creative labour and trust insist that those twentieth-century philosophies that have prompted the posthuman or speculative turn be revisited.

Thanks to the director’s attention to “quotidian time,” by my count, all action takes place over the span of thirteen days. *Day One* introduces the Survivalist, alone in the forest performing essential tasks that are augmented by jump cuts (gardening, hunting, perimeter checks, etc.). Early on, there is a sense of a constant conditionality that points to what I will later clarify as a “future-present” mode. As viewers, we observe the man’s *own* observational experiences and the day is capped by a dream sequence that suggests a traumatic and catalytic past event. Marc Augé has written of forgetting as the paradoxical condition of memory and forgetting as the form of memory that is always tied to an experience of the present (57–58). That overlay is performed at the dawning of *Day Two* by a phantom hand; an absent presence touching the man’s shoulder before quotidian time resumes and we witness the banal falling of rain alongside intimate routine acts and the burning of old photographs. These are arguable signs of the Survivalist’s solitary attempt to regain a sense of purpose and ownership.

In his essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Heidegger defines rootedness or locational belonging. “[S]pace is not something that faces man,” he states;

there is no externality from which to escape ontology. “Even when mortals turn ‘inward,’ taking stock of themselves, they do not leave behind their belonging to the fourfold [...] Man’s relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 154–155). Heidegger’s existential phenomenology depends upon a notion of *technē* as that which supports a human agency or “letting appear” of things; while it is terribly anthropocentric, it substantiates the homestead as a microcosm for conceiving macrocosmic absolutes or unknowns (157). If, as Oliver has argued, for Heidegger “[o]ur being toward death is a way of being exposed” (*Earth and World* 142), then it follows that the state of dwelling is enhanced by the *a priori* attribute of building, which also constitutes thought itself as an integral part of *Dasein*. In this way, we can understand the Survivalist himself as part of a functioning environmental or spatial paradigm, allegorised by his own embodiment and the enclosures of hut and garden.

The opening scenes of *The Survivalist* constitute a clear focus on the determination of domicile or site of inhabitation and therefore the habitual, now connected to place as well as to temporal routine. Writing in the aftermath of the Holocaust but trapped by methodological individualism, Heidegger concludes a cyclical historicity for human-being: “mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling [...] they *must ever learn to dwell*” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 157, 159). Presumably, through great effort, this knowledge can be obtained, resulting in an aesthetics of dwelling or transcendental phenomenology. Also writing in the 1950s, and pondering birds’ nests, Gaston Bachelard realised that “[t]he nest, quite as much as [what he calls] the oneiric house [...] knows nothing of the hostility of the world” (103). While both Heidegger and Bachelard’s work on the subject’s consciousness of objects and zones of encounter raises useful questions for experience and how space becomes a rooted place, the preoccupation with insularity makes it unprepared for the variable perspectives that undoubtedly arrive with Others.

The Survivalist is awakened suddenly on *Day Three* by noises in the garden. Two women approach the hut and, as viewers, we take part in what Derrida refers to as “paralysis on the threshold” (“Hostipitality,” 14). Negotiations commence in which looted jewellery is refused by the man before seed packets (the “real treasure”) buy Kathryn and her daughter Milja a place at the man’s table; an exchange such as this immediately isolates the two seed-bearing women as representatives of “Nature”-as-feminine. A customary choreography ensues, but mealtime conversation quickly takes on the tone of interrogation. “Oikonomia” or the “law of the household,” with etymological connections to both “ecology” and “economy,” is explored by this simple series of domestic exchanges or power plays (4). Sex with Milja is offered in exchange for more food.

Sandilands’s study of feminist histories, ecologies and democracy analyses Carolyn Merchant’s work as a seminal example of socialist ecofeminism that emerged in the 1980s (57–61). In *Reinventing Eden* (2013), Merchant recounts the “Recovery story” for a paradise lost, a part of Christianity that, she argues, constitutes the foundational ideology for modern or colonialist

industrialism, as well as masculinist and reparative environmentalism. The Fall of Adam and Eve, as an integral part of religious doctrine, is shown to have merged over time with concepts of scientific truth. A worldview that “human labour would redeem the souls of men and women, while cultivation and domestication would redeem the earthly wilderness” (and thereby reunify a traumatic earth with God) gestures towards the figure of a “survivalist” as the caretaker of a damaged planet (19). It is Merchant’s detailed attention to how this worldview is bound to gender that, I would argue, resonates with Fingleton’s almost allegorical portrayal of male and female human beings in the *Umwelt*. The Eden myth establishes a dialectical “Nature” attached to the first man and the first woman. After the Fall, Adam is no longer an image of the Creator but is instead charged with recovering the earth through a discovered *technē*; agriculture, for instance, becomes a necessary labour or technology. Eve, on the other hand, becomes a symbol for a “mother” Nature or a wilderness in need of subdual (20–21).

On *Day Four* the women request to join forces with the Survivalist and are refused. Milja attempts to improve the situation by shaving the man’s beard with a straight razor to establish equanimity. Recalling Levinas’s investment in “recollection,” it is at this moment that an ethical dimension of dwelling resonates. He elaborates:

Recollection in a home open to the Other – hospitality – is the concrete and initial fact of human recollection and separation; it coincides with the Desire for the Other absolutely transcendent. The chosen home *is the very opposite of a root*. (172, emphasis added)

By this he means to expand the scope of interior-driven isolated subjects to include a sense of identity formation, or, “recollection,” based on an ethical phenomenology of “separation.” That is, the *fact* of the face of the other compels a reappraisal of singularisation when it comes to dwelling, making the home not a specific site or secure position but a mobile and transmutable set of relations with other dwellers. Indeed, Levinas’s juxtaposition of totality and infinity speaks to the spatial dynamic of unavoidably shared interiors and exteriors. As shown in my analysis of *The Wall*, this drive to re-collect the disjointed is explained further in terms of “feminine alterity;” woman becomes a key figure for thinking hospitable encounters of departure and return (155).

*Day Five* sees the trio silently farming together and connects with Michael Marder’s study of “vegetal being” as one based on “the nature of a gift outside of circuits of exchange” (in Irigaray and Marder 208). And yet it is at this point that Kathryn separates herself to search the hut and plots to take control of the Survivalist’s shotgun, thereby gaining the upper hand. On *Day Six*, an Intruder abducts Milja at gunpoint while she bathes in a nearby stream. The Survivalist pursues them to a meadow, where he finds his shotgun shells to be missing. He nevertheless overcomes the Intruder but is gravely injured. Back in the hut, the women cauterise the wound, approaching further levels of trust. By *Day Seven* the wound has become infected and the man has fallen very ill. He enlists the aid of maggots from

nearby graves that are also aiding the growth of edible mushrooms. Away in the woods, the two women discuss the fate of the man. During the night, his nightmare recurs, in which it is revealed the traumatic past event was the murder of his brother while both were on the run. At this stage, it is worth noting the setting of Northern Ireland; and the violent histories and social ecologies such imagery and sequencing evoke.

On *Day Eight* the Survivalist begins to recover as the women nurse him back to health. Milja taps a spoon against a post as a marker of quotidian time, waking him. A domestic scene follows, in which Milja and the Survivalist work in the garden and rest on the porch together. Developing his own from Levinas's definition of acquisitional "love," Marder notes that "love [...] is [instead] propitious for a cultivation of respect toward the natural world" (in Irigaray and Marder 199). While this apparent partnership develops, the scene cuts to Kathryn climbing a tree in search of birds' eggs in a nest, then back to Milja marking time again, now by circling scissors around a glass jar. The affectivity of such screen editing can be informed by Gestalt psychologist James J. Gibson's problematisation of deep time and quotidian time:

There are events within events, as there are forms within forms, up to the yearly shift of the path of the sun across the sky and down to the breaking of a twig. And hence there are no elementary units of temporal structure. You can describe the events of the environment at various levels. (12)

The almost spatial dimensions assigned to time begin to align with the opacity of those "dark ecologies" addressed previously. From here, time and environment in the film quickly shift from modes of orientation to disorientation. After dark, six men approach the dwelling carrying automatic weapons; the trio hide quietly indoors having seen searchlights in the woods.

The next morning (*Day Nine*), they discover that their garden has been destroyed; humankind's inhumanity is understood, and the loss of food is palpable. The slow duration of cultivation is opposed by an acceleration of time-as-destruction. We then learn of Milja's pregnancy as she attempts to self-administer an abortion (fearing too many mouths to feed). Fingleton mixes this harrowing scene with clips of Kathryn setting a bear trap in the woods. During the abortion attempt, a rabbit approaches the trap but does not trigger it; Milja also fails. Both the foetus and the prey escape from harm.

On *Day Ten*, due to a lack of food, the women conspire to "humanely" poison the Survivalist using toxic mushrooms in that evening's stew. In Derrida's study of hospitality, "[t]he one inviting becomes almost a hostage of the one invited" (9). By the morning of *Day Eleven*, Milja's allegiance has changed and it is revealed that she served the poisoned stew to her mother instead. A calm acceptance follows, as it is logical that, because of drastic food shortage, the eldest member of the household should be the one eliminated. Accordingly, Kathryn and the man enter the woods, where she asks him to dispatch her with a knife, to preserve valuable ammunition. Kathryn imagines her own execution and burial through the same filmic

montage as the abortion/bear trap scene. What comes to pass is pre-imagined thanks to the temporal undulations authored by Fingleton. Returning to Levinas, the problems of heteronormativity and ageism arise here following previously discussed definitions of his ethics. Do such ethics presume a sovereign or unavoidably androcentric subject regardless of a treatment of the feminine as a universally discrete essence for inhabitation (155)? Is the “future-present” effective as a “different cultural framework” inaugurated by this film or are Merchant’s Edenic dynamics to be forever rehearsed? It could be said this is one of several instances in *The Survivalist* where the ability of the ecocinematic to achieve an alternative aesthetics to normative, character-driven cinema remains uncertain.

Symbolically, the *Survivalist* returns to the hut and to Milja carrying two rabbits who had been caught in Kathryn’s trap overnight. Together they eat the meat while the man explains the story of the raid that killed his brother and brought about his current circumstances; we learn that he wounded his brother to escape more surely himself: “I did what I had to do,” he says. While Milja (Eve) and the *Survivalist* (Adam) are out foraging on *Day Twelve*, the raiders return to the dwelling. Milja secretly enters the anteroom to rescue the remaining precious seeds hidden there. The raiders pursue the couple into the woods and the man holds them off, sacrificing himself in atonement for the death of his brother so that Milja can survive. Fingleton’s touch is again noticeable here in a third temporal manipulation involving a bonfire and the implication of a desperate and cannibalistic act. The cut jumps to the hut and farm burning to the ground.

I would contend that the abortion/bear trap sequence, that of Kathryn’s death, and this final destruction of that place in which we have dwelt in the deep time of the everyday do point to a “future-present” mode that parallels Derrida’s interest in the temporality of hospitality. In his “Hostipitality” lecture, he provides a detailed analysis of Kant’s claim for a universal right to hospitality, arriving at a point where time itself becomes contentious. “We do not know what hospitality is,” he famously declares (6). The sentence can be comprehended as a negation – if we do not know it, it must not be accessible in the present. Kant’s universal right of hospitality includes a future imaginary – it is something that *should be* or that which should arrive and is therefore problematic in its object-hood or fixity. To expect the hospitable state is to succumb to guest/host power relations that nullify the very concept – within hospitality we will always find forms of hostility. There is also an “asynchrony” to hospitality. The sentence, “We do not know what hospitality is,” bears the trace of the “not yet,” or, a “future-present” that operates by anticipation and contingency but not by expectation or obligation. Hospitality is therefore only experienced in a suspended state of encounter, not unlike the meeting of two identical ends of a polar magnet. In order for there to be hospitality, the threshold must be crossed, and the hospitable-hostile guest/host relationship inaugurated. Conversely, in order to *conceive* hospitality, the threshold must be sustained or never crossed: “It becomes the threshold. This is why we do not know what it is, and why we cannot know. Once we know it, we no longer know it, what it properly is, what the threshold of its identity is” (14).

On the final day (*Day Thirteen*), a pregnant Milja wanders alone in the woods until she reaches a paved motorway that leads to a guard tower and blockaded property. There is a sign on a fence that reads “The End of All Things.” She hands over her possessions to a guard and awaits the judgment of her new hosts. *The Survivalist* ends with a new but unseen community’s acceptance of Milja and the naming of her unborn baby: “Augustus” (after the Survivalist’s brother who was killed so he could go free). Such figures of hope in dystopian narratives are not uncommon, and it is worth noting that a redeemable planetary crisis is implied by the promise of this future, messianic child (Weik von Mossner 163).

In her study of Derrida, Oliver has addressed the “good face of tolerance,” an ironic concept that comes about following intolerance. On a global scale one might think of “humanitarian aid” as something oddly dependent on war – and then there is such a term as “humanitarian war” (“Earthquakes” 39). Fingleton’s attention to the nuanced exchanges among what develop as members of a sort of nuclear family caught in a suspended state of ecological and economic uncertainty produces a particular scale effect. It demands our own critical attention to the social sphere as a starting point when rethinking planetary survival. Historically, epistemologies of dwelling and hospitality have depended upon a certain moralism, resulting in the belief that there is a solution to the problem that is the world. In response to such misinterpretations of Gaia that presume a unitary ecosphere is recoverable, Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett have more recently called for an increased awareness of how agents or “actants” are not simply reducible to a causal chain but instead comprise frenetic assemblages. For Derrida (and after Heidegger and Levinas), hospitality remains a productive possibility only if it avoids capture or paralysis. It is a constant promise “in the present and a future that does not have a horizon” (14). Perhaps the complexity to be found in “survivalist” figures of the Anthropocene indicates a need to rescue a theory of “sustainability” from that of “homeostasis” or “negative feedback relations.” We must learn to dwell positively but also inconsistently, so as to reattach ourselves to our environments and to one another.

## Conclusion

By closely viewing these films I have asked in what ways the moving image experiments with spatial and temporal modes of observation and expression to convey the often-perplexing aesthetics and politics of the Anthropocene. If not within an eventful moment, at what subjective level do we understand an ecological encounter? How might such an encounter be performed or communicated imagistically, and what does such a possibility suggest for the comprehension of authentic environmental sustainability today?

I have argued that both *The Wall* and *The Survivalist* demand critical engagement with those same ecological tools employed by twentieth-century continental philosophy. Ivakhiv’s exhaustive project follows Whitehead, Peirce and Deleuze in search of a “process-relational ontology” or study of *how* worlds are made; that is, *how* ecological ontology is accessed thanks to cinematic practices and relational moving images (43, 67). Indeed, the action



and, importantly, the *in*-action in each film supports what he calls ecocinema's "animacy," or, "interactivity" with us, the viewers (10). While I am indebted to this work, here I have attempted to follow Heidegger, Levinas and Derrida largely due to the resounding theme of "cohabitation" embedded in these two case studies. The apocalyptic circumscription of past, present and future time along with the challenges of dwelling-in-difference alone and together on a damaged planet are communicated and explored by deliberately contained territories and scalar shifts in each film, primarily through specific compositional choices that enhance immediate or local experiences for the protagonists. As such, my attention has been drawn to *what* these moving images communicate for contemporary ecocriticism and *why* they do so.

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