Stray Visuality in Andrea Arnold's *American Honey*

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ABSTRACT

In dialogue with Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed's work on the concept of 'stray', this video essay explores 'stray visuality': visuality that exceeds the anthropocentric and ocularcentric frames of reference. Focusing on Andrea Arnold's *American Honey*, this essay argues that her cinema is profoundly stray, not only because it makes room for a variety of human and non-human strays, but also because of its formal engagement with strayness. Even though at first glance *American Honey* is concerned with the phenomenological rhythms of its human protagonist, the camera often strays away from her to look at other things, while redrawing the anthropocentric hierarchies often in unsettling, uncanny ways. This video essay shows that (eco-)videographic criticism itself can be thought of as a vehicle for retraining our perception.

Keywords: stray visuality, the non-human, Andrea Arnold, Julia Kristeva, Barbara Creed

Video link: https://vimeo.com/978442545

ACCOMPANYING COMMENTARY

This video essay opens with a quote from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, in which she writes about the 'sublime':

> When the starry sky, a vista of open seas, or a stained-glass window shedding purple beams fascinate me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colors, of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things I see, hear, or think. The 'sublime' object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory. It is such a memory, which […] transfers that object to the refulgent point of the dazzlement in which I stray in order to be. (Kristeva, 1982: 12)[1]

It is through this poetic and near-cinematic imagery that Kristeva enacts what she is struggling to comprehend, transporting the reader beyond the confines of language and, indeed, beyond the purely visual. In Kristeva's writing, like in the 'sensuous methodologies' of videographic research (Grant, 2013, 2016), the form and the content intermingle. Through her words, Kristeva is prompting us to stray.

In dialogue with Kristeva, and Barbara Creed's reflection (2017) on 'stray ethics' in the Anthropocene,[2] this video essay examines what I dub 'stray visuality': visuality that exceeds the anthropocentric and ocularcentric frames of reference. Deriving from my previous work on Andrea Arnold and her stray aesthetics (Paszkiewicz, 2021a, 2023), with a particular focus on Arnold's rewriting of the road film in *American Honey*, I argue that her cinema is profoundly stray, not only because it makes room for a variety of human and non-human strays, but also because of its ongoing formal and stylistic engagement with strayness. I show how, even though at first glance *American Honey* is concerned with the phenomenological rhythms of its human protagonist, the camera often strays

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[1] In the French version of this passage, Kristeva uses the verb 'se perdre' (to lose oneself) instead of 'stray': 'je me perds pour être'. As Barbara Creed observes, 'synonyms for stray are to become "lost, abandoned, homeless, roaming, vagrant"' (2017: 8). All of these terms, as I show in my video essay, resonate deeply with Andrea Arnold's work.

[2] Stray ethics is closely related with the concept of care. As Creed puts it, 'a stray ethics asks us to put ourselves in the place of the other, while also recognising the importance of acting upon the experience through an ethics of care', and as such, it offers 'an alternative for living in the Anthropocene' (2017: 101 and 99).

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away from her to look at other things, while redrawing the anthropocentric hierarchies often in unsettling, uncanny ways.[3]

As a research method to investigate 'stray visuality', I have chosen to maintain Arnold's scale and near-square format for all clips, while keeping most of the screen space in darkness. Just like Arnold's aspect ratio, this choice delimits the visual field, questioning the wide-open vistas of far-reaching landscapes that have traditionally served as a mere background for narratives of progress and heroic action in Hollywood Westerns and road movies. Much has been written about how the beautified framings of landscape in these genres contribute to the glorification of the US nation (Klinger, 1997: 189-192), carefully tied to 'the establishment of white male authority over territory and peoples that seemingly require subjection' (Tasker, 2017: 112). Arnold revisits this convention by emphasising the constrained movement of her underprivileged female protagonist and, most importantly, by enclosing the expansive vistas in narrow, claustrophobic frames; yet, in doing so, she also offers glimpses of the non-human lives that generate a deep sensorial immersion with the environment, both 'built' and 'natural'.[4]

In keeping with Arnold's aesthetics but reorienting the attention away from most of the human characters in the film, I have foregrounded the material quality of landscape and phenomenological rhythms of its inhabitants – many of whom also inhabit the 'non-places' (Augé, 1995) of motels and temporary homes – while opting for the kind of montage that would be in tune with Arnold's poetic glimpses. The soundscape of the video essay re-performs and intensifies the sounds already present in *American Honey*: the acoustic environment of the traffic superimposed with the sound of flapping wings, birds' chirping, cows' mooing and, towards the end of the video essay, the sound of the protagonist suffocating under water. The latter purposefully destabilises the film's utopian ending (Kirby, 2019), revealing the fragility of human and non-human survival in a damaged world. An earlier repetition of a textured shot of blood-stained grass in the proximity of the slaughterhouse, which appears only momentarily in the source film, stretches out the cinematic image (Mulvey, 2006: 146) and magnifies the haunting quality of the landscape: the capitalist appropriation of 'cheap Nature' (Moore, 2016), which encompasses both non-human animals and those human animals that have been barred from participating in the Anthropos. These strategies reveal the film's subtle questioning of its hopeful ending: the anthropocentric power cannot be divorced from the repeated patterns of gendered, class and racialised violence.

If, as I have argued elsewhere, building on Anna Tsing (2015), ecocinema can be understood as part of 'the arts of noticing' (Paszkiewicz, 2021b), then straying as an aesthetic strategy, which allows for redirecting the attention to the non-human and noticing the details that first passed unnoticed,[5] can also be read as an ecocinematic endeavour. In this sense, videographic research itself can be thought of as a vehicle for retraining our perception (MacDonald, 2013) or as a site where our 'sense of reciprocity with the world' can be re-learnt, as John Landreville, drawing on Lauren Berlant, proposes in his revisiting of ecocinematic paradigms. That is, audio-visual film analysis can work as an 'amplifier' or 'sensitizer' (Neimanis, 2017: 59) that increases the ecocinematic dimension of the studied film and our attunement to it, as well as, more broadly, our attunement to the world. Put simply, videographic criticism itself can do the ecological work. With this in view, rather than making videos *about* ecological or environmentalist issues, what is at stake in (eco-)videographic criticism is precisely the retraining of perception. In Catherine Grant's words, videographic work often 'reveals, materializes and, indeed, re-performs something that is already there' in the source film, 'but which is difficult to see or to reflect on fully at normal speed in its original cinematic flow' (2024). While Grant refers here to Laura Mulvey's reflections on delayed cinema, such methods of noticing can also involve selecting, repeating, and contraposing images, sounds and words, while straying from the film's human-centred plots, not only to make certain visual clues and meanings visible, but also to 'sweep [us] beyond the things [we] see, hear, or think' (Kristeva, 1982: 12).

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[3] See also Catherine Grant's (2016) influential video essay, 'Un/Contained', that reveals the haunting quality of Arnold's poetics in *Fish Tank*.

[4] On the non-human in the cinema of Andrea Arnold, see also Thornham (2016), Lawrence (2016), and Forrest (2020), among others.

[5] See also Mulvey's (2006) rethinking of Roland Barthes's notion of the *punctum* in cinematic ways.

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