

Attentive observation and the cinematic imagination: an interview with Matthew Gandy.

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Matthew Gandy in the Concept film studio, Berlin, 2016. Photo : Wiebke Hofmann.

ME: Matthew, you've written quite extensively on films and film-makers. What influenced you to start to make your own films in the early 2000s?

MG: As you rightly say, I have a long-standing interest in film, which actually goes back to my teenage years, when London had many more repertory cinemas. My writing on film initially marked a critical departure from my PhD thesis, which was on urban environmental policy. Shortly after completing my PhD I wrote an essay on the cinema of Werner Herzogⁱ that opened up new perspectives for my thinking and writing about the cultural depiction of nature. My engagement with the humanities was certainly inspired by hearing Denis Cosgrove speak for the first time, at the University of Sussex, where I was then working. Listening to him opened my eyes to the possibilities opened up by cultural geography and geographical work on the visual arts. Since then I have continued writing on film and the work of specific film directors – Teshigahara, Pasolini, Antonioni, Haynes, and othersⁱⁱ – but at the same time, I became very curious about the possibilities for documentary film-making.

I first engaged with film making in a systematic way with my project on urban infrastructure in Mumbai, for which, in 2007, I released *Liquid City*ⁱⁱⁱ, which was my first documentary film. It was very much a question of learning as you go along. Somehow miraculously, we finished it in the middle of the night just hours before the premiere in India! And I think, looking back, I was quite naïve about some of the technical complexities of film making, as well as questions to do with distribution, promotion, and so on. And then in 2012 I applied for money for another grant, from the European Research Council, where I again specifically listed a documentary film as a research output. And that's how *Natura Urbana*^{iv} emerged. It was initially meant to be just half an hour, aimed primarily at university audiences, maybe similar in scope to *Liquid City*, but it grew and grew, and it is fair to say that it became a huge part of my research project. The final version is 72 minutes long, and the technical scope and complexity were much greater than *Liquid City*, and it involved a much larger team of people. The more I got involved in it, the more I wanted to improve the production standards, extending to every single facet such as sound, editing, and web-design. So it was really on a very different scale from my earlier documentary work. But it was an odd experience because I couldn't really be certain where this whole project was going, though I did know that I wanted to reach a broader audience, beyond academia, an audience of people who are interested in cinema and documentary film-making.

ME: Most of your writing tends to be single-authored, whereas you have worked in a team to make both of your films. So let me ask you a first question on your practice of film-making: How do you work with people on a film? And what difference does it make to your thinking?

MG: In practical terms, writing can be done alone. And I prefer to write alone. But with film-making, for a variety of practical and technical reasons, you need a wider range of people, and many of these people have very specialist skills. For example, for *Natura Urbana*, we had a steadycam operator, who is somebody who can basically walk in a straight line with very heavy equipment, and specialist colour correction inputs to ensure aesthetic continuity between frames as well as the use of differentiation for archival sources. For both of my films, I also worked with a cinematographer. So there's a dialogue: if you notice something interesting, you have to tell your cinematographer to capture it. For instance, for the movement of leaves in trees, I'm interested in examples of modernist experimentations such as László Moholy-Nagy who used light shining through leaves as a kind of spotlight and things like that. So I'm trying to respond to these different possibilities as I come across them.



Figure 1: Playing with leaves. Still from Natura Urbana.

And because *Natura Urbana* is related to urban biodiversity, in a way I had more specialist knowledge of plants and invertebrates than other people in the team. It would really be, in a way, my responsibility to say “stop, look, take this, and then incorporate it into the overall structure”. Then, the most complicated phase is probably the editing of the material. For *Natura Urbana*, I worked with Wiebke Hofmann, who is a professional editor. It was the first time that I’d worked with a professional editor. And it was an extremely illuminating experience, because she had a very precise knowledge of how the smallest change in the sequence of frames, or different fragments of interviews, changes not only the meaning but also the mood of a particular scene. It was fascinating to work closely, frame by frame, with somebody who really understands the visual language of documentary film-making. So ultimately, my role as a director was to bring together all of these different technical skills into the final synthesis; to have an overall creative concept, and to hold together these disparate elements. Sometimes it implies having to stick to your own idea about what you want to achieve, especially when it comes to making complex decisions about what to keep in, and what to cut out.

ME: Several of your film writings focus on the question of landscape. Has this emphasis on landscape influenced the making of your own films?

MG: Certainly, in terms of the filming schedule for *Natura Urbana* I had specific ideas about the types of landscapes that I wanted to include in the film, and I had identified vantage points, for example a bridge, with a particular view of Berlin; we also took some shots from the tops of buildings and things of that kind. We didn’t use drones at all: even though they’re becoming cheaper using them does engender a certain aesthetic, and because the focus of the film is on a more tactile, or middle-range interaction with landscape, it didn’t seem to be a necessary point of departure. So instead we used only physical vantage points for the contemporary filming although there are a few aerial shots in the archival material.

ME: It’s interesting this term “tactile”, given the visual quality of films...

MG: I think landscape as a concept or as a genre of representation has really fascinated me for a long time. And there is this issue with the dominance of visual registers of landscape, but I’m very much

aware that landscape is a multi-sensory form of embodied aesthetic experience. And converting the direct experience of landscape into visual or acoustic modes of representation is quite complicated. And certainly, I'm interested in at least trying to draw the viewer closer to objects or surfaces. We can't easily reproduce olfactory spaces or direct tactile experience in a cinematic form, but nevertheless, we can point towards some of these things, to provide a small step towards a multi-sensory representation of landscape.



Figure 2: Evoking a tactile landscape. Still from Natura Urbana.

ME: I suppose there's the mobility and rhythm that also convey an embodied feeling...

MG: Yes, and in terms of rhythm and mobility, I think that probably my own sense of the landscape is related to the way in which I experience space, generally as a walker, in ecological terms. I'm often walking through spaces, I'm looking closely. In other cases, possibly looking through the window of a car, or in particular from a train, because trains create these very interesting "urban transects", where you cut through space, and you notice unusual places. In *Natura Urbana*, we used some footage from a moving vehicle, and also some footage from the S-Bahn, which goes across the surface of the city and is quite helpful in that way.

ME: I would like to discuss more the similarities and distinctions between your two films. In *Liquid City* we don't really hear you, whereas in *Natura Urbana*, you're much more present. How do you decide on the role you play in your films?

MG: Actually, it's a strange situation, because in *Liquid City*, you do hear me indirectly, because I composed the music. And I also did the stills photography. And then with *Natura Urbana*, for some of those creative aspects, I initially stepped back. I also had a sound designer who composed some of the original music. At first I thought that the film would be largely self-explanatory and that my interpretation of the material would remain implicit rather than explicit. But as the project took shape it became clear that the narrative structure was much more complex than in the case of *Liquid City*. So I realized it was necessary to provide a clearer narrative structure, and one important shift in the later stages of the editing was my decision to write a commentary for the film that I would deliver myself. Having initially resisted the idea of film maker as auteur I nonetheless came round to the view

that I couldn't hide behind my own narrative or simply assume that key elements in the narrative would be comprehensible from a mix of interview materials and visual sources alone. I also decided to divide the film into a series of chapters to underpin the idea of the city as a "living book" thereby connecting the ecological imaginary with a more literary narrative form. I also enjoyed playing with words for the chapter titles that are given in English and German so that the audience can appreciate the subtleties of moving between these two languages (the tension between different terms and the difficulties of translation also appears explicitly in one of the interviews when Hanns Zischler asks me to translate the German term "Brache").

ME: You've also published on sound and on light. For your films, how did you conceptualise the relationship between the spoken text of the interviewees, the ambient sounds, your own voice, and the images?

MG: I would say that soundscapes are obviously a very significant component to the affective atmospheres of landscapes. But one thing that became very clear, is that soundscapes are much more complicated than merely visual scenographies, and pose greater technical challenges than many aspects of cinematography. For *Natura Urbana* I worked with an excellent sound designer, Jonathan Schorr, who has a very acute ear, in terms of appreciating the complexity of urban soundscapes, and he had a clear understanding of what I was trying to achieve. So in terms of the mixing, and so on, this became really important. And in fact, there are two final versions of the film: there is a surround sound version, which is a DCP (digital cinema package) for fully equipped auditoria, with six different sound channels; and then there is a stereo DVD version. So there are two different acoustic versions, one that takes the technical apparatus to its limits, and another one suitable for more routine form of dissemination.



Figure 3: Recording soundscapes. Still from *Natura Urbana*.

ME: How do these visual, auditory and discursive materials collected through the film, ultimately contribute to the broader research project?

MG: In practical terms, because film-making is so expensive, we had a concentrated period of filming, over about three weeks with occasional extra days. But because each day is so expensive, with wages

for six or seven people, and the hiring of transport, equipment, and so on, you have to pack as much as possible into the time available. So you have to manage each day really carefully and arrange it around the availability of interviewees. In the morning you might have an interview, and then in the afternoon, you're going to various sites. And if you can't get what you want you have to quickly decide to go somewhere else. And all the time you're looking at the changing light conditions and the weather (it rained on many of our shooting days). The interviews, of course, can serve a research purpose in their own right and be regarded as semi-structured interviews. In terms of the Berlin work, I was a visiting professor at the Institute for Ecology at the Technical University before I made the documentary. So I had already got to know many of the key protagonists and knew their work well. I think that already knowing most of the interviewees made a real difference for how the interviews went. It established a sense of trust so that they could talk with enthusiasm about ostensibly esoteric or highly specialized topics. And they would know that there was a sympathetic audience for what they were talking about. So in a sense I am part of the field that I am presenting as well as trying to step partially outside of it to give a more dispassionate kind of overview. This is clearly a slightly different relationship to other examples of documentary film making where there is a greater distance between film maker and topic. Since we collected such a wealth of material this will clearly inform my future writing and research: I would also like to use some of the soundscapes in an exhibition as another way of reaching beyond academic audiences. For many of my interviewees, especially those associated with the pioneering work at Berlin's Technical University, the film will also serve as a kind of record or testament of their distinctive contribution to urban ecology.

ME: In the companion piece to Liquid City, which you published in 2009 in Cultural Geographies', you wrote about immersing yourself in existing films on Mumbai. Is it important for you, this immersion in the existing visual culture of the places you're filming? And beyond immersing yourself in the Institute of Ecology, did you do the same thing for Berlin?

MG: Certainly Berlin has a very rich cinematic legacy, equal to Bombay of course, and I was familiar with many films about the city. There are certain films which for various reasons had a profound impact on my thinking about the city. There are lesser-known films, such as Berlin Chamissoplatz (Dir: Rudolph Thieme, 1980), which has some interesting footage of wastelands around Potsdamer Platz, and also includes a lead role by one of our interviewees, the actor and writer Hanns Zischler. There is also Menschen am Sonntag (People on Sunday) (Dir: Robert Siodmak and Edgar G. Ulmer, 1930), filmed in the summer of 1929, which has these poignant depictions of lakes and other spaces of nature towards the edge of the city. So the film does contain cinematographic influences derived from other works. We also used extensive archival footage in the film since the historical dimension to the narrative is so important. The film clearly serves as a kind of oral history since some of our interviewees could reflect back on developments they personally experienced in the 1950s and 1960s during the formative period for the emergence of new approaches to urban botany as well as wider reflections on urban past. It was also very interesting to weave rarer archival materials, including elements derived from other documentaries, into the structure of the film.

ME: Beyond these specific cinematic representations of the cities you've worked on, has one of the film directors you've written about particularly influenced your way of making films?

MG: I think it's very hard to pick just one person. An important influence on my work is certainly Andrea Arnold who has a deep interest in nature like me, and also includes small entomological motifs within the structure of her work. Arnold has an interest in architecture and urban space as well, and especially marginal landscapes, which is clearly another common thread. I also think that some of the experimental post-war Japanese cinema such as Hiroshi Teshigahara is very interesting in terms of its use of experimental sound, and also the textures and surfaces as well. Clearly, the significance of

landscape in the films of Michelangelo Antonioni has been very important for me: I was intrigued to recently see the final scene of *L'Eclisse* (1962) and note how Antonioni uses lawn sprinklers and also ants to frame different scales of movement and space.



Figure 4: Movement and light. Still from *Natura Urbana*.

ME: *Perhaps because at the time you wrote the Cultural Geographies paper (in 2009), using films in geographical research was less of a well-established practice, I didn't see any mention of geographers' films?*

MG: Certainly, during the time I was shooting *Liquid City* in 2006 there were very few examples. And I still think there are relatively few examples. Clearly there are some geographers who are interested in using small-scale documentary inputs to their methodologies. However, in terms of larger scale works there are very few examples. One of the most striking examples of geographical collaborations is of course my colleague Clive Oppenheimer's film with Werner Herzog, *Into the Inferno* (2016), which is a very impressive film^{vi}. Very, very different, of course, from my own project, his film about volcanoes is based on a high-profile collaboration with an established film maker and funded by Netflix, which also serves as the distributor.

In UK universities there is an uncertainty surrounding films because the bureaucratic systems that exist are extremely unsure how to respond to such works, or even how to evaluate whether they're interesting or successful. In terms of the conceptual jargon of "impact" you are required to make clear what "stakeholders" have contributed to projects (or expect to gain from such work) and you are confronted with a very peculiar type of bureaucratic jargon that is actually very remote from the more creative aspects of visual methodologies. It's very difficult, for example, to move beyond rather banal indicators such as numbers of people who have seen the film, or measures of that kind. So you have this peculiar tension, which remains unresolved, between different understandings or expectations of what research should be. There is also the issue of funding. *Natura Urbana* was funded by the European Research Council which is one of the only funding sources available for more innovative, large-scale, or methodologically experimental work. Although I did receive funding from the UK based Arts and Humanities Research Council for the *Liquid City* film the project was on a much smaller scale.

ME: In spite of these difficulties, is there an emerging UK community based around film-making in geography?

MG: I think there is increasing interest. We ran a workshop recently in Cambridge, on film as method in the geo-humanities, including a one-day of screening (with a curatorial dimension) and another day for a workshop with discussion. The event attracted a range of contributions including people who work primarily as film-makers and others who primarily write about film from a critical or scholarly vantage point. Interestingly, the workshop not only attracted interest across a range of different disciplines but especially among graduate students. It's clear that many graduate students are interested to know how they might incorporate film making into their doctoral research. And of course, universities, including geography departments, are unsure how to respond to these emerging interests. In some disciplines the use of film making in PhD projects is already clearly defined in terms of the format, length or technical specifications. But within geography this is still an uncertain area.

ME: Could this uncertainty be linked to the fact that films may constitute of provocation towards geography's visuality?

MG: I think it clearly forms part of this complicated relationship between geography and visuality, and different techniques of representation. We now have this very rich critique of cartographic methods, for example, but I think cinema remains something of an anomaly in terms of geographical writing and research. The theme of cinematic landscapes, for instance, remains somewhat under-explored. Sometimes I think that film is subject to a rather crude critique, that visuality is treated as inherently suspect, and that we need to completely break out of the ocularcentrist gaze; and yet of course that's an extremely difficult thing to do in relation to cinematic works, or cinematic forms of representation. At the same time, however, I think that geography as a discipline is actually quite open to experimentation. Certainly more than other fields such as history or economics. I think there is the potential for people working within geography to do different things, in a way that's harder within other disciplines. The presence of interdisciplinarity has typically been an innate characteristic of geography, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. So I think that many people working within geography are already familiar with quite a broad range of different disciplinary or methodological approaches.

ME: More specific to your own practice of geography, and the focus of your work on Urban Political Ecology, has making films transformed the way in which you think about urban natures? For instance Natura Urbana is concerned with the spontaneous nature of the Brachen of Berlin, so do you feel that using film has allowed you to touch upon the question of urban nature's spontaneity in a particular way?

MG: Definitely. I think a moving image can convey a sense of magic about these small spaces within the city that moves beyond a purely abstract sense. We can capture the way plants move very gently in the breeze, or we can convey the experience of moving slowly through a space, and noticing things such as birds or insects, so in a way, for me at least, film can bring to life some of this interest or fascination with interstitial landscapes. And it's also about seeing space differently. I'm very interested in the idea of "attentive observation", which I'm writing about at the moment, as a particular kind of methodological approach, which, as I would see it, involves looking extremely closely at things, but also linking elements to wider historical or scientific developments and the political dynamics of the urban arena. In my recent research I've become very interested in the notion of "forensic ecologies" and the collaborative collection of ecological data, and how these complex bodies of knowledge can be related to broader processes of urban and environmental change^{vii}.



Figure 5: Forensic ecologies. Still from Natura Urbana.

And I think implicitly here, for me at least, there is a critique of speculative realism and object-oriented-ontologies, which moves beyond the scope of what documentary films can adequately deal with. At an intellectual level, however, in terms of my thinking and writing I am trying to articulate a different response to critical materialities and the changing field of urban ecology. I am also concerned with overly generalized accounts of urbanisation at a global scale and prefer to emphasize the role of an emerging “technosphere”, that the historian Chris Otter has written about, so that we can retain a sense of the heterogeneous and fine-grained dimensions to urban space. I think there has been some degree of elision between administratively defined metropolitan units, and the ecological and material differences between different types of urban biotopes. I am certainly interested in developing a revived perspective on urban political ecology that can take account of a more nuanced set of cultural, political, and ecological developments, spanning both processes of material change and the evolution of interpretative frameworks across different disciplines, including the bio-physical sciences.

ME: Matthew, thank you for this conversation. Do you have any additional thoughts?

MG: One of the things that I would like to convey about film making, in addition to the difficulty in obtaining funding, is the complexity of managing film-making projects, and also the length of time involved in editing and completing these kinds of works. *Natura Urbana* took about two years to complete, and in that respect might be comparable with the work required to complete a book, and could be regarded as an unconventional type of research objective. Modern academic life is in any case characterized by quite a narrow set of work priorities, including specific types of research output that are highly standardised in their format. With film, however, you can really break out of that pattern and try new things.

ⁱ Gandy, M. 1996. Visions of darkness: the representation of nature in the films of Werner Herzog. *Cultural Geographies* 3(1), pp. 1-21.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Gandy, M. 1996. The Heretical Landscape of the Body: Pier Paolo Pasolini and the Scopic Regime of European Cinema. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14(3), pp. 293-309; Gandy, M. 2003. Landscapes of deliquescence in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert*. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 28(2), pp. 218-237; Gandy, M. 2006. The cinematic void: desert iconographies in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*, in Lefebvre, M. (ed) *Landscape and Film*. New York and London: Routledge, pp. 315-331; Gandy, M. 2011. The texture of space: desire and displacement in Hiroshi Teshigahara's *Woman of the dunes* [*Suna no onna*], in Richardson, D.; Daniels, S.; de Lyser, D. and Entrikin, N. (eds.) *Geography and the Humanities*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 198-208; and Gandy, M. 2012. The melancholy observer: landscape, neo-romanticism and the politics of documentary film making, in Praeger, B. (ed.) *Companion to Werner Herzog*. Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 528-546.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gandy, M. 2007. *Liquid City*. Documentary film, 30 minutes.

^{iv} Gandy, M. 2017. *Natura Urbana: The Brachen of Berlin*. Documentary film, 72 minutes.

^v Gandy, M. 2009. Liquid City: reflections on making a film. *Cultural Geographies* 16, pp. 403-408.

^{vi} Herzog, W. 2016. *Into the Inferno*. 104 minutes.

^{vii} On forensic ecologies, see: Gandy, M. 2019. The fly that tried to save the world: saproxylic geographies and other-than-human ecologies. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. Online First.