# Mold in the Machine

## Nature and Technology in *Treme* (2010) and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)

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The Gulf Coast of Louisiana is at a perilous intersection between nature and the extensions of humanity. The mix of human intervention and natural subsidence has completely transformed the area over a few decades. The marshlands along the Gulf Coast are being devoured by the ocean, making the coastline unstable and susceptible to flooding and ocean rise. Repeated oil spills have contributed further to the destruction of existing ecosystems. Combined with ever more powerful tropical storms and more frequent heavy downpours and flooding, living conditions in the area have become harsh.[1]

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Louisiana area in August 2005, it set off an array of artistic responses to the situation on

the Gulf Coast. On the following pages, I will discuss the relationship between nature and technology as it is portrayed in the TV series *Treme,* season 1,[2] and the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.[3] My analysis will revolve around the visual imprint and effects that water has on infrastructure and society. The aim is to further our understanding of how the aesthetic rendering of damages to the infrastructure of cities or communities following extreme weather contributes to visualizing the duality of nature as both violent and violated.

## Cinema in the Anthropocene

Fictional cinematic presentations such as *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* contribute to our understanding of life within a climate emergency, also as aesthetic practices. As film scholar Jennifer Fay argues in her book *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*:

> While no one film or set of films adds up to a totalizing explanation of climate change, cinema enables us to glimpse anthropogenic environments as both an accidental effect of human activity and a matter of design. Thus, not only is cinema like the Anthropocene in its uncanny aesthetic effects, but also, insofar as cinema has encouraged the production of artificial worlds and simulated, wholly anthropogenic weather, it is the aesthetic practice of the Anthropocene. Or, to put it more forcefully, cinema helps us to see and experience the Anthropocene as an aesthetic practice.[4]

While it may seem overwrought to stress the importance of the Anthropocene as an aesthetic practice, Fay is undoubtedly correct in suggesting that we cannot gain a full understanding of

our current situation without considering the aesthetic practices with which we have met the climate crisis, and the aesthetic effects it has produced.

While the often "uncanny aesthetic effects" of cinema, as Fay puts it, can be visually spectacular and hard to miss, literary scholar Rob Nixon has pointed out the *slow* violence that accompanies a warming planet, taking on forms which in their non-spectacular manner delude us or bid to be overlooked. This specific form of violence is always made possible by discrimination and "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."[5] Identifying slow violence is, as Nixon sees it, an ethical and political responsibility in order to give voice to the environmentalism of the poor and a necessary commitment in order to mitigate climate change. Positioned within postcolonial literary studies and environmental humanities, Nixon develops his key term by connecting various literary and political forms of resistance with environmental catastrophes.

Nixon's concern with discrimination shows an affinity to the most popular interpretations of *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. The reception of *Treme* has, for the most part, been dominated by discussions on cultural identity tied to authenticity,[6] place and race[7]; cultural analyses of disasters[8]; to discussions on how the effects of Hurricane Katrina were facilitated by human-made structural failure, both technologically and socially.[9] Similarly, the academic reception of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* has been led by discussions of race, poverty, sovereignty, and identity politics.[10] Nevertheless, in connecting this discrimination with the warming planet, Nixon provides us with a new approach to the analysis. By centering the discussion on how the series and film depict the relationship between technology and nature, we might cast a fresh look at

their continued relevance as expressions of life in the time of climate emergency.

I propose to identify a specific visuality by which I mean a set of scenes or individual images that are tied to each other by specific motifs. Borrowing from Leo Marx's trope of "The Machine in the Garden," I will call this visuality "Mold in the Machine."[11] Marx introduced the machine in the garden as a metaphor for the American dream of a lush, utopian landscape in which human-made structures or signs of industrialization interrupt the pastoral ideal, as when the sound of a steam locomotive enters Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Marx, in his work on literary criticism and great American authors,[12] used the metaphor to express what he saw as a specific relationship between nature and technology. The machine in the garden signaled human progress and the industrialization of America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at the expense of a pastoral idyll: "[A]gain and again our writers have introduced the same overtones, depicting the machine as invading the peace of an enclosed space, a world set apart, or an area somehow made to evoke a feeling of encircled felicity."[13]

Marx's evocation of the American pastoral as naturally pristine and idyllic and the city as a progressive civilization, albeit loud and disturbing, seems out of place as we encounter the disheveled state of the Louisiana Gulf Coast in *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. While Marx's American "garden" is perfect in its natural state, the garden of Louisiana is devastated, and the progress promised by technology is no longer available. Mold in the machine suggests a reversion of Marx's description, where the machine, in this case, specifically manifested as the city's materiality and infrastructure, is interrupted by nature. The underlying problem is, of course, that the Louisiana bayous already were wet and unstable to settle on, and that technological progress fueled by capitalist interests made the situation even worse. The bayous never were paradises, and now they are ruined.

## *Treme* – The City as (Failed) Technology

"New Orleans, Louisiana. Three months after." These words flicker across the screen during the opening scene of *Treme,* where a marching band is warming up to a parade. The TV series portrays life in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, revolving around people trying to pick up their everyday lives in the ruins of the city. Katrina hit New Orleans and its surroundings in late August 2005. The ensuing devastation to the area serves both as the pervasive backdrop and the unseen driving force of the narrative.[14]

The very first scene serves as an example of how the storm is a constant reference point for the characters' actions and statements, as well as a pervasive visual background. We follow salary negotiations between musicians in a dark bar before the very first parade post-Katrina, a traditional rebirth parade, set in in the Seventh or Eight Ward in Treme in December 2005. Before the men settle their affairs and walk into the streets to start the parade, the conversation turns to their dingy-looking surroundings:

> Man 1: "Hey, look around. Look at this damn place."
> Man 2: "How much water did you get up here?" [Murmurs from the musicians about the water].
> Man 1: "See the line over my head? Six, six and a half."[15]

As *Treme* begins, New Orleans is still in a state of emergency. The city of New Orleans is an infrastructure, a network of technological systems made up of buildings, roads, ports, waterworks, sewers, communication networks, and more. The materiality of this network is exposed by its destruction in *Treme*, for instance by the ever-present bricks and rubble of destroyed buildings in the series' backdrop, as well as the disintegrating roads and

shoddy water, gas, and electric services that cause trouble for the characters. Many are barred from moving back into their homes, due to the damages caused by the flooding. Through mold and fungus, the destructive effect of water persists long after the water itself resided. The city police archives are lost, complicating people's search for incarcerated loved ones who have been missing since the storm. Furthermore, the violence of neglect exerted by the government aggravates the violence exerted by nature.

Hurricane Katrina hit an area covering 90 000 square miles, and 80 % of New Orleans was flooded when the levees and floodwalls holding back Lake Pontchartrain broke. The storm killed more than 1800 people, according to the National Hurricane Center, and over a million people were displaced in the Gulf Coast region.[16] Katrina is considered to be the worst humanitarian catastrophe in the US to date. The levees of New Orleans did not break directly because of the hurricane, but because of longtime neglect of structural weaknesses—the storm surge overwhelmed the levees. The massive devastation of New Orleans is tightly bound to the materiality and technology of the city—of how nature met specific social and technical conditions. The lack of action from society at large aggravated the damage brought on by the floodwater.[17]

This very point is made in one of the very first scenes in the first episode of *Treme*, where novelist and professor Creighton Bernette (John Goodman) is interviewed by a British TV crew by the river on the industrial canal, where the barge caused one of the levees to break. Bernette delves into a heated discussion on the topic, where he manifests a popular rage against the government and claims that Katrina was not only a natural disaster, but a disaster brought on by government neglect of the area, lack of investment in the bay area swamp landscape, and in the structures that were supposed to protect the city in the event of hurricanes.[18]

## Interventions in the City

Seeing the city as an infrastructural network of technologies, mold can be seen as a visual—and invisible—trope in *Treme*, holding the key to our understanding of how nature and technology are tied together in the visuality of Mold in the Machine. Mold is both visibly and invisibly present in the series, visible already as striking still images in the introduction and through numerous individual scenes, and invisible in the omnipresent smell that is referred to by the various protagonists. A smell, which naturally cannot be conveyed on-screen other than through words and gestures, but which nevertheless was omnipresent in New Orleans in the months following Katrina.

Under normal circumstances, and in most visual portrayals, New Orleans is a lush and green city. In *Treme*'s first season, everything is gray, covered in mud and debris. During Katrina and the flooding, it is said the city lost 70 % of its trees in addition to other plants and shrubs.[19] Portraying the city as gray and "dead" was both a realistic representation of the real city streets in the months after Katrina but also a visually striking way to display the abnormal situation in the city. A rare exception from this portrayal in season 1, is the city garden belonging to the neighbors of Davis McAlary (Steve Zahn), a DJ for a local radio station and hardcore New Orleans patriot. Their city garden is portrayed as a safe and secluded haven from the city's destruction. However, rather than representing an authentic green lung from the past, their garden seems to be the epitome of the gentrified new New Orleans, representing the living conditions of the creative middle class: Their lives seem to have continued smoothly. The visual representation of nature here points to the city's stratified class structure, a relation that remains relevant throughout *Treme*'s representation of nature.

For the rest of the season, nature is almost exclusively present as an imprint or through debris: As watermarks on the walls and ceilings, as fallen trees in the streets, in family photos where the faces are washed out by the floodwater, in decomposing bodies found in sheds. Yet nature is everywhere, even where it is not visible. Mold and fungus are living organisms that have spread throughout people's homes, making them uninhabitable even where the structural damage could be repaired. Nature is pervasive, as it is embedded in the city's materiality. The majority of scenes depicting mold and fungus, feature Albert "Big Chief" Lambreaux (Clarke Peters). In one scene, he visits the Lower Ninth Ward with a friend to assess the damage to a house. Says Lambreaux: "Structurally, it looks solid. Still on its foundation, at least. But that mold (covers his mouth and shakes his head) I don't know … Talk about bulldozers."[20] In an earlier scene that sets the tone for how mold is present—and presented—in season 1, Lambreaux enters his living room, the walls are covered in green mold, and the watermarks on the walls sit at eye level. Lambreaux sinks his foot into a deep layer of mud. His accompanying daughter covers her mouth and nose to avoid the smell.

Through highlighting the smell, *Treme* specifically reaches out to those in the audience who experienced the aftermath of Katrina firsthand. Addressing the smell lends legitimacy to the realism of the representation of the event.[21] The smell is infrequently referred to by different characters. In one scene, as we watch Big Chief's gang rehearse in his dark, dingy, and humid bar, one of the players remark: "I can't even taste the beer with the smell of mold. Can't we meet somewhere else?"[22] Watermarks and mold are clearly visible on the wall behind them, while blue plastic is covering one wall. The costume sewing sessions with colorful feathers, pearls, and sequins and the traditional music during rehearsal make for stark contrasts to their surroundings, as seen in another scene from the bar. Several men are sewing

on their Mardi Gras costumes, their colorful fabrics standing out against the surroundings.[23] These scenes tie a bond between this explicit cultural expression, rooted in an old African-American heritage, and the effects of the hurricane and the poor city infrastructure that primarily affected the underprivileged African-American population.[24]

Referring to the smell also addresses the severe air pollution created in New Orleans as warmth and humidity fortified the smell of death, rot, and mold in the months following Katrina. As the musician Antoine Batiste (Wendell Peirce), one of the main protagonists of season 1, is talking to another musician friend before a gig, he asks about the whereabouts of the friend's father. The friend answers that because of his asthma, he cannot return to New Orleans before the air gets better.[25] Lambreaux, on the other hand, refuses to leave New Orleans. He embodies the city's African-American working-class traditions, taking up work as a carpenter. The conditions of his day job in Uptown—an affluent area spared from the more critical infrastructural damages—form a glaring contrast to his dwellings in Treme, as he takes shelter in his closed neighborhood bar. In one of the series most direct references to the harmful health effects of mold and fungus, Lambreaux develops lymphoma, possibly triggered and, at the very least, severely worsened by his living conditions.

## The Aesthetics of Destruction

The connection between natural destruction and social issues that *Treme* emphasizes is paired with an acute sense of the specific visual aesthetics of life post-Katrina, which is a central aspect of the visuality in the Mold in the Machine. This aesthetics is a combination of the look of destruction in the formal, organic aesthetic qualities of the traces left in the destruction's aftermath.

This double aesthetic tendency has a twofold outcome in *Treme*, in that it both calls attention to the city's infrastructural materiality and creates an estranged point of view that leaves room for the free play of the aesthetic gaze.

Nowhere is the aestheticization of destruction more evident than in the glimpses and signs of mold. The visuals played at the opening of each episode, and thus given an amplified significance, directly link mold—its aesthetics and effects—with the history and culture of the city. A series of images flicker across the screen: a selection of photographs that map out the series' starting point—Hurricane Katrina—framed by its past, present, and future. The photographs range from old images from parades to a satellite image of the hurricane and air photos of the flooding taken from a live news report. It continues with close-up images of mold-infested interiors—with family portraits and photos—where the motifs are made indiscernible by water damage before it ends with images of rubble and a trailer park. The visual effect of the mold is striking; the marks and waterlines create aesthetic effects on pastel-colored walls and ceilings and portray the city post-Katrina as overtaken by nature. Penetrating and dissolving the surfaces of walls, furniture, and family photographs, the mold completely takes over what should have been the safest of spaces, the ur-technology, the shelter, the family home.

While these photographs appear to be authentic documents of a disaster, their aesthetic adheres beautifully to an aesthetic gaze that borders on the disinterested. The abstract patterns left by mold lend the images an eerie expression, the result of beauty found in destructive organic growth. Architecture photographer Robert Polidori has made this into an aesthetic project.[26] Polidori visited New Orleans after Katrina, photographing a series of ruined homes. His photographs are framed and exhibited with the explicit intention of serving as aesthetic

objects. Polidori photographed both interiors and exteriors of water-damaged buildings in New Orleans after the water had receded. Through Polidori's lens, the watermarks, dirt, mold, and mildew on the walls and ceilings take on distinct aesthetic qualities. The muted colors and elaborate patterns of the dots and lines of mycelium are strikingly beautiful. Nevertheless, the seriousness of the disaster is always present. While some of the houses are wrecked, others seem as if they were left in a hurry, family photographs still hanging on the wall over the living room couch. The visible signs of mold are constant throughout Polidori's photos, and their formal aspects are always prominent.

These images bear a resemblance to still-life paintings (from Dutch *stilleven*—in French, *nature morte*), originally portraying everyday objects for the sake of their formal qualities. They especially resemble the early Renaissance Dutch still-life paintings, which included skulls, candles, hourglasses, and frequently dead wild game and overly ripe fruit as signs of mortality and nature's cycle.[27] Of course, neither Polidori's photos nor the traditional still life is literally *nature morte*: Nature in these images is not dead at all but filled with vibrant microbiological life, even the air is full of spores not visible to the naked eye. In the still life, the death and decay depicted show a beginning re-naturalization of natural objects that have been appropriated by human culture. The visual culture of Mold in the Machine shows the naturalization of the city infrastructure.

While *Treme* heavily aestheticizes mold, it also inquires how its own aesthetic gaze functions. In the vital last scene in Episode 1, our attention is drawn to the fact that the aesthetic gaze on the crumbling buildings is exerted by outsiders and residents alike. We see a traditional funeral band walking down the street next to a graveyard, along a row of houses, two of which have moss and large, green shrubs growing on their roofs and with doors and windows missing, while another house has shut-up

windows. Nature has taken over the buildings to the extent that it looks picturesque, natural even.[28] The picturesque surface undermines the seriousness of the situation, letting us as spectators take a step back and detach ourselves emotionally.

The detached impulse inherent to the aesthetics of destruction is emphasized in a later scene from a memorial service: The camera shifts from the colorful feathers of Lambreaux's costume to the contrasts of the dark and filthy interior of the bar and over to the wrecked houses and scattered debris of the neighborhood streets, where Mardi Gras Indians sing in memory of a dead friend. Suddenly a "Katrina tour"-bus arrives, filled with tourists looking to see the damage done to the neighborhood and the performance of grief by the inhabitants. Flashlights from cameras belonging to faceless passengers blind the grievers at the memorial service.[29] The scene evokes DJ Davis's earlier statement about the problematic beauty of New Orleans's dilapidation, while simultaneously reminding the audience that we are watching from a safe distance. We can enjoy the oddly picturesque neighborhoods of New Orleans even as they slide into ruin. The tourist bus provides us with a meta-perspective and serves as a reminder—perhaps a token of the series creators' embarrassment—of the insensitivity of our gaze.

## *Beasts of the Southern Wild* – The City as Violent Technology

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* offers a different visualization of a tropical storm and its subsequent flooding of the greater Louisiana area than *Treme*. Staged as a highly eco-conscious drama belonging to the genre of fantastic realism, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* portrays the six-year-old girl Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis) as she barely outlives parental neglect, a devastating

fire, then a tropical storm and its aftermath. Hushpuppy lives alone with her alcoholic and mortally ill father Wink (Dwight Henry), albeit in separate ramshackle sheds, in a bayou called the Bathtub. The bayou is one of many similar isolated places in the Louisiana bay area surrounded by water, where people also depend on the water for their living. Her mother "swam away" when she was little, and water remains an important motif throughout the film, taking on a dominant symbolic role representing nature and life, summed up by Hushpuppy as "All Things."

The Bathtub is cut off from society-at-large by a long levee that protects the nearby city. In an early scene, Hushpuppy and Wink are out on their boat by the levee, looking over to the noisy, grey industrial plant on "the dry side." "Ain't that ugly over there?" Wink says to his daughter. "We got the prettiest place on earth."[30] The very same levee traps the water in the Bathtub as the area floods following a major storm. The landscape remains barely recognizable, with nearly all buildings submerged in water. The Bathtub's population is subjected to a mandatory evacuation. A small group of people, however, including Hushpuppy and her father, refuse to be evacuated. Outliving the storm, they gather with a group of surviving friends in a bar, surrounded by alligators, rotting animals, and increasingly putrid water. Their perceived primal threat is the government enforcing a mandatory evacuation of their local community while refusing to drain the area. While the protagonists of *Treme* are fighting an ongoing battle with nature in the form of mold, the putrid saltwater trapped by the levee makes life for the friends in the Bathtub near impossible. Nature, however, is not primarily presented as a hostile force.

The Bathtub is located outside of society, and although it is a decidedly human community, it is not representative of the technological modernity that Leo Marx ascribes the city. On the

one hand, it seems a remnant of the idyllic pastoral past, the loss of which Marx laments. On the other hand, there is a decidedly preapocalyptic streak running through the Bathtub, as they talk about the wave—a storm surge—that will once come and devour them all. In this sense, it seems more fitting to compare the relationship between the Bathtub and greater society to the relationship between mold and technology in the visuality of Mold in the Machine. This connection is most clearly brought to the fore in the event where three male Bathtubbians plant a bomb along the levee protecting the city. They succeed, and the water levels in the Bathtub normalize. Society reacts by forcibly evacuating the remnants of the small community from the area.

The anonymous violence exerted by the city's infrastructure toward its surrounding landscape is thus echoed by the Bathtubbians' self-defensive terrorist act and then reaffirmed by the official reaction against the protest. The small community is taken to a local hospital that presents Hushpuppy with an experience that is much more alienating than the brutal storm she has already gone through. Through her eyes, the welfare offered by modern society is comparable to a straitjacket.

By letting a six-year-old child be the story's focal point and narrator, the film evades the audience's natural skepticism toward its regressive stance regarding the need for crucial social and technological infrastructures. As the film opens, we are taken aback by the life conditions of Hushpuppy and Wink, but we accept her descriptions as the thoughts of a child who knows nothing else. As the narrative unfolds, we are taken in by her voice and natural perspective on her place within the ecosystem as someone who eats and will be eaten, a lesson learned from her father as he prepares her for life in the wilderness. Hushpuppy combines an acute sense of responsibility for all living things with an uncompromisingly realistic stance toward her surroundings, which both threaten and nourish her. As we arrive at the

hospital toward the end of the film, our sympathies for society's demand for safety have shifted to empathy for the Bathtubbians and their loss of autonomy and a future.

Understood as a representative for modern society, the city in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* fails. It fails as a landscape technology, destroying its surroundings and creating a version of what Leo Marx in his epilogue calls the Garden of Ashes, a "hideous, man-made wilderness."[31] At the same time, it fails as a technology of care, creating an alienating society with no room for genuine individuality and authentic social contact. In this perspective, the Bathtubbians constitute spores of mold in the machine, offering smaller and greater acts of resistance: an unmanageable, smelly, and sometimes destructive life that threatens the order of things.

## Nature and Responsibility

*Beasts of the Southern Wild* portrays nature in a positive light, although the Bathtub and its residents are always at the mercy of natural forces. The storm is considered a worthy opponent rather than an existential threat. Wink takes this traditional struggle for power between man and nature to an extreme as he refuses to seek safety, instead opting to fight off the storm personally, with a shotgun. This scene is later echoed in Wink's story about Hushpuppy's mother killing a large, approaching alligator, the blood splattering over her white underwear, a typical example of the film's matter-of-fact approach to nature, life, and death.

The floodwater that follows the storm naturally finds its place in the Bathtub, as it directs the lives of the inhabitants. People navigate their lives in symbiosis with nature in a manner that may seemingly continue without much ado. The community gather on a boat, strengthening their authentic social bonds. The

critical threat caused by the water—a result of the city's infrastructure and industrial exploitation of the landscape—slowly becomes clear to them as they realize that the high water level is not going to sink anytime soon. The salty and increasingly toxic water filled with putrid carcasses and aggressive alligators starts to pose a health threat, destroying any sustainable living conditions. To Hushpuppy, the threat posed by society and the official policy to remove her from the landscape she calls home is much more significant. The cost of keeping the bayou livable through ever-more rising waters is higher than what society is willing or able to pay, both in terms of money and in terms of changing the path of global warming.

In a desperate act, when her father is on his deathbed, Hushpuppy leads a group of children as they swim out to open sea, realizing that the society the grownups are leaving them has no future. A fisherman picks them up and takes them to a floating brothel where Hushpuppy meets a cook who resembles her mother. Hushpuppy's relationship with her parents is intimately linked to the way the film depicts nature, human's place in it, and our personal responsibility for both ourselves and our surroundings. As her father is dying, Hushpuppy says: "Everybody loses the thing that made them. It's even how it's supposed to be in nature."[32] The mother figure reiterates this stoicism in the face of loss as she tells Hushpuppy that she is on her own in this world, while deftly and demonstratively skinning an alligator tail.

The vulnerable situation of the Bathtub is partly due to rising sea levels following global warming. Global warming is explicitly referenced through the storm breaking out when the image of a calving glacier is cut into the narrative, and Hushpuppy hears thunder and sees the rising water. The climate emergency is also the background for the film's central magic element, the release of mythic versions of the extinct aurochs. While standing as explicit symbols of the imminent threat of global warming, the

ominous approach of these immense animals adds to the urgency of Hushpuppy's path to individual awakening.

Hushpuppy first learns of the aurochs from her schoolteacher. She later dreams of their release from the ice, and clips of their run through the landscape are interspersed throughout the film up until the very end. As Hushpuppy and the group of children make their way home to her father's death bed after their trip to sea, they are almost overrun by the aurochs in a dramatic crescendo. Just as the children are about to be trampled, Hushpuppy turns and faces down the beasts until they kneel before her, recognizing a kinship. The scene points to the close connection between the existential struggle of marginalized communities, such as the Bathtub, and the environmental crisis. The aurochs represent extinction, under the threat of which Hushpuppy and her community are living. As she expresses responsibility for "her own," the aurochs turn away, and Hushpuppy returns to burn her father's corpse and lead her people into the future.

## The Aesthetics of the Bathtub

In the same way that *Beasts of the Southern Wild* conceptualizes and thinks about nature in prosaic ways, the film takes much of its expression from a naturalist aesthetic, foregrounding the materiality, the grit, dirt, and decay found in the Bathtub, or the cold cleanliness of the hospital. This aesthetic baseline, which corresponds well to the visuality of the Mold in the Machine, makes the parts of the film that take a different approach—either dreamily, like in the early sequences with the ethereal beauty of the glaciers and the aurochs trapped in ice or the trip to the brothel, or heroic like the end sequence—stand out that much more.

After the storm, in a scene that distinctly displays the film's naturalist impulse, Hushpuppy, Wink and his alcoholic friends, together with the teacher Bathsheeba and a group of children, celebrate their deceased friends with a feast of crab and crayfish. As one of the men starts to teach Hushpuppy to open a crab using a knife, Wink loudly voices his objection and demands that she "beast it!" using only her hands to break open the shell while the rest of the group cheers her on.[33] After succeeding, Hushpuppy climbs the table and flexes her biceps while giving out a loud shriek. Her father approvingly yells: "Yeah, you're an animal!" The scene is shot inside in a dimly lit room, where the yellow light and distinct shadows contribute to a cave-like atmosphere, further underscoring the community's primordial qualities.

The post-apocalyptic imagery, consisting of repurposed modern items—Wink and Hushpuppy sail a boat constructed from a pickup truck—combined with their primitive way of life, is at first presented as a hopeful beginning. However, as it becomes clear that the water will not recede, hope shifts to despair. Under the harsh sunlight, trees dead from the saltwater make stark silhouettes against the horizon. The hopeless situation leads to the blowing up of the levee. However, as the Bathtubbians return, it is their turn to stand out against the horizon, echoing the naked shape of the trees, as they behold the destroyed landscape they have tried to save.[34]

After the ordeal in the shelter, the trip out to sea, facing the aurochs, and the death of her father, the very last scene shows Hushpuppy leading the Bathtubbians down a road, waves spilling onto the pavement as the road is nearly engulfed in water. The group have their gazes fixed straight ahead, walking steadfast, carrying two tattered black flags. The characters are still a dirty and raggedy gang, but the heroic idealism of the image seems to suggest the coming of a new era. Hushpuppy's voiceover

speaks of being remembered by the scientists of the future. And although it is unclear whether these scientists will be her descendants or if the Bathtubbians will go extinct, the stark contrast between the tone of this scene—ending in a fanfare!—and the rest of the film, supports an affirmative, possibly even revolutionary, interpretation.

## Slow Violence

The violence besetting the protagonists of both *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is an impersonal violence, affecting whole communities but with individual aftermaths. Importantly, as dire as the direct consequences of the violent storms are, there is also a violence of neglect at play, with equally alarming effects. With his term slow violence, Rob Nixon has coined the form of environmental violence that is low in drama but high in long-term catastrophic effects. This form of violence does not claim visibility through spectacle and speed. Instead, it is an expression of the power of society at large—or capitalist society—to unleash the consequences of the environmental crisis on the poor.[35] The invisible nature of this violence corresponds to the traditional undervaluation of the people of the Louisiana coastline, tied to century-long identity and racial politics.

The Louisiana coastline is particularly vulnerable to the consequences of global warming due to its swampland. Land exploitation has led to draining, eroding the swampland's ability to hold vast amounts of water. Consequently, more and more land is flooded and swallowed by the sea. The combination of oil extraction draining the marsh and human-made shipping canals for oil transport leaves the freshwater marshes open to saltwater. The entry of saltwater changes the underwater ecosystem of oysters and other sea life and leads to biodiversity loss. The

channeling of the Mississippi River for industry and development purposes hinders freshwater from refilling the marshes. The subsidence of these marshy coasts leads to weaker storm protection and thus contributed to the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina.[36]

This sad state of affairs is a precondition for both *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, and they deal differently with them. *Treme* avoids bringing attention to nature's precarious state, both the damaged landscape and global warming, that likely contributed to the destruction in the first place. Rather, *Treme*'s narrative contributes to the continued invisibility of the nature that surrounds New Orleans. In fact, the only mention of the problematic ground conditions in the area comes indirectly from outsiders who question rebuilding the city, a question repeatedly dismissed by Creighton Bernette. Instead, our gaze is left to linger on the destruction after the water's withdrawal, and we are asked to consider the frail materiality of the city infrastructure and the uneven social distribution of the damages—the violence of neglect—asserted by class and government. Ironically, *Treme* thus becomes an example of the exclusion of the Gulf Coast from the "the US territorial imaginary," as argued by Stephanie LeMenager in an article on the representation of the BP blowout: "Thinking through subsidence as a narrative that has not become national despite its dissemination through national media raises the question of when the Gulf Coast fell out of the US territorial imaginary."[37] One might add that New Orleans never fell out of this imaginary, even if its surrounding landscape did.

In *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, as we follow Hushpuppy through the storm and as the flood water lingers, nature's violated state is much more apparent. The way the Bathtubbians risk their lives by not evacuating serves as a reminder of the life-altering effects of living in the Anthropocene. The strong point made by the film on this account is, however, made possible by

the Bathtubbians weak connection to modernity. LeMenager defines a schism between the entire Gulf Coast culture and modernity: "Gulf Coast people have fallen out of (or were never included within) the concept of modernity, where life practices are not clearly tied to place."[38] Hushpuppy and her community's life is unthinkable outside of their specific place and landscape.

It can be argued that this exclusion from the logic of modernity is what facilitates the slow violence exerted by society at large toward vulnerable communities such as the Bathtub, resulting in the modern melancholia for the lost pastoral idyll, as argued by Leo Marx. An underlying premise for my argument is that the slow violence of environmental crisis is predated by discrimination, as Nixon explains:

> Discrimination predates disaster: in failures to maintain protective infrastructures, failures at pre-emergency hazard mitigation, failures to maintain infrastructure, failures to organize evacuation plans for those who lack private transport, all of which make the poor and racial minorities disproportionately vulnerable to catastrophe.[39]

Global warming is causing modernity to collapse, as exemplified by the failing levee system in New Orleans and the governmental fiasco in the wake of the storm. We are now given to a "grieving of modernity itself," to quote LeMenager.[40] This grief is a central element of the visuality of Mold in the Machine.

While the violence of hurricane Katrina visibly altered New Orleans's infrastructure in mere hours, the violence of the mold was a much slower event, developing in the aftermath as an ominous threat, both visible and invisible. In this sense, the mold acts as an agent in its own right. In a world where we, according to philosopher Jacques Rancière, divide all things into things (matter) and beings (vibrant life) through a partition of our

sensible world,[41] political theorist Jane Bennett has argued that we start seeing *matter* as *vibrant*:

> How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (non-human) bodies? By 'vitality' I mean the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.[42]

With vitality, Bennett leans on sociologist Bruno Latour's term "actant" as something or someone who has the ability to produce effects. Bennett's examples of vibrant matter do not extend to mold, although she mentions storms. Nevertheless, the term is useful as a tool for describing the relationship between nature and technology in *Treme*. This perspective is only articulated by the visuality of the Mold in the Machine, in a series that is otherwise prone to stating its points quite explicitly. Whereas in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Hushpuppy's relationship to her surroundings, although based more on the magical thinking of a child, fully incorporates Bennet's expanded perspective on vitality.

Given the status as a vibrant matter, mold is also a *violent matter*, one of the leading causes of harm in post-Katrina New Orleans. This *natural violence* comes about as a result of the *violation of nature* within the Anthropocene. Through the identification of Mold in the Machine in *Treme*, we become aware of this duality of nature, a perspective that is the starting point for *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Hushpuppy and Wink are always masters of—and at the mercy of—nature.

The discussion of vitality may be furthered by engaging the idea of hurricanes and mold as vibrant matter with the concept of hyperobjects, as framed by Timothy Morton[43] as "things that

are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans,"[44] and as such frequently invisible, with extensive outreach and potentially dangerous effects, and importantly, they are *real:* "[G]enuine nonhuman objects that are not simply the products of a human gaze."[45] In *Treme*, the proliferation of mold can be seen as an expression of the hyperobject global warming. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* takes a very different approach, enlisting the tools of cinema to express "the Anthropocene as an aesthetic practice."[46]

The visuality of Mold in the Machine in *Treme* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* demonstrates the duality of nature as violent and violated. Along the Louisiana coastline, it is evident how years of exploitation of the landscape and disinvestment in city infrastructure aggravate the consequences of the climate emergency that we are living through now. The Mold in the Machine demands that we recognize both the materiality of progressive modernity and its material—and human—consequences. Embedded in this visuality is both a reinforced emphasis on the forms of violence caused by the increasing technologizing of the world, while at the same time giving shape to a new melancholy for modernity itself, the central structuring human-made force in our lifeworld.

## Notes

1. For an insightful overview of the problematic conditions of the Louisiana Gulf Coast and the centuries-long attempts to control nature along the Mississippi river, see Elizabeth Kolbert, "Louisiana's Disappearing Coast," *The New Yorker* (New York, 2019), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/01/louisianas-disappearing-coast.
2. David Simon & Eric Overmyer, *Treme.* Season 1: *Won't Bow Don't Know How* (HBO Entertainment, 2010).

3. Benh Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2012).
4. Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.
5. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.
6. See for instance Rolf Potts, "Treme's Big Problem: Authenticity," *The Atlantic*, 2013, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/-em-treme-em-s-big-problem-authenticity/281857/.
7. See for instance Dominique Gendrin, Catherine Dessinges, and Shearon Roberts, eds., *HBO's Treme and Post-Katrina Catharsis: The Mediated Rebirth of New Orleans* (Washington D.C.: Lexington Books, 2017).
8. See for instance Isak Winkel Holm, "The Cultural Analysis of Disaster," in *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, ed. Carsten Meiner & Kristin Veel (Berlin Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2012).
9. J. Steven Picou, "Introduction. Katrina as Paradigm Shift: Reflections on Disaster Research in the Twenty-First Century," in *The Sociology of Katrina: Perspectives on a Modern Catastrophe*, ed. D.L. Brunsma, D. Overfelt, and J.S. Picou (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).
10. See for example Tavia Nyong'o, "Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanism in Beasts of the Southern Wild," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2015); Agnes Woolley, "The Politics of Myth Making: 'Beasts of the Southern Wild,'" openDemocracy, 2012, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/politics-of-myth-making-beasts-of-southern-wild/.
11. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1964]).
12. Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, Mark Twain, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and others.
13. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 29.
14. *Treme* season 1, which this analysis is based on, aired in 2010, five years after Hurricane Katrina. The title is borrowed from the neighborhood Treme in the Lower Ninth Ward, one of the areas

that were hardest hit by the floodwater when the levees broke. Treme is the oldest African-American neighborhood in the US populated by free people of color.

15. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme.* Season 1, episode 1: 1:40.
16. Allison Plyer, "Facts for Features: Katrina Impact," The Data Center, 2016, accessed September 23, 2020, https://www.datacenterresearch.org/data-resources/katrina/facts-for-impact/.
17. Picou, "Introduction," 2.
18. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme,* season 1, episode 1, 18:40.
19. A later study found that New Orleans suffered the greatest loss of tree coverage in the US in the period 2005–2009. See David J. Nowak and Eric J. Greenfield, "Tree and Impervious Cover Change in U.S. Cities," *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening* 11, no. 1 (2012), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2011.11.005.
20. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme,* season 1, episode 3, 15:00.
21. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme*, season 1, episode 1, 20:20. The two directors point to the impossibility of representing smell on film in the commentary track to season 1, where they also discuss how they specifically addressed the issue in the audience who experienced the smell first hand. Dave: "The city smelled so different. You couldn't do the smell."
22. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme*, season 1, episode 4, 04:30.
23. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme*, season 1, episode 6, 50:47.
24. The white middle-class lived on higher grounds, sparing their houses from the surge, while they also had the economic security and means of transportation to leave New Orleans prior to the hurricane making landfall.
25. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme,* season 1, episode 8, 05:42.
26. Robert Polidori, *After the Flood* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006).
27. "Still-Life Painting," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2018, accessed September 23, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/art/still-life-painting.
28. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme*, season 1, episode 1: 1:13:00. As David Simon puts it in his comments to the scene: "No city falls down as beautiful as New Orleans. That may be the trouble."
29. Simon & Overmyer, *Treme,* season 1, episode 3, 52:00.
30. Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, 4:05.
31. Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 358.

32. Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, 1:07:04.
33. Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, 38:58.
34. Zeitlin, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, 49:41.
35. Nixon, *Slow Violence*.
36. Kolbert, "Louisiana's Disappearing Coast."
37. Stephanie LeMenager, "Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief," in *Energy Humanities An Anthology*, ed. Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 476.
38. LeMenager, "Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief," 473.
39. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 59.
40. LeMenager, "Petro-Melancholia: The BP Blowout and the Arts of Grief," 472.
41. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006).
42. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter, a Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 8.
43. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
44. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.
45. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 199.
46. Fay, *Inhospitable World*, 4.

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