From Green to Brown Landscapes – and Back Again: Urban Agriculture, Ecology and Hae-jun Lee's *Cast Away on the Moon*

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Abstract

My essay looks at contemporary developments in urbanism that re-negotiate the place of nature in our cities. Looking at the example of bottom-up and top-down models of urban agriculture, two alternative approaches to urban systems are presented which try to re-embed them in the natural-material cycles of life. Firstly, the changes that have occurred in our urban landscapes (and our cultural images of them) since the age of industrialization are discussed, to uncover the socio-historical dimension of the subject. The second part analyzes the cultural urban ecology invoked in South Korean director Hae-jun Lee's film *Cast Away on the Moon* (2009). As I show, the film imaginatively deals with these issues and invites a re-consideration of our urban lifestyles before the background of the question what place nature has in our cities and in how far working with the soil can lead to regeneration.

Keywords: urban ecology, agriculture, farming, ecomedia, storytelling.

Resumen

Mi ensayo contempla los desarrollos contemporáneos en urbanismo que renegocian el lugar de la naturaleza en nuestras ciudades. Observando el ejemplo de los modelos ascendentes y descendentes de la agricultura urbana, se presentan dos enfoques alternativos a los sistemas urbanos que tratan de incorporarlos en los ciclos de vida naturales-materiales. En primer lugar, se debaten los cambios que han ocurrido en nuestro paisajes urbanos (y nuestras imágenes culturales de estos) desde la época de la industrialización, para descubrir la dimensión socio-histórica del asunto. La segunda parte analiza la ecología urbana cultural invocada en la película del director surcoreano Hae-jun Lee *Cast Away on the Moon* (2009). Tal y como muestro, la película trata estos temas de forma imaginativa e invita a reconsiderar nuestros estilos de vida urbanos ante el trasfondo de la pregunta de qué lugar ocupa la naturaleza en nuestra ciudades y en cuánto puede llevar a la regeneración trabajar con el suelo.

Palabras clave: ecología urbana, agricultura, cultivo, medios de comunicación ecologistas, narración.

Introduction: From Green to Brown

In his influential 2001 monograph study *Writing for an Endangered World*, Lawrence Buell called for the need to "put green and brown landscapes, the landscapes of exurbia and industrialization in conversation with one another" (Buell 7). He based his call on Lance Newman's observation that "the environmental crisis threatens all

landscapes—wild, rural, suburban, and urban" and that "South Boston is just as natural (and wild) as Walden Pond" (Newman 71). Although some might regard this statement as a provocative one—obviously there are differences between natural and human built environments in both a phenomenological and a conceptual sense—I take it as the starting point for my essay in order to illustrate how contemporary developments in urban planning re-negotiate the boundaries between "green" and "brown" landscapes. I want to address this renewed urban ecology through the example of urban agriculture, which has become an increasing trend in post-industrial nations and newly industrialized countries alike. Comparing bottom-up with top-down models of urban farming, I will present two alternative approaches to urban systems that try to re-embed them in the natural-material cycles of life and that seek new ways of conceptualizing cities as integral parts of a living, interactive biosphere, in which non-human and human built environments are interrelated and depend on each other for survival. First, I will briefly sketch out the changes that have occurred in our urban landscapes (and our cultural images of them) since the age of industrialization, in order to provide the discussion with a socio-historical framework. This is important in so far as the "green knowledge" involved in contemporary urbanism, especially with regard to urban food culture, harks back to a long tradition of working with the environment and with the soil and could lead to a re-negotiation of urban landscapes and innovations in the conception of living—innovations that, interestingly enough, do not emanate from utopian visions out of thin air, but that look back and take their impetus from a premodern time period. In the second part of my essay, I will discuss the cultural urban ecology presented in South Korean director Hae-jun Lee's film *Cast Away on the Moon* (2009). As I aim to show, the film deals with these issues imaginatively and invites a re-consideration of our urban lifestyles before the background of the questions what place nature has in our cities and whether working with the soil can lead to regeneration.

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Re-Greening City Spaces: The Example of Urban Agriculture and its Historical Roots

From a cultural-historical viewpoint, the decline of nature and the coinciding ascendancy of an urbanized world have turned into a narrative template quite common in public environmental discourse and among scientists. Since the time of industrialization, urbanization has gone hand in hand with industrial practices and economic processes that have an adverse effect on the environment. This era also gave way to a tradition of thinking about cities as urban enclaves or fortresses, radically separated from their surroundings, as if city and country were miraculously sealed off from one another by an invisible wall.[1] This view has been encapsulated in many cultural projections evolving from the environmental movement. For instance, in a description of his 1989 oil painting *Gaia*, American artist Alex Grey writes about the inspiration behind his work:

[1] This observation is also the starting point of Raymond Williams' influential study *The Country and the City* (1973).

> Gaia was the tree of life or web of life with her roots in the subatomic, atomic, molecular, and cellular levels of matter (mater/mother) reaching upward through the oceans, stones, soil, grass, forests, mountains, lakes, rivers, air, and atmosphere to nurture all plants and creatures. A natural cycle of birth, sustenance, and death was woven into the tapestry of Nature (…) Gaia's body was being ravaged and destroyed by man, reflecting the present crisis in the environment. A diseased and demonic phallus had erected structures [sic] all over the earth to suck dry Gaia's milk and turn it into power and money. The wasteland of a disposable culture was piled high and was seeping into the microgenetic pool causing diseases and defects in the Great Chain of Life. (Grey, *Gaia*)

Famous for his anatomical artworks, probably best encapsulated in his series of life-sized paintings *The Sacred Mirrors*, Alex Grey is both an artist concerned with the interaction between bodily matter and spiritual mind and a mystic, whose glowing, translucent prints and installations are tied to belief in the transcending power of creation and the healing effect of what he refers to as "performance rites."[2] As his impressive body of work, featured in dozens of magazines and the cover art of popular bands like Tool or Nirvana, as well as the quote above show, there is also an ecological train of thought embedded in his artistic vision. Already the title of his latest book, *Net of Being* (2012), expresses an ecological sentiment, connected to a perception of the world as a vast, interconnected network of bodies and material or spiritual agencies. The metaphor of a "net" can also be found in the painting *Gaia*, which presents its viewers with two inter-related visions of the biosphere: a green paradise of peaceful equilibrium on the one hand and a downtrodden, hellish and almost apocalyptic industrial world on the other. It is interesting to note that both belong to the same web of life, visualized by a small globe at the center of the painting, from which concentric circles emanate and reach out to its margins.[3] The "cycle of death and life" alluded to by Grey is symbolized by a lush tree that encapsulates all of creation, human and non-human beings. However, the dense network of the human sphere of entitlements and practices and the biophilic order to which it is inextricably linked also seem to exclude each other like two sides of the same coin. More important still is the fact that the industrial wasteland on the right is clearly identified as an urban world. The pollution spewing smokestacks and towering skyscrapers feed on the land and have maimed the life-giving power of the environment. The message engrained in this painting seems to be clear—our ecological crisis is both part and outcome of a process of industrialized urbanization.

[2] For further information also see the biography on his webpage alexgrey.com/bio/.

[3] The message behind the painting as well as its title may evoke associations with the "Gaia hypothesis" originally developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis in the 1970s. According to Lovelock and Margulis, organisms and their non-organic surroundings make up a complex system that constantly adapts to changes and self-regulates to make up the conditions for life on Earth. The "Gaia hypothesis" has attracted a good deal of criticism, not only because of its neglect of some aspects of (co-)evolution like selection processes, but also for its holistic approach that conceptualizes the Earth as a unified whole. Recently, Bruno Latour has taken up the "Gaia hypothesis" to re-think the tension inherent in the original concept between the image of a sublime nature and the anthropogenic vision of mastery over the system Earth (see Latour). For a concise discussion of Lovelock's and Latour's respective take on "Gaia" see Schrape.

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In this context, it is interesting to note that both the painting and Grey's description focus on the material processes of urban life. There seems to be a material exchange between cities and their environments. However, in Grey's vision they are primarily one-sided. Industrialized urbanization, it suggests, brings with it a pollution of the environment through greenhouse gasses and toxic sewage that cannot be turned around, while nature has been relegated to the wastelands surrounding the city space—it does not seem to figure prominently within the proper urban area. Not merely a cultural projection, this view is also implicitly encapsulated in scientific concepts of urban climates and ecological footprint analysis.[4] Both provide models that conceptualize city areas as dense material networks, which may affect their surroundings, but that are seldom influenced by material flows from the outside, as places where nature is likewise present in myriad ways. As William Cronon has shown with the help of Chicago in his classic study *Nature's Metropolis*, this rigid division between city areas and their respective hinterlands has never been the case. He argues that if one traces the flows of goods, water, even of pollutants, the mobility of people and capital, the boundaries that exist in our imagination between country and city become permeable and it becomes clear how they depend on each other (Cronon 8). Nature is very much present in our cities and although urban metabolisms are characterized by a higher degree of emissions and higher temperatures in comparison to their surroundings, the material flows that come in from the outside are every bit as important as the material products of the city space proper (Schliephake xii-xiii, xxviii-xxxiv). Nonetheless, the modern age *has changed* our cities. Factories, and later the automobile, have considerably altered the way our cities look, smell, and feel, often removing green areas from inner city districts in favor of industrial sites or parking lots. Early pioneers of green urban design and sustainable architecture like Frederick Olmsted, Patrick Geddes, and Ebenezer Howard were among the first to criticize this development and to counter it with visions that sought to re-embed nature into urban landscapes. In these concepts, the natural environment was to be transformed into a built, engineered environment on principles transferred from nature. Howard in his influential garden city concept argued for the importance of bringing nature back into cities, and suggested the need of decentralization and urban containment for managing urban growth (Eaton 301). Similarly, Geddes proposed the idea of a bioregion where he highlighted the importance of a comprehensive consideration of the interrelationship between cities and their surrounding ecosystem (Wong and Yuen 2-3). He insisted that it is crucial to understand cities as being embedded in their rural hinterland (Girardet 5).

[4] The Canadian ecologists William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel deveolped ecological footprint analysis as a model to imaginatively visualize the global areas required to supply cities with resources as well as absorb their output of gases and wastes (Girardet 113-114). While their model is certainly important for rendering the global impact of local urban living, it implicitly presupposes that cities feed on their surroundings like great machines, absorbing materials and emitting waste. It does not reflect on the ways in which cities can actually absorb emissions, bring about biological diversity, and mitigate problems of population density and transport—these aspects are often mentioned in the many books which welcome our current urbanization patterns (Saunders or Glaeser as examples). However, it is important to underline that these positive impacts on the environment depend on how urban policies and how cities are actually managed (Wong and Yuen 2-10, Hambleton 208-233, Lehmann 212-241).

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Many contemporary urban planners and architects would agree with these visions and, at least in post-industrial countries, nature has indeed returned to our cities on a grand scale, either by reconquering abandoned industrial sites, overgrowing asphalt and concrete, or by the conscious human planning of park areas, canals, and recreational spaces.

Probably no other sphere illustrates the shifts that have occurred since the modern era in spatial as well as ecological terms in cities better than agriculture. In most major cities, agricultural practices made up a large part of daily urban life until urban growth, an increase in population and commercial trade demanded new methods of production, with agriculture moving out of the city and big industries moving in. Recent urbanization patterns, with statistics projecting a dramatic increase in urban population rates until the middle of the 21st century (Hambleton 36-41), have made the question of food supply and transport important for urban policies and put them on the agenda of politicians, scientists, and economists alike. More than a question of green capitalism or consumerism (both feature prominently in the debates), this is a subject that could well lead to a re-conceptualization of urban landscapes and a re-interpretation of land use patterns. In both ecological and architectural terms, the issue of whether to build on or rather into nature has been relevant and disputed since the early 20th century (Ingersoll 577). Contemporary concepts of urban agriculture seem to offer a middle ground, trading in the "on" or "into" for a "with nature". In this context, landscape has been re-discovered as a fundamental ingredient of urban planning. Rather than being a passive repository of resources or space to be built on, it is now increasingly seen as an agent itself which "holds tremendous potentials for the re-shaping of urbanizing territories" (Shannon 637). Especially in the fast-growing urban centres of Asia and Africa, landscape has turned into a structuring element in urbanization patterns. The outskirts and improvised spaces at the edge of cities are thereby thought of as hybrid zones where traditional rural habitats and urban ways of life meet and merge. The migration from country to city holds enormous potential for these urban communities, because it co-occurs with a transfer of knowledge from rural areas, where most people had grown up as farmers. It is interesting to note that "this emerging hybrid morphology" makes use of a mixture "of urban and rural activities" (McGrath and Shane 653) and is predominantly a development led from the bottom up, unregulated by state authorities and characterized by spontaneity, improvisation, and innovation.[5] Urban planners have increasingly started to adapt to these developments and to translate them into more focused and strictly outlined concepts. For instance, the new town center of Guangming in Shenzen, China, is designed "to develop a city paradigm reconciling the contrasting needs of urban growth and rural preservation" (Lim and Liu 51). Based on "the hybridization of city and arable land" (56), this design should safeguard a swift transition for the rural-urban migrants and benefit the urban community as a whole—not only with regard to food supply, but also by increasing the presence of green spaces,

[5] In post-industrial nations, too, the "village" evolves as a new paradigm in urban planning which provides a mixture between urban and rural practices and which leads to a hybridity in social and spatial terms (Girardet 170-174).

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including a responsible use of the natural morphology of the landscape and rivers. However, technology also features prominently in this framework, since advanced farming techniques, harvesting machines, and (green) energy resources should be used to guarantee an efficient workforce and surplus yields. Urban farming is thus increasingly characterized by a mixture of factors: bottom-up initiatives are met with top-down planning, natural landscape features are engineered in ways that should provide an efficient use of space, and local markets are created to boost (green) consumerism.

Interestingly enough, this is not only a trend in developing countries or the booming cities of Asia, but rather a global phenomenon with distinct local characteristics. In Europe and North America, peri-urban farming has strong historical roots and produces enough food for millions of urban dwellers (Girardet 236-251). But still, urban agriculture and gardening has grown into a trend as grassroots movements and guerilla gardeners take it upon themselves to re-fashion city spaces. Let us look at the example of Brooklyn: According to Linder's and Zacharias' monograph on the subject, *Of Cabbages and Kings County: Agriculture and the Formation of Modern Brooklyn* (1999), Kings County was a leading vegetable producer until the end of the 19th century, and had been one for over 250 years, mostly due the many farms in the outer-borough area, until its land was rendered almost entirely urban residential in the early 20th century. The land was most productive on those parcels that were urbanized and built over and the book outlines how Brooklyn residents' relationship to the land shifted drastically during that period. However, it also makes clear that Brooklyn's agriculture persisted in outer-borough areas, and shows how its agricultural history shapes Brooklyn today. For although it is now dominated by residential districts and industrial sites, agriculture is actually staging a huge comeback on the rooftops of abandoned factories and in grey back alleys. This development has to do with urban space that became available when old industries left the city. It also had to do with a renewed sensitivity in nutrition, an interest in local food and in knowing the provenance of what you eat. There are now many commercial vegetable and chicken farms in Brooklyn including the Eagle Street Rooftop Farm and the Brooklyn Grange farm, a commercial farm that grows a wide variety of produce and keeps chickens on rooftops in Long Island City and the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and these continue to expand.[6]

If we compare Brooklyn to what we are currently witnessing in Asia, a wholly different picture arises. On a continent where about three quarters of the current urbanization patterns are occurring, making cities self-sufficient and independent from foreign exports is literally a matter of life and death. Singapore is an example of a city state which promotes urban agriculture. Here, the agriculture looks a little different from Brooklyn's innovative, but very traditional methods. The private enterprise Sky Greens has developed some of the first fully functional vertical farms in the world, where vegetables and plants grow under ideal, but also artificial and engineered

[6] As an example, see *Brooklyn Grange*.

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conditions.[7] Their soil based vertical farms produce one ton of vegetables a day and are far more productive than a regular farm. The vertical system is carbon hydraulic water-driven, using less water, energy and natural resources, to achieve a sustainable green high-tech farm. This vertical farming system, called "A-Go-Gro" technology, grows vegetables in A-shaped towers six meters tall. The water powering the frames is recycled and filtered before returning to the plants. All organic waste on the farm is composted and reused. According to official statistics, the whole system has a footprint of only about 60 square feet, or the size of an average bathroom (Krishnamurthy). A total of 120 such towers have been erected in Singapore, with plans to build over 2,000 towers in the next few years. It is a fascinating vision that could fundamentally alter our city landscapes and that could be a true alternative to the many "food miles" that cities all over the world are piling up in their food imports. Of course, as Krishnamurthy rightly points out, there are problems involved: "Requirements such as pollination in an insect-free environment, controlling the environment within the buildings with regards to lighting, temperature, arrangement of plants, etc., make food production in a vertical farm a very expensive affair" (Krishnamurthy). Another issue is that these farms are, more or less, laboratories, artificial environments that do not interact or add to the urban nature around them. So while they can certainly mitigate problems of transport and supply shortages, they do not necessarily lead to greener cities.

It is easy to criticize Singapore's concept of urban farming in the light of Brooklyn's grassroots and community-based movements and methods. If one takes into account the precarious situation of a city state which has to rely on its neighboring states and the stability of trade routes, however, a different view arises. Although Singapore's farming is artificial and reminiscent of a food factory, it could prove to be a viable alternative for millions of people who live in cities where peri-urban farming is not possible for climatic or other reasons. One clear advantage is that food mileage is drastically reduced to local distances, thus minimizing carbon emissions. A disadvantage is that it is costly and, so far, only the affluent middle- and upper-class residents can afford Sky Green's products. In consequence, my goal is not to play off one version of urban farming against the other, but rather to see the connecting links, which consist in a renewed sensitivity to local environments in a globalized age. Clearly, from a communal and ecological perspective alone, Brooklyn's rooftop and back-alley gardening is to be welcomed for the immediate interaction it enables with the landscape and the raw matter of the urban soil. Leaving aside the aspect of public health and community building, this interaction with the urban environment also means creating an integral vision of how urban landscapes can be re-designed to bring about resilience and sustainability. In both approaches, this vision does not develop out of utopian thinking, but is rather rooted in the premodern or preurban history of the places themselves. And it is in this context that culture becomes an integral part of urban ecology as a repository of knowledge and imagination. The stories attached to city space,

[7] I take my information from their webpage, which presents the technical methods of their vertical farming in detail. While this technology works in countries in the Southern Hemisphere, it is not applicable to countries in the North, for reasons of climate and hours of sun (*Skygreens*).

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along with the alternatives one can envision for a particular environment, can become every bit as important as present realities. That is why I will, in the following, look at how a film, set in contemporary Seoul, South Korea imagines an urban ecology for the 21st century.

The Urban Ecology of Hae-jun Lee's *Cast Away on the Moon*

South Korea is no stranger to urban aspiration and innovation. With the help of international star architects and architectural consortia, one of the first eco-cities[8] of the world has been built along reclaimed land on Incheon's waterfront, near Seoul. Situated in the Incheon Free Economic Zone, New Songdo could easily become the template for a new urban design, focused on both ecological and economic functionality as breeding ground for a new, relatively homogeneous middle class. It would be worthwhile to delve deeper into the narrative and ideological fabrics of an eco-city like Songdo, yet, for the sake of the length and the initial topic of my essay, I will not do this at this stage. It probably suffices to note the utopian vision and political determinacy included in the planning of this large scale urban project—while it holds great promise for a future based on mutual prosperity and well-being, there have been set-backs as well: Initially planned for roughly 70,000 inhabitants, the city now holds about half those people.[9] The implementation of the project has been more costly than initially calculated, and the city primarily hosts a population whose mobility is constrained by various factors: I do not mean this in the literal, spatial sense of the word, but in both social and cultural terms. While the public transportation system is excellent and walking distances have been reduced to a bare minimum within the city space, Songdo is planned *for*, not *by* its inhabitants. Career paths and job opportunities are pre-determined, there is not much room for individuals' initiatives; moreover, it has been made up of parts of already existing cities, including a central park, an opera house modeled on Sydney's, and vast shopping malls resembling Dubai's sumptuous duty-free areas. People move *in* Songdo, but are they really moved *by* their city? A retort city like Songdo has the problem that it lacks a history, a sense of place based on a long interaction with the environment, its structures have not grown in laborious processes, but were imposed on a blank slate. This is the primary reason why critics of eco-city projects predict a somber future for these cities as their top-down modelled design misses the cultural aspects of urban ecology and communal identity (Sze, Ouroussoff). In an environmental sense, they also dodge the difficult question of what to do with already existing cities which may not be as sustainable or self-sufficient. What is needed is not so much a look ahead to shiny urban projects, but rather a look back to the environmental history of our cities: Where do they come from and how have they negotiated the shifting landscapes of their surroundings? How can they work with their natural environments to reach an ecological equilibrium and a sound base for biophilic well-being? That South Korea's

[8] On eco-cities Hagan 87-105, Girardet 274-294 as well as the essays in Wong and Yuen.
[9] New Songdo is featured prominently in Frédéric Castaignède's documentary series *Cities of the Future* (2014), produced by European tv channel ARTE. One part of this series also investigates urban farming.

leading politicians are not blind to this issue can be seen in Seoul, where government-led green initiatives have seen the implementation of natural reserves along the shores of the once polluted Cheonggyecheon River. In the late 1970's a four-lane elevated highway was built atop the Cheonggyecheon creek near downtown Seoul which once served as drainage for the city until the 40's. After safety concerns and much debate, the expressway was turned into a pedestrian park in 2005 that reclaimed the river, decreased the number of cars in the area and increased the use of public transit, turning a brown landscape into a green one. The river and its biosphere have recovered and have turned into a popular local recreational space with beneficial effects on Seoul's urban climate and its (non)human inhabitants (Dunn and Jamieson 101). When it comes to urban planning, the simplest measures sometimes have the greatest effects.

This can, in fact, be seen as an integral part of what constitutes ecological knowledge within our cities: a sensitivity to natural landscape features and an experience in dealing with them, based on a long history of nature-culture interaction. What are marked characteristics of South Korea's urbanism—versatility, contradictions, and grand designs—are also signature features of its vibrant film industry. Finding themselves in a middle space between East Asian neo-realist cinema and Hollywood's genre films, South Korean directors like Kim-Ki Dook, Park-Chan Wook and Bong Joon-Ho have made the playful transformation of generic conventions and the variation of cinematic themes a distinct quality of their respective films (Schliephake 158-160). It is no coincidence that life in the city, the dense network of everyday constraints and entitlements, practices and dreams, finds increasing attention by filmmakers who develop their own imaginative take on South Korea's socio-political realities. In the following, I want to illustrate this with the help of Hae-jun Lee's 2009 film *Cast Away on the Moon*. A major success when it was first released, it has found a cult following in South Korea but otherwise failed to attract a wide international audience. This may have to do with the absence of synchronizations of the film, but equally with the inversion of genre expectations. Although *Cast Away on the Moon* is a romantic comedy and uses moments of comic relief and the motif of star-crossed lovers, the protagonists do not meet until the last moment of the movie. In fact, the film leaves open whether we are dealing with a love movie after all and rather employs the theme of a developing love interest as a subplot to deal with issues of alienation, abandonment, social depravation and isolation, presenting its viewers with a critical take on modern communication and capitalist estrangement. As I want to show in the last part of my essay, it interweaves these issues with a critique and re-imagination of contemporary urbanism and invites a re-consideration of the place of nature in our complex urban ecologies. Moreover, it challenges modern urban lifestyles by re-integrating agriculture within our cities and shows how communal involvement with other beings can not only inspire change, but also lead to regeneration.

The film is set in present-day Seoul and functions along the lines of a goofball comedy and romantic escape movie, depicting the struggle of the protagonists against a fantastic-realist take on urban nature on the one hand, and the claustrophobic constraints of dense city space on the other. Woven into the double helix of the story are

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two narrative strands that explore these settings with the help of a male and a female protagonist respectively. Both are named Kim and struggle with problems of alienation and isolation, yet in totally different circumstances: The male Kim is stranded on an abandoned island in the Han River. Initially, he had planned to take his life by jumping off a bridge, but he survived only to be washed up on Bamseom, which lies directly below the bridge. Although the city is in full sight, he is stuck on the island, because he cannot swim and so he is literally cast away in the middle of a city of millions. After a while, he makes the best of his situation and enjoys his carefree lifestyle. The female Kim is a young woman, who is a castaway of her own making, since she is agoraphobic and has not left her room in years. She spots him through the viewfinder of her camera while engaging in her nightly habit of photographing the moon. They soon begin exchanging messages, with the woman venturing out of her house at night in a jumpsuit and helmet, which give her the look of a kind of urban astronaut, to throw bottled messages onto the island, and Kim writing his replies in the sand. The climax of the film arrives with a torrential storm which destroys the man's farm that he has begun to set up on the island and sweeps away the possessions he has collected. Eventually, he is found by a group of workers sent to clean up litter on the island. He boards a bus in the city in a desperate attempt to go to a skyscraper from which to jump to his death. The woman, who watches how Kim is taken away from the island, is afraid for him and manages, after overcoming her anxiety, to meet him in the bus. They shake hands and although the film stops at this point, it becomes clear that they have, in a twisted turn of events, saved each other.

Cast Away on the Moon is a remarkable film for various reasons. It interweaves a cultural discourse, which is critical of social developments, with a highly imaginative take on urban ecology. From its beginning, it addresses problems of the failure of communication in a digital age and the (self-)deceiving disguises and roles played in a world dominated by advertisements and social networks. The female protagonist has become so obsessed with the Internet and inventing profiles for her websites that she trades in the virtual world for the real world, giving in to a strict routine of computer "work". That there is another world waiting behind the closed curtains of her dim room becomes clear at night, when she photographs the moon and enjoys the stillness of the sleeping and lit silhouettes of the city. Locked in a big apartment block, the noisy and hectic everyday life of a big city is too much for her and her alienation from her environment is rendered in stark images of the claustrophobic atmosphere of her room. Shutters block out the sun and the cinematography makes use of dark and somber colors, including brown, to underline the forlorn situation of the female protagonist. For instance, Kim forces herself to sleep in her closet, covered with sterile cellophane tape. This death-in-life motif is the visualization of a symptomatic estrangement from the environment and of a dysfunctional social life, which is not only rooted in psychopathological disorders of the individual but also in modern (urban) life itself. This is echoed in the suicide attempt of the male protagonist, who, as disclosed right from the outset of the film, is deep in debt. A series of flashbacks shows how he was lured into high expenses by advertisements and how he was let down by his family, his girlfriend, and his employer. The calls for help he can send off with his low-battery cellphone are

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either ignored or misunderstood as pranks and so he is left to his own devices. The business suit he is wearing, along with the many plated credit cards and the ID he keeps in his wallet, are symbols of conformity and interchangeable commodities, which add to his increasing sense of disintegration. On the island, they are of no use to him, serving only as dress for a scarecrow Kim forms out of wooden sticks.

In this context, the setting of the main action of the film gains increasing relevance: The island becomes the stage for an imaginative counterdiscourse which presents the viewers with a surprising take on urban nature and retains, at the same time, various genre conventions, which are undermined in the course of the film.[10] The failure of communication, which remains a key subject until the end, and the alienated living situations of the two protagonists evoke themes of absurdist drama. Yet, the film does not stop here but rather presents these in the guise of a modern Robinsonade.[11] It plays with many themes and motifs found in Defoe's initial version of the story and there are many interpictorial references to more contemporary adaptions like the Tom Hanks movie *Cast Away* or the Christopher McCandless story depicted in Jon Krakauer's reportage and Sean Penn's movie *Into the Wild*.[12] While abandonment, outsiderdom, loneliness, and isolation are therefore major themes of the film that strike home a social message, which consists in arguing for conviviality, community, and face-to-face communication as opposed to other modern life styles in the virtual world, there is also another aspect to the story that brings environmental issues into swift focus: The island on which the male protagonist gets stranded is, despite its location in the middle of the Han River, completely desolate and resembles a jungle in an outback wilderness. That it has not been untouched by human hands altogether becomes clear at the end of the movie, when it is disclosed that it is, in an ironic twist of events, a nature reserve. However, human impact on it can be seen much earlier, because it is littered with garbage. Especially plastic bottles and polythene bags remind us of the way in which our food is normally packaged. Most of it may not be visible in the city space proper, because it gets disposed of by garbage trucks and the like, but the film reminds us that it has real consequences for the environment, since it does not easily dissolve, but stays, even in places removed from full human control. The plastic on the island is echoed by the many scenes in the film that depict the female protagonist next to heaps of waste that she piles up in her room (she is clearly messy). There are also contrasts, however: Where her room is cramped and claustrophobic, very much like the city streets she forces herself to traverse at night, the natural environment on the island is bright and open. There is room to breathe and also to interact with non-human beings and matter. The film thus works along a dialectic of a series of polarities: between culture and nature, built and natural environment, light and darkness, freedom and constraint. In this context, it is

[10] In my cultural ecological reading of the film I draw on Hubert Zapf's theory of cultural ecology (Zapf).
[11] Even in Defoe's original version of the story, nature takes on the role of a counterdiscourse (Novak).
[12] Christopher McCandless was an American college graduate who gave all of his possessions to charity and decided to tramp through the United States and, finally, Alaska in an escape from a dysfunctional family and modern lifestyle commodities. He died in Alaska, presumably due to poisoning by wild berries. The converted bus he used as shelter became a symbol after he was found; in *Cast Away on the Moon*, Kim uses a pedal boat in the form of a duck as shelter.

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important to note that the film achieves this effect mainly through clever lighting and a creative take on cinematography: since there is only little dialogue in the film, these contrasts are depicted by visual means. The dark and muffled atmosphere of Kim's room is opposed to the bright colors on the island; and whereas the scenes in the city space mostly take place at night, the island is usually visited during daytime. Sun and moon, green and brown landscapes constantly alternate; yet, they are not only contrasted, but the visual design correlates them so that it becomes possible to reflect on their interlacement and possible interconnections.

However, it would be too simple to claim that the film tries to oppose a culture critical version of modern urban life with some idyllic version of tree-hugging bliss. Rather, it questions whether we are truly fit for a life removed from the comforts of modern life and what it takes to live self-sufficiently. As I mentioned earlier, food is a major motif in the film: Whereas the female Kim mainly relies on junk food that her caring mother serves her every day, the male protagonist has to learn to survive with what little he spots on the island. The food residue he finds in plastic bags is not enough to nurture him and so he starts to spear fish and tries to capture birds. He is not very talented at either of these undertakings, until he, one day, dissects the dung of the birds that nest over his camp. He buries the seeds he finds in it in the ground and uses the dung as a natural fertilizer. After a laborious and long process, he can finally reap corn and make noodles out of it. His triumph does not last long however, because a freak storm demolishes his little plantation and destroys his camp. It is interesting to note that Kim's effort in working with the soil of the island and in growing his plants make up much of the core of the film. At many instances, we enter the island via the viewfinder of the female protagonist's camera. Like her, we follow his work and his almost Neolithic struggle for survival with an ethnographic interest. The little island becomes an imaginative laboratory amidst a huge concrete and glass city and the movie turns into a reflection of alternative lifestyles in the vast urban jungle of our modern era, where the old and the new, the ancient and modern can co-exist and complement each other. That this process is neither balanced nor harmonious can both be seen in the environmental pollution through garbage and the storm that wreaks havoc on the built and natural environment alike. And while the latter is a stark reminder of how our urban ecologies are intertwined with natural, thermodynamic weather systems and geological landscape features, the vision of the nature-culture interaction in our modern cities projected in the film is still a regenerative one: Through the commitment to his surroundings and through working with the soil, the male protagonist finds a new perspective and outlook on life, while the female protagonist is inspired to plant corn in her room herself and finally manages to overcome her anxiety in the end. In both instances, the presence and interrelation with urban nature play fundamental roles in bringing about personal change and in re-envisioning lifestyles.

What can a film like *Cast Away on the Moon* tell us with regard to our thinking about urban ecology and urban environments? On the one hand, it shows that culture is one way of bringing "the green and brown landscapes of industrialization and exurbia in conversation with one another." The film focuses on urban nature—it is not a nature

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untouched by human hands, nor is it entirely engineered or built on. Like the approaches to urban agriculture discussed in this essay, *Cast Away on the Moon* vividly illustrates that urban nature is a hybrid zone, where brown and green landscapes, human-built and natural environments constantly interact. As the bottom-up and community-based initiatives of urban farming all over the world make clear, cities harbor manifold possibilities of (re-)introducing green styles of living which can bring about new ways of using and conceptualizing city space. City space is thereby seen as a space of creative interaction, whose state can be seen as an indicator of how we treat our environment and, in turn, ourselves; and a space that allows for patterns of land use long abandoned in the age of urbanization, where green modes of knowledge can be tested and rural ways of life be brought back into the city. On the other hand, *Cast Away on the Moon* also shows that we cannot turn our backs on our modern lifestyles altogether. Our cities are here to last and they will, for better or worse, continue to grow in the near future. What we need is not an imagination that helps us break free of this world, but rather an imagination that helps us to see them with new eyes and to shape our urban environments in ways that are more sustainable for our current biosphere and future generations.

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