

MENU



entanglements

experiments in multimodal ethnography

[Review] Natura Urbana: The Brachen of Berlin

Matt Barlow

Recommended citation: Barlow, M. (2019). '[Review] Natura Urbana: The Brachen of Berlin', *entanglements*, 2(1): 202-206.

Natura Urbana: The Brachen of Berlin.

Dir. Matthew Gandy
Documentary, 70 minutes
Great Britain / Germany 2017

Abstract

Since 1945 the urban spaces of Berlin have grown alongside a diverse range of botanical species, what might be thought of as remnants of a world war. Through this innovative and poetic documentary, geographer Matthew Gandy encourages us to think about nature in a

different light, as integral to the development and enjoyment of public space. He does by investigating the botanical history of Berlin's often neglected yet vital public spaces.

On the 21st of October, 2018, I hosted the Indian premiere screening of Matthew Gandy's acclaimed documentary, *Natura Urbana: The Brachen of Berlin*, at Pepper House, Fort Kochi. Fort Kochi is an island connected to the west coast of India by two bridges, it is a popular tourist destination for its rich and diverse colonial history, its emerging international art scene, and for its 'urban nature'. Trees grow out of rooftops, moss covers walls, and many buildings lay neglected, waiting for the next creature or fungus to inhabit them. Ever since I moved to Fort Kochi, some 6 months earlier in order to complete my PhD fieldwork into the various ways in which activists, artists, and institutions are grappling with the challenges that waste and environmental destruction present to achieving some kind of sustainability, I knew this would be a great location to host a screening of Gandy's new film. I thought the ideas and methods represented in Gandy's film might resonate with an audience in Fort Kochi, more so than perhaps in Adelaide, my hometown in South Australia. I invited three people to instigate a discussion immediately after the screening, an anthropologist conducting research in Kochi, a philosophy student from a nearby college, and a member of the communications team of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, one of Asia's largest arts festivals held in Fort Kochi every two years since 2012.



Figure 1: Pepper House, Fort Kochi, 2018. Photo by author.

In this film, Gandy and his crew beautifully represent an alternative way of reading the past, present, and future of Berlin through its brachen, the spaces simultaneously altered and left fallow that litter the urban fabric of post WW2 Berlin. As the film shows, these spaces have

been the sites of an amazing growth in biodiversity, as plants with origins in Australia and the US now spontaneously grow in places they had never been seen before. They have also been the sites of continued contestation over what kinds of development are conducive to the flourishing of a contemporary city. It is a documentary filled with sounds of leaves in the wind juxtaposed with traffic on the streets, of archival footage of the streets of Berlin immediately after WW2 and during the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and with wonderfully poetic and rich interviews with ecologists, botanists, and sociologists all concerned with the alternative history of Berlin that is represented, and continually being contested, through its brachen.



Figure 2: Fort Kochi, 2018. Photo by author.

What this film emphasizes, is the importance of a particular kind of nature to urban life, and it is here that I find a source of tension that carries throughout the film. On the one hand, those interviewed advocate for leaving these spaces alone, letting them continue to be brachen, fallow, a kind of caring for an uncaring. Yet, on the other, there is a suggestion of needing to protect these kinds of urban spaces from perhaps a different kind of more inherently 'natural' becoming or being turned into sites of new 'development' projects. At one point, an interviewee states that "forests are boring" in comparison to the brachen spaces full of new kinds of flora and fauna, and that if they "did nothing" the forest would return and they would lose the brachen, and its biodiversity. This kind of value judgement, and the political decisions that inherently follow, I find to be a little problematic. If one kind of nature is given preference over another, and 'nature' as a whole is pitched against 'culture' in strict binary thinking, then I think the film is missing the opportunity to suggest a larger claim to be made about the nature of 'nature' itself. Gandy, toward the end of the film, suggests that there is the possibility for opening up this dialogue, stating that "the words we use are merely cultural projections", but even here there is a strict separation between nature and culture. Despite the absence of engaging with this tension explicitly, I did enjoy how the film encourages the audience to think about how what nature is, might become contested and problematic through the

exploration of some of these urban spaces in slightly unconventional methods. Much of the conversation that followed the screening was centered around the idea that freedom of mind might be predicated on the understanding or recognition that we survive and thrive in symbiotic relationships with all other life forms on Earth, even if we often don't recognize it. It is in this way that the film goes beyond just documentation of a unique kind of urban nature found in Berlin, and begins to raise questions about the ways in which what kinds of histories we tell ourselves matter to how we live in the present, and what kinds of futures are possible.



Figure 3: Teufelsberg, Berlin, 2018. Photo by author.

I was fortunate enough to visit one of the sites featured in *Natura Urbana*, Teufelsberg, during a trip to Berlin in 2017 after a PhD workshop at the University of Tübingen. It is an abandoned American listening station, operational during the cold war, that sits on top of the biggest debris mountain in Europe: some 25 million cubic tons of rubble transported there during the rebuilding of Berlin post-WW2. It is an immensely fascinating site, now covered in decades of graffiti, and has an eerie yet generative character to it. While there, I felt simultaneously humbled and troubled just by the sheer complexity of the histories that had played out, literally beneath my feet. I got the impression that the future of Teufelsberg is contested, by those who want to see it remain free and open to all, and those who would like to steer it in a particular direction for particular means. *Natura Urbana* might help in navigating these contests, as pressure to develop urban space continues grow, and new modalities of conducting research into these complex histories continue to sprout.

Matt Barlow is an artist and an anthropology PhD student at the University of Adelaide. Through his doctoral research he is exploring transitions in waste management alongside environmental activists, artists, and institutions in Kochi, India. He does so with a keen interest in elemental philosophy, feminist and decolonial praxis, and collaboration. ORCID: 0000-0001-9196-6502 Web: <http://mattbarlow.virb.com> Twitter: [@_mattbarlow](https://twitter.com/_mattbarlow)



u