

# Street Cats, City Rats: Synanthropes and Cinematic Urban Ecologies

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The second season of the BBC documentary series *Planet Earth* concluded with a somewhat atypical episode that focused on animals in urban environments. The episode, titled “Cities,” highlights the creation of habitats by various animal species out of the “unnatural” landscapes of global metropolises – including peregrine falcons in New York, leopards in Mumbai, and raccoons in Toronto. Urban development encroaches on natural habitats, and as animals move into urban spaces, they must adapt to new terrains in order to survive. The episode at times stresses the similarity of these built environments to the animals’ original environs; New York’s skyscrapers, for instance, provide falcons with tall ledges for nesting and updraft for flight, as well as ample prey at street level. Accordingly, the city is presented as an environment subject to the same competitive pressures seen in nature, wherein animals enact the same dominance rituals and territorial disputes. This ecosystem’s “top predator,” the voiceover narration comments, is humanity; it is people who “make the rules here.”

Nonetheless, the episode emphasizes that urban habitats are often beneficial for animals. In Jodhpur, India, langur monkeys have access to an abundant food supply, provided by the residents of the city. This “constantly replenished source of food” enables more time for intra-species play and greater population growth, as the langurs “create troops far larger than in the forests nearby.” Far from functioning as a hindrance to the flourishing of animal life, the urban ecosystem provides a

comparative advantage. Peregrine falcons are “more successful than their cousins living in the wilderness,” and raccoons display heightened ingenuity and problem-solving skills in navigating the obstacles presented by the urban landscape. Animals can exploit the “unnatural” aspects of their adopted environment, as when the persistent noise of the city muffles the leopard’s stealthy approach of its prey.

Urban ecology has recognized the mutually constitutive relationship between animals and urban environments. For example, while modernization contributed to the displacement of animals from urban centers, the design of cities still bears the traces of animal presence. Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr observe, for instance, that prior to motor vehicles and mass transit, “it is obvious that municipalities planned street systems around horses.”<sup>1</sup> Sidewalks, they note, separated pedestrian traffic from horses passing on the street. Moreover, the grading and paving of streets (and eventually the conversion from stone to asphalt) was meant to facilitate ease of travel for horses, as well as the necessity of cleaning up after them. Sanitation ultimately was a primary reason for the removal of animals from urban habitats, as slaughterhouses were moved to the periphery. However, the separation between urban environments and animal lives has never been total, and urban ecologists show how animal species carve out ecological niches within the urban ecosystem. Indeed, whereas the countryside was once the destination for naturalists, the monoculture of industrialized agriculture has reduced biodiversity outside of the city, making the urban environment (and the warmer climate produced by its heat island effect) a draw for animals. Noting this historical reversal, Menno Schilthuizen writes, “Compared to such sterile, geometric landscapes, the messiness of the urban center, a varied mix of backyards, green roofs, old stone walls, overgrown drains, and city parks, is a haven for a lot of wildlife.”<sup>2</sup>

Schilthuizen argues further that urban habitats are now driving evolutionary development in animal species. He draws his wide variety of examples from scientific studies of urban-dwelling animals. The London underground mosquito is genetically differentiated based on its railway line, and unlike its above-ground counterparts, has developed protein receptors attuned to human blood; urban pollution has caused changes in coloration in moth populations, reverting back following the passage of clean air legislation; and impassable urban infrastructure such as freeways produce genetically distinct variations of the same species, including bobcats in Los Angeles. Whatever the direction of influence, then, with urban environments shaped by animal presence or animal development affected by urban ecosystems, cities and animals have historically co-evolved. Recognition of this fact undermines the common perception of cities as hostile to wildlife, as an “unnatural” site of human dwelling.

The “Cities” episode of *Planet Earth* at times perpetuates this familiar assumption, foregrounding the “alien” nature of an urban space that “wasn’t designed for wildlife.” The city is presented as an “unnatural” habitat, a human-created space designed around the needs and desires of people. As McShane and Tarr characterize it, “cities represent civilization and the conquest of nature.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in his essay “Animals of the City,” Roberto Marchesini writes, “When we refer to the city we generally consider humans as the only living referent found there.”<sup>4</sup> Reductive oppositions between urban spaces and the presence of wildlife, however, can erase the complex historical relations between them. Recognizing these relations demonstrates the myriad ways that, as Annabelle Sabloff puts it, “cities teem with animal and vegetable presence.”<sup>5</sup> A city plays host to multiple ecosystems that take root in the interstitial spaces of its network of concrete and steel and exploit what Marchesini calls “*an enormous cafeteria of garbage and organic material*” that results from the city habitat’s excessive appropriation of resources.<sup>6</sup>

The perception that the urban environment is incompatible with animal life is a feature of the broader contention that the animal has effectively disappeared under modernity. John Berger in his canonical essay “Why Look at Animals?” argued that modern life entailed the physical and cultural marginalization of animals.<sup>7</sup> Animals no longer occupy a central place in the everyday lives of humans. Even so, they reemerge in multiple ways: as pets, as popular culture, and as zoo exhibits. For Berger, modernity confines the animal to artificial environments and transforms it into spectacle. The animal is thereby reduced to an object of our curious gaze, and in being subject to inspection, they are rendered docile and inert. For Akira Lippit, this state of affairs specifies the animal’s “spectral” or “undead” condition under modernity. Animals, he writes, “exist in a state of *perpetual vanishing*.”<sup>8</sup> This apparitional quality suggests how technological modernity supplements and mourns the loss of the animal, and indeed, Lippit argues “technology and ultimately the cinema came to determine a vast mausoleum for animal being,” serving as “virtual shelters for displaced animals.”<sup>9</sup>

These analyses are compelling, but it is useful to question the extent of the animal’s disappearance, and to do so by challenging the assumption that, as Sabloff summarizes, “nature is where the city is not.”<sup>10</sup> The range of human-animal interactions in the city is wide, encompassing forms of labor (carriage horses, homing pigeons, police dogs) and domestication (pets, service animals). My focus will be on animals known as synanthropes. Neither wild nor tamed, synanthropes are animal species that live in close proximity to humans and sustain themselves through a dependence on the city’s available resources. Synanthropes construct their habitats within and parallel to a human-created environment. Marchesini indicates that synanthropes are often framed by humanity’s attitude toward them: The rat is despised for being a carrier of pestilence, while the squirrel’s presence is comparatively benign. This affective response, he argues, obscures the vital role

synanthropes play within an urban ecology. Synanthropes are integral to the ecosystem of the city, to the (bio)diversity that drives the dynamism of urban spaces. From my perspective, synanthropes invite analysis because they bridge nature-culture distinctions. Their proximity to and dependence on human society prevents categorizing them as “wild” animals. At the same time, their close relationship to humans is not reducible to domestication or labor, as instrumentalized forms of living capital subject to human mastery. Though shaped by interactions with humans, those relations do not wholly subsume their autonomy. Social and cultural attitudes toward synanthropes can therefore reveal aspects of human society – particularly as, as we will see, their treatment often prefigures or symptomatically signals actions taken against vulnerable and disadvantaged segments of human populations. Changes to complex urban ecosystems are frequently first visible in their effects on synanthropic animals. They are the metropolitan equivalent of canaries in the coal mine. Even so, since they remain relatively autonomous from humans, synanthropes are not simply metaphors for human social systems, and their value should not be reduced to their ability to stand in for their human counterparts.

Urban wildlife has featured minimally in scholarship on the natural history film and animal documentaries. One reason for this is that there have been comparatively few examples from the history of the genre that centrally focus on synanthropes, in part because of assumptions about the city as an unnatural site. Noteworthy historical surveys such as Derek Bousé’s *Wildlife Films* and Cynthia Chris’s *Watching Wildlife* reflect this absence.<sup>11</sup> As representational subjects, urban animals appear more regularly in Internet-distributed digital video – as with the recent online phenomenon of a raccoon scaling a 25-story skyscraper in Minnesota – since people are close by to record these events.<sup>12</sup> These viral videos deploy a sensationalistic voyeurism rooted in the incongruity of animal behavior against an urban backdrop. YouTube is a popular repository for videos of this sort, as with

a recent example like *Pizza Rat*, and visual fascination with synanthropic animals is clearly widespread. The short running time and comedic nature of these videos, however, privileges the momentary and unique intersection of animal and city, emphasizing the aberrance of each incident, rather than providing a focused examination of how these animals are situated within an urban ecology. My essay thus turns toward two recent documentaries that approach the synanthropic animal from an ecological perspective, in seeking to understand both the cooperative and antagonistic relations between animals and the urban environments in which they make their habitat. *Kedi* (Ceyda Torun, 2017) profiles the famous street cats of Istanbul and *Rat Film* (Theo Anthony, 2017) offers a critical history of the Norway rat in Baltimore. Each film demonstrates how a particular animal species is tied to the development and character of the city, especially insofar as synanthropes signal socio-political changes to urban ecosystems. These documentaries, moreover, highlight the affordances of cinematic technique to visualize the complex ecological networks of the synanthropic animal, which like the city itself, both reveal themselves to and exceed the mobile gaze of the film camera.

### **The Cats of Istanbul**

*Kedi* offers a sentimentalizing portrait of the public culture centered on Istanbul's street cats. The documentary is organized around stories about individual cats known to neighborhood residents, as it profiles the animals' characteristic behaviors and idiosyncrasies in a moderately anthropomorphizing manner. For example, one cat, named Psikopat, is described as the "neighborhood psycho" for her aggressive bullying of a male cat, which is presented as the actions of a jealous wife. Another named Gamsiz is shown infiltrating a second-story apartment in order to pursue a domestic female cat. The film emphasizes his territorial behavior, depicting his

confrontations with another male cat as a romantic squabble between two suitors. Interviews with city residents reinforce these character profiles, establishing the synanthropic cat as a point of identification for Istanbul's inhabitants, who ascribe various qualities to the animals that, one imagines, reveals more about the person than the cat. Moreover, Istanbul's street cats are called on to symbolically represent the city itself: Said one resident, "The cat is more than just a cat. The cat embodies the indescribable chaos, the culture, and the uniqueness that is the essence of Istanbul." The cats are a traditional part of Istanbul's culture, a familiar fixture of its public life, having thought to come to the city by means of European ships. *Kedi* rhetorically links this non-indigenous species, now wholly integrated into Istanbul's ecosystem, to the preservation of tradition in the face of urban development. Their symbolic value is related to those characteristics of urban life – the specificity of neighborhoods, a diverse working-class culture – thought to be under threat from the homogenization of urban spaces. By understanding synanthropic animal as the figurative representation of displaced traditions in the face of Istanbul's changing urban landscapes and of the shifting political dynamics of Turkey, *Kedi* frames the street cat as a leading indicator of a disappearing public culture. An urban ecology that makes no space for the street cat prefigures similar enclosures on human communities.

The proximity of synanthropes to built environments means their habitats register changes in the urban ecosystem. However, given that they are not subject to human mastery through either domestication or labor exploitation, their relationship to the city is not exhausted by their symbolic value for humans. The wildness of the synanthrope, its otherness from humans, is evident in the technical and formal challenge of representing it – a challenge often faced by nature documentaries. As a matter of production logistics, *Kedi* confronts what Rosalind Galt refers to cats' resistance to representation: "their bodies are so plastic and their musculature so often hidden by fluff, and,

unless they're asleep, they rarely sit still long enough to sketch.”<sup>13</sup> Torun and her cinematographer Charlie Wuppermann faced difficulties in tracking the cats as they stealthily moved through the city, slipping through fences or into closed-off spaces. Particularly challenging, they note, is when a cat would venture into a private location – an apartment building, for example – where the filmmakers could not follow, at least not without permission from the property owners. The street cats’ relative freedom of movement through the city suggests a different experience of urban space, one where “their concept of boundaries of totally different than ours,” as Torun says.<sup>14</sup> These logistical obstacles are countered by technological strategies. The filmmakers utilized a remote-controlled car (a “cat-cam”) that could keep pace with the street cats, as well as capture ground-level footage. This mobile camera enabled the filmmakers to keep a cat’s actions in view, since as Wuppermann notes, “when they do something, they do it really quick.”<sup>15</sup> The cat’s speed, their unwillingness to sit still, may make it a poor fit for traditional artistic representation, but particularly well-suited to cinema. As Galt indicates, cats, like cinema, embody “modernity’s themes of movement and the street,” and the non-human gaze of film is capable of “giving us privileged access to an uncommon feline lifeworld.”<sup>16</sup>

The feline lifeworld in *Kedi* is a public one, which operates alongside humans, sometimes cooperatively, sometimes not. Distinct from the privatized relationship to a domestic cat, the synanthropic cat has no privileged connection to any one person. It is potentially a companion to many. Care for the animals is therefore not a matter of individual responsibility but of civic pride. Istanbul’s residents build makeshift housing structures to protect the animals during winter months, and individuals make daily rounds throughout their neighborhoods to provide food to dozens of cats. Torun interviews a fisherman who, on discovering abandoned kittens living in the dockyards, regularly bottle-feeds them milk, as the cats would likely die without his protection. In short, an



entire ecological network has developed around the street cat. Passing through and between human-occupied spaces, the synanthropic cat benefits from these interactions but is not wholly dependent on them. This autonomy makes the street cat a potent symbol for the civic virtues and communal values of the city. They represent the preservation of traditions rooted in democratic openness and neighborhood solidarity.

Indeed, *Kedi* signals that this public culture is under threat from urban development, and control of the cat population is one instrument of this enclosure of the commons. As reported by *The Economist*, animal welfare has been one dimension of an authoritarian crackdown under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In response to animal welfare policies mandated by European Convention rules, including provisions related to population control, “authorities have taken drastic, and unpopular, measures to get rid of the creatures.”<sup>17</sup> *The Economist* notes further,

In 2012 the government tried to introduce a law that would have consigned street dogs and cats to remote, deserted areas referred to as “nature parks”. It was shelved after an outcry from animal-rights activists and dog lovers. Thousands marched in the streets. Last week [in March 2017] several women wearing animal masks in Alanya, a coastal town, tried to file a petition “as cats” against the killing of around 50 of their fellow felines—to be told that only humans could file petitions.<sup>18</sup>

The “nature parks” would not have provided any supervision or care for the animals. This proposed ghettoization of street animals demonstrates concerns about the marginalization and eradication of city animals under the banner of modernization. In *Kedi*, the forced closure of an open-air market is the clearest indication of these modernizing forces.



Figure 1: Cats in a demolition site (*Kedi*, 2017, dir. Ceyda Torun)

The documentary tracks the cats that reside in the Ferikoy market – in particular, a gray-and-white tabby named Deniz – as they circulate among the vendor stalls and beg food off the sellers. The market will close, we learn, for the construction of a road to connect new high-rise buildings, and one vendor nostalgically laments the loss of green spaces in the city. “We’re more worried about what’ll happen to the cats than what might happen to us,” he says of the impending demolition. The filmmakers later revisit the site, and include a quick insert of the fenced-off construction area, providing a visual marker of human and animal displacement. In framing the protection of Istanbul’s street cats as a bulwark against the eradication of tradition, *Kedi* shares Marchesini’s contention that the standardizing effects of urban development can undermine the city as an ecologically harmonious site for non-human animals. As noted by a reviewer for *The Paris Review*, the film’s “nostalgia for animal autonomy dovetails with vague longings for old Istanbul.”<sup>19</sup>

This connection is especially apparent in the film’s passing references to Erdogan’s authoritarian government. The vulnerability of animal populations to forms of repressive control – including the restriction of movement, forced displacement, sterilization, and systematic killing – makes their protection a metaphorical resistance to the curtailment of civil rights under the regime.

*Kedi* is an example of Galt’s observation that “the cinematic cat can be political.”<sup>20</sup> Galt references the extensive depiction of cats in the political essay films of Chris Marker, who said “a cat is never on the side of power.”<sup>21</sup> One moment from the documentary stands out in this regard. Torun frames a cat, perched atop a parked motorcycle, against street graffiti that reads “Erdo-gone,” a gesture of resistance to the Erdogan administration.



Figure 2: A cat poses in front of political graffiti. (*Kedi*, 2017, dir. Ceyda Torun)

The synanthropic cat is an animal that, as an opening intertitle notes, “live[s] without a master,” and *Kedi* deploys it as a symbol of threatened democratic values. To carry this political message, the documentary relies on virtuous connection between cats and humans – the street cat is a point of identification and affirms positive values. *Rat Film*, as the next section will demonstrate, tests the socio-political significance of the synanthrope in the absence of this affirmative connection, where the relationship between human and animal is largely antagonistic.

### **The Rats of Baltimore**

If the street cats of Istanbul are part of the city’s public culture, then urban rats, in being associated with pestilence and unsanitary conditions, form a shadow public. An unwelcome presence subtending the city’s infrastructure, they are particularly vulnerable to extermination. Rats are in

many ways the exemplary synanthrope. “Their evolution,” writes Peter Atkins, “has mirrored that of humans and they have been largely dependent for their spread and their livelihood upon unconscious human generosity.... Rat city is a parallel, subaltern universe that the complacent among us like to pretend is virtual but which is all too present and real for people living in rat-friendly housing.”<sup>22</sup> Whereas in *Kedi* cats embody the democratic values of the *polis*, rats are generally represented as a destabilizing presence in the urban habitat. Cats stand for the communal cohesion of the neighborhood, while the rat represents the social fracture of the segregated “ghetto,” the division of urban spaces along racial and class lines. Theo Anthony’s *Rat Film* documents the history of the Norway rat in Baltimore, revealing in the process a parallel history of discrimination against the city’s black residents. Anthony’s documentary assumes a different posture toward its synanthropic animal than does *Kedi*, opting for a more abstract mode of narration than Torun’s sentimentalizing approach. *Rat Film* does not aim to make the city rat knowable, to tame its wildness by means of sociological analysis. Instead, the Norway rat appears a strange sort of being, more a concept than an animal. It is a common test subject for scientific experimentation, and the results of these studies are frequently applied to human society. *Rat Film*, starting with the deadpan gesture of its nondescript title, marshals a critique of the Norway rat as a stable object of knowledge. Beyond the literal traps set for its extermination, the city rat is ensnared by ideological discourses of biopolitical management, especially as its presence is often framed as a threat to the urban ecosystem. By defamiliarizing the rat, *Rat Film* discloses the ecological control enacted by humans to control and contain this species, which models similar techniques used against segments of the city’s human population.

Whereas *Kedi* presents an affirmative image of the street cat, especially as it reflects democratic society’s positive values, *Rat Film* introduces its synanthrope by negating it. The rat is,

the film's computerized voiceover says, a "null object." In object-oriented programming, a null object is a way of representing the absence of an output – an empty value, in other words. As Jacob Gaboury writes of null values in database management, "While the number 0 would indicate an explicit lack of some quantifiable thing, and therefore be numerically meaningful in the calculation of a given value, NULL indicates the absence of any value whatsoever, such that linguistically it is not considered a value at all, but rather a 'marker' that indicates a state of indeterminacy."<sup>23</sup> By positioning the Norway rat as an "empty value," Anthony's film forestalls ascribing specific meanings to the synanthrope. Against those sociological discourses that instrumentalize the rat by making it yield usable information through experimentation, the rat's null value prevents any clear output, making it a wholly defamiliarized object whose significance cannot so easily be exchanged for or converted into its significance for humans.



Figure 3: Baby rat as null object. (*Rat Film*, 2017, dr. Theo Anthony)

The director refers to the rat as "an incredible vector" which, rather than revealing aspects of the animal itself, provides a view into the ecological conditions of the city.<sup>24</sup> The rat – through the broad range of its interactions with humans, from extermination to domestication – tells us something about the character of the city, in particular the inequalities that structure race and class

relations in Baltimore. Anthony notes that his “films operate by looking away from the thing you are supposed to be looking at,” and although he comments that he “could have made a film about public transportation” as an alternative vector, the synanthrope seems to me, precisely because it is a living animal, an ideal way to understand the urban ecosystem. Anthony’s intended target is the history of discriminatory practices against Baltimore’s black population, and as a white filmmaker, he is aware of the risk of equating the treatment of rat populations and black communities. As he told the *Los Angeles Times*:

I don’t think I ever saw rats as equal to humans. I try to bait people into that interpretation, only to show them how much fuzzier it is the closer you get to it. Specifically with race relations: Rats don’t just happen anywhere. If you look at rats, they thrive where humans don’t. To me that was really interesting. I’m never placing an equal sign – “Rats are the pest symbols of the underbelly of society.” But they have been tested on, and blacks in the American city have been tested on, in terms of redlining. You learn a lot about how we treat humans by how we treat rats.<sup>25</sup>

Toward this end, *Rat Film* documents both the animal control procedures pioneered in Baltimore and the city’s history of racial segregation. As the film narrates, Baltimore passed a residential segregation ordinance in 1911, for “preventing conflict and ill feeling between the white and colored races,” as the ordinance stated, which was subsequently declared unconstitutional. Following that, private sector policies barred sales of homes to minority buyers in specified areas, leaving as the voiceover says, “a map deliberately frozen, its boundaries strained with the pressures of a growing city.” *Rat Film* outlines the discriminatory policy of redlining, which classifies neighborhoods such that minority-majority areas are left without access to capital investment and fall into disrepair as a result. Parallel to these practices of segregation, the film references the advances in rodent control made at Johns Hopkins University necessitated by wartime concerns about biological warfare using rats to spread disease. Biologist Curt Richter discovered a new rat

poison, and field studies, without prior testing, were conducted in the black-populated slums. Richter's work was superseded by his colleague at Johns Hopkins, David E. Davis, who initiated an ecological approach to pest control. "If Dr. Richter's work tried to bring nature into the lab," the film says, "Davis tried to bring the lab into nature." By targeting the environment that allowed rat populations to thrive – including trash disposal, enforcement of housing codes, and access to water and sewage systems – Davis showed that rats could be eliminated while simultaneously improving the living conditions for humans. As the film summarizes, "control the environment, control the rats." This principle characterizes the strategies used for both the segregation of racial minorities and the extermination of rats in the urban environment. The administrative management of "undesirable" populations is what, according to the film, makes the treatment of rats indicative of the treatment of humans.

That we can infer knowledge about humans from the study of rats underpins not only scientific experiments on them, but also urban ecology's comparison of the city to natural ecosystems. Andrew Ross argues that urban ecologists have long viewed the urban habitat "as a functional organism in its own right, regulated by supposedly natural laws that govern the interaction of space and population, and relatively immune both to external economic and political pressures and to community resistance to such pressures."<sup>26</sup> This organicist conception of the city sees metropolitan growth as modeled by evolutionary development, and makes appeal to Darwinian natural selection to explain competitive and cooperative intra-city dynamics. Poor and immigrant communities were thought to compromise the health of the city's ecosystem. Ross emphasizes the work of the Chicago School of urban sociology, which utilized ecological studies of plant succession to explain how cities develop "by diminishing competition within and by resisting invasion from without," as Robert Park writes in *Human Communities*.<sup>27</sup> Park contended that the city, "the natural

habitat of civilized man,” is organized as much by a “moral order” as by physical boundaries, and the division of the city into “the immigrant and racial colonies of the so-called ghettos” is part of the natural development of the urban habitat.<sup>28</sup> As Ross writes of the Chicago School, “the biological analogy is infused with assumptions about the pathology of the racial and class composition of neighborhoods and their populations.”<sup>29</sup> The problem therefore with the organic metaphor, Ross argues, is that it naturalizes what are more properly understood as social relations, and this ideology remains a persistent assumption in approaching the urban environment.

Richter’s work, referenced by *Rat Film*, deploys the same analogy, echoing the organicist metaphor of the Chicago School sociologists. In his 1959 essay “Rats, Man, and the Welfare State,” Richter argued that the physical and behavioral deterioration of rats when domesticated could explain the higher incidence of non-curable diseases in humans living under an expanded welfare state. The removal of an animal “from its original wild unprotected environment to an almost entirely protected environment” shields it from the competitive pressures of its habitat, and compromises its physical and mental health.<sup>30</sup> Richter argues that welfare society similarly severs the human community from the process of natural selection allowing “the survival of the less strong.”<sup>31</sup> *Rat Film* also references another experiment with rats, conducted by Davis’s former assistant John Calhoun and thought to have implications for human society. In 1958, Calhoun sought “to study the effects of crowding on the development of social pathology,” according to the film, by placing a community of Norway rats in a sealed environment, with unlimited food and protection from predators. “The only limiting factor,” the voiceover says, “was space.” Calhoun’s experiment demonstrated what he called a “behavioral sink,” indicating the emergence of social pathologies due to overcrowding, which in the case of the rats, meant hierarchies, violence among subordinates, abandoned young, and cannibalism.



Though *Rat Film* extensively cites these studies, the film departs, I would argue, from their naturalistic explanation of the urban environment. Instead, it shows the natural habitat of the synanthropic rat to be shaped by social relations. Consider, for instance, the object-lesson from the start of the film: a handheld camera frames an overhead shot of a rat trapped in a city trash receptacle. The rat repeatedly leaps toward the camera in order to escape. A voiceover matter-of-factly says, “The adult Norway rat can jump 32 inches high. The average Baltimore trash can is 34 inches high.” The implications are clear: the rat’s physical entrapment is the result of regulation that sets the height of trashcans above its jumping range. The rat is controlled and immobilized in real space by abstract rules; the synanthropic animal is subject to administrative management. This is comparable, the film suggests, to how minority residents are confined to particular neighborhoods through the practice of redlining. Discriminatory policies are shown to target the ecological conditions of the urban habitat, rather than the specific individuals living within it. The synanthropic rat is a vector that discloses this environmental control.

*Rat Film* also confronts the difficulties of representing the habitat of the synanthrope. Whereas *Kedi* deploys cinematic technique to match the mobility of the street cat, Anthony’s film avoids realism in favor of the abstraction of urban space. A recurring motif of the documentary is the presentation of Baltimore as a 3-D virtual space, navigable like a video game.



Figure 4. Baltimore as a virtual space. (*Rat Film*, 2017, dr. Theo Anthony)

To move through this space, rendered from satellite maps of the city, “the user assumes the role of a floating point.” This disembodied point of view traverses an unreal Baltimore, as buildings and streets appear in animated form. A similar device is used to simulate the perspective of a laboratory rat. As the film recounts Richter’s experiments regarding the consequences of domestication, a video game simulation presents the roving viewpoint of a caged rodent. As with the designation of the Norway rat as a null object, the effect of this abstraction is to de-realize Baltimore’s urban spaces. Presented this way, the city is no longer a lived space, a dynamic ecosystem of human and non-human animals. Abstraction is necessary to make the space mappable, and *Rat Film* repeatedly returns to different maps of the city in order to emphasize how their abstract lines constrain real populations. The (bio)diversity of the city is compromised by rat extermination, on the one hand, and discriminatory practices such as redlining, on the other. The synanthrope offers resistance to this homogenization of the urban ecology, and while the Norway rat is rarely a point of identification for city residents, it nonetheless embodies their vulnerabilities to confinement, displacement, and impoverishment.

## **Conclusion**

The city is a site for human drama, which explains cinema’s attraction to the urban environment. Urban ecology, however, recognizes that the city also teems with wildlife, living off the excesses produced by population density. In carving out their habitats in the city, synanthrope exploit the city’s infrastructure and abundant resources, often giving them a comparative advantage over non-urban species. The presence of animals in the city might serve to legitimate an understanding of the urban environment along naturalist lines – as an “urban jungle” subject to the same competitive and evolutionary pressures as habitats in the wild. Instead, as I have discussed,

synanthropes, given their proximity to human communities, demonstrate how these seemingly natural relations are in fact thoroughly social. As evidenced by the cinematic urban ecologies of *Kedi* and *Rat Film*, urban wildlife provide non-human perspectives on the urban environment which makes visible the precarity and vulnerability of the city's disadvantaged populations. Viewing the city from the perspective of the synanthrope is a mode of estrangement that sets into relief the power dynamics of the city. Synanthropes are leading indicators of changes to the urban ecosystem; threats to the biodiversity of the city's non-human inhabitants often signals similar threats to the diversity of its human residents. In *Kedi*, the public culture centered on Istanbul's street cats is placed at risk by an authoritarian curtailment of civil rights and the neoliberal displacement of traditional neighborhood enclaves. In *Rat Film*, the techniques of environmental control for the Norway rat overlapped with the discriminatory policies that regulated the place of Baltimore's black populations within the urban ecosystem. As "wild" animals, though, synanthropes generally exceed these attempts to control them, and thrive in defiance of them. By abandoning the idea that the city is an unnatural habitat, cinematic urban ecologies can represent the complex human-animal interactions that take place within these modern ecosystems.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Clay McShane and Joel A. Tarr, "The Horse in the Nineteenth-Century American City," in *Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans, and the Study of History*, ed. Dorothee Brantz (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 239.
- <sup>2</sup> Menno Schilthuizen, *Darwin Comes to Town: How the Urban Jungle Drives Evolution* (New York: Picador, 2018), 56.
- <sup>3</sup> McShane and Tarr, "The Horse in the Nineteenth-Century American City," 228.
- <sup>4</sup> Roberto Marchesini, "Animals of the City," *Angelaki* 21, no. 1 (2016): 80.
- <sup>5</sup> Annabelle Sabloff, *Reordering the Natural World: Humans and Animals in the City* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Marchesini, "Animals of the City," 80, original emphasis.
- <sup>7</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 3-28.
- <sup>8</sup> Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1, original emphasis.
- <sup>9</sup> Lippit, *Electric Animal*, 187.
- <sup>10</sup> Sabloff, *Reordering the Natural World*, 7.
- <sup>11</sup> Derek Bousé, *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000) and Cynthia Chris, *Watching Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006)
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