

Cartographies of the Absolute

Neoliberalism as Horror: *Wolfen* and the Political Unconscious of Real Estate

Posted on May 14, 2010 by Jeff K



‘The South Bronx and Wall Street, what’s the connection?’, wonders an expert on the psychology of terrorism mid-way through the 1981 horror film *Wolfen*. For those not from NY, the South Bronx is not an exact location and its boundaries are not universally agreed upon. In the 1960s it was designated as the area south of Robert Moses’ Cross Bronx Expressway, finished in 1963, but later the boarder moved further north to Fordham Road.^[1] In *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* (1982), Marshall Berman writes, ‘Among the many images and symbols that New York has contributed to modern culture, one of the most striking in recent years has been an image of modern ruin and devastation. The Bronx, where I grew up, has even become an international code word for our epoch’s accumulated urban nightmares: drugs, gangs, arson, murder, terror, thousands of buildings abandoned, neighborhoods transformed into garbage- and brick-strewn wilderness.’^[2]

There are a myriad of films that capture the horror of urban decay and/or contributed to this dystopian vision through aerial bombardment but so many others like *Apache*, *The Bronx*, *80 Blocks from the Heart of the City*, *New York*, *Driller Killer*, and innumerable others imply that urban decline is a natural process, people together (especially non-white people) and eighties that depicted, documented, exploited, of the world’s greatest cities reduced to rubble, not ‘planned shrinkage’: *Bonfire of the Vanities*, *Fort* these, as well as a series of Hollywood films that *Death Wish*, *C.H.U.D.*, *The Warriors*, *Escape from* any little about what created the situations, usually resulting depravity is the inevitable result of packing

One of the more ambitious and unusual mix of werewolf movie, police procedural, and serial killer thriller, *Wolfen* is based on a 1978 novel by Whitley Strieber, and directed by Michael Wadleigh, best known for directing the documentary *Woodstock* (1969). Entangled in a plot symptomatically torn between political history, capitalist practice and mythologies of

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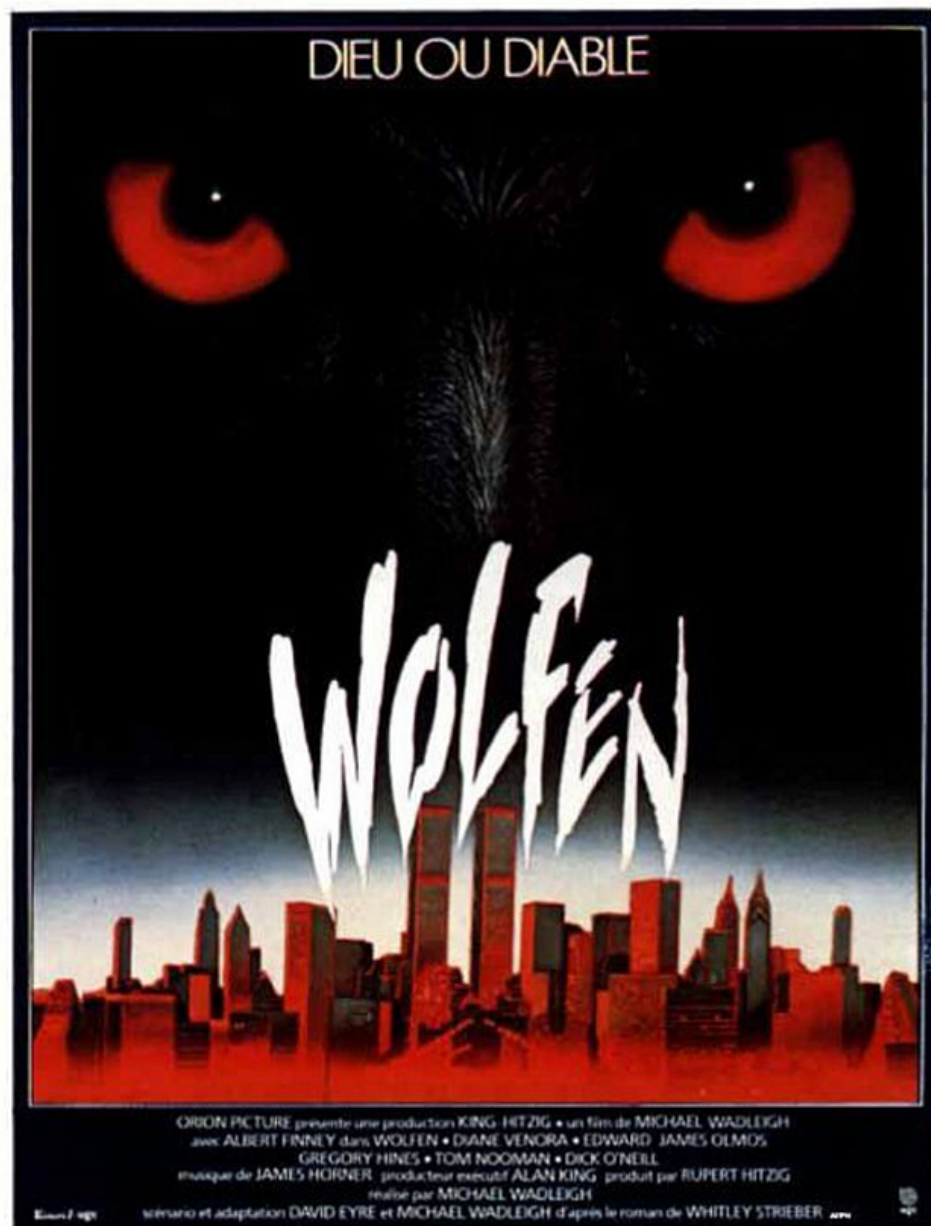
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the land, *Wolfen* is an odd and beguiling narrative about a critical moment in the collapse of radical politics and the emergence of a feral neoliberalism against a backdrop of urban dereliction and real estate speculation.



To put this presentation into context, this paper is part of a project I've been working on with Alberto Toscano dealing with Fredric Jameson's concept of the aesthetic of cognitive mapping. The project is an investigation into various attempts in the visual arts to cognitively map the contours of the current world system and its influence on various local settings (previous articles and presentations have covered [The Wire](#), [contemporary conspiracy films](#), and works that deal with containerization). It will focus on the techniques artists, filmmakers, and cartographers use to portray global forces in all their complexity without being merely didactic or reverting to antiquated aesthetic models.

This concept of cognitive mapping comes from a text from 1988 where Jameson argues for the necessary elaboration of a cultural and representational practice adequate to the highly ambitious (and, he suggests,

ultimately impossible) task of depicting social space in our historical moment of late capitalism or postmodernity, as well as the totality of class relations on a global scale. This is what Jameson calls ‘a cartography of the absolute’. This notion of cognitive mapping builds on the American urban planner Kevin Lynch’s book from 1960, *The Image of the City*. Jameson writes that ‘Lynch taught us that the alienated city is above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves. [...] Disalienation in the traditional city, then, involves the practical reconquest of a sense of place and the construction or reconstruction of an articulated ensemble which can be retained in memory, and which the individual subject can map and remap along the moments of mobile, alternative trajectories.’^[5] Behind Jameson’s call for an aesthetics of cognitive mapping, is his argument that an inability to cognitively map the mechanisms and contours of the world system is as debilitating politically as being unable to mentally map a city would be for a city dweller.^[6] The works that would emerge under the banner of this aesthetic would allow individual subjects and collectivities to make their local situation in a globalised world intelligible: ‘to enable a situational representation on part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole’.^[7] While the works emerging under the aesthetic of cognitive mapping would not merely be didactic or pedagogical, they would necessarily also be didactic or pedagogical. While in his original cognitive mapping piece, he claims that no properly cognitive mapping works have yet emerged, a few years later, in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, he looks at a number of conspiracy thrillers from the 1970s and 1980s in these terms (*Parallax View* *Three Days of the Condor*, *All The Presidents Men*, *Videodrome*). These films, he claims, can be understood as an attempt ‘to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves’.^[8] This is an inevitably impossible task, but, he writes, in the intent to map, ‘lies the beginning of wisdom’.^[9]



As the quote I began with indicates, mapping the relation between Wall Street and the South Bronx is at the core of the investigation into a series of brutal murders in *Wolfen*. The film begins with the groundbreaking ceremony for a new building project in the South Bronx, led by the crème de la crème of New York’s power elite, Christopher Van Der Veer. That night he is found brutally murdered together with his wife and bodyguard in Battery Park (southern tip of Manhattan). Van Der Veer’s corporate interests around the globe immediately steer the investigation towards intentional terrorism. The police suspect a political assassination, the final spasm of the urban guerrillas of the 1970s. A trust-fund militant of the Weather Underground, American Indian Movement-

affiliated construction workers, and a terrorist organization named *Götterdämmerung* are all targeted by a sinister state-corporate investigation. Then bodies showing the marks of the same inhuman *modus operandi* are discovered in the rubble of the South Bronx. The film's protagonists – a disheveled cop, the expert on the psychology of terrorism, and an eccentric coroner – are left to make the connection between the city's most powerful forces and its most destitute terrains.

The police bosses are keen to follow the terrorist angle and don't think there can be a connection (the police boss incredulously asks, 'There's a connection? That's a big jump from the South Bronx to Wall Street.'). Unfortunately, in order to begin to answer this question, plot spoilers are required. Strange hairs are found on all the corpses, which a researcher identifies as coming from a species of wolf, suggesting a potentially lycanthropic murderer, and the lead detective suspects ex-AIM Native American shape-shifters might just be behind it. In the end, however (ATTN: SPOILERS), it is a rare breed of hyper-evolved wolf – the eponymous 'wolfen' from the title – that is responsible for the killings. These wolves are intelligent enough to not only avoid detection in one of the most densely populated urban spaces in North America, but also to launch a political assassination, and they killed Van Der Veer essentially because his redevelopment plans for the Bronx would gentrify their hunting territory. As North America was colonized, according to the Native American ex-AIM, ex-con who lets the detective in on the truth, the wolfen 'went underground into the new wilderness, the cities, the great slum areas, the graveyards of your fucking species.' They became scavengers, preying upon 'the sick, the abandoned, those who will not be missed.' (Yes, this resolution is as frustratingly unsatisfying as it sounds.)

Wolfen was Wadleigh's first and only Hollywood film. In the mid-sixties he started working with Cinéma Vérité and the first film he worked on was about Gus Hall, Head of the American Communist Party. He also worked on two films with interviews with Martin Luther King, visited the occupied Sorbonne, and he sees all his work as being political at its core.^[10] Wadleigh has lamented that *Wolfen* 'gets sold as a horror film and not a serious political film,' which, it has to be said, isn't so surprisingly considering the plot and the frequency with which characters' limbs are severed. Despite this, it is worth taking Wadleigh at his word and trying to treat *Wolfen* as a serious political film.



The New York of *Wolfen* feels eerily depopulated, not just the South Bronx, which is depicted as a complete wasteland, but the city as a whole, which feels like a dead city. There are no shots of crowds, street life, or loud

traffic that are staples of most New York films: the only location that could be said to be bustling in the film is the morgue. You have the inevitable skyline shots, but they are always silent and still. The city is more of a rubble-strewn desert than an asphalt jungle. There are certainly historical reasons for this. Over the course of the seventies New York lost 825,000 residents, about 10% of its population, while the NY metropolitan area lost about 20% of its population. About 1.3 million white people left the city over this period, while 600,000 poor people were displaced as their homes were destroyed.

During this same period the South-Central Bronx lost an astounding 80% of both its housing units and population.^[11] Partly responsible was what has come to be known as the policy of ‘planned shrinkage’. First formulated in 1976 by Roger Starr, head of the New York City Housing and Development Administration, the goal of planned shrinkage was rapid population decline. According to Deborah and Rodrick Wallace, ‘It dictated the withdrawal of essential services from sick neighborhoods which were seen as unable to survive or undeserving of survival. These services ranged from libraries to fire service to public transportation.’^[12] The city’s justification for what sounds like such a truly horrific policy was that their hands were tied by the crisis of 1975 (despite the fact that the policy, for all intents and purposes, had started years earlier), and that by drastically cutting services in these areas that were already rotten (the city’s poorest areas), they would be able to keep servicing the rest of the city and almost normal levels. As Miriam Greenberg writes, ‘Applying Darwinian reasoning to the logic of capital, [Starr] argued that just as corporations were eliminating unprofitable plants, the city should shift services and resources from poor neighborhoods that were already “dying” to those that were better off and most likely to survive.’^[13] Starr was soon fired after protests from an understandably outraged public but the city enacted his plans more or less to the letter.^[14] This started a vicious circle as once tightly knit communities were scattered, causing overcrowding in adjacent areas, and neighborhoods that already had serious problems saw escalating rates of crime, poverty, and disease. The abandoned buildings becoming havens for illegal activity and fires, all the more difficult to douse as the city closed down fire departments in the area.

It should be said that *Wolfen* doesn’t engage with any of this per se: the city’s economic crisis is never mentioned, nor do any characters make snide remarks about Robert Moses, Roger Starr, then-Mayor Ed Koch, or jobs disappearing overseas. Still one of the reasons why *Wolfen* is retrospectively interesting is that it frames the strategy behind the abandonment of these neighborhoods, the (re)development behind the dereliction. Most of the ‘asphalt jungle’ or ‘New York exploitation’ films portray the city as an organic body that is terminally ill, and ‘were all too happy to play up the worst New York stereotypes for thrills and laughs’.^[15] The notion that the destruction of the South Bronx is clearing the way for something else is never considered. The city will gradually depopulate and be taken over by street gangs and lunatics.



In an intriguing footnote in his essay ‘Totality as Conspiracy’ from *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Jameson mentions how the gang war films of the late 70s and early 80s – he lists *Escape from New York*, *The Warriors*, and *Fort Apache, The Bronx* – ‘might well have been read as visions of internal civil war.’^[16] In each of these films, although most clearly in *The Warriors*, an armed and organized force threatens the state’s monopoly of violence. An argument can of course be made that these films are in fact best classified as exploitation films, and they were both the result of and contributed to the (racialized) fear of the American inner-city. What’s remarkable is how hopeless the situation seemed to be and how the era’s imagination saw total urban collapse as being just around the corner. Take for example John Carpenter’s *Escape from New York*, which was also released in 1981. In that film, by 1988 New York is so plagued by violent crime and urban decay that it was simply abandoned by the state and Manhattan turned into a huge prison. *Wolfen*, however, seems to be distinctly set after the so-called ‘Second Civil War’. The name *Götterdämmerung* is particularly apt for the primarily terror group suspected to be involved because it is very much portrayed as the twilight of the radical movements of the 1960s and 70s. Their effectiveness is precluded by the power and resources of the security-industrial complex and they are portrayed more as a convenient scapegoat rather than an actual threat.

The wolfen in the film, on the other hand, achieve their mission and are essentially victorious. They manage to kill the most powerful man in New York, and in the end seem to convince the lead detective of the validity of their ‘project’, as in a final scene he trashes a scaled model of the Van Der Veer Towers and refuses to tell the powers that be that the wolves were behind the killings, instead blaming it on *Götterdämmerung*.^[17] There are three different readings of all of this. First, if we take the action on screen as depicting the actual events, it is indeed a species of hyper-evolved wolf that is behind the murders.^[18] The second and third possibilities both rely on the ‘supernatural’. The director himself has said the film ‘is about American Indians who are killing rich people.’ He says, quite ambiguously, that this might be because they want Manhattan back, and his reading of the film’s conclusion is that: ‘The cop is upholding a society he begins to feel is unjust. [...] In the end he allows to let the murders or the terrorists get away with what they are doing because he no longer believes in the values of his society.’ There are numerous problems with this reading. First, most obviously, what the viewer sees throughout the film are wolves – not Native Americans. So either we have to believe that part of the film’s premise is that Native American shape-shifting is indeed possible, or that somehow, because of their ancient wisdom or whatever (kind of like in Cameron’s *Avatar*), Native Americans are able to conspire with or manipulate this army of hyper-evolved wolves. The Native Americans in the film work on the city’s skyscrapers and bridges: points that either or both connect (downtown) Manhattan with outer boroughs as well as provide an overview of the city as a whole.

The French poster features the eyes of the wolves over the city (see above).



In all three possibilities the film's 'green' message is arguably lamer than *Avatar*'s and even less convincing. The wolfen – like the Navi in *Avatar* – serve as an utopian other on which one can project an image of organic wholeness in communion with mother earth – 'In their world, there can be no lies, no crimes. In their eyes, you are the savage.' But what makes *Wolfen* interesting is that at the same time the wolfen live in a symbiotic relationship with capitalist urban planning in the sense that they thrive in the new wilderness created by urban collapse (they exist not just in NY, the coroner in the film discovers, but Newark, Philadelphia, New Orleans). There is a strong sense that their role as scavengers clears the South Bronx of the last vestiges of the detritus the property developers are desperate to remove from the territory – those who did not escape in the opening salvos of planned shrinkage – in order to wipe the slate clean so they can redevelop the area, build luxury high rises and office buildings. The wolfen here act as the shock troops of gentrification. This makes the director's claim that the film is about 'American Indians killing rich people' all the more unusual. In terms of the film's narrative, the wolfen are devouring primarily the most vulnerable, not the most powerful (otherwise they would have been detected and culled a long time ago). Or, rather, in the events depicted in the film they were forced to go overground and kill the powerful in order to be able to continue to devour the most vulnerable. In the film's conclusion as the wolves are running off into the sunset, they are essentially sprinting back to the South Bronx to eat more poor people.^[19] In other words, the film's focus on Native American shapeshifters and the eco-harmony of the wolves obscures the voracious 'werewolf hunger' of capital.



Part of what is so intriguing about *Wolfen* is – and I say this as a fan of the film – its sheer idiocy. *Wolfen* is a film of exhaustion: the film's lead never ceases to look like he just woke up after a weeklong bender (as one character points out, he has the eyes of the dead). It is a film about an exhausted city and an exhausted working-class and radical left.^[20] To conclude by returning to Jameson, there is a quote from his cognitive mapping essay that seems particularly appropriate here: 'successful spatial representation today need not be some uplifting socialist-realist drama of revolutionary triumph but may be equally inscribed in a narrative of defeat, which sometimes, even more effectively, causes the whole architectonic of postmodern global space to rise up in ghostly profile behind itself, as some ultimate dialectical barrier or invisible limit.'^[21] There is a tendency in many of the works that Alberto and I have looked at to self-consciously acknowledge their own limitations. There is often a double sense of failure that emerges as a unifying theme – the failure of political action (usually reformers or lone crusaders) to bring about meaningful change and the failure of the work itself to transgress certain established epistemological limits. Part of the problem with *Wolfen* in this respect, is almost that it doesn't acknowledge its own limitations in same manner as these other works. It attempts to posit a revolutionary subject capable of intervening in the development of the city comes across as ridiculous, and it is completely unable to give it any sort of logical or even narrative consistency. Distorting Samuel Beckett's motto a bit, the film would be considerably more effective if it failed better.

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^[1] Katherine Simpson, 'Media Images of the Urban Landscape: the South Bronx in Film', *Centro Journal*, Vol. XIV, No. 2. Fall 2002, p. 101. Even as recently as 2005 the Bronx was the poorest urban county in America. Moody, p. 6.

^[2] It would perhaps be going too far to accept the popular notion of the South Bronx during this time as a hell on earth. This is, after all, around the time when graffiti writing was developing and hip hop originated. As Greenberg notes, part of the reason for graffiti's boom was that there were more abandoned buildings and less police and city workers patrolling the streets and guarding the train yards. As Berman has argued, during this period 'the Bronx became more culturally creative than it had ever been in its life.'

[3] In Brian De Palma's *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1990) the protagonist's problems begin when he makes a wrong turn and ends up in the South Bronx: 'A goddamn war zone.' In *Fort Apache, The Bronx* (1981), the police station in the South Bronx in which Paul Newman works is depicted as an outpost out amongst the savages and wild animals. Meanwhile the documentary about South Bronx gangs, *80 Blocks from Tiffany's* (1979), plays with conceptions of distance and proximity: the wasteland only a few miles from some of the most luxurious shops in the world.

[4] *Wolfen* is actually classified by Miriam Greenberg as a 'New York Exploitation' film. Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis was Sold to the World* (USA: T & F Books, 2009), p. 157.

[5] Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 51.

[6] The conception of cognitive mapping proposed here therefore involves an extrapolation of Lynch's spatial analysis to the realm of social structure, that is to say, in our historical moment, to the totality of class relations on a global (or should I say multinational) scale.... The incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience. It follows that an aesthetic of cognitive mapping in this sense is an integral part of any socialist political project. (Jameson, 1988, p.283)

[7] Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 51.

[8] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 2.

[9] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 3.

[10] NHPR, Oct 6th, 2004 <http://www.nhpr.org/node/7381>

[11] Wallace and Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses*, p. xvi.

[12] Wallace and Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses*, p. 24.

[13] Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York*

[14] Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York*

[15] Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York*

[16] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 83. Fn. 15.

[17] On his blog Jason Read argues that 'In the final scene, when Wilson is cornered and surrounded by the wolf pack, he destroys the model of the new real estate development. This is an interesting reversal of the clichéd scene from horror and fantasy movies in which the protagonist has to destroy the magic amulet or other device in order to destroy the monster: in this case the monster is us, and what has to be destroyed is not some primitive magic, but a symbol of urban gentrification. In the end what makes the movie interesting is how it solves the problem of the werewolf as symbol and subtext. The wolves are not symbols of some repressed animal nature, but are the return of the repressed, the vengeance of a population subject to genocidal slaughter.'

<http://unemployednegativity.blogspot.com/2009/09/man-is-wolf-to-man-appreciation-of.html>

[18] Arguably, what is so unsatisfying about *Wolfen*, is that it attempts to explain the horrors. The genre is much more affective when the reasons behind the attacks can only be speculated about, as in *Cloverfield*, instead of a film like *The Happening*, where they are given a pseudo-scientific explanation.

[19] In a way this feels like a cheap point to make, but I think it's necessary to point out to properly frame the (cognitive mapping) blockage that these films seem to inevitably encounter.

[20] It would be possible to frame all this with the ways in which the unions were blackmailed into accepting the huge cuts, having their pensions buy up city bonds, etc.

[21] Pp. 352-3.



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