

For the Occasion of:
 Jacky Connolly's *Hudson Valley Ruins*
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Jacky Connolly's *Hudson Valley Ruins* is a machinima film produced entirely in the life simulation computer game *The Sims 3*. The film represents Connolly's first attempt to explore, through conventions of narrative cinema, the rural-suburban virtual world that she's crafted over the last three years.

Hudson Valley Ruins is a multi-diegetic ensemble film. Its plot follows two central characters (the young girl and the teenage girl) and their uncanny doppelgängers (the grey-haired child and the "Caretaker"). It extends to encompass four family units; those of the two protagonists (the adulterous father, the alcoholic single-mother), that of the teenage girl's villainous boyfriend (the unnerving blond twins and their mother), and that of the Caretaker (the mother of a battered looking child). Throughout the film, the story lines following the two protagonists intersect briefly if at all. Instead, what the two girls share is a certain space or proximity and an affinity that neither they nor we quite understand.

The virtual world of *Hudson Valley Ruins* was created far before the production of the film and served as the context of a number of shorter video pieces. This sheds light on the significance of the film's narrative structure. With *Basement Puzzles/Rune Rooms* (2014) and *Fawn's Leap, NY* (2015) Connolly composed scenes from her virtual world in the form of looping tableaux. In the former, the repetition of the digital assets forming the interior *mise-en-scène* (the wallpaper texture, the linoleum floor tiles) conspires with the algorithmically looping gestures of the figure (also a young girl), and the looping of the video itself, to create the effect of a radically de-temporalized moving picture. Connolly employs this effect to simulate the experience of encountering the enigmatic totems a deracinated stretch of personal history—highly cathected objects of adolescent suburban life are split-off from their personal-historical context; like runes, they both solicit and deny attempts at their discursive, narrative emplotment. They thus repeat themselves vertiginously—refusing, time and again, their relegation to the past. Simulating these repetitive encounters, *Basement Puzzles/Rune Rooms* intensifies the predominant affects hounding both the *Sims* characters and their game-players alike. Feelings of isolation and alienation accumulate in the dead, spatialized time of the *Sims* tableaux.

With *Hudson Valley Ruins*, Connolly sought to preserve or recreate this strange de-temporalizing effect while producing a work recognizable as one of narrative cinema. It was the tension between these two concerns that lead Connolly to adopt the form of the multi-diegetic ensemble film—a form that Allisa Quart tellingly names "hyperlink cinema". Exemplary films of this genre include Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1973), *Shortcuts* (1993), Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999), and recently, David Cronenberg's *Maps to the Stars* (2014).¹ Most generally,

¹ Its no coincidence that a good deal of these films take place in L.A. nor that they often end in a kind of *deus ex machina*— some mysterious force abruptly invades the scene whether in the form of a natural disaster, an eruption of collective madness, a stroke of fate, etc. In the context of the pure horizontality of the hyperlink film—a horizontality emblemized by the landscape of LA as much as by the psychic life of subjects "leveled" by the culture industry—it takes nothing less than a kind of apocalypse to introduce a common diegetic time-marker into the numerous

hyperlink cinema is characterized by the preponderance of the horizontal axis of film over its vertical axis. In terms of narrative structure, the horizontal represents the spatial, synchronous relations between events and characters while the vertical represents the temporal, biographical, and traditional aspects informing a cinematic narrative. In most cases, a film is identifiable as belonging to a specific *genre* by virtue of its vertical axis. More generally still, V. F. Perkins has argued the horizontal axis of film has its roots in the mediums constitutive dependency on the still image—the photographic substratum from which film arises but never departs. The vertical axis of film represents its reliance on what Perkins calls montage, that is, the differential relationships between individual images that provides them with their context and signifying function. The horizontal axis *qua* image, accounts for a film’s raw visual content while the vertical axis *qua* montage is the seed-germ of a film’s encompassing narrative form.

As a piece of hyperlink cinema, *Hudson Valley Ruins* exploits the tension between the horizontal and the vertical, the multi-linear and the biographical, the imagistic and the diegetic, by playing the latter set of terms off of the former. Its topical and thematic features insinuate a coming-of-age story (a kind of *bildungsroman*) while its form consistently resists devices of novelistic composition and closure. The horizontal does the work of storytelling, while the vertical is employed to reduce narrative back into its constituent images—a mechanism for exploring the world of the film. This accounts for one of the reasons why Connolly draws on the scenic tropes of melodrama and gothic horror— at a glance, such thematic elements point up at the genre to which they belong. Like the isolated article (an earring, a glove, a key) finally disclosing the story behind a murder mystery, such tropes consolidate a whole history of cinematic storytelling into an individual image.

But the plot (or plots) of *Hudson Valley Ruins* never culminates into something like a story. Earlier events are never finally revealed as significant and continuous with later developments. While the general sequence is indexed to the perspective of the characters, these characters are more witnesses to whatever happens to be transpiring than motivated participants. What we witness is not a significant and cohesive stretch of their “life stories” but a sequence of activities that for all of their monotony, or perhaps because of it, exude a sense of happenstance. The narrative schema of *Hudson Valley Ruins* borrows more from the pre-modern chronicle than from the 18th century novel—it is precisely through a repetition of short, happenstance episodes, resistant to a principle plot line, that the film anticipates a sudden climax.

What’s more, the shots that do conform to the perspectives of the characters shade into those setting the general scene, the establishing images of the town and natural landscape, the B-roll. This gives the impression that the dramatic action occurs in a low relief from the general *topos* of the film. What the plot sequences and establishing montages share is a sense of intense contemplative indifference— an indifference mimetically expressed in the features of the

disparate plot lines. Latent in Connolly’s film is a hypothesis concerning a salient aspect of the genre itself; the hyperlink form reflects a social condition in which collective anomie has become so intense that a desire for renewed solidarity, or at least a sense of proximity, can only take the form of a death wish. Recall the storm sequence that rounds off *Hudson Valley Ruins*. The climactic moment is itself as ambivalent as the films images of nature. It hovers somewhere between a representation of communion through death—that is, the fulfillment of a drive to mimetically merge with lower animal and vegetable life forms (recall the shot of the parrot in the therapist’s office) and an image of impossible consolation.

landscape itself; the rapid elapse of the sky textures, the dreadful repetition of the (at times ambiguously) diegetic wind sounds.

These techniques of collapsing cinematic verticality into the horizontal make the experience of *Hudson Valley Ruins* essentially the experience of a landscape or inscape. In it, first nature and second nature (reified culture and custom) ensconce one another in turn; recall the opening montage of a ruined barn, farmland, and its internal duplication in the decorative outdoor sign.

First nature ultimately appears as dead nature (in the world of *Hudson Valley Ruins* it is permanently autumn). With the exception of the climactic storm sequence, nature will not bend to express the psychic states of the characters populating it; rather, *they* become the provisional vessels of some ambiguous force best expressed in weather and landscape. Nature's indifference to human purposes, its deadness, is made all the more palpable by its reanimation as a picturesque set piece saturated with mood—and indeed, this mood mimics nothing other than that expressed in the hauntingly inert décor of the suburban home, office or yard. The sense of dread saturating the images of nature in *Hudson Valley Ruins* latently registers the violent pre-history of the contemplative, bourgeois appreciation of natural beauty.² This violence is refracted at the level of personal history. The depressed adolescent's indifferent gaze—no doubt close to one of aesthetic disinterestedness – as well as her withdrawal into phantasy play, bear witness to the quotidian violence of patriarchy. But the landscape/inscape of *Hudson Valley Ruins* is also, perhaps primarily, a survey of second nature. The images of the many interior artifacts of *Hudson Valley Ruins*, the exotic figurines, the faux Tiffany glass windows, the upstate-nouveau motifs on sconces, appear as so many natural encrustations. From the perspective of the landscape surveyor, their patterns are menacingly regular but we've forgotten what they signify, lost the code, or perhaps never had it.

No doubt, the film reflexively elaborates the process through which it was conceived and crafted. But it isn't straightforwardly biographical, or only to the extent that the plot could be said to follow the biography of any one of its characters. It *does* encode aspects of Connolly's own personal history that anticipated its making, but its not a story leading up to the moment of its telling. Instead it's a kind of mythic pre-history of a highly developed form of phantasy play. Mythic, because these aspects of personal history are radically estranged, objectified, apprehended like figures of a natural landscape. By enfolding the vertical axis of montage into the horizontal axis of the quasi-photographic image, Connolly thus forestalls a lapse into the ironic, hyper-reflexive techniques of medium-building that characterize early video art—indeed, medium-building techniques that one would expect from a film composed in the purely synthetic world of *The Sims*. Instead, it's the enigmatic images and objects of *Hudson Valley Ruins*-- in which the narrative is forever estranged—that betray the work's medium, and this medium is manifestly that of film i.e. *genre*.

Connolly thereby creates an effect similar to that of *Basement Puzzles/Rune Rooms*, but at a level of greater complexity. Puzzled out of dissociated elements, the imagistic landscape of *Hudson Valley Ruins* solicits an attempt at narrative emplotment that its formal structure abjures. She thus captures the experience of groping after that which, by definition, circumvents our capacity for narratable experience, namely, trauma. If the mysteries bound up in the landscape

² Here Connolly is pulling from the Hudson Valley River painters- for whom nature's sublimity was nothing other than a coy invitation to, and a preemptive celebration of, nature's ongoing domination by "man".

of *Hudson Valley Ruins* never accede to being experienced in full, the process of puzzling them together, in ever-new cinematic configurations, can be experienced as a form of productive *iteration*. This iteration is not the dead repetition of a compulsion—the repetition of the looping tableaux, the repetition of dead nature, the algorithm of the Sims themselves— but is instead akin to the process of learning a new, insipidly common language— call it film.





All images courtesy of the artist.