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**ECOLOGICAL GENTRIFICATION, POST-POLITICS AND  
FETISHISM**

**BRISTOL, UK, AS EUROPEAN GREEN CAPITAL**

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## ECOLOGICAL GENTRIFICATION, POST-POLITICS AND FETISHISM

### Bristol, UK, as European Green Capital

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#### ABSTRACT

The paper argues that the European Green Capital Initiative has become enrolled in a post-political moment in Bristol, UK, to aid in ongoing processes of 4<sup>th</sup> wave gentrification. The paper utilizes a visual semiology approach to understand the signifiers presented by two key videos which were produced by the Bristol Green Capital Partnership to 'sell' Bristol to the rest of the world. These videos, analyzed in the context of Wilson and Swyngedouw's (2015) definitions of post politics demonstrate a clear tendency for the city to become fetishized in various ways, but mostly focusing on middle-class, cultural and creative conceptions of 'fun' and 'quirk' to enroll a specific social configuration in their portrayal of 'Green' politics. This enrolment, it is argued, leads to an emptiness of the signifiers present and produces new nature(s) which are perceived as incontestable and unified 'truths'. The paper then argues that this unification of the non-unifiable is problematic for allowing a political moment to emerge from different conceptions of nature. The paper concludes with a radical call to re-evaluate Lefebvre's *Right to the City* thesis in relation to reclaiming socio-natures and allowing for a more political politics to emerge around the notion of difference and contestability.

**KEYWORDS:** Post-Politics, Fetishisation, Ecological Gentrification, European Green Capital, Bristol

I have come to the conclusion that politics are too serious a matter to be left to the politicians.

Charles De Gaulle, Former French President

I log on to the European Commission for the Environment website, navigate to the European Green Capital page and click on 'Bristol', a video plays, the opening shot is the sun seen through trees zooming by, fast and 'urgent' piano music plays in the background, a young, blonde woman walks to a park bench in the wind, overlooking the city below her hair blowing in the breeze and cold (Photo 7), in the next shot a young man stands with his back to us, gazing down a graffiti strewn tunnel (Photo 8). Over the image of a young woman staring up at the sky through the trees (Photo 9), a man's voice states "I believe... we should give more power to our imagination." Seven seconds later, after shots of young people gazing at different parts of a city (Photo 10), we hear "We should keep trying... to surprise ourselves, and stay open to change. Remember where we came from, but at the same time, be prepared to go somewhere totally new."

(Author's reflective journal 2016)

These types of videos are familiar, they have been used to sell bank accounts, life insurance, mortgages, and investment opportunities for over a decade. What is different about this video, however, is that it is designed to tell European citizens what Bristol in the UK has done during its year as European Green Capital, an initiative established by the European Commission to recognise cities which perform particularly well in key environmental indicators, in 2015 (<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/>). The video continues, for a total of two minutes and one second, with more and more aspirational signifiers, showing technology, children skipping (Photo 12), lovers on buses (Photo 13), playgrounds with trees, BMXers in graffiti laden tunnels (Photo 5), rooftop views of the contemporary city and fireworks displays. The young people in the video, dressed in the attire of skaters, a subcultural group around the UK but a significant culture in Bristol, with the young and not so young alike (Author's fieldwork). Peel away the layers of symbolism within this media, and a new face of ecological gentrification, post-politics and urban fetishism appears.

According to Swyngedouw (2006), the production of phantasmagoria and spectacularised relationships is a key component in making and supporting the contemporary, neoliberalised city. These forms of abstracted relationships, fluid space and culture, and spectacles contribute to the negation of the political moment, in the sense that Rancière (2015) uses the term to describe a moment of dissensus in which those without a part in society assert their part, thereby introducing a 'post-political' moment in which all democratic debate and participation is ignored in order to pursue a predetermined set of actions (Swyngedouw 2009). Post-politicisation can, and seemingly does, gain its legitimisation from a multitude of sources, however, as this paper will argue, the most powerful de-politicizing force of the current era, is environmental politics itself (Smith 2010).

Bristol served as the European Green Capital in 2015, an initiative set up by the European Commission for the Environment to award a different EU city each year with the title as recognition of its strong environmental performance in twelve key areas, such as: transport, noise pollution, water quality and sustainable employment (European Commission 2016a, 2016b). Bristol has applied every year since the title's inception in 2010 and has been a finalist for four of the five years before it gained the title in 2015 (European Commission 2016c). Whilst it is important to ask why Bristol has enjoyed such success and was the first

UK city to hold the title, this paper seeks to address the ways in which the European Green Capital Award in Bristol was presented. Who did Bristol include in its political moment of success? How is the city portrayed? How was nature produced to support this agenda? To answer these questions, I attended to three key videos produced by Bristol Green Capital Initiative to 'sell' its story surrounding its purported 'Green' status. I approached these videos using a visual semiology methodology to analyse and unveil some of the symbolism and ideology behind the images (Banks 2001; Harper 2014; Lynn and Lea 2005; Prosser 2013; Rose 2012).

In 2013, when Janez Potočnik, then the European Commissioner for the Environment, announced the winner of the European Green Capital Award, his exact words, as can be heard in one of the three videos analysed for this paper, were: "2015 goes to the city with the sense of *fun*, Bristol, congratulations." (my italics). This is an interesting basis for an award based on ostensibly environmental factors, but aligns itself with a long tradition of self-identified 'quirk' and 'fun' in Bristol, such as the 'Park & Slide' day in central Bristol (Photo 4). This 'fun' plays out in different ways across the Bristol Green Capital but is perhaps best exemplified by the visual media produced by the Bristol Green Capital Partnership under the auspices of the *Bristol2015* banner. This fun, as suggested by Wilson and Swyngedouw (2015) is, potentially, part of the ongoing process of depoliticisation of everyday life through the visual promotion of certain circumscribed, permitted forms of enjoyment, participation and democratic values through the creation of a hegemony which enables people to experience enjoyment as consensus and agreement. Whilst it may seem paradoxical to argue that depoliticisation can be achieved through encouraging participation and democracy, this is the core of the theory of post-politics. According to Rancière (2015), the political moment emerges from a struggle between those who the police order recognises and those who are excluded. This means that if everyone is included in the distribution of the sensible, then there is no struggle and no politics. Post-politics also goes further, to argue that there are certain issues which are so grounded in technocratic language and principles that they become post-political by closing down opportunity for debate (Bylund 2012; Harsin 2015; Haughton *et al.* 2013).

In two of the videos chosen for this study<sup>1</sup>, (located at <http://www.bristol2015.co.uk/about> and <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital/>, which I will refer to as the 'About' video and 'BGC' video respectively), there is a conspicuous lack of explicitly environmental messages, especially when compared to previous cities' videos on the European Commission's website. There are images of trees, parks and allotments, but the general signification is one of hope, progress and change. Nature, instead, is used as a vehicle for a progressive and sanitised form of politics to be brought about (Smith 2010). The images on the screen show us pictures of the wealthier areas of Bristol, the city centre (Photos 11 & 15), the Clifton Suspension Bridge (Photo 13), a famous Bristol landmark. However, the narrative is one of gentrification, there are a surprising number of images of Graffiti, cafés, restaurants, and the recently gentrified harbourside displayed under the voice track and piano music, giving a sense of gritty, yet high, culture. These images cannot simply be examined and then passed over; as Banks (2001) reminds us, the power of the visual researcher is to bring knowledges to bear upon the images. This is important, as Rose (2012) suggests, because there is a growing body of literature which argues that the intention of the photographer or cinematographer is almost certainly lost when audiences

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<sup>1</sup> The sampling method used was purposive and convenience based. I was most interested in 'flagship' representations of Bristol as the Green Capital and thus sampled based on the easiest to find and most prominent videos (Arber 2001; Charmaz 2011; Mason 2002).

bring their ideologies, past experiences and preconceptions to bear on the images. This is of course what Barthes (1977) described as the 'Death of the Author'. Debord (1967) shows us that the audience site of meaning production is important as, he argues, we are constantly mediated by visual culture, a concept he termed 'The Society of the Spectacle'. This is an important question to raise when using visual semiology as a major critique, as presented by Rose (2012), is that many studies do not detail their sampling techniques in great detail, opening them to criticisms surrounding researcher bias and selective sampling to allow predetermined conclusions to be drawn. Arber (2001), however, reminds us that, by employing a purposive or 'theoretical' sampling technique, the researcher performs sampling based on the theoretical lens and do not concern themselves with generalisability or representability.

Returning to our theoretical debate, however, in Debord's view, the world has become an immense collection of spectacles, which represent but do not constitute the real world. Building on Marx's works on commodity fetishism, where people no longer desire to consume the use value of a commodity but instead desire to possess that commodity, Debord argued that this abstraction is taken further in a society of spectacles and produces a desire to *appear to have* (Debord 1967). Therefore, and importantly, visual images and culture, such as those produced around the European Green Capital must be analysed in relation to the concepts of spectacle to understand possible avenues of abstraction and spectacularisation. At a very basic level, these processes can be seen in these videos as the main signified of the project is 'change', 'hope', and 'community', whilst the project has resulted in funding given to the city disappearing (Onions 2016), heavy criticism of the lack of concrete action (Birch 2015) and even the (as yet unproven) rumour that the European Green Capital lost George Ferguson his re-election as Mayor of Bristol due to misallocation of funding, public opinion and a lack of consultation over planning decisions.

The opening paragraph of this paper, taken from the author's reflective journal was written with relation to the *BGC* video, which represents the most spectacular video chosen for study. The *About* video is less abstract and contains more relevant information to the European Green Capital Award. Instead of a faceless narrative, a young boy (Photo 1) is heard speaking about how more people are living in cities and that "to make the world a better place, we're going to have to change some of the things we do in them." After this statement, the boy's face is shown as he skateboards through a wealthy, leafy suburb of Bristol, most likely Clifton, he then states "I live in Bristol" and that in 2015, his city is hosting the title of European Green City. There are, as best as can be identified in the use of this young boy's voice, two common symbolic signifiers: youth and paternalism/fraternalism (Chandler 2007; Eco 1986; Hall 1980; Williamson 1978). The diagesis, or general signification, is that, through a process of objective correlation whereby the signifieds of paternalism and youth are transferred to the city itself, Bristol is still learning to be 'Green' but will protect citizens from the mistakes of not being 'Green' by acting as a father/brother figure. As the video goes on, during the one minute and forty-seven seconds there is only one mention of sustainability, spoken over images of hot-air balloons rising over the local countryside whilst a solar glare casts strange aurora-like patterns over the camera lens (Photo 2). The majority of the video uses various images, mostly recycled in other videos, of the city (Photos 3, 4, 10, 11 & 15), cafes, children (Photo 12), and polytunnels (Photo 14). This level of abstraction is worrying and confirms not only the ideas expressed by Debord (1967), but also is in agreement with Marx's (1867/1976) theories on commodity fetishism, where in this case, the city itself is the commodity. The starkness of this relationship is made even more obvious when one views the videos produced by previous cities in the European Green Capital Award, available at the same location as the *BGC* video. Other cities, so it would appear, have chosen to

interview key figures to show how much progress is being made towards a truly sustainable Copenhagen, or Stockholm. The focus on real, concrete doings helps demystify environmental actions and helps people to relate to the real threats and challenges that their city faces (Holloway 2010). Given this knowledge, one must ask, why has this specific approach been followed in Bristol? However, this would need a more thorough discussion than can be given here.

The aforementioned theories of spectacle and fetishism also lend themselves well to the notion of gentrification. The gentrification which occurs in Bristol, it should be noted, is not always the traditional kind described by Ruth Glass in the late 1960s, where working class neighborhoods are bought up and ‘redeveloped’ to provide more expensive accommodation and leisure facilities for the middle classes who then live in a mixture of high-technology housing and ‘shabby-chic’ retrofits (Lees *et al.* 2016). Bristol’s gentrification appears to be based upon a mixture of the exclusion of those in economic or social deprivation to make way for the wealthier middle and upper classes, and in other parts of the city also, importantly, conforms to what some scholars are now describing as a ‘fourth wave’ gentrification (Checker 2011; Dooling 2009; Quastel 2009; Rérat *et al.* 2010). This fourth wave is defined by its use of ecology or environment as legitimation for its processes. This is an essential shift in the processes of gentrification as it allows for previously unoccupied sites (as with central Bristol) to become gentrified. This process can be seen statistically in the 2011 National Census in which the city was shown to have provided 68% of all new build accommodation over the previous 10 years as flats and apartments, 33.7% of all households as single occupancy, over the same 10 years the rental market shifted from a majority socially provided housing (61.7% of all rented accommodation) to a majority privately rented (55.1%) and the city has the third fastest population growth rate (9.7%) outside of London<sup>2</sup> and higher than the national average (Mills 2011). I argue that this is still gentrification as it tends to preclude the possibility of social housing and replaces the opportunity with a locked-in reality of expensive housing, shops and cultural activities, such as around Bristol’s harbourside area and the post-industrial cityscape surrounding the main train station, Bristol Temple Meads (Author’s fieldwork).

To argue that ecology is a legitimating force behind the gentrification of Bristol is to draw on arguments reaching back over two thousand years, to Plato’s allegory of The Cave (Latour 2004). The logic behind this statement comes from millennia old ontological debates around the legitimacy of the term ‘truth’, and importantly, where that truth, if it exists, comes from. For Plato, truth and nature were synonyms. The science of his time, so he argued, sought to uncover falsehoods produced by society by showing it the ways of nature. As Latour (2004) recounts, this meant that scientists and the elite could effectively shape the nature which society received to further their own objectives. More recently, political ecologists, most notably Forsyth (2003), updated this philosophy to account for the notion that, due to cultural hegemony and individual ideology, scientists no longer actively shape their knowledges and meanings to please the elite, instead, the very epistemological and ontological questions they concern themselves with coincide with the society in which they receive their training. This co-production of society and nature, largely unrecognized in non-academic circles, creates an opening for ecological gentrification. As Smith (2010) points out, nature is still viewed by many as an unassailable truth, therefore, any agent of change which claims nature as its legitimating authority becomes incontestable. The spectacularisation of nature and sustainability in Bristol’s

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<sup>2</sup> Manchester (18.9%) and Nottingham (13%) are the only two cities with higher population growth rates than Bristol.

videos contributes strongly to the post-politicisation of the environment and therefore aids gentrification.

The incontestability of nature becomes a serious issue when considering Rancière's notions of *politics*, *the political*, and *the police* (2015). These three concepts create a possibility for post-politicisation as the *political* (i.e. the assertion of a part of those who have no part in society) becomes subordinated to *politics* (i.e. the exercise of the power to govern) in a relationship framed around consensus. In this relationship, *the police* (i.e. the conceptual agent which decides which parts can be included in the *distribution of the sensible* or, put simply, who is to be listened to), accepts a techno-managerial governance above all other forms and, in doing so, evacuates the *political* from the process of governance (Rancière 2015; Swyngedouw 2009). Nature, sustainability or ecology become political issues so large and insurmountable that they completely evacuate the political from the Lacanian notion of the Symbolic order. This means that, in relation to the videos, when the coding employed signifies notions of progress, hope, and change, but not in any specific direction or mobilized around any specific issue, the political struggle towards sustainability, social justice and progress (themselves, arguably post-political concepts) is lost and the video ceases to be an empty signifier. Instead, the video becomes a signifier of inclusion, participation and democracy. Ironically, all of these processes have a depoliticising effect on the audience as they do not feel disavowed from the process and become included through their inaction (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2015).

If this is the case, what can we do, as citizens of a city, to ensure that actual concrete doings are enacted to aid the current socio-natural crisis? Whilst it is not the place of this paper to dictate solutions, one possible avenue of exploration may be to re-examine the Right to the City thesis (Lefebvre 2003; Marcuse 2009). Whilst some may argue that the recognition of post-political moments is not a useful tool to provide solutions as it presents us with a totalising ideology which appears inescapable (Larner 2015), this is only because the radical potential of recognising the separation of politics and the political and the depoliticising effect that a lack of separation can have is lost. Paradoxically, to overcome post-politics and regain democratic control, we must fight against inclusive participation. Recognise that things can be bad *and* be okay. By working on the agonising struggle of continual democratisation of our lives and cities. According to Mouffe (2013), democracy is not an end-point, it is a process. Therefore, whenever the noun is attached to a process, along with 'inclusive', 'participatory'<sup>3</sup>, or 'green', civil societies must react with scepticism and caution. There is a danger with environmental politics, as has been argued in this paper, and many others (Bulkeley and Betsill 2013; Checker 2011; Harsin 2015; Latour 2004; Levin *et al.* 2012; Loftus 2012; Purdy 2015; Swyngedouw 2010, 2014), that the apparent incontestability of the issue can, and does, foreclose the political moment and lead cities, communities and states to post-democratic scenarios.

We must constantly assert our right to the city, our right to a radical potential to shape the conditions of our own existence (Holloway 2010; Lefebvre 2003), even if that potential is never to be realised. The environment is an issue which most people can agree on, to varying degrees, and it makes logical sense to tackle issues such as climate change, resource consumption, and water pollution. But, its unifying feature is also its downfall. The Bristol Green Capital initiative presented *A Nature* without presenting a nature. This emptiness opened a space for co-option by the actors and agents behind gentrification processes in Bristol. This gentrification, played out in the visual culture of the city's initiatives, for

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<sup>3</sup> In this context, the words 'inclusive' and 'participatory' are used in relation to new agendas of corporate social responsibility brought about in the UK by the New Labour government's policy of 'Duty to Include' introduced in the late 1990s.

example, whilst over 16% of Bristol's population are Black and Minority Ethnicities (BME) (Mills 2011), the videos, which portray around 70 different people, only 4 of them are obviously from a BME background. Therefore, to prevent the environment from taking on an ultra-politics, leading to a de-politicisation, fetishisation and spectacularisation of the city in a post-political moment, we must defend eco-diversity, we must constantly struggle to maintain different natures, different significations and symbologies. The true crisis is not the competing ideologies of nature, the city or 'green' politics, but rather the apparent unification of the non-unifiable. The evacuation of the political from politics is dangerous, especially in environmental issues. As Žižek (2009), drawing on Klein (2007) argues, crises of such phenomenal proportions as climate change and the general degradation of the environment produce conditions conducive to the reinvigoration of capital flows by providing opportunities for commodities, such as the European Green Capital Award, to 'solve' the problem. In the case of the *BGC* and *About* videos, the commodity which provided this solution was the title of the Green Capital and the very city of Bristol itself. The edginess, the quirkiness, the graffiti, the charismatic, red-trousered Mayor of the city, George Ferguson all provided legitimation for asking the people of Bristol to place their faith in the city, although it never appeared clear as to how the city itself could solve the problem, nor what the problem in fact was. To return to the opening quote of this paper, politics is too serious to be *left* to the politicians, no, it is too important not to be *taken up* by everybody.

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## TABLES FIGURES, PHOTOS



**Photo 1:** The young boy who narrates the *About* video

**Source:** Bristol Green Capital 2015



**Photo 2:** Solar flares seen at the moment when Sustainability is mentioned

**Source:** Bristol Green Capital 2015



**Photo 3:** Former Mayor George Ferguson standing on North Street, Southville during his piece to camera

**Source:** Bristol Green Capital 2015



**Photo 4:** An example of the ‘fun’ and ‘quirk’ of Bristol. One of the main, and very steep, shopping streets in Bristol, Park Street, transformed into the ‘Park & Slide’, a giant water slide.

**Source:** Bristol Green Capital 2015



**Photo 5:** The graffiti laden tunnels, BMX culture, and urban ‘grit’ which appears throughout the videos.

**Source:** Bristol Green Capital 2015 & European Commission 2016



**Photo 6:** Lovers on a Bristol bus, incidentally, the colour and branding suggests a First Bus, First Group were a major sponsor of the Bristol Green Capital Partnership

**Source:** Bristol Green Capital 2015 & European Commission 2016



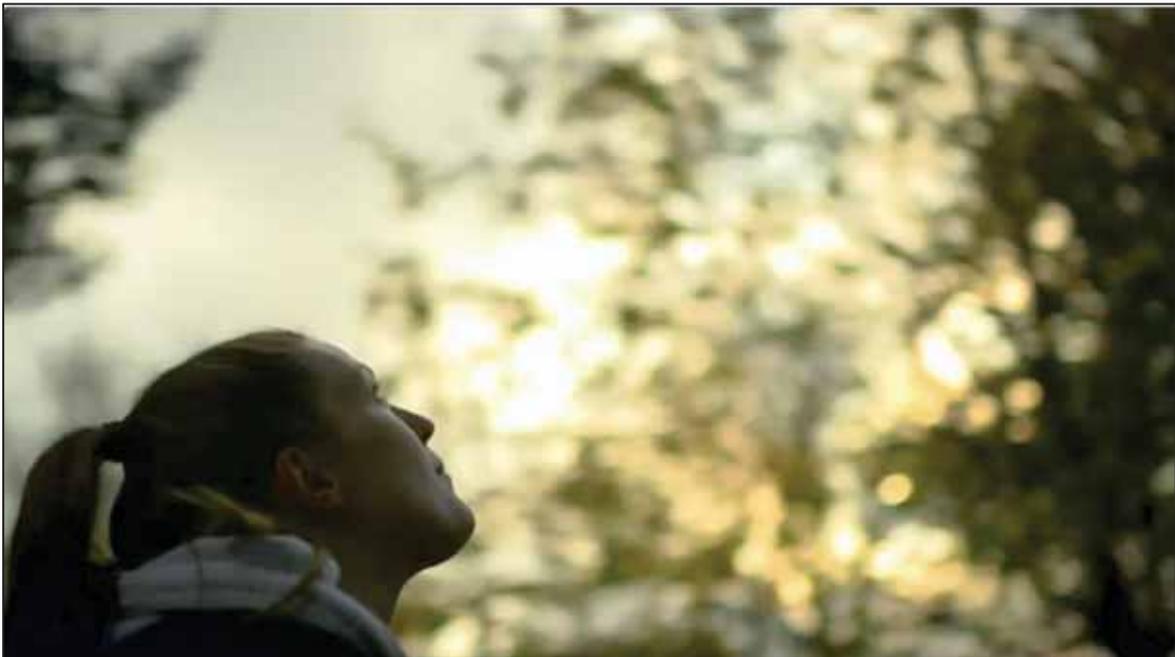
**Photo 7:** The opening shots of the *BGC* video, young woman gazing at the city

**Source:** European Commission 2016



**Photo 8:** The opening shots of the *BGC* video, young man gazing down a tunnel

**Source:** European Commission 2016



**Photo 9:** The opening shots of the *BGC* video, a young woman gazing at the sky and trees

**Source:** European Commission 2016



**Photo 10:** The opening shots of the *BGC* video, a young man gazing at the city

**Source:** European Commission 2016



**Photo 11:** Images of the gentrified harbourside area

**Source:** European Commission 2016



**Photo 12:** One of the most commonly used images in the videos, a pair of feet skipping through raised vegetable plots. Presumably young, by comparing the size of the feet, and female, from the colour of the socks, but otherwise ambiguous.

**Source:** European Commission 2016



**Photo 13:** The Clifton Suspension Bridge, a common connotive and synecdochal signifier for Bristol

**Source:** European Commission 2016



**Photo 14:** The polytunnels of City Farm

**Source:** European Commission 2016



**Photo 15:** The extent of the light pollution in Bristol is seen in the *BGC* video.

**Source:** European Commission 2016



**Photo 16:** The closing shot of the *BGC* video

**Source:** European Commission 2016