

Article

'Muzak for Frogs'—Representations of 'Nature' in *Decoder* (1984)

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Abstract: This paper examines the various representations of 'nature' present in *Decoder* (1984), a German experimental cyberpunk film that was inspired by William S. Burroughs' thoughts on utilising tapes as revolutionary weapons. Though *Decoder* is not a film one would easily associate with labels, such as 'green' or 'environmental', signs and images that represent or refer to 'nature' and non-human life are not omitted. Through a close reading of the film, the paper first explores the ways in which these representations convey and evoke certain meanings and associations and then elucidates the themes at play in the context of these representations.



Citation: Hanser, Eva-Maria. 2021. 'Muzak for Frogs'—Representations of 'Nature' in *Decoder* (1984). *Humanities* 10: 67. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10020067>

Received: 7 February 2021

Accepted: 7 April 2021

Published: 9 April 2021

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Keywords: experimental film; cyberpunk; nature; sound; control

1. Introduction

In this article,¹ I will focus on the various representations of 'nature' that are present in *Decoder* (Muscha 1984), a German experimental cyberpunk film directed by Muscha and written by Klaus Maeck. The film was inspired by William S. Burroughs' thoughts on utilising tapes as revolutionary weapons, which he elaborated in *The Electronic Revolution*, *The Revised Boy Scout Manual* and *The Job*.²

Though relatively unknown, *Decoder* has attained cult status, especially among fans of industrial and noise music, not least because of its infamous cast members FM Einheit (a former member of *Einstürzende Neubauten*), Christiane Felscherinow (known to the wider public for her autobiography *Zoo Station: The Story of Christiane F.*), Genesis P-Orridge (a founding member of *Throbbing Gristle* and *Psychic TV*) and William S. Burroughs, who has a cameo. The only experienced lead actor was artist and writer Bill Rice (best known for his appearance in Jim Jarmusch's (2003) *Coffee and Cigarettes*). Rice plays agent Jaeger (German for hunter), who has developed a deep fascination for the stripper Christiana³ and is commissioned by the Muzak Corporation to eliminate FM Einheit because FM, who happens to be Christiana's boyfriend, has initiated large-scale riots by creating and disseminating anti-Muzak tapes (cut-ups). Whereas Christiana is obsessed with frogs and fantasises about training them to be killer-frogs, FM is obsessed with tapes. When he realises that the background music (Muzak) played in the burger joint H-Burger is an instrument for controlling people, he becomes obsessed with the idea of creating a sonic remedy (anti-Muzak), which involves the killing of one of Christiana's frogs and the

¹ The title, 'Muzak for Frogs', refers to the first track of the *Decoder* soundtrack (Ball et al. 1985).

² In an interview with Jack Sargeant in *Naked Lens*, Klaus Maeck mentions these three texts explicitly, stating that they were 'his favourite books' at that time (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 201). *The Job*, first published in 1969 in French as *Entretiens avec William Burroughs*, contains interviews conducted by Daniel Odier, which are interrupted by essayistic sections (Burroughs and Odier [1969] 1989). The essay collection *The Electronic Revolution*, first published in Germany in 1970, is inserted in later editions of *The Job*. An excerpt of *The Revised Boy Scout Manual*, originally recorded in 1970 on three tapes and including sections presented in *The Electronic Revolution*, was published in *RE/Search* by V. Vale (1982); this seems to be the source Maeck refers to. The whole content of the tapes, later edited by Geoffrey D. Smith and John M. Bennett (Burroughs [1970] 2018), was not published until 2018.

³ With the exception of the credits, the name of this character is not mentioned in the film. In the script, her name was initially 'Christiane' but was then changed to 'Christiana'. In the synopsis printed in the *Decoder Handbuch*, both versions of the name are present (Maeck and Hartmann 1984, p. I, pp. 53–58).

recording of its death cries. FM gets advice from an old man (Burroughs) and a high priest (Genesis P-Orridge), the latter of whom, along with a small army of 'pirates' (punks), helps FM cause chaos and spread the tapes.

Although the frogs are one of the key motifs of the film, the literature on *Decoder* focuses, with a few exceptions (Sargeant [1997] 2008; Reddell 2018), almost exclusively on Muzak, the issue of control, FM's tape experiments, references to Burroughs' cut-up theory and the subcultural background of the film (Goodman 2010; Becker 2019; Nitsche 2020; Torner 2020). One reason for this may be the film's complexity and the difficulty of managing the abundance of motifs and references within it, given that *Decoder* follows a nonlinear narrative that is disrupted by surreal and sometimes comical scenes and additionally makes excessive use of inserts and screens to display material from various sources (e.g., *Metropolis*, the marriage of Diana and Charles and the assassination of J. F. Kennedy). As a result, even after several viewings, one is left with confusion and a plethora of open questions.⁴ It is possible that Christiana and her frogs have been largely disregarded in the literature because her activities, like FM's attempts to create and spread a 'sound virus', fall prey to this confusion.

The motif of the frogs and the idea of the virus are not the only references to 'nature'. In addition to a surreal scene filmed at a landfill, elements related to the environment and the non-human are occasionally interspersed in the film's imagery. Despite the presence of these references, however, *Decoder* cannot easily be associated with labels such as 'green' or 'environmental', as the film's main emphasis is not on such issues but on drawing attention to the intersection of media/music and control. Other themes, such as drug addiction and sex work, are also touched upon. As hinted above, *Decoder* is deeply embedded in the so-called 'Industrial Culture', a polarising movement that used music and art to explore 'the grim side of post-Industrial Revolution society' (Monte Cazazza, cited from Vale 1983, p. 2). By its very nature, 'Industrial Culture' largely eludes definitions and genre conventions. However, it can be characterised by a certain set of ideas that, according to Jon Savage, includes 'organizational autonomy', 'access to information', 'use of synthesizers and anti-music', 'extra-musical elements' and 'shock tactics' (Vale 1983, pp. 4–5). These ideas were also crucial for *Decoder*, which together with the *Decoder Handbuch* (Maeck and Hartmann 1984) can, in this context, be understood as an extra-musical element that provides information about music as an instrument of control (Muzak) and about revolutionary counter-tactics, such as the use of tape recorders, cut-ups, scrambling, infrasound and noise, culminating in 'anti-music'. The 'anti-music' promoted in *Decoder* attempts not only to disrupt expectations, listening habits and associational lines, as well as to distort and play back the post-industrial soundscape, but also seeks to explore the manifold effects of sound on the body, psyche and mind in order to 'decondition social constraints in thinking and bodily behaviour'⁵ (Maeck and Hartmann 1984, pp. 3–8). Jon Savage has pointed out the significance of organisational autonomy for these efforts; thus the requirement for artists in the movement 'to record for their own, or 'independent' labels was partly enforced, but mainly voluntary' (Vale 1983, p. 4). On the one hand, major labels were hardly interested in these sound experiments; on the other hand, 'Industrial Culture', which was concerned with the issue of control and driven by the intention to disseminate information, was attached to DIY ethics. *Decoder* received a total of 400,000 DM in funding from German state and city institutions (Sargeant [1997] 2008, pp. 202–3) and was produced by a team consisting mainly of non-professionals. Although the budget was ample in comparison to the New York para-punk films on which *Decoder* was stylistically based (ibid., p. 200), it was still limited, especially when compared to other filmic models, such as *Metropolis* (Lang 1927) or *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), which each were given their own specially designed futuristic cityscape (Weik von Mossner 2017, p. 417). This

⁴ This impression is also supported by a statement from Klaus Maeck: 'Well, in the end our story became so confused that nobody could really understand what was going on—unless he studied the film carefully' (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 202).

⁵ Translated from German: '[...] soziale Zwänge im Denken und Körperverhalten zu deconditionieren' (Maeck and Hartmann 1984, p. 5).

junction of limited means and ‘ingenious dilletantism’ (sic)⁶ resulted in surprisingly fresh cinematic approaches but also in (unintended) shortcomings, most notably with regard to the filmic language, which occasionally impedes the comprehension of the basic plot, and the mise-en-scène, as the production—the film was shot within four weeks—was largely dependent on its environment and the conditions that were present. Because of this, the city, especially in some scenes filmed in the morning or during the day, sometimes appears more charming than grim. In addition, weather could not be used deliberately to set the mood of a scene. Instead, the film works with light filters in various colours, and each character is assigned a specific colouring.

In this paper, instead of focusing entirely on Muzak, I rather attempt to shed light on the representations of ‘nature’ in *Decoder*, which previous studies on this film have only touched cursorily, if at all, and thereby contribute to the field of ecocinema studies. A majority of the works in this field address professional, non-experimental films that portray ‘nature’. These might include wildlife documentaries or films featuring animals (such as Disney films), further films in which themes of wilderness, landscape, the pastoral, animality or anthropomorphism are present. Films in which ecological issues or disasters are centred in the narrative or in which the concept of human/humanity is challenged (as in horror, science fiction, cyberpunk, etc.) are also commonly studied (Ingram 2000; Brereton 2005; Cubitt 2005; Ivakhiv 2008; Rust et al. 2013; Weik von Mossner 2017). Of particular relevance are Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann’s *Ecocinema and the City* (Murray and Heumann 2018), which transgresses the divide of city and ‘nature’, Scott MacDonald’s *The Garden in the Machine* (MacDonald 2001), which deals explicitly with independent, avantgarde and experimental films and also includes chapters on the city, and, in particular, Adrian J. Ivakhiv’s *Ecologies of the Moving Image* (Ivakhiv 2013), which not only draws from a rich and wide-ranging cinematic pool but also examines how cinema has shaped our relation to and perception of the material world. Yet, when speaking of examining the various representations of ‘nature’ in *Decoder*, I do not simply mean to focus on how the non-human is portrayed. Rather, *Decoder* gives an opportunity to draw attention to signs and images that refer to the non-human, but elude cinematographic conventions shaping the perception of ‘nature’. In a first approach, I will address the absence of pastoral imagery and show that *Decoder* instead gives room to both the non-human within the human sphere and the exposure of human bodies to invisible non-human matters, including microbes, viruses, toxins and sound waves. Then, step by step, I will elaborate on the motifs of the landfill, the frogs and the sound virus. While the landfill and the frogs are motifs that are presented as rather open to association, beyond the fact that they address the themes of pollution/toxicity and animality, the idea of the sound virus does not easily arise, but requires additional material provided, for instance, by the *Decoder Handbuch*⁷, including sections of Burroughs’ ‘Feedback from Watergate to the Garden of Eden’. Despite the ambiguity that surrounds the landfill and the frogs, by approaching these motifs with Burroughs it becomes apparent that, together with the sound virus, they point to guerrilla tactics as elaborated in *The Revised Boy Scout Manual* that involve the weaponizing of chemicals, animals, viruses and sound. However, though these motifs can be associated with the issue of control in varying ways, they cannot simply be reduced to that, as they also shed light on the existence within the post-industrial landscape.

⁶ *Die große Untergangs-Show—Festival Genialer Dilletanten* was the name of an event that took place in Berlin in 1981 and showcased bands such as *Einstürzende Neubauten*, *Die Tödliche Doris* and *Sentimentale Jugend*. The misspelling of ‘Dilletanten’, which was originally an unintended typo, was affirmed rather than corrected. The notion of ‘Geniale Dilletanten’ then became synonymous with the subcultural No Wave scene in which *Decoder* was also embedded (Müller 1982; Nitsche 2020).

⁷ The *Decoder Handbuch* (Maeck and Hartmann 1984), which is unfortunately only available in German, contributes greatly to the comprehension of the storyline and the film’s aims. The handbook provides an extensive collection of the texts that served as the main impulses for the script—which is also included—and is divided into six sections, five of which are assigned to the key motifs of the film. These are Muzak, cut-ups, pirates, frogs and burgers.

2. '... It Is Free of Preservatives and Additives and Is Grilled without Fat ...'

In *Decoder*, each sign or image that represents or refers to non-human life is either embedded in a human environment, a product of (artificial) imitation or overshadowed by human activity.

In addition to the frogs living and hopping in Christiana's flat, there are indoor plants in her apartment and at H-Burger that give both spaces particular but slightly different qualities. While the plants at H-Burger are intended to create a family- and consumer-friendly atmosphere, Christiana's plants can be read as an attempt to replicate the natural habitat of her frogs and to create a safe space, or sanctuary, that allows her to retreat from the outside world and the urbanised landscape. Other imitations of 'nature' or non-human life include drawings of frogs in books, the coin-operated horses at H-Burger and a neon sign near the strip club where Christiana works. The sign depicts an elephant with a decorative blanket on its back and might belong to the club whose name, 'Safari', is similarly illuminated. But the frogs are not only pets for Christiana to cuddle. Looking closely, one can also find glasses filled with dead frogs preserved in alcohol in Christiana's flat and FM's fridge. Furthermore, a recording of the death cries of a frog that FM squeezed in anger after Christiana brought it to his flat is the final and crucial ingredient in the anti-Muzak tape that makes people flee and vomit. These are not the only moments in which non-human life is overshadowed by human activities; there are at least three others that render humanity's destructive impact visible. In a surreal scene that takes place in an arcade, footage of video games and war scenes has been spliced together in rapid succession.⁸ These inserts, which are partly displayed on screens, contain imagery of a two-dimensional landscape with a gun pointed at the sky, triggering an explosion in space, a tank camouflaged by plant material rolling down an overgrown landscape, a bazooka camouflaged by plant material, a soldier spying in a cornfield and more tanks moving quickly through a green landscape (00:13:30–00:14:52). Additional footage of war scenes is later displayed on a TV screen at the beverage shop where Christiana and FM buy beer. Among other things, a downed aircraft is shown crashing and exploding over a cornfield (00:21:24–00:22:21). In another surreal scene, a dream scene, Christiana follows an old man across a toxic and seemingly endless landfill. Flying birds are seen behind a mesh fence hung with plastic bags and other rubbish (00:27:02–00:29:41). In addition, FM's flat has a view of the city's harbour; its shipyards and cranes can be seen reaching into the sky from his window.

In contrast to filmic models, such as *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982), an 'ecocide' (Brereton 2005, p. 211) or a similar apocalyptic event has not yet occurred—animals of flesh and blood do still exist and are affordable. However, the emphasis is on 'not yet', as the imagery points to the high probability that such an event could happen in a somewhat near but still distant future. Moreover, the dream of the toxic landfill is an indicator of an unconscious haunted by eco-fears, fears that are probably being suppressed in daily life. In this sense, the world of *Decoder* is not so much a dystopia as a representation of 'the grim side of post-Industrial Revolution society' (Monte Cazazza, cited from Vale 1983, p. 2), which is also one of the main reasons why imagery related to the 'beauty' of 'nature', such as the pastoral, is avoided.⁹ In the post-industrial world, fleeing the city and the noise of industry (indicated by the shipyards) and retreating to the countryside is not an option for many people for a variety of reasons.¹⁰ Instead, there are other substitutes that allow people to

⁸ The scene is a reference to the 'The Penny Arcade Peep Show' sections in *The Wild Boys* (Burroughs [1969] 2008) and to *The Electronic Revolution*, which ends with the words, 'END OF THE WAR GAME' (Burroughs [1970] 2001, p. 58).

⁹ When pastoral or a similar type of imagery appears in the context of the 'Industrial Culture', it can be assumed that there is probably something grim hidden in it, even if this is not immediately apparent. For instance, the record cover of *20 Jazz Funk Greats* shows the bandmembers of *Throbbing Gristle* standing in a meadow filled with flowers. On closer inspection, it can be seen that they are next to the slope of a cliff and that a car is behind them. The photo was taken at Beachy Head (England), which, according to Peter Christopherson, is 'a traditional suicide point, because it's a very tall cliff' (cited from Daniel 2012, p. 20).

¹⁰ *Decoder* was filmed in 1982, when Berlin was divided. Although people from West Berlin could travel through East Germany to West Germany by car, they were not allowed to leave the transit route. Thus, leaving the city spontaneously for a trip to the countryside was not that easy.

cope with a certain lack regarding the organic, such as the coin-operated horses and the Safari club—elements that revolve around fetish, fantasy and pleasure. Christiana's frogs represent another approach: keeping pets and creating a garden-like atmosphere within one's flat is a rather common approach to finding solitude and rest within the urban sphere. However, as I will later discuss in more detail, there is, according to *Decoder*, another reason that people seem to be happy despite the circumstances that accompany modern existence: Muzak and its soothing effects. Within the diegetic world, a fundamental question is whether only Muzak can fulfil this function or whether Muzak is meant to represent media more broadly. With the exception of the marriage of Diana and Charles, all of the material displayed on screens is related to death, destruction and war. Is this content aimed at us, in order to demonstrate the grim side of modernity, or is this grim message intended for the viewers within *Decoder*, in order to provoke us to ask why despite this imagery no attempts for change are made? This question arises due to the absence of pastoral or other similar imagery, which might be regarded as having a soothing effect, much like Muzak or the marriage of Diana and Charles.

It is because of this absence that, at first glance, one might have the impression that 'nature' does not exist within this diegetic world. What we do and do not perceive as 'nature' is to a certain degree shaped by media. As Ivakhiv (2013) points out, '[a]s a categorical stand-in for the non-human and non-artifactual world around us, nature, in Western history, has taken many forms', ranging from 'a divinely ordained system of norms and rules, rights, and obligations' to 'a locus for the residence of spirits' (p. 77). Over the course of industrialisation, through which the divide between the urban and rural spheres intensified, '[n]ature became what was "out there" in the country, and certain types of landscape came to represent pastoral, romantic, and classic ideals' (p. 81). Paintings and photographs of these idealised places 'out there' were brought into the city. Viewing them, the masses learned 'how to see nature' and then travelled to these places by train (p. 83).

Yet 'nature' is not only 'out there' or in-between, 'nature' is also within and invisible to the naked eye. Microbes and viruses, which inhabit the human body and sphere, are also present in *Decoder*, but they escape the eye and are only revealed in a roundabout way. A first hint is given in a scene that depicts the way that the employees of H-Burger are drilled. While they do synchronised exercise sequences in sportswear to a strangely funny chant, the manager instructs them on hygiene and appearance:

- People with bad teeth, with herpes, with skin diseases, eczemas or tattoos are naturally not employed to have direct contact with customers but where . . . ?
- In the kitchen.
- Exactly. Remember that.
- What should our appearance be at work?
- Clean-shaven, with clean fingernails and teeth and fresh breath. I use a deodorant against smell. At work, I wear black trousers, black shoes and have neat, washed hair.
- Like this one. Once again. The appearance of our waiters and waitresses is of utmost importance to our customers. And that brings me to the crucial question: What makes the H-Burger better than all rissoles, meatballs and all the rubbish of our rivals?
- The H-Burger is, of course, manufactured from 100% pure German beef . . . it is free of preservatives and additives and is grilled without fat.
- And anybody can look into our pots. We have nothing to hide. Therefore, it is essential not only to keep your clothes in order but also to always make sure that all kitchen utensils are in perfect condition. And smile! Smile! After all, we're selling happiness (00:24:30–00:27:02).

Microbes and viruses are seen as a constant threat to consumerist and capitalist society—represented in *Decoder* by H-Burger. Food poisoning, for instance, would have a business-damaging effect. Control at the microbiological and viral level thus involves control over the human body and its practices. Conversely, in *Decoder*, resistance against the system involves an embrace of the microbial and viral realm. The appearance of the pirates who assist FM inverts the bodily ideal that H-Burger seeks to enforce. With unwashed and

uncombed hair and showing their bad teeth with relish and pride, the pirates vandalise the burger place. Later, they disseminate anti-Muzak tapes in various burger joints, causing mass hospitalisation that is initially associated with food poisoning. However, it is not actually a virus that makes people sick but sound waves, which are as invisible as viruses and which affect the human body. *Decoder* thus draws attention not only to visible 'nature' but also to a wide variety of invisible matter ranging from microbes, viruses and sound waves to chemicals, which the human body is not only exposed to but, as Stacy Alaimo (2010) notes, 'is always intermeshed with' (p. 2).

In this sense, one could say that *Decoder* brings into play two different conceptions of the relation between human and 'nature'. On the one hand, there is an anthropogenic view informed by industrialism, in which humans are separate and seemingly independent from 'nature', while 'nature' is overshadowed by human activity and is more or less only conveyed via various media (which can include the dream, the window and also the glasses with the frogs, the coin-operated horses and the illuminated signs). On the other hand, the film presents a view that can be described by Alaimo's notion of 'trans-corporality', a perspective that emphasises the 'interconnections, interchanges and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures' (ibid.) and shows the inseparability of humans from the environment, which 'runs right through us in endless waves, and if we were to watch ourselves via some ideal microscopic time-lapse video, we would see water, air, food, microbes, toxins entering our bodies as we shed, excrete, and exhale our processed materials back out' (Harold Fromm, cited from Alaimo 2010, p. 11).

3. 'So, I Have Decided that Junk Is Not Green but Blue'

There are two scenes, both of which are FM's dreams, in which an old man (Burroughs) appears. Whereas FM encounters the old man in an electrical appliance store in the second of those scenes, the first scene only involves Christiana but not FM.

It opens with a full shot of frogs crawling on something glittery and uneven, accompanied by Christiana's moony voice reciting the words of the Weird Sisters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

Eye of newt/and toe of frog/Wool of bat, and tongue of dog/Adder's fork and blind worm's sting/Lizard's leg and howlet's wing/For a charm of powerful trouble/Like a hell-broth boil and bubble./Liver of blaspheming jew/Gall of goat, and slips of yew/Silver'd in the moon's eclipse/Nose of turk, and Tartar's lips/Finger of birth-strangled babe/Ditch-delivered by a drab/Make the gruel thick and slab ... (cited from Maeck and Hartmann 1984, p. 54)¹¹

The camera zooms out to reveal Christiana, who is bathed in green light and wrapped in a silver rescue blanket, sitting on a slope surrounded by trash bags. As the camera zooms out further, the outline of an old man in a hat and trench coat walking with a cane can be seen at the top of the hill. Christiana straightens up and watches him walk by. The next shot shows the man—only his body but not his head is captured—stopping in front of a mesh fence, behind which is the gloomy grey-violet sky. Birds are flying behind the fence, and the sound of crows can be heard. Burroughs' voice from *Nothing Here Now but the Recordings* (Burroughs 1981) is played in the background: 'Word falling—Photo falling—Breakthrough in Greyroom—He has gone away through invisible mornings, leaving a million tape recordings of his voice behind, fading into the cold spring air, pose a colourless question ...' (Burroughs 1981, B4 'Word Falling—Photo Falling'). As the recording continues, he moves on and walks along a brownfield covered with rubbish. The imagery is now filtered through red light. Christiana runs after him—which is depicted by her fast-moving feet in shimmering green stilettos on dark ground—and catches up. While they slowly disappear into the distance together, the last part of the track is played:

¹¹ These lines are actually 'cut-up' from the famous scene that opens the fourth act of *Macbeth*, more precisely from passages of the second and third witch (Shakespeare [1606] 2009, pp. 100–1). One can only speculate why exactly these (notably the antisemitic and racist phrases) and no other lines (for instance from the passage of the first witch who adds poison obtained from a toad to the brew) were included.

‘Junk turns you on vegetable—It’s green, see? — A green fix should last a long time—An unworthy vessel obviously—So, I have decided that junk is not green, but blue’ (ibid.). With the word ‘junk’, the image starts to flare blue again and again, an interference sets in and the camera zooms out to reveal a screen and then FM sleeping in his studio (00:27:02–00:29:41).

Despite the scene’s mysteriousness, it is apparent that it engages with the theme of toxicity. This issue is introduced in the first shot, in which the frogs are associated with poison in the recited lines from Shakespeare, which describe the preparation of a charmed brew. The next indicator is the green filter that is used when Christiana is shown amid the rubbish, thereby adding a toxic quality to the subject of pollution. Finally, the recording highlights the issues of drug intoxication and addiction (junk) as the central, albeit not sole, concern of this scene.

Sargeant calls the depicted environment a ‘post-apocalyptic landscape’ (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 198)—an impression that may be due to the use of the green and red light filters, the grey-violet sky, the crows as messengers of doom, the deserted landscape littered with rubbish where nothing seems to grow and possibly the silver rescue blanket Christiana is wrapped in, evoking the association of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. However, the scene was actually not shot after an apocalypse but at a moment when an ‘apocalyptic’ event was in the process of unfolding. It was filmed in 1982 at the Georgswerder landfill in Hamburg, where highly toxic industrial waste was dumped and which was closed in 1979. One year after the filming, in 1983, it was discovered that dioxin was seeping into the groundwater. Thereupon, newspapers called the landfill ‘the most dangerous hill of the world’, and the evacuation of an entire district was considered (Maeck and Hartmann 1984, p. 58; NDR 2014). Although they did not know the extent of the pollution at the time of filming, the scene was already shot from a perspective shaped by what Cynthia Deitering (1996) calls ‘toxic consciousness’. According to Deitering, a shift can be detected in the fiction of the 1980s in which waste and pollution become dominant reference points in the perception of modern culture. The landfill thus reveals ‘the underside of consumer capitalism’ (p. 197), which is omitted from the public image that H-Burger seeks to project (as in the staff-training scene) and is in contrast to H-Burger’s values of service, cleanliness and quality (‘The H-Burger is, of course, manufactured from 100% pure German beef . . . it is free of preservatives and additives and is grilled without fat’). In this sense, the camera zooming out can be understood as showing the bigger picture: it draws attention to the enormous amount of waste being produced by major companies and equates H-Burger’s products with junk¹² (junk food), thereby implying health-damaging effects and addictive properties.

At the time the film was shot, only a few people, including her flat-mate Klaus Maeck, knew that Christiane Felscherinow was Christiane F. (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 202). It is possible that the inclusion of the theme of drug addiction was at least partially motivated by her.¹³ When seeing the film today with this knowledge, what comes to mind are the parallels between Christiane Felscherinow and William S. Burroughs (the old man). Both were survivors of heroin addiction, and both achieved their first public recognition—while initially remaining anonymous—in books giving first-hand insights into the vicious circle of addiction (F[elscherinow] 1979; Burroughs [1953] 2003). From that point of view, the scene seems to silently hint that Burroughs is a precursor of Christiana/Christiane Felscherinow, that Christiana/Christiane Felscherinow, who by the recitation of Shakespeare’s lines is identified with witchcraft and magic, possesses supernatural/superhuman power(s) not least in regard to her survival and the constant fight against addiction and that both are leaving toxic grounds behind when disappearing together into the distance.

¹² Klaus Maeck stated that the H in H-Burger ‘stood for heroin’ (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 202).

¹³ ‘[. . .] also Christiane lived in our ‘Wohngemeinschaft’ (commune), and so we created this split character after her real life. She was already famous for her book, but tried to hide herself from hungry media. And she tried to change her life, to find new things to do’ (Maldonado and Maeck 2020).

Burroughs did not actually play the old man in this scene.¹⁴ His absence is indicated by the title of the LP from which the recording was taken—*Nothing Here Now but the Recordings*—and by the first part of the track, notably the words ‘leaving a million tape recordings of his voice behind’. The track was a cut-up from the chapter ‘Shift Coordinate Points’ in *Nova Express* (Burroughs [1964] 2014, pp. 29–33), a novel in which addiction is exposed from the beginning as a means to control people (‘Prisoners, Come Out’, pp. 3–6). Taking this, the reference to H-Burger’s junk food and the landfill into account, the scene establishes a connection between the issue of addiction and modern capitalist society, implying that it is society that creates addiction, leading to individual suffering and far-reaching, long-term consequences, such as damage to health and psyche, legal persecution and exposure to violence and (sexual) exploitation.

What is particularly interesting in this scene is how ‘nature’ and toxicity are brought into relation with each other, first in the juxtaposition of the Shakespearian lines and the frogs and then in the enigmatic lines about junk, both of which echo each other. In the above-mentioned chapter ‘Shift Coordinate Points’, ‘Doc picks up a piece of grass [. . .] and starts cooking up this green junk’ (ibid., p. 32). Grass could indeed only mean grass but could also include plants that are known and used specifically for intoxicating effects, such as cannabis, coca or papaver somniferum, to name a few. However, the juxtaposition of the words ‘vegetable’, ‘green’ and ‘junk’, shifts the connotation of ‘green’, which is commonly associated with ‘nature’, to toxicity, which is also commonly indicated by the colour green. Frogs are also green, and some species, such as the giant monkey frog or the Colorado River toad, produce a secretion that is used for its intoxicating effect. Although both the grass and the frogs highlight the natural occurrence of toxins, in both instances it is humans who process these toxins for specific uses and subsequently expose themselves, others and the environment to toxic substances, with both intended and unintended effects. The conclusion ‘that junk is not green, but blue’ could in this context denote that green matter has become something else through human processing in the age of (post-)industrialism—it has become ‘junk’ in its manifold manifestations.

4. ‘Did I Tell You about My New Death Frogs?’

Chad Weidner has pointed out the challenges of undertaking ecocritical readings of experimental texts, namely the ‘lack of coherent narratives and recognizably relevant content’ (Weidner 2016, p. 22). It is similarly difficult to make one’s way through experimental films, where one is at constant risk of either over-interpreting or overlooking content.

For instance, one could spend days reflecting on the enigmatic lines about junk from the recording in the scene above and find various possible interpretations because it is a cut-up and thereby ambiguous and open to association. However, I think the crux is that something was needed to scenically establish a connection between the landfill and heroin, and this is performed by the recording (notably by the juxtaposition of the words ‘junk’ and ‘fix’), which in turn informs the mise-en-scène (as in the words, ‘He has gone away through invisible mornings’ and the green and blue light filters, the latter highlighting the word ‘junk’). Thus, at some point, the search for hidden meanings becomes rather questionable and probably leads to becoming bogged down in an excess of possible meanings while yielding little insight. The idea that each element and motif in the film does not have a secret meaning to be decoded by the viewer is supported by a statement Klaus Maeck made when asked in an interview about the concept of the death frogs:

Well, I realized years later, when I watched Alejandro Jodorowsky’s *Montana Sacra* [= *La Montaña sagrada/The Holy Mountain*] (1973) again, that the bloody battle of the frogs must have impressed me a lot. I remember seeing this film many times in the 70’s. And then, working on the script I studied various frog rituals

¹⁴ Burroughs had agreed to participate in the film on the condition that it would not take too much time. The scene with him in the electrical appliance store was shot in London within one hour and was rather difficult as Burroughs had trouble memorising his lines (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 203). Against this background, it is unlikely that Burroughs would have come to Hamburg to shoot the scene at the landfill.

in different religions and traditions. I didn't take it too serious though, just liked the slightly surrealistic flip for the movie. I liked the idea of being obsessed by frogs. Which resulted in a private frog collection, since all my friends thought I am obsessed with frogs and gave me frogs in all formats and sizes as presents. Still have some (Maldonado and Maeck 2020).

The possible symbolic meaning of the frogs is thus less relevant than the contexts in which they are put. They are first introduced in a scene in which Christiana and FM, both wearing blindfolds, are talking to each other on the phone. When the camera moves back, it is revealed that they are actually both in the same room. In the dialogue that unfolds, it becomes apparent that both of them are preoccupied with their particular obsessions and are annoyed by the obsession of the other:

- Whenever I played my new tape, someone stopped.
- You're crazy. I'm not interested in hearing your tape fantasies.
- Well, you're not listening properly.
- That's right. Did I tell you about my new death frogs? I could train them to be assassin frogs.
- So they can bite off men's cocks?
- Why not? But castration doesn't solve the problem. Did you know that Lady Di gave birth to a frog? (FM yawns) I read that they're a symbol of fertility or amniotic fluid. For the Mayans they symbolized the vagina: mucho.
- Mums against muchos. I think the big M of McDonalds looks like a mother's tits. Big, fat and round [. . .] (0:22:22–0:23:18)

As the dialogue progresses, they also talk about Christiana's work as a stripper, and it is hinted that FM is troubled by it. He then tries to get close to her in an intimate way, but she rejects him and brings up the subject of her work herself, specifically the gazes she is exposed to, which 'burn'. She has the impression that one man in particular (agent Jaeger), who 'had eyes like a laser', 'wanted to slit [her] open' with his gaze, but somehow she 'made it' and thereby compares herself to an 'energy force' (0:22:22–0:24:29). Although, in this case, FM seems not to take her entirely seriously, she indeed had defeated Jaeger by gazing back, which dazzled him until he could not leave his eyes open any longer (00:18:16–00:19:21).

I suspect it was the intention of *Decoder* to render both Christiana and FM as characters fighting against control, each with different weapons in different fields (visual/peepshow and sonic/H-Burger) that come with different implications. However, in the case of Christiana, the film does not fully succeed in this aspiration. One of its merits is the ambiguity inherent in the main characters, whose relation to each other, as Sargeant point outs, is marked by polarities that 'do not remain static but are repeatedly re-negotiated' (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 199). Though FM is the protagonist of the film and is 'initially identified with sound' and 'further [. . .] with science and technology' (ibid.), in the encounter with Christiana, his heroism is cracked and challenged. She does not question the fact that music is used to control people, but she is annoyed by his approach and the weight he attaches to this matter:

- Oh, once again, the great hero feels misunderstood.
- Look, with this [=tape with Muzak] they have everything under control.
- Ah yes . . . they have all in hand.
- You know what that means?
- Of course.
- Don't you care?
- Don't you notice that this is an old story? This kind of music has been used for a long time already. Even the Gestapo used music to make people shit to death. Do you want to be on the front page? 'Scandal at H-Burger. Street boy reveals mystery of power of music.' It makes me sick . . . 'They have everything under control'.
- But it's true!

- It's true, it's true! You know what? You have no idea! [. . .] You have no idea about music!
- No idea about music?
- Sure, you do have some idea. But you don't go about it properly. I'll buzz off. (00:56:23–00:57:23)

Just as FM is not a shining hero, Jaeger, who is identified with both sound and vision, is not a classic villain. He does not like his job or Muzak, but instead hints at his sympathy for FM. His obsession with Christiana seems to oscillate somewhere between voyeurism and affection, but it is not reciprocated by Christiana, for whom he is nothing but another representative of an obscene society she feels the urge to withdraw from. Christiana, on the other hand, is initially 'identified with sight' and further 'with the magical and organic' (Sargeant [1997] 2008, p. 199). Moreover, she is perfectly aware of technologies and techniques for imposing control but is not convinced that Muzak controls everything. However, in contrast with FM and Jaeger, it is more difficult to define her activities, which is my major point of criticism for the film. Although she is laid out as a fairly independent character, in the end, she does not seem to complete her goals but instead worries about FM, whom she can't reach and who is chased by Jaeger. In this context, her identification with the organic is somewhat problematic, as *Decoder* thereby risks reiterating gender-related dichotomies. The frogs, as the centre of Christiana's obsession, serve among other things to highlight her discomfort with male (sexual) desire, which is in no small part a reaction to her labour as a sex worker. Sex work itself is not rendered pejoratively in the film; rather, the film critiques the society and circumstances it is embedded in. The character of Christiana is in this regard partly informed by the life of Christiane Felscherinow, who, due to addiction, was forced into child prostitution as a minor, and by the musician and performance artist Cosey Fanni Tutti (a founding member of *Throbbing Gristle*), who caused a massive scandal by exhibiting material from her appearances in pornographic magazines at the ICA in London in 1976 (Ford 1999, chp. 6). Just as Cosey Fanni Tutti undermined the male gaze by becoming in the context of the exhibition 'both subject and object, artist and model, viewer and viewed' (pp. 6.25–6.26), Christiana defeats the male gaze by gazing back. However, her urge to withdraw also indicates the draining effect the work has on her. She thus seeks to recharge at home surrounded by her frogs, which, according to her research, are associated with aspects of femininity.

The intersection of frogs and femininity is not limited to fertility alone but also encompasses confusion, 'powerful trouble' and death, as Christiana's idea of death frogs and notably her recitation of the (bearded) Weird Sisters' lines in FM's dream suggest. There is a strange parallel between the preparation of the charmed brew—which contains 'Eye of newt/and toe of frog' and, though not cited, a venom obtained from a toad (Shakespeare [1606] 2009, p. 100)—performed by the Weird Sisters (or, respectively, by Christiana) and FM's tape experiments, in which he is imprinting his tape with 'trouble-causing' information, including, as the final ingredient, the death cries of the frog. However, it remains unclear whether the dream gave him the idea of squeezing the frog to death or whether his act was due to rage arising from not making progress, arguing with Christiana and feeling jealous of the frogs (which is indicated in a remark in the script in Maeck and Hartmann 1984, p. 55). Furthermore, it is impossible to say to what extent Christiana consciously contributed to the creation of this tape. Did she send him the dream with her magical abilities, and was it her actual intention to bring him the frog, which then freed itself from the bag? Or did everything just happen by coincidence, which, according to Burroughs does not exist?

Although Christiana does not provide further detail about the death frogs besides mentioning that she might train them to be assassin frogs, there are some possible reverberations from this image. Maeck refers to the battle of the frogs in *La Montaña sagrada* (Jodorowsky 1973), a deeply polarising scene that has (for good reason) been repeatedly criticised for harming animals (e.g., Klein 1974) and that depicts the conquest of Mexico as a street performance using chameleons dressed as Aztecs and toads as Conquistadores

(00:08:26–00:12:23). What is interesting about this scene is that it indirectly draws attention to the introduction of non-native animals in the course of colonialism, which affected local ecological systems.¹⁵ At the same time, importing non-native animals is one of the guerrilla tactics suggested by Burroughs in *The Revised Boy Scout Manual*. Whereas, in the 2018 edition, his suggestions about importing animals, spreading viruses and using infrasound (in addition to ‘Deadly Orgone Radiation’) are all subordinated under the heading ‘Chemical and biological weapons’ (Burroughs [1970] 2018, pp. 8–11), in the excerpt published in 1982 in *RE/Search*, each of these points is assigned a separate heading—‘Chemical and biological weapons’, ‘Biologic Warfare Proper’ and ‘Infrasound’ (Vale 1982, pp. 6–7). When looking at these two pages of the excerpt, in which the text is arranged in three columns and the headings stand out in their juxtaposition, one realises the extent of the influence this text had on *Decoder*, as the headings echo the film’s (underlying) programme in almost exact order. Burroughs does not mention frogs but does refer to a variety of other animals (and plants), including invasive species such as the walleyed pike and the black bass, endangered animals such as lemurs and flying foxes and animals that are considered potentially dangerous for humans such as bushmasters, leopards and tigers, as well as freshwater sharks, piranhas, desert cobras, rattlers, Gila monsters, tiger snakes and wolverines. The idea of using animals in the context of guerrilla tactics/warfare is not as absurd as it seems and not just something Burroughs spontaneously came up with, as the article *Ecologies of Empire: On the New Uses of the Honeybee* by Jake Kosek (2010) shows. There is a long tradition of using bees for military purposes, dating back to ‘antiquity, when hives were dropped on invading armies or launched into fortified tunnels, caves, forts, and bases’ (p. 654). Bees were further deployed in the torture of Viet Cong soldiers or, more recently, of ‘U. S. detainee Abu Zubaydah’ (p. 655), and current military research focuses on their use as ‘bio-monitors’ for all kinds of toxic materials’ (p. 656) and landmines (p. 657). Bees and other insects have also informed military strategy and tactics, notably through models of swarming that have been applied to the use of drones (pp. 663–69). The concepts of death frogs, sound viruses and infrasound are not merely references to the inserts of war scenes displayed on screens mentioned earlier—at their core, these are tactics and techniques of control inspired by military research and innovations for which Burroughs showed a great interest.

5. ‘I’m Not the Virus, but Sound Can Be One’

Although one might have the impression that the Burroughsian virus is primarily about revolutionary resistance, it is instead more deeply related to the issue of control. Viruses invade the human body, take control on a cellular level and program/condition their host in order to replicate and spread. Burroughs’ analogy of a ‘word virus’ thus draws attention to language as an instrument of control. Words invade our bodies right from the beginning of our lives; they are in our heads, they constitute our world and our perception of reality and they are replicated and spread by us (Lydenberg 1992; Kahn 1999, chp. 11). We cannot remain silent because we are locked in, but we can attempt to change the codes by which language is structured (Burroughs [1970] 2001, pp. 53–56). This is where the cut-up comes in, which is, first of all, a tool of deconditioning (Burroughs and Odier [1969] 1989, pp. 160–70) that allows us to ‘nullify associational lines’ (Burroughs [1970] 2001, p. 21) but also a tool that has the capacity to impose associations. When Burroughs in *The Electronic Revolution* ponders creating viruses with tapes, he aims to explore the possibility of the revolutionary appropriation of control techniques enabled and utilised by mass media. In *Decoder*, it is sound that is being examined as an instrument of control and revolutionary appropriation.

¹⁵ The classification of species as ‘invasive’, ‘native’, ‘non-native’ and ‘alien’ is not unproblematic, as, among other things, it threatens the ‘right to existence’ of animals. For instance, cane toads in Australia, having been introduced from South America, are on ‘the government’s Feral Animals control list’ and are hunted by groups of ‘Toad Busters’, who ‘catch toads in car headlights and crush them with heavy vehicles’, an activity that is often ‘accompanied by drinking sprees’ (Robin 2017, p. 51).

At H-Burger, FM comes to realise that the background music affects his perception of the surroundings—people look grotesquely happy and contented, but when he closes his ears, suddenly they make quite the opposite impression (00:31:15–00:33:59).¹⁶ Influenced by a dream in which the old man advises him to ‘start by zero preconceptions’ and hands him a dismantled tape recorder (00:37:34–00:39:31), he begins to distort and scramble a recording he had made of the music played at H-Burger. Little by little, a voice can be discerned saying something like ‘Feel good!’ (00:39:32–00:43:22).¹⁷ Subsequently, FM goes for a walk searching for sound material that has the potential to evoke the opposite effect. Attracted by strange noises, he enters a vacant building where the pirates are squatting. He witnesses a ritual in which they hammer rhythmically with different items against the floor, the wall and metal plates—which scenically contrasts the H-Burger staff training. When he starts recording, a pirate attacks him and drags him away. After being exposed to a dream machine, he is brought to the high priest, who instructs his followers to value and obtain information (‘to rob the bank’). The pirate who has brought FM in announces that FM was recording. The high priest then declares (in an ambiguous manner), ‘We don’t like infections, parasites or viruses. We don’t want that kind of person in here’, whereupon FM replies, ‘I’m not the virus, but sound can be one. [. . .] Sound is coded and you got the keys.’ FM is allowed to keep the recording (00:45:23–00:52:03). In the following scene, FM and the pirates riot at H-Burger and are pushed away by a noise tape the manager plays (which FM also seems to record). After the argument with Christiana, he squeezes the frog, records its death cries and mixes them with the distorted material recorded at H-Burger and the recorded sound performance of the pirates. The result is a noise/infrasound tape that makes him feel sick and vomit.

My suggestion is that FM’s sound operation is not only informed by Burroughs’ idea of using infrasound or creating a tape that could cause illness but also by the concept of ‘the virus mechanism’ laid out in the introductory essay ‘Feedback from Watergate to the Garden of Eden’ in *The Electronic Revolution* (pp. 5–17). Simply put, a virus can be compared to a program that contains information regarding first the ‘perspective host’, second ‘the means by which a virus gains access to the host’ and third ‘the effect produced in the host’ (p. 10). In a subsequent section, which is also reprinted in the *Decoder Handbuch* (Maeck and Hartmann 1984, pp. 15–16), Burroughs offers examples of the way a virus could be produced by three tape recorders, each obtaining a different strain of information. In one example, the target is a politician, in another, The Moka Bar. In the case of the politician, tape recorder 1 obtains recordings of his speeches (host), tape recorder 2 obtains recordings of his sex life (access) and tape recorder 3 captures voices expressing indignation (the effect). In the case of The Moka Bar, tape recorder 1 records the sounds at the bar (host), tape recorder 2 obtains recordings of the surrounding neighbourhood (access) and tape recorder 3 records the act of playing these sounds back (the effect). According to Burroughs, the acts of recording the target and of playing back the recordings are actually enough, and everything else is just refinement because the recording itself is access—it is a piece of the target obtained by recording that ‘becomes autonomous and out of their control’ (p. 16). The act of playing back, abstractly speaking, affects the target: ‘By playing back my recordings to the Moka Bar when I want and with any changes I wish to make on the recordings I become God for this local. I effect them. They cannot effect me’ (ibid.). In his essay ‘On Coincidence’, Burroughs defines magic as ‘the assertion of will, the assumption that nothing happens in this universe [. . .] unless some entity wills it to happen’ (Burroughs [1985] 1993, p. 101). The power attributed to the act of playing back is thus located somewhere between technology and magic. In *Decoder*, H-Burger takes the place of The Moka Bar, although FM’s tape operation exceeds the simple act of recording and playing back. His recording of the music played at H-Burger could be considered tape recorder 1 and thus contains information about the host. Tape recorder 2 might hold the

¹⁶ The scene is a direct reference to the essay ‘The Invisible Generation’, which is introduced with the assertion that ‘what we see is determined to a large extent by what we hear’ (Burroughs and Odier [1969] 1989, pp. 160–70).

¹⁷ The scene refers to Burroughs’ thoughts on the transmission of subliminal messages by scrambling (Burroughs [1970] 2001, pp. 23–41).

recording of the sound ritual performed by the pirates and thus could be interpreted as gaining access by hammering into the host. Tape recorder 3 contains the death cries of the frog, which portray the effect he wishes to create, the effect of making people feel the opposite of 'feeling good'. The tape, which is then spread in various burger joints, inspires large-scale riots. The reasons for these demonstrations are not explained in more detail in the film, but possibly the attack on and paralysation of Muzak, which blurs the perception of reality, has led people to recognise that the social conditions under which they exist and the world they inhabit are forbidding and toxic.

The *Decoder Handbuch* offers more information, especially an essay contributed by Genesis P-Orridge about Muzak, in which the various potential uses and effects of sound waves, and notably frequency, are addressed. According to this essay (which refers to an internal paper of the *Muzak Corporation*), Muzak attempts to conceal stress and inspire maximum productivity with minimum dissatisfaction. Muzak is also used to cover up noise pollution (in heavy industry, light industry, open plan offices, banks, etc.), to disguise the isolation of some working environments (such as radar stations) and to meet the general demand for cheerful and productive workers and employees. Based on hypotheses about human biorhythms, it was broadcasted in 15 min blocks, during which the 'tempo, rhythm, instrumentation and volume' were gradually increased, followed by 15 min of silence, and was thought to stimulate metabolism, respiration, blood pressure and the nervous system. The idea of anti-Muzak, then, in a way, follows an opposite program: the noise of the industrial soundscape, instead of being concealed, is used deliberately to achieve a liberating effect. By causing an ecstatic effect without the use of drugs, anti-Muzak could decondition social constraints on thought and bodily behaviour (pp. 3–8). Though further explanations remain rather vague, sometimes contradictory and overly optimistic, the essay and also *Decoder* shed light on sound waves as a further invisible agent, in addition to toxins, microbes and viruses, that human bodies are exposed to and affected by in various ways ranging from harming to beneficial.

6. Conclusions

Decoder, which leaves much room for interpretation, is by no means a film one would easily associate with 'nature' or labels such as 'green' or 'environmental'. It deals primarily with the subject of control—humans (companies and perhaps the state) use information technology (Muzak) to control other humans in order to maintain the status quo of a capitalist society (which is based on the exploitation of human labour and natural resources). Moreover, FM's aspirations to fight 'Muzak' are not driven by noticeable environmental concerns. In addition, with some exceptions (the landfill scene and the war footage scenes), *Decoder* does not draw on imagery or rhetoric related to 'the pastoral', 'wilderness' or 'apocalypse', which are the most commonly employed tropes in environmental discourse (Garrard 2004). On the other hand, *Decoder* does not entirely omit signs and images that represent or refer to 'nature' and non-human life. The landfill highlights the fact of environmental pollution and points to the underbelly of consumer capitalism, which is rendered invisible in everyday life, as suggested in the film by Muzak's power to blur the perception of reality. FM's efforts to fight Muzak might also, therefore, include regard for the environment as well as other topics. Christiana's obsession with frogs and her attempt to replicate the natural habitat of her frogs in her flat does hint at a longing for an idyllic natural sanctuary. In addition, the coin-operated horses and the illuminated signs (the elephant and 'Safari'), although placed in a context that revolves somewhat around fantasy, pleasure and fetish, refer to a sense of lack regarding the organic. However, the representations of 'nature' employed in *Decoder* are introduced to point to the human, rather than the non-human sphere. The landfill establishes the connection between waste (junk), junk food and heroin (junk) in order to communicate the causal link between addiction and society, by whose conditions addiction is created, and to highlight the damaging effects that accompany addiction. The frogs, on the other hand, refer to a range of subjects depending on the context: remedy, magic, poison, femininity, animals as weapons, anger

and death. Thus, they occupy a blank position that is filled with different meanings and associations throughout the course of the film—similar to the concept of ‘nature’, which has been charged with many different and also contradictory meanings and associations throughout history. The frogs are, first of all, the object of obsession of Christiana, who herself struggles with being the object of obsession of others. Through her obsession with the frogs, she expresses her rejection of male (sexual) desire. The frogs then become the object of FM’s annoyance, jealousy and anger. Later, they become a magic ingredient, which is first introduced in Christiana’s recitation of the Weird Sisters’ lines and then applied by FM, who squeezes the frog to death and records its death cries (Thus, ‘Muzak for Frogs’—the title of the first track of the *Decoder* soundtrack—is deeply cynical). At the level of the virus or the microbes, representation works differently: one has to deduce their invisible presence through ‘symptoms’. The high priest provides a crucial hint that enables FM’s sound operation to be read as the creation of a sound virus and, moreover, evokes a sensitivity towards the presence of viruses and microbes, which is first brought into play by the H-Burger manager during the staff training. Although viruses in *Decoder* are associated with the idea of resistance, in the end, it is not ‘nature’ that resists human activity but a group of humans who resist capitalist society through the production of an (artificial) imitation of a virus for which an animal was sacrificed. On the other hand, *Decoder* contests perceptions of ‘nature’ that evolved in the context of industrialism, in which ‘nature’ has become something that is ‘out there’ while humans have become separate and independent. Instead, the film directs attention to non-human matters within, ranging from microbes and toxins to soundwaves, which affect the human body in various ways. Moreover, the film draws attention to the fact that many people cannot simply leave the city for recreational reasons but have to make do with what it offers; therefore, in regard of how people within the urban sphere might possibly relate to ‘nature’, *Decoder* is more realist than actually dystopic. The absence of pastoral imagery in this film may also be due to a certain degree of suspicion with regard to imagery that has a soothing effect, which would indicate an equation of pastoral imagery with Muzak, and thus the assumption that the comfort this imagery creates is more likely to prevent profound change. However, this possibility requires more in-depth examination, including the study of various other material related to the ‘Industrial Culture’. Furthermore, it could be insightful to undertake green readings of films that were shot in West Berlin after the wall was erected (*Decoder* was shot in Hamburg, West Berlin and London), similar to *Wings of Desire* (Wenders 1987), *Taxi zum Klo* (Ripploh 1981) or *Christiane F.* (Edel 1981), and also of other experimental films that were inspired by the writings of William S. Burroughs. I am thinking, in particular, of the film *The Wild Boys* (Mandico 2017), in which the wild and exotic island on which they are stranded has a profound and altering effect on the protagonists and their bodies.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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