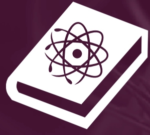
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Special Issue Reprint

Thinking Cinema

With Plants

Edited by
Sarah Cooper

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Thinking Cinema—With Plants

Thinking Cinema—With Plants

Editor

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Editorial

Introduction: Thinking Cinema—With Plants

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There is a moment in Peter Brosens and Jessica Woodworth's *Khadak* (2006) when the image of a tree is rotated 180 degrees. The branches that are silhouetted against the crisp blue sky gradually shift round to the bottom of the screen, pointing downwards as the trunk rises into the air, the mesh of branches now resembling a mesh of roots even though they remain suspended rather than grounded. Plant life, or more particularly, the life of this tree, is not the main focus of this eco-crisis film set in Mongolia, but from the outset it is recognized as an important part of a network of relationships connecting soil to sky, human to nonhuman, and materiality to the spiritual vitality of Shamanism. Usually shown the right way up, the image of a single tree in an expansive frozen landscape appears several times throughout the film. Bagi (Batzul Khayankhyarvaa), the main protagonist, has a special relationship with it, as he does with animals and the land, embracing the trunk and placing his ear against it to listen to the life force that courses through it and connects it to other things. It also features in the foreground of shots that mark a transition from traditional to enforced newer ways of life, such as from travel by horse to motor vehicle. And in the final shot of the film, after Bagi's departure, a close-up of the tree's bark shows a steady flow of water running down its trunk, a possible sign of sentience and of mourning for the multiple losses caused by rapid industrialization—the needless mass slaughter of animals, the mining of the land, and the death of people. The rotation of this tree in the midst of a world that metaphorically has been turned upside down is a literal turning point: it marks a change in vision and the emergence of critical thinking as momentum gathers for a revolution. In keeping with the image of this upside-down tree, this Special Issue explores relations between cinema and plant life to show how the conjunction of film and the vegetal can turn thinking about thinking on its head.

The topic of this Special Issue was initially inspired by contemporary philosophical engagements with two distinct disciplines: film studies and plant studies. In film studies, from the work of Stanley Cavell to that of Gilles Deleuze [1–3], and from analytical to continental philosophy, the question not only of how filmmakers think through film but how film itself thinks galvanized a major area of enquiry in the multi-faceted sub-discipline of film philosophy [4,5].[1] Within plant studies, and in keeping with research in plant science that has explored plant intelligence and sentience in recent years [6–11], the question of whether, and if so how, plants think has prompted much debate, with philosopher Michael Marder devoting one major study specifically to what he terms "plant-thinking" [12]. Whereas the aims of attending to film thinking and plant-thinking are, at first glance, completely unrelated and specific to their respective fields, these divergent areas of inquiry nonetheless share a desire to think about their components—philosophy and film, and plants in relation to the capacities of other life forms—on a par with one another and thus non-hierarchically, while still recognizing their differences. It is with such a lateral impulse in mind that this Special Issue invited its contributors to think across the realms of film and plant studies, encouraging a variety of responses to the question of how we—scholars, readers, spectators—might go about "thinking cinema—with plants", and attending to how filmmakers and films are already doing this. The Special Issue brings together film scholars working on the vegetal from a range of different methodological positions: from the historical and archival through film theory and philosophy to film practice. Drawing

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upon plant life and plant scholarship to pose innovative questions within film studies, and placing film, film theory, and philosophy in dialogue with work in plant studies, this Special Issue responds to the call from *Philosophies* to cross borders between different paradigms of intellectual investigation in the search for new modes of inquiry.

As Teresa Castro, Perig Pitrou, and Marie Rebecchi point out in an edited volume on animist cinema and the vegetal, vegetal life has captured the public as well as academic imagination in recent years and has generated a "vegetal turn" [13] (p. 7). The implications of this turn for work in film studies in particular are just beginning to be explored, and this is where this Special Issue seeks to make an intervention.[2] The vegetal turn both follows on from and intersects with other such shifts within the era of the so-called Anthropocene, chiming with the decentring of the human and care for the nonhuman that Richard Grusin points to as part of the nonhuman turn [14]. But, it places emphasis on what Jeffrey T. Nealon has termed the liminal place of plants within the wider biopolitical focus on "life" in humanities theory today, which has devoted more attention to animals to date [15] (unpaginated e-book preface, loc. 151). In contrast, the burgeoning field of critical plant studies has brought together philosophy and plant science with a range of work in the arts and humanities over the past decade, in order to make the hitherto marginal vegetal central [16–19].[3] As Teresa Castro notes in her signal article "The Mediated Plant", the post-natural plants that appear through technologies such as film are our "queer kin", which urge us forward in what she, citing philosopher and eco-feminist Val Plumwood, affirms as an urgent "struggle to think differently" [20]. Such interest in plants in film and beyond relates to other works in film scholarship and criticism [21–23],[4] as well as to broader thinking in the environmental humanities that shows how intertwined plants are with other life forms, and how our thinking needs to work collaboratively with them in order to effect change.

When Donna Haraway declares "We must think!", for example, she is continuing the thread of a feminist collective thinking-with, generating a call to action in the service of developing further "tentacular" ways of thinking that challenge human exceptionalism [24]. Haraway includes the "tendrilled ones" with myriad other critters among the tentacular who can tell the story of the Chthulucene, in which human beings are not the only important actors. Plants are therefore vital participants in the development of such alternative ways of thinking, and a focus on plants need not be at the expense of thinking with other creatures of all kinds, human and nonhuman, biota and abiota. Furthermore, within critical plant studies, the notion that plants might serve as the model for all animate life, rather than being at the bottom of a hierarchy of which the apex is the human, is part of the radical botanical thinking pursued by Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari, which includes film among the other arts in developing such radical thought [25]. Meeker and Szabari draw upon the distinct theoretical responses of Nealon and Marder to the specificity of plant life and its relation to philosophy. In *Plant-Thinking*, Marder interrogates the history of western metaphysics in order to challenge the consignment of plants to the margin of the margin in this philosophical tradition and to articulate a conception of "plant-thinking", which is allied with the more prominent place plants occupy in contemporary western philosophy as well as non-western and feminist thinking [12] (pp. 1–6). Marder defines plant-thinking as follows, encapsulating at once:

> (1) the non-cognitive, non-ideational, and non-imagistic mode of thinking *proper to* plants (what I later call "thinking without the head"); (2) the human thinking *about* plants; (3) how human thinking is, to some extent, de-humanized and rendered plant-like, altered by its encounter with the vegetal world; and finally, (4) the ongoing symbiotic relation between this transfigured thinking and existence of plants [12] (p. 10).

Engaging critically with Marder's work, Nealon argues that he preserves a life-as-hidden-secret model with an anthropomorphic identity logic that he extends to plants and that, for Marder, plants become the new animals [15] (p. 12). The specificity of Marder's

first point in his definition of plant-thinking seems distinct, however, from the zoomorphic and anthropomorphic tendency. While Marder has himself been critical of the ways in which film has approached plant life through time-lapse cinematography, saying that it replicates the imposition of an alien frame of reference upon them [26], his work has been taken up productively by film scholars who have begun to conceive of how cinema might help secure ways of "existing alongside, not above, plants", as film scholar Chris Dymond puts it [27]. Following on from this, several of the contributors to this Special Issue engage with Marder's multi-faceted conception of plant-thinking in a filmic context as one among many theoretical and philosophical speculative prompts towards thinking otherwise.

Contributors to this Special Issue take up the titular concern, understanding "thinking" in abstract and concrete terms as well as in dialogue with a wide selection of philosophical and theoretical work that ranges from vegetal philosophy and existentialism, through feminist, transgender, and critical race studies, to the thinking that underpins the American conservation movement, Saugeen First Nations epistemologies and cosmologies, Indigenous thinking from the Amazon and beyond, and the Māori world view. In Teresa Castro's piece, for example, "thinking with" concerns a concrete experiment in terms of filming. As opposed to "thinking about", "thinking with" is an invitation to "do your thinking" otherwise through film and with your entire body, not just with your brain, an idea that Castro shows the filming process demonstrates well and that works in collaboration with the plants filmed. In Castro's analysis, such thinking is associated first and foremost with the filmmaker in relation to their plant subjects, but it also extends to the process of writing about these films, and indeed, to reading this writing as well as watching the films. The different ways in which the scholars who contributed to this Special Issue think cinema with plants is indebted implicitly and explicitly to not only how the films but also their plant subjects can be understood as thinking entities. The contributions also gesture towards the other unforeseeable connections that future readers and viewers will make in their own encounters with these films as well as this scholarship, which, to return to the rotated tree of *Khadak*, ally themselves with plants not only to turn thinking about thinking on its head, but also to ask what and where the "head" is in this context.

As Ngāpuhi artist Nova Paul and scholar Tessa Laird recognize in their contribution, which focuses on the intricate relationship between Paul's experimental film practice and trees, Māori have long known that the "head" of the tree is its root system, not the leafy canopy. For Paul and Laird, film thinks, but so too do trees. The Darwinian notion of a "root-brain" has been revisited in contemporary plant science [7], as has the contention of plants "thinking without brains" [9]. As Paco Calvo notes, the roots of plants are intimately entwined with fungi, another vital kingdom of organisms, and he uses this interdependency to ask: "If plants can have such an interchange with other plants and other species, would it not be less of a stretch of the imagination to think that plants might be able to communicate within their own bodies, in a complex way that might be akin to 'thinking'?" [9] (p. 39). Myriad trees, flowers, fruits, vegetables, and ruderals feature in this Special Issue's filmic explorations as just such complexly functioning entities entwined in networks that extend ever outwards to connect soil and sky. Yet, the plant severed from its initial connections—the cut flower, for example—is as prevalent in film as the wild ones or the cultivated ones that grow in gardens. And the pot plant as well as the artificial flower are just as pertinent when considering the relationship between cinema and plants, as the articles by Georgina Evans and Sarah Cooper in this Special Issue attest. From experimental filmmaking to a Netflix production, and across varied genres, from natural history film to arthouse cinema, and from a Hollywood studio comedy of the 1950s to a longform streaming television series, contributors have explored thinking with and without the head from cinema's moment of inception.

As scholarship on early film has demonstrated, and as Colin Williamson's article in this Special Issue also shows, film has long served to scrutinize plant life, making use of microcinematography and time-lapse technology [28–31]. Plants and film have been inextricably linked with each other since the emergence of technologies in the nineteenth

century that led to the birth of cinema. While nonhuman animals were more obvious sources of interest for early cinematographic studies of movement, plants served such a purpose too, provoking even greater wonderment for scientists and lay observers alike as their habitually imperceptible movements were made visible. Flowers, in particular, were a focal point not only for the beauty of their unfurling, but also due to the fact that they permitted technical and aesthetic investigations of cinema itself. Williamson returns us fittingly to this early moment of cinema through his archival research into the American nature filmmaker Arthur Pillsbury. Pillsbury's pioneering time-lapse work with plant life shaped attitudes to nature in the U.S. context while also permitting the filmmaker to think through the techno-scientific potential of cinema at the beginning of the twentieth century. Historicizing and contextualizing the distinctiveness of Pillsbury's time-lapse engagements with plants, Williamson encourages us to think again about the time-lapse footage that surrounds us today, cautioning against ahistorical readings of its ubiquity from early cinema through to the present.

Not all early interest in plants was directed by the filmmaker's choice of them as subjects, however. While the makers of some of the earliest vegetal nonfiction films were as interested in using film to study previously unnoticed aspects of vegetal life as they were in presenting them to a mainstream public as entertainment, some films drew inadvertent attention to plants quite apart from their explicit subject. As the contributions to this Special Issue from Evans, Castro, Paul and Laird, as well as from Anat Pick and Chris Dymond remind us, the Lumière brothers' *Repas de bébé/The Baby's Meal* (1895), filmed by Louis and showing Auguste and his wife Marguerite feeding their daughter Andrée, has become more noteworthy for the movement of the leaves in the background of the shot than the principal subject of the film. The location of plants in the background or on the margins of cinematic shots usually contributes to their being taken for granted or ignored—a filmic manifestation of the liminal philosophical position that plant theorists have identified. Such side-lining and backgrounding are also instrumental in continuing what biologists James Wandersee and Elisabeth Schussler have termed "plant blindness" [32]. In the case of the Lumière brothers' film, though, attention to what the filmmakers included in the background has opened up other ways of thinking about and seeing both cinema and plants. As Pick has observed elsewhere, referring to *Repas de bébé* among other films, such images of plants are constitutive of a cinema of "letting be", which she characterizes as nonviolent and non-possessive. *Repas de bébé* may place emphasis on eating, but the relation to the leaves in the background leads Pick to speak of it as an example of what she terms "vegan cinema" due to its non-devouring gaze [33].

In contrast, and in other forms of filmmaking ever since these early years, plants have sometimes had starring roles as very explicit vegetal embodiments of a devouring rather than non-devouring gaze. When plants have formed the subject of horror films, for example, they have often been sources of fear precisely because they could eat us. Among the more socially, historically, and culturally specific anxieties that scenarios in plant horror may encapsulate (see, for example, film historian Andrew Howe's work [34] for discussion of this), there is a more widespread confrontation with mortality at stake here in the foreknowledge that they have of our own demise.[5] As is apparent in plant horror scholar Dawn Keetley's observation on how human mortality involves a turn from flesh to food [35] (p. 1), many a plant horror fiction story or film simply acknowledges and hyperbolizes the fact that we will all one day become sustenance for plants. Plant horror has been a prominent area of study when thinking about plants in literature and film, as Georgina Evans notes in her contribution to this Special Issue, taking up an interest in plant life that links to early film and horror. Mindful of the fact that the plant that is out of place is often a cause for fear in horror or is denigrated as a weed, Evans turns to a quite different way of thinking about the out-of-place plant. Focusing on the philodendron in the 20th Century Fox studio comedy *Desk Set* (1957), she discusses the pot plant, directing attention to the frequently overlooked category of the houseplant in work on the vegetal. The pot plant—a luscious philodendron in Bunny's (Katharine Hepburn) high-rise office—is

aligned with Bunny's organic working and thinking styles, which stand in opposition to computational thinking. The philodendron is posited by Evans as excessive and is understood to reframe figure and ground in a manner that links the philodendron to the explicit presence of the plants of early film and horror. Evans argues that *Desk Set* shows a vegetal landscape that reveals the commonplace instrumentalizing of plants in modernity, but in which Bunny's philodendron emerges as an exception, not in terms of the "out of placeness" that denotes invasion or horror, but which prompts a need for thinking otherwise, oriented towards care and responsibility.

The alignment between Bunny's thinking and her burgeoning pot plant, in contrast to computational thinking, gestures suggestively beyond the philodendron's potted existence towards the ways in which plants can offer alternative, and more ethical, models of networked thinking to those based on the model of computer networks. Enmeshment in questions of care and responsibility emphasizes the ethics of attentiveness to plant life when thinking with the vegetal in filmic contexts, and stretches beyond care for the individual plant, potted or otherwise. The ethical stakes of bringing plants and film together are high, however, for other reasons. This is not only because film technologies can reinsert the human at the heart of the encounter with plants (cf. Marder's objection to time-lapse distortion of the time it takes plants ordinarily to move and grow, bringing them up to the speed of human perception [26]), but is also because of the pollutant place of cinema within capitalist and extractive regimes, which have had, and continue to have, such a decimating effect on the planet from the celluloid to the digital era of film and streaming media. While the contributors to this Special Issue are interested in how film might enable rather than disenable ethical relations with the plant world, all are conscious of the role film has played and continues to play within an epoque of anthropogenic destructiveness.

Even prior to the earliest encounters between plants and film, plants have unconsciously, and for millennia, harboured within the structure of their cell walls their future existence as film. Cellulose, vital to our green kin, would eventually, via collodion and then celluloid, feed the photographic and film industries. This positions film within a problematic history of extractive relationships with organic substances that characterizes the ongoing use and abuse of natural resources. More broadly, the extractions of minerals, metals, and plant-based substances from the earth that have enabled the film industries to thrive link up with pernicious extractions of other kinds. William Brown's article in this Special Issue on Barry Jenkins's 2021 adaptation of Colson Whitehead's 2016 novel *The Underground Railroad* centres on the role played by okra in this work and its relation to the soil and the mycorrhizal connections that sustain it. An extractive logic transplanted this plant as well as Africans who endured the Middle Passage to the New World slave plantations, but the plant, similar to the people, survive, according to Brown's argument, by going through "black holes". Bringing together critical race studies with critical plant studies, Brown argues that it is not possible to think or philosophize the plant or the medium of film (or by extension, television or streaming media) without philosophizing race. Brown holds that okra represents an otherwise lost African past in *The Underground Railroad*, both for the protagonist Cora (Thuso Mbedu) and for the show as a whole. *The Underground Railroad* serves here to bring together plants and plantations, soil and wormholes, along with Blackness and black holes, which Brown gathers together critically and creatively under the umbrella term "black (w)hole foods".

An implicit critique of extractive activity informs other articles in this Special Issue, but there is a strong sense in which film's relation to the vegetal in this regard does not necessarily culminate in an ecological, ethical, or political impasse in all contexts, as the contributions from Paul and Laird, Patrícia Vieira, and Pick and Dymond lay bare, all of which draw upon different kinds of Indigenous thinking with film. Mindful of what film scholar Nadia Bozak aptly terms our "cinematic footprint" [36], these contributors interrogate, nonetheless, the role that film can play more positively in spite of its complicity with extraction and other damaging practices. Vieira's contribution focuses on animism and Indigenous Amazonian filmmaking, which derives from a region in which vegetal

beings have great importance and which is grounded in the everyday lived experience with flora. Such filmmaking foregrounds a strong affinity between the human communities and plants with which they share their existence. Vieira responds to the challenge of "thinking cinema—with plants" by considering persons as plants, in a reversal of plant scholar Matthew Hall's formulation in his book-length study of plants as persons [37]. She reflects on both the ontological and epistemological consequences of this inversion in the human approach to vegetal life. Cautioning against a Romanticized view of what an Indigenous cinematic vision might express, Vieira argues that Indigenous filmmakers, trained in a medium developed at the heart of western modernity, nonetheless navigate cinematic conventions to bring new content and forms of seeing into being. The resultant film that she discusses in detail is an animistic phytofilm about plant-persons and their interactions with humans.

Following on from this productive vision, Pick and Dymond's contribution demonstrates how filmic encounters with plants can see regeneration and sustainability encouraged rather than curtailed by ethical practices of growing, harvesting, and eating. Pick and Dymond think cinema through its vegetal entanglements by considering work by Indigenous artist-filmmakers who encounter plants not as resources to be plundered, but as inspirational instructors whose own agential inputs are welcomed into the filmmaking process. In their first case study from the Saugeen First Nation community filmmaking project, for example, they show how the flower processing of film serves as a sustainable alternative to harsher chemicals. The filmmakers ask permission from the plants before picking and only ever take less than a quarter of the plant so that it continues to flourish. Pick and Dymond point to the extractive colonialist roots of film, from celluloid through to digital culture, defining their alternative conception of "permacinema" against this. Focusing on films made by Indigenous artists informed by Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies, they situate permacinema in a wider project of decolonization and rewilding.

For Pick and Dymond, "[i]f film thinks, it lives, and whatever lives grows". Plant growth is distinguished sharply from economic growth models that are the stock-in-trade of capitalist extraction, and is aligned alternatively with what Pick and Dymond describe as the politics, ethics, and aesthetics of degrowth. Developing these profound ecological reflections based on the relation between plants and film, as well as expanding the Deleuzian notion of the filmmaker who thinks in images rather than concepts, Nova Paul's own experimental films are, as she and Tessa Laird outline in their article, co-produced with trees. Like Pick and Dymond's article, Paul and Laird's is co-written, and they speak of the braided voice as emblematic of a kind of thinking that is not that of a singular individual entity, pre-empting their move beyond consideration of plants in individualistic terms. Exploring the technological and the ecological, as these are incarnated by trees and not just film, Paul and Laird ask how trees think through Paul's films, which are made with kaupapa Māori values. Their article shows how the films are not so much *about* trees but *by* trees. Highlighting how Paul's films are made without harsh chemicals (cf. the Indigenous filmmaking practices in Pick and Dymond's study), Paul and Laird detail how a chlorophyl developer is used to make, rather than take, images, which reveal the "mauri" (life force) of the trees. Paul and Laird note that recent scholarship on plant intelligence has recognized that trees think, but tends to position trees as independent scholars. Their own work is geared towards acknowledging the whole enmeshed forest, beginning with the undergrowth and the mycorrhizal web of relations. Furthermore, their filmic tree thinking unseats Deleuze and Félix Guattari's upright image of arborescence, recognizing a positive genealogy of kinship between the human and the more-than-human, from trees to film, to understand the arboreal in terms of myriad nodes within underground networks. The cinematic "thinking-with" the arboreal that emerges through Paul's films shows how Indigenous living and thinking have long known that trees provide the template for thinking and being, and that all creatures are dependent on their wisdom.

The spirit of what (pl)anthropologist Natasha Myers has termed the "Planthroposcene" is evident across these and other articles in this Special Issue, which seek alternative path-

ways through the ruins of the Anthropocene towards different futures in which humans cooperate and collaborate with plants as well as the other life forms they sustain. Myers's neologism envisages plants as our ideal companions in the creation of what might come next. Myers writes: "The Planthroposcene does not name a time-bound era but an aspirational episteme marked by a profound acknowledgement of the joint and uncertain futures of plants and peoples, and a profound commitment to collaboration" [38] (p. 126). Elsewhere, and indebted to the scholarship of biologist Lynn Margulis whose work on symbiosis emphasizes histories of involvement and entwinement with forms of life and beings beyond the human, Myers and historian Carla Hustak foreground "involutionary" rather than combative and competitive evolutionary developmental relations [39]. Involution is a matter of co-evolution, which means getting involved in each other's lives. For Myers, the Planthroposcene "is a call to change the terms of encounter, to make allies with these green beings" [38] (p. 127). Myers has herself collaborated with filmmaker Ayelen Liberona to think through film in order to consider such plant-human involvement and allegiance [40], and other film-focused collectives have also focused on rethinking the terms of encounters with plants [41].[6] These collaborations and encounters mean making allies of the less showy and frequently denigrated green beings of the plant world, as well as those more spectacular plants that otherwise command our attention and stimulate our desire for them. In this Special Issue, Teresa Castro turns to the margins of the plant world to centre attention on ruderals and plant-like lichens—which she terms "strange, queer, and turbulent creatures"—to explore just such collaborative and synergistic bonds with them in an era of eco-crisis.

Often referred to as weeds—those plants that, as nature writer Richard Mabey suggests, we ignore at our peril since "they may be holding the bruised parts of the planet from falling apart" [42] (p. 20)—ruderals grow on wastelands or among rubbish. Castro's focus on their place within the films she studies puts forward a compelling case for their centrality in our anthropogenic times. She posits them as exemplary companions to think with in our profoundly ruptured ecological epoque, but also as a way of engaging less anthropocentric histories. Entering into what artist Sarah Cowles terms "ruderal aesthetics" [43], Castro focuses on these plants of the limit—oft politicized and vilified for their resilience to be described as "invasive" or "non-native"—to point towards "the prospect of world-making in the midst of the devastation". Indeed, alert to connections between organisms in such world-making, and referring in particular to the composite organism of the lichen—which can be plant-like but which is not a plant—Castro suggests that thinking with ruderals and lichens challenges the insularity of the individual, pointing towards the kind of symbiosis that Margulis envisioned and others have explored since. Castro considers how film not only bears witness to complex "natureculture" entanglements, but can also be a way of reconfiguring affective ecologies and of reclaiming the involutionary modes of attention of which Myers and Hustak speak.

In her article, Castro refers in passing to the fascinating, albeit ecologically problematic, connection between the film and artificial flower industries—a link which Sarah Cooper picks up on in her contribution. From cellulose through collodion to celluloid, the thread that binds plants to the photographic and film industries also ties them to artificial flower making, which was thriving at the time of the 1920s in the U.S., the setting of the book on which Jane Campion's film, *The Power of the Dog* (2021)—Cooper's main focal point—was based. Collodion and celluloid served the making of artificial flowers, but a more common substance for such flower making, also indebted to cellulose, was paper. Embedding this film in Campion's wider oeuvre, Cooper looks at how the film questions historically entrenched associations between flowers and female sexuality by homing in on the significance of the paper flowers made by Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee) and their entwinement in myriad human power relations in this revisionist Western. Inspired by the plant-thinking articulated by Marder and the flower thinking of Emanuele Coccia, Cooper traces a filmic "thinking without the head" through the film's *mise en scène* on the basis of what happens to one particular paper flower. Indebted throughout to a questioning of

binary thinking, and in tune especially with the work of Roland Barthes and transgender scholar Eliza Steinbock, she shows how this paper flower brings a shimmering, yet fragile, floral aesthetic into being.

Focused as it is on an artificial flower, Cooper's article questions the reproductive circuits that usually lead from flowers to fruits. Following on from this line of questioning, and in separate locales, historical associations between flowers, as well as fruits, and the feminine are taken up critically in Graig Uhlin's and Laura Staab's articles, respectively. Uhlin considers the work of Agnès Varda (whose film *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse/The Gleaners and I* (2000) also features in Pick and Dymond's piece). He examines *Le Bonheur* (1965) and *Sans toit ni loi/Vagabond* (1985) in particular for their critical invocation of a patriarchal association between women and plants. Thinking with plants in relation to the feminine in Varda's work, Uhlin challenges the ways in which plants and women are thought of in the metaphysical tradition to have a negative relation to freedom. He draws together the post-war existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir with the more recent vegetal philosophizing of Luce Irigaray and Marder in order to consider how conceptions of female liberation in post-war France shape the cinematic rendering of vegetal being in Varda's filmmaking. Uhlin notes the political value of such work that connects women and the vegetal, in contrast to a patriarchal association of women and flowers. Discovering the encounter with the vegetal in silence, Uhlin argues that the liberated woman and the liberated plant speak a language audible to each other, but not to the phallic order.

In her contribution, Laura Staab turns to consider the place of fruit—apples, lemons, and oranges—in experimental writing and experimental filmmaking by a selection of women, with an extended reflection on the work of Hélène Cixous and Laida Lertxundi. Staab points to how both the writer and filmmaker see in art, literature, and philosophy an historical relation of women to nature. Staab acknowledges how "thinking women with fruit can be disturbing and vexing", particularly in a contemporary feminist context. She is interested, nonetheless, in how women in Cixous's and Lertxundi's work look at times at fruit, pointing to how their texts and films loosen any essentialist association between women and nature. Across Cixous's texts and Lertxundi's films, Staab argues, fruit is not positioned as equivalent to feminine anatomy, and their gathering of images of apples, oranges, and lemons in all their juiciness is not metaphorical of feminine jouissance. In this feminist take on associations between women and fruit, Staab draws upon a range of feminist philosophy and eco-philosophy in order to show how Cixous and Lertxundi's explorations of women's eyes looking at a piece of fruit can enable us to see and think the world anew.

This vision of citric vibrancy and thoughtful possibility brings this introduction to a close. Each contribution to this Special Issue raises its own questions about the relation between plants and film relevant to the specificity of the materials they discuss and their particular historical and geographical contexts. Yet, there is a shared hope that runs throughout the Special Issue as a whole: that it will stimulate further conversations about what it means to think cinema with plants, and encourage many more fruitful encounters between film and the vegetal realm.

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Notes

[1] This area of research has flourished over the last two decades. For just one early example of work on film and thinking that draws upon the philosophy of Deleuze, see Daniel Frampton [4], and for an early example drawing upon the philosophy of Cavell, along with Wittgenstein, see Rupert Read and Jerry Goodenough's edited volume [5].

[2] Castro, Pitrou, and Rebecchi's volume is pivotal in this regard, as are other volumes and individual articles cited elsewhere in this introduction that include plant-film connections among discussion of the other arts and within wider ecological investigations.

[3] Michael Marder's *Critical Plant Studies* book series with Brill features a range of contributions to this growing field. See, for example, Randy Laist [16], Prudence Gibson [17], and Giovanni Aloi [18]. Giovanni Aloi and Michael Marder's forthcoming reader from MIT brings together some of the key contributions to date in this area [19].

[4] The beautiful "Full Bloom" series on MUBI, for example, written by Patrick Holzapfel and illustrated by Ivana Miloš, reconsiders plants in cinema and why filmmakers have given myriad different flowers, trees, or herbs special attention in their films [21]. There are also expansive studies of film that look at the screening of nature by broaching animal and plant life: see, for example, Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway [22]. More recently, Elio Della Noce and Lucas Murari involve plants within the discussion of the wider ecologies of experimental film under the umbrella of expanded nature [23].

[5] The important edited volume *The Green Thread* in which Howe's work was published features stimulating essays by Patrícia Vieira, Guinevere Narraway and Hannah Stark, Pansy Duncan, and Graig Uhlin that also focus on plants and film, with Uhlin's in particular engaging with Marder's work on plant-thinking.

[6] For events at Tate Modern London in October 2022, the Counter Encounters collective (Laura Huertas Millán, Onyeka Igwe, and Rachael Rakes) organized films around the theme of encounters with plants from an anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist perspective, which their Special Issue of *World Records* explores in further detail [41].

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Article

The Garden in the Laboratory: Arthur C. Pillsbury's Time-Lapse Films and the American Conservation Movement

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Abstract: From the 1910s through the 1930s, the American naturalist and photographer Arthur C. Pillsbury made time-lapse and microscopic films documenting what he, in common parlance, called the "miracles of plant life". While these films are now mostly lost, they were part of Pillsbury's prolific work as a conservationist and traveling film lecturer who used his cameras everywhere from Yosemite National Park to Samoa to promote both public understanding of plants and a desire to protect the natural world. Guiding this work was Pillsbury's belief that the nonhuman optics of the film camera, which revealed the animacy of plants, could also incite viewers to sympathize with them. In the context of the early American conservation movement, that sympathy stemmed in complicated ways from longstanding transcendental and pastoral ideas of nature that were entangled with imperialist visions of controlling nature. With an eye to that context, I show that Pillsbury's filmmaking was not simply about using motion picture technologies to shape attitudes toward plants and nature more broadly; it was also about using nature to think through the techno-scientific possibilities of the cinema in the early part of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Arthur C. Pillsbury; time-lapse photography; natural history film; national parks; aesthetics; environmentalism; American visual culture

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> *Pursuing my lonely way down the valley, I turned again and again to gaze on the glorious picture, throwing up my arms to inclose it as in a frame.*
>
> —*John MuirThe Mountains of California*

> *When Americans want to understand their relationship to the natural world, they often turn to images.*
>
> —*Finis DunawayNatural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform*

1. Pillsbury's Nature

In 1937, the American naturalist, photographer, and filmmaker Arthur C. Pillsbury described a curious experiment he had undertaken while filming wildflowers with what he called a "traveling camera". The device consisted of a 16 mm motion picture camera mounted on a ten-foot aluminum rail that stood on legs a short height above the ground. The camera was rigged with a battery-operated motor and would travel at a constant speed along the rail, which was flexible enough to be shaped into a curve so that Pillsbury could create "panoramic" motion pictures of plants. The goal was to produce more dynamic and aesthetically engaging filmic views of flowers "in their natural habitat" where on the surface—e.g., looking out onto a field of California poppies—one typically does not see much life or movement. However, the dynamism of the traveling camera and the scenic beauty it offered up on its journey through nature were only part of the attraction. According to Pillsbury, the apparatus could be positioned so that the moving camera "finish[es] on two or three buds that have been carefully placed; these buds are then matched up in the laboratory with the lapse-time [sic] camera and open as though it were one continuous picture" [1] (pp. 177–178).[1] The idea was that the viewer would

have the impression of beholding a flower as it bloomed not in the laboratory but in its natural habitat.

On a practical level, the substitution trick solved a simple problem. Pillsbury could not successfully record plants in their natural habitats using time-lapse photography because the uncontrollability of weather and lighting resulted in inconsistencies from frame to frame that undermined the illusion of continuous motion. So, he filmed buds opening in the laboratory and staged the nature captured by the traveling camera such that the two would blend seamlessly, or at least the seam would be bridged by passing the camera's movement to the movement of the flower blooming. However, beyond practicality the trick also rehearsed a complicated fantasy. If beholding the secret movements of a flower blooming required filming in the laboratory, then merging that footage with footage from the traveling camera into "one continuous picture" suggests a desire to see a flower bloom "naturally", that is, without manipulation, as if the camera happened upon it "in nature" at the end of the aluminum rail and recorded it in real time. The desire makes Pillsbury's experiment a site of significant tensions, for instance between ideas about uncontrolled nature and the controlled environment of the laboratory; between the organic and contingent movements of a flower and the precise, mechanized, and uniform movements of the traveling camera; and between the time of the flower—of its life and movement in its natural habitat—and the time of the camera—its clockwork photographic time with calculated intervals.

What follows is an account of how these tensions informed Pillsbury's vision for filming plant life as a means of establishing a harmonious relationship between humans and nature in the early part of the twentieth century. From the 1910s through the 1930s, Pillsbury made time-lapse and microscopic films documenting what he, in common parlance, called the "miracles of plant life". While these films are now mostly lost, their traces in the archival record show that Pillsbury was prolific as a conservationist and traveling film lecturer. He used his cameras everywhere from Yosemite National Park and the Missouri Botanical Garden to Pago Pago to promote both public understanding of plants and a desire to protect the natural world. Guiding this work was his belief that the nonhuman time and optics of the film camera, which revealed the animacy of plants, could also incite viewers to sympathize with them. In the American context that sympathy stemmed in complicated ways from longstanding transcendental and pastoral ideas about harmonizing with nature that were entangled with imperialist visions of controlling nature.

Pillsbury was not systematic in theorizing the relation of his work to that broader context. His ideas evolved in a piecemeal fashion over several decades of experimenting with joining his love for nature and his fascination with photographic technologies. He was very much a child of America's early conservation movement who worked with policy makers, activists, and environmental organizations, such as the seminal Sierra Club, to protect plant life in the country's wilderness areas. Furthermore, like his contemporary, the famed naturalist and preservationist John Muir, Pillsbury envisioned nature as a "glorious picture" with inherent aesthetic values that needed to be preserved. He was also an ardent technophile who dedicated his entire career to understanding and expanding the aesthetic possibilities of film and photography through invention and innovation. The way that Pillsbury brought these two strands together—the aesthetics of nature and the aesthetics of film—in the service of recording plant life raises interesting questions about time-lapse photography. For instance, what made time lapse useful to the American conservation movement? What aspects of place—local and national—defined that usefulness? Furthermore, in those places, what did seeing the "miracles of plant life" have to do with historically specific ideas about nature and technology?

With an eye to these questions, I consider how Pillsbury's filmmaking was not only about using motion picture technologies to shape attitudes toward plants and nature more broadly; it was also about using nature to think through the techno-scientific possibilities of the cinema. While Pillsbury's case resembles many others in this regard, its significance is in the fact that his approach to filming plant life stemmed from distinctly American ideas about the relationship between nature and technology in a country that was rapidly

modernizing. As I will show, his understanding of that relationship led him to envision time lapse as means of bringing not only viewers but also the motion picture camera into harmony with the natural world. To record the movements of plants, Pillsbury developed complex automated photography systems that could produce time-lapse footage largely without the aid of the human hand. The automations imbued his photographic machines with a mechanical life that was complemented by the plant life Pillsbury sought to capture. By understanding that complementarity, I argue, we can see how Pillsbury's filmmaking brought nature and moving image technologies into a kind of sympathetic relation such that each—plants and film—was involved in shaping ideas about the other.

2. Seeing Nature

While studying mechanical engineering at Stanford University in the 1890s, Pillsbury discovered a passion for photography that he developed into a career as a professional photographer first for the U.S. Census Bureau in Alaska and then for the *San Francisco Examiner*. He subsequently shifted to making time-lapse films of wildflowers, primarily in Yosemite National Park and the surrounding Sierra Nevada mountains of California on the West Coast of the United States. From 1906 to 1927, Pillsbury operated a photography studio in Yosemite where he sold still photographs and projected lantern slides and motion pictures (scenics and time-lapse films) of the landscape, plants, and animals to park visitors. In the 1930s, he experimented with microcinematography, time-lapse X-ray imaging technologies, and underwater cameras while documenting everything from hydroponics and healing bone fractures in Berkeley, California, to flora and fauna in Jamaica and Samoa. His work generally adhered to natural history filmmaking conventions that were popular at the time. Furthermore, his time-lapse films of plants were not particularly distinctive compared to those of his contemporaries. Flowers appeared against the familiar black background that was a condition of filming in a controlled laboratory setting; and they were framed in close-up to emphasize the movement of buds blooming. Oftentimes, Pillsbury added the attraction of color, especially when Kodachrome film stocks became more widely available in the mid-1930s. His films also tended to be encyclopedic in that they surveyed a wide range of species in a particular region, and they were exhibited to tourists, garden club members, and a variety of international publics in a lecture format that Pillsbury liked to frame as a "journey into the mysteries of plant life" [2].

These time-lapse journeys followed the logic of "nature study", an observational mode "marked", as Jennifer Peterson explains, "by idealization and simplification" that privileged the aesthetic experience of nature's dramas and wonders over specialized scientific discourse [3] (p. 146). Take Pillsbury's educational science film *Reproduction in Plants and Lower Animals* (ca. 1930), which details biological processes with the aid of time-lapse photography and microcinematography. The premise of the film is that "[a] clear understanding of fertilization, conjugation, and cell division is essential in the study of natural science". And the central theme—what an opening title card calls "A primal urge of all life—to reproduce its kind"—is mapped with a series of observations about flowers, algae, worms, and anemones. The observations are delivered with title cards that provide some basic information about the processes being depicted, but the information is clearly subordinate to spectacles of plant and animal life. For instance, while time-lapse footage of a Spider Lily blooming is used to introduce the topic of fertilization, the connection between the time-lapse footage of the flower's movements and the lesson on pollination is not made. Likewise, in a brief segment on conjugation in the world of algae, simple descriptions of behaviors and structures of plant cells are paired with lengthy and largely independent shots of filaments floating and forming underwater arabesques and cellular matter squiggling around beneath the lens of a microscope (Figure 1). The pairing follows a larger pattern in the film of creating space for viewers to simply marvel at the sight of mesmerizing movements and forms in nature that are revealed, also marvelously, with Pillsbury's cameras.

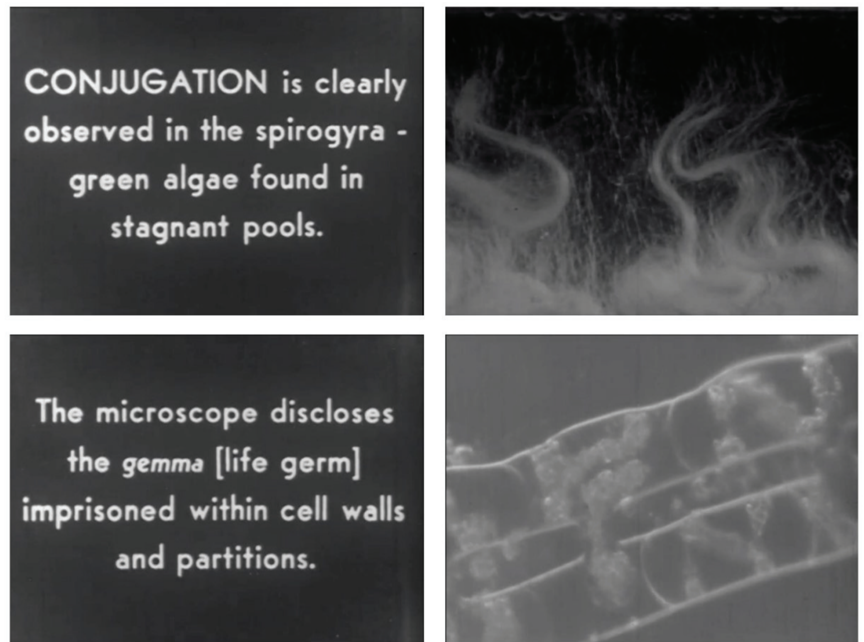

Figure 1. Screen grabs from Arthur C. Pillsbury's *Reproduction in Plants and Lower Animals* (c. 1930). Source: Prelinger Archives https://archive.org/details/0971ReproductionInPlantsAndLowerAnimals (accessed on 1 July 2022).

The aesthetics of plant life were inseparable from Pillsbury's sincere affection for nature, which stemmed from the pleasures he took in observing the intricate and varied appearances and behaviors of plants. We see this reflected in his book on the subject, *Picturing Miracles of Plant and Animal Life* (1937), when he positions himself as an artist who uses "[a] beam of light for a brush, a silver salt for paint, a transparent ribbon of celluloid for the canvas, chemicals to render it visible and permanent" [1] (p. 18). Filming plant life was for him firstly a way of capturing those everyday beauties of form and color and, as in a travelogue, making them available to audiences who might not have the opportunity to encounter them otherwise. However, the art—"painting" with film—was in his ability to wield the motion picture camera to make plant life newly visible, to transform the aesthetic experience of observing flowers in their natural habitats by abstracting their movements and forms with the aid of time-lapse photography and microcinematography. This is not to say that Pillsbury was unscientific in his endeavors—he was in fact interested and versed in botany—but rather that he did not seek primarily to popularize science or even necessarily to promote scientific ways of seeing nature. By aligning his filmmaking with painting, he placed his work in a different register, one where the science and technology of filmmaking made possible an art of defamiliarization that encouraged audiences to see the natural world anew.

The vision that Pillsbury had in mind for helping people to see nature differently was shaped by early twentieth-century discourses on the environment and tends to be ecological in orientation. As a photographer and filmmaker in Yosemite, Pillsbury was motivated to protect wildflowers after observing the destruction of their habitats to create grazing grounds for livestock. The motivation went beyond a concern for the ways that the scenic beauty of the landscape was being degraded. Intense debates about the environment that were taking place at the time turned on whether and how nature should be protected from human encroachments. Notably, in 1906, when Pillsbury began his career in Yosemite, President Theodore Roosevelt placed the park under the protection of the

federal government. The move was in part the result of ardent work done by John Muir and the Sierra Club, who were advocating for preserving the area against development on the grounds that the "pristine" environment held unique spiritual values for visitors amidst the decadence of modern life. As Muir put it, "Yosemite Park is a place of rest, a refuge from the roar and dust and weary, nervous, wasting work of the lowlands, in which one gains the advantages of both solitude and society" [4] (p. 350). A turning point in those efforts came in 1913 when a proposal to dam the Tuolumne River in the park to help meet San Francisco's growing water needs—an issue that was magnified after a 1906 earthquake sparked devastating fires in the city—was approved and Yosemite became the focus of a conservationist project organized around land use and resource management.

The events during these years were formative for Pillsbury. He was active in the debates over Yosemite and subscribed to Muir's ideals. He also believed film and photography could do good preservationist work to keep the aesthetic values of the landscape from withering.[2] When Pillsbury began filming plant life in 1912, his time-lapse photography aligned with a broad Emersonian tradition which was flourishing in America at the time as a critical response to the growing industrial exploitation and development of the environment. The tradition has origins in early settler colonial fantasies of North America as an Edenic wilderness, an idealized pastoral paradise that was uncorrupted by civilization (cf. [5]). In the nineteenth century, that vision was renewed prominently by the transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, who advocated for cultivating a reverent and harmonious relationship with the wilderness as a way of uplifting the moral and spiritual character of an industrializing America where, to his mind, peoples' relationship to nature was at risk of growing discordant. Mark Stoll explains that in the first few decades of the twentieth century, as Pillsbury worked, Emerson's ideas were guiding both the design of national parks as shrines to the American wilderness, as well as the work of artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Ansel Adams who, with their respective painted and photographic images of untouched, pristine American landscapes, sought to "educate the public to perceive beauty and thus bring humanity into harmony with nature" [6] (p. 118). For Pillsbury, who like Adams found a spiritual connection to Yosemite, time-lapse photography could do for viewers what the national parks did for visitors: offer aesthetic experiences that restored an intimate connection between humans and nature.

To understand the restorative potential of time-lapse films of flowers, we must understand Pillsbury's relationship with photography. His early photography with the U.S. Census Bureau and the *San Francisco Examiner*, for example, is firmly in the tradition of scenics and travelogues, and he was heavily influenced by discourses on the sublime. In the American context at the time, sublimity was tethered to visions of "wild" nature and the awesome scale of geographical features such as Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon that can provoke in beholders powerful feelings of astonishment and incomprehensibility, what Edmund Burke called "that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" [7] (p. 53). For example, many of Pillsbury's photographs, taken with a panorama camera of his own invention, sometimes while aloft in a manned balloon, depict such things as people and settlements dwarfed by the magisterial Alaskan wilderness and the awe-inspiring conflagration that followed the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Pillsbury often aimed his camera at encounters between the natural sublime—e.g., vast mountain ranges and bodies of water—and the technological sublime—e.g., steamboats and railroads. Furthermore, while we might be tempted to read these as the meeting of opposing forces—wild nature and industrialization—many Americans at the turn of the century did not. David Nye explains that American industrial and engineering power and ingenuity were largely seen as "extensions" of the awesome natural power of the North American landscape to the degree that "[t]he natural sublime would inspire the engineer to produce works in harmony with it" [8] (pp. 62–63). For instance, in Pillsbury's photograph "White Pass and Yukon Railroad, ca. 1899," train tracks are threaded into mountains that reach up to the heavens and give the impression that the extraordinary feat of engineering

is one with the sublimity of the landscape (Figure 2). Here, nature offers a way of thinking about technology.

Figure 2. White Pass and Yukon Railroad, ca. 1899. Dimensions: 33.11 × 9.32 in. Panoramic photograph by Arthur C. Pillsbury. Source: Arthur C. Pillsbury Photograph Collection, The Seattle Public Library: "This item is in the public domain. No known copyright restrictions identified by the library at the time of scanning in July 2019".

Of course, the experiences offered by time-lapse films of flowers are not the same as those offered by the landscapes captured in such photographs. Plant life operates at a radically different scale than that pertaining to the discomfiting vastness which philosophers such as Burke and Immanuel Kant placed at the heart of the sublime and which inspired Pillsbury's landscape photography. Nonetheless, for him, photographic technologies did function, like the railroad, as opportunities for bringing viewers into a kind of aesthetic harmony with nature. We see this in his panorama camera, itself a mechanical marvel that Pillsbury explained "looked like half a wash tub and made a picture 10 × 36 inches taking in almost half a circle" [9]. Furthermore, while neither the camera nor its photographs were sublime objects, it was as though the technology suggested in its form the scale of the views it recorded and produced pictures that would be seen in kind. Similarly, in 1919 he filmed Yosemite while aboard a biplane, another icon of the technological sublime that quite literally gave Pillsbury's camera a transcendental view of sublime nature that would uproot viewers from their habitual perceptions and sweep them away into the awe-inspiring landscape.

When Pillsbury brought nature into his laboratory to film wildflowers growing, time-lapse photography became a tool for revealing that there was beauty hidden behind nature's appearances, that another aspect of the grandeur which one might encounter in the face of sublime North American vistas was dwelling quietly, unseen, and unnoticed everywhere in "the miracle of plant life". I say "beauty" rather than sublime because, in addition to the matter of scale, for Pillsbury the aesthetics of plant life were entangled with a discourse of affection (even love) rather than awe and terror. Turning to film on those grounds was a significant shift in his photographic practice, for it was with time lapse that he began thinking about synergies between motion pictures and plants that could reshape humans' relationships with the natural world. The secret beauties of plant life revealed by Pillsbury's cameras did more than infuse natural history lessons with the visual pleasure of beholding astonishing spectacles of movement where, to borrow the words of his promotional materials, nature is otherwise "apparently as still as death to the naked eye" [10]. In Pillsbury's work, seeing plant life involved the possibility of discovering an unexpected connection—a kinship even—between plants and humans. A brochure for one of his film programs makes this explicit with the inclusion of an excerpt from a 1925 *Boston Herald* review that mused, "Wild flowers are like people—they have their births, their loves, their deaths, their moments of triumph, their inevitable tragedies; to watch a Mariposa Lily or an Evening Primrose struggle into being, live its life and pass on, is as poignant and beautiful a spectacle as anything ever produced by the greatest dramatists. Are human beings and flowers of the same life source? Are the wild flowers of the fields, the mountain slopes and the home garden simply an earlier stage of human life?" [11]. The musing was

not new. Charles Darwin used recordings of plant growth to propose a similar evolutionary link between plants and animals as early as 1880, a topic that Oliver Gaycken has explored thoroughly [12]. However, for Pillsbury such a possible kinship was not an opportunity for advancing scientific knowledge; it was grounds for calling lay people back to nature.

Pillsbury understood this call mainly in aesthetic and spiritual terms. Writing in *Picturing Miracles of Plant and Animal Life*, he explained, "One of the first reactions of seeing a reel of flowers growing and opening was to instill a love for them, a realization of their life struggles so similar to ours" [1] (p. 25). The realization, prompted by the sight of flowers apparently dancing, pushing, jostling, aspiring, and suffering as humans do, might jolt viewers out of seeing nature as something separate from themselves. For Pillsbury, a naturalist and conservationist eyeing the threats posed by a civilization that was increasingly encroaching on wilderness spaces like Yosemite, that vision of separateness fueled an unwelcome attitude toward nature as something to be used and exploited. And, he believed, it was the jolt of encountering the wondrous animacy of plants in a time-lapse film that could cultivate in viewers "a wish to do something to stop the ruthless destruction of them [wildflowers] which was fast causing them to become extinct" [1] (p. 25). This was the harmony he envisioned for viewers, from visitors at Yosemite to garden club members in Missouri and audiences of his film lectures abroad: struck by the secret world of plant life that was revealed by his time-lapse cameras, one might be inspired to revere and protect nature, that is, to enter, through technology, into a kind of Emersonian "communion" with it.[3]

3. Timing Nature

The relationship to nature that Pillsbury imagined for viewers of his time-lapse films extended to his cameras, which he understood to have an affinity with plants. In many ways the early film camera was an emblem of modernity that embodied prominent tensions between technology and nature in American society; it was, as Leo Marx would have it, a machine like the locomotive before it that signaled the intrusion of industrial civilization into "the garden," the Arcadian ideal of an untouched and unspoiled North American wilderness (cf. [5]).[4] Indeed, to borrow Mark Stoll's words, national parks like Yosemite where Pillsbury worked were premised on the idea of protecting that ideal by "preserv[ing] the illusion of an uninhabited world of otherworldly beauty" [6] (p. 136). These spaces were conceived as refuges that articulated pastoral fantasies of restoring a harmony with nature, which many believed had been disrupted by the radical changes brought about by industrialization, urbanization, and the machinery of modern life in the nineteenth century. Such fantasies raise the question of how Pillsbury reconciled his enthusiasm for technology with his love of so-called unspoiled nature and a desire to protect plants from the forces of civilization.

The simple answer is that Pillsbury, like many other American photographers and filmmakers at the time, did not see the camera as a machine at odds with nature but rather as a tool for restoring harmony with it. Writing about American environmentalism in the early twentieth century, Finis Dunaway explains: "As they witnessed the alteration and loss of particular places, many artists and activists expressed ambivalence or even outright hostility toward technology, blaming it for the destruction of the American landscape. Yet, they continued to rely on the camera—a technology of representation—to convey their ideas about the natural world [. . .] With a sometimes naïve belief in the camera's mechanical, objective vision, they hoped that photographs and films could record the reality of nature and bring Americans closer to the nonhuman world" [13] (p. xvii). For Pillsbury, objectivity was a pretense for an idealized vision of harmony that was ultimately about control, a topic to which I will return later. Furthermore, beneath this vision was a complicated understanding of the relationship between film and nature that had to do with ideas about time.[5]

Time-lapse photography is of course always already about time, about the manipulation of intervals to make visible otherwise imperceptible movements in time. However,

Pillsbury was remarkably preoccupied with a matter of time that all filmmakers who are in the business of recording plant life confront in some form: plants do not all grow at the same speed. Variability in the rates at which different species of flowers germinate, sprout, bloom, and die makes it so that the movements corresponding to those processes cannot be recorded effectively using a standard or uniform set of time-lapse intervals. For instance, filming a slow-growing plant and a fast-growing plant at the same rate of one frame per hour may result in filmed movements that are smooth and jittery, respectively. The results will be affected as well by variations in the speed of each plant's individual processes—e.g., one frame per hour may result in a filmed movement that is smooth when the flower is sprouting and jittery when it is blooming. The issue, for Pillsbury, was that failing to take these variables into account can lead to films that are displeasing to the eye and thus out of sync with the natural beauty of the subject being recorded. "So", he advised, "in making your lapse-time pictures you must know when the bud starts to open, day or night; how long it takes before the petals fall; how much of it is worth picturing—as sometimes its death is more dramatic than its birth; and then how long the entire picture will hold the interest" [1] (pp. 40–41).

The idea is that making a beautiful time-lapse film—one that holds interest and pleases the eye—depends on the filmmaker's ability to bring the time of the camera into harmony with the time of the plant being recorded. To that end, Pillsbury studied plants carefully in their natural habitats and developed a comprehensive understanding of the timing of stages in their individual life cycles. What he found was that, generally, while those cycles vary considerably across species of flowers, each one is "remarkably uniform in its habits," meaning that their individual stages and processes occur at consistent and predictable times, like clockwork [1] (p. 52). However, within that uniformity the movements of life and the time of specific processes are highly irregular. The irregularity was well established in early twentieth-century Western scientific theories as a unique characteristic of living things, a marker of what the French bio-physicist and philosopher Pierre Lecomte du Noüy in the 1930s called the "biological time" of organisms (cf. [14,15]).

For Pillsbury, the biological time of flowers revealed a curious affinity. The 16 mm and 35 mm motion picture cameras that he used functioned according to clockwork mechanisms that recorded images at regular intervals. In that regard, the machine was like a flower that is "remarkably uniform in its habits". However, taking a similarly uniform approach of simply adding time between the camera's regular intervals was inadequate for recording the movements of plants. Getting a good picture—essentially one in which a flower looks alive—required modifying the regularity of the camera's clockwork mechanism to record at irregular intervals, which the device was also exceptionally capable of doing if it was properly reengineered. Jimena Canales points out that such modifications were identified as being necessary to cinematic studies of life as early as the 1910s when, in light of theories holding that living things move in irregular rather than cadenced ways, "scientists became increasingly concerned with filming at the speed of biological organisms '*according to the activity of the culture* [*or specimen*]' rather than at predetermined, clock-controlled intervals" [15] (pp. 250–251). In Pillsbury's case the scientific implications were marginal to the aesthetic ones and the ways in which filming the beauties of plant life meant getting his cameras to keep time with nature.

Working out of a laboratory (first in Yosemite and then in Berkeley, California), Pillsbury developed complex mechanical systems for synchronizing his cameras with the life processes of plants. His typical time-lapse unit consisted of a camera mounted on a long track in a greenhouse that was rigged with an electrical lighting system. The camera was operated by a motor that controlled the process of making exposures and advancing the film according to an interval schedule that was set by a series of pins on a wheel attached to the motor shaft (Figure 3). Pillsbury's description of the system is worth quoting in full because its status as a mechanical marvel is important:

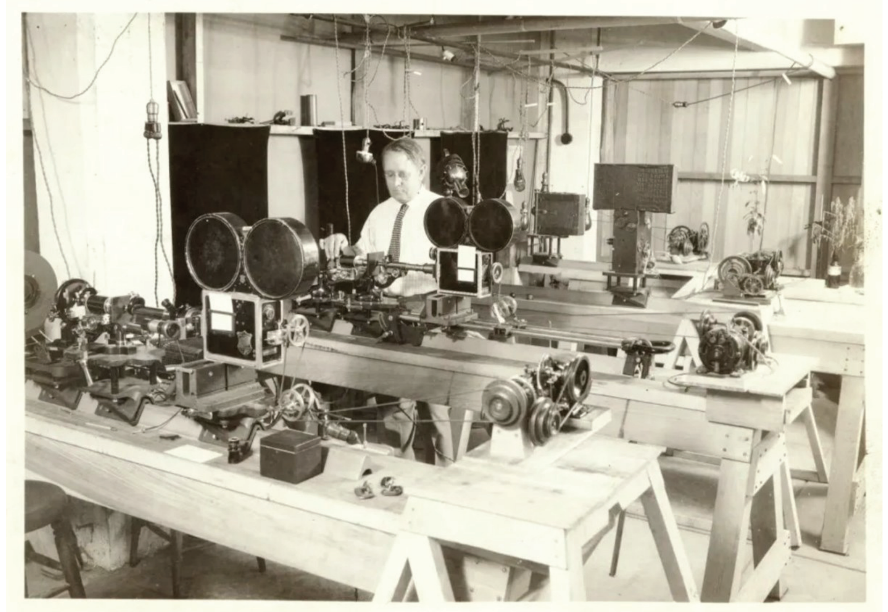

Figure 3. A version of Pillsbury's automated time-lapse photography systems at the Missouri Botanical Garden. Source: Time-lapse photography set up. Arthur Pillsbury. *Missouri Botanical Garden Bulletin* 1927, Vol. 15, no. 7, p. 111 [16]. Image Credit: Missouri Botanical Garden. With permission from Missouri Botanical Garden.

> One pin [on the wheel] would pass a given point [. . .] every minute, or 5–10–20 or 30 min, as often as desired. Just above this slowly revolving wheel was hung a pendulum-like rod. At its upper end, projecting above the wheel, a mercury tube switch almost balanced was installed. The pegs in the wheel came along slowly, hitting a projecting arm on the pendulum and caused the mercury to run to one end of the tube, which made an electric connection without sparking. This started a small motor that was geared down to make a shaft run one revolution in thirty seconds or a minute, as I desired, while the long end of the pendulum was lifted up [. . .] high enough to keep the mercury in its end of the tube giving an electric connection, running the small motor connected with a reduction gear—running it until it had made one complete revolution. This one revolution was connected with a chain belt and sprockets to the camera, giving one picture or frame. At the same time the motor started, the electric lights came on, giving the correct amount of illumination required for the exposure. Just as the same shaft that was connected with the camera by its chain belt made its complete revolution an arm kicked off the holding lever of the pendulum. Stopping itself it would swing back to its vertical position, the mercury would flow away from the connecting end of the tube without a spark [. . .], the lights would go out, the motor stop and nothing more would happen until the next taper pin in the so-called clock wheel came along and started the chain of operations again [1] (pp. 35–36).

Similar contraptions can be found throughout the history of time-lapse photography, from the technique's origins into our contemporary moment, with Pillsbury's being an innovation on earlier cases, such as F. Percy Smith's and Lucien Bull's time-lapse units.[6] His electric lighting system provided uniform exposures from frame to frame so that a plant's movements onscreen appeared to unfold continuously in unified space without lapses as though the plant had been recorded in "real" time. That seamlessness extended

to the way the pin system was designed to allow for the fine-grained programming of irregular intervals, which Pillsbury could tailor to the specific life processes of different plants—e.g., using slower frame rates during the growth of a stem and faster rates when the flower was blooming to enhance the drama of that moment. In theory, the apparatus could be programmed to unlock what he deemed to be the unique aesthetic potential of any plant that could be grown in the laboratory.

Pillsbury's operational description of the time-lapse unit is also revealing because he described the plants he studied with the same language, passion for detail, and sense of wonder that he expresses above toward the mechanics of his own invention.[7] Oftentimes this took the form of him musing explicitly on the ways that the form and function of plant cells, leaves, and blossoms resembled mechanical devices of wonder. For example, he proclaimed the leaf "more wonderful than any of our most modern [factories], because it furnishes its own power and product" [1] (p. 127). Sometimes the connection was more accidental. For example, his greenhouse laboratory was equipped with a window shutter system that would block out the sunlight when the electric lights were triggered. The system turned the entire building into a kind of camera that simulated with its mechanical systems inside the conditions under which plants grow in their natural habitats outside. Furthermore, while Pillsbury did not theorize these resemblances in any meaningful way, he clearly engineered his time-lapse cameras as extensions of nature; every turn of the gears, movement of the pendulum, and exposure on celluloid was animated by the biological time of the plants he filmed.

The harmony was bolstered by the fact that the entire camera system was fully automated, as though the time-lapse unit behaved like a living organism. The automation was partly practical. The amount of human labor needed to manually operate multiple time-lapse cameras for long periods of time exceeded Pillsbury's capabilities as a filmmaker who worked largely alone. Doing the work by hand also risked compromising the kind of precision he sought in tailoring his cameras to the movements of plants because human factors such as mental and physical fatigue increased the possibility that he would make errors when applying his calculations to the filming process. The camera system he developed solved both problems by allocating matters of efficiency and control to a machine. We can see this as a kind of inversion of the Taylorist model in which, rather than the human laborer synchronizing their body to the mechanical time of a machine or an assembly line, the mechanical camera is synchronized to the biological time of a plant.[8]

The automation was also partly itself a source of wonder. In Pillsbury's description of the motors and gears and pendulums and switches that brought his time-lapse cameras to life, one gets the impression that he is marveling at his own absence from the machine, which could be set to run itself for days or months on end as he monitored its progress. His laboratory in turn stood like a shrine to technological wonders where plant life and his photographic technologies harmonized within a kind of mechanical ecosystem of his own invention.

Pillsbury's work was thus marked by the fact that his desire to understand the biological processes of plants and unlock their secret beauties was entangled with a desire to understand the technical processes of photographic reproduction. Put simply, plant life taught him about the nature and aesthetic possibilities of film, a lesson that Max Long has called the "co-production of knowledge" in natural history films of the period [17]. Pillsbury's writings brim with lengthy discussions of probing the limits of film chemistry and technology to come up with innovative solutions to problems that he encountered in the process of studying plants—e.g., using X-rays to visualize the inner workings of a flower blooming. This meant that, while he was firstly "a student of the phenomena of plant life" [1] (p. 45), as he phrased it, he was ultimately an inventor of mechanical contrivances whose experiments with flowers were also experiments with the art, form, and function of motion picture technologies.

From this perspective, the automation of his time-lapse cameras was also partly (and unintentionally) symbolic. Recall that Pillsbury's vision of nature was formed by Yosemite

National Park, which was, like other national parks in the United States, "designed as much as possible to look like no one was there" [6] (p. 129). The carefully constructed image of an unpeopled and untouched wilderness informed his understanding of the aesthetics of plant life as something that could be accessed most fully by the nonhuman optics of the motion picture camera, a kind of unpeopled machine. Furthermore, upon unlocking those secret beauties the camera could help people discover a new harmony in which nature is revered and observed but not touched. That vision extended to his automated time-lapse systems, which, in being designed to operate when no one was there, brought his mechanical devices even further into alignment with his ideas about nature.

We see a similar alignment in the prominent and pervasive interest that theorists and avant-garde filmmakers in the 1920s and 30s took in natural history films. Scholars such as Hannah Landecker [18], James Cahill [19], Caroline Hovanec [20], and Oliver Gaycken [21] have shown how early filmmakers' uses of time-lapse photography and microcinematography to reveal secret dimensions of plant and animal life helped crystalize then-dominant discourses on the medium specificity of film, namely the aesthetic values of the camera's unique mechanical ability to transcend the limits of human vision and defamiliarize the visible world. Hovanec explains that "proponents [of natural history filmmaking] believed that cinema opens up a nonhuman world before our eyes, bypassing human intent and intervention to reveal, in Virginia Woolf's words, 'life as it is when we have no part in it.' Within this logic, nature films, which showcased the living forms of plants and animals in motion, were seen as the purest expression of a cinematic aesthetic. These films came closest to realizing what classical theorists considered the essential purpose of film: to let nature speak" [20] (p. 246). Pillsbury arrived at this non-anthropocentric sense of cinema independently and by way of experimentation; decentering himself in the photographic process was firstly a technical matter of figuring out how to film plant life.[9] Nonetheless, he understood that plants and the motion picture camera speak to each other, that they have their own special kind of sympathetic relationship. And for him that sympathy made film, at the level of its most basic properties as a photographic medium, uniquely suited to his vision for conserving the American wilderness.[10]

4. Conserving Nature

The importance of Pillsbury's interest in linking time-lapse and conservation is magnified when we consider that his films on the surface do not look much different from many other filmmakers' time-lapse studies of plant life. For example, except for the color schemes, Pillsbury's rose, filmed at the Missouri Botanical Garden around 1927, is nearly indistinguishable from F. Percy Smith's in *The Birth of a Flower* (1910) and John Ott's in the 1950s (Figure 4). For much of the twentieth century, the iconography of plant life in science and natural history films in Europe and North America was remarkably consistent along those lines: flowers grow from seeds to blossoms against blank backdrops without much variation. Given that such views circulate as seemingly endless copies of each other, it is no wonder that they give the impression of being ahistorical, which of course they are not. As I have shown elsewhere, much of the historicity of time-lapse films of flowers is behind the images in the specific methods and mechanics of their production, the constantly changing technoscience that makes picturing plant life possible (cf. [22,23]). So, while Pillsbury's rose may be indistinguishable from Smith's, the specific significance of his photographic processes is in how he wedded them to ideas about a particular place—Yosemite—as well as to particular national concerns—early twentieth century environmentalism in the United States.

I have touched on those concerns to varying degrees above, but here I want to turn briefly and in a more focused way to the intriguing fact that for Pillsbury filming plant life was a deeply American project.[11] The affections he expressed for the beauties of an untouched nature rehearsed a longstanding fantasy that emerged when European explorers and settlers developed a picture of North America as an unspoiled landscape that, they believed, "looked [. . .] the way the world might have been supposed to look before the

beginning of civilization" [5] (p. 36). That picture became a defining feature of (namely white and patriarchal) American society, especially in the nineteenth century when the "wilderness"—embodied by the frontier that was ever moving westward—functioned prominently as a measure of the industrializing nation (cf. [24]). For, the wilderness was the idealized site where American civilization performed its possibilities by transforming nature through settlement and mechanical invention. (Recall Pillsbury's panoramic photographs of encounters between the technological sublime and the natural sublime.) However, the stakes of the transformation were incredibly high. As Finis Dunaway explains, "Following the U.S. Census Bureau's announcement of a 'closed' frontier in 1890 [signaling that the so-called unspoiled landscape had been completely settled], more Americans became worried about the loss of wilderness and the scarcity of resources" [13] (p. xvii). The worry gave rise to the American conservation movement, which in the first decades of the twentieth century dealt with the loss in part by preserving the fantasy of untouched nature in places like Yosemite and the pictures that people made of them.

Figure 4. Screen grabs of time-lapse roses. Left: Pillsbury, *Flowers Growing and Opening* (1927). Middle: F. Percy Smith's *The Birth of a Flower* (1910). Right: John Ott, film fragment from *Plants and Flowers: From the John Nash Ott Collection*, Winnetka Historical Society Available online: https://youtu.be/4J0xXwwIlVY (accessed on 1 July 2022).

As part of that fantasy, Pillsbury's time-lapse films are inscribed by an important taxidermic impulse that shaped the early history of American conservation. For people like Pillsbury, Yosemite was, to borrow Rebecca Solnit's words, "the very crucible and touchstone for American landscape" [25] (p. 221) because the park embalmed an idealized vision of pristine nature, preserving it against the decadence of modern life and the passage of time at a crucial moment when for some the wilderness appeared to be on the verge of vanishing entirely. From this perspective, it makes sense that Pillsbury saw film as a medium that was uniquely suited to carrying out that preservation. The American conservation movement in the early 1900s was broadly underpinned by an idea of nature that was essentially photographic.[12] Writing about the art of taxidermy in American museums of natural history at the time, Donna Haraway explains photography's resonance with the country's conservationist mission: "To make an exact image is to insure against disappearance, to cannibalize life until it is safely and permanently a specular image, a ghost. It arrested decay. That is why nature photography is so beautiful and so religious—and such a powerful hint of an apocalyptic future" [24] (p. 42). Hence, the significance of Pillsbury's choice to *film* the natural world. Bringing Yosemite's wildflowers to life through time-lapse photography was not only a way of defamiliarizing nature in the hopes that viewers might develop a love for it; it was a way of countering nature's death and destruction by reproducing the vanishing wilderness in pictures. Furthermore, like Yosemite, those pictures provided idealized encounters with nature: the secret beauties of plant life were only visible to viewers on film, not in the plants' natural habitats.[13]

The core tension in Pillsbury's work, then, is that his vision for bringing humanity into harmony with nature was entangled with ideas about controlling nature and time. The entanglement is clearest in a curious episode from his career. Around 1928, Pillsbury began experimenting with using X-ray technologies to produce time-lapse films of plants. The idea was that producing X-ray motion pictures of a flower blooming would reveal

wondrous aspects of the inner workings of a blossom that were previously unknown to science and otherwise inaccessible even to the time-lapse camera. Pillsbury was a bit at pains to justify the scientific values of the undertaking, for which he invented a customized lens-less camera apparatus that made 3 × 4-inch exposures on 200-foot rolls of film (Figure 5). However, the experiments led him to an unexpected discovery. After filming two plants simultaneously, one with the X-ray camera and one with his standard time-lapse camera, he reported: "I had not paid much attention to the roses I had worked on except set them aside, when I suddenly noticed the X-rayed blossom was still almost perfect, while on the other, taken in the usual way, the petals had fallen and the haw was forming. Still it did not make much impression on my mind, although they were the same kind of roses and of equal development when I started, but in each recurring picture I got the same results—prolonged life of the blossom" [1] (pp. 146–147). The taxidermic qualities of film apparently bled back into nature.

The discovery added a new layer to a practice Pillsbury had developed of manipulating the growth of plants using aspirin, whiskey, and strychnine, which, he reported, helped some flowers to bloom more quickly and more fully for his cameras in the laboratory. As with the X-ray camera, the manipulations were simply meant to reveal and enhance the secret beauties of plant life. However, such interventions in the biological time of plants—accelerating, augmenting, and prolonging life—also mean that for Pillsbury the aesthetics of nature were always already constructed by and for the motion picture camera. This is particularly true in the case of his "traveling camera" that I mentioned at the beginning of this article wherein Pillsbury sought to blend time-lapse footage of plants with footage of them in their natural habitat, giving the impression that the "techno-flower", as Sarah Cooper puts it (cf. [26]), bloomed not in the laboratory but in nature. His was through and through a cinematic vision of nature, or rather, the two—film and nature—worked synergistically to shape ideas about each other.

In the early part of the twentieth century, that vision and synergy articulated what Dunaway, writing about American environmentalism's visual culture, calls "a desire to domesticate the wilderness by creating pictures" [13] (p. 6). (This extends as well to the longstanding entanglement, which was particularly prominent at the time, between natural history and imperialism.) Wrapped in ideas about discovering a kind of spiritual harmony with and love for untouched nature, in the American context the desire was animated by ideas about possession and control that resonated strongly with the capacities of photography and film to defamiliarize the visible world and to embalm time. André Bazin's familiar description of those capacities is strikingly and unexpectedly apt here: "Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered over it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love" [27] (p. 15). In the United States, being reproduced as an image meant that nature could be fitted neatly into an analogous fantasy of keeping the wilderness pristine in part so that it could be made to serve as a spiritual refuge for weary citizens of a modernizing nation.

Pillsbury was distinct in exploring the potential of time-lapse films of plant life to fulfill that desire just as the contours of the American conservation movement were beginning to take shape. This is not to say that he was exceptional, but his work is particularly useful for giving some much needed specificity to the now ubiquitous picture of time lapse photography as a technique for recording the secret beauties of the natural world. Often the beauty of these kinds of films is attributed to the mechanical objectivity of the motion picture camera and the ways that time lapse simply reveals inherent aesthetic values of nature that are otherwise inaccessible to humans. Pillsbury thought as much when he deployed his time-lapse cameras to record plant life and conserve the purportedly timeless beauties of an untouched natural world. However, what his cameras revealed was far from objective and ahistorical; his time-lapse flowers were very much political in that they participated in the construction of specifically American ideas about nature.

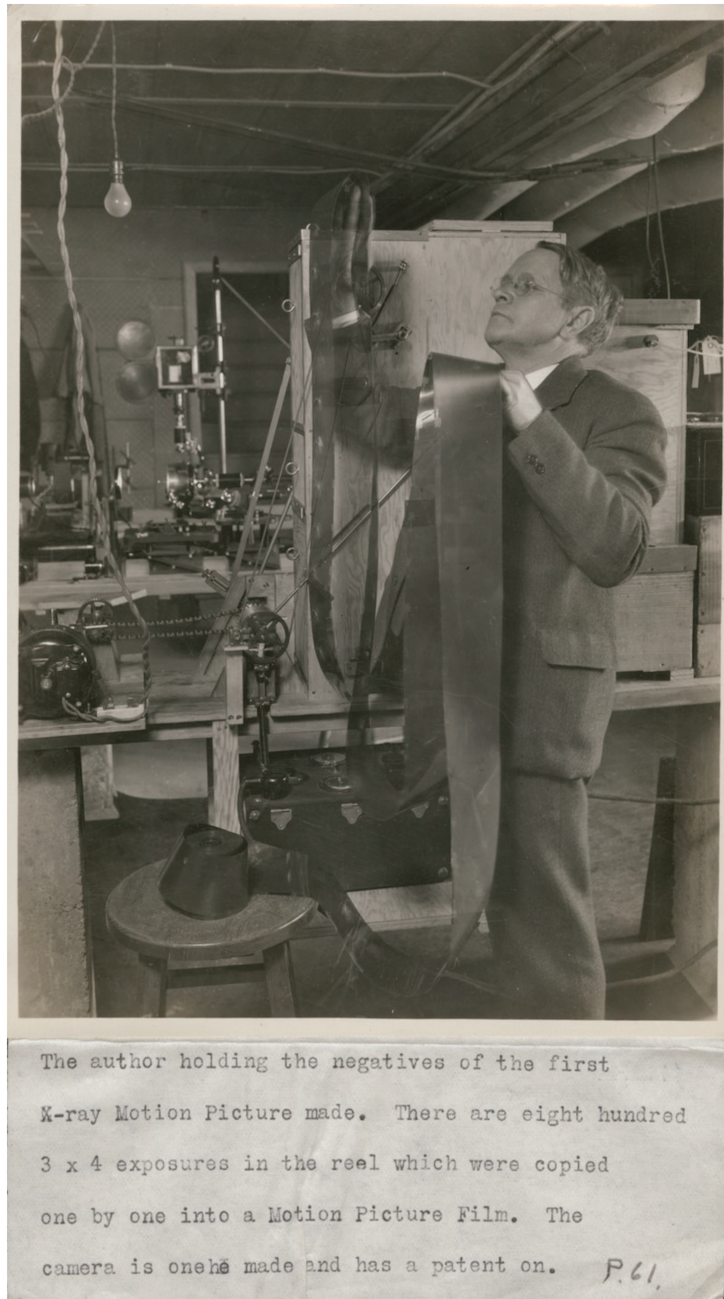

Figure 5. Pillsbury with film from his X-ray time-lapse camera. Source: Arthur C. Pillsbury Photographs, MSS P-83 box 1, folder 3. Reprinted with permission from L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602.

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Notes

1. Pillsbury consistently used the term "lapse-time" to describe his filmmaking practice. In this essay I have chosen to use the more common "time-lapse" when referring to the same process.
2. Notably, Pillsbury supplied most of the photographs for John Muir's book *The Yosemite* (New York: The Century Company, 1912) [28].
3. The kinship between humans and plants that Pillsbury saw as being important for inspiring people to love nature has an interesting resonance with Emerson's famous passage in *Nature* (1836): "Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" [29] (p. 8) Pillsbury did not express such a natural-theological view, but his sense that the animacy of plants shared in the same vitalistic energy as humans casts the common trope of the anthropomorphic time-lapse flower curiously in the light of American transcendental thinking like Emerson's.
4. In the American context, the Arcadian ideal is also entangled with the "salvage ethnography" project that was powerfully shaping discourses on race and imperialism in film and photography cultures during the decades that Pillsbury worked. See further Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) [30], and Alison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) [31]. The centrality of the national parks to that project, particularly as those spaces intersected with racist fantasies about so-called vanishing Native Americans, makes Pillsbury's work inseparable from the politics of the salvage paradigm in the United States.
5. Pillsbury did not have a theory of time. As with his film and photography practices, he arrived at a particular understanding of time through observation and experimentation, but neither was informed by scientific or philosophical discourses that were in circulation at the time.
6. Pillsbury's time-lapse technologies are followed in the American context by the extraordinary automated systems created by the American time-lapse filmmaker John Ott in the 1940s and 1950s (cf. [22]).
7. A similar preoccupation with operational descriptions of time-lapse photography and the technological challenges of filming plant life animates Mary Field and F. Percy Smith's book *Secrets of Nature* (1934) [32]. I have not been able to determine whether Pillsbury was aware of Field and Smith's work or their book, which is quite similar to the one he published in 1937.
8. I am very grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript for making this wonderful connection to "Taylorized time". See further along these lines Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) [33].
9. As of writing this essay, I have found no evidence that Pillsbury intersected with the avant-garde and film criticism circles where these ideas were circulating at the time.
10. For a wonderful recent account of the ways that ideas about entanglements of film with nature have been theorized, see Cassandra Guan and Adam O'Brien's "Cinema's Natural Aesthetics: Environments and Perspectives in Contemporary Film Theory, *Screen* 61.2 (2020), pp. 272–321 [34].
11. I am not suggesting that there is anything inherently or essentially "American" about time-lapse photography but rather that Pillsbury saw in the technique something that made it particularly useful for exploring a set of historically-specific ideas in American culture.
12. We can think, too, of the importance of nature in the history of photography theory, particularly the role of nature in developing ideas about the medium's ontologies in the nineteenth century. See, for example, Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999) [35].
13. I am indebted here to Donna Haraway's history and theory of taxidermy in early twentieth-century natural history museum displays as modeling idealized encounters with nature that have no physical referent (cf. [24]).

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Article

'What Am I Going to Do with My Philodendron?' Looking at a Plant in *Desk Set*

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Abstract: *Desk Set*, a 1957 20th Century Fox studio comedy, made with the sponsorship of IBM, charts the relationship between a reference librarian, Bunny Watson, and Richard Sumner, the inventor of a computer which appears to threaten her job. The film displays a thriving philodendron within Bunny's skyscraper office, illustrating her organic style of thinking, and implicitly inviting us to see the plant in opposition to the computer. The suggestion that the plant is in some sense excessive, claiming attention beyond the norms of the ornamental background houseplant, opens questions about how we look at plants on film. We find here a reframing of figure and ground, which relates the philodendron to moments where plants become conspicuous in early film and in horror. *Desk Set* reflects a vegetal landscape characterised by all the commonplace instrumentalising of plants in modernity, amongst which the philodendron emerges as an exception. The plant does not point outwards to a putative wilderness. Instead, our looking at it allows us to contemplate it as an individuated specimen, and to move from that act of looking to recognise its deep entanglement with the urban environment, and with human care.

Keywords: plants in film; houseplants; romantic comedy; *Desk Set*; Katharine Hepburn

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1. Introduction

Desk Set, a 1957 20th Century Fox comedy directed by Walter Lang, portrays a time of upheaval in the New York offices of a broadcasting company. The workplace plays host not just to human workers, but to various forms of decorative plant life, consistent with a world in which, as Susan McHugh describes, 'the mod cons of piped water and central heat enabled commercially-produced, ornamental houseplant-keeping to become an ordinary urban experience' [1] (p. 191). In the midst of just such an ordinary urban setting and story, one plant above all, an enormous, thriving philodendron, is singled out as the object of care, the gaze, and the casual speculations of its human companions. What does it mean to bring one plant out of the invisibility to which it might ordinarily be subject, in both the intradiegetic workplace and the superficially realist world of the Hollywood studio comedy? In asking *Why Look at Plants*?, Giovanni Aloi draws a parallel with John Berger's consideration of animals, proposing that such attentive looking at plants involves a comparable refocusing on forms of life which may have receded from conscious view, despite being fundamental elements of the terrestrial environment. Aloi proposes that 'paying attention to plants entails the possibility of considering new modes of attention and crafting new modalities of perception' [2] (p. xx). *Desk Set* is a film with an entirely conventional anthropocentric storyline, relatively little studied and perhaps most viewed now through the prism of its star casting of Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. Yet within the narrow parameters of the studio comedy, the film directs us to notice one plant among many, thereby opening up to contemplation the role of the plant within urban modernity and in its filmic representation more broadly (Figure 1). The plant is ever at risk of being subsumed into a symbolic role in the constructed tensions of the plot, but what more might we gain from looking at it? What, to borrow the words of protagonist Bunny, will we *do* with it?

Figure 1. Bunny Watson tends her philodendron.

Desk Set was adapted from William Marchant's 1955 Broadway hit play *The Desk Set*, and the writers Henry and Phoebe Ephron follow much of his text quite closely, while altering some aspects of the characterisation and changing the romantic storyline [3]. The women staffing a television network Research and Reference department find their livelihoods apparently threatened by the arrival of a 'methods engineer' who introduces a computer, without offering any apparent sense of how this innovation may affect them. The computer, known as EMMARAC, an acronym for 'Electro-Magnetic Memory and Research Arithmetic Calculator', appears set to take over the women's daily task of answering queries posed to them over the telephone by other departments of the organisation, on an encycloapedic range of topics. Announced in the opening titles as having been made with the 'cooperation and assistance' of IBM, the film was, as Merrill Schleier elaborates, the subject of 'unprecedented' levels of sponsorship from the company and 'the first film to actively endorse the computer's inclusion in the skyscraper office' [4] (p. 232). The film explores the anxieties of a post-war workforce in the face of growing technologisation, and ultimately seeks to appease such fears with an ending which results in a happy union between the computer and the human skills of the women researchers, as well as between EMMARAC inventor Richard Sumner (Spencer Tracy) and Head of Reference Bunny Watson (Katharine Hepburn). The putative conflict is resolved by exposing the limitations of computer information retrieval, as EMMARAC spews out pages of irrelevant data, and by advertising the time savings the machine might supposedly offer the women. This, it is suggested, will enhance their present research methods, which rely not just on the contents of the in-house library but on the workers' memories; when Bunny's junior colleague Ruthie expresses her wish to do well in her job, Bunny tells her, 'just get to learn the reference library'. Despite the pacificatory ending, Carol Colatrella points out that the resolution still derives from a competitive business case for the value of the women's labour, as EMMARAC proves incapable of intuiting which information serves the purpose of the enquiry [5] (p. 7). The film, and Bunny as a character, slot into what Janet Thumim terms Hepburn's 'spinster cycle', 'in which the unloved and ageing professional woman is required, through the diegesis, to recognize that what she has always really wanted is a man' [6] (p. 92). In *Desk Set*, Bunny is never in any doubt that she wants a man, but is investing her affections in her boss Mike Cutler, who exploits and undervalues her and is shown not to appreciate her mind as Richard eventually will. The New York setting, flagged up by a few key indicators, sets the parameters of the women's lives. They enjoy a degree of professional authority, albeit heavily circumscribed by gendered structures, and take pleasure in shopping at the stores close to their office. Bunny makes her late arrival for work clutching a dress box, declaring 'wait till you see what I snagged at Bonwit's!', while her junior colleague uses the telephone to pursue 'that little black velvet strapless you had in the window'. Here, *Desk Set* fits with a wider corpus of New York-set romantic comedies and their protagonists. As Deborah Jermyn describes, 'It is because New York

permitted the rise of the "savvy" or "spunky" urban single woman that she became so readily available and focal to the genre (and its hero) within this location, flourishing into a dynamic character type with which to facilitate the romantic machinations of the rom-com plot' [7] (p. 15). Bunny is consistent with this model, and, in line with Hepburn's very well established star persona, is presented as someone whose thinking is both razor sharp and eccentric in style. When Richard puts her through a series of testing puzzle questions, which she sails through and turns inside out, she declares simply that 'I associate many things with many things'.

2. 'Time Is Money, So They Say . . . '

Our first encounter with the plant which forms the focus of this essay occurs at the initial meeting between Richard and Bunny, where his fascination with her is sparked. We glimpse the philodendron before we meet Bunny herself, as visitor Richard is ushered into her private office to wait for her. As we share the view of Bunny's three co-workers through the glazed doors, we see him measuring and pacing the room beneath a lush climbing plant, looped along close to the ceiling. It is only once Bunny has returned and is talking with Sumner that it comes more fully into view, along with its pot on top of a bookshelf. While the two central characters cautiously interrogate each other's professional credentials, Bunny reaches into her desk, spoons some white powder from a tin, and mixes it into a glass of water without breaking the flow of conversation. As Richard observes that 'time is money, so they say', she equivocates with 'mmhm—so I've heard', and moves across the room towards the philodendron, as the film cuts to a medium shot to show the plant's full extent (Figure 1).

As Bunny pours the plant food mixture into the pot, Richard's baffled gaze prompts a point of view panning shot which carefully traces the philodendron round the top of the room, right to its slightly trembling end (Figure 2). A comic refrain in the soundtrack amplifies the general mood of astonishment. To his wordless reaction, Bunny simply responds 'green thumb!', before the ringing telephone curtails any further comment. What is the nature of the joke, or unease, here? The building is full of plants, all presumably requiring watering. Some of the signalled comedy springs from the sheer size of the philodendron, its extension in space (and therefore the duration of the shot) implicitly excessive in failing to stop. The film's visual language takes its shape from the philodendron, deploying an 8 second long, mobile shot purely to trace the rambling linear growth of the plant, and refusing a cut back to Richard's face until the very last leaf has been taken in.

Figure 2. The camera follows the philodendron.

Wrapped up in this sense of excess is the degree of attention Bunny accords to the philodendron, both in the immediate moment, in which she continues to minister to the plant even as Richard engages her in a tense professional discussion, and in the preceding years of care manifested in its growth. While this sequence indubitably serves a purpose, in progressing

our sense of Bunny's ease with her own unconventional work style, this is a secondary effect of a moment where the plant commands our gaze. Richard's words propose time as a quantifiable economic resource, whereas Bunny's glance at the philodendron hints at an alternative possibility of time as growth, time as extension in space, time as a potentially generative dimension without teleology. For the rest of the film, the plant is given no direct attention until EMMARAC mistakenly issues pink slips firing everyone in the building, and the research staff begin to gather their personal possessions. This is a straightforward matter of sorting the contents of the office according to ownership, until the plant is again brought to the fore. Bunny clambers onto a chair, telling her colleague Peg that she must take all the books on the top shelf as 'they're worth an awful lot of mon . . . ' before suddenly finding herself face to face with the plant. 'My philodendron! What am I going to do with my philodendron?', she exclaims, before joking that she could 'dump all the plant food in and head it toward Emmy', or take it on the bus and 'say it's alive and pay an extra fare'. Again, the plant is deployed as a symbolic antithesis to any rationalizing agenda, indeed each and every time the plant comes to the fore some question of money is running in the dialogue as a potentially opposing current. The plant, and her care for it, offers a simple symbolic demonstration of her idiosyncratic working style within the corporation, and hints at a conflation of the organic and the feminine at work in her systems—or non systems—of knowledge organisation. While this may be a simple, even obvious co-option of the vegetal into a human drama with a rather slight political bite, the tendrils sent forth through our looking at the plant nonetheless extend beyond that.

The philodendron is the exception amongst countless other, less remarked, plants inhabiting the offices of the Federal Broadcasting Network. Work spaces and lobbies are adorned with all the conventional flora of the thriving corporation, the 'superfluous trinkets of urban decoration' in Emanuele Coccia's terms [8] (p. 3). Identical, single-stem, roses sit in bud vases on desks, and glossy green potted plants unobtrusively augment corners of the décor. The President's vast, contemporary office plays host to several TV screens, verdant ornamental plants, and a staged fireplace laden with logs, dead wood offering an ersatz allusion to some other time and place in which plants were more directly utilised. In this respect, the mise en scène reflects what Michael Marder describes of plants which form 'the inconspicuous backdrop of our lives—especially within the context of "urban landscaping"—much like the melodies and songs that unobtrusively create the desired ambience in cafes and restaurants', omnipresent but drawing a 'practical lack of attention' [9] (p. 3). These invisibilised plants are complemented in the film by those which we might, following Marder, see as more directly instrumentalised. The co-opting of plants into a symbolic decorative function reaches its greatest height in setting the scene for Christmas, the film's leap forward to that season being signalled by a shot of the Rockefeller Christmas tree, followed by a cut to mistletoe being hung above the office door and a scene of the workers decorating a real tree in the reference department: 'I told you the old-fashioned kind are the prettiest!', announces Bunny. Flowers are deployed as tokens in the transactions of the romantic plot, in line with Marder's account of how 'we wrap them—and other plants that matter to us—in layer after layer of symbolic significance, cultural meanings, and utility. [...] Indeed culturally, flowers are usually assigned the task of mediation between romantic partners, but to narrow their language down to this function is to impoverish their self-expression' [10] (p. 165). Mike, Bunny's boss and noncommittal romantic partner, brings a stiffly arranged pot of pink carnations to her office on the day they are due to go away for a weekend. As she expresses her delight at their loveliness, he intones that 'you'd better read the card first' before cancelling their trip; the flowers are not to be disentangled from the purpose they were purchased to serve. In the closing moments of the film, Mike, now wanting to win Bunny back, appears clutching a glossy beribboned box of red roses, the flowers identifiable more through the sheer predictability of the choice than by being visually legible as themselves. After Mike gives up hope and abandons the roses on the desk, they are spotted by Richard, who then immediately passes them to Bunny. This floral gesture articulates a love he has so far expressed most directly through

asking EMMARAC, 'Should Bunny Watson marry Richard Sumner?', and the computer had seemed set to come between them. Now, as the fears around the computer have been assuaged, he hands Mike's cast-off flowers to Bunny. She looks at them and accepts the unspoken message before they kiss in front of EMMARAC, the work of the narrative now completed as the lights on the computer announce, 'The End'. As Marder writes, in such uses of plants 'we do not yet encounter them, even though their outlines become to some extent more determinate thanks to the intentional comportment on the part both of those who tend them and, less so, of those who ultimately consume them' [9] (p. 4). The cut flowers of *Desk Set* facilitate human social manoeuvres, but never appear as themselves.

3. What's in a Name?

So far then, the film abundantly illustrates cultural norms around the marginalisation and instrumentalisation of the vegetal world. In this respect its representation of plant life is akin to that of multiple other studio films aspiring to represent a modern urban existence—see, for example, the houseplants and cut flowers in the stylish apartment of Doris Day's single New Yorker in *Pillow Talk* (1959). In *Desk Set*, the philodendron claims exceptional status, which of course springs partly from its symbolic role in representing Bunny's organic working and thinking styles and implied resistance to a technologised, capitalist world. But this does not mean that it falls into being entirely instrumentalised, and arguably the sheer amount of attention we are invited to devote to this particular plant opens space for other possible ways of relating to it. In an interview, Henry Ephron comments that the plant was 'mentioned in our script as being a philodendron—the long word got a laugh when she [Hepburn] wrapped her tongue around it' [11] (p. 177). But the sense that the humour associated with the plant derives from its name is hard to draw from the film as it was released, in which the word is spoken only twice and then only in the very late scene when Bunny packs up her office. The word does however emerge as a source of contention in anecdotes about the production of *Desk Set*, during which Katharine Hepburn reportedly objected to the plant which was first put in place, and switched it for one she felt to be a better fit. Henry Ephron, interviewed by Garson Kanin, describes the debate on set as one revolving around the identity of the plant:

> Kate came onto the set, looked at it, and asked, 'What's *that* supposed to be?' The prop man replied, 'That's the philodendron.' 'Ridiculous,' she said. 'That's not a philodendron.' 'Well, the next thing [. . .] I was down on the set. I had other things to worry about but she was raising hell, and the set decorator said, 'I don't know what she's talking about. That's a philodendron.' Kate was absolutely furious and kept saying, 'It is *not*. Don't tell *me*!' So they sent for the studio gardener and he looked at it and they asked him what it was and *he* said it was a philodendron. [. . .] In a couple of hours she came back with a truck, and in the truck was a plant that was too big to get into the elevator, even. She got it onto the set and, sweating, pointed at it and said, 'Now, that's a philodendron.' I guess the point of the story is that it was and the thing we had wasn't; so, of course, we used hers [12] (p. 286).

The frustrated batting to and fro of the word 'philodendron' points to some unarticulated gulf in understanding between Hepburn, Ephron and Lang, in which the word apparently only hinders everyone's attempts to express what they are seeing—or failing to see—in the individual plant in front of them. The presence of a philodendron in Bunny's office was specified in the property list for Marchant's play, with a snaking dotted line on the plan of the set indicating the path of the stem around Bunny's office, a layout replicated in the screen adaptation; the word then precedes any individual plant brought in to fulfil it [3] (p. 80). The story of *Desk Set*'s production raises the question of whether some prime exemplar of the genus, or a particular species, was required, or alternatively whether the disagreement was really situated in the distinct qualities of each of two individual philodendrons, and the extent to which they were felt to fit the 'role'. The breakdown in communication suggests that any notion of the word 'philodendron' as a term characterised

by precision can only persist in relation to a certain mode of thinking. Karen Houle observes how every act of naming of a plant makes a claim, which becomes more entrenched with repetition: 'Only one aspect of an apple, or a Douglas fir, is reached for with one kind of word, and that quality of the thing—its color or its species' name, or what it means for national security—emerges in response to that mode of address. It is ordered and "stands forth" each time we speak, and in a certain way' [13] (p. 165). There are various forms of uprooting inscribed in the very word 'philodendron', including the erasure of the name these plants had through centuries of indigenous knowledge before European botanists collected and catalogued them [14]. The etymology of the genus name *Philodendron*, coined only as recently as 1829, speaks of a plant which 'loves' (*philo*), or needs, a tree (*dendron*) as its source of support, but here it finds itself on a film set standing in for a skyscraper office, rather than in the forest canopy. The film showcases reference management systems, represented by the stacks of catalogued materials on every surface of the department, which feel remote from their objects and run through with Western colonialist history; enquiries about indigenous people are considered a matter for The Explorers Club. The knowledge culture of the organisation would therefore seem consistent with the classification of plants in scientific language, of which Marder observes 'In the West, nominalism has been the prevalent method of thinking about plants, integrated into ever more detailed classificatory schemas' [9] (p. 4). In the story of the switching of plants on set, the name seems to be a positive hindrance to comprehension. The discussion hinges around the degree to which either plant fulfils the word which precedes them both, 'philodendron', even as the unnamed studio gardener insists that the first plant fits the bill. Marder elaborates that 'These names are meant to capture the essence of the plant by assigning to it an exact place in a dead, albeit highly differentiated, system that swallows up the sunflower's singularity and uniqueness. The actual sunflower turns into an example of the genus, tribe, and so forth, to which it belongs and is nothing in itself outside the intricate net of classifications wherein it is caught up [9] (p. 5). In *Desk Set*, the presence of the plant might at first have been instigated through a top-down process, driven by one word, and the limitations of that word became conspicuous in the practical business of production. In the finished film, however, we find the indexical impression of one plant in particular, which to some extent escapes the fate of being a non-individuated specimen of a plant group, simply through the way it is shown, but not named. When at last the philodendron is invoked in language, it is not in the same spirit as the abstracted, unseen objects of the department's research, but claimed as an individual in the exclamation 'My philodendron! What am I going to do with my philodendron!'. While it is framed as a possession, it is one which is in the same breath figured as having a claim to Bunny's care and protection.

4. Figure and Ground

The philodendron is rendered hyper visible through the film's own presentation of it as spectacle, along with Richard's reaction to it. The scene of Bunny and Richard's first meeting closely follows both the text and action of Marchant's play. Marchant's stage direction specifies that '*She pours the mixture into the philodendron plant that climbs round the window frame. He follows it around with his eyes. She catches his look*' [3] (p. 13). This 'catching' of his look, the prompt for response, has implications in film, which do not arise in the theatre. While Bunny 'catches' his look, in the sense that she remarks it, we as film spectators also catch the look in a more contagious sense, and what might on stage pass as a far less conspicuous moment of diversion is enshrined as significant by the cinematography and editing. The cut to a point of view panning shot takes us into the perspective of Sumner, through which we trace the sequence of the philodendron's growth, and, with that, Bunny's care for it. Through this shot, the philodendron emerges from the general background of the office space, and is granted a formal status as a figure meriting the time and space of such a shot. Thus, it is through a choice in the translation of a stage direction to the medium of film that the philodendron comes to preoccupy our gaze. In the structuring of attention this generates, there is an interesting comparison to be made

with perhaps the most mythologised example of a plant erupting from ground to figure on film, in the Lumières' *Repas de Bébé* (1895). The film, exhibited in their 1895 Café de Paris screening, famously shows a couple feeding their child at an outdoor table, while behind them the leaves of a potted plant, and the more distant garden vegetation, stir in the breeze. The fascination of this fleeting background movement is reputed to have astonished the neophyte audience, including Georges Méliès. Jacques Aumont frames the claimed effect as being tied up with an unexpected call on our attention: 'As well as enjoying so much stuff offered at once to the gaze, people were amazed at the effects that gaze singled out. Effects of pure movement, like the famous leaves that moved in the background to *Repas de bébé* [. . .]' [15] (p. 424). Aumont elaborates on what he finds in this, namely a constant play on the relation between figure and ground provoked by movement, asking 'what is it to film *Repas de bébé* when, in the background, there are trees whose leaves move, so marked that they attract all the attention? There is no denying that this inaugurated a hitherto unseen relationship between a figure and its ground' [15] (p. 428). The call on attention made by the plant in *Desk Set* is, formally, the antithesis of what is popularly understood to be happening with the Lumières' film, our attention directed to it not by movement incidental to the purported central action, but by the film's own determined craft. It is nonetheless, in the broader cultural landscape, comparable, as an instance rebalancing the figure and ground relation between human actors and vegetal life. For Dawn Keetley, the phenomenon of plants becoming conspicuous is anomalous enough to underpin one of her six theses on plant horror, namely: 'Plants Lurk in our Blindspot' [16] (p. 10). Keetley traces a line through multiple critical perspectives to describe how plants have frequently constituted unattended background, and 'Plant horror exploits this taken-for-granted "fact" of plants' invisibility, passivity, and harmlessness' [16] (p. 10). Keetley proposes that 'What this means is that when vegetation refuses to be mere backdrop—when it balks at being dismissed as the hiding-place of snakes, spiders, lions, and crocodiles—it becomes doubly horrifying, the dread legible through both psychoanalytic and cognitive models of mind' [16] (p. 11). There is perhaps something of this in Richard's reaction, as he is not permitted to inhabit Bunny's office without conceding to notice the philodendron.

Yet, if the plant is attended to by the film in a way which runs counter to the norms for plants in its environment—the office, and the Hollywood studio film alike—it also becomes clear that this is not because it is somehow in the 'wrong' place. In the body of theoretical writing on plants, houseplants receive relatively little direct discussion, except under the general category of the ornamental use of plants. Presupposed by much use of ornamental houseplants is the capacity to nurture a plant often native to some other location (in the case of the philodendron, the South American rainforest). Out of placeness is not here something which denotes horror or invasion but a need for care, and a sense of responsibility wrapped into the question 'what am I going to do with my philodendron?'. *The Desk Set*, as a play, was bound by the limits of theatre to the office space, and the philodendron offers an efficient way of gesturing to forms of organic growth which would otherwise be difficult to draw into the diegetic world. As André Bazin observes, in comparing the rendering of nature on stage and on screen, even if a real tree might be brought onto the stage, there is no possibility of a forest [17] (p. 89). For Bazin, the capacity of film, versus theatre, to represent nature lies in the way the right image can postulate a wider landscape. Disparaging the artfully constructed forest of Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen*, Bazin argues that 'the trembling of just one branch in the wind, and the sunlight, would be enough to conjure up all the forests of the world' [17] (p. 111). Such a metonymic form of realism arguably still co-opts a plant or plants into representing something other than, or more than, themselves and their own self-expression. The extent to which *Desk Set*'s philodendron resists this is striking. Its individuation lies in part in the film's insistence on its status as an inhabitant of the interior world, which does not signpost us towards some putative wilderness beyond the office. Nor does it participate in the sort of 'motley, intricate weave of urban artifice and uncontrollable nature' identified by Pansy Duncan in the urban flowerbed of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) [18] (p. 222). *Desk Set* makes virtually no space at all for the idea of a

vegetal existence capable of subsisting without human intervention. The world of the film is resolutely urban, with the New York setting established in the first shot by a vertiginous tilt taking us from ground level, up and up 30 Rockefeller Plaza, not quite reaching the top before we are immersed in the bustling modernist office. Fleeting excursions beyond the skyscraper never take us to any wilder zone than the kerbside, a place drenched in rain, to be escaped as rapidly as possible in a car. This is an environment in which plants survive at the will of humans, and if they are to thrive it is under their care. This is never clearer than in the only scene of any length to be set outdoors. Richard invites Bunny for lunch, an event which, to her dismay, turns out to involve a brown bag of sandwiches on the roof terrace of the office building. The terrace is a hard, frigid, built zone, with litter blowing around amidst the few desultory pigeons who provide the only example of non-human animal life in the film. Leafless trees are trained to trellis grids, with every branch shaped to fit the rectilinear demands of the supports, matching their fellows. The wooden planters in which they stand feature symmetrical diamond patterns, created by slicing and shaping wood into geometry. Deeper in the background, other trees stand with their crowns wrapped up in hessian against the frost. The patio furniture represents ossified forms of foliage in cast metal. There is almost an inversion of *Repas de Bébe* here, the vegetal life which sits behind the diners being positioned as props in a highly controlled studio environment, against a static diorama of the New York skyline (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Bunny and Richard eat lunch on the roof terrace.

There is no prospect of leaves stirring in any breeze to draw our eye away from the conversation, indeed the branches are concertedly and conspicuously immobilised. Within the fictional dimension, this immobilisation reflects acts of cultivation and care designed to ensure the plants' survival in a hostile city environment, and thereby their decorative function in more clement weather. Almost every plant in *Desk Set* then is placed in circumstances which strip away the essential plant quality noted by Emanuele Coccia, that plants 'have no need for the mediation of other beings in order to survive' [8] (p. 8). This is a place where only plants which respond to, and are offered, the mediation of others can survive. The philodendron is the most positive expression of this inescapable dependency. Marder finds a place for human care behind the self-expression of some plants, noting that 'Plants, to be sure, respond to our care without saying anything. They do so by expressing themselves more exuberantly, by spreading more branches, unfolding more leaves, or opening more blossoms. They exist, they *are*, more intensely, and this intensity is of a piece with their extending themselves further in space, or, in a word, their growth' [10] (p. 163). The exuberance of the philodendron is both an expression of itself, and of Bunny's 'green thumb'. While its name may recall its origins in the forest canopy of South America, it has indubitably flourished in the skyscraper. When the plant is taken down in readiness for Bunny's departure from the company, it is her hands and

those of her co-workers which cradle it, as it is carefully teased apart from the fabric of the room (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Bunny and her colleagues take down the philodendron.

5. Green Thumb

In possessing the 'green thumb' delivering the acts of care which preserve these urban plants, Bunny's character is inextricably interwoven with Hepburn's star persona, perhaps even more so from a position of retrospect. Henry Ephron's story of her selection of the 'right' philodendron reflects this element of Hepburn's character, and her reputation as a gardener forms a more and more prominent strand in her public reputation over the course of her life. Biographer Anne Edwards reports the story told by executive stage manager Bernard Gersten, who accompanied Hepburn on a tour, which involved travelling with 'trunkloads of food and other necessities, including plants she'd been given and couldn't bear to leave behind. Once, someone had apparently neglected to wrap a beautiful, delicate plant against the weather and when [we] opened the trunk [we] discovered it had given up the struggle against the cold. Miss Hepburn cried' [19] (p. 309). This sense of an imperative to protect plants from an environment in which they find themselves only through human agency recalls the wrapped trees of the *Desk Set* terrace. Yet it would be a mistake to see the forms of care expressed here as quasi-anthropomorphising sentimentality. Just as in *Desk Set* there is never any credence given to the jokes that the philodendron might participate in the workers' animosity towards EMMARAC, nor to the claim that it is 'alive' in the same sense as other bus passengers, and therefore an economic actor, so too does Hepburn's relation to plants entail a recognition of difference. In another biographical anecdote, we again see Hepburn switching plants around for maximum cinematic effect, this time in Joan Kramer and David Heeley's 1993 TV film about her, *Katharine Hepburn: All About Me*. Hepburn wanted to be seen transporting plants between New York and Fenwick, the beloved Connecticut home she had inherited from her family. The filmmakers recount how she invited them to film her departure, telling them 'We take enough stuff for a month—food, clothes, and all the flowers. I never leave the flowers behind' [20] (p. 313). For the purposes of representing this though, she borrowed a pot of red geraniums from neighbour Stephen Sondheim, having reportedly explained that 'All the flowers I have are pink and white—and they'd look rather dull on camera. No contrast' [20] (p. 313). On screen impact is of primary importance here, in a way it probably was in the choice of philodendron, and Sondheim's plant is drafted in to represent her care for plants in a general sense rather than Hepburn feeling any duty to authentically portray a relationship with an individuated plant of her own. Elsewhere, the work of gardening is figured in Hepburn's thinking as pure labour, and the cost of this is elaborated. Hepburn devotes an entire chapter of her autobiography to a piece titled 'Memorial Day', recounting the process of weeding and replanting an area of ground at Fenwick, in the company of David Lean, his wife Sandy, and Hepburn's secretary Phyllis [21] (p. 279). The story provides a

frank digging into the pleasures and trials of working with plants, as well as a sense of entitlement to uproot plants not to her taste and choose the specimens which satisfy the eye of the human gardener. On the way to the house, the group stops at a nursery to select plants and tools, and Lean increasingly takes the lead in running the project. Back at the garden, Lean directs the work and Hepburn sweats and struggles. He warns her to be careful with the roots of the plants, describing how direct contact with manure will burn them, to which she reacts 'Fuck the roots! I thought; I'm going to die. What about my roots? These people are like a machine' [21] (p. 284). Here there is no binary opposition between plant and machine, but instead a machine-like quality is attributed by Hepburn to people whose vision of plants is in thrall to such a didactic cultivatory regime as to exclude the organic needs of their fellow humans. Hepburn herself then represents a star for whom plants were a constant presence amidst the other forces flowing in her life and work. She actively brings them forth as figures in her writing and self fashioning, they are entwined with her labour as a co-maker of film images, and shape her relation to other human beings.

6. Conclusions

What should we, as spectators, make of *Desk Set*'s attention being offered to one plant, giving us the time to look at it, while invisibilising countless others? The film's treatment of the philodendron echoes all the conventional structures of 1950s Hollywood studio film form and star culture. Marder warns of the risks of such uneven generosity towards plants, commenting that, even if we can attest to a genuine, non-anthropomorphising love for a plant or plants, such a love may still be 'unjust', for 'We cannot avoid privileging the singular being or beings we love over those that do not evoke affection in us' [10] (p. 165). That affection becomes part of the mechanism of survival for a plant held, like the philodendron, in a set of circumstances which render it dependent. Coccia comments that plants' 'absence of movement is nothing but the reverse of their complete adhesion to what happens to them and their environment. One cannot separate the plant—*neither physically nor metaphysically*—from the world that accommodates it' [8] (p. 5). *Desk Set* shows the philodendron to be prospering in the office, as well as vulnerable to the threatened changes which might see it transported elsewhere, and to an outside climate which would not be survivable. There is a similar sense of vegetal precarity in the stories around the switching of plants in the production of the film, and Hepburn's shuttling of plants between her two homes. The same currents of modernity which bring EMMARAC into the office see humans override plants' natural immobility and relation to their environment. However, Natania Meeker and Antonia Szabari offer a vital caution of the risks they see in any framing of plants as 'victims' of modernity (and thereby potentially redeemers also), noting that 'plant life does not somehow remain outside of modernity or inherently in opposition to the forces that structure it' [22] (p. 2). There is a perhaps surprising resonance with *Desk Set* here, a film which does not in the end ask us to invest in any opposition between the philodendron and the computer, nor requires it to ally with humans, nor uses it to conjure up a broader natural sphere somewhere beyond the skyscraper, but lets us recognise the plant as itself, in the time and place where we find it. *Desk Set* is an industrial product in more than one sense: in its themes, in its studio production and in its sponsorship by IBM. It directs the spectator to look at the philodendron because it provides a comedic opportunity, to pit plant against corporation for a beat or two of humour. Looking at the philodendron serves a narrative which is not concerned with plant life more broadly, nor with any place or time, real or dreamed, beyond an immediate present. The philodendron and its image cannot be teased apart from the technologies which bring it to the studio set, the diegetic office, or the screen on which we see it. Yet, despite all this, having brought this plant out of the background, the film leaves us free, like Bunny, to leave behind us the logic of the original proposition and 'associate many things with many things'.

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Article

Black (W)hole Foods: Okra, Soil and Blackness in *The Underground Railroad* (Barry Jenkins, USA, 2021)

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Abstract: This essay analyses the role played by okra in *The Underground Railroad*, together with how it functions in relation to the soil that sustains it and which allows it to grow. I argue that okra represents an otherwise lost African past for both protagonist Cora and for the show in general and that this transplanted plant, similar to the transplanted Africans who endured the Middle Passage on the way to 'New World' slave plantations, survives by going through 'black holes', something that is not only linked poetically to the established trope of the otherwise absent Black mother but which also finds support from physics, where wormholes (similar to the holes created by worms in the soil) take us through black holes and into new worlds, realities or dimensions. This is reflected in Jenkins's series (as well as Whitehead's novel) by the titular Underground Railroad itself, which sees Cora and others disappear underground only to reappear in new states (the show travels from Georgia to South Carolina to North Carolina to Tennessee to Indiana and so on), as well as specifically in the show through the formal properties of the audio-visual (cinematic/televisual) medium, which, with its cuts and movements, similarly keeps shifting through space and time in a nonlinear but generative fashion. Finally, I suggest that we cannot philosophise the plant or the medium of film (or television or streaming media) without philosophising race, with *The Underground Railroad* serving as a means for bringing together plants and plantations, soil and wormholes and Blackness and black holes, which, collectively and playfully, I group under the umbrella term 'black (w)hole foods'.

Keywords: okra; Underground Railroad; plantation; plantationocene; plant-thinking; Blackness; race; mud; earth

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1. Introduction

In the first episode of Barry Jenkins's 2021 adaptation of Colson Whitehead's 2016 novel, *The Underground Railroad*, we see escaped slave Cora (Thuso Mbedu) unearth and carry with her some okra seeds from the small plot of land that she and others till alongside her home. Noted by slave catcher Arnold Ridgeway (Joel Edgerton) in episode five for its ability to endure harsh conditions, okra becomes a minor theme that runs throughout the show, with fellow escaped slave Grace (played by Mychal-Bella Bowman and who does not feature in Whitehead's novel) describing Cora reverentially as a 'planter' in episode three during a discussion of the seeds. Indeed, Grace (who will later be renamed Fanny Briggs, a fictional escaped slave who is reported as teaching herself to read in Whitehead's 1999 novel, *The Intuitionist*) notes the association between Cora and soil, with earth and mud being generally prominent features of the show, which takes place on cotton plantations, cleared Cherokee territories and more. Finally, when Cora finds tentative freedom within an antebellum USA at the end of the show's final episode, she and Molly (Kylee D. Allen), who together escape Ridgeway after the latter has tracked Cora down to the all-Black farm of Gloria and John Valentine (Amber Gray and Peter de Jersey) in Indiana, bury the okra seeds next to a tree at an abandoned farm before they climb aboard the wagon of Ollie (Troy Anthony Hogan), who is heading to St. Louis and on to California in search of a new life.

This essay, then, will analyse the role played by okra in *The Underground Railroad*, together with how it functions in relation to the soil that sustains it and which allows it

to grow. I shall argue that okra represents an otherwise lost African past for Cora and for the show in general and that this transplanted plant, similar to the transplanted Africans who endured the Middle Passage on the way to 'New World' slave plantations, survives by going through 'black holes', something that is not only linked poetically to the established trope of the otherwise absent Black mother but which also finds support from physics, where wormholes (similar to the holes created by worms in the soil) take us through black holes and into new worlds, realities or dimensions. This is reflected in Jenkins's series (as well as Whitehead's novel) by the titular Underground Railroad itself, which sees Cora and others disappear underground only to reappear in new states (the show travels from Georgia to South Carolina to North Carolina to Tennessee to Indiana and so on), as well as specifically in the show through the formal properties of the audio-visual (cinematic/televisual) medium, which, with its cuts and movements, similarly keeps shifting through space and time in a nonlinear but generative fashion. Finally, I shall suggest that we cannot philosophise the plant or the medium of film (or television or streaming media) without philosophising race, with *The Underground Railroad* serving as a means for bringing together plants and plantations, soil and wormholes and Blackness and black holes, which, collectively and playfully, I group under the umbrella term 'black (w)hole foods'.

2. The Plot and the Plantation

In an interview with Michael Boyce Gillespie, Barry Jenkins explained that the okra seeds

> *only happened because the prop master—this guy in the art department who decides the vegetables or wine for every scene—one day showed me some dried okra and let the seeds drop on my desk. He picked one up and he held it to my eye and said: 'No matter how dry this gets, if you plant it, it will grow.' You've seen the show and what we did with that. So much of this production was just [shaped] organically from being receptive to what was happening.* [1] (p. 17; original interpolation)

Given that the prominence of okra seeds in the show came about providentially (or 'organically' and, thus, plant-like?), one might contend that the following argument hinges upon a contingency rather than the pre-established design of Barry Jenkins or Colson Whitehead as authors. Nonetheless, while okra is mentioned only once in Whitehead's novel before becoming a much more sustained presence in Jenkins's show, that mention does bear analysis and helps to strengthen the argument about okra that I wish to make here.

Early in the novel, we are told that Cora's mother, Mabel (played in the show by Sheila Atim), took over the running of her own mother's plot after the latter's death and that Mabel thus 'assumed care of the yams and okra, whatever took her fancy' [2] (p. 14). Whitehead goes on to discuss Cora's own stewardship of the plot, which she maintains in spite of threats from other slaves on the Georgia plantation of the Randall family, her supposed 'owners'. However, that the plot (as a physical space) begins with her grandmother, Ajarry, who does not visibly feature in the show, helps us to understand that the okra from that plot links Cora to her African heritage, not least because a second plot, namely the plot of Whitehead's novel, itself begins with Ajarry being kidnapped from her village by Dahomeyan raiders, who take her to Ouidah, a port town in what today is known as Benin. That is, while Ajarry clearly embodies Cora's African past in Whitehead's novel, the okra seeds from the plot that Cora tends signify more obliquely, but nonetheless meaningfully, this African past, not least because okra's journey to the USA took place in conjunction with the transplantation of Africans to America as slaves via the Middle Passage [3] (p. 123); [4] (p. 140); [5] (p. 95)[1]. Indeed, when Grace/Fanny asks Cora about the okra in episode three, the latter responds by saying that the seeds are hers and that '[m]y mama sowed 'em... and her mama', leading us back to the otherwise unseen and, in the show, unnamed Ajarry. Furthermore, okra is not only known as being a, if not the, key ingredient of gumbo, a speciality of the American South, but it is also central to Callaloo, a dish that has its origins precisely in the Republic of Benin [6] (p. 201).

Over the course of Whitehead's novel, Cora recalls several times the plot of land that she tilled on the Randall estate, if not the okra specifically, and towards the end, she explains to her suitor Royal (played in the show by William Jackson Harper) that her grandmother Ajarry had been 'kidnapped from her family in Africa and tilled a small corner of land, the only thing to call her own' [2] (p. 285). She then calls that plot 'her inheritance' and connects Ajarry's 'indomitability, her perseverance' to those 'three square yards and the hearty stuff that sprouted from it... The most valuable land in all of Georgia' [2] (pp. 299–300). In other words, if, in the novel, the plot is inseparable from Ajarry and, thus, from not only Cora's familial but also her wider African heritage, then we might transpose the 'African' meaning of the plot on to the okra that it, and then Cora, nurtures (with okra and Cora being of course near-homophonous and near-anagrammatical). Indeed, while Ajarry does not feature in the show, it is in the plot that Mabel also buried Cora's placenta, a ritual that not only signifies Cora's links to the land but which also means that the okra seeds are linked to her mother, who herself escaped the Randall plantation before the events of the show began and whose fate we only discover towards the end of both the novel and the show (about which, more later). In other words, the plot and the okra alike function for Cora and, by extension, for us as viewers, as what Toni Morrison calls a 'site of memory', wherein the past for which the okra stands is, even if technically unknown (as Mabel's fate is forever unknown to Cora), also treated as if real in order to forge a Black reality out of a world that has otherwise written Blackness out of the official record and, therefore, out of reality itself [7]; [8] (p. 32).

But if okra and the plot both represent absent mothers, a lost Africa, or, to employ another common plant metaphor, the otherwise subterranean and invisible African 'roots' (as well as the 'indomitability and perseverance') of Cora and African American slaves, more generally, they also carry deeper philosophical meanings that we should presently explain. For, as Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter argued in an early essay, the distinction between the plot and the plantation is key to understanding the completely distinct worldviews of modernity's colonisers and slaves. Since it involves the creation of crop monocultures, the plantation sees nature become nothing more than land to be exploited. This shift in the treatment and understanding of nature to exploitable land is interlinked with, and matched by, a shift towards a globalised market economy where profitability supersedes kinship with the earth and where 'the thing made dominates, manipulates human need' [9] (p. 98). That is, rather than till the land and create a product that responds to a direct need (food to eat), humans begin to dominate the land and simultaneously to create a need that responds to the crop being produced (sugar, cotton, tobacco or indigo). Not only does this see a shift in attitude towards nature, which now is subjugated rather than nurtured (it is land and property), but it also involves a necessary shift from the human as a gardener or steward to the human as embodied labour[2]. Since this abstraction of humans into units of labour is now necessary to the process of profit-making, humans themselves are also abstracted away from being people and towards becoming bodies or commodities; work is no longer chosen, but labour is necessary for profit and, therefore, coerced or forced. That is, slavery comes into existence, not incidentally but as a logical consequence of capital. As the earth becomes what here we are calling 'mere' land, so do certain humans, namely slaves, thus become what Hortense J. Spillers would call mere 'flesh' [11]. And perhaps we do not need to say that part and parcel of this creation of an American labour force of flesh was simultaneously enabled and reinforced by the creation of what W.E.B. Du Bois called 'the color line' [12]; that is, the institution of a racialised system of difference in which certain humans, namely Black folks from Africa, were cast into slavery, as well as being linked conceptually to the earth and dirt/dirtiness, a conceptual manoeuvre that also helps to legitimise slavery to its proponents (if a 'Black' human is 'dirt,' then they can also be exploited like dirt). The way in which slavery sees not just Black humans enslaved but also enslaved humans 'Blackened' [13] therefore helps equally to demonstrate how the shift in attitude towards the earth (from nature to land) is intimately bound together with the creation of an attitude towards certain racialised humans: the 'Blacks' as slaves

who are inferior to the 'enlightened' white European humans, just as the earth is inferior to the same.

As mentioned, both the Black human and the earth as land come to be notably characterised by dirt and dirtiness; 'enlightenment' involves a literal separation, then, of the white human from the Black other and from the earth (the white human becomes 'light', both in the sense of becoming white/not dirty and in the sense of elevating itself above the muddy earth, with photography and cinema as tools for writing with light, eventually becoming key instruments in this process, too, as we shall see). And both the racist and what we have come to understand latterly as the anti-planetary underpinnings of this 'enlightenment' are not just off-shoots of capitalist modernity, wherein profit supersedes humanity (including what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro might polemically call the humanity of the planet [14]); they are, rather, its necessary conditions. That is, anti-Blackness and anti-planetariness, whereby both the Black(ened) race and the earth (as land)—the 'dirty' and dirt—are perpetually destroyed for the enrichment and 'enlightenment' of white people, are essential to capital. And, so, the logic of the plantation—the logic of slavery and monoculture—is the logic of modernity, or as Wynter puts it, '[t]he plantation was the superstructure of civilization' [9] (p. 100), thereby indelibly linking the plant in certain respects to Blackness, not least through the transplantation of both to the Americas. The concomitant racism of plantations is not accidental to modernity, therefore, nor is it an issue that can be 'dealt with' through mere reflection and promises. This runs against the prevalent notion that 'the [capitalist] system works and is capable of reform', a position also critiqued by Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton [15] (p. 170), for racism is not just something that can disappear through an act of the will, not through 'wokeness' and certainly not through 'enlightenment', since racism is inscribed into the latter. Racism is, rather, fundamental to modernity, and capitalism cannot function without it. For this reason, Donna Haraway and others consider that modernity, or the anthropocene, might more productively be termed the plantationocene [16,17].

If Grace/Fanny expresses admiration towards Cora in calling her a 'planter' in episode three of *The Underground Railroad*, we can contrast this with Kenyan cultural theorist Simon Gikandi's explanation that the 'planter class' was, in the European imagination of the period, 'the ultimate expression of African barbarism' [18] (p. xv). Perhaps as much is suggested by the way in which Connelly (Jeff Pope), one of the white overseers on the Randall plantation and a serial abuser of the slaves, urinates on Cora's plot of land just before he realises that she has escaped in episode one; since the plot, as a space where Cora cultivates her own plants, is 'barbaric', for Connelly, it becomes a suitable toilet (in the process demonstrating that, if there is any 'barbarism' at work, it is the white man's, as he literally pisses on Cora's birth right). But while plantation owners and the west more widely grew rich off slavery, and while the link between 'planting' and Blackness served only to signify the 'barbarism' of the latter in the white western imagination, the relationship between Cora/slaves/Africans and the earth or, perhaps better, the kinship between them in fact demonstrates an entirely different worldview or an entirely different philosophy of life and living. In this way, the plot, as a space in which slaves cultivated their own plants, demonstrates not the view that man is separate from nature but that humans are part of nature and that, for the descendants of Africans, 'the land remained the Earth—and the Earth was a goddess; man used the land to feed himself; and to offer first fruits to the Earth; his funeral was the mystical reunion with the earth' [9] (p. 99).

Now, since the slave, with Cora as our example, used the plot to feed themselves, of course the plot became structurally necessary to slavery as an institution; it, in fact, enabled the slaveowner to maximise profits, because they did not have to spend as much money on feeding and, thus, maintaining the energy of their labour power. That is, plots 'provided sustenance in a plantation regime that was hostile to life that could not be commodified', meaning that '[e]ven if plantations were geared towards monocropping regimes of export-oriented commodity production, they were sustained by the cultivation of foods and animals practised by enslaved peoples' [17] (p. 9). Nonetheless, for Wynter,

the plot stood in contrast to the plantation in being 'the roots of culture' [9] (p. 100), with 'culture' here being oppositional to 'the history of the plantation', which is 'the official history of the superstructure; the only history which has been written' [9] (p. 101). That is, the plot involves a different epistemology from white western modernity, which itself is based upon a different ontology; its mode of knowledge is 'dirty' and 'imagined' (Cora does not know what happened to Mabel; Africa is absent), and its being is not separate from the earth, as per the (claimed) ontology of the white human, but rather, it involves what I am calling, à la Haraway, a kinship between the two. More simply put, and as Elizabeth DeLoughrey explains in her Wynter-inspired work while drawing upon Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, it was in such plots where slaves would 'plot' escape, revolt and other means of defying tyranny [19] (p. 44); see also [20] (p. 25). That is, it was in the plot where wholly other conceptions of reality were devised and revised, expressed and nurtured, one in which the white human was not superior to the land and the Black human alike but where the human and earth existed in, to rephrase Wynter, 'mystical union'. Not only a Morrisonian site of memory, then, but the plot is also what Lauren F. Klein, drawing on Christina Sharpe in her analysis of the novel, calls a 'site for imagining otherwise' [5] (pp. 108 and 132); see also [21].

Understood in this way, the plot and the okra seeds of *The Underground Railroad* suggest that what white western modernity dismisses as unreal (a 'mystical' kinship between humanity and nature, an 'otherwise' way of being) is precisely real and that the dismissal of that kinship/that ontology to unreality (its labelling as mystical, if not as barbaric, dirty and so on) is part and parcel of a racialised program that aims to elevate the white human as superior to nature and as superior to other, Blackened humans. If to provide others with food is an act of love, as Maria Flood understands the scenes of food-giving and food-sharing in Jenkins's earlier *Moonlight* (USA, 2016), then the plot is also a space of love, while the plantation is loveless, with no love for the land, the slave or even between the white people that own it (the Randalls, similar to the Ridgeways, seem little to love or even to like each other over the course of the show) [22] (p. 55). Small wonder, then, that a loveless white western modernity would (typically) both exploit and deny the reality of the plot and its contents. To borrow from Episcopal priest Francis X. Walter, when speaking in 1966 against attempts by white supremacists to stop the formation of the Southwest Alabama Farmers' Cooperative Association (SWAFCA), which would see Black farmers get paid more for their crops, in turn encouraging Black people to stay in the region instead of migrating away: 'Yes Lord, we're subversive, vegetables are subversive[,] Lord... Okra is a threat' [23] (p. 106).

3. Soul Food

In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the unnamed narrator buys a yam from a street vendor during his time in New York. It is a transformative moment for the titular 'invisible man', who declares upon biting into it that 'I yam what I am!' [24] (p. 266). While a moment of witty wordplay, however, this sequence also reveals how yam-ness in some senses replaces 'being' in African American life (the narrator 'yams' rather than 'is') and that this 'being otherwise', this 'yamming', is linked to an underground root vegetable that, similar to okra, has also been transplanted from Africa. Indeed, for Kimberly W. Benston, the moment suggests 'the hope of endless renewal without denying the security of completion, and dreams of the hypostatic experience that simultaneously names and unnames itself' [25] (p. 9). In other words, to yam takes us into new realms of existence and towards what Wynter, without reference to Ellison, proposes as 'the basis of a [different] social order', a chthonic existence otherwise to whiteness [9] (p. 99); see also [26] (p. 60). Now, the link between yams and Blackness has long since been explored, including by Orlando Patterson in his foundational *Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* [27] (pp. 242–245), and the link can still be found today, including in Whitehead's novel, where yams are far more prominent than in the show, especially as a food source from Cora's plot and which she shares while on the run with

fellow escaped slaves Caesar and Lovey (played respectively in the show by Aaron Pierre and Zsane Jhe)[3].

Further salient examples of yam-thinking include the work of the late bell hooks, who, inspired by Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1992, 1980), uses the yam as a

> *life-sustaining symbol of Black kinship and community. Everywhere Black women live in the world, we eat yams. It is a symbol of our diasporic connections. Yams provide good nourishment for the body; yet, they are also used medicinally to heal the body.* [29] (p. 23)

Indeed, yams function precisely as a medicine to heal Nettie's malaria when she is living with the (fictional) Olinka people in an unidentified part of Africa in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* [30] (p. 254). Meanwhile, yams have also featured briefly in the recent experimental film about African American history, *The Inheritance* (Ephraim Asili, USA, 2020), while also being a key feature of Kendrick Lamar's 2015 song, 'King Kunta', where the rapper proposes that '[t]he yam is the power that be'.

If, from novel to show, there is, in *The Underground Railroad*, a shift from yams to okra, we nonetheless might draw a salient point from the former before we move more closely to consider the latter. For, while okra might, similar to the yam, suggest an otherwise way of being (Cora as okra, the narrator in *Invisible Man* as yam, Black women as yams, yams as a life-giving force, and okra as the soul), DeLoughrey draws once again upon Brathwaite to chart how the yam homophonously, if not etymologically, recalls the term *nyam*, which 'derives from a number of West African languages for the word for "to eat"', and that Brathwaite's use of the word *nam*, which he defines as 'the heart of our nation language', is an 'underground resource' that is a 'secret-name, soul-source, connected with *nyam* (eat), *yam* (root food), *nyame* (name of god)' [19] (pp. 42–43); see also [31] (p. 121). For Brathwaite to propose *nam* as 'the heart of our nation language' serves several purposes, foremost being a wilful mis-spelling of 'name' precisely in order to un-name and to rename the self (former slave families in the Americas lost their original names, with many still carrying the names of their plantation owners). But more important for present purposes is how Brathwaite links *nam* and *yam* not only to *nyam* but to *nyame*, meaning God.

As can be understood from the similar spelling, *Nyame* is linked to the Akan term for the Supreme Being or God, *Onyame*. And if it is by Dahomeyan raiders that Ajarry was kidnapped in Whitehead's novel, then the chances are that they were raiding for slaves from a nearby kingdom, which could conceivably be the Akan kingdom of the Ashanti, which lay due east of Ouidah, and which stretched inland across present-day Ghana and as far north as what is now Mali. My reason for providing evidence that Ajarry might be Akan is because it allows us to perform a similar wordplay to the one performed by Brathwaite[4]. For, while Carolyn Kolb suggests that '[t]he West African term, *ukru ma*, became *okra* after slaves brought the plant through the Caribbean to southern plantations' [32] (p. 206; original italics), I also wish to suggest that, as *yam* recalls *Onyame*, so does okra even more closely recall how the same word, *ōkra*, in the Akan language means 'soul'. Indeed, it is hard to believe that slaves of Akan origin did not relate okra to their native term for the soul, not least because 'okra' was, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, in use in the English language by the 1670s (i.e., long before the transatlantic slave trade came to an end), meaning that Akan slaves would almost certainly link okra to *ōkra*. Furthermore, the same Online Etymology Dictionary also compares okra to the Akan word *nkruma*, which loosely recalls other Akan terms such as *nkrabea*, which means 'destiny', and *nkra*, which is a message (from God). Therefore, to be clear, it is not that okra is specifically derived from *ōkra*; it appears not to be. But I am suggesting that there is some reason to believe that the becoming-okra of *ukra ma/nkruma* could not help but recall for Akan speakers their religious belief in *ōkra*, the soul given to them by the same *Onyame* that Brathwaite links to the yam. And even if not descended specifically from the Akan, Cora in *The Underground Railroad* comes at least from a family of West African origin, and her grandmother might have understood the word okra to be linked to a variation of *ōkra*, as Brathwaite also discusses *nyame* across 'a number of West African languages'.

Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye is perhaps the most incisive scholar of the 'Akan conceptual scheme', and there are numerous ways in which his work might be of use in this essay, including how he seeks to legitimise as philosophy what the west other-foolish (as opposed to other-wise) dismisses as 'mysticism' [33] (p. 5) and how being killed by a snakebite, which is Mabel's fate in *The Underground Railroad*, poses a real problem to Akan thinkers, because while snakes can and do kill people, that it would happen to a specific person at a specific time would not so much be meaningless as have a meaning that is inaccessible to the Akan thinker [33] (pp. 78–82). That is, much as Cora never discovers that her mother died in the swamp not far from the Randall plantation and that she therefore did not escape to freedom as Cora hopes and as Ridgeway fears, so does Cora not know that it is Mabel's very disappearance that, in many ways, inspires her also to escape (Mabel was about to return home after having just a small taste of freedom by going into the swamp at night; had she not died, she would have gone back to the Randall plantation, and Cora would likely never have escaped). Furthermore, Mabel's disappearance also inspires Ridgeway to pursue Cora so doggedly, since it is a source of humiliation for Ridgeway that a mother and a daughter both might escape and elude him. In other words, *The Underground Railroad* subtly proposes to us meaning (at least in the sense of having meaningful consequences) in otherwise senseless and/or random happenings (a fatal snakebite to Mabel will eventually set Cora free and lead to Ridgeway's downfall). Finally, Gyekye's general defence of communalism, or a society in which the group comes before (but not at the expense of) the individual, would also seem to be reflected in the all-Black community that the Valentines build on their farm in Indiana and which is so antithetical to white individualistic existence that it must be destroyed [33] (pp. 154–162). To connect Gyekye's work with that of contemporary Black studies, the Akan way of life involves what Fred Moten calls 'consent not to be a single being' [34].

More than these specifics, however, is the idea that okra, as the *ōkra*/soul, represents a different and specifically African way of being, one that is, as Gyekye outlines, not dualistic in the western sense of the Cartesian *cogito* but rather 'dualistic and interactionist' [33] (p. 102). That is, *ōkra* is integrated into, rather than separate from, the body (or *honam*) while also being a gift from *Onyame*, from whom *ōkra* is nonetheless separate. 'Interactionist' therefore suggests that '[w]hat happens to the soul takes effect or reflects on the condition of the body ... [and] what happens to the body reflects on the conditions of the soul' [33] (p. 101). For this reason, illness in the Akan conceptual scheme can be understood and treated as an affliction of both body and soul, while, in the white west illness, is generally understood only to affect the body. To eat a yam, therefore, does indeed have medicinal qualities, as per the hooks and Walker examples outlined above. And so, concurrently, if okra has similar medicinal qualities, it is because it is (literally?) soul food. It reaffirms an otherwise (non-western) and interactionist soul, which itself is derived from God/*nyame* and which has a direct relationship with the earth. To return to western etymologies, it is to remember that *homo*/human comes from *humus*/mud [26] (p. 59), and that land is life, not property [19] (p. 41). In this sense, the land is indeed what Wynter calls a 'goddess'—a living being with whom we have kinship rather than an object to be treated similar to the proverbial dirt. Similar to okra, the land also sustains us. It gives us the soul/*ōkra* (just as Cora is at, and gives to *The Underground Railroad*, its core). It reminds us that we are linked to a wider existence rather than alienated from it; it gives us roots, which, as DeLoughrey also suggests, are linked to 'rot' [19] (p. 54). And to comprehend this link between roots and rotting is, in turn, to give to us an acceptance of time, change and death to help us to understand that the *ōkra*/soul might indeed live on past our bodies but not as the spirit of a specific individual; rather, it is returned back to *Onyame,* whence it originally came, thereby fulfilling a 'mystical reunion with the earth', if not with the cosmos more generally[5].

4. Black Holes and Wormholes

There is a tendency in the west to say that we are born into the world, rather than that we are born from it[6]. From birth, then, there is a separation in the western mindset of

human from the earth and, I might suggest, a tendency to forget and perhaps even to deny the *humus* of our humanity (western society seeks to escape death and time rather than accepting them). As a matrilineal culture, meanwhile, the Akan would seem to have a much more 'grounded' sense of being, while, in *The Underground Railroad*, which arguably depicts an Akan—or at least West African—diaspora, motherhood across two (the show) or three (the novel) generations is central to its organisation. If the family's link to Africa is lost, except perhaps through okra, and while Cora does not know Mabel's fate, meaning that, in some sense, she does not 'know' her mother, the above-described chthonic worldview as passed down from mother to daughter nonetheless has strong feminist components, as hooks' 'sisterhood of the yam' also helps to make clear (note that the text in which Brathwaite elaborates his theory of *yam/nyam/nyame* is likewise called *Mother Poem*). And as the cultivation of a plot involves sowing seeds into the mud, from which plants then sprout, so there is a vaginal (nonpatriarchal) component to this process that I should like to let grow here. Furthermore, the dark holes in the mud that worms help to dig can be linked to what in physics are also referred to as wormholes and black holes. As the former are the source of life on Earth, so can the latter be mother-poetically understood as the source of galactic life, with cinema/television being media that can help us to understand this, as I wish shortly to explain.

Mud is ubiquitous in *The Underground Railroad*, a constant part of its mise-en-scène, as potentially goes without saying given that it is a show set partially on a plantation, involving farming in various capacities, and set during a period before asphalt roads and concrete. In episode five, Cora, having been recaptured by Ridgeway in North Carolina at the end of episode three, tries to kill herself by drowning in a lake as they cross a desolate Tennessee following the self-willed death of Jasper (Calvin Leon Smith), another recaptured slave. Ridgeway pulls Cora from the water, the second time that he has foiled an escape attempt in the same episode. Needless to say, both are covered in mud. As Ridgeway explains to Cora, who lies on the lake's muddy bank, that dying is not as easy as she would wish it to be, we get a sense of how muddiness is linked to death. Notably, as the show cuts to an overhead shot of the pair by the water, Ridgeway starts to scoop water on to his clothes so as to wash off the mud; he seeks to remove traces of his earthliness, while Cora remains dirty, perhaps even abjected.

In an article-cum-interview with Jenkins in *The Atlantic*, meanwhile, Hannah Giorgis explained how 'the show beautifully emphasizes the ways ... [in which the slaves's] bonds with the land persisted—and persist even now—beyond the specter of forced labor'. She continues:

> *[t]he last episode features a weighty burial scene, one of the moments when Jenkins actually cried during filming. 'This actor ... at the conclusion of the scene, without my prompting, he got down on his knees, and he puts his forehead to the soil, and he inhales the earth,' Jenkins recalled. 'And I thought there was just something so, so deeply spiritual about it. And there was something so visceral, this connection between this person and the Earth; it wasn't corrupted by the condition of American slavery'* [36].

Jenkins seems here to be discussing the moment when, during a flashback to Mabel's last days on the Randall plantation, Moses (Sam Malone) collapses to the ground after discovering that his partner, Polly (Abigail Achiri), has killed herself and their foster children. As the camera slowly moves towards Moses, he steps from the shack where Polly lives and falls to his knees, kicking up dust and breaking down in tears. Even though Jenkins either misremembers the moment (Moses does not put his forehead to the soil) or did not include the take mentioned above in the final cut, he nonetheless affirms here how *The Underground Railroad* seeks to emphasise a relationship between humans and the earth/Earth. And so, as DeLoughrey demonstrates the way in which Erna Brodber chooses 'to displace the yam as originary root and [to] focus our attention on the figure of the maternal, on the earth/Earth' in *The Rainmaker's Mistake* (2007) [19] (p. 58), so might we here think similarly about not okra alone but okra in relation to the mud/soil/earth that nourishes it. As Grace/Fanny says of the okra seeds to Cora in the attic of Martin and Ethel

Wells (played, respectively, by Damon Herriman and Lily Rabe) in episode three: '[y]ou should plant 'em, you know? Ain't no point in carrying 'em around like that. Ain't what they meant for.' That is, okra might evoke the *ōkra*/soul, but as *ōkra* cannot exist without the body/*honam* or the bodily spirit/*sunsum*, according to the Akan conceptual scheme, so okra cannot exist without mud, the 'flesh' of the Earth.

Okra, similar to many plants, sprouts from the earth, having been placed in a hole (and likely, but not necessarily, covered over). Earthworms, meanwhile, aerate and recycle nutrients in the soil. While there are no visible worms in *The Underground Railroad*, we nonetheless know that soil is more fertile when it contains a larger number of earthworms. In other words, life grows thanks to holes: the 'black' hole where seeds are sewn into the mud and the wormholes that are produced by this vital species of mollusc (a figure no less important than Charles Darwin ended his career most fascinated not by the supposedly most complex creatures of evolution but rather by the 'simple' earthworm) [37]).

Meanwhile, in physics, wormholes or the Einstein–Rosen (ER) bridges that connect distant points in spacetime, are equivalent to quantum entangled particles, which themselves are referred to as Einstein–Podolsky–Rosen (EPR) pairs, hence the formula ER = EPR. The latter are also thought to involve 'spooky action at a distance', Albert Einstein's description of how information between entangled particles would have to travel faster than the speed of light in order for their actions to be simultaneous, which, in principle, would contravene Einstein's understanding that nothing can travel faster than light, even though such 'spooky action at a distance' has been proven mathematically to be true. Not only is there a simultaneously racial logic at work in Einstein's thinking ('spook' as both ghost and racist slang for a Black person), but more particularly, wormholes are theorised as being the heat that black holes slowly give off and which typically is called Hawking radiation, after Stephen Hawking. In effect, for physicists such as Juan Maldacena and Leonard Susskind, every wormhole is a tentacle of Hawking radiation squiggling its way out of a black hole and re-entering spacetime as we know it at a point completely different from where it entered the black hole [38]. In this way, wormholes via black holes potentially connect together each and every point in spacetime, a notion salient both to the titular 'Underground Railroad' of Whitehead's novel and Jenkins's show, and to the editing techniques adopted by Jenkins, as we shall see.

In her analysis of *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, DeLoughrey says that the cave is a 'well-known feminized figure of Platonic allegory' and that it is 'also a foundation for subterranean human development and provides a new plot for the post-emancipation community' [19] (p. 57). However, while we might read Whitehead's and Jenkins's literal underground railroad stations in the same way, I wish also to suggest that, when in the show we see Cora and other refugee slaves descending into the spaces of the underground railroad, it is visually more suggestive of a blackhole. What is more, for the railroad's passengers, together with those who help them, to go underground and then to reappear in a completely different location or state means that the Underground Railroad, as it is signified in both Whitehead's and Jenkins's texts, functions as a sort of wormhole; it connects different and distant points in spacetime as it passes through a black hole while also being connected to racial Blackness, as per Einstein's sense of being 'spooked' by something moving 'faster' than light (i.e., darkness itself, which, if nothing moves faster than darkness, is perhaps also 'nothingness'). As the show progresses from Georgia to Indiana and onwards, and as each state charts a different take on race relations in the USA, so does it take us through wormholes, showing the interactionist nature not just of humans but of reality itself; as per my analysis of ER = EPR above, all of these realities are interlinked.

The second episode of the show begins with the camera moving in towards the window of Cora's former shack on the Randall plantation. A yellow curtain blows in the wind before darkness almost completely covers the screen. While the show then cuts to Ridgeway and adopted former slave child Homer (Chase Dillon) searching for clues inside the shack as they begin their pursuit of Cora, Caesar and Lovey, this moment nonetheless

is one of many in the show whereby we see 'black holes'. Meanwhile, the third episode with Cora and Grace/Fanny in the aforementioned attic cannot but recall Harriet Jacobs's famous 'loophole of retreat', where she hid for seven years during her own journey towards freedom from slavery (Whitehead openly acknowledges Jacobs's influence on his text, while Lauren F. Klein also explores this connection in her treatment of the novel; see [2] (p. 315); [5] (pp. 130–131)). As Katherine McKittrick points out, Jacobs's 'loophole' is also a 'dark hole' [8] (p. 41), and we might push further here and say that it is also a 'wormhole', in that Jacobs passes through it and into a new reality (the same cannot quite be said for Cora and Grace/Fanny, since the former is discovered by Ridgeway and the latter is left to burn in the attic when the Wells's house is set on fire by the white supremacist people of their unnamed North Carolina town; nonetheless, both women do eventually escape to freedom via the titular railroad). What is more, as Jonathan Beller describes Jacobs's experience of witnessing life on her plantation from inside the loophole/wormhole as akin to being inside a camera obscura, so does this apply to *The Underground Railroad*, as Cora and Grace/Fanny both observe village life from their attic vantage point [39] (p. 101); [40].

Furthermore, we might suggest here that all audio-visual media, from the camera obscura to cinema, television and streaming media, themselves are linked to wormholes/black holes. This is not just expressed in figurative black holes along the lines of what I have outlined above, nor is it confined to the way in which the story takes us through space and time as it plays out in a linear fashion. It is also there in Jenkins's editing more generally. Take the opening sequence of the first episode: we cut from a notably dark screen with the sound of wind whooshing to a slow-motion image of Cora and Ridgeway falling into a black hole, first shot from above and then from the side. We then cut to Mabel's face in close up, screaming as she gives birth. At ground level, we see a placenta drop to the floor. Cora and Ridgeway continue to fall. A slow tracking shot in towards the exterior of Mabel's shack, Mabel crouched by her plot as the camera moves left. An overhead shot of Mabel placing the placenta in the ground and then burying it in the dirt. A beam of light shines at the camera, and an Underground Railroad train approaches. In reverse-motion, we see Caesar running backwards through a field. Royal walks forwards, hands aloft. Ridgeway's father (Peter Mullan) stands in his house. Grace/Fanny also walks backwards through the Wells's burning house. And so on, until we fade to an adult Cora standing by a lake and a voiceover saying '[t]he first and last thing my mama gave me was apologies' as she turns to the camera, which approaches and then backs away from her. Cut to an image of Cora and Caesar by a tree, giant text on the screen: Chapter One. Georgia. In this sequence of images, which cuts radically between moments in the show, we get a sense of how the cuts of cinema/television/streaming media are or, at the very least, can be wormholes, spanning vast swathes of space and time or perhaps even different realities, even if most shows and films simply cut within familiar spaces and times for the sake of 'continuity'. Furthermore, this opening sequence spans life and possible death, as we see Cora born, falling into darkness and by the lake where she will also attempt to take her life[7]. Her regard to the viewer in the latter shot also implicates us: this is not simply a spectacle from which we are detached but an experience with which we are invited to interact.

This potential of the medium to take us through wormholes/black holes in a story that is about entering black holes and then leaving them in new realities is also, as per DeLoughrey's analysis of the cave, constitutive of a feminised and post-emancipation reality. Furthermore, *The Underground Railroad* also chimes with the treatment of the black hole as a conceptual figure in the works of various Black feminist scholars. For example, Michele Wallace argues that 'black holes in space are full, not empty ... black holes may give access to other dimensions' [41] (pp. 556–558), while for Evelynn Hammonds, black holes point to how the sexuality of Black women has a 'different geometry' than the 'more visible sexualities' [42] (p. 310). That is, as a black hole is not visible (since light cannot escape it), so are Black women often rendered invisible, as per Mabel's disappearance from and Ajarry's nonexistence in Jenkins's show; but also, the matrilineal line of Black women posits

a different structure/geometry to white heteropatriarchal society (being white, Ridgeway is of course locked in an oedipal struggle with his father).

Rizvana Bradley furthermore argues that 'black w/holeness' possesses a 'performative potentiality' through which it can express 'the empty fulfilment or fulfilled emptiness of black female dispossession', or the process whereby Black women were regularly dispossessed of their children during slavery [43] (P13). Finally, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues that the Black woman is, similar to a black hole, caught between negativity and generativity, between life and death, and thus an example of what physicists call superposition [44] (p. 645). And so, given that Mabel is an absent mother, fulfilled but empty, a negative presence but also generative of Cora's life, *The Underground Railroad* exemplifies this superpositional logic of the black hole or what Bradley terms the 'black w/hole', a supposed emptiness or negativity that is, in fact, at the root of all that exists, just as a mammy, deprived of her own children, raises white kids and feeds the white family, and just like all American (and other) slaves whose names are erased from history but upon whose broken backs modernity is constructed.

Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip writes in 'A Piece of Land Surrounded' how '[f]ive hundred years ago Cristobal Colon came upon Watling Island: he enc(o)untered another world and that first enc(o)unter with the land of the Natives would be the palimpsest for Europe's subsequent enc(o)unter with the New World. The New World would become both womb (*cunt*) and wound (*cut*)' [45] (p. 164). If the Americas are indeed the cu(n)t from which a precisely 'new' world is born, then, taking into account how that 'New World' was also built by enslaved Black humans, Blackness itself also becomes a cu(n)t. Furthermore, the cut, the invisible (non-)space of Blackness in between shots in cinema/television, is also the cunt from which these media are born. They are, in other words, black holes/wormholes from which the 'whole' is born, a generative act that Fred Moten, in his analysis of improvisation in the Black radical tradition, might call 'the image and the sound of love' [46] (p. 122). That is, as Moten proposes that the cut lies at the heart of 'origin and initiality, drive and energy', so does it constitute (an) 'Event' [46] (p. 30). Similar to the okra seeds landing organically on Jenkins's desk, thereby changing the shape of his show, so is to improvise an organic or, as Moten says, drawing upon Jacques Derrida, an 'invaginating' act of love that cuts into and through heteropatriarchal reality/loveless white western modernity [46] (p. 6). Blackness, as excluded from white western modernity, must always improvise; cast outside of white reality/ontology, it cannot 'prove' itself but must instead always 'improve' itself.

'If you want to see what this nation's all about', says Underground Railroad worker Fletcher (Sean Bridgers) in the first episode, 'you got to ride the rails. Just look outside as you speed through, and you'll see the true face of America.' Looking outside, what does Cora see? Pitch blackness. Underground blackness, therefore, is the 'true face' of America, a seeming absence or emptiness that is constitutive of, and which allows us to cut through, white western modernity. It is a black (w)hole, much like the plot, or the (im)provision ground (the improvised provision ground) that feeds the slave, is seemingly outside but is, in fact, constitutive of, modern capital. In this way, okra is a 'black (w)hole food', a food that springs from the earth, guides Cora to new realities, having also crossed into the 'New World' via the Middle Passage, and the black 'soul' of white modernity built out of Black bodies treated as flesh and out of the Earth treated as land.

5. Black Radical Cinema

In Nia DaCosta's recent *Candyman* (Canada/USA, 2021), a sequel to Bernard Rose's 1992 original film, Black artist Anthony McCoy (Yahya Abdul-Mateen III) berates white critic Finley Stephens (Rebecca Spence) for insincerely praising his work as being emblematic of the Chicago 'hood' where he lives. He asks her:

> *Who do you think makes the hood? The city cuts off a community and waits for it to die. Then they invite developers in and say, 'Hey, you artists, you young people, you white, preferably or only ... please come to the hood, it's cheap. And if you stick it out for a couple of years, we'll bring you a Whole Foods.'*

I include this mention of Whole Foods to highlight a tension in my use of the term 'black (w)hole foods' and which I wish productively to use in relation to *The Underground Railroad*. For, if Whole Foods is effectively a white grocery store, as is implied here by McCoy, then what is or can be as a 'Black' Whole Foods? It is not that the parenthetical (w) in 'black (w)hole foods' negates the link between Whole Foods and whiteness, even as it playfully tries to wrestle an otherwise/'Black' way of thinking from a 'white' brand. Rather, it points to how *The Underground Railroad* is, like the plot, in an almost impossible position in attempting to make visible something that is not just typically invisible within white hegemonic culture, namely slavery, but which rather is antithetical to the ethos of visibility that is at the core of that same white hegemonic culture. That is, white western modernity might be built upon occulted Black labour, cinema might be built upon otherwise invisible cuts, and the visible universe itself might be built upon black holes. And so, how can one use the cinema, which is understood typically as writing with light, in order to depict the opposite of light, namely darkness? To say that *The Underground Railroad* is not the cinema and that it is television and/or streaming is not, I should say, enough. For, even if a dissenting voice wanted to make a case for medium specificity, the show remains a big-budget and commercial enterprise that must, in some respects, court 'visibility'. And even if it is 10 h in length (and, thus, not commercially viable for theatres), it is still broken up into 'manageable' episodes of about an hour in length.

As mentioned, the plot sustained Black life, but it also became co-opted by the plantation owners to maximise profit (knowing that the slaves were feeding themselves, slaveowners did not provide them with as much to eat). And this tension between being radical while also possibly reinforcing that same 'superstructure' identified by Wynter is also inscribed both into the novel and the show through their very premise. For the train, something that both Whitehead and Jenkins imagined the Underground Railroad to involve when they first heard about it as children [47,48], is a technology that, thanks to the Lumière brothers' *Arrival of the Train* (France, 1895), was inscribed into cinema from the get-go. And to use a literal train, even if underground, therefore renders automatically 'cinematic' an historical event, the Underground Railroad, that otherwise deliberately eluded record and visibility in order to operate. As much as can be seen in the show's violence, which runs consistently throughout the series, especially in the first episode in which a slave, Big Anthony (Elijah Everett), is whipped and conflagrated. If, as Frank B. Wilderson III has argued, 'the *spectacle* of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world... our deaths must be repeated *visually*' [49] (p. 225), then, for Jenkins to render visible a traumatic historical event that perhaps eludes visibility is also to partake in anti-Blackness. As Bradley contends, 'the image of black death sutures a wounded nation. Black people are held hostage by the visual, whose myriad permutations are only so many entrances into a mortuary' [50].

And so, while Jenkins's work is considered a 'counter-cinema' [51] (pp. 169–190), while it does have an otherwise 'wormhole' logic along the lines that I have been suggesting, and while Jenkins himself suggests that *not* to depict the violence of slavery is equivalent to 'participating in our own [black people's] erasure' [1] (p. 16), one might nonetheless argue that *The Underground Railroad* is not 'radical' enough, a position held by a filmmaker like Skinner Myers, whose work, similar to Asili's *Inheritance*, is much more alienating and who sees Jenkins as having 'beautified slavery in a way that was very disgusting to me' ([52]; for a similar position about the 'pornographic' nature of the show, see [53])[8]. The issue is not so much who is wrong or right, nor even to acknowledge that of course there can, and perhaps should be, a multiplicity of perspectives on the show (Samantha N. Sheppard argues cogently that the show involves both a 'narrative' and 'counter-narrative' [56] (p. 19)). Rather, it is to point to the impossible position in which Black artists and filmmakers find themselves, in that a truly 'Black' cinema, a cinema of the cu(n)t, would not be and could not be cinema (or television or streaming media), much as Blackness as a whole cannot 'be' without being destroyed, since Blackness 'is' not (it 'yams' instead of 'is'; it is okra/*ōkra*, or rather, it 'okras'; it is improvised and improved). Put otherwise, if, '[w]ith the sole exceptions of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, black women of the slave era remain

more or less enshrouded in unrevealed history' [57] (p. 90), then that history has to be invented/improvised, but in that very invention, improvisation and/or revelation, so is the fact of its invisibility destroyed (it is no longer a 'black hole' once we can see it). As the rendering-visible of Blackness is thus impossible, so can we understand white western modernity as being structured as (cinematically) anti-Black, beyond any specific iterations of racism (hence why it cannot be changed; for racism to end, modernity must end).

6. Conclusions: Plant-Thinking and Race

I hope in this essay to have analysed how the very visibility of white western modernity and its 'enlightenment' is predicated upon (anti-)Blackness, a black (w)hole beyond light, which, with its ongoing chthonic kinship mediated by the plot with the earth and plants such as okra, suggests a being otherwise of Blackness, perhaps even Blackness as opposite to white western 'being', which itself seeks always to steal Blackness's soul/*ōkra* and its otherwise wisdom, even though it refuses to cultivate its own.

I shall end, then, with a brief engagement with the work of Michael Marder, who is perhaps the most well-known of recent plant-thinkers, for Marder's major text on plants, namely *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, explores how 'plants are wholly other and foreign to us, so long as we have not yet encountered them, as it were, on their own turf' [58] (p. 3). That is, we do not really encounter plants when we 'instrumentalise' them [58] (p. 4) or, in the language of this essay, when we use them for profit. For Marder, the plant is thus from the perspective of modernity 'an obscure non-object' [58] (p. 20), which does 'not advocate a naïve vitalism that would insulate life and the living from death; quite to the contrary, it situates "participation in life" in an intimate relation to mortality' [58] (p. 52). If we are to understand the plant, we must understand that the plant has a soul, Marder argues repeatedly, before declaring that '[p]lant liberation is indispensable for the possibility of human liberation... While it is true that the emancipation of human beings is incomplete without the liberation of vegetal life, plants will not be free unless the political and economic conditions responsible both for their oppression and for our appreciation of them change as well' [58] (pp. 142 and 149).

Marder is not necessarily wrong in any of these assertions. However, what hopefully is clear from the foregoing essay is that Marder discusses plants in the way that this essay has discussed Blackness *in relation to plants*, especially via the plot that plays such an important role in *The Underground Railroad*. In effect, then, everything that Marder believes we must do to understand plants is what we must do to understand Blackness. That Marder discusses plants at such great length *without once mentioning race*, though, suggests that what he can understand of plant–human relations, he cannot understand or see of human–human/race relations. If the human–plant divide came about through the advent of a long modernity, during which time humans came to see plants not as kin but as 'instrumental' and without a soul, then this came hand-in-hand with the institution of Du Bois's 'color line'. If our understanding of the world is incomplete without a philosophy of vegetal life, then our understanding both of vegetal life and of the world is also surely incomplete without a philosophy of race (in his silence about race, Marder arguably reinforces the 'color line', thereby potentially allowing the anti-Blackness of modernity to continue uncritiqued).

Okra functions in *The Underground Railroad* as a 'black (w)hole food' that allows us to see how plants and the plantation, soil and wormholes and blackness and black holes are constitutive of our modern world with its white and western hegemony in which Blackness is flesh, the earth is land and death and rot are to be 'eradicated' (or 'uprooted'). Whether or not it is 'truly' radical, or to everyone's taste, *The Underground Railroad* attempts towards a nourishing sense of the black (w)hole. And without a sense of the black (w)hole or cu(n)t, we will not fully understand the cinema or the black nothing, the invisible Black mother, from which we all come.

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Notes

1. 'Africa' features in the show's second episode, where Cora, known now as Bessie, takes a job working at the Museum of Natural Wonders in Griffin, South Carolina. Among other tasks, Cora performs as a 'savage African' for white audiences, dressed in straw clothes, wearing a face mask and carrying a spear. Indeed, it is to an image of a masked Cora that we dissolve from the Randall plantation where Ridgeway begins his search for her. This 'Africa' I place in scare quotes by virtue of its simulated nature, despite the demands of white exhibition curator Mr Fields (Christopher Berry) for 'authenticity' ('Now, Bessie, listen, I want you to work on channeling that African spirit, you see?'). During this episode, we mainly see Cora 'playing' a slave on a cotton plantation, with fellow performer Betty (Charmaine Shaw) also playing the 'African'. In the novel, Cora's performance in the Darkest Africa exhibit allows her to go 'back in time, an unwinding of America... [that] never failed to cast her into a river of calm' [2] (p. 128). In the show, however, Cora seems somewhat removed from that 'African spirit', as per her bemused look to Betty upon Fields's above request. Even if unconsciously so, perhaps the 'authentic Africa' for Cora is the okra seeds, all the more 'authentic' precisely because personal, secret and not part of a public performance.
2. These shifts in attitude and behaviour towards/with nature are accompanied by a logical shift in taste. As amusingly lampooned in a 2018 episode of the recurring *Saturday Night Live* sketch, 'Black Jeopardy', white tastes have became 'bland' over time. Indeed, the 7 April episode from that year saw Chadwick Boseman reprise his role as T'Challa, the Black Panther superhero of the Ryan Coogler Marvel film of the same name. As T'Challa slowly begins to understand the principle of *Jeopardy!*, in which contestants must provide a question to an answer that belongs to a certain category, so must T'Challa find a question about 'white people' that engages with the statement '[y]our friend Karen brings her potato salad to your cookout'. The sketch eventually sees T'Challa understand that Karen is Caucasian and that she does not season her food and that therefore she can 'keep her bland ass potato to herself'. Amusing as it is, though, the sketch also belies how white tastes were shifted by crop monoculture, especially a sweetening of tastes thanks to the cultivation of, and the development of a need for, sugar. This involved a concomitant shift away from more bitter, sour and other tastes, which crops did not become mass produced in the same way. The point to make here is that racial difference also functions on the level of taste, something otherwise supposed to be 'colourblind'. And that our philosophies are matters of taste. Or, rather, our philosophies are not formed in the mind as per a white western/Cartesian worldview but in the mouth and gut (for a key work on this matter, see [10]). I might add that, as our philosophy derives from what we consume, so too do the media that we 'consume' shape our philosophy, including what shows we 'binge'.
3. In a later work, Patterson contends that the North American yam is a misnomer and that it is rather a sweet potato and, thus, does not, 'strictly speaking', belong to 'the real yam culture of West Africa', which did manage to persist in the Caribbean (as opposed to the American South) as a result of the more similar landscape, geography and climate between the two. All the same, Patterson suggests that 'familiar, if not identical, material things [such as sweet potatoes] encouraged language retention' [28] (pp. 65–66).
4. Research has not unearthed the origin of the name Ajarry, which, rather than being a name chosen specifically to evoke a certain culture (it could be a variant of Adwoa/Adjoa, which is a name given in Akan culture to women born on a Monday), could be chosen to evoke a writer such as Alfred Jarry, who, through his concept of 'pataphysics', tried to undermine conventional understandings of reality and, thus, to imagine otherwise. Notably, Jarry also wrote in 1895 a play called *Caesar Antichrist*, with Caesar of course being another name that is prominent in *The Underground Railroad*.
5. American rapper Tyler, the Creator has a song called 'OKRA', released as a standalone single in 2018. Among other things, it involves Tyler discussing how he prefers the land to the sea ('Need a spot in the hills, not the beach, need a pool/Just to cool it, I do need the grass, not the sand') before culminating in him professing not to care about the loss of former friends or that he is materially successful "cause okra'. While he might be referring to the food, it may also be that Tyler is saying that these things (friends, enemies and wealth) are transitory and that the soul is all that remains. The split-screen video to the song also suggests a kind of 'wormhole' aesthetic along the lines that I outline in this essay; that is, two different spaces and times are seen to coexist simultaneously.
6. This argument recalls a well-known dictum from New Age figurehead Alan Watts: '[w]e do not "come into" this world; we come out of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean "waves," the universe "peoples." Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe' [35] (p. 9).
7. It is quite common in *The Underground Railroad* for the show to cut to 'expressive' shots of characters standing in exterior spaces and looking at or close to the camera, which, in turn, approaches and/or circles around them. In other words, Jenkins does apply a 'wormhole' aesthetic pretty consistently, although perhaps its clearest expression is in *The Gaze* (USA, 2021), a medium-length film that features the extended cast of the show in shots similar to the ones just described above: portrait shots filmed at or close to the 'magic hour' and in which the camera moves towards and/or around the characters. Jenkins provides no narrative to

connect the images, making it a much more experimental work than *The Underground Railroad* and thus, in some senses, a perhaps more 'radical' work.

8 The relatively 'happy' ending of the show—in that Cora, together with Molly, escapes and heads west—would seem also to involve some tension. Has there been a 'happy ending' for African Americans in the wake of slavery? Many of the theorists assembled here would, as per Wilderson's proposed 'Afropessimism', suggest not, although an unhappy ending might further render Black suffering as a spectacle. While to head west might seem too 'white American' a resolution to the film, in that white American Manifest Destiny is centred around the ethos to 'go west', that Cora, Molly and Ollie are heading at least initially to St. Louis might, as Whitehead himself suggests, also remind readers (and, by extension, viewers) that the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson was at the heart of the recent rise of Black Lives Matter following the killing of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson in 2014. Furthermore, if an ongoing journey to California might seem to promise a life better even than St. Louis/Ferguson, one need only view Little Marvin's brutally violent Amazon Prime show *Them* (USA, 2021), which looks at the origins of Compton as a Black community within Los Angeles, to see that Los Angeles, the cinematic destination par excellence, is equally unwelcoming to Black Americans. As Whitehead says, 'wherever we [African Americans] go, we're still in America, which is an imperfect place. That's the reality of things' [54] (also quoted in [55]).

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Animist Phytofilm: Plants in Amazonian Indigenous Filmmaking

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Abstract: Early films about plants offer a glimpse into the behavior of vegetal life, which had hitherto remained hidden from humans. Critics have praised this animistic capacity of cinema, allowing audiences to see the movement of beings that appeared to be inert and lifeless. With these reflections as a starting point, this article examines the notion of animist cinema. I argue that early movies still remained beholden to the goal of showing the multiple ways in which plants resemble humans, a tendency we often still find today in work on critical plant studies. I discuss the concept of animism in the context of Amazonian Indigenous societies as a springboard into an analysis of movies by Indigenous filmmakers from the region that highlight the plantness of human beings. I end the essay with an analysis of Ika Muru Huni Kuin's film *Shuku Shukuwe* as an example of animist phytocinema.

Keywords: plant cinema; Amazonian cinema; animist

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1. Plants as Humans in Early Cinema

Early cinema was fascinated by plants. The technology that made film possible offered a window into a realm that had hitherto eluded human perception. Scientists were quick to realize the potential of the new medium to enhance their understanding of the vegetal world. German botanist Wilhelm Pfeffer, for instance, made four films between 1898 and 1900 showing the growth of flowers in an accelerated manner as part of his studies on the movement of plants. British naturalist and pioneer nature documentary filmmaker Frank Percy Smith also shows the movement in plants in his *The Birth of a Flower* (1910), which focuses on the blossoming of different flower buds, including hyacinths, crocuses, tulips, daffodils, snowdrops, narcissi, lilacs, anemones, and roses. The intertitles of the movie indicate the actual amount of time it took for each flower to blossom (from 1 h to 3 days), therefore highlighting the artificiality of the temporal compression needed to show multiple flowering buds in the less than 7 min of the film.[1]

When it comes to fiction, plants were also running the show in many early films. French director Gaston Velle made two short movies that, akin to the works of his more scientifically inclined predecessors, also highlight the growth of plants. In *La Fée aux Fleurs* (*The Fairy with Flowers*, 1905), a woman makes leaves and flowers magically appear at her window, to a point when her image is replaced by an expanding, blossoming flower bud, only to reappear again inside the flower. Velle's *Les Fleurs animées* (*The Animated Flowers*, 1906) takes the topic of human–plant metamorphosis even further by depicting several dancing flower-women exacting revenge on a man who destroyed a beautiful flower. They drug the man and cover him in soil and water until he turns into a flowerless plant. The long-established link between women and flowers—a trope that goes back to poetry and iconography, and that is reflected in many women's names[2]—is upheld in the film, the man being portrayed as a plant that shoots straight up, with clear sexual connotations. Still, the movie upends traditional gender roles by depicting the flower-women as the drivers of the action, who impose their will upon the unsuspecting man. In Velle's work, plants are openly anthropomorphized. His films blur the boundaries between humans and flora through multiple metamorphoses, thereby ascribing human physical and psychological

attributes to plants (Dubois 171–74) [1]. The gist of these and of many other early films about plants might be summarized as an effort to show that, despite their apparent sessility, plants are quite similar to animals. They move, grow, and have their own aspirations, which just happen to unfold at a slower pace than that of humans and other animals.

The effort to emphasize the continuities between plant and human existence we find in Velle's work also clearly stands out in Max Reichmann's critically acclaimed *Blumenwunder* (*The Miracle of Flowers*, 1926). Time is again of the essence here, as the film reveals the gap supposedly dividing the animal and the vegetal realms to be merely a matter of a temporal misalignment to be disentangled through cinematic means. The movie's intertitles explain that 24 h in the life of humans are equivalent to a second for a plant and, through the use of time-lapse technique, it translates plant time into human temporal dimensions, therefore revealing the "rhythms", "struggles", and even "feelings" of plants. The nymph Flora serves as a guide who teaches a group of children—here standing for humanity as a whole—carelessly plucking flowers how similar plant behavior is to that of humans. Interspersed with images of plants are dance sequences that mimic the accelerated plants' movements.[3] Vegetal life, the movie seems to be telling its viewers, is just like you and me, except that it acts in slow motion.

Nowhere is the anthropomorphization of flora in early cinema clearer than in *Flowers and Trees* (1932), part of Walt Disney's Silly Symphony series. The short film draws on the literary genre of the fable, which presents animals with human traits, but deploys the technique of animation to enliven plants that display human-like behavior. It centers on a love triangle that involves a nasty-looking "male" tree, who vies for the attention of a beautiful "female" tree with another "male" tree.[4] The two "male" protagonists engage in a duel and, when the decrepit tree loses, it ignites a fire to get back at the two lovers. Rage, jealousy, and revenge, all quintessentially human feelings, are attributed to the personified trees, who are also able to walk, dance, play music, and so on.

Early films such as the ones we have briefly discussed offer a glimpse into the alternative temporality of vegetal life, thus underlining that human kinetic tempo is not the sole measure of animation.[5] Plants are as much living, volitional forms of existence as their animal counterparts, the only barrier to understand this being that the human perceptual apparatus is blind to their activity. Cinema appears as a sophisticated kind of spectacles able to correct this plant "blindness".[6] The movies, the art of movement par excellence, manipulate plant time to render vegetal motion visible.

While these films place flora and its different pace at the core of cinematic art, they nevertheless continue to use humanity as a measure against which its alterity is outlined. The films show plants *as* humans, that is to say, they transform plant temporality to adapt it to the perception of human viewers; highlight the similarities between plant and human movement through metamorphosis, dance, and animation; and, more broadly, reveal that the hitherto unseen life of plants is surprisingly similar to that of humankind. It is as if plants were a riddle that could now be solved by the new techniques of cinema and, when finally looking at them face to face, humans ended up contemplating another version of themselves.

If I am perhaps overstating the human solipsistic leanings in the depiction of plants in early cinema, it is because I believe that, mutatis mutandis, these movies point to a core feature of current thinking about plants, namely, the tendency to show that they are very much like *Homo sapiens*. The secret that plants have been hiding—a common notion in popular books about vegetal life[7]—turns out to be that they "think" (Marder) [2], display a certain "behavior" and "intelligence" (Trewavas) [7], are cable of "sensing" and "communicating" (Karban) [8] through a "language" (Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira) [9], have a "mind" (Ryan, Vieira and Gagliano) [10] and perhaps even a soul, similar to the rest of us animals. Apparently, they are also politically active and in possession of a "revolutionary genius" (Mancuso, *Revolutionary*) [11] capable of forming a "nation" (Mancuso, *Nation*) [12]. This sample catalogue of features attributed to flora in the titles of some recent books about vegetal existence signals a long-overdue acknowledgment that plants are active agents in

the interaction with their environment, which they adapt to but also shape according to their needs. Still, it is noteworthy that, in the books alluded to in this paragraph, plant life is predominantly described by resorting to human-centered vocabulary.

The recognition that vegetal life behaves intelligently, communicates with its kin and with other species, and has a will and a mind of its own traces its roots to the growing interest in botany from the eighteenth century onwards, a significant marker of which was Charles Darwin's book *The Power of Movement in Plants* [13] (1880/2010), written in collaboration with his son Francis. Early films about plants come in the wake of these studies on flora, putting the new medium at the service of science, as well as of the curiosity of the general public.[8] The explosion in the past couple of decades of scientific research in the field of so-called "plant neurobiology",[9] as well as the attention paid to plants within the environmental humanities, including in plant philosophy, historical and cultural botany, and critical plant studies, has brought plants to the limelight and placed them at the center of broader discussions about environmental issues, from anthropocentrism to the Anthropocene.

While I agree that plants rightfully deserve pride of place in contemporary thought, the emphasis placed on the similarities between plants, humans, and other animals, which we find both in early films about vegetal life and in more contemporary plant studies, gives me pause for thought. To be sure, by placing the approach of early cinema to flora together with recent research on plants in the same bag, I am running the risk of a gross overgeneralization. And yet the growing protagonism of plants in human cultural life over the last century or so appears to have required that they are perceived as acting more and more like people, displaying human-like features. Even though there is nothing inherently wrong about the anthropomorphization of plants, which, as I have argued elsewhere, could be a means to underscore the continuities between humans and other forms of life (see Vieira, "Plant Art", 91) [16], it should not be deployed to erase distinctively vegetal ways of inhabiting the world.[10] Could the tendency to anthropomorphize plants not be another form of the same old anthropocentrism in a thinly veiled disguise? Is humanity not just widening the circle of those allowed into its fold—from white men to women and children; then racial, sexual, and other minorities; later animals; and now plants—instead of radically opening human thinking to truly different forms of existence? Is the version of plants depicted in contemporary thought not portraying vegetal life as more of the same?

Responding to the challenge to "think cinema—with plants" and, implicitly, to think plants with cinema, put forth in this special issue of *Philosophies*, I would like to focus on a different portrayal of plants in film in the remainder of this essay. What if we were not to consider plants as persons, as Matthew Hall suggests we do in his homonymous book, but, rather, see persons as plants [20]? What would be the ontological outcomes of such a shift in perspective, as well as the epistemological consequences of this inversion in the human approach to vegetal life?

In my reflections on a cinema that thinks with plants and highlights the plant inflections of human life, I turn to contemporary Indigenous Amazonian filmmaking. Grounded in a region where vegetal beings are all-important and grounded on everyday, lived experience with flora, this cinema underscores the affinity between human communities and the plants with whom they share their existence. I analyze the film *Shuku Shukuwe* (*Life is Forever*, 2012) directed by Ika Muru Huni Kuin [3], who belongs to the Huni Kuin Indigenous people[11] living in the Brazilian state of Acre, as an example of cinema that underlines the indebtedness of humans to plant modes of being in the world. Part of the project Live Book (Livro Vivo) developed in the São Joaquim Centro de Memória village, which documents Indigenous medicinal practices, *Shuku Shukuwe* depicts the Huni Kuin's close connection with plants, whom they regard as their ancestors and guides.[12]

Before embarking on a close analysis of Indigenous Amazonian filmmaking in *Shuku Shukuwe*, though, a more in-depth reflection on the issue of plant time in its relation to cinematic motion is in order. As we have seen in the early movies on plants mentioned above, the vitality of flora came to light through a cinematic manipulation of vegetal time, which

enabled humans to contemplate plant activity. Early cinema disclosed plant movement and animation, thus bringing back to the fore the topic of animism, an anthropological concept that gained a new lease on life. As Teresa Castro points out, "cinema [. . .] was thought, since its beginnings [. . .] as an animist medium, essentially thanks to its capacity to animate (or re-animate) the beings and things in the world" (48) [14].[13] Early film theorists, most notably Jean Epstein, understood that, with cinema, "a surprising animism is being born", since "we know, because we see them, that we are surrounded by non-human forms of existence" (Epstein, quoted in Castro 51) [14]. How do disparate films express a plant's animating principle, or, going back to the word's Latin roots, its *anima,* enlivening breath, or soul? And in which ways do Indigenous people, to whom the term "animist" traditionally applied, portray the animation of plants differently from the images issuing from Western movie-making conventions? In the next section, I reflect upon the term "animism" as it applies to cinematic depictions of plants, and will then, in the final section of this article, discuss *Shuku Shukuwe* as animist plant cinema.

2. Naturalist and Animist Films

The term "animism" was first used with its current meaning by Eduard B. Tylor, one of the founding scholars of anthropology, in his magnum opus *Primitive Culture* (1871). The definition of the concept has been the subject of heated debate since Tylor brought it into academic discourse[14], but it can generally be understood as the attribution of a soul or spirit to non-humans, including animals, plants, features of the landscape, objects, or otherworldly beings.[15] While he considered animism to be an archaic, childlike, and utterly erroneous belief, Tylor saw in it the root of all religious sentiment (vol. 1, 328) [22].[16] In fact, he built his theory of animism on the basis of the spiritualist movement of the late-nineteenth century, which he studied first hand (Bird-David 69) [23].[17] The notion of animism was therefore, from the outset, a projection of modern conceptions onto "savage" people, who were identified as the origin of more advanced forms of thought.

When used by early film critics, the word "animism" loosely retained the meaning Tylor attributed to it, but it was given a positive spin. The images of beings such as plants that appeared to the naked eye to be unmoving and unfeeling were captured by the cinematic lens and reworked, disclosing to viewers that entities that seemed inert were in fact as alive as humans. For early film critics, animism, far from a misguided notion, meant that, through the power of cinema, forms of existence such as plants could be recognized as animated. Castro points to the paradox of employing film, which results from techno-scientific modernity, to awaken an animist mindset: "cinema is the fruit of [. . .] technological civilization, the spearhead of mechanical objectivity [. . .] and yet [. . .] the images of cinema do not cease to rouse other forms of seeing. Instead of disenchanting, cinema re-enchants the world: it reveals the interiority of animals, plants, objects, meteorological phenomena, machines, etc". (44) [14]. A hallmark of modern objectivity, cinema purportedly mechanically reproduced reality through a flow of objective, dispassionate images—think of Dziga Vertov's Kino-eye. And yet cinematic images ended up demonstrating the irreducibility of subjectivity, both that of the filmmaker and that of the ones filmed by the movie camera.

For Castro, cinema "invites the spectator, a modern being part excellence, to reconnect with modes of thinking that are not quite 'rational'". "Differently put", she continues, "an anthropology of the cinematographic medium as a phenomenon of modernity reminds us that we have never been completely modern" (44) [14]. Castro evokes the renowned book by Bruno Latour to underline that cinema takes spectators back to a pre-modern, not fully rational mindset that she equates with animism [24]. While the jury on whether Western modernity was truly "modern" is still out—Latour's definition of being modern, predicated on the full separation between nature and culture, subject and object, humans and things, suggests that modernity never existed—Castro's correlation between animism and irrationality is a little hasty. For if peoples not steeped in the Western cultural matrix may not be "modern" in the Latourean sense of the term, they are therefore not necessarily irrational,

nor is the animism of cinema a ticket back to an older and somehow unadulterated form of relating to non-humans. Diverse as their specific cosmovisions[18] clearly are, animist peoples generally espouse an alternative way of experiencing the world—some might say that they experience a different world or worlds, in other words, a pluriverse—that does not regard non-human forms of existence as lifeless matter ready to be exploited, considering them instead as sharing key features of life, intelligence, and sociality with humans. Given the current rates of environmental destruction, such an approach appears to be much more rational—not to mention modern—than what goes for modernity in contemporary thought.

It is because of its potential to prompt a reconsideration of the current, Western-style, extractivist approach to non-humans that the term animism has received a windfall in the past few decades. A “symbol designating new ways of thinking and of staging relations with non-humans”, animism has become, in the words of anthropologist Perig Pitrou, “the marker of a new modernity, conscious of the disasters caused by the ecological crisis and concerned with establishing a more harmonious connection with the living world” (25) [25]. It is telling that a call to recover this mode of thought has been heard from several quarters, from Nurit Bird-David’s effort to “revisit” animism [23], through Tim Ingold’s plea to “re-animate thought” [26] and Isabel Stengers appeal to “reclaim” animist mindsets [27], to Graham Harvey’s sustained efforts to rescue animism from its association with the racist, colonialist mentality that plagued its use in early anthropological studies, ascribing to a new animism the potential to teach humans how to “act respectfully” towards other beings (xi) [21].

While an appraisal of the critical fortune of the term animism, of its jump back into the fray of contemporary anthropological debate and of its larger contribution to environmental thought lies outside the scope of this essay, an in-depth reflection on what Castro called the “animist faculty” (44) [14] of cinema is central to understand the depiction of plants in film. Was early cinema’s fixation on plants truly a marker of an animist approach to the vegetal world? And what about movies about plants made in the context of animist societies? Are these similarly animist films?

Anthropologist Philip Descola, who has written extensively on Indigenous peoples from the Amazon, distinguishes in his later work between naturalism and animism, which he considers to be opposites.[19] He regards naturalism, the default mode of experiencing the world in Western modernity, as predicated on “a discontinuity of interiorities and a continuity of physicalities”, according to which all beings partake of the “universal laws of matter and life” that provide the basis for “conceptualizing [. . .] the role and the diversity of the cultural expressions of humanity” (172) [28]. Conversely, in animism, the way in which the peoples of the Amazon and many other non-Western societies relate to the world, all beings share the same culture or interiority, their dissimilarities resulting from their variegated physical traits (121–22) [28].

Descola’s definitions of naturalism and animism result from a fruitful dialogue with the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who put forth the distinction between multiculturalism and multinaturalism in his work on Amerindian Amazonian communities. Viveiros de Castro points out that, for Amazonian peoples, “*the original common condition of both humans and animals* [and plants, I would add] *is not animality but, rather, humanity*. The great separation reveals not so much culture distinguishing itself from nature as nature distancing itself from culture” (465) [29]. The corollary of this approach is a “multinaturalist” ontology that radically differs from the Western “multiculturalist” one. While multiculturalism is “founded on the mutually implied unity of nature and multiplicity of cultures—the former guaranteed by the objective universality of body and substance, the latter generated by the subjective particularity of spirit and meaning—the Amerindian conception presumes a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity” (466) [29].[20]

Viveiros de Castro adopted the term “perspectivism” to define Amerindian Amazonian animism that views each form of existence as espousing its own particular perspective on the world. As he puts it, “Amerindians postulate metaphysical continuity and physical discontinuity. The metaphysical continuity results in animism; the physical discontinuity

(between the beings of the cosmos), in perspectivism" (475) [29]. According to a perspectivist outlook, beings do not represent the world in different ways; it is the world itself that differs: "all beings perceive ("represent") the world in the same way. What varies is the world that they see. [. . .] Being people in their own sphere, nonhumans see things just as people do. But the things that they see are different" (472) [29]. Nonhumans and humans alike "impose the same categories and values on reality" (472) [29] but contemplate this reality through divergent lenses. There is no "one world" in perspectivism, only a multiplicity of points of view shaped by the relations established between different beings, including humans, plants, animals, rivers, rocks, the wind, and so forth.[21]

To unpack Descola's and Viveiros de Castro's dense and somewhat counterintuitive insights and their implications for an interpretation of different films on plants, we can focus on the issue of personhood. In a naturalist, multiculturalist Western worldview, humanity is the core of the definition of personhood, non-humans being called "persons" only insofar as they resemble the model of a person, which is humankind. Non-humans are made of the same bodily matter as humanity but are only said to have culture if they evince forms of behavior close to human ones. In an animist, multinaturalist Amerindian context, in turn, the expression "personhood" is a misnomer, since it refers to a body of attributes that all beings share, not just those usually identified as "people". As Harvey puts it, "[a] nimists are those who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human" (xi) [21].[22] In other words, humanity is just an example of what it means to be a person: a kind of people among many others, including tree-persons, fish-persons, jaguar-persons, and so on, all of whom have their own cultural and social lives.

Despite claims about its animist power, I consider that early cinema's efforts at showing the extent to which plants act like humans remain bound to a naturalist paradigm. The films highlight that plants not only share key elements of their physiology with humanity but also display other traits of human "personhood", such as the ability to move; to strive for a goal; and, in a generous reading, perhaps even to have an incipient form culture. The very same naturalism is the background for many debates on vegetal life both in the field of botany and in so-called critical plant studies that aim to reveal the extent to which plants display forms of behavior similar to those of animals. The recent move to grant rights to certain plants, for example in a country such as Switzerland, is a case in point. While offering plants legal protection is laudable, these new subjects of rights are construed following the prototype of the human individual, vegetal life acquiring rights because it approximates this ideal.

Movies by Amazonian Indigenous directors are, in my view, instantiations of truly animist filmmaking. These works highlight the similarities between humans and the plant-persons upon whom their lives hinge. In the remainder of this article, I analyze the film *Shuku Shukuwe* as an example of animist cinema that underlines the plantness within humans and reveals the indebtedness of human communities to the vegetal beings that determine their physical and communal existence.

3. Humans as Plants in Indigenous Cinema

The emergence of Indigenous filmmaking in the last few decades has resulted in a welcome break away from the reification of Indigenous communities in cinema. In the past, fictional films such as Westerns often portrayed Indigenous peoples in a conventional manner, devoid of complexity, as stand-ins for a timeless, Rousseauian "noble savage" or as symbols of violent, war-prone barbarians. Early documentary movies, in turn, focused on the exoticism of non-Western societies and their customs, frequently conflated with the unfamiliar and potentially threatening flora and fauna of far-flung locations, to garner the attention of movie goers. While ethnographic cinema strove to overcome the worst excesses of an exoticized gaze upon Indigenous peoples, it remained bound to a mostly Western view of Indigenous foreignness.

In the case of the Amazon, there is a long tradition of stereotypical cinematic depictions of societies from the area. Early movies about the region tend to revolve around the topic

of a voyage of a group of Western, white males into the rainforest, where they encounter countless perils, which often include aggressive Indigenous communities.[23] The series of travelogues by the Marquis de Wavrin about his expeditions in Amazonia from 1913 to 1937, including *Au Pays du Scalp* (*In the Scalp Country*, 1931), adopt this narrative plot of a journey from civilization into tropical barbarism.[24] Later ethnographic films concentrate on the history and cultural specificities of different Amazonian Indigenous groups. Jesco von Puttkamer's series of short documentaries from the 1960s for the BBC series *Travelers' Tales* is a good example of movies that seek to bring footage of remote peoples to a Western audience. In *Contact with a Hostile Tribe* (1965), Puttkamer accompanies the Indigenous rights advocates Orlando and Cláudio Villas-Boas in their first contact with the Txicão (Ikpeng) Indigenous people. The melodramatic title of the movie notwithstanding, it mostly documents the daily routines of members from this community. More recently, there has been a plethora of fictional and documentary productions about Amazonia that depict the local natural world and Indigenous peoples by adopting an environmentalist outlook. Ginger Kathrens's *Spirits of the Rainforest* (1994) about the Manu National Park in Peru, home to the Machiguenga people, or the first season of the Brazilian series *Aruanas*, from 2019, portray Indigenous groups as siding with conservationists in their fight to protect the Amazonian environment. Still, Indigenous characters are rarely the center of the plot in such works and tend to be depicted as representatives of their community's customs and values.[25]

If Indigenous people traditionally have had little or no agency in movies about the Amazon, the rise of a group of Indigenous directors from the region in the past few decades has allowed the voice of local communities to reach the silver screen. The Video in the Villages (Vídeo nas Aldeias) project, created in 1986 to support the struggle for legal recognition of Brazilian, Indigenous territorial, and cultural rights, has played a key role in training a new generation of Indigenous film professionals. By offering Indigenous people access to audiovisual forms of expression and by backing Indigenous film production, the NGO has supported the creation of over 70 Indigenous films since its inception. It has also encouraged the financing of Indigenous films by other public and private cultural institutions and placed Brazilian Indigenous cinema in the map of the country's cultural life.[26]

A significant part of this recent Indigenous filmography adopts a strong activist stance. Consider, for instance, Kamikia Kisêdjê's *Carta Kisêdjê para o Rio+20* (*Kisêdjê Letter for Rio+20*, 2012), a manifesto against deforestation and the contamination of Amazonian waters by the runoff of large agribusiness ventures made to commemorate the 20 year anniversary of the Earth Summit organized by the United Nations in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, or the 2020 short *Equilíbrio* (*Balance*) by the young filmmaker Yawar Muniz Wanderley, which reproduces the discourse of Kaapora, an Indigenous spiritual entity that criticizes the destruction of the rainforest. Such works that emphasize political activism certainly are central to lending visibility to the fight for the protection and demarcation of Indigenous ancestral lands, a significant group of Amazonian Indigenous movies places activism as a backdrop and foregrounds, instead, the daily lives of communities and their cosmologies, shaped by a close interaction with non-human beings. This is the case of *Shuku Shukuwe* that explores the bond between human-people and plant-people in the context of Huni Kuin society.

The very first images of *Shuku Shukuwe* concentrate on plants. After a close-up of out-of-focus brown soil, the camera tilts up through undergrowth foliage and stops at a large green leaf with four black worms on top. A voice off begins to recount the Huni Kuin creation narrative and spectators learn that the first being to exist was a tree "born out of the cream of the earth", upon which Yuxibu placed four worms. Only then were the air, the light, the stars, and the rest of the natural world created. The primacy of vegetal life goes hand in hand with a clear awareness of the human dependence upon non-humans. Once the earth "wore the uniform of living beings", the Huni Kuin could "wear the uniform of their ornaments". Human life is thus not the corollary of a Genesiac tale but appears as a kind of afterthought that is made possible by the existence of everything else. It is probably

to represent the derivative nature of human life that no human beings appear in the initial sequence of the film.

The creation of the world is tied to the all-important chant "shuku shukuwe" that lends the film its title. According to Huni Kuin tradition, it was the mulateiro tree (*Calycophyllum spruceanum*) that first heard the song, followed by the Brazil nut tree (*Bertholletia excelsa*) and other trees that shed the outside of their bark. This is explained by a man who appears on screen after an extreme close-up of a mulateiro tree trunk, followed by a pedestal shot that moves down the trunk, and by a camera zoom out and tilt up the same plant. The man is filmed from the back, in a low angle shot, looking at and speaking directly to the imposing tree that towers right in front of him. He says that, after coming to the trees, the powerful chant was heard by snakes, shrimp, and other forest animals that shed their skin. Not only does this scene begin with a tree, but the plant also occupies most of the screen throughout. The man, who never faces the camera, has the tree as his only interlocutor during his monologue. The might and centrality of the plant in this sequence visually translates its import for the Huni Kuin as the first recipient of the wisdom conveyed by the song.

The correlation between shedding the outer layer of bark or skin and hearing "shuku shukuwe" is gleaned from the scene that immediately precedes the one about the mulateiro tree. In it an older man, sitting on a hammock with a large leaf around his head, further leaves on his lap and other plant adornments, constantly repeats "shuku shukuwe", only to be asked by a child, hidden behind vegetation, what that chant is for (Figure 1). The man, who seems to have acquired his wisdom from the plants that drape him, replies "shuku shukuwe is life forever". But the child is insistent and continues asking about the purpose of the expression, to which the man finally answers that it is "so that life is brief". The man's two seemingly contradictory statements teach a valuable lesson about existence: life itself is forever, but the lives of different beings are brief and, far from this being a misfortune, such transience should be welcome. The mulateiro and other trees that shed their bark, together with animals that cast off their skin, have understood the significance of "shuku shukuwe", namely, that transformation, metamorphosis, and renewal lie at the core of all life.

Figure 1. Still from *Shuku Shukuwe*.

Some of the singularities of *Shuku Shukuwe*'s depiction of plants and humans have by now become clear. The prominence of vegetal life in Huni Kuin's cosmovision is expressed through various means, including a focus on plant characters, with humans often being

absent from the screen or relegated to the margins of the frame. When people appear center-stage, they are usually dressed in plant-based attire and/or positioned behind large plants so that their bodies appear to be almost indistinguishable from the vegetation of the rainforest. Humans invariably talk about plants or, on occasion, animals that are at the core of the filmic narrative. The centrality of plants in the movie is also conveyed by long, static takes and slow camera movements that cinematically mimic the vegetal mode of inhabiting a place and of experiencing time. *Shuku Shukuwe* makes it clear that vegetal life is essential for the plot, with human characters being secondary and dependent upon plant existence.

I interpret *Shuku Shukuwe* as an example of animist cinema that, instead of highlighting the multiple ways in which plants resemble humans, dwells on the idiosyncrasies of plant existence and strives to articulate vegetal life through cinematic language. Humans are shown as reliant upon flora, which they resemble by way of the body language and vegetal adornments they display in the movie. Humanity is not only subordinated to plants, but the Huni Kuin believe that they descend from plants, to whom they owe their lives, as we shall see momentarily.

True, one should be cautious not to see in films such as *Shuku Shukuwe* instantiations of a more authentic connection to the natural world mediated by a Romanticized notion of what an Indigenous cinematic approach might express. Still, it behooves viewers to recognize that Indigenous movies such as this one put forth a distinctive way of expressing the world that differs from the Western one—or, again, perhaps show a different world—and translate this vision into a novel, truly animistic filmic language. Indigenous filmmakers, trained in a medium developed at the heart of Western modernity, have had to navigate cinematic conventions and adapt this artform to convey new content and forms of seeing. The result, in the case of *Shuku Shukuwe*, is an animistic phytofilm about plant-persons and their interactions with humans.

The centerpiece of this animist plant movie comes towards the end in a sequence where viewers learn the origin of the different groups of Huni Kuin. A man hiding behind a large palm tree leaf narrates in a long static shot that, when the first Huni Kuin appeared, there was no death, and all lived in peace (Figure 2). This situation changed when women and men started to have relations, at a time when they used to eat the curdled blood of hunted animals. The animal blood transformed into different humans who then had children with the Huni Kuin.[27] Illness arose out of the intercourse between humans and animals through a process of contamination of human blood with that of animals. Thus far, this myth of origins displays many similarities with other descriptions of the fall of humans from a Golden Age into a period plagued by disease and conflict. Unlike the Biblical Edenic tale, though, the original sin here seems to have been hunting and associating with non-human animals. This might be interpreted as an allusion to the spread of zoonotic diseases and a cautionary tale against exposure to such disorders. More generally, though, the narrative implies that excessive contact with animals—becoming too animal-like—is harmful to humans. To live happily and peacefully, the Huni Kuin should have distanced themselves from animals and, one imagines, follow a plant-based diet that obviated the need to hunt.

The narrator continues to explain that, after the Huni Kuin fall from grace because of their association with animals, a shaman told the people that they had to turn into plants to save their community. Different Huni Kuin families metamorphosed into various plants, and an old woman, represented by a character who had been sitting silently while the narrator told the tale (Figure 2), was chosen to witness the transformation necessary "to cure us and so that we could live in peace". The old woman learned about the properties of all the vegetal beings her people turned into and went to a nearby village, where her grandson lived, to impart this knowledge to him, who then passed it on to future generations. According to this narrative, redemption from an unhealthy consortium with animals came from becoming plant-like, which allowed peace and well-being to return to the Huni Kuin. Vegetal beings are the source of prosperity and healing, which clearly points to the importance of flora in Amazonian Indigenous medicine. The entire story

is told in the midst of the rainforest, with plants at the center of the screen, as a visual reminder of their pivotal role in the film.

Figure 2. Still from *Shuku Shukuwe*.

Shuku Shukuwe ends with close-ups of several plants interspersed with close-ups of people who clarify that they belong to the family of a specific plant and enumerate its different medicinal uses. The juxtaposition of shots of vegetal beings with those of humans emphasizes the ties between them, with each person underscoring their affiliation with a given plant community. In a telling image, the face of a woman is superimposed onto the leaves of the plant she identifies as part of her family (Figure 3). In another sequence a man, speaking from behind a plant, says "This bush here is Inu Bake [a plant family]. I am also Inu Baku", thus affirming his identification with that plant (Figure 4). In the film, then, humans profess their descent from families of plants and take pride in their plantness, from which they derive their sense of belonging. This animistic phytofilm shows plants as communal beings and depicts vegetal life as the model for human society.

The significance of watching alternative ways to see reality, or, indeed, the expression of alternative realities on screen in a film such as *Shuku Shukuwe* cannot be overstated. The movie redresses the epistemic violence of decades of silencing Amazonian Indigenous communities and their practices. In the film, Indigenous people are no longer the object of a Western gaze but, rather, those in charge of the camera, offering their perspective on vegetal life in their region. Films like this one are made, first and foremost, for Indigenous peoples in order to keep their knowledge and traditions alive for younger generations. But they are also perceived by local communities as a means to bring Indigenous cosmovisions closer to non-Indigenous audiences.[28] *Shuku Shukuwe*'s is an example of truly animist cinema that depicts plants as a model and inspiration for human life, highlighting the plantness of human existence. The movie allows Western audiences to envision a more equitable, animist, and multinaturalist way relating to plants and to the natural environment as a whole, a vision particularly necessary at a time when the West has, in the words of Indigenous leader Ailton Krenak, run out of ideas to stave off the end of the world [4].

Figure 3. Still from *Shuku Shukuwe*.

Figure 4. Still from *Shuku Shukuwe*.

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Notes

1. Another example of the early alliance between science and cinema to unravel the mysteries of plant life can be found in the films *Le Mouvement des Plantes* (*The Movement of Plants*, 1920) and *La Croissance des Végetaux* (*The Growth of Vegetals*, 1929) by Jean Comandon. The latter begins by referring to the manipulation of time in cinema, which allows humans to perceive details of plant life that had hitherto remained inaccessible: "Cinema, by accelerating the representation of very slow movements, makes them perceptible" (my translation).
2. The exception would be Narcissus, with his homoerotic connotations.
3. The dancers were directed by the choreographer Max Terpis and embodied the principles of expressionist dance popular in the 1920s and 1930s (Castro 71) [3].
4. I place the words "male" and "female" in quotation marks, as the movie clearly superimposes human gender divisions onto flora and endows each tree with markers that are meant to signal its appurtenance to a specific gender.
5. The featuring of plants as protagonists in these films is a welcome move away from all the literary and cinematic works in which plants remain in the background as part of the setting upon which the plot unfolds.
6. Plant "blindness" is a term used to refer to the human tendency to background plants and pay more attention to animals. For a discussion on this topic, see Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira, "Introduction", viii [4].
7. For instance, Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird's *The Secret Life of Plants* [5] or, more recently, Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* [6].
8. For a more in-depth contextualization of early cinema on plants within scientific research on this subject, see Castro (55–64) [14].
9. The designation "plant neurobiology" is controversial within the scientific community, with some scientists arguing that, since plants do not have a brain with neurons, "neurobiology" is necessarily a misnomer when applied to vegetal life. For a summary of this controversy written for the lay person, see Pollan [15].
10. Several researchers have recently come to the defense of anthropomorphism, including Bennet (99) [17]; Karlsson (passim) [18]; and, in the context of plant studies, Ryan (103) [19].
11. The Huni Kuin, or "true people", belong to the Pano linguistic family and live in the South-West of the Amazon rainforest, in the Brazilian state of Acre, and in the east of Peru, at the tropical foothills of the Andes, on the banks of the Juruá and Purus rivers and in the Javari valley. For more information on the Huni Kuin, see https://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/Povo:Huni_Kuin_(Kaxinaw%C3%A1)#Identifica.C3.A7.C3.A3o (accessed on 2 December 2022.)
12. The Live Book Project was developed within the Huni Kuin communities living near River Jordão and, beyond the film, also resulted in the publication of a homonymous book. The film was produced with the support of the association Filmes de Quintal, in partnership with the Literaterras Transdisciplinary Study Group of the Federal University of Minas Gerais and with the National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage, part of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture and Education.
13. This and all other quotes from an original in a language other than English are rendered in my translation.
14. For a brief history of the concept of animism, see Harvey 1–29 [21].
15. Examining the specific case of vegetal life, Tylor mentions that "plants, partaking with animals the phenomena of life and death, health and sickness, not unnaturally have some kind of soul ascribed to them" in animist cultures (vol. 1, 359) [22].
16. In Tylor's words: "Animism is, in fact, the groundwork of the Philosophy of Religion, from that of savages to that of civilized men. And although it may at first sight seem to afford but a bare and meager definition of a minimum of religion, it will be found practically sufficient; for where the root is, the branches will generally be produced" (vol. 1, 328) [22].
17. For an analysis of the development of the notion of animism in Tylor, see Bird-David 60–70 [23].
18. I use the word "cosmovision" in the sense of "worldview" or "Weltanschauung".
19. Descola identifies four major forms of human relation to non-humans, which result in four distinctive ontologies, cosmologies, and ways of social organization: "The recognized formulae for expressing the combination of interiority and physicality are very limited. Faced with some other entity, human or nonhuman, I can assume either that it possesses elements of physicality and interiority identical to my own, that both its interiority and its physicality are distinct from mine, that we have similar interiorities and different physicalities, or, finally, that our interiorities are different and our physicalities are analogous. I shall call the first combination "totemism", the second "analogism", the third "animism", and the fourth "naturalism". These principles of identification define four major types of ontology, that is to say systems of the properties of existing beings; and these serve as a point of reference for contrasting forms of cosmologies, models of social links, and theories of identity and alterity" (121) [28].
20. Descola refers to Viveiros de Castro's distinction between multiculturalism and multinaturalism directly in his reflections on naturalism and animism: "According to him [to Viveiros de Castro], animism is 'multinaturalist,' since it is founded upon the corporeal heterogeneity of classes of existing beings that, however, are endowed with identical souls and cultures. Meanwhile, naturalism is 'multiculturalist' in that it uses the postulate of the oneness of nature to support recognition of the diversity of both individual and collective manifestations of subjectivity" (173) [28].
21. As Viveiros de Castro puts it: "We would thus have a universe that is 100 percent relational—a universe in which there would be no distinctions between primary and secondary qualities of substances or between 'brute facts' and 'institutional facts'" (473) [29].

[22] While this seems to go back to the idea of plants as persons, the reach of this new definition of animism is broader, for if everyone/everything is a person, the very definition of personhood is exploded from within.

[23] For an in-depth discussion of films about the Amazon and its peoples, see Vieira "Movies" [30], Vieira, "Rainforest" [31], and Vieira, "Laws" [32].

[24] Other examples are *Amazon* (1926) by Hamilton Rice, which documents the director's expedition to the River Branco, or the short *River of Doubt* (1928) by Caroline Gentry about the journey of the former American president Theodor Roosevelt and of the Brazilian Cândido Rondon in search of the source of the so-called River of Doubt, later renamed River Rooselvelt.

[25] There are some notable exceptions to this general trend, including the critically acclaimed *El Abrazo de la Serpiente* (*The Embrace of the Serpent*, 2015), directed by Ciro Guerra—for an analysis of this film, see Vieira, "Movies", 37–40 [30]—or, even more recently, Luiz Bolognesi's *A Última Floresta* (*The Last Forest*, 2021) that portrays the fight of the Yanomami people and of their leader Davi Kopenawa against illegal mining in their land.

[26] For a history of the rise of Indigenous filmmaking in Brazil, see Freire [33].

[27] This transformation of animal blood into a human was enacted in the previous scene of the movie, where the curdled and boiled blood of a hunted porcupine is poured onto the body of a baby, after which an old woman says: "The blood of the porcupine transformed into a child. The blood of the porcupine transformed into Huni Kuin".

[28] Amazonian Indigenous cinema is watched within local communities but also disseminated in film festivals, schools, and universities and even on national Brazilian TV.

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Permacinema

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Abstract: This article charts the contiguity of farming and film, blending permaculture and cinema to advance a modality of sustainable film theory and practice we call "permacinema." As an alternative approach to looking and labour, permaculture exhibits a suite of cinematic concerns, and offers a model for cinematic creativity that is environmentally accountable and sensitive to multispecies entanglements. Through the peaceable gestures of cultivation and restraint, permacinema proposes an ecologically attentive philosophy of moving images in accordance with permaculture's three ethics: care of earth, care of people, and fair share. We focus on work by Indigenous artists in which plants are encountered not only as raw material or as aesthetic resource but as ingenious agents and insightful teachers whose pedagogical and creative inputs are welcomed into the filmmaking process. By integrating Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies we hope to situate permacinema in the wider project of cinema's decolonization and rewilding.

Keywords: permacinema; permaculture; the vegetal turn; indigenous film; phytography; ecocinema; degrowth

> It is only in plants by virtue of the sun's energy caught up by the green leaves and operating in the sap, that inert matter can find its way upward against the law of gravity. Simone Weil, "Human Personality" ([1] p. 81)

1. Introduction

In the physical light whose touch enlivens the photosensitive strip and the metaphorical light thrown on the projected world lies the vegetative soul of film. The recent "animal turn" in the arts and humanities was quickly followed by the "vegetal turn." Both have enabled the untethering of thought from habitual forms of human-centred seeing and its reorientation towards a biodiverse, more-than-human vision of life.[1] With the re-turn to realism, especially the work of André Bazin, the rise of ecocinema, new materialism, and flat ontology, film too has been undergoing a number of paradigm shifts.[2] We take "thinking cinema—with plants" to explore not only the medium's vegetal affinities but also the kinship between cinema and plants as "growing beings." If film thinks, it lives, and whatever lives grows. "The common Greek word for plant, *phuton*," writes Michael Marder, "is etymologically linked to nature, *phusis*," and, despite his hierarchical distinctions between them, "Aristotle . . . includes both plants and animals under the umbrella of *ta phuomena*, growing things. Putting the matter of vegetal life positively, he now argues that 'all things that grow [*ta phuomena panta*]' are alive because they are capable of growing and decaying ([2] p. 242).[3]

Marder argues against the "animal turn" (the "zoocentric paradigm"), which he sees as residually anthropocentric in its reliance on sentience. The turn to plants (the "phytocentric paradigm"), he claims, offers the broadest, most inclusive shift in our thinking precisely because whether or not plants are living beings remains contested: "[t]he most doubtful kind of life turns out to be the most universal" ([2] p. 242). But does moving from zoocentrism to phytocentrism achieve the desired result of a truly comprehensive

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conception of life?[4] To avoid replicating the problems of centrism as such (rejecting both zoo- and phyto-exceptionalism) we may wish to redirect our thinking to the entanglement of all life, where nothing and everything is privileged simultaneously. In this regard, the animistic and kincentric models we explore below pose, we believe, more viable paradigms.

Unlike the top-down categorisations of western philosophy, "in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as 'the younger brothers of Creation'" ([3] p. 9). Moreover, "Indigenous ways of understanding recognize the personhood of all beings as equally important, not in a hierarchy but a circle" ([3] p. 385). As the planet's life systems buckle under the strain of extractive capitalism, a revaluation of cinema's relationship to living/growing beings is, perhaps not urgently enough, underway. At stake are ways of living that depart from the (pseudo-botanical) economic orthodoxy of limitless growth, increasingly acknowledged as detrimental to human and planetary wellbeing.[5] Paradoxically, then, to grow like a plant may be more closely aligned with the politics, ethics, and aesthetics of *degrowth*.[6] It is at this juncture, where earthly survival itself is at stake, that filmmaking and horticulture converge as complementary, life-affirming practices.

Our essay explores the contiguities of farming and film, blending permaculture and cinema to advance a modality of sustainable film theory and practice we call "permacinema." Permaculture is a systems-based approach to farming, grounded in cooperation rather than conflict with nature. Permaculture is based on "protracted and thoughtful observation rather than protracted and thoughtless action; of looking at systems ... and of allowing systems to demonstrate their own evolutions" [4]. As an approach to looking and labour, permaculture itself exhibits a suite of cinematic concerns, offering a template for cinematic creativity that is environmentally accountable and sensitive to multispecies relationships. Through the peaceable gestures of cultivation and restraint, permaculture is a model not only for sustainable filmmaking but for an ecologically attentive, non-extractivist philosophy of moving images in accordance with permaculture's three ethics: care of earth, care of people, and fair share.

Permaculture, from "permanent" agriculture, is "an agricultural system that can be carried out in perpetuity" ([5] p. 2). Since its founding in the late 1970s by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren, the definition of permaculture has significantly expanded. Agricultural in origin, subsequent iterations increasingly apply permaculture to other, potentially all, areas of life. Terry Leahy describes this as the shift "from permanent agriculture to permanent culture" (12) [5]. Jesse Watson defines permaculture as "an ecological approach to the design of whole systems. It is an ethically bounded framework of ecological design that can be used to design everything from landscapes and farms to business enterprises and other cultural projects, on nearly any scale" (Watson 2016).[7] [6] As the definition of permaculture is stretched, however, it risks dilution and appropriation by the very mechanisms it seeks to correct: "[t]he commodification of terms such as permaculture may have detrimental effects on the practical impacts of the movement. Sustainability, as a term and a framework, provides a sobering case study in the effects of commoditization through industrialization and marketing" (Spangler et al., 2021) [7]. An equally serious difficulty is the movement's historical blindness, "rebranding Indigenous practices and knowledge as 'permaculture' without proper acknowledgment and reconciliation" [7].

Many of the strategies and design solutions championed by permaculture have been known and widely practiced by Indigenous communities long before the emergence of permaculture. As predominantly white (and male), the movement has justly been criticised for a "failure to acknowledge the similarity of permaculture's proposals to Indigenous cultures of land use and for re-packaging Indigenous land management practices as an innovation originating within permaculture" [8]. In *Iwígara: American Indian Ethnobotanical Traditions and Science* (2020), Rarámuri ethnobotanist Enrique Salmón explains that Native methods like the "repeated cycles of clearing, fire, and careful use, on a scale unimaginable today, may be considered a form of advanced permaculture" (23) [9]. And Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete claims that "[p]eople in the Americas are only now beginning to explore and rediscover a food heritage that is second to none in the world. The new science

of permaculture ... is in reality applied Indigenous science" [10]. Nor is permaculture exclusively plant-based, which is problematic for all ethical and some environmental vegans. We believe that plants enjoy a life beyond their human utility. Even horticulture, therefore, is not free of violence. Nevertheless, the Indigenous ecological and artistic practices we investigate here begin from encounters with plants as subjects whose capacities for regeneration are encouraged, not curtailed, by growing, harvesting, and eating. Our use of permaculture is thus qualified and critical; by focusing on films made by Indigenous artists referencing Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies, we hope to situate permacinema in the wider project of cinema's decolonization and rewilding.[8]

In what follows we highlight one area of permacinema: work in which plants are encountered not only as raw material or as aesthetic resource but as ingenious agents and insightful teachers, whose pedagogical and creative inputs are welcomed into the filmmaking process. To think cinema through its vegetal entanglements, we discuss two moving image projects deploying hand-processing techniques with sections of plants and blooming flowers grown on filmmaker Philip Hoffman's farm near Mount Forest, Ontario, Saugeen Ojibway territory. Hoffman runs the annual Film Farm "independent imaging retreat" devoted to the support of artisanal filmmaking, especially 16mm film. In her wide-ranging discussion of materiality, ecology, and DIY film cultures, Kim Knowles claims that "Film Farm demonstrates how artisanal film practice can open up entirely new experiences of the world that connect art and politics in very physical ways" ([11] p. 19).[9] In contrast to a "purely skills based" commercially driven film pedagogy, Hoffman's workshop follows a "'process cinema" approach: "drawing attention away from the final product and emphasising a more mindful practice of observation, reflection, being in the moment and responding instinctively to one's surroundings" (145) [11]. Integral to Film Farm's mission is also "(e)ncouraging the participation of artists typically under-represented in mainstream film production" (Philip Hoffman website 2022) [12].

Our first example is part of the Saugeen First Nation community filmmaking project, *Saugeen Takes on Film* (STOF).[10] The second is a triptych of films by the Odeimin Runners Club, an "Indigenous and Black-Persons-of-Colour (IBPOC) media arts collective" ([13] p. 48). The three films were inspired by Octavia E. Butler's cli-fi novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993), and by "odeimin [strawberry, or heartberry] teachings," adopting the plant's relational capacities maintained through its network of runners: "strawberry teachings link us in the physical and metaphysical sense, as women, as mothers, as artists, as storytellers, and as descendants from several nations" ([13] p. 50).

Film Farm has offered a number of workshops on plant processing to Saugeen and other First Nation artists. In return, Indigenous community members shared their knowledge of the powers of local herbs and plants. The films made by the Saugeen artists and by the Odeimin Runners Club explore cinema's ability to facilitate rather than bulldoze Indigenous knowledges, connections, and communities. The use of culturally meaningful plants endemic to the filmmakers' territories links the films to their local environments, to seasonal rhythms, and to sustainable regimes of extraction and sharing. The creative exchanges between plants, Film Farm, the Saugeen First Nation project, and the Odeimin Runners Club shape our understanding of permacinema: cinema as anticolonial, capable of fostering multispecies sovereignty and hospitality. By consenting to the ecological and cinematic fecundity of plants, these artists use film to restore relations between people (both human and not) and place, relations disrupted by settler colonial plundering.

We conclude with Alisi Telengut's hand-painted film *The Fourfold* (2020), steeped in Mongolian and Siberian animistic and shamanic traditions. Using a stop-motion animation technique on a single sheet of paper or metal, Telengut incorporates a range of materials, including plants, the traces of which accrue on the photographed surface. The resulting mixed media landscapes are created under the camera, with little use for post-production. Although Telengut uses a digital camera, her images are cultivated through slow manual labour. By discussing a range of Indigenous films with and about plants, we hope to

establish permacinema as an idea and a constellation of principles at the intersection of film-philosophy and radical ecology.

Our choice of corpus was informed by filmmakers' employment of Indigenous harvesting strategies that elevate instead of eviscerate multispecies ecosystems, and translate animistic and kincentric cosmologies into cinematic registers. Philip Hoffman of Film Farm introduced us to films by the Saugeen First Nation artists and the Odeimin Runners Club. The Canadian filmmaker Dan Browne, with whom in 2018 we programmed a screening of Canadian diasporic cinema, introduced us to Telengut.[11]

Every film, however, negatively impacts the world. All production requires taking [14,15], and even in giving—distribution, exhibition, and streaming—the cinema continues to take [16]. Writing about cinema's carbon footprint, Nadia Bozak points out that "(f)ossil fuels and natural resources drive the global economy and their availability and fluctuating prices determine the conditions of all our lives—that the moving image or any other culture industry is embroiled in the business of extracting and burning earth-bound energies should not be a surprise, and yet it is" ([14] pp. 7–8). As Nicole Shukin suggests, the photochemical emulsion depends on the presence of animal remains in the gelatine, while the cinematic assembly line recalls the disassembly line of the slaughterhouse (Shukin 2009) [17]. Gelatine, "aka animal glue," is produced by boiling the "skin, bones, and connective tissues of cattle, sheep, and pigs" sourced from meatpacking facilities ([17] p. 104). During exposure, silver halide crystals absorb light and an invisible image of the subject forms in the emulsion. When the film is developed, this latent image becomes visible and (ostensibly) permanent. The image's emergence coincides with gelatine's withdrawal as the figurative and literal background out of which photochemical imagery can occur. A reliance on silver is as problematic as cinema's appetite for animal bodies.

Digital technologies are no less voracious. They are extractive enterprises operating in fraught ecological and political contexts. Purportedly ephemeral, data is always embodied, stored in vast databanks sequestered "somewhere up north, preferably on the permafrost" ([18] p. 25). The melting icecaps become the wellsprings of digital clouds. "Data," writes Jussi Parikka, "feeds on the environment both through geology and the energy-demand" (24) [18]. Digital residue survives as "obsolete electronics . . . shipped offshore where mercury leaches into groundwater and, if burned, becomes toxins that poison the air" ([14] p. 156). Sasha Litvintseva claims that "[m]edia technologies are entangled in the history of colonialism and an ever-advancing extractive frontier, from lithium mined in Chile salt flats to rare earths from Inner Mongolia" ([19] p. 111).

By linking cinema to agriculture, moreover, we acknowledge cinema's toxic runoffs since the advent of agriculture exacerbated the depletion of water and soil, and the loss of biodiversity through monocultures. Although many of its benefits are undeniable, large-scale agriculture has also been linked to reductions in human health [20]. As we edge closer to a world unable to sustain human life, we must ask: is cinema beyond repair? In our conclusion, we push permacinema to its limit, imagining its ultimate rewilding at the point at which a cinema of nature retrieves its primordial form as movement in time.[12]

2. The Gleaning Eye

The botanical element in cinema emerged early on in Louis Lumière's *Repas de bébé* (*Baby's Lunch*, 1895)—a true cinematic perennial. Although it centres on a human family's meal, the film is famous for viewers being "captivated instead by the elusive movement of plants" [21]. We find the film a rich source for a cinematic phyto-philosophy, and have each returned to it several times in our individual writings. If despite its ubiquity the motif of leaves in the wind resists becoming a cinematic cliché, this is because of its enduring and original power: eliciting pleasure in the sight of the contingent, non-narrative, and autonomous life of plants that momentarily flips (human) foreground and (nonhuman) background. Moreover, the disinterested gaze in whose eyes plants do not serve any particular purpose, but simply *are*, critiques the notion that cinema is, by nature, extractive and predatory [22–24]. Yet, Lumière's film works in spite of itself, against the grain of

the hierarchical split between human foreground and vegetal background, the result of a conspiracy between plant and machine. *Repas* elucidates both the potential and limitations of a western relation to plants that sees them as mere setting or resource. The Indigenous films discussed below approach plants differently as participants in world and community-building, part of what Salmón calls a "kincentric" ecology [25].

If eating in Lumière is the ritual of a newly affluent bourgeoisie, Agnès Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000) explores consumption under the conditions of scarcity. The characters in *Gleaners* subsist by foraging or scavenging for food.[13] They range from members of rural communities to urban "dumpster divers" who eat what others throw away. The lowly gesture of gleaning participates in the world from the margins. Gleaners stoop to pick up what was left behind, discarded yield, or food unfit for the market. Gleaning exposes the structural deficiencies of capitalist modes of production by recasting trash as treasure through acts of salvage [26,27]. *Gleaners* is concerned with ecology and equity—care of Earth, care of people, and fair share—but gleaning for Varda is also aesthetic. It lends itself to artistic practice, but not without problems.

The film's star agricultural crop is the humble potato, a perennial tuber crop favoured by permaculture.[14] Indeed, the potato has become a kind of mascot of the film and even of Varda herself.[15] Marder sees the film as attempting a less violent form of consumption that honours plants by reducing the destructive impact of eating. "Gleaning," he writes in "Is It Ethical to Eat Plants?" "respects plants by consuming what has been left or discarded," avowing the "ontological freedom" of vegetal beings ([28] p. 35). Similarly, in aesthetic terms, the world is "let be" when images are gleaned along the way and it is the subject herself (in this case Varda) who, in a gesture Marder calls an "inversion of exposure," the camera captures and displays. *The Gleaners and I*

> interweaves the experiential and alimentary dimensions of gleaning in an aesthetic medium especially propitious to what the filmmaker herself designates as the gleaning of images . . . . the beings (both human and nonhuman) are let be without being framed in a formal narrative, while Varda exposes herself (for example, her aging hands and hair) before the lens of the camera, refusing to make sense of the images she had gleaned. ([28] p. 35)

Many plants eat by gleaning, and Varda's style of filming approximates plants' style of eating. However, Marder reminds us that actual gleaners

> more often than not, have no other choice but to procure food by seeking what remains after the harvest or in the aftermath of wasteful consumption in urban centres. Not so with the aesthetic gleaners, such as Varda herself, who engage in this activity not out of necessity but out of the freedom afforded by art. This divide is telling and troublesome to the *nth* degree. ([28] p. 35)

Varda is the sympathetic observer, not a member of the communities of gleaners she meets. The film's anti-capitalist politics are finally subsumed by the artistic project in which gleaning is a privilege, not a need. Thus "only provided that aesthetic freedom is transposed onto the realm of necessity would gleaning become a truly ethical way of eating and experiencing" ([28] p. 35).

Lumière and Varda's films offer glimpses into an alternative, non-extractivist, non-consumerist cinema, modelled on plants' ways of eating and being. However, these are only glimpses. They are often matched, and outweighed, by cinema's devouring impulses to capture and eat up the world.

3. The Good Enough (Mother) Earth

> The world is not enough.
>
> But it is such a perfect place to start, my love.
>
> And if you're strong enough.
>
> Together we can take the world apart, my love.

(“The World is Not Enough,” Garbage)

The bulk of big budget films today subscribe without irony to the proposition of the 1999 James Bond film *The World is Not Enough*.[16] The logic of taking apart the world in order to satisfy uncontainable wants goes hand in hand with the accelerationist fallacy of the world’s insufficiency, when the world is all there is. Forgoing the characteristic irony of the (earlier) Bond films, cinema must rediscover abundance and pleasure within the confines of the earth. What would a degrowth cinema, for which the world is just enough, look like? Degrowth may seem counter-intuitive, even unnatural, partly because growth, conceived as a wilful self-propelling effort to innovate and accumulate, has become synonymous with life itself. However, growth-based models are not natural facts. As Kothari et al. argue, the “western development model is a mental construct adopted by (*read* imposed upon) the rest of the world that need [sic] to be deconstructed . . . . Deconstructing development opens up the door for a multiplicity of new and old notions and worldviews” ([29] p. 366; emphasis in the original).

In “Human Personality,” cited in the epigraph to this essay, Simone Weil posits plant life as an organic model that bypasses the power-driven western notion of growth. Plants feed on light that sustains them by circumventing rather than by harnessing gravity.[17] Plants’ orientation towards the light mirrors the supernatural mechanism by which human beings receive divine light for spiritual sustenance. Thus, plants and humans (and photosensitive film) need light in order to thrive. Through the process of photosynthesis, plants overcome the weight of gravity and reach upwards. Following in the way of plants, we too can be exalted. Weil treats photosynthesis as the biological image of supernatural grace [30].

Anishinabek scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer makes a similar point when she writes that plants “live both above and below ground, joining Skyworld to the earth. Plants know how to make food and medicine from light and water, and then they give it away” ([3] p. 9). Sunlight cannot be sought and possessed, only received. The gratuity of light reflects the logic of the gift, which plants embody:

> A gift comes to you through no action of your own, free, having moved toward you without your beckoning. It is not a reward; you cannot earn it, or call it to you, or even deserve it. And yet it appears. Your only role is to be open-eyed and present. Gifts exist in a realm of humility and mystery—as with random acts of kindness, we do not know their source. ([3] pp. 23–24)

If there is something broadly religious about the idea of degrowth it is the seeking out of ways of thriving that are not purely transactional and which lie, mysteriously, outside the realm of force, that is, outside of the modes of extraction, extension, accumulation, possession, and appropriation that ultimately deplete rather than sustain. Weil’s Christian mysticism has much in common not only with some of the more radical spiritual traditions of the west but with Indigenous cosmologies, whose intimate connection to plants revolves around alternative formulations of giving and receiving.[18]

Plants as analogs and metaphors of artistic practice, as kinned collaborators and chemical conspirators that demand “respectful harvesting”—these are some of the key ideas of permacinema [9]. Yet, as we go on to show, the social dimension of permacinema is no less important. It asks how art could retrieve a sense of worldly enoughness, and “recalibrate contemporary hemispheric relations outside of colonialism such that the settler position is one of being good guests with responsibilities to the hosts” ([13] p. 57).

4. Permacinema in Action

> Instead of a dualistic point of view of animator animating “the dead,” the human, the objects, the technical apparatuses, all become important in the process of an entangled and inseparable phenomenon—creating the animation. Alisi Telengut [31]

De- and regrowth coincide in plants, who guide us in producing landscapes of biotic abundance, practicing hyper-local regimes of reciprocity. Like plants, combining the stems' upwards and the roots' downwards momentum, degrowth blends two ostensibly opposing trajectories. Preserving abundance requires sharing territories' comestible wealth with human and more-than-human others to feed everyone in collective, sustainable ways. The One Dish, One Spoon treaty is an Indigenous agreement of resource management and land stewardship practiced in the north eastern parts of Turtle Island. The treaty is marked through wampum belts displaying a white field with a dish (representing the earth) containing a beavertail (standing for everything needed to live).

The Ancestors' Gift (2019), made by Anishinabek citizen of Saugeen First Nation Natalka Pucan, opens with lesions over a white screen, orienting our attention towards physical film's receptivity to plants' touch. Gradually two figures, Pucan and her daughter, appear, holding hands in a bright field of plants (Figure 1). A straight cut, and Pucan's camera follows a hand as it brushes over the One Dish, One Spoon belt, suggesting a synchronicity between this practice and cinema.

Figure 1. Mother and daughter holding hands, *The Ancestors' Gift* (2019).

A voiceover spoken by Pucan's mother tells of how there is no ownership over the landscape's ecological wealth, which belongs only to "Mother Earth." Traditionally, knowledge of this agreement is transmitted generationally. In the film, knowledge moves across three generations: from Pucan to her daughter, and from Pucan's mother to them both. We occasionally see Pucan's brother, who is also party to this inter-generational exchange. Through Pucan, cinema participates in the circulation of Indigenous teaching, becoming a medium through which ancestral knowledge is safeguarded and shared. Through cinema, Pucan invites us to participate in these exchanges, too.

The One Dish, One Spoon treaty dates back to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy's origin. "The Haudenosaunee Confederacy was formed," writes Onondawaga and Nyagwai scholar Darren Scott Thomas, "when a prophet known as the Peacemaker explained the benefits of peace to the original five Nations." Known as the "Gayensragowa (Great Law of Peace)," it was intended to resolve the conflict between warring tribes ([32] p. 90). According to the Cayuga Nation's official website, this occurred in the 12th century [33]. The Peacemaker's message included the metaphor of a dish and a spoon upon which the treaty was based:

> (t)he meaning of this agreement was the idea that Creation is here for the benefit of all humankind, and there should be no war, conflict, or fear of being able to

> enjoy the gifts of the Creator. That if we consider the dish being Creation, we must share and take care of all the benefits of Creation for all the generations to come. ([32] p. 90)

The treaty helped conclude the 17th century Beaver Wars that had erupted between Indigenous Nations following increased settler contact. Anishinabek Nations have abided by its principles for centuries. The Ojibway Nation's oral history recalls agreements made with the Sioux Nation concerning the sharing of territories during the hunting season, securing mutual survival whilst avoiding conflict [34]. Haudenosaunee historian Rick Hill argues that One Dish, One Spoon is as relevant now as it ever was:

> (o)f particular importance in this age of environmental degradation is the fact that the dish with one spoon is also a covenant with nature. "Nature says, 'Here's the great dish and inside the dish are all the plants, the animals, the birds, the fish, the bushes, the trees, everything you need to be healthy and therefore, happy. . . .'" "The three basic rules are: only take what you need, second, you always leave something in the dish for everybody else, including the dish, and third, you keep the dish clean . . . that was the treaty between us and nature, and then the treaty between us and everybody else. ([32] p. 91)

The treaty is evidence of original, advanced, and expanded permanence-oriented agricultural forms practiced by Indigenous cultures for millennia, long before permaculture's three ethics of care of earth, care of people, and fair share.

Elsewhere in *The Ancestors' Gift*, plants are picked in the forest, then placed in a dish. Extraction strategies align with the One Dish, One Spoon treaty: harvesting concludes once the bowl fills up. We then see three plants growing together. Pucan's daughter digs around one with a trowel, leaving the others. Motion is decelerated, signalling the physical and spiritual care required to navigate this potentially fraught encounter. Pucan's daughter takes just what is needed, practicing restraint. Placing the plants inside the dish telegraphs that these goods will be shared, not hoarded.

Pucan used lilies and other local plants to "flower process" her film. Processing with flowers, salt, and washing soda replaces the harsher chemicals, like Dektol, of conventional processing methods, and invites plants to modify the films' form, content, colour, and even sound. In 2018 and 2019, Saugeen First Nation citizens attended two Saugeen Takes on Film (STOF) workshops at Chippewa Hill at the Saugeen First Nation Training Center, located about 100 km north of the Film Farm. The workshops taught participants how to develop film with local flowers and plants, and Lori Kewaquom, Saugeen First Nation Advocacy Coordinator and knowledge keeper of plants, taught Hoffman how to request plants' permission before picking. "I told Lori that when we take the leaves and flowers from a plant we always take less than 25% of the plant," explains Hoffman. "She answered: 'Next week I will teach you how to ask the plants how much you can take.'" Reflecting on Kewaquom's guidance, Hoffman wonders: "Do they agree with me using them for processing film? In a way, their answer is in their continued growth and beauty, and that beauty resurfaces in the images that surface from the film processing. This is a healthy conversation between me and the plants" [35].

The Ancestors' Gift flowers alongside plants' rhythms and seasonal cycles, humbly subordinated to vegetal schedules. The film's time of gestation synchronises with the time of plants' growth, not the other way around.[19] Moreover, plants' organic patterns of growth are empirically observed and cultivated to secure edible and medicinal abundancies, and certain cinematic qualities: lilies are endemic to Pucan's territory. Their material inclusion connects Pucan's film to her local landscape. In Anishinabek cosmology, lilies communicate inter-generational trauma. As the film communicates ancestral knowledge as a means of overcoming forced erasures and settler epistemologies, the use of lilies was deeply meaningful.

Where the One Dish, One Spoon treaty signals a permaculture-before-permaculture, Pucan's permacinema is grounded in vegetal collaborations. *The Ancestors' Gift*'s production context is key to our understanding of permacinema as a constellation of practices and

ideas pertinent not only to the growth of cinematic media but also to the communities and ecosystems where the works are created. In this regard, Film Farm's STOF workshops are particularly illustrative, first, as projects of community building where human and more-than-human beings encounter one another via the artisanal prism of hand-made film, and second, as evidence of what Mi'kmaq scholars Murdena and Albert Marshall and biologist Cheryl Bartlett call "Two-eyed Seeing,"

> learning to see from one eye with the *strengths* of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the *strengths* of Western knowledges and ways of knowing, and to using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all. ([36] p. 335; emphasis in the original)

"It is the blending of the *two-eyes* that establishes a learning scenario from the best of both worlds," Thomas writes (91; emphasis in the original) [32]. Permacinema takes shape between different forms of seeing and being, including the being of plants. Physical film is a site through which the "eyes" of not only western and Indigenous but of vegetal ways of knowing triangulate, enriching each other's perspectives. *The Ancestors' Gift* exemplifies the fertility of such encounters.

The STOF workshops were arranged by Hoffman, Adrian Kahgee (from Saugeen First Nation), and Debbie Ebanks Schlums (Black and Chinese Jamaican), who, with Rebeka Tabobondung (Wasauksing First Nation) comprise the Odeimin Runners Club. In their co-authored article, they develop

> an "a-colonial" approach to building cross-cultural relations based on *odeimin* teachings. *Odeimin* means "heartberry"—or "strawberry"—and it grows and thrives by sending out runners, thereby creating a networked lattice of relations between individual plants. These plants are a metaphor for individuals and communities—one cannot survive disconnected from relations with each other. . . . The *odeimin* contains within it the idea of nourishment as physically and spiritually essential to the body, incorporating an understanding of connected communities as part of the self. ([13] p. 49; emphasis in the original)

The collective's first artistic collaboration, *Everything I Touch I Change* responds to Butler's 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*, about climate-migration and planetary exodus in a post-apocalyptic United States. The collaboration produced a triptych of films, each by one member. Individually and collectively the works articulate odeimin teachings, proposing strategies for reclaiming Indigenous territories and multispecies relationships. "Each of us had a different response to it [*Parable of the Sower*], but they were all linked in some way," explains Kahgee:

> (o)ne of the common threads, I think, was that connection to land, for all of us. That deep connection that we all have to land. . . . In Octavia's book, she always talked about creating a whole new religion that looked to the stars, took us outside what was. But for me, for my cosmology, from my point of view, everything is right here. [37]

In another cli-fi story, Christopher Nolan's blockbuster *Interstellar* (2014), humans must master interstellar travel to escape an anthropogenically exhausted earth. "We used to look up at the sky and wonder at our place in the stars," laments astronaut-turned-rancher Cooper (played by Matthew McConaughey), "now we just look down and worry about our place in the dirt."

The intertitles of Kahgee's *Everything Is Right Here* (2021) propose a different trajectory: "everything is right here, all we have to do is give thanks." Each film in the triptych is also an exercise in counter-mapping, activating alternate cartographies to those imposed over Indigenous landscapes by settler cultures. The collective operates like a strawberry plant, rejecting colonial impositions aboveground, as strawberries do belowground, via their boundary-defying roots.

Everything Is Right Here and Schlums's *The Traveller* (2021) employ filmmaker and scholar Karel Doing's practice of "phytography," while Tabobondung's *Mammoth Bone* (2021) applies the same technique to a mammoth's tusk (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Odeimin Runners Club lay materials on film, producing phytograms.

What is phytography? Many plants contain polyphenols, molecular packets like those within popular photographic developers. If soaked in a solution of water, soda, and vitamin C to encourage the release of their chemicals and placed against receptive media, plants can develop photographic imagery [38]. Subsequently, if whole plants or plant sections (stems, leaves, or petals) are placed against surfaces after being appropriately soaked, imagery of plants' bodies besides their chemical reactions with the substrate can form (Figure 3).[20]

Figure 3. A phytogram, *The Traveller* (2021).

Physical film reacts to phytochemistry and, if animated during projection, conveys vegetal gesticulation. Plants signify along two pathways: gesticulation and chemical exchange. Thus "phytograms" (phytography's media products) provide windows onto "phytosemiosis," the system by which plants relay meaning extrapolated from their environments ([39] p. 266). Phytography taps into plants' methods of conveying meaning, through their bodies, and by exchanging chemicals. These methods constitute, as forest ecologist Suzanne Simard states, "the language of plants" ([40] p. 201). "My phytochemical explorations are mere experiments," Doing says, "attempting to explore a possible shared semiotic realm between plants and humans. . . . The plants are my teachers, I am an absolute beginner, eager to learn" [41]. Phytography stems from plants' teacherly gestures, germinating into artworks made by plants that, Doing argues, translate "a plant's experience of the world into an image that is legible for humans: plant sensation captured on film" ([42] p. 32).[21]

Phytography "physically and chemically embeds cultural and environmental knowledge into the material and resulting images," Kahgee, Schlums, and Tabobondung explain. "Thus, the importance of the process and the importance of the plants we selected have equal weight with the constructed images in giving meaning to the works" (54) [13]. Kahgee made her phytograms with dandelion, trillium, cedar, sage, and strawberry plants: all local to her territory, bar dandelions, that were brought by settlers. However, dandelions have since been embraced by Anishinabek people for their medicinal virtues. Schlums, who comes from the Caribbean, employed "sorrel, which is Jamaican," bananas, and other tropical plants, like palm. Importantly, "a Christmas drink is made from it [sorrel] in Jamaica," which "comes from an African tradition. The plants came from Africa to Jamaica and are very much part of our culture." As this drink is "celebratory," sorrel distil into the film a keen sense of "aliveness, and living into the future" [37]. In Kahgee's film, phytograms first appear against a starry sky, facilitating the transition to the second image of a rockscape. Schlums, too, links space and the earth through phytography. In Anishinabek creation stories, the daughter of Skywoman, who fell to earth from the Skyworld bearing the few seeds that would later grow into the full spectrum of vegetal life, died during childbirth. Distraught, Skywoman buried her child, whose heart produced the heartberry ([3] p. 23).

In this story, strawberry plants bind the sublunary and the celestial, anthropic bodies with the body of the earth. In Kahgee's and Schlums's films, strawberries and other plants literally call us back to the world, through phytography. By cinematically expressing the meaning of the odeimin in Anishinabek worldviews, and by exploring film's susceptibility to phytochemistry as a means of materially transmitting such knowledge, the Runners tap into a permacinematic impulse: telling us that everything is right here, and that securing futurity means giving thanks.

By contrast to the Odeimin collective, Alisi Telengut, a Canadian artist of Mongolian origin, works in comparative solitude, yet in the company of water, plants, and rocks. Telengut's grandparents lived nomadically on the Mongolian grasslands, and their traditional knowledge is often included in her films. Telengut employs a unique animation method that has its antecedent in William Kentridge's practice, synthesising digital technology with Indigenous Mongolian beliefs and traditional practice, transforming hand-made artefacts into audiovisual media. Telengut works on one surface, either paper or metal, painting with pastels and sculpting by hand, creating three-dimensional artworks on A4-sized substrates. Individual images are painted, photographed, and then re-arranged, erased, or painted over. The films are produced live on such surfaces, which, upon completion, form three dimensional objects. These procedures are repeated over months, resulting in two interrelated yet distinct artworks: a digitally rendered film made via stop motion animation, and a sculptural artefact made by hand [43].

Telengut's art invites a permacinematic reading due to her protracted, laborious hands-on approach through which she partners with mineralogical and vegetal others. Indeed, Telengut's practice is strikingly agricultural. Telengut works mainly with conifers (such as foliage of cypress and fir) and mosses. Conifers grow across the Northern Hemisphere, and are dominant species in the taiga forest. Mosses, on the other hand, are the primary

food sources of the reindeer living in the north of Mongolia. Telengut also uses red clovers, commonly considered as weeds in Canada, but also valued for their medicinal properties. The films' imagery grows through the gradual accumulation and fusion of organic and inorganic matter, stewarded by Telengut, to form cine-landscapes of multispecies design. Consequently, we approach Telengut's practice as a form of "cine-gardening," guiding cinematic landscapes towards increasing levels of environmental complexity through the execution of terraforming techniques: introducing new plants to the cinematic surface, for example, or sculpting ravines of pastel through which water runs.

"Animation is a long journey of solitude," states Telengut in *Solitude* (2016), a documentary on her practice [44]. "It's about serving your ideology through hours of contemplation, labour, or even torture." [44] The prolonged time of Telengut's production underwrites her practice's permacinematic character. However, it is not that Telengut simply works slowly, luxuriating in the tempered flows of slow-living. Telengut works frenetically, constantly, and hard across large tracts of time to tune into rhythms beyond her own.

Unlike in Saugeen teachings, in Indigenous Mongolian cosmologies, plants are not necessarily kin. Though not kin, humans and plants are entangled and co-determinate. Moreover, "plants have sentient souls much like our own," writes Buryat shaman Sarangerel in *Riding Windhorses* (2000) [45]. As in *The Ancestors' Gift*, in Telengut's *The Fourfold* a grandmother shares key cultural knowledge with her granddaughter, and us. In voiceover, Telengut's grandmother introduces us to an animistic worldview: "Nature is the homeland of human beings, Tengri is the deity and the father sky. Earth is mother with rivers nourishing all beings. Paganist and pantheist gods co-exist with all mortals." Like Pucan, Telengut takes cinema as a means of archiving ancestral knowledge and facilitating its transmission across generations and cultures.

While for some Indigenous thinkers, relational ontologies risk appropriating (and abstracting) Indigenous knowledge, Telengut speaks of them as complementary.[22] "In Indigenous and animistic beliefs," she says,

> humans are considered deeply imbricated with the soil, water, and the environment. Animism is in fact a relational ontology [instructing us] to act respectfully to non-human others and the more-than-human world, rejecting the dualistic and anthropocentric perspectives of modernity. [31]

The artisanal aspects of her practice are intimately tied to Indigenous Mongolian crafts: knitting, weaving, and embroidery. Telengut's embodied approach connects her to her relatives and culture, and to the other beings involved in the production, enabling productive exchanges across time and the species divide:

> The communities' stories and relationalities are weaved and crafted into the fabrics and materials with unique patterns, designs and techniques. In this sense, I see under-camera animation as a similar process that not only reveals aspects of materiality and tangibility, but also indicates the animation process as a phenomenon where humans, non-humans and the technical other are entangled in the co-creation. [31]

The Fourfold includes real plants, whose physical presence enhances Telengut's animation. "This is not to devalue my painted animation," she says,

> it is my attempt to develop a form of perception or sensitivity to expand my own as well as the viewer's bond with nature. . . . This gesture allows the animation process and my body to be in a co-creating and even a symbiotic relationship with the plants, stones and particles. They become active agents and voices in the creation process which deconstruct the human-centred perspective. [31]

Plants are not only animate-*d*, but animat-*ing*. Midway through the film, plants emerge from a river, proliferating from background to foreground, until finally enveloping the image. Horizontally across the screen, a forest of diverse plants forms, bisected by a river

of glittering ultramarine (Figure 4). Typifying the uncontainability of vegetal life, plants are never static but ceaselessly quiver, alive.[23]

Figure 4. Plants march across the screen and seemingly return our gaze, *The Fourfold* (2020).

We began with the idea of a cinematic horticulture that takes its cues from Indigenous knowledge and ecological design, and from encounters with plants as biosemiotically proficient companions.[24] Agricultural by association, permacinema remains conceptually sedentary. In *Surrender* (2019), her journey through the American west, Joanna Pocock encounters "the hoop,"

> a seasonal migratory way of living by following one's food source. This lifeway was practised for thousands of years by indigenous Americans in the Great Basin . . . . It was a lifeway that worked with the seasons, leaving plenty of the Earth's resources untouched for future generations . . . . As they travelled the hoop, they deliberately put the seeds of the plants that they harvested back into the ground in order to keep the cycle intact. (71) [46]

Like Varda's film, Pocock's nonfiction novel is a work of gleaning. She meets environmentalists, hunters, and urban rewilders on and off the road, making connections and gathering stories. One of the book's most memorable and moving encounters is with Finisia Medrano, a "radical rewilder" who lives on the hoop [47]. Medrano's commitment to the hunter gatherer way of life is uncompromising. "For Finisia . . . the rot of civilization began with agriculture. Once we became sedentary and started storing our food rather than going out to find it, we became landowners. Our gaze shifted from seeing land as belonging to all people to seeing it as something to be owned and exploited" ([46] p. 100).

Could (or should) a fully rewilded cinema be imagined? A cinema unfettered by institutions, finances, artistic ownership, even the mechanics of capture—a cinema on the hoop, embedded in and attuned to the patterns and progressions of the earth?

5. Postscript. Cinema in Perpetuity?

> A narrow Fellow in the Grass
>
> Occasionally rides—
>
> You may have met Him—did you not
>
> His notice sudden is—

The Grass divides as with a Comb—

A spotted shaft is seen—

And then it closes at your feet

And opens further on—

(Emily Dickinson) [48]

Every living being, we think, enjoys a cinematic power, that is, signifying whilst moving in time. "Motion is not only written on a filmstrip . . . a snake slithering through sand is doing something very similar," says Doing [41]. A plant's body, when moving, is a work of cinematic art. Cinema is the "superb conciliation of the Rhythms of Space (the Plastic Arts) and the Rhythms of Time (Music and Poetry)," wrote the early French critic Riccardo Canudo in 1911 (1988, 59) [49]. Vegetal life intertwines with the medium of cinema, whose unique identity is articulated through a recourse to the synthesis of motion and time. Perhaps this is why Lumière's *Repas de bébé* continues to fascinate: the moving leaves are already an image of cinema's own obsolescence.

If cinema is an industrial technology *and* an energy possessed by life as such, the cinematic may be present in the absence of a camera and other anthropogenic motion capture paraphernalia. It is possible, then, to enjoy the *cinematic* without the *cinema*. Confronting "the end of cinema" (yet again!) does not, however, render it redundant.[25] To attribute cinematic capacities to nonhuman others elevates both living beings and the cinema at the point of their mutual entanglement. We speak of "permacinema" as a launchpad for further inquiry into human, more-than-human, and cinema's non-exceptional existence on the continuum of earthbound creative expression.

And yet the prospect of cinema's extinction is no fantasy. Rapid environmental decline will precipitate not only humans' but cinema's demise unless largescale structural changes occur, which is unlikely. Permacinema responds to these challenges by turning to modes of production that can exist and endure beyond cinema's industrial context, and by speculating on a future in which the cinema no longer exists. The reality of cinema's finitude calls us to explore other ways in which cinematic experiences might be enjoyed. Plants' gesticulations and rhythms, the tentacular meanderings of fungal hyphae, strike us as a more expansive kind of (perma)cinema, perhaps even its only true form.

If life operates cinematically prior to the arrival of the cinematic apparatus, every living being enjoys a cinematic power that not only precedes but, more importantly, exceeds the act of filming. From this conclusion we might draw comfort: the cinema will live on, indeed outlive us, via the gestures of plants and other living beings and forces. "When I think of the word cinema," writes filmmaker Alex MacKenzie,

> I think first of a meeting space where there is a collective experience that effects each individual differently but maintains a common thread that reaches us all . . . That said, if cinema needs to be sacrificed in order for there to be a "two hundred years from now," I am okay with that too. I think if we can collectively watch the sun rise and fall and learn to appreciate that more, then a direct relationship with the world might be a better way to go. [50]

Now, Kahgee's comments become doubly significant: "everything is right here." When we can appreciate the snake's body weaving through the grass, a sunlit "spotted shaft," what need have we for cinema?

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Notes

1. On the animal turn in film see Jonathan Burt's *Animals in Film* (London: Reaktion, 2002), Akira Mizuta Lippit's *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), Nicole Shukin's *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010) [17], Anat Pick's *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), and Laura McMahon's *Animal Worlds: Film, Philosophy and Time* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2019). Shukin's discussion is particularly relevant in the present context since she views cinema as implicated in the violent "rendering" of nonhuman life. On the vegetal turn in film see for example Chris Dymond, "New Growth: To Film Like a Plant," *Ecocene* 2.1 (2021), pp. 32–50 [38], and Terea Castro, Perig Pitrou, and Marie Rebecchi's *Puissance du végétal et cinéma animiste: La vitalité révélée par la technique*. Paris: Presses du reel, 2020.
2. On the return to realism, see Herve Joubert-Laurencin and Dudley Andrew's seminal edited volume *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory and Its Afterlife* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), Richard Allen, "'There Is Not One Realism, But Several Realisms': A Review of *Opening Bazin*," *October* 148 (2014), pp. 63–78, and Lourdes Esqueda Verano, "There is No Such Thing as One Realism: Systematising André Bazin's Film Theory," *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 20.3 (2022), pp. 401–423. On the link between Bazin and animals see Jennifer Fay's "Seeing/Loving Animals: André Bazin's Posthumanism," *The Journal of Visual Culture* 7.1 (2008), pp. 41–64. See also Fay's *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the time of the Anthropocene.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, on the interlacing of cinema and the Anthropocene.
3. In *De Anima*, Aristotle distinguished between the different faculties of soul in plants and animals. He says: "The faculties we spoke of were the nutritive, perceptive, desiderative, locomotive and intellective, plants having only the nutritive, other living things [414b] both this and the perceptive." Plants lack perception (that all animals enjoy), and reason (which only human animals enjoy). Aristotle, *De Anima* (*On the Soul*). Hugh Lawson-Tancred, trans. London: Penguin, 1986.
4. In response to Marder, one could point out that not only plants photosynthesise, nor were they the first to do so. It is generally believed that the chloroplasts in contemporary plants derive from an event of ancient endosymbiosis, when a free-living cyanobacterium was engulfed by another organism. See, for example John A. Raven and John F. Allen, "Genomics and chloroplast evolution: what did cyanobacteria do for plants?" *Genome Biology* 4.3 (2003), article 209. https://genomebiology.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/gb-2003-4-3-209.pdf (accessed on 29 August 2022).
5. The OECD's own report, *Beyond Growth: Towards A New Economic Approach*, acknowledges that while "[e]conomic growth continues to generate the benefits of higher national income . . . the dominant patterns of growth in OECD countries over recent decades have also generated significant harms" (12 September, 2019, https://www.oecd.org/naec/averting-systemic-collapse/SG-NAEC(2019)3_Beyond%20Growth.pdf (accessed on 29 August 2022).
6. Degrowth remains hotly debated. For the case for degrowth, see Giorgos Kallis, *Degrowth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, and Drew Pendergrass and Troy Vettese's *Half-Earth Socialism: A Plan to Save the Future from Extinction, Climate Change and Pandemics*. London: Verso, 2022. For a critique of degrowth see for example, Leigh Phillips, "The Degrowth Delusion," *Open Democracy* 30 August, 2019, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/degrowth-delusion/ (accessed on 29 August 2022).
7. Watson's article originally appeared in *Permaculture Design Magazine* (formerly *Permaculture Activist*) 98, Winter 2015.
8. The Odeimin Runners Club collective prefers the term "a-colonial" to indicate a resistance to "oppressive capitalist systems while taking a different path: one outside of colonialism's hegemonic frameworks" (Schlums, et al. 49). [13]
9. Knowles describes Film Farm as a "utopic endeavour" (144), at once inside and outside the world. This is significant when considering Film Farm as a site of resistance. Knowles is open and honest about her own experience at Film Farm: "[w]e were about to close ourselves off from one kind of world, where the contentious politics of Trump and Brexit (still too fresh in my mind) were raging, in order to immerse our bodies and minds in a kind of physically engaged art-making that might be considered by some as escapist, frivolous even. I grappled with these thoughts throughout the journey, trying to make sense of the relationship between art and politics" (150). [11]
10. The 2019 programme of *Saugeen Takes on Film* was screened at the Fabulous Festival of Fringe Film (18-27 July, 2019), a long-running festival of experimental film that brought together Philip Hoffman, Debbie Ebanks Schlums, and Adrian Kahgee. The programme included Natalka Pucan's *The Ancestors' Gift* (2019), Sharon Isaac and Kelsey Diamond's *Thunder Rolling Home* (2019), and Tiffany Kewageshig and Cassidey Ritchie's *Tune In* (2019). The 2018 festival programme featured Pulcan's *Mii Yaawag* (2018), Emily Kewageshig and Taylor Cameron, *Zgaabiignigan* (2018), and Jennifer Kewageshig 's *How Far We've Come* (2018). For information on the 2018 and 2019 STOF workshops at Film Farm, see https://philiphoffman.ca/process-cinema/ (accessed on 29

August 2022). See also the Archive/Counter-Archive open house event, during which the STOF films were enjoyed alongside wild edibles and traditional food, https://counterarchive.ca/saugeen-takes-film-open-house (accessed on 29 August 2022).

11 The use of plants in film processing is an established practice. Our selection of case studies demonstrates the correspondence between plant processing and Indigenous studies. Other recent examples of plant processing of film include Jacquelyn Mills' documentary *Geographies of Solitude* (2022), Karel Doing's feature In Vivo (2021), and Dagie Brundert's short *i am a* (2022). The Atlantic Filmmakers Cooperative (AFCOOP), for instance, runs eco-processing workshops, https://afcoop.ca/2017/09/eco-processing-film/ (accessed on 29 August 2022).

12 In the chapter titled "Energy," Bozak describes a truly carbon-neutral cinema as "a cinema that does not leave a residue; a cinema, therefore, without a permanent infrastructure or, perhaps, any physicality at all" (17). Our conclusion suggests that such a cinema already exists. [14]

13 Varda explored similar themes far more bleakly in *Sans toit ni loi* (*Vagabond*, 1985). The film takes place in rural France and follows the life of its itinerant character Mona (played by Sandrine Bonnaire), whose death opens the film. Mona exists on the margins of society, without shelter or law, a complete outsider. In the later film, Varda returns to the question of the law, which gleaning as a liminal practice continuously challenges. For a reading of both films, see for example Allan Stoekl, "Agnès Varda and the Limits of Gleaning," *World Picture Journal* 5 (Spring 2011), http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_5/PDFs/Stoekl.pdf (accessed on 29 August 2022).

14 The potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) was cultivated in the Andes and transported to Europe by colonists around 1562, thirty years after Francisco Pizarro reportedly encountered potatoes in Peru. See J.G. Hawkes and J. Francisco-Ortega, "The Early History of the Potato in Europe," *Euphytica: International Journal of Plant Breeding* 70 (1993), pp. 1–7.

15 At the opening of her art exhibition *Patatutopia* at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003, Varda appeared dressed in a potato suit.

16 By some delightful coincidence, the film's theme song was performed by the band Garbage. Indeed, the by-products of a never-enough psychology and economics of growth are surplus and waste. The proposed solutions of the "green economy" (Kothari et al., 2014) and "green capitalism" (Buller 2022) have so far failed to tackle the world's ever-increasing tonnages of trash. See Ashish Kothari, Federico Demaria and Alberto Acosta, "Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the Green Economy," *Development* 57.3–4 (2015), pp. 362–375, and Adrienne Buller, *The Value of a Whale: On the Illusions of Green Capitalism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022.

17 On plants' indifference to power-possessing and enhancing modes of being see Michael Marder's "Resist like a plant! On the Vegetal Life of Political Movements," *Peace Studies Journal* 5.1 (2012), pp. 24–32.

18 Weil was interested in modes of reflective detachment, what she called "attention," that have existed for centuries across east and west. They include Meister Eckhart's idea of "gelassenheit" (letting be), and the Indian "aparigraha" (the virtue of non-possessing or non-grasping in Jainism).

19 Hoffman introduced us to thinking about the synchronicity of plants and films' gestation periods, when processed with flowers. In our interview, he said: "My statement 'the film will bloom when it is ready' relates to the gestation time of an artwork, when the unconscious is aligned with the creative process, and a work is ready to be born" (Hoffman 2022). [35]

20 See Karel Doing's blog on phytography, https://phytogram.blog/ (accessed on 29 August 2022). See also Doing's 2020 article, "Phytograms: Rebuilding Human-Plant Affiliations." [42]

21 The impact of plant juices on photographic emulsion was verified in William Henry Fox Talbot's early photograms, although he ignored plants' agency. On this, see: Dymond (2022) "How to Look at Plants?" [21]

22 In their article, the Odeimin Runners Club resist conflating their relational approach with Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT): "*odeimin* teachings extend beyond ANT by acknowledging spiritual and cultural forms of knowing and relating beyond that which can be explained by senses and deductive reasoning alone" (Schlums et al., 54). [13]

23 Many of Telengut's artworks can be seen on her website: http://alisitelengut.com/ (accessed on 29 August 2022), which also includes links to many interviews. In May 2021, Telengut conducted a particularly informative interview with Haliç University, available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ep8AW8IhNjE (accessed on 29 August 2022).

24 Biosemiotics, the pre-linguistic biological production and reception of meaningful signs, operates in two dimensions: movement and time. As Eduardo Kohn explains, "all life is semiotic and all semiosis is alive. . . . the locus . . . of a living dynamic by which signs come to represent the world around them to a 'someone' who emerges as such a result of this process. The world is thus 'animate.' 'We' are not the only kind of we." (16) Biosemiosis is the primary meridian through which "multispecies relations are possible . . . and also analytically comprehensible" (9). We verify others' possession of a unique lifeworld and an internal point of view by their ability to relay meaning by moving in time. Kohn's conception of life is strikingly cinematic. Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013, p. 16.

25 The end of cinema has been repeatedly proclaimed. See for example, André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*. Timothy Barnard, trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, or Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory and the Digital Dark Age*. London: BFI, 2019.

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Article

Ngā Pūrakau No Ngā Rākau: Stories from Trees

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Abstract: Within te ao Māori—the Māori world view—whakapapa, or genealogical connections, link together every being. Relationships with trees are traced through ancestral bonds that are recited through storytelling. Trees are tūpuna, elders, who hold knowledge, reflected in the etymology of rākāu (tree) being the pū (base) of pūrākau (stories). The Atua Tāne Mahuta, sought ngā kete o te wānanga, the three baskets of knowledge. The wānanga is a place of learning and was brought into being by the god of trees, forests, and birds. Ngāpuhi artist Nova Paul's experimental films are made with kaupapa Māori values. Her most recent films *Rākau* and *Hawaiki*, both 2022, reflect on lessons from trees, the latter premiering at the Sundance Film Festival 2023. These films are not so much *about* trees as *by* trees. Nova has made film developer from foliage of the trees that are filmed so that, for example, the riverside pōhutukawa tree is processed in a bath of pōhutukawa chlorophyl developer. For Nova, this process reveals not only an image but the mauri (life force) of the tree through the taking and then the making of her tree films. The films produced are more like an arboreal self-portrait: trees speaking directly through an embodied medium. If trees process sunlight to produce chlorophyl, here, chlorophyl produces images of light in order to communicate messages across species. The tohunga Reverend Māori Marsden wrote that photographic technologies might provide spiritual insight into perceiving life force: "Those with the powers and insight and perceptions (Matakite), perceived mauri as an aura of light and energy radiating from all animate life. It is now possible to photograph the mauri in living things." In previous films, Nova experimented with colour-separation techniques to pull apart the fabric of time and space, which Tessa wrote about for the *Third Text* online forum "Decolonising Colour?" That article was translated into Spanish for the book *Pensamientos Migrantes*: *Intersecciones cinematográficas* by the Colombian experimental film publishers Hambre Cine (2020). Continuing with a conversation about the ways in which experimental film practices can open up a space for decolonial thought and Indigenous epistemologies, Nova and Tessa co-write this paper in order to share the pūrākau (stories) arising from the images of these rākāu (trees), in which photosynthesis, filmmaking, and spirit, are intertwined, and where the mauri (life force) is revealed.

Keywords: trees; stories; branches of thought; decolonial representation; Indigenous film practice; plant-based film processing

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There is a story from the tribes of Ngāti Wai and Ngāti Hine that says the Kauri tree and the Whale (Tohorā) are brothers. When the Tohorā went to explore the sea, he liked it, and suggested that the Kauri tree join him, but the Kauri wanted to stay on the land. So the Tohorā removed his skin and gave it to the Kauri and returned to the sea [1]. Now, throughout Aotearoa (New Zealand), Kauri trees are dying from a pathogen that attacks their root systems. Kauri dieback, as the disease is known, has wreaked havoc on the Kauri forests, leaving skeletal stands of craggy branches. Recalling the story that the Kauri and Whale are brothers and that the Tohorā left the Kauri its skin for protection, Māori elders wondered if this ancestral connection might hold a cure for the twenty-first century disease and prepared an ointment of whale blubber to lather on the roots. The result saw the disease regress and this holds the possibility for a cure. In mātauranga Māori, or Māori

knowledge, this system of storytelling holds scientific understandings. The story of the kinship relationships between the Kauri and the Whale was kept as a repository for the knowledge that would be required in the future for the protection of the Kauri.

Making connections in the Māori world is called whakawhanaungatanga. The word itself is broken into whaka (become), whanau (family), and tanga (a suffix that expands the concept). Whanaungatanga is used as a way to establish relationships. Traditional stories are often recited to reveal specific relationships between ancestors, species, gods, and states of being. These connections are woven together and held in stories and retold; a web of connections is mapped out through whakapapa or ancestral links. The term whakapapa embodies "much more than genealogy; for it encapsulates not only the knowledge pertaining to various relationships within Māori cosmogony, but the process of layering knowledge and connecting those relationships" [2] (p. 4). Ngā Puhi scholar Kirsty Dunn reflects on this quote by Charles Royal, and notes that whakapapa can also mean "to place in layers", as well as "to make a foundation" [2] (Ibid). Layers and foundations will be important to our kōrero or discourse here, where, drawing on whakapapa, we ask, how can these connections between the land, species, and gods be revealed in film?

In te ao Māori (the Māori world), trees are our whanaunga and tuakana (elder siblings) and holders of knowledge, from which wisdom and understanding are derived. Pūrākau is the Māori word for story and, as Jenny Lee notes, it is "not coincidental that the word pūrākau literally refers to the roots or the base (pū) of the tree (rākau)" [3] (p. 7) (see Figure 1). Indeed, imagery of trees and bushes reflects Māori cultural understandings of social relationships and inter-connections, both with each other and the natural environment [3]. Lee notes that the base of each tree is buried deep within Papatūānuku, the earth mother, and that every tree needs its roots, which she characterizes as "experiences, knowledge and teachings", in order to survive and grow [3] (Ibid). The "base" of every story comprises a mycorrhizal web of relations—whakapapa that literally resides within Papatūānuku [3]. According to Robin Wall Kimmerer, mycorrhizae are "fungal strands that inhabit tree roots" that "weave a web of reciprocity", redistributing wealth so that "(a)ll flourishing is mutual" [4] (p. 20). This paper will not discuss fungi as a discrete entity within ngāhere, the forest, but rather considers fungi, plant, soil, and animal life to be inextricably interconnected.

Lee advocates for a "pūrākau approach" or methodology which "guides us to speak in a language that is not exclusive, but draws on our own ways of seeing, speaking and expressing ourselves" [3] (p. 10). Nova has used a purākau method to make her most recent films *Rākau* (2022) (see Figure 1) and *Hawaiki* (2022), which were created from the premise that "every tree has a story". Moreover, within this essay, we utilize Lee's "purākau approach" by talking with, about, and around rākau and pūrākau, stories and trees, with each other, and a host of others, in order that new branches of thought will emerge from ancient roots, for "the researcher adds another branch to the rākau, a 'branch' that has space to be unique" [3] (p. 11). Lee considers the pūrākau approach as a research method which has the potential to hold many layers of meaning, and this is achieved through the activation of voice and literary techniques within the text. Our voice is multiple, like the layering in Nova's experimental colour-separation films (see below), including images of multiple trees forming one tree, or one tree made of many trees.

Let us begin with making a foundation and placing layers upon it. Nova is tangata whenua Māori, her mountain is Whatitiri and her river is Waipao. She has an experimental film practice that spans two decades, and much of this is guided by her tribe, the hapū Te Uru Roroi, Te Parawhau me Māhurehure ki Whatitiri, and the iwi Ngāpuhi. Tessa was born and raised in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), under the watchful eye of Rangitoto from across the sparkling waters of the Waitemata. Tessa now lives in Australia, working in Naarm/Melbourne, on the lands of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung peoples of the Eastern Kulin Nations.

Figure 1. Nova Paul, *Rākau*, 2022, 16mm film print.

We have been friends and colleagues for over twenty years, with Tessa writing about Nova's use of colour-separation in her experimental film works *Pink and White Terraces*, (2006), and *This is Not Dying*, (2010), for the *Third Text* online platform "Decolonising Colour?" [5] Nova's process, in this instance, involved filming the same sequence three times, processing each take in a separate colour (red, green, or blue) and reassembling the sequences so that static objects maintained "true to life" colour, while moving objects unleashed coloured after-images within the filmic frame (see Figure 2). In pulling apart and reassembling colour, Nova created *shades*, in both senses of that word, allowing the wairua, or spirit, of matter, to be visualized. This stretching, disassembling, and layering of time follows First Peoples' ontologies in which time is not linear, but a meshwork of past, present, and future.

Nova filmed the daily life around her marae (ancestral land) for *This is Not Dying*. A humble kitchen scene features a fridge covered in magnets, one of which depicts the demigod Māui snaring the sun in a net, a synecdoche of the film as a whole. The pūrākau of Māui catching the sun is a familiar childhood story in Aotearoa New Zealand; a story about the days moving too quickly for Māui to get things done. To slow down the endless march of time, Māui's heroic intervention was to catch the sun and beat Rā, the solar deity, so that rā, the daylight hours, could be longer. Just as Māui slows time, makes it linger longer, so too Nova's film layers and congeals time. The story of how Māui slowed the sun reminds us that time is malleable, material; it can be stretched and thickened.

Figure 2. Nova Paul, *This is Not Dying*, 2010, 16mm film, 30 min (still).

When considering the concept of time for Māori, Nova once asked her Aunty for a Tangata Whenua perspective. Her Aunty's reply was that she might like to direct her question to Tāne Mahuta, God of the Forest, embodied in the form of a giant Kauri tree in the Waipoua Forest of Northland, who was a seedling 2000 years ago, the span and scale of a lifetime elongated into millennia. Since then, Nova has put her questions directly to the trees, particularly during the lockdowns of COVID-19, when rākau provided much-needed grounding. As daily life ground to a halt, an ordered sense of time also became untethered, which Paul Preciado, among others, saw as a "micro-political opening" for decolonial and ecological thought; a shamanic caesura for "modifying subjectivity", an opportunity to declare "stop the world: I want to get off" [6]. Is it implausible to connect such a tectonic temporal shift and its concomitant effects on thought, to shifts within cinema, which Deleuze assesses as points when new cerebral circuits are created? Creating new sequences in art means creating them in the brain, too [7].

Both *Rākau* and *Hawaiki* are conversations with trees. *Rākau* (2022) preceded *Hawaiki* and was commissioned for the Māori Moving Image exhibition at Christchurch Art Gallery in 2022. In this film, Nova carried out her first experimentations, filming trees and hand processing them in the leaves of the trees. Carefully exposing the film footage to ensure all film process elements could be worked through, with notations on the filming, this film is a study of the textures of the trees from an etheric circle of ancient pūruri. The Bolex camera moves along the trunk and into the branches, filming in 20 second rushes of hand-wound film to create in-camera edits. The footage sways along with the wind in the trees. In the B&W experimentations in *Hawaiki* (which screened at the Sundance Film Festival 2023), Nova has approached filming the trees with a more formal, portraiture approach: sometimes the camera is locked off and other times it pans around smoothly, or carefully tracks the limbs of the tree.

Here, Nova is extending her experimental film practice of exploring the materiality of film and early cinematic practices through a Māori lens. She has researched and developed a methodology to process 16mm film in a plant-based film developer, replacing environmentally damaging Kodak D-76 chemicals. Using foliage from the very same rākau that are her filmic subjects, she creates a chlorophyll bath made from leaves and bark, in which she develops the celluloid. For example, a riverside Pōhutukawa tree is filmed on 16mm film and is processed in a bath of Pōhutukawa-based chlorophyll developer, or, as Nova calls it, "tree juice". This is in addition to the plant-derived materials which traditionally make up the celluloid medium, including cotton by-products and camphor [8]. This technical methodology reflects the epistemological frameworks of te ao Māori. Plant-based

film chemical processing reveals not only an image of the rākau but also the mauri (life force) of the tree. Rather than continuing the extractive nature of western photographic histories—*taking* an image—this co-creation between tree, human, and celluloid is a collaborative *making* of an image. You could even say that the images are given by the trees themselves, as Nova considers that the whole project "came from the trees". Just as Lee speaks of a pūrākau method which "creates the opportunity to write about culture as well as write culture into the text" [3] (p. 12), so too Nova is making images *of* trees as well as *by* trees, in a branching methodology that allows for both–and.

The branching methodology of both–and troubles the categories inherent to pākehā (non-Māori, generally European) epistemologies, including the triadic semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce. In this theory, the word "tree" is a symbol, the photograph or film of a tree is an icon, and residue of the tree's bark, an index. But photographs already problematize this division by sharing characteristics of indexicality (physically affecting the form of the sign) and symbol (requiring a certain degree of cultural literacy to be interpreted) [9]. The Māori photographer Natalie Robertson argues for the indexical nature of photography when she writes about the experience of coming into contact with negatives of her ancestors in a museum archive. "Silver halide crystals held traces of light, and energy reflected off my ancestral Waiapu River and off people from my tribe" [10] (p. 64). Nova's films, however, exceed the indexical; the fact that the images are made with "tree juice" and therefore carry DNA material, imbues them with whakapapa. They are not remnant traces, but living relations.

These films are akin to an arboreal self-portrait, trees speaking directly through an embodied medium; (the use of this word "akin" rather than "like" deliberately leaves behind the language of Facebook, and instead uses language that emphasizes kinship or whakapapa cosmologies). An analogy can be drawn with Stan Brakhage's 1963 film *Mothlight*, where the filmmaker sandwiched moth wings, flowers, grasses, seeds, and leaves between two strips of clear film. As J. Hoberman writes in *Artforum*, this ceases to be representation and is instead "the thing itself . . . profoundly indexical" [11]. In Nova's films, we might equate this with Mana Motuhake in action: self-determination for the trees, as their own representatives. If trees process sunlight to produce chlorophyl, here, chlorophyl produces images of light in order to communicate messages across species. In the case of Brakhage's *Mothlight*, Hoberman declares the filmmaker was "practicing a particular sort of magic" [11]. In the case of *Rākau* and *Hawaiki*, photosynthesis, filmmaking, and spirit, are intertwined and mauri is revealed.

Nova's filmmaking practice has been driven by implementing Mana Motuhake and Tino Rangatiratanga (self-determinacy) in order to decolonize representation and privilege Indigenous processes. Centring a Māori world view in both the *what* and the *how* of her film practice creates relationships with subjects that echo Māori values and ways of being. In making her recent films, Nova wondered, can plants teach us how to take an image? And how might the wisdom that comes from Indigenous harvesting be practiced when filming? In approaching her filmmaking, she asked the trees for their image and their leaves to make into a developer and offered a karakia (prayer or acknowledgement) to the ngāhere (forest). Indigenous practices around collecting food and medicine, and utilizing materials from the natural world have an intentionality, as described in Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Honorable Harvest*: care for the things that care for you, acknowledge the provider, ask for permission and uphold the integrity of the process. Only take what is offered and only what you need, leaving more than half for others and for regeneration. Follow traditions of harvesting and utilize everything. "Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever" [4] (p. 183).

Considering filmmaking as a "harvest" both by filming the tree and collecting leaves to make the film developer, Nova's practice included karakia, acknowledging the gods or Atua of the ngāhere and of creativity. How often do we ask permission before we "take" a photo? And how often do we treat images of ancestral beings we have "taken" with the ongoing respect they deserve? Speaking of images of her departed ancestors, Māori

filmmaker Merata Mita said "at home I greet the images of my ancestors . . . and speak to them as they come forth on the screen. They have much to relate to me and I and my children have much to learn still from them . . . Foremost, and through all pervasiveness throughout this connection, is the acknowledgment of our creator and our implacable link to the earth, its creatures, its elements and seasons, the stars, the planets, the entire universe . . . " [12] (pp. 103–104).

So, if rākāu (trees) are the pū (base) of pūrākau (stories), then let us dig deep into their whakapapa—grounded, ancestral, and material relations. We will pair three of the rākāu that make up Nova's new film series with a pūrākau which *develops* (in the double meaning of botanical growth *and* the emergence of imagery on film) the knowledge and wisdom of the trees: ngā tohu, the signs they reveal through their kōrero, messages.

"If your films don't heal, there's no point in making them" [13]. As with other Indigenous practices that centre the natural world, such as those outlined in Kimmerer's *Honorable Harvest*, for Māori, karakia (acknowledgements) are offered to Tāne Mahuta for all plants harvested, giving thanks for life and the fruits of the forest that give us health. Each karakia finishes with *Tihei mauri ora*, calling the breath of life and asserting wellbeing. By entering into this relational practice, it is also possible to consider taking filmic images in the same way.

Undergrowth, bushes, scrub, and ferns, provide the birthing and nursery conditions for trees. Fern fronds unfurl like koru, the intricate spirals that can be seen throughout Māori whakairo, carving, and kowhaiwhai, painting. Ferns are fractal plants, whose leaves mirror and echo their own structure on a micro and macro level. Perhaps it is no coincidence that one of the first photographs on record is William Fox Talbot's *Buckler Fern* (1839), a "calotype" from the Greek meaning "beautiful impression" [14]. Another key species of the undergrowth is Kawakawa, a medicinal plant known for its many healing properties. Such is the significance of this sacred plant that it is used in ceremonial contexts; for example, Kawakawa is held by women when they karanga (call) people on to the sacred grounds of the marae.

Kawakawa leaves are held and shaken to create energies which open a doorway for ancestors to come through. This trembling can also be heard in the vibrato voices of the women calling the ancestors, known as ihirangaranga, which shares vibrational resonances with rākau, and it can be seen in quivering, iridescent leaves in a scene in Nova's *Pink and White Terraces* (see Figure 3). Such trembling indicates a threshold space, and can be productively linked to what Édouard Glissant referred to as the "trembling thinking" required to imagine the world anew: "utopia needs trembling thinking: we cannot discuss utopia with fixed ideas" [15] (p. 139). For Glissant, a Caribbean writer who thought with the mangrove, tremblement "is thinking in which we can lose time, lose time searching, in which we can wander and in which we can counter all the systems of terror, domination, and imperialism with the poetics of trembling" [15] (p. 140). If only he could have seen kuia performing the wiri, or quivering of hands, with and without Kawakawa leaves, as they enter the sacred space of the marae. It is said that this movement represents, among other things, shimmering waters, heatwaves, and, importantly to the kaupapa of this kōrero, wind rustling through leaves [16].

Trees have been imbricated with film since the Lumières produced *Repas de bébé* (*The Baby's Meal*, 1895), where it was noted that audiences were even more enthralled by the rustling of leaves in the background than the prosaic action of feeding a baby in the foreground [17] (p. 50). In her essay "Vegan Cinema", Anat Pick contrasts two approaches to life and looking exemplified by this film: the devouring baby, and "its non-voracious alternative that attends to objects at a distance, and lets them be" [18] (p. 131). Pick's concept of "vegan cinema" is not necessarily a didactic exploration of animal rights, but a cinema which allows the more-than-human to permeate the medium, rather than the relentlessly anthropocentric narratives of mainstream film. In *The Baby's Meal*, what is most profound is that the "beauty of the fluttering leaves made visible the operation of natural

forces, undirected by human hands, to which the cinema is witness" [18] (pp. 131–132). It is these natural forces that Nova connects to and makes-with in the films *Rākau* and *Hawaiki*.

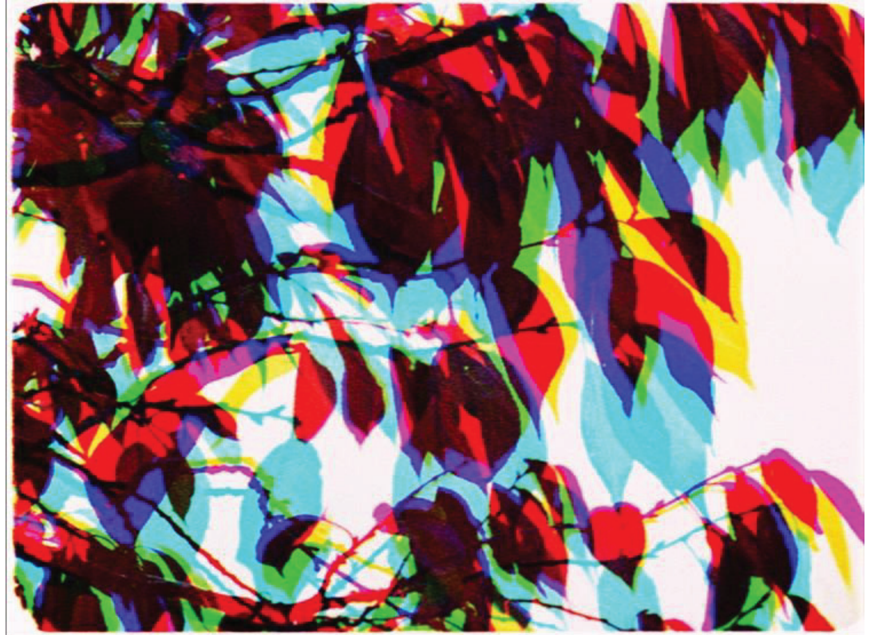

Figure 3. Nova Paul, *Pink and White Terraces*, 2006, 16mm film, 10 min (still).

Perhaps the most famous, and foundational, of pūrākau, is that of the separation of Ranginui, the sky father, and Papatūānuku, the earth mother. Before their son Tāne, God of the Forest, pushed them apart, there was no light, and no differentiation in the universe; the two parental gods and their children lived together in featureless darkness. Tāne and his siblings were tired of living this way, and instigated a rebellion. Tāne lay on his back and pushed with his long straight legs (interestingly, in terms of the copious contemporary literature on the "intelligence" of trees, which resides in the mycorrhizal or fungal networks found in trees' entangled roots, Māori always knew the "head" of the tree is its root system, not the leafy canopy). Eventually, Tāne's parents were pushed apart, allowing for illumination and creating Te Ao Mārama, the world of light. Aptly, Tāne Mahuta is personified as the largest Kauri tree in Aotearoa, lording it over the ngāhere, forest, in Northland, where he is a major tourist attraction, and home to countless forms of wildlife.

Film is a medium of light, and our whole cosmos can be visioned, as Henri Bergson imagined it, as a "metacinema", with its plays of light, shadow, and movement [19] (p. 61). Similarly, photosynthesis brings the world into being: plants are our oldest ancestors, without whom we could not breathe, and to whom we owe the gift of life. Tūhoe kaumātua Hēmi Waiwai further elaborated the etymology of rākau, trees, as follows: rā is the source of divine energy (the sun); kā is the igniting of divine energy (a spark); ū is to instil, and therefore rākau can be understood as the process western science more recently came to call photosynthesis. This could also be related back to the pūrākau of Māui snaring the sun, since photosynthesis is a kind of binding of the sun's energy, transmuting it into another form. We can understand photosynthesis as a mode of "non-human looking" [20] (p. 153). The sun must be *perceived* by plants to create the basic building blocks of life. Even the birth of human vision is linked to photosynthesis, as our microscopic ancestors had no

eyes, but photoreceptors, which sensed sunlight, and the cellular structure that enabled them to photosynthesize is the same one that eventually developed into eyes [20] (Ibid).

Film can also be called a kind of photosynthesis; just think of the first photograms which were literally developed in the sun. If the Reverend Māori Marsden speaks of a "woven universe", perhaps we could imagine both film and photosynthesis, and especially film developed in chlorophyl, as weaving with light? Patricia Grace explains: "Writing can be likened to both carving and weaving. A writer, like a carver, seeks to reveal what is within. A writer, like a weaver, selects the strands and works them together" [2] (p. 16). Certainly, Nova's films have always been woven, meshing together layers of colour, time, place, and perspective. But in attending to light, we cannot ignore the foundational role of darkness, either in cinema, or in the growth of plants and people. Dunn quotes Tina Makereti, who refers to Te Kore (the void or chaos) as a "place of pure potentiality", and Dunn interprets this as meaning the place where creativity springs from [2] (p. 17). Indeed, Ranginui Walker refers to Te Kore as "the primaeval matter that comprised the seeds of the universe" which coalesced to form Papatūānuku and Ranginui; and it is from this union that "all things in the world descend, including atua, stars, mountains, lakes, and rivers, flora and fauna, humans and other animals" [3] (pp. 25–26). This is why Māori whakapapa to, or make relations with, not just the originary parents, but the environment and everything in it, including animals; they are whanaunga, relations.

If Gilles Deleuze compares filmmakers to philosophers, saying that the former think with images rather than concepts [19], could we compare trees to filmmakers? Both do their developing in the dark in order to be projected into, or via, Te Ao Mārama, the world of light. "Film itself thinks" [21] (p. xix) and so too do trees. There has been so much recent scholarship on "plant intelligence" [22,23], but much of this tends to imagine trees as independent scholars, although Michael Marder is quick to point out that rhizomatic thinking, which is "plant-thinking *proper*", takes us beyond "the fictitious enclosure of a reified and self-sufficient identity" [24] (p. 169). Likewise, we want to acknowledge the whole entangled forest, starting, of course, with the undergrowth, and what is under the undergrowth, Papatūānuku, our mother, to whom we all whakapapa, make relations, with (see Figure 4). In fact, the word ngāhere (forest or bush, as it is referred to in Aotearoa) literally means the (nga) ties (here), representing interrelations and interdependence [3] (p. 7).

If plants were the first filmmakers, it is not surprising that light in the trees recurs as a filmic trope well beyond its debut with the Lumières. This is how the Dream Machines of Brion Gysin and William Burroughs came into being—they were contraptions built to echo the play of light and shadow on eyelids, as seen with the sun setting through trees while travelling on a bus or train [25]. The pulsing flickering could induce hallucinatory patterns behind the eyes, psychedelics without drugs, a state Nova's films frequently produce.

Important to this discussion is the concept of mauri that permeates all Māori thinking, including arts and sciences. Scholars from the latter field, Daniel Hikuroa, Angela Slade and Darren Gravley, have provided an excellent summary of mauri via numerous thinkers and definitions, including that it operates as a "physical life principle; the spark of life, the active component that indicates a person is alive, the binding force between the physical and the spiritual; the capacity for air, water or soil to support life." Importantly, for our purposes here, mauri can be found "in water, land, forests as well as mist, wind, soil and rocks, and is the force that interpenetrates all things to bind and knit them together" [26] (p. 2). Tohunga Reverend Māori Marsden notes that photographic technologies can reveal the mauri in life: "Those with the powers and insight and perceptions (Matakite), perceived mauri as an aura of light and energy radiating from all animate life. It is now possible to photograph the mauri in living things" [27] (p. 50). Marsden recognizes that photographic practices enable mauri to be visualized and that the filmic apparatus has the potential for revealing otherwise imperceptible life forces, thus enabling spiritual insights. Reflecting on the aura of light radiating from life has been an ongoing preoccupation in Nova's film practice. Her technicolour films experimented with colour-separation techniques, intent on

opening spaces for tracing wairua, spirit, layering whakapapa, and creating a decolonial *thought-image* [28] (p. 105), by pulling apart the fabric of time, just as Tāne once pulled apart his parents in order to create a new reality.

Figure 4. Nova Paul, *Rākau*, 2022, 16mm film print.

This same Atua, Tāne Mahuta, God of the Forest, also sought and retrieved ngā kete o te wānanga, the three baskets of knowledge, from the heavens. These included te kete-tuatea (the basket of light), te kete-tuauri (the basket of darkness) and te kete-aronui (the basket of pursuit) [29]. That the wānanga, which is a place of learning, was brought into being by the god of trees, forests, and birds, does not seem coincidental. The forest is a library, a repository of knowledge, it is "thick with information" (Michael Pollan uses this term in relation to his garden) [30] (p. 73). In having this cross-cultural, and cross-Tasman hui, we too, Nova and Tessa, are creating a wānanga. This text is not the product of a singular vision—we are not a singular voice, but a braided one, like the afterimages in Nova's colour-separation films. Kimmerer also discusses coloured afterimages when she notes the abundance of her ancestral lands on Turtle Island, including the psychedelic inflorescence of yellow goldenrods and purple asters. These complementary colours appear in late summer, making pupils (in both senses of the word) vibrate and dilate. Kimmerer uses this afterimage effect as a metaphor for the two worlds she inhabits; her "science eyes" and the world of Potawatomi traditional knowledge. Her methodology, like our Trans-Tasman, Māori-Pākehā wānanga, is one of complementarity. She hopes that science and traditional knowledge can be "purple and yellow to one another", enacting the beautiful overlay of goldenrod and asters in their complementary colours. "We see the world more fully when we use both" [4] (p. 46).

Vision, however, not to mention scopic apparatuses such as cameras, microscopes and telescopes, have all been tied to western systems of domination. Behind Nova's film practice is an ethos that echoes Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay's notes around hui, meetings, kōrero, discourse, and the desire to make the camera a listener, rather than a scopophilic voyeur [31] (pp. 14–18). Listening is a humble activity, undertaken by students in the

wānanga of life. A film can also be a wānanga; a place of learning, a place of time in space, a starting point for filmic production and engagement, the site of making and then viewing. This wānanga framework radiates out, like the concentric circles within a tree trunk, marking growth, knowledge, and measuring time. In this wānanga, Mita has a kōrero with Deleuze about the thought-image, suggesting that the medium of celluloid film creates memory pictures, pictures of the imagination, in a continuation of the oral tradition [13] (p. 3).

The Pūriri tree is very special to Nova's hapū, because her mountain, Whatitiri, was covered in Pūriri that were felled by colonial settlers. It is said that the name Whatitiri (Goddess of Thunder) was given to the mountain because of the flapping of the kūkupa (kererū/wood pigeon) wings; their abundance, due to gorging on Pūriri berries, made a thunderous noise. Nova's hapū use Pūriri leaves in their tangihanga (funerary rites) making pare rau, (head wreaths), and surrounding the tūpāpaku (deceased body). The rau/rākau is a portal between this world and the underworld. Before colonization, tūpāpaku were placed in trees and a year later our bones were interred in caves. Today, stands of Pūriri are often wāhi tapu, sacred sites.

Within the film *Hawaiki*, the Pūriri tree is a focal point, a portal created by the children of Okiwi school on Aotea, Great Barrier Island, in the Hauraki Gulf (see Figure 5). At the edge of the playground, close to the forest, the children have made a refuge they call Hawaiki. Woven through ancestral stories and in genealogy, Hawaiki is a place with spiritual and metaphysical connections for Māori. With deep cultural links across the Pacific or Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa, Hawaiki is an island, a homeland, a portal where Māori come from and will return to. In the world of the children, we see that their ancestors also intended that Hawaiki was for them to make their own, to play with, and have agency within. Hawaiki is a place where spiritual connections to ancient wisdom exist, a sanctuary for reflection and place to be yourself. Under the shelter of the trees and grounded on the land, the children create a space for their self-determination, reminding us that Hawaiki enables us to build the world we want.

Figure 5. Nova Paul, *Hawaiki*, 2022, 16mm film print.

This is a fractal, or nested wānanga, place of learning, within, or in addition, to the school on whose grounds it has emerged. We might relate this relational wānanga to Moten and Harney's concept of Study, that exists both inside, outside, and in spite of, the institution. Study is always relational—Study is "what you do with other people",

it is "talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice" [32] (p. 110). In *Hawaiki*, Nova is both filming a wānanga, and creating one. The film itself is a place of learning, a concrescence of time into place, with its mauri, life force, coming from the Pūriri tree itself. The Pūriri juice that develops the film is vivid green, bursting with chlorophyl, with life, giving a rich tone to its celluloid self-portrait. Tīhei mauri ora!

By contrast, Pōhutukawa gives an orangey, sepia tone. This makes sense both in terms of its reddish wood, bright red flowers, and the fact that, in film media, sepia is associated with memory and passing, and Pōhutukawa are connected to death. They tumble and prostrate themselves, humbly reaching and searching sea and sky, as well as holding out a helping hand to guide those on rocky paths, including the spirits of the departed on their journey to Hawaiki (see Figure 6). Pōhutukawa is the name of one of the stars of the Matariki cluster (Pleiades), and she is the star associated with collecting the souls of the departed [33].

Figure 6. Nova Paul, *Hawaiki*, 2022, 16mm film print.

In *Hawaiki*, Pōhutukawa's self-portrait is flecked by flashes of light, scars and scratching, like the salt and sea-spray that some say is the source of the name Pōhutu (a geyser), appropriate to a sea-side tree [34]. So close are they to the sea that some iwi have the Pōhutukawa whakapapa (relate) to Tangaroa, God of the Sea, rather than Tāne, God of the Forest [34]. The ocean breeze gusts through limbs, which wave to, and with, the waves of the ocean. They have strong hearts, as the name "iron heartwood" attests to; their timber is staunch and red, like a beating heart. Ngāti Rārua Ātiawa Iwi Trust writes that Pōhutukawa are "filled with aroha" or love [35].

The Pōhutukawa and Rātā are related by their red blooms, and Rātā is a key character in an important pūrākau or story. Rātā was on a mission to avenge his father, and so he

needed to make a canoe. But even though he cut down a straight tree and began carving it, when he returned the next day to complete his task, the canoe was nowhere to be seen, and instead, the tree he had felled was standing tall again in the very spot he had cut it down. Rātā felled the tree again, and carved it again, but the next day the exact same thing happened. This time, after cutting and carving, Rātā hid behind a bush and saw the hakuturi (spirits of the forest in the form of birds, insects and pekapeka, or bats), were replacing all the fragments of the tree. When he confronted them, they told him he had failed to follow kawa or protocol. When he did so by reciting a karakia before taking a life from the forest (as in Kimmerer's *Honourable Harvest*), the hakuturi released the tree and Rātā was able to continue on his mission [36].

That the tree cannot be felled is interesting in relation to Deleuze and Guattari's systematic attempt to destroy the image of arborescence and lineal descent in favour of the distributed rhizome. Of course, we now know that trees are not in fact individual, upright citizens of the plant "kingdom", but nodes in underground networks. Marder argues for the use of rhizomatic thought and other Deleuzian concepts without uprooting or felling the tree, because *no* plant is the product of hierarchical organization. According to Marder, even in its spatial verticality, the tree "maintains conceptual horizontality ... its body is a non-totalizing assemblage of multiplicities" [24] (p. 85). It goes without saying that Māori have always known this, and that in trying to fell Tāne Mahuta without acknowledging mycorrhizal whakapapa Deleuze was barking up the wrong tree, a pun all the more layered when we consider both the *bark* that develops Nova's films, and that Deleuze himself called the barking of dogs "the stupidest cry ... the shame of the animal kingdom" [37]. The fact that Rātā's tree reassembles again and again is thanks to the networked nature of the forest: birds and insects put the tree back together again, piece by piece, because the tree is already made up of countless actors, countless forces; it is "an inherently political space of conviviality" [24] (p. 85). Pōhutukawa remind us of this, with their fibrous, matted aerial roots, fringing their gnarled trunks. Pōhutukawa are elders; they demonstrate the beauty of the bent frame, wrinkled skin and bleached, blemished limbs, a reminder of death in life, and life in death.

The films *Rākau* and *Hawaiki* enact a cinematic thinking-with arboreal whanaunga, family, including the undergrowth and medicine, here represented by Kawakawa; abundance including food (berries and fat pigeons) but also knowledge (wānanga) and life force, as with the Pūriri; and death, rebirth, and the entanglement of those states with Pōhutukawa. All of these rākau/pūrākau exist within a Māori kaupapa or framework of relations that holds a space for us all. The films call for a collective restoration of the ngāhere, chip by chip, to slow the capitalist march of time, as Māui did, so that the trees have time to grow. Indigenous epistemologies, science and knowledge, enable us to consider how we might think-with the trees and acknowledge how trees have in fact provided the template for thinking and being since the emergence of Te Ao Mārama, our shared world of light. Indigenous ways of being, passed down, tuku iho, generation after generation, understand that all creatures depend upon the trees and their wisdom.

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Article

Common Grounds: Thinking With Ruderal Plants About Other (Filmic) Histories

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Abstract: This article explores the connections between film and ruderal plants: plants that grow spontaneously in anthropized environments and that we often call "weeds". Thriving across damaged lands, ruderals are not only exceptional companions for thinking with at a time of ecological rupture, but also a way of engaging with less anthropocentric histories. As argued in this paper, such histories also pertain to film. Despite its timid representational interest in ruderals and "weeds", cinema is concerned with the stories of collaborative survival, companionship and contaminated diversity raised by such turbulent creatures. Framed by a reflection on our ruderal condition, a discussion around some recent artists' films allows us to explore some of these problems, while putting an accent on the idea of affective ecologies and involutionary modes of perception.

Keywords: affective ecologies; ecocriticism; lichens; plants in film; ruderal plants; vegetal turn; weeds

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1. Introduction: Beyond Representation Alone

Celebrated as the co-creator of a world-changing device known as the *cinématographe*, French inventor Auguste Lumière apparently used the machine's prototype only once, in order to shoot a view called *Mauvaises herbes* ("Weeds", view n° 64, 1896) [1]. Despite its suggestive title, the film in question is less about the fortuitous plants known as "weeds" than about the rising swirls of evanescent white smoke caused by their burning. In those early years, and for many decades to come, trees, plants, let alone the humble and reviled weeds—"nature's most unloved plants" [1]—rarely made it to the foreground. From its beginnings, film was pictured as a human-centred medium, as illustrated by the views that the Lumière brothers displayed to marvelled audiences in France and abroad. If the rustling leaves in the garden setting of *Repas de bébé* ("The Baby's Meal", Louis Lumière, view n° 88, 1895) famously caught their eye, briefly rescuing our vegetal companions from the background, film consistently measured its shots against human bodies and human time scales. Unsurprisingly, the ten views shown at the historic Grand Café screening in late 1895 were all carefully composed around human figures, renewing with anthropocentric modes of vision and temporalities [2]. Moreover, the early spectators' fascination with moving leaves does not actually suggest an undocumented affinity towards the vegetal realm. Swirling sea-waves, tossing waterfalls and fluttering clouds (of steam, dust or smoke) equally attracted their attention. Hinting at the powerful experience of seeing fugitive, unplannable movements captured on screen, even a beer's fleeting head could stand out against a lively tableau (p. 308, [2]).

Historically, cinema's timid but noteworthy interest in plants as filmic subjects in their own right goes back to this initial period. As early as 1896, there was talk in the French press of documenting the lifecycle of a rose (or of a rhododendron) by means of the movie camera [3]. Before the Institute Marey put the idea into practice, German botanist Wilhelm Pfeffer shot four time-lapse studies on plant motion between 1898 and 1900, the technique "endow[ing] plants with a vivid sense of vitality" (p. 56, [3]) [4]. Envisaged as a new research tool by different disciplines, among which was plant physiology, filmic technology began to

unmoor itself from its anthropocentric underpinnings, exploring other-than-human scales and helping to shake the boundaries of century-old conceptions about life and the living [5]. Writing about *The Life of a Plant* (Percy Smith, 1926), a *Secrets of Nature* production starring a garden nasturtium, a reviewer commented that after seeing the film "you find it difficult to believe (. . .) that the life of a plant is not as sentient as your own" (p. 9, [4]) [6].

Nonetheless, beyond the specific interest evinced by a handful of experts and scientific popularisers alike in vegetative movements (and the audiences' continuing fascination with time-lapse technology), plants were rarely promoted to the role of film stars [7]. Certainly, once stencilling became mechanized (1907) and as different additive two- and three-colour systems were perfectioned in the following years, flowers graciously lent themselves to the spectacular showcase of flamboyant palettes, like in Gaumont's *Études des fleurs* ("The Kingdom of Flowers", 1910) [5] or *Bouquets dans des vases* ("Bouquets in vases", Gaumont, 1912) [6] (Figure 1). Placed on rotating pedestals, as if arrayed behind the glass of a fancy shop window, flowers (but also fruits and vegetables) occupy the centre of the screen. But such films are exceptional, and the subgenre too modest with regards to its supposedly phytocentric ambitions, to turn plants into more than just a curious footnote in the history of cinema.

Figure 1. Film still from *Bouquets dans des vases*, Gaumont, 1912 (© Gaumont Pathé Archives).

However, to think about cinema with plants is not necessarily to focus on representation alone [8]. To return to *Étude des fleurs* and *Bouquets dans des vases*, the most relevant aspect of these pictures concerns our perception of their colours and what they tell us about filmic flowers. If their vibrant hues strike us as nonnatural (in particular the chronochrome florae of *Bouquets dans des vases*), it is probably because of the synthetic, celluloid character of these specimens—yet another iteration of what Sarah Cooper has aptly named "techno-flowers",

flowers that come to matter through cinematic means and, one can add, through very concrete, material supports, such as the flexible and highly-flammable material known as celluloid [7]. Curiously, before it became the motion pictures' stock of choice (and a synonym for cinema generally), celluloid—essentially composed of nitrocellulose and camphor (a plant-derived chemical in its natural form, synthetised in the early 20th century)—had also transformed the buoyant industry of artificial flowers. Indeed, if silk and fine cotton remained the privileged choice for dressmakers and milliners excelling in the fine art of fabricating flowers, celluloid imposed itself as a cheaper alternative to organic funeral wreaths [9]. Jean-Luc Godard (incidentally, an exquisite filmer of flowers and gardens [10]) seemed to recall this curious fact when he observed, in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998), that "Technicolor films will use the same dominants as funeral wreaths" [8]. Whatever the case, celluloid wreaths and artificial plants are as much the child of chemical industries as aniline dyes, colour filters and special film stocks manufactured during cinema's quest to achieve so-called "natural colour" [11]. Relying on voracious energy economies [12], all of these products leave their toxic imprint on the planet, the environmental impact of film inviting us to reframe the old question of ontology. As pointed out by Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway (drawing on Nadia Bozak's *The Cinematic Footprint* [9]), a retooled filmic ontology stresses cinema's extractive nature by reconsidering indexicality as the "hinge or hook that connects the [photographic and digital] image to the world" (p. 3, [10]) [13].

If thinking about cinema with plants potentially means to engage in discussions around ontology, complex materialities and overlooked industrial ecologies such as those interweaving celluloid film, industrial dyes and artificial flowers, my essay wishes to explore yet another facet of this problem. Taking Auguste Lumière's paradoxical (non-)inscription of plants in film history as a cue, I wish to concentrate on the humblest of them all: "weeds" and, more specifically, disturbance-adapted species known as ruderal plants. As we will see, ruderal plants are much more than the "weeds" of cities and industrial sites, the successful "colonizers" of wastelands and urine-saturated tree beds. Flourishing in what we can call, as did anthropologist Anna Tsing, the everyday ruins of capitalism, and embodying what she calls a "third nature" (p. viii, [11]), ruderals are exceptional companions for thinking with, in particular at a time of rupture, when "all the world's a dump" and that particular condition "wreck[s] the very-being world of the world" (p. 2, [12]) [14]. Relegated to the fringes of our screens, ruderals will allow me to illustrate the theoretical and methodological point that I wish to make about the challenge of thinking cinema with plants: if plant representation can be our starting point, plants can always tell us an array of complex stories, including about film itself. In the context of this essay, ruderals will take us from the representational to the surprising entanglements bringing together human (film)makers and spectators, plants and the camera.

Thinking with ruderals about other filmic histories (but also, as we will see, with lichens: reliable bio-indicators and composite organisms standing for collaborative survival and symbiosis [15]) is no minor affair. Among others, it implies reckoning with the politicisation of the living to which ecological thought has been inviting us for several decades. To politicise forms of life as neglected as lichens and ruderal plants means bringing the unnoticed, the trampled and the trodden to the space of our agonistic polis, to reimagine it as a common ground: a place of care and mutual recognition open to all sorts of humans and the more-than-human. In other words, thinking with ruderals and lichens is perhaps a way of articulating visions on the new communities to be invented if we wish to make a "world" out of the devastation that according to philosopher Michael Marder and others equally permeates our senses and thoughts. In the hope that the lethal logic of the dump and the "ontological toxicity" [12] on which it relies can still be subverted, this is clearly a difficult, but vital task. Film has an evident role to play, in particular when it comes to reframing the terms in which we think about attention. Turned into the most valuable of commodities by the boom in digital content, "attention" must be rescued from the grips of economy, particularly if we wish to revitalise our capacity to see. To "undump" attention is

to think about it in ethical terms, not as a resource or an asset, but as a means of caring; a way of noticing what we were taught to ignore and to background. Film can help us do that—and more: it can give shape to new ("involutionary") modes of attention, kinder and more generous to others.

"The wisdom of the plants", Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari once wrote, is that "even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else—with the wind, an animal, human beings" (p. 11, [13]). With a bit of luck, thinking with ruderals and lichens might bring us closer to the wisdom of plants, helping us forge more ecological rationalities. By this necessarily plural notion (ecological rationalities can express themselves in various forms), philosopher and eco-feminist Val Plumwood understood the different ways of "phasing out destructive capacities and evolving a sympathetic partnership or communicative relationship with nature" (p. 68, [14]). But one could also recall Marder on the "strategies of undumping": "uncluttering, revitalising physiological, cognitive, ecological and planetary metabolisms, reactivating becoming beyond mutations provoked by the dreams of immutability at every one of those levels" (p. xiv, [12]). More concretely, thinking with ruderals and lichens is also a way of engaging with less anthropocentric histories, accounts that ignore the nature–culture divide and which can tell us "small, partial, and wild stories of more-than-human attempts to stay alive" (p. 6, [15]). As we will see, such histories equally pertain to film: a medium whose general lack of representational interest in ruderal plants (and lichens) does not mean that cinema is not concerned by the issues raised by such strange, queer and turbulent creatures.

2. Our Ruderal Condition

Certain vegetal species are called ruderals, from the Latin *rudus*, *ruderis:* gravel, rubble, ruins. Ruderal plants are those that grow spontaneously in anthropized environments, that is, habitats disturbed by human presence or action, such as the piles of debris evoked by the word's etymology. The use of the term in a botanical context goes back to Carl Linnaeus' nomenclature. In the 10th edition of its *Systema Naturae* (1758), *ruderale* refers to the type of soil where certain plants grow [16]. For instance, vervains are known to flourish in damp ditches, sandy roadsides, abandoned gravel pits: in sum, typical ruderal milieus. Even though Linnaeus could not have known this (the ruderalisation of the planet accelerated considerably only after his lifetime), ruderals thrive in devastated soils, saturated with iron, phosphates and, of course, nitrates [17]. Widely used in agriculture, man-made fertilisers have radically improved agricultural productivity, but the abundance of ammonia and nitrates has its cost. Synthetic fertilisers have not only transformed the global nitrogen cycle (one of the most altered biogeochemical cycles on Earth and one of the largest contributors to global warming today), but are also the cause of increasing nitrate pollution, harmful to people, animals, plants, soils, bacteria and bodies of water alike. Usually, nitrophilous ruderal plants (or at least those tolerant of the high nitrate contents frequently found in their disturbed habitats) are reliable bioindicators—as we will see, a there is very concrete way of implicating them in worlding projects.

In the 18th century, the term ruderal did not have the connotation that it was to acquire once it became bound to disturbance processes such as soil nitrification. Then fundamentally linked to ruins, some ruderal plants played an active cultural role in the Romantic monumentalisation of certain specific landscapes. The *Cymbalaria muralis* or ivy-leaved toadflax, a floriferous perennial with small lilac flowers, vulgarly seen on the ruins of Rome and also known as the "Colosseum ivy" is a case in point. Before the brushing and cleaning of multiple restoration campaigns ripped most species off its walls, the Colosseum—described as "a giant stone vase" by German historian Ferdinand Gregorovius (p. 294, [16])—was actually inhabited by all sorts of trees and plants. In his *Flora of the Colosseum of Rome* (1855), the amateur botanist Richard Deakin recorded as many as 420 species, among which rare flowers that grew nowhere else in Europe and whose seeds were perhaps transported to the capital of the Roman empire by the African animals who once fought in the Flavia amphitheatre [18]. Today, most of them have disappeared, even

if the Colosseum still harbours species that can no longer survive outside its perimeter due to increased pollution and raising temperatures, such as *Asphodelus fistulosus* (onionweed) and *Sedum dasyphyllum* (the Corsican stonecrop).

Other common names for the ivy-leaved toadflax include mother of thousands, travelling sailor and Oxford weeds. Indeed, many ruderals are considered "weeds": an imprecise, deprecative term, tainted by discussions on "alien" and "immigrant" species and rife with fear-mongering metaphors on "biological invasions" [19]. Introduced in England in the early 17th century (supposedly via seeds dissimulated in the boxing of marble statues brought from Italy), the ivy-leaved toadflax was originally found in the Mediterranean basin and is now considered a "naturalised" species in many temperate regions of the planet. On the contrary, the *Asphodelus fistulosus* that still subsists in the Colosseum features as an "invasive" plant in the Federal Noxious Weed List published by the United States Department of Agriculture [20]. It is true that the "naturalization" of certain species to the local flora can cause serious damage to so-called "native" plants, as "cosmopolitan" species (an adjective sometimes used by botanists to describe ubiquitous plants) take over their living environments and effectively reduce biodiversity. But the problem with onionweed is that livestock avoids eating it and that it outcompetes grasses and more "desirable" forage plants. British nature writer Richard Mabey appropriately sums the "weed" problem when he writes that "plants become weeds when they obstruct our plans, our tidy maps of the world" [1].

As Romanticism faded and more disciplined standards were set for urban landscapes (in Paris, even lichens were sometimes removed from tree trunks during the 19th and the 20th centuries [21]), ruderals came to refer to plants that grow on gutters, sidewalks, wastelands, road verges, railways and freight yards, industrial landfills, eroded lands, etc. In sum, the everyday ruins of capitalism: highly disturbed habitats where ruderal vagabonds precariously coexist with other species, among which is our own [22]. Like certain fungi, ruderal vegetation is that which emerges despite devastation, whether that devastation is invisible to the human eye, as with contaminated soils, or whether it assumes more flamboyant expressions, as in Beirut, where the famous "green line" that separated the eastern and western sectors of the city during the civil war became a death strip overgrown with brambles, grass, sycamores and wild fig trees [23].

Ruderal plants are often mentioned for their capacity to "recolonise" debris after violent conflicts [24]. In Germany, the flora and vegetation of *Trümmerlandschaften*, the rubble landscapes of the early post-war years, did not fail to catch the eye of botanists and ecologists, in particular in Berlin, a city divided by the Cold War and dotted with many interstitial, feral spaces [25]. In *Germania, Anno Zero* ("Germany Year Zero", 1948), Roberto Rossellini's conclusion to his war trilogy, shot in Berlin in the summer of 1947, ruderals can be spotted pretty much everywhere. One sequence in particular comes to mind: after telling his teacher that he has just poisoned his ailing father, young Edmund Kohler wanders the city. He comes across a group of children playing football in a heavily blasted but blossoming street. He tries to join them, but the children rebuff him: Edmund walks away, making his way among a jungle of what looks like sticky goosefoot (*Chenopodium botrys*) [26] (Figure 2).

Unlike ruderal plants, Edmund is unable to survive in the heavily-disturbed milieus of post-war Berlin. The history of the city's *Brachen* (a term that can be translated as "wastelands" or "abandoned lots") has been explored by British geographer Matthew Gandy in his documentary *Natura Urbana—The Brachen of Berlin* (2017). Drawing a cross-generational history of these marginal spaces, Gandy's film is a thought-provoking meditation on evolving botanical and ecological discourses, urban biotopes and the question of the commons. If *Brachen* are ephemeral spaces by definition, the predatory practices of big property developers, as well as the city's hyper-gentrification, have turned such urban commons into an endangered naturecultural form. Anthropologist Bettina Stoetzer has equally made clear that such interstitial spaces are inseparable from plant–people relations, as well as

questions of social justice, very often implicating immigrant and racialized communities. "Exploring Berlin's urban ecologies ethnographically", she writes, "involves looking for unanticipated human-nonhuman interactions that occur at the edges of the city's infrastructures and that do not adhere to national or capitalist schemes for multicultural gardening and rehabilitating nature" (p. 309, [17]). To put it differently, urban and ruderal ecologies bring about untamed forms of diversity, beyond strict garden infrastructures and their designs on vegetal life [27].

Figure 2. Ruderals surround Edmund, film still from *Germania, Anno Zero* (Roberto Rossellini, 1948).

If "weeds" are the nemesis of human endeavours—certain humans struggling and often failing to "control" them, poisoning soils, rivers, lakes and all sorts of living bodies in the process—ruderals are anthropophiles or, more specifically, synanthropic organisms, i.e., undomesticated species living closely alongside or benefiting from human beings. Humans may not always notice or appreciate them, but they are embedded in the fabric of our lives. A 1986 episode of *L'Aventure des plantes* ("The Adventure of Plants", TF1), a series by French botanist and pioneer urban ecologist Jean-Marie Pelt and filmmaker Jean-Pierre Cuny, remind us exactly of that. In its opening sequence, the camera turns its attention to pellitories-of-the-wall, Canadian fleabanes, buddleias, fat-hens and trees of heaven growing in Paris [28]. Despite their love of humans, ruderal plants have a slightly murky status, like the rainwater that so often spreads their seeds. On the one hand, they have a bad reputation: they are sometimes called "invaders" and "opportunists". In the name of "diversity", ruderals are accused of "biotic homogenization", fuelling narratives of fear and safety and nourishing fantasies of pristine ecologies, very often inseparable from nation-making projects [29]. On the other hand, they are amazingly resilient, at least from a human perspective, thriving in the most unlikely places. In fact, the term ruderal also refers

to a specific survival strategy: according to the C-S-R triangle strategy, coined in 1974 by British ecologist J. Philip Grime, plant species are either competitors (C), stress-tolerators (S) or ruderals (R) [18]. Ruderals are plants that thrive in (highly) disturbed situations, but that only support low levels of stress (such as extremes of temperature and moisture supply); on the contrary, stress-tolerators such as lichens, composite organisms able to survive in extremely harsh environments, are disturbance sensitive (for instance, lichens are sensitive to nitrogen atmospheric pollution and for that reason reliable bioindicators). Ruderals tend to be small and to have short lifecycles (many ruderals are annuals). Nonetheless, they are capable of restoring minerals and nutrients, of attracting insects and birds, of regenerating life. They are also the vegetal allies that some still know how to use and prepare. Ruderals can be our first nourishment and our first medicine: green purslane makes for delicious soups and the common vervain is a well-known medicinal herb.

Standing for the alien, the undesirable, the out of place—but also for the multiple, the decentred and the entangled—ruderals, like "weeds", are fitting companions for those who grow in-between (Figure 3). Those who prosper in the fissures and cracks of dominant discourses; those who infuse wildness and diversity in all sorts of toxic monocultures. Those, in sum, who invite us to read against the grain of conventional natural and cultural histories. After all, ruderal plants are the migrants of the vegetable realm, the anti-forest of urban wastelands, the overlooked flora of our ecological obliviousness. They are the vegetation of the contaminated commons, the interstitial condition of the undercommons [30]. They embody what Tsing calls "third nature": precarious forms of multispecies coexistence in the ruins of advanced capitalism [31]. In other words, the possibility of transforming "the dump" into a breeding ground for life: the prospect of world-making in the midst of the devastation.

Figure 3. Ruderal plants growing in the cracks of a cobblestone pavement, Lisbon, Portugal, 2022 © Teresa Castro.

3. Common Grounds: On the Affective Ecologies Binding Humans, Ruderals and the Camera

A handful of artists and creators—among which is the late Lois Weinberger (1947–2020), often remembered for his ground-breaking work around marginal zones, nature–culture

hierarchies and ruderal ecologies [32]—have engaged with what Sarah Cowles calls "a ruderal aesthetics", explored in works of contemporary art and design where "ruderal species are dispatched as artistic subject and medium" (p. 388, [19]). When it comes to film, the medium's aforementioned human-centredness means that explicit references to ruderal plants are historically rare, rarer even than mentions of "weeds" [33]. In order to find them, cinematic incursions into urban interstitial spaces and man-made industrial wastelands provide us with interesting (but nonexclusive) clues. Robert Siodmak's and Edgar G. Ulmer's *Menschen am Sonntag* ("People on Sunday", 1939), George Franju's *Le Sang des bêtes* ("Blood of the Beasts", 1949), Jacques Tati's *Mon Oncle* ("My Uncle", 1958), Marcel Carné's *Terrain Vague* ("Wasteland", 1960), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Accatone* (1961), *Mamma Roma* (1962) or *Uccelacci e Uccellini* ("The Hawks and the Sparrows", 1966), Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Eclisse* ("The Eclipse", 1962), Andrei Tarkovsky's *Сталкер* ("Stalker", 1979), Jacques Rivette's *Le Pont du Nord* (1981), Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi* ("Vagabond", 1985), Bela Tarr's *Kárhozat* ("Damnation", 1988) and *Sátántangó ("Satan's tango", 1994)*, Bruno Dumont's *La Vie de Jésus* ("The Life of Jesus", 1997), Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (2002) and Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in Ruins* (2010), to quote but an evident few, all offer us valuable insights to the stories told by ruderals. Some of these tales are about the terrain vague as a place of leisure and pleasure, the home of vibrant and transgressive communities; others about forms of governance and biopolitics dictating what should be valued or relegated and even excluded: what should be "weeded". In these films, ruderals often stand for the proletarianization of different lifeforms (and forms of life), embodying power relations, as well as the fallouts from globalization, labour migration and capitalism.

Amongst these non-exhaustive examples, Tarkovsky's *Stalker* is certainly one of the most striking. The ruderal is much more than a "simple" landscape: it tells us a "rush of troubled stories" about "contaminated diversity" (p. 34, [11]). In a film otherwise known for its allusions to the environmental dangers of nuclear waste, ruderal vegetation plays a prominent role, both in the city's apocalyptic wasteland and in particular in the Zone. As explained by the Stalker, the latter is a "very complex maze of traps": "as soon as humans appear, everything begins to change" [20]. For this reason, the Zone has been likened to the phenomenological reality of the Anthropocene (a notion not yet coined at the time of the film's shooting) [34]. Concretely however, and in line with Tarkovsky's refusal to understand it in allegorical or metaphorical terms, the Zone (from the Latin *zōna*, "belt, girdle, imaginary band circling the earth") is a ruderal milieu, a fragile and unstable environment haunted by incessant transformation and precarious survival. A place where the Stalker, the Professor and the Writer (in other words, the Human) are all affected by the more-than-human. Beyond its remarkable depiction of ruderal landscapes, *Stalker* also tells us other stories: cacophonous tales about our entangled vulnerability, linked to historical contingencies and the "indeterminacies of encounter" (pp. 46–47, [11]) [35]. According to camera technician Sergey Bessmertny, the dam and abandoned power plant on the Jägala river, Estonia, where most of the shooting took place, "had an expressive texture: cracked, lichen-covered concrete broken glass, oil stains" [21] (Figures 4 and 5) [36].

Because of a chemical complex upstream, that section of the river was heavily polluted, as evinced in a famous shot, where snow can be seen falling on toxic foam floating down the river. "A few years later, when it turned out that most of the members of the crew had passed away", Bessmertny adds, "rumours appeared that it was because the area around the place of filming had been poisoned" [21]. Sound recordist Vladimir Sharun is likely behind such reports: according to him, the cancers that took Tarkovsky's and his wife Larissa's lives (as well as those of Nikolai Grinko and Anatoly Solonitsyn, who play the Professor and the Writer, respectively) were caused by contamination from the chemical plant [22].

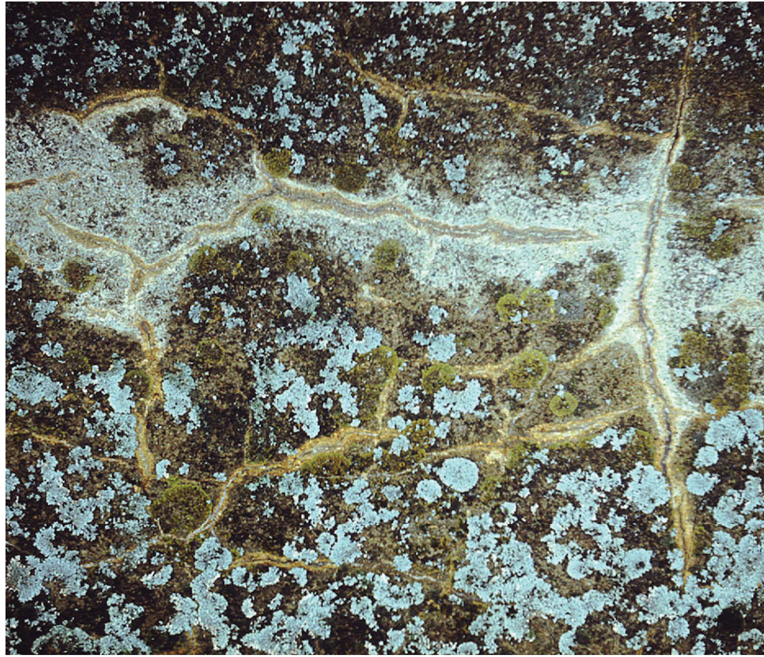

Figure 4. Lichens on a concrete wall (photograph taken during the filming of Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*) © Serguei Bessmertny.

Figure 5. Andrei Tarkovsky surrounded by plants during the shooting of *Stalker* (1979) © Serguei Bessmertny.

However, the stories of "contaminated diversity" that I have in mind are about companionship and collaborative survival, not death. As Tsing herself writes, "I use the term 'contaminated diversity' to refer to cultural and biological ways of life that have developed in relation to the last few hundred years of widespread human disturbance. Contaminated diversity is collaborative adaptation to human-disturbed ecosystems" (p. 95, [23]). Certainly, such stories can be deeply disturbing for humans, challenging their perceived individualism and exceptionalism, like in Alex Garland's *Annihilation* (2018). In this xenobiological tale set in yet another Zone (a toxic ecosystem known as Area X), plant buds sprout in one of the characters' arms (a timid astrophysicist played by Tessa Thompson) (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Flowers sprouting on Josie Radek's arm, film still from *Annihilation* (Alex Garland, 2018) (© Netflix).

But again, it is not on such fears and anxieties that I wish to dwell—or even on strictly representational issues around ruderal plants. If filmic images can bear witness to the complex natureculture entanglements they express, I would like to suggest that cinema is also the place where affective ecologies involving humans, ruderals and filmic technology can be reconfigured. Moreover, maybe film can be a way of reclaiming what historian Carla Hustak and anthropologist Natasha Myers have named, in their rereading of Darwin's work on orchids, "involutionary" modes of attention: accounts that "map interspecies enmeshments and intimacies" fashioned by "pleasure, play and experimental propositions" (p. 78 and p. 98, [24]) [37]. Shifting Hustak's and Myers's unhinging of evolutionary logics towards the domain of cinema means reinventing the former, in order to accommodate the camera within configurations usually restricted to living organisms. Thinking with lichens might help us do that.

Soils-Habit-Plants (2017, 11 min), a short film by artists Mikhail Lylov and Elke Marhöfer, provides us with an interesting case-study. Interested in more-than-human communities and advocating for a less anthropocentric cinema, Lylov and Marhöfer focus

here on a number of ruderal "weedy" plants, such as wild millet and Japanese knotweed. As Marhöfer writes, the "plants in the film are typical of landscapes shared between humans and nonhumans. Despite their widespread and ubiquitous status, they can be called 'fringe species'" [25] [38]. Shot in Japan, while Marhöfer was conducting research on disturbed ecologies, the film also takes us to a plantation of sugi cedars and hinoki cypresses, the most noble of Japanese trees [39]. Established in the post-war years (sugi and hinoki provide high-quality and decay-resistant timber used for posts, pillars, floors, panels, etc., in shrines and temples in particular), such human-planted forests account for 30% of the total wooded area in the country and are today investigated for their high nitrogen leaching. A photograph lying on the forest floor, taken in Sarawak, Borneo, when the Malaysian state was still a British colony, documents "a by now logged down primary forest" [25] and alludes to the replacement of Japanese cedars and cypresses by other cheaper, natural "resources".

But the filmmakers also direct their attention to soil. Shot by Marhöfer with a macro lens (Lylov filmed the plants), the soil sequences are particularly striking. The ground level point of view adopted, as well as the unstable use of focus—the extreme close-ups of the soil, plants and even micro test plates oscillate between sharpness and blurriness (Figure 7) [40]—contribute to the feeling of a cinema unfettered by human-centred standards.

Figure 7. Wild millet, film still from Mikhail Lylov and Elke Marhöfer, *Soil-Habit-Plants*, 2017 (© Mikhail Lylov and Elke Marhöfer).

Lylov describes how he and Marhöfer involved themselves haptically and erotically with plants and the soil, caressing them with the camera and hinting at a relational cinema:

> If we speak of pleasure as a physical experience, filming plants and soil—in macro with no tripod—requires a lot of physical concentration and guessing. You are

> moving the camera, trying to follow the curve of a leaf or a soil particle, which induces an extremely strange state of the body. It's like you are maintaining a sense of touch on the verge of the sensible [26] [41].

Commissioned for an exhibition on Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub's work (two filmmakers known for their attention to soils and geology [42]), *Soils-Habit-Plants* effectively moves beyond oversight, perspectival form and logocentric knowledge, exercising its own involutionary mode of attention. Moreover, the film equally documents an affective ecology where the 16 mm camera (an avatar for filmic technology) is an active participant. Marhöfer in particular has insisted on the idea that filming is for her a means of generating affects and intensifying sensations, instead of creating representations. Her relationship with the 16 mm camera is crucial. Thinking of a different film (*Shape Shifting*, 2015, 18 min), the artist explains that she likes "to understand the camera as a machinic companion" [27]. Marhöfer remarks that "companions transform one another" and that "their entanglement with the environment from which they emerge, forms them"; "this companionship", she adds, "overlaps perspectives of the environment, the camera, and the human. It creates a diversity of sensations and temporalities and activates relational modes of perception" [27] [43].

Mapping on screen some of the enmeshments and intimacies that bind together humans and other-than-humans such as soil, bacteria and ruderal plants (what *Shape Shifting* does by delving into the Japanese *satoyama*, the border zone or area between mountain foothills, *yama*, and the arable flat land next to the villages, *yama*), Lylov and Marhöfer recall to us that exploring the other-than-human by means of film is also a way of shaping affective relationships encompassing machinic fellows. The joyful myriad of other-than-human agents potentially implicated are not limited to organic actants: in *Soils-Habit-Plants*, the camera's tremulousness, as well as the rapid editing of close-up shots of wild millet, evokes the collaboration of the wind [44]. *Soils-Habit-Plants* reminds us that other-than-human subjects hint at specific modes of sensing, feeling, affecting and being affected. Filming here means attuning both human makers and human spectators to the sensibilities of the soil, plants, the wind. Their positions and experiences are not the same: makers, and in particular the camera operator, are at the forefront of such "thinking with", understood here not only as an exercise in speculative reasoning, but as playful physical investigation ("thinking with" being an invitation to do our thinking otherwise, not only with our brains, but with our bodies). Questioning our human ways of perceiving the milieu, but also "the self", *Soils-Habit-Plants* is an experiment in "becoming with", an exercise in terms of an ecological subjectivity, for makers and spectators alike. This is where thinking with lichens might be helpful: symbiosis in lichens is a good way of thinking about ecological subjectivities, subjectivities deeply entangled with other forms of life, but also with technology and media.

Even though they are often plant-like, lichens are not plants. Mistaken for mosses, and for a long time reduced to the status of primitive plants situated somewhere between fungi and algae, lichens are composite organisms, resulting from the perennial association between fungi, algae or cyanobacteria living in mutualistic association. For this reason, they challenge the essentialist insularity of the "individual" and have come to embody the chimeric and resolutely ecological vision according to which we are symbiotic beings in constant becoming. Associated with libertarian thinking and suspected of bias, mutualism was considered an anomaly for many decades. In the eyes of serious scientists, it seemed to suffer from that greater evil from which parasitism and other conflicting relations, reasonably focused on the "struggle for life", had always miraculously escaped: anthropomorphism. If not for the rebellious intelligence of the American microbiologist Lynn Margulis, who began to rewrite the history of our own cells from an endosymbiotic point of view at the end of the 1960s, the rehabilitation of mutualistic symbioses would certainly have taken a great deal longer [45]. In the wake of Margulies' work, three scientists concluded in 2012 that, from a biological point of view, we have never been individuals. Therefore, "we are all lichens" [28].

Lichens feature prominently in Marhöfer's *Becoming Extinct (Wild Grass)* (2017), a film shot in the Russian Southern steppes, in the Divnogorye Natural Museum reserve, as the crow flies not very far away from Chernobyl (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Lichens, film still from Elke Marhöfer, *Becoming Extinct (Wild Grass)*, 2017 (© Elke Marhöfer).

The park is known for its wild grasslands—many of which are threatened—as well as for its unique collection of animal bones (in particular, the remains of the ancient ancestors of tarpan horses, a feral species of steppe horses, extinguished in the early 20th century). In line with the idea of disturbed ecologies, the excavation sites in the Divnogorye concretely become places of collaborative survival between fungi, grass, flowers, insects and bacteria. As the artist puts it, the film "speculates about more-than-human relationalities, attempting to stimulate an environmentally attuned mode of acting in a damaged world" [29]. Anticipating many of the sensorial strategies favoured in *Soils-Habit-Plants*, *Becoming Extinct (Wild Grass)* explores sensations of colour, movement and sound, equally refusing oversight and engaging in (stunning) involutionary modes of attention. As Marhöfer writes,

> Affective encounters beyond the lived, and outside the human with machines, earth strata, light, lichens, soil, bacteria, plants, animals and their symbiotic endeavors, heterogeneous micro- and macro-perceptions and temporalities might potentially help us to learn inhuman interspecies modes of care and attention and enable us to confront the limits of the very concept of the human [29].

To "confront the limits of the very concept of the human" is, of course, to undermine anthropocentrism and human exceptionalism as we have known them, but also, potentially, to address the question of the untamed ecological subjectivities to come [46]. This point again brings me to Marder's remarks on the "ontological toxicity" that haunts our very selves.

It is not only that "all the world's a dump" and that the dump is depriving us from a world: according to Marder, we, as human subjects, are also becoming toxic and incapable of making world(s). The need to intersect the "natural environment", (eroding) social relations and the psychic had already been made by Guattari in his book *The Three Ecologies* (1989) [30]; writing thirty years later, Marder goes farther, detailing how we stopped being *of* and *from* the world [47]. Observing that "noxious thoughts and poisoned senses, toxic built environments, social milieus, and contaminated ecosystems merge and reinforce one another", he identifies "the desire to cleanse my garden of unwanted intruders" as a symptom of this ontological malaise (pp. 188–189, [12]).

Strongly marked by Deleuze and Guattari's work, Marhöfer recalls their credo on the "wisdom of plants": their capacity to form rhizomes and to entangle with the fabric of life. In addition to disputing the nature–culture divide, *Soils-Habit-Plants* and *Becoming Extinct (Wild Grass)* tell us the tangled, split and venturesome histories that we need to imagine in order to become again of and *from* the world—to sow worlds, to terraform with Earth Others. Such stories are likely to involve ruderals and lichens: if the first call us to "commoning", the second call us to symbiose.

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Notes

1. As told by Louis Lumière to the film historian Georges Sadoul. See Georges Sadoul, *Lumière et Méliès*, Paris: Lherminier, 1985, p. 94.
2. A couple of months after the Grand Café projection, the accidental reverse screening of *Démolition d'un mur* ("Demolition of a wall", Louis Lumière, view n° 40.1, 1896) introduced a specifically machinic (and therefore non-human) time experience to the Lumière catalogue.
3. Among others, see Michel Cordat, "Correspondance. La croissance d'une rose au cinéma", *La Nature*, 1896, n° 1219, p. 304.
4. Founded in 1899, the Institut Marey was also to use time-lapse in order to record the unfolding of botanical living processes, as explored by Oliver Gaycken in his essay on visualising plant motion between 1880–1903 [3]. In addition to Hannah Landecker's discussion of time-lapse techniques in early 20th century film in her article "Microcinematography and the History of Science and Film" (*Isis* 97, no. 1, 2006, pp. 121–132), the use of that particular technique in order to explore vegetal living processes has been discussed in recent studies, among which Caroline Hovanec's "Another Nature Speaks to the Camera: Natural History and Film Theory" (*Modernism/modernity*, vol. 26, n° 2, April 2019, pp. 243–265), Max Long's, "The ciné-biologists: natural history film and the co-production of knowledge in interwar Britain" [4] and Colin Williamson's "The Garden in the Laboratory: Arthur C. Pillsbury's Time-Lapse Films and the American Conservation Movement" (*Philosophies*, 2022, 7, n° 5: 118. https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies7050118). See also the collective book *Puissance du végétal et cinéma animiste. La vitalité révélée par la technique* (Teresa Castro, Perig Pitrou and Marie Rebecchi, eds., Dijon: presses du réel, 2022).
5. On this topic, and in addition to the already-quoted Oliver Gaycken article [3], see also Teresa Castro, "The Mediated Plant", *e-flux*, n° 102, September 2019. Available online: https://www.e-flux.com/journal/102/283819/the-mediated-plant/ (accessed on 14 November 2022).
6. Produced by British Instructional Films, the extremely popular series *Secrets of Nature* released 144 documentaries between 1922 and 1933: out of these, 39 films focused on the plants. On *Secrets of Nature*, see, among others, Max Long, "The ciné-biologists: natural history film and the co-production of knowledge in interwar Britain" [4].
7. In their book *Secrets of Nature* (1939), filmmakers Mary Field and F. Percy Smith dedicate a few, amusing pages to the topic of "plants as film stars" (p. 147). They write: "A plant makes up its own mind—or whatever Nature has given it in place of a mind—as to the programme it intends to carry out; and unless one has already sufficient experience of its habits to know exactly what to expect, the working-out of a detailed script is useless, as the plant will be no more likely to follow it than it will to

conform to the percepts of textbooks"; and they conclude, "plants, unlike humans and animals, can be neither bribed nor bullied, coaxed nor cajoled. Unduly generous treatment is useless, and over-fertilization may injure or even kill the plant. Our wisest plan is to allow the plant to tell its story in its own way, while optically accelerating its slow and dignified progress to conform with the requirements of the age of speed" (p. 148). See Mary Field and F. Percy Smith, *Secrets of Nature*. London: The Scientific Book Club, 1939.

8 Recent and thought-provoking literature has often focused on the representation of plants on screen, in particular in horror films (but not only). See Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (eds.), *Plant Horror. Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, p. 145–162); Andrew Howe, "Monstrous Flora: Cinematic Plant Antagonists of the Post-World War II Era" (in Patrícia Vieira and Monica Gagliano, eds., *The Green Thread: Dialogues with the Vegetal World*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016, p. 147–163) and Marc Olivier, "Houseplant", *Household of Horror. Cinematic Fear and the Secret Life of Everyday Objects* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020, pp. 154–179).

9 Known as an inexpensive imitator of ivory, horn and tortoise shell, celluloid became a popular material in the second-half of the 19th century. Celluloid goods flooded the markets and accidents were not infrequent (celluloid combs, for instance, were known to explode and to injury their owners).

10 The "gardener"and its blossoming gardens are a recurrent character in Godard's films from the late 1980s onwards. Among others, see *Nouvelle Vague* ("New Wave", 1990), *Hélas pour moi* ("Alas for me", 1993) and *Notre Musique* ("Our Music", 2004).

11 Esther Leslie's *Synthetic Worlds. Nature, Art and the Chemical Industry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005) provides a thorough and fascinating introduction to this point.

12 According to Paolo Cherchi Usai, the Chronochrome filters (as well as the filters employed by George Albert Smith's and Charles Urban's Kinemacolor, another successful additive process used between 1908–1915) absorbed so much light that they required "250 per cent more electric power to achieve a luminosity equivalent to that of a conventional projector". See Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction*, London: BFI, 2000, p. 30.

13 On this topic, and in addition to Bozak, Pick and Narraway [9,10], see also Teresa Castro, "L'ontologie fossile. Pellicule et impensé environnemental du cinéma(tographe), *Écocritiques. Cinéma, audiovisuel, arts*. *Cahier Textuel*, Gaspard Delon, Aymeric Pantet and Charles Hewinson, eds., Paris: Hermann, in press.

14 Significantly, if the word "ruderal" was for long only used by botanists, French geographer Jean Gouhier founded the science of rudology—the systematic study of waste—in 1972. Today, being a *rudologue* (a "rudologist") is a recognised occupation, "rudologists" specialising in the management of waste and in the prevention of environmental hazards. See the fiche "rudologue" made by the French Centre d'information et documentation jeunesse. Available online: https://www.cidj.com/metiers/rudologue (accessed on 14 November 2022).

15 The word symbiosis (from the Greek *symbíōsis*, "living together") now refers to any type of a close and long-term biological interaction between two different biological organisms, be it mutualistic, commensalistic, or parasitic. The term was subject to a century-long debate about whether it should specifically denote mutualism, as in lichens. It's in this latter sense that I'm using it.

16 Linnaean nomenclature identifies sixteen different types of soils: *lacustre* (near lakes), *palustre* (swampy), *nemorōsōrum* (wooded), *pratense* (of a meadow), *littorale* (littoral), *campestrium* (rural), etc.

17 If there is a difference between the ammonium nitrate used in fertilisers and the cellulose nitrate used by the motion picture industry, connections can be drawn between the two, as pointed out by Anaïs Farine in "Archives nitrates. Représentation, pollution, explosion: sur la piste des effets sauterelles", *Trouble dans les collections*, n° 2, September 2021. Available online: https://troublesdanslescollections.fr/2021/07/26/article-9/ (accessed on 14 November 2022).

18 In 1643, Domenico Panaroli had already observed the presence of many exotic species in the Colosseum, in his *Plantarum Amphytheatralium Catalogus*, probably one of the first studies of ruderal botany ever published. On the animal hypothesis, see Paul Cooper, "Rome's Colosseum Was Once a Wild, Tangled Garden", *The Atlantic*, 5 December 2017. Available online: https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/12/romes-colosseum-garden/547535/ (accessed on 14 November 2022).

19 The ideological connotations behind the terminology used by botanists, biologists and ecologists with relation to nonindigenous plant species has regularly been criticised, including by ecologists themselves. Among others, see Robert I. Colautti, "A neutral terminology to define invasive species", *Diversity and Distributions. A Journal of Conservation Biogeography*, vol 10, issue 2, march 2004, pp. 135–141, as well as Jacques Tassin and Christian a. Kull, "Devising Other Metaphors for Biological Invasions", *Natures Sciences Sociétés*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2012, pp. 404–414. On the specific question of "weeds", see Lucia Argüelles and Hugh March, "Weeds in action: Vegetal Political Ecology of Unwanted Plants", *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 46, issue 1, December 2021, pp. 44–66. On a different note, Richard Mabey also provides a thorough cultural critique of the discourse on weeds on his book on "nature's most unloved plants" [1]. See also his remarkable *The Unofficial Countryside* (London: Collins, 1973), a personal mapping of bombed sites, car parks, city docks, etc., published in 1973.

20 See https://adminplants.sc.egov.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=ASFI2 (accessed on 14 November 2022).

21 The hygienist urges of urban managers, who tended to consider lichens unsightly, ignored botanical knowledge: lichens were known to constitute indicator of the air's *salubrité* (healthiness) since at least 1866. See William Nylander, "Les lichens du Jardin du Luxembourg", *Bulletin de la Société Botanique de France*, 13:7, pp 364-371, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00378941.1866.10827433.

[22] In relation to ruderals and "weeds" as "vagabonds", see *Éloge des vagabondes* ("In Praise of Vagabonds"), by French landscape architect Gilles Clément. The book's introduction and concluding essay have been translated into English by Jonathan Skinner: "In Praise of Vagabonds", *Qui Parle*, Spring/Summer 2011, vol. 19, n°2, pp. 275–297.

[23] Jocelyn Saab's Beirut trilogy not only provides a striking portrait of Civil War Beirut as it documents a city progressively turned into rubble and speckled with ruderal plants. In *Beyrouth, ma ville* ("Beirut My City", 1982) a short-sequence focuses on an old-man who cultivates plants in a tree bed and continues to take care of them during an aerial bombing.

[24] As episodes of great environmental disturbance, wars have also coincided with the involuntary introduction of new vegetal species. Spores and seeds present in horse forages, or concealed in clothes, shoes and vehicles, were often responsible for this. In 1871 (after the siege of Paris during the Franco-Prussian war), two French botanists published a study on such *obsidional* species (from the Latin *obsidionalis*, of/connected to a siege/blockade). Their *Florula Obsidionalis* lists an impressive number of species brought by German troops. In France, many species are known to have been introduced in Lorraine during the World War I. See François Vernier, *Plantes obsidionales. L'étonnante histoire des espèces propagées par les armées*, Strasbourg: Vent d'Est, 2014.

[25] See Bettina Stoetzer, "Ruderal Ecologies: Rethinking Nature, Migration, and the Urban Landscape in Berlin" [17], as well as Matthew Gandy's essential book, *Natura Urbana. Ecological Constellations in Urban Space* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2022). Stoetzer also mentions the fact that many ruderal species found in postwar Berlin were introduced by soldiers and migrants during World War II.

[26] Originally from the Mediterranean, sticky goosefoot is often mentioned as one of the species that thrived in Berlin's ruins. First recorded in the city in 1894, the dry, rocky soils of the postwar period proved to be their "ideal milieu".

[27] See also Natasha Myers, "From Edenic Apocalypse to Gardens against Eden: Plants and People in and after the Anthropocene", in *Infrastructure, Environment, and Life in the Anthropocene*, Kregg Hetherington (ed.), New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 115–148.

[28] *L'Aventure des plantes* was first released as a 13-episode series in 1982; a second series was aired in 1986. The episode "Des hommes et des plantes" belongs to the second series and can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=surHaGNO4FU (accessed on 14 November 2022). Pelt's book on *L'Homme renaturé* ("The Re-Naturalized Human", 1977) is often mentioned as one of the first studies explicitly focusing on urban ecologies.

[29] On this point, see Bettina Stoetzer's article, "Ruderal Ecologies" [17].

[30] The term "undercommons" comes from Fred Motten's and Stefano Harney's book *The Undercommons. Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wienhoe, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013). To follow Yves Citton and Jacopo Rasmi, the undercommons evoke the neglected and ill-treated "commons from below", those upon which the modern "exploitation of human and other-than-human natures" has relied; fugitive, precarious and transgressive commons, refusing the values and norms imposed from above. See Yves Citton et Jacopo Rasmi, "Le Plantationocène dans la perspective des *undercommons*", *Multitudes*, vol. 76, no. 3, 2019, pp. 76–84.

[31] According to Tsing, "first nature" refers to "ecological relations" and "second nature" to "capitalist transformations of the environment" (p. viii, [11]).

[32] On Lois Weinberger and his interest in ruderal plants see, among others, Bergit Arrends and Jessica Ulrich, "Lois Weinberger: Green Man" (interview with Lois Weinberger), *Antennae. The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, 2011 issue 18, pp. 37–48; Philip van Cauteren (ed.), *Lois Weinberger* (Berlin: Hatje Cantze, 2013) and the already quoted text by Natasha Myers "From Edenic Apocalypse to Gardens against Eden. Plants and People in and after the Anthropocene", art. cit.

[33] In the already evoked *Secrets of Nature* series, even the reviled dodder—a rootless, parasitic "weed", with little to no chlorophyll—deserved an episode of its own: *The Strangler* (F. Percy Smith, 1931, 11 min).

[34] See, among others, Jeanne Etelain, "The Crisis of Anthropocentric Space. Thinking the Politics of the Zone with Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*", *Thinking Space with Cinema and Literature*, Ludovic Cortade and Guillaume Soulez, eds., Bern: Peter Lang, 2022, pp. 75–91.

[35] Following Anna Tsing, "To listen and to tell a rush of stories is a *method*. And why not make the strong claim and call it a science, an addition to knowledge? Its research object is contaminated diversity; its unit of analysis is indeterminate encounter" (p. 37, [11]).

[36] The power plant in question had been blown up by the Red Army in 1941. Tarkovsky had initially intended to film around an old Chinese mine in Tajikistan, but an earthquake rendered the location unusable.

[37] "Working athwart the reductive, mechanistic, and adaptationist logics that grounds ecological sciences, we offer a reading", write Hustak and Myers, "that amplifies accounts of the creative, improvisational, and fleeting practices through which plants and insects *involve* themselves in one another's lives" (p. 77, [24]).

[38] As recalled by Marhöfer, the wild relative of millet that we see in the film is considered a particularly resistant "weed", "typical for patches of disturbed land" [25]. Likewise, Japanese knotweed (introduced in Europe as a garden shrubbery in the mid 19th century and used as animal fodder in the 20th century) is often described as a virulent "biohazard". Both species—*Panicum ruderale* and *Fallopia Japonica*—are ruderal.

[39] On Marhöfer's film driven post-doctoral research in Japan, see the artist's website: https://elkemarhoefer.xyz/projects/disturbed-ecologies/ (accessed on 14 November 2022). As recalled by Anna Tsing (whose work is also about disturbance-based ecologies,

questioning the idea of ecology as balanced equilibrium), the aristocracy's obsession with sugi and hinoki meant that Japanese peasant forests privileged oaks and red pines (pp. 183–187, [11]).

40 The micro test plates seen in the film were used to evaluate the number of microbes living in three different types of soil [25].

41 On the erotic dimension of the film, see Mokoto Mochida, "I is an-other ... Eroticism in Marhöfer and Lylov's film *Soil-Habit-Plants*", in Anette Busch and Tobias Hering, eds., *Tell it to the Stones. Encounters with the Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*, London: Sternberg Press, 2021, pp. 404-409.

42 In line with Gilles Deleuze, who observed that "The visual image, in [Straub-Huillet] is the rock" (Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, p. 244), the question of geology comes up regularly in interviews with Jean-Marie Straub. See, among others, Marhöfer's and Lylov's conversation with Jean-Marie Straub, "A Thousand Cliffs", in Anette Busch and Tobias Hering, eds., *Tell it to the Stones. Encounters with the Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*, London: Sternberg Press, 2021, pp. 312–335.

43 See also, with regards to *Shape Shifting* and the role of the camera, the conversation between Marhöfer, Lylov and Andrea and Matei Bellu, "Talking in Waves", in *Shape Shifting*, Berlin: Archive Books, 2015, pp. 69–72.

44 An intuition shared by Nida Sinnokrot in "*Soils-Habits-Plants*. Mikhail Lylov and Elke Marhöfer in conversation with Sahar Qawasmi and Nida Sinnokrot" [26].

45 See Lynn Sagan (Margulis), "On the origins of mitosing cells", *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, vol. 14, 1967, pp. 265–274. Margulis' research (initially received with great skepticism by her peers) promotes mutual symbiosis to the status of the engine of evolution, since at the origin of complex cells, called eukaryotes (containing a separate nucleus from the mitochondria and characterizing all plant cells and animals), one finds the fusion or symbiosis with simpler organisms, such as certain archaea and bacteria (single-celled organisms, without nucleus and mitochondria, so-called prokaryotes). Margulis's hypothesis radically reshaped the narrative around evolution.

46 On *Becoming Extinct (Wild Grass)* and subjectivity, see also Julia Bee's article "Filming through the Milieu. Becoming Extinct and the Anthropocene", in Gabrielle Dürbeck and Philip Hüpkes, eds., *The Anthropocenic Turn*. The Interplay between Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Responses to a New Age, London, Routledge, 2020.

47 On the question of being of and from the world, see also See Bruno Latour's opposition between "Humans" and "Earthlings" (or "Earthbound", "Terrans" or "Terrestrials" in *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climactic Regime*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017 and *Down to Earth. Politics in the New Climactic Regime*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018.

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Article

Paper Flowers: Jane Campion, Plant Life, and *The Power of the Dog* (2021)

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Abstract: Taking as its point of departure the place of the vegetal realm within Jane Campion's filmmaking, this article attends to both living and artificial plants, homing in on the exquisitely crafted paper flowers of *The Power of the Dog* to explore their entanglement with human power relations. Manmade flowers are clearly distinct from the flowers of the garden or the prairie, but in this Western, they form part of a broader floral aesthetic with their living kin. Drawing upon thought that stems from actual plants (Deleuze and Guattari's arboreal-rhizomatic thinking) and vegetal philosophy (Marder, Coccia), as well as parallel botany's attention to the artificial (Lionni), I follow the fate of one paper flower as it intersects with the gendered history of artificial flower making and floral sexual symbolism. Thinking with this paper flower, I engage with theories that variously question binary power relations (Cixous, Barthes, Steinbock), reading these alongside scholarship on sex, gender, and masculinity in the Western (Neale, Mulvey, Bruzzi), and broaching the hierarchies of settler colonialism. The film's floral aesthetic, I argue, challenges the either/or logic of male or female, masculine or feminine, and even though it cannot fully break away from the binaries it critiques, it is indebted to registering the importance of the nuance (Barthes) in the unthreading of power.

Keywords: Jane Campion; *The Power of the Dog*; the Western; artificial flowers; gender; masculinity; vegetal philosophy

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1. Campion's Flower Power

In Jane Campion's filmmaking, plants may not always be central to the narrative of a given work or even particularly noticeable, thereby endorsing at times through the *mise en scène* philosopher Michael Marder's observation that plants have frequently populated the margin of the margin in the history of western thought [1] (p. 2). But some works, especially Campion's feature films, are indebted to kinship between humans and plants, making the vegetal more noteworthy than it may at first appear. Writing on Campion's filming of nature, film critic Pascal Binétruy positions her in an intermediary category between those filmmakers who consider the landscape they observe as painters, and those who film as geographers, specifying that Campion approaches nature as matter, that is to say as grass, leaves, bark, rock, and earth [2] (p. 109). Correspondingly, Campion homes in on the plants of the landscapes and urban areas she films. From the trees of *Sweetie* (1989), through the lush grass and woods of *An Angel at My Table* (1990), to the humid, muddy forest of *The Piano* (1993), the garden blooms and posies of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996), the blossom shower of *In the Cut* (2003), and the flowers of *Bright Star* (2009), plant life has a vital presence across her work. Flowers are no less important in her most recent feature, *The Power of the Dog*. Divided into chapters and based on Thomas Savage's 1967 novel of the same name, the film confirms Campion scholar Estella Tincknell's sense of the filmmaker's talent as adapter [3], while not abandoning preoccupations for which she is celebrated as auteur. The film is set in the sagebrush plains and mountainous folds of 1920s Montana but shot on New Zealand's South Island. There are fleeting cameos from white rose buds in a wedding bouquet, pressed yellow prairie flowers in a scrapbook, dried flowers baked by the sun, California poppies planted in parched soil, along with wreaths and garlands of

white flowers in a funeral display. The film also includes handmade paper flowers, and these will be my main focal point in this article. More precisely, my reading of this film will focus on the significance of one such flower and on where attention to the smallest of details, the nuance as Roland Barthes terms it, can lead [4].

The flower in question is made on screen by Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee), one of the main protagonists. It is afforded several close-ups during the time it takes Peter to finish it, as well as in a later scene where it reappears in the more hostile hands of Phil Burbank (Benedict Cumberbatch), who insults and torments Peter using the flower before destroying it. Peter's mother Rose (Kirsten Dunst) will subsequently marry Phil's brother George (Jesse Plemons) and go to live on the Burbank ranch. Phil makes Rose's life hell and Peter avenges her suffering in the end by killing him. In Savage's book, Peter says that it is his mother who has "a way with flowers" [5] (p. 57), and in the film he says she was a florist. As cultural historian Kasia Body observes, a sizeable part of the burden of floral association has been placed on women over the centuries [6] (unpaginated e-book, loc. 109). Yet by establishing Peter as the artificial flower maker, both book and film challenge any fixed gender relation with the floral dimension. This more fluid gender relation that is forged with paper rather than actual flowers points indeed to the artificiality of "naturalized" gender identities. To date, *The Power of the Dog* has prompted stimulating scholarly commentary on its challenge to toxic masculinity and gender binaries [7,8] and has been understood as part of a wider move on the part of contemporary women filmmakers to revisit the Western genre critically, with Kelly Reichardt and Chloé Zhao offering other strong examples [8]. As film scholars Alfio Leotta and Missy Molloy note, dissecting "toxic masculinity" with the support of rugged natural backgrounds is not new to Campion's work [9]. Engaging afresh with this longstanding concern, my aim here is to show how flowers have a more prominent place in the film's power relations than has hitherto been observed.

Whereas Campion's attention to masculinity in the second decade of the twenty-first century has as its backdrop the #MeToo moment as it tells the tale of a century ago, Savage's vision of 1920s ranch life from the vantagepoint of the late 1960s was written at a historical moment of revolution and dissent in which flowers played a visible role. In 1965, Allen Ginsberg's suggestions for organizing peaceful protests and deflecting violence on a march began with "masses of flowers—a visual spectacle—especially concentrated in the front lines" [10] (p. 209). Flower power was a core non-violent aspect of the counterculture of the late sixties and early seventies. While Savage's and Campion's paper flowers seem at first to be on the side of non-violence, they do however come to bear a more ambivalent relation to such peaceable power. The initial paper flower of the film, even after its demise, is caught up in the most affirmative as well as the most poisonous human relations, which span intersections of gender, sexuality, and the hierarchies of settler colonialism. Attending to this embroilment, I begin by emphasizing a connection between the vegetal in Campion's wider oeuvre and this film's flowers through dialogue with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's arboreal and rhizomatic thinking which is inspired by plants. I then carry this forward to follow the fate of the initial paper flower whose destruction appears to conjure the plant-based equivalent of the sexualized wounding—castration or decapitation—of which Hélène Cixous speaks and which I discuss with reference to Marder's notion of plant-thinking and Emanuele Coccia's flower theory. Given that Marder's and Coccia's plant theories refer to actual plants, I engage additionally with the work of Leo Lionni and his parallel botany to account for the distinctiveness of the artificial flower. I interweave with this vegetal and parallel philosophy discussion of sex and gender in the Western scholarship of Steve Neale, Laura Mulvey, and Stella Bruzzi. Arguing ultimately that the initial paper flower opens onto a floral aesthetic that is not aligned with either the male or female, masculine or feminine, I draw upon Barthes's interest in using the nuance to outwit the power play of binary thinking and its influence on Eliza Steinbock's cinematic philosophy of transgender embodiment. Although this floral aesthetic turns out to be imbricated in the very binary power relations it otherwise questions, it ensures nevertheless that the paper flower remains disarmingly central to this all-too-human tale of love, jealousy,

bigotry, and revenge, becoming far more than a benign, marginal presence that is quickly dispatched.

2. Vegetal Campion and the Introduction of the Paper Flower

Prior to flowers, there are trees. Even though the family unit, as film critic Michel Ciment notes [11] (p. 9), is at the heart of Campion's work, trees are of equal importance in her first major feature. Campion's *Sweetie* is a tragicomic take on a difficult relationship between two estranged sisters within a dysfunctional family. In the opening aerial shot of a floral-patterned carpet, Kay (Karen Colston) announces in voice-over that trees scare her. Her superstition originates from the palatial tree house in the yard of the family home and the roots she imagined crawling under the house with their hidden powers. Her sister Dawn/Sweetie (Genevieve Lemon) will eventually die when this tree house collapses. When Sweetie is buried, a tree root prevents the grave diggers from lowering the coffin into the ground. This just confirms Kay's superstition about trees as, literally and metaphorically, the family tree splinters and breaks.

Also suspicious of trees, but for non-superstitious reasons, Deleuze and Guattari write that "there is always something genealogical about a tree" [12] (p. 8). Instead of heredity, they prefer more haphazard relationality, foregrounding the rhizome as a subterranean stem different from roots and radicles and declaring instead, "the rhizome is antigenealogy" [12] (p. 12). Likening rhizomes to their conception of a "plateau," they speak of both as always in the middle, never at the beginning or end [12] (p. 27). Critical plant scholars, Marder among them, have been quick to come to the defense of trees [13], with Jeffrey Nealon also pointing out that "rhizomatics" derives from discussion of plants without expanding to explore plant life per se [14] (p. 84). The rhizomatic impulse of Deleuze and Guattari's thinking is however apposite in the context of Campion's *Sweetie*, which witnesses the breakdown of genealogical ties alongside the uprooting and destruction of trees, paving the way toward varying human-plant relations that appear in later films. Trees are important within the landscapes of *An Angel at My Table* and *The Piano* too, both of which share gradations of a color palette of earthy greens and browns. The human-plant connections of Campion's films, as generative as they are destructive, are also forged frequently with flowers, and they oscillate between the arboreal genealogical line and more random rhizomatic becomings.

Women are sometimes linked to flowers through a name before any floral relationship develops in or beyond family lineages. Like Rose in *The Power of the Dog*, Pansy (Valentina Cervi) in *The Portrait of a Lady* has a strong bond with flowers, but they differentiate her from, rather than identify her with, her parents, symbolizing her innocence in contrast to their scheming. Flowers feature heavily too in *Bright Star* within the relationship between Fanny Brawne (Abbie Cornish) and John Keats (Ben Whishaw). Although their love is never consummated, such a desired outcome plays out metaphorically as Keats runs around a garden pretending to be a bee pollinating the abundant flowers, while Fanny and her sister Toots (Edie Martin) sniff them to find the best scent. Making the connection to reproduction more explicit, in the earlier *In the Cut* flower petals are associated retrospectively with the original family romance that led to Frannie (Meg Ryan) being born. A petal storm experienced one morning by her half-sister Pauline (Jennifer Jason Leigh) is also witnessed by Frannie, still in bed, who sees it out of the window in her half-awake state, thinking it is snow. She goes back to sleep to dream in sepia of a woman and a man skating on ice, all to the soundtrack of "Que Sera". Frannie later explains to Pauline that their father proposed to Frannie's mother while out skating. The confusion of blossom with snow brought back the dream of skaters, in the form of her parents, associating flowers with betrothal. Wherever the life cycle of flowers serves as an analogy for familial, heterosexual relations and marriage there is a risk of asserting ensuing essentialist, naturalizing links between pollination and fertility, along with the straight continuity of a familial line. In *The Power of the Dog*, Peter's flowers, whose paper substance is originally from plants, question this continuity.

Reproduction through pollination ensures survival in the world of living plants. When actual flowers are supplemented by artificial flowers, as they are in *The Power of the Dog*, we shift across the nature/culture boundary into artefactual production of flowers by human hands or machines alone. But plants have long been the basis of the manufactured object too. Cellulose, the main substance found in plant cell walls and responsible for making them stiff and strong, is used in the making of many things. It is the foundation of collodion and, of course, celluloid, both of which have not only been central to the history of the photographic and film industries but also the artificial flower industry. Collodion (nitrocellulose in ether and alcohol) was used in the nineteenth century before celluloid became a core material in the early twentieth century in the making of artificial flowers [15] (p. 111). Although not quite on a level with the film industry, the artificial flower industry was for a time a significant consumer of this flexible plastic, among other derivatives of cellulose, to fashion its desired objects, meaning that artificial flowers and the film image have had a close relationship from the outset [16]. The basis of paper also being cellulose, paper flowers no less than collodion or celluloid flowers are resolutely plant-based in their material substance, quite apart from any imitative relationship they may have with the flowers of the prairie or the garden. Through their very materiality, then, paper flowers bear a distant relation to the circuits of pollination that ensure the ongoing survival of living plants through sexual reproduction, even though they obviously halt that very process too. While the paper flowers of *The Power of the Dog* discontinue the reproductive network of the living plant world due to their artificial status, they still bind Peter intimately to his mother.

Continuing what Campion scholar Kathleen McHugh points to as a staple of the filmmaker's features, all of which make use of voice-over narration [17] (p. 25), Peter declares over a black screen and the credits at the start: "When my father passed, I wanted nothing more than my mother's happiness. For what kind of a man would I be if I did not help my mother? If I did not save her?" His sense of obligation to his mother sets up the strong genealogical mother-son bond, along with the question of what it is to be a man, on which the film depends. It is however the Burbank ranch and the brothers who run it, rather than Peter, who appear first when the film cuts from the black screen to images. Phil and George's ranch abounds with cattle and horses, as well as dogs and rabbits in later scenes, but the family name harks back implicitly to the famous American botanist, Luther Burbank, as well as pointing to the future location in California of major film studios, introducing a tacit link between flora and film, which will be foregrounded by Peter and Rose.[1] The accompanying Jonny Greenwood score of plucked cello strings gives the film an off-beat air from the outset, with instruments not played in the usual way. This sets up expectations for a new revisionist rather than neo-traditional Western, to use Steve Neale's post-1970s categorizations [18], in tune with the atypical contribution to the genre that Campion recognized in Savage's book [19]. An expansive vision of cattle herding, dusty mountainous terrain, and the grand, austere interiors of the ranch house, replete with servants, fill the screen in the opening moments such that the contrast in scope is great when the film then cuts to Peter for the first time. More specifically, it cuts to a close-up of the small pair of scissors he is manipulating as he slowly and patiently makes slits in a pink strip of paper (Figure 1). These cuts will form the sexual organs of a paper flower.

Grant Major, Head of Production Design, explains that attention to the smallest of details is a hallmark of Campion's filmmaking, describing how this was exemplified in the production of the paper flowers. He tells of how Campion and her friend Michelle Freeman, a set decorator, buyer, and dresser, had the idea for the look of the flowers. Campion apparently asked whether the film's props buyer, Alani McKenna, could find something, but they decided ultimately to bring Michelle back and they all worked together to come up with something Campion liked [20]. Major ended up making Peter's scrapbook too in which he sticks all kinds of images, along with pressed flowers (Figure 2). Peter will also request rose petals from his mother's wedding bouquet, although it is not said in the film that he will add them to his scrapbook as the novel suggests he will (Figure 3). Peter's floral sensibility is palpable from the start, and whereas the film cuts down the range of

living flowers that are mentioned in the book, it extends the scenes connected to the paper flowers.

Figure 1. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 2. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 3. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

From the close-up of Peter cutting slits in the pink paper, further close-ups show him building up this flower layer upon layer (Figures 4–6). Peter first coils around the slitted paper to form the heart of the flower, and then adds two sets of petals, which are tied to a stem. The part of Greenwood's score that accompanies Peter's fashioning of the first flower is titled "Paper Flowers". The piece is played on a detuned piano, which becomes associated with Rose and her gradual slide into alcoholism as the film progresses. The piano also links Rose to her previous occupation of playing the piano in a movie theatre. When she marries George, he gets her a baby grand piano, which Phil then uses to humiliate her, crushing her confidence by demonstrating his own musical prowess, outplaying her efforts to play Strauss's "Radetzky March" on the piano on his banjo, and then mocking her in front of the governor, his wife, and the brothers' parents when she is not able to perform. That the "Paper Flowers" music for the sequence of Peter's making of them is so fitting at this early stage in the film, though, is visible through close-ups of the paper Peter uses, since it is cut-up sheet music. Peter cuts along the lines of the staves in making the flower's center and its evenly pleated outer petals reveal the word "Mazurka." The link to his mother's musical background is built into the very material from which the flower is made, just prior to our first encounter with Rose. This in turn precedes Peter's visit to his late father's grave.

Figure 4. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 5. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 6. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Rose asks whether she can put Peter's paper flowers on the tables in the restaurant to adorn them for when the Burbank party comes into town. Peter consents, before taking a different paper posy to the graveyard, removing a dried bunch of flowers from a glass jar, and sticking the paper flowers directly into the ground at the dusty foot of his father's tombstone (Figure 7). Commemorating his relationship to a man of his past—his father—before becoming the point of entry in a following sequence to the antagonistic relation with the man who will dominate his immediate future—Phil—Peter's posies are more than the sum of their paper parts. Linking Peter to his mother and, more tangentially, his absent father, the flowers are bound to a genealogical lineage, but this is already a damaged family tree, and the more haphazard, antigenealogical relations that ensue will destroy the initial paper flower. This artificial flower takes on a life of its own in spite of this, though, overspilling historically gendered and sexual floral associations as well as its initial form, and leading from the arboreal and rhizomatic to a floral aesthetic.

Figure 7. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

3. The Unmaking of the Paper Flower, or beyond Castration and Decapitation

When the Burbank group enters the Red Mill restaurant for dinner, the paper flowers in vases catch Phil's eye, as he also notices and then stares at Peter who is waiting on another table. There is a close-up of the flower we saw Peter making, now in Phil's hands as

he twirls it around and looks back at Peter. As Phil wonders aloud "what little lady made these," he runs an index finger around the rim, before pushing it directly into the center of the flower (Figure 8). Peter responds to Phil, declaring he made the flowers, mentioning his mother's former occupation as florist, and explaining that they were meant to look like the ones in their garden. Phil and the others sniff them, as Phil says how real they are, continuing his mockery of Peter and evoking laughter from everyone except George. Phil then uses the flower as a spill to light a cigarette from a candle in full view of Peter, as he concludes a tale of the legendary cowboy Bronco Henry, and the flower ends up singed head downwards in the water jug on the table (Figures 9 and 10). The flower that mediates this fateful first encounter between Phil and Peter condenses issues of gender and sexuality that span vegetal and human worlds from the early-twentieth to the twenty-first century, from the history of making artificial flowers, through sexual symbolism, to the place of the flower in vegetal philosophical and parallel botanical thought.

Figure 8. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 9. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 10. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

By the time of the setting of Savage's novel in 1925, an Artificial Flower Industry was booming in the US, which included the preservation of natural flowers and plants alongside the manufacture of artificial flowers from paper and cloth[2] [21]. The making of paper flowers was also a means of generating income from home or just a popular leisure pursuit across America (and Europe) in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Jim Jarmusch's Western *Dead Man* (1995), set in the late nineteenth century, touches on this when William Blake (Johnny Depp) meets Thel Russell (Mili Avital), a former prostitute who makes and sells paper roses[3]. Paper has long been a popular substance in artificial flower making, which many writers of manuals on this craft put down not only to its malleability and suitability to the qualities of the flower, with crepe and tissue paper most favored, but also its economical price for both industrial fabrication and for the hobbyist [22] (p. 5) [23] (p. 6). Flower-making manuals were initially written by women and addressed to many different constituencies of women and girls [15,24–27][4]. From the mid-twentieth century onwards, the addressees of these texts expanded, with Rosemary Brinley declaring artificial flower making in 1952 to be "a complete and satisfying craft for workers of all ages and both sexes" [28] (unpaginated e-book, loc. 1100–1109), and with more diverse expert crafters writing such manuals today [29]. Ahead of his time, Peter was engaged in what in the 1920s was still thought to be women's work or a lady's pastime, hence the deliberate wording of Phil's sneering question and the subsequent feminized and homophobic insults from him and his men, who attack how Peter walks and talks, right down to the white tennis shoes he prefers to wear instead of cowboy boots.

Adding to the ways in which Phil wounds with words, his insertion of his finger into the center of Peter's flower is aggressively sexual. In this, it resonates with earlier standout images in Campion's oeuvre. In her short film, *An Exercise in Discipline: Peel* (1982), a young boy sticks his finger into the center of the orange he is peeling in a phallic image that has drawn commentary as such from Campion scholars [30] (unpaginated e-book, loc. 703) [11] (p. 25). In *The Piano*, Baines (Harvey Keitel) caresses Ada's (Holly Hunter) flesh through a small hole in her stockings, creating an image which Dana Polan suggests incarnates the film's affective eroticism [31] (p. 44). In Phil's case, the fingertip that enters the flower is no less suggestive in its uneasy mix of eroticism and violation. Peter coiled the slitted piece of paper to make the flower's sexual organs whose purpose in nature is reproduction, but there is no distinction in the cuts he made between pistils and stigmas (female), and stamens and anthers (male). Both mother and son are targeted symbolically by Phil in his fingering of the ambiguous organs of this artificial yet "real as possible" flower, before he incinerates it. Phil arrests the circulation of the paper flower as object by defiling and

burning it. To explore the further implications of this desecration, it will be helpful to turn to vegetal philosophy: the philosophy of Marder and Coccia is rich in relevance to what the paper flowers of this film stand for and enact in their artificial equivalence to the vegetal world. It is however useful first to acknowledge in passing botanical work of a quite distinctive kind, which recognizes explicitly the importance of artificiality.

Anywhere that there is an artificial flower or fictional flower, there is an attempt to parallelize the living botanical world, and just such a parallel world is what we glimpse in Italian writer Leo Lionni's *Parallel Botany* published in Italian in 1976 [32]. This is a field guide to imaginary plants, which is full of references to real as well as invented places and people, and which is written with academic authority. Lionni's parallel botany is a more serious if still playful relative of Edward Lear's work on nonsense plants [33]—both deal with invented plants but are no less real for this. Through his words, Lionni lends substance to a parallel world of timeless and matterless entities. Whereas Lear's nonsense plants imitate the Latin structure of eighteenth-century naturalist Carl von Linnaeus's taxonomic naming, Lionni talks of how parallel botany falls *outside* Linnaean systems of classification [32] (p. 6), which have endured through to this day, and which were based on distinctions via sexual characteristics. By dispensing with this link, Lionni's parallel plants proliferate beyond set patterns of sexual reproduction, their catalyst being the richness of the imagination. Lionni dwells with the "paramateriality" of plants whose substance is said to elude chemical analysis and flout all known laws of physics [32] (pp. 11–12). Although the paper flowers of *The Power of the Dog* are clearly not matterless, being tangible and visible artefactual objects, they come to matter by questioning identity and binaries including that of nature/culture, and parallelizing both albeit in a more substantial way than Lionni's imagined plants. The importance of the artificial flowers' substance in *The Power of the Dog* leads us to the work of Marder and Coccia on actual plants, while retaining Lionni's focus on proliferation beyond set patterns of sexual reproduction.

It is hardly surprising that it is the head of the paper flower that is the main focal point in the sequences where it features, yet the significance of the head has wider ramifications when it comes to thinking with and about flowers in vegetal philosophy and beyond. In *Plant-Thinking* Marder mentions the German idealists who attempted to upturn metaphysics through their attention to plant life. As he notes, Lorenz Oken felt that the flower, not the root, was the highest instance of spiritual development that a plant may attain [1] (pp. 60–61). Oken's thought has been taken up more recently by Coccia. Coccia's theory of the flower understands it to combine the cerebral and sexual realms [34] (p. 138). The flower, he specifies, is not an organ but an aggregate of different organs modified to make reproduction possible [34] (pp. 125–131). Yet all plants seem to invent and open up a cosmic plan, according to Coccia, suggesting that there is a material (rather than nervous) brain at work too, immanent to organic matter, whose most obvious manifestation is the seed [34] (p. 133). The development of his thinking on this point is indebted to Oken who declares that "the flower is the brain of plants, the correspondent of light, which remains here on the plane of sex" [34] (p. 135, my translation). Like Coccia, Marder foregrounds the place of the seed in his plant-thinking, but he is closer to Deleuze and Guattari in their rhizomatic thinking when he elaborates on this.

Marder explains that germination "commences in the middle, in the space of the in-between," and the root and flower become variegated extensions of the middle "in marked contrast to the idealist insistence on the spirituality of the blossom and the materialist privileging of the root" [1] (p. 63). Taking up French poet Francis Ponge's pithy phrase that declares flowers and vegetal life in general to have no head (*pas de tête*), plant-thinking for Marder is a kind of thinking without the head: "Rather than search for a more accurate parallel to the objectively fixed head of any organism, post-metaphysical philosophy, in keeping with this ongoing transvaluation, performs a symbolic decapitation or castration of the old metaphysical values" [1] (p. 62). Marder's reference to a symbolic castration or decapitation is as critical of a phallogocentric masculine economy as Hélène Cixous was in her 1981 essay "Castration or Decapitation?" [35]. Cixous describes decapitation as the

fate of women within such an economy and Phil's destructive gesture towards the head of the paper flower seems the artificial vegetal parallel of this. Yet the ambiguities of the sex of the flower and its association with Peter as much as Rose suggest that something further and, following Marder, as well as Lionni, not quite so literal, is at stake. Instead of understanding Phil's belligerent move as marking the end of the paper flower and symbolically decapitating/castrating Rose and Peter, it is a beheading and unsexing of the old metaphysical values that the film initiates, as a kind of thinking without the head is unleashed between and beyond masculine and feminine economies.

In Campion's film, the old metaphysical values reverberate through to twenty-first century debates about toxic masculinity, revealing a deep affiliation with one of the Western's longstanding concerns. As Lee Clark Mitchell notes, the genre has fretted about masculinity from the beginning [36] (p. 4), and the threat of castration looms large. Focusing on the 1960s when Savage's novel was published, Steve Neale who comments on Sam Peckinpah's Westerns in particular, but draws upon Laura Mulvey's observations on John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), notes that the threat of castration is figured in wounds and injuries incurred by the likes of Joel McCrea in *Guns in the Afternoon* (1962), Charlton Heston in *Major Dundee* (1965), and William Holden in *The Wild Bunch* (1969) [37] (pp. 9–10). In *The Power of the Dog*, Phil is the castrator of bulls who goes gloveless at all times as a sign of bravado. The threat of the castrator being castrated becomes real, though, not through a shoot-out in his case, but through Anthrax poisoning that enters him via a gash in his hand which not only emasculates but annihilates. Phil's contention with masculinity clashes with Peter's sense of what it is to be a man, and this turns out to be deadly. Yet in contrast to Phil who reviles Peter's floral sensibility, his brother George actively imitates Rose's son when he takes his place in her restaurant one day, positioning the cloth over his arm, as Peter did to Phil's derision, to wait on tables. This recalls *Liberty Valance* in which Ranse Stoddard (James Stewart) dons an apron to help out Hallie (Vera Miles) in her restaurant. In Ford's film, Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) is associated with a cactus rose, which blooms in large quantities around his house and is placed on his coffin when he dies. Indeed, both *Liberty Valance* and the film Mulvey discusses in direct contrast, *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946), have flowers at their heart [38]. The unusual red cactus flower at the opening of *Duel* is synonymous with Pearl (Jennifer Jones), whereas the cactus flowers of *Liberty Valance* are associated principally with Doniphon and his demise. Flowers cross the gender divide in these two films, while *The Power of the Dog* combines this blurring of association in the center of the single initial paper flower. Speaking of living plants, but implicitly in tune with Lionni's parallel botanical move beyond set patterns of sexual reproduction, Marder notes their challenge to sexual difference, explaining: "a non-metaphysical reconstruction of plant ontology will liberate sexual difference from its confinement to a binary opposition of the two sexes and breathe new life into the phenomena of dispersed, perverse, and non-productive sexualities. Vegetal sexuality and the logic of supplementarity will henceforth reinforce each other" [1] (p. 86). Marder's description of this liberation from the binary is explicitly deconstructive in its reference to the supplement, but it is also reminiscent of Barthes's interest in baffling the paradigm when he discusses reading for nuance.

In his work on the neutral (*le Neutre*) and questions of nuance, Barthes's wish is to outplay paradigms of meaning dependent on an implacable binary logic [4] (pp. 6–7). He describes his aim as follows: "To describe, to unthread what? The nuances. In fact, I would want, if it were in my power, to look at the figure-words (beginning with the Neutral) with a skimming gaze that would make the nuances come out" [4] (p. 11). Nuances are the very things that are covered over in the authoritarianism of binary choices. "Either/or" distinctions obliterate what Barthes terms the shimmer of the nuance, as he declares that "the Neutral might reside in this nuance (this shimmer)" [4] (p. 83). This shimmer is central to Eliza Steinbock's recourse to Barthes in their philosophy of transgender embodiment [39] (p. 145). Rather than the binary logic of either/or, Steinbock argues that it is the "'angle' of the subject's gaze emerging in different contexts" that brings out the nuanced space of the shimmer [39] (p. 9). Steinbock's politically vital work attends to slight modifications

of gender outside of binary frameworks, which they liken to this nuanced, shimmering space. Although Campion's film, following Savage's book, is not concerned with transgender embodiment, Steinbock's interpretation of Barthes's nuance is nonetheless apt. It is pertinent to the paper flower, with its sexual organs that shimmer beyond the either/or of the male/female and this, in turn, unsettles alignment with the binary division of the masculine and feminine. Campion scholar Sue Gillett notes that her films do not represent power as dividing neatly along gender lines [40] (p. 12). The dominant power relations of this film are bound most strikingly to the threading/braiding/plaiting of rope, but an audio-visual unthreading is simultaneously discernible within this activity, in line with Barthes's nuanced challenge to power. It is the initial paper flower that sets this unraveling in motion.

4. A Floral Aesthetic

The floral aesthetic of this film emanates from the shimmering space of the nuance at the heart of the paper flower, whose neutrality is a function of not siding with the male or female, the masculine or feminine. While Campion herself declares that she does not think of stories as women's or men's pictures [41] (p. 193), her work has been considered a major force within "women's cinema" [42] and has long attracted the attention of feminist film critics [43]. *The Power of the Dog* continues this appeal, but its heightened focus on masculinity and its critique also reflects key tropes of what Stella Bruzzi terms "men's cinema" [44]. Whereas Neale and Mulvey pursue discussion of masculinity and the male gaze in the Western in terms of identification and desire in relation to bodies on screen, Bruzzi considers a masculine aesthetic that is reinforced through style and tone, and this chimes with *The Power of the Dog*. In preparation for making her film, Campion says that she watched Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) [45]. Shortly after the Burbank party rides into Beech, the men walk in a line towards a bar before arriving in the Red Mill restaurant, repeating the gesture of men walking purposefully through space, evident in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, which Bruzzi posits as a major trope of men's cinema [44] (pp. 74–75). Even more significant to my argument, though, is the disruption to the connection between onscreen body and identification apparent in Bruzzi's commentary on the final crane shot of Leone's 1968 film. She describes the shot as arresting in its epic sweep but not necessarily allied to femininity: even though it draws out from a focus on Jill McBain (Claudia Cardinale) it is more "an abstract rendition of masculinity" that engulfs her [44] (p. 72). Cinematography, editing, and *mise en scène* become points of identification that can provoke an emotional response that is not allied particularly to the embodied subject within the frame. Extrapolating from Bruzzi's argument in the context of Campion's film, even though the initial paper flower disappears as a subject within the frame, a floral aesthetic emerges in spite of this. The difference here from Bruzzi's points about a masculine aesthetic is that this floral aesthetic is not bound only to the masculine (or feminine).

As Ari Wegner, Director of Photography, notes, the pastel pinks of Rose's bedroom and the cool greens of Phil's willow glade stand out from the otherwise restricted dusty color palette drawn from the grass and hills [46]. These demarcate spaces of heightened femininity and masculinity respectively, but the overall vision of the film blurs these lines. Evelyn Cameron's photography of the early life of settlers in Montana in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century informed the look of the film [47], yet Phil's glade points implicitly to a different reference point. Prior to Peter's discovery of Phil's secret den and Bronco Henry's nude male magazines, Phil takes solitary, sensuous pleasure in the water and mud, lies on the grass in the sun, and caresses himself with a silky scarf embroidered with the initials B.H that he keeps down his trousers. These scenes and those of the ranch hands bathing and amusing themselves resemble an all-male painterly idyll from the work of Thomas Eakins. O. Alan Weltzien, Savage's biographer, notes that the author's critically acclaimed yet widely neglected stories are frequently entwined with the repression of same-sex love, drawn from Savage's own life [48][5]. The film, following the book, is deeply

conflicted in this regard. The queer subtext of Campion's film has received criticism for being clichéd [49]. It has also garnered affirmative readings that nonetheless point to the "violent evasion" of its ending [50]. Imbued with Bronco Henry's memory, Phil's connection with Peter is a mix of hostility and eroticism that tries but fails to demarcate the masculine from the feminine, from the scene of the paper flower's probing and incineration onwards. Campion makes clear that a different tie binds the men as the film progresses, with the paper flowers giving way to a more explicit focus on the rope and its relation to animals rather than flora [11] (p. 212) [51] (pp. 231–242). But this shift is not a clean break.

Campion speaks of the rope as a "proof of masculinity" because it is used on the ranch to get animals into submission [52]. The rope is made from animal hides. We see the journey of the rope from live beast through slaughtered animal to hides being dried and prepared, before being cut up into strips for braiding. The scene referred to by Campion and her crew as the "love scene" centers on Phil braiding at night in Peter's company. It takes place in the dimly lit space of Phil's barn, which houses Bronco Henry's saddle that Phil lovingly polishes in earlier sequences as if massaging and caressing the late Bronco's body, and which Peter now touches. Phil places the rawhide strips that Peter gave him into a bowl, and we see blood seep from the open wound on his hand under water (Figure 11). When Phil plaits the infected strip of rawhide into the rope, he braids from crotch level, as Peter watches, asking about Bronco Henry and lighting a cigarette that he and Phil share (Figures 12 and 13). Akin to a post-coital cigarette, this moment recollects but also reverses the power relationship of the earlier scene in which Phil lights his cigarette with Peter's paper flower. With this echo of the earlier scene in mind, the explicit focus on the rope does not reduce the resonance of the paper flower even after its literal disappearance.

An earlier scene in which Rose trades Phil's hides with a Native American father, Edward Nappo (Adam Beach), and son (Maeson Stone Skuggedal) for a handmade pair of beaded and tasseled gloves bears out this continuing relation to the paper flower in audio and visual terms, while complexifying it. The tassels recall the slits of paper in Peter's making of the initial flower while also pre-empting the appearance of the rawhide strips that will become more prominent later. In Savage's novel, Edward and his son encounter Phil, rather than Rose, who refuses Edward's request to camp on the land as well as an offer of gloves, sending them curtly on their way. The book also specifies that it is the boy's mother Jennie who makes the gloves. While there is no reference to this feminine connection in the film, Rose is visibly moved as she touches the gloves, puts them on, and walks away holding her gloved arms up ahead of her as if mesmerized. Overwhelmed by the weight of this encounter, which is a fleeting reminder of the troubled settler-colonial history central to the Western genre, Rose then collapses. Carried to bed by George, her Prince Charming, Rose's trajectory is a modified, darker version of the fairy tale journey Cixous describes: "Woman, if you look for her, has a strong chance of always being found in one position: in bed" [35] (p. 43) (Figure 14). The pink hues of Rose's clothing, embossed with hundreds of little flowers (Figure 15), which hark back to the color of the center of Peter's paper flower, also relate her to a quite different bed, her flower bed, which she tends earlier (Figure 16). For Campion scholar Ellen Cheshire, the filmmaker's heroines are all in search of their own identity [53] (p. 14) and, for Rose, albeit less extensively in the film than the novel, her work with flowers is a desperate attempt to tend to her own sense of self. Rose abandons the flower bed and runs after Peter when Phil takes him into his barn. Both sequences—Rose leaving the flower bed, and her collapsing after giving away the hides—are accompanied by the detuned piano that first played over images of Peter making the paper flower. This music that is no longer attached to the physical object of the paper flower is, however, part of the fabricated floral *mise en scène*, which travels with Rose in sonic form and through the color and print of her clothing, including her donning of the Native American gloves, making momentary contact with living flowers along the way.

Figure 11. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 12. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 13. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 14. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 15. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 16. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

The paper flower also lives on through the composition of the braided rope. The slits that Peter cuts into that first piece of pink paper are loosely replicated again in the pale strips of rawhide that hang out to dry on one of the ranch gates (Figures 17 and 18). The shot in which we see them drying is inserted between Phil's row with George about Rose giving away his hides, and the calming of Phil's temper by Peter who offers him the rawhide that he collected. Towards the end of the row with George about the hides Rose gave to the Native Americans, Phil yells out "They were mine!" as the images cut to the pale strips of rawhide dangling on the gate. Phil's forceful declaration of ownership brings together his contempt for the feminine and his sense of colonial entitlement to the land and its animals. Yet from the cuts of Peter's first paper flower, through the tassels of the gloves Rose accepts in exchange for the hides, to the dangling rawhide on the gate, his dominion is to be unsettled.

Figure 17. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Figure 18. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

Peter enters the barn when George leaves, approaching Phil gently, nervously, taking off a glove and reaching out to touch him. Peter justifies having rawhide when questioned, saying that he aspires to be like Phil. Likeness was first spoken about by Peter when Phil

quizzed him about the paper flowers in the restaurant scene—"My mother was a florist, so I made them to look like the ones in our garden"—paralleling the feigned likeness to Phil that he declares he desires at this later climactic moment through the offer of his rawhide strips—"I cut some up, I wanted to be like you". Phil responds to Peter emotionally, reassuring him that everything will be plain sailing for him from now on, clasping him around the neck as the camera turns around them. Wegner comments on this moment: "We wanted to feel this electricity. He [Phil] is spun by this very tiny gesture, by this one touch breaking his shell, it cracks. So that was our thought in the spinning camera, which is Steadicam—it's both an unraveling and a tightening at the same time" [54]. Wegner's description of an unraveling is similar in filmic terms to the kind of unthreading of power advocated in Barthes's attention to reading for nuance. Phil may have burned Peter's paper flower, but he accepts his rawhide, and Peter's artifice brings about Phil's downfall.

From being the original antagonist, Phil becomes more multi-faceted as the film advances; his vulnerabilities that first become obvious in the glade sequences combine his bullying with a seemingly incongruous sensitivity. Already hinted at intermittently in Phil's changing attitude to Peter when they are alone together, a teary-eyed tenderness comes out when Peter first makes tactile contact with him in the barn, contrasting with Peter's steadfast impassivity. Phil is disarmed of the might he wielded in this narrative that is otherwise propelled by his prejudices, and the power referred to in Psalm 22:20 that lends the film, following the book, its title is not where it was initially thought to be.[6] The nuance that lies in that grey area between binary oppositions and that baffles them, is here to be found between Phil and Peter, threaded into the rope whose unthreaded composition from rawhide strips seen dangling on the ranch gate in the day and again in the barn sequence that night (Figure 19) carries with it a formal reminder of the sexual organs of the paper flower. Lying beyond the either/or of male/female organs and associated with Rose—her pink hues—as readily as they are with Peter—the slits he cuts at the start—the strips of the rope/paper flower variously bring the masculine and feminine into view depending on the angle of the gaze at any one moment in the film's narrative, but they are never aligned definitively with either. That the strips relate formally too to the tassels on the gloves Rose trades with Edward Nappo and his son for Phil's hides, brings an intersection with settler colonialism into view in passing here. While the hierarchies of colonialism remain entrenched as the Burbank ranch seems here to stay, and other binaries also reassert themselves as the film draws to a close, the initial paper flower's unsettling presence is palpable through to the very end.

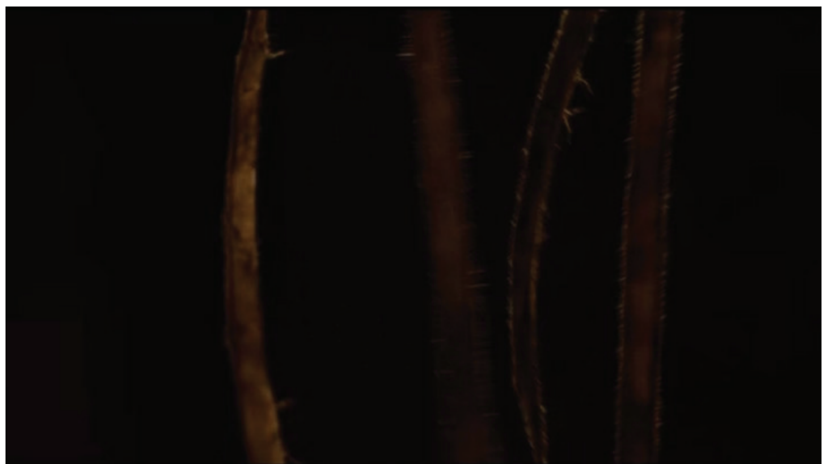

Figure 19. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

As Phil begins to soften towards Peter on their day out on a trail together, Peter tells of how his late father, prior to committing suicide, spoke of the need for Peter to show more kindness, and of how men are made through the removal of obstacles from their path. Peter removes the obstacle of Phil from his mother's life, wielding his "kindness" with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel cutting into Anthrax-infected animal flesh, which is not too dissimilar to the meticulous operation of scissors in the equally dexterous work that goes into the making of a paper flower. The equilibrium of Rose and George's relationship is restored in the closing moments of the film and Peter has got away with murder to achieve this. Less expansive than the final crane shot of *Once Upon a Time in the West*, the final camera movement of *The Power of the Dog* nevertheless assumes an importance of its own. Following on from the elliptical way in which Phil's death is presented, it connects Rose, George, and Peter seamlessly in spite of their occupation of separate spaces. The camera views out of an upstairs ranch house window in the semi-darkness alongside Peter who watches his mother and George return home after Phil's funeral. They kiss, surrounded by long, thin, slatted shadows (Figure 20).

Figure 20. *The Power of the Dog*. Netflix.

The Power of the Dog invites us to look into the shadows. The most obvious example of this is when we, along with Peter, are prompted to see the barking dog's head in the mountains that only Phil and Bronco Henry had seen before, but the ending of the film has a subtlety that also calls to be read. The linear shadows recall so many different parallel lines of the film, from the doors of Phil's barn to the teeth on Peter's comb. Most powerfully of all, though, they bring back the specter of colonialism through the tassels of the Native American gloves, along with the striking images of the dangling rawhide strips, which return us, one final time, to the slitted pink paper strip that was coiled around to make the center of Peter's flower. While the main subject of the shot is Rose and George kissing in the dark, it is, to borrow Bruzzi's formulation, a more "abstract rendition" of the film's floral aesthetic that is evident in the lined shadows, before the camera then draws upwards and backwards to catch the faintest glimmer of a smile on Peter's face as he moves from blurred to clear focus and walks out of the frame. Rose re-emerges at the end with her Prince Charming as her avenging angel looks on from above, and the vertical genealogical potential of a family tree is forged anew, enclosed nonetheless in the unraveled heart of a beguiling paper flower.

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Notes

1 I thank Michelle Devereaux for encouraging me to consider the significance of the Burbank name.

2 Eight years later the industry would have its own code of fair competition [21]. However, the code underwent amendments in 1934 before being deemed unconstitutional in 1935 by the Supreme Court and scrapped.

3 I thank Tom Cuthbertson for reminding me of Jarmusch's paper flowers.

4 Not all early flower manuals name an author, but those that do are authored by women. Early French manuals address "lectrices" (women readers) and the "jeune fille" (young girl) [15,24]. An English guide cites paper flower making among "the many agreeable occupations of ladies" [25] (p. 2). Other manuals address ladies [26] and educators [27].

5 Savage was gay but married with three children to the writer Elizabeth Savage. In his fiction, as Weltzien notes, sexual minorities are frequently condemned [48] (p. 219).

6 In Savage's novel, and coupled with other prejudices, Phil is deeply anti-Semitic. For readings of the psalm that span Jewish and Christian traditions, see [55], and for a discussion of the psalm in relation to the film, see [56].

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Feminism and Vegetal Freedom in Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur* (1965) and *Vagabond* (1985)

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Abstract: This essay examines French filmmaker Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur* (1965) and *Vagabond* (1985) for their critical invocation of the persistent and patriarchal association of women with plants. Both women and plants are thought within the metaphysical tradition to have a deficient or negative relation to freedom. Varda's films, however, link the liberation of women in postwar France to the liberation of vegetal being; her female protagonists pursue their liberation by accessing the vegetal freedom that subtends human freedom. In *Le Bonheur*, Varda uses visual irony to critique the processes of idealization that turn both women and flowers into signifiers of ideal beauty in thrall to the enchantments of happiness. In *Vagabond*, the enigmatic female drifter at the center of the film enacts a plant-like refusal of self-preservation. In both films, female liberation takes vegetal shape, as their protagonists embody a vegetal silence or vegetal indifference in defiance of the patriarchal situations they encounter.

Keywords: Agnès Varda; French feminism; vegetal ontology; plants; vegetal freedom

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Agnès Varda's production company Ciné-Tamaris (originally Tamaris Films, when it was founded in 1954) is named for the tamarisk plant found along the Mediterranean Sea, including in the coastal city Sète near to which Varda shot her first feature *La Pointe Courte* (1955). Varda has commented that her appreciation of the plant stems from its "strong, southern, and discreet" [1] nature[1]. An entire corpus of films, spanning decades, is thus collected under the banner of this pink-flowering plant. Not surprisingly, Varda's filmmaking is overstuffed with vegetation. Among the many possible examples, one would include the Paulownia trees and Lebanese cedars explicitly referenced by the French soldier in *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962); the rose petal titles of *Elsa la rose* (1965); the plants captured by Varda's dangling camera in *The Gleaners and I* (2000); and the flower that sprouts magically from a buried button in her short film *Les 3 Boutons* (2015). Varda's botanical abundance offers an opportunity to consider cinema's vegetal forms that stretch beyond mere depiction to questions of vegetal ontology.

Scholarship at the intersection of film studies and plant studies has largely focused on questions of vegetal movement and growth. The apparent immobility of plants is overcome by their cinematic reproduction, which reveals their locomotion through its malleable temporality. Oliver Gaycken [2], for instance, has documented the late nineteenth-century use of motion analysis to depict vegetal movement through the enlistment of visual devices such as time-lapse photography. Methods for the scientific observation of plant movement are an integral part of the pre-history of cinema, just as images of plant germination and growth became fascinating subject matter for early cinema. In an analysis of Percy Smith's *The Birth of a Flower* (1903), an actuality film that exhibited the flowering of ten floral species through time-lapse cinematography, Kyle Murdock [3] argues that films of this type are more than "a simple *disclosure* or *inscription* of vegetal agency" or representation that "reveals the 'truth' of plant movement". Rather, they are entanglements of human and nonhuman agencies. The depiction of plant movement, otherwise imperceptible to human vision, results from the assemblage of film's technological mediation and the plant's vitalist agency[2] [4].

These analyses of plant agency remain insightful into what vegetal ontology can reveal of cinematic ontology, and vice versa, but they do not exhaust that relation. Varda, for instance, is not especially interested in plant movement. Her films engage other aspects of vegetal being, especially insofar as they are relevant for the feminist concerns of her films. In her landmark 1973 essay, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema", Claire Johnston [5] criticized the feminist credentials of Varda's films—*Le Bonheur* (1965) in particular—because, she claimed, their "concern for nature" constituted a "retreat from history"[3]. *Le Bonheur*'s images of domestic happiness were indistinguishable from advertising, Johnston claimed, making Varda's film "totally innocent to the workings of myth," which naturalizes what is historically contingent. Heidi Holst-Knudsen [6] argues that Johnston judged Varda wrongly, that she misrecognized the ironic distanciation operative in *Le Bonheur*'s "too perfect" natural settings. Yet, as I will emphasize, Varda's botanical interest, her "concern for nature," is as integral to her feminist project as her films' formal reflexivity. This essay considers how conceptions of female liberation in postwar France shaped the cinematic rendering of vegetal being in Varda's filmmaking—in particular, in *Le Bonheur* and *Vagabond* (1985).

The philosophical question of existential freedom was paramount in postwar France, particularly in the wake of the liberation from German Occupation, but Western philosophy has generally excluded plants from the freedom available to humans. As Michael Marder [7] indicates, plants are considered to be ontologically unfree because they cannot self-determine or cannot otherwise exceed their external determinations (i.e., their growth is wholly responsive to environmental conditions). Moreover, plants exhibit no self-consciousness—which is not to say that they are not capable of communication or do not possess some form of intelligence. They have no unitary self that can take itself as the object of a reflexive conscious apprehension; the plant is not one but multiple. Their relation to the world is not internalized; rather, plant-being is entirely "superficial", a matter of the spatial extension of surface through growth rather than interiority. By virtue of their lack of self-determination and self-consciousness, plants are positioned negatively in relation to freedom. They are alive but unfree, more than a thing but absent a will that would allow a plant "to be otherwise than what or who it is," this becoming-other, as Marder notes, being essential to freedom[4].

Postwar French philosophy, such as the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre [8] and the hermeneutic phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur [9], is indicative of these claims regarding the metaphysical deficiency of plants. For Sartre, free will is constitutive of the human; man is "that which he wills himself to be"[5]. Condemned to his freedom, man is determined by the actions he takes to realize himself. Consciousness is the capacity to negate what is given, but plant-being is deficient in this regard. The plant lacks an ability to project into the future, and therefore cannot transcend the determinants of its external situation. According to Sartre, writing in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, self-consciousness sharply distinguishes the human from "a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower"[6]. Moreover, in his novel *Nausea*, as Randy Laist [10] argues, plants function "as a terrifying symbol of the unfathomable absurdity and radical contingency of human being"[7]. The purposeless vitality of plant-being stands in sharp contrast to the human's effortful quest to transcend its own facticity. Ricoeur's philosophy of the will, as outlined in his *Freedom and Nature*, offers a more modest conception of freedom than found in Sartre. For him, willing is not simply a matter of free choice, where a subject that acts operates with sovereignty over an impassive world. Ricoeur posits instead that freedom and nature are reciprocally intertwined. The will can only realize itself in being actualized within the domain of involuntary nature (the subject that acts is situated within a world) but the involuntary offers up the resources—for example, the body's abilities—through which the subject has the capacity to act. In being wholly determined by its external relations, plant-being is excluded from this dynamic interplay and remains confined to the realm of the involuntary.

Freedom may have been valorized in postwar philosophy, but it remained restricted in practice for women living under the Fourth Republic, in ways that would mobilize feminist

movements in France in the decades after. Women were granted political emancipation in 1946 through the right to vote, but their personal and social lives remained highly regulated as a consequence of the reassertion of patriarchal values and natalist social policy in postwar France. As Lisa Greenwald [11] notes, "married women were still at the mercy of the anachronistic Napoleonic Code, which effectively maintained their legal status as minors," meaning that they "could not seek employment, relocate, or keep their finances and business separate without the formal consent of a husband"[8]. Diagnosing the secondary status of women in postwar French society in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir [12] deployed the terms of existentialist philosophy to demonstrate women's differential access to freedom. Woman, she wrote, "is not considered an autonomous being"[9]. She is defined as Other to man—supplementary to, derived from, and dependent on his subjectivity. The existential subject "posits itself as a transcendence concretely, through projects" but in having to do this continually, the subject risks "laps[ing] into immanence," of falling from freedom into facticity[10]. Woman's freedom is constrained by patriarchal society which would "freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence"[11]. She decides and chooses, as any existential subject, but does so within the confines of her historical situation. Her liberation will result from a change in these material circumstances, and be measured—writes de Beauvoir, anticipating the irony of the title of Varda's *Le Bonheur*—"not in terms of happiness but in terms of freedom"[12].

The restriction of female subjectivity to immanence entails an ideological conflation of woman and nature, one to which de Beauvoir was well attuned. In the section on myths pertaining to womanhood, de Beauvoir observes that woman, in her patriarchal construction, is "nature raised to the transparency of consciousness"[13]. The existential subject's continual efforts toward authenticity and sovereignty are fraught and can easily veer toward unfreedom or alienation, but woman as Other, as intermediary between man and nature, resolves this existential restlessness. Yet, as much as woman confirms man's freedom by the diminution of her own, she also continually reminds him of the immanence that he wishes to transcend. As de Beauvoir writes, "woman embodies nature", and comes to represent "the horror of [man's] own carnal contingence that he projects on her"[14]. Existential subjectivity posits a duality between spirit and matter, between transcendence and immanence. Man springs from nature; he originates from it and depends on it, but he wishes to overcome this limitation on his freedom. This duality between ideality and materiality is gendered one. Man "would like himself to be as necessary as pure Idea, as One, All, absolute Spirit" but "it is woman who imprisons him in the mud of the earth"[15]. De Beauvoir specifies this disavowal of the feminine and the natural by citing historical prohibitions, taboos, and restrictions pertaining to fertility, sexuality, childbirth, and menstruation. Within this patriarchal mythology, woman is how man accesses nature in a transfigured form. She is adorned and ornamented by artifice designed to evoke (but also neutralize the frightening excesses of) the natural: "[M]an wants woman at the same time to be animal and plant and that she hide behind a fabricated armature"[16]. De Beauvoir is attentive to the vegetal associations of feminine beauty. Woman, she writes, "perfumed herself so as to smell of roses and lilies"; the "vegetal mystery" of her hair is tamed in being "braided, curled, or sculpted," making nature "present but captive"; and when she ages, "she is said to be withered, faded, like a plant"[17].

The persistent patriarchal association of the feminine with nature is critically invoked in Varda's filmmaking, as well as in a contemporaneously released short film directed by Jeanne Barbillon. The pursuit of liberation by the female protagonists of *Le Bonheur* and *Vagabond* entails discovering the vegetal freedom that subtends human freedom. These films recognize that, as Marder [7] has argued, "plant liberation is indispensable for the possibility of human liberation"[18]. As he indicates, the symbiosis between vegetal and human freedom has been "concealed and disavowed"[19]. Its disclosure, however, offers a post-metaphysical conception of freedom not premised on transcendence and ideality, overturning a metaphysical tradition in which both women and plants are understood as

having a negative or deficient relation to freedom. The foreclosure of freedom to plants is overcome, Marder argues, by stripping away the accumulated weight of metaphysics bearing down on vegetal being, and so liberated, an encounter with the vegetal "triggers the emancipation of those who come into contact with it"[20]. Varda stages these human-vegetal encounters as a means of posing questions about the possibilities for (but also constraints on) living freely in society. For example, *The Gleaners and I* thematically links the discarded vegetal remnants of the harvest to marginalized people surviving off what society has cast off; gleaning as a practice of recovering value in what is deemed waste involves a proximate relation to the vegetal otherwise suppressed by a highly industrialized society. In *Le Bonheur* and *Vagabond*, female characters confront patriarchal limitations on their freedom, and they pursue their liberation via a vegetal freedom that may be difficult to recognize as freedom as such, since it is based on qualities, such as silence and indifference, that look like its negation.

Strands of postwar French film theory provided support for the idea that cinema could overturn metaphysical certainties, and therefore offer a space for staging human-vegetal encounters not premised on their hierarchical relation. Filmmaker Jean Epstein [13], writing in postwar France in his 1946 book *The Intelligence of a Machine*, argued that the medium's capacity for variable movement, its deceleration or acceleration of motion, achieves an "upheaval in the hierarchy of things"[21]. The medium slides, as it were, between different levels of existence or between different assemblages of matter and spirit, breaking down the metaphysical boundaries between mineral, vegetal, animal, and human. In cinema, "all the partitioned systems of nature are disarticulated"[22]. The human body is not privileged, and remains capable, says Epstein, of accessing its animal and vegetal inheritances, "rediscover[ing], in the movements of the torso or the neck, the active elasticity of the stem; in the undulating of hair or a horse mane, the swaying of a forest; in the beating of fins and wings, the palpitating of leaves; in the coiling and uncoiling of reptiles, the spiral sense of all vegetal growth"[23]. One does not have to endorse Epstein's vitalist understanding of the medium to recognize the mutual affinity between cinematic ontology and vegetal ontology. Rather than being defined by some idealist essence, both realize their being in taking form, in the ways they materialize by spatial extension. Cinematic studies of plant movement already point to the entanglement of film and the vegetal and that affinity can be expanded to other avenues for the formal expression of vegetal being. Varda's films are ultimately fruitful sites for thinking about cinema's possible vegetal forms. Before proceeding to a discussion of Varda, however, I turn to a lesser-known short film, released the same year as *Le Bonheur*, that likewise links the vegetal to a woman's pursuit of freedom.

Jeanne Barbillon's 14 min *L'Avatar botanique de Mademoiselle Flora*/*The Botanical Avatar of Miss Flora* (1965) dramatizes the escape of a disaffected young woman named Flora (Bernadette Lafont) from the dissatisfactions of her romantic relationship with a soldier. Flora narrates the events of her life just prior to her flight into what she calls a "vegetal silence". For nearly three months, she has lived with Charles, in Nemours, but his continual absence from their shared apartment for much of the day due to his military obligations leaves Flora feeling isolated and neglected. The tedium prompts a response resembling vegetal torpor ("I couldn't bring myself to move", "I didn't do anything"). She spends much of her time lying in bed reading women's magazines, which, she complains, write only of "cold women". Charles is occasionally "attentive", she says, but he is otherwise too bound to order and discipline to provide her much intellectual or sexual stimulation. Flora's disaffection is also linked to the alienating effects of a newly modernizing France at midcentury. For example, confining herself to the apartment, she complains about the "industrial smell" of a plastic curtain. She also comments that she and Charles never eat butter, only "vegetaplase", a margarine substitute that Flora comments will "kill you", citing the deaths of thousands of Danish people in the previous year[24]. Though she says she has "never lived in the countryside", Flora remains ill at ease with her increasingly artificial and stifling surroundings.

Her escape from these conditions begins with an engagement with the vegetal. A strong fascination with plants develops as a means for overcoming her isolation. Uninterested in her neighbors (“one sad old lady and a pig merchant”), she is instead drawn to a tall houseplant with large, waxy leaves—what looks like a rubber plant. A close-up shows a bare-shouldered Flora with one of these leaves covering her chest; both the plant and Flora’s skin are dappled with water. This implies some form of intimacy, a displacement of affection perhaps in response to Charles’s inattentiveness, but it is also indicative of a relation of identity, as the aptly named Flora begins to see herself in or as a plant.

This desire for vegetation (or to be vegetation) draws Flora out of the apartment as she takes long walks along the banks of the Loing River. The riverbank is distinguished from the apartment as a site of renewal rather than stagnation. She describes this place as “almost temporal”, since it involves the dynamic interactions between earth, mud, and water. It promises “a ventral return to life” as she imagines being able to absorb the “brighter blood” of the river. When back at the apartment, in defiance of Charles’s “methodical, hygienic, [and] thrifty” adherence to routine, Flora discovers a “great silence” that is “wonderfully vegetal”. She kneels on the floor next to a pile of vegetables. A close-up shows her face obscured behind a tangle of leeks. She then crowns her head with endive lettuce and caresses her face with a celery stalk. Heaped among these greens, Flora initiates her withdrawal from the human condition: “I no longer belonged to the world”, she says.

Flora’s radical transformation is completed the next day. She returns to the riverbank, her feet clinging to the ground (“I had to pull them out of the earth”), suggestive of the movement of roots. Charles confronts her, complaining that she has abandoned her domestic duties. Flora is vegetally silent in response. “I was indifferent, frozen”, we hear in voice-over. Charles lectures her about responsibility (“we must deserve society”). By means of her vegetal silence, Flora rejects Charles’s patriarchal values. Amid their argument, he holds her hair tightly. Barbillon pans to his face, and when the shot returns to his hand, he is now gripping the branches of a tree. Flora’s self-described “useless flesh” has taken arboreal shape. Frustrated, but oddly not shocked, Charles leaves her at the riverbank, as the film’s final shot lingers on Flora’s new vegetal self.

By casting Bernadette Lafont as Flora, Barbillon situates her short film within and against the French New Wave’s complicated (and often compromised) relation to feminism. Lafont starred in many of the canonical early New Wave films, appearing in *Les Mistons* (François Truffaut, 1957), *Le Beau Serge* (Claude Chabrol, 1958), and *Les bonnes femmes* (Chabrol, 1960). These roles were representative of a newly liberated femininity—young, economically independent, sexually assertive—but, as Roland-François Lack [14] has argued, they were often dominated by a carnality that reduced women to their bodies. Lack notes the distinction between Lafont’s onscreen roles in these early New Wave films and those of the post-May 68 period, which importantly for him, enact social critique through their joining of body to voice. Films such as *La Fiancée du pirate* (Nelly Kaplan, 1969) and *Les Stances à Sophie* (Moshé Mizrahi, 1971) utilize an interplay between silence and voice as the means for asserting a feminist subjectivity through the strategic deployment of speech, as when Lafont as the embattled protagonist of Kaplan’s film turns her sexual exploitation by men in her village against their attempts to denounce her through secret tape recordings[25].

Barbillon’s film falls between these two periods of Lafont’s career, situated at the transition point between her initial rise to stardom in the early New Wave and the post-68 period where she became “cinema’s dominant signifier of *‘la femme 68’* in all her newness and difference”[26]. Given this emphasis on the liberating potential ascribed to voice, what we are to make of Flora’s vegetal silence? Her silence confronts the double bind that British feminist Sheila Rowbotham pointed to in her 1969 article “Women: The Struggle for Freedom” (which, Lack notes, is featured as part of the audio track of Jean-Luc Godard’s *British* Sounds [1969]): “We are assumed to have nothing to say, find it difficult to assert that we want to say something, are observed to say nothing, and they assume you’ve got nothing to say”[27]. Flora’s vegetal silence risks the masculinist assumption that she has “nothing to say”. Nonetheless, her becoming-plant expresses a radical indifference

to societal values and to the narrowly circumscribed place allotted to women. Though it could be mistaken for a nihilistic gesture, her sink into vegetal freedom is an escape from the alienation of her situation since what the vegetal models is a mode of living not limited by these ideological constraints. Once Flora becomes a tree, Charles can no longer make any demands of her. The film's yoking of vegetal silence to its feminist project is related to what made the feminism of Varda's *Le Bonheur* illegible to critics such as Johnston, for whom political modernism (as practiced by Godard, say) was a more recognizable form of ideology critique. Flora's vegetal silence represents a different response to the denial of freedom to women, one that locates that freedom by accessing what it suppresses, the vegetal freedom that lies at its root.

Varda's *Le Bonheur* famously opens on a shot of a sunflower. Standing in a field of other sunflowers, it confronts the viewer like an unseeing eye from the center of the frame. Varda repeatedly returns to this shot throughout the film's opening credits, alternating between it and a wider shot of the Chevalier family crossing an out-of-focus grassy field. Each insertion of this shot, interrupting the family's slow movement toward the foreground, is progressively shorter in duration, making this sequence a self-conscious play with form. In part because of this formal reflexivity, scholarship on the film encourages us to read these images of sunflowers symbolically. Both Catherine Dousteyssier-Khoze [15] and Heidi Holst-Knudsen [6], for example, see the sunflower's heliotropism (it follows the sun) as metaphorical of the film's central married couple, specifically of Thérèse's (Claire Drouot) "dangerously single-minded devotion" to her husband François (Jean-Claude Drouot)[28]. Dousteyssier-Khoze extends this symbolic reading to François's relentless pursuit of happiness; like the sunflower, he is "always turned toward the sun"[29]. Varda's emphasis, she argues, pertains more to the "sunflower-as-image" than to the sunflower itself, in keeping with the film's thematic deconstruction of "*the image of a happy family*"—that is, its ironic evocation of overly "sunny" depictions of domestic bliss that it ultimately shows to be more sinister than they appear[30]. That the sunflower is associated, in the language of flowers, with "false riches", indicative of the empty promise of happiness, only bolsters this symbolic reading.

In his "The Language of Flowers" (1929), Georges Bataille [16] took aim the symbolic interpretation of flowers, such as the association of the red rose with romantic love. Such symbolism is a gesture of abstraction, from the base elements of the plant to its more colorful and fragrant qualities, a "displace[ment] from the pistil and stamens to the surrounding petals"[31]. The flower's corolla comes to represent ideal beauty through an act of sublimation, through a disavowal of the plant's "hairy sexual organs"[32]. Its efflorescence into beautiful, colorful form is a "flight of angelic and lyrical purity" that rises above "the stench of the manure pile" before returning, once it withers, to its "original squalor"[33]. The purity of the flower that Bataille rejects is an effect, Marder [7] writes, of "the idealist repression weighing upon it"[34]. Against the idealist tradition that sees the flower as innocent, Marder cites Derrida's "deconstructive counterthesis . . . that the flower is *coupable*" ("cuttable-culpable")—that is, "non-innocent, always already entangled in phallic imagery"[35]. The cut flower "both assuages and exacerbates castration anxiety: *assuages*, because the knife spares the man's sexual organ and slits, in a sort of sacrificial ritual, a non-human being that supplants man; *exacerbates*, because, despite (or better, due to) symbolizing romantic love, it is an ever-present reminder of the possibility of castration and death"[36]. Bataille's de-idealization of the flower is the liberation of repressed vegetal sexuality, its seemingly endless capacity for growth.

The same idealization that moves from pistil to petal with respect to the flower extends to human desire. As Bataille [16] writes, "the object of human love is never an organ, but the person who has the organ"[37]. Thus abstracted, a "beautiful woman", he indicates, is as much a signifier of love as a red rose. The repressive idealism that converts vegetal sexuality into ideal beauty is of a piece with the prohibitions that de Beauvoir identified in relation to female sexuality and procreation. Both the figure of the woman and the culled

flower therefore provoke castration anxiety, in keeping with the conflation of femininity and nature. *Le Bonheur* strategically perpetuates this conflation, treating its female characters (Thérèse and Émilie) like flowers. Dousteyssier-Khoze [15], for instance, calls Varda's characters "colourful flowers, without psychological depth"[38]. Both Thérèse and Émilie are costumed in floral print clothing (or otherwise, outfitted in bright, deeply saturated colors), they are situated within floral environments, and they are repeatedly visually linked to bouquets of flowers.

The apparent beauty of the film stemming from this colorful efflorescence does not, as Johnston thought, compromise the film's feminist credentials but advances its critique of the repressive idealism that burdens figurations of both woman and flower alike as signifiers of ideal beauty. The liberation of women from this idealist burden begins with the liberation of the flower. Vegetal freedom subtends human freedom; as Marder [7] writes, "the emancipation of human beings is incomplete without the liberation of vegetal life"[39]. *Le Bonheur* recruits the de-idealization of the flower in the film's overall de-idealization of happiness. The film's pointed irony is directed against the spell cast by happiness, as opposed to or in distinction from the possibilities of freedom. As Marder reminds us, it was Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer who, in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, linked the eating of lotus flowers with the "illusion of bliss" that is merely "an absence of the awareness of unhappiness"[40]. Consider the vegetal analogy that Varda has used repeatedly to explain the animating idea behind the film: "I imagined a summer peach, with its perfect colors, and inside, there is a worm"[41]. Happiness disavows what might spoil it, admits nothing that might contradict it. It hides the worm. Varda's film is critical of consumerist promises of happiness, to mass-mediated images of the good life. The enchantment of happiness, as in the case of the lotus-eaters, conditions the subject to their unfreedom. In *Le Bonheur*, it is François who continually attests to his happiness. He insists that happiness can only be additive, refusing any limit. "Happiness adds to happiness", he tells Émilie. There is therefore no reason, as he sees it, to choose between Thérèse and Émilie. He has "enough joy for both". Indeed, François likens happiness to natural abundance. As he explains to Thérèse when confessing to the affair, "You and I and the kids are like an apple orchard, orderly and well-tended. Then I notice an apple tree growing outside the orchard flowering at the same time. More flowers, more apples. It all adds together, understand?" Marital fidelity is but a social convention that places on an artificial limit on happiness.

In *Le Bonheur*, happiness, despite its sunny promise, restricts the freedom of women. Thérèse especially conforms to the model of a devoted wife who submits herself to the desires of her husband. "Sweet, passive, uncomplaining", writes Holst-Knudsen [6], Thérèse "is the very incarnation of the myth of the eternal feminine so scorned by de Beauvoir"[42]. She is, as François calls her, a "hardy plant"—a patronizing characterization indicative of how flexible the vegetal analogy is for the patriarchal construction of women. This analogy underlines her passivity and compliant tendencies and recalls de Beauvoir's observation that the domination of women and of nature are interrelated. As all François's vegetal references are meant to reinforce, the subordination of women's free will and desire to male prerogatives is the "natural order". Varda gives this ideological viewpoint a literal (though ironic) visualization, by presenting a social dance using a tree as a framing device. The tree vertically bisects the image in the foreground, and during the long take, Varda repeatedly tracks back and forth across it. The couples participating in the dance break off and form new arrangements in a continual exchange of partners. Each time the camera passes across the tree, a rack focus brings it into sharp view, only to then reveal a changed configuration of dancers in the background. Without listing all the permutations of dancing couples, this unbroken shot starts with François and Thérèse paired together, and they cycle through new partners until François joins Émilie, before finally reuniting with his wife. The shot calls attention to itself—requiring a precise coordination of the actors, lens focus, and camera movement—but it serves a concise thematic purpose. It visually overlays social rituals of courtship onto natural forms. Framed astride and under the tree, the dancers appear as its branches or better, its hanging fruit. Varda's ostentatious formal

presentation of the scene hyperbolizes the idea of a "natural order", as the substitution of one dance partner for another, of one woman for another, is naturalized by taking vegetal shape. The vegetal form of Varda's direction makes apparent the ideological conflation of femininity and vegetality, with the ultimate aim of secreting out some autonomous space of freedom from this alliance. At this point, though, this scene is representative how totalizing patriarchy's vegetal logic can be, as it subsumes all under its natural order, treating women as flowers to be culled or fruit to be plucked—that is, as signifiers of ideal beauty dependent on the repression of their fecundity. When Émilie assumes her place as François's wife and mother to his children following Thérèse's death (by accident or suicide?), she is seamlessly "grafted" into the family. Varda's disturbing ending where this newly constituted family stroll through the autumnal wilderness as if nothing has changed, their clothing designed to coordinate with the natural landscape, only underlines the vegetal nature of the substitution that has taken place since in grafting, the section from the new plant will be indistinguishable from the original plant. This final substitution adheres to François's strictly additive notion of happiness, such that Thérèse is not so much replaced or wholly dispensed with as subsumed into a vegetal hybrid (a Thérèse-Émilie figure).

The circumstances of Thérèse's death are almost entirely occluded by the film. Having seemingly accepted the terms that François proposes regarding the affair, the couple make love in the grass and fall asleep. When François wakes, Thérèse is gone. He goes in search of her with the children only to discover that she has drowned in a nearby lake. Passersby pull her limp body from the water. It is not clear if the drowning is merely a terrible accident or whether, shocked and saddened at what her husband has revealed, she ended her own life. Mark Lee [17] sees Thérèse's death as "submitting to a Darwinian natural order" in which her happiness is premised on "giving way to the fitter Émilie, [and] to the instinct of a dominant François"[43]. If happiness, so conceived, is submission to the natural order, freedom is the escape from it, and it is therefore of interest that Thérèse's death is presented as an incongruous, formally intrusive moment in the film. When François comes upon her body, Varda utilizes overlapping editing when he cradles her in his arms, overtly repeating the action as if the film were struggling to assimilate this new event. She then includes two brief flashbacks (of no more than a few seconds) of Thérèse struggling in the water, trying to grab a branch for safety. Each of these shots are haloed in the foreground by unfocused leaves. Their brevity makes her death somewhat illegible (as accident or suicide), but it is this enigmatic quality that makes this moment resonate strongly with Flora's mysterious transformation into a tree in Barbillon's film. Thérèse's reach for a low-hanging branch can perhaps be read as an expression of the same desire for freedom that motivated Flora's vegetal metamorphosis. As Marder [7] indicates, the flower "gains its freedom when, capitalizing on the internal rupture and the discontinuities within the 'natural' cycle, it is extracted from the universality of the self-reproducing life", and thus liberated from this reproductive function, "on the brink of non-being, passing or withering away, it begins to signify nothing but itself"[44]. The disjunctive interruption of the film's "natural order"—the overlapping editing, the unreadable flashbacks—excerpts Thérèse, otherwise presented as only devoted wife and dedicated mother, from the enchantments of so-called happiness.

Speaking generally, *Le Bonheur* is everywhere in bloom—including in countryside scenes framed to recall Impressionist paintings, the lush garden of François's brother, and the numerous flower bouquets placed in domestic interiors. This vegetal abundance, though, is tied to the idealist repression inherent to the beautiful. In *Le Bonheur*, shot composition resembles an act of floral arrangement. However, the film does gesture at its margins to forms expressive of vegetal freedom, to depictions of plant-being shorn of symbolic meanings and not bound by a patriarchal order. Rather than being denied the capacity for imagination, Marder [7] indicates that, citing Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic philosophy, plants' imagination comprises "material play ... without any reference to shape"[45]. The "echo of vegetal freedom" discernible in imaginative play can be accessed through the

sensuous engagement with materiality "lacking the principle of formal organization"[46]. Is there something like this in Varda's film? *Le Bonheur* makes distinctive use of fades that shade into a range of colors (green, red, white, blue) rather than to black. A fade to black, in the grammar of film form, has the function of effecting a transition between narrative units, but the application of color here is in excess to that functional operation. Depiction is suspended temporarily and gives way to the shapeless registration of chromatic intensity, the color of the flower's corolla set loose onto the frame. Color is the trace of the vegetal, as prior to the industrial manufacture of color through artificial dyes the production of pigment was dependent on vegetable and mineral sources. These blossoming images shift the spectator's attention from the referential to color's perceptual immediacy. The final fade to color at the film's conclusion suggestively matches the autumnal tones worn by the new Chevalier family as they stroll through the countryside. By freeing this color from its symbolically charged object, Varda strikes a dissonant note in the film's "happy ending", distancing the film from everything—the nuclear family naturalized and eternalized by its pastoral surroundings—that Johnston accused Varda of uncritically reproducing. Presented in this way, as color unbounded by shape, the vegetal can appear "freely"—that is, unburdened by metaphysical trappings or symbolic meanings—carrying the force of Varda's feminist critique of postwar patriarchal values.

Varda returned to this thematic interest in the association of women and plants, of feminist liberation and vegetal freedom, in *Vagabond*. Whereas *Le Bonheur*'s feminism was couched in irony, *Vagabond* represents a more direct articulation of women's marginalized position in society. This shift reflects the widened social and cultural presence of the women's movement in France throughout the 1970s. Varda's filmmaking in the intervening years consistently intersected with the social movements of the time, as seen in *Black Panthers* (1968) about the Black Power movement Varda witnessed while living in California and her musical feature *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (1976), which sets its story of two female friends against the backdrop of the women's rights movement. *Vagabond* centers *Vagabond*'s narrative around a female drifter named Mona Bergeron (Sandrine Bonnaire). The film opens with the discovery of her body in a ditch, having died from exposure to the cold in the night, like a green shoot succumbing to an early frost. It then retraces the weeks in Mona's life just prior to her death. She lives an itinerant existence, always traveling, never staying in place long, and the various characters she encounters testify to Varda's camera what they know and think of her. In Varda's depiction of her, Mona remains an "utterly opaque female protagonist", in Kelley Conway's [18] description, as these individuals make assumptions, pass judgments, or otherwise project their own biases onto this enigmatic central character[47]. As Varda explained, "I decided that the people she'd met would be the ones who spoke of her. She'd be practically silent herself. And that what we learned about her would come from those who'd seen her go by, from what little they might have shared with her"[48] [19]. This narrative structure led to a representational problem for Varda; as she said, "[C]an one render silence, or capture freedom?"[49] Like Barbillon's film, *Vagabond* confronts the difficulty of making freedom recognizable when it is assumed by a character who chooses silence over speech, who appropriates the seeming passivity of the vegetal, and who, like Thérèse, dies at the end. There is no literal becoming-plant in Varda's film, but Mona, by discovering the plant-like in herself, discloses the vegetal freedom that subtends human freedom.

As with the vegetal analogies of *Le Bonheur*, *Vagabond* thematically links Mona to the abundant vegetation in the film. Her proximity to the vegetal measures the degree of her social exclusion. For example, as Mona travels on the road, camping and hitchhiking where she can, she gets increasingly dirty. Characters comments on the filth on her hands or the smell she emits. Though she starts the film emerging nude from the sea, her body steadily accumulates the muck of the earth. Mona is linked to the elemental earth as a mode of resistance to social convention and propriety. This association is given a more direct vegetal reference at the end of the film when Mona stumbles into a bacchanal ritual in a local village. She is accosted by men dressed in stuffed burlap sacks, with branches

jutting upward on either side of their heads, meant to resemble grapevines. They carry rags drenched in wine dregs and smearing Mona, cover her face and clothes in purple pigment. As the unfermented remains of the wine-making process, the dregs mark Mona as a vegetal castoff, underlining her marginalized position in society as a female drifter.

Plants, like women, are subject to a discourse of remediation in *Vagabond*, framed as something requiring cultivation or rescue. For example, Mona encounters a college professor named Madame Landier (Macha Méril) whose research specializes in a non-native fungus that infects and kills plane trees. Her aim is to develop a strain of the tree that will be resistant to the fungus. The plane trees are "doomed", she tells Mona, but "to do nothing to stop the plague" is unacceptable to her. This humane interventionism is likely what draws her to Mona, who she picks up while hitchhiking. Landier provides her with food and some money and allows her to "take root" in her car. The implication is clear: Mona is a "sick tree" in need of saving. Varda emphasizes this connection in an earlier scene by panning directly from Mona, sitting in the passenger side of Landier's car, to an infected plane tree. The colloquial name for the disease, moreover, is "canker stain", and is recognizable by the colorful stains visible on the tree's exterior, just as Mona will later be marked by the wine dregs. In all, these vegetal associations serve to link Mona to the discarded and marginalized elements of society, subject to expulsion or elimination, unless rescued.

Mona, however, repeatedly resists all attempts to "save" her from her itinerant wandering. She displays what Marder [7] calls a "vegetal indifference" to her situation. According to Marder, the plant is thought to be unfree because it cannot transcend need; it remains bound to "the overarching logic of self-preservation"[50]. Like us, the plant "wants to live", and it seeks nourishment just as we strive to meet the basic requirements (hunger, thirst, shelter) for life to persist, yet it can never liberate itself from this "compulsion of need" as done by humans in their projects of willing and desiring[51]. Freeing the plant from this metaphysical baggage, Marder argues that, as vegetal being has "no intimate, inner, unified self", it has "therefore nothing to preserve"[52]. Not only, he writes, do plants appear "uninvolved in their own existence", they "flourish only in 'falling apart,' in not keeping themselves intact, in not keeping themselves *as selves*", as seen in the seed or fruit whose function is precisely to tear itself open or wither away for growth to occur[53]. This is the gratuitousness inherent to plant reproduction: In the release of pollen or the dispersal of seeds, the plant is "literally throwing itself (away), potentially wasting itself"[54]. Vegetal indifference inheres in this "freedom of the throw", out of which nothing may come to fruition[55].

One way that humans emulate vegetal indifference is by means of Heideggerian profound boredom, where "human beings vegetate, careless for their being and uninvolved in the world"[56]. This existential condition approximates the "absolute unconcern of the plant"[57]. The virtue of profound boredom's radically indifferent attitude is that it allows one to shed ideological frameworks and established values, functioning as a temporary nihilism that casts a shadow of meaninglessness so that meaning may be recovered. The longstanding feminist interest in boredom stems from the recognition that it characterized the affective condition of women's everyday life under modernity. As scholars such as Patrice Petro [20] and Allison Pease [21] have emphasized, literary modernism repeatedly turned to boredom in its depictions of women to narrate the patriarchal limitations placed on women's self-actualization as rights-bearing subjects. Pease notes that feminist reappraisals of boredom had to confront its passivity and indifference, in contrast to the rebellious assertiveness of feminist activism. She argues that "boredom in modernist literature displays the conflict women experienced between their desires and the few outlets for such desires", and that this negative affect registered the failure or struggle of female protagonists "in realizing themselves as anything other than bored"[58]. This modernist investment in boredom can be equally seen in Chantal Akerman's feminist film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). Barbillon's film gave feminist boredom

a vegetal shape. Flora's state of physical lassitude prior to her withdrawal into vegetal silence embodies profound boredom in that her environment is no longer emotionally sustaining for her.

Like Flora, Mona is a figure of vegetal indifference, especially insofar as she seems at times unconcerned about her own self-preservation, in defiance of the repeated interventions of those she meets. Consider her encounter with a goatherder and his family. Like Mona, the goatherder spent time on the road, but he cautions her that the cost of the freedom of her itineracy is social isolation. "You chose total freedom, but you got total loneliness", he tells her. "The time comes when if you go on, you destroy yourself. You head for destruction. If you want to live, you stop". He offers her some land to grow potatoes, but she does nothing with it, sleeping while the family works. He accuses her of wanting nothing, even of being nothing ("You don't exist"). After she has left the property, he will complain to Varda's camera that Mona has "no plans, no goals, no wishes, no wants". Headed for destruction, indifferent to the logic of the end, she negates the foundations of existential freedom. Even though she is continually on the move, she vegetates—or, in the goatherder's terms, she is not "wandering" but "withering".

Flitterman-Lewis [19] argues that Mona's itineracy and eventual death demonstrates "the impossibility of evasive freedom and the necessity of human connection", but alternatively, we can see the film as affirming the possibility of a vegetal freedom, rooted in the supposed metaphysical deficiencies shared by women and plants[59]. Modeled on the vegetal, the freedom that Mona assumes for herself refuses the distinction between wandering and withering. What Marder [7] calls the "wandering of the seed" or the "errancy of the flower"—that is, its submission to chance over whether it ever comes to fruition—secures its freedom, since it is no longer only a transitional stage in the reproductive cycle. The flower's wandering, Marder writes, "stands for [its] insubordination to the idea of finality. Only in becoming superfluous, unproductive, and un-reproductive, is the tulip beautiful"[60]. Such wandering is withering in that the flower will fall apart without being redeemed (i.e., will not come to fruition), but this superfluity is what grants the doomed flower its singular presence. The comparison of female characters to flowers had signaled, in *Le Bonheur*, the metaphysical weight of ideal beauty bearing down on both, but the vegetal analogy in *Vagabond* imagines a post-metaphysical freedom wherein Mona assumes the "free beauty" of the flower liberated from this idealism. The question of how to "capture freedom" that Varda identified as being at stake in the film is answered by plant-being. Just as there is "no transcendental ideal of a beautiful flower", no concept under which it can be subsumed, the enigmatic Mona slips free of whatever characterization the people she meets labels her with (i.e., "drifter", "lazy"). Some want to save her, some to exclude or exploit her, and others are simply fascinated by her. One young woman, for example, who allows Mona to use a water pump, admiringly describes Mona as "free" to her parents ("She goes where she likes"), and when her mother chides her that the security of home is better than the freedom of the road, the teenager asserts that being free is often better than not eating. The competing views of Mona never cohere into a representation capable of capturing her, and she thereby embodies the non-conceptual singularity of the beautiful flower. Mona's commitment to the freedom of the road even if it means loneliness, her embodiment of the idea that it can be better to be free than to eat, her acceptance that to wander may also be to wither, her resistance to any conceptual mediation that would aim to define her, being the enigmatic center of the film whose mystery is never dispelled, all underline how her character discovers her own freedom via a vegetal freedom, how she comes to approximate the alterity of plant-being, modeling a type of freedom that looks "doomed" but in its very indifference to this finality finds liberation in the superfluity of her existence.

The staging of female liberation takes vegetal shape in Varda's *Le Bonheur* and *Vagabond*. Each in their respective way, these films explore the alliance between the feminine and the vegetal to liberate both from their entanglement in and repression by a patriarchal order. Plant-being offers a model of post-metaphysical freedom premised on the immanence rather than transcendence, materiality rather than essence—a project integral to the intellectual

tradition of French feminist theory. For instance, beyond her influential critiques of the masculinist assumptions of psychoanalysis and philosophy in the 1970s, Luce Irigaray [22] has recently turned, in conversation with Marder, to plant-being to ask what might be regained by being attentive to the repressed vegetal. Like Barbillon and Varda, Irigaray discovers the encounter with the vegetal in being silent. "In our tradition, silence has been left, with undervaluation and even with contempt, to nature and to the women assimilated to nature. It is true that, without the capacity for keeping silence, I cannot meet with a tree or a flower"[61]. Silence permits a relation to nature, a being-with, not defined by domination, since for Irigaray, it is a mode of listening that avoids categorizing in advance. The liberated plant and the liberated woman speak a language audible to each other but not to a phallic order that would only, in order to render them beautiful, cut them off at the stem.

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Notes

1 Quoted in Morghan [1] p. 182.
2 See also Sarah Cooper [4] which similarly references *The Birth of a Flower*, as well as the more recent film *Little Joe* (Jessica Hausner, 2019), to elucidate cinema's "techno-flowers" that emerge from "the encounter between a real flower and the film apparatus," between nature and technology, where neither has mastery over the other.
3 Johnston [5] p. 39.
4 Marder [7] p. 119.
5 Sartre [8] p. 22.
6 Sartre [8] p. 23.
7 Laist [10] p. 164.
8 Greenwald [11] p. 42.
9 de Beauvoir [12] p. 5.
10 de Beauvoir [12] p. 16.
11 de Beauvoir [12] p. 17.
12 de Beauvoir [12] p. 17.
13 de Beauvoir [12] p. 161.
14 de Beauvoir [12] pp. 163, 167.
15 de Beauvoir [12] p. 164.
16 de Beauvoir [12] p. 178.
17 de Beauvoir [12] pp. 177–178.
18 Marder [7] p. 142.
19 Marder [7] p. 138.
20 Marder [7] p. 142.
21 Epstein [13] p. 3.
22 Epstein [13] p. 3.
23 Epstein [13] p. 29.
24 This is likely a reference to a 1960 incident where Unilever caused a public health crisis involving its newly reformulated margarine Planta. The consumer food product featured a new commercial emulsifier to aid its spreadability, but this led to an outbreak of skin ailments that caused hundreds to be hospitalized and a handful of deaths in the Netherlands and West Germany.
25 Varda, too, in her short film *Réponse de femmes* (1975), features women testifying to their objections to being reduced to sexual objects or confined to the role of motherhood. Several of these women appear nude before Varda's camera but their speech reframes and reclaims these displays of nudity from their objectification by male desire.
26 Lack [14] p. 359.
27 Quoted in Lack [14] p. 363.
28 Holst-Knudsen [6] p. 510.
29 Dousteyssier-Khoze [15] p. 99. See also DeRoo, R. Unhappily Ever After: Visual Irony and Feminist Strategy in Agnès Varda's *Le Bonheur*. *Studies in French Cinema.* 2008 8, 189–209.

[30] Dousteyssier-Khoze [15] p. 100, original emphasis.
[31] Bataille [16] p. 11.
[32] Bataille [16] p. 12.
[33] Bataille [16] p. 12.
[34] Marder [7] p. 148.
[35] Marder [7] p. 148.
[36] Marder [7] p. 148.
[37] Bataille [16] p. 11.
[38] Dousteyssier-Khoze [15] p. 99.
[39] Marder [7] p. 149.
[40] Quoted in Marder [7] p. 147.
[41] Interview, "Agnès Varda on *Le Bonheur*," *The Criterion Channel*, accessed June 7, 2022
[42] Holst-Knudsen [6] p. 522.
[43] Lee [17] pp. 93–94.
[44] Marder [7] p. 143.
[45] Quoted in Marder [7] p. 145.
[46] Marder [7] p. 146.
[47] Conway [18] p. 7.
[48] Quoted in Flitterman-Lewis [19] p. 303.
[49] Quoted in Flitterman-Lewis [19] p. 285.
[50] Marder [7] p. 131.
[51] Marder [7] p. 131.
[52] Marder [7] pp. 131–132.
[53] Marder [7] p. 132.
[54] Marder [7] p. 134.
[55] Marder [7] p. 135.
[56] Marder [7] p. 136.
[57] Marder [7] p. 136.
[58] Pease [21] p. x.
[59] Flitterman-Lewis [19] p. 301.
[60] Marder [7] p. 144.
[61] Irigaray [22] pp. 49–50.

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Article

Hélène Cixous, Laida Lertxundi, and the Fruits of the Feminine

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Abstract: In the fields of experimental writing and experimental filmmaking, respectively, Hélène Cixous and Laida Lertxundi gather images of fruits: apples, oranges and lemons. Although Cixous and Lertxundi are well-known for seeking something of the feminine for writing and filmmaking, in these texts and these films, fruit is not equivalent to feminine anatomy and the juiciness of neither apple, nor orange, nor lemon is mere metaphor for feminine jouissance. While Cixous and Lertxundi recognise in art, literature and philosophy an historical relation of women to nature, an essentialist equation of one to the other is loosened as the texts and the films situate apples, oranges and lemons as organic things in the world. Neither Cixous nor Lertxundi, then, eradicate the distance between human and non-human on the ground of the feminine: fruit is not entwined with women—but women do look, from time to time, at fruit. As if photosynthetically towards the sun, both Cixous and Lertxundi turn from the self towards the world, taken by the beauty and the light of fruit. In an addition to recent ecofeminist philosophy (Donna Haraway, Luce Irigaray) and also to recent feminist film-philosophy on attention (by way of Iris Murdoch, Simone Weil), I refer throughout the article to Kaja Silverman's philosophy of 'world spectatorship' (2000) as I outline the way Cixous and Lertxundi each post-deconstructively combine a language of desire—feminine appetite, curiosity and pleasure—with a language of things to affirm, with women's eyes on a simple piece of fruit, the world anew.

Keywords: eco-philosophy; feminist philosophy; film-philosophy; film spectatorship; experimental film; experimental writing; fruit; women filmmakers; women writers

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1. Introduction

This will be an account of women looking. It will linger with sight for some time. In the name of some corporeal feminine, women are often aligned with the other senses besides sight (and some align themselves). Feeling, hearing and tasting: if women look under the sign of an embodied feminine, then that glance is often attached—sensuously, synaesthetically—to the hand, the ear or the mouth. As important as this has been for a feminist approach to art, film and literature, I am not interested in a multisensorial mode of vision here. I am writing about women looking—with an emphasis on what we can see.

I am not mounting a manifesto for a female gaze to combat the male one of 1970s psychoanalytic theory. This will be an account of looking that is invested in feminist thought of what is sometimes known as 'the long 1970s' (that much is true), but little about sight as it is outlined here is essential to women. It is shared by women, but not exclusively. While I consider women who search specifically for other women in the following pages, they do so out of a sense of isolation, finding themselves in filmic and writerly histories where they struggle to see even a hint of other women for all the many men.

This will most of all be an account of women looking at the world, and doing so with art, film and literature—for the world need not come at the expense of the aesthetic. One of these woman is a contemporary of Luce Irigaray, and the others are readers of her, but none shares with late Irigaray the following sentiment: 'What nature offers us to experience is so beautiful, multiple, and speaking to all our senses that more often than not I prefer to spend a moment in it, instead of going to the cinema or an exhibition' [1] (p. 43). Hélène Cixous comes differently to the world, with eyes full of art (and painting in particular). No

either-or economy for her separates the two. Art can indeed be an inadequate imitation of the world—and writing, for her, an even poorer one—but mediation is not fundamentally an obstacle to nature. Rather, art, reading and writing can offer a pleasurable passage to it.

As it is for the filmmaker Laida Lertxundi and the theorist Kaja Silverman, the self is also involved in looking for Cixous: to look towards the world is not to martyr or to transcend the self. Similarly, a language of desire intermingles with a language of things: erotics, with an ethical imperative to attend to nature. Turning from introspection to respond to the wider world too, each of these three women does decentre the self (a result of deconstructive beginnings or borrowings in each instance) but she does not efface it. Writing from the 'I' in the case of Cixous, not opting for an objective language of long-distance shots and long-enduring takes in the case of Lertxundi: subjectivity and positionality is a part of an approach to the world for these women. Neither one undergoes, in the manner of Iris Murdoch, a process of 'unselfing' as she observes the things of the world—a process in which the 'brooding self is disappeared' and there 'is nothing now but kestrel' [2] (p.82). Were Cixous or Lertxundi to regard such a bird, the look would not exist in a vacuum: it is possible to look, and to look well, without negating or vanishing the self.

Were Cixous or Lertxundi to look at a bird, the chances are that they would, tirelessly, look at it again and again, each time from a different angle, with both woman and bird changed with each regard. If there is, to quote Jane Bennett, a 'vagabond' quality here, 'a propensity for continuous variation', then these mutations are not the agency of non-human materiality alone, and nor are they the activity of one human alone [3] (p. 50). After Silverman, I argue for our collective look at the world, in which one 'pair of eyes make good where some other pair fails': some find beauty where others' eyes were not able to see it, where others' words were not able to name it [4] (p. 26). Across repeated images of oranges in Cixous and of lemons in Lertxundi, one image-spectator or image-reader encounter is able to illuminate what is beautiful or 'good' in the fruit where another fails. This will be an account of women looking, then: with writing and filmmaking, again and again.

2. Thinking Women with Fruit

Fruit is visible across various instances of women's art, film and literature. In a short story by Claire-Louise Bennett—'Morning, Noon & Night' (2015)—her narrator looks to a windowsill where light might fall. Here, 'a bowl especially for fruit can be placed' [5] (p. 3). In the aesthete mind of this narrator, a bowl especially for fruit is full of writerly and painterly potential. Looking at fruit contains the seeds of a creative act. Put in the hands of another woman writer or filmmaker, however, fruit resonates more with feminine corporeality and sexuality than with the possibility for artistry in the everyday. Consider Lucile Hadžihalilović's eighteen-minute film *Nectar* (2014) as an example: a woman in a post-innocent garden smears half a lemon with honey, flirtatiously licks and sucks it, then passes it via a hole in a wall to a man who does the same. In *Nectar*, even the sharpest, sourest fruit is plentiful in erotic potential.

Whether fruit for women is erotic, painterly or writerly, thinking women with fruit can be disturbing and vexing—especially in a contemporary feminist context. When it comes to women and nature, accusations of determinism abound [6][1]. Some women, as we have seen and will continue to see, take fruit for the page or the screen nonetheless. In *Nectar*, a piece of fruit is suggestive of a vulva; the licking and sucking, of a sexual act. In 'Morning, Noon & Night', meanwhile, fruit is imagined next to a window and in relation to light. Between the two, the first approach to fruit was more common of women filmmakers in the mid-twentieth century. As women ruminated on fruit to embrace or to experiment with an historical resonance between fruit and the feminine, so the flesh of one often mirrored the other; juiciness paralleled jouissance [7][2]. Take, as an example, Agnès Varda's *L'Opéra-Mouffe* (1958). Framed across three shots to be headless, only swollen body, a pregnant woman is juxtaposed across a cut with a similarly spherical pumpkin. Through this formal arrangement, close-ups of pumpkin pulp and seeds come to rhyme with close-ups of the gravid stomach. In another short film by a woman, corporeality is

connected with fruit not by way of montage but by way of suggestion. In Karen Johnson's *Orange* (1970), the titular citrus fruit is fingered, peeled and segmented, bulging across a series of extreme close-up that are set, as if with a wink, to the soundtrack of a striptease. In Barbara Hammer's *Women I Love* (1976), meanwhile, the oscillating, pulsating zoom used in shots of an artichoke and of a cauliflower is identical to the oscillating, pulsating zoom used in shots of a woman's pubis—and citrus slices also come into the frame from time to time. As in *L'Opéra-Mouffe*, echoes in the formal composition of things in *Women I Love* invite comparison between those things: edible, organic matter on one hand and the female body on the other.

Hadžihalilović's honeyed lemon accords with the eroticism of Hammer and Johnson, who link or liken either fruit or vegetables to female genitalia, indifferent to charges of essentialism. By contrast, Bennett bypasses this entirely, and she is also uninterested in implications of fertility in either fruit or vegetables (dissimilarly to the Varda of *L'Opéra-Mouffe*). Neither curves to caress nor child-bearing hips are envisioned in the fruit bowl of 'Morning, Noon & Night'—only inspiration for painting and writing. Bennett's artful narrator states that 'it's no surprise at all that anyone would experience a sudden urge at any time during the day to sit down at once and attempt with a palette and brush to convey the exotic patina of such an irrepressible gathering' as the things collected in a fruit bowl on a 'nice cool windowsill' [5] (p.4). Often in a room without a nice cool windowsill during the lockdowns of 2020, I had something of the same urge while watching Chantal Akerman's *La chambre* (1972) online. As Babette Mangolte's pivoting camera pans across a circular table on which oranges or grapefruit are arranged alongside tableware and pastries, I pressed 'command', 'shift' and '3' on my keyboard to take a screenshot of the image, bathed beautifully in natural light falling through the window of the eponymous room. I looked at the image again and again.

What to make of a sudden urge of a woman to capture colours, shapes and textures of fruit as seen in the light of day, without going on to equate fruit with her own flesh and skin? What remains between fruit and the feminine then? Cixous and Lertxundi gather images of fruit over and again: apples, oranges and lemons. While Cixous and Lertxundi are well-known for seeking something of the feminine for writing and filmmaking, fruit in these texts and these films tends not to be equivalent to female anatomy, and the juiciness of fruit is not a mere shorthand for feminine jouissance. If Cixous and Lertxundi recognise an historical relation of women to nature in art, literature and philosophy—especially in images of apples—then an essentialist equation of one to the other is loosened, as the texts and the films situate apples, oranges and lemons first of all as things in the world. Cixous and Lertxundi do not eradicate the distance between the human and the non-human on the ground of some mystical feminine: fruit and women are not intrinsically entwined. Yet, women do look at fruit and with fruit.

Taken with the beauty and the light of fruit, both Cixous and Lertxundi turn not only from the female body but also from the feminine self towards the world. Crucially, as aforementioned, both turn towards the world via art, film and literature. For Cixous, reading the literature of Clarice Lispector is a path to 'reading' the world, and doing so with fruit. 'Read Clarice as she reads the world to us,' Cixous instructs us. 'Clarice' reads the world by 'the light of the fruit' [8]. For Cixous, reading for colour, fruit and light allows us to approach difficult or oblique experimental writing, such as that of Lispector, and also allows writers to illuminate the world to us, even if in the slightest of fragments or in the darkest of rooms. Something as simple as an apple in a bowl or an orange on a table is able to flood the mind of the reader with red, with orange—thus vivifying the world of the book and bringing book closer to world.

After Cixous, I suggest that reading for colour, fruit and light also allows us to approach difficult or oblique experimental filmmaking, such as that of Lertxundi. I hope not to make too much here of a passing comment in a recent festival report—but there is something exciting about an experienced film critic confessing he does not 'feel very much like a "film critic" while watching and writing about Lertxundi's films', continually finding

himself reading 'for meaningful things to say' [9]. If the old words and ways are ineffectual, then let us find new ones. Cixous is not often called upon to approach film (and nor indeed is fruit). Affinities that circle around femininity and fruit, however, open up a space to read her writing in conversation with Lertxundi's films. Cixous and Lertxundi remake the relation between fruit and the feminine. For the most part, the relation of women to fruit is one in which women are no more and no less than creatively appreciative of fruit—and fruit belongs, in the beginning, not mythically to women, but instead to the world.

3. Allowing Us This and That Apple

Some of the oldest stories of beginnings bind feminine figures to fruit. Against interdictions on eating in the Garden of Eden and in the underworld, Eve bites an apple and Persephone consumes arils from a pomegranate. Cixous is taken with both of these feminine figures, these disobedient daughters flying in the face of the law with the act of eating—but not necessarily with the next part of each story, traditionally told. For Cixous, feminine appetite and curiosity, symbolised by fruit, need not lead to the fall of humanity or to absence, missing and mourning (had Persephone not eaten in the underworld, she would not be forever sentenced to spend part of every year there, taking the fructuous springtime with her when she does) [10][3]. Cixous is interested in the innocence from which feminine appetite and curiosity arises, rather than the fateful knowledge to which it apparently leads. After her encounter in the mid- to late 1970s with the literature of Lispector, in particular, she is interested in regaining an antediluvian innocence for writing. 'How does the poet become self-strange to the point of the absolute innocence?" she asks [11] [4]. This is not to cast the point after having eaten forbidden fruit in shame—caught in a state of regret, wishing to reverse time and the rebellious act—but to assert that some sort of innocence is still possible in the wake of eating an apple or pomegranate arils.

Lertxundi is just as sanguine about apples as Cixous is. In *The Room Called Heaven* (2012), a naked woman walks into the frame to lie in repose on the wooden floor of a living room. In the foreground, there is a rug as well as a mussed sheet, but she dismisses these minor comforts to recline instead in an oblong of warm sunlight on the wooden floor. In a matter-of-fact shot that is uninterrupted by, say, a seductive close-up to imply sinful eating, she holds out an apple before her and goes on to bite it, to chew it, to contemplate it some more, to take another bite and another—all of this, not unlike Akerman in *La chambre*, toying with an apple while lying in bed. After eating an apple in Akerman's and Lertxundi's films, there is no fall. In *The Room Called Heaven*, an ascent in fact follows the scene: skies superimposed onto an image of slatted doors that open and close, open and close. Akerman's Eve and Lertxundi's Eve go unpunished.

Although the appeal of Eve and Persephone to Cixous has been discussed in critical discourse on the writer, the importance of the apple to Cixous beyond the Book of Genesis is little considered. Turning to the apple in painting, Cixous recalls Eve and Persephone as she forgoes abstinence for the pleasure of eating. For all that she admires in Paul Cézanne, for instance, she feels differently about apples to him and other painters.

> In what way do I feel differently to these painters I love? In my way of loving an interior apple as much as an exterior apple. [. . .] Myself, I would have eaten it. In this way, I am different from those I would like to resemble. [. . .] In my need to share with you the food [. . .] the words, the painted food and also the not-painted food. [12] (p. 130)

'Myself, I would have eaten it.' Cixous likes pleasure by way of the tongue as well as pleasure by way of the eye: one does not substitute the other. She wants an apple, an actual apple to taste and to share, the food, not-painted, 'and also' an image of an apple, painted or in words. She expresses a similar desire in the same essay for an experience of the sea that is simultaneously unmediated and mediated. 'I would like to be in the sea and render it in words,' she writes—before deeming it 'impossible' [12] (p. 105). All she can do, she concludes, is tell us of the desire.

Cixous is not naïve, then: she suspects, I think, that she cannot have an apple and eat it too. Yet, she wants more than 'an exterior apple'. She likes, in this regard, the apple as she sees it in the literature of Lispector. Referring to her debut novel *The Apple in the Dark* (1956), Cixous writes that Lispector 'calls the apple with such intelligence' that 'everything the apple signifies, contains for us', is there at the same time as there is 'in the apple the promised sustenance'. Cixous concludes, 'And so there is *this* apple' [13] (p. 67). Altering the definite article to a deictic and emphatic '*this*', she shifts from an assumption of common knowledge ('everything', 'for us') to an identification of an object that is specific, at hand. Lispector for Cixous enfleshes 'the apple' as symbol by pointing to '*this* apple' 'in' which there is nourishment. Cixous and Lertxundi similarly realise oranges and lemons as objects that 'contain', intimately, as well as 'signify' on the surface.

When we think of the apple, we might think of forbidden fruit—better left uneaten or untouched. For Cixous, this is no fun, not to mention unrealistic. In place of archaic prohibition or drastic damnation, she wants to permit us this apple, an apple in the world, and that apple, the one of art's eye. When we think of apples after Cixous, we might think about eating them and also painting them. As I progress later to consider Cixous' oranges and Lertxundi's lemons, looking at fruit supersedes eating it. I underline a taste for fruit here not only to reframe fruit, contrary to myth, as accessible and vital, but also as a reminder that neither Cixous nor Lertxundi is ascetic in looking: looking is not a form of absolute distance and reserve. Although not sexual or visceral, looking remains connected, for both writer and filmmaker, to other kinds of feminine jouissance: at once an artful form of jouissance and that of being in the world, enjoying the gift of fruit.

4. Approaching World Spectatorship

Lertxundi's image of opening and closing doors is an apt one for exploring Cixous' and Silverman's turns towards a post-deconstructive perspective in which opening and closing, presence and absence, coexist. Cixous in an anglophone sphere and Silverman in the field of film studies are most well-known as deconstructive writers of the feminine who move away from vision, for its implications of masculinity and mastery, and towards the body that is traditionally overlooked or dismissed. Cixous is famous, for instance, for her call for women to write the body and make it heard in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975) [14] (p. 880). Silverman is best known as the feminist theorist of *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988). Yet, both women return from bodies, sounds and voices to vision after these texts. Cixous does so sooner, after her encounter with Lispector in the mid- to late 1970s; Silverman, in *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996) and *World Spectators* (2000). Where both deconstructive writers were influenced by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis in the first instance, their turns to vision take them towards philosophy too (towards that of Martin Heidegger, for example). Ultimately, Cixous and Silverman arrive at a position of world spectatorship without forgetting the absences and withdrawals, the darkness and deferrals written throughout deconstruction—to use the image from *The Room Called Heaven* again, the doors onto the world close as well as open. Cixous and Silverman nonetheless put a new emphasis on light and presence so as to attend to the world.

Across *The Threshold of the Visible World* and *World Spectators*, Silverman tries to wrest vision from influential theories of a narcissistic gaze in order to explore an alternative erotics and ethics of looking: perhaps it is possible, she suggests, to look with love and with care. Silverman moves on from ego, gaze and mirror reflections to cast light instead on forms of looking that are affirmative, collective and productive. In *World Spectators*, she focuses after Heidegger on appearance as 'a coming forward into view or becoming visible' and 'a stepping forth' [4] (p. 3). Referring to the image of the clearing in Heidegger, she speaks of 'the open space' within which things can emerge [4] (p.30). Silverman also states that it is we who 'bring things into the light by looking' and we who 'conceal them when we fail to look' [4] (p. 7). While Silverman, curiously, does not address film in *World*

Spectators, I am interested in an emphasis on looking from a woman once closely associated with feminist film theory.

Cixous writes similarly in 'Clarice Lispector: The Approach' (1979) of an 'invisible aura [that] forms around beings who are looked at well' [13] (p. 66). Clarice—as Cixous sometimes calls Lispector, presumably for the resonance of that name with clarity and luminosity—teaches Cixous how to see what is plain to see and what calls out to be seen. 'Clarice gives us to see,' she states in a seminar on Lispector from the early 1980s [15] (p. 97). 'Clarice looks,' she elucidates in 'The Approach', 'and the world comes into presence' [13] (p. 61). Lispector, to recall Silverman, brings things into the light by looking. In 'The Approach', Cixous offers as an example a bouquet of flowers that is given to a character in one of Lispector's short stories, 'The Imitation of the Rose' (1960). When not given and therefore unseen, these flowers would be 'blurred, almost not flowers in [the] field of unvision'. Yet, because given and seen, these flowers—'all wet with looking'—'rose up looked-at' and 'shone' so lustrously as to facilitate 'reading by the light of flowers' (a sentiment recalled by Cixous when she writes of reading by the light of fruit) [13] (p. 72). For Cixous and Silverman, taking time to look, and to look well, is vital: the world is concealed, blurred, almost not world without us.

Appearance for Silverman is dependent on a meeting of absence, connected to a language of desire, and presence, connected to a language of things. When Cixous tells us of an impossible longing to be in the sea and to render it in words, she reaches towards a language of things while using a language of desire, attempting to make 'the rose-colored beach and the pearly ocean' present to the reader through description while underlining that these words are in fact 'colorless' and barely 'sonorous' [12] (p. 105). She echoes a meditation on adjectives and description from *The Book of Promethea* (1983) here, in which her anxious narrator worries that 'calling a white egg white risks causing the egg to seem to disappear along with the one calling it white and the whole visible world' [16] (p. 183). For Silverman, the risk of such disappearance is circumvented 'when the perceiving subject is 'open' to the perceptual object':

> To be 'open' in this way means to renounce all claim to be the master of one's own language of desire. It means, indeed, to surrender one's signifying repository in the world, to become the space within which the world itself speaks. To abdicate enunciatory control in this way is, however, not to lose, but to find one's language of desire. [4] (p. 145)

Silverman affirms the importance of vision, but it is not allied to a stance of transcendence. For her, world spectatorship is in part a process of abdicating, renouncing or surrendering sovereignty and accepting, without mastering, an absence in the self. Cixous' inclusion of moments of doubt as she reaches towards the world from writing in effect creates an open space—one which is not always already known—within which things can emerge.

According to Silverman, nature addresses us formally—in colours and movements, in patterns and shapes—and asks from us 'that very particular passion of the signifier' [4] (p. 144). Nature seeks from us naming and calling, our words and our images: world spectatorship is not just looking at the world, but responding to it in language. Silverman argues that 'the human imperative is to engage in ceaseless signification': it is in the end 'this never-ending symbolization that the world wants from us'. And the world wants it from us, plural. Silverman asserts that it is only 'as a collectivity [that we can] be equal to the demand not only to find beauty in all the world's forms, but to sing forever and in a constantly new way the jubilant song of that beauty' [4] (p. 146). As I come across the last sections to discuss oranges in Cixous' writing and lemons in Lertxundi's films, I enumerate various forms of orange and various forms of lemon. Both appreciating fruit as it exists in the world—in a bowl on a table, on a branch in a tree—and also responding to it with aesthetic experimentation, Cixous and Lertxundi engage in something like the ceaseless signification and never-ending symbolisation of Silverman's world spectator. As Cixous and Lertxundi long for something in common with other women in writing and

filmmaking, furthermore, I take these repetitions of oranges and lemons as amounting to invitations to a collective look, equal to the demand to find beauty in these forms of the world.

5. The Gift of Sight: Hélène Cixous' Oranges

'Sometimes the repeated word becomes the dry orange-skin of itself,' writes Lispector, 'and no longer glows with even a sound'[12][5] (p. 127). Cixous reads this and rallies nonetheless for 'the right to repeat the word until it becomes dry orange-skin, or until it becomes fragrance' [12] (p. 128). If the repeated word for Lispector sometimes 'becomes a hollow and redundant thing', then Cixous sees repetition differently. In an essay after her encounter with Lispector, and very much in the mode of a world spectator, Cixous writes the word 'orange' repeatedly as she recounts a sudden ability to see other women and the world beyond writing. Any resonance of fruit with something of the feminine unravels from a connection or a comparison of an orange with genitalia (as occurs in the films *Orange* and *Women I Love*). As we will see, Cixous reframes oranges as aesthetic material and also resituates oranges as things that exist in the light of the world: oranges are painted and also not-painted. While we are able to write with the first kind of orange, women share with the second kind a state of being in the world.

As Verena Andermatt Conley ascertains, an earlier image of the orange in Cixous' *Portrait du soleil* (1974) stands as 'a simulacrum of the sun, god, father and capital' [10] (p. 104). Later, however, the orange is less heliocentric and phallocentric for Cixous. After Lispector, it is instead consonant with a more diffuse, diverse light, with the gift of sight and women. In a bilingual essay entitled 'To Live the Orange/Vivre l'orange' (1979), Cixous reflects on writing B.C., before Clarice. She laments,

> [. . .] my writing was grieving for being so lonely, sending sadder and sadder unaddressed letters: "*I've wandered ten years in the desert of books—without encountering an answer*", its letters shorter and shorter "*but where are the amies?*" more and more forbidden "*where the poetry*", "*the truth*", almost unreadable, messages of fear with no subject "*doubt, cold; blindness?*". [11] (p. 84)

Cixous narrates an impoverished version of écriture féminine: for some time, writing the feminine was writing in doubtful, cold and blind solitude, with other women nowhere to be seen. (Note that Marguerite Duras and Colette, the two lonely examples of women who practice écriture féminine according to Cixous in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', are mentioned only in a footnote to the text and only briefly [14] (p. 879). Cixous asks herself and her writing, '*What have you in common with women? When your hand no longer even knows anymore how to find a near and patient and realizable orange, at rest in the bowl?*' [11] (p. 10) From here, Cixous continues to parallel that near but unseen orange with women.

Starting from a single orange, 'a given orange', Cixous offers her reader 'an open, bottomless species of orange' in the ceaseless, never-ending mode of a world spectator [11] (p. 16 & 18). Forms of orange include variations of fruit such as 'a blood orange' Elsewhere, orange becomes colour and light: 'an orange beam' [11] (p. 88). Cixous adds *ange*, the French for 'angel', to the end of 'Lispector' to grow an orange from her name: the seraphic arrival of the woman writer is signalled in *Lispectorange* [11] (p. 113). Although a near and patient and realisable orange is in the end found, furthermore, the orange is a gift rather than a given. Access occurs but is not guaranteed: it might come and go. In an instance of unusual reserve, Cixous writes, 'I leave the orange to herself, in her climate' [11] (p. 22). Here, the orange observes Persephone's seasons: it is not forever ripe for taking, and absence is balanced with presence. I have listed only a handful of permutations here, yet over the course of 'To Live the Orange', the word 'orange' becomes an incantation of sorts, a word with which to call out to other women and the world from the desiring space of writing.

After wandering for a decade in a desert of books, Cixous writes of Lispector: 'She put the orange back into the deserted hands of my writing, and with her orange-colored accents she rubbed the eyes of my writing which were arid and covered with white films' [11]

(p. 14). Where the desolate eyes of Cixous' writing are covered with white films in the English translation, 'une taie de papier' covers them in the French—*une taie* is either a leucoma, an opaque spot in the cornea of the eye, or a pillowcase. Lertxundi's *Footnotes to a House of Love* (2007) opens as if covered with white films, on a white screen. Soon it becomes clear that the white screen is a white sheet—proximate to *une taie*, a pillowcase—and one that is held at the edges by two pairs of hands in a dry, dusty Southern Californian desert. It creases and folds. It is then suffused with some orange-coloured accents, in effect rubbing the eyes of the film that was arid and white (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Footnotes to a House of Love* (2007).

Cixous rejoices at Lispector's orange-coloured accents, re-juicing her arid eyes. Lertxundi seems similarly allergic to desiccation in her work:

> Here's the making of something—that's very dry, right? But I'm also interested in pleasure. [. . .] Talking about process is a kind of deconstruction, and pleasure constructs, makes new worlds. I am interested in feminine jouissance. [17]

Following the orange-coloured accents of *Footnotes to a House of Love*, we glimpse little else of the orange native to Southern California. In an interview, Lertxundi acknowledges that there is an 'idea of utopia' ascribed to the landscape, as 'a place with oranges growing everywhere' [18] (p. 39). Her new worlds are filled, however, with another citrus fruit. Her films live more in the light of the bittersweet sister of the orange: the lemon. As Cixous' discoveries of other women are accompanied by oranges, so Lertxundi's discoveries are accompanied by lemons.

6. Lemons According to Laida Lertxundi

Handfuls of bananas, here and there. One bunch has been placed in the foreground of a mountain in *Footnotes to a House of Love*. Another, in *Utskor* (2013), is placed on a nice cool windowsill in Northern Norway, beside three lemons on a table[6]. Someone in *Utskor* removes the bananas from the frame, but the lemons remain. Of all fruits, yellow or otherwise, Lertxundi's filmography is replete with so many lemons. After *Utskor*, there is for instance a lemon in a tree—left to itself—in *025 Sunset Red* (2016) and there is more than one lemon in the hands of *Words, Planets* (2018). Yet, to speak of lemons in Lertxundi's films is not only to speak of lemons with peel, pith and pips, with citric juice that drips, but also to speak to the colour of lemon and the light of lemon. Lertxundi gives us '*this*' lemon, an actual lemon, as well as variations on that lemon. Sometimes pale, other times vibrant, lemon is visible in other flowering and fruitful forms, in material worn and torn, and in the lettering of titles, subtitles and intertitles. What to make of so much lemon? Lertxundi's husband, who often appears in her films, has suggested that there is 'a sort of riddle with the lemons' [17]. When I had an occasion to ask whether the lemons scattered across her films bore a meaning or a metaphor, however, she smiled, 'No, the lemons are not symbolic'. If we are to take her at her word (not believing her to be a sphinx), then we will not take the lemons as signs. Although the lemons are not signs, Lertxundi engages in ceaseless signification with lemons. In other words, the lemons are not representative of something else—a lemon for a vulva, as in *Nectar*—but lemons are a part of this artist's palette. Lertxundi films with lemons. Adopting and adapting Cixous' advice to read Lispector as she reads the world to us, by the light of fruit, we might read Lertxundi as she reads the world to us: by the light of lemons.

In an interview from 2012, Lertxundi makes explicit mention of Cixous while discussing previous participation in a reading group focused on writing the feminine. 'I reread and found texts that spoke to me,' she says, going on to list Cixous, Irigaray and Julia Kristeva as writers who 'propose the idea of creating a feminine form through writing'. With reference to these three women, Lertxundi says she is 'interested in [the] possibility of a feminine space' for film [18] (p. 40). Then, in an essay from 2019 entitled 'Form and Feeling', Lertxundi wonders whether feminine formalism in film is possible without the influence or the knowledge of other women filmmakers who might be aligned with such a practice. Lertxundi asks herself whether she momentarily assumes a masculine subjectivity when her camera approaches a hand as she thinks of minimalism in the manner of Robert Bresson or when her camera approaches a space and she thinks of structuralism in the style of Michael Snow [19] (p. 2). Reading Carolee Schneemann's 'Interior Scroll' text from the mid-1970s, which voices a riposte to structuralist filmmaking from a feminist standpoint, Lertxundi is concerned that 'structuralism and a feminist praxis seem irreconcilable' [19] (p. 3). I do not intend here to resolve an ostensible paradox of feminine or feminist structuralism; all of this is rather to underline that Lertxundi shares with Cixous a wish to correspond with other women while attempting to create a feminine space for film.

While we are in the realm of film structuralism, however, we might attend to a work with special relevance for speaking about lemons. Hollis Frampton's *Lemon* (1969) is sometimes shown together with Lertxundi's work [20]. In the film, the eponymous citrus fruit is plucked from the earth and set against a black background, illuminated by an orbiting light. With its thick, cratered skin, it seems—even though it is static and the substitute sun here is mobile—as if it traverses a lunar cycle: new, crescent, gibbous, full. 'When life gives you lemons, make lemonade,' goes the proverbial phrase. Frampton's film more or less alters the phrase to be: 'When life gives you lemons, make a celestial body.' Lertxundi's lemons are not, by contrast, transformed into satellites. One essay on Lertxundi's work uses Eileen Myles' poem 'Movie' (2007) as an epigraph; in it, we read, 'you're like/a moon I want/to hold/I said lemon' [21][7] (p. 8). In accordance with Myles' 'Movie', Lertxundi wants to hold the lemon that, in Frampton's film, is transformed into distant moon. She wants an actual lemon as much as an aestheticised one. She wants *this* lemon. In line with Cixous' desire for the painted and the not-painted fruit, Lertxundi adds the living world to artful abstraction and allusion.

Before we come to lemons both living and artful, it is worth noting that red is prominent in Lertxundi's films as the colour of the self. *025 Sunset Red* is, she says, 'an abstract autobiography' [22]. Should we seek to link Lertxundi to a community of other women, then connecting red to autobiography is reminiscent of Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (1998) and Maggie Nelson's *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial* (2007). Carson's red is volcanic, Nelson's red is violent—and Lertxundi's red is different still. Starting with the title: 025 Sunset Red is the name of the filter used intermittently in the film. It is also a nod to Lertxundi's 'red' communist upbringing. In an image of a hand pouring blood from a jam-jar onto a white page, red is also fruitful and menstrual (Figure 2).

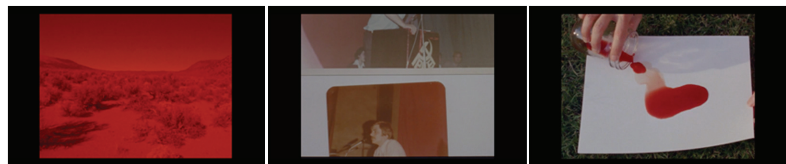

Figure 2. *025 Sunset Red* (2016).

Yet, Lertxundi's abstract autobiography indicates, in a spectrographic graph measuring electromagnetic radiation at the start of the film, an importance to yellow too. (Figure 3.) From 300 to 380 nanometres, wavelengths are invisible, ultraviolet. From 380 to 450 nanometres, wavelengths are visible as violet. From 450 to 500, blue. From 500 to 565, green.

From 565 to 590, yellow; 590 to 625, orange; 625 to 740, red. From 740 to 800 nanometres, wavelengths are again invisible, albeit felt as infrared. Where wavelengths are visible as yellow, the line on the chart leaps from a transmission rate of approximately 10 to one of approximately 60, then continues to oscillate at a transmission rate of 60 to 90 through a sunset spectrum of orange, red and infrared. If we take red to be the colour of introspection and yellow to be the colour that illuminates the world, both transmit at a high rate here. In the mode of a world spectator, Lertxundi does not efface the self as she looks at the things of the world.

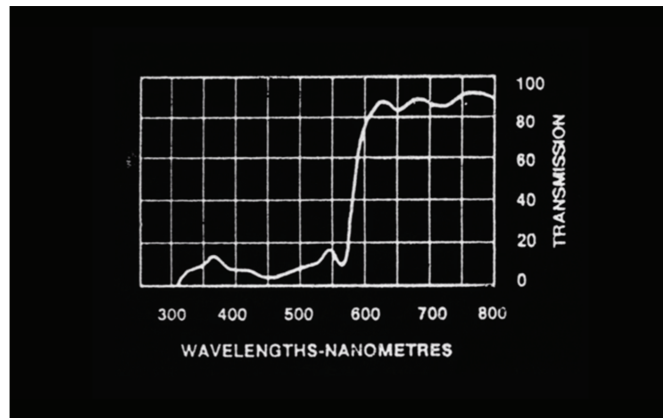

Figure 3. *025 Sunset Red* (2016).

Nor does she erase the body. From *Footnotes to a House of Love* to *The Room Called Heaven* to *025 Sunset Red*, people often rest naked and horizontal in Lertxundi's films. When there is a mountain in the frame, it is not to be conquered: in the mode of a world spectator, people surrender sovereignty in relation to the landscape. This is not however to lose a language of desire. In *025 Sunset Red*, Lertxundi kisses her husband in an image saturated in amorous red. Though Lertxundi also lies naked and prone on the floor of a warehouse in the film, she is nowhere near as explicit as Hammer in her films. Unlike Hadžihalilović and Hammer, Lertxundi never mixes fruit into these lightly corporeal, gently erotic images When Lertxundi starts from *Words, Planets* onwards to address motherhood, she does not give a gourd as a visual simile for pregnancy as did Varda. In *The Room Called Heaven*, a hand holds a lemon in the foreground of the image, obscuring the face of a woman in the background, as if to ask, 'What if a woman were a lemon?' Yet, the gesture is so blunt as to be comical, and so far from the realm of the sexual, that the image is set apart from the feminine fruits of Hadžihalilović, Hammer, Johnson and Varda. In Lertxundi's films, the feminine imaginary is not hungry for fruit as a way to represent bodies [23][8]. Lemons coexist with bodies under the Southern Californian sun, then, but do not blend with bodies by way of montage or any other method of suggestion.

If lemons do not become a metaphor or a synecdoche for women (do not become, that is, a stand-in for them or a part of them), then women are nonetheless surrounded by colours, fruits, and the light of lemons in Lertxundi's films. Connected yet distinct, lemons and women coexist. In *My Tears Are Dry* (2009), a woman's arm rests on a pillowcase that is the colour of etiolated lemon. In *The Room Called Heaven*, a woman wears a raincoat—and the colour is lemon (Figure 4). Some of the lemon colours across Lertxundi's films are no more than minor details or coincidences; other interventions of lemon, however, are more deliberate, with commonalities that are difficult to ignore. On the wooden floor of *The Room Called Heaven*, a sheet of lemony paper is unfurled, complementing lemon-coloured accents in the rug that remains half-visible beneath it (Figure 5). In *Live to Live* (2015), a similar sheet of lemony paper is torn to unveil prickly plants behind it (Figure 6). In *Words,*

Planets, we will see a series of similar cacti—some with lemon-coloured flowers. After the spectrographic graph in *025 Sunset Red* suggests there is an increase, an importance to yellow, lemons proliferate across *Words, Planets* and crop up again in *Autofiction* (2020). Where red was the colour of autobiography in *025 Sunset Red*, it subsides in *Words, Planets* to make space for lemon, the colour that draws Lertxundi further towards other women and the world.

Figure 4. *My Tears Are Dry* (2009) and *The Room Called Heaven* (2012).

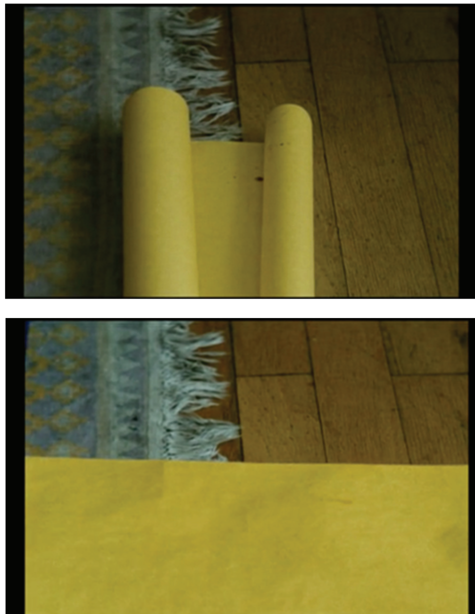

Figure 5. *The Room Called Heaven* (2012).

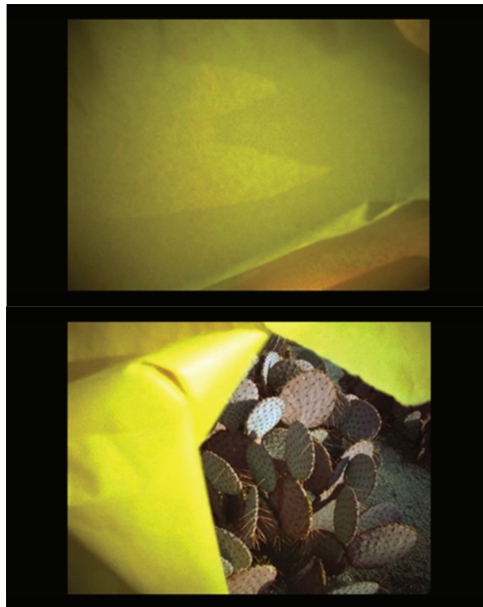

Figure 6. *Live to Live* (2015).

Against a landscape with a canopy of clouds and a faint rainbow, a hand in the foreground of the frame holds something that looks like little lemons stuffed inside a larger one. In the same setting later on, a hand holds something that looks like a lemon wishing it were instead a banana (Figure 7). If lemons figure as things seen in the world, then lemon is repeatedly used as a way in which to talk about the world too. Lertxundi sees lemons and responds in lemons: in, for instance, lemon-coloured subtitles. Writing and reading, a woman wears a lemon-coloured shirt. Wearing the same shirt later on, she squeezes two lemons or objects resembling lemons (Figure 8). One is real, the other is fake: the real one bursts and the fake one remains intact. Between lemons fake, real and rare (the banana-like lemon and the involuted-looking lemon are examples of an unusual citrus fruit called a Buddha's hand), Lertxundi collects images of lemons in such a way that spectators may find beauty in many of the world's lemony forms. In a post-deconstructive meeting of absence and presence, some of these lemon-filled scenes that see lemons in the light of the world later withdraw from that light. Projected into a darkened room, a frame nested in a frame, these scenes from before become lemons in the dark, lemons of their own reflexive light (Figure 9). As much as lemons are pleasurably of the world, lemons are deconstructively of an abstracted cinematic space too: again, the world need not come at the expense of the aesthetic.

At no point is any lemon a sour-sweet symbol for the body, incorporated into it; we might wear or luminously be layered, immersed in lemon, but no methods of montage or suggestion take the flesh of one for the other. If lemon is the colour of jouissance, then that jouissance is consonant with artistic experiment (subtitles, sheets of paper, projections) or otherwise with living among the things of the world (cacti, flowers, lemons).

Figure 7. *Words, Planets* (2018).

Figure 8. *Words, Planets* (2018).

Figure 9. *Words, Planets* (2018).

Inspired by Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy (2014–2018), *Autofiction* is a conscious turn towards correspondence with other women. In a studio with rolls of coloured paper stood against the walls, women share stories related to their gender in a small group. One of these rolls is later held in front of the lens of the camera: a hole is cut into the sheet to frame the mouth of a woman, the ear of a woman, the eye of a woman. Looking, listening and speaking is therefore mediated by this sheet—and its colour, of course, is lemon (Figure 10). Where a lemon sheet previously underlined the domestic world and revealed the natural world in *The Room Called Heaven* and *Live to Live*, a lemon sheet focuses attention on women's stories in *Autofiction*, just as orange is attendant to Cixous' renewed attention towards women writers in 'To Live the Orange'.

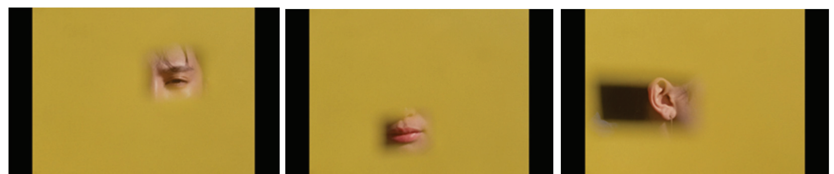

Figure 10. *Autofiction* (2020).

Anne Carson writes that a quotation is 'a cut, a section, a slice of someone else's orange': 'suck the slice, toss the rind, skate away' [24] (p. 75). Taking fruit as a crude image for the female body time and again, without much difference between one image and another, might desiccate and do away with fruit similarly. Cixous and Lertxundi take a cut of the world's oranges and lemons, and linger with whatever dry orange-skin or lemon-skin that remains. Cixous repeats the word 'orange' and tries to rehydrate it, to revivify it, in the way of a world spectator: not taking to ice to skate away, she keeps the world's oranges wet with looking. Lertxundi also shows us lemons as fruit belonging to the world and, like Cixous, recreates lemons in other colourful and luminous forms. In *Autofiction*, she uses these forms—grown over almost a decade, from a pillowcase the colour of pale lemon—to create a new world that highlights a correspondence between women. Just as the colour and the light, the fruit and the writing of orange accompanied Cixous' wandering out of a desert of books in which she saw no women, so lemon in these multifarious forms accompanies Lertxundi's search for kindred women filmmakers. Rather than using associative montage or suggestion to link women, fruit and art, Lertxundi's films function as containers in which she gathers things, things that together create a new world.

Cixous tells us Lispector looks by the light of fruit. 'Hers, apple. Mine, orange.' Cixous continues to ask, 'And yours? Which colour?' [8]. Lertxundi's, lemon. This is, for her, the

colour of the aura that surrounds beings who are looked at well. Between fruit and the feminine, the gift of this look is what now remains.

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Notes

1. Accusations tend to come after so-called 'second wave' feminism in particular. For further discussion of these issues in relation to experimental film and feminism of the 1970s, see [6].
2. Anne Boyer still agitates for 'a healthy combination of jouissance and juiciness' as part of 'A Provisional Avant-Garde' [2009] in *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018).
3. For a more detailed discussion of Cixous' readings of Eve and Persephone, see the chapter 'Accord Koré to Cordelia' in [10].
4. Hélène Cixous, 'To Live the Orange/Vivre l'orange' [1979] in *L'Heure de Clarice Lispector* (Paris: des femmes, 1989), 38. Note that the text is bilingual, with the English translation printed on the left-hand pages, even-numbered, and the French printed on the right-hand pages, odd numbered, in both the 1979 and the 1989 edition.
5. Clarice Lispector quoted in Cixous, 'The Last Painting', 127.
6. Until *Inner/Outer Space* (2021), which is filmed in the Basque Country, *Utskor* was the only work Lertxundi had filmed outside of Southern California.
7. Eileen Myles quoted in Alejandro Alfonso Diaz, 'a spiral feeling, a dry landscape' in Laida Lertxundi: Landscape Plus (Milan and Santander: Mousse, 2019), 8.
8. Writing of landscape filmmaking, P. Adams Sitney notes the 'devouring subjectivity' of Stan Brakhage, whose 'near-solipsism' eclipses or towers over the natural world—there is something of this danger, I think, in women taking fruit as metaphors for the female body. See [23].

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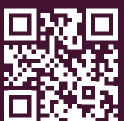

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