

*Filming through the Milieu.
Becoming Extinct and the Anthropocene*

The concept of the Anthropocene has been widely discussed from different perspectives beyond the scope of geology. Feminism and postcolonial theory have critiqued it as a new master narration and specifically the notion of the human as a problematic signifier of a very limited group of people having enduring impact on the planet's atmosphere as well as on geology. In opposition to the concept of the Anthropocene, Donna Haraway has proposed the "Chtulhucene" (2015; 2016) as an age centered on relations instead of re-affirming the (destructive) agency of the human by making it a geological force. Jason Moore (2016) in his notion of "Capitalocene" has, in turn, advanced the Anthropocene as a capitalistic endeavor which is closely connected to the industrial exploitation of the earth's and human resources. In this regard, extractivism can be seen as a principle of taking different resources from the earth and humans like minerals and labor as well as from data in data mining (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017).

The proliferation of many—*cenes* thus demonstrates the controversial nature of conceptualizing climate catastrophe as challenging already existing concepts of human-earth relations. For heuristic reasons, I will keep the notion of the Anthropocene here since it combines different and heterogeneous approaches following the originally geological paper of Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (2000). To this already complex and heterogeneous debate, I want to add an argument on the psycho-cultural processes of negotiating relations to "the" earth from the angle of film studies.

The Anthropocene has become a highly mediated assemblage of discourses and phenomena regulating relations between humans and the earth as a central focus point for subjectivities in transformation. Despite its controversial character, the Anthropocene as a (visual) discourse as addressed by the editors of this volume has a fundamental and ongoing impact on practices of representation and therefore forces us to rethink social, ecological as well as aesthetic practices. One of the major issues among different societies today is confronting the threatened state of the earth and its relation to the "position" of the human. This renewal of positioning as cultural technique of situating and place making has aesthetic as well as psycho-cultural implications and places images, films, narrations and cultural productions in general in the position of negotiating the role of human agency and human-earth relations.

Far from all imagery dealing with the Anthropocene contains critical elements, much imagery even bears a catastrophic or elegiac tone (see e.g. on disaster trauma films Ann Kaplan 2017; 2016), destabilizing sovereign positions or sometimes revitalizing totalitarian phantasies. Besides, much older forms of communicating with the earth exist among different societal groups, different cultures, religions and cosmologies beyond the (visual) discourse of the Anthropocene. This calls for a discussion about the relation of humans to the earth as aesthetic and psycho-cultural force.

The older notion of World Image (*Weltbild* in German¹) refers to the earth as image—fundamentally re-conceptualized by "Blue Marble" (1972) as a first account of the "whole earth" (Diederichsen/Franke 2013) from above. Very different to the imag(in)ing the earth as a whole being, I analyze how film deals with the Anthropocene by inventing and taking up older forms of an aesthetic

of what Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 21) term “the middle.” In this paper, I address this from the perspective of documentary art film in the lineage of ethnographic filmmaking which by now has produced images of humans and their milieu for over 100 years. Since documentary film works with material from the very world we live in, it is poised as an instrument to experiment with the relation *towards* the world. In this paper I will consider how film’s existential function can be understood in relation to inventing and facilitating ecological subjectivities by drawing on three films by filmmaker Elke Marhöfer.

Film and the Anthropocene

Today, humans once more need to develop new subject positions for an age of the Anthropocene. This process is by no means a linear development that follows one direction around the planet. There are still violent resistances and deep resentments not only expressed by the followers of fake news and climate deniers. In this light, the films I want to focus on here do not represent a general change in film industry, let alone industrial societies in general but offer a glimpse of the potential of experimental film. They are influenced by what can be termed a “shared anthropology” (Rouch 2003, 44), in line with anthropological filmmaker Rouch, on the one side and sensory ethnography, on the other. Both tendencies put forward an experimental film research on ecological thinking, what I choose to define as “filming through the milieu” following Alanna Thain (2015) reading of *Leviathan* (2012). By its very materiality, documentary ethnographic film can invent new positions triggering the production of new subjectivities, however situational and temporary a viewing experience might be (Guattari 2011). Félix Guattari (1995) believes in the potential of film to create and facilitate subjectivities. By creating affects and percepts, film, for him, produces not identifications but subject positions. Describing the production of subjectivities he proposes to combine mental, ecological and psychosocial realms assembled. An ecological subjectivity refers to a transversal thinking of these realms of the natural, the psychic and the social. In difference to Jean-Louis Baudry’s (among others) dispositive theory in film studies, subjectivities are temporary and not structured only along the unconscious laws of language in the dispositive of the cinematic apparatus. Although Guattari ([1975] 2011, 15) takes language into account, he focuses on affects and percepts in the reception of films. Guattari (2015) in his later work turned to the regulating function of the exchange between the milieu and subjectivities. Subjectivities, for him, are already contained in the milieu; they operate as potentialities of new self-relations and new ways of perceiving the self and the milieu. The perceptions of being *of* the world and not *in* the world as well of activity and passivity at the very same time are a crucial strategy to relate anew to “the” world. Subjectivity seen through Guattari’s eyes is not an inherent property of a human but a self-relation of milieus running across humans (and others).

By perceiving the world as an ever-ongoing change and in transition, film not only becomes a “better” representation of the Anthropocene, but rather than serving as a general device to display information, it creates new perceptions of the world by making itself part of the world. Documentary film is, therefore, not only of interest because it (importantly) tells us about today’s increased forms of agricultural (slow) violence, car fetishizing and the toxicity of industrial lifestyles, but it can also contribute to much more radical transitions of giving up the presumed central position the human on the planet. The Anthropocene makes people think about a reeducation of sensibility and the de-partition of sensibility (Rancière 2000).

Film can, in this way, become an “existential territory” (Goffey in Guattari 2015, xii) for new subjectivities. These subjectivities display as self-relations. A subject does not make experiences but experiences create subjectivities.² By turning toward experience, film, as I want to point out here, has

re-activated its sensual productivity over the last few years and has lost its ties to language as the main signifier in documentary film.

By investigating landscape-making practices, Elke Marhöfers' films contribute to the project of transforming film into a critical cultural technique of the Anthropocene. She focuses on inter-species communication with various complex beings like bacteria and soil micro-organisms. In her films, Marhöfer explicitly rejects a narrator's voice or voice-over explanation. The imagery emancipates itself from the function of information or the framing of a god-like commentary that glues together seeing and hearing in order to install a documentary authority. Most of her recent films deal with human's impact on landscapes and the multiple processes of restoring soil or grasslands, and in particular of self-restoring practices between human cultural practices and natural ways of recovering. Marhöfer is interested in practices of human-soil interaction in different places like Cuba (*Prendas, Ngangas, Enquisos, Machines. Each part welcomes the other without saying* 2014), Japan (*Shape shifting* 2015, in collaboration with Mikhail Lylov, *Who does the earth think it is? Becoming Fire* 2019), Russia (*Becoming Extinct* 2018) or China (*Is there something else I've lost* 2011). Unlike in reportage style, activities are accompanied by the camera without any explanation. The place or milieu is allowed to matter for itself in both senses of the word. By writing about the topics in papers and her dissertation, Marhöfer (2016) combines writing and filming but keeps each medium distinct from the other so that film is not a mere appendix of text and conversely, her texts are not the interpretation of her films.

In searching for ways to conduct research film is meaningful to create new perspectives on the nature of knowledge in the Anthropocene. Film can serve as such a new scenery for working between knowledge and experience, experience is not to be understood as data. Following the onto-epistemology of Karen Barad (2007), one can say film is knowledge itself; it does not only communicate knowledge, rather it embodies it. In Marhöfer's film *Becoming Extinct (Wild Grass)*, landscape *is* knowledge, it consists of sediments of knowledge that bear the traces of radioactive toxicity and witness the extinction of many species in this environment. Marhöfer writes about plants communicating with soil to trigger nutrition in order to facilitate the plant's growth. Knowledge is, in this way, embodied by different actors like plants and bacteria (Barad 2007, 392). Extinction of entities here portrays a form of violence that generates new interspecies relations without offering a comforting position for the human. In this case, nature is nothing eternal but a constant process of change, a "naturing nature" (Massumi 2009).³ Most importantly, film's materiality does not become invisible by doing this. Percepts and affects create material "machinic" perspectives (Marhöfer 2019, 21) in and through the very aesthetics of film.⁴ This is addressed by the perspective of the camera, the cut, the length of the take amongst other aesthetic choices. I refer to this interplay of techniques as the creation of a "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1989), the creation of time-spaces that facilitate a self-understanding of positioning as immanent to what is shown (Barad 2007, 376). In a similar understanding, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 23) have criticized the problematic logic of representation since it differentiates between the world, the book (here the film) and the author instead of positioning them on one plane of production⁵: "It is not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up to them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it and you'll see that everything changes. It's not easy to see the grass in things and in words."

Becoming Extinct (Wild Grass)

The perspective of the middle is *with* the things. It represents its becoming by co-becoming—an perspective which can be extended to the filmmaker (i.e. author), the film (i.e. book) and the spectator, all positioned on one plane of experience.⁶ In *Becoming Extinct*, a 23 minutes short film shot on

16mm, the notion of becoming includes growth as well as degrowth, as Deleuze and Guattari have suggested. Becoming and undoing at the same time (Grosz 2011). *Becoming Extinct* is not only an affirmation of the dying of a landscape but the complex thinking and sensing of landscape as dying/becoming at the same time. The mode of extinction performs becoming as an omnidirectional movement.

The epistemology of documentary film reflects its way of perceiving the world in different ways. In Marhöfers' films, destruction carries out its own aesthetics—often paradoxically beautiful—the latter becoming a key issue over the last few years. *Who does the earth think it is? Becoming Fire* (2019), for example, interrelates soils and agricultural production with cycles of destruction in swidden farming techniques in Japan.

Becoming Extinct appears as a “stream of consciousness” (James 2001) combining multiple perspectives and heterogeneous points of view touching on germs of narrative micro pieces. However, it is not a fluid montage but a (jump) cutting of every image into micro movements by constantly shifting angle, distance and frame even in one shot. In one shot it assembles perspectives like close-ups and semi close-ups without smooth transitions. Activities of animals such as bumble bees and a dog, wild horses and a research station are cut together in a flickering shacking manner, altered by black and white frames. Nothing conciliatory or forgiving, comparable to phoenix in the ashes can be sensed about this place that borders on the wasteland of industrial agriculture and radioactive areas impacted by Chernobyl.

Insert Figure (...)

Becoming Extinct is a collage of perceptions. Similar to *Re-assemblage* (1983), Trinh Minh Ha's filmic intervention in realistic modes of representation in ethnographic filmmaking, the power of the filmmaking aesthetics is less subtle and much more presented by the filmmaker herself. The montage “cut[s] ‘things’ together and apart,” it simultaneously connects as it divides (Barad 2007, 179). It embodies a thinking about interconnection of species *by* interconnecting perspectives and experiences. Here, different scales of imagery act together like micro-images of the landscape mixed with aesthetic forms to investigate this landscape. In this way, Marhöfer collages not only images but also species and cultural techniques (like excavation and reforestation), so that the montage becomes a way of assembling species as well as parts of species with practices in and of the image. Typical for her works in general, *Becoming Extinct* assembles perspectives of parts of animals. Also *Prendas* begins by showing the skin of a horse and then its legs before one perceives it visually as situated fully inside the cadre of film. Marhöfer discards perspectives introducing the spectator to an overview of a place and refuses to offer a perspective of oversight and, accordingly, a viewing position in which subject and object are divided. By beginning a scene with the direct skin contact of an animal with the camera producing a haptic sight, objectification is prevented as Laura Marks (2000) argued for the realm of transcultural video. This aesthetic strategy can be seen as a meta-commentary on ethnographic filmmaking to which Marhöfer implicitly refers in her work. The sectional or partial views refuse to represent a being with fixed bodily borders but underline much more the power of the perspective and of film as investigator of materials and structures, such as for instance the fur of a dog playing in the toxic landscape in *Becoming Extinct*.

Although one of Marhöfer's other films, *Is there something else I've lost?*, deploys much longer shots than *Becoming Extinct*, it also reorganizes the relation between image and sound. The on-site interviews on urban gardening Marhöfer conducts in *Is there something else I've lost?* are mostly accompanied by a black frame. The spectator hears the voices but does not see their visual

equivalence, rather, he/she is prevented from seeing anything at all. This underlines critically how seeing and hearing usually stabilize each other and thereby create evidence in documentary films. The powerful situation of conducting an ethnographic interview becomes split in different modalities of senses like hearing and seeing and refuses to become an evidential image. Again, this can be regarded as a cinematic intervention in ethnographic styles. The black image, however, is not a lack but a transfer of the capacity of combining hearing and seeing. It foregrounds hearing (and reading the subtitles if one does not understand Chinese/Mandarin) as a complex activity of different layers combining natural and cultural techniques. This mirrors what the spectator perceives in the film, namely the self-supporting micro-gardening culture as it is threatened by urban development: Urban gardening figures as a cultural technique assembling social activities like chatting in the gardens, regional production and ecological and self-sufficient ways of producing vegetables: a niche activity threatened with extinction. Marhöfer's film makes women's work visible in displaying intersecting techniques of place-making. Without using direct verbal commentary, she introduces the audience to an atmosphere of gardening. It is an activity that produces affects and percepts at the same time as it produces vegetables.

In both films—*Is there something else I've lost?* and *Becoming Extinct*—the notion of extinction refers to the colonial context of the discourse of the Anthropocene (Mirzoeff 2016; Demos 2016) and the ethnographic filmmaking and photography that seek to “preserve” human groups threatened by extinction. Ethnographic filmmaking has often combined this with a romanticized point of view and a humanist approach that has naturalized extinction and underplayed the role of colonizers who actively did harm and destruction to social groups and places as part of the larger project of appropriating space and resources.

Contrary to the above-mentioned colonialist underpinnings, recent ethnographic film in the wider discourse of the Anthropocene is based on how film shifts in its history from an instrument of geopolitical power and anthropometric dehumanizing to the production of new relations between human and others. Cinematic space can present the land as something empty and to be owned by colonizers in a so-called imperial gaze on the one hand (Kaplan 1997), but, on the other hand, film can also present space as a complex process re-emerging with media techniques.

In *Becoming Extinct*, Marhöfer takes up the idea of “becoming with” which already appears in the film's title, provocatively combining it with extinction. This plays with the fear of humans Becoming Extinct through “empty” landscapes before and after western colonization. Thus, the imagery of imagined “emptiness” is questioned—as precursor of settler colonialism as well as in the Anthropocene. This play with emptiness also hints at the notion of the human as Becoming Extinct by giving up his or her special position in the world. It follows that the *concept* of the human really does become extinct.

Becoming Extinct is part of a research project situated on the plateau of Divnogorye Natural Museum Reserve as part of the Eurasian Steppe Belt “stretching east to west, from Mongolia to Kazakhstan to Russia to Ukraine to Romania” (Marhöfer 2019, manuscript 8). The project includes texts on species extinction in combination with archaeological, biological and cultural theory as well as other fields: it “focuses on plant sensing; an archeological excavation of horses from the late Palaeolithic period; an ecological restoration project of grassland; and cyanobacteria” (Marhöfer 2018, n.p.).

The film is part of a collaboration with a research project by Misha Lylov. Its scope includes publications, research and public discussions as well as the making of a film. On the one hand, film becomes a medium of research among other forms and, on the other hand, this research network

demonstrates the ways in which arts and science have been seeking new forms of collaboration in recent years. This is not about using film as a distributor to reach wider audiences or representing scientific developments. *Becoming Extinct* rather shows the vivid dialogue between visual and textual forms of producing knowledge as one of the outcomes of the Anthropocene discourse and its implications of delving into the meanings of knowledge.

In addition to the collaboration of science and humanities in order to study complex interplays of nature and culture, film is also (re-)discovered as a medium of research being “natural” and cultural technique at the same time. In particular, the turn towards experiences in recent years has transformed audiovisual forms of research into a medium to represent a complex spectrum of sensual perception not limited to seeing as complicit with the (colonial) gaze. Furthermore, forms of research by artists meet forms of investigation by other artists, scholars and citizens.

Becoming Extinct is an investigation of a micro zone of a place which is renewed: “Becoming-with-the-dead mobilizes our imagination for a future life without reconciliation or a place to hide. It embraces the struggle for a collective survival together with the nonhuman” (Marhöfer 2018, n.p.). The filmmaker informs the viewer on her *vimeo* website:

we might need to establish an inclusive approach to ecological conservation and survival, where human reproduction is not the most important factor. We might begin by perceiving the world not as “our” environment, “our” climate, “our” epoch, “our” survival, ‘our’ films, or ‘our’ images. (Marhöfer 2018, n.p.)

In this case, she deploys not only the notion of survival but brings up film in the same sentence and suggests a close connection between both. The decentering of the human as the ‘most important being’ to be conserved throughout the transformation of the planet and its climate is related to the imagery (Schneider and Nocke 2014). Film imagery here can be regarded as modality to create new perceptions which facilitate these transformations instead of stabilizing existing viewing positions. *Becoming Extinct*, as other films by Marhöfer emphasize, does not only represent other life forms but aims at finding new ways of creating relations and herewith a new aesthetics. The experience of transformation and its agents become debatable themselves and produce new aesthetic strategies in films. Before one translates the scaling of the planet and re-connects it to individual behavior, film can create a point of entry towards ecologies of perception. Also ecologies need to be considered as consisting of different experiences as forms of becoming, of various life forms and most importantly, of their interconnection. Film cannot only capture a-modal (synesthetic) forms of perceptions but forms of movement by movement itself (Deleuze 1989).

Processes of extinction can be found *in nuce* in the southern Russian steppes where *Becoming Extinct* was shot. Extinction is neither happening in the far away future as one of the very extreme scenarios of dystopic films nor is it a phenomenon of the colonial past where groups were depicted to “save” an imagery before people’s extinction—something often not traced back to colonial genocide but more to a “sad” but somehow “natural” process. It is a phenomenon of the very present concerning micro species in the cities and the agro-industrial areas across the globe (see for a critical account of Brazilian colonialism Viveiros de Castro/Danowski 2017).

In *Becoming Extinct*, the camera often closely studies and thereby “moves with movement” in the environment, like the wind folding the plants or following the line of the horizon with the camera, or following a tree trunk up and down between soil and treetop. Slow and long takes are combined with hectic and fast cuts as if the film seeks to embody the very different speeds and slowness acting

together in the steppe. These different speeds feed into the different forms and beings like soil and stone, plant and weather. All consist of different forms and processes of time (or movement) turned into matter by slowing down (Bergson 1990). The camera traces not only lines or silhouettes but also movements. Such movement can also be found in one shot in *Prendas* and seems to be a precarious and volatile perspective searching for an object. At the same time, it underlines that the object cannot exist because one has to face an ecology of heterogeneous and often violent interacting forces. In this very image of searching for a position, the aim of becoming part of the milieu without becoming invisible or adapted to the milieu appears as a symbolic form of the search for a position as a filmmaker which is simultaneously inside and outside of the depicted events. Every milieu is characterized by being in-between and not serving as a container or an object one could become simply a part of. The search for a position is not to be understood in a negative way: as a lack of a fixed and stable position. Nor is it an image metaphorically figuring for the search of a new place in nature following the romantic paradigm. It is rather an experimental gesture in need of the construction of new perceptions that concentrate not only on the human experience. Again, space is not to be mastered visually and centrally organized by perspective but rather a topology Deleuze terms “any-space-whatever” (Deleuze 1986, 109).

Centering on the human is even the case when researchers in the movement of sensory ethnography deploy phenomenological forms of experience. In the end, phenomenology, although centered on multiple senses, does begin—and therefore must conclude with—the human perception. For William James (1912), experience is much more abstract and much more concrete at the same time: it is the change felt (James 1912, 161; Massumi 2011, 1). When Marhöfer writes she works with plant sensing, this does not only mean sensing a plant rather it is a form of prehension of growing by light and water and communicating with soil and other plants around (Marhöfer 2018, n.p.).

Film is a direct form of “machinic” perception able to de-center human perspectives. The turn toward sensory experience in ethnography will be extended here by a turn toward experience as becoming “extinct”: becoming and fading at the same time, as James in *Psychology* has characterized experiences, reverberates Deleuze’s becoming as an undoing. Becoming is not the becoming of someone or something but, again, a multidirectional movement. In film, an image is a process cutting through processes, as Deleuze (1986; 1989) has pointed out in his books on cinema. This becoming also has a form and a history. Film creates a form for this becoming, but does not represent the becoming of form. This form can be an existential territory, not a given place but an ongoing place-time-making.

In the Anthropocene, new images of the human-milieu relation emerge (or are re-discovered) and it can be argued that they emerge as new images of experience. Becoming in *Becoming Extinct* does not copy a bumble bee by mimicking its view with the camera (by “flying” from flower to flower) but by working with the cinematic space, its sound and its kinesis among others. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 10) write: “The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image”. Like the rhizome emerging between wasp and orchid in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), *Becoming Extinct* becomes in relation to the landscape and not as a copy of it. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the book is not a representation of the world. Building up on this, films like *Becoming Extinct* experiment with maps of co-becoming as well. These include maps of situating viewers in between things which means being no longer the human towards the milieu or in the milieu but a complex assemblage in which the human is diffracted as a being (cf. Nitzke and Pethes 2017). In *Becoming Extinct* a holistic perception of the environment gets de-naturalized and becomes a shattered collage. Like cut and continuity, the montage resembles the principle of becoming and undoing on a visual and acoustic plane. The form of micro rupturing very much embodies a

thinking about cut as end and cut as new connection, of continuity and discontinuity of life (Deleuze and Guattari 2000, 38).

As the landscape in *Becoming Extinct* becomes fractured into many becomings and undoings by violent transformations, the camera refuses a position as fixed and stable, creating oversight. Landscape as a homogenous narrative space needs to be deconstructed. It no longer serves the human as a basis for narration as a projection for human emotions. At the same time, this refusal to anthropomorphize the landscape points to a immanent politics of nature.

Filming through the milieu

To “film through a milieu” does not mean to make film part of the nature or even to naturalize documentary film images as authentic or truthful. *Becoming Extinct* escapes being an invisible medium by generating extra immersive perspectives. It acknowledges film’s agency not only as inscription into a natural milieu but turns film in an actor itself, as autonomous, embedded and relational. Both processes intersect. This paradox is related to film being at the same time a device to depict a milieu and being part of the milieu itself by changing it from within. By making itself accountable, film highlights itself as an element of the landscape. That is also why Marhöfer shot many images of the very interaction of flowers with the camera or the tactile structure of a stray dog’s fur in extreme close up as if it were a landscape itself. These are images embodying relationality: relative positions between elements of the research and the researcher instead of subjects studying objects.

Movements of the camera and movements of the landscape interrelate and different rhythms intersect: the cry of a cuckoo (in stress) and the cut of the images, the hand grasping the flower, the wind moving. The 16mm film flickers and micro movements run through the spool in the case, the light flickers on film, the hand holds a thin stick interacting with a flickering plant and examines its material that also becomes shaky, while the clouds change the light on the scenery. All these stream-like movements do not form a whole impression (in the sense of being impressionistic) they create a perception of the heterogeneity of an ecology in transition.

The many different parallel perceptions cut across the species and form events of perceptions: micro rhythms of perceptions neither representing a single being nor belonging to it in the film, be it a horse, a flower or even the filmmaker. Like Virginia Woolf who once described the garden in *The Waves* (1931) from the perspective of flowers growing, *Becoming Extinct* forms a stream of perceptions, too. The grassland inspires a rhythm of sound, vision, movement and haptics in a montage-oriented style focusing on the interplay of sensual perceptions.

The re-valuation of film as a tool for research over the last few years is closely related to the turn towards highlighting experience and the sensory already found in observational cinema’s aim to depict atmospheres and social aesthetics (MacDougall 2006; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009). Showing or sharing multisensory experience is something particularly characteristic to film in comparison to text. Images in the films of Marhöfer, Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Véréna Paravel, Stephanie Spray and many other recent filmmakers can *matter* without verbal commentary. They deliver atmospheres of places, gestures, textures and impressions to the viewer. Unlike other filmmakers in sensory ethnography, Marhöfer writes texts about the subject of her work in addition to the filmmaking process and thereby creates dialogues between film and text without the text explaining her film or vice versa. Her film although unique reflect a general turn to be observed in experimental documentary: By foregrounding experience instead of information, film grows more and more apart from its supplementary and

illustrative position. Milieus and human-nonhuman assemblages gain importance as subject and as aesthetic strategy. The turn towards experience so overlaps with anthropocenic filmmaking studying nature_cultures.

The sensory in Marhöfer's work follows an autonomous interpretation refusing phenomenological positions and empathy. Marhöfer uses her camera as an apparatus that diffracts the landscape and produces very specific imagery aware of the artificiality of the images. Here, she moves away from long shots and an observational style. The creative work of the camera is more foregrounded as well as the creativity of the landscape itself which also inscribes itself into the film. Again, this is not indexical truth but a complex process of translation between the becoming of nature and filmmaking. This process is very much considered since Marhöfer uses 16mm film and works with the materiality of the light as an artefact causing visual interference patterns in the film.

By capturing sounds and echoes, the diffraction pattern of light reflection is carried out by immanence and not by the distancing of the camera allowing the viewer to gain oversight. We do see the work of the camera and post-production, but we also sense different experiences informing these techniques. Instead of these techniques becoming naturalized, the already existing complex techniques of *naturing* inform the montage. Nature here becomes a technique, entangled with other techniques like refostering the ground, excavation, montage and perspective. These experiences of different natural and cultural techniques form a milieu of experiences entangled with the landscape. Perceptions here are not secondary—neither is the reflection of the camera, which does not want to alienate or distance itself as often found in the aesthetics of critical documentary. As nature, the cinematic perception is creative and productive. Film figures as an element of nature, without again *naturalizing* nature or the imagery as a *naturalized* part of nature.

Becoming Extinct operates very much as an element of broader research on bacteria, horses and plants, taking place at the southern Russian steppe. Like excavation, film becomes a research technique by intra-acting with other media forming the larger network of research methodologies. It translates the rhythms perceived in the environment into the montage. The strong and rhythmic dis/harmonic montage also points to a reflexive role of the film. Here again, film becomes a relational technique by foregrounding its own capacities, materiality and agency. “Within this mode of film practice, images are not just indexical mirrors of the world, but self-expressive beings” (Marhöfer 2019, Manuscript 3).

Prendas, ngangas, enquisos, machines (each part welcomes the other without saying)

Prendas, ngangas, enquisos, machines (each part welcomes the other without saying) (2014) was shot in Cuba in 2010–12. *Prendas* and *ngangas* are the containers through which Palo communication takes place. The film does not follow the animistic, so-called pre-modern belief but adapts it as an contemporary practice for filmmaking. In *Prendas*, the camera often deploys long shots, listens to the wind in the trees, studies bones and skulls of animals in the woods, the sun over the corn fields and the slipping of a small chick out of an egg. The film becomes a device to question what is living and how agency is usually organized by film. Since the filming takes place in Cuba, the spectator might expect a travelogue or ethnographic documentary made by a Western-based filmmaker. But the animistic theme becomes a way of filmic communication with the landscape. Without exoticizing the landscape as pre-modern, it specifically creates images between colonialist plantation-scapes and Palo.

As in *Becoming Extinct*, in *Prendas*, images of humans are rare. We get to hear voices of people riding on the train although the image does not screen human bodies but only the view from the window onto the forests and plantations. The human here is already contained in the landscape: through her impact,

she is in the landscape but herself invisible. This complicates what can be seen and what is invisible in *Prendas*.

Even if there are just micro movements we constantly see transformations, nothing ever stands still: goats are eating, chickens are running, clouds are moving in the sky, the wind is constantly blowing and the light is changing. All of these are interfering movements; small movements like the slipping chicken cracking the egg, the leaves moving with the wind and the train cutting through the landscape. Landscape becomes a complex interplay of movements (Bee and Egert 2018).

Weather and sun form the place as sugar cane production does. By listening to the wind and studying the light, the film evokes romantic pictures of the landscapes. But since this landscape is shown from within, from an immanent perspective, it is neither an overwhelming other nor a harmonic habitat for studying cultural practices. By taking up movements, the boundary between what is living and what is dead is reconceptualized, as Ingold notes: “We are not required to believe that the wind is a being that blows, or that thunder is a being that claps. Rather, the wind is blowing, and the thunder is clapping [...]” (Ingold 2011, 73).

Here, the relation between things before the camera and the camera person itself becomes the subject of the film without *Prendas* becoming a travelogue focusing on the subjective experiences of the filmmaker. Rather, it creates a milieu of experiences which are not necessarily the kind of subjective ones of the filmmaker who makes an essay film out of these experiences.

Insert Figure (...)

The opposition and the imagination of total harmony between humans and landscapes through art, film and other visual media have produced positions of sublimity of the landscape. Much of the relation between humans and nature is produced by visual media as well as by cultural techniques like agriculture. These different forms of cultural techniques become subjects in Marhöfers’ films. She does not suggest only a more harmonic relation with natures but seeks to embody a search for the position by pointing toward the relation in the production of film and visual media. Like the agro-industrial techniques rooted in colonialism, film has had a history of visual violence toward the other and produced powerful forms of looking (Kaplan 1987). Marhöfer studies these forms of violence and at the same time, new forms of life that emerge at places deeply impacted by historic and recent forms of violence.

Prendas shows how film as a relational technique can become a device to research positions that negotiate the fragile boundary between the living and the dead that Kathryn Yusoff (2019) described as a key for the colonial discourse in the Anthropocene. Since film itself is animistic and brings images “to life,” the relation between the medium and the topic of *Prendas* can be seen as echoing one another. By negotiating imagery about landscapes and the history of the colonial gaze, *Prendas* also reflects on the role of film in the production of milieus and landscapes as affective spaces.

Instead of filming people or rituals, *Prendas* refuses a narration in the form of climax. In the last shot already first under than behind the credits, some Palo bins and a candle appear—shot rather *en passant* than as a central reference to decode the imagery. From the margin of the film an image appears imagined to be central to the understanding of animism. It gives the practice of searching for forms of life its relevance. The convention of the ethnographic film is diffracted by refusing any exoticistic or voyeuristic views. We do, however, see the Palo ritual containers and create connections between the other images of the film and Palo retrospectively. Palo is not reduced to a dramatized ritual but

becomes graspable as a way of sensing, a connection of landscape, agricultural techniques, wind, and of the living and the dead which appears in the interstices of what can be seen and can be sensed otherwise.

Film with its many modalities and perspectives is an ideal medium to do research on the new relation of human and world. Film can be conceived as a medium of ecology (Ivakhiv 2013), not by representing ecological topics but by creating perspectives *of* the milieu. The world shows itself and this includes media which is located on the same plane as that what it shows.⁷ The human being here no longer admires the gloriousness of nature or is dwarfed by the overwhelming beauty of the landscape. Rather, the film makes the search for new positions perceivable, a processual positioning that informs larger cultural movements of ecological practices in a wider sense.

Anthropocenic Negotiations

Documentary film has gained importance in the negotiation of human-milieu activities over the last few years. The documentary ethnographic or anthropological film produces new perspectives of human positions in nature_cultures. By emancipating itself from being a representation of anthropological research and developing its own materiality and autonomy towards the anthropological text, film has increasingly turned to sensory experience. (Pink 2009).

The concept of experience is often seen as unpolitical. Since scaling is, however, one of the major issues in the human perception of herself as impact in the climate change, experience becomes a major factor offering new ways of relating to ecologies. These relations can also be seen as “territories” for new subjectivities, as Guattari has pointed out. By going through different techniques of sensual filmmaking, Marhöfer proposes in her film what can be termed a filming through the milieu (see Thain 2015). Isabelle Stengers (2005), by describing practices in the laboratory, has coined this term to describe an “ecology of practices”. By “thinking par le milieu,” she refers to Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy (187). Since filmmaking nowadays creates audiovisual concepts about the condition of the world and operates as a relational technique, I adopt this phrase to propose sensory ethnographic film as a possible strategy of becoming with the milieu.

In recent years it is the documentary that forms a field for these aesthetic ways of dealing with the earth’s condition. The films discussed above are ecological films, precisely because they address positions and perspectives of human-nature interactions.

Films, like those by Elke Marhöfer, are situated knowledge (Haraway 1998) proposing immanent positions. They do research and facilitate humans to find a new position by thinking about position by the very medium of positions (i.e. perspectives)—and be it to not have a position fundamentally or ontologically separated from other species. Documentary film is one of the significant fields for these audiovisual negotiations because it intensely deals with relations to what is—or what co-becomes. It chooses the “muddiness” of the very world as point of view, as Donna Haraway (2008, 14) has described it. The relation of media to the world is at stake and this can be seen in the multiple artistic projects dealing with (postcinematic) documentary modes. Particularly the films of Harvard’s Sensory Ethnography Lab have helped to articulate new perspectives of humans, machines, things, and animals all together by taking milieus as a subject and as a mode of investigation. In Marhöfers’ and other recent art films such as Harvard’s SEL, film also has its own materiality and adds to the milieu as a becoming part of it. It does not seek to represent a reality apart from itself but very much foregrounds its own agency. In this way, film not only explores the human-earth relation, i.e. about what it actually means to inhabit the world and not just to be in the world, but it also thinks about its own role in

creating these specific and affective relations. For media scholar Andrew Murphie (2014), for example, the world becomes its medium by articulating the voices of nonhumans and thereby using nature *as* a medium: film articulates itself as nature does. Reflexivity is no longer a privilege of text alone. *Becoming Extinct* and other recent sensory films reflect on this new form of multispecies audio-visibility in the Anthropocene. The production of documentary forms throughout media and the arts can be understood in the discourse of the Anthropocene in a broader sense including human fears and narrations about the future. Film itself forms a passage in the search for new positions of the researcher-filmmaker who creates and affirms a less detached position toward the world: “Deriving from direct entanglements, this ethics has nothing to do with self-reflectivity, or identification, but rather with pre-individual interspecies immersions and mutations” (Marhöfer 2019, 4–5).

Like Paravel and Castaing-Taylor’s *Leviathan* (2012), Marhöfer’s *Becoming Extinct*, *Is there something else I’ve lost?* and *Prendas* reflect the paradoxical agency of the human between the inscription into earth’s history while showing that the age of the human on the planet is only one of the ages of the earth among many others. The use of media technology in the representation of nature becomes re-politicized through the creation of imagery in which the human agency in the earth history is paralleled in the use of media: media’s self-consciousness (like in Marhöfer’s films) articulates other than human agencies by (paradoxically) underlining the agency of the medium as the one directed by the human.

Coda

Documentary film produces a specific way to negotiate the new role of the human discussed in the Anthropocene discourse. This broad scientific and public discourse has also created a psycho-cultural dynamic of the production of subjectivity deeply entangled with forms of media. Film brings forth potential “existential territories” (Goffey in Guattari 2015, xii), as has already been suggested by Guattari. These are closely entangled with the aesthetics of media, especially in experiments in documentary film today.

In experimental documentary like Marhöfer’s the earth becomes a reference point of belonging for subjectivities. More and other psycho-cultural connections emerge alongside those that have long existed in different cosmologies and cultural practices (see for example in Sun Ra’s Afrofuturisms or Amerindian perspectivism). Images can express the concern between humans and the world without relying on representation or information. Furthermore, they do so without a patriarchal ideology of caring *for* the earth, as Bruno Latour (2017) once put it. Images become techniques of locating oneself in the world (Povinelli 2016) and most importantly *with* the world (Haraway 2008, 3). New subjectivities can emerge on the existential territory of experiences, proliferated and created by documentary art film. Its role cannot be sensed apart from an ecological consciousness, but this is much more than a rationalization of behavior, it includes aesthetics as well. Ecological aesthetics extend beyond the eco movement of the 1980s and 1990s that first have raised an awareness of the finiteness of the human on the earth, at least in the industrialized north of the globe. Films like *Leviathan* and *Sweet Grass* (2009) by the SEL as well as *Becoming Extinct* reflect the paradoxical position of humans as a geological force and at the very same time being reduced to one of many ages of the earth. Ethnographic and ecological art film today is less a self-affirmation of “the” human and human technology but more an apparatus of contingency splitting the human into many diverse images of what has long been the colonial European human *white* man.

There are other possible aesthetics and many recent forms to be found dealing with the discourse on the Anthropocene. Moreover, film or audiovisual installations are by no means the only possible

medium which experiments with aesthesis and perceptions. But what is characteristic for some of the recent art projects that take up the Anthropocene discourse is the aim to become part of a milieu and to break with the history of the human view as above or distanced from things. They, instead, invent and reinvent filming a milieu through the middle.

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¹ *Weltbild* means a set of opinions and beliefs: how one sees and perceives the world.

² An experience can be an event assembling different societies of perceptions (Whitehead 1967, 206).

³ Massumi follows Spinoza here on the notion of a naturing nature vs. a natured nature.

⁴ "My approach imagines inhuman worlds of perception and amalgamates cartographies of multiple and simultaneous scales, spaces and temporalities" (21). In her own words, Marhöfer wants film to become a "machine" (21) connecting humans and milieu. She advocates an active role for film to produce new affects and percepts.

⁵ "There is no longer a tripartite division in between a field of reality (the world), and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor on or several authors as its subject. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 23).

⁶ Following Deleuze and Guattari's critique of representation, this does not mean that no differences emerge from this, but that these are not limited to the three realms of film, filmmaker and world.

⁷ Andrew Murphie (2014) writes about new documentary informed by a Whiteheadian position: „[...] technics, as an extension of our thinking/perception, and as something ‚out there‘, can be found in different forms on both sides of the bifurcation [...] The world is as it is, as it is sensed, whether by human or non-human. All is part of one nature, one world and all is [im- or differential] mediation—it amounts to the same thing. Indeed, Whitehead writes of ‘the world as medium’ (1978, 286) within which multiple vectors of feeling move, assemble and then disperse to be taken up elsewhere”.