

*Soils\_Habit\_Plants*: A public conversation with Elke Marhöfer and Mikhail Lylov

Mikhail: Like some of the films we have seen today and yesterday, our film *Soils\_Habit\_Plants* also has to do with the notion of landscape, even though we prefer not to use the term. One can speak about landscape as a material entity that bears readable marks and through these marks enters into history. A film can be an exercise of reading these marks. The landscape can also become an intensive character corresponding with the mood of the film's protagonists. But I think that in our work we understand landscape in a different way.

Elke: The idea of landscape is problematic, because it messes all the different protagonists into one kind of perception. And maybe this relates a little bit to what we are trying to do, which is not to mess everybody up, and still being out in something that is called "landscape."

M: *Soils Habit Plants*: The first and the last element of the title are very present in the film. So maybe the middle element, the interstice, should be highlighted. Our informal proposition may be: instead of a notion of landscape, to consider the place in terms of 'habit,' or 'habitat'. This is important for us, because we try to work with protagonists that are not always inscribed into the human history: plants and animals. They are always commented upon, represented. But they have a certain autonomy, a certain resistance towards this inclusion into the commented space, into the filmic space which puts them in relation to human concerns. On the one hand, it is very important politically to bring things into our human concern, but on the other hand, this concern also bears the risk to initiate a form of violence. We believe that we can speak about the non-human perspective through the notion of the habitat or habit, and by not putting these protagonists into a 'landscape.'

E: We are in Japan and we are doing some research on disturbances there, ecological disturbances. And we understand 'disturbance' in a way that it isn't necessarily destructive but it can also be productive. Human and non-human disturbance can cause, for example, bio-diversity, higher bio-diversities. So this is what we are learning, let's say. Actually, I would like to replace the term 'learning' with 'experiencing,' and then put it into relation with other experiences that we previously had through reading or being out somewhere else. Learning, experiencing, to read—about plants for example, soil for example, habitat for example. We could tell you a couple of things about the plants that we saw in this film, but we wanted to share this with you not by way of a voice-over, that would kind of bring it into a place already.

M: It's a complicated question how you can actually learn something from the soil or from the plant. For the conventional idea of learning, communication is the central point; but the soil and plants they don't communicate very well in a direct way. If we were trying to use the voice, this would mean to bring these things into our concern and to express our concern about them, but at the same time it would mean to already include the representation, which we would not like to include in the film.

[Audience, Kajsa Dahlberg ] *I have a question, which might be related to what you just said about reading, text, and the film. Can you please say something about the [unstable] use of focus in your film, which is also of course a matter of allowing one to see or not to see, and how that came into the film.*

E: Thanks for this question. Certainly it has to do with a form of resistance, in a sense of unlearning the seeing, to kind of resist the expectations towards the image. At the same time we don't want to close the door to anybody, to the viewer. There's always a [negotiation] how much you can disclose of some singularity by exposing it to the camera. How much can you actually film some of these? If it is soil, it seems to be less problematic, because soil does not appear as a singularity. But if you have a flower, it's quite an exposure and kind of violent what you do to this plant, while trying to learn from it in alternative ways, or to learn its language. These are some of the thoughts that sometimes made us go in and out of focus.

[Audience, Philip Widmann?] *Is this also a way to show respect? I remember that in the conversation you had with Straub there was a part about the secret and keeping a secret and also respecting the secret.*

M: You just don't want to pretend that you know everything and it is always good to have a mistake or imperfection on your side. Rather than pretending that we have a perfection, we are trying to keep imperfection on our side. On the one hand, this can lead to a learning experience when it comes to the imperfections of the production of the film itself and the failures that we experience sometimes. And on the other hand, it is a way to keep a useful distance between us and between what we try to work with, because I think the distance between you and what you film is an extremely important notion. So this unsharpness is definitely a way to keep the distance.

E: We wanted to give the camera an acting position in this as well. But in terms of the secret, it's also important not to *make* a secret. It is important to be as open and ...bland, I think is the term, as possible. But there is nothing as such, not even a secret. So in a way the secret is part of a construction, it comes with the process of production, but it's not something planned. Of course, one could strategically use a

secret, which could be interesting as a method, but I think this is not how we work. If there are secrets to us, I guess we keep them in a way, in the sense that it is not necessary to unveil them.

[Audience: Luisa Greenfield] *I think it's interesting that you break down this term landscape and question its use. Of course we think about cultivation when you show the close-up of the soil. If it's healthy soil, we see life in it, and we can see life in that soil in the close-ups in your film. But it also makes me think about the history of the soil in Japan and the history of cultivation and farming in Japan. As I understand it, the US brought industrial agriculture and chemical agriculture to Japan, sold it to the government and basically devastated the soil there. But then I also think about the history of rice-paddy farming and how flooding the paddies is also an extreme intervention and cultivation into the land. Then came this movement in the 1970s towards Natural Farming where you basically create an environment that allows for the land to do what it wants to do naturally.*

*I appreciate that the text material is over here, separate from the film, because the first thing that came into my mind when watching it were actually books that I'd read about the soil in Japan. I just wonder how much of that is 'revealed' in your film, in terms of what you just said about the secret. I mean you end it with a shot of the cars and the highway and the garden underneath it. How much of that comes into play for you?*

M: Okay, thanks, that's an extremely informed comment, everything you mention matters for us very much. Let's switch the mode of discussion to "communication," since we have matters of fact to talk about. The second plant that we see in the film is a wild relative of millet. Millet is a very interesting *personage*. It was part of the staple diet in Japan before the events you mention, before the '70s. Some parts of Japan never actually cultivated rice, be it because they were too high in the mountains, or because it was too cold. This fact of course totally contradicts the image, created by the Japanese agricultural lobby, of Japan as an essentially rice eating culture. The wild millet somehow interacts with this version of reality: it fully mimics rice, pretends that it does not exist, up until a certain stage of its life cycle. It is indistinguishable from rice until it produces seeds.

To counteract the repeated attempts by people to kill it off in their fields, this plant created a camouflage technique and an incredible resistance to agrochemicals. Wild millet is a great example of guerilla resistance to the industrial farming. One can see this plant as an agent of biodiversity in a monoculture of a rice paddy. Also it draws attention to other edible types of millet, who because of their robustness require much less labor and much less industrial efforts to cultivate them. But since the change of the agrosystem, plants like millet are treated as good as weeds. I think this gives quite an interesting example of the history of interaction between plants and people.

But of course, when I speak of "history," I only speak of plants as food, which means I speak of *my* concern, which is not necessarily the concern of the plant—to be my food, right? So that's also in parenthesis answering why this is all in the printed texts and not in the film.

In relation to this, I would like to read a quote, which leads us back to the aesthetic questions. Elke and I argue so much about this quotation, it is extremely important for us. It comes from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and their book *What Is Philosophy?* They write: "A plant contemplates by contracting the elements from which it originates. Light, carbon and the salts and it fills itself with colours and odours that in each case qualify its variety, its composition. It is sensation in itself." I think this understanding of a plant as sensation in itself, is something which for us was a very important entry point for our efforts to make this film.

E: And other films.

M: And other films as well, but this one especially. It is extremely interesting how they bring together the production of an image and biological processes which they don't understand in biological terms. They don't explain the molecular processes or they don't use the scientific parlance or jargon to explain this, but they conceptualize the plant as having the capacity to contract the outside, contract an image, contract itself as an image. And from where does a plant contract? It contracts from the soil, right? These two elements are meeting in our film's production. The plant produces itself from the soil and we try to produce the film as a kind of documentary of plant production, which passes through political notions that we have just discussed.

E: The plant contracts an image not only from the soil but also from the sunlight and the all critters and insects that roam around. In a way, Deleuze and Guattari gave us a tool: 'contraction,' the idea of production to explain the sensibilities of plants, their brain, their knowledge, their beauty. Producing whatever senses, images, the luring and these mimicking capacities that we see in the wild millet; like being the joker in the rice field, pretending that they are rice just to have a habitat for their endurance. Deleuze and Guattari gave us this concept of contraction to understand these great capacities. The going in and out of focus of the camera is a mode of contracting an image. And that's how we used it, as a concept and as a way to communicate with you about this.

[Annett]: *You have used the term personage. I have been wondering if it is ironic. And now also the term communication; so you want to communicate, but how does it work, how do you communicate?*

M: 'Personage' refers to the fact that they are singular for us. 'Persona,' the singular persona. They are unique, just like Florian was pointing out today that the moment of learning has to propose a singularity, so that's why learning is not really about communication, but it's an encounter. What happens is you encounter these protagonists, plants, and then you exercise your capacities of being *aufmerksam* [attentive]. And this is the obligation of the viewer, because as a filmmaker there is a part where you create an image but there is also a big part where you just see it and passively contract it.

This is very similar to what the two philosophers write, that contraction is not really an action. There is a moment of contemplation in this, a contraction of an image. So I think, this film is about arranging encounters with things in a way that you can become more engaged, more interested. This is maybe the process of learning as we understand it.

[Audience: Makoto Mochida] *I want to ask you a question. While I was watching your film, I remembered the word 'eroticism,' which Jean-Marie used in the interview that you made with him. Now you were talking about 'capacities'. Does the word 'capacities' have a connection with eroticism?*

E: It's a very nice comment, thank you, very interesting. 'Eroticism' came from Jean-Marie. It's a bit difficult. The idea is a bit masculine for me. But concerning capacities and eroticism I can just refer back to what I already said: the capacities of a plant to be erotic I guess. To lure or seduce for example and to mimic.

M: To lure a bee to enter it. An insect comes inside to pollinate; it's an erotic capacity of a plant that's directed towards, not a plant, but towards other species, animals. So it's interspecies eroticism. When the plant contracts all these elements from the soil or from the earth, I think this is an erotic process. It's not masturbation, it's a narcissistic notion. Narcissism includes eroticism and it is simply because there is a certain affirmation of pleasure in this process. When the plant contracts itself, it affirms its own pleasure and it further expects that it will continue and this is the kind of duration of this eroticism. And yes, definitely, there are these blurry images and then something comes into focus... I never thought about this as being erotic. It's a great question. Thank you very much.