

Media Ecologies

In one of his signature moments on screen, Werner Herzog narrates the cruelty of nature. In a clip that can be easily found online, Herzog releases while filming *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) his dark ecological meditations about the environment; the plants, animals, and life all just expressing an echo of (sort of) Darwinian natural selection styled meditations about survival through fornication and death and also what Herzog calls the “misery of existence.”¹ It is an odd meditation, which at first sight seems powerful due to the style and voice of Herzog. Yet, it turns out to be extremely problematic as soon as one considers more carefully what is actually being said. Herzog claims that nature is “prehistoric,” still in its formation, like looking for a historical period; however, nature is in fact already set within a historical narrative that defines it as prehistoric. Any attempt to speak of nature is already inside a specific discourse that sets it in relation to humans and culture. This seems to be partly ignored, at least for a fleeting moment of exaggeration. Such a scene also prescribes the Americas as “prehistoric”: displacement of indigenous people, plants, natural resources by way of massive operations of military, scientific and technological nature since the late 15th century. European treaties such as the one of Tordesillas narrativized not only maps but also the way that time and history was perceived. They outlined the contours of what they defined as “prehistoric times,” the “arrival of modernization,” and colonized areas as European “discoveries.” Even the Herzog film *Fitzcarraldo* dealt with access to rubber growing areas (this also being a historically significant reference, considering the massive abuse of indigenous populations in the Amazon during the “rubber boom” in the late 19th century).

Despite Herzog’s trademark provocative style, one wonders whether his rather nonhuman stance still implies a sense of anthropocentrism by suggesting a sense of melancholy about nature as a “state of nature” – pre-social, ignorant of any social conventions or aesthetics, and mostly about biospheric cruelty of plants and animals. While avoiding the romantic idea of nature, it somehow gets entangled in the latter.

Contrary to that scene presented by Herzog, Elke Marhöfer’s film *prendas – ngangas – enquisos – machines* follows a different path by illuminating an alternative ontology of film. In short, Marhöfer does not prescribe a prehistoric nature, but one that is post-historical in a couple of ways.² While not forgetting or leaving history behind, it realizes that all sorts of natural formations are already historically conditioned, whether through scientific use of materials or the cruel histories of colonialism. Rather than the narrative history invented in the 19th century, it has a cinematic and media aesthetic quality that offers an audiovisual impression of time where natural and social history conjoin. It is a film of the nonhuman that is embedded in human history.

In other words, if Elke Marhöfer’s film is about the Anthropocene, it curiously and fittingly hardly ever shows any humans on screen, except for a few shots. It is a film that moves in and out of human reach; it touches human hands, animals,

¹ On Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xQyQnXrLb0>

² See also Vilem Flusser’s use of the term to refer to the programmed nature of history as post-history. Vilem Flusser, *Post-History*, trans. Rodrigo Maltez Novaes (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013).

ecologies of multiple scales, all entangled in a filmic rhythm that forms the audiovisual ontology. It attempts to be a noninvasive investigation, which instead moves in and across the rhythmicity of the events, mapping their duration.

In this short essay, I want to unfold themes that are present in Marhöfer's work, especially in *prendas – ngangas – enquisos – machines*, and tease out how it speaks to the Anthropocene debate by way of specific filmic techniques that show how the planetary concept is also working on micro levels.³ These dimensions aren't necessarily always "smaller" but cut across the big-small-binary and thereby reveal aesthetic dimensions of reality as ways to address historical contexts such as colonialism.⁴ One could almost say that it refers to the famous Jacques Rancière thought about politics of aesthetics – or how aesthetics is at the center of the political as it divides the reality in perceptual blocks.⁵ It gives orientation and guides, and in this sense, informs an aesthetic sensibility that is formative of ethical and political divisions too. It is of course clear that Marhöfer's main reference point is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophy, however the philosophical concepts are discussed in relation to issues of aesthetics as embedded in the material reality. One could even say they are embedded in the natural history of the planet.⁶

I want to address this theme in the two following sections.

prendas – ngangas – enquisos – machines deals with the two-fold theme of "ecology of practice" and "practice of ecology." The film is situated in an ecological relation including both, the filmic aspect as part of the epistemological mapping and the environmental aspect as one of multiple layers of human and nonhuman traits that forms an assemblage. In the most subtle moments of the film that has no voiceover and is of course in many ways not a narrative film, one can almost detect an implied trace, sometimes through longer shots, sometimes quick, almost abrupt cuts.

Across the cuts and articulated by them, there are hints of various trails, that in most instances could indicate the existence of colonial networks of labor, material and the mapping of the global South. In this case it is the Americas and other places around the world marked by their role as providers of resources necessary for building modern societies, such as tin, rubber, etc. Another vital resource is human and animal labor. The film makes this visible in some of the shots showing the animal labor as much as the hands that prepare the horse, which of course is also a sign of the transported labor force from the European continent.

The domesticated animals belong to the post-historical as much as the infrastructures of modernity that at times appear in the film; the most obvious

³ On Anthropocene and cinematic culture, see McKenzie Wark, "Anthropo{mise-en-s}cène", Public Seminar-blog,

December 10, 2014, <http://www.publicseminar.org/2014/12/anthropomise-en-scene/>.

⁴ This "micro" refers to the micropolitics of Deleuze and Guattari. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

⁵ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

⁶ Recently there has been an increasing amount of research on the relations of "natural history" and media (art) history. See especially Douglas Kahn, *Earth Sound, Earth Signal. Energies and Earth Magnitude in the Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013). Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

example being the railroad as a sign of colonial infrastructure for transporting goods and more. Such systems organize, synchronize space and time, indicating the sort of programmability Flusser analyses too. If time is increasingly programmed – and we take this as one key element of colonial policies – then subjectivity is programmed too by way of its relation to infrastructure: “The apparatuses that program us are synchronized. For example: the transport apparatus is synchronized with the industrial apparatus, and the administrative apparatus with the entertainment one. The synchronicity is the rhythm that marks our lives.”⁷ Hence, the question of rhythm becomes a way to unfold political questions regarding how subjects, objects, environments, animals and people are being governed. “[I]nvasion is a structure not an event”⁸ and we can add: invasion is an aesthetics and structured by way of media (technologies) and time.

The film’s variety of shots ranging from close-ups of an animal, the ground, a plant to the landscape becomes a way of entangling scales. The film stock material – originally shot on 16 mm and later transferred to digital – becomes more visible as the surface effect. The light illuminates the scene but at times is displayed itself too.⁹ While the film is recording the scene, it becomes a condition in its existence as audiovisual. It is this epistemology through the media of film that is part of the colonial mapping of the global South – South America, Central America, Africa, etc., which shaped an anthropological insight to various cultures and natural environments, and forms a post-colonial approach regarding its presence in this narration without words. Those geographical places are also sites where knowledge of natural worlds of light and color slowly transform into the massive industrial production of audiovisuality and color. The organic color extracted from natural sources is an important reference point in the history of visuality, but is increasingly superseded by the chemical industry.¹⁰

Marhöfer is aware of this dual role, this co-conditioning of the technological media and the anthropological knowledge, the media and the natural, the light, colors and their artificial afterlife in the Industrial Age. However, she is also interested in how to detour and detach from the normalized power relations of the film medium and to stimulate another set of forces of art and filming, lived experience, conceptual abstractions and alternative knowledge, to paraphrase her ideas. This means resurrecting an awareness of different rhythms and their relations to colors.

It is as if the film moves along with the rhythms of nature. The wind, the plants, the animals are themselves rhythmic elements that are paired up with the film and shot as rhythms that relate to breathing. Again, Marhöfer is aware of this co-conditioning of the technological and nature. In her words:

It breathes and never keeps one movement or one affect throughout, but each affect and each movement, each bending of my mind is turning into an actual

⁷ Flusser, *Post-History*, 59.

⁸ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Continuum, 1999), 2.

⁹ On the cultural practices of light, see Sean Cubitt, *The Practice of Light. A Genealogy of Visual Technologies from Print to Pixels* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

¹⁰ See Cubitt, *The Practice of Light*, 131. See also Michael Taussig, “What Color is Sacred?” *Critical Inquiry* 39 (2006), 28–51

movement recorded by the camera. It connects and switches assemblages. Producing symbiotic sensibilities in motion. It turns into a machinic companion.¹¹

This companion is a body formed by the entanglement of the different rhythmic worlds. It responds to Deleuze's note that "[a]ny two forces, being unequal, constitute a body as soon as they enter into a relationship," introducing it into this specific artistic context.¹² Broadly speaking, the issue of rhythm has been recognized in media studies and cultural theory, and it is also relevant here, as an underpinning factor of how such heterogeneous bodies (film nature, nature-film) are formed.¹³

This film perception is what forms a specific way of approaching the theme we have opted to call the Anthropocene. In short, the term functions as a sort of placeholder in the midst of the scientific debates about whether or not we have entered a new geological era that is characterized by the massive human involvement on a planetary scale. This refers to agriculture, chemistry, geoengineering and many other ways in which the soil and the atmosphere are record(ing)s of humans living on the planet. In recent debates different periodizations regarding the beginning of the Anthropocene were suggested. Did it start thousands of years ago with the introduction of agriculture or rather in the 19th century scientific acceleration that had a new chemical impact on the earth (both in agriculture, industries and warfare)? Or perhaps, as most recently suggested by the Anthropocene Working Group, it only started properly with the "Great Acceleration" in the middle of the 20th century?¹⁴ However, in order to put things into a political and historical perspective and more apt to the focus of our film, it could also be dated back to the early modern era and the colonization of the Americas with its brutal history that brought about the colonial trade routes and the unequal power relations not merely between humans and the earth, but between Europeans and the indigenous tribes that were deemed inferior.¹⁵ As Sean Cubitt and many others demonstrate this is still happening; the neo-colonial displacement or misuse of indigenous land continues to be part of the current resource mapping and extraction across the planet.¹⁶

II

prendas – ngangas – enquisos – machines teases out an ecology of practices. It refers to the specific Afro-Cuban practices of healing, a sort of a cultural technique that relates to both histories of colonialism and slavery.¹⁷ And it also practices ecology, bringing ecological and environmental relations, humans and nonhumans,

¹¹ Elke Marhöfer, *Ecologies of Practices and Thinking*, doctoral thesis draft, June 15, 2015, 40–41.

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 37.

¹³ See the special issue on rhythm: Julian Henriques, Milla Tiainen and Pasi Valiaho, "Rhythm, Movement, Embodiment – special issue," *Body & Culture* September & December 20 no. 3–4 (2014).

¹⁴ Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "When Did the Anthropocene Begin? A Mid-Twentieth Century Boundary Level is Stratigraphically Optimal," *Quaternary International* (2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.quaint.2014.11.045>.

¹⁵ Dana Luciano, "The Inhuman Anthropocene," *Avidly – A Los Angeles Review of Books Channel*, March 22, 2015, <http://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2015/03/22/the-inhuman-anthropocene/>

¹⁶ Sean Cubitt, "Decolonizing Ecomedia," *Cultural Politics* 10 no. 3 (2014): 275–286.

¹⁷ On cultural techniques, see the special issue: Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, Jussi Parikka and Ilinca Iurascu (eds),

"Cultural Techniques-special issue", *Theory, Culture & Society* 30 no. 6 (2013).

closer together in specific situations, perceptions and affects. It is in the context of such percepts and affects that humans and nonhumans are gathered into one body in interaction.¹⁸ Regarding the debates about the Anthropocene, Bronislaw Szerszynski outlined how we might be able to consider not merely histories and memories of the Anthropocene but the way the world itself incorporates and expresses a memory through its various processes.¹⁹ He relates this to theories of self-organization where the systematic qualities of natural “things” (i.e. systemic processes) are based on a memory through which they change their state and life unfolds. This applies also to inorganic systems, including geological ones. This viewpoint allows us to think of the planet’s inorganic life as wholly entangled with the biosphere, and to elaborate a position of nonhuman memory that is constantly expressed, both on a local and planetary scale.

The various systems and subsystems form a living entity that is in resonance across different scales. This applies to geochemical formations, the atmosphere and many other magnitudes that thereby reveal their dynamic qualities. They unfold towards the future but are prescribed by their memory, which can be said to be their virtual potentiality. Szerszynski reminds us that this is also a long-term memory: a memory of planet Earth and memory’s outer-planetary conditions and yet of a constant relevance to us as entangled in such systemic qualities.²⁰ Every thing across the scale of being is embedded in a dynamic, rhythmic existence.

It is also an archive of sorts – or at least it stimulates the discussion concerning memory and the archive that we have been witnessing over the past few decades. It relates to the wider sense of archivability, which opens up anew when we think of nature, the world as media that already does the work of active inscription and active memory:

The archive works against itself – this is the *mal d’archive* [Derrida...] Whether it is the very strata of the rock, or an archive created by humans in order to record Earth’s memories and what it knows, the archive’s very form of resistance to forgetting makes a more final forgetting possible – the hiding or destruction of the archive. The closed archive of the solid body of the Earth is now being opened but at the same time ransacked.²¹

Indeed, this subtle imbalance that we call the Anthropocene signals a sort of temporality surfacing at certain moments. In *prendas – ngangas – enquisos* –

¹⁸ The terms are used as suggested in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson (London: Verso, 1994). “Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects. The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself.” (164). I see this characterization pertinent both to a media technological understanding of percept and affect and also to an understanding of the structuring role of power that constitutes subjectivity by flowing through us, independent and yet entangled with us.

¹⁹ Bronislaw Szerszynski, “The Anthropocene and the Memory of the Earth”, paper at the conference *The Thousand Names of Gaia: From the Anthropocene to the Age of the Earth*, Casa de Rui Barbosa, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 15–19 September 2014.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

machines it is teased out by scenes of animal and plant life; a memory on screen, in things, in relations. The world becomes an issue that can only be dealt with by way of understanding it as media, time and as memory. Unlike the nostalgia for a “prehistoric” nature this very different approach is interested in summoning a complex set of human and nonhuman times as an “archive” in which the Anthropocene takes place.

Another philosophical approach that relates to the same question is put forward by Andrew Murphie. He addresses the situation by way of Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy, perceiving the world as a medium.²² This view acknowledges that our usual fields of film, media and communications should not be set against a backdrop of a world of nonmediation. Instead, Murphie describes media as something that runs through the world as an ontogenetic process. As such, it resonates with recent readings of process philosophy and relationality, such as that of Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, outlining a way to understand the dynamics of nature as parallel to the work of media.²³ This refers to the ontogenetic force of both media and nature as constant processes of differentials that mark a difference, rather than just passively registering it. It also corresponds closely to Marhöfer’s thinking that filmic material and natural processes should not be conflated but treated as contrasting counterpoints in a co-determining interaction. They merge into dynamic bodies of knowing and feeling, of affects in media environments where the media is not reduced to merely being the film.

In other contexts I talked about “insect media” and the silent, minor history of animals and technology especially as it pertains to the past 150 years of technological modernity.²⁴ This approach outlines the ways in which natural formations and animals such as insects have been included in the technological imagination and sometimes even design plans. We can, however, adapt an approach as broad as Murphie suggests; to unfold the situation of the world as media in order to be able to appreciate the audiovisual rhythm of its dynamic life. This brings both a sense of vital life to film and media to nature. Marhöfer’s work is a development of this vitality by way of situated practices of ecology. Such a practice is based on staging encounters and creating events. Rather than being a laboratory practice in the sense of being removed from the world, it takes the world as its stage to be framed, reframed, and embodied by the movement that becomes a catalyst for the filmic work. This is where the references to anthropological research on nonwestern epistemologies – such as Viveiros de Castro’s work – become extended by way of this cinematic media form. The moving image comes to life through rhythm and observes the organization of the postcolonial spaces: these are not prehistoric, but post-historical in how they are constantly lived through various historical and temporal realities both human and nonhuman.

²² Andrew Murphie, “The World as Medium”, unpublished article manuscript, March 30, 2015, forthcoming.

²³ Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

²⁴ Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).