Amazon Cinema

Vegetal Storytelling

Fourteen

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The dense jungle of the Amazon is a long-standing chronotope of exploration cinema, from the silent period (*Matto Grosso*, 1931) to the anthropological work of the 1970s by Napoleon Chagnon and Timothy Asch, to the epic features of Werner Herzog. Amazon cinema is not only a primal scene of first contact narratives; it is also a visual spectacle, a physical and technical challenge, and a spatially disorienting experience for filmmakers and spectators alike. While it has been the site of some important Indigenous filmmaking (e.g., the Video in the Villages project, which began in 1987), the Amazonian travel narrative remains a vital dynamic of media culture as a mode of intercultural experience and representation. I would like to propose that we can learn something from the avant-garde about how to navigate this infamous region in sounds and images.

The Amazon River basin, or Amazonia, straddles nine countries and 5.5 million square kilometers. Its inhabitants speak dozens of languages and include dozens of distinct cultural groups, so a survey of Amazonian media

is clearly beyond the scope of this brief study, which focuses on two films: Lothar Baumgartner's film *Origin of the Night (Amazon Cosmos)* (1978) and *Embrace of the Serpent* (2015) by Columbian filmmaker Ciro Guerra. These very different works interest me because of the ways they produce a visual spectacle of the rainforest, evoking its mystery within very different eco-critical discourses. Assuming the guise of realism only to undercut it with counter-stories that remain hidden, illegible, and outside the visual field, these are false narratives, fictions not facts, and yet their critical engagements with the colonial narrative are each grounded in the sensory environment of the rainforest. Neither film lays claim to documentary truth, and both indulge in alternative ways of knowing the world in which visual culture, sensory immersion, and soundscapes predominate over narrativity and veracity. By bringing together these very different works that share only the chronotope of the Amazon region, I hope to delineate the possibilities of a postcolonial practice that moves beyond observational cinema by means of strategies that can be described as ecologies of representation.[1]

The predominant modality of Amazon cinema has been variations on documentary cinema, including visual anthropology, and variations on essayistic film practice, such as the videos of Juan Downey Junior (i.e., his *Video TransAmerica* installation project of the mid-1970s) and the reenactment film *Serras de Desordem* by Brazilian filmmaker Andrea Tonacci (2006). While this experimental work has produced valuable scenarios of encounter, they also repeatedly fail to produce "knowledge" in the form of facts and truths of the Amazon region. Indeed, as Bill Nichols has said of Timothy Asch's canonical ethnographic film *The Ax Fight* (1975), its multiple layers of document and explanation may promise certainty but ultimately deliver only mystery.[2] One of the predominant tropes of Amazon cinema is one of failure, in keeping with a frontier that lacks perspectival form. Few tropes of logocentric knowledge—including observational cinema—can gain traction in a region so dense with forest given the spatial disorientation.

The repeated return to the Amazon region by documentarists and fiction filmmakers is deeply linked to the colonial production of the "uncontacted." Danielle Bouchard has argued that "[t]he Amazon is often figured as a sort of ground zero, a ruins which can render new knowledge for the sake of humanities' future, but only through the interpretive capacities of those who know what they are looking at."[3] Recent archaeological research has determined that the inhabitants of the Amazon are the likely descendants of ancient civilizations, and the jungle itself is "the product of precontact civilizations' practices of ecological management."[4] In other words, the Amazonian jungle is in itself a ruin of a civilization, but as a ruin, it lacks evidence of destruction. The Amazon has been viewed as empty, without history, precisely because of the assumption that ruins leave

traces. Meanwhile, the production of first contact narratives and the anthropological embrace of the Amazonian inhabitants, designed to save traces of human experience, relies on a "fundamental aporia," according to Bouchard. It assumes that they need and/or want Western knowledge when, in fact, it is entirely possible that in the absence of destruction, the jungle and its inhabitants have much to teach us. The questions then are, How to structure this inquiry, or this learning that has to happen, and how it might be mediated or articulated in audiovisual media?

Beyond documentary and visual media, the Amazon has been written about extensively in many languages. Patrícia Vieira has described the Amazonian tales of nature and vegetation as "phytofables" and has analyzed several such Portuguese literary examples from the early 20th century. Her term "phytographic writing" is a useful convergence of eco-criticism and critical analysis. She defines it as "the literary portrayal of plants that depends both on the creativity of the author and upon the inscription of the plants themselves in this very process of creation."[5] Vieira also offers a perceptive account of the construction of the Amazonian jungle in the European imagination, starting with the name itself, which Spanish conquistadors borrowed from Greek mythology as a vehicle to feminize the mysterious, dangerous, and unruly continent they planned to rape and conquer.

The attraction of the jungle to the literary imagination has a number of themes. First of all, the interconnected, intertwined growth of the dense jungle offers an alternative vision of individuality and interdependence. The cycles of death, decay, and regrowth struck one of the early Portuguese writers, Euclides da Cuhna, as a challenge to the categories of self and other that predominate in Western thought.[6] The ambivalent image of a fertile earthly paradise, at once fertile and an "empty" green hell, have served to underscore 20th-century movements toward both the development (particularly by Brazilian government policy) and protection of the Amazon region (particularly by global environmentalists). The jungle is still perceived by many as an "El Dorado" replete with treasures to be exploited; others take a protectionist view in which the Amazon is regarded as an enormous library or, perhaps more accurately, as a gigantic supermarket of endangered species.[7] Vieira advocates for a kind of fiction that might "emanate from our attunement to the rainforest's own tales."[8] With this in mind, I would like to turn to two very different films that propose new ways of engaging visually and aurally, with the Amazon region.

Origin of the Night

Lothar Baumgartner's film *Origin of the Night (Amazon Cosmos),* made from 1973 to 1977 and exhibited first in 1978, constitutes a unique intervention into Amazon cinema. Although it opens with a myth borrowed from

Levi-Strauss's collection of tales from the Tupi people, Baumgarten's fantastic imagery of jungle-like vegetation is entirely shot in Germany. Baumgarten's play with storytelling, myth, language, and botany is arguably a critical gesture towards imagining the limits of colonialism and a tentative opening onto Indigenous forms of knowledge. Baumgarten is a German conceptual artist who works in film, photography, sculpture, and installation art. A student of Joseph Beuys, his fluxus-related surrealist critique of museum practices has taken many forms since the late 1960s, of which this film is only one component. *Origin of the Night* is a gallery work, shot on 16 mm, and now projected via a Blu-ray transfer, with a remarkable electronic soundtrack mix of jungle noises. I believe it shares a great deal with structural film and sensory ethnography, although it was produced in the parallel universe of the art world.

Before Lothar Baumgarten went to the jungles of the Amazon rainforest, he imagined it, quite literally, as an imaging and a sounding, a reconstruction of its powerful sensual embrace.[9] He shot his film *Origin of the Night* in the forests of the River Rhine, not far from the Düsseldorf airport, creating a testament of postcolonial caution regarding the representation of otherness. The film is constructed as a conversation, not with the people who live in the Amazon but with the discourses that have attempted to translate their world into European languages. Rich in art-historical references and salvage ethnographic discourse, *Origin of the Night* was created in an era of conceptual art in the 1970s, and yet it also articulates the threshold of the Anthropocene.

The film begins with an overflow of language. Words appear from the darkness to set the tone—to get "attuned"—to the pace and rhythm of the forest, and the diversity of flora that might be found there. A second set of words, introduced as the "Amazon Cosmos," appear and then slowly vanish one by one. Baumgarten leads us into the darkness of a false story, an imaginary place, which is nonetheless a place of naming. Many of the words are German; others are Latin, Spanish, and some such as *morokoto* and *uruku* are derived from Amazonian languages, but even for a German-speaking viewer, the words are cryptic and unfamiliar. Some words denote trees and animals not found in the Amazon at all, although most refer to species of plants, birds, and animals from South America, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Thus, we imagine a cosmos of Amazonian vegetation, and in the darkness beyond the opening word-images, and the epigraphs: "The tapir makes noises; he runs in shoes," and "the jaguar walks quietly and barefoot," a woman tells a story. The tale she tells, in German, is borrowed from Levi-Strauss, who "collected" it from the Tupi people of the Amazon in the mid-20th century. The story is about a woman who separates night from day, and in the process, she discovers her sexuality and redistributes language among the creatures of the forest. In Levi-Strauss's interpretation, the story

aligns a series of structural oppositions between night and day, sex and no sex, and language versus no language.[10] Baumgarten jettisons the psychodynamics altogether, simply by removing the human figure from his Amazonian cosmos. He has given the forest and its creatures a film of their own, in which they struggle with and against the confines of language.

Becoming "attuned" to the forest entails an experience of textures, lighting, subtle movement, and variations in depth of field, and Baumgarten explores all this and more. His camera is frequently fixed on compositions framed in close-up or in modalities of distance in which the sky is one mass among others, glimpsed through trees or in darkness or crossed by trees and birds. The framing of extreme close-ups of surfaces reveals abstract compositions of line and color extracted from the forest. No horizon lines means no familiar landscape compositions. The "attunement" to the forest is accomplished most perfectly, however, by the soundtrack of birds, insects, and frogs that permeate the film with rhythms and tones that have been looped and mixed with electronic tools. (See Figure 14.1.)

Baumgarten's presence is strongly felt, and not only in the handheld camera. The compositions capture light, they spread darkness, they twinkle with reflections, and the editing creates rhythms and contrasts between "arrangements" found in woods and water. Moreover, a litany of textual inscriptions is superimposed on the imagery. Most of the language-images refer once again to the flora and fauna of the Amazonian region. Other words and phrases, such as *gelopfte melodie* (tapped melody) refer back to Levi-Strauss's text, or like *augenlecker* (eye candy), refer to the film itself, but none corresponds directly to the image, except through puns or word play. A narrator intones names of South American trees, but of course, the

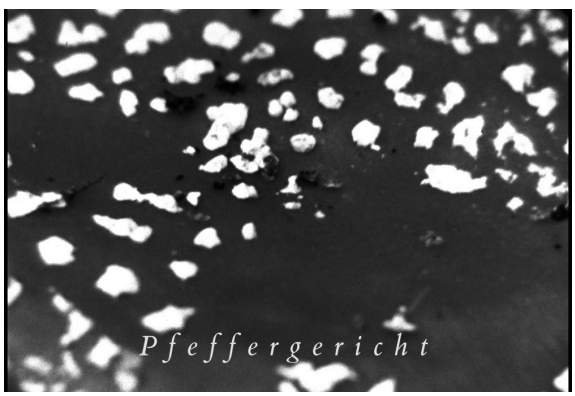

Figure 14.1 "Pfeffergericht" translates as "prepared with Pepper." Frame grab from *Origin of the Night (Amazon Cosmos)* Lothar Baumgarten 1978

trees we see are all European trees that remain nameless. A confrontation of geographies is staged in which the Amazonian other eludes representation altogether.

Lest this sound like a primeval forest, or some kind of rarified nature study, it is important to point out that this jungle is constantly interrupted and crossed with signs of life in 20th-century Europe. Traffic passes on the outskirts of the woods, a plane takes off and lands, and a diesel-engine boat from Basel chugs through the darkness. Deep in the forest, more tokens of modern life appear: a bullet casing and a pink plastic toy float down the river, pots and pans hang in the trees, and a set of rusting garden furniture are ruins of human activity in the forest. Some items, like a fern branch and a blue streak of color, could be either nature or culture. A brick wall and an Oriental carpet are secreted within the patterns of leaves and light. The forest is voracious in this respect, absorbing everything in its alternate world of water, light, and color. For viewers attuned to the genealogies and correspondences of modern art, *Origin of the Night* is further littered with special signs and codified messages. References to Sigmar Polke, James Joyce, Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter, and Baumgarten's own works are there to be read, hidden in the shrubs.[11]

How can a fake documentary about the Amazon rainforest constitute a mode of ethnography? The answer perhaps lies in a perceptive book by Eduardo Kohn called *How Forests Think*, which is based on research conducted among the Runa people of the Amazon. Kohn's revisionist anthropology seeks to articulate the "connections between representational processes and living ones."[12] His anthropology pushes beyond the human to explore "how we might better live in a world we share with other kinds of lives."[13] Ethnography is here a method of discovery, in which "form" is found everywhere including in the "regularities" and patterns of the forest. In Kohn's analysis, a tree species such as *Hevea brasiliensis* (the rubber tree—a name that appears in *Origin of Night*), is implicated in patterns of vegetation, the ecosystem of the forest, as well as the networks of economy and exploitation. He also includes the spirit masters of the forest whose presence informs the hierarchies of colonial and postcolonial social relations. If we are to survive the Anthropocene, he argues, we need to allow the living logic of the forest to think through us.[14]

In *Origin of Night*, a semiosis of things, plants, and animals participate in a discourse that engenders "nondiscursivity,"[15] as a resistance to the techniques of naming that threaten to close off meaning. In the Tupi myth, the daytime is originally when everything, even plants and stones, could speak. In the darkness, the colors vanish, the textures fade into another aural realm where the daughter of the Great Snake can sleep with her husband, beyond the confines of language and representation. As Kohn argues, "understanding the workings of that which is not noticed is crucial for an anthropology beyond the human. Form is precisely this sort of

invisible phenomenon."[16] The film indulges in the forms that "fall out" of the forest, including the colors of moss and mushrooms, the snowfall of blossoms, the crowding of frogs, the dancing of insects, the curves of branches, and the reflections of clouds.

Kohn's forests are not primeval or untouched by history. "The history that gets caught in the forest is mediated and mutated by a form that is not exactly reducible to human events or landscape."[17] In *Origin of Night*, aesthetic form meets natural form, and the empirical data of photography meet the discursive forms of naming evoked by the textual overlays. For Kohn, the Amazon forest and its creatures are legible through a semiosis of signs that are not intractable or fixed but remain mutable and significant as living forms. In a compatible sense, Patrícia Vieira defines *Phyotographia* as the inscription of plants into textual form, and although her examples are limited to written texts, she notes an analogy with photography and the writing of light. "In their inscription of the environment, made possible by photosynthesis, plants already perform a *proto-photographia*." Thus, "*Phytographia* designates this communion between the *photo*graphic language of plants and the *logo*graphic language of literature." [18]

Vieira's inquiry into whether the Amazon can write may be best answered through the example of cinema in which textuality is composed of moving images and sounds. In *Origin of the Night*, a disconnection is forged between plants and their names, precisely through the act of misnaming. The plants can be said to inscribe themselves directly into the text—which is then constructed through framing, montage, sound mixing, and other devices at the filmmaker's disposal. Vieira refers to Walter Benjamin's theory of language for his key insights into the language of things that is imperfectly translated into human language. For Benjamin, the task of poetry, art, and indeed the translator, is to recall "the communication of things [which] is certainly communal in a way that grasps the world as such as an undivided whole."[19] And yet Benjamin also claims that while song is related to the language of birds, "the language of art can only be understood in the deepest relation to the doctrine of signs."[20] Benjamin's utopian view of language is always bound by the recognition that "all nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language."[21]

Origin of the Night, I would argue, strongly evokes this sentiment, in such a way that the forest itself becomes an allegory for the subaltern. As Vieira puts it, the question of whether plants can speak follows directly from Gayatri Spivak's inquiry into whether the subaltern can speak.[22] Baumgarten's work from the 1970s does not pose such a question, but it certainly opens the space for such an inquiry. The rupture between things and their names is made visible by *phytographia* insofar as the plants are in light; Baumgarten's remarkable soundtrack likewise creates an immediate "immersive" experience for the viewer. We need to turn to a more recent film to translate this inquiry into one about Indigenous knowledge,

naming, and inscription. Within the crevices and ruptures between forms of language and forms of nature, one can perhaps recognize the contours of what James Clifford has described as "history's blind spot" from which Indigenous peoples have finally, in the 2010s, emerged.[23]

Embrace of the Serpent

Like Baumgarten, Ciro Guerra engages with colonialism in its scientific guise of naming and collecting and adds the narrative dimension of exploration and interpersonal relations between natives and foreigners. *Embrace of the Serpent* includes signs painted on rocks that are legible only to those Indigenous to the area who can read them, excluding most viewers along with the two central characters based on colonialist scientists.[24] The script was written in consultation with inhabitants of the Vaupés region, although the names of many sacred plants were changed for their own protection.[25] Nonprofessional actors were cast alongside professionals, and although the story is loosely based on the journals of two explorers, the film is entirely a work of fiction.

Guerra aimed to fuse two styles of storytelling, one of which—narrative fiction—is familiar to moviegoers everywhere, and enabled the film some degree of popular success, having been nominated for a foreign film Oscar in 2016;[26] while the other is a more experimental engagement with dream logic, animals, and non-linear time. The two styles come together in the modality of the dream. The role of hallucinogenic plants in the mystique of the Amazon is well known and key among its desired natural resources—even if these plants also mark the limits of knowledge and vision or maybe precisely because they do mark these limits. One of the explorers in *Embrace of the Serpent* is based on the American ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes, whose research in the Amazon was reputedly an influence on such countercultural luminaries as William Burroughs, Carlos Castaneda, and Allen Ginsburg. (See Figure 14.2).

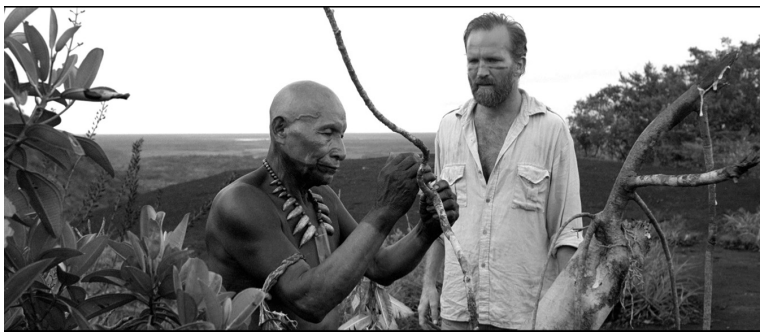

Figure 14.2 Antonio Bolivar as Old Karamakete and Brionne Davis as Evan in *Embrace of the Serpent* (Ciro Guerra, 2015)

Guerra's script weaves together the stories of Schultes with those of the German ethnologist Theodore Koch-Grunberg, who died in the jungle of malaria in 1924. In the film, both scientists are searching for a mythical plant called yakruna, the German to kill his malaria and the American, in 1942, for its capacity as a type of rubber to be used in the ongoing world war. Yakruna is thus an allegory for everything from ayahuasca to extractable resources, to salvation and access to the secret healing powers of the forest. The trajectories of both explorer-scientists through the Amazon's beautiful yet treacherous terrain are guided by the same shaman, named Karamakate, played by two different actors, both of them cast from the local population of Vaupés. Nilbio Torres is from the Cubeo tribe, and Antonio Bolivar is from the Ocaena tribe, and the latter, older man is said to be among the last living member of his community. Toward the end of the film, Karamakate says to Evan, the American, that he "was not meant to teach his people. I was meant to teach you. You are Cohiapu," (a fictional people) as he gives him a dose of caapi, his (fictional) hallucinogen of choice throughout the film. (See Figure 14.3.)

In the contest of knowledge between the scientists and the Indigenous people, the Amazonians clearly have the upper hand, and yet the filmmaker and his crew from urban Colombia are, in a sense, intermediaries in this contest. The visual style and narrative arc of the film strongly evoke the scenario of exploration in which the wide river with its dangerous currents and the thick forest-lined shores shape a journey of discovery. Historically, the mystique of the Amazon is bound up with the secretive nature of its topography that hides everything from the view of the colonial traveler—including the treasures of anthropology and extraction alongside the dangers of hidden eyes and arrows. *Embrace of the Serpent* respects this veil of mystery and takes us further into the many layers of sensory experience and memory, as they have emerged from both colonial and Indigenous discourses.

Figure 14.3 Nilbio Torres as Young Karamakete and Jan Bijvoet as Theo in *Embrace of the Serpent* (Ciro Guerra, 2015)

To describe the Amazon rainforest as a chronotope is to recognize the overlay of topography and narrative ideation, which includes not only the drive to explore but also the futility of such endeavors. This chronotope is most clearly defined in cinema by Herzog's pair of epic films, *Aguirre the Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), and the stunning documentary by Les Blank, *Burden of Dreams* (1982), in which Herzog lays bare his colonialist "vision" within the terms of heroic and insane filmmaking. It is a chronotope shaped by the challenges of penetrating the jungle that, by definition, excludes the viewpoint of the Amazon's Indigenous population. The challenge for storytelling is not necessarily by way of Indigenous myths and tales, which have been recorded by anthropologists for decades, but to find ways of representing the relationship with plants, animals, and spiritual presences that constitute a very different chronotope of the region. It may be that it is a chronotope that resists empirical transcription or documentary evidence, or translation into language, but appeals to other forms of knowledge available through the senses.

The European and American travel diaries may be the "inspiration" for *Embrace of the Serpent* but the loose translation of these texts becomes deeply intermingled with other visions, quests, and dreams. Karamakate is stingy with his knowledge but generous with caapi. Even so, the foreigners have trouble dreaming under its influence. For the film viewer, glimpses of jaguars and serpents punctuate the film; a meteor passes when Theo, the European character based on Koch-Grunberg, drinks the potion; and a full-scale color kaleidoscopic display marks Evan (Shultes's) final revelation toward the end of the film. This startling interruption of graphic animation moves the film outside the register of representation and into an imaginary, productive, and creative realm of image production in which signification is rendered mysterious and transcendent.

The filmmaker and his Colombian crew are intermediaries between the scientists and the people of Vaupés, and there is also a character named Manduca (Miguel Dionisio Ramos), who plays the role of what anthropologists would call a "native informant." He translates for Theo and cares for him as he slowly dies. He and his patron are last seen fleeing from Colombian soldiers, along with a village whose elders are drunk. Karamakate destroys the yakruna cultivated there, refusing to cure the dying ethnographer who believes it is the cure he needs. The older Karamakate, whom Evan discovers on his own and with whom he speaks in Spanish, seems to be leading him on a wild-goose chase until they finally find the last yakruna, which Karamakate abruptly destroys as well. He takes the American through many of the same places as he took Theo 20 years earlier, and the film moves back and forth between the two journeys, creating a cyclical, nonlinear narrative. Both scientists visit a mission headed by two different insane gurus, and while most commentators have described this as a *Heart of Darkness* homage, Guerra notes that stories of Messiahs in the jungle

overseeing rogue cults are rampant in the region.[27] He did not need either Conrad or Coppola for inspiration, although the reference to that myth of exploration is nevertheless there to be read—like the writing on the rocks.

Embrace of the Serpent concludes with a series of photos taken by Koch-Grunberg in the Amazon in the 1920s, and after crediting the travel diaries as inspiration, a note says: "Those are the only known accounts of many Amazonian cultures. The film is dedicated to all the people whose song we will never know."[28] Guerra has attempted to create a historical narrative for people whose history lacks a written record. The photographs function as passages into the past, where Karamakate, the shaman and guide, is waiting to escort the scientists and the viewer beyond the limits of the photographic and written record.

Both the younger and the older Karamakate appear as noble, strong, and wise, virtual superheroes of the jungle. They are shamans dressed as warriors and are adorned with traditional costumes that were hand-made in Vaupés according to old designs and locally sourced materials.[29] If this is a history, it is also a history of images and appearances, even while those images are said to be empty and illusory. Karamakate asks Evan when he first meets him, "Are you chullachaqui?"—a hollow spirit, and perhaps a ghost or an imaginary replicant of his predecessor Theo. Within this palimpsest of performance and borrowed stories is the spectacular footage of the Vaupés River itself, a tributary of the Rio Negro that runs into the Amazon. The film includes a few shots from elevated angles, amplifying the size and scope of the river as it disappears into the jungle, inscribing that perspectival, frontier logic that informs the epic imagery of Herzog's film *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1977), and it also uses aerial footage toward the end when Evan and Karamakate as another element of the white man's possible hallucination. In this way, Guerra and his crew not only engage with the mythic, epic story of the Amazon but also render it slightly fantastic and gain some distance from the frontier logic of penetration and discovery.

By choosing to shoot in black and white, Guerra embraces the fictions of the great river system of the rainforest and also puts it at one remove. His cinematography renders the landscape not only mysterious and mythic but also historical. This is not a region "out of time" but one with its own versions of temporality and memory. Particularly striking are the mirrored reflections of the forest in the river in scenes that bring the film close to being a *challachaqui* itself, emptying the image of depth and transparency. This is not a phytographic text but a performative one in which the jungle is translated into the forms of narrativity and storytelling.

Conclusion: Senses and Texts

The two films discussed here are idiosyncratic forays into Amazon cinema and are not indicative of any particular style or genre, and yet a moving image installation called *Amoahiki* (2008) by Brazilian artists Gisela Motta

and Leandro Lima that is surprisingly evocative of these works. In this floor-to-ceiling piece, imagery of the dense jungle is filtered by sunlight and swaying in constant movement is projected onto strips of cloth.[30] Shadowy figures of Indigenous people move within and across this greenery accompanied by a soundtrack of bird, animal, and wind sounds. The artists were inspired by a trip to a Yanomami village, and the piece strongly evokes the intermingling of people and plant life as a kind of fantasy space of phantom beings, allowing the people themselves to remain veiled within the privacy of the jungle. The piece weaves together a variety of images through superimposition, creating layers of representation over layers of tactile materials: a palimpsest of light, movement, and color.

It is particularly significant that *Amoahiki* was included in one of the first major exhibitions of Amazonian arts and cultures—*Amazonia: The Shaman and the Mind of the Forest*—that was first installed in the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève, with the participation of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels. Along with the usual display of artifacts, the show included a large selection of photographs and moving images, mainly from the colonial era but also more recent work by contemporary artists. In fact, the exhibit as a whole is indebted to Kohn's book, although only a handful of photographic works along with *Amoahiki* embrace new modalities of sensory, experiential representation. Like *Origin of the Night*, *Amoahiki* evokes the forms of forest life as an integral part of social life and uses moving images and sounds to create an imaginary passage into a world that is not of the past but of the future.

Amoahiki, like *Embrace of the Serpent*, becomes a form of writing, a play with images that falls far short of resembling anything we might call Indigenous knowledge, but nevertheless, like Baumgarten's experiment in the 1970s, it works toward the conditions of such knowledge. The archive of historical images is slim, but precisely because there is no archive of the jungle, we have to imagine what kind of knowledge is made possible by the thinking of the forest. These works are phytofables of some kind, or at least proto-phytofables for the cinema, pointing to modes of eco-critical representation. The question concerning the value of these films to visual anthropology remains unanswered.

Baumgarten and Guerra, in very different ways, deploy cinematic tropes of audiovisual discourse to transform the contact zone into one of superimposed geographies. In Baumgarten's museological practice, he engages in a kind of semiotic warfare, using the trope of naming as a strategy of appropriation and power that he thoroughly deconstructs through radical misnaming. The slippage between discourses of images—of plants and animals—and the botanical sciences of colonial knowledge lie at the heart of his project. Guerra's film also revolves around the botanical sciences and the travels of a European and an American each in their own century collecting botanical samples from the Amazon. Their journals and

travels are appropriated for another kind of story in which the colonialists are doomed to losing their way in the Amazonian jungle.

These films point toward other ways of knowing and experiencing the world and may portend the ecological methods advocated by Felix Guattari in his mapping of ecologies of society, the psyche, and the environment. Following Benjamin's critique of the information society, Guattari calls for a new ecosophy:

> To bring into being other worlds beyond those of purely abstract information, to engender Universes of experience and existential Territories where singularity and finitude are taken into consideration by the multivalent logic of mental ecologies and by the group Eros principle of social ecology.[31]

If forests do think, those who have lived in forests are individuals who are immersed in a semiosis that extends the practice of forms to all modes of living. In Baumgarten's Amazonian archive, cultural debris litter a mislabeled forest. The signs are there to be read, but the signs themselves are symptoms of ecological patterns that are in constant flux. For Guerra, the semiosis of the forest is not only audiovisual knowledge, but it extends to the trance-like experience of sensory hallucination, a form of knowledge for which the cinema serves as a very appropriate allegory.

Guattari points toward the poetic realm as a site of eco-logic in which the semiotic interlacing of nature and culture, subjects and social processes, is expressed.[32] Donna Haraway likewise conceptualizes the ecological struggle as taking place in the sphere of signification, or as she puts it: sympoeisis.[33] Within the experimental practice of the 1970s' avant-garde, Baumgarten's idiosyncratic work points towards the terms of an ethnographic practice for a posthumanist era. Kohn's methodology aims to "free our thinking of that excess conceptual baggage that has accumulated as a result of our exclusive attention… to that which makes us humans exceptional."[34] The Amazon region not only is home to millions of people but is also described as the "lungs" of the world, due to the production of oxygen, and thus, its precariousness is indeed planetary. The human encounter with plant life in the Amazon basin is arguably one of the key thresholds of a damaged world, or, as Haraway puts it, a critical site within the Chthulucene.

For Haraway, the Chthulucene points beyond the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene towards "a timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth."[35] Her methodological intervention is multi-layered, but leans heavily towards science fiction and storytelling with "multispecies players, who are enmeshed in partial and flawed translations across difference."[36] Both Haraway and Guattari stress the discursive, linguistic, character of the poetic

interventions into eco-criticism. Ethnographic film arguably moves beyond observational cinema in multiple ways, including the emergent discourse around the senses as an epistemic regime. In what I am describing here as vegetal storytelling, the formal properties of vegetation intermingle with those of cinematic language, and arguably provide a more nuanced epistemological modality than the affective "nondiscursive" mode of sensory ethnography.

The inclusion of *Amoahiki* in the Musée d'Ethnographie exhibit suggests that institutional anthropology may finally be opening up to the kinds of knowledge produced through moving image arts. At the same time, the works discussed here suggest that the move toward sensory anthropology is not necessarily antitextual or that sensory modes of knowledge are not necessarily without text. A recent collection of articles emerging from a major conference in 2007 is titled *Beyond Text? Critical Practices and Sensory Anthropology*, the question mark clearly indicating the editors' reluctance to commit to the jettisoning of textuality altogether. Addressing the confluences of art-making and anthropology, the editors aim to argue "that there may be critical and creative competencies at work in artistic, non-textual or media productions and show how these have the capacity to offer anthropological insights of equivalent value to the written text." [37]

The turn to sensory modes of knowing is echoed in other defenses of sensory ethnography issuing from those defending the "subjugated" knowledge of those who tend to be studied by anthropologists, such as Indigenous populations. As Dwight Conquergood puts it, "[w]hat gets squeezed out by… epistemic violence is the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert."[38] Performance studies, in his view, "challenges the hegemony of the text best by reconfiguring texts and performances in horizontal, metonymic tension, not by replacing one hierarchy with another."[39]

Going back to *Embrace of the Serpent* in this light, we might note that it is a genre of performance, which includes the performance of local inhabitants of the Amazon within the idiom of fiction film. While neither *Embrace* nor *Origin of the Night* seems to resemble ethnographic film in any way, they may nevertheless have anthropological value precisely in the ways that they challenge norms of representation in favor of more sensory and embodied modes of knowledge regarding the Amazon. At the same time, both of these works are texts, in their complex interplay of forms. They engage with the Amazonian region through visual and aural forms and through the texts that colonial cultures have produced within the "violent episteme" of logocentric knowledge. They put those texts into dialogue with the immersive, sensory feel of the jungle. Images and sounds do not produce meaning independently of context, and the films, works, installations, or artworks are precisely the first and most important context for those images and sounds. As Janet Wolff argues in the nay-saying epilogue

to *Beyond Text?*, "the power of images… is a power which is socially and culturally given to them. The language of animism, mobilized to confrontational effect…is a metaphorical language."[40]

Phytographia, the language of plants, like the thinking of trees, provides valuable tools for moving beyond the epistemological violence endemic to Amazonian cinema. If the epic failures of visionary explorers such as Chagnon and Herzog can be overcome, it demands new modes of seeing, hearing, and knowing. For this, we need to heed more closely to the textual experiments of moving image artists.

Notes

1 For a cogent, sustained critique of the participatory and observational modes of documentary practice, please see Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
2 Bill Nichols, "What Really Happened: A Reassessment of the Ax Fight," in *Timothy Asch and Ethnographic Film*, ed. E.D. Lewis (London: Routledge 2003), 236.
3 Daniele Bouchard, "Communities of Ruin: Humanitarian Violence and the Amazon's Uncontacted Tribes," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 1 (2017): 65.
4 Bouchard, "Communities of Ruin," 66.
5 Patricia Vieira, "Phytofables: Tales of the Amazon," *Journal of Lusophone Studies* 1, no. 2 (2016): 116–34, 120.
6 Vieira, "Phytofables," 118.
7 Vieira, "Phytofables," 126.
8 Vieira, "Phytofables," 133.
9 Baumgarten traveled to the Amazon in 1978, where he shot several short films that have been exhibited in an installation format titled *Señores Naturales/Yãnomãmi* (1980) as well as a photo series called *Makunaíma* (1980).
10 Claude Levi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes: Introduction to a Science of Mythology,* trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).
11 Peggy Gale has detailed these references in her article "Lothar Baumgarten's The Origin of the Night," *Parachute* 43 (June–August 1986): 4–9.
12 Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 7.
13 Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 22.
14 Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 227.
15 Felix Guattari writes, "Discourse, or any discursive chain, thus becomes the bearer of a non-discursivity which, like a stroboscopic trace, nullifies the play of distinctive oppositions at the level of both content and form of expression." Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (London: Athalone Press, 2000), 38.
16 Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 186.
17 Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 183.
18 Patrícia Vieira, "*Phytographia*: Literature as Plant Writing," in *The Language of Plants*, ed. Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 225.

19 Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and the Language of Man" [1916], in *Selected Writings*, *Vol. 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 73, cited by Vieira, *Phytographia*, 225.
20 Benjamin, "On Language," 73.
21 Benjamin, "On Language," 72.
22 Vieira, "*Phytographia*,"216.
23 James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 24.
24 Tom Graham, interview with Ciro Guerra, "Jungle Fever," *Sight and Sound* 26, no. 7 (July 2016): 42.
25 Graham, "Jungle Fever," 42.
26 Although it did not win an Academy Award, *Embrace of the Serpent* won a dozen other awards around the world for best film, best cinematography, and best foreign film and was a legitimate hit on the festival circuit in 2015 and 2016.
27 Graham, "Jungle Fever," 43.
28 *Embrace of the Serpent*, 2015 dir. Ciro Guerra DVD (Oscilloscope Blu-ray).
29 *Making Embrace of the Serpent*, Special Feature on the DVD.
30 See http://www.aagua.net/Amoahiki for a video of *Amoahiki*.
31 Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (New York: Continuum, 2008), 67.
32 Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, 48–49.
33 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 34.
34 Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 22.
35 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2.
36 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 10.
37 Robert Cox, Andrew Irving, and Christopher Wright, "Introduction: The Sense of the Senses," in *Beyond Text: Critical Practices and Sensory Anthropology*, ed. Robert Cox, Andrew Irving, and Christopher Wright (Manchester UK: Manchester University Press, 2016), 7. This collection includes an interview with Lucien Castaing Taylor, who has his own account of sensory ethnography (about making *Sweetgrass* [2009]): "Our interest was skewed towards the affective colouration and the embodied engagement with the world rather than with understanding every word." Lucien Castaing-Taylor, "*Sweetgrass:* 'Baaaah. Bleeeeet,'" in Cox, Irving, and Wright, *Beyond Text?*, 152. The title of his essay is indicative of his resistance toward language.
38 Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," in *The Performance Studies Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. Henry Bial and Sara Brady (New York: Routledge, 2016), 38.
39 Conquergood, "Performance Studies," 43.
40 Janet Wolff, "After Cultural Theory: The Power of Images, the Lure of Immediacy," in Cox, Irving, and Wright, *Beyond Text?*, 193.