Towards Non-human Personhood: Relational Animism and the Moving Image

Bogna M. Konior / Ph.D. Thesis Project[1]
Hong Kong Baptist University

The task of imagining an alternative to modernity and its inherent anthropocentrism is an especially pressing matter in an epoch that natural scientists label 'the Anthropocene',[2] where human relation to the so-called natural environment on one hand, and technological advancement on the other forms the crux of critical, artistic, and activist inquiry. Marked by human impact on the seemingly separate nonhuman realm, the Anthropocene demands new ways of thinking and acting that critically explore and re-imagine the entanglement of human and nonhuman *actants*. Through highlighting the impossibility of asking ethically relevant questions without considering the nonhuman, the Anthropocene also invites a re-consideration of the purpose and politics of art. The urgency of this matter was the starting point of this project, which operates at the intersection of moving image studies and non-anthropocentric politics from the angle of contemporary anthropological theory.

If, as Bruno Latour[3] and fellow anthropologists such as Philippe Descola[4] or Nurit Bird-David[5] propose, the ontological assumptions that modernity presupposes as axiomatic are only one way of categorizing and experiencing reality among others, then alternate worldviews, becomings, and existences could by their very alterity offer a possible solution. In my dissertation, I explore the usefulness of engaging with the relational potential of new animism[6] in critically evaluating the separatist ontology of modernity, based upon the binary dualism of nature and culture. Furthermore, I argue that speculative, aesthetic, affective, and formal properties of the moving image are indispensible in speculatively

[1] Ph.D. thesis supervised by Professor LO Kwai-Cheung. For information: bognakonior@googlemail.com

[2] Jan Zalasiewicz and others, 'Are we now living the Anthropocene?', *GSA Today*, 18.2 (February 2008), pp. 4–8.

[3] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1999).

[4] Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[5] Nurit Bird-David, 'Animism revisited: Personhood, environment, and relational epistemology', *Current Anthropology*, 40.S1 (February 1999), pp. 67–91.

[6] Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

imagining animistic futures. Perhaps it is precisely from this periphery that we can observe the ethos of the Anthropos rising — and falling.

Yet, what is animism, an 'ontological anarchy' or 'the ghost that hunts modernity'?[7] In *Beyond Nature and Culture*, Descola maps out four ontologies — animism, naturalism, totemism, and analogism in order to account for the ways in which humans and nonhumans live the relations between them. Descola systematizes these relations on the basis of enacted similarity and dissimilarity between humans and non-humans. Naturalism, based on a strict division of the natural from the cultural is the ontology of modernity: humans, as the sole possessor of any interiority (culture) are only by virtue of their material bodies connected to the non-human world (nature), which itself is devoid of an interior. In this ontology, representation and meaning separate humans from the nonhuman world. On the contrary, in animism, humans and non-humans share an interiority — the possibility of becoming persons through engaging in relational practice that cuts across the nature/culture division.

In contrast to the loaded terms stereotypically associated with animism, such as 'spirits', 'ghosts', 'shamans', 'supernatural' or 'life forces', personhood is the least burdened with the oppressive politics of the nineteenth century anthropology. To approach animism as practice rather than belief is to vacate the territory of transcendental commitment to a world distant from ours, populated with anthropomorphic spirits and vengeful ghosts. Rather than that, animism as practice rooted in relationality highlights the immanent entanglement of human and nonhuman actors in the here and now. This, in turn, accentuates the vital role of creative practices, such as art, philosophy and activism, in laying groundwork for a politics beyond anthropocentrism — a politics that the Anthropocene pressingly demands.

Can animism help us think a post-naturalist cinema? According to Descola, '[the arts] enjoy a certain degree of freedom, which affords the possibility of stepping into different ontologies',[8] while for Felix Guattari, animism is the condition that brings about 'aesthetic and affective events that [could] recompose the world'.[9] Indeed, cinema theory provides multiple considerations of the medium's ability to world-build and fabulate; to viscerally immerse in new worlds. As film philosopher Patricia Pisters states, referring to the work of Gilles Deleuze, 'cinema is not an illusion of reality but a reality of illusions'.[10] Among various scholarly approaches, the idea that the cinema is an ontological vehicle for thought rather than a representation of reality runs throughout the history of cinema theory; for some it is a matter of formalism and for others a

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[7] Anselm Franke, 'Introduction', *e-flux*, 36, (July 2012) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/introduction%E2%80%94%E2%80%9Canimism%E2%80%9D/> [accessed 6 March 2016].
[8] Eduardo Kohn, 'A Conversation with Philippe Descola', *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, 7.2, Article 1 (2009).
[9] Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 86.
[10] Patricia Pisters, *The Neuro-Image: A Deleuzian Filmphilosophy of Digital Screen Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 65.

necessary space for political speculation.[11] While fleshing out the connections between relationality and film philosophy would demand a separate dissertation, I take as especially relevant the instances when film theory explicitly engages with animism or other non-modern ontologies. From Jean Epstein's assertion that all of cinema is animistic[12] to Rachel Moore's *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*,[13] Raul Ruiz's meditation 'on a shamanic cinema'[14] and, more recently, Sarah Cooper's *The Soul of Film Theory*,[15] film theory has stressed the political potential of non-modern ontologies as enabling an enchantment that cuts through modernity's dualistic reductions. Following Moore's statement that 'the cinema is for the moderns as magic is to the primitives',[16] it would seem that *all* engagement with the cinema is a mode of self-anthropology, an anthropology of the moderns. Capturing and generating animist stances, the cinema reveals its position as an ethical and speculative agent, investigating and proposing remedies to anthropocentric modernity and humanism.

Inter-disciplinary in its scope, this dissertation seeks to present a possible conjunction of the ontological turn in contemporary anthropology, from which it borrows the concept of animism, and moving image studies. While the sizeable field of visual ethnography continues to produce insight on stylistic and aesthetic features of ethnographic films — often in relation to realism — little research has been generated on how fiction or experimental films can touch on ontological questions that anthropology currently investigates. Although a number of anthropological studies deal with the question of perception,[17] cinema is rarely used as a thought model. Through a diffractive reading of anthropological and cinema theory as well as case study analysis of selected films, this project proposes that an engagement with the moving image through an animist lens can produce ethical insight into human relations with the nonhuman world.

[11] See, for example: Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Daniel Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); John Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

[12] Jean Epstein, 'Le Cinématographe vu de l'Etna', in *Jean Epstein. Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. by Sarah Keller and Jason Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), pp. 287–307.

[13] Rachel Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

[14] Raul Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema* (Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 1995), pp. 73–91.

[15] Sarah Cooper, *The Soul of Film Theory* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

[16] Moore, p. 12.

[17] See, for example: Rane Willerslev, *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood Among the Siberian Yukagharis* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2007).