

Article

Animist Phytofilm: Plants in Amazonian Indigenous Filmmaking

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Abstract: Early films about plants offer a glimpse into the behavior of vegetal life, which had hitherto remained hidden from humans. Critics have praised this animistic capacity of cinema, allowing audiences to see the movement of beings that appeared to be inert and lifeless. With these reflections as a starting point, this article examines the notion of animist cinema. I argue that early movies still remained beholden to the goal of showing the multiple ways in which plants resemble humans, a tendency we often still find today in work on critical plant studies. I discuss the concept of animism in the context of Amazonian Indigenous societies as a springboard into an analysis of movies by Indigenous filmmakers from the region that highlight the plantness of human beings. I end the essay with an analysis of Ika Muru Huni Kuin's film *Shuku Shukuwe* as an example of animist phytocinema.

Keywords: plant cinema; Amazonian cinema; animist

1. Plants as Humans in Early Cinema

Early cinema was fascinated by plants. The technology that made film possible offered a window into a realm that had hitherto eluded human perception. Scientists were quick to realize the potential of the new medium to enhance their understanding of the vegetal world. German botanist Wilhelm Pfeffer, for instance, made four films between 1898 and 1900 showing the growth of flowers in an accelerated manner as part of his studies on the movement of plants. British naturalist and pioneer nature documentary filmmaker Frank Percy Smith also shows the movement in plants in his *The Birth of a Flower* (1910), which focuses on the blossoming of different flower buds, including hyacinths, crocuses, tulips, daffodils, snowdrops, narcissi, lilacs, anemones, and roses. The intertitles of the movie indicate the actual amount of time it took for each flower to blossom (from 1 h to 3 days), therefore highlighting the artificiality of the temporal compression needed to show multiple flowering buds in the less than 7 min of the film.¹

When it comes to fiction, plants were also running the show in many early films. French director Gaston Velle made two short movies that, akin to the works of his more scientifically inclined predecessors, also highlight the growth of plants. In *La Fée aux Fleurs* (*The Fairy with Flowers*, 1905), a woman makes leaves and flowers magically appear at her window, to a point when her image is replaced by an expanding, blossoming flower bud, only to reappear again inside the flower. Velle's *Les Fleurs animées* (*The Animated Flowers*, 1906) takes the topic of human–plant metamorphosis even further by depicting several dancing flower-women exacting revenge on a man who destroyed a beautiful flower. They drug the man and cover him in soil and water until he turns into a flowerless plant. The long-established link between women and flowers—a trope that goes back to poetry and iconography, and that is reflected in many women's names²—is upheld in the film, the man being portrayed as a plant that shoots straight up, with clear sexual connotations. Still, the movie upends traditional gender roles by depicting the flower-women as the drivers of the action, who impose their will upon the unsuspecting man. In Velle's work, plants are openly anthropomorphized. His films blur the boundaries between humans and flora through multiple metamorphoses, thereby ascribing human physical and psychological



Citation: Vieira, P.I.L. Animist Phytofilm: Plants in Amazonian Indigenous Filmmaking. *Philosophies* **2022**, *7*, 138. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies7060138>

Academic Editor: Sarah Cooper

Received: 4 November 2022

Accepted: 30 November 2022

Published: 8 December 2022

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attributes to plants (Dubois 171–74) [1]. The gist of these and of many other early films about plants might be summarized as an effort to show that, despite their apparent sessility, plants are quite similar to animals. They move, grow, and have their own aspirations, which just happen to unfold at a slower pace than that of humans and other animals.

The effort to emphasize the continuities between plant and human existence we find in Velle's work also clearly stands out in Max Reichmann's critically acclaimed *Blumenwunder* (*The Miracle of Flowers*, 1926). Time is again of the essence here, as the film reveals the gap supposedly dividing the animal and the vegetal realms to be merely a matter of a temporal misalignment to be disentangled through cinematic means. The movie's intertitles explain that 24 h in the life of humans are equivalent to a second for a plant and, through the use of time-lapse technique, it translates plant time into human temporal dimensions, therefore revealing the "rhythms", "struggles", and even "feelings" of plants. The nymph Flora serves as a guide who teaches a group of children—here standing for humanity as a whole—carelessly plucking flowers how similar plant behavior is to that of humans. Interspersed with images of plants are dance sequences that mimic the accelerated plants' movements.³ Vegetal life, the movie seems to be telling its viewers, is just like you and me, except that it acts in slow motion.

Nowhere is the anthropomorphization of flora in early cinema clearer than in *Flowers and Trees* (1932), part of Walt Disney's Silly Symphony series. The short film draws on the literary genre of the fable, which presents animals with human traits, but deploys the technique of animation to enliven plants that display human-like behavior. It centers on a love triangle that involves a nasty-looking "male" tree, who vies for the attention of a beautiful "female" tree with another "male" tree.⁴ The two "male" protagonists engage in a duel and, when the decrepit tree loses, it ignites a fire to get back at the two lovers. Rage, jealousy, and revenge, all quintessentially human feelings, are attributed to the personified trees, who are also able to walk, dance, play music, and so on.

Early films such as the ones we have briefly discussed offer a glimpse into the alternative temporality of vegetal life, thus underlining that human kinetic tempo is not the sole measure of animation.⁵ Plants are as much living, volitional forms of existence as their animal counterparts, the only barrier to understand this being that the human perceptual apparatus is blind to their activity. Cinema appears as a sophisticated kind of spectacles able to correct this plant "blindness".⁶ The movies, the art of movement par excellence, manipulate plant time to render vegetal motion visible.

While these films place flora and its different pace at the core of cinematic art, they nevertheless continue to use humanity as a measure against which its alterity is outlined. The films show plants *as* humans, that is to say, they transform plant temporality to adapt it to the perception of human viewers; highlight the similarities between plant and human movement through metamorphosis, dance, and animation; and, more broadly, reveal that the hitherto unseen life of plants is surprisingly similar to that of humankind. It is as if plants were a riddle that could now be solved by the new techniques of cinema and, when finally looking at them face to face, humans ended up contemplating another version of themselves.

If I am perhaps overstating the human solipsistic leanings in the depiction of plants in early cinema, it is because I believe that, *mutatis mutandis*, these movies point to a core feature of current thinking about plants, namely, the tendency to show that they are very much like *Homo sapiens*. The secret that plants have been hiding—a common notion in popular books about vegetal life⁷—turns out to be that they "think" (Marder) [2], display a certain "behavior" and "intelligence" (Trewavas) [7], are cable of "sensing" and "communicating" (Karban) [8] through a "language" (Gagliano, Ryan and Vieira) [9], have a "mind" (Ryan, Vieira and Gagliano) [10] and perhaps even a soul, similar to the rest of us animals. Apparently, they are also politically active and in possession of a "revolutionary genius" (Mancuso, *Revolutionary*) [11] capable of forming a "nation" (Mancuso, *Nation*) [12]. This sample catalogue of features attributed to flora in the titles of some recent books about vegetal existence signals a long-overdue acknowledgment that plants are active agents in

the interaction with their environment, which they adapt to but also shape according to their needs. Still, it is noteworthy that, in the books alluded to in this paragraph, plant life is predominantly described by resorting to human-centered vocabulary.

The recognition that vegetal life behaves intelligently, communicates with its kin and with other species, and has a will and a mind of its own traces its roots to the growing interest in botany from the eighteenth century onwards, a significant marker of which was Charles Darwin's book *The Power of Movement in Plants* [13] (1880/2010), written in collaboration with his son Francis. Early films about plants come in the wake of these studies on flora, putting the new medium at the service of science, as well as of the curiosity of the general public.⁸ The explosion in the past couple of decades of scientific research in the field of so-called "plant neurobiology",⁹ as well as the attention paid to plants within the environmental humanities, including in plant philosophy, historical and cultural botany, and critical plant studies, has brought plants to the limelight and placed them at the center of broader discussions about environmental issues, from anthropocentrism to the Anthropocene.

While I agree that plants rightfully deserve pride of place in contemporary thought, the emphasis placed on the similarities between plants, humans, and other animals, which we find both in early films about vegetal life and in more contemporary plant studies, gives me pause for thought. To be sure, by placing the approach of early cinema to flora together with recent research on plants in the same bag, I am running the risk of a gross overgeneralization. And yet the growing protagonism of plants in human cultural life over the last century or so appears to have required that they are perceived as acting more and more like people, displaying human-like features. Even though there is nothing inherently wrong about the anthropomorphization of plants, which, as I have argued elsewhere, could be a means to underscore the continuities between humans and other forms of life (see Vieira, "Plant Art", 91) [16], it should not be deployed to erase distinctively vegetal ways of inhabiting the world.¹⁰ Could the tendency to anthropomorphize plants not be another form of the same old anthropocentrism in a thinly veiled disguise? Is humanity not just widening the circle of those allowed into its fold—from white men to women and children; then racial, sexual, and other minorities; later animals; and now plants—instead of radically opening human thinking to truly different forms of existence? Is the version of plants depicted in contemporary thought not portraying vegetal life as more of the same?

Responding to the challenge to "think cinema—with plants" and, implicitly, to think plants with cinema, put forth in this special issue of *Philosophies*, I would like to focus on a different portrayal of plants in film in the remainder of this essay. What if we were not to consider plants as persons, as Matthew Hall suggests we do in his homonymous book, but, rather, see persons as plants [20]? What would be the ontological outcomes of such a shift in perspective, as well as the epistemological consequences of this inversion in the human approach to vegetal life?

In my reflections on a cinema that thinks with plants and highlights the plant inflections of human life, I turn to contemporary Indigenous Amazonian filmmaking. Grounded in a region where vegetal beings are all-important and grounded on everyday, lived experience with flora, this cinema underscores the affinity between human communities and the plants with whom they share their existence. I analyze the film *Shuku Shukuwe* (*Life is Forever*, 2012) directed by Ika Muru Huni Kuin [3], who belongs to the Huni Kuin Indigenous people¹¹ living in the Brazilian state of Acre, as an example of cinema that underlines the indebtedness of humans to plant modes of being in the world. Part of the project Live Book (*Livro Vivo*) developed in the São Joaquim Centro de Memória village, which documents Indigenous medicinal practices, *Shuku Shukuwe* depicts the Huni Kuin's close connection with plants, whom they regard as their ancestors and guides.¹²

Before embarking on a close analysis of Indigenous Amazonian filmmaking in *Shuku Shukuwe*, though, a more in-depth reflection on the issue of plant time in its relation to cinematic motion is in order. As we have seen in the early movies on plants mentioned above, the vitality of flora came to light through a cinematic manipulation of vegetal time, which

enabled humans to contemplate plant activity. Early cinema disclosed plant movement and animation, thus bringing back to the fore the topic of animism, an anthropological concept that gained a new lease on life. As Teresa Castro points out, “cinema [. . .] was thought, since its beginnings [. . .] as an animist medium, essentially thanks to its capacity to animate (or re-animate) the beings and things in the world” (48) [14].¹³ Early film theorists, most notably Jean Epstein, understood that, with cinema, “a surprising animism is being born”, since “we know, because we see them, that we are surrounded by non-human forms of existence” (Epstein, quoted in Castro 51) [14]. How do disparate films express a plant’s animating principle, or, going back to the word’s Latin roots, its *anima*, enlivening breath, or soul? And in which ways do Indigenous people, to whom the term “animist” traditionally applied, portray the animation of plants differently from the images issuing from Western movie-making conventions? In the next section, I reflect upon the term “animism” as it applies to cinematic depictions of plants, and will then, in the final section of this article, discuss *Shuku Shukuwe* as animist plant cinema.

2. Naturalist and Animist Films

The term “animism” was first used with its current meaning by Eduard B. Tylor, one of the founding scholars of anthropology, in his magnum opus *Primitive Culture* (1871). The definition of the concept has been the subject of heated debate since Tylor brought it into academic discourse¹⁴, but it can generally be understood as the attribution of a soul or spirit to non-humans, including animals, plants, features of the landscape, objects, or otherworldly beings.¹⁵ While he considered animism to be an archaic, childlike, and utterly erroneous belief, Tylor saw in it the root of all religious sentiment (vol. 1, 328) [22].¹⁶ In fact, he built his theory of animism on the basis of the spiritualist movement of the late-nineteenth century, which he studied first hand (Bird-David 69) [23].¹⁷ The notion of animism was therefore, from the outset, a projection of modern conceptions onto “savage” people, who were identified as the origin of more advanced forms of thought.

When used by early film critics, the word “animism” loosely retained the meaning Tylor attributed to it, but it was given a positive spin. The images of beings such as plants that appeared to the naked eye to be unmoving and unfeeling were captured by the cinematic lens and reworked, disclosing to viewers that entities that seemed inert were in fact as alive as humans. For early film critics, animism, far from a misguided notion, meant that, through the power of cinema, forms of existence such as plants could be recognized as animated. Castro points to the paradox of employing film, which results from techno-scientific modernity, to awaken an animist mindset: “cinema is the fruit of [. . .] technological civilization, the spearhead of mechanical objectivity [. . .] and yet [. . .] the images of cinema do not cease to rouse other forms of seeing. Instead of disenchanting, cinema re-enchants the world: it reveals the interiority of animals, plants, objects, meteorological phenomena, machines, etc”. (44) [14]. A hallmark of modern objectivity, cinema purportedly mechanically reproduced reality through a flow of objective, dispassionate images—think of Dziga Vertov’s *Kino-eye*. And yet cinematic images ended up demonstrating the irreducibility of subjectivity, both that of the filmmaker and that of the ones filmed by the movie camera.

For Castro, cinema “invites the spectator, a modern being part excellence, to reconnect with modes of thinking that are not quite ‘rational’”. “Differently put”, she continues, “an anthropology of the cinematographic medium as a phenomenon of modernity reminds us that we have never been completely modern” (44) [14]. Castro evokes the renowned book by Bruno Latour to underline that cinema takes spectators back to a pre-modern, not fully rational mindset that she equates with animism [24]. While the jury on whether Western modernity was truly “modern” is still out—Latour’s definition of being modern, predicated on the full separation between nature and culture, subject and object, humans and things, suggests that modernity never existed—Castro’s correlation between animism and irrationality is a little hasty. For if peoples not steeped in the Western cultural matrix may not be “modern” in the Latourean sense of the term, they are therefore not necessarily irrational,

nor is the animism of cinema a ticket back to an older and somehow unadulterated form of relating to non-humans. Diverse as their specific cosmovisions¹⁸ clearly are, animist peoples generally espouse an alternative way of experiencing the world—some might say that they experience a different world or worlds, in other words, a pluriverse—that does not regard non-human forms of existence as lifeless matter ready to be exploited, considering them instead as sharing key features of life, intelligence, and sociality with humans. Given the current rates of environmental destruction, such an approach appears to be much more rational—not to mention modern—than what goes for modernity in contemporary thought.

It is because of its potential to prompt a reconsideration of the current, Western-style, extractivist approach to non-humans that the term animism has received a windfall in the past few decades. A “symbol designating new ways of thinking and of staging relations with non-humans”, animism has become, in the words of anthropologist Perig Pitrou, “the marker of a new modernity, conscious of the disasters caused by the ecological crisis and concerned with establishing a more harmonious connection with the living world” (25) [25]. It is telling that a call to recover this mode of thought has been heard from several quarters, from Nurit Bird-David’s effort to “revisit” animism [23], through Tim Ingold’s plea to “re-animate thought” [26] and Isabel Stengers appeal to “reclaim” animist mindsets [27], to Graham Harvey’s sustained efforts to rescue animism from its association with the racist, colonialist mentality that plagued its use in early anthropological studies, ascribing to a new animism the potential to teach humans how to “act respectfully” towards other beings (xi) [21].

While an appraisal of the critical fortune of the term animism, of its jump back into the fray of contemporary anthropological debate and of its larger contribution to environmental thought lies outside the scope of this essay, an in-depth reflection on what Castro called the “animist faculty” (44) [14] of cinema is central to understand the depiction of plants in film. Was early cinema’s fixation on plants truly a marker of an animist approach to the vegetal world? And what about movies about plants made in the context of animist societies? Are these similarly animist films?

Anthropologist Philip Descola, who has written extensively on Indigenous peoples from the Amazon, distinguishes in his later work between naturalism and animism, which he considers to be opposites.¹⁹ He regards naturalism, the default mode of experiencing the world in Western modernity, as predicated on “a discontinuity of interiorities and a continuity of physicalities”, according to which all beings partake of the “universal laws of matter and life” that provide the basis for “conceptualizing [. . .] the role and the diversity of the cultural expressions of humanity” (172) [28]. Conversely, in animism, the way in which the peoples of the Amazon and many other non-Western societies relate to the world, all beings share the same culture or interiority, their dissimilarities resulting from their variegated physical traits (121–22) [28].

Descola’s definitions of naturalism and animism result from a fruitful dialogue with the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who put forth the distinction between multiculturalism and multinaturalism in his work on Amerindian Amazonian communities. Viveiros de Castro points out that, for Amazonian peoples, “*the original common condition of both humans and animals [and plants, I would add] is not animality but, rather, humanity.* The great separation reveals not so much culture distinguishing itself from nature as nature distancing itself from culture” (465) [29]. The corollary of this approach is a “multinaturalist” ontology that radically differs from the Western “multiculturalist” one. While multiculturalism is “founded on the mutually implied unity of nature and multiplicity of cultures—the former guaranteed by the objective universality of body and substance, the latter generated by the subjective particularity of spirit and meaning—the Amerindian conception presumes a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity” (466) [29].²⁰

Viveiros de Castro adopted the term “perspectivism” to define Amerindian Amazonian animism that views each form of existence as espousing its own particular perspective on the world. As he puts it, “Amerindians postulate metaphysical continuity and physical discontinuity. The metaphysical continuity results in animism; the physical discontinuity

(between the beings of the cosmos), in perspectivism" (475) [29]. According to a perspectivist outlook, beings do not represent the world in different ways; it is the world itself that differs: "all beings perceive ("represent") the world in the same way. What varies is the world that they see. [. . .] Being people in their own sphere, nonhumans see things just as people do. But the things that they see are different" (472) [29]. Nonhumans and humans alike "impose the same categories and values on reality" (472) [29] but contemplate this reality through divergent lenses. There is no "one world" in perspectivism, only a multiplicity of points of view shaped by the relations established between different beings, including humans, plants, animals, rivers, rocks, the wind, and so forth.²¹

To unpack Descola's and Viveiros de Castro's dense and somewhat counterintuitive insights and their implications for an interpretation of different films on plants, we can focus on the issue of personhood. In a naturalist, multiculturalist Western worldview, humanity is the core of the definition of personhood, non-humans being called "persons" only insofar as they resemble the model of a person, which is humankind. Non-humans are made of the same bodily matter as humanity but are only said to have culture if they evince forms of behavior close to human ones. In an animist, multinaturalist Amerindian context, in turn, the expression "personhood" is a misnomer, since it refers to a body of attributes that all beings share, not just those usually identified as "people". As Harvey puts it, "[a]nimists are those who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human" (xi) [21].²² In other words, humanity is just an example of what it means to be a person: a kind of people among many others, including tree-persons, fish-persons, jaguar-persons, and so on, all of whom have their own cultural and social lives.

Despite claims about its animist power, I consider that early cinema's efforts at showing the extent to which plants act like humans remain bound to a naturalist paradigm. The films highlight that plants not only share key elements of their physiology with humanity but also display other traits of human "personhood", such as the ability to move; to strive for a goal; and, in a generous reading, perhaps even to have an incipient form culture. The very same naturalism is the background for many debates on vegetal life both in the field of botany and in so-called critical plant studies that aim to reveal the extent to which plants display forms of behavior similar to those of animals. The recent move to grant rights to certain plants, for example in a country such as Switzerland, is a case in point. While offering plants legal protection is laudable, these new subjects of rights are construed following the prototype of the human individual, vegetal life acquiring rights because it approximates this ideal.

Movies by Amazonian Indigenous directors are, in my view, instantiations of truly animist filmmaking. These works highlight the similarities between humans and the plant-persons upon whom their lives hinge. In the remainder of this article, I analyze the film *Shuku Shukuwe* as an example of animist cinema that underlines the plantness within humans and reveals the indebtedness of human communities to the vegetal beings that determine their physical and communal existence.

3. Humans as Plants in Indigenous Cinema

The emergence of Indigenous filmmaking in the last few decades has resulted in a welcome break away from the reification of Indigenous communities in cinema. In the past, fictional films such as Westerns often portrayed Indigenous peoples in a conventional manner, devoid of complexity, as stand-ins for a timeless, Rousseauian "noble savage" or as symbols of violent, war-prone barbarians. Early documentary movies, in turn, focused on the exoticism of non-Western societies and their customs, frequently conflated with the unfamiliar and potentially threatening flora and fauna of far-flung locations, to garner the attention of movie goers. While ethnographic cinema strove to overcome the worst excesses of an exoticized gaze upon Indigenous peoples, it remained bound to a mostly Western view of Indigenous foreignness.

In the case of the Amazon, there is a long tradition of stereotypical cinematic depictions of societies from the area. Early movies about the region tend to revolve around the topic

of a voyage of a group of Western, white males into the rainforest, where they encounter countless perils, which often include aggressive Indigenous communities.²³ The series of travelogues by the Marquis de Wavrin about his expeditions in Amazonia from 1913 to 1937, including *Au Pays du Scalp (In the Scalp Country, 1931)*, adopt this narrative plot of a journey from civilization into tropical barbarism.²⁴ Later ethnographic films concentrate on the history and cultural specificities of different Amazonian Indigenous groups. Jesco von Puttkamer's series of short documentaries from the 1960s for the BBC series *Travelers' Tales* is a good example of movies that seek to bring footage of remote peoples to a Western audience. In *Contact with a Hostile Tribe (1965)*, Puttkamer accompanies the Indigenous rights advocates Orlando and Cláudio Villas-Boas in their first contact with the Txicão (Ikpeng) Indigenous people. The melodramatic title of the movie notwithstanding, it mostly documents the daily routines of members from this community. More recently, there has been a plethora of fictional and documentary productions about Amazonia that depict the local natural world and Indigenous peoples by adopting an environmentalist outlook. Ginger Kathrens's *Spirits of the Rainforest (1994)* about the Manu National Park in Peru, home to the Machiguenga people, or the first season of the Brazilian series *Aruanas*, from 2019, portray Indigenous groups as siding with conservationists in their fight to protect the Amazonian environment. Still, Indigenous characters are rarely the center of the plot in such works and tend to be depicted as representatives of their community's customs and values.²⁵

If Indigenous people traditionally have had little or no agency in movies about the Amazon, the rise of a group of Indigenous directors from the region in the past few decades has allowed the voice of local communities to reach the silver screen. The Video in the Villages (VÍdeo nas Aldeias) project, created in 1986 to support the struggle for legal recognition of Brazilian, Indigenous territorial, and cultural rights, has played a key role in training a new generation of Indigenous film professionals. By offering Indigenous people access to audiovisual forms of expression and by backing Indigenous film production, the NGO has supported the creation of over 70 Indigenous films since its inception. It has also encouraged the financing of Indigenous films by other public and private cultural institutions and placed Brazilian Indigenous cinema in the map of the country's cultural life.²⁶

A significant part of this recent Indigenous filmography adopts a strong activist stance. Consider, for instance, Kamikia Kisêdjê's *Carta Kisêdjê para o Rio+20 (Kisêdjê Letter for Rio+20, 2012)*, a manifesto against deforestation and the contamination of Amazonian waters by the runoff of large agribusiness ventures made to commemorate the 20 year anniversary of the Earth Summit organized by the United Nations in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, or the 2020 short *Equilíbrio (Balance)* by the young filmmaker Yawar Muniz Wanderley, which reproduces the discourse of Kaapora, an Indigenous spiritual entity that criticizes the destruction of the rainforest. Such works that emphasize political activism certainly are central to lending visibility to the fight for the protection and demarcation of Indigenous ancestral lands, a significant group of Amazonian Indigenous movies places activism as a backdrop and foregrounds, instead, the daily lives of communities and their cosmologies, shaped by a close interaction with non-human beings. This is the case of *Shuku Shukuwe* that explores the bond between human-people and plant-people in the context of Huni Kuin society.

The very first images of *Shuku Shukuwe* concentrate on plants. After a close-up of out-of-focus brown soil, the camera tilts up through undergrowth foliage and stops at a large green leaf with four black worms on top. A voice off begins to recount the Huni Kuin creation narrative and spectators learn that the first being to exist was a tree "born out of the cream of the earth", upon which Yuxibu placed four worms. Only then were the air, the light, the stars, and the rest of the natural world created. The primacy of vegetal life goes hand in hand with a clear awareness of the human dependence upon non-humans. Once the earth "wore the uniform of living beings", the Huni Kuin could "wear the uniform of their ornaments". Human life is thus not the corollary of a Genesis tale but appears as a kind of afterthought that is made possible by the existence of everything else. It is probably

to represent the derivative nature of human life that no human beings appear in the initial sequence of the film.

The creation of the world is tied to the all-important chant “shuku shukuwe” that lends the film its title. According to Huni Kuin tradition, it was the mulateiro tree (*Calycophyllum spruceanum*) that first heard the song, followed by the Brazil nut tree (*Bertholletia excelsa*) and other trees that shed the outside of their bark. This is explained by a man who appears on screen after an extreme close-up of a mulateiro tree trunk, followed by a pedestal shot that moves down the trunk, and by a camera zoom out and tilt up the same plant. The man is filmed from the back, in a low angle shot, looking at and speaking directly to the imposing tree that towers right in front of him. He says that, after coming to the trees, the powerful chant was heard by snakes, shrimp, and other forest animals that shed their skin. Not only does this scene begin with a tree, but the plant also occupies most of the screen throughout. The man, who never faces the camera, has the tree as his only interlocutor during his monologue. The might and centrality of the plant in this sequence visually translates its import for the Huni Kuin as the first recipient of the wisdom conveyed by the song.

The correlation between shedding the outer layer of bark or skin and hearing “shuku shukuwe” is gleaned from the scene that immediately precedes the one about the mulateiro tree. In it an older man, sitting on a hammock with a large leaf around his head, further leaves on his lap and other plant adornments, constantly repeats “shuku shukuwe”, only to be asked by a child, hidden behind vegetation, what that chant is for (Figure 1). The man, who seems to have acquired his wisdom from the plants that drape him, replies “shuku shukuwe is life forever”. But the child is insistent and continues asking about the purpose of the expression, to which the man finally answers that it is “so that life is brief”. The man’s two seemingly contradictory statements teach a valuable lesson about existence: life itself is forever, but the lives of different beings are brief and, far from this being a misfortune, such transience should be welcome. The mulateiro and other trees that shed their bark, together with animals that cast off their skin, have understood the significance of “shuku shukuwe”, namely, that transformation, metamorphosis, and renewal lie at the core of all life.



Figure 1. Still from *Shuku Shukuwe*.

Some of the singularities of *Shuku Shukuwe*’s depiction of plants and humans have by now become clear. The prominence of vegetal life in Huni Kuin’s cosmivision is expressed through various means, including a focus on plant characters, with humans often being

absent from the screen or relegated to the margins of the frame. When people appear center-stage, they are usually dressed in plant-based attire and/or positioned behind large plants so that their bodies appear to be almost indistinguishable from the vegetation of the rainforest. Humans invariably talk about plants or, on occasion, animals that are at the core of the filmic narrative. The centrality of plants in the movie is also conveyed by long, static takes and slow camera movements that cinematically mimic the vegetal mode of inhabiting a place and of experiencing time. *Shuku Shukuwe* makes it clear that vegetal life is essential for the plot, with human characters being secondary and dependent upon plant existence.

I interpret *Shuku Shukuwe* as an example of animist cinema that, instead of highlighting the multiple ways in which plants resemble humans, dwells on the idiosyncrasies of plant existence and strives to articulate vegetal life through cinematic language. Humans are shown as reliant upon flora, which they resemble by way of the body language and vegetal adornments they display in the movie. Humanity is not only subordinated to plants, but the Huni Kuin believe that they descend from plants, to whom they owe their lives, as we shall see momentarily.

True, one should be cautious not to see in films such as *Shuku Shukuwe* instantiations of a more authentic connection to the natural world mediated by a Romanticized notion of what an Indigenous cinematic approach might express. Still, it behooves viewers to recognize that Indigenous movies such as this one put forth a distinctive way of expressing the world that differs from the Western one—or, again, perhaps show a different world—and translate this vision into a novel, truly animistic filmic language. Indigenous filmmakers, trained in a medium developed at the heart of Western modernity, have had to navigate cinematic conventions and adapt this artform to convey new content and forms of seeing. The result, in the case of *Shuku Shukuwe*, is an animistic phytofilm about plant-persons and their interactions with humans.

The centerpiece of this animist plant movie comes towards the end in a sequence where viewers learn the origin of the different groups of Huni Kuin. A man hiding behind a large palm tree leaf narrates in a long static shot that, when the first Huni Kuin appeared, there was no death, and all lived in peace (Figure 2). This situation changed when women and men started to have relations, at a time when they used to eat the curdled blood of hunted animals. The animal blood transformed into different humans who then had children with the Huni Kuin.²⁷ Illness arose out of the intercourse between humans and animals through a process of contamination of human blood with that of animals. Thus far, this myth of origins displays many similarities with other descriptions of the fall of humans from a Golden Age into a period plagued by disease and conflict. Unlike the Biblical Edenic tale, though, the original sin here seems to have been hunting and associating with non-human animals. This might be interpreted as an allusion to the spread of zoonotic diseases and a cautionary tale against exposure to such disorders. More generally, though, the narrative implies that excessive contact with animals—becoming too animal-like—is harmful to humans. To live happily and peacefully, the Huni Kuin should have distanced themselves from animals and, one imagines, follow a plant-based diet that obviated the need to hunt.

The narrator continues to explain that, after the Huni Kuin fall from grace because of their association with animals, a shaman told the people that they had to turn into plants to save their community. Different Huni Kuin families metamorphosed into various plants, and an old woman, represented by a character who had been sitting silently while the narrator told the tale (Figure 2), was chosen to witness the transformation necessary “to cure us and so that we could live in peace”. The old woman learned about the properties of all the vegetal beings her people turned into and went to a nearby village, where her grandson lived, to impart this knowledge to him, who then passed it on to future generations. According to this narrative, redemption from an unhealthy consortium with animals came from becoming plant-like, which allowed peace and well-being to return to the Huni Kuin. Vegetal beings are the source of prosperity and healing, which clearly points to the importance of flora in Amazonian Indigenous medicine. The entire story

is told in the midst of the rainforest, with plants at the center of the screen, as a visual reminder of their pivotal role in the film.



Figure 2. Still from *Shuku Shukuwe*.

Shuku Shukuwe ends with close-ups of several plants interspersed with close-ups of people who clarify that they belong to the family of a specific plant and enumerate its different medicinal uses. The juxtaposition of shots of vegetal beings with those of humans emphasizes the ties between them, with each person underscoring their affiliation with a given plant community. In a telling image, the face of a woman is superimposed onto the leaves of the plant she identifies as part of her family (Figure 3). In another sequence a man, speaking from behind a plant, says “This bush here is Inu Bake [a plant family]. I am also Inu Baku”, thus affirming his identification with that plant (Figure 4). In the film, then, humans profess their descent from families of plants and take pride in their plantness, from which they derive their sense of belonging. This animistic phytofilm shows plants as communal beings and depicts vegetal life as the model for human society.

The significance of watching alternative ways to see reality, or, indeed, the expression of alternative realities on screen in a film such as *Shuku Shukuwe* cannot be overstated. The movie redresses the epistemic violence of decades of silencing Amazonian Indigenous communities and their practices. In the film, Indigenous people are no longer the object of a Western gaze but, rather, those in charge of the camera, offering their perspective on vegetal life in their region. Films like this one are made, first and foremost, for Indigenous peoples in order to keep their knowledge and traditions alive for younger generations. But they are also perceived by local communities as a means to bring Indigenous cosmovisions closer to non-Indigenous audiences.²⁸ *Shuku Shukuwe*'s is an example of truly animist cinema that depicts plants as a model and inspiration for human life, highlighting the plantness of human existence. The movie allows Western audiences to envision a more equitable, animist, and multinaturalist way relating to plants and to the natural environment as a whole, a vision particularly necessary at a time when the West has, in the words of Indigenous leader Ailton Krenak, run out of ideas to stave off the end of the world [4].



Figure 3. Still from *Shuku Shukuwe*.



Figure 4. Still from *Shuku Shukuwe*.

Funding: Research for this article was funded by the project ECO, financed by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 101002359). For more information: eco.ces.uc.pt.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: No conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 Another example of the early alliance between science and cinema to unravel the mysteries of plant life can be found in the films *Le Mouvement des Plantes* (*The Movement of Plants*, 1920) and *La Croissance des Végétaux* (*The Growth of Vegetals*, 1929) by Jean Comandon. The latter begins by referring to the manipulation of time in cinema, which allows humans to perceive details of plant life that had hitherto remained inaccessible: “Cinema, by accelerating the representation of very slow movements, makes them perceptible” (my translation).
- 2 The exception would be Narcissus, with his homoerotic connotations.
- 3 The dancers were directed by the choreographer Max Terpis and embodied the principles of expressionist dance popular in the 1920s and 1930s (Castro 71) [3].
- 4 I place the words “male” and “female” in quotation marks, as the movie clearly superimposes human gender divisions onto flora and endows each tree with markers that are meant to signal its appurtenance to a specific gender.
- 5 The featuring of plants as protagonists in these films is a welcome move away from all the literary and cinematic works in which plants remain in the background as part of the setting upon which the plot unfolds.
- 6 Plant “blindness” is a term used to refer to the human tendency to background plants and pay more attention to animals. For a discussion on this topic, see Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira, “Introduction”, viii [4].
- 7 For instance, Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird’s *The Secret Life of Plants* [5] or, more recently, Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees* [6].
- 8 For a more in-depth contextualization of early cinema on plants within scientific research on this subject, see Castro (55–64) [14].
- 9 The designation “plant neurobiology” is controversial within the scientific community, with some scientists arguing that, since plants do not have a brain with neurons, “neurobiology” is necessarily a misnomer when applied to vegetal life. For a summary of this controversy written for the lay person, see Pollan [15].
- 10 Several researchers have recently come to the defense of anthropomorphism, including Bennet (99) [17]; Karlsson (passim) [18]; and, in the context of plant studies, Ryan (103) [19].
- 11 The Huni Kuin, or “true people”, belong to the Pano linguistic family and live in the South-West of the Amazon rainforest, in the Brazilian state of Acre, and in the east of Peru, at the tropical foothills of the Andes, on the banks of the Juruá and Purus rivers and in the Javari valley. For more information on the Huni Kuin, see [https://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/Povo:Huni_Kuin_\(Kaxinaw%C3%A1\)#Identifica.C3.A7.C3.A3o](https://pib.socioambiental.org/pt/Povo:Huni_Kuin_(Kaxinaw%C3%A1)#Identifica.C3.A7.C3.A3o) (accessed on 2 December 2022.)
- 12 The Live Book Project was developed within the Huni Kuin communities living near River Jordão and, beyond the film, also resulted in the publication of a homonymous book. The film was produced with the support of the association Filmes de Quintal, in partnership with the Literaterras Transdisciplinary Study Group of the Federal University of Minas Gerais and with the National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage, part of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture and Education.
- 13 This and all other quotes from an original in a language other than English are rendered in my translation.
- 14 For a brief history of the concept of animism, see Harvey 1–29 [21].
- 15 Examining the specific case of vegetal life, Tylor mentions that “plants, partaking with animals the phenomena of life and death, health and sickness, not unnaturally have some kind of soul ascribed to them” in animist cultures (vol. 1, 359) [22].
- 16 In Tylor’s words: “Animism is, in fact, the groundwork of the Philosophy of Religion, from that of savages to that of civilized men. And although it may at first sight seem to afford but a bare and meager definition of a minimum of religion, it will be found practically sufficient; for where the root is, the branches will generally be produced” (vol. 1, 328) [22].
- 17 For an analysis of the development of the notion of animism in Tylor, see Bird-David 60–70 [23].
- 18 I use the word “cosmovision” in the sense of “worldview” or “Weltanschauung”.
- 19 Descola identifies four major forms of human relation to non-humans, which result in four distinctive ontologies, cosmologies, and ways of social organization: “The recognized formulae for expressing the combination of interiority and physicality are very limited. Faced with some other entity, human or nonhuman, I can assume either that it possesses elements of physicality and interiority identical to my own, that both its interiority and its physicality are distinct from mine, that we have similar interiorities and different physicalities, or, finally, that our interiorities are different and our physicalities are analogous. I shall call the first combination “totemism”, the second “analogism”, the third “animism”, and the fourth “naturalism”. These principles of identification define four major types of ontology, that is to say systems of the properties of existing beings; and these serve as a point of reference for contrasting forms of cosmologies, models of social links, and theories of identity and alterity” (121) [28].
- 20 Descola refers to Viveiros de Castro’s distinction between multiculturalism and multinaturalism directly in his reflections on naturalism and animism: “According to him [to Viveiros de Castro], animism is ‘multinaturalist,’ since it is founded upon the corporeal heterogeneity of classes of existing beings that, however, are endowed with identical souls and cultures. Meanwhile, naturalism is ‘multiculturalist’ in that it uses the postulate of the oneness of nature to support recognition of the diversity of both individual and collective manifestations of subjectivity” (173) [28].
- 21 As Viveiros de Castro puts it: “We would thus have a universe that is 100 percent relational—a universe in which there would be no distinctions between primary and secondary qualities of substances or between ‘brute facts’ and ‘institutional facts’” (473) [29].

- 22 While this seems to go back to the idea of plants as persons, the reach of this new definition of animism is broader, for if everyone/everything is a person, the very definition of personhood is exploded from within.
- 23 For an in-depth discussion of films about the Amazon and its peoples, see Vieira “Movies” [30], Vieira, “Rainforest” [31], and Vieira, “Laws” [32].
- 24 Other examples are *Amazon* (1926) by Hamilton Rice, which documents the director’s expedition to the River Branco, or the short *River of Doubt* (1928) by Caroline Gentry about the journey of the former American president Theodor Roosevelt and of the Brazilian Cândido Rondon in search of the source of the so-called River of Doubt, later renamed River Roosevelt.
- 25 There are some notable exceptions to this general trend, including the critically acclaimed *El Abraço de la Serpiente* (*The Embrace of the Serpent*, 2015), directed by Ciro Guerra—for an analysis of this film, see Vieira, “Movies”, 37–40 [30]—or, even more recently, Luiz Bolognesi’s *A Última Floresta* (*The Last Forest*, 2021) that portrays the fight of the Yanomami people and of their leader Davi Kopenawa against illegal mining in their land.
- 26 For a history of the rise of Indigenous filmmaking in Brazil, see Freire [33].
- 27 This transformation of animal blood into a human was enacted in the previous scene of the movie, where the curdled and boiled blood of a hunted porcupine is poured onto the body of a baby, after which an old woman says: “The blood of the porcupine transformed into a child. The blood of the porcupine transformed into Huni Kuin”.
- 28 Amazonian Indigenous cinema is watched within local communities but also disseminated in film festivals, schools, and universities and even on national Brazilian TV.

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