



ECOCENE

CAPPADOCIA JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES



Volume 2/ Issue 1/June 2021

Making Peace with the Earth—The Diplomatic Turn: A Special Cluster



New Growth: To Film Like a Plant

Chris Dymond

Queen Mary University of London, United Kingdom

c.dymond@qmul.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0001-6552-003X

Dymond, Chris. 2021. "New Growth: To Film Like a Plant." *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 2, no. 1 (June): 32-50. <https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.20>.

Research Article/ Received: 14.03.2021 /Accepted: 18.06.2021

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



New Growth: To Film Like a Plant

by Chris Dymond



Abstract

This article asks whether cinema, specifically contemporary experimental cinema, might enable new ways of thinking about, and caring for, plants. Through an analysis of Karel Doing's film, *The Mulch Spider's Dream* (2018), it displays how cinema may showcase more-than-human subjectivity by conveying phytosemiosis, a plant's way of signifying. Afterwards, it investigates a vegan cinema and explores how the style of existence exemplified by plants may be drawn on to design a more sustainable way of producing cinematic media.

Keywords: Karel Doing, veganism, cinema, plant ethics



About the Author

Chris Dymond is a PhD student in film studies at Queen Mary University of London. His research is on plants, bacteria, and fungi in cinema.

New Growth: To Film Like a Plant

Chris Dymond

What is Cinema?

Cinema's identity¹ is multiform. At its origin, various definitions vied for supremacy. Per cinema's capacity to animate, invert the micro- and macro-scopic, reverse and accelerate time, and knot together disparate events, the young industry enjoyed a magical plasticity. Consider, for instance, James Williamson's *An Interesting Story* (1905), where a person is steamrolled flat and, subsequently, reinflated, or Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), where some astronomers visit the moon, fight with its people, and return with a captive. Another designation pertained to cinema's ability to convey specialist knowledge to a lay, and, during the early twentieth century, primarily illiterate, audience. Charles Urban and Francis Martin Duncan's show, "The Unseen World": A Series of Microscopic Studies, Photographed by Means of the Urban-Duncan Micro-Bioscope," which premiered on 17 August 1903 at London's Alhambra Theatre is an exemplary case.

Recently, another identity has coalesced. Though always present, the climate crisis's exigency and the arrival of digital media expedited its revelation. Cinema is ecologically bankrupt. Cinema plugs into a planetary network propagating extreme violence. Its reliance on physical technology imbeds it within a destructive matrix: the seemingly endless war in the Gulf over the West's insatiable thirst for oil; the mines worked by children in the Democratic Republic of Congo in pursuit of coltan, a key ingredient in computers, phones, and laptops; the toxic vapors seeping out from heaps of discarded technology to infect the nervous systems of workers in Ghana and Pakistan; the layer of gelatin which impregnates the film strip, tying the arcane beauty of analog film to the slaughterhouse: this, truly, is cinema.²

Such operations feed cinema, which is voracious. Cinema devours vast quantities of energy and extends the subjugation of peoples. "Media technologies are entangled in

the history of colonialism and an ever-advancing extractive frontier” (2018, 111), says Sasha Litvintseva. Amidst environmental collapse, cinema must metamorphose or perish. If so-called resources are exhausted, cinema, as it stands, will starve, just like the rest of us.

Despite a history of violence, cinema is also a vector of hospitality or site of communion, a medium connecting worlds normally regarded as disparate. As experimental filmmaker Karel Doing puts it, “cinema is an intermediate, helping us to perceive signals that would normally exist beyond our event horizon” (Personal interview, 26 October 2020). Yet cinema often reinforces the feedback loop by which only human animals are truly significant. The screen is regularly framed as a mirror. Nonetheless, I work to jam the loop by means of cinema.

Jamming the circuit requires devising ways within which more-than-human entities can represent their own subjectivity on their own terms. Yet the realities of more-than-human entities might not align with how human animals interpret the world. Artistic interventions capable of augmenting human animals’ perspectival faculties are required. Céleste Boursier-Mougenot’s installation, *révolutions*, provides one example. Here, three Scotch pines are shuttled around the Venice Biennale’s French Pavilion on wheeled bases tethered to sap flow sensors designed to translate the trees’ electrical signals into motion. The trees, responding to fluctuations of light, moisture, and temperature, moved of their own accord.

Cinema, likewise, can help. Cinema has long been figured as a memorial or ocular prosthesis, a supplemental organ capable of enhancing human animals’ limited faculties. But I am interested in thinking cinema as a bridge between worlds: a medium. Specifically in tracing its ability to help beings formerly thought silent to convey their subjectivity and evoke one’s capacity to care, working collaboratively with the creatures with which it shares the earth.

This article³ explores whether cinema, specifically contemporary experimental cinema, might enable new ways of thinking about, and caring for, plants. Why? Because, as I’ve written elsewhere, “plants enjoy a life that exceeds the ends into which they are relentlessly crammed, and a majority of life will be extinguished if human animals continually fail to care for plants” (Dymond 2021, 30). Advancing peace with plants requires fresh interpretations of plant ontology. However, as Doing reminds one, “it is impossible to know anything with certainty about a plant’s subjective experience” (Personal interview, 2020). Nonetheless, art is a powerful raft across which more-than-human subjectivities might be grasped. Learning to let plants be requires acquiescing to

vegetal sovereignty. And sovereignty is conterminous with subjectivity. Artistic speculations are critical. As Giovanni Aloï, in *Botanical Speculations* (2018), says:

The ultimate alterity of plant-being necessitates a radical aesthetic reconfiguration to emerge along with new philosophical frameworks. It demands the will to change the way in which we look, the way in which we occupy space and time, and most importantly it entirely reconfigures our cognitive rhythms in order to reconnect us with biosystems through new modalities. (xxxii)

Aloï, in *Why Look at Plants?* (2019), continues. “What we look at, and how we look, constitute essential parameters in the recuperation of alternate gazes and the crafting of new ones—modalities of engagement that entail more than the ocular—modalities that can lead to a reontologization of the living” (xx). What one looks at, and the apparatuses that guide one’s looking, constitute a world-forming dyad, defining the status of that which bears the look and that which does the looking.

This usually functions negatively. Dominant ways of gazing regularly confine more-than-human beings to the background, blocking access to the semiotic sphere. Consequently, cinema, both mainstream and experimental, often enforces human exceptionalism. Yet alternative gazes can shunt thinking into new frontiers and prohibit violence.

Aloï’s two edited volumes explore a turn in contemporary art towards plants. Tracing cinema’s ability to convey plant subjectivity, I articulate a nuanced cinematic contribution to such ongoing developments. Yet this article is non-exhaustive. Many filmmakers are now turning to plants. I focus on Doing’s *The Mulch Spider’s Dream* (2018), which showcases the subjectivity, semiotic capacity, and creative agency of plants. I conclude by exploring a cinema both vegan and non-violent.

Phytosemiosis

Like new growth willfully emerging from an extant stem, Doing’s work signifies, as Anna Tsing might say, the possibility of life in capitalist ruins.⁴ Doing’s work with analog film pursues a radical possibility, namely “a bridge between . . . two forms of subjectivity,” or, plant-human animal “communication” (Doing, Personal interview, 2020). Doing’s film works to “open up the possibility of a real, lived relationship

between humans and other species or ecosystems” (Doing, Personal interview, 2020), specifically plants.

This occurs via the phytogram. Phytograms are images made with phytography. In phytography, phytochemistry and the plant body coalesce to produce imagery. Many plants contain polyphenols, molecular packets aligning with those within popular photographic developing agents. When soaked to encourage the release of their chemicals and placed against a photographic surface, plants can develop photographic imagery. Subsequently, if a plant’s body be placed against a photographic surface after being handled appropriately, an image of a plant’s body besides its phytochemical reactivity can form.⁵



Figure 1. Phytography in progress. Image courtesy the artist.

For this work, plants were laid against analog film and then left to secrete their chemicals “in a garden shed” (Doing, Personal interview, 2020). The final image includes a detailed representation of the plant body. Like a plant, every phytogram “grow[s]” gradually (Doing, Personal interview, 2020) across time and an entanglement of physical adventures. Plants generally enunciate themselves slowly. Subsequently, to offer plants hospitality, Doing’s methodology employs patience and understanding. Doing respects plants’ rhythms, refusing to make plants abide by an anthropic clock, willfully succumbing to a vegetal beat. Shifting gears, cinema can yield to, and accommodate, plants. A speculation on the possibility of plant subjectivity and a rejection of anthropic mastery, phytography helps plants write their own story.

Doing's inspiration came from Thomas Nagel's article, "What Is It Like To Be A Bat?" (1974). Nagel argues that it is highly likely that "conscious experience is a widespread phenomenon" that is enjoyed by "animal life" and "countless forms totally unimaginable to us, on other planets in other solar systems throughout the universe" (436). Nagel contends that science's inability to qualify subjective experience has resulted in a disregarding of its existence beyond the human animal. Nonetheless, Nagel says that "the fact that we cannot ever hope to accommodate in our language a detailed description of Martian phenomenology should not lead us to dismiss as meaningless the claim that bats and Martians have experiences fully comparable in richness of detail to our own" (440). Following Nagel, Doing writes: "the question remains if and how film, photography and sound can be used as tools to represent other ways of seeing, hearing and sensing. Or perhaps, even more radical, inspired by Nagel: can film, photography and sound be used to represent other mindsets?" (2020, 25).

The Mulch Spider's Dream advances answers. As Doing says, one "might say that the phytogram translates a plant's experience of the world into an image that is legible for humans: plant sensation captured on film" (2020, 31). The plants involved in *The Mulch Spider's Dream's* production were "perennial plants from [Doing's] back garden: wild onion, ground elder, and herb robert" (Doing, Personal interview, 2020). With these plants, Doing expands cinema.

Expanding cinema, Doing makes space for phytosemiosis. What is phytosemiosis? In "Phytosemiotics" (2010), Martin Krampen, building on Jakob von Uexküll's early work in biosemiotics, shows how plants use their body to communicate, "iconically portray[ing] the forces of their environment through their meaningful form" (276). But phytosemiosis also includes the "immunological responses and intercellular communication [that] express the plant's inner experiences of the world at the microscalar level of cells and tissues" (Ryan 2020, 103). Plants creatively interpret a plethora of factors to intensify their flourishing, such as: moisture and rain (Krampen 2010, 269); temperature, "gravity, water, minerals, chemicals, and alien roots," plus light competition and the "relative stature and densities of their opponents" (Calvo and Segundo-Ortin 2019, 66); stress, damage, and the proximity of herbivorous predators or a change in nutrient and water availability (Falik et al. 2011); sun direction, darkness, barometric pressure, and "the volatile airborne and soluble waterborne chemical signals exchanged within their ecosystem" (Doing 2020, 26). Arguably, plants mainly signify via phytochemistry. As Suzanne Simard says: "these signals, the amino acids, hormones, and other compounds . . . constitute the language of plants" (2018, 201).

Wait—aren't human animals exceptional in their ability to signify? Isn't talking about a language of plants gibberish? No, says Eduardo Kohn. In *How Forests Think* (2013), Kohn, again employing Uexküll's work, writes that: "all beings, including those that are nonhuman, are constitutively semiotic" (16). The idiosyncratic twist of a leaf, the subtlest flick of a tail, the exchange of volatile chemicals: these, too, are meaningful signs, messages sent out by a subject relaying their experiences of a world.

It's generally held that to possess life to its fullest degree thought and language must be present. Hence, human animals—who designed this schema—occupy the cosmos's pinnacle. If every entity is semiotically proficient, this hierarchy flounders. Kohn continues: "all life is semiotic and all semiosis is alive. . . . It is the locus—however rudimentary and ephemeral—of a living dynamic by which signs come to represent the world around them to a 'someone' who emerges as such a result of this process. The world is thus 'animate.' 'We' are not the only kind of we" (16). If something enjoys a world, they have life. Semiosis, may be the only vector by which "multispecies relations are possible . . . and also analytically comprehensible" (9), is the window via which this having is verifiable. *The Mulch Spider's Dream*, showcasing phytosemiosis, implores a viewer to acknowledge the methodology via which plants display their rich worldhood and vibrant subjectivity.

Screening Plants

Film's specificity complements plants' style of communication. Time beside a chemically impregnated canvas offers one framework through which phytosemiosis can be translated. Though other mediums might be suitable, analog film, employing such ingredients, helps plants self-represent and auto-inscript. Cinema, too, is photosynthetic. Ingesting light, it excretes imagery as a surplus. Cinema ontology harmonizes with vegetality.

Crucially, cinema is also animate. Though sessile, plants are mobile. If *Doing* presented phytograms as a series of still images *Doing* would have entrenched plants' standard designation as inert. Cinematic imagery, synthesising stasis and animation, can represent plants well. Additionally, when plants are placed at various points on the strip, animation can arise during the production process. Here, plants are not inert items cinematically conjured to life. They are equally the image's producer and animator.

Conducting direct animation, *Doing* visually invigorates new understandings of plants. Direct animation makes imagery by doctoring the stock, forfeiting the use of a

camera. Constantly evoking a close-up, direct animation produces a set of idiosyncratic viewing relations between spectator and content. The close-up is famed for its “decentering and defamiliarizing capabilities,” its capacity to make “details and textures . . . more pronounced” and to cause “traditional perspectival reference points [to] fall away” (Knowles 2020, 87). As James Leo Cahill suggests, “the magnifying close-up . . . dissect[s] but also displace[s], . . . swerv[ing] between recognition and an estranging reorientation” (2019, 77). Part of “a different cinematographic scalar anatomy” (84), close-ups magnify the physically minor and dissect the ontically major. Béla Balázs, in *Theory of the Film* (1952), similarly celebrates the close-up. Close-ups may show “your shadow on the wall with which you have lived all your life and which you scarcely knew” (55), Balázs writes. In 1935, Walter Benjamin, in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1968), went further. “With the close-up, space expands The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject” (16).

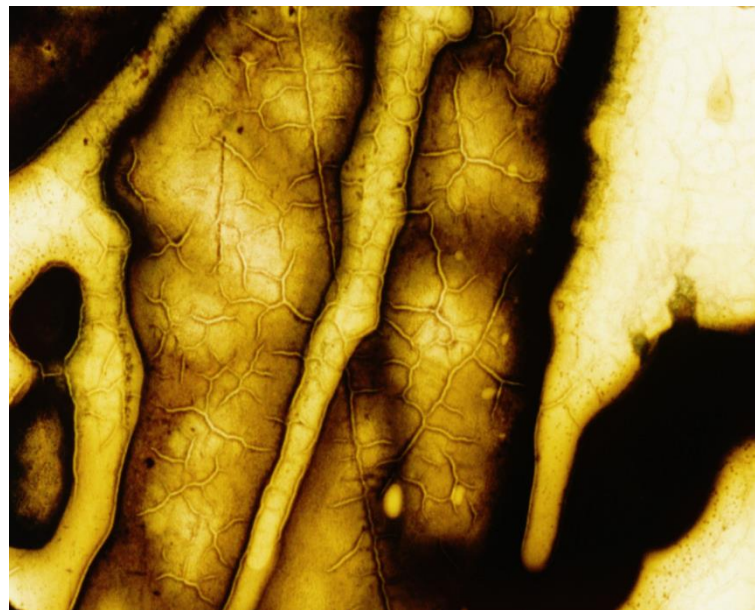


Figure 2. Learning to look anew at—and with—plants. Image courtesy the artist.

I have critiqued micro- and macro-cinematography when deployed as tools of non-anthropocentric revelation (Dymond 2021). Why? Because both replicate human animals’ perspective. As I write elsewhere: used alone, they fail “to wander into the eerie labyrinth of more-than-human subjectivity” (Dymond 2022). Doing, however, employs neither. Rather, Doing, as Kim Knowles might say, plays with “the repertoire of things worthy of attention” (88) whilst swerving into territories devoid of

anthropocentric coordinates. In *The Mulch Spider's Dream*, plants' worlds are cinematically magnified, posed as worthy of attention, and revealed as significant.

Phytograms are beautifully arcane and intoxicatingly mysterious, a painting, possibly indecipherable, by a consciousness both perfectly alien and thoroughly quotidian, a gift from another galaxy yet born of this world. Phytographic imagery evades every standard toolkit and extant frame. Abstraction, however, can enhance one's capacity to welcome an enlarged world, thick with new meaning. Gregory Zinman defines abstraction “not as a pulling away from the world but rather a moving toward it, a recalibration of our relation to the world via our simulated senses. The challenge and richness of art that initially overwhelms us is met by an expansion of the senses that will ultimately enlarge and enrich our understanding of the world” (2020, 16). Showcasing other worlds, *Doing* encourages one to unplug from a recognizable reality and slot into a plant's.⁶

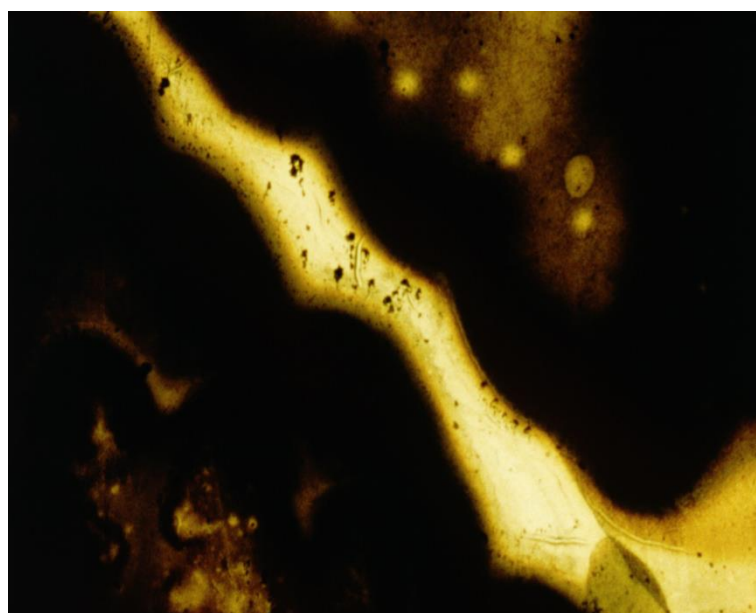


Figure 3. Phytochemistry produces unpredictable formations—and makes novel art. Image courtesy the artist.

Doing has attempted “to explore a possible shared semiotic realm between plants and humans” (Personal interview, 2020). For Nagel, the contention that subjective experience is most likely ubiquitous across the cosmos

should be regarded as a challenge to form new concepts and devise a new method—an objective phenomenology not dependent on empathy or the

imagination. Though presumably it would not capture everything, its goal would be to describe, at least in part, the subjective character of experiences in a form comprehensible to beings incapable of having those experiences. (1974, 449)

Such is Doing's methodology. Doing produces, as Anat Pick might say, a set of "new relational trajectories" (2015, 227). New relational trajectories expose new ways of relating to others besides new ways of understanding how others possess and relate to vibrant life worlds that they create and enjoy. New relational trajectories signpost less destructive futures.

The Mulch Spider's Dream works for peace. In trying to communicate with plants, Doing found an ally in analog film, "a complex combination of elements—an amalgam of vibrant matter whose chance constellations lead to a continually changing granular makeup" (Knowles 2020, 73). More than just "a reflection of the world," analog film is unashamedly "of the world—[it]s visual form resulting from the physical transformation of matter" (73).

Doing investigates cinema's physical side as a vector of hospitality. The work exhibits a more-than-human's subjectivity through a radically non-anthropocentric and non-anthropomorphic methodology. The knowledge it generates can work as a flashpoint for disengaging human exceptionalism and advancing more sustainable ways of being in the world.

Follow the Plants

Doing's work signals an alternate trajectory of cinema. How might this trajectory be theorized? Cinema is not perfect. But perfection, implying beatific terminus, might be an unhelpful fallacy. Thinking through and embracing cinema's imperfectability is productive.

Michael Marder speaks similarly of veganism. For Marder, veganism is not inherently ethical because plants enjoy a life beyond anthropic designs. To this conundrum Marder extends the expression: "to eat like plants" (2013a, 33). This is a culinary objective and an epistemological one. In *Plant-Thinking* (2013b), Marder says:

instead of "What can I eat?" we should inquire, "How am I to eat ethically?" . . .
[I]f you wish to eat ethically, eat like a plant! Eating like a plant does not entail consuming only inorganic minerals but welcoming the other, forming a rhizome

with it, and turning oneself into the passage for the other without violating or dominating it, without endeavouring to swallow up its very otherness in one's corporeal and psychic interiority . . . [W]e turn into passages for the vegetal other that nourishes us, if we do not endeavour to consume, along with the edible parts of the actual plants, the temporal modalities and possibilities of vegetal life. (185–86)

In the West, the eaten is generally seen to reach their fulfilment in the asymmetrical act of consumption. A cow, for instance, acquires ontological climax upon transmogrifying into meat. A plant, flourishing amongst its companions in a field, patiently awaits the time when it can be boiled, steamed, woven, or baked. Refuting such views, eating like a plant coalesces as an acknowledgement of the fact that that which satiates simultaneously exceeds the event of being eaten. It is a restriction on unbridled consumption and on imbibing items in a way that devours their corporeal body and ontology.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari set down an injunction: “Follow the plants” (11), they state. Plants, for Deleuze and Guattari, show how else to be. Actual rhizomes are subterranean parts of plants which proliferate sideways and enable asexual reproduction. Rhizomes stand in partial contrast to plants’ visible stalks and adventures above ground. However, where plants appear to be independent due to distance, they may actually be stalks shot upwards by one rhizomatic network; that is, the same plant.

Deleuze and Guattari thought through rhizomatic plants in order to generate modes of organization different from those grounded on unitary subjectivity. Vitrally, just like actual rhizomes, Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome is an open-ended phenomenon. Neither can attain perfection. That is their lure. Imperfectability is not negative but rather a bottomless situation providing material for further development.

I follow plants towards more sustainable forms of cinematic practice. Thus I advance the idea of filming like a plant. Filming like a plant transports Marder’s analysis from the gastronomic realm to the cinematic. Pick, too, in “Vegan Cinema” (2018), conjoins optics and eating, tracing, as Pick says, the shape of a “non-devouring gaze” (127). Pick’s gaze manifests as a style of witnessing congruent with veganism’s aims—as “an approach which is also a kind of retreat, [a] reticence before the other when confronted by the other’s sovereign existence” (128). But veganism is primarily a style of life and only symptomatically a culinary preference, a fact Pick is undeniably aware of. Vegan “as a signifier . . . designate[s] a form of life that extends far beyond simple dietary choice” (2018, 254), contends Robert McKay.

A vegan cinema, for Pick, primarily manifests as a way of seeing. But what about a cinematic methodology which abides by, as McKay might say, a vegan “form of life” (2018, 254)? What of a vegan film practice? Would it jettison products torn from more-than-human bodies, such as gelatin? Undoubtedly. Would it obviate environmental crises? Definitely. But a documentary on such issues does not automatically enact a vegan way of doing cinema. Neither does media employing no more-than-human suffering. Why? Vegan cinema should combine the “what” of that which is filmed and the “how” of the way in which filming is done, advancing towards a form of cinema which both looks and acts in a non-violent way. Designing a non-devouring practice is also a requisite of a vegan cinema. Warping one’s own desires; bending the medium to aid an other’s capacity to signify; deploying cinema as a conduit, not a cul-de-sac; moving forward only to make plenty of room; refusing to wantonly destroy; rejecting instrumentality: such would be the basic program of a vegan practice. A vegan practice may be grasped by working with plants, and applying that which they teach. Filming like a plant—following a vegetal other—feeds into Pick’s vegan cinema.

What might plants teach cinema? Plants decry massive, cross-planetary consumption, for plants enjoy only that which is nearby.⁷ Plants, too, instruct cinema to twist into a passageway or junction and strive to intensify an other’s flourishing. Crucially, plants show that cinema must return to its roots, for this is where earthly connection truly exists.

By roots I mean cinema’s constituent materiality, whether analog or digital. Cinema’s reracination is not about nostalgia. Rather, cinema’s reracination means thinking the medium’s possibilities in the here and now and through analyses of its material elements. Acknowledging cinema’s physicality tethers cinema to the world and uncovers ways via which more-than-human beings can express themselves. Phytography provides but one example.

Reracinate cinema, plants say. Cinema’s reracination describes the return of cinema to its roots as a material phenomenon and a rejection of the cinematic image’s transcendence from its context of production. Etymologically, deracinate stems from the Latin for root, *radix*. Deracinate means to pull up by the roots, or de-root. Reracination, then, is a word that describes a restorative trajectory, to re-root.

Yet cinema’s reracination is not exclusively industrial. As Doing shows, falling back to cinema’s body exposes novel ways of producing imagery with—not of—the world. New views emerge from the tangle of cinema’s roots. Various dimensions get synthesized through the methodological prism of cinema’s reracination.

Cinema's reracination names, at least, a fourfold operation. (1) Cinema must scale down. It must partake only respectfully, slowly, in small batches, and never without remainder. Filmmakers must never exceed their grasp. (2) Cinema should connect with a network of beings which relate across an earthly matrix. Paring back is also a gateway to artistic creativity. Cinema's material body enables communication with a multiplicity of more-than-human beings and forces. (3) Cinema must build rhizomes with its partners. Total consumption is not a requisite of cinematic exertion. Cinema should work to facilitate the expression of the subject of its analysis, even when that subject is more-than-human. Cinema must unite with its companions, striving towards a plateau which strengthens each party. (4) Cinema must be treated as an industry which is firmly rooted along every axis. Responsibility requires accountability. Without accountability, as Donna Haraway says, "response-ability" (2016, 28) is vacant. If cinema may serve the contemporary climate crisis's resolution, it must accept its role within that crisis's formation. Evading recognition, cinema remains free to walk a deadly path. "[C]inema has to land," says Doing (Personal interview, 15 February 2021). "Flying ever upwards is unrealistic and unsustainable" (Doing, Personal interview, 2021). Cinema must look to the earthly ground which subtends it and trace new pathways of peace from a stage of material origin.

Much of cinema's dirty business occurs beyond the screen, during its production and within the orbital periphery and outlying extractive frontiers of its planetary enterprise. Generally, moving images dodge liability on account of their ontology. For what do mines or minerals, pick axes or proxy wars, have to do with ephemeral, bodiless images? Data floats in a cloud, and analog imagery arrives riding beams of light. To reracinate cinema is to refute its slippery tendency to evade its relationship to abuse, to shine a light on violence and investigate every work with a fine-toothed comb. "[O]ne of the core aspects is to consider the real costs of cinema just like we should consider the real costs of a plastic bag" (Personal interview, 2021), contends Doing. It would be amazing for a cinematic production to be free of violence, no matter what that production advocates through its content. It is never a question of presence or absence, but rather more or less.

I am also accountable. Immersed in technology, I do not escape the challenge to reracinate. Working out ways to reduce one's own mark-making to a maximal degree is a key aspect of cinema's reracination applying equally to the practitioner, scholar, and viewer of cinema. Even Doing's film is not fully exempt. Doing's film includes an emulsion that contains gelatin, a protein harvested from more-than-human animal bones. Additionally, bringing plants into contact with film requires transplantation. Phytography necessitates the extraction of plants from their home milieu. Doing,

however, accepts responsibility and respectfully manages such negativity. As Doing states,

I agree that it is important to look at the environmental, economic, and social entanglements of the tools and materials that are being used to produce artworks. In my own practice, this includes film-stock, chemistry, and all the tools to process, edit, and distribute my work. [This work] was made on . . . 16mm film that was given to me by a film archivist. The rusty can with faded GDR label looked like trash and would certainly have been thrown away, ending up in a landfill without my friend's generous gesture. . . . I rarely uproot whole plants and instead look closely at the plant before picking leaves or flowers, carefully taking only the parts that I will use. Moreover, I also have a preference for plants that are growing in abundance, mostly these are weeds, unwanted and unloved by gardeners. (Personal interview, 2020)

Furthermore, "plants that are used . . . are foraged from abundant gardens, making it possible to promote rather than limit further growth By only selecting leaves, petals, stems and roots, the plants will sustain their lives" (Doing 2020, 34). "Of course none of this is perfect," agrees Doing, "I do not consider myself as being innocent, I am part of the whole mess that we have created. . . . [I]t would be false to claim that [such] entanglements . . . are invalid in my case. Instead of claiming to be innocent, I . . . try to find a way forward. It is encouraging to walk on this path with many fellow travelers" (Personal interview, 2020).

Doing acknowledges his negative impact, striving for peace across form and content, theory and practice. The forging of more peaceful practices that refuse to destroy through the acceptance of responsibility is a particularly important part of what it means to film like a plant.

The cost of transfer also weighs on Doing's film. Available online, *The Mulch Spider's Dream* depends on a killing industry. Data is never disembodied. All clouds have actual wellsprings. Could Doing achieve recognition without going digital? Are digital transfers and online accounts contemporaneously necessary? A solution is not immediately apparent. But such conundrums offer fertile ground for advancement. Indeed, Doing never claims to be innocent. Rather, Doing regards himself as a fallible beginner whose onwards momentum is the result of transformative encounters with others. Doing embodies filming like a plant's restless movement towards greater sustainability. Like a splaying rhizome or inquisitive shoot, filming like a plant names a

relationship to cinema which wallows in imperfectability. Filming like a plant is about testing out new allegiances in an ever widening field of connections.

Alternate ways of disseminating media are key, too. Doing's methodology provides us with options. Doing exhibits in smaller, often community run venues, predominantly projecting himself. With only two copies in circulation, massive release events are impossible. As Doing says, "my own solution is to focus on quality and ethics and stubbornly ignore the fact that my work remains marginal" (Personal interview, 2021). Made in a back garden, exhibited in venues one at a time, Doing's methodology shows how cinema can avoid leaving too many marks. "I work with available means," writes Doing: "exhibition spaces, places and platforms" (Personal interview, 2021).

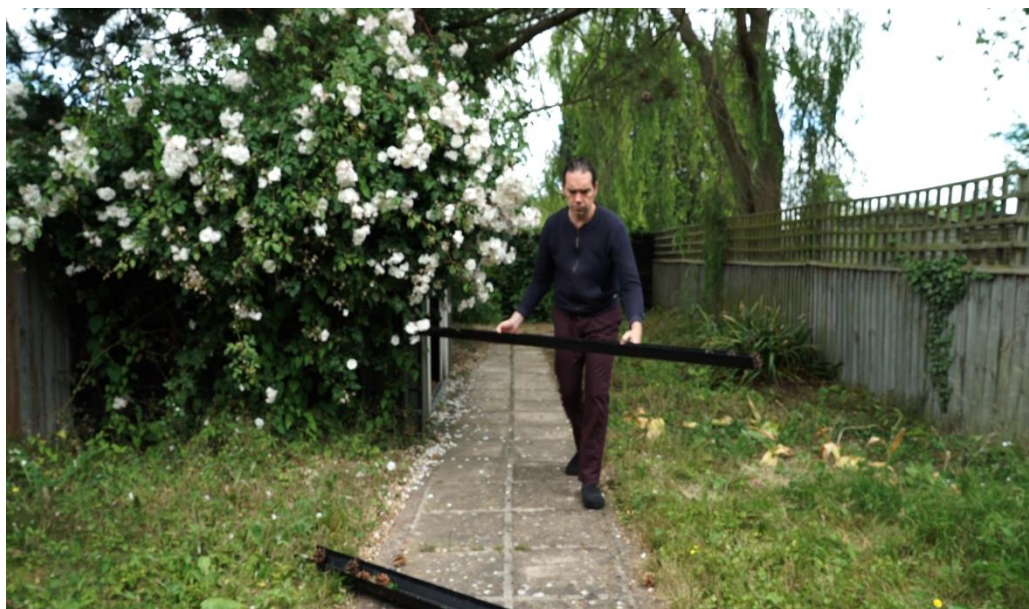


Figure 4. A glimpse into Doing's studio: his garden and, to image left, shed. Doing is laying out old guttering containing film stock upon which plants have been placed. Image courtesy the artist.

Doing regularly teaches phytography at workshops. Such efforts stem from Doing's belief "that we [must] act together. . . , [that] without collective action, a solution will not be available" (Personal interview, 2021). "A cinema can be more than an entertainment venue," says Doing. "Under the right circumstances it can be a shared space. . . . Cinema does not take place elsewhere in an imagined reality. Cinema takes place in the here and now. . . . I like to compare filmmaking to cooking and gardening. . . . [T]he final screening is comparable to a dinner table with multiple guests" (Personal interview, 2021). Cinema, for Doing, is an art of rebellion and an instrument of hospitality.

One can offer my argument some ripostes. First: that such seemingly rarefied behaviors have no real-world application, that such designs are out of sync with reality. A rejoinder of this style works by presupposing that cinema, in its current state, complements our world's actual rhythms, that it alone makes sense, that any operation to the contrary is crazy. But cinema is broken. It designs its own suicide and advances the earth's destruction. Subsequently, such responses are short-sighted. The full-scale metamorphosis of the medium is massively difficult, but necessary. Designing sustainable ways of doing this must become a next step.

Second: that working marginally is insufficient, that a more aggressive stance is required, "that this is a toothless reaction and that we have to fight back" (Doing, Personal interview, 2021). But, as Doing says, "there is great power in withdrawal, the game can't continue when there are no players" (Personal interview, 2021). Maybe the pursuit of peace requires, very simply, the employment of peaceful practices. Resistance needn't be laced with explosive bravado or flavored with vitriolic machismo. Rebellion, too, can take its cue from plants. Hence Marder's injunction: "Resist like a plant!" (2012, 31). Consequently, filming like a plant may expose a trajectory of cinema wherein every act of making manifests as an act of rebellion which is peaceful right down to the quick. "A sort of *Walden*; or, *Life in the Woods* approach to filmmaking," states Doing (Personal interview, 2021). Unplugging is an activity requiring enormous effort, and which exposes a matrix of reverberations. Pursuing viable alternatives, living and creating with passion and yet non-violently, is a way forward. The plant's way is revolutionary.

Making Differently

Crisis swaddles the earth. Much more than human animals' survival is at stake. The earth and all its denizens are submerged beneath a suffocating hood of fragility for whose construction Western people are responsible. Though it is impossible to fully decouple oneself from the engines sustaining planetary destruction, fervently pursuing restoration is an ethical imperative.⁸

Pursuing restoration requires the revision of every extant Western institution, ideological and physical. This includes cinema. The ongoing task of cinema is twofold. What's now required is the production of different media differently. What is this statement conveying? Simply: to sustainably make moving images that encourage more sustainable ways of being. Cinema, as Jussi Parikka says, is beholden to a "double bind" (2015, 12):

Our relations with the earth are mediated through technologies and techniques of visualization, sonification, calculation, mapping, prediction, simulation, and so forth: it is through and in media that we grasp the earth as an object for cognitive, practical, and affective relations. ... And conversely, it is the earth that provides for media and enables it: the minerals, materials of(f) the ground, the affordances of its geophysical reality that make technical media happen. (12–13)

Much of cinema visually promotes human exceptionalism and, subsequently, anthropocentrism. Generally, the apparatus thoroughly aligns with a human animal viewpoint, tacitly signifying that human animals' reality is the only reality. Doing writes it clearly:

Film looks at reality in a singular way. Cinema represents the human eye and appeals to the human brain. The optical system, picture plane and projection speed are chosen in such a way that a near perfect illusion is created that suits us. The standard lens is constructed so that it is able to recreate a perspective similar to ours. The ratio of a film frame is chosen to cover the most important area of our field of vision and the current projection speed of 24 frames per second is selected in such a way that a smooth perception of motion is achieved. This is often described in terms of realism, assuming that our own perception is coinciding with reality. (2020, 22)

Moreover, narratives perennially produce tales relevant only to human animals, relegating every other story to the background, casting the world as an instrumental prop. And cinema, ingesting real materials, really devours the world.

Cinema often does its damage in two ways: industrially, and ideologically. However, this issue's latter half, if navigated carefully, might be the source of cinema's highest possibility. If cinema can affect the ways within which one understands the world, then it could strive towards the promotion of a less abusive set of relationships. This double bind is seemingly unavoidable. Facing it head on is critical. Doing's work displays how cinema may navigate this irrevocable knot in a better way.

Plants have assumed my full focus. The logics guiding my argument are applicable elsewhere. My readings may not be. One-size-fits-all approaches are inappropriate. A bee's subjectivity differs from a plant's, or a bacterium's. Only novel solutions are appropriate. The level of inventiveness and innovation now necessary is staggering, maybe unattainable. This may work as an antidote to the idea that every desire may be satisfied by the mere flick of a switch. Extreme degrees of intellectual and practical

labor; forging new, seemingly unthinkable connections; descending from a lofty perch; working hard to slow down—these are the tasks towards which the contemporary Western person must turn. Success, of course, may be impossible. Thankfully, the pursuit of peace is always a worthwhile enterprise in and of itself.

The style of existence exemplified by plants coalesces as a methodology for the peaceful production of artworks that promote peace. If cinema refuses to metamorphose it will expedite planetary annihilation and commit suicide. Filming like a plant excavates an alternate trajectory of the medium along whose endless tracks a non-violent form of cinematic practice might fruitfully coincide with a vegan rubric. As it stands, the contemporary cinema industry and its media function as one of the many engines of a deleterious machine which shows no sign of tiring. But routes of resistance exist. Cinema, perhaps paradoxically, is one. Following plants is another. Through their unity—a medium of peace with the earth.

Notes

¹ Investigations into cinema's identity are numerous. André Bazin's, which I am referencing here, is particularly famous. See: Bazin's *What is Cinema? Vol I.* (1967) and *What is Cinema? Vol II.* (1971).

² The authoritative works on cinema as an industrial phenomenon are Nadia Bozak's *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (2012) and Jussi Parikka's *A Geology of Media* (2015). See these to learn more.

³ An earlier version of this article was released as "Plant-Filming: Re-viewing Vegetality" in *Millennium Film Journal* (2021).

⁴ I'm using the subtitle of Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015).

⁵ Doing runs a blog (phytogram.blog) about the phytogram method. See this for an in-depth explanation of phytography.

⁶ Cinema's ability to expand or recalibrate perception has been a topic of focused debate. Scott MacDonald's "Towards an Ecocinema" (2004) is a lodestar. Though MacDonald's conclusions starkly differ from mine, our arguments pursue a similar inquiry. Namely, how to align cinema's rhythms with that of a more-than-human being.

⁷ I thank Michael Marder for this idea, which comes during Marder's discussion, in "Is it Ethical to Eat Plants?" (2013), of symmetries between gleanings and plant foraging.

⁸ I owe this idea to Pick, who, in "Vegan Cinema" (2018), writes: "While it is impossible to extract oneself completely from the set of violences against animals that saturate and sustains daily life, . . . veganism is a symbolic and concrete refusal to bear arms in the war on animals" (133).

References

Aloi, Giovanni. 2018. "Introduction: Botanical Speculations." In *Botanical Speculations: Plants in Contemporary Art*, edited by Giovanni Aloi, xxix–xxxvii. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

- . 2019. “About this Book.” In *Why Look at Plants? The Botanical Emergence in Contemporary Art*, edited by Giovanni Aloï, xx–xxv. Leiden: Brill.
- Balázs, Béla. 1952. *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*. London: Dennis Dobson.
- Bazin, André. 1967. *What is Cinema? Vol. I*. Translated and edited by Hugh Gray. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- . 1971. *What is Cinema? Vol. II*. Translated and edited by Hugh Gray. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1968. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Translated by Harry Zohn. In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 217–52. New York: Schocken Books.
- Boursier-Mougenot, Céleste. 2015. *Révolutions*. Gallery installation. Venice Biennale (French Pavilion).
- Bozak, Nadia. 2012. *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Cahill, James Leo. 2019. *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Calvo, Paco, and Miguel Segundo-Ortín. 2019. “Art Plants Cognitive? A Reply to Adams.” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 73: 64–71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2018.12.001>.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Doing, Karel, dir. 2018. *The Mulch Spider’s Dream*.
- . 2020. “Phytograms.” *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 15 (1): 22–36.
- Dymond, Chris. 2021. “Plant-Filming: Re-viewing Vegetality.” *Millennium Film Journal* 73: 28–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847720909348>.
- . 2022. “Expanding Cinema: How to Look at Plants?” In *Expanded Nature: Ecologies of Experimental Cinema*, edited by Elio Della Noce and Lucas Murari. Paris: Light Cone. (Forthcoming).
- Falik, Omer, Yonat Murdoch, Lydia Quansah, Aaron Fait, and Ariel Novoplansky. 2011. “Rumor Has It . . . : Relay Communication of Stress Cues in Plants.” *PLoS ONE*, 6 (11): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0023625>.
- Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Knowles, Kim. 2020. *Experimental Film and Photochemical Practices*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kohn, Eduardo. 2013. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Krampe, Martin. 2010. “Phytosemiotics.” In *Essential Readings in Biosemiotics: Anthology and Commentary*, edited by Donald Favareau, 257–78. London: Springer.
- Litvintseva, Sasha. 2018. “Geological Filmmaking: Seeing Geology Through Film and Film Through Geology.” *Transformations* 32: 107–24.
- MacDonald, Scott. 2004. “Towards an Ecocinema.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11 (2): 107–32. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/11.2.107>.
- Marder, Michael. 2012. “Resist like a plant! On the Vegetal Life of Political Movements.” *Peace Studies Journal* 5 (1): 24–32.
- . 2013a. “Is it Ethical to Eat Plants?” *Parallax* 19, no. 1 (January): 29–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2013.743291>.

- . 2013b. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McKay, Robert. 2018. “A Vegan Form of Life.” In *Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture: Towards a Vegan Theory*, edited by Emilia Quinn and Benjamin Westwood, 249–72. Oxford: Palgrave.
- Méliès, George, dir. 1902. *Le Voyage Dans La Lune/A Trip to the Moon*. New York: The Star Film Company.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1974. “What Is It Like To Be A Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (October): 435–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183914>.
- Parikka, Jussi. 2015. *A Geology of Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Pick, Anat. 2015. “Animal Life in the Cinematic Umwelt.” In *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, edited by Laura McMahon and Michael Lawrence, 221–37. London: BFI.
- . 2018. “Vegan Cinema.” In *Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture: Towards a Vegan Theory*, edited by Emilia Quinn and Benjamin Westwood, 125–46. Oxford: Palgrave.
- Ryan, John Charles. 2020. “Writing the Lives of Plants: Phytography and the Botanical Imagination.” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 35 (1): 97–122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2020.1720181>.
- Simard, Suzanne. 2018. “Mycorrhizal Networks Facilitate Tree Communication, Learning, and Memory.” In *Memory and Learning in Plants*, edited by Frantisek Baluska, Monica Gagliano, and Guenther Witzany, 191–214. London: Springer.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Williamson, James, dir. 1905. *An Interesting Story*. London: William Kinematograph Company.
- Zinman, Gregory. 2020. *Making Images Move: Handmade Cinema and the Other Arts*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.