

How to Film Light Beings? A Challenge to Twenty-First Century Cinema

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The more Western technologies strive for an absolute visualization of the world—its transparency—the more the world appears to escape the West. Perhaps this vague feeling of estrangement towards the world, a paradoxical affliction given the proliferation of visual technologies, is alien only to those who persistently claim themselves as ideologues of Reason. For the rest, the world seems to escape us on multiple fronts. Climatically there appears to be no safe spot in the Earth system and no end to the degradation of the future. While the future does not arrive, in its abstraction finance corrupts and subdues nation-states by the day. In turn, religious fundamentalism has reawakened divine visions, just as the humanity of spirits, animals, and landscapes affirmed by animist peoples blocks commonplace capitalist ideas of development, surprising and infuriating extraction industries keen on the territories of native people.

To a large extent, this feeling of estrangement might reflect recent transformations in the ontology of the modern image. The moderns, in which I unavoidably include myself, no longer are what they used to be. While the destruction wreaked by the modern mentality won't disappear so soon, the cosmovisions upon which modernity structured itself appear to be mutating. Perhaps it is the same with the substance of the modern image.

The impact of linear perspective and geometry from the Enlightenment to modernity is a story well told, even if the power relations tying enlightenment to coloniality have lost none of their

urgency. Historically, these relations have found a metaphor in film, both as a visual space and in its materiality.

Materially, the luminous essence of analog film persists in the digital, yet the latter's processing of visibility is radically distinct. Semiconductor sensors capture light images, processing the visible no longer literally but rather through a pure translation of world into information. Each pixel is the irrefutable proof of that which exists. Each algorithm and Boolean code a world. Images become information archives, literally. And the digital a translation technique. These are images able of being processed not only by humans but also by other information machines. For humans, there is no world without technology, without mediation. However, as visual artist Trevor Paglen remarks, there are today more images in circulation seen and perceived by algorithms than by humans: images made by computers for other computers to read.¹ This is an utterly new, utterly inhuman image regime: image as information or as algorithmic computation living beyond our perception capacities. These are images which have left us behind. What type of image ontology do they propose? Which anthropology?

As for the visual space proposed by the filmic image, visual artist Hito Steyerl rightly affirms that we are witnessing a perspective revolution: the passage from linear perspective (the parallel between point of view and horizon) to vertical perspective (the parallel between point of view and the surface of the Earth). Free fall, in Steyerl's words.² The satellite or drone point of view. This is a technical passage, but certainly also sociological, such is the obsession with drone footage, drones which can be bought at prices lower than those of cameras. Militarily and scientifically the ambition is total planetary visibility, enhanced by multispectral scans capable of measuring light and heat frequencies or climate data such as carbon levels. Aerial thermal imagery, for example, is part and parcel of the so-called fight against terrorism. Here's an artifact of war: equipped with 368 lenses, the US military drone ARGUS-IS is capable of mapping up to 96 km² and of zooming at different scales with each individual lens; on land, the 360° cameras

¹ Trevor Paglen, "Operational Images," *e-flux Journal*, 59 (2014).

² Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective" em *The Wretched of the Screen* (Nova Iorque: e-flux, 2012).

developed by Google, used for mapping and translating real landscapes (such as war settings) into virtual reality, are close kin.³ On the other side of the spectrum, however, it is now possible to measure the age of forests by mapping carbon capture in tree canopy color, data which might be then used in court cases against environmental and population genocide, such as in Amazonia.⁴

Hubris notwithstanding, large-scale data mapping holds its illusions. The virtual reality artwork *Phantom (Kingdom of All the Animals and All the Beasts is my Name)* (2015) by Catalan visual artist Daniel Steegman Mangrané offers the possibility of wandering through part of the Brazilian Atlantic Forest, which has been scanned digitally, using VR goggles. To inhabit a forest without being in the forest, objectifying each atom in a pixel grid. Yet, the technology is still unable of scanning the sky, peeking through the forest canopy, far away, overly diffuse and luminous. All that is captured is an abstract, spectral digital forest, white dots against an oily black background.

This is about the relation between existence and visibility. Almost a hundred years ago, Brazilian writer Oswald de Andrade wrote: “The Indians did not have the verb to be.”⁵ As a matter of fact, in the forests where animals and spirits are human the visible is something else altogether.

While fragile and precarious, we have witnessed in recent decades the public and political uprising of indigenous voices, with their own native cosmologies. These are critical voices, demanding a redefinition of the basic premises and concepts of our modernizing discussion. Here the issue of who and what is political, of those modernity once naturalized and silenced, has become central.

³ Adam Kleinman, “ARGUS IS: An Almost Cock and Bull Story,” *e-flux journal*, 65 (2013).

⁴ See the work developed by Goldsmiths University of London’s Research Architecture, among others. I am referring here in particular to the work of former student, architect and researcher Paulo Tavares.

⁵ Anonymous author under the name Freuderico (possibly Oswald de Andrade), “De Antropofagia,” *Revista de Antropofagia*, 2nd edition, N. 1 (March 24, 1929). For English version, “Of Anthropophagy,” in *The Forest and The School / Where to Sit at the Dinner Table?*, ed. and trans. Pedro Neves Marques (Berlin and Cologne: Archive Books and Akademie Der Kunste der Welt, 2015) 117-121.

Such indigenous cosmovisions carry their specific image ontologies, definitely complex and certainly diverse among each other. I'll limit myself briefly to a confusion, found among anthropologists of lowland Amazonia, between image and spirit. This is a confusion anthropologist Michael Taussig alluded, and dedicated himself to, in his *Mimesis and Alterity*.⁶ The recent biography-manifesto by Yanomami chief and shaman Davi Kopenawa, written together with anthropologist Bruce Albert, along with its readings by anthropologists Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Pedro de Niemeyer Cesarino, further clarify this ambiguity.

Kopenawa tells of a world where images refer to spectral forms, non-iconic and invisible, roughly translated by the word “spirit,” while also being elements, or a technology, of communication in dreams: these are “active images, indexes which interpret us before we interpret them, images which *must see us in order for us to be able to see them*—‘someone who isn’t looked upon by the *xapiripë* [spirits] doesn’t dream, it just lies like an axe left on the ground’—and images *through which* we see other images.”⁷ Instead of having a fixed form or being a class of things images are instantiated by relations, pacific or otherwise, between different beings, each donning their own clothes. These are “representative” (not representational) images, to use Kopenawa and Albert’s provocative expression—Viveiros de Castro adds a final note: “Representatives that are not representations.”⁸ This means that each animal, plant, river or rock, has its representative image, an image that is intimately tied to myth, in this case Yanomami.

The notion of images that “must see us in order for us to be able to see them” and “through which we see other images” echoes differently, but nonetheless seems to echo, in our own digital societies. It questions our modern obsession with images as representations of the visible. For such image ontology spins the relation between visibility and invisibility, between spectrums (and specters) of reality. Images are that which puts in motion and allows social relations. Thinking images in the terms presented by Kopenawa equals thinking the place and the role of spirits, their visual ontology, in society. Thinking through images to think cosmopolitics.

⁶ Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).

⁷ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “The Crystal Forest: Notes on the Ontology of Amazonian Spirits,” *Inner Asia*, 9 (2007) 20. Italics in the original.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Where our machines see and quantify nothing but a forest, and our sciences simply a biotechnological encyclopedia, Amerindian societies see a social nature. Where Australian aborigines see a totemic kinship tie with the desert, mining industries see only profit. Filming Fukushima says nothing about its radiation. Yet, evidently, when in Fukushima we have Geiger counters to help us out. In this case, the Geiger counter is a film camera.

Such image problems arise from the emancipation lived both by native people and modern technoscience. These are often incommensurable cosmovisions, incorporated in image technologies themselves, regardless if film camera or tattoo. Such barriers need not be an issue though; they can be a humble principle of what Donna Haraway has called *situated knowledges*: knowledge, in the plural, approached through partial connections rather than via the illusion of a transparent and totalizing universalism, liberal no less. Suffice to recall how the horizon of total fluidity and transparency is a capitalist dream—and we all know what happens when capitalism faces its barriers: annihilation.

To sum, how can film, reflecting upon the encounter between disparate worlds, that is, the possibility of connections and speculations between cosmologies, participate in a plural cosmopolitics, there where the West sees only Boolean code, 1 and 0? This is a challenge to twenty-first century cinema: how to translate, not capture, the *Xapiri* spirits of the Amazon forest, so obviously visible to the Yanomami, the brightest light beings in the world?