

# NARRATIVES OF VEGETAL INTELLIGENCE

INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIA VIEIRA

CO-EDITOR OF THE BOOK “THE MIND OF PLANTS: NARRATIVES OF VEGETAL INTELLIGENCE,” PATRICIA VIEIRA IS CURRENTLY COORDINATING THE RESEARCH PROJECT ECO - ANIMALS AND PLANTS IN CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS ABOUT THE AMAZON RIVER BASIN AND CO-COORDINATING THE PROJECT RESILIENT FOREST CITIES IN THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON.

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## How do you see the current state of environmental awareness?

The general public is growing increasingly aware of the fact that profound anthropogenic environmental changes are unfolding before our eyes, including climate change, the acidification of the oceans, the contamination of large areas of the world with materials toxic for humans and many other life forms, deforestation, mass species extinction, and the list goes on. Young people are particularly conscious of the urgency to address environmental issues, since they are going to experience the worst consequences of the recklessness with which humans are destroying large areas of the natural environment. Movements such as Extinction Rebellion or Zero Hour show that the younger generation is deeply invested in fighting against environmental degradation.

In spite of this growing awareness, it seems that many people are at a loss about what they should do in their everyday lives to address environmental challenges. The impact of individual choices seems to be too small, given the magnitude of environmental problems. This is where we find a profound failure in leadership, especially in wealthier countries that have the economic means to pave the way for a more balanced relationship between humans and their surroundings. While the programs of most mainstream political parties in Western Europe, for instance, include buzzwords such as “sustainability” or “green transition,” they are simply not doing enough to effect the change needed to prevent the collapse of the environment as we know it.

The short four or five-year election cycles of our democracies are not conducive to long-term thinking and pressing economic concerns, supported by well-oiled lobbies, often trump environmental action. The considerable transformation in our consumption habits, energy production and overall relationship with the more than human world required to prevent an environmental catastrophe needs to be addressed urgently. The role of activists and of academics is to put this issue centre-stage in contemporary political debate. Societies should realise that environmental disaster is, first and foremost, a disaster for humans and for many of the other species that currently share the earth with us. The planet will go on just fine when humans are no longer around, as it did for millions of years before the appearance of Homo sapiens. It is therefore up to humans to clean up their mess and rich societies, responsible for the vast majority of carbon emissions from the time of the Industrial Revolution onwards, have a historical duty to lead the way.

## What inspired you to explore the intersection between culture and environment in your work?

The main thread guiding my research throughout my career has been the analysis of the relationship between literature, film and the fine arts, on the one hand, and the socio-political circumstances wherein they originate and to which they respond, on the other. I have worked on propaganda cinema, on testimonial literature and on utopias, among other topics. My most recent projects have continued to look at the ways in which cultural productions dialogue with societal trends by focusing on the so-called environmental humanities. This relatively recent trend in humanities studies reflects upon the ways in which human relations to nature have informed human history, thought and cultural productions and, in turn, how the discourses on the natural world found in works of philosophy, literature and the arts determine attitudes toward the environment. Within the environmental humanities I focus specifically on ecocriticism, namely the analysis of cultural life through an environmental lens.

I was inspired to do this kind of work because I realised that the way human communities conceive of the environment determines their behaviour towards the natural world. If we see the earth as a collection of raw materials to be transformed for economic gain, extractivism becomes inevitable. If we consider plants, animals, rivers or mountains as beings endowed with sentience and a will of their own, we will regard them as equal partners in the negotiation of a common future. In my research, I explain the cultural presuppositions behind different perceptions of the environment through an analysis of literary, cinematic and artistic works. By rendering different assumptions about nature consciousness, my hope is to show that there is nothing immutable in the way we relate to the human world. Societies can change their approach to the natural environment in a way that will allow humans to peacefully coexist with other beings on a shared planet.

## You are coordinating the research project ECO - Animals and Plants in Cultural Productions about the Amazon River Basin. Could you tell us more about the project and discuss the concept of Zoophytography?

ECO is a research project funded by the European Research Council that seeks to bring the knowledge of Amazonian peoples to a broader debate on ecocriticism, the environmental humanities and the role of more than human beings in Amazonia’s cultural productions. The key hypothesis of the project is that texts, cinema and artworks about the Amazon reveal dynamic interchanges between human beings, animals and plants, and highlight the ways in which more than humans shape human cultural life.

ECO’s main theoretical innovation is to develop the notion of zoophytography to describe the inscription of more than human beings in human culture, thus decentering humanity as the sole source of meaning-making. Zoophytography envisions animals and plants as beings who respond intelligently to their surroundings and considers that cultural productions lend a voice to the worldview of more than humans. The concept designates an encounter between the animals’ and plants’ inscription in the world and the traces of that imprint left in texts, cinema and artworks. It results from the communion between the modes of articulation of animals

and plants and the human language of artistic expression. It requires humans to broaden their horizons to make them capacious enough to listen to and interpret the animal and plant voices within their cultural lives. At a time when the Amazon and its peoples are increasingly threatened by large-scale logging and forest fires associated to extractivist industries such as mining, oil drilling, agribusiness, and so on, that regard the biosphere as a mere resource at the service of humankind, ECO aims to uncover alternative, more equitable, views on animals and plants in the region.

## How do Indigenous perspectives and traditional ecological knowledge influence artistic representations of animals and plants in Amazonian cultural productions?

For many Amazonian communities, the past was a time when there was no stable distinction between plants, animals and humans. While beings have now acquired definitive shapes, cross-species fluidity is still prevalent in local myths and legends and metamorphosis of humans into more than humans and vice-versa remains a central feature of the Amazonian imagination. In addition, Amazonian peoples consider that more than human beings have desires, intelligence and many other qualities that the Western tradition of thought tends to attribute only to humans and certain animals. Plants and animals are seen as subjects capable of intentionality and social agency and interspecies relationships involve careful, diplomatic negotiations between the various inhabitants of the rainforest. Because more than human beings are akin to humans, interspecies relations are common, an example being the widespread belief throughout the Amazon that river dolphins seduce young women, often by assuming the shape of men.

This understanding of more than human beings is reflected on Amazonian cultural productions. In the online exhibition “Politics and Poetics of the Rainforest: Indigenous Ontologies in Amazonian Contemporary Arts,” which I am co-curating within the ECO project, Amazonian Indigenous artists combine traditional Indigenous thought and artistic practices with contemporary artistic techniques to articulate their communities’ connection to plants and animals. More than human beings are viewed as co-creators of artworks and figures that mix plant, animal and human features are common. Such works of art contribute to reveal the deep connections between Amazonian peoples and the natural world, based upon a dialogic exchange between different beings—plants, animals, humans and spirits—, who converge in a multi species socio-politics.

**Can you discuss the concept of animist cinema and its significance in contemporary film culture? What are some key characteristics or themes that define animist cinema, and how does it challenge traditional narratives or representations of human-nature relationships in cinema?**

I define animist cinema as a kind of filmmaking that dwells on the idiosyncrasies of plant or animal existence and strives to articulate more than human life through cinematic language. While early movies highlighted the multiple ways in which more than human beings resemble humans, animist cinema shows humans as reliant upon flora and fauna, from whom they descend and upon whom they depend for their existence.

In most films, plants and often also animals are part of the setting. They are the background for a human-centred plot. Conversely, in animist cinema plants and animals take centre-stage. Humans are often absent from the screen or relegated to the margins of the frame. The significance of plants in these movies is sometimes conveyed by long, static takes and slow camera movements that cinematically mimic the vegetal mode of inhabiting a place and of experiencing time. In the case of animals, films frequently use animal point-of-view shots to depict the animal perspective.

I have worked on Indigenous films from the Amazon as examples of animist cinema. In *Shuku Shukuwe* (Life is Forever, 2012) directed by Ika Muru Huni Kuin from the Huni Kuin Indigenous people living in the Brazilian state of Acre, for example, plants are key to the plot. When people appear in the foreground, 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 film makes it clear that vegetal life is essential for the movie, human characters being secondary and dependent upon plant existence. Animist films such as *Shuku Shukuwe* question the view of the natural world as an inert setting for human stories and show human life to be thoroughly dependent upon more than human beings.

**Can you share with us any particular literary works or films that prominently feature animals and plants from the Amazon River Basin? What insights do they offer into the region's biodiversity and environmental significance?**

The so-called “**novel of the jungle**,” a type of novel that flourished roughly in the first half of the twentieth century, is particularly telling in terms of the depiction of plants and animals in the Amazon River Basin. Still indebted to previous depictions of the region as a “green hell,” some of these narratives have nevertheless broken new ground in their portrayal of an active, often sentient forest that, more than any of the human protagonists, is the main character in the texts.

Written during the period of the rubber boom, when the sale of latex extracted from the *Hevea brasiliensis* rubber tree brought unprecedented wealth to the Amazon, the “novels of the jungle” plot often centred around a male protagonist who travelled from the city to the rainforest, where he came into direct contact with plants and animals he had hitherto not known. The encounter leads to a re-evaluation of the main characters’ perception of more than human life and to a critique of modern extractivism.

In *The Vortex* (La Vorágine, 1924), one of the most famous “novels of the jungle” by Colombian writer José Eustasio Rivera, flora complains about human greed that fueled the felling of trees and large-scale latex extraction, damaging plant life in the rainforest. Trees conjure up a future, paradisiac landscape when humans will have been wiped out of the planet and plants will reign supreme over the earth. Such reflections give voice to plants, who warn about the disappearance of the Amazonian biome, thus clearly anticipating contemporary environmental discourses about the region.

**We would like to draw attention to your most recent co-edited book "The Mind of Plants: Narratives of Vegetal Intelligence" that represents a collection of short essays, narratives and poetry on plants and their interaction with humans. The notion of vegetal intelligence challenges our traditional view on plants. How do you address those who may be sceptical of the idea of plant intelligence?**

**THE CONSIDERABLE TRANSFORMATION IN OUR CONSUMPTION HABITS, ENERGY PRODUCTION AND OVERALL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MORE THAN HUMAN WORLD REQUIRED TO PREVENT AN ENVIRONMENTAL CATASTROPHE NEEDS TO BE ADDRESSED URGENTLY.**

**What does it mean to learn from non-human beings? And what can we learn from animals and plants, in particular?**

First, humans need to learn that they can learn from more than human beings. They have to open themselves and their forms of thought to this possibility. Only then can learning, which is a process of exchange, take place. Plants and animals are not a homogenous whole. What plants and animals in my home country, Portugal, a drought-prone region where most of the natural world has been domesticated and deeply modified by humans, have to teach us is different from the lessons of the more than human world from the Amazon rainforest. The diversity of plants and animals and their variegated ways of co-existing in the world, which have made the planet what it is today, are lessons we should learn from more than human life.

As I work on the Amazon, I see it disappearing. In the past 50-60 years, it is estimated that around 20% of the Amazon rainforest has been lost to deforestation. How will we learn from plants and animals when all the world’s old-growth biomes, with their accumulated millennia of knowledge, are gone? We, humans, are such a recent species on the planet that we should try to learn as much as we can about living on earth from those who have been around much longer than we have.

**Can you tell us about any current or upcoming projects you're working on?**

I am currently working on two book projects. The first is a monograph titled *Zoophytography: Animals and Plants in Amazonian Cultural Productions*, where I examine Amazonian literature, cinema and artworks that give voice to plants and animals. I am editing another volume, *The Amazon River Basin: Extractivism, Indigenous Perspectives and an Aesthetics of Resistance*, a collection of essays about the multiple forms of extractivism plaguing Amazonia from the late nineteenth century onwards, which highlight the perspectives of Indigenous and other traditional communities, as well as of more than human beings, often silenced by a one-sided notion of progress.

I have recently also started co-coordinating the research project “RESILIENT: Forest Cities, Utopia and Development in the Modern Amazon” at the Max Planck Institute of Geoanthropology in Jena, Germany. In RESILIENT, I analyse literature and cinema about “lost” Amazonian cities, i.e., cities created in the region during the twentieth-century to support large-scale, developmentalist activities, including latex extraction, mining and oil drilling, which were abandoned once these enterprises failed. The goal of RESILIENT is to study the afterlife of these cities and the interaction between plants, animals, humans, and the ruins left behind by these extractivist mega-projects. The resilience of local more than human and human communities can point towards paths of healing and rewilding in the aftermath of

environmental catastrophes. ●

In “The Mind of Plants” we asked authors to select a plant they have a special relation to and write a short text together with that plant. We wanted to move away from the notion of plants as the subject matter of a piece of writing and see them as co-authors of the text. This presupposes that plants, like humans, can express themselves in different ways.

Many people are sceptical about attributing intelligence, consciousness and behaviour to plants. Even among biologists, there is heated debate about the possibility of plants being intelligent, given that, unlike mammals, they have no brain or neurons. But recent studies by plant biologists including Stephano Mancuso, Frantisek Baluska, Anthony Trewavas or Monica Gagliano have shown that plants communicate with one another and with animals, have memory and strive towards goals.

Our language is very human-centred and, therefore, we tend to define words such as “intelligence” or “behaviour” based upon human models. More than human beings teach us to expand our patterns of thought and to consider different forms of intelligence, and expression. Life is shaped by its environment, and it also shapes the world around it. Intelligence could be defined as the ability to successfully interact with other living and non-living beings for the continuation of life. If we adopt this broad definition, all life is intelligent.

**How do you see art, literature and cinema contributing to fostering greater consciousness and action towards environmental issues? In your opinion, can cultural expressions be a form of eco-activism?**

The arts can foster ecological awareness by bringing dry scientific data about environmental problems closer to the heart. Literature, cinema and the arts are the realm of the imagination. They allow humans to think about what could be, unmoored from the fetters of what is. I have worked a lot on utopian thought and what fascinates me about this topic is that, through utopia, humans can conceive of alternative, more just and equitable worlds. All literature, film and art are, in a sense, utopian, in that they start from a “what if” question. What if humans saw the natural environment as more than a collection of resources? What if we considered plants and animals as bearers of intelligence or as subjects of right? What if more than human beings could create artworks? By putting forth alternative ways of inhabiting the planet, the arts nudge people out of complacency and encourage them to dream of other pluriverses.

The arts are also a powerful tool in the critique against environmental destruction and in calling for more balanced living with more than human beings. An example is the work of Brazilian artist Frans Krajcberg (1921-2017), who made sculptures out of calcined wood he salvaged in the aftermath of forest fires in the Brazilian rainforests. Krajcberg saw art as a way to express his cry of revolt against the destruction of plant life and he frequently said that he was unconcerned about whether or not his pieces were deemed to be artworks. His incinerated wood sculptures blur the boundaries between art and activism, between aesthetics, ethics and politics, in his denunciation of environmental disasters.