

Scott Macdonald's (2012) defined ecocinema as a filmmaking practice that evokes "the experience of being immersed in the natural world". This definition opens itself up to scrutiny, as we critically reassess the relationship between the inevitable anthropocentrism of filmmaking and the existence of a natural world 'out there', a spatial object to be 'immersed' in – camouflage, losing oneself. I seek to intervene in this assumption of harmonious, ready-made immersion with one of Nitasha Dhillon's (2020) *Principles for Decolonial Film*:

"Decolonial film is not representational, whether epistemically or politically. Image, sound, and sequence flow into life, land, and liberation. Decolonial film is grounded not in representation but facilitating spaces and enunciation as an event, act, or rupture into the field of the sensible, the visible and the audible."

Accordingly, this essay posits that within eco-films, desires could be strategically non-representational, acting instead as an animating force within spaces, giving shape to meaningful images and sounds. Desires simultaneously made apparent a force of resistance against complacent objectification under imperialism. In the spirit to demonstrate this, this essay will survey the implication of desires within three works of ecocinema: Latipa's *Perpetual Peace*, Miko Revereza & Carolina Fusilier's *The Still Side* and Laura Huertas Millán's *El Laberinto*. The essay will explore the construction of the human as a desiring agent within ecological networks by investigating portrayals of quotidian labor work, anecdotal memories, and manufactured fantasies, among others. Looming in the background of the desires is the persistence of imperialism and the people's entanglement with not only the global economy powered by neoliberal capitalism. In direct accompaniment, the landscape of desires also constructs an omnipresent network of ecologies as resources, as hosts, as companion characters. In surveying these three films in its commonalities and differences, an alternative non-representation for imagining human presence within ecological sites emerges.

Miko Revereza & Carolina Fusilier's *The Still Side*:

voiding stillness, implied abundance

In Revereza & Fusilier's *The Still Side*, the film is entirely devoid of visual images of humans. What animates the frames, instead, are water, winds, animals, and the Siyokoy, against the stillness of artificial structures, murals, and domestic objects. In a way, this constitutes a figure-ground relationship. The stillness of the ruins and structures became a backdrop for non-human lives to take place. In this framework, a sense of ecological continuity is established. Visible in the frame is spatial activation, as the water ebbed and flowed, washing away and receding, as the flora and fauna alongside what's left behind of human expedition fluttered in the wind, as animals made homes out of the cracks and corners of ready-made structures. Implied in the frame, however, is temporal activation. The ruins, in their incompleteness, in the way they retained a silhouette of their past shapes with their on-going destruction laying bare, stood as a manifestation of time passed. This passage was not neutral, not simply occurring irrespective of the structures, but was abrasive, making impacts, leaving traces of its processes. The apparentness of these processes creates imperfect loops, for ruins are testaments to the way certain materials outlast others. Regardless, this passage of time brings abundance, as lives replacing lives, making new habitation out of old dwelling places. Among these temporal waves rising and falling, there were also constants, nestled in themselves myriad of temporalities, like water and wind. They were not the same as the water and wind that saw these structures in their glory days of human occupation, but the facts of their operation remained consistent. Another such constant is the Siyokoy, as it also took on the gentleness and lightness of the wind and water. The inclusion of a mythical creature complicated the temporalities of the natural world and the human world. As myths activate traditions and longevity, the Siyokoy seemed to act as an omnipresent force that existed before these different temporalities could collide, acting as witness or guardian of

what could remain after an impact. Yet, the Siyokoy was also a product of human imagination, of the humans' urge to mythologize to make sense of the world, and to have the world be explained and accountable to forces more permanent than human life itself. The Siyokoy stood at the intersection of both the affirmation of and the negation of human traces, its nebulous presence giving a home to the audience's urge to move through and investigate the space, reinforcing a cycle of discovery, exploration, use and decay.

In an interview, Miko Revereza spoke of the way he approached the space 'intuitive', citing that "... there's a lot of feelings going through these spaces" (George, 2022). If the states of animateness and stillness in the structures filmed had been sites of spatial and temporal mobilization, then the filmic apparatus activated affective propagation. At times, the film read as a series of uncanny stills, portraits of lack, failures, of unrealized visions and untapped potentials. The overwhelming stillness of the film acts as a compression, the frames boiling with imagined possibilities of what once was or what could have been. The camera holds still, as if inviting the audience to detect any last traces of movement. Yet, in the recognizability of the structures filmed, in the ghostly remnants of the chairs, tables or speakers amidst destructive humidity, the still camera also left space for imagination of dwelling, of inhabiting the way we have always inhabited our domestic spaces. Yet, when the camera moved, we were reminded that we should tread lightly. We should read lightly because the objects we encountered were so fragile, eroding in front of our eyes at a pace beyond our cognition. This fragility stood in contrast with the permanence that empires conceived for themselves in their utopian vision, in the various acts of violence they conducted to persevere.

Although Capaluco did not exist, it evoked real and recognizable desires that were placed and now misplaced into the place. The film's realism worked on the layer of the fictional, reminiscent of Laura Huertas Millan's notion of ensembles of narratives rooted in

colonialism as fiction-making (Rogers, 2023). Capaluco was not real, but it was believable, referencing fragmentedly the tourism industry and the sites that embrace similar ideologies across the world, especially in previously colonized places. The Siyokoy was not the only source of myth-making in the film: the Capaluco island resort also manufactured its own myth and the continuation of it – continued consumption, endorsement of indulgence - was formulated as ‘tradition’: “Cocktails at sunset on The Galat terrace is a classic tradition of Capaluco. Don’t miss it!” Even Miko remarked this superficiality in the film himself, saying that in order for something to be attractive, an attraction must be created. The narrative of exoticism in Capaluco worked insidiously, for it schizophrenically (to borrow Deleuze’s formulation of capitalism) tried to take up all tangible signs of cultural heritage from all corners of the world into its fold – even the non-human world. Capaluco had a zoo (where animals were assumed to want to befriend humans), a Parthenon Museum where one could hear Greek myths told by the Olympian gods themselves, and music nights with DJs and danceable tunes, among many other attractions. In the way that empires never wanted to preserve the agency of cultures they displaced but to possess it through subjugation, draining them to become comfortably recognizable traces of themselves, tourism (itself a cultural-economic manifestation of imperialism) made the same gesture. The resort was fragmented , juxtaposing many different forms of desire: some sites were created to be re-enactment and mimics (the zoo), some to generate fictional proximity (the Parthenon museum), some anachronically interventionist (luxury structures, for instance). However, in contrast with the resort narration’s directness in addressing this form of mastery, there was a moment of rupture: the story of the octopus, told in the Parthenon museum. The story of the octopus was one of mutation as adaptation to hostility, the ability to transform to preserve one’s existence and to appear illusive to perpetrators. As the voices of the resort speakers faded into the background, as we learned more and more of the structures’ stillness, we came

to understand that Capaluco had transformed similarly, its subjugation under tourism was ephemeral, and it is now in a different form, resilient, once again.

Laura Huertas Millan's *El Laberinto*:

the colonial force and its Others in a battle of wants

Laura Huertas Millan's *El Laberinto* acted as a filmic connection between the desire towards affluence (superficially) of the drug lord Evaristo Porras and the origin of that desire, the mansion in the American TV show *Dynasty*. One of Millan's most used strategies was formal repetition, producing images of imitation. At the first half of the film, there was the camera moving to follow Cristóbal into the forest, edited to be followed by a string of images from *Dynasty* where characters were also having their back to the camera. There were also many exterior shots of Porras's mansion edited to be adjacent to helicopter shots of *Dynasty*'s mansion, mimicking to the detail of the impenetrable, curtained windows. There is the initial layer of imitation, where it was Porras's wish to imitate the mansion in *Dynasty*, according to Cristóbal's narration. There lies the imperial aspiration, thought to be achievable through extreme wealth and control, through violence and domination. As Cristóbal was recounting the killing of the cow at the mansion, literal and symbolic cycles of violence were evoked:

“The brutality of the killing of the cow for its consumption, how the slaughter of the animal becomes part of the Narco routine of gathering, celebrating, and corrupting the police and the army, is also a representation of what violence constitutes in those circles: a spectacle and an ethos. Everything and everyone in that system has to be executed, annihilated at some point: animals, women, indigenous people, workers, the forest, judges, activists, themselves.” (Myles, 2018)

There also lies the power to create desires in American television: the way affluence is displayed and dramatization humanizes the oppressor class of society becomes a machine that

produced consistent yearning. However, only in the frames of Millan's work that these two underlying currents were matched, for Porras never managed to sustain that desire for long, *Dynasty* was never realized to begin with, and Cristobal's gait was substantially different from the actors'. In a way, this parallelization made apparent how intangible images were, and how *simple* and convenient they were to be made alike, reminiscent of the instantaneous process of desire production.

However, in the binary of the Global South – North, of Porras's desire and *Dynasty*'s production, lay a third, intervening character, which was Cristobal. Cristobal inhabited a third site in the film, as he was shown going into the ruin. Millan's ruin bore strong resemblance to Revereza and Fusilier's, in the sense that new lives continued to flourish in the remnants of previous structure, amidst the persistent artifacts of its previous lives that outlasted human occupation. However, Millan's ruin also held a stark sense of delinquency and anachronism, with graffiti, discarded shoes, old bottles and so on floated on waters, shoved in the corners of concrete walls, spread out like grass. The beings that inhabit this third space, outside the fold of narco-violence and TV fantasy exhibited subversive liveliness, near-obvious inevitability. While Cristobal did not wish for the ruin, the way he was our guide into the ruins, into the forest, into his community and his life marked Millan's strategy of access as agency restoration. Cristobal gradually transitioned to being a witness to Porras's affluence and crime to being his own narrator of his near-death experience, which we learned at the end, almost as an assertion to what previously excavated desires would be heading for. Millan noted, "the near-death experience is the most subjective experience one can have, as it can only be shared with others afterwards, through stories." Prior, and in preparation for the recounting of the near-death experience, we saw the face of Cristobal as he sat on the boat rowing down the river. There were only two faces seen in the film, that of Cristobal, and that other of the white, blonde matriarch-wannabe in *Dynasty*: they were both gazing into a space

inaccessible by the frame. While the *Dynasty* matriarch lent her voice to saccharinely and dramatically animate the ruin as a character in this cycle of feverish desires and tumultuous destruction, Cristobal's account of the near-death experience provided a narrative of wisdom, of imagined space untouchable by such a cycle. Once again, similarly to the octopus story in *The Still Side*, the allegory of the death anaconda, provided a radically poetic commentary on the facts of empire and domination of the mind. Millan opened the film with contradictory sites of desire, like the forest, or the mansion, and ended the film reaching into subjectivity, into the drive to both avoid and confront death, to both be afraid and charmed by it. Deep into the Amazon, Millan created a mental geography, locating and mapping the pulsing agents and entanglements, spatializing, both in narrative and filmic terms, as a commentary on the root of desire.

Latipa's *Perpetual Peace*:

scales of projections, a hand extended

In Latipa's *Perpetual Peace*, the process of harvesting, processing, and packaging Dole bananas were intimately explored. A carousel of banana bunches in holed plastic bag, cut down by a man with a knife. Another man cut them off into individual bunches and threw them into the rippling water. Some women washing the bananas by hand. A close-up on these women's faces from the side, their hair stuffed inside plastic hats. Another close-up of their hands reaching for the bananas from the water, before we saw them from the back. Then the bananas entered the automated assembly line with even more people, putting Dole stickers on them as they were lined on a tray. Then they were placed into carton boxes, electric blue and yellow – close-ups on the hands that placed them, tied the knots, pushed the boxes down the belt. Latipa presented globalization in the form of ritualistic procedure, fragmented operations performed by the hands of Filipino laborers. She noted that “Places like the

Philippines that are at the center of what makes globalization run.” (Dizon & Osterloh, 2021). On this site of banana production, there existed the ever-destructive greed of multi-national corporations like Dole, who compensated for its exploitation in tax dollars to the Philippines government. Yet, in the operation, the human figures remained calm, almost masterful, the sense of normalcy and regularity felt contradictorily claustrophobic evoked cyclic temporalities that had stretched generations of people inhabiting on the land filmed. When is a place land of a people, and when is it a ‘special economic zone’? Perhaps, the question could also be a where, for it is one of distance. These are the people of Latipa’s films – some of them taking up center frame, addressing the camera directly; how are these people different from the people in ‘the American people’ on the US AID signs? Latipa managed to explore the space of extractivism in a way that aligned humans, nature and machine in one frame – yet each rejecting its relation to one another, as fragmented as the assigned procedure of the banana operation. There were the humans, corporeally involved in the production of value yet ideologically removed from what energized it, the distance between their labor input and the reward they (should rightfully) reap spanning as far as the journey the banana boxes would take. There were nature, quite literally being displaced and shipped off to the other side of the globe (echoing how Latipa described the destructive mining on the mountain, metaphorized as ‘shipping [land of a mountain] abroad’), nature that was nurtured on Philippines soil only to be possessed by foreign powers. And there were machines, there were the impossible, unthinkable amount of water, engines, screws and belts, carton boxes that took up a full warehouse, scales that seemed unfathomable by, and unfit for the needs of, individual humans. These sobering explorations into different areas that bore the remnants of American presence in the Philippines stirred up spirals of various sizes. These remnants also contained many repetitions: the repetitions of labor and extracting processes, of recurring American intervention, of cycles of birth and destruction, of have and have-nots. Yet in the

constancy that Latipa presented, there was also a sense of inescapability and the suspicion that these repetitions that fuel global capitalism were omnipresent.

While Millan's repetition presented direct comparisons and imitative desires, Latipa's repetition of the narrative of exploitation in multiple sites across the Philippines presented binaries that were much less direct. In Latipa's film, both sides of the colonial binary were assumed to retain somewhat similar desirous gaze of each other. Yet these gazes always *missed* their target, for they never truly saw their target in high resolution. From the side of the Americans, the Philippines existed as military bases, a Other-nation state to insert the governors they wanted, a gold mine, among others. Even to the American people, the Philippines were made tangible to them through the stickers on the bananas – and that was one of the only moments of direct encounter made available in the film. From the side of the people of the Philippines, America existed in the balikbayan boxes and the abundance of consumer goods, in the US AID signs that were addressing some nebulous good by patching up some capitalism-inflicted wounds, in the tent camp inhabited by displaced people of the disastrous mine water accidents. America also existed in the words of folks as Mount Pinatubo erupted, as the provocateur of angry gods. There was never a moment of dialogue or sameness; both the Philippines and America stood as shadows of itself. This lack of clarity in both sides' visions of one another portrayed in this film evoked Latipa's desire to 'work at the threshold of what conditions visibility' (Dizon & Osterloh, 2021), while also suggesting Latipa's narration in the film that there was not one Philippines, and the story she was telling was only one of many. The multiplicity of stories flourished in the multiplicity of viewpoints and images; yet in the collective imagination there were still historical singularities: like the military base, which was the "most" important for American operations in South-East Asia, like the existence of one Dole company that drained the area off its fruits.

Conclusion

This essay has explored the implications of desires in the three works of eco-cinema. The notion of 'implications' echoed Dhillon's call to look for the fuel, the energizing mechanism of what makes the visible visible and the invisible not, rather than merely representing, putting forward complacencies of these regimes. Common patterns in motifs and intervening methods were observed in three three films, namely the motif of ruin, the method of repetition, the intentions to allegorize and metaphorize, the explication of agency for the colonial Other. There was no immersion, but critique, radical co-existence, biting distaste, somber mourning, and aspiration for subversions in alternatives. The arguments were grounded in an investigation of desire, of locating not only who wants what, but also who were and were not allowed to want, and who were granted what they wanted at the expense of another's loss. By aligning the three films under a common mechanism of desire, a toolbox for alternative ways to exploring ecologies through cinematic means reveals itself.

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