



PLANT-FILMING: RE-VIEWING VEGETALITY

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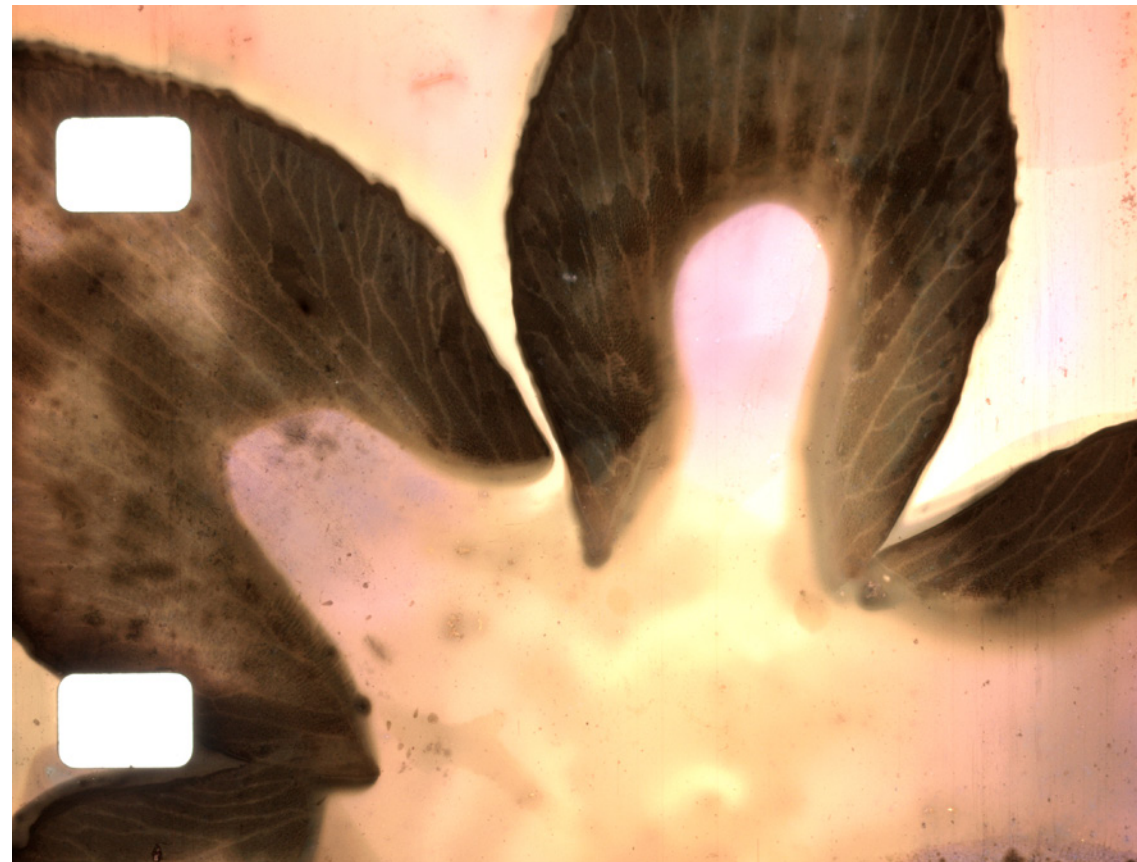
When cinematically viewing more-than-human beings, relying on technological manipulation, whether temporal—time-lapse, slow-motion—or spatial—micro- and macro-cinematography—is insufficient, even unjust. Consider Jean Comandon’s films, *Spirochaeta Pallida (Agent de la Syphilis)* (1909), which observes microscopic syphilis bacterium, or *La Croissance des Végétaux* (1929), which displays the usually slow bodily behaviours of some plants. Comandon’s methodology weds science and cinema, wielding cinema’s technology, namely its capacity to invert the macroscopic and microscopic through processes of enlargement, condense time, and its proficiency to animate, to make a view that eludes opticality coincident with an anthropic register. Comandon’s contemporary, Jean Epstein, saw similar potential in cinema’s novel technicity. Time-lapse, Epstein says, can let one see “a sprout swelling up into an oak tree”¹ whilst slow-motion can display “the gesticulation of plants”.² Something not entirely innocent is at play here. An alien, anthropic perspective is being imposed upon other beings, implying that a human animal’s perspective is univocal, that such a reality is the only reality.³ As an asymmetrical translation, some injustice, however residual, is always present.⁴

Yet how may one respectfully represent more-than-human beings who resist a strikingly human animal tendency to want to apprehend them completely? Maybe by drawing back, by going slow? No, says Ryan Conrath.⁵ In his article, “The Ecological Cut,” which was included within *Millennium Film Journal* No. 69, Conrath regards James Benning’s video *Nightfall* (2011), a static, single ninety-eight-minute take of a forest at twilight, as symptomatic of a popular tendency to go slow when looking at

more-than-human areas or beings. Scott MacDonald has argued that a methodology geared towards the long take’s achievement exemplifies and encourages ecological consciousness, modelling “patience and mindfulness.”⁶ What is the issue? For Conrath, imagining ecology as a long take regards ecology as homogeneous harmony, smooth interconnection, but ecology is untidy contagion, separation—an ever-shifting synthesis of heterogeneous elements, a murky mosaic of provisional alliances and frequent decouplings. I would add that such media regularly imply that so-called nature is only natural when human animals are absent, architecturally corroborating this by gazing upon so called nature with awe, potentially deifying it.

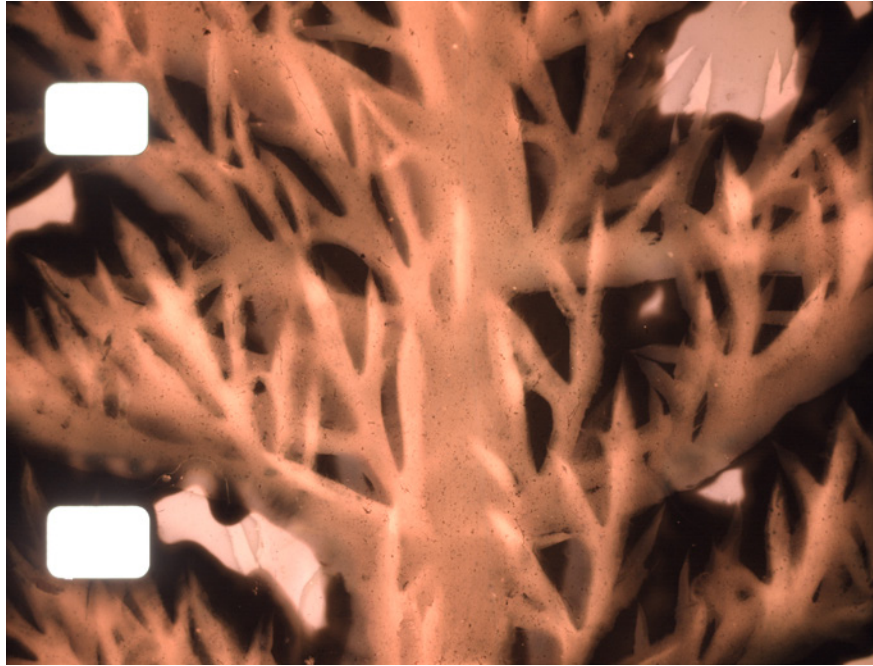
Conrath’s theory? Strategically embrace the cut. Conrath’s methodology, however, is risky. Conrath is moved by Daïchi Saïto’s writing, particularly this quotation: “Nature is natural only when it is not seen. Close your eyes, and nature will restore its naturalness.”⁷ Here, so-called nature is moved beyond representation, instantiating a taboo. Advocating the cut may introduce a duality wherein the more-than-human is indelibly other, and human animals are non-naturalized. Nonetheless, Conrath’s wonderfully novel theory of the cut as a “technique of relation”⁸ explores ways of visualising ecology beyond cinematic stasis, or cinema’s purportedly neutral capacity to distend or deflate space and time.

Properly representing more-than-human beings requires experimentally subordinating cinema to more-than-human dynamism, and entirely fresh modalities of audiovisual expression. More-than-human subjectivity must be explored according to the terms by which it may actually be enjoyed. Though it is “impossible



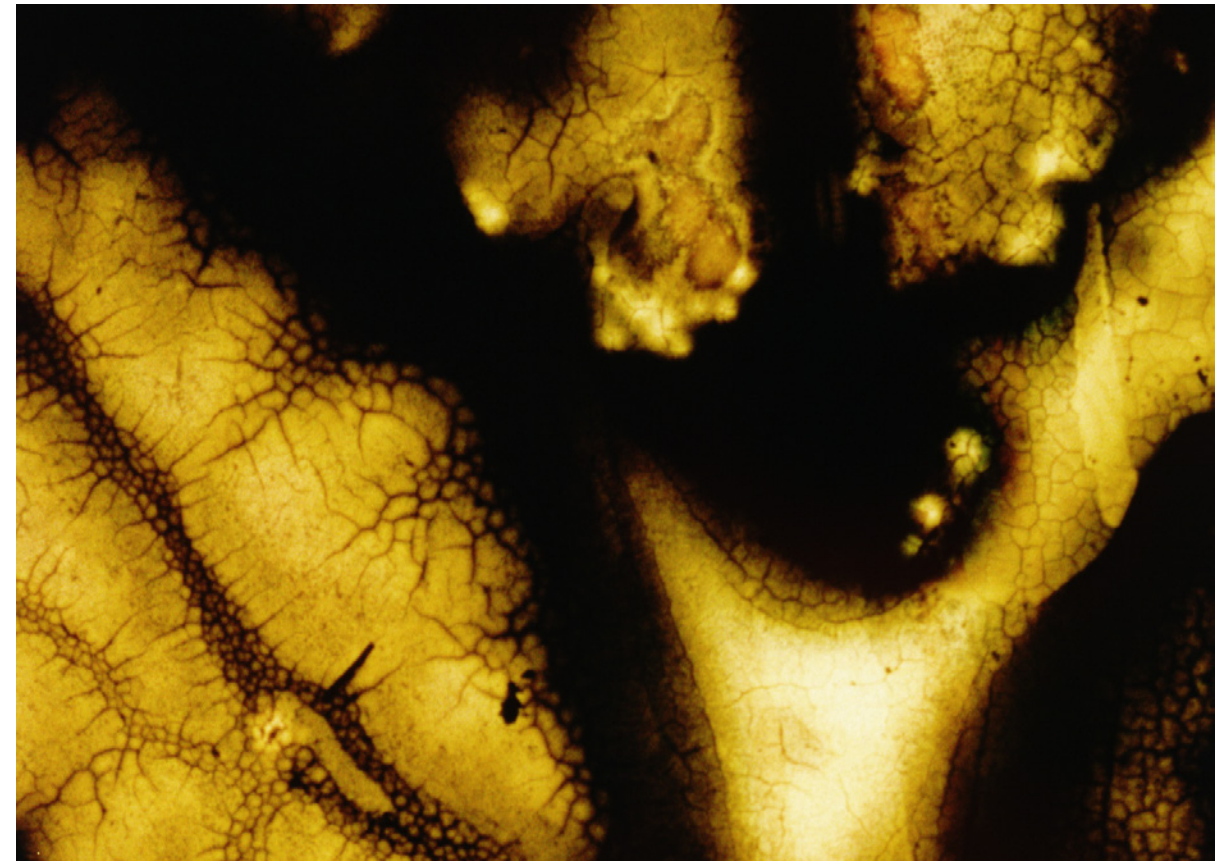
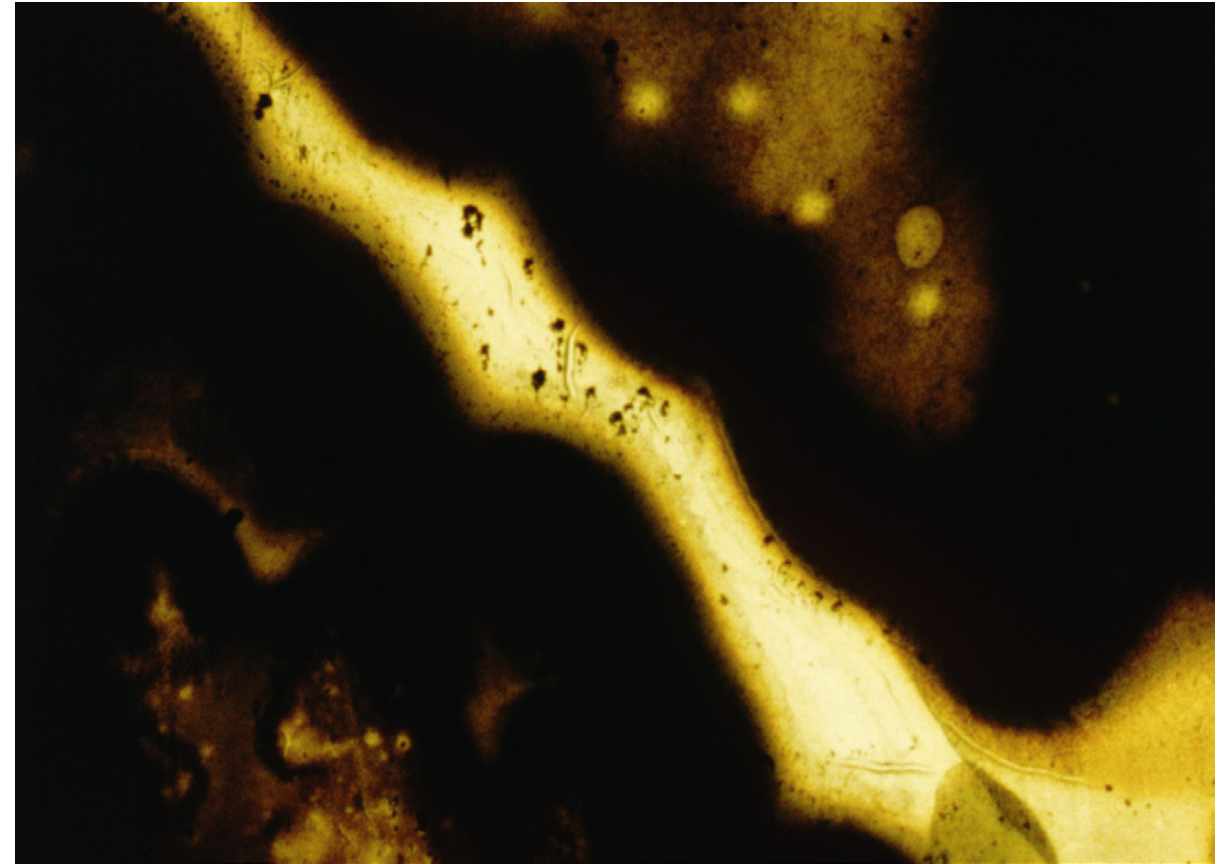
TOP Charlotte Clermont, *Plant Dreaming Deep* (2017), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

BOTTOM Karel Doing, *Phytography* (2020), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



LEFT Karel Doing, *Phytography* (2020), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

RIGHT Karel Doing, *The Mulch Spider* (2018), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.



to know anything with certainty about” an other’s “subjective experience,”⁹ when it is respectfully informed, artistic speculation is permissible, maybe necessary. Thus, I too am focused on seeing differently. Yet I am particularly concerned with plants. Why? Because plants enjoy a life that exceeds the instrumental ends into which they are relentlessly crammed, and a majority of life will be extinguished if human animals continually fail to care for plants.

I draw from Conrath’s percipience. However, I consider alternate modalities in their entirety, not emphasising any singular operation. Additionally, I explore contemporary cinema, offering plants my full attention. Much literature has dealt with plants in early cinema.¹⁰ Little considers contemporary media.¹¹ Yet the sciences, humanities, and arts are now reviewing plants. The contemporary moment exudes the novel possibility of a new, non-anthropocentric synthesis of science, ethics, politics, and art. I will partially unpack contemporary experimental cinema’s contribution to this budding revolution.

The climate crisis’s exigency excavates another stratum of potentiality. Desperately, new modalities are required wherein plants may be apprehended for what they are, not just what they offer. Yet plants may not entirely align with human animal temporality, spatiality, opticality. Human animals require a prosthesis. As Giovanni Aloï argues, images have always played a part when it comes to how something is understood, or “ontologized,” even plants.¹² This trajectory, however, can be reworked, with images doing work for the good. Alternate gazes may help produce “a reontologization of the living.”¹³

This question has yet to be widely asked of cinema, especially experimental cinema. However, experimental practitioners can be fantastically fruitful because they are predisposed to looking differently, keyed in to working through alternate modes.

Contemporary filmmaker Karel Doing has evocatively written that “cinema is an intermediate, helping us to perceive signals that would normally exist beyond our event horizon.”¹⁴ Doing provides an excellent starting point. Doing’s works are about plants, and plants help to make them. They expose a plant’s subjectivity by helping one witness a plant’s semiotic ability.

Doing has developed phytography. Phytography is a way of making images by using the internal chemistry of plants and the plant body. In phytography, plants are placed against a photosensitive element and encouraged to release their polyphenols, groups of molecules that parallel the compounds present in certain photographic developers. Phytograms portray a detailed structure of a plant’s body and phytochemical reactivity, whilst using phytochemistry as a developing agent.¹⁵

Plants communicate with their iconic body, but especially their phytochemistry. Suzanne Simard contends that phytochemistry constitutes “the language of plants.”¹⁶ As Eduardo Kohn says, to witness something conveying meaning via a semantic methodology is to witness something having subjectivity, enjoying a world. In *How Forests Think*, Kohn elaborates: “Semiosis (the creation and interpretation of signs) permeates and constitutes the living world, and it is through our partially shared semiotic propensities that multispecies

relations are possible, and also analytically comprehensible.”¹⁷ Martin Krampen, in ‘Phytosemiotics,’ erected a plant-oriented offshoot of biosemiotics, forging a (sub)discipline dedicated to the study of plants’ ability to convey meaning. Any plant, writes Krampen, “iconically portray[s] the forces of [its] environment through [its] meaningful form.”¹⁸ Arguably, to witness phytochemistry and a plant’s bodily articulation produce an image is to witness phytosemiosis, the system by which a plant expresses its subjectivity. Phytograms translate phytosemiosis into a legible register, signifying plant subjectivity and perhaps, as Doing suggests, making possible human animal-plant “communication.”¹⁹

The Mulch Spider’s Dream (2018), made of phytograms, was composed by Doing and wild onion, ground elder and herb robert. The jittery imagery registers beneath the threshold required to produce linear motion. A direct animation, one’s viewpoint is perpetually held in a disorienting, top-down position. The imagery is intoxicating, recalling a crackling fire or lava flow. Warmly familiar yet fascinatingly alien, it is uncanny, maintaining the viewer in a space of hospitable unknowability. As the film progresses, imagery becomes more recognisable; patterns recalling a plant’s corporeality gradually become discernible, yet remain incessantly slippery. The image thrums wildly, a glittery cosmos phasing in and out of obscurity. The film’s mysterious, abstract imagery, signifying beyond human animal perception, occupies a deterritorialized zone, holding open an undetermined, utopian futurity. Plants occupy a threshold, both present and recalcitrant, familiar and strange. The uncanny, kinetic imagery communicates plant dynamism, agency, and unknowability. Its beauty and familiarity convey plant hospitality and generosity, the possibility of plant-human animal communion.

The dynamic view afforded by Doing’s film refutes an anthropic tendency to rhythmically subordinate plants, resisting the audiovisual repertoire by which plants are regularly imaged. Anthropocentrism is also rejected methodologically. Here, patience at the level of process is key. Yet, wait—isn’t operating glacially anathema? Processually, not necessarily. Experientially, plants exhibit behavior slowly. Cinema, beholden to the economy’s clock, cannot waste precious time by coinciding with plant speed. Thus, generally speaking, plants are aligned with an alien schedule by being made to speed up. Where cinema technology is usually deployed to make a plant’s disjunctive temporality satisfying to a human animal viewer, Doing has worked otherwise, comporting his methodology to welcome plants, making cinema’s rhythm coincident with plant dynamism. Phytograms “grow” slowly over time, usually many days, through an array of deeply material entanglements.²⁰ Indeed, open to corporeality’s vicissitudes, analog film’s specificity—material, malleable, vulnerable—

presents novel pathways along which the subjectivity of plants may be visited. Phytosemiosis is exclusively physical; conveying phytosemiosis requires a physical canvas upon which plants may scribe. Analog film, enabling cameraless production, may also entirely bypass figuration. Importantly, Doing utilised unexposed film. One thus doesn’t see a pre-existing image that has been negatively degraded, or brutalised. One sees a new image, created solely by plants. Plant agency registers as a positive, creative act, not a negation.

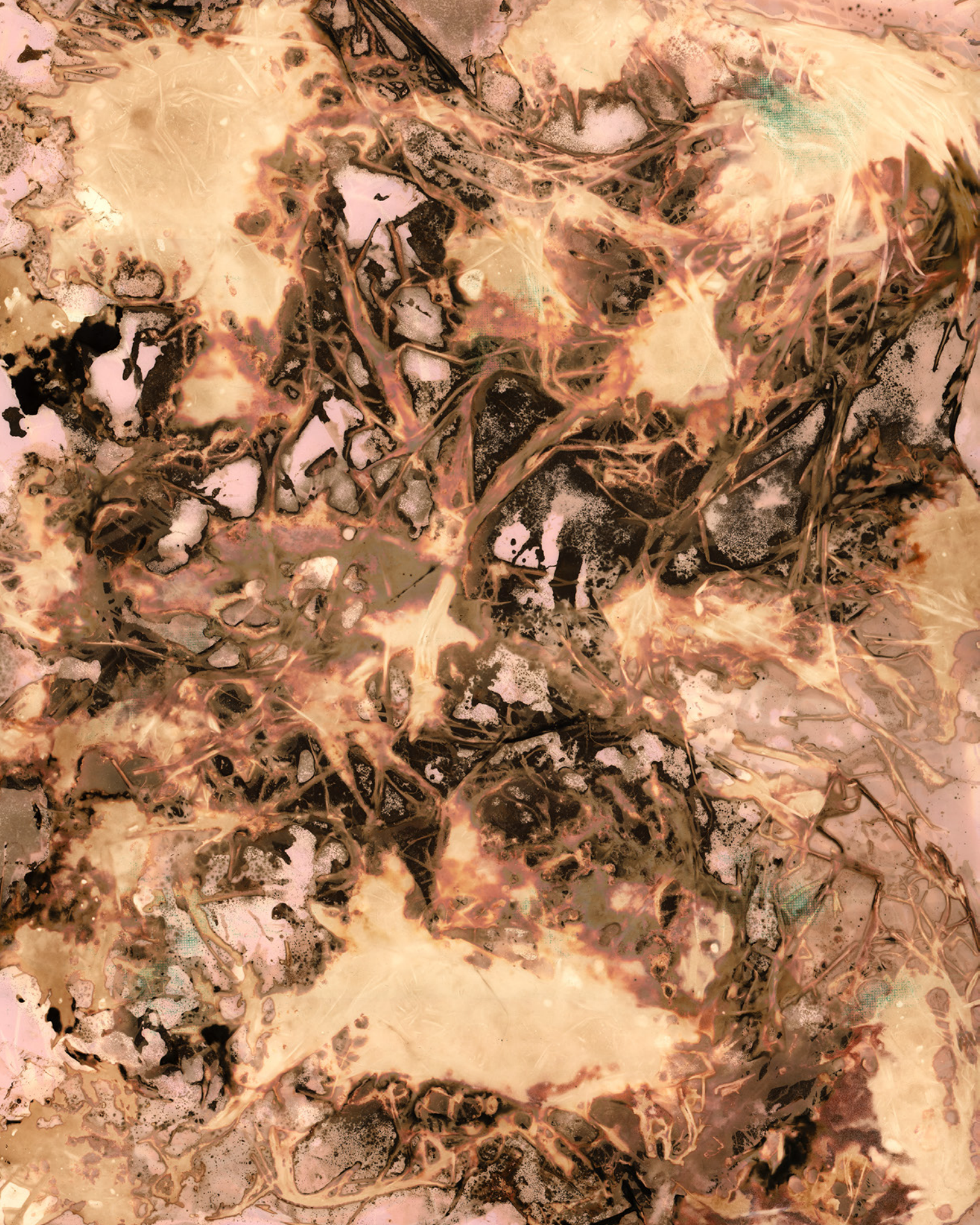
Here, plants communicate their own communicability. Doing’s film’s subtle trajectory, from obscurity to familiarity, is telling. Doing has attempted “to explore a possible shared semiotic realm between plants and humans.”²¹ He asks that his “audience step out of their comfort zone and follow [him] on a rather uneven and winding path without clear destination. The reward is that this path is eventually more familiar to us than we might expect.”²² Doing has explored the similarities between plants and human animals, not the differences, in the hope of achieving legitimate plant-human animal communication.

Doing writes that “imagination is a necessary attribute in my quest.”²³ Doing’s film suggests that plants have a world, and that their way of communicating is legible to human animals. This equates to the requirement that plants be encountered anew, as not inert, nonconscious pseudo-beings, but as thoroughly unique beings that exceed the systems that

incessantly corral them. Here, a shared register may be explored and restoration may begin. Doing, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari wrote, has chosen to “follow the plants”²⁴ in the pursuit of something nearly unthinkable, namely a contemporary human animal-plant relationship based on recognition and respect. Sadly, however, Doing methodologically consumes plants. Yet Doing is exceptionally mindful, respectfully managing this negativity. As Doing says, “I do not consider myself as being innocent.” Rather, “I am a beginner who is trying to find a way forward, and plants are my teachers.”²⁵

Can plants be followed in other ways? A video by Charlotte Clermont seemingly displays an answer. *Plant Dreaming Deep* (2017), which was scored by Emilie Payeur, views plants in exceptionally novel ways. Clermont borrowed its title from May Sarton’s eponymous book about solitude.²⁶ Though plant imagery is ubiquitous, at around midway in the video one sees a particularly fascinating sequence. Five separate images that are static, two-dimensional, and exclusively of plants appear. These depictions do not exemplify entire plants, but sections of a plant’s body, as if a plant’s body has been cut up, segmented for focused analysis. The images’ backgrounds are neutral: the plant body stands alone, severed from its native milieu.





Karel Doing, *Grassroots* (2020), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

These images parallel herbarium imagery. Historically, herbaria were botany's primary literary document. Now, a herbarium can also be an actual museum. Think, for example, of The Herbarium at The Royal Botanic Gardens of Kew, London. Either way, herbaria are collections of plant specimens that are systematically presented so as to facilitate easy study and endless analysis. This all comes down to identifying plants, hedging them into rigid taxonomies and neat systems of classification that legitimate and tacitly imply the presence of a central subject that adjudicates on these arbitrary groupings and polices their borders. Any herbarium pays homage to an anthropocentric imaginary.

Sarton's book offers a cipher. For, when tasked with visually transmitting "lonel[iness] and suffocati[on]", Clermont turned to "flowers."²⁷ Here, Clermont seems to say: plants exceed herbaria, which deracinate, suffocate, make lonely. Evocatively, Clermont deploys an aesthetic regime that rejects the herbarium's impulse. Although one surely sees plants, each image is nearly indiscernible. The image comprises a distinct lack of focus; pixels incessantly blur. Additionally, Clermont has utilised a video synthesizer. The images include an undulating, wavelike quality. Bands of static regularly cascade downwards, horizontally bisecting the screen, generating mobility despite the images' immobility. The dense colorization of images is particularly striking. Hues of every palette overwhelm the image, producing playful vibrancy where solidity should reign. The herbarium's form, usually a stable container, is now unable to fully contain its content. One is seeing too much, as if two diametric oppositions are vying for supremacy within the space of the screen.

Clermont's methodology precludes botany's capacity to didactically determine, displaying that plants exceed the systems that claim to account for them in their entirety. A standard description of plant ontology comprises inertia, nonconsciousness. Could Clermont's vibrant aesthetic be interpreted as signifying plant ontology's excess? The vitality behind the inertia? An ear to Payeur's soundtrack says yes. Split between organicity and artificiality, it is incessantly rambunctious, sonically embodying plant vibrancy. Never achieving tidy musicality but rather continuously becoming-musical, it audibly writes plant potentiality as an excessive force.

The intentional choice of analog video is very important. Caught amidst film's arcane beauty and the digital's perfect clarity, analog video comprises deficiency, liminality—like a plant confusingly conceived as neither dead nor alive. These qualities, however, offered Clermont distance from "a tangible reality," access to a world of "dreams... illusions."²⁸ This, alongside Clermont's synthetic "alter[ation of] the image," introduces "[a] distance from the original", a "[w]indow" onto a space wherein things once familiar may adopt new guises.²⁹ A vital aspect of

analog video's specific qualities is its connection to aesthetic and economic poverty. Unloved by the mainstream, analog video has become defunct refuse. Artists regularly come to it, as Clermont did, via financial insolvency. Liminal, deficient, poor, discarded: analog video's specificity may itself coincide with normative definitions of plant identity; that is, with how plants are normally treated, and understood.

Another remarkable moment comes at the video's beginning. The video starts with a zoom that retreats from a television. After a beat, the camera retraces its movements until the television screen's edge envelopes the frame. This viewing position is maintained throughout, tacitly suggesting that the video's material is emanating from the diegetic space of the television. One is constantly twice removed from the video's content, always watching a plant being watched. A plant's actuality, whatever that may be, is, generally speaking, majorly veiled by some arbitrary conceptual schemata that have been unjustly imposed. This viewing position may be the analog of the notion that plants are, and have been, perpetually screened and mediated. Not just in cinema, but across the full history of the Occident—in philosophy, so-called natural history, science, art, and beyond.

Interspersed throughout the video are images of gesticulating human animal body parts and written words. As Clermont insists, "[m]y work won't make any sense if at least one of these are not present."³⁰ When words appear, letters are randomly redacted, inscribing a failure of human animal language to adequately signify. Arguably, bodily gesture delineates a non-species-specific language, ubiquitously democratic. From the ashes of language's failure gesture seems to emerge as a shared semiotic ability equally endemic to all things, a creaturely capacity that freely marauds across presupposed boundaries. This curtails anthropic exceptionalism, producing a horizontalizing effect. Language, human animals' special tool, is discredited. Plants, using their iconic body, may conduct semiosis and properly possess life. The gestural body becomes a shared semiotic arena, a locus of interspecies understanding.

Clermont effects a rigorous management of cinema technology. She employs: frequent zooms; a range of lenses; material both original and archival; and a near constant manipulation of the image's various qualities. One may therefore ask: is Clermont's methodology not just a skewed version of Comandon's? Absolutely not. If one removed the artefacts of Clermont's experimentation—dense colorization, digital disturbance, and so forth—one would be left with some remarkably normative imagery wherein plants have been captured through static, slowly panning, or gradually zooming shots; that is, according to the audiovisual conventions of so-called wildlife



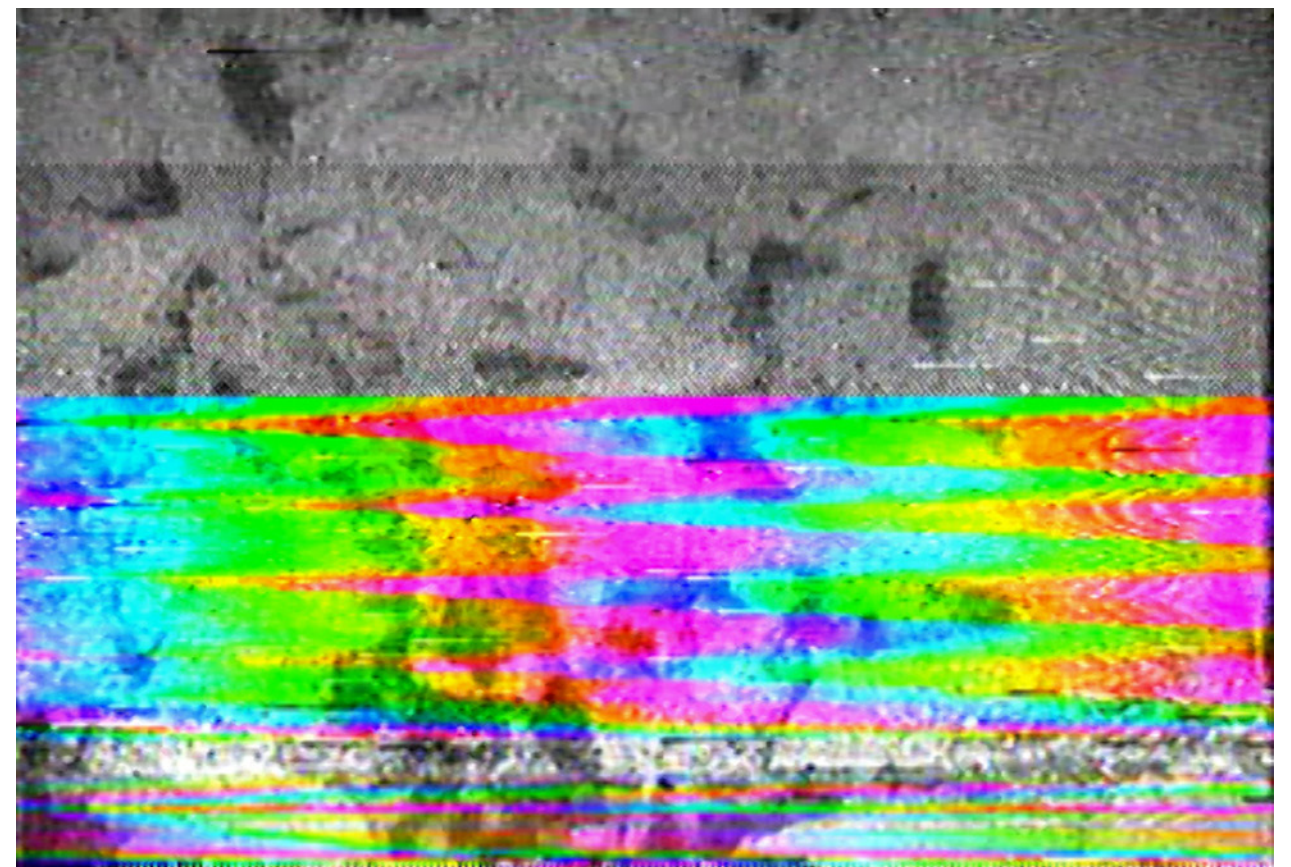
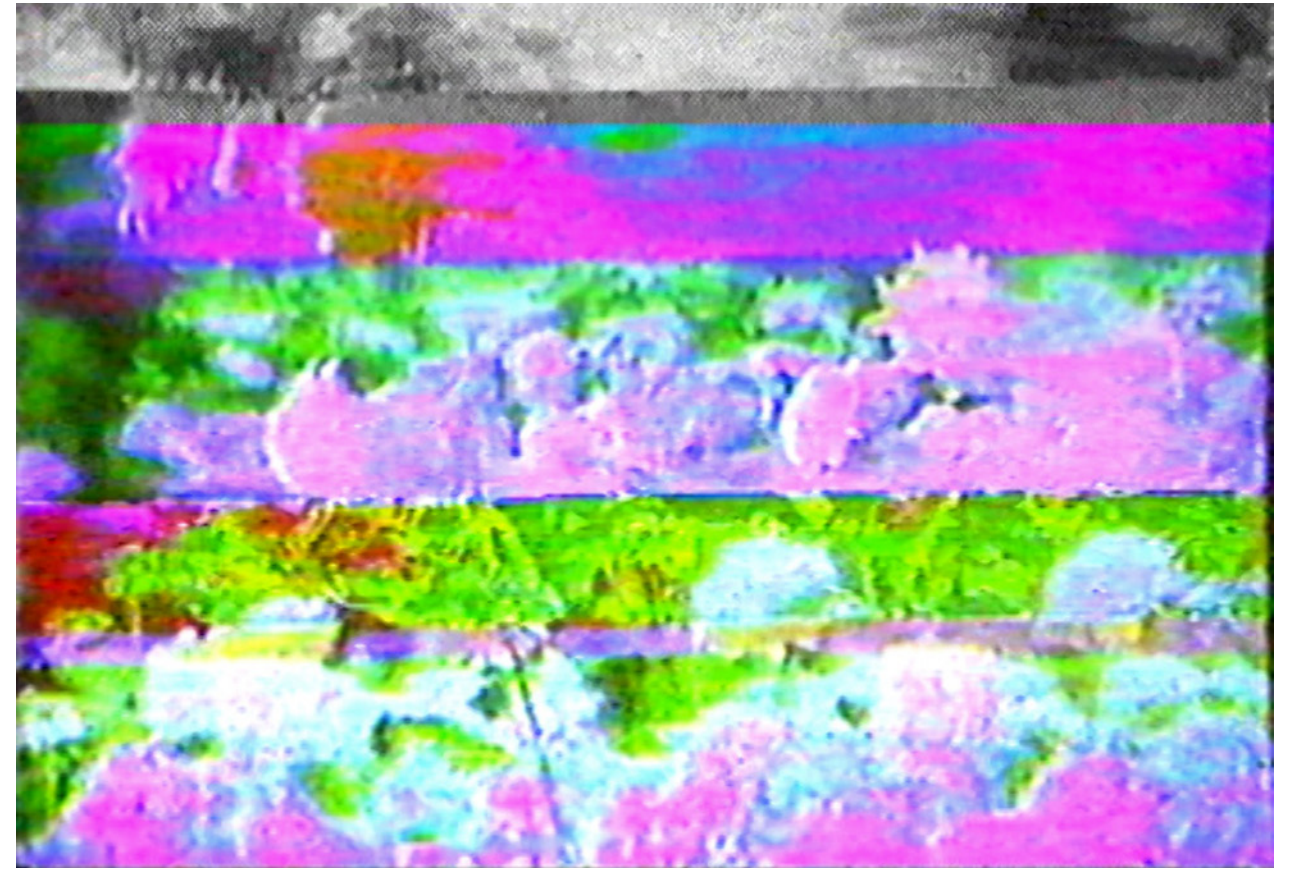
Charlotte Clermont, *Plant Dreaming Deep* (2017), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

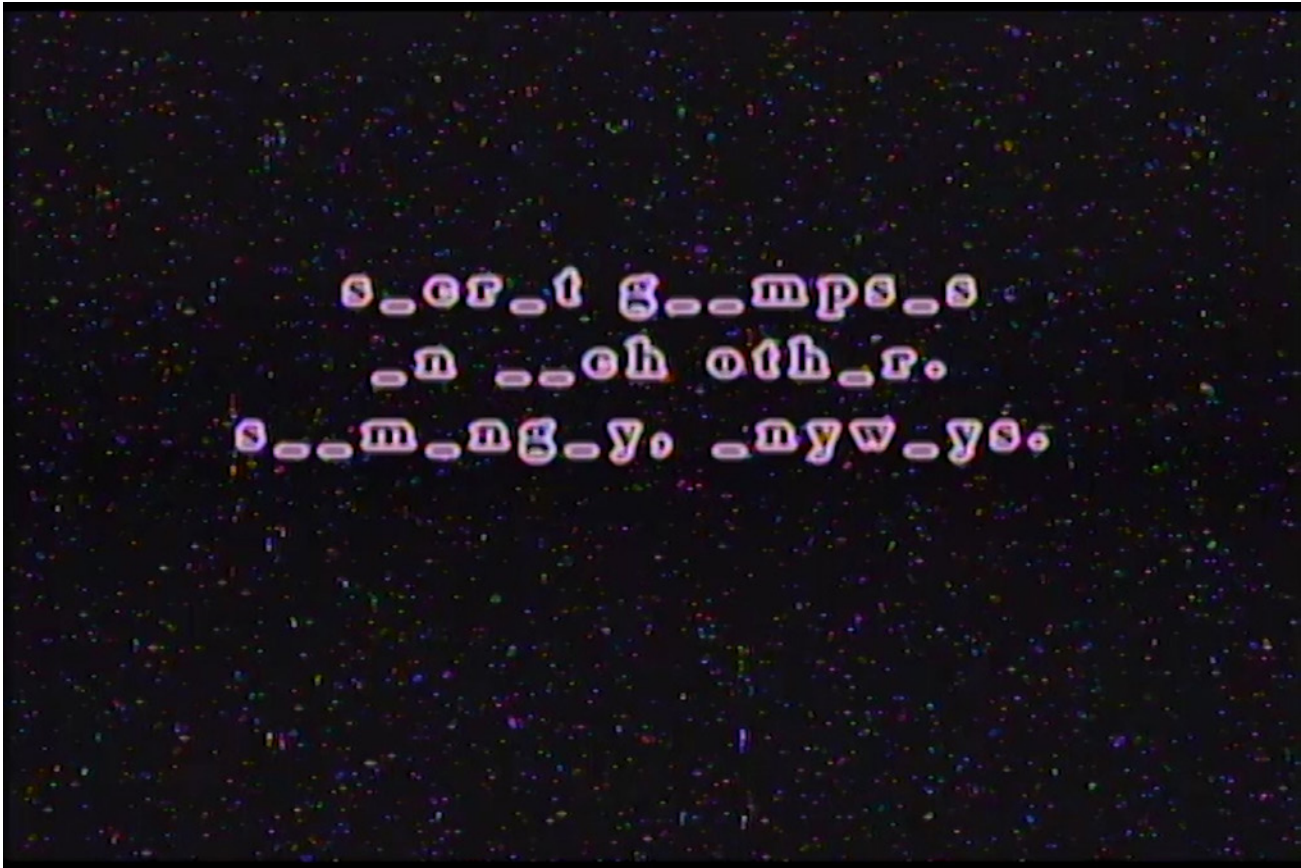
documentaries or even literary herbaria. However, Clermont overwhelms such imagery, rendering them unable to signify in a usual way. Clermont problematizes such representational systems, neither redeploying nor negating them. Clermont productively constructs an alternate view of plants by experimentally re-viewing imagery indicative of a diametric style. Yet Clermont is not viewing plants in an entirely strict sense. Rather, Clermont primarily re-views, and subsequently destabilizes, the systems by which plants are generally imaged and subsequently imagined—namely botany, but also its progeny: the so-called nature or wildlife documentary. Clermont’s video may be a nexus where two contradictory agendas clash, fail to perfectly coincide, and consequently produce a rich ambivalence. It is upon the terrain of this ambivalence that a new view of plants may propagate.

Arguably, a vegetal turn across the humanities, sciences, and arts is underway.³¹ My primary objective has been to theorise contemporary experimental cinema’s relationship to this exciting manoeuvre. Thus I have discussed some contemporary media that view plants in novel ways. Pursuing extra flavor and further cohesion, I will synthesise these works under a conceptual

apparatus comprising two expressions, plant-filming and cinema’s becoming-plant.

Karen Houle says that Western human animal thinking is determined by its animalesque body, which is contemporaneously infected by an anthropocentric, Cartesian ideal. One struggles to think about plants because they defy these logics. Thinking properly about plants, however, may unearth alternate trajectories. Houle says that this, the “becoming of thought”³² or thought’s “becoming-plant,”⁴⁰ may provide “an opportunity by which thought itself might mutate upon encounter (with plants, in our case) and might become” something new.³³ Cinema’s becoming-plant represents the medium’s metamorphosis to the point of coincidence with plant ontology, defined as non-abusive hospitality. Becoming-plant is necessary if cinema may proactively partake in the climate emergency’s resolution. Plant-filming, however, especially builds on Michael Marder’s term “plant-thinking”³⁴ which partly considers “how human thinking is, to some extent, de-humanized and rendered plant like, altered by its encounter with the vegetal world”.³⁵





Charlotte Clermont, *Plant Dreaming Deep* (2017), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

I am using Marder’s term slightly differently. Plant-filming vocalizes that properly representing plants requires entirely new representational schemas, new methodologies, and new ways of understanding the industrial qualities of cinema. Media that respectfully coincide with plant ontology are instances of plant-filming. Thus enacting plant-filming may occur accidentally. Cinema’s becoming-plant, however, is conscious. Cinema’s becoming-plant is, perhaps, an impossible process. It requires the metamorphosis of nearly every modality through which cinema is produced and enjoyed. Neither of these works exemplify its full materialisation. Yet they have provided new views of plants by devising regimes through which plants can be welcomed or appropriately imaged. Thus they are instances of plant-filming and maybe steps towards cinema’s becoming-plant.

The earth is beset by ecological crisis. Destruction’s exigency offers a juncture wherein stale ideas may be reappraised. Certainly, views on plants are radically changing. A plant is now a who, not simply a what. Recent work on plants is, quite literally, world changing. Beyond cinema, Michael Marder is a key figure, as are Sylvie Pouteau, Karen Houle, and Giovanni Aloï. Despite such work, many solutions to environmental crises revolve around an

intensely heightened instrumentality. Almost ubiquitously, plants are held to be a limitless bio-resource whose usage entails a pristine non-violence and indefinite futurity, a secular green messiah. This replicates a historic abuse under a new, anaesthetised sign. To retain a radical potentiality one must critically rethink ideas and beings that were once so recognisable. New, wholly experimental modalities are required. Works radiating out of contemporary experimental cinema may provide such modalities. Here I have touched on a very small list—it is exemplary but non-exhaustive. Caryn Cline, Charlotte Pryce, Philip Hoffman, and many others may also help secure a way of existing alongside, not above, plants.

To let plants be, “to say ‘yes’ to plants”,³⁶ is one of human animals’ and, by extension, cinema’s most necessary tasks. Its difficulty is equal to its necessity. The earth’s continuation depends on not abusing plants. Cinema is no exception to this rule.

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