



# Sites of Situated Hope: Amazonian Rhythms, Unruly Caribbean Plants, and Post-Anthropocentric Gazes in Contemporary Latin American Cinema

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To cite this article: Azucena Castro & Gianfranco Selgas (2023): Sites of Situated Hope: Amazonian Rhythms, Unruly Caribbean Plants, and Post-Anthropocentric Gazes in Contemporary Latin American Cinema, Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies, DOI: [10.1080/13569325.2022.2158440](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2022.2158440)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2022.2158440>



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Published online: 19 Jan 2023.



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## SITES OF SITUATED HOPE: AMAZONIAN RHYTHMS, UNRULY CARIBBEAN PLANTS, AND POST-ANTHROPOCENTRIC GAZES IN CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN CINEMA

*This article examines the ways in which the cinematic practices of the audiovisual productions *Farmacopea* (2013) by Beatriz Santiago Muñoz (Puerto Rico) and *Río Verde* (2017) by Diego and Álvaro Sarmiento (Peru) address human-nature assemblages by articulating a post-anthropocentric gaze. Addressing these two movies as neoregional films, this essay discusses how these contemporary audiovisual productions explore the disastrous environmental histories of the tropical plantation in the Caribbean and the extractive exploitation of the Peruvian-Amazon jungle, exhibiting cinematic techniques that disrupt the socially committed tradition of Latin American cinema of the 1960s centred on human communities. Deploying experimental and poetic cinematic techniques, it is argued that these movies feature small matter by foregrounding local poisonous vegetation and corporal takes of humans and animals that register landscapes in disappearance in the face of modern extractive practices. Departing from Santiago Muñoz's and the Sarmiento brothers' filmic productions, we discuss how the embedding of Amazonian rhythms and unruly Caribbean plants in their filmic narratives produces sites of situated hope that both reconceptualise Latin American cinema and contest the necro-political violence of the modern extractive machinery.*

**Keywords:** *Farmacopea*; *Río Verde*; post-anthropocentrism; contemporary film; necropolitics; landscape; situated hope

I try to go back and unite poetic thinking, form, the material and the sensorial with political and economic processes.  
—Beatriz Santiago Muñoz

Q'uniqa mana kikinchi. Cambio climaticorayku, papaqa nawpaq pachamanta mana wiñanchu [El calor es diferente. Por el cambio climático, la papa ya no crece como antes].  
—*Sembradoras de vida* by Álvaro and Diego Sarmiento

This is an essay about disappearing landscapes. Latin American topographies have been traversed by racial and extractive capitalism, signalling internal processes of necrosis that re-signify the politics of life and death. As Macarena Gómez-Barris (2017) and Jens Andermann (2018a, 2018b) have proposed, the relation between extractive zones and the cultural representation of landscapes both reflects on and contests the colonial and modern project that has played a major role in the configuration of unequal social ecologies in the region. The subjugation of human and nonhuman life to the powers of death in the context of climate change has exacerbated an “earthly trauma” (Casid 2018, 239) that contemporary Latin American cinema visualises through what we would like to call a micro-agential aesthetics that both formally and thematically foregrounds the agency of small matter, e.g. raindrops, plants, light, and sounds of various kinds. In that regard, the films *Farmacopea* (2013) by Puerto Rican Beatriz Santiago Muñoz and the Quechua-language film *Río Verde* (2017) by Peruvian brothers Diego and Álvaro Sarmiento signal the spatiotemporal entanglements of the living that defy the anthropocentric politics of representation, while recasting the necropolitical environmental history of Latin America.<sup>1</sup>

The audiovisual productions of the Sarmiento brothers and Santiago Muñoz encourage a reformulation of the norms and expectations of visibility through the manifestation of micro-agencies in what we call post-anthropocentric cinema. By micro-agencies we refer to what Jane Bennett (2010) defines as interconnected micro-presences such as light, electricity, rain, wind, and insects, constituting a “vascularized collective”, as Bruno Latour (1999, 261) terms it. These presences emerge in the films in the form of luminous and sonic techniques, as well as in footage and in random takes that seem to deviate from the film script. Departing from the Sarmiento brothers’ and Santiago Muñoz’s filmic productions, in our essay we discuss how these micro-agencies call for a new conceptualisation of visibility in the aftermath of the ecological ravaging of Latin America. The visual and its enmeshment with other senses beyond the visual, e.g. sonic and tactile, open a synesthetic path that interweaves a situated yet entangled web of connectivities between humans and nonhumans. The idea we want to put forward is that the small matter visualised in these disappearing physical and cinematic landscapes of the Necocene build up a scenario for situated hope. Following Donna Haraway (1991, 191), by situated hope we refer to partial and located knowledge that forges interactions between humans, nonhumans, and the world through “webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology”. The small matter we locate in these films has the potential to forge ties of solidarity through worlding processes that destabilise politics as we know it by foregrounding the agency of the nonhuman. The latter reformulates Jennifer Fay’s discussion on cinema in the Anthropocene.<sup>2</sup> According to Fay (2018, 11–12), cinema can either help us to cope with the idea of the human being as a force of nature causing irreversible environmental transformations or build up imaginary worlds without humans, thus producing inhospitable places. By disquieting colonial and extractive structures to create spaces for situated hope, the films by Santiago Muñoz and the Sarmiento brothers rethink this idea of inhospitable places, reconfiguring the norms and expectations of cinematic representations of the

Anthropocene. It is in this sense that we understand this cinema as post-anthropocentric: by foregrounding the spatio-temporal entanglements between human and nonhuman bodies, the selected experimental filmic productions unravel both memories of extraction and the necropolitical environmental history in Latin America while also configuring sites of interspecies hope.

From the standpoint of film history, Latin American cinema has had a long tradition devoted to documenting and bearing witness to socioecological inequalities in order to create spaces for hope that contest capitalism and its many forms. The social effervescence experienced in the region with the revolutionary avant-gardes and with different forms of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the ideological-political events at the national and international levels, have aroused the interest of several Latin American filmmakers to document images that recorded the continent's social and ecological transformations. In addition to this, Latin American film-making in the mid-twentieth century was not only notable for its socio-political thematic approach but also because it proposed “to intervene in it through self-conscious enunciative resources that bordered – in many cases – on innovation and experimentation in film language” (Cossalter 2015, 2). The films discussed in this essay follow this cinematic tradition since they are also inspired by the changing conditions of the landscape and the effects of extractive mechanisms. However, these films open new sites for situated hope since they deploy new cinematic experiments that foreground the lives and circulation of small more-than-human matter, a gesture that is needed in the face of ecological devastation.

### ***Farmacopea*: an unruly plot of land**

Puerto Rican video artist Beatriz Santiago Muñoz has a distinctive body of work in which, as art critic Franklin Sirmans (2017, 7) has put it, “materials are transformed into symbols of alternative modes of consciousness that push the limits of human perception”. Santiago Muñoz’s films can be considered in relation to the traditions of conceptual and performance art, and are focused on Indigenous cosmologies, post-military spaces, and syncretic religions in the Caribbean in order to bring forth “her explorations on Caribbean environments, politics, and identity [affected by] the ruptures created by violence and economic disparity” (Ortiz 2017, 11). Her works combine techniques and materials from ethnography, fiction, and documentary film to examine the symbolic and material histories of communities in Puerto Rico, Haiti, and Mexico. Defining her video art as within the “alternative cinematic forms of the global periphery” (López Martínez 2015, 18), several critics have identified Santiago Muñoz’s cinematographic practice as deeply engaged with socially and environmentally challenging stories rooted in the colonial history of the Caribbean, as well as with the artistic, performative, and relational aesthetics that integrate the viewer into the field of artistic action (López Martínez 2015, 20; Garrido Castellano 2016a).

*Farmacopea* (2013) is a short film that deals with a hidden pharmacopoeia, i.e. a compilation of medicinal herbs with comments and instructions that emerge from Afro-Indigenous rural worldviews in Puerto Rico. This book of plants with medicinal

and healing properties in the movie relates to historical processes and to the disappearance of the natural landscape and biodiversity of Puerto Rico. More specifically, the film depicts the landscape transformations of this Caribbean island, both physically through introduced species, agriculture, and development, as well as visually, as Ileana Rodríguez (2002) has shown, through representations of a profitable tropical place for tourism, service, and folklore. By screening poisonous, non-poisonous, and psychoactive flora, the movie configures a dual narrative of pharmacopoeia: on the one hand, it brings to cultural memory the taxonomic and colonial classification of plants based on their utilisation for drugs and medicinal uses and, on the other, it contests the division of plants into benign and malign species. The film lacks audio, but there is a narrative voice represented by English subtitles that corresponds to an indeterminate narrator that at times is interchanged with the voice of Pablo – a local farmer and fisherman who is planting different tropical seeds for a future to come. These voices function as a sort of storyline support to the visual narrative constituted by the images of local plants mostly taken from low-angle shots.

Pablo discusses different plant species in folkloric-vernacular terms. His role goes beyond the depiction of a local connoisseur of plants. Rather, the man's role in the film is key as he is shown to be devoted to creating a seed bank, working with different types of plants, and conducting research on agriculture after experiencing, he explains, the hallucinatory effects of the fruit of the *Campana* tree or *Angel's trumpet* – we will return to this scene later in this essay. As shown in *Matrulla* (2014), a later film by Santiago Muñoz that narrates the life of Pablo, who sows ancestral seeds in preparation for the extinction of water and food resources in the near future, the farmer explains that he is “preparing [himself], because I know things are gonna turn bad one of these days” (Santiago Muñoz 2016, 163). Such a message is charged with a speculative tone, and it relates deeply to the prospective vision of an endangered world learned by Pablo under the effects of the *Campana* tree. In contrast to the latter, the narrative voice seems to follow a more conventional, historically oriented account of events, chronologically recounting the European encounter with the tropical flora of Puerto Rico, as well as telling fin-de-siècle stories about bourgeois women smoking tobacco – thus evoking the extractive history of this plant and its commodification in the Caribbean. Having the speculative and the historical discourses run side by side in the film displaces the generic medical-scientific classificatory system used by the traditional pharmacopoeia recovered from natural-cultural memory. In that sense, storytelling, both speculative and historical, accounts for another understanding of the interrelations between human beings and plant beings that the scientific pharmacopoeia undoes in the name of taxonomic organisation.

Moreover, the low-angle shots of the local flora foreground these entities as life-forms and as agents that can sabotage human classificatory fantasies. The pharmacopoeia acts as a master narrative because it emphasises classification, taxonomy, and rationality. However, hallucinatory visions, dreams, time-travelling, and ambiguity concerning the hazardousness of tropical plants constitute disruptive scenes that break down and infiltrate this narrative. The movie foregrounds the potential of local poisonous flora to intercept humans' plans to domesticate lifeforms. In this regard, the spectator sees the *Campana* tree or *Angel's trumpet* – *Brugmansia* – reproducing itself

wildly in the landscape; *Chicharrón* – *Comocladia Dodonaea* – luring humans with its tiny thorns; *Guayacán*'s roots growing as a subterranean presence, and the feared *Little Apple of Death* tree – *Manchineel* – one of the most poisonous plants on the island, growing fiercely out of human sight. Taken as small matter and micro-agents in the sense developed by Bennett (2010), these plants challenge the rational modern thought that has legitimised the taxonomic classification of life and thus the extermination of lifeforms to make way for plantation, tourism, and agriculture. Put differently, the film highlights the importance of the poisonous flora in the natural history of Puerto Rico from a different discursive and visual standpoint, foregrounding a site for situated hope. It portrays the unruly plot of land filled with hazardous plants and trees beyond its conception as an outpost of classificatory technologies and technology transfer implemented during and after the plantation system and the deforestation associated with it. By retrieving unconventional and dangerous flora, the film highlights the transformative capacity embedded in the vegetation that not only remakes the Puerto Rican landscape but also storms back to disquiet the homogenising effort of the modern capitalist system.

From a historical perspective, the landscape of the Caribbean has endured physical transformations through the introduction of species, agriculture, and development and experimental projects. The imposition of Eurocentric modernity in the region is deeply rooted in the understanding of tropical landscapes as geographic laboratories “for making of the modern capitalist system out of the slave plantation (...) whipping between production and consumption, between planting and the colonial sites of manufacture” (Casid 2014, 217). This representation coheres with the idea of the Plantationocene proposed by Haraway (2015), which refers to the domination of landscape through extractive practices, monoculture development, and coercive labour structures. This resonates with Puerto Rico's history as an enclave of US pharmacological production and the transformation of the island into a zone for racial, sexual, and biotechnological experimentation. As Muñoz Varela (2018, 274–279) has noted, during the 1980s Puerto Rico served as a manufacturing and experimental site for herbicides, contraceptive pills, and sterilisation methods tested on humans and nonhumans. In addition, Puerto Rico became one of the many locations in Latin America and the Caribbean for the appropriation and exploitation of biodiverse tropical and subtropical areas. Led by US pharmaceutical corporations, these richly endowed environments were gradually transformed into the preferred site for another form of extractive capitalism: the drug industry.

Through these elements of context, Santiago Muñoz's film-making can be understood as a decolonial practice (Dennis 2017; Flores and Stephens 2016), weaving together the political and social concerns of Caribbean films today. However, this falls short of addressing the ecological dilemmas that are deeply inscribed in the Puerto Rican artist's work. Santiago Muñoz (n.d., n/p) has stressed the importance of articulating the environmental crisis with a decolonial approach<sup>3</sup> to attain the prevalence of an insurrectionary environment and commonalities beyond the human that illuminate other forms of (bio)political inscription:

I made a series of works which I think finally were able to sort of open up my way of thinking about the place. I was listening to the sounds of

this vast space ... you realize you hear the thousands of insects, and you are able to see something now that you could not see before. It is a way of switching your frame of reference, so that at that point you can recognize that there is a new event that is taking place [an] ecology that has wild dogs running around, iguanas that the wild dogs eat, coquis, the ornamental ferns that were planted by the military to go along with the Californian bungalows. This insane, new ecology is actually taking over this past event. In a way, you have to trick your own mind into seeing in a new way. (Santiago Muñoz in Pacific Northwest College of Art 2018, 35'24"–38'00")

Following this, we can take into consideration *Farmacopea's* opening line, "This is a film about a disappearing landscape" (Santiago Muñoz 2013, 05"), as it reflects the effects of the domination of lifeforms on the island, deeply related to the context of the Plantationocene and biotechnological context in which we inscribe the movie. In addition, it is relevant to note that the temporality articulated by the gerund *disappearing* builds a site for situated hope as it opens a space for sensing and perceiving the vulnerability and the resilience of these small matter and micro-actants that contest domination mechanisms (Figure 1).

Moreover, such contestation is featured aesthetically through chromatic disruptions in the image. Halfway through the films' climax, a strong colour shift to red alters the moving picture, producing a technical visual disruption in two key moments of the film that foreground the existence and the voice of plants. The first one concerns Pablo, who consumes a tea made of the hallucinogenic fruit of the *Campana* tree or *Angel's trumpet*, listed as extinct in the wild. Even though this fruit is highly toxic and can cause death, in Pablo's case the *Campana* tea allows him to access an oneiric state of mind beyond reason – we will discuss a similar



Figure 1. Film still from Beatriz Santiago Muñoz's *Farmacopea*, 2013.

oneiric state enacted by the human-plant interaction in *Río Verde*. Under the influence of the *Campana*, the old man states he could time-travel, envisioning a future filled with plants that cannot be found elsewhere. He then creates a “plot of land” (Santiago Muñoz 2013, 2’14”) by retrieving the plants that were cut down or eradicated by colonial and neo-colonial extractive dynamics. This vision is not utopian or nostalgic of an environmentally friendly past, nor does it contemplate plants as pharmaceutical resources to foster escapist visions that resonate with drug addiction or that sustain the biotechnological ventures taking place on Puerto Rican soil. It rather functions as a projection onto a multispecies future, eliciting what Herrera and Ramos (2018, 14) have described as a posthuman form of “reordering” the world. This form of reordering goes beyond the general understanding of plant and drug consumption as ecstasy substances, towards the recognition of a complex interaction between humans and hallucinogenic agents that enhances perception and consciousness, enabling another experience of the world. Pablo’s interaction with the *Campana* stimulates a symbiotic auxiliary property connecting the sensible and suprasensible world. As Juan Duchesne Winter (2019, 40) explains, vegetal beings such as *Brugmansia* – the *Campana* tree’s fruit –, coca, tobacco, and ayahuasca are visionary and master plants traditionally ingested by Amerindian societies in order to habilitate forms of thinking *with* the territory. In Amazonian and South American Amerindian traditions, these plants are subjects of knowledge rather than objects of study; they transcend their medical, pharmaceutical, nutritional, and artefactual properties to become an aid for enhanced thought and action. In this sense, Pablo’s vision about an unruly plot of land constitutes a site for situated hope, an imagined multispecies space yet to be built that engages with a post-biotechnological island and a post-landscape gaze (Andermann 2018a), prompting viewers to reimage Puerto Rico. The disruption of the canonical notion of landscape and of plants as resources, bequeathed by the colonial, romantic, and modern tradition, departs from the dichotomous visions of nature and culture emphasised by Western worldviews. By promoting other forms of environmental visualisation and explicitly laying out the intervention of micro-agents as well as small matter in the transformation of the world, *Farmacopea* questions the dichotomous characterisation of plants and nature as mere aesthetic and representational symbols (Figure 2).

The other moment at which the existence and the voice of plants is foregrounded by the film occurs almost at the end of the video, when an indeterminate narrative voice that calls herself a back-to-the-lander, i.e. a person who moves back to the land and learns how to farm from scratch,<sup>4</sup> narrates an encounter with the *Campana* tree under its hallucinatory effects:

At first the effects were mild. But then the trees started to speak to us. They said we were at war. That we had been at war for centuries. The hallucination lasted for days. We were being attacked. And we fought back. (Santiago Muñoz 2013, 5’09”–5’31”)

Then, the screen featuring the plants turns red and fades to black, while the same voice continues: “In a few days we had cut down every tree on our land. And even some up in the hills” (Santiago Muñoz 2013, 5’35”). This story portrays a





**Figure 2.** Film still from Beatriz Santiago Muñoz's *Farmacopea*, 2013.

misunderstanding that is at the core of the confrontation between humans and non-humans. In that last scene, the plants try to communicate through their hallucinatory effect the “silent war” (de la Cadena 2015a, 3) that they have been enduring for centuries. However, the back-to-the-landers mistake the trees’ voice as a threat and proceed to burn them all. The attempt to attain the semiosis of nonhuman others, and more specifically of plants, animals, and environments, can be identified as a recurrent topic in Santiago Muñoz. In other films by the Puerto Rican artist,<sup>5</sup> noises emitted by animals and plants, as well as phantasmagorical references to Indigenous burial sites, are sometimes recorded as a multiplicity of sounds and visuals that can be considered in terms of a micro-agential conglomerate of small matter juxtaposed over the human voice. Given that human language is unable to properly describe the environmental milieu that surrounds her, these animals, plants, and environments recorded in the films make sense out of the tangle of Caribbean plants and the zones of post-military oblivion, the pharmaceutical contexts, and developmental projects on the island. In that sense, while the consolidation of Puerto Rico as a post-military zone due to its Spanish colonial past and its US neo-colonial present, plays a fundamental role in Santiago Muñoz’s films (see Garrido Castellano 2016a; Arbona 2016, 205–217), the pre-eminence of the non-human – plants, animals, environments – in the form of the living sounds and visuals that we cannot see or identify but that are emitted by vegetables, insects, or the allusion to non-attainable humans such as spectres, also have significance in terms of the existence of a world beyond the reach of sight. This effect is important in Santiago Muñoz’s work because it accounts for an aesthetic in which juxtapositions from/with the nonhuman others are part of the discourses of resistance and legitimacy of the contemporary Caribbean. Operating under the decolonial dynamic of making the invisible visible, it highlights what goes beyond

representation, be it the nonhuman organisms or the colonial constructs that are still fixed in the discursive-material matrixes of the Caribbean region (Figure 3).

The final red screen connotes the effects of this silent war that Western Modernity has fought to maintain a political, economic, and symbolic monopoly over the definition and cultural role of nature. In this sense, by staging the voice of the plants in their psychotropic visions, the movie becomes a cinematic political event that goes beyond environmentalist discourses and claims about saving nature for the common good. The manifestation of the voice of plants in this movie updates the historical demand to imagine disobedient world-making practices that can open up spaces for situated hope in the ravaged landscape of the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. Moreover, this form of intervention set at play by the film resonates with the notion of “slow violence” (Nixon 2011). According to Rob Nixon, the term is related to the representational difficulty of accounting for the gradual and often invisible violence wrought by climate change and extractive practices, the violence of which “is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (2011, 2). The notion of slow violence, read alongside the interaction of small matter and micro-agents in the form of the poisonous flora in Santiago Muñoz’s film and of the Amazonian rhythms in the Sarmiento brothers’ films, as we will discuss next, shows that violence is not only a sudden and radical alteration inflicted on individual bodies and places, but that it also accounts for the different levels at which such infliction of harm takes place. That is to say, paying attention to the film in terms of its disruption of the pharmacopoeia narrative and the reference to the historical war fought between human beings and plant beings, it calls attention to the way slow violence has traditionally been unaccounted for in modern cultural apparatuses of representation.<sup>6</sup> By bringing back to the fore the

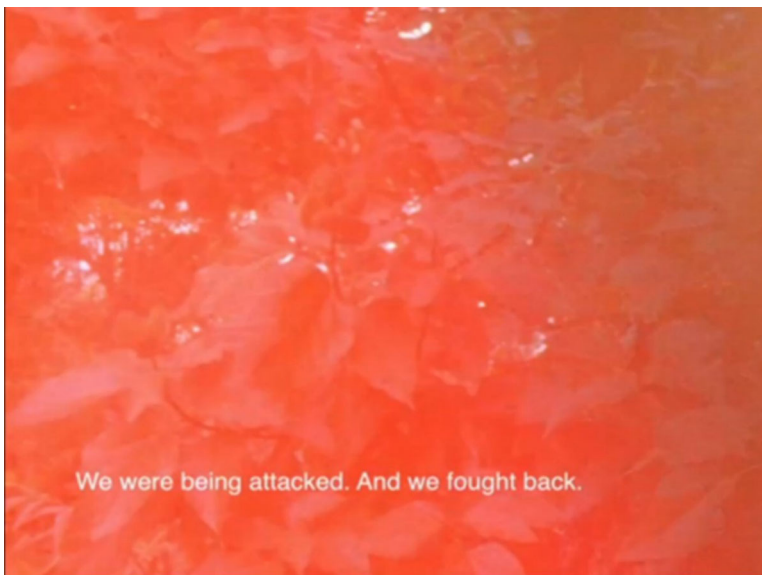


Figure 3. Film still from Beatriz Santiago Muñoz's *Farmacopea*, 2013.

micro-agency of plants, *Farmacopea*, as an instance of what we call post-anthropocentric cinema, uncovers, both formally and thematically speaking, the various levels at which different types of violence act and slowly transform and shape the present and the future of the shared human and nonhuman environment.

### ***Río Verde: amazing time***

Involved in the defence of native peoples' rights and environmental conservation, the Indigenous cinema of Quechua-descendant Peruvian brothers Álvaro and Diego Sarmiento engages non-Western temporalities and landscapes of extractivism in the Andes and the Peruvian Amazon. Their first short film, *La Oroya, aire metálico* [La Oroya, metallic air] (2007), focuses on the local inhabitants breathing air contaminated with lead, cadmium, arsenic, and sulphur dioxide in La Oroya – considered one of the most toxic places on Earth due to the activity of the metallurgic corporation Doe Run Perú, a vast complex of mining extraction in the Yauli province (FIDH 2013). Sharing that preoccupation with the loss of communal ways of living, the independent documentary *Río Verde* (2015), that occupies us here, as well as their recent Quechua-language film *Sembradoras de vida* [Mothers of the Land] (2019), focus on the local communities' struggles to maintain traditional organic ways of working the land, and co-habiting harmoniously with the Andean nonhuman world.

Situated at the intersection between ethnography, documentary, and poetry, Diego and Álvaro Sarmiento's movies have been described as poetic journeys into a world of ancient mythology, green foliage, and shamanic rituals. The experimental documentary practice they deploy in *Río Verde* "blurs the boundaries between documentary and fiction to explore the sensory landscape that constitutes the everyday lives of Indigenous communities living along the Peruvian Amazon River" (Gutierrez 2020, 337). Such an approach to the landscape as a sensory surface and as an affective bridge to connect the cinematic image to the living world of the Peruvian Andes and Amazon configures a site of situated hope that permeates human-nonhuman interconnections in this instance of what we call post-anthropocentric cinema. As we will discuss next, while this documentary approaches the sensorial landscape in a poetic register that entangles images of the human communities with the nonhuman worlds unfolding in the rivers and the jungle, it also communicates the traumatic experience of lifeforms in retreat. This film, and this is the idea we want to explore in this section, invites the spectator on a journey through an enhanced sensorial experience of space and time synchronised with the temporalities of the *yakuruna* myth, the lives of the contemporary local ethnic communities, the rivers, and the Amazon forest.

*Río Verde* approaches the layered temporalities and the life rhythms of three small villages of Quechuas Lamistas and Cocama Cocamilla people in the Peruvian Amazon. This low-budget independent film, which was shot over five years, revolves around the Sarmiento brothers' retrieval of the *yakuruna* myth from Iquitos, Peru, consisting of symbiotic water entities, half-human and half-amphibian – *yaku*/water, *runa*/human – that live underwater. The *yakuruna* is also the spirit of the river that weaves together the lives of human and nonhuman communities

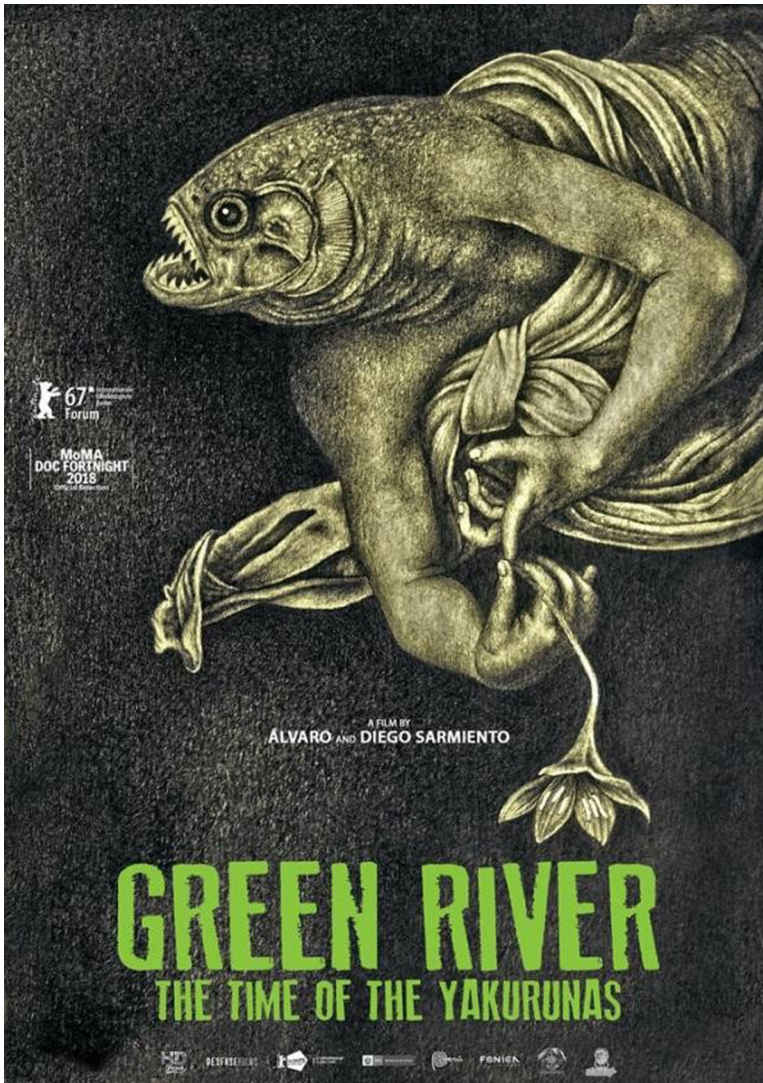


Figure 4. Official film poster *Río Verde*.

with the realm of the ancestors. This retrieval of the *yakuruna* being in the movie should be read alongside the local ethnic communities whose lives are entangled with the Amazon River and the forest, as suggested in the film poster used to present the movie in the 67th Berlinale in 2018 (Figure 4).

While the subtitle suggests the presence of the mythical being *yakuruna*, *Río verde* does not attempt to portray such a being in otherworldly fantastic perspectives, in contrast to the contemporary explosion of ancient and folkloric protagonists in fantasy and science-fiction movies and mainstream TV series.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as the CLACPI Indigenous Film Showcase put it:

the film deals neither with mythical creatures nor with legends, catapulting viewers instead right into the midst of this incredibly green world. The residents of this region fish, hunt, cook, weave and live under circumstances that are anything but simple or romantic; their existence is dependent on the river, with which they live in an extreme symbiosis. (CLACPI Indigenous Film Showcase 2018)

It is through such symbiotic entanglements that viewers perceive how the lives of the Indigenous communities are deeply enmeshed with water and jungle life. These ways of living and existing with the surroundings have been threatened since the unfolding of the modern extractive machinery, from rubber exploitation at the end of the nineteenth century to the extractive business of oil companies in the Amazon under present global capitalism, which has constantly threatened the local Amazonian ecologies with extinction. The movie seems to invest all efforts in the poetic and sensorial portrayal of the lives of villagers, their chores developing in slow, circular temporalities and their close bodily contact with the nonhuman world. However, three subtle details in the movie evoke the extractive context, thus interconnecting the poetic perception with a political gaze in this documentary. One detail concerns the slow zooming-in on the tag of the T-shirt of one of the men cutting wood, where we can barely read “Oil Company” on the back as a phrase haunting the villagers and the surrounding environment (Figure 5).

Furthermore, a second detail entails the individual shots of local Indigenous men chopping wood with *machetes* in plastic boots, an image which is reminiscent of the *caucho* extraction in the nineteenth century, which had enormous consequences for the Indigenous communities and the Peruvian Amazon’s ecosystems. A third detail consists in the fact that the protagonists are all aged people, a community of aged bodies. Such an overwhelming presence of older protagonists in this milieu might evoke the emigration of younger generations to urban centres or the forced displacement as the jungle habitat is being dismantled by the increasing contamination, deforestation, and climate change. The three subtle details mentioned above



Figure 5. Film still from Álvaro and Diego Sarmiento’s *Río Verde*, 2017.

prompt the spectator to look at the past, the memories of violence and extraction warping such ageing bodies, as Álvaro Sarmiento has also commented:

This hybrid narrative portrays the bodies of Indigenous elders to invoke the ghosts of rubber exploitation at the end of the nineteenth century, summon the memory of ancient Indigenous cultures still alive, but in danger of disappearing as a consequence of global capitalism. (Sarmiento 2019, our translation)

The three details described above evoke an environmental historical memory of the extractive violence suffered by human and nonhuman bodies, a violence that is still lurking around in this place as long as extractivism continues to be considered as a blessing for economic reactivation in the region. Rather than representing the history of extractivism, such indirect evocations open an affective and embodied passage through which the slow violence still impacting this territory is transmitted to the viewer. If, as Nixon indicated, slow violence is “a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (2011, 2), the subtle references to the extractive context in this movie capture the force of global capitalism to annihilate human and nonhuman lives, but also the resilience of such lives in this terrain of crisis. The extractive violence conveyed in the movie is not instantaneous or spectacular, but, as Nixon puts it, its disastrous consequences affect several temporal spaces and its results are manifested at the corporeal level of human and nonhuman lives alike, turning the documentary form into a kind of art of disappearance. In this sense, we read the long camera takes evoking the embedded circular temporalities of these Amazonian communities as an attempt to retain and conserve those ancient practices and local lives on the verge of extinction. Through these long shots and subtle details reminiscent of the extractive violence, the film thus construes a speculative gaze on the quotidian chores and the small matter that entangles the ethnic communities of the Peruvian Amazon with the local nonhuman landscape.

The filmic technique characterised by long, silent shots as well as by shots of animal body parts constitutes a rupture with ethnographic cinema and the classical documentary. Ethnography has historically strived “to mediate the translation of local knowledge into universal language to achieve some political end” (de la Cadena 2015b, 12). However, as an example of post-anthropocentric cinema, *Río Verde* breaks with this tradition of ethnographic mediation by inscribing the circular, repetitive, and layered time of the *yakuruna* myth and world into the filmic narrative: a form of *amazoning* time. According to Duchesne Winter, the verb *amazoning* can be understood as a way of thinking *with* the territory “onto the unexplored convergences of Amazonian thinking with traditions and emergent expressions of agroindustrial societies that also develop modes of territorial thinking” (2019, 2). The film opts for the foregrounding of environmental sounds, close-up images, and long shots, thus challenging the accelerated and progressive tempo of Western Modernity. Indeed, the movie brings to the fore an un-narrativity and un-representationality that configure ways of noticing entanglements between Indigenous communities, animals, and vegetables as submerged resilient lifeforms; it is “about ways to see what lies within the ecologies all around us, and

about how to perceive those things that are not usually available to the naked eye” (Gómez-Barris 2017, xiv). In that sense, through the *amazoning* of cinematic time, *Río Verde* foregrounds sites of situated hope in practices that involve thinking with diverse cultural expressions acting in the human-nonhuman entangled *yakuruna*-world. Moreover, it is important to point out that the local family members that the movie follows are shown throwing casual gazes into the camera, thus acknowledging the presence of the other with gazes and compliant laughter. Such active and aware participation of the filmed subjects further reinforces the disruption of the traditional ethnographic register which objectifies the depicted world, producing instead an “ethnographic refusal” (Simpson in Gutierrez 2020, 343); that is to say, ways of approaching the living that diverge from the Western reduction to human-centred relations and the objectification of non-Western communities and nature.

Moreover, as part of this post-anthropocentric experience, this experimental documentary approaches the perception of the surroundings through animals. We can observe such animal-mediated sensorial experience in shots depicting animals and animal body parts whose movements open a passage with their surroundings, as we can see in the close-up of a donkey’s ears moving around or the fins of a piranha opening and closing in Figure 6.

Such animal perception prompts the viewer to sense and notice the environment – e.g. air, sound, insects – through our nonhuman companions, thus producing a shared body semiosis between the spectator and the animals. This experience can



Figure 6. Film still from Álvaro and Diego Sarmiento's *Río Verde*, 2017.



**Figure 7.** Film still from Álvaro and Diego Sarmiento's *Río Verde*, 2017.

be thought of as indexical body semiosis taking place outside human language. The latter has parallels with Eduardo Kohn's (2013) study suggesting that forests and animals also think, dream, and communicate, although in different semiotic registers that we, as modern urban humans, have lost the capacity to notice. In that regard, Diego and Álvaro Sarmiento's effort to channel the spectators' perception through animals, water, and foliage along the lives of local human communities articulates, in this documentary, an ethnography beyond the human, thus renovating the social documentary tradition in Latin America. Such animal viewpoints indicate, as Jorge Marcone (2015, 220)<sup>8</sup> has pointed out in his study about Indigenous environmental films, that Amazonian identity is not merely ethnic since human identity is not cut off from other-than-human entities. In this sense, *Río Verde* encourages comparisons with *Farmacopea*. Both films configure entanglements between animals, plants, and humans, and both present forms of "popular environmentalism" (Marcone 2015, 222) since they approach ideas about preservation and recovery through Indigenous and local forms of knowledge. Such rural and Indigenous articulations of environmental approaches fall outside modern Western ways of envisioning environmental conservation in top-down approaches to land management.

*Río verde* starts and finishes with a suggestive, almost oneiric shot: an elder from one of the ethnic communities in the Peruvian Amazon smokes ayahuasca and sings the *ikaro*, a shamanic chant performed during Amerindian vegetal ceremonies to induce a profound state of healing, awareness, or amazement (Figure 7).

The close-up shot of the elder's mouth and the smoke coming out from his pipe opens a parallel temporality that impregnates the filmic narrative in the sense that it opens a synesthetic passage to the Amazonian rhythms. In the same way as in Santiago Muñoz's film, where the hallucinatory effects of the *Campana* tree open a passageway to envision a future to come, in this movie the smoking of ayahuasca frames an opening into a slowed-down and plastic temporality. In this sense, we see long takes of the rain falling from the roof of a thatched shack; a man taking a nap in a canoe floating on the river; an elderly woman washing clothes; a couple slicing bananas and the donkeys carrying the load; among others. The long takes



and the lack of narrative action force spectators to scrutinise the repetitive and circular actions carried out by these villagers as well as the landscape's thickness. The viewer is then guided to pay attention to subtle details as well as to the micro-relations between human bodies, animals, green vegetation, and the small matter that they come into contact with such as air, sounds, and insects. As an instance of post-anthropocentric cinematic practice, *Río Verde* produces affective ties both with the world portrayed but also with the cinematic images that materially channel an array of experiences to the viewer. Grant Gutierrez (2020, 338) argues that the perceptive and emotional dimensions in this movie produce "affective re-orientations", i.e. the insistent green foliage on the screen is filled with material and discursive layers, which displace the representation from the nostalgic or romantic registers. Indeed, such a sensation of a plastic image pregnant with green life produces an affective ecological awareness that has the potential to re-weave the spectator into that landscape but in an always disquieting manner: as in the disappearing landscape in *Farmacopea*, this is also a landscape in a process of erasure.

In *Río Verde*, the camera functions as a means to register and communicate a sensorial experience. It is not only that time and place are presented differently, but that our sensorial and material experience of things and bodies are heightened by way of close-up shots focusing on corporeal symbiosis: bananas and hands, horses and bananas; hands and fish; the horse's nostrils breathing in and out; a man's ear hearing the river flow and the forest's fauna; the fur of the donkey trembling as it shakes off insects; the gathering of *yucca* plant; a trapped piranha breathing and flapping; among others. All of these shots bring to the fore micro-actants and micro-actions, bodily symbiosis and body functions that might be taken as nontranscendental but which are utterly significant to perceive how the lives of the local human communities are deeply entangled with the living matter around them. Such an entangled perception at the level of small matter opens up a speculative space in the film to think about our existence and coexistence with other beings that have been overshadowed by Western Modernity. Similarly, by articulating entangled forms of image-making that incorporate micro-actants and micro-actions occurring within an Amazonian rhythm of life, the film appeals to the viewer's body, e.g. hands, ears, nose. It is from this corporeal and haptic experience that the viewer is thrown into the sensorial perception of space and time in synchrony with that of the contemporary *yakurana*-world, thus opening up a site for situated hope (Figure 8).

The register of environmental sounds is also a prominent feature in the movie and it captures voices that cannot be narrated in the semiosis of human language as they relate to human-nonhuman entanglements. This is suggested in the soundtrack in the previous image, where the scene portrays the cutting of the bananas and the contact between the human hands and the fruit, as if it were a woman-banana continuum, also suggested by the green dress matching the green colour of the bananas. Besides this, the film registers casual dialogues in Quechua between a local couple in one of the villages as well as the sounds of the rain falling, the foliage being stepped on by animals and humans, the onomatopoeic sound made by a local man imitating pigs, and the river flowing down, to name but a few examples. These sounds might function as a component of the film's scenery effect in order



**Figure 8.** Film still from Álvaro and Diego Sarmiento's *Río Verde*, 2017.

to immerse the viewer in the Amazon *loci*, but the insistence on registering these climatic, atmospheric, and geological soundscapes as well as the Quechua language brings about an interspecies agency that connects the modes of expression of humans with nonhuman entities in this region. In other words, these nonhuman soundscapes open up indeterminate zones of inter-species encounter, thus displacing the logo-centricity in Western human languages that has legitimised the nature-culture divide and served as the foundation for anthropology and ethnography (Kohn 2013, 9). These Amazonian sounds take over the camera, disrupting its instrumental usage as a mere technological device. Instead, the camera becomes part of the Amazon soundscape, functioning like the elder's pipe in the smoking of ayahuasca: it builds up an oneiric poetic passage where the spectator attunes to nonhuman semiosis and the Amazon rhythms in both sensorial and corporal manners as an alternative way of experimenting time and the environment.

### Cinematography otherwise for disappearing landscapes

*Farmacopea* and *Río Verde* are contemporary environmental explorations of ways of thinking with small more-than-human matter, Indigenous communities, and local nonhuman lifeforms. Both the poisonous pharmacopoeia utilised in Santiago Muñoz's film and the *yakuruna* water-forest world invoked in the Sarmiento brothers' movie are tangible proposals for a damaged planet rooted in the local landscapes of Puerto Rico and the Peruvian Amazon. The cinematic choices made by the film directors highlight species solidarity and border crossings, thus challenging the taxonomic and classificatory thinking that characterises Western Modernity.

In that sense, the Sarmiento brothers' and Santiago Muñoz's films propose a cinematography otherwise, a post-anthropocentric cinema where the entanglements between the human and nonhuman protagonists highlight the importance of the environment, its flora and fauna, small matter, and its micro-actions in territories on the verge of extinction due to the dynamics of global capitalism. The camera registers in these movies notice the nonhuman as agents that construe alternative

bodily and sensorial experiences through the cinematic image. Such cinematic experiences contrast with the spatio-temporalities of Western Modernity, thus proposing an art of noticing<sup>9</sup> beyond the human in this Latin American cinema-making concerned with vanishing landscapes. In relation to the history of Latin American cinema since the twentieth century, the Sarmiento brothers' and Santiago Muñoz's films displace the traditional genre of *testimony* from its predominantly human perspective to the material and sensorial situatedness of the nonhuman. In other words, these movies configure types of *posthuman testimonies* that, in the face of disappearing landscapes, foreground multispecies entanglements that build sites of situated hope with the potential to influence the war that humans and the capitalist system have been waging on our vegetal and animal companions.

The vegetal entanglements in *Farmacopea* and the *yakuruna*-world rhythms in *Río Verde* are subjects stimulating speculative reflections which are relevant to our contemporary ecological predicaments to think futures in common. By allowing a situated cinematic interface, these two movies address one of the most fundamental challenges in our times, as pointed out by Isabelle Stengers (2010): namely, how to think with the *hippomane manchineel*, the piranha, and the banana tree, and how to make this thinking a political act of transformative power and interspecies hope.

### Acknowledgements

We want to thank the Nordic Institute of Latin American Studies (NILAS) at Stockholm University, where we have curated the itinerant *Series of Latin American Cinema* during 2020 and 2021. It was during the film screenings and post-screening discussions that we began shaping the idea that originated this article. We also want to thank the anonymous reviewers who read this text for their insightful and sharp comments that helped us strengthen our arguments. A special thanks to Giovanni Pizardi, who helped us with the Quechua writing of the phrase from the movie *Sembradoras de vida*, used as one of the article's epigraphs.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes

1. We use the term necropolitical environmental history of Latin America to refer to the violence and extraction inflicted on human and nonhuman bodies that accelerated with the establishment of nation-states and resulted in species extinction and ecocide. More recently, this phenomenon is manifested in the wave of assassinations of environmental activists across the region, such as Chico Méndez and Berta Cáceres. The notion of "necropolitics" is elaborated and discussed by Achille Mbembe (2003) and we connect it to the context of the "Necrocene" proposed by Jill Casid, i.e. a force that "foregrounds the agencies and power-producing effects of making die (...) death as a scene in which we are vulnerably situated [and where] we are positioned not as remote witnesses or only as mourners but also as the mortal vulnerable exposed among the killable and dead" (2018, 237–239).

2. In the context of Latin American film studies, there have been approaches to experimental cinema as forms of post-anthropocentric world-making and as intersections between humans and nonhumans that have inspired our approach in the present study (Andermann 2018b; Depetris Chauvin 2019; Incarbone and Wiedemann 2021).
3. Regarding decoloniality in Santiago Muñoz's oeuvre, Carlos Garrido Castellano (2016a, 85) pays attention to her discussions on the imperial, colonial, postcolonial, and the ambiguous representations of memory and slavery.
4. Back-to-the-land movements are represented by various agrarian movements across different historical periods. The common thread is a call for people to take up smallholdings and to grow food from the land with an emphasis on a greater degree of self-sufficiency, autonomy, and local community in a prevailing industrial or postindustrial way of life.
5. For example, in *La cueva negra* [The black cave] (2012), Santiago Muñoz investigates El Paso del Indio, an Indigenous burial site in Puerto Rico discovered during the construction of a major freeway, and *Ojos para mis enemigos* [Eyes for my enemies] (2014) depicts how both introduced and Indigenous species share the terrain and together constitute a new space.
6. Scholarship on Santiago Muñoz's films has also discussed the notion of representation in connection to slavery (Garrido Castellano 2016b, 3) and the failure of representation (Lockward 2010, 3).
7. We are thinking about the Brazilian Netflix series *Invisible City* (2019), portraying the revival of folkloric, rural human-animal creatures in cities; and Guillermo del Toro's film *The Shape of Water* (2019), portraying a humanoid amphibian creature captured in the Amazon.
8. In his study of Indigenous film-making, Marcone (2015) proposes that a growing corpus of Indigenous environmental movies portray environmental struggles and advocate for popular, rural, and Indigenous forms of environmentalism, such as *Buen Vivir*. In the thematic aspect, the movies by the Sarmiento brothers and Santiago Muñoz are congruent with such a corpus since they also illuminate forms of co-habiting and preserving the environment beyond Modern Western models. However, the poetic work with the cinematic image in both experimental films adds a new component to the genre of Indigenous documentary. The deployment of poetic strategies creates ambiguity and adds a playful dimension, as it is through the identification of certain subtle details that the movies reveal the environmental histories of these places. Such techniques challenge the classification of these movies along the lines of traditional documentary-making, bringing them closer to the strategies of fiction film-making.
9. We refer to Tsing's (2015, 37) idea about ways of noticing as forms of perception that emphasise our connections with the environment and the nonhuman, much needed at a time of relentless extinction. From that standpoint, Tsing prompts us to listen to the stories that a mushroom under the ruins left by capitalism might have to tell us.

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