

The natural world onscreen:
Non-anthropocentric narratives examined through phenomenology and filmmaking

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ABSTRACT

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In the past 12 to 15 years, the proliferation of films with environmental themes has led to the development of ecocinema theory, broadly defined as “ecologically minded film criticism” (Ivakhiv, 1) which studies the framing of environmental narratives and metaphors. Although there exists scholarship on Hollywood productions (Cubitt, Rust), experimental films (MacDonald), and Third and Fourth cinemas (Kääpä, Lu and Mi), to date few scholars have focused on emergent art-house cinema. Addressing this gap, this research-creation conducts an ecocritical study of works from three contemporary auteurs: Rolf de Heer’s *Ten Canoes* (2006), Michelangelo Frammartino’s *Le Quattro Volte* (2010) and Roberto Minervini’s *Low Tide* (2012). Drawing on environmental interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of perception, I argue that the chosen films both reflect and themselves produce a phenomenology of nature in accordance with Merleau-Pontian environmentalism. The last chapter discusses the creation portion of my thesis, which involved making two short fiction films, *Gaea* (2018) and *Absence* (2019). Both films are centered around young adults yet portray their lives as inseparable from the natural world, thus seeking to create non-anthropocentric narratives.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Historical overview of ecocinema

Media creations play a prominent role in the framing of environmental issues and in the conception of solutions; the artist, according to Marshall McLuhan, “provides us with anti-environments that enable us to see the environment.” (119) In relation to film, ecocinema theory has emerged over the past fifteen years and is broadly defined as “ecologically minded film criticism” (Ivakhiv 1) that studies “how visual representations position nature and natural features” (Willoquet-Maricondi 8). There has been debate though as to what exactly categorizes an ecocinema film. In “Towards an Ecocinema”, an article published in 2004, Scott MacDonald coined the term ecocinema to describe films that reshape perceptions of the environment, creating “a *garden* – an “Edenic” respite from conventional consumerism – within the *machine* of modern life, as modern life is embodied by the apparatus of media” (109). This analogy appears in the title of his 2001 publication *The Garden in the Machine*, the first extensive ecocritical analysis of avant-garde cinema. In his body of work, MacDonald has written about experimental filmmakers such as Andrej Zdravič, Peter Hutton, and Sharon Lockhart, believing that their films provide viewers with “a depiction of the natural world within a cinematic experience that models patience and mindfulness – qualities of consciousness crucial for a deep appreciation of and an ongoing commitment to the natural environment” (19). Meanwhile, the editors of the 2013 anthology *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, the first to group articles from founding scholars in ecocinema, state that “all films present productive ecocritical exploration” (3). Some, such as Paula Willoquet-Marcondi, feel that ecocinema should address films with activist agendas and focus on independent documentaries, while others such as Sean Cubitt and Stephen Rust have

extensively written on Hollywood productions, such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *Into the Wild* (2007), which they feel cannot be overlooked for their potential to create environmental awareness. Other approaches include studying Third and Fourth Cinema, such as Pietari Kääpä's *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinemas* and Lu and Mi's *Chinese Ecocinema*. To date though, few scholars have focused on fictional and emerging art-house cinema, a gap this paper addresses.

Research context

The genesis of this research-creation thesis stems from my background in environmental studies and my experience as a filmmaker. My own ecological anxieties and desire to respond to climate change are at the heart of the project. As a filmmaker, I am drawn to the potential of fiction film to help us reflect on our relationship with the natural world. Adrian Ivakhiv considers film to “borrow from the non-cinematic world, selecting bits and pieces that are then assembled and fused into temporal sequences” (25). As mirrors of our world, film worlds can help us understand how and why we conceive of nature in certain ways, for example as wilderness. In my cinephilia, I have been marked by the early work of Terrence Malick, notably *Badlands* (1973), *Days of Heaven* (1978) and *The Thin Red Line* (1998), and the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, especially *Stalker* (1979) and *Mirror* (1975). These films introduced me to narrative filmmaking that pays attention to animals, vegetation, weather (Figure 1), natural phenomena, etc. They embed characters in the natural world, which becomes a protagonist in the film. I began looking for similar approaches in contemporary art-house films, which I am drawn to and situate myself in as a filmmaker. Also known as art-films, “art-house” is a term used to classify independent films which distinguish themselves in their form and content from commercial cinema through an

“engagement with modernist philosophy and aesthetics, and cultivation of more active and contemplative forms of spectatorship” (Lykidis). I found that many current art-house auteurs were critically engaging with nature, filmmakers such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul (*Tropical Malady*, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*), Naomi Kawase (*The Mourning Forest*), and Andrea Arnold (*Wuthering Heights*). Their films along with others represent a growing trend of environmental themes in fiction. Yet, I feel narrative cinema has far more potential to innovate in ways of representing non-human beings, natural systems and ecological phenomena. As a researcher and filmmaker, my work is informed by environmental philosophy drawn from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Very broadly, ecological readings of Merleau-Ponty consider that the natural world is the world and this world is in fact the Earth itself, made of all matter whether living or nonliving. This ontology is in line with ecocentric environmental ethics, an ethical view that is very influential for me. Advocated by environmentalists such as Aldo Leopold, Arne Naess and Carolyn Merchant amongst others, ecocentric environmentalism is an ethics that refutes a dualistic view of human beings and nature, instead placing the two within the same holistic system; thus, all living and non-living beings have the same intrinsic value (Merchant 74-75). To reflect these perspectives, I believe that cinema should seek to create non-anthropocentric narratives in fiction and to give agency to the natural world. As we will soon discuss, some filmmakers have already begun to break the norm of human-centered storytelling.

Research questions and chapter breakdown

My research-creation thesis aims to contribute to ecocinema in both theory and practice, asking: How may the film form reflect a holistic ontology of the natural world? To answer this question, I conducted a phenomenological investigation of three eco-centered fiction films.

Narrowing the scope of my research to ecocinema since the early 2000s, I chose to analyze the following works: Rolf de Heer's *Ten Canoes* (2006), Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le Quattro Volte* (2010), and Roberto Minervini's *Low Tide* (2012). Each of these films represents nature in a unique way. Thus, my analysis was driven by the following questions: How does cinematic language portray the natural world in the chosen films? What metaphysical conceptions of nature can be read in these depictions? Chapter II is centered on this discussion, drawing on environmental interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. The research that went into this chapter was instrumental in informing the creation portion of this thesis. In *Gaea* (2018) and *Absence* (2019), two short films I made for my creative submission, I sought to embed non-anthropocentrism in fictional narratives. Both films are centered around human protagonists yet aim to portray their lives as inseparable from a greater natural world. Chapter III addresses the creative process behind the making of these films, discussing their themes and placing them within the research. I will touch upon research on the Anthropocene, described by film scholar Selmin Kara as the idea that since the Industrial Revolution, humans have reshaped "the world's ecosystems, the biosphere, and even the geological record itself" (3). The paper concludes by considering the future of non-anthropocentrism in fiction amidst the realities of climate change.

Theoretical framework: Merleau-Pontian environmentalism

Before analyzing the chosen works, let us first recap the main features of Merleau-Ponty's theory on perception. Perhaps best known for his lifelong interest in phenomenology, notably focusing on perception and embodiment, Maurice Merleau-Ponty was one of the leading French philosophers of his generation and had an important influence on the succeeding generation of post-structuralists such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida (Toadvine). Influenced by the work of phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, Merleau-Ponty completed *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1944, one of two major theoretical texts he published in his lifetime, the other being *The Structure of Behavior* which appeared in 1942 (Toadvine). In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty theorizes the study of human perception in opposition to philosophical traditions of naturalism and science. In the book's *Avant-Propos*, Merleau-Ponty writes that "Phenomenology is the study of essences and accordingly its treatment of every problem is an attempt to define an essence, the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example" (vii). Central to phenomenology is a description of human experience, examining phenomena from subjective points of view. In describing human experience, phenomenology seeks "to turn back to the things themselves...to that world prior to knowledge of which knowledge speaks...it is like the relationship of geography to the countryside where we first learned what a forest, a prairie or a river was" (Merleau-Ponty 60). It is important to mention that Merleau-Ponty's writings do not directly address plants, animals or other beings. Despite the little attention paid to the natural world, environmental scholars like David Abram and Simon P. James believe his work paves the way for a radical ecological philosophy. The central feature they draw upon is Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh. His notion of "flesh" stems from his account of a communion between perceiver and thing perceived.

He compares this relationship with the experience of touching one hand with the other: “the hand (either hand) is only able to touch because it is itself a touchable thing” (James 512). Thus, “the awareness of what it feels like to be touched enters into one’s very experience of touching so that one cannot fully understand the phenomenology of touching without understanding what it is to be touched. (James 513). Expanding on this, James writes: “my perception of the world is, in truth, not mine at all – not entirely. I touch the thing, but at the same time I am myself susceptible, worldly, embodied being that I am, to what may be described as its touch” (513).

The relationship that intertwines the perceiver and the thing perceived is the flesh, translated from *la chair*, a metaphysical tissue that runs through all matter on Earth, binding them together (James). Thus, perception is an activity carried between the human body and the living world, and the existence of a thing is thus always bound to human perception (Merleau-Ponty). While environmental realists may critique his philosophy as being anthropocentric, James argues that phenomenology is in fact better equipped than environmental realism to reveal the richness of experiences with nature because it focuses on human experience, bringing to light “what it means to perceive, in an immediate and visceral way, the independent reality of the natural world” (James 511). By applying phenomenology as a method, I will examine the specificities of such perceptual moments in the chosen films. I was notably inspired by film scholar Vivian Sobchack, who in “The Active Eye” (Revisited), provides a very relevant example of how phenomenology can be applied to cinema. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s writings, she examines camera movements occurring both “*in* the image” and “*as* the image” (63). For her, “while phenomenological philosophy must use language ‘to make us see the bond between subject and world, between subject and others,’” the perceptual experience of seeing images move onscreen makes this bond “sensually visible” (64). For Sobchack, the importance of cinematic movement

can be found in Merleau-Ponty's assertion that consciousness is "manifest only as it is *embodied* and *in movement* – that is, actively perceiving, expressively responding to, and inhabiting a 'given' lifeworld into which it has been existentially 'thrown'" (66). The cinema puts in motion a lifeworld, which can, whether consciously or subconsciously, reshape our understandings and interpretations of our own world. Taking a similar approach, my analysis will focus on various aspects of cinematic language, such as camera movement, editing, mood, rhythm, and sound. In this way, I aim to reveal metaphysical conceptions of nature that can be read in these films.



Figure 1: Still from *Days of Heaven* (1978)

Chapter II: Media texts and analysis

Roberto Minervini's *Low Tide*

In *Low Tide* (2012), Italian filmmaker Roberto Minervini examines a mother-son relationship between a young boy (credited as “The Boy”) living with his single mother in a rural and poverty-stricken Texan town. During the heat of the summer, the Boy spends his days in solitude, often in the outdoors, finding ways to pass time while his mother is out of the house. His mother’s neglect increasingly takes its toll on the Boy who is faced with situations beyond his maturity. The film is the second instalment of Minervini’s Texas trilogy, beginning with *The Passage* (2011) and ending with *Stop the Pounding Heart* (2013), and like these two it creates a fiction/documentary hybrid, filming people Minervini met and built relationships with (qtd. from Minervini). We often witness the lines of fiction and documentary blurred, such as during the Boy’s interactions with residents. In fact, the cast is entirely made of non-actors, starring Daniel Blanchard, playing the Boy, and his real-life sister, Melissa McKinney, playing the role of the mother. A bull-rider in the film, played by Colby Trichell, becomes a central protagonist in *Stop the Pounding Heart*. As discussed later in this section, the filmmaker’s style borrows from Italian neorealism, putting in action a protagonist who is receiving the world rather than acting upon it (Deleuze). The ecological considerations of this character-driven neo-realistic film may appear quite subtle, especially given that divergent themes emerge from the domestic drama, such as the social impacts of poverty in the South, childhood depression, and the nature of fear. However, closely examining the Boy’s solitary moments spent with nature, I argue that many core concepts in Merleau-Pontian environmentalism can be witnessed if not explicitly conveyed in the film. Furthermore, the use of neo-realism and blending of genres becomes conducive to a

phenomenological inquiry of human-nature relationships. Applying the framework of Merleau-Pontian environmentalism, this analysis focuses on the Boy's sensorial and bodily interactions with nature. These moments reverberate Merleau-Ponty's description of perception as an "embodied experience of living in this world" (505). Through such embodied interactions we gather how the Boy perceives nature, which in turn can inform our own notions of the natural world.

In the opening scene, the Boy is carrying his bike along a dry field of grass when he suddenly spots a rattle snake. He stops and watches it with fascination before crouching down and carefully holding it. He spends a few moments like this, letting the snake move along his arms before letting it slither into a crack in the ground. There is mutual fascination between the Boy and the snake, each examining the other and coming into contact. There is also danger involved yet the diligence displayed by the Boy shows that he has a certain sensitivity and perhaps even knowledge of this species. Without the presence of his mother, the Boy is free to live within his own rules. Yet, instead of turning to mischief like Antoine Doinel in the *400 Blows* (1959), which *Low Tide* appears to pay homage to (Waltz), the Boy explores the outdoors and displays innate curiosity for other species. We see him walking along empty fields, fishing alone, laying on grass, playing with frogs, etc. By depicting simple actions, focusing on the character's movement in space and his corporeal exchanges with nature, Minervini depicts sensory experiences that reflect Merleau-Ponty's placement of the Boy's physical body as "the conscious subject of experience" (Abram 103). A Merleau-Pontian reading of the film would therefore consider the Boy's body as a conduit of his being-in-the-world. Other such moments stand out, like when on a hot afternoon, he fills his inflatable pool with fish and carefully sits inside to play with them. We see him carry a bag of ice to his backyard, spreading the ice on the

dry lawn and laying on top of it shirtless (Figure 1). He steps into muddy creek water and skips rocks (Figure 2). During rainfall, he walks outside and fills his fish bowl with rain water.



Figure 1: Still from *Low Tide* - the Boy lays on ice he's bought from a convenience store



Figure 2: Still from *Low Tide* - the Boy and Vernon rest after picking up garbage from the streets



Figure 3: Still from *Low Tide* - the Boy is alone by his window, moments later a man appears from his mother's room

Referring to Merleau-Ponty, Abram would say that by paying close attention to these bodily experiences, the Boy and by extension the viewer can come to realize “our corporeal immersion in the depths of a body much larger than our own” (105). To grasp Abram’s conjecture, let us look further into James’ similar discussion of the unique bond between perceiver and thing perceived.

Merleau-Ponty believes that the world has an “otherness to it, a side that could not have been constituted by us, and which we encounter in perception” (James 506). Yet at the same time, he asserts that a thing is “inseparable from the person perceiving it, and can never be actually *in* itself because its articulations are those of our very existence” (James 510). For James, the relationship between perceiver and thing perceived is a type of co-constructive world-making that binds the two together. Using the example of touching a tree, James writes:

“Merleau-Ponty would deny that this tall, leafy being before him enjoys the kind of independent existence the realist attributes to it. Yet he would at the same time affirm that in placing my palm against the tree’s bark or in looking up through its branches I am party to an event which is to a certain extent trans-human, a ‘communion’ of man and tree, or better, an intertwining of a flesh that ‘traverses’ me” (James 514-515).

The non-anthropocentric or perhaps more accurately “flesh-centered” nature of such trans-human communion is advanced further when Merleau-Ponty writes of flesh as existing not just in our bodies but in all other matter of the Earth (James 514). Returning to *Low Tide*, sensory depictions can draw the viewer to a communion taking place between the Boy and the natural world. When the Boy is alone by the window and holds an insect in his hands (Figure 3 /

00:25:45), we become privy to the flesh running through him and binding him not only to the insect but also to the jar, the house, birdsongs we hear from outside, etc.

Such moments point to another important feature in Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh: all elements of the world belong to the flesh of the Earth. This type of interconnectedness is woven in the Boy's experiences *with* nature. Nature has no boundaries for him. It encompasses his backyard, woodlands, barren patches of grass by the road, rainwater seeping through the roof of his house and the same rainwater filling his fish tank. In one scene, he is collecting garbage with an older washed-up looking man. The two begin along sidewalks, continue in back alleys and end up at a creek close to a busy road. The Boy then gets into the muddy presumably polluted water and skips rocks (00:14:54 – 00:18:03). This scene exemplifies a patchwork ecology omnipresent throughout the film. Minervini's protagonist traverses different types of landscapes, a mix of the natural and the manmade, from barren fields to woodlands to a rodeo arena. The sound design also reflects the absence of a pristine environment. Nearly every natural setting has the sound of nearby cars. Birdsongs are heard throughout without being dominant; they blend with sounds of cars and people. Seen through a Merleau-Pontian lens, Minervini's landscapes reflect the idea that the natural world is the world. James writes that nature "encompasses everything – it is a world not just of mountains, trees and rivers, but also of multi-storey car parks, glass skyscrapers and air- conditioned shopping malls" (508). Because of the dominance of man-made structures, we tend to think of urban spaces and nature as a binary. In *Low Tide* however, the "patchiness" of this landscapes is reflective of post-industrial ecologies across the world (Tsing 4). These locations highlight co-existence: pockets of biodiversity, such as a creek, a lake or forest, flourish amidst populated urban spaces. Precisely because they are difficult to

define these landscapes may help us realize that nature is everywhere, that all matter belongs to the Earth.

Minervini's *Low Tide* not only reflects a Merleau-Pontian ontology, but in its use of neo-realism *itself* conducts a phenomenology of nature. To demonstrate this, let us first examine Deleuze's definition of neo-realism. In "Cinema 2 - The Time-Image", Deleuze makes the distinction between sensory-motor situations in the action-image of old realism with what he calls "a purely optical situation and sound situation" (2) of neo-realism. Neo-realism is marked by "a new form of reality, said to be dispersive, elliptical, errant or wavering, working in blocs, with deliberately weak connections and floating events" (Deleuze 1). Such traits are seen in *Low Tide*, where scenes often feel fragmentary, lacking an obvious plot-driven order, the filmmaker instead relying on mood and emotion. Moreover, according to Deleuze, neo-realism is the cinema of "voyant" and no longer of the "actant":

"The character has become a kind of viewer. He shifts, runs and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action. He records rather than reacts. He is prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in an action." (2)

The Boy is this type of voyant, wandering, being, and reacting to situations he encounters rather than having a defined motive that advances narrative. Moreover, through his hybrid form of filmmaking, Minervini *documents* a protagonist who is an observant of events rather than inflicting change upon the world. Through neo-realism we see and hear things with the Boy. We become witness to his experiential contact with the world and his reactions (rather than actions). The film therefore encourages us to discover the world as he is discovering it.

Non-anthropocentrism in Michelangelo Frammartino's *Le Quattro Volte*

Having studied architecture and worked across disciplines in photography, film and video art, focusing on “the relationship between the image and the physical space, materials and constructions” (“Torino Film Lab”), Michelangelo Frammartino takes a unique approach to fictional storytelling in his second feature, *Le Quattro Volte* (2010). Taking place in his parents’ region in Calabria, *Le Quattro Volte*, translated as “The Four Turns” (McMahon), begins by following an old solitary shepherd and his herd of goats. Having fallen ill, the shepherd succumbs to death a quarter way into the film, and his soul is passed on to a newly born goat who becomes the film’s protagonist. Skipping through seasons, the passing away of the goat hands the torch to a tree and in the final chapter, the ashes of that tree become the central figure. Beyond this unique structure, Frammartino’s use of film language, particularly through framing and documentary techniques, gives agency to animals and other non-human beings. In the following analysis, I argue that the film creates a non-anthropocentric narrative and depicts a holistic world in consonance with Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the flesh.

From the survey of films I conducted, Frammartino’s stood as the only one where non-human beings carry the majority of the narrative. As discussed by Monica Seger, the film draws inspiration from Pythagoras’ theory “that all beings contain four lives within them: the animal, the human, the vegetable, and the mineral” (292). With the passing of each character, their spirit is reincarnated by the next. Frammartino thus subverts audience expectations, breaking the mold of narrative cinema focused on humans. When asked about his motivation to make the film, Frammartino responded by saying: “Can cinema free itself of the dogma which dictates that human beings should occupy the leading role?” (McMahon 2). Frammartino’s quest is evident in his directorial choices. He employs deep space photography, which involves using wide-angle

shots to create depth in the image and framing subjects in a way that forces the viewer to choose what to focus on (Segar). A perfect example is the film's longest continuous shot, an 8-min sequence featuring an Easter ceremony, a dog running up and down the road, and the shepherd's heard of goats (Figure 4 / 00:27:56 – 00:36:00). Each of these characters holds equal importance in the scene, therefore the viewer isn't presented with an obvious protagonist. Segar writes that deep space "challenges viewers to no longer place the human centre-frame, but rather see it as one form of life among many" (293). Meanwhile, in her discussion of the film, Laura McMahon attributes this technique to Jane Bennett's concept of "horizontalization", which refers to a non-hierarchical depiction of beings on screen. Through horizontalization, the film breaks the cinematic norm of "active (human) subjects and passive (nonhuman) objects" (McMahon 2). Furthermore, Segar points to the many wide-angle shots where all of the characters, whether people, the dog or the goats, appear as the same size. The pace of their movements also mimic each other. Even their colours match. (Segar 4)



Figure 4: "Horizontalization" in *Le Quattro Volte*

McMahon further discusses the film's sound design: absent of dialogue, a mixture of sounds coming from different sources blend together to create a "intermingling across species" (4). Frammartino himself says that his camera's point of view is "like trying to see the world through the eyes of someone who is not capable of making distinctions, of discriminating between things – who can't therefore establish hierarchies" (McMahon 3). For Segar, giving equal importance to non-humans places them on the same ontological level as humans: "their truth exists on the same plane as the humans" (294). Similarly, for McMahon the film conveys "interconnections across species" (3). She notably refers to Bazin's notion of cinematic realism as a "nonhierarchical opening to the world" where the "impassive lens" does not privilege the importance of particular beings or things (McMahon 3). Often, Frammartino's camera is static and looks down at the world from high above, clearly presenting a point of view that cannot be human. The frame thus becomes a vehicle for a non-human observation of our world. To use Frammartino's own words, the film offers an objective point of view that doesn't "discriminate" amongst beings or things of the Earth.

In the filmmaker's use of deep space there is a strong affinity with Merleau-Ponty's discussion of depth. James writes that for Merleau-Ponty, the spatial relations between objects and elements, rather than being considered dimensions of our world, are more truly existential dimensions functioning within our "embodied being-in-the world" (505). The use of deep space in *Le Quattro Volte* can help us conceive this idea. The depth and dimensions of the world within the frame changes according to each viewer's unique perception. One viewer focuses on the herd of goats and the crowd performing a ceremony, while another eye passes from the dog to the ceremony and near the end of the shot notices the Calabrian style houses in the background. For each viewer this world varies in its makeup and spatial dimensions, perhaps slightly for some and

more distinguishably for others. Furthermore, according to Abram, Merleau-Ponty places human perception within a corporeal world that is structured in “depth...the dimensional spread from the near to the far” (103). Depth is malleable: “we can discover depth, can focus it or change our focus within it” (Abram 104). For Abram, this discovery points to the contours of the Earth in all its depths as a sentient body we are a part of. Similarly, Frammartino encourages our eye to move through the depth of the image and pay attention to its many entities: from people to animals to houses to the shadow of a cloud. Thus, the film’s cinematography reinforces the idea that we belong to a greater body outside of our own.

Focusing on other beings, particularly animals, has another interesting effect on viewers. When the goats take over the story, this shift disorients our notions of narrative cinema. While we are familiar with these types of images in nature documentaries, seeing them embedded in a fiction creates tension. McMahon addresses this phenomenon, writing that animal agency in the film is “captured yet not controlled” (5). By *documenting* the life of goats and “relinquishing [his] directorial control” (McMahon 4), Frammartino creates animal agency which is seldom seen in fiction. In doing so, Frammartino creates an additional, more subtle layer of tension touched on by film theorist Vivian Sobchack in her phenomenological analysis of movement in cinema. Using a Merleau-Pontian framework, Sobchack writes that movement of lived bodies onscreen, whether human or non-human, remind us of our own being-in-the-world. Instead of seeing these entities as existing independently of us, we see them as our co-constitution of them. Sobchack calls this relationship an “intersubjective relation of recognition” (82). At the same time, it is evident that characters onscreen, whether actors or other beings, exhibit a certain amount of autonomy in their movements that isn’t pre-determined (Sobchack 82). For Sobchack, this creates tension in the viewer’s intersubjective relationship with them (82). She

further writes that this tension is especially prevalent in nature documentaries due to the autonomy and unpredictability of animals: their agency points to the “the discrete intentionality and existential status” of the film image. (Sobchack 82-83) I argue that this tension is even more intensified in hybrids like *Le Quattro Volte*. For example, there is a scene when the camera is placed inside a shed, holding us witness to young goats playing with each other (Figure 5 / 00:46:43). A broom stands against one of the wooden beams in the middle of the room. One of the goats tries to climb it, causing it to fall abruptly and startle the group who quickly runs away from it. Left on their own, these goats create a moment of storytelling by chance. They exercise their agency onto the captured images and for a brief moment the film world becomes the world, before a cut to a close-up reminds us of their existence within filmic reality. By blurring notions of fiction and documentary, Frammartino erases as much as he can the biases of the cinematic apparatus onto the world. In this scene like in others, Frammartino creates the conditions for a pure moment of perception. In essence, the frame becomes a world that reciprocally perceives us.



Figure 5: Still from *Le Quattro Volte* - young goats knocking down a broom

The opening montage of *Ten Canoes*

The 2006 film *Ten Canoes* was made from close a collaboration between Dutch filmmaker Rolf de Heer and Australian actor David Gulpilil, set in Gulpilil's traditional lands in northeastern Australia (Davis 5). Centered on themes of ancestral law, intergenerational knowledge, and oral history, the film tells a creation story of the Yolngu people of Arnhem Land in northeastern Australia. The story is told in two separate timeframes. The first is set during a goose-egg hunt in an undetermined past and is shot in black and white. A young man named Dayindi, in love with his older brother Minygululu's third wife, is recounted a story by Minygululu who wishes to teach him important lessons in ancestral law. A second timeframe is established, set in mythological times and shot in colour, putting in action ancestors of the Yolngu, played by many of the same actors from the first storyline. The film's opening, an immersive montage of a wetland in Arnhem Land, is narrated by Gulpilil, whose voiceover draws the viewer into the creation story of his people and the land. The following discussion will focus on these first four minutes, examining amongst others the use of camera movement, dissolve and voiceover. These different techniques establish Yolngu cosmology as the lens through which the story will unfold. Using this framework, de Heer depicts a deep-rooted connection between the Yolngu and the natural world. Drawing parallels with Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh, I argue that the film's opening conveys a holistic conception of the natural and also reveals core values shared between Yolngu cosmology and Merleau-Pontian environmentalism.

In just the first the three minutes, de Heer combines a number of camera shots and transitions to present an ecosystem through different scales. The film begins with an aerial shot: we are looking down at the landscape from above. The movement of the camera is steady, traversing the vastness of the landscape. Large pockets of trees serve as scales of reference. We

see miniature-sized birds flying and hear their vibrant chirps. The sequence feels very peaceful and points to the wholeness of this ecosystem. Progressively, the sound of thunder and rain accompanies a dissolve to a close-up of a leaf drenched in heavy rain. From an encompassing view of the land we all of sudden see just one small part of it. Another dissolve now brings us to a different kind of aerial view. The camera is gliding over the swampy land, its movement mimicking the flock of birds flying within sight (Figure 6). We are much closer to land this time and can see the details of the swamp, the trees, and the grass. The wide-stretching river is centered throughout, highlighting its life-giving importance. We hear Gulpilil's first words, giving additional means to interpret the images. He says: *"This land began in the beginning. Yurlunggur, that Great Water Goanna, he traveled here. Yurlunggur made all this land then. He made this water and he made this swamp, that stretches long and gives us life."* On these last words a dissolve reveals a microscopic view of a colony of ants. The transition is a powerful moment. The images, which are very uncommon in fiction, reminiscent of microscopy techniques used in *Microcosmos* (1996), portrays an interconnected ecosystem: the swamp, the ants, and the Yolngu are all part of its web. Juxtaposed with the montage, the voiceover reinforces a sense of interconnectedness in Yolngu cosmology: *"When I die, I will go back to my waterhole. I'll be waiting there, like a little fish...waiting to be born again. You didn't know all that, did you? But it's a true thing. It's always like that for my people."* The narrator's creationist imagery is reminiscent of *Le Quattro Volte's* cycle of life and echoes a worldview similar to Merleau-Pontian environmentalism.



Figure 6: Still from *Ten Canoes* - An aerial view of a swamp in Arnhem Land, northern Australia

The first obvious parallel is in Merleau-Ponty's description of the flesh as "the common tissue between oneself and the world" (110) and for Abram this places human beings within the flesh of the Earth. Abram goes further by asserting that human thought is influenced by the Earth:

"The hidden presence of the distances, the secret life of the Wind which we can feel and breathe but cannot see, the interior depths of things, and, in general, all the invisible lines of force that constantly influence our perceptions. The invisible shape of smells, rhythms of cricketsong, or the movement of shadows all, in a sense, provide the subtle body of our thoughts." (109)

His words echo Gulpilil's monologue, conveying a spiritual connection with the natural world.

Here, it is important to mention that in his book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram often refers to examples from indigenous cultures. Like Abram, I believe that Merleau-Pontian

environmentalism should be acknowledged as an articulation of truths long known in indigenous cultures. For example, in *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*, Gregory Cajete lists a number of grounding principles found in indigenous knowledge, of which “Every ‘thing’ is animate and has spirit” (Cajete 65). Similar sentiments have also been articulated in Western theories such as Spinozan deep ecology. Coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1973, deep ecology is a philosophical movement that is eco-centric rather than anthropocentric, promoting the idea that nature needs to be preserved because of its intrinsic value (Kober 54). Deep ecology opposes itself to “shallow ecology”, which considers conservation as a means to benefit human society, instead drawing on founding principles in the work of seventeenth century philosopher Spinoza (Kober 54-55). Notably, deep ecology is associated to Spinoza’s conception of nature as an infinite substance which human beings belong to (Kober 49). As such, humans are no different than any other object of nature, belonging to an interconnected web of all things on Earth (Kober 55).

Reading the film through a Merleau-Pontian framework, another important discussion emerges: perception is reciprocal and this has important implications when examining how we think of the natural world. Explaining Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh, Abram writes:

“To touch the coarse skin of a tree is thus, at the same time, to experience one’s own tactility, to feel oneself touched by the tree. And to see the world is also, at the same time, to experience oneself as visible, to feel oneself see” (68).

This leads Abram to consider that if we spend significant time in a forest, we can come to sense the forest itself is watching and indeed perceiving us (68). He notably refers to Koyukon culture in Alaska who consider their surroundings as sentient, aware and able to feel (70). This type of relationship reveals a deep connection with nature, and evidently, the conditions of urban spaces

attunes our perception to entirely different rhythms. For this reason, the opening montage in *Ten Canoes* is vital. It encourages non-indigenous audiences to view the film with diligence and sensibility. To learn from Yolngu ways of knowing, one must open oneself not just to view but to *receive* their world. Thus as viewers, we too can be reminded of our connection with all elements of the Earth.

Chapter 3: Research-creation process and making

Methodology

Using research-creation as an approach was a natural progression of my past academic and artistic background, which combines filmmaking and research to explore environmental topics. For Chapman and Sawchuk, research-creation intervenes in scholarly research to produce subjective and tacit forms of knowledge (11). It was during my first undergraduate year in Environmental Studies that I realized I could use the film medium to creatively explore environmental issues. Faced with the realities of climate change, I wanted to examine the roots of a disconnect I felt with my surrounding ecologies. In many ways, this research-creation is a continuation of questions I have been studying since that time. In “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and ‘Family Resemblances’,” Chapman and Sawchuk write: “This understanding of the role of intuition and “feeling” presents itself as one of the strongest reasons why those who pursue research-creation are committed to the methods they promote, as it is only through working theoretically and artistically, or creatively, with their research topics that they become invested and engaged in a process that is right for them.” (12) By designing a thesis where research would inform my creative output, I was able to balance theory, creativity, and

experimentation in my vision for a non-anthropocentric fiction film. My project combines two categories of research-creation described by Chapman and Sawchuk: research-for-creation and research-from-creation (15). In order, my methodological steps were the following:

1. First iteration of research-creation: making of pilot film, *Gaea* (2018).
2. Literature review, media review of ecocinema, and gathering of key concepts.
3. Pre-production and production of final film, *Absence* (2019).
4. Film analysis of chosen works and post-production for *Absence*.

After a year of course work, I felt it was important to begin by making a type of “pilot” film to explore themes and concepts I had been honing-in on during the year. It was also a logistical decision to shoot in the summer of 2017: I wanted to film in favorable conditions and capture vibrant ecologies in Montréal. I thus set out to make *Gaea*, a 19-minute short fiction film, which ended up being a much bigger production than my final film. I learned so much from making this short: I made many mistakes, I gained invaluable feedback, and ultimately I built on this experience for my research phase and the making of my final film. Following post-production of *Gaea*, I began an expansive media review of ecocinema (particularly in art cinema) since the early 2000s. Along with auteurs previously mentioned (Weerasethakul, Kawase, and Arnold), I also researched indigenous cinema from Canada, Australia and New Zealand, finding relevant examples in Zacharias Kunuk’s *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001) and Ivan Sen’s *Beneath Clouds* (2002), amongst others. It was during this time that I first discovered *Ten Canoes*, which I considered to be perfectly situated within my research topic. I also found that a number of South American films were engaging with environmental themes, such as Lucrecia Martel’s *La Ciénaga* (2001), Lisandro Alonso’s *Los muertos* (2004), and Jayro Bustamante’s *Ixcánul* (2015). Although

these viewings didn't lead to research analysis, they nevertheless provided sources of inspiration which influenced the writing process for *Absence*.

As discussed by Chapman and Sawchuk, the creation process is itself a form of research (15). In relation to filmmaking, there are traditionally three distinct phases of production, and both for *Gaea* and for *Absence*, each of these phases informed the whole of my research-creation. During pre-production, rather than writing a traditional screenplay, I instead relied on film treatments, which are a type of long synopsis, written like a short-story. In these treatments, I visually described each scene, conveyed moments of tension and plot-driven actions, and articulated the film's central themes. They also provided material that I submitted to grants, which became an integral part of pre-production. I was very fortunate to receive funding for both films: for *Gaea*, I obtained a grant from Concordia's Sustainability Action Fund and for *Absence*, I was awarded Hexagram's research-creation student grant. Another tool I heavily relied upon was location scouting. During the writing process, I needed to have a strong sense of locations and build the story according to these spaces. I would thus travel to familiar and unfamiliar parts of Montréal as well as outside of the city, taking photographs along the way and later reviewing these to write my scenes. The next step was storyboarding, which are drawings that map-out each scene visually, conveying a sense of character as well as camera movement in the frame (Figures 7 and 8). Especially because my films rely on imagery and mood rather than dialogue, these drawings would help me visualize the overall "feel" of the film. The last stage of preparation before filming was for the director of photography and I to do a test shoot in each location and review the footage, serving as a test-run of the actual production.



Figure 7: Storyboard from Gaea – drawings by Ivan Tolj

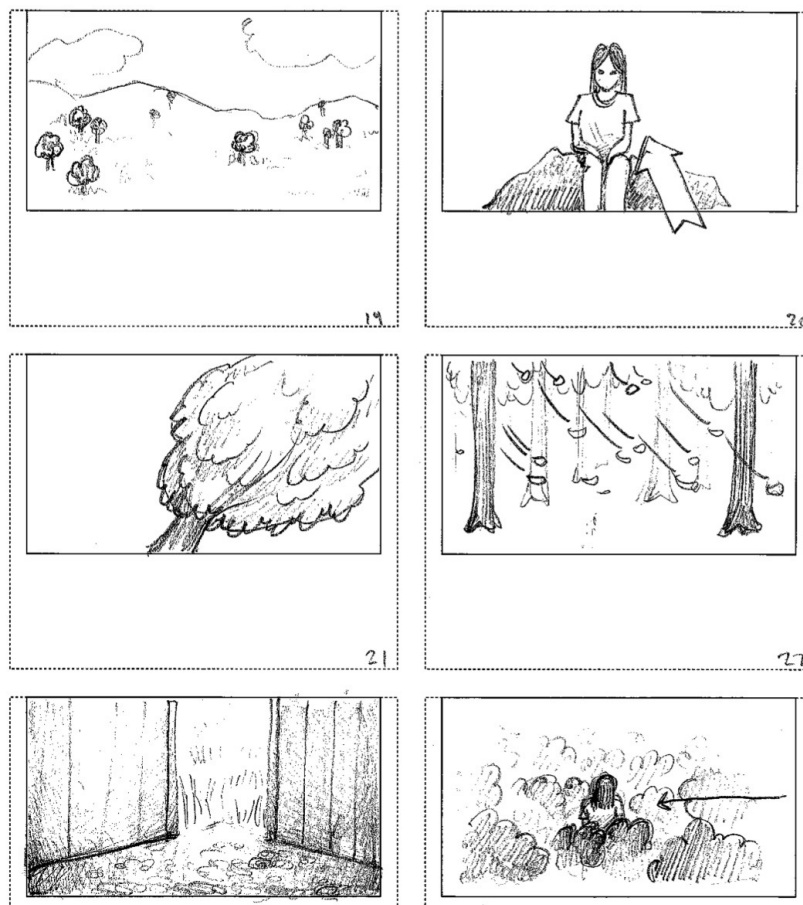


Figure 8: Storyboard from Absence – drawings by Juliette Cazes

Collaboration and outside influences

Chapman and Sawchuk mention the importance of collaboration in a research-for-creation methodology, citing the possibility for “participatory design and friendship-as-method” (16). In my case, I collaborated with friends and fellow artists, each of whom played an integral role in the creative process. For both *Gaea* and *Absence*, the actresses shaped their characters around their personal experiences. In doing so, they guided me on how to shoot a scene: I would often make creative decisions, such as camera movement, length of a shot, and later the type of editing, based on how they were naturally interacting with people or spaces. To cite a few other of the many types collaborations, my sound artist Sandrine Corbeil not only helped construct the sound design for *Absence* but also contributed to writing the voiceover and gave invaluable feedback during editing. During post-production of *Gaea*, I worked with two Concordia students for the sound mix and colour correction, each of whom brought their own voice to the project.

At this point, it is important for me to mention that throughout my thesis I was balancing my time with work outside my studies, and as result, there were often gaps in time that would break-up my research-creation. These experiences outside of my program, though, were related to my project in some form, and in many instances they directly informed my thesis. During the second year of my MA, I joined Concordia’s Speculative Life Research Cluster as a student researcher. Speculating on how technological advancements will form the future for living and non-living beings, the cluster situates itself at the intersection of art, life sciences, architecture and design, and computation media. One of the projects I collaborated on was filming microscopic time-lapses of mycelium growth and bacteria. These portrayals of life at the macroscopic-level inspired me to continue to explore similar representations. At Concordia’s Centre for Microscopy and Cell Imaging, I conducted a 3-hour microscopic time-lapse of a plant

sample undergoing dehydration. Using their Cell and Imaging microscope, I was able to obtain images of plant cells expanding and contracting (Figure 9). While I didn't include this time-lapse in my films, I was able to develop microscopy techniques which I applied to film plants and insects, present throughout *Gaea* and *Absence*.



Figure 9: Image of plant cells captured at Concordia's Centre for Microscopy and Cell Imaging

More recently, I have been working as the Technical Coordinator for Vidéographe, an artist-run centre for artists working in experimental film, documentary, animation, and other forms of video art. Working at Vidéographe has been an invaluable experience; I have been exposed to video artists I otherwise would not have encountered, and I have been inspired by works I continually discover. For example, there is a scene in *Absence* that was influenced by Canadian media artist Frédéric Moffet, whose work we distribute. In *Fever Freaks* (2017), Moffet juxtaposes slow-motion imagery with high-pitched sounds to create the sense that his characters are living in a temporal space entirely different from our own. Similarly, in *Absence*, there is a moment when the protagonist is shown moving through a forest in slow-motion, the sounds of

footsteps exaggerated (02:39-02:47). In this moment, I sought to convey a different sense of time, one that belonged to the realm of the forest. I also gained valuable lessons from Vidéographe's distribution activities and presence at international festivals. Notably, with *Absence*, I aimed to make a shorter film that would be easier to program at festivals, and I was much more conscious of audience reception during editing.

Reflection on *Gaea* (2018)

Grappling with different versions of a treatment, the idea behind *Gaea* became fully fleshed around the month of June 2018. It was a summer of unstable weather, perhaps the first time I could clearly feel the impacts of climate change manifesting themselves in the city. The weather was changing erratically: sunshine followed by heavy rain turning into clear skies again, all within the same day. There were chilly days, heat waves and more precipitation than I had ever remembered experiencing. This was to become the context of *Gaea*, allowing me to examine a topic I had long been interested in: the psychological and emotional impacts of climate change. Relating to my own experiences, I was interested in exploring how young adults living in Montréal are navigating through ecological anxiety. I decided very early-on that I wanted to focus on a group of friends I had met through my younger sister. They belong to a younger generation than me, in their early 20s, their personalities and social interactions representing a care-free and still innocent part of adulthood. In *Gaea*, I sought to capture a glimpse into this circle of friends, climate change manifesting itself before their eyes. The film's logline is as follows: Amidst unstable weather, a young skateboarder finds her growing eco-consciousness clashing with her social life. As it turned out, the actress, Jane, related strongly to the character:

she is very environmentally engaged and at the time was going through personal struggles of bringing this activism into her social life.

Almost all of the scenes involving Jane and her friends are unscripted, a decision that was influenced by Roberto Minervini's hybrid approach to working with non-actors. Rather than having the actresses memorize lines, I felt this approach would allow them to feel comfortable in front of the camera and, rather than performing, to simply be themselves. I also felt it gave them control over how they wished to represent themselves. Meanwhile, I was drawn to skateboarding as an activity that provides a certain freedom in the city and opportunity to reclaim urban spaces. Skateboarding also creates friendships and I was interested in exploring this bond. Moreover, because I wanted to film a day in Jane's life, having her skateboard allowed me to capture many different spaces she travels through in a single day.

Within the first two minutes of the film, Jane skateboards to a small public garden below a bridge, a location situated in Pointe-Saint-Charles, a neighborhood in the southwest of Montréal (Figure 10). This scene has a central importance in the film, establishing its themes and introducing us to the protagonist. The making of the scene is also reflective of my directorial approach throughout the production. I was already familiar with this garden, having focused on it for an Art History project during my MA. My classmates and I were studying Pointe-Saint-Charles' diverse ecology, identifying many different species of plants. Collaborating with urban botanist Roger Latour, in this garden and other green spaces we found examples of biodiversity despite impacts of human disturbance. Returning to this site for *Gaea*, I wanted to convey the presence of ecologies flourishing amidst the constraints of urban spaces. In the same way that I had gained ecological knowledge of the neighborhood, I hope to encourage viewers to take interest in species of plants, insects and other living beings in the city. For this scene, I once

again collaborated with Roger, asking him to join us on location and to give Jane a botanical tour. Giving her time to learn about the garden, we then filmed Jane without instructing her on how to move through the space. In this way, I hoped to document a moment in real time of her discovering the ecological specificity of the garden. Thematically, the garden represents hope amidst the realities of climate change. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing writes of the term “contaminated diversity”, referring to multiple species growing and interacting within the same space, coming into contact as a result of human disturbance (30). Having learned about the site’s historical and sociopolitical context, I wanted to represent it as an example of contaminated diversity. To briefly summarize, the tracks situated above the garden date back to the industrial period when trains would pass through Montréal, and seeds would often fall out of their containers, introducing species of non-native plants to the ecosystem. Meanwhile, the neighborhood has gone through many spatial changes over the years: once an industrial hub, it encountered a drastic economic decline and is now being gentrified. As a response, activism in the neighborhood has sought to protect green spaces which are promoted as community spaces. (R. Latour) Although this context isn’t provided in the film, I hinted at inter-species interactions happening amidst the pressures of urbanization, ourselves included in the possibility of diversity spurring from contamination (Tsing 31).



Figure 10: Still from *Gaea* – Jane arrives at a public garden in Pointe-Saint-Charles

The protagonist's introspective journey ends with her decision to leave the city, and in the last shot we see her walking alone towards a mountain. To address the thematic implications of the ending, I turn to one viewer's interpretation. In "Anthropocenema: Cinema in the Age of Mass Extinctions," Selmin Kara writes that often, a response to anxieties associated with the Anthropocene has been to return to a period before the Anthropocene, romanticizing the Earth prior to human civilization (29). Echoing her argument, a viewer told me he interpreted the ending of *Gaea* as a return to nature. For me, such an interpretation perhaps connotes nature as "wilderness", the idea of a pristine and untouched landscape. This interpretation also seems to consider her escape from the city a respite from the realities of climate change. Contrarily for me, her decision signals a desire to face her fears and anxieties. It is true that to leave the city is to immerse herself in a natural world far more biodiverse, far different than in the city. Yet, her long walk at the end does not symbolize a return to an idea of "nature" but rather a seeking-out

of what Merleau-Ponty would call nature prior to human definition of it. It is for her an attempt to remove her bias and preconceptions of what nature might be. In sum, she wants to provoke a change in the way she perceives her immediate surroundings.

Reflection on *Absence* (2019)

Although *Absence* is not a sequel to *Gaea*, I consider the two as companion pieces, and Janie's experiences in *Absence* can be viewed as a continuation of Jane's journey (coincidentally their names are similar). With *Absence*, I aimed for a shorter and more succinct film than *Gaea*, influenced by films I helped distribute at Vidéographe. The production of *Gaea* had been a demanding one: the time constraints and number of people involved made it a challenge as the director to hit the right note on every take. Therefore, for my final film, I decided to have less locations and work with a smaller crew, allowing me to have more flexibility on set, whether to make changes to a scene or have more time to direct the actress. We were a team of five people and the shoot took place over one weekend, the first day at Îles-de-Boucherville National Park and the second day at the Alfred Kelly Nature Reserve. Like in the previous film, I didn't prepare dialogue for the production, instead deciding to write the voiceover in post-production. While I had written some of the lines and had decided on the emotions the protagonist was going through in each scene, I preferred to give both myself and especially Janie freedom during the shoot by not sticking to a script. Later reviewing our footage, this allowed me to write and record her voiceover according to the emotions Janie projected. In this way, I felt the words would have a closer tie to what she was feeling. I can also add that the emotions Janie conveys onscreen are true emotions: they stem from experiences in her life she is reliving in front of the camera.

In *Absence*, Janie's character is facing both ecological and more personal anxieties, and in fact the two become interchangeable. Like in *Gaea*, this film examines the emotional impacts of climate change on a young adult. Its logline is as follows: In a state of unrest, a solo hiker sees her will challenged by forces of the natural world. While there isn't context given to how Janie finds herself in this landscape, it is hinted that she's made a spontaneous (perhaps hasty) decision to leave the city and hike alone. Compared to the protagonist in *Gaea*, she is going through a more tumultuous period in her life. I consider her decision almost suicidal: she is prepared for whatever might happen to her, perhaps even death. I also imagined the story taking place several years into the future, when the severity of climate change has reached a graver state. Writing this story, I wondered what may connect Janie to the natural world, critically examining multiple aspects of this relationship: personal, ethical and metaphysical. Ultimately, the story is about the presence Janie brings to the land and reciprocally the presence it has for her. It is about this bond Merleau-Ponty writes about, which ties her body to the flesh of the Earth. When we first see her, Janie's thoughts are chaotic and we sense her uneasiness. Her journey thus becomes one of adjusting to this new environment and coming to terms with her fears of ecological calamity. Reaching the top of a mountain, she has an outpouring of emotions, a type of cathartic moment that frees her. In the following scene, there is an abandoned cabin and through one of its openings we see her walking slowly through a field of tall grass (Figure 11). This figurative window presents another type of being-in-the-world, one where Janie is much more present in her surroundings. Bordering the edges of the image, this frame within the frame alludes to the cinema serving as a window into another world, to other possibilities of being.

Already from the feedback I've received, the ending has created problems for viewers who wonder how the protagonist died. Although the film hints at possible causes of death, such as

toxic fruits, the presence of a dangerous animal or another person, a suicide, etc., I consider the ending as symbolic rather than explicitly implying that she has passed away (Figure 12). Having opened-up herself to an intimate perception of the world, Janie feels herself belonging to the whole of the Earth. Motionless, her body is no different in existence than the sand she lies on, the wind running through the reeds, the chorus of frogs during nightfall, etc. In *Becoming Animal*, discussing human notions of time and space, David Abram says “Space is the world of nature, the plants, the happenings of other animals,” and explains that space doesn’t belong to a human conception of linear time (qtd. in *Becoming Animal*). Echoing this idea, the film’s ending places Janie’s existence within a non-linear notion of time. Thus, in this image, her existence is not tied to whether her body is “alive” or “dead”. A phrase from Gary Snyder, quoted at the beginning of the *Spell of Sensuous*, resonates with me for the ending: “As the crickets’ soft autumn hum is to us so are we to the trees as are they to the rocks and the hills” (Abram xiii). The title of the film also takes its truest meaning with this last image. I chose the word “absence” because it can refer to many types of absences: her disappearance, an absence she feels in her life, the absence of a connection with nature. Most importantly though, in the final scene, her presence is shown through an absence. While her body is physically present, we assume it to be without a heartbeat and thus absent of conscious life. Perhaps though, in spirit or metaphysically, her soul remains very much present within the world.



Figure 11: Still from *Absence* – a view from inside an abandoned cabin



Figure 12: Still from *Absence* – one of the last images in the film

Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* was an important source of inspiration for this film, especially in calling for constructive ways of thinking about climate change. In particular, I sought to convey Tsing's concept of "collaborative survival" (4), the idea that different species can help each other survive amidst unfavourable conditions, such as those caused by human disturbance and impacts of climate change, and that we too can participate in such positive interactions (4, 23). For Tsing, the precarity of the current environmental crisis requires sensibility and an openness to imagine new ways of adapting to climate change and coexisting with other species (29). She writes that despite human activity drastically reshaping forests, these transformed ecosystems can give birth to new species and different types of species interactions (Tsing). She points to Matsutake mushrooms, which grew in abundance in Oregon forests as a result of fifty years of fire suppression activities, and are now part of an interconnected relationship allowing trees to grow in poor soils (30, 40). In one passage, Tsing writes: "When Hiroshima was destroyed by an atomic bomb in 1945, it is said, the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape was a matsutake mushroom" (3). This passage mirrors another source of inspiration for *Absence*: the screenplay for Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), written by Marguerite Duras. Echoing Tsing's words, Duras writes that in the weeks following the disaster, Hiroshima was covered in flowers: Cornflower, Gladiolus, and Morning Glories grew from the ashes (28). Both Tsing and Duras inspired a scene in the film, when Janie asks: "Which plants will be the first to be reborn? Which species will survive? Imagine other forms of life, other ways of being". The message here is that to embrace the interconnectedness of ecosystems, which we are a part, is to partake in collaboration with other species. Rather than considering climate change as posing a threat to mankind, a constructive

engagement with climate change is to turn to the type of collaboration necessary for the survival of all species.

Concluding Remarks

The findings of this research-creation reveal three different approaches to depicting the natural world onscreen. Roberto Minervini's character-driven narrative draws attention to the corporeal exchanges of a young boy with his surrounding environment. Using a neo-realistic style and a hybrid form of filmmaking, Minervini encourages the viewer to perceive nature along with the protagonist. Through the Boy's sensorial experiences, Minervini shows human existence to belong to a greater order, echoing David Abram's interpretation of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of the flesh. Read through this lens, *Low Tide* conveys the idea that an Earth-binding metaphysical tissue runs through our bodies. Expanding on this notion, Abram asserts that by the world, Merleau-Ponty is referring to the Earth rather than the universe, and that the Earth is "an intermediate and mediating existence between oneself and the 'universe'" (105). Michelangelo Frammartino's film conveys similar concepts, although through an entirely different approach. By giving agency to non-human beings and having these characters carry most the narrative, Frammartino creates tension which points to a trans-human dimension of reality. In *Le Quattro Volte*, we see things from the perspective of other beings and are thus able to peer into a realm of reality existing outside of our own. Similarly, Simon P. James writes that an appreciation of the "otherness" of the world can particularly be felt when interacting with the natural world (516). The discussion of *Ten Canoes* showed that these metaphysical conceptions of nature can be found in other cosmologies, such as in Yolngu culture. The opening montage of the film is a perfect example of how the film form may reflect a holistic view of the world, portraying

interconnectedness of all beings. Drawing inspiration from these works and informed by my findings, the two short fiction films I made sought to embed the story of human characters within an interconnected natural world. In the age of the Anthropocene, there is a growing urgency for cinema to help us reflect on our relationship with nature and, as encouraged by Tsing, to think of ways of collaborating with other species. I believe that there lies far more potential for fictional cinema to convey holistic ecological beliefs that engender such collaborative relationships. With *Gaea* and *Absence*, I focused on representing both the presence and absence of nature in our lives, the emotional impact of weather, and the metaphysical relationship that binds us to the natural world. The next step in my inquiry is to further experiment in embedding non-anthropocentric narratives in fiction film. Like in *Le Quattro Volte*, I envision having large portions of a story carried by non-human characters. In *Le Quattro Volte* though, the non-anthropocentric narrative is aided by the cyclical structure of the film. It is my intent to explore ways of truly meshing narratives surrounded around humans, animals, and ecological systems and phenomena. The hope is to depict interconnectivity within our lived environments, and thus to encourage the type of multi-species relationships needed to adapt to the current ecological transition.

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