etc.

Approaching Eremos: Introduction to a Recursive Research

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Although this text is a companion piece to an audiovisual essay named *Towards Eremos: Form, Emptiness, Posthumanism*, it does not strive to explain it or provide a clear manual for how to watch it. It should not matter whether you are reading this just before viewing or just after, whether you have seen it months ago or will never watch it. The objective of my writing (as a continuation of the audiovisual essay itself) is to highlight the weight of an image, to describe how to step towards it, to sketch a trace of a specific encounter, and to open up new ways of studying the next image, and the next one. It outlines an ongoing research, which is as much an experiment in form as it is an exploration in theme. However successful it ends up, it is my hope that, rather than a simple self-indulgent exercise, it will signify an effort—a beginning of an effort, even—to engage in a posthumanist dialogue with audiovisual objects.

The use of the word "dialogue" presents, of course, a certain provocation, and might be interpreted as some sort of anthropomorphization of images. The metaphor of "images speaking" is of no interest to me. Rather, I approach the figure of *dialogue* with regards to its etymology, and understand it as a "double order", a doubling or multiplying of structuring principles, of organizations of time and space, of divergent regimes of perception and signification with no guarantee of reconciliation. Instead of inserting humanity into the images, I am attempting to deprive my own subjectivity of its privileged status as an eminent, impartial actor. Although this carries a democratic gesture of dissolving the "viewer—image" hierarchy, it certainly does not necessitate an erasure of the complicated dynamic between the human bodymind, the audiovisual object, and all that allows this mediation—quite the contrary, this heterogeneous site is where this criticism wishes to lodge in.

It is needless to say that such efforts in bridging the gap between the spectator and the image, beginning from the standpoint of the intricate middle rather than from one side of the binary, are by now an established line of inquiry in film studies and related disciplines—and present an indispensable resource for this short text. However, instead of reaching outside of the scope of

this short text and addressing the different critical foundations laid down by Vivian Sobchack, Laura Marks, Jennifer Barker and others, which deserve close attention and nuance, I wish to briefly stay with the peculiar situation I found myself in when working through this audiovisual essay, and hopefully situate my own insights within this theoretical framework.

My research focuses on two films: *Notes from Eremocene* (2023) directed by Viera Čákanyová, and *Sleep Has Her House* (2017) directed by Scott Barley. When it comes to locating the connection between these two notably different works, I run into a dilemma: either I name some of the surface-level parallels (both of the films would qualify as experimental documentaries, modeling an alternate perception of reality with a significantly decentered—or even expelled—human presence), which would beg a follow-up explanation as to why I am concerned with *these two* films specifically and not any of the many others that would fit this description. Alternatively, I could provide the reader with a list of specific narratives and speculative strategies shared between Čákanyová's and Barley's films, implying that this analysis came in a ready-made form, that it evidently and objectively presents itself, and thus justifies the research — which would obviously disregard the complicated and extended process of the research itself.

Instead, this process of research, analysis, and interpretation is, to some extent, the very subject of my writing, especially as it relates to moving images deemed "posthumanist." There is, of course, a threatening recursivity to this method of work, suggesting solipsism, triggering almost a vertigo effect: a research about research about... It is then, quite paradoxically, the films themselves which help to ground the text, which give it its shape and equipment for claims. Instead of a unilateral relation, we enter a more complicated, generative situation: the method interpreting the films, the films interpreting the method, the method interpreting the films interpreting the method...

In other words, the performed process of working through these films—watching them, studying them and editing them together—is not just a marker of a situated experience, but a record (or, at least, recreation) of a thought process, an argument coming into life. My situated experience of these films does not serve as an illustrative anecdote—it is constitutive, it structures and wishes to be structured back.

To begin explaining the affinities between *Notes from Eremocene* and *Sleep Has Her House*, we might as well explore the key concept: what is *posthumanist cinema*? I can only answer what posthumanist cinema is *becoming* in the instance of this text. There are various tendencies in audiovisual culture—be it queer cinema, decolonial cinema, feminist cinema or a

number of other cinemas of resistance—which thrive on dislocating the oppressor's perspective and inventing new, emancipatory visual modes. All of these, at the same time, presuppose a possibility of sympathetic spectatorship, a space for an allied audience. Posthumanist cinema complicates this dynamic: it posits a horizon—the loss of anthropocentric perspective—which is an inherent challenge to the viewer. This, of course, does not mean that each viewer possesses the same "human" eyes (our global community is populated by innumerable "ways of seeing"), but rather that these images involve a gesture of perceptual alienation. No matter who is watching, there is no one in the audience to feel at home, no one to feel represented in some way. Taken at its most serious, it would be difficult to present the audience with a more radical task than approximating geological time, inhabiting the mind of an animal or the sensorium of an artificial intelligence.

It is this exact moment of estrangement that guides us to conceive of such works as speculative objects, worthy not only of description, but of reflecting on *how* we reflect them. The goal here is not to find a method encompassing a singular way of approaching such objects, thus diminishing this speculative potentiality, but paying close attention to the shaky process of transforming their aesthetic strategies into theoretical claims. If, as Rosi Braidotti writes, "[t]he transformation towards the posthuman is neither linear nor one-directional, but is rather a multi-faceted experimentation with what 'we' are capable of becoming," **[1]** then we should embrace this experimentation as a primary concern—not as a means to an end, but perhaps the end itself. We are not searching for *the posthuman*, but continuously confronting our perception and cognition. And if each encounter with posthumanist cinema involves this confrontation, should not one's own writing remain a recurrent question, rather than simply an instrument of critique?

Let me make clear that when I am discussing the role of situated experience, I do not necessarily mean a remarkable physical reaction that begs theoretical examination (such as Vivian Sobchack's realization of "what my fingers knew" in her essay on the opening shot of Jane Campion's The Piano **[2]**), much less a specific social or cultural background that often merits taking the viewer's situatedness into account. In that regard, I am "guilty" of nothing more than simply being a human—which, for the purposes of this inquiry, is indeed enough. My encounter with these films was really quite prosaic: at two different festivals, six years apart, in the middle of the day, and yes, sober. I felt no immediate sense of connection between the two films after seeing the latter (which was *Notes from Eremocene* in 2023), and I did not wake up from my dreams thinking about either of them.

The sense in which I “situate” my writing is more reminiscent of how Timothy Morton approaches the concept of hyperobjects: “No longer are my intimate impressions 'personal' in the sense that they are 'merely mine' or 'subjective only': they are footprints of hyperobjects, distorted as they always must be by the entity in which they make their mark — that is, me.” **[3]** It is exactly in this way that, it seems, these films “made their mark” on me. They reappeared in my mind numerous times as a topic for research, somehow vaguely connected even without a specific concept or framework to legitimize this connection. They kept compelling me to revisit them, capturing my curiosity.

Only then was I able to formulate something akin to an initial hypothesis: both of these films are interested not just in the *fact* of a more-than-human world, but in the *processual experience* of abandoning anthropocentrism. *Notes from Eremocene* is narrated from the perspective of a fictional digital self of Viera Čákanyová, the director herself, in a future where our physical world no longer exists, and unfolds only in the form of a blockchain code, which allows a preserved, immortal existence and shared communication of all human and non-human “bodies.” In this perfectly networked, cloud-stored reality, the protagonist searches through the code to find out what being human (now called merely an “original character”) was like. *Sleep Has Her House* is by contrast devoid of any notion of a protagonist, as well as narration on any level other than abstract. The film takes place in the wilderness after sunset, and uses prolonged shots to observe animals, nature and sky over the course of a stormy night. Despite their innumerable differences, these audiovisual pieces both actively engage their mediality, materiality and duration to not only challenge normative human-centered scale of space and/or time, but perform and embody a transitive state of perception and cognition — what I will call *eremos*.

This is the same *eremos* that makes up the word Eremocene—a term coined by Edward O. Wilson to signify our “age of loneliness,” marked by the constant growth of human population and staggering decline of global wildlife. However, in its Greek etymology, *eremos* carries a more specific meaning: it denotes a remote, uninhabited, solitary, deserted place unfit for living. Although *Notes from Eremocene* does not explicitly take up this concept, I want to argue that it can be helpful in understanding not just these two films side by side, but also, by extension, the project of posthumanist critique.

What is immediately striking in Čákanyová's film is its concentrated focus on materiality, with analog footage representing remnants from our known physical world, and fuzzy digital imagery shaping the non-spaces of the immaterial blockchain code. However, rather than unfolding in two neatly separate narrative lines, these opposing modes of visuality constantly collide as the artificial intelligence of the protagonist struggles to incorporate the different

analog images into an ever-shifting grid of concepts, making up the totality of her “knowledge.” This struggle for the image, revealing itself through digital distortions deforming the figural compositions of the analog footage, brings about an uncanny defamiliarization of the supposedly tangible, durable images captured on film stock, but even more crucially, it discloses and extends the very time it takes for the human eye to work out an image. The visual fabric of this fictional environment is never smooth, never quite prepared for being looked at—it is always an image-in-process, in need of persistent effort to grasp the unobtainable physicality.

Already, we can see how important it is to engage with the film as *mediation*, and pay close attention to the ways it primes the viewer for receiving the world *as image*—image with material workings, history, opaqueness, duration. The importance of “materializing” images and “imaging” materiality always bears repeating. As Hito Steyerl puts it: “If images start pouring across screens and invading subject and object matter, the major and quite overlooked consequence is that reality now widely consists of images; or rather, of things, constellations, and processes formerly evident as images.” **[4]** As such, these images do not just *reveal* their material basis, but carry the *weight* of their material existence into cinematic mediation, transcending the notion of the “distancing effect” as self-seeking estrangement, and instead producing a continuous mode of divergent, non-anthropocentric subjectivity.

It is indispensable to maintain an emphasis on these instances of emergent and disruptive, yet self-sustaining and fundamentally generative experiential frameworks, which is why I choose to foreground the figure of *eremos*. The very subject of *loss* of an anthropocentric perspective might be understudied, because it suggests an absence or lack rather than creation. However, if this loss may indeed be the defining feature of posthumanist cinema, we need to inhabit this exact motion of losing. Sara Ahmed discusses such instances of sudden disorientation and chooses to affirm their productive potential: “They are moments in which you lose one perspective, but the 'loss' itself is not empty or waiting; it is an object, thick with presence.” **[5]** As is the case with any normative, oppressive, historically sedimented way of seeing, the denial of anthropocentrism does not just submit its inverse rendering, but sows a fertile ground for multiplicities of new visual strategies.

It is, then, quite enticing to approach *Sleep Has Her House* with this theoretical trajectory in mind, as its imagery could not be a more literal representation of the original meaning of *eremos*—that is, wilderness, an uninhabited, remote place. Following this surface level affinity as a mere clue, it becomes remarkable how Barley's film interrogates the practice of posthumanist cinema. Paradoxically, instead of constructing a spatial configuration, *Sleep Has*

Her House performs its more-than-human subjectivity in temporal terms. This goes beyond the simple observation that the film adheres to slow cinema poetics: its prolonged, static shots, often spanning several minutes with minimal action, do not just serve the purposes of restoring the viewer's attention and approximating some meditative rhythm of nature—what Scott Macdonald once called the "'Edenic' respite" of slow ecocinema **[6]**—but much more profoundly, create a dynamic of *anticipation*. This means anticipation both in the conventional sense of extended uncertainty, and in the sense that Vinciane Despret writes her "anticipatory" tales of fictional science, as if grasping for signs of future to come. **[7]** Once more, we enter a situation where images do not just appear for the eye to behold, but have to be worked out, continually discerned: the gradual unveiling of a horse's body in the dark, the bright and flickering flashes of lightning illuminating a lake for a split second.

Where Čákanyová chooses ostensible meshing of heterogeneous materialities, experimentation with linguistic orders, and conceptual invention, Barley seems to engage in a different kind of speculation, one we might call *speculation by withdrawal*: withdrawal from the human, withdrawal from language, withdrawal from light. This withdrawal does not operate as escapism, fetishism or even asceticism—it does not strive to provide solace, seek an object of fascination or deprive the senses, but instead affirms the scarcity of the visual field and figural motion to produce a cinematic regime, one defined by *waiting and recognizing*. In other words, although it is tempting to characterize *Sleep Has Her House* in terms of absence and stillness, it is, very much like *Notes from Eremocene*, fundamentally interested in creating and maintaining a mode of perception and cognition.

The reason I might seem intent on distancing Barley's film from conventional discourse about slow cinema and its meditative, "medicinal" qualities is that I believe the stakes are significantly more momentous. The affect of anticipation appears not just as a gesture of opening oneself up to uncertainty, but as a negotiating principle, prodding the viewer to stay and methodically work through that uncertainty without denying the opaqueness of the image. It is then not difficult to make the leap and see the film itself as a figure standing in for the process of posthumanist critique, in search of what we might call cinematic *forms of emptiness*: affective strategies which embody and perform the loss of a structuring principle, producing a continuous movement of anticipation. *Eremos* then appears as one such form of emptiness, marking a departure from the anthropocentric lens.

Here we find a kinship with Eugenie Brinkema's radical formalism, which seeks to "activate and launch the speculative potential of texts, one only available through readings that proceed without guarantee." **[8]** This notion of interpretation as a process "without guarantee," meaning

without a prescribed framework of reference or assumed outcome, is of course fitting for the kind of posthumanist critique outlined in this text. Brinkema's use of the word *radical* does not necessarily denote some kind of extraordinary ambition, but etymologically designates the goal of paying close attention to cinematic form as the very root or “ground zero” of analysis—an effort “to move past thinking about form to the question of thinking *from* form.” **[9]** While there is much more to be said about Brinkema's formulation of affect theory in regards to posthumanist thought, it is this close attention to the processual structuring of cinematic form that enables a generative reading of moving images as speculative objects—one that I hope to have sketched in this essay.

It seems quite fitting that the argument of this text—at least in its initial stage—was first formed as an audiovisual essay, a kind of assemblage of images, springing from the rudimentary connection these films presented to me. If there is an underlying proposition threading this text together, it is the belief that to reflect on posthumanist cinema, one needs to be able to follow mediations in their uncertain, opaque and often disorienting materializations.

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[1] Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*. Cambridge & Medford: Polity Press 2019, 42.

[2] Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2004, 63.

[3] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2014, 5.

[4] Hito Steyerl, Too Much World. *E-flux Journal*, no. 49 (2013), 6.

[5] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2006, 158.

[6] Scott Macdonald, Toward an Eco-Cinema. *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, no. 11 (2004), 109.

[7] Vinciane Despret, *Autobiographie d'un poulpe et autres récits d'anticipation*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2021.

[8] Eugenie Brinkema, *Life-Destroying Diagrams*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022, 260.

[9] ibid, 259.