

Cinematic creation as ritual: Michaela Kinghorn In Discussion with Juanita Onzaga
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In this interview, writer Michaela Kinghorn has a discussion with film director Juanita Onzaga surrounding the topics of animism, ancestrality, magic in the Anthropocene, and her conception of the artist as a medium and cinema as a ritual.

Juanita's films combine fiction and non-fiction elements, touching the importance of mysticism, ancestral knowledge, explorations of perception, technology and futurism, creating poetic tales that reflect different ways of perceiving reality within strong political contexts.

These topics are approached in this interview through the context of her new short film [Tomorrow Is A Water Palace](#).

MK

We all begin as animists and only unlearn this through socialization, according to developmental psychology. This movement implies a cultural repression of our natural animist inclinations, of the intuitive knowledge that proposes that we are enmeshed and indistinguishable from the world we belong to.

In this early animist state, the individual feels unified and at home in its surroundings, recognizing itself as a part of its environment. The departure from this natural inclination leads to adults who feel alienated and estranged, from their own nature as much as the rest of nature.

What is your relationship with animism and the importance of moving back towards our natural state as animists?

JO

I grew up in Colombia in an environment which acknowledged shamanism as a valid and needed way of understanding life, death and the beyond.

Along with my brother, being confronted with death very young, we developed a personal quest on trying to understand what it means to be alive and to die. The same way that my family had reconnected with our Vasque roots by the origin of

my mom's last name Onzaga, it was essential for us to reconnect with the roots from our Indigenous blood. Shamanism took a big part in our exploration.

Where was our blood coming from? How could we communicate with our ancestors? Which was our connection to our homeland? Not a country, not a city, but the land itself and what lives within it, its soil, its symbols, its waters, its animals, the steps that our ancestors had over this land and how this land remembers them, how the waters of the soil and the water inside the plasma of our blood remembers our ancestors.

With time, the shamanic knowledge that all living things have a spirit and soul and that we can communicate with them, which is the sole base of animism, became an intrinsic part of our understanding of the world, of our perception of the landscapes we inhabit, our ancestry line, our relationships and our existence. As our perception of our own reality is modeled by belief, and my beliefs are based partly in the acknowledgment of my Indigenous roots, I decided that whatever I created had to respect this. Animism is an essential part of my work, as it is an essential part of my worldview.

MK

There is the conception of "modernity" as a rejection of what has passed, of technology as the usurper of the "irrational" beliefs of our ancestors. Your works seem to put this notion on its head, by diverting the notion of technology, using the very tool that is meant to conquer and replace the magic of our ancestors, as a means of modern ritual to engage with them. How did you arrive at the thought and practice of cinema as an intuitive creation of rituals that engage with ancestrality?

JO

Some time ago, while having a long talk with a wise Colombian female shaman, I asked her how could I talk with my ancestors; how could I hear them; how could I communicate with them? After staring at me deeply, she said "As you study your ancestors' history, as you try to understand your own story and how it unfolds from their paths, when you create with this knowledge, it is them, your ancestors, who write through you."

This opened a door where I understood that art is a bridge between humans and the otherworldly. Between us and our dead. Between us and our ancestors. Between us and our landscapes, what lives within them.

How do our ancestors talk? How do they still talk to us? How can we talk to them? If from my perspective, time is non-linear, then they can hear us. How can I hear them?

Cinema became an active practice to try to answer all these questions; the sole act of cinematic creation became a ritualistic practice in order to dialog with my ancestors and the spirits of the land.

MK

How, then, is creating films a practice that connects you with your ancestors?

JO

I created my short films [*The Jungle Knows You Better than You Do*](#) and [*Our Song to War*](#) as rituals to communicate with my ancestors and with the lost spirits of the war which roamed our territory. The films act as bridges between worlds, so that the living can be at peace with the idea of death, so that my ancestors (in *The Jungle*) and the spirits of a Colombian village that went through a massacre during the war (in *Our Song*) can be at peace as well, knowing they will live forever in our memory.

It is a kind of exchange; I give them my films, they give me the dreams, visions and words which come as I dream.

Creating for the others, for the dead, for the ancestors, for the spirits, is acknowledging that this sole existence as a human is not a lonely space. To create for the otherworldly presences is to know that I'm not alone.

MK

In that line of thought, animism can be seen as the counterbalance to the alienation which is a key feature of our age. In a time when the modern world has become alienated from itself, a strict dichotomy of nature and culture has become dominant; humans and human technology as the "us," and nature as an obscure "other." The western world in particular suffers from this lonely separation.

We have made a shift from envisioning ourselves as part of nature, immersed in the web of life as simply one extension of the whole, to something apart, becoming alien colonizers of the earth we inhabit.

How is the animist exploration of your new short film [*Tomorrow Is A Water Palace*](#) building a possibility of horizontal dialogue with nature and its spirits, dissolving the distance with nature and its own agency over the future?

JO

The main idea of the film was to depart from the feeling that our spirits and ancestors travel with us in our migrations. I built the post-apocalyptic inner-space science fiction universe of the film from the perspective of an exile (which I personally am), a female character (the last person alive on earth) who remembers that she can communicate with the spirits of its lands. The narrative converges in a dialogue between the main character with the spirit of the water, in order to bring back to the earth what it has lost.

The idea came after having a dream some time ago. In my dream, the spirit of the water spoke to me as I slept inside a little wooden hut in a little village in the Colombian Amazon jungle. We had traveled there with my mother and had spent the whole day swimming with her in the Tarapoto lake, next to the pink dolphins of the Amazon waters. That was the last time I saw my mother for a long period of more than two years that followed with the pandemic. What I dreamt that night, which I call the night of the dolphins, is the root of the film.

I dreamt that I swam inside the river's waters, which are thick and black, full of all the nutrients of the world. Feeling the thick texture of the water surrounding me, the river spoke to me. Its voice was coming from the waters I bathed in. By touching this rich thick river, I felt its water had so much life, so much power. I couldn't see through it as it was dark as the night sky, dense with life-giving nutrients. From within this water mass that mirrored the sky on it, a female voice echoed through the whole river; the spirit of the water spoke through the river. Its language was not human words. As I swam in the waters, I listened to it.

I woke up and wondered, what was the spirit of the water telling? Then I looked at my mother and thought, as women have water inside our belly, maybe we can talk the language of the spirit of the water. In times like the ones we are living, what does the spirit of the water have to say?

MK

This notion of giving a word to the water as a spirit, breaks with the idea that nature is something that doesn't have agency but is only acted upon, building a relationship with it based on extraction.

In the article “Animism in the Anthropocene”, western culture is described by Arianne Conty as one which has deeply embraced the Cartesian dualism of human vs animality. This moving away from animism towards a vision of nature as lifeless and unfeeling, conveniently serves to ease the collective conscience in its exploitation of nature for capital. How does “Tomorrow is a Water Palace” deal with these themes?

JO

One of the biggest problematics within Latin American jungles and mountains nowadays, is the violent extractivism from North American and European multinationals, which are erasing the rainforest and transforming it into eroded arid lands. The effect of this deforestation is known in terms of the physical aspects of the destruction of the lungs of our world and their role in climate balance. But what is happening to the spirits of these sacred lands? Do we talk about them when we talk about the future of our world? Are our Latin American landscapes only important for the global north in their material aspects, not taking in account the spiritual knowledge kept in them?

While developing the film, it became evident that the spirits of nature and the balance to be kept with them are not something that we talk about in the global north when we talk about the *future*. At a certain point in history, the natural world of colonized countries became only a material world of trees and oxygen, but these jungles have always been inhabited by spirits, knowledge and presences. Where are these spirits now? What is their role in the thought of futurity?

MK

There are so many narratives happening from the perspective of humans as the dominants of nature, even pro-ecological films and narratives still come from the perspective of a call to action for us to assume our roles as the benevolent caretakers of nature. But this still perpetuates the idea of nature as a passive object whose future will be decided by human beings.

You are spinning the point of view of this narrative. Can you tell me more about your approach to futurism by reminding us that the fate of nature and the fate of humans are not separate?

JO

For me it was important to think of the future out of the notion of western-colonial thought. I created *Tomorrow Is A Water Palace* as an exploration of the big question of the future by stepping out of the nature-colonizing human-centered narrative. As the main character is the last human alive on a planet where there is no fresh water anymore, what can she do to regain the water?

The exploration of the ability to travel through visions and talk to spirits is a tool of ancestral futurism, where the main character uses the tools that her ancestors used to dialog with nature and its spirits.

There is no more water? Well, then speak to the spirit of the water, see what is going on! What does it have to say to us, humans? Do we deserve the water that we are destroying? What do we need to change to deserve it? The spirit of the water has the agency to choose if we deserve to have water and live, not us.

MK

When watching a film, the intention is generally to have the viewer empathize with the emotions and perspectives of the characters on screen.

In *Tomorrow is a Water Palace* the only human character is the narrator, who is only shown once. The absence of the human presence in the imagery creates an environment in which the viewer feels an ambiguous empathy, uncertain if it is the narrator, the spirits, or the earth which you are identifying with. What was your intention with creating this feeling?

JO

I wanted to give the freedom to the viewer to empathize with whoever their imagination points to while watching the first part of the short. It indeed could be the earth speaking, or a spirit. By not seeing a human body, many other possibilities open in the mind of the viewer. I'm interested in what can be created by those possibilities.

I felt that this open imagery allows the viewer to travel through the visions as the character does, blurring the lines between what is real with what she imagines, what she sees and what she dreams. If we don't see the character, but we see what she sees (outside and inside), we can easily dive into her ancestral ability to connect with spirits through visions and dreams.

I'm interested in exploring how different perceptions of the real can be evoked and transformed by the use of cinematographic tools from a sensorial approach. For example, in this film the use of a non-human narrative voice, or as well images without characters in them but with a particular point of view. I believe that there are many ways to create emotions in the viewer that don't necessarily need a character on screen. Empathy can also be felt with what we don't see or what doesn't have a body; it leaves freedom to our imagination.

Michaela Kinghorn is an American writer and teacher with native roots and a formal background in continental philosophy, whose area of research focuses on environmental ethics, gender theory, and postcolonialism.