

---

Angels and Animals: Posthumanism and 'cosmic consciousness' in psychedelic 'expanded' cinema

Author(s): Harry Salisbury

Email: [hs418@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:hs418@sussex.ac.uk)

Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 8 No. 1 (July 2024), pp. 1-12.

URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/211>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v8i1.211>

---

Focusing on two 'expanded' films – Bruce Conner's *Looking for Mushrooms* (1959–65) and Stan Brakhage's *Eye Myth* (1967) – this paper stages an encounter between psychedelic 'expanded' cinema, the writings of Alan Watts, and the field of posthuman philosophy. Drawing special attention to the materiality of film and its relation to the experience of altered states of consciousness, this paper will critically connect the art and ideas of the Californian counter-culture in the 1960s to a wider network of transnational anti- and posthumanism. Beginning with Watts' dualism between the 'angel and animal' elements of human subjectivity, this paper then considers the inherent tension between the transcendentalism of the psychedelic 'cosmic consciousness' and materialist posthumanism centred on 'embodied and embedded' experience. Whilst these areas are not usually considered alongside one another, exploring their potential resonances can help to situate Watts' philosophy within a wider genealogy of posthumanist thought, and shed light on the ways in which 'expanded' cinema engaged with complicated questions concerning altered experiences. Finally, by highlighting the tensions between materiality and transcendental experience at play in Conner and Brakhage's films, this paper will demonstrate how film stages a complex intervention into debates around human and posthuman subjectivity. In doing so, this paper offers a radical and alternative perspective on both psychedelic 'expanded' cinema, and the intellectual history of transnational anti-humanist philosophy.

---

© Harry Salisbury

License (open-access): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. No warranty, express or implied, is given. Nor is any representation made that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for any actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

*Brief Encounters* is an open access journal that supports the dissemination of knowledge to a global readership. All articles are free to read and accessible to all with no registration required. For more information please visit our journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>.

In association with

# Angels and Animals: Posthumanism and 'cosmic consciousness' in psychedelic 'expanded' cinema

---

Harry Salisbury

*"It has often been said that the human being is a combination of angel and animal, a spirit imprisoned in flesh, a descent of divinity into materiality..."<sup>1</sup> – Alan Watts*

The essay 'Spirituality and Sensuality', from Alan Watts' 1958 collection *This is IT*, highlights what Watts describes as an inherent dualism in the human condition. A tension between the spirit on the one hand, and the flesh on the other; between the transcendence of divinity, and the immanence of materiality. Various 1960s countercultural movements, influenced by Eastern philosophy and the use of psychedelic drugs such as LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, and peyote contributed to a radical questioning and reimagining of what it meant to be 'human', and what human society could, and should, look like.<sup>2</sup> In more recent years, the combined influence of post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonialism, and "the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns" has led to the emergence of a philosophy of 'posthumanism' – which similarly seeks to critique and reimagine the human condition.<sup>3</sup> While these two areas of thought are not usually considered alongside one another, exploring their potential resonances can help shed light on the ways in which artists in and around the Californian counterculture engaged with complicated questions concerning altered experiences. Through two 'expanded' films – Bruce Conner's *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (1959–67/1996) and Stan Brakhage's *Eye Myth* (1967), we will explore and complicate the dualisms at play in both countercultural and posthuman ideas of human subjectivity.

Before considering how Conner and Brakhage's films explore altered states of consciousness and subjectivity, it is important to discuss what is meant by 'human' in relation to the philosophy of posthumanism. More specifically, which assumptions concerning 'Humanness' are critiqued and undermined? In her book *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti claims that in Western philosophy, 'humanness' is equated with a "faith in the unique, self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers of human reason" which formed

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan Watts, 'Spirituality and Sensuality', in *This Is IT* (London: Hutchinson Publishing Group, 1978), pp. 112–23 (p. 113).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Harris, 'Countercultural Intoxication: An Aesthetics of Transformation', in *West of Centre: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965–1977*, ed. by Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), pp. 324–43 (p. 325).

<sup>3</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 1.

the basis of the European Enlightenment. In humanist philosophies, such as those of Descartes and Kant, “subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart”.<sup>4</sup> This universalist position has been rightly criticised for conflating multiple forms of human experience and identity into a singular account of subjectivity; one that usually assumes a white, bourgeois, male subject. Braidotti sketches a genealogy of humanist and anti-humanist philosophy, arguing that an anti-humanist critique in the 1960/70s was “developed by the new social movements and the youth cultures of the day”, and the American New Left.<sup>5</sup> While Braidotti’s genealogy does not explicitly include countercultural movements or psychedelia, there are clear resonances between the critique of universal accounts of subjectivity and an exploration of altered states of consciousness.

In drawing together posthumanism and the counterculture, we must examine the stirrings of ‘posthumanity’ in the countercultural imagination, in this case, in the writings of Alan Watts and work of ‘expanded’ filmmakers. Doing so will help to situate countercultural ideas in a wider genealogy of humanist and anti-humanist thinking. In ‘This is IT’, Watts explores ‘cosmic consciousness’, which he describes as:

a release from self-consciousness [...] from the fixed belief and feeling that one’s organism is an absolute and separate thing, as distinct from a convenient unit of perception. For if it becomes clear that our use of the lines and surfaces of nature to divide the world into units is only a matter of convenience, then all that I have called myself is actually inseparable from everything.<sup>6</sup>

Watts’ ‘cosmic consciousness’, in which the individual is freed from a fixed sense of self, coming to realise that “individual consciousness and existence is a point of view temporarily adopted by something immeasurably greater”, presents a radical alternative to Enlightenment humanism.<sup>7</sup> If, as Braidotti argues, humanist “subjectivity is equated with consciousness”, then a ‘release’ from self-consciousness and the dissolution of the individual ego presents an alternative experience of subjectivity, in which the division between self/other is effaced.<sup>8</sup> Watts’ notion of ‘cosmic consciousness’ does not simply participate in an anti-humanist critique, but resonates with contemporary ideas of posthumanism. In Braidotti’s work, “subjectivity can be re-defined as an expanded

---

<sup>4</sup>Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, pp. 13–15.

<sup>5</sup>Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, pp. 16–19.

<sup>6</sup>Alan Watts, ‘This Is IT’, in *This Is IT* (London: Hutchinson Publishing Group, 1978), pp. 17–39 (pp. 35–36).

<sup>7</sup>Watts, ‘This Is IT’, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup>Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, pp. 13–15.

self, whose relational capacity is not confined within the human species".<sup>9</sup> We can see a similar attentiveness to an 'expanded' self, grounded in interrelations that go beyond the individual, in Watts' claim that "all that I have called myself is actually inseparable from everything".<sup>10</sup> In 'Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species', anthropologist Anna Tsing draws on the work of Donna Haraway to ask "what if we imagined a human nature that shifted historically with varied webs of interspecies dependence? *Human nature is an interspecies relationship*".<sup>11</sup> It is precisely attentiveness to the multiple human and non-human interrelations in the formation of human subjectivity that we can observe in Watts' philosophy. By paying attention to radical epistemologies that seek to explore states of being beyond traditional humanist philosophy, we can begin to see the stirrings of an emerging model of posthuman thinking in the work of the 1960s counterculture; one that elaborates "alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject".<sup>12</sup>

Of the two films I have selected for this article, Conner's LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS more explicitly addresses altered states of consciousness and expanded subjectivity Figures 1–2. Stan Brakhage warns us however, "make no mistake, this is not simply a peyote documentary or a travelogue of Conner's Mexican sojourn; nor is it simply a 'trip' movie. He titles his films accurately, so don't forget the word 'looking' in the title. It is partly a word of instruction to the audience".<sup>13</sup> Throughout the film, Conner makes use of experimental techniques such as overlaying multiple images at the same time, and splicing tapes together, creating complex and indiscernible scenes that frequently defy narrative chronology and convention. The 1996 edit takes this further, lengthening each exposure and setting the film to 'Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band' (1968), by minimalist tape composer Terry Riley.<sup>14</sup> Mark Harris argues that "the film's materiality [...], the complexity of its image overlays, and its acceleration convey a state of intoxication", which we can view as akin to the states of 'cosmic consciousness' described by Watts in *This is IT*.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in his influential 1970s book, simply titled *Expanded Cinema*, Gene Youngblood writes "when we say expanded cinema we actually mean expanded consciousness".<sup>16</sup> In 'The New Alchemy', Watts recounts his experiences with LSD, claiming that "my senses

<sup>9</sup> Rosi Braidotti, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 0.0 (2018), 1–31 (p. 12).

<sup>10</sup> Watts, 'This Is IT', p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Anna Tsing, 'Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species', *Environmental Humanities*, 1 (2012), 141–54 (p. 144).

<sup>12</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> Stan Brakhage, *Film at Wit's End: Eight Avant-Garde Filmmakers* (New York: McPherson & Company, 1989), p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> 'Bruce Conner: LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS | MoMA', *The Museum of Modern Art* <<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1666>> [accessed 31 March 2023].

<sup>15</sup> Harris, p. 328.

<sup>16</sup> Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (London: Studio Vista Limited, 1970), p. 41.

had been given a kaleidoscopic character [...] which made the whole world entrancingly complicated, as if I were involved in a multidimensional arabesque".<sup>17</sup> By utilising collage, Conner creates a similarly multidimensional experience, where we are seduced by a cavalcade of seemingly disparate images and visual signifiers. Rather than relying on fixed narratives or systems of signification, an experience of 'cosmic consciousness' relies on the realisation that "the point of the action is each moment of its unfolding".<sup>18</sup> Brakhage describes Conner's shifting images in *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* as "flowerings", as if the images do not simply appear one after another, but gestate, bloom, and wither through the screen. Rather than dismiss these images as meaningless, we are presented with a hypnogogic flux of excessive signification and ego dissolution. In the final section of *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, Conner overlays images of fireworks with interior scenes, patterns, drawings, and objects, resulting in a euphoric maelstrom of colour and light. The euphoria induced by these images does not stem simply from the images themselves, but the total experience – an effect Conner produces by using multiple exposures and overlays to not only represent psychedelic states, but to offer an experience of 'cosmic consciousness'.



Figure 1: Still image from Bruce Conner, *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (1959–67, 16 mm to 35 mm blow-up, colour/sound, 3 min); Courtesy of Bruce Conner family trust.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Watts, 'The New Alchemy', in *This Is IT* (London: Hutchinson Publishing Group, 1978), pp. 126–53 (pp. 131–32).

<sup>18</sup> Watts, 'The New Alchemy', p. 135.



Figure 2: Still image from Bruce Conner, *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* (1959–67, 16 mm to 35 mm blow-up, colour/sound, 3 min); Courtesy of Bruce Conner family trust.

Whilst relating a film that shows hallucinogenic mushrooms to Watts' writings on LSD experiences is not saying much, the techniques used by Conner in representing the 'multidimensional arabesque' can help us to consider the aesthetics of a potentially posthuman subjectivity. *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* and 'The New Alchemy' both highlight the importance of a disruption or suspension of temporality in altered states of consciousness. Watts emphasises the experience of being "endowed with all the time in the world, free to look about me as if I were living in an eternity [...] a world consisting entirely of process".<sup>19</sup> This attention to process has strong resonances with posthuman epistemologies, which draw on the philosophy of 'becoming' explored by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. The final scenes suggest a split temporality provoking, as Braidotti puts it, "on the one hand the sharp awareness of *what we are ceasing to be* [...] and on the other the perception [...] of *what we are in the process of becomin*". Subjectivity is a multiplicity, shifting between states of actuality and virtuality, as "nomadic subjects-in-process, in perpetual motion".<sup>20</sup> Can we not see a similar attention to the shifting multiplicity of being in *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*? Towards the end of the film, human and animal figures fleetingly emerge among exploding fireworks and abstract patterns; a cavalcade of images and experiences that do not seem to rely on a singular rational viewpoint, pushing the boundaries of humanist epistemologies. Instead, Conner's

<sup>19</sup>Watts, 'The New Alchemy', pp. 134–40.

<sup>20</sup>Braidotti, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities', p. 6.

disruption of linear chronology, engendered by his use of collage, points towards a radically posthuman experience, highlighting a “non-linearity, non-fixity and non-unitary subjectivity” of process and becoming.<sup>21</sup>

In continuing to explore these connections, we must move beyond the mind, to the relationship between subjectivity and external perception. Stan Brakhage’s 1967 film *Eye Myth* is barely ten seconds long, however within it we can read a complex exploration of visual perception that upsets humanist accounts of subjectivity. *Eye Myth* is constructed using abstract patterns, hand painted directly onto film, producing a rapid blur of non-representational coloured forms from which a recognisably humanoid figure emerges and recedes Figure 3. In his essay *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage asks us to:

Imagine an eye unrulred by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, [...] which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception [...] imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of colour.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 3: Still image from Stan Brakhage. *Eye Myth*. (1967, 35 mm, colour, silent, 8 sec); Courtesy Estate of Stan Brakhage.

<sup>21</sup> Rosi Braidotti, 'Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23.7–8 (2006), 197–208 (p. 201).

<sup>22</sup> Stan Brakhage, 'Metaphors on Vision', in *The Avant-Garde Film*, ed. by P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), pp. 120–28 (p. 120).

Brakhage illuminates the 'man-made' logic that underpins how we are told to view the world, asking us to consider visual experiences that defy that logic. These sensations include "hallucination [...] dream visions, day-dreams or night-dreams [...] the abstractions which move so dynamically when closed eyes are pressed".<sup>23</sup> Sitney notes that "hand painting on film had been tied to [Brakhage's] study of closed-eye vision". The flickering, shifting colours and forms that make up *Eye Myth* certainly resemble the visual ephemera that dance behind our closed eyelids, or the moving shapes at the periphery of our vision. In *Eye Myth*, Brakhage shows us "the arena of dedifferentiated oceanic vision, the sublimated perception of a ground that absorbs all figures".<sup>24</sup>

Returning to 'The New Alchemy', Watts recounts that "the distance or separation between myself and my senses, on the one hand, and the external world, on the other, seemed to disappear. I was no longer a detached observer, a little man inside my own head, *having* sensations. I was the sensations".<sup>25</sup> A profound sense of 'becoming-sensations' can be felt in both Brakhage's film and his writings in *Metaphors on Vision*. To experience a world incomprehensible objects, shimmering movements and colours is to move beyond an experience of the world rooted in rationality, towards an altered state of consciousness or subjectivity. Brakhage's attempt to "sound the depths of all visual influence" by incorporating extra-visual perceptions into *Eye Myth* can help us to explore how altered experiences resonate with notions of posthuman subjectivity.<sup>26</sup>

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write: "if the experimentation with drugs has left its mark on everyone, even nonusers, it is because it changed the perceptive coordinates of space-time and introduced us to a universe of microperceptions".<sup>27</sup> It is these 'microperceptions', and the extra-visual perceptions at play in *Eye Myth* that we will now consider alongside both 'cosmic consciousness' and posthuman subjectivity. In 'Posthuman, All Too Human', Braidotti argues that "scopophilia, that is to say a vision-centred approach to thought, knowledge, and science" plays an important role in traditionally humanist notions of subjectivity, which place vision atop the hierarchy of senses.<sup>28</sup> Brakhage's attention to extra-visual sensations, including hallucinations and dreams, can therefore be seen to complicate the primacy of sight, and thus also decentre and challenge humanist epistemology. Central to posthuman philosophy is Deleuze and

<sup>23</sup> Brakhage, 'Metaphors on Vision', pp. 120–21.

<sup>24</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (New York ; Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 254–55.

<sup>25</sup> Watts, 'The New Alchemy', p. 138.

<sup>26</sup> Brakhage, 'Metaphors on Vision', p. 121.

<sup>27</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), p. 290.

<sup>28</sup> Braidotti, 'Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology', p. 204.



Guattari's concept of 'becoming', notably 'becoming-animal'. In *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari define 'becoming-animal' as participation "in a movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold [...] to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of deterritorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs".<sup>29</sup> Could we not argue that in representing extra-visual sense experience in *Eye Myth*, Brakhage is engaging in a becoming in which, as Deleuze and Guattari put it, all forms come undone? In *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage dreams of "the mystery camera capable of graphically representing the form of an object after it's been removed from the photographic scene [...] the motion picture is unrealized, therefore potential, magic".<sup>30</sup> *Eye Myth* can be seen to not only present an anti-humanist model of sense perception, but a posthuman subjectivity which places importance on the unrealized potential of experience beyond the traditionally conceived rational human. *Eye Myth* is a film of becoming, in which human subjectivity is constructed and dismantled in a rapid blur of hallucinatory flux.

So far, our discussion draws links between Alan Watts, posthuman philosophy, and experimental cinema of the 1960s. It is important however to ask whether there are any tensions between the transcendental notion of 'cosmic consciousness' and the, more materialist, approach to posthuman subjectivity taken by Braidotti, Haraway, and Tsing. As discussed earlier, posthumanism emerged from the anti-humanist traditions of feminism, post-colonialism, and post-structuralism which have sought to decentre 'Man' from the top of both political and epistemological hierarchies. Posthumanist philosophers have therefore closely considered material realities, situated knowledges, and transgressive relations. Francesca Ferrando argues that "the significance of spirituality as a genealogical source of the posthuman has not been fully acknowledged in the contemporary field of post human studies", pointing to Vedanta, Christian Gnosticism, and Mahayana Buddhism as non-dualistic thought systems which resonate with posthumanism.<sup>31</sup> Braidotti outlines posthumanism succinctly by arguing that "the posthuman subjectivity I advocate is rather materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere".<sup>32</sup> An 'embodied and embedded' subjectivity could, however, be seen to stand opposed to the

<sup>29</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Brakhage, 'Metaphors on Vision', p. 128.

<sup>31</sup> Francesca Ferrando, 'Humans Have Always Been Posthuman: A Spiritual Genealogy of Posthumanism', in *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*, ed. by Debashish Banerji and Makarand R. Paranjape (Springer, India: Private Limited, 2016), pp. 243–56 (pp. 243–47).

<sup>32</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 51.

spiritual 'cosmic consciousness' of Watts. The quote from 'Spirituality and Sensuality' we began with speaks of the animal aspect of the human condition as a "descent of divinity into materiality", suggesting our physical forms are in some sense inherently a lower state of being than the elevated consciousness we can access through LSD, or other means of expanding the mind.<sup>33</sup> While Watts asks "whether it is really and scandal, any deplorable inconsistency, for a human being to be both angel and animal with equal devotion", his attention is focused entirely on reconciling the duality between these two states, rather than exploring the multiple forms of subjectivity within and between the 'angel' and 'animal'.<sup>34</sup> Watts seems to posit angels and animals as two fixed states of being, with the human situated somewhere in between, forgetting that angels, daemons, spirits, and familiars have long been mediators between worlds. The types of posthuman philosophy discussed here would seem to reject such dualisms, favouring instead a "dynamic web of interconnections or hybrid contaminations" that highlight the multiplicity of subjectivity; the "nomadic subjects-in-process" of Braidotti's philosophy.<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that the ties between Watts and posthumanism have come undone, but rather to highlight the inherent tensions between a transcendental 'cosmic consciousness' and an "embodied and embedded" account of subjectivity.<sup>36</sup>

LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS and *Eye Myth* use similar experimental techniques to evoke the sensation of an altered state of consciousness; multiple overlays, fluid, abstract patterns through which we can glimpse objects and biomorphic, humanoid forms. In *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–2000*, Sitney writes that "by attacking the surface of the film and by using materials which reflect back on the conditions of film-making, Brakhage begins to formulate an equation between the process of film-making and the search for consciousness".<sup>37</sup> The use of hand painting in *Eye Myth* indexically reflects the materiality of film production, whilst simultaneously representing altered states of consciousness which, as we have argued, decentre rational humanist conceptions of subjectivity. Sitney draws parallels to the transcendentalist writing of Emerson, and the filmmaker protagonist, struggling against the ego in solitude, overcome by the

---

<sup>33</sup> Watts, 'Spirituality and Sensuality', p. 113.

<sup>34</sup> Watts, 'Spirituality and Sensuality', p. 118.

<sup>35</sup> Braidotti, 'Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology', p. 199; Braidotti, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities', p. 6.

<sup>36</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*, Third edition. (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 158.

sublimity of it all.<sup>38</sup> Emerson's masculine transcendentalism may seem to be at odds with the materialism of posthumanism, however in *Eye Myth* the human form which emerges and recedes from the flux of extra-visual sensations is a material assemblage; a subject which is always "between things, interbeing, *intermezzo* [...] coming and going rather than starting and finishing" – at once transcending the chaos of materiality and yet unable to separate itself from everything else.<sup>39</sup> Could we not argue that the construction of a human form from the materiality of film is simultaneously evoking the transcendental consciousnesses celebrated by Watts, and the 'embodied and embedded' materialist subjectivity of the posthuman?

Conner's *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS* can be seen to navigate a similar tension between transcendental consciousness and a materially located posthuman subject. The first half features images of hands holding mushrooms, vegetation, and scenes of rural Mexico. Whilst the multiple overlays and non-linear temporality of the final scenes clearly correspond to a state of hallucination, the close-ups of foraging show us a more located and embedded experience of the world. Anna Tsing writes of the territoriality of foraging – claiming that "foragers nurture *landscapes* – with their multiple residents and visitors".<sup>40</sup> Foraging, according to Tsing, is an engagement in the interspecies interactions that form subjectivity. To look for mushrooms is to embed yourself in a landscape, being attentive to its idiosyncrasies. In *LOOKING FOR MUSHROOMS*, Conner presents us with an embodied act of foraging, paying attention to the interrelations of human and non-human life, whilst simultaneously representing altered states of consciousness which rupture the seams of humanist models of subjectivity. As Brakhage noted, Conner chose the word *looking* specifically. Both the 'eye' in *Eye Myth* and Conner's 'looking' constitute a 'visionary' seeing where, in Sitney's words, "fantasy and sight mingle together".<sup>41</sup> Brakhage and Conner, through their representations of altered states of consciousness, gives us a view of human subjectivity both transcendental, and materially embodied and embedded.

'Expanded' cinema stages a complex intervention in the apparent dualism of Watts' angels and animals. Rather than a descent into materiality, or a spirit imprisoned in flesh, human subjectivity is enmeshed in a shifting web of interrelations between

---

<sup>38</sup> Sitney, *Eyes Upside Down*.

<sup>39</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>40</sup> Tsing, p. 142.

<sup>41</sup> Sitney, *Visionary Film*, p. 157.

human and non-human. Rather than simply rejecting the rationalist conceptions of human subjectivity found in Enlightenment philosophy, the task of posthumanism is to work “instead towards elaborating alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject”.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps, somewhere in the scratched, acid drenched, material, embedded and embodied chaos between the angel and the animal, lies the possibility of a new, truly posthuman, subjectivity.

---

<sup>42</sup>Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 37.

## Bibliography

- Braidotti, Rosi, 'A Theoretical Framework for the Critical Posthumanities', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 0.0 (2018), 1–31
- , 'Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23.7–8 (2006), 197–208
- , *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013)
- Brakhage, Stan, *Film at Wit's End: Eight Avant-Garde Filmmakers* (New York: McPherson & Company, 1989)
- , 'Metaphors on Vision', in *The Avant-Garde Film*, ed. by P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), pp. 120–28
- 'Bruce Conner: Looking for Mushrooms | MoMA', *The Museum of Modern Art* <<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1666>> [accessed 31 March 2023]
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987)
- , *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986)
- Ferrando, Francesca, 'Humans Have Always Been Posthuman: A Spiritual Genealogy of Posthumanism', in *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*, ed. by Debashish Banerji and Makarand R. Paranjape (Springer, India: Private Limited, 2016), pp. 243–56
- Harris, Mark, 'Countercultural Intoxication: An Aesthetics of Transformation', in *West of Centre: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965–1977*, ed. by Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), pp. 324–43
- Sitney, P. Adams, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (New York ; Oxford University Press, 2008)
- , *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde, 1943–2000*, Third edition. (Oxford ; Oxford University Press, 2002)
- Tsing, Anna, 'Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species', *Environmental Humanities*, 1 (2012), 141–54
- Watts, Alan, 'Spirituality and Sensuality', in *This Is IT* (London: Hutchinson Publishing Group, 1978), pp. 112–23
- , 'The New Alchemy', in *This Is IT* (London: Hutchinson Publishing Group, 1978), pp. 126–53
- , 'This Is IT', in *This Is IT* (London: Hutchinson Publishing Group, 1978), pp. 17–39
- Youngblood, Gene, *Expanded Cinema* (London: Studio Vista Limited, 1970)