

Rhetoric of Ecology in Visual Culture

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Telepathic Visions: On Alvin Yapan's *An Kubo sa Kawayanan* (2015) Widzenie telepatyczne: *An Kubo sa Kawayanan* (2015) Alvina Yapana

Abstract

This article considers the practice of encouraged gazing in Alvin Yapan's *An Kubo sa Kawayanan* ("The Hut in the Bamboo Grove") (2015) as a possible exercise on revering things. As such, it is warged to be instructive towards a reunderstanding of vision as a form of material encounter with things beyond their mere objectification. Sense of sight is argued to be a human telepathic ability, that is, a distance (*tele*) feeling (*pathein*) with and for thigns, despite and because of their indeterminate materialities. Through looking closely at the rhetorical engagements of Yapan's *Kubo* with its various viewers and critics, the essay attempts to articulate that such telepathic work can be an instance of enchantment with things, wherein one becomes most permeable to the vitalities of others. At the same time, this is also deemed as a consequence of one's active practicing of careful attention to these materialities performing their own vitalities in the same ecology, no matter how seemingly imperceptible.

Niniejszy artykuł ukazuje zjawisko "intensywnego patrzenia" (*encouraged gazing*) w filmie Alvina Yapana *An Kubo sa Kawayanan* („Chata w bambusowym gaju”) (2015) jako potencjalne ćwiczenie w oddawaniu czci rzeczom, prowadzące do zrozumienia widzenia jako formy materialnego spotkania z rzeczami, wykraczającego poza ich zwykłe uprzedmiotowienie. Autor argumentuje, że zmysł wzroku jest ludzką zdolnością telepatyczną, to znaczy odległym (*tele*) odczuwaniem (*pathein*) z rzeczami i dla rzeczy, pomimo i z powodu ich nieokreślonej materialności. Przyglądając się bliżej retorycznym negocjacom pomiędzy filmem Yapana a jego widzami i krytykami, autor zauważa, że tak rozumiana telepatia może być traktowana jako zachwyty nad rzeczami, w którym człowiek współodczuwa ich witalność. Jest to jednocześnie konsekwencja aktywnego praktykowania uważności wobec przedmiotów i innych form nieożywionych, które realizują swoje własne życiowe siły w tej samej ekologii, bez względu na to jak niezauważalne się wydają.

Key words

Philippine contemporary cinema, Alvin Yapan, new materialism, telepathy, spectatorship
filipińskie kino współczesne, Alvin Yapan, nowy materializm, telepatia, widzenie

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Telepathic Visions: On Alvin Yapan's *An Kubo sa Kawayanan* (2015)

1. “Is it possible for a person to fall in love with a house?”

Alvin Yapan's *An Kubo sa Kawayanan* (*The House by the Bamboo Grove*) (2019) tells the story of Michelle (Mercedes Cabral), a maiden who lives alone in a bamboo hut, away from the rest of the population in the town of Baao in Camarines Sur, Philippines. In her solitude, people would often visit her, either to source bamboo from the grove near her house or to avail her services as the remaining skilled calado embroider in their town. During such visits, people would often remark to Michelle that she would be better off finally leaving her hut and their town, so that just like her mother, she would be able to make a more lucrative living for herself abroad. This sentiment for departure is concretely personified in the film through two men: Michelle's lover Gary (Marc Felix), who initially invites her to come work overseas with him, only to eventually leave on his own; and the opportunistic filmmaker named Larry (RK Bagatsing), who features Michelle's exquisite embroidery in his documentary, and later on persuades her as well to move to the city with him, offering her a life where she could possibly showcase her art to a much larger audience.

For Michelle, however, leaving the bamboo hut is out of question, despite the possible compromises that the two men graciously laid out to her, such as asking someone else to look after the house, or finding a new abode altogether. Michelle firmly resolves to stay in her house because for her, the bamboo hut is not just a mere shelter, an infrastructure from which she could simply depart anytime she desires; instead, for her, it is also a being in itself, a matter most vital too in terms of its own materiality (Bennett 2010, xiii), with which Michelle shares a cherished bond. As Larry jokingly—and rather uncomfortably—remarks to her later on, Michelle regards and speaks about the bamboo hut as if it is almost like another person (“Kung makapagsalita ka, parang tao ’yong pinag-uusapan mo!”). And yet, no matter how incredulous it may sound to everyone else, this revered materiality of the bamboo hut is indeed palpable to Michelle, in how it supposedly interacts with

her in intimate ways. For instance, Michelle says she would sometimes dream of scenarios that she believes to illustrate, rather poetically, what the house intends to tell her. Or how, over the course of the film, as more people attempt to persuade Michelle to leave, portions of the house fall into disrepair, such as the bamboo flooring by the door squeaking under her feet louder and louder by day, which Michelle takes to be the hut's aggressive urging to yield to the people's convincing. Prior to this, things also go missing around the house without any apparent reason—Michelle's pair of slippers, her mother's shears, and even the bolo she used in lieu of her scissors—as if they have all “become the house's accomplice, deliberately disappearing to give Michelle a cold shoulder” (Maburaot 2016). All the while, Michelle simply continues working on her embroidery, insisting against all these incitements, from both the people and the hut.

Towards the end of the film, as it is already made apparent that there would be no changing of Michelle's mind, she poses a rhetorical question to Larry, and, in turn, to the one beholding the cinematic moment: “Possible bang magmahal ang isang tao sa isang bahay? O sa isang lugar?” (Is it possible for a person to fall in love with a house? With a place?)—a question that can be imaginably extended as to consider other things that are not only nonhuman—say, a beetle or a bamboo grove—but also those that are not alive, in the most quotidian and narrow understanding of “life”—say, a pair of scissors or even an empty can of sardines. Michelle's question is then followed by the film's punctuation, which can be intuited as Yapan's cinematic protraction of the argument that has just been proposed: a close-up of a flower floating on the Bicol River eventually drifting to the sea, the cinematic pursuit of which appears to compel the viewer to meditate on—if not similarly fall in love with—the vitality of this very matter in sight.

While one might easily respond to Michelle's question with the same incredulity, if not outright disapproval expressed by Larry, this essay foremost considers the possibility of indeed loving a house, a place, and other nonhuman materials; in other words, the rhetorical question posed by Michelle is hereby wagered as a foundational argument. Such affirmation can only be conceivable keeping in mind the most urgent impetus of the so-called “materialist turn” of contemporary theory, that strives to resist the “perceived *neglect* or *diminishment* of matter [especially] in the dominant Euro-Western tradition” of thought, where matter is commonly taken as simply “passive substance intrinsically devoid of meaning” (Gamble, Hanan, and Nail 2019, 111). And so, despite the enduring understanding of love that has been limited to anthropocentric interrelations (see Ackerman 1994; Fisher 2017), an alternative is thus presently envisioned: if, as frequently claimed, love is indeed an art, a “faculty” that one performs (Fromm 1995, 2; see also Badiou and Truong 2012, 38ff.), then the same technique can also be imaginably

extended to other forms of matter that might be nonhuman, in order to share with them an intimate encounter, a “becoming *with*” that allows one the opportunity to *become* in the first place (Haraway 2008, 244). This way, more than anything, love is proposed to be an “erotic *modus operandi*” that is “synergetic rather than repressive” to any material other, which then allows one to become “permeable to another.... [as to] begin to plumb the other’s unsuspected enormity” (Mathews 2003, 10-11, 19).

It is also in this sense that such love for the material is differentiated from a merely fetishistic attitude toward it, whose appraisal of things as “mysterious” primarily hinges on their being commodities, that is, as materials that are always subjected to terms of anthropocentric pragmatic valuation while keeping the social chains involved in their laborious productions most hidden (Marx 1990, 164). Indeed, contrary to this attitude, in the presently proposed love for matter, the human is intuited as possibly willing to be similarly interrupted by the indeterminable capacity of things to cause even a “strange combination of delight and disturbance” (Bennett 2010, xi) that can only exceed the aforementioned anthropocentric valuation. In other words, such love is a way of relating to the material in which one is permitted every so often “to become shaken by doubt,” if only “to persist with what [one] can know *when* [one] can know it” (Butler 2002, 66; emphasis mine; see also Nancy 1991). This way, this new materialist erotic *modus operandi* becomes crucially feminist as well in its urgency, by the virtue of its attempt to deconstruct the predominant supposition of a certain human objectivity that ultimately stems from the logic of “White Capitalist Patriarchy... that turns everything into a resource for appropriation... in short... objectified” (Haraway 1991, 197-198), and to acknowledge instead the perpetual “agential intra-action” (Barad 2003; Barad 2011) that takes place among materials, humans, and nonhumans alike.

Furthermore, this love for the material is also perceived to be potentially decolonizing, by the virtue of an insistence it offers against the rush of contemporary globalized capitalism, that notion of “progress [as] a forward march” (Tsing 2015, 21), in which ecologies such as the site where Michelle resolves to settle, as well as materialities in general, are often easily neglected, disposed, and departed from, as to pursue instead the alluring promises of the capitalist empire. However, this decolonial intuition in Yapan’s film is not so much as the precarious “idealization of nature, the fetishization of the past and the opposition to the ‘new’” (Salazar 2016), than an uneasy, and perhaps even awkward assertion of an alternative. Indeed, it suggests the possibility to exist in what might simply appear as a “patch of ruination” (Tsing 2015, 206) such as Michelle’s hut by the bamboo grove and its immediate environ, with all the materials found here, in the present postcolonial

Philippines, where opportunities for thriving in another, and perhaps more creative terms are often overlooked, if not deliberately left unexplored. Certainly, through her love for and becoming with things that surround her, “rather than let herself be swept up toward witless complicity in notions of progress and development, especially with reference to the global traffic of bodies and commodities in which the Philippine state has all too readily connived, Michelle insists on fashioning for herself a vantage from which to appraise the costs of such notions, and to negotiate the performance of her everyday life accordingly” (Salazar 2016).¹ It is through such a loving attitude toward things that the decolonizing potential of new materialism, albeit perhaps understated in this preliminary essay, can be intuited.

Bearing this critical possibility of loving the material, this essay considers the encouraged gazing at the end of Yapan’s film as a viable exercise of such erotic *modus operandi*. This essay wagers on the said gesture to be instructive toward a potential reunderstanding of the sense of sight as a form of encounter with other materialities, beyond the frequent association of vision to the objectification of things, by simply “subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 1989, 16). As such, sight is presently argued to be a human telepathic ability, that is, a distant (*tele*) feeling (*pathein*) with and for things, despite and because of their thinghoods that are knowable, if only for a moment (see Gamble, Hanan, and Nail 2019, 122-124; Benitez 2019, 477-82). Through looking closely at the rhetorical engagement of Yapan’s *Kubo* with its various viewers, particularly with the attention of the latter to the presence of things projected on the cinematic screen, the essay attempts to articulate from the film a preliminary speculation of critical attention—itsself an art of noticing (Tsing 2015, 17ff.)—as an anthropomorphic cinematic practice that doubles as a loving attempt to become with the material ecology of things.

2. “The flower is a flower”: On vitality of things

An Kubo sa Kawayanan premiered on June 25, 2015, as part of the 2nd World Premieres Film Festival, where it was given several accolades, including the award for the Best Picture in the Filipino New Cinema category (Garcia 2015). On its gala night, a short question-and-answer session with the director, Alvin Yapan, followed the film screening, during which a woman from the audience stood up and went to the microphone, to try make sense of the film’s ending: what was the *meaning* of this flower floating down the Bicol River, she asked. The woman was

1. In his director’s statement on the film, Yapan draws attention to the understated discourse on im/mobility in the context of contemporary globalization: “The point is staying put does not necessarily mean idleness. This is important because the supremacy of the idea of a network over the individual is sometimes misconstrued as fighting for stasis, for the preservation of the status quo... [It] is important to show how stasis is not necessarily synonymous to idleness and decay” (“The Hut by the Bamboo Grove” n.d.). See also Mortel, Jocson, and Natividad (2016).

curious whether Yapan really intended to have as the punctuation of the film this flower—from the genus zinnia, the woman identified—because according to her, it was often considered as a “symbol” of strength (which was, she further shared, the reason why she herself has gotten a tattoo of the same flower on her forearm).²

In his response, Yapan was evidently resistant to such kind of moral symbolization of the flower in question, and by extension, the other things featured in the film: for him, the flower is a flower, as much as the other things projected onto the screen are also what they materially are.³ Such articulation on the manner of revering things is most crucial in understanding Yapan’s film, for although it might seem circuitous a statement, it points at his critical attempt to portray these things in accordance to their very materiality—that is, to render them as they supposedly *are*, instead of their being objects, as in reduced as “symbols” for a didactic rhetoric rampant even in the contemporary Filipino cinema and spectatorship.⁴ As Yapan himself excitedly shared in a press conference prior the film’s release, in *Kubo*, “characters din dito ‘yong kubo, ’yong salagubang, ’yong lata ng sardinas, bulaklak, bato...” (“the hut, the beetle, the sardine can, the flowers, the stone are also characters here...”) (“Filmmaker Alvin Yapan...” 2015), where *character* is implied to turn to its etymological sense, as in accentuating of the distinctive quality of anything, and thus not simply limited to anthropomorphic figurations.⁵ In other words, *Kubo* is Yapan’s cinematic effort to “depict an ‘organic’ relationship between human and house” (Lee 2015), in which the latter is suggested to be just as significant as the former, since for Yapan, once more, “it is not just us human beings who has a will; even the stone, the beetle and the can of sardines can express their will” (“The House by the Bamboo Grove” n.d.). And so, the film is ultimately rendered

2. This association of the zinnia to strength can perhaps be attributed to the genus’s persistence throughout history; see, for instance, Grissell’s (2020) horti/cultural historization of the plant. Taking into consideration this entanglement of the said plant with humans throughout history, one can then intuitively imagine an existence of metonymic chain that could breakdown the instantaneous, if not hasty equivalence of a zinnia to the virtue of strength, as to reveal such equation to be catachretic, that is, a forced metaphorization. Most instructive in imagining such associative chain is, of course, Derrida’s (1982, 245-457) tracing of the heliotrope or the metaphor of the sun.

3. In another recounting of the same instance: “a stone represents a stone, says Yapan during the film’s gala premiere. Everything is what they are. Hence, the film ought to be taken as it is” (Macarayan 2015).

4. As symptomatically attested already by the woman’s instinctive appreciation of the zinnia in the aforementioned scene. To further illustrate this didactic tendency in Philippine cinema spectatorship aside from the appraisals of *Kubo* to be cited in the succeeding parts of the essay, one can turn to the reviews for the film *Baconaua* (2017) by Joseph Israel Laban, whose locus is the island of Masbate. In this film, the sea as a material in its entirety performs a crucial role in instigating the most significant turns of the diegesis. However, most readings of the film, in relation to the sea, intuit the latter to be a symbol implied to necessitate a deciphering (see Tan 2017; Cruz 2017); or if the sea was even considered as a character in itself, it is only to the extent that the sea is mythic (see Castillo 2020)—a critical tendency that is shared by at least one review of *Kubo* (see Manaig 2015).

5. In his director’s statement, Yapan also articulates the role of things in the film as follows: “I really want to *characterize* the house as an object, a thing, that is also capable of expressing its love for a woman, whatever the house’s definition of love may be” (“The Hut by the Bamboo Grove” n.d.; emphasis mine). It is crucial to underscore Yapan’s usage of the term *characterize* instead of, say, *animate*, whose etymological basis is that of the soul. For further significance of this turning away from the *anima* for Yapan, see note 7.

to be an exercise in “translat[ing] a story of a house—*as a house*” (Balante 2015; emphasis mine), with all the other things found in such material ecology to be performing as themselves as well (see Barad 2011).⁶

In *Kubo*, therefore, what takes place can be suggested as “a recourse to cinema as ‘object-oriented ontology,’ where earthly matter takes precedence over human agency” (Jacobso 2016). As how Morton (2013) defines *object-oriented ontology* to be a “commit[ment] to a unique form of realism and nonanthropocentric thinking” (2), *Kubo* as a supposedly “object-oriented” film offers a way to attend to things, to carefully notice them, while also refusing the common temptation of merely objectifying them; in other words, it is a cinema that attempts to propose a manner of revering materials, in a way that is “not just licked by nostalgia or sentimentality” (Dela Cruz 2015) that can precariously turn things to, say, symbols. In this sense, to simply say that the things featured in *Kubo* function as “narrative device” or a “metaphor to evoke something deeper to the viewers” (Balante 2016) does not suffice—and indeed, must be refused—as an appraisal. Instead, what ought to be insistently imagined is a consideration of these things to be as they are perceived materially, if not sensually, than merely rhetorically, for the purpose of preconceived anthropocentric valuation, as in such symbols for the most didactic of rhetoric.

Bennett’s (2010) critical attention to what she calls “vitality” of things can be most instructive to imagining this “object-oriented” reverence to the material in Yapan’s film.⁷ For Bennett, this vitality is “intrinsic to materiality as such,” and thus involves “detach[ing] materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance. This vibrant matter is not the raw material for the creative activity of humans or God” (xiii). Vitality then, one can say, can be perceived on the very physicality of things: it is in the being flower itself of, say, the zinnia, with its colorful petals, that take part in the entire process of a plant’s persistence and propagation of itself; it is in the flower’s very lack of fragrance, and its possibly softest of sound when brushed by another matter. Or, if such a zinnia is

⁶ It is interesting to quote here at length a reviewer’s remark on the performance of a beetle in the film: “This film revels in miniaturism that a beetle is given its own narrative fiber. And as if following it slowly crawl on a window stool is not enough, Yapan gives it its own highlight. A thread is gripping it around the pronotum, so it is not able to fly away. Its winding through infinite loop by its chain is its dramatic cry for the curtailed freedom to flutter away, and this momentous spotlight could earn for it a Best Cameo award, you bet” (Maburaot 2016).

⁷ Here, it must be noted that Yapan himself, in his director’s statement for *Kubo*, relates that “the inspiration for this film came from reading Jane Bennett’s [2010] book entitled *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. In this book, Bennett tries to deploy an ecocriticism by developing a theory of vitality which she says takes the place of the will or spirit, when we erase the centrality of human experience and thought in understanding phenomena. In this film, I would like to show how the erasure of the boundaries between the human and animal, the organic and inorganic, the animate and inanimate, is important for us to appreciate the delicate balance of the ecological network and interconnectedness we live in” (“The Hut by the Bamboo Grove” n.d.). Therefore, if one is to take Yapan’s directorial note as an extension of the film itself, however, not by the virtue of Yapan’s authorial precedence in making sense of the film but rather the intertextuality of the two, it can even be construed that the film asserts itself in its own terms, in order for the things it features to be read according to their respective materialities.

picked, plucked away from the rest of the shrub, vitality must be in the capacity of this flower, too, to wilt in due time, or in some other cases, to dry itself to brown if chosen to be kept pressed between the pages of a book. Vitality must also be in the size and lightness of the same flower, able as it is to float and be drifted by the currents when it is thrown into the river and carried to the sea; vitality is in the conceivable sinking as well of the zinnia, wet as it would eventually be.

Therefore, the being “symbol” of strength of the zinnia is not so much because of its being an inherent symbol, especially since the term *symbol*, as Barthes (1967) reminds us, “implied the idea of motivation” (38) that is, more often than not, anthropocentric in its locus. And so, in the refusal to simply consider and reduce things as symbols, it is crucial to underscore that this is not to say that such materials lack any motivation per se; on the contrary, it is to assert the possibility of their being motivated, too, although in forms that can only be in their own terms, and thus, perhaps, ultimately inaccessible to human comprehension. For as how Bennett insists that things in their vibrancy are far from being passive, mechanistic, and divinely infused, their motivations too as materials must also mean that their impulses cannot be necessarily determined with utmost accuracy, especially if the method of such attempt at knowing is limited by rigid anthropocentric parameters; at most, what can be known about these things is already an outcome of “specific physical arrangements,” a resultant of “specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted” on their materialities (Barad 2003, 814, 816). Or as Morton (2013) reminds us, in the paradigm of object-oriented ontology, things are “objects in their own right” (2), and thus to nominate a thing to be certainly a “symbol” that strictly corresponds to whatever specific ideal designated to it is to outright subject it to an anthropocentric valuation regarding its presumed motivations. This, in turn, violently divests from the material the numerous opportunities to become anything else it could possibly be.

In the case of hailing the zinnia to be a “symbol” for strength, the danger lies then in the likely disregard of the very materiality of the flower itself—that is, its range of capacities to interact with other things given its being a flower—if only to perpetuate instead the anthropocentric moralities projected onto it. In other words, this symbolization can only precariously lead to “the erasure of the efficacy of the sensory figure” itself (Derrida 1982, 210) that is the zinnia, as to exclusively accommodate in its place an imposed value. It is from this danger that one might—and indeed, must—urgently attend to the symbolism that is claimed to happen upon the sight of the flower: what is this “strength” that the zinnia is purportedly “symbolizing” anyway? Why can the zinnia not be taken as an embodiment too of, say, “weakness”—or for that matter, other “virtues,” or even “profanities”? And perhaps, even more crucial: why should the zinnia be taken

as a “symbol” in the first place? Could the zinnia be taken instead for what it supposedly is—a flower that participates in a particular material ecology at any given time, in a variety of ways that might even be beyond its functions currently known to humans, biological or otherwise? Or at the very least, a flower, indeed, on the cinematic screen, colorful petals and all, beside and among other materials found in a *mise-en-scène*?

Taking cue then from the poet Gertrude Stein’s (1922) iconic line (187), similar to what has already been articulated by Yapan himself in response to the question of the flower at the end of *Kubo*, it can be said that the zinnia in the film is a zinnia is a zinnia. Such statement of identity emphasizes the materiality of the flower, “stressing that the [zinnia] is *there*, but it does not really say very much” (Fleissner 1977, 326) about anything, even about itself. It is through accentuating such “quiet” performance of the zinnia that the temptation of hastily designating it as a symbol can be ultimately resisted, as this renders palpable the most indeterminate materiality of the flower. In other words, through this perceived quietness of the zinnia, the flower is underscored to be “what exceeds” (Barthes 2013a, 87) because of its vibrant materiality, the understanding of which can only be approximated through a language that also strives to refuse thoughtless, and often didactic symbolisms. It is then intuited here that the attempt to decipher the zinnia as a symbol, the desire to “really say very much” about it to comprehend it, is not necessary after all, because to begin saying anything about the flower is already a moment of precarity, wherein the reduction of the muchness that is the vitality of the matter itself is always at bay. Or if anything, at the very least, such gesture of saying something about the flower ought to simultaneously invoke other instances of saying regarding the same matter—indeed, a semantic blossoming that desires to approximate the phenomenon of the zinnia while most conscious of its perpetual excessiveness in the vicinity of anthropomorphic language.

It is in the same manner that Yapan’s *Kubo* in its entirety can be perceived—as a cinematic gesture that ultimately attempts to attend to the vibrant materiality of things, and thus “a literal representation of all elements present onscreen” (Macarayan 2015). For instance, one can hereon pause from hastily deducing that the bamboo hut Michelle devotedly inhabits simply “*represents* home” (Cruz 2015; emphasis mine), especially when such rhetoric of home is wrought with nostalgia, as in the romance of a “perpetual search of greener pasture” (Lauzon 2015) or “lost origins” (Manaig 2015); or deployed in unexamined terms of stasis, as in the dangerous sentiment that “change is not necessary... marvel[ling] on the idea that some things are left untouched and unmoved” (Balante 2015), to the point that it becomes “a site of decay” (Manaig 2015).⁸ For on the contrary, the bamboo

8. For a related articulation by Yapan himself regarding stasis, see note 1.

hut can also be perceived as moving at the same time, “unavoidably pervious [as it is] to the currents of modernity” (Salazar 2016), “not able to evade the feelers of globalization” (Maburaot 2015): indeed, change itself is suggested to be most welcomed, deemed as necessary even, for the infrastructure to persist itself over time; after all, even the wooden parts of the house have to be replaced anew every so often, so that its entirety would not collapse into poor condition. It is only through such permeability with other materials, even in manners that might seem hardly noticeable to the human eye, that the hut by the bamboo grove can *be*.⁹ As Michelle herself puts it early in the film:

Nakapirang ribay na ning kawayan para sa lanob na ini. Para sa salog na ini. Pirang beses na? Kun ako sana kuta, mas gusto ko kutang dai na pararibay-ribay. Magastos. Pero ining harong lugod, an gusto sanang magparasangli ning magparasangli ning na garo nagsasangli ning bado. Bago sanang bago.

(How much bamboo has been spent on these walls. This floor. For how many changes? If it's up to me, I'd prefer to not change. It's expensive. It is [the] house that likes to keep changing, with bamboo for its clothes. Over and over.)

3. “I do not know”: On the vitality of cinema

Despite the attempt of *Kubo* towards an “object-oriented” discourse, the tendency to treat the materials in the film as mere symbols still abounds. A Filipino film reviewer points out the tension at work in beholding *Kubo*: bearing in mind Yapan’s “proclivity towards more silent, mysterious approaches in telling a story,” despite his warning to do otherwise, one cannot help but “look at a film like this and not consider what *symbolisms* were used,” as if being played “into thinking there’s more to this pile of stones consistently flashed on screen” (Balante 2015; emphasis mine). Similarly, for another Filipino film reviewer, after considering *Kubo* as “a completely arthouse type of cinema where plot is secondary to the images it presents onscreen,” it seemingly becomes an imperative that “we *have* to extract meaning from the visually lyrical poem that we just watched... [as] that is the art in films like this” (Fred Said 2015; emphasis mine). In other words, between the new materialist discourse Yapan attempts to advance through his film, the cinematic mode through which the film is deliberately rendered, and the arrival

9. Most contrary then to what Bachelard (1994) imagines of “the hermit’s hut... need[ing] no variations,” and whose “truth must derive from the intensity of its essence, which is the essence of the verb ‘to inhabit’” (32, in Manaig 2015). By the utmost permeability of the house in *Kubo*, it can then be perceived to be more akin to the Philippine rendition of the hut as *bahay kubo*, whose common imagination by way a Filipino folk song of the same title (see *Bahay Kubo* 1996) renders it to be a “structure that opens up time and space... by encompassing [even] the vegetable garden that surrounds it” (Jacobo 2011, 67).

of the film itself to the Filipino spectator,¹⁰ there appears to be a gap. As another Filipino film critic astutely articulates it, an uncertainty can only be perceived “whether the cinematic language the director has experimented with can be said to apprehend the neo-impressionism this kind of paradigm shift [i.e., object-oriented] *must evince*” (Jacobo 2016; emphasis mine).

It is crucial to note here that while these remarks on *Kubo* may seem understanding or at least empathic of Yapan’s new materialist stake in his film, they also happen to commit a form of violence, no matter how seemingly minute, to material ecologies through the very critique they rehearse: for in their respective efforts to write about *Kubo*, they also subject the film itself to common typifications, which, in turn, violently forecloses the possibility of its cinematic materiality to their imaginations. For instance, by nominating *Kubo* as “a completely arthouse type of cinema,” or by supposing the imperative that its “object-oriented ontology” “*must evince*” a certain “neo-impressionism,” the film is immediately subjected to sets of expectations that are usually, if not hastily, associated with these cinematic modes. This way, it can be inferred that in the particular case of *Kubo*, the disjuncture perceived between the filmic discourse, its cinematic mode, and its arrival to the audience stems as well from existent preconceived notions regarding the material that is the cinema itself: in being hailed as an “arthouse curio” (Lee 2015), for instance, the vitality of the film as a thing of its own is then implicitly insisted to conform to a specific standard, a “genre-clause” (Derrida 1992, 231) that is ultimately derived from an exterior—and of course, anthropocentric—force at work, namely the entirety of Philippine culture industry.¹¹

If criticism is to interfere as to make apparent the new materialist potential in Yapan’s *Kubo*, a reconsideration on the vitality of cinema itself must be pursued. In undertaking such task, an ecocritical turn in film studies, such as Ivakhiv’s (2013) three ecologies, can be useful as a paradigm: in Ivakhiv’s case, through

10. It is important to underscore the notion of a cinematic *arrival*, in lieu of its *reception*, especially since the latter implicitly directs the vector of the material toward what is often a solely human audience. In other words, in translating the Marxist concern of *reception* as *arrival*, the perceived anthropocentrism in the ecology of materials as the economic circuit is aspired to be attenuated. While this recourse to *arrival* is primarily owed to Lumbera’s (2000) ideation of the Filipino *dating* (lit. “arrival,” “impression”), the present critical attention to the indeterminate materiality of things is also considered through a simultaneous echoing of the Derridean notion of *l’avenir*, “that which is totally unpredictable” (Derrida, Dick, and Kofman 2005, 53), related to the *arrivant*.

11. For instance, considering *Kubo*’s first screening to the 2nd World Premieres Film Festival in 2015 can align it to “a mode of production that attended the rise of *independent* cinema in the country,” that is, the “practice of filmmaking that would aspire a first screening in a festival of cinema somewhere, as long as the city hosting the event could claim global or post-colonial pertinence” (Jacobo 2015; emphasis mine). “Independent” or “indie,” as a particular description of the *Kubo* as a film (see for instance Cruz 2016; Fred Said 2015; Lee 2015; Macas 2015; “Eight Indie Pinoy Films...” 2015), only integrates it then to an entire circuit of anthropomorphic valuation, in which cinema is speciated to “resist crass commercialism, formal aesthetic sterility, Hollywood domination, and state censorship” (Campos 2016, 216). In the case of the Philippine cinemascapes, however, this quality of “independence” remains contentious, especially since it has been commonly attributed to an aesthetic associated to the Cinemalaya Film Festival—and thus, ironically rendering such “independence” to be still dependent after all to a most dominant mode of cinematic production in the country (see Campos 2016; Flaviano 2017).

looking at the material-economic, social, and perceptual ecologies in which a film participates, cinema is ultimately deemed “[as it] has been from its outset—intimately linked to the reproduction of capitalist social and ecological relations” (36; see Beller 2006). However, Ivakhiv himself also admits that these linkages are predominantly alienated from the audience: often, a film “tell[s] us little or nothing about its own production... [or] the social relations that went into its production” (36). And so, criticisms that simply direct themselves to these ecologies confront the danger of disregarding altogether the filmic material in sight, as to direct their thinking instead to the aforementioned ecologies that are frequently anthropocentric in its discourse.¹² And so, as Bennett (2010) argues, critical turns as such often rely on the gesture of demystification that “should be used with caution and sparingly, because demystification presumes that at the heart of any event or process lies a *human* agency that has illicitly been projected into things”; in other words, “demystification tends to screen from view the vitality of matter and to reduce *political* agency to human agency” (xiv-xv).¹³ Therefore, if what is aspired is a method of criticism that considers things in terms of their most vibrant materialities, these anthropocentric inclinations must also be resisted. It then

12. This can be traced back to the most enduring dichotomy between nature and culture, in which the latter is nominated as the site in which art as a creation, if not a product, aligns itself. Recursing to the Filipino ideation of art as *sining*, for instance, a philological pursuit of the term reveals that art as “‘thought’ is by turns cognised and embodied, [with] the hands of the artist appear[ing] to break open the discourse of how art is transfigured by the vernacular where it is imagined to bear the burden of a universal language” (Jacobo and Legaspi-Ramirez 2018, 104). In this sense, in consciously treating something as an instance of art, anthropomorphic presence seems to always haunt the material, in the precedence culturally given to the human modus that has supposedly brought such thing into being—a valuation that constructs the art object’s aura, that “unique phenomenon of a distance, however close [the material] may be” (Benjamin 2007, 222), since the appreciation on such thing is merely directed on its purported originary moment that is its creation, instead of its very material presence at the moment of encounter.

Here, it is illustrative to turn again to Yapan’s directorial notes for *Kubo*, if only to observe by way of self-referential pronouns an instance in which the human agency appears to primarily lead forward (as in the etymological sense of the word *produce*) the process of making the film: “I am still quite excited over the idea of shooting in just one location. This one-location shoot is necessary to capture the point of an ecological network. From afar this may be just a single location, but in minutae we will see life teeming in its diversity. We will see the human and the non-human, the organic and inorganic, the animate and inanimate, all living together in peaceful coexistence. And it is only man’s hubris that leads us to think that we are alone in this world. This is what I want to capture in *my* film” (“The Hut by the Bamboo Grove” n.d.; emphases mine).

Although beyond the limits of the present essay, a turn away from such anthropocentric conception of art can be imagined through a deconstruction of the latter, as to exceed the subterranean nature-culture dichotomy at work. Most instructive for such endeavor is Kirby’s (2011) “reading [of] Derrida’s ‘no outside of text’ and the sense of systemic involvement to which it attests, as ‘no outside of Nature’” (x), as to ultimately propose forms of art that can also take place without the presence of a human (artistic) agency. In other words, what can be envisioned is an understanding of art, whose premise is that “if there is no radical or absolute boundary line between things, including between humans and non-humans, then humans have no more monopoly over what counts as intelligence, or even scientific inquiry than anything else does” (Gamble, Hanan, and Nail 2019, 124).

13. Interestingly, Barthes (2013) also describes “demystification” as a gesture that “penetrate[s] the object... liberat[ing] it but... destroy[ing] it” inevitably; such method “posit[s] a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize[s]” (274). Here, the preference for such method in Marxist thinking becomes more understandable, not only with its conscious consideration of socio-historical conditions, but especially with its treatment to things as primarily susceptible to fetishization as commodity (see Marx 1990, 163ff.). And so, for Barthes (2013), the critical impetus is to balance such demystifying impulse with a tendency to poeticize, that is, to “acknowledge [the thing in] its full weight... respect it,” which can also precariously “restore it to a state which is still mystified”; ultimately, the most difficult task of the critic then is to seek “a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge” (274).

becomes evident that what is necessary toward an articulation of the ecocinematic potential in Yapan's *Kubo* is a critical regard that puts into practice the film's proposed manner of revering things—a disposition that can only be premised on the foremost recognition of cinema as a thing in itself too, “to be taken as it is” (Macarayan 2015), a material that also possesses vitality, and therefore capable of inciting events on its own, even when taken separately and autonomously from the auteur that has supposedly created it in the first place (see Barthes 1977).

Bearing this new materialist possibility of a critique, one can then return as to reread the aforementioned disjuncture between the avowed “object-oriented” discourse of *Kubo* and the insistent impulse to “extract meaning” from materials such as the zinnia projected on the screen: more than a failure of the film resulting from the supposed inconsistency between its cinematic discourse and mode, or simply an erroneous understanding of the film as fostered by a local film culture that tends to merely see things as didactic symbols, such difference can be intuited instead as the workings of the encounter itself between the film and the anthropomorphic spectators, as they each perform and persist their respective materialities at the moment. In other words, this seeming disjuncture is that “cinematic encounter tak[ing] place... between [the spectator's] body and the film's body... the meeting of two different sensoria” which, in this particular instance, appear to “not intersect” (Marks 2000, 153), at least by the virtue of the perceived disjuncture between the film's purported intent vis-à-vis its arrival to the Filipino audience. Formulated as such, it is then crucial to underscore that in this material encounter, *Kubo* is far from being only passively viewed by the anthropomorphic onlooker, as it also actively partakes in the very creation of the “understandings” of itself, however, not because Yapan himself has provided instructions on how to make sense of the film—for this, too, could precariously revert to the same anthropocentric valuation of the film, with its auteur attributed precedence over the film itself¹⁴—but because in terms of its materiality—its visuality and aurality, among others—the film also sensorially engages with its human beholders.

It is at this point that one might be tempted to refute the presented agency of the film thus far through a stubborn reiteration that its very construction, after all, was made possible by its human makers. Such attribution, however, injudiciously

14. Although, it must be emphasized, Yapan's auteorial presence in the meaning-making of his film, by way of his directorial notes and interviews, can be easily deconstructed through the Barthesian principle of death of the author (see Barthes 1977): if these texts are to be taken as materials as autonomous as *Kubo* itself, then what becomes possible is the recognition of the film, together with these paratextual things, as an assemblage, whose heterogeneity is most evident in the difference of the materialities gathered—a film, a written note, and instances of speech-act, among others. It is only imaginable that such assemblage must also include the appraisals for the *Kubo*, despite—or precisely because—not having been written by Yapan himself, and thus rendering the present essay to be as much part of the film as the things captured by the camera and then projected onto the screen. This continuity between the film and the present essay can perhaps be articulated, among other means, through a recourse to Yapan's directorial statement that deliberately cites Bennett's (2010) theory, which is currently taken into consideration of the present argument; see note 7.

reduces the materiality of the film as merely derivative of the anthropocentric production that is presumed to be the originary agency and significance, whereas as a thing in itself, the film is actually capable to insist itself as well, by the virtue of its “profusion, [its] resistance to strict measures of equivalence” (Appadurai 2006, 21) that is demonstrated through its differing arrivals to various engaging spectators. In other words, the noted range of the film’s possible “meanings” is intuited here to be not merely an effect of the diverse anthropomorphic perceptions of it, a demonstration indeed of the human creative prowess to generate various meanings for its own species, but a concrete manifestation of the indeterminate materiality itself of the film. This vitality, however, cannot be simply considered as a “polysemic” quality of the material, since such nomination presumes that it foremost *means* something (and means so in anthropocentric grammar) by this very multiplicity. For all we know, the film, for itself, could not have meant anything, at least in the vicinity of our most anthropomorphic understanding: the motivation of the film could have been, for instance, to modestly light a dark room to attract moths, or to purely fill the same room with ambient sounds; it could have also been the process itself of making the film, without any necessity for its screenings, in the Philippines or elsewhere.¹⁵ This way, it seems to be more appropriate to regard this vital materiality of the film as *disseminatory*, in the sense that its thinghood is always “marked out by the undecidable syntax of *more*” (Derrida 1981, 43), that is, always exceeding, even of human understanding.

Through Adorno (1973), Bennett (2010) articulates this excessiveness in the vitality of things as *nonidentity*, “a presence that acts upon us: we [human] knowers are haunted... by a painful, nagging feeling that something’s being forgotten or left out... [that] remains no matter how refined or analytically precise one’s concepts become” (14). It is this very presence that can be, for instance, hinted in the following statements from three different reviews of *Kubo*, notable for their varying degrees of uncertainty in their respective critical engagements with the same filmic material:

I do understand though that story is not the point of this film, but it is the symbolic meaning of its images. We have to extract meaning from the visually lyrical poem that we just watched. I thought of it as an allegory about Filipinos (Michelle) and the Philippines (her House)—that we should not abandon our home country. Is that what Yapan meant to tell us? *I do not know. The true meaning is not explicitly spelled out. You give it your meaning.* That is the art in films like this. (Fred Said; emphases mine)

15. While this premise of a spectacle that resists its own exhibition might easily appear paradoxical, it is also here that the most anthropomorphic valuation of the cinema can be revealed, bringing to the fore the dichotomy of nature-culture that designates what must be expected from a particular material (see note 12). Consider, for instance, how “the filmstrip embodies the struggle between permanence and transience[:] that whatever light is allowing us to see the series of fixed images along the celluloid strip is causing them to fade... accelerat[ing] its inevitable destruction,” which in itself is “only one instance of a much larger reality,” symptomatic of “the explosion of population across the globe,” resulting to having the Earth “increasingly circumscribed and infiltrated” (MacDonald 2004, 107-108).

Perhaps *An Kubo sa Kawayanan* only settles for the reminder that we live in a grander scheme, made up of plenty of smaller things, and perhaps that's enough. *I don't know* if cinema will look back to this small film about the smaller things. *I don't know* if it will even have time for it. Also, *I don't know* if it's caffeine intoxication, but I walk out of the cinema, moved by all the beautiful ways. (Dela Cruz; emphases mine)

I am not sure yet whether the cinematic language the director has experimented with can be said to apprehend the neo-impressionism this kind of paradigm shift must evince, or if such a metaphysics of the tropical can take us to an analysis of historical modernity through a critique of empire that has coopted even the sensorium Yapan himself protects with impunity, but yes, at least, this spirited instance of possibilization... (Jacobo 2016; emphases mine)

In these statements, variations of the anthropomorphic admission that they “do not know” or “are not sure yet” about the film can be read not only as a rhetorical pretense that somehow destabilizes the argument, through a suggested refusal to claim any objectivity or complete confidence on their persuasions; more importantly, at least for the present aspiration toward a new materialist critique, these statements can be understood as intimations of the nonidentity that besieges after one experiences beholding *Kubo*, that haunting affect that is evoked by the very materiality of the film itself. In other words, these admissions allow for an articulation, no matter how seemingly understated, of the discomfort that is often deliberately overlooked and rationalized through a hasty branding of the film as, say, “arthouse.” And while these admissions might look like simply surrendering to the “inevitable insufficiency,” the “guilt” that comes with one’s limited anthropomorphic thinking (Adorno 1973, 5), it is ironically through this acknowledgment of human vulnerability that one can also activate “the recognition of human participation in a shared, vital materiality... the ethical task at hand here [being] to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it” (Bennett 2010, 15). What then is such admission of anthropomorphic insufficiency but perhaps a manifestation as well of the erotic *modus operandi* at work: the revelation that “I do not know” might as well be one’s attempt to profess their willingness, however seemingly awkward at the time, to be also permeable to the material that is the film itself.¹⁶ In this sense, in these critiques of *Kubo*, love for the material can be imagined to be, in fact, already in sight.

16. While such interpretation of the statement “I do not know” as one’s willingness to be permeable to another is intuitively not a universally applicable or even appropriate equivalence, in the Philippine context, the possibility of such translation can be drawn from the mechanics of a particular folk poetry: the vernacular rendition of riddle as *bugtong*, the guessing of which can either culminate to the identification of the described matter, or to the admission of one’s incapability to do so. In the case of the latter, the statement of one’s not-knowing is euphemised in the phrase “Sirit na,” which means that the guessers have already decided to just learn from the riddle the answer for the unsolvable *bugtong*. Here, it is interesting to note how the word *sirit*, as the moment of figuring out, is simultaneously visual, tactile, and auditory in its turn: *sirit* literally pertains to either a liquid or gaseous matter spilling out of a narrow opening, or a whistle. And so, one can then intuit that in its Philippine rehearsal, the permeability incited from one’s admission of not-knowing can only be most sensuous, rendering the pedagogical instance here as ultimately subverting of the dominant precedence attributed to the head, as the locus of (Euro-Western) reason. Such turning to the entirety of the body, as metonymized by the senses, is crucial for the present new materialist critique, as further explicated in the succeeding part of the essay.

4. “To lose one’s head”: On the technique of telepathy

Of dissemination, Derrida (1981) remarks that its “effect” is “to lose one’s head, no longer to know where one’s head is”—an insight derived from his assertion that in any given text, bearing in mind its disseminating potential, the break “between anticipation and recapitulation” that is supposedly introduced by the preface “appears inadmissible today” (20). While Derrida appears to playfully deploy the idiomatic turn of “losing one’s head” in relation to the implication of the preface or heading—as in that which arrives first of a given text, indeed its countenance, what “put[s] before the reader’s eyes what is not yet visible” (9)—the figure of the head, in this case, can also be also regarded in an anatomical sense. The human head, for instance, has long taken a comparable precedence in considering the body, valued as it is across many cultures to be the locus of power, the condensation of one’s wholeness, and thus identity (see Janes 2005). Meanwhile, in the case of the angiosperms under the family Asteraceae—in which the genus zinnia belongs—the capitulum or the head that is often deemed at first glance to be the plants’ flower is in fact their inflorescence, that is, their assemblage of smaller flowers that only resembles a singularity; in other words, in a fleeting look, the Asteraceae flowers themselves are missed in the relative largeness of the capitulum—a demonstration perhaps of implicit expectations concerning floral scale.¹⁷ Across these translations, the capitulatory “effect” that Derrida describes is intuited to still hold true: by virtue of a material’s dissemination, it loses its head precisely because what distinguishes and separates this part from the rest of its body cannot be clearly delineated in the first place; in other words, its entire body might as well be taken as its very head, as much as its head its entire body. This way, it can also be crucially hinted here that what Derrida nominates as an “effect” is perhaps, at the same time, a “premise,” if not a “cause.”

This disseminatory capitulation is most instructive for the urgent task of recognizing one’s human participation in certain material ecologies at any given moment: for similar to the effect of losing one’s head, one can propose that the anthropomorphic agency that has been long attributed as justification for claiming precedence over nonhuman materials is, in fact, a consequence of one’s encounters with various materialities; in other words, the human vitality might as well be one’s “vital entanglement” (Haraway 2008, 163) with others. In Yapan’s *Kubo*, for

17. Such expectation on the scale of flowers renders both the Asteraceae flowers and their capitula vulnerable to misrecognition, with the former being unnoticed and the latter mistaken as a singular blossom. However, this precarity is, of course, only insofar as the grammar of anatomy is concerned, whose project of identifying and demarcating organisms’ structures and their respective functions create a seemingly proper language that simultaneously constitutes the erroneous ones, as Foucault (1994) has similarly shown in other scientific discourses. In this instance, might what Tsing (2015) calls as scalability, or the “ability... to change scales smoothly without any change in... frame” (38), be productive perhaps in transgressing the rules of botanical language, if only to begin interrogating the presumed objectivity of science itself—that is, to reflexively ask, for example, what separates one part of a flower from another?

instance, Michelle's resolve to stay in her abode can be perceived as an outcome not only of her most insistent choice, but also as the persistence of the bamboo hut to be a material that makes inhabiting it a viable possibility; to put it in another way, Michelle's agency as performed through her staying is only made feasible with the vibrant materiality of the bamboo hut itself. Through such new materialist consideration, the common anthropocentric appraisal of the film as embodiment of either an "agency to transcend the forces and structures of the prevailing social order" (Salazar 2016) or merely an "indigenous innocence" (Jacobo 2016) is ultimately undermined, as to assert instead the simultaneity of most varying vitalities at work. Michelle herself eventually articulates such epiphany to Larry, in her recounting of a dream: "Nanaginip ako. Nakatingin ako sa tubig. Akala ko, ako'yong gumagalaw... Iyong ilog ang gumagalaw para sa akin. Napakasakit natin maunawaan... Napakahirap." (I had a dream. I was looking at the water. I thought I was the one moving... The river was moving for me. It's hard to understand that... Difficult...)

While the difficulty for such insight can be certainly rooted to a most anthropocentric worldview that prohibits even the slightest possibility of acknowledging nonhuman vitalities, it might as well arise from the contrary: in an utmost but thoughtless reverence to things, one's recognition of excessive vitality of things can precariously turn as an unexamined belief on the impossibility of ever reconciling with them, and thus ironically regarding them as perpetually "inimical" (Adorno 1973, 6) and "mystified" (Barthes 2013b, 274), "withdrawn... never chang[ing]" (Gamble, Hanan, and Nail 2019, 121). However, as Bennett (2010) also warns us, such "acceptance of the impossibility" (14) is not so much the critical point of new materialism, as the attempt itself to recognize intersections of human vitalities with those of nonhumans, no matter how briefly. This recognition, according to Bennett, can be put into practice when vital materialists are able to "cultivate a more careful attention" to things, to "try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them" (17); in other words, such crucial recognition necessitates that one permits oneself the opportunity to be vulnerable to things, to be permeable with their most indeterminate vitalities, indeed, despite and because of the likelihood to be "shaken by doubt" (Butler 2002, 66) in such encounters.

This loving doubt is crucial in the practice of careful attention, lest this gesture precariously regresses to a hasty projection of anthropocentric valuation—if not symbolization—of things: by keeping in mind the utmost excessiveness of any material, what may easily appear as the vitality of a particular matter is considered in relation to one's limited understanding of it, as well as the potential of the same

thing to turn into something else at any given moment. This way, in such careful attention, the materiality encountered in one instance can only be intuited at most to be a degree of intimation of itself, which can also be perceived differently by another in a separate happenstance. As such, in the case of the material that is cinema, this careful attention thus entails an acknowledgment of the said thing as, indeed, a *palabas*, the Philippine rendition of “spectacle and appearance... (dis)guise and... manifestation,” whose being “tactical” ultimately renders it to be “also corruptive [where] semblance is always elusive” (Flores 2008, 9). However, far from implying to be simply withdrawn from and hence impermeable to other materials, this underscored elusiveness of the cinema only points to a most necessary distance between things—what could be perceived as *différance*, that “interval [that] must separate the present [material] from what it is not in order for the present [material] to be itself” (Derrida 1982, 13). To put it in another way, this interval is the space in which a thing is given time to perform its own materiality (Benitez 2019, 480), if only to allow itself eventually to be vulnerable as to assemble with another. And so, it can then be construed that only with and through such interval of elusiveness could the possibility of love, with its most erotic of *modus operandi*, also emerge.

In *Kubo*, it is by the virtue of this crucial material interval that Michelle would also perceive difficulties every so often in making sense of her connection with things: despite her most careful attention for them, the bamboo hut, among others, can only encounter and be encountered in its own terms as a house. And yet, at the same time, it is also through and against this difficult interval that Michelle and the bamboo hut both perform the possibility of communicating with each other, however oblique or temporal this contact might be. For her part, Michelle at least intuitively this interaction with the bamboo hut to happen through the technique of telepathy:

May tataramon kami kan harong na kami sana nagkakasabutan. An mga bagay sa palibot ko ang ginagamit kaining tataramon. Minsan, pinapadarhan niya ako ning mga pangatorogan para duman kaulayon. Pag minsan lugod, dai ko na aram kun nagtataram pa ako sa isip o gamit na ang dila ko.

(The house and I have a language only we could understand. Its words are the things around me. Sometimes it sends me dreams so we could talk there. When I reply, I sometimes could no longer tell if I speak with my mind or with my tongue.)

In what Michelle asserts to be a secret language with the house, things become imbued with urgent significance: missing shears and creaking bamboo underfoot become proclamations from the house itself, as if urging her, like the rest of the town, to leave. However, similar to how the zinnia can be precariously taken as a “symbol” for strength, this telepathic line between Michelle and the bamboo hut

is most precarious, for in the first place, to contend that a material is an envoi *is* already a wager in itself, a rehearsal of one's agency, and even more so to claim that such message is intended to arrive for a particular anthropomorphic addressee such as oneself. Indeed, as Derrida (2007) reminds us, for while a material "falls to me... I *choose* that it should choose me by chance, I *wish* to cross its path, I *want* to be there... [I] say 'It was me,' with a gentle and terrible decision" (229; emphasis mine). It is then by willingly taking such risk that Michelle can be understandably regarded as a madwoman by some,¹⁸ given her most daring capability "to say after the letter [that is the material] 'it is I,' it was already I, that will have been I and in the night of this wagered certainty commits her life to it without return, takes all possible risks, keeps upping the stakes without trembling..." meanwhile doing all this "gently... without show and as if in silence" (230). It is, in other words, "to lose one's head, no more no less" (243)—however not necessarily because Michelle is certainly a madwoman, but because the bold claiming that she performs ultimately renders her erotic desire for "the erasure of the boundaries between the human and animal, the organic and inorganic, the animate and inanimate" ("The House by the Bamboo Grove" n.d.)—indeed, a disseminatory instance in which her head can be imaginably elsewhere, or perhaps everywhere, in her surroundings.

Such precarity, for Derrida (2007), can only be the work of telepathy itself: "*telepathy against telepathy*, distance against menacing immediacy, but also the opposite, feeling... against the suffering of distance..." (259); it is then, one can say, the insistence for a loving encounter with and through the necessary interval one shares with another matter. Translating it to Bennett's (2010) rhetoric, such telepathic work can thus be described as an instance of enchantment with things, wherein one becomes most permeable to the vitalities of others, which is at the same time a consequence of one's active practicing of careful attention to these materials: telepathy is thus the recognition of the intersection of one's anthropomorphic agency with those of many others, ultimately premised on the willingness as well to wager that these materials indeed perform their own vitalities in the same ecology, no matter how seemingly imperceptible. It is to most daringly

18. For instance, Salazar's (2016) positing of a certain Foucauldian madness (see Foucault 1961) upon Michelle, given her deviance from "the prevailing social order": "she evinces an intense attachment to her domicile, as well as the customary design of her life-ways, that is revealed to border on the uncanny, suggestive of either psychological disorder or supernatural intervention." A worse charge would be Manaig's (2015) blunt description of Michelle to be in a "quasi-schizophrenic state," whose further explication as her "speak[ing] to herself, perhaps in response to all the decoded flows of labor, capital, and commodities that encircle her" might have been an attempt to echo Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) conception of schizophrenia as potential resistance against capitalism, but ultimately fails in locating Michelle nevertheless in the idyllic discourse of "nostalgia for our nation's [the Philippines] lost origins." And yet, considering how Derrida (2007) implicates telepathy to be the premise of any communicative instant—since language itself is most prone to dissemination, and thus to claim that one "understands" another is to perform the same telepathic daring—anyone who participates then in a communicative ecology might as well be suspected of similar madness, which in turn would obliterate the notion of deviance upon which the notion of madness itself is premised.

feel for these things, despite and through the necessary interval between one and another: it is, in Michelle's rehearsal, less of the imperfection of the language she secretly shares with the bamboo hut, than the possibility of performing this telepathic line repeatedly over time, if only in the hopes of making room for differences every so often. As Michelle relates it to Larry at the end of the film, "Naiintindihan ko ang sinasabi ng harong kung pipirmi ako dito... kasi masaya ako" (I understand what the house is telling me if I want to stay... It is because I am happy): the telepathic prospect of becoming with things, however uncertain it may initially appear, is most imaginable and probable, only with and through the loving choice to become vulnerable enough to attempt visualizing so.¹⁹ In other words, in telepathy, one loses their head, no more and no less, if only to risk toward a certain intimacy with the material ecology of things.

5. Towards telepathic technique as a cinematic practice

The technique of telepathy can be instructive in articulating the gesture of beholding the cinema as a viable erotic *modus operandi*, no matter how preliminary. For as how in *Kubo*, Michelle and the house, as well as the other materials present, converse by way of telepathic interactions in their particular ecology, at the moment of beholding a film, the spectator and the film itself can be imagined to partake in a similar telepathic instance, one that can be imagined to take place in the very act of looking. In such a moment of looking, a wager simultaneously unfolds, one that aspires for an encounter to happen—say, that the human may dare claim to understand the film, however incompletely; and, at the same time, that the film may somehow insist itself upon the human, however briefly. In other words, sight, especially in the practice of a most careful attention, becomes a sense that rehearses the loving attempt to cross the persistent and necessary interval among materials—indeed, a form of “feeling” that can only be aspired to be “against the suffering of distance.” Certainly, as Marks (2000) has similarly suggested, “vision itself *can be tactile*, as *though* one were touching a film with one’s eyes”—what she calls a haptic visuality (xi; emphasis mine). In the case of telepathic vision, however, it is crucial to underscore that such haptic opportunity in looking is precariously asserted to happen indeed—that is, that vision *is* tactile, that one *does* touch the film with one’s eyes—by the virtue of the new materialist propensity that can only

19. It is in this consciousness regarding the part that one's anthropomorphic agency plays in forming encounters with the material ecology of things that the practice of telepathy also becomes crucially ethical. In Mathews's (2003) reading of the biblical myth of the Garden of Eden as instructive to what she calls as pansychist practice, she points out that “our new capacities for self-direction and self-concealment give rise to possibilities of choice on the one hand, and deceit and dissemblance on the other, and hence to a range of moral behaviors that were impossible within the state of un(self)consciousness. In this sense, selfconsciousness is associated with a ‘knowledge of good and evil’” (95).

allow even the sense of touch itself to be permeated by other understandings, such as becoming the very gesture of looking.²⁰

And yet, as Haraway (1991) also reminds us, “vision is *always* a question of power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices” (192). A version of such violence is demonstrated in the above symbolizations of the zinnia as well as the *Kubo* in its entirety: the impulse for immediately “interpreting” these materials reduces their otherwise excessive vitality into an imposed set of moral codes that is commonly left unexamined, and thus ultimately objectifying them as media for such anthropocentric valuations. In other words, it is the scopophilic tendency in looking, in which the thing beheld becomes subjected to a most brutal gaze, which values it as merely “an object of... stimulation” or “identification,” and thus effectually diminishing material vitality to be always “attached to an [anthropocentric] idealisation” (Mulvey 1989, 18). However, such precarity in our visualizing practices must be resisted to be perceived as an excuse compelling enough to completely withdraw from their telepathic potential that could offer us a more intimate relation with the material world at large. In fact, the loving promise of vision might even lie in its very possibility “to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events,” as to perhaps ironically “settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places” (Haraway 2016, 1)—to simply put it, in the vision’s possibility to *critique*. Indeed, it is by this critical opportunity that the said instance of symbolizations of things could be looked at once again and troubled, if only to let emerge from the event another understanding: here, it can be proposed that the encounter between the human spectator and the cinematic things has, in fact, not (yet) taken place, not only because the zinnia, among other things, is amiss over the imposition of anthropocentric ideals, but also because the humans are rhetorically transfigured to be “a blank page for social inscriptions” (Haraway 1991, 197), impermeable as they have become with their singular concern for anticipated and preconceived symbolisms. This way, it can be deduced that the violence of vision in such method of dully “interpreting” the cinema does not only occur in the objectification of vibrant matters, but as well as the reduction of the anthropomorphic possibility into a mere medium for hegemonic ideations; for the human, in other words, it is to lose one’s head, indeed, to the rule of White Capitalist Patriarchy.

Haraway (1991) reverberates then Bennett’s call for careful attention to the vitality of materials in her emphasis on the criticality of taking into account the

20. Contrary then to Ivakhiv’s (2013) assertion that while “film objects... are more than mere objects,” being potential “carriers of affect, mediators of relations that both pass on an energetic quality or charge between humans and things and *represent* that quality itself,” the material that is the film “remains an audiovisual medium, not one that can directly transfer the movement of air on skin” (124). The crucial difference then between Ivakhiv’s formulation of the ecocinema and the present new materialist engagement with the cinema is in the insistence of the latter to consider as well other forms of perception, in which touch can be translated in terms of sight.

positionality of one's vision, as this crucially "implies responsibility for our enabling practices" (193). For Haraway, "location is about vulnerability [as] location resists the politics of closure": through recognition of one's situatedness, the knowledge production that simultaneously takes place at any given moment of looking is reoriented, from its presumed objectivity and autonomy imagined after the illusion of anthropocentrism, and toward its being a conscious and humble participation in the "process of ongoing critical interpretation among 'fields' of interpreters and decoders" (196). In other words, through an admission of one's location—of one's emplacement in their body, with the latter's utmost permeability to material ecologies—vision becomes an acknowledgment as well of one's necessary interval from the materials in sight, that, in turn, would allow the telepathic work of attempting to relate to them in various manners. As such, recognition then of one's positionality in the gesture of looking is an ironic attempt on reclaiming one's head from the anthropocentric hegemony, with its White Capitalist Patriarchic grammar, as it is intuited to be a reclamation that necessitates at the same time one's head to be lost among the material ecology of things: it is to ultimately enable oneself to be sensorially moved, which is a form, too, of engaging with these materials in the critical task of discourse.

Intuitively, this recognition of one's positionality provides the opportunity to underscore the critical intersections that are also necessary to be considered in any given discourse—for instance, the urgency to perform the task of decentering anthropomorphic precedence in simultaneously decolonizing terms, which is especially urgent for a critic who hails from the Philippines, a site that has been repeatedly subjected to colonial duress. In such consideration, it is only crucial to imagine the possibility of articulating these intersections not only in relation to specific anthropomorphic populations, but also to the material ecologies that are intimately entangled with them. In the case of *Kubo*, the aspiration for a decolonizing gesture can be initiated from, say, carefully attending to the presence of the bamboo in the film, to recognize it beyond its being commonly "valorized, quixotically so [as] the matrix of our [the Philippine] folklore, of our creation myths, from which our first man and woman emerged" (Manaig 2015), and to realize that far from being simply archetypal, if not symbolic, bamboos in the country are, in reality, most diverse, with over 60 known species, each of them with their own characteristic materialities (see Roxas 2012). It is from here that one can see the specific ecologies in which the bamboo, in its variety, participates—ecologies that cannot be easily assimilated to the binaries of within and without the global capitalist circuitry (see Tsing 2015, 61ff.), and by extension, the categories of modern and anti-modern, if not the primitive (see, for instance, Balante 2015; Lauzon 2015; Manaig 2015). In the same vein, Michelle's intimacy

with the bamboo hut and the rest of the environ can be thus perceived differently—not as a simple echoing of the presumed habitus of the *babaylan* or the Philippine shaman who is often figured as “a reference to the [Philippine] past,” the “nation’s lost origins” (Manaig 2015), but, indeed, an alternative practice that is just as “modern.” As Yapan himself says of the film, “there is no magic here, just the intervention of things” (“The House by the Bamboo Grove” n.d.)—an intervention that, of course, partakes in the ecology that is contemporary globality at large.

And so, from a practice of vision that is located on one’s anthropomorphic vitality, the work of telepathy can then imaginably take place, wherein one’s material interval from other things is still pronounced and ultimately acknowledged, if only to allow oneself the opportunity to perform a loving insistence toward a material encounter with these things. In such encounters, one might say to these things that “I do not know,” but at the very least, through this utterance of perceptible vulnerability, discourse itself can unfold, and possibly again. It is through such discursive rehearsal, especially if performed most considerately in relation to nonhuman materialities, that the human audience can embody a certain form of careful attention that makes of a vital materialist. What becomes possible, therefore, is a new materialist technique of looking: not simply the solitary beholding of cinema in each of our material intervals, but the loving attempt towards encounter, however obliquely or temporarily, with the material ecology of things. Perhaps, it is here that one can even say such erotic *modus operandi* of looking could potentially also involve practices that are commonly deemed extraneous to the act of watching itself—say, minding one’s waste, or as a Filipino film review proposes, “follow[ing] the poet Rilke’s dictum: ‘You must change your life!’” (Garcia 2015; see Rilke 1995, 67-68).²¹ As such, when another Filipino reviewer relates that he did not know “if it’s caffeine intoxication, but [he] walk[ed] out of the cinema, moved by all the beautiful ways” (Dela Cruz 2015), it can be surmised that what he describes is, indeed, an instance of telepathy with the cinema—an encounter that can be imagined to extend even well beyond the particular moment of watching it.

21. Similar to the proposition made by Lav Diaz, another Filipino filmmaker, known for his unusually lengthy cinema: for him, “the filmmaker shouldn’t struggle by himself... the viewer must struggle with me,” and thus inviting the spectators to “experience this thing [that is the cinema] together and be immersed in this universe.” It even implies yielding to “the demands of the body, [one’s] need to defecate and urinate” in the middle of watching (“Lav Diaz, Filipino maestro” 2016). As such, Diaz says that he “[doesn’t] believe in the concept that you have to sit in the cinema for two hours and watch a story... Cinema can be anything... My films are not purposely done for the cinema anymore. You can watch them there, or in the streets, or... on a plane!” (Baumgärtel 2012, 175). However, such manner of looking can be intuited as a consequence of the length of Diaz’s films, than a new materialist engagement: the deviating gestures that Diaz implicates in watching his film are more oriented to attend to anthropomorphic needs given the duration of his cinema, than a loving attempt to encounter materialities. For further implications of temporality in Diaz’s film, particularly his eight-hour long *Hele Sa Hiwagang Hapis (A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery)*, 2016, see Benitez (2018).

As for *Kubo*, this proposed telepathic encounter between the film itself and the anthropomorphic spectator becomes an opportunity as well for the former to persist in its own vitality. For one, it can simply be considered: are these forms of “anthropomorphic” discourse—criticisms, question-and-answer sessions, and even plain word-of-mouth, among others—not also viable material extensions of the film? Are these “anthropomorphic” encounters not outcomes, too, of the film’s very vitality, without the crucial presence of which these aforementioned discursive events were not to happen in the first place? And in the same vein, it can also be asked: is this very essay not a part as well of the same house in the bamboo grove shown in the film, whose vitality is most protracted by Yapan’s cinematic feature itself? Are these words—supposedly initially mine—not actually a telepathic relay, making you, reader, see the film, too, however faintly—indeed, a relay from the Philippine tropics where I have written this, all the way to where you are? To put it in another way, are we not all simply connected now telepathically in this material ecology of things, through and against our distances? It is here that the punctuation of Yapan’s *Kubo* can be imaginably extended: the flower floating on the Bicol River eventually drifting to the sea has now also reached wherever you might be.²² Instead of breaking down here, at the very last instant of this essay, the metonymic chains that could explicate these implicit ecological connections, one can take risk and simply pass it all over in silence; this, in itself, is also a moment of telepathy—that one could perhaps already somehow understand.

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22. With such outward movement of the flower—that is, from a locale and toward the world at large—Yapan’s *Kubo* can then be perceived to ironically allude to the national hero Rizal’s (1976) poem “A las flores de Heidelberg” (“To the flowers of Heidelberg”), in which the persona, currently in diaspora, speaks to the flowers, asking them to “carry... / my love to my loved ones, / peace to my country and its fecund loam, / faith to its men and virtue to its women, / health to the gracious beings / that dwell within the sacred paternal home” (“llevad... / amor a mis amores, / paz a mi país y a su fecunda tierra, / fe a sus hombres, virtud a sus mujeres; / salud a dulces séres / que el paternal, sagrado hogar encierra...!”) (126-127). In the case of *Kubo*, however, the direction of Rizal’s flower has been crucially reversed, and thus effectively refuting the common appraisals of the film to be a blunt ode to home, indeed, a search for the nation’s “lost origins.”

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