

Amazonian Visions: Animating Ghosts

by

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*Amazonian Visions: Animating Ghosts*  
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### Abstract

*Amazonian Visions* is a practice-based research project that finds associations between the concepts of expanded cinema and animation, and the myriad worlds of the Amazonian psychedelic brew, ayahuasca. I argue that expanded animation is a medium not unlike cultural practices of expanded vision and psychedelic experiences inspired by ayahuasca. By juxtaposing these two concepts, tracing their genealogies, and examining unexpected links between the two, I propose that both are techniques that allow the fantastical to enter the ordinary. This theoretical framework informs my expanded animation work, in particular the shows *Tranquilandia* and *Tres Esquinas*, where the histories of the Colombian Amazon are transformed through ayahuasca visions into digital animations and immersive installations.

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## Preface

I was born in Bogotá, Colombia during the 1980s, a particularly violent decade in the country's history, when drug lords like Pablo Escobar wielded control over all aspects of everyday life. My family hails from the Amazonian region of Caquetá, a land with a troubled history and where the Colombian conflict is magnified, sometimes spiraling out of control. The region's impenetrable jungles, far from the reach of the central government, provide the perfect hiding spot for guerrillas, paramilitaries, and coca plantations. As a child and teenager, I visited my extended family every summer in Florencia, the capital of Caquetá. Florencia is a small town at the edge of the forest that seemed as far away as possible from the cold and sprawling city I called home. Florencia is a town at a crossroads, where indigenous and mestizo<sup>1</sup> cultures coexist surrounded by violence. During these summers I became fascinated with a landscape and a culture I couldn't fully call mine. A pivotal moment took place when an uncle gave me a small art book on the hallucinogenic brew ayahuasca, after a trip to the Putumayo. This book spurred a lasting interest in the field of ethnobotany<sup>2</sup> and led me to read Richard Evans Schultes' seminal work on hallucinogenic plants, *Plants of the Gods* (2001), as well as *One River* (1996) and *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) by ethnobotanist Wade Davis. I considered pursuing a career in the field but these plans were put on a hold due to an escalation in the Colombian conflict that forced my family to migrate to Canada in 2002. While in Canada, my interests shifted towards animation and art, but I never forgot my

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<sup>1</sup> Coined after the conquest of Latin America, mestizo designates mixed race people with indigenous and European ancestry. The mestizo constitute Colombia's demographic majority.

<sup>2</sup> Ethnobotany is the study of plants that have cultural significance as medicine or hallucinogens.

ethnobotanical impulse. This interdisciplinary project is a way to reconcile and find unexpected commonalities between these two seemingly different fields of knowledge.

### Chapter 1: Introduction

“ [Through animation] a boundary is violated; a passage between worlds takes place.” (5)

Bukatman, 2012

The following study is designed to assess the links between expanded animation and the otherworldly landscapes of ayahuasca within the context of the Colombian and Peruvian Amazon. Through immersive installations, I investigate indigenous and mestizo art that find a central source of visual inspiration in ayahuasca, a compound hallucinogenic potion that triggers episodic experiences of altered perception. At the same time I find conceptual links to the history of animation and expanded cinema, which I consider a continuation of magical thinking. I argue that animation and the visionary experiences produced by hallucinogenic plants can be interpreted as ruptures between worlds, allowing the fantastical to creep into the real. My aim is to use digital animation and installation as a way to bridge the gaps between these two realms.

#### I. Context: The Amazon and Ayahuasca

The Amazon is the largest rainforest and one of the most bio-diverse ecosystems on the planet. It is a maze of exuberant life and death, with dangers that are as real as they are imagined. Inhabited by various peoples over thousands of years, the rainforest abounds with myth and history. Today hundreds of indigenous groups, mestizos, and

colonists make it their home while industrialization continues to encroach on its borders. The Amazon has stirred the imagination of European explorers and colonizers, and challenged whoever dared to brave its perilous immensity. Spanish, Portuguese, and British people and companies have explored it in search of wealth, land, and natural resources. Some explorers were driven by legends of lost civilizations, such as the British adventurer Percy Fawcett, who famously disappeared searching for the mythical Lost City of Z in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. To this day, scientists continue to explore the region anxious to encounter new species and eager to chart the forests' teeming reserves of life. The discovery of the rubber tree in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the technological innovations it generated<sup>4</sup> put this resource in high demand, resulting in rapid industrialization and an intense need for large amounts of cheap labour in a relatively uninhabited region (Taussig 1984: 9). The results of these incursions have been catastrophic. The rubber boom and the violence it produced during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries remain a dark chapter in the history of the continent.

Today illegal cocaine production keeps the region entangled in a destructive and horrific war on drugs. My thesis exhibition entitled *Tranquilandia* translates to "Tranquility-land". The ironically named Tranquilandia was a large cocaine processing facility within the jungles of Caquetá. It had eight illegal landing strips serving nineteen laboratories and estimates put the value of its total cocaine production in the billions of dollars (Reyes 2007). In 1984 with the help of the US Drug Enforcement Administration

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<sup>3</sup> David Grann's non-fiction book *The Lost City of Z: A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon* (2010) gives an account of Fawcett's journey.

<sup>4</sup> Rubber is the main component of car and plane tires.

(DEA) the Colombian army raided Tranquilandia and burned it to the ground<sup>5</sup>.

Despite the Amazon being an inhospitable region and its history of violence, it is a dynamic and prolific locus of cultural production. I am particularly interested in Amazonian artists that use ayahuasca as inspiration for cultural artifacts and practices. Ayahuasca is a psychedelic brew known for its powerful psychotropic visions and intense physical effects. The ambiguous visions produced by the brew can slip between the beautiful and the nightmarish. Ayahuasca is a drink for visual revelation; producing what Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig calls the “hallucinatory art of the real” (1991: 329). Ayahuasca visions act like dreams – reorganizing personal and cultural experiences through fantasy. Amazonian indigenous groups have used ayahuasca historically and it is an important part of their mythologies, music, and visual arts. For Amazonian mestizos – whose syncretic culture is a product of both indigenous civilization and European colonization – ayahuasca also plays an important role in their cultural production. The work of Pablo Amaringo, a *vegetalista*<sup>6</sup>-turned-painter, whose life and artistic practice have been documented in detail by Colombian anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna (1999), informs much of this project.

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<sup>5</sup> The raid of Tranquilandia was a much-publicized event in Colombia. In many ways it revealed the true scale of drug production of the country and the amount of power drug-lords had.

<sup>6</sup> *Vegetalistas* are practitioners of *vegetalismo*, an Amazonian syncretic healing practice. Ayahuasca mestizo use is not only found in *vegetalismo*. There are two syncretic Brazilian Catholic churches (Santo Daime and União do Vegetal) that use ayahuasca as their main sacrament.

## II. Expanded Animation and Cinema

I see expanded animation as a conceptual site not unlike the visionary world of ayahuasca<sup>7</sup>. Both offer places where the invisible realms of myth and the mind are made visible. Expanded animation is a subset of expanded cinema, even though in the digital age these categories and divisions are being challenged<sup>8</sup>. Expanded cinema, a term most associated with Gene Youngblood, is the product of the techno-Utopianism of the 1960s, the writings of Marshall McLuhan, and the prevalence of mind-altering drugs like LSD. Film theorist Andrew Utterson describes Expanded Cinema as a diverse movement concerned with new technologies in video and television (computer graphics, holograms, IMAX theatres, cinematic pavilions, and video installations) for the creation of “experiences, often multiscreen and multimedia, that would engage with a world increasingly rooted in technology” (Utterson 2011: 117). Youngblood’s expanded cinema is very much a manifestation of 1960’s counterculture, ultimately proposing that art and technology can, and should, be used to create new visual experiences for the expansion of consciousness (Utterson 2011: 115).

It is interesting to note that advocates of both ayahuasca and expanded cinema consider them tools for spiritual and personal growth<sup>9</sup>. Expanded cinema provides an apt

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<sup>7</sup> Animator and theorist Philippe Blanchard in his essay *Quest for Fire: Explorations in Expanded Animation* (2010) proposes a workable definition for Expanded Animation.

<sup>8</sup> Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media* (2001) proposes that through digital media divisions between live-action cinema and animation are blurred. Film becomes again a subset of animation.

<sup>9</sup> Psychedelics like ayahuasca, ibogaine, and LSD, have been the subject of scientific research for their possible therapeutic benefits when treating addiction and other psychological problems (Ellam 2011, Strassman 2000). As expected, this research has been the subject of controversy and hampered by strict prohibition laws. However, due to globalization, the Internet, ayahuasca churches, and the work of authors like Terence McKenna, there is a growing interest in ayahuasca in the West. This has

framework for my work, however my intention is to avoid some of Youngblood's utopic trappings. For this reason I also refer to another historical animation model –that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century phantasmagoria. Combining, magic lantern shows, animation, projections, and theatrical elements, these spectacles and mechanical *curios* delighted audiences, often with visions of ghosts and other terrors (Gunning 2009: 23).

My aim is to create immersive spaces that reference the strange spectacles of phantasmagorias, while deploying cultural and aesthetic tropes of Amazonian mestizo art. Through my expanded animation practice, I interrogate the ways in which animation and ayahuasca are both sites where the social and the fantastical intersect. By referencing Amazonian cosmologies, mestizo painting, and historical events, my thesis project is a melancholic look at the history of the Colombian Amazon. *Tranquilandia* is an attempt to communicate with the afterlife, as if under the influence of ayahuasca, which in Quechua fittingly means “vine of the dead”<sup>10</sup>. The histories and cultures that inform *Tranquilandia* are in many ways case studies that serve as starting points to examine larger concerns surrounding animation's inherent affinity to psychedelic experiences. I argue that animation can be seen as a technological extension of psychedelia – both challenging the stability of human perception.

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produced a type of ayahuasca tourism, which brings increasing numbers of westerners to the Amazon looking for healing, spiritual enlightenment, or just for a good thrill (Tupper 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Quechua is a South American indigenous language spoken throughout the Andes.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

My research continues previous investigations into syncretism<sup>11</sup> and hybridization as important forces in the artistic output of Latin America, but expands these concerns into animation theory. The literature review is divided into two distinct strands that are interwoven throughout the document –one is focused on anthropology and ethnobotany texts regarding ayahuasca and hybrid cultural production in the Amazon, while the other investigates animation and expanded cinema theory. Throughout the literature review I make a case for associating ayahuasca and expanded animation through issues of ritual, space, fantasy, and reconfigurations of time.

### Ayahuasca, Violence, and Mestizo Painting

Ayahuasca or yagé (as is known in parts of Colombia) is a compound hallucinogenic potion, named after its main ingredient, the vine *banisteriopsis caapi*. In addition to the ayahuasca vine the brew contains the leaves of *psychotria viridis*<sup>12</sup> (commonly known as chacruna) and, depending on the recipe, other additives like brugmansia<sup>13</sup> or tobacco leaves. Shamans and *vegetalistas* boil crushed ayahuasca vines

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<sup>11</sup> Syncretism is a term used to describe hybrid religious or cultural expressions. In Latin America is associated with tactics that Indigenous groups and African slaves used to maintain their culture within Catholic and European hegemony, creating unique hybrid cultures.

<sup>12</sup> *Psychotria viridis* contains dimethyltryptamine, or DMT, which is a powerful hallucinogenic compound. If ingested orally it is not active because stomach acids destroy it (which is why it is usually smoked or snuffed). However, what makes the ayahuasca brew a chemical miracle is that the harmala alkaloids present in the ayahuasca root act as MAO inhibitors, allowing DMT to be ingested orally. Interestingly, DMT is also produced in the human brain.

<sup>13</sup> Brugmansia is a genus of plants in the family Solanaceae. Brugmansia contains high levels of scopolamine and other alkaloids.

with chacruna leaves, concocting a dark coloured liquid famous for its rancid smell. Once ingested, the participant feels strong physical effects that include nausea, vomiting and purging. A cathartic fantasy unfolds, which is perceived to restore both body and mind. This is why ayahuasca is sometimes called *la purga* –the purge. Besides cleansing the body, ayahuasca plays an important role in mending social relations as these visions represent a realm where the tensions and conflicts of the ‘real’ can be performed and resolved (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975: 105).

Ayahuasca has been used in the Amazon for millennia and its visions have influenced the art production of indigenous people. There is evidence of pre-Columbian psychedelic-inspired art in ancient statues and rock paintings (Stone-Miller 2004). The textile art of the Shipibo of Peru, the drawings of the Tukano of eastern Colombia and the Piro of Peru, and the art of the Canelos Quichua of Ecuador, are examples of indigenous psychedelic art. The artistic production of indigenous groups in the Amazon is a complex and vast subject that I will not attempt to describe here in detail<sup>14</sup>.

In the early 20th century –after the discovery of the rubber tree and the advent of the automobile –a rubber boom rocked the Amazon. Rubber production became an important source of income for colonists and adventurous capitalists from England. The rubber trade is marked with infamy due to the culture of terror it created. Debt peonage, torture, killings, and other forms of ritualistic violence that attempted to ‘civilize’ the indigenous population were common practices of the rubber trade. Michael Taussig (1984, 1991) has written extensively about this period, analyzing the economic and

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<sup>14</sup> See Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975, 1978, 1987), Belaunde (2012), Brabec de Mori and Mori Silvano de Brabec (2009), Gow (2012), Roe (1980), Whitten Jr. (1978).

mythic discourses that propagated this violence. Reconfiguring the European notion of the Wild Man, colonizers transformed the indigenous population into supernatural and dangerous creatures that carried in their bodies the very “essence of evil” (Taussig 1984: 470). The Amazon became a metaphor for the savagery of the human spirit and was plagued by colonial narratives that created an “uncertain reality out of fiction, a nightmarish reality in which the unstable interplay of truth and illusion becomes a social force of horrendous and phantasmic dimensions” (Taussig 1984: 492). The legacy of the rubber trade still haunts the Amazon.

One of the unintended consequences of the rubber trade was the development of *vegetalismo*. As a way to cope with the cataclysmic violence of this period, many mestizos turned to indigenous shamans for healing and training, marking the creation of a widespread syncretic healing practice (Beyer 2009: 229). The development of *vegetalismo* began ayahuasca’s gradual journey beyond the Amazon<sup>15</sup>. Syncretism is similar to Kapchan and Strong’s definition of the hybrid. They state that the hybrid is “...effected whenever two or more historically separate realms come together in any degree that challenges their socially constructed autonomy” (Kapchan and Strong 1999: 243). Ethnobotanist Dale Pendell, describes the position of Amazonian mestizo as:

Through surrounded by the wealth, the written history, and the trained armies of the colonialists, the mestizos, like all disenfranchised people, had no access to that power. But they did have access to the other half of their heritage –the Indians –

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<sup>15</sup> Ethnopharmacologist Dennis McKenna (2005) proposes that ayahuasca has an evolutionary drive to spread globally by associating with humans. Michael Pollan proposes a similar theory regarding the will of plants and their relation to humanity in his book *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World* (2001).

who, if not power, had the magic and the occult knowledge stereotypically associated with the Wild Man (145).

Luis Eduardo Luna suggests that Amazonian hybridization, and hybrid cultures in general, are byproducts of colonialism and globalization. These powerful processes introduce new images and symbols that later mix with traditional beliefs (Luna, Amaringo 1999: 36). This has resulted in a particular type of mestizo visual culture. I am especially interested in the work of Amazonian mestizo painters from Iquitos, Peru, due to their vivid and hybrid imagery that captures the complex narratives of the Amazon. Peruvian anthropologist Luisa Elvira Belaunde, in her article *Visions of Spaces in the Paintings of the Asháninka Sheripiare Noe Silva Morales* (2011: 365), defines this type of painting as a “hybrid art born from the coming together of Western figurative techniques, indigenous body painting and visionary shamanic experiences”. Usually self-taught, these artists, such as Pablo Amaringo (1938-2009), create paintings where social realities and the psychedelic worlds of Ayahuasca collide (Luna and Amaringo 1999: 10). The catalogues for the exhibitions *Poder Verde* (2009) and *Poder Verde II* (2011) curated by Iquitos-based artist Carlos Bendayan provide an insightful look into contemporary mestizo art. These artists, like Lu.Cu.Ma., Jose “Ashuco” Araujo, Carlos Bendayan, among others, share a rebellious quality in their work –exuberant and unapologetically crude, filled with humour and eroticism (Bendayan and Villar 2009: 3). Pablo Amaringo is a particularly interesting case study, not solely based on his position as a *vegetalista* and artist, but due to the fact that his work reveals much of the surrounding myth, ritual, and sacred music related to ayahuasca.



Figure 1. Pablo Amaringo *Ondas de la Ayahuasca* (2002, Gouache on Arches Paper, 57 x 76 cm)

### Ayahuasca Ceremonies and Phantasmagorias: Setting, Darkness, Anticipation

Ayahuasca is usually drunk in a ceremonial context. These rituals are an integral part of the ayahuasca experience and are described widely in anthropological literature (Reichel-Dolmatoff, Pendell, Beyer). There are certain commonalities, but the traditions, beliefs, and recipes can vary greatly among ethnic groups, families, and individuals. As a general rule these ceremonies are communal events that take place at night, often in a circle (Pendell 2010: 143). As Pendell, Beyer, and Dolmatoff report, before the ceremony starts, participants are full of anticipation. For days or even weeks, participants follow a

strict diet<sup>16</sup>, perform sexual abstinence and have other restrictions. Shamans and *vegetalistas* provide guidance and orchestrate elaborate events, in which they dance, smoke tobacco, chew ginger, spray perfumes, and sing *icaros*<sup>17</sup> to call their helping animal and plant spirits. These ceremonies are well-coordinated spectacles in their own right and they heighten the hallucinogenic effects of the ayahuasca brew. In this light Reichel-Dolmatoff (1987: 13) states: “it is clear that the entire ceremony and its individual ritual aspects consist of sensorially acted-out components and aim at the control of sensory manifestation.” Similarly, Pendell and Beyer point out that ‘setting’ and performance are of utmost importance in these rituals and indicate that many shamanic traditions are able to arrive at altered state of consciousness without the use of hallucinogens (Pendel 2010: 145).

Setting and expectation also play an important role in the spectacles of phantasmagorias. Film and media theorist Tom Gunning examines their history in eighteenth century Paris in his essay *The Long and the Short of It: Centuries of Projecting Shadows, From Natural Magic to the Avant-Garde* (2009). Gunning describes phantasmagorias as all-encompassing spectacles that combined atmosphere and fantastical projections that challenged the audience’s perception by engaging the senses. Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, the Parisian developer of phantasmagorias, hosted these nightly events in abandoned convents and monasteries, feeding the public’s mania for all-things Gothic. The audience navigated through rooms filled with ghostly projections,

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<sup>16</sup> *La dieta* is both a symbolical commitment to the ritual and a necessity as some foods interfere chemically with the MAO inhibitors found in ayahuasca and may cause physical complications.

<sup>17</sup> *Icaros* are songs used by *vegetalistas* and shamans during ayahuasca ceremonies. Each song is associated with a specific spirit.

eccentric paintings, mirrors, and strange music, like that of the maligned glass harmonica. The combination of sensorial stimuli within this dark setting created awe and terror in the audience, causing, in some cases, audience members to faint (Gunning 2009: 24-28). Film theorist Thomas Lamarre describes magic lanterns (a common element in phantasmagorias) as “a sorceress conjuring up the spirits of the dead, to regale and terrify spectators” (2011: 132). My installation work uses similar approaches in the construction of spaces that guide the spectator through externalized mental states.

Ayahuasca as Special Effect: “How beautiful. This is like a movie!”<sup>18</sup>

“Ayahuasca visions can be movingly beautiful –distant landscapes, other planets, brightly lit cities, crystal fountains in the midst of distant oceans, bright green leaves and raindrops on flowing water.” (247)

Stephan V. Beyer

Ayahuasca’s link to cinema and spectacle is not limited to elaborate settings. Colombian-German anthropologist, Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff (1978: 13), gives a detailed account of the nature of the visions and identifies two distinct phases. The first stage is characterized by the appearance of *phosphenes* (colorful abstract and geometric shapes) in the visual field. During the second phase, the participant is visited by entities and might feel the sensation of traveling to alien landscapes. Reichel-Dolmatoff states: “it is obvious then that, while the phosphine phase is neutrally based, the second, figurative phase is culturally conditioned and the visions consist of previously stored information

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<sup>18</sup> Luna recounts people saying this phrase after taking ayahuasca (quoted in Beyer 2009: 238).

which are projected upon the screen produced by the drug” (1987: 13)<sup>19</sup>.

What I find significant, especially for this project, is Reichel-Dolmatoff’s choice of words when describing these images, ‘*visions... are projected upon the screen of the drug.*’ This passage establishes a connection between ayahuasca visions and cinematic experiences, and Reichel-Dolmatoff is not alone in making these metaphorical associations. Stephan V. Beyer describes ayahuasca visions as having “a two-dimensional feel to them, like watching events unfold on a screen” (2009: 238). Beyer also reports of users sometimes describing the visions as cartoon-like or animations, or as being within “television or the movies –like “cinematographic films of a phantasmagoric nature”” (quoted in Beyer: 238). Luna, Pablo Amaringo, and young members of the Amazonian Shuar tribe describe ayahuasca in cinematic terms, as if they were watching a movie (Beyer: 238). For the Tukano tribe of eastern Colombia, ayahuasca reveals the hidden (and in a way a much more real) aspect of the world (Dolmatoff 1987: 11). Do psychedelic visions resemble the moving image or is it the other way around? Ayahuasca, like cinema and animation provides a way of seeing what is not there – either as a result of the particularities of human vision (the persistence of images in the eye make way for the illusion of movement in film), or through chemically induced activity in the visual cortex of the human brain. Certainly, some of the language seems to overlap (dreams, illusion, magic) when describing both.

Scholars like Bukatman, Utterson, and Gunning have also pointed out the

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<sup>19</sup> Luna agrees with Dolmatoff on the role that culture plays in shaping the visionary experience. However, newer research (Shannon 2003) complicates Reichel-Dolmatoff and Luna’s assumptions that secondary visual elements are purely culturally determined. Some visions are consistent cross-culturally – reports of jaguars, giant serpents, anthropomorphic entities, and a sense of being eaten or engulfed seem to be common, even if they are interpreted differently.

similarities of the special effects of cinema and altered states of consciousness. The sense of delirium, kinesis, kaleidoscope vision, and shifting perspective of special effects and the immersive spaces of expanded cinema (IMAX, planetariums, phantasmagorias) are irrational pleasures (Bukatman 2003: 114) that mirror the overwhelming nature of psychedelic states<sup>20</sup>.

### Animation, Cinema and Ayahuasca as Immersive Space

Ayahuasca visions can remain as two-dimensional images but they also have the potential to become immersive environments for the advanced user. Amaringo explains that “it is only when the person begins to hear and see as if he were *inside the scene*, not as something presented to him, that he is able to discover many things” (quoted in Beyer: 238). Ayahuasca visions are ruptures into animated spaces that break into our world, allowing the user to enter what biophysicist Clifford Pickover describes as a “completely different universe, a type of DMT hyperspace” (quoted in Beyer 2009: 238). This association with navigable space links ayahuasca visions and moving images, as illustrated in Bukatman’s analysis of cinema as a bridge between material and immaterial worlds (2003: 123), allowing for the creation of cinematic spaces that show an “overwhelming spatiality that is physically penetrated by the body of the subject” (2003: 31). This notion also resonates with Youngblood’s assertion that Expanded Cinema reveals a way of ‘navigating inner space’ (Utterson 2001: 118).

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<sup>20</sup> There are significant examples of psychedelia in “mainstream” cinema: the cosmic hallway of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the hallucinatory experiments with psychedelics in *Altered States* (1980), and the DMT-fuelled visions of Tokyo and the afterlife in *Enter the Void* (2009).

## Fantasy and Time Reconfigured

Additional connections between cinematic spaces and ayahuasca can be found in the way both are able to challenge linear readings of time. In ayahuasca visions, the past and the future coexist in a single moment –bringing to the foreground of consciousness past traumas, ancient mythologies, futuristic cities, and alien encounters. Ayahuasca produces *time dilation*, the experience of time slowing down (Beyer 2009: 233). For the Tukano, ayahuasca is a tool that reveals the flexible nature of time. During their visions, participants return to a cosmic uterus, and there they are able to witness acts of birth, death, and rebirth at an accelerated pace (Dolmatoff 1978: 13). Film and animation similarly pose thought-provoking challenges to normal readings of time. For media artist David Clark, animation is particularly interesting because in it time is “constructed, not captured” (Clark 2005: 141). Film theorist, Bliss Cua Lim (2009) presents a compelling analysis of time within fantastic cinema in her book *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*. She states:

On the one hand, the cinema as clockwork apparatus belongs to the regime of the modern homogenous time; on the other, fantastic narratives strain against the logic of clock and calendar, unhinging the unicity of the present by insisting on the survival of the past or the jarring coexistence of other times (11).

The reconfiguration of time in both ayahuasca and animation is particularly important for my project. This suspension allows for ancient modes of thinking – like the concept of animism – to reenter the present<sup>21</sup>. Ayahuasca mythology is highly animistic due, in part,

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<sup>21</sup> Animism is an ancient but prevailing belief system where spirits inhabit non-human things.

to the hallucinatory quality of DMT<sup>22</sup>. Legions of spirits, angels, and fairies<sup>23</sup> inhabit rivers, rocks, and forests (Beyer 2009: 112). In addition, Bukatman makes a strong case for animation as one of the last refuges for animism in the modern world. He states,

Comics and cartoons are bastions of plasmatic and animistic energies and, under the guise of their implied address to children, are one of the most significant repositories of such “primitive” beliefs in the modern world (2012: 13)

Animism brings to life simple drawings or objects in animation. This magic is present in the work of stop-motion animators Jan Svankmajer and the Brothers Quay, who create fantastical narratives with puppets and everyday objects. The concepts of animism, special effects, and the reconfiguration of time and space inform the way I have constructed *Tranquilandia*.

### Contemporary Artists

I would like to acknowledge contemporary artists working within the field of expanded animation that have influenced my work. South African artist William Kentridge, recognized internationally for his animations and installations that deal with the memory of Apartheid, provides a workable model for animation as a way to reconcile collective trauma. In his work, memory and time are deconstructed through the simple technique of altering drawings while filming. Kentridge’s animations are expressive and poetic, and construct subtle narratives that hint at past events of a troubled country. His

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<sup>22</sup> DMT usually presents the user with entities.

<sup>23</sup> Do to its syncretic nature; several European folk creatures are present in *vegetalismo* mythology.

work is also significant for my project because it is not a direct representation of history, but rather it is an act of translation through dreams and fantasy. “You cannot face the rock head on: the rock always wins”, Kentridge explains, referring to violence as a rock that needs to be approached through subtler means (Krauss 2005: 122).

The work of Ed Pien is also important for this project. Pien is a Canadian-Taiwanese artist whose varied practice includes drawing, sculpture, and installation. His work explores the relationship between the body, mythology and the grotesque. Pien’s large paper installations (which often feature video) are imposing yet delicate oneiric spaces (Jansma et al. 2005).

Nalini Malini is an Indian artist whose work encompasses drawing, multimedia installations, shadow plays, and experimental theatre. Exploring and reconfiguring traditional Indian and European iconography, she creates ambiguous narratives that reference violence and colonialism. Her multilayered work is characterized by baroque excess, where the fantastical and the psychological become allegories for political histories (McEvelley et al. 2007).

I also recognize the importance of Stan Vanderbeek and John Whitney. Both are experimental animators associated with the Art and Technology movement of the 1960’s. They pioneered the use of early computer graphics, with a distinct psychedelic approach (Utterson 2011: 73) that has allowed me to link the historic roots of computer animation with altered states of consciousness.

## Chapter 3: Development of *Tranquilandia*

### I. Research Questions

- How can my interdisciplinary practice engage the illusionistic qualities of animation and the psychedelic aspects of visionary mestizo art?
- How can the fantastical be brought into the everyday, either with animation or ayahuasca?
- Besides mirroring the stages of psychedelic experiences, can animation offer a deeper understanding of psychedelic states?
- How can animation and fantasy be an effective strategy for the representation of violent histories?

### II. Methodology

One of the benefits of having an interdisciplinary research and studio practices is having several methodologies at my disposal. Within these larger concerns, my methodology is practice-based, and dependent on methods from digital animation, visual reference collection, field note taking, and reflexivity.

Working within an animation methodology, I develop an initial concept influenced by my personal background and experiences. I continue by doing significant research on this concept (in this case, a literature review) and by collecting photographs that serve as a repository of visual information. The result of this research is the development of an image database that serves as inspiration for my drawings and animations. The *Tranquilandia* database is composed of images of Amazonian

vegetation, fauna, and indigenous and mestizo art. I have gathered images from Reichel-Dolmatoff's collection of hallucinogenic art from the Tukanos (1970, 1984), as well as from two thoroughly documented volumes of Amaringo's paintings (Luna and Amaringo 1999, and Charing, Cloudsley and Amaringo 2011), Shipibo textile art, catalogues from the *Poder Verde* exhibits, and from the book *Hybrid Andean Baroque* (2011), which is an exceptional catalogue of syncretic architecture in Peru and Bolivia. I have also collected newspaper photographs of the Tranquilandia site. The database also contains botanical, zoological, and landscape images of the Amazon. Some of these images are from botanical species I have grown myself<sup>24</sup>. Cultivating these plants not only provides live models to draw from, but for me represent a tangible connection to the tropics.

This catalogue is incredibly useful because it acts as a visual network of distinct associations and narratives that are used for the creation of fast sketches. This method is similar to visual field notation as described by the anthropologist Carol Hendrickson in her essay *Visual Field Notes: Drawing Insights in the Yucatán* (2008.) Hendrickson (2008: 11) sees visual field notes as a place where subjectivity, cultural perceptions of art, indexical representation, anecdotal histories, and global theories can co-exist. During this stage, I rigorously go back and forth between the photographs and my sketches, generating "insight and understanding" (Hendrickson 2008: 117). This exercise is an attempt to balance a need to be faithful to the original designs while at the same time allowing myself to be intuitive and creative.

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<sup>24</sup> Some of the species I have grown are brugmansias, daturas, morning glories, plantain trees, and bomareas.

Through the iterative process of making these images, I interpret the visual data; creating what Alevsson and Skoldberg call a “fusion of seemingly different phenomena” (2000: 251). This process parallels Lev Manovich’s description of pastiches and quotation in the digital age. Manovich links these processes to the aesthetics of postmodernism and the process of digital compositing, stating that: “one operation is used to select elements and styles from the “database of culture”; another is used to assemble them into new objects” (2005: 54). This method of conversion is less a form of appropriation but more of an attempt of creating, through my own subjectivity and artistic intent, new visual forms that are in dialogue with larger histories and cultures. I do not shy away from letting my own idiosyncrasies affect the work. Through reflexive methods, I let my memories, dreams, and personal experiences influence the design of these images. Once this period of creation is completed I evaluate the visual material, select a few pieces, and refine them further. After a sketch is finished I decide what medium best suits it (either animation or a large-scale drawing). Sometimes one single image may be expressed through different mediums, allowing for the discovery of nuances and new meanings within my work. The result is a hybrid artwork that references the process of syncretism – actively choosing, curating, and mixing iconography, both subjective and referential.

Central to my animation methodology is the development of a storyboard. A storyboard is a quick but effective visual representation of the action, story, and pacing of the final animation<sup>25</sup> (Khan 2002: 4). I use this method because it allows me to evaluate

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<sup>25</sup> Developed by Disney in the 1920’s, storyboards also include colour schemes, camera angles, and movement. Through storyboards and other methods animation production became a much more structured process meant to make it more cost- and time- efficient Muqem Khan (2002: 2).

the flow, timing, and editing, while giving me an opportunity to implement quick corrections. Once the animation and the drawings are complete, I produce small models to evaluate how the drawings, projections, and shadows interact within the exhibition space. These preliminary exercises provide useful information regarding design issues that might arise in the space. During this period I have informal discussions with viewers and analyse how they move and respond throughout the space. This provides me with further information regarding the design of the space and can lead to small changes before it is finalized. The piece, however, remains an organic entity that grows and evolves, ready to move to different venues.

### III. Research and Creation

Working within an interdisciplinary context, my studio practice has provided me with an opportunity to develop hybrid art forms that incorporate elements from my various artistic endeavours. My aim is to use installation's immersive quality and animation's connection to the fantastical to create spaces that reference the visionary experiences induced by ayahuasca. By doing this, I am seeking to find ruptures between worlds, letting the fantastical creep into the 'real'. The installation *Tranquilandia* is the culmination of research done during this MFA program, but its seeds have been long gestating. Before I describe this project, I have to step back and retrace my steps.

### Little Islands

As previously stated, I am interested in the aesthetics of syncretic artistic practices. It was within an animation framework that I was able to explore this concept. An early but significant attempt to produce a syncretic animation is the short *Little Islands* (Figure 2). *Little Islands* is a light-hearted piece that is both a dream and a quick stylistic journey through the colours of Peruvian street advertisement<sup>26</sup>, Bolivian pagan shrines, and psychedelic art. Throughout the animation, mountains, stone idols, and other geological formations pulsate with life, transforming into breathing biology. *Little Islands* is noteworthy because it allowed me to explore the concepts of syncretism and animism, which are the conceptual foundations of my thesis project.

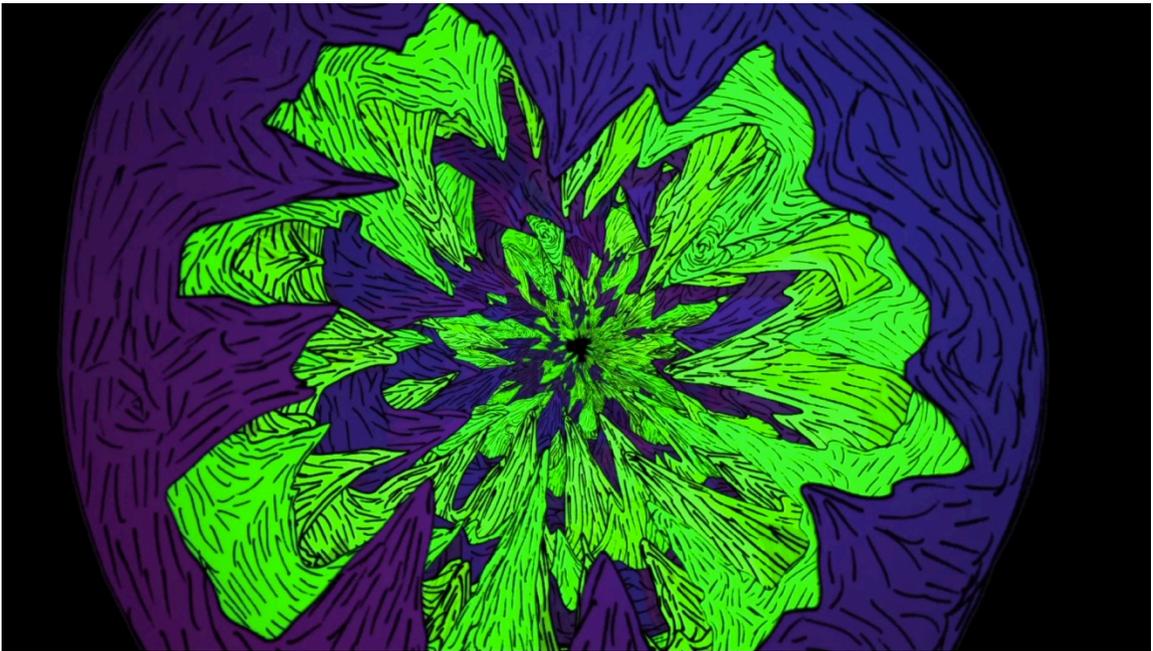


Figure 2. *Little Islands* (2012, video still.) Artist's still.

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<sup>26</sup> *Chicha* is a style of printed street advertisement easily recognizable for its use of bright neon colours against a black background.

## Space and Movement

As a computer animator I use software such as Autodesk Maya, Cinema 4D, and AfterEffects<sup>27</sup>. In these programs, space is an important element that has to be engaged with and conceptualized within a 2D screen<sup>28</sup>. A large part of my career has been devoted to the design of impossible spaces. An interesting aspect of 3D animation software is its use of artificial cameras to navigate and record these environments. I use digital cameras not only to explore these systems but as a tactic to reveal greater narratives within the animation. My objective is to bring some of these strategies into my installation work. Norman Klein's concept of 'scripted spaces' usefully outlines some of the issues that can arise when creating cinematic environments. Klein offers a critique of baroque churches, Las Vegas, and other designed spaces that use optical illusions, special effects, and metaphors as a way to sustain power structures (Klein 2004: 42). In these immersive spaces, bodies are controlled and minds are numbed. My interest in using scripted spaces is not aimed at sustaining hegemonic power structures, but at creating open-ended environments that ignite the imagination. Important for my work is animation scholar Aylish Wood's analysis of animation's ability to transform spaces in her essay *Re-Animating Space* (2006). Wood states that in animation, space is not simply the setting for action but it gains agency and it is capable of being fluid, transformative, and multiple. Animated space allows for "...encounters that reveal the multiplicity of meanings from either the perspective of chronology or different points of view" (Wood 139). My aim is

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<sup>27</sup> AfterEffects is widely used as a postproduction software, also includes 3D environments.

<sup>28</sup> The screen is usually divided in four different viewing angles.

to activate audience participation through movement and to instigate the discovery of hidden narratives.

### *Tres Esquinas*

My installation work prior to OCAD consisted of papier-mâché sculptures of imaginary creatures suspended in space. I constructed these sculptures with wire, paint, and tracing paper. I choose tracing paper over regular paper because once it is treated with gloss medium and shellac it becomes a translucent and solid material that is a perfect substitute for the body parts of insects, parasites, and other abject creations. I decided to continue working with these materials while developing a method to integrate them with video and animation. This proved to be a challenge. Could the sculptures simply be presented alongside a projection without appearing as two disconnected elements? Could proximity make up for material disparity? Finding a proper solution for this problem was crucial. The answer came through studio experimentation and my practice-based research. I had a renewed interest in drawing and spent long hours in the studio working on colour ink drawings. I decided to draw on tracing paper and treat it with shellac as I usually do with my papier-mâché sculptures. The drawings became sculptural and because of their transparency became interesting projection screens. This development was exciting because I recognized a parallel between these flat sculptures arranged in space and the technique of 2.5D animation<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> 2.5D animation is an animation technique that uses 2D images in a 3D space, creating a visual look similar to early theatre design.

*Tres Esquinas* (Figure 3) is named after a small municipality that served for many years as a rubber station deep within Caquetá. Through paper, projections, and sound, *Tres Esquinas* builds an otherworldly landscape inhabited by the dead, frozen within the trees and plants of the jungle. The paper trees are rendered using a similar visual style to that of the painting style of Pablo Amaringo –in particular his characteristic use of *horror vacui*<sup>30</sup>. An animation is projected on the drawings, imitating their shapes and patterns, creating optical illusions that blur the distinction of what is projection and what is sculpture. The soundtrack is a mixture of nature sounds and echoes of a distorted *icaró*. My aim with *Tres Esquinas* is to make visible the traces of the violence left by the rubber boom.

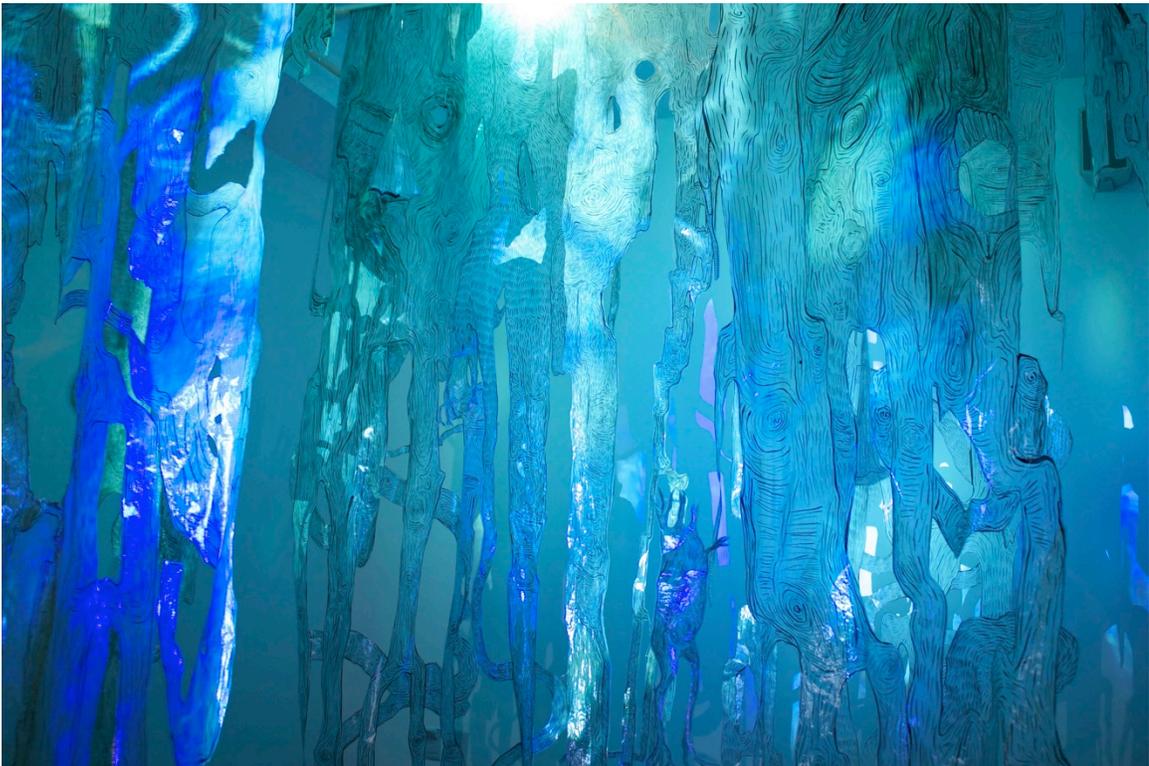


Figure 3. *Tres Esquinas* (2012, animation, video projector, paper and ink). Artist's still.

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<sup>30</sup> Horror vacui is used to describe a visual style where empty space becomes full of detail.

### Tranquilandia

The installation *Tranquilandia* (Figure 4), my graduate thesis show, is in many ways a companion show to *Tres Esquinas*<sup>31</sup>. As companion pieces, they reflect both the pleasant and nightmarish aspects of the ayahuasca experience. While *Tres Esquinas* is quiet and haunting, *Tranquilandia* marches toward the uncanny and weird. *Tranquilandia* is a simulation of a jungle – a scripted space, where “nature is invaded by the artificial” (Klein 2004: 39). *Tranquilandia* becomes a metaphorical place and an abstraction of the many narratives associated with the Amazon. Seen through the filter of a hallucination, it is a feverish dream that combines pieces of its violent history, its culture, and its landscape.

Using my image database and sketches, my drawings and animations reference several of Amaringo’s decorative patterns, fantastical creatures and cities. I am keen to incorporate the way in which design elements in Amaringo’s paintings all seem interconnected: the vegetation, spirits, people, and animals are all manifestations of the same energy<sup>32</sup>. Likewise, I use Tukano patterns and images of their mythical creatures, like the Boraro and the Master of Animals<sup>33</sup>. *Tranquilandia*’s vegetation is strange, almost insect like. These plants are aggressive, acting like a spider’s web waiting for prey

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<sup>31</sup> In relation to *Tres Esquinas* my drawing technique is more refined and cohesive. I am also implementing procedures that have improved the look and the functionality of the drawings. In some instances, I use mylar instead of tracing paper.

<sup>32</sup> Before I start drawing I use different colour ink washes on the paper. Once the paper is dry, several pathways of colour are left which I use as part of the design elements in the drawings. I see this as a tactic to emphasize the interconnectedness of the iconography with the materials, as if they were ghostly apparitions emanating from space.

<sup>33</sup> The Master of Animals, a central figure in Tukano mythology, governs the animal spirit world and may cause afflictions if not appeased before an animal is killed. The Boraro is a dangerous spirit that inhabits forest clearings while surrounded by blue morpho butterflies.

to fall into their tangled biology. In *Tranquilandia*, plants are active characters, almost ready to pull their roots out of the dirt and walk (a scenario depicted in the animation.) Hybrid creatures that resemble piranhas, pirarucus<sup>34</sup>, electric eels, poisonous snakes, and parasites accompany these monstrous trees.



Figure 4. *Tranquilandia* (2013, animation, video projector, paper and ink). Artist's still.

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<sup>34</sup> Pirarucus are large Amazonian fish capable of jumping out of the water.

## The Animation

“Cinematic images are indeed full and superbly weird: they are dreams that pull us towards the uncanny and the utopian” (13)

Bukatman, 2003

The overarching narrative of the animation is meant to reflect the different stages of the ayahuasca experience<sup>35</sup>. The animation starts in darkness – an ode to the anticipation at the beginning of the ayahuasca ritual. Slowly, sounds and phosphine-like visuals can be seen moving across the frame. The patterns appear and disappear quickly, filling the screen with bright and disorienting flashes. These intense and abstract colour fields reference the experimental and psychedelic animations of Stan Vanderbeerk and John Whitney. Eventually, these patterns subside. From the darkness, small tree creatures march towards the camera, revealing an otherworldly jungle (Figure 5). A crystalline city appears in the horizon. The colour scheme changes to the neon colours against a black background, which is common in mestizo art. The camera slowly moves towards this city, constructed of both mineral and biological shapes. Once the camera reveals the complete infrastructure of the city, everything collapses. An overwhelming whirlwind of colour, branches, roots, and strange ecology overtakes the screen, mirroring *Tranquilandia*'s ultimate fate – being burnt down in a military raid. The figures and sounds recede and the exhibition space falls silent. The soundtrack combines jungle noises and low frequency sounds that create an uneasy delirium.

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<sup>35</sup> See page 13



Figure 5. *Tranquilandia Animation* (2013, video still). Artist's still.

*Tres Esquinas* and *Tranquilandia* combine material and digital elements that refer to the convergence of biological and spiritual worlds. Both are inhabited by paper sculptures of imaginary plants and animals lit by a projection, as momentarily possessed by the spirits of ayahuasca lore. Animation works in this case, and as an ode to Bukatman's correlation between animation and animism, as a type of magic – a projected light that carries the potential to bring simple materials to life. The first stage of ayahuasca visions are sometimes described as being superimposed on reality, like projections on objects (Beyer 2009: 246). This relationship is also reciprocal – the drawings provide materiality, and a chance for the animation to exit the single channel screen. This association plays on Rudolph Arnheim's analysis of the projected image as existing somewhere in between two and three-dimensions (quoted in Wood: 144). These are the relationships that

*Tranquilandia* is built upon: the immaterial and the material, the flat and the sculptural, the digital and the analogue, the jungle and the spirit world, the fantastical and the nightmarish.

## V. Ethical considerations

My work starts a dialogue about appropriation and preservation of visual traditions. It calls into question my position and access to these images. Anthropologist Paula Callus has written on contemporary animation produced in non-western countries and the complex relationships they create. Outsiders and insiders might judge animators and their work alike, either exoticizing them or questioning their authenticity. Callus describes non-western animation as filled with ‘minefields of discourses on authenticity, exoticization, myth and identity’ (2012: 125). These issues are at play in *Tranquilandia* and I do not shy away from them. As a person with roots in the Colombian south, but born and raised in Bogotá and later transplanted to Canada, I have certain privileges that disconnect me from Amazonian mestizo artists. Issues of identity are always murky, especially in Latin America<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> For further discussion of mestizo identity as a cultural and socioeconomic construction refer to Marisol De La Cadena’s essay *Are “Mestizos” Hybrids? The Conceptual Politics of Andean Identities* (2005) and Beyer’s chapter “Being Mestizo” (2009: 293)

#### Chapter IV: Conclusion

Throughout *Amazonian Visions* I have outlined several theoretical and practical approaches that connect the ayahuasca experience with expanded animation. I have done so in part by analyzing their histories and identifying several shared characteristics: the importance of setting, their association with magic and animism, their distortions of time and space, their navigability, and their capacity to act as bridges between worlds.

With *Tranquilandia* I offer a way of thinking equally about these two fields of knowledge. *Tranquilandia* adapts the language of phantasmagorias and mestizo art to investigate social realities and the fantastical. This expanded animation speaks to the persistence of the fantastical, even if frightening or uncomfortable, or tainted by the real. *Tranquilandia* is a material and a digital construction that does not offer simple answers regarding the implications this conceptual pairing. It is however a significant step in what will be a larger body of work investigating these issues.

Animation and ayahuasca are respectively optical and biochemical technologies that reveal invisible worlds and give an insight into the malleability of human perception. At a time when digital media can transform the world, further investigation surrounding media technologies and consciousness seems crucial.

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