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Becoming *moita*

Pedro Urano

I

Every year, in the mountainous region of Rio de Janeiro, residents of the Macaé Valley gather in the village of Rio Bonito de Cima, where they craft costumes entirely covered in plant foliage to play carnival. Since 2016, I have been taking part in this festival, locally known as the "carnaval da moita" (bush carnival), making and animating costumes sewed with vegetal leaves. Each costume is made with only one plant species, emphasizing the perception of the chosen species through a strategy of grouping and accumulation, reminiscent of the techniques employed by the Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle-Marx.

Crafting a "moita" (translated as shrubbery) costume requires manual skill, patience, and deep knowledge of the forest and its inhabitants. One must know where to find the chosen plant species in sufficient quantities, understand its ecological relationships with other plants, animals, and fungi (since collecting foliage often inadvertently gathers lichens, ants, beetles and spiders), and work quickly before the leaves wilt and compromise the costume.

II

The foliated human is a paradoxical figure. Is it an animal? Is it a plant? Does it belong to the landscape, or does it act upon it?

Facing the question of mobility—perhaps the most decisive bifurcation in

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the evolution of animals and plants—the animated vegetal seems to embody an ambivalent response, as if it was possible to merge into a single being the complementary aptitudes of animals and plants. Movement through space, whether for nourishment or to escape imminent threats, was, after all, the fundamental choice that led to subsequent developments like the central nervous system or the emergence of vision in vertebrates. For philosopher Henri Bergson (2005, p. 122), the capacity to move determines consciousness, intelligence, and the spiritual dimension of being.

Conversely, the decision to remain rooted in the soil gives rise to the distributed structure of plants. As Stefano Mancuso (2019, p. 95) notes, "if a plant had a brain, two lungs, two kidneys, a liver, and so on, it would be destined to succumb to predators—even tiny ones, such as bugs—because an attack on any one of its vital organs would impair the plant's function. That is why plants do not possess the same organs as animals—not because, as one might think, they are unable to perform the same functions".

This constitutional difference between animals and plants manifests in adaptations so distinct that they are sometimes mutually incomprehensible. The absence of recognizable structures in plants that could be analogously compared to similar structures in animals has rendered plants invisible to the modern sensibility. "We consider them mere parts of the landscape," says Mancuso.

This invisibility stems from a perceptual framework that privileges animal-like forms and functions, leaving the complex, distributed, and non-centralized systems of plants outside the scope of modern

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understanding. By failing to see plants as active, intentional beings with their own forms of intelligence and relationality, the modern subject reduces them to passive background elements—a static backdrop against which human and animal dramas unfold. This oversight reflects a broader anthropocentric bias that marginalizes non-animal life and obscures the dynamic, interconnected vitality of the vegetal world.

So, does the "moita" belong to the landscape, or does it act upon it, as we humans commonly understand ourselves to do? Because, well, if it belongs to the landscape, the landscape itself becomes dynamic, moving, animated. The walking bush, in its persistent indistinction, reminds us that the landscape is alive. The environment, objectified by the Enlightenment and extractivism as a universal, disenchanted, passive and mute Nature, nonetheless, breathes.

III

Over time, I realized that the leaf-clad figure points to another mode of being and relating to the forest. It depicts an attitude entirely distinct from the separation between beholder and environment characteristic of the modern imaginary. I refer to the visual regime that presents a world divided into two dimensions—one mental, pertaining to the subject, and the other physical, pertaining to objective reality, to Nature.

This modern way of seeing provided symbolic support for the transformation of our relationship with the environment, progressively objectified as a resource to be extracted and as real estate capital. The

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contrast between vast expanses of land and the reduced presence of native populations in representations of colonial regions produced the fantasy of a horizon to be occupied—and territory to be conquered—sustained by the centripetal force of the vanishing points of linear perspective.

Representations of colonial landscapes by European travelers followed the reconfiguration of conquered territories into zones of mineral and agricultural extraction, a process that almost always began with the total destruction of the native landscape. Depictions of the forest often accompanied its felling, serving as a kind of *memento necare* (remember your lethality)—a *memento mori* for non-humans; now, it's them that will die.

In the tradition of the bushmen carnival, the distance between observer and landscape, prevalent in colonial-extractivist imaginaries, is replaced by an idea of radical immersion in the environment, a *metaphysics of mixture* (Coccia 2018), in which every individual is necessarily related to many others.

However, care must be taken to understand this opposition between distancing and immersion, identified when contrasting the observer's relationship to the environment in colonial imaginaries with the tradition of the "moita", as a *counter-visuality* (Mirzoeff 2011).

The perspective experienced by one who becomes a leaf-clad figure is not produced against Cartesian perspectivism[1] but harks back to a much older imaginary. It is extractivist visuality that establishes its contradiction to the immersive, vegetal way of seeing associated with the leaf-clad human, and not the other way around.

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The visuality of the "moita" is thus less associated with a counter-history than with *another* history, one that extractivist visuality represses in order to exist. Its positive character—the fact that it does not constitute a reaction, but the affirmation of a different and older path—aligns it with what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) calls History 2, when describing, in his critique of historicism, two modes of history under capitalism.

According to Chakrabarty, History 1 is the past evoked by capitalism as its condition of possibility, the set of antecedents that resulted in the emergence of the capitalist mode of production. History 2, on the other hand, encompasses everything that, while preceding capitalism, does not contribute to its emergence or reproduction and must therefore be subordinated (through violence) to modern historicism.

While proclaiming that every social or cultural phenomenon is historically determined, modern historicism simultaneously establishes Europe as the birthplace of modernity (and capitalism) and historical time as the measure of cultural distance between the West and its others (Chakrabarty 2000, p. 7). The history of Europe is thus presented as a meta-narrative, a universal model of development with well-defined stages—a model that, in the colonies, legitimized the idea of civilization.

History 2, therefore, consists of narratives that account for other paths, other *possibilities of community* among beings that History 1 tries, at all costs, to assimilate into the modern project as something "primitive," "archaic," "outdated," or, ultimately, "barbaric" and "savage". History 2 thus constantly interrupts the totalizing force of History 1.

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The vegetal costumes are interspecific assemblages whose production process acts as a vector for recognizing relationships between different forms of life—they make visible not only the dizzying diversity of beings coexisting in the forests of Macaé Valley but also the alliances they cultivate among themselves. These costumes establish a *biocentric perspective*, one that extractivist visuality necessarily opposes. It is, after all, the vital energy of beings, otherwise entirely dedicated to the possibilities of living, that is appropriated by Capital. The will that animates beings to realize the potentialities they carry within themselves, however, resists capitalist appropriation.

Chakrabarty (2000, 60) notes how Marx sees in the origin of all resistance to capitalism a somewhat mysterious force he simply calls "life". "Life, in all its biological/conscious capacity for willful activity (the "many-sided play of muscles"), is the excess that capital, for all its disciplinary procedures, always needs but can never quite control or domesticate."

I still need to further my research on the relationships between certain narratives of History 2 and the anticolonial counter-visualities discussed by Nick Mirzoeff. I think, however, that the most effective counter-visualities are often linked to older, autochthonous imaginaries associated with History 2.

Rio Bonito de Cima, Satriano di Lucania[2]*, Carnival of 2025.*

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Metamorfose vegetal | Vegetal metamorphosis. 6 color photographs, 2020.

The overalls used in offshore oil and gas extraction are the preferred *medium* for crafting the vegetal costumes of the "carnaval da moita". A choice justified by the anthropomorphic, one-piece design of these overalls, which allows for better visualization of the final costume, which also provides good protection for the wearer—some plant species can cause irritation after prolonged contact with the skin.

The use of overalls in crafting vegetal costumes[3] also alludes not only to the vegetal nature of oil itself, derived from the fossilization of unicellular planktonic plants, but also to the region's vicinity to the birthplace of deepwater oil extraction in Brazil. The city of Macaé, known as the "national capital of petroleum" is located at the mouth of the Macaé river, which originates in the forest where the "carnaval da moita" takes place.

In the series, as the foliage climbs the body, the luminosity of the environment weakens. This aspect points to the time required to create the costume and the nocturnal nature of the festival. The "moitas" of Rio Bonito only appear at night.

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Looking backwards, we might say that
in the beginning was the leaf.

Ailton Krenak[4]

Filantropo, Filodendro | Philanthropist, philodendron. Diptych, mineral print on cotton paper, 2021.

Native to Mesoamerica, the Swiss cheese plant (*Monstera deliciosa*), with its large, perforated, heart-shaped leaves and unmistakable design, has become emblematic of the tropical imaginary cultivated in the temperate zones of central capitalism.[5]

This epiphytic species[6] with aerial roots exhibits negative phototropism when on the ground, orienting its growth toward the darker areas of the forest until it finds a trunk to climb, at which point it reverses direction and grows toward the light. The resulting form—a trunk hidden beneath foliage—evokes the vegetal costumes produced in Macaé Valley. The plant's taxonomic genus, *Monstera*, also refers to the hidden double that haunts the Darwinian concept of species: the "monstrosity", or simply put, the monster.[7]

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Vegetal vitruviano | Vitruvian plant. Circular inscription on 35mm film, 2025.

I crafted this costume using a bamboo native to China but well-adapted to Macaé Valley known as Taquarinha (*Bambusa textilis gracilis*). I then photographed this "moita" on the rocks by the river, near Roncador waterfall, on a misty morning.

After developing the photo, I scratched a circle into the film itself using the metal tip of a school compass. The resulting image seems to declare that what modernity always positioned in the background can now return to the center, and vice versa.

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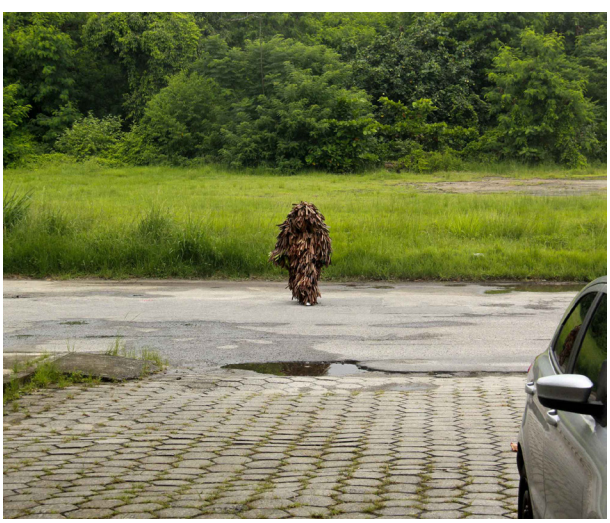
Thus, against the background of the continuum, the monster provides an account, as though in caricature, of the genesis of differences.

Michel Foucault[8]

Monstro | Monster. Leucena and cotton on human body, 2022. Apparition at Rio de Janeiro Federal University's School of Fine Arts.



The White lead tree (*Leucaena leucocephala*) is a leguminous tree native to Central America. The symbiosis of its roots with bacteria of the genus *Rhizobium* (which enable excellent atmospheric nitrogen fixation) and fungi of the genera *Glomus* and *Gigaspora* (which facilitate phosphorus solubilization) allows the plant to improve the quality of soils poor in organic matter. Additionally, since the White lead tree remains green during the dry season and exhibits rapid growth in tropical climates, it was initially widely used in reforestation projects.

White lead trees are found throughout Fundão Island, home to the main campus of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). The clusters of flat, brown pods that contrast with the tree's green canopy are the striking feature that makes the species unmistakable presence in the landscape noticeable. It is difficult to determine whether the plant was deliberately used in the reforestation following the landfill that created the island or if its ubiquity is due to the species' aggressive proliferation.

Indeed, when mature, the White lead tree's pods open longitudinally and eject their seeds, which disperse on the ground. These "seed rains" occur year-round, forming a persistent seed bank awaiting favorable conditions to germinate. Recent studies accuse the species of weakening biome resilience by promoting flora homogenization due to its high competitive capacity. Its abundant natural regeneration, especially in open areas and farmland, compromises ecosystem structure and quality. The White lead tree's capacity for proliferation is monstrous.

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The species exhibits a feral dynamic—initially promoted by humans, whether directly (in reforestation projects) or indirectly (through deforestation), it has spread far beyond initial plans and now threatens particularly delicate biomes, such as islands and archipelagos.

Upon encountering many White lead trees in the grove in front of the UFRJ School of Fine Arts, I decided to craft a vegetal costume using not foliage but fruits—the elongated pods containing the elliptical, flattened, and shiny seeds characteristic of the species.

As the costume matures, it transforms. The pods turn from green to brown, then open longitudinally, one after another, revealing their somewhat golden interior and dispersing their seeds as I walk. The activation of the costume amplifies the White lead tree's proliferation across the island.

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For myself, I never hear anyone talk about revolution without thinking of the conversation that G. K. Chesterton tells us he had, on landing in France, witha Calais innkeeper. The innkeeper complained bitterly of the harshness of life and the increasing lack of freedom: "It's hardly worthwhile", concluded the innkeeper, "to have had three revolutions only to end up every time just where you started." Whereupon Chesterton pointed out to him that a revolution, in the true sense of the word, was the movement of an object in motion that described a closed curve, and thus always returned to the point from where it had started...

Igor Stravinsky[9]

The video plays with the elusive nature of plant movement (from a human perspective) and the construction of movement from static images, central to the technical apparatus of cinema.

The images alternate between two situations. In the first, an animated plant (*Monstera deliciosa*) begins to rotate on a rock during the day—a body in revolution. The second scene, shot at night, features another "moita" made of Taquarinha leaves (*Bambusa textilis gracilis*). The nocturnal scene is illuminated by intermittent flashes that slice the movement into static images.

The next scene, again daytime, adopts the rhythm of the light beam from the previous scene. Each frame of the image is followed by two black frames without any image. This time, the animated plant wields a red flag, an emblematic image of the idea of social revolution. However, it is not the flag of a political party or social movement but the Brazilian national flag dyed with a solution made from the ground core of a Brazilwood (*Paubrasilia echinata*) tree trunk.

When we return to the nocturnal scene, the leaf-clad figure ceases its movement. To neutralize the intermittent light, I excluded the black frames and juxtaposed only the illuminated ones, creating a fragile illusion of continuity and rest. A cut loops back to the beginning of the daytime sequence—the same frame value, the same posture of rest. The dark gaps that compose movement in cinema are now less evident, interspersed in their conventional position between each of the 24 images that make up one second of a film projection.

Revolução da planta | Plant revolution. Color video loop, 2021. *Bandeira brasil | Brazil flag*. Natural brazilwood dye on cotton, 2019.

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1 Martin Jay (1988) identifies as "Cartesian perspectivism" this typically modern way of seeing, an output of the interplay between Renaissance linear perspective and Cartesian subjective rationality, which presents a world divided between nature and culture.

2 The author thanks the "moitas" participants Emanuel Salustro, Josimar Muller Tavares, Marcella Arruda, Pedro Kiua and Rocco Perrone.

3 The offshore coverall RF NR10, standard for the Brazilian state-owned oil company Petrobrás, is made with 100% cotton fabric, ensuring the complete vegetal nature of the foliated costume produced.

4 (Krenak 2022, 31)

5 The growth of the species, which in tropical soil requires significant space, is moderated in enclosed environments and temperate climates. This, combined with its ease of cultivation (the plant prefers indirect light) and propagation (through nodes of a mature individual), has made the species highly popular in residential and corporate settings. In 2017, *Monstera* received the Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society, a prize awarded to species successfully adapted to the environmental conditions of the British Isles.

6 Etymologically, "epiphyte" means "plant upon plant," referring to plants that live on other plants. They are common in tropical forests, where competition for light and space is intense. Epiphytes do not seek nourishment from the host organism they attach to; they are not, therefore, parasitic plants. The main epiphytic plants include bromeliads, orchids, begonias, and certain types of green algae.

7 Valentim (2020) notes that even Charles Darwin acknowledged the overly vague nature of the taxonomic division between species, variety and monstrosity. Darwin writes in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*: "Naturalists do not agree on what is a species and what is a variety." "(...) it is impossible to separate monstrosities from mere variations by clear lines of distinction" (Darwin 2018, 50, 97). Valentim (2020, 257) concludes: "The distinction between species, variety, and aberration is nothing but an effect of perspective."

8 (Foucault 1992, 172)

9 (Stravinsky 1947, 10, 11)

10 The films *HU Enigma* (2011) and *Homage to Matta-Clark* (2015) were directed in collaboration with Joana Traub Csekö.