

Research objective: Despite the growing interest in animal studies, there are no accounts on how animals and human-animal relations are represented in American experimental ecocinema. To fill this gap, the project will examine how the work of experimental makers – with a special focus on women’s and Black and Afro-American film – brings in the animal viewpoint through its complex exploration of ecocinematic sensibility and the materiality of the film medium, echoing the animal and corporeal turn in film studies. Specifically, it will investigate how experimental film removes the animal from the regimes of anthropomorphism and symbolism, common for the structural-materialist film, and highlights its independent and/or ambiguous status, demonstrating an attentiveness to the physical substance of the filmstrip through a creative use of a non-narrative format, mise-en-scène, camerawork, editing and montage. The main hypothesis is that while more and more films decenter or absent the human, pointing to the ways in which the human-animal relationship is becoming more complex, ambiguous and multilayered, experimental ecocinema often undermines the human gaze, eliminates the human-animal boundary and equalizes human with nonhuman as it directly connects animal species to plant life and human bodies, resisting comparisons to other species, identities and power structures. The project will also broaden and clarify our understanding of experimental ecocinema, which engages with animals and human animal relations, and determine how it responds to current developments of the Anthropocene and the animal crisis, addressing the growing need to radically rethink our systems of thought and action, which guide complex human-animal relations in the wake of mass extinctions, habitat destruction, global pandemics and climate change. In addition, the project will develop a distinctive methodological approach, which combines the animal and the corporeal turn in avant-garde film studies with the most recent revisionist theories in human-animal studies and ecocritical writings on film and media, including vegan cinema and the vegan gaze, the animal gaze, ecofeminism, queer ecology, eco-masculinity, cinempathy and vegetal cinema.

Research carried out in the project: The conducted research will involve consulting theoretical materials for the methodology of the project within the fields of environmental criticism, animal studies and American avant-garde film studies, collecting the source material (50-60 titles) and selecting archival material relevant to the analyzed titles and the filmmakers’ life and work. The research will be carried out at the world’s leading and largest centers, libraries and art schools, which preserve, study, and exhibit artist-made films and store invaluable collections of avant-garde cinema-related resources. The theoretical, source and archival material will be then analyzed within the proposed methodological framework and the key findings will be presented in a series of publications, conference talks and curated film programs at experimental film festivals.

Reasons for choosing the research topic: Although ecocinema that engages with animals draws on a relatively diverse corpus, including feature-length narrative, documentary, wildlife and animal rights activist films or nature cams, there is no consistent research on how animals, animality and the human-animal connection are represented in experimental film and video. Also, there are no accounts, which directly and systematically approach, define and categorize experimental ecocinema, especially in the context of the animal crisis and the current developments of the Anthropocene. Therefore, the project fills a gap in animal studies, American avant-garde film studies and ecocritical studies and makes a genuine contribution to contemporary film studies due to its focus on a particular segment of artistic production within American (film) culture, which remains significantly understudied within the field. Also, as many films and videos have received no attention from researchers despite being successfully preserved in the consulted collections, the project sheds light on some lesser known and rarely screened experimental films and highlights women’s, Black and Afro-American prolific experimental ecocinema practice, remarkably underrepresented in film criticism and elsewhere.

Research outcomes: The project will result in i) the publishing of several articles in peer-reviewed journals with a high impact factor and/or chapters in edited collections published by respectable international publishers; ii) submitting a book proposal, which will offer the first book-length study on animals and human-animal relations in American experimental ecocinema, to the respectable international publisher or university press (e.g., Routledge Human-Animal Studies, Brill Human-Animal Studies, U of Chicago P Animal Lives, etc.). The research outcomes will facilitate a more rapid development of research at the intersection of environmental criticism, animal studies and avant-garde film studies through combining the animal and corporeal turn in experimental film and video with the most recent revisionist theories in ecocinema and human-animal studies.