



Creative Work

The Difference between a Bird and a Plane: The Language of the ‘it’

Laura Malacart

Visual Artist and Independent Scholar, UK

E-mail: lauramalacart@gmail.com

*The Difference between a Bird and a Plane (in three episodes)*¹ is a film essay shot in Canada and inclusive of photographic materials from Canada and the UK. The film articulates three main arguments that foreground traditional philosophy in order to problematise the values promoted by global capital when it comes to living beings, i.e. the planet. What follows is the script for Episode 1. This episode is indebted to the wonderful work of Robin Wall Kimmerer.

* * *

Episode 1: The Language of the ‘it’



Who are you? A sci-fi chrysalis? Or a failed AI project...
A reminder that human exceptionalism has led to a crisis...?

¹ If you are interested in viewing the film, please contact Laura Malacart at lauramalacart@gmail.com.

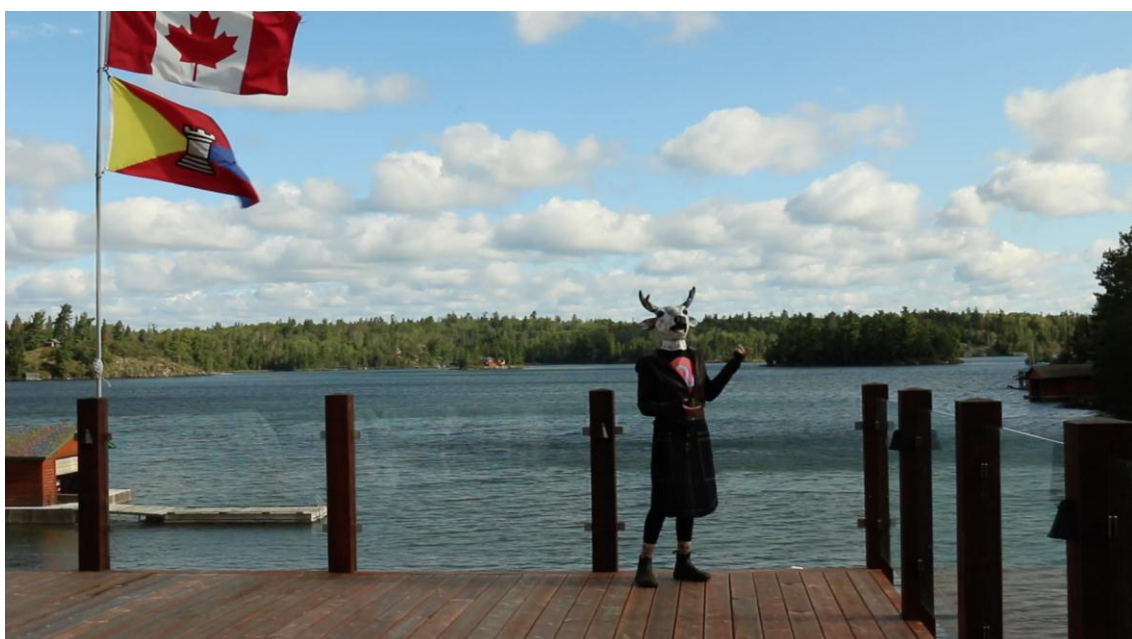
We, the ‘he’ and the ‘she’, have relegated everyone else to the rank of the ‘it’.
And when everything is ‘it’, living and non-living, our language cannot distinguish between a bird and a plane.



Some languages can. In native philosophies, all living beings are people. Not people in the human sense, but, as living beings, they have intelligence, wisdom and responsibility.

Plants, for example, are ancient beings, who provide us with food and medicine, so in some native languages they translate as ‘those who take care of us’.

This is Lake of the Woods, the native land of the Ojibwe people, who with the Potawatomi and Odawa belong to The Council of the Three Fires.



And Potawatomi can distinguish between a bird and a plane because it has two different verbs for listening: depending if you are listening to something animate or inanimate.

English instead and colonial languages relegate all living beings (except humans) to the status of objects.

Can we stop using ‘it’ for living beings?
How do we avoid life being an abstraction?



A member of the Potawatomi Nation and Botany Professor has come up with a suggestion. She asked her grandfather if Potawatomi had a word to translate ‘a being of the earth’.

And he said yes: *Aakibmaadiziiwin*.

She was delighted with this answer, but also noted that those beautiful syllables could not easily replace ‘it’ in English.

One day as she walked over the land, she wondered whether from the beginning of the word, *aaki* meaning ‘land’, a new pronoun ‘ki’ could be born.

With its Potawatomi roots, ‘ki’ could replace ‘it’ for living beings in English — not ‘she’ or ‘he’, but ‘ki’.

“Ki is singing up the sun;
ki runs through the branches on squirrel feet;
ki howls at the moon;
ki’s branches sway in the pine-scented breeze.”

But what about the plural for ‘ki’?

Oh, she said, “no need to borrow from Potawatomi, we already have ‘kin’ in English:

kin are ripening in the fields;
kin are nesting under the eaves;
kin are flying south for the winter,
come back soon.”

“Our words can be an antidote to human exceptionalism, to unthinking exploitation, an antidote to loneliness, an opening to kinship.” (Robin Wall Kimmerer)

