

## The plant in between

Analogism and entanglement in an Italian community of anthroposophists

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**ABSTRACT:** The article analyses the special relationship with the world of plants developed by anthroposophy from the framework of a new perspective called the “plant turn” (Myers 2015). Anthroposophy (AS) is analysed as a peculiar form of Analogism (Descola 2005), historically derived from the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner and subsequently evolved into contemporary AS practices that the author encountered during her fieldwork in a community of North-Eastern Italy. Both Steiner’s texts and the analysis of contemporary practices of AS reveal a relationship with the world of plants that the author reads in light of Ingold’s categories of “interweaving” of the world, the interpenetration of elements, and their ceaseless becoming (Ingold 2011). The result is a representation of the vegetal world involving the whole cosmos, humans and non-humans, terrestrial and celestial, in a cosmic expansion of the relations between beings typical of Analogisms. The practices referring to the vegetal world enacted by anthroposophists are intense, engaging, dialogue-based and provocative in their ability to uproot many elements of naturalism and deal with a contemporary world characterised by ecological crisis.

**KEYWORDS:** ANTHROPOSOPHY, ANALOGISM, PLANT-TURN, ENTANGLEMENT, HOMEODYNAMIC AGRICULTURE.

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## Introduction

The syntax of the four ontologies outlined by Philippe Descola in his *Beyond Nature and Culture* (2013), distinguished according to the ratio of similarity/dissimilarity of interiority and physicality, limits the scope of the composition of the world to a very small number of cosmologies (Benadusi, Lutri, Sturm *infra*)<sup>1</sup>. Of these four ontologies, two, the naturalism and the analogism, are historically related in the Western world, since the former supplanted the latter through a process carried out over the last three centuries; namely, the fading and diluting of analogism into naturalism, at the end of the Renaissance (Descola 2013: 205; see also Benadusi *infra*). Analogism is, in fact, considered by Philippe Descola an ontology that, after enjoying great success until the sixteenth century in Europe, is now to be considered – with regard to the Western world – largely subsumed into naturalism, still partly persisting, with traces in astrology, in numerology, in New Age visions, in alternative contemporary medicines (*ibidem*: 218). Descola explains that such a transition marks the dominance of naturalism in the West, producing a sort of underground, karstic life of analogism. However today, provocatively and sporadically, the latter can be seen again (*ibidem*: 205). Contained in this nuance of Descola's text is the broad issue that stimulated my anthropological thinking and my ethnographic assessment. What do we know about these worlds of analogism, we sometimes discover within a Western world strictly considered in naturalistic terms? How can we get to know them? What questions and challenges does their presence raise? And, what role do these analogisms play today, within the political framework of conflicts and quests for solutions to our increasingly unsustainable ways of life?

These questions compel me, since I identified during my field research a strong analogical matrix in the anthroposophical Steinerian movement and its rapidly expanding ramifications<sup>2</sup>. This is a type of cosmology that brings to our present time a path of esotericism and spiritualism that, according to historian Antoine Faivre (1992, 2012), starts from Paracelsus' theories, and through Goethe, the inspirer of Rudolf Steiner's theories (Steiner 2008;

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1. I would like to thank the peer reviewers of *Anuac* for the helpful assistance for this publication, Enzo Nastati and La Nuova Terra community for agreeing to my fieldwork among them, the anthropologist Silvia Lelli for the help with the English translation of this paper. All the colleagues and friends that helped me in this research will be thanked personally in my forthcoming monograph.

2. For quantitative information about Anthroposophy in Italy and abroad see: [www.rudolfsteiner.it/societa\\_antroposofica.php](http://www.rudolfsteiner.it/societa_antroposofica.php).

2014), continues with the foundation of Anthroposophy<sup>3</sup> in the early XX century and, in my field research case study, develops in the homeodynamic variant I will focus on in this article<sup>4</sup>.

I will therefore develop the line of this argument as follows: after a brief description of my research field, I will show some characteristics of Anthroposophy (AS) as a form of analogism. This first phase gives me the opportunity to open a field of study that I will define “anthropology of Anthroposophy”. In a second phase, I highlight that the analogical characteristics of AS need to be understood through other categories that I consider important, such as those of overlapping, fuzziness, interweaving and those of *tramage*<sup>5</sup> (weft, woof) by Tim Ingold (see below), of the environment like «a tangle of interlaced trails» (Ingold 2011: 71), of “meshwork” like «entangled lines of life, growth and movement» in fluid space (*ibidem*: 63). I have identified this as an interpretive step that includes the Ingold’s concept of entanglement into analogism. Descola and Ingold are therefore two essential authors for experiencing an anthropological study of the anthroposophical world, analyzed not as “esotericism” (a complex and controversial term that intends to underline the presence in the Western world of theories of knowledge alternative to those of institutional religion and Rationality)<sup>6</sup>, but as a contemporary cultural phenomenon worth studying like any other culture<sup>7</sup>. A third and final part will show the plant handling practices of homeodynamic anthroposophists: experimentation and alternative agronomies come into

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3. Henceforth I will use the abbreviation AS for Anthroposophy.

4. Important texts for historically framing AS are: Corsetti 2003 [1992]; Faivre 2012 [1996]; Garin 1976; Godwin 2004 [1998]; Cassirer 1976; Zolla 1991; Rossi 2006.

5. In French in the original text, not yet translated into English.

6. Western esotericism, since ancient times, is studied in detail by The European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE, [www.esswe.org](http://www.esswe.org)). This recent and important work is conducted with scientific rigor on esoteric texts and subjects investigated with philological, interpretive, historical, literary and philosophical tools. This work is strictly focused on Western esotericism (Hanegraaff 2012), and is quite different from the work I am bringing forward, dedicated to the contemporary anthroposophical reality. Rudolf Steiner founded AS as a revelation and an unconcealed process of esotericism, nevertheless anthroposophical literature remains at a high level of esoteric signification, and a certain degree of familiarization with the anthroposophical language is required in order to make any sense of the anthroposophical speech and practices. A future interaction between “anthropology of Anthroposophy” and the ESSWE scholars could lead to a philological study of the specific terms used within the AS. I do not intend to reconstruct the history and philology of esoteric terms, but to show how nowadays they are used in everyday language by the anthroposophists I met during my fieldwork.

7. The results of this research will be published in my forthcoming monograph where I discuss many controversial historical and cultural aspects of this philosophy that I cannot consider in this article including its proximity or distance to/from Nazism and Fascism. The aim of that study is to investigate Anthroposophy as a cultural form. Among the few studies in this direction see Brendbekken 2003, and Papageorgiou 2013.

play in contemporary AS, also in relation to environmental conflicts and ecologic disputes, with the results we will see<sup>8</sup>. The plant world will act as a catalyst in the description of the anthroposophical cosmology, a key access to its world representation.

*“Plant turn” and field research. Among anthroposophists*

Before meeting the anthroposophists’ community where I now develop my fieldwork, I had already attended and observed many anthroposophical practices, in a kind of diffused and low intensity field research, distributed over a long period of about 10 years. The anthroposophical movement is indeed widespread in my area, and on many occasions I attended their events, I visited their structures and frequented their open proposals (in schools, health food stores, festivals, conferences, medical care, painting lessons, concerts, theaters, and even artistic circuses), interviewing and discussing with various anthroposophists. At the same time, I started reading Steiner’s books and seeking an access key to his language. My fieldwork was for me, in fact, a long apprenticeship of the anthroposophical language. This language consists of terms, concepts, images, and narratives that I consider self-referential, inserted in a “circular” writing (a huge and always re-produced and re-interpreted one)<sup>9</sup> where anthroposophical terms and concepts are given for granted and not questioned except within the anthroposophical analogical scheme itself – and the text sounds like a bumper circle with no access doors. A language that, although not intending to be esoteric, has its own semantic, lexical, syntactic, stylistic articulation, and a conceptual reference that must be intended, in order to talk with the anthroposophists themselves. The study of some of the approximately 6000 “lecture texts” by Rudolf Steiner and 80 books written by the community leader, Enzo Nastati, was therefore an integral part of my ethnographic experience, and Steinerian/anthroposophical literature, both old and contemporary, is the linguistic-conceptual background I will often refer to.

Two years ago, I arrived at the community *La Nuova Terra* (“The New Earth”), about 100 km from my home, informed by some other anthroposophists about a group particularly passionate about the plant world and actively experimenting with it. This community and my interest for the “plant turn” met there.

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8. It is also important to note how the anthroposophical movement created by Rudolf Steiner at the beginning of the twentieth century has changed over time; the homeodynamic agriculture is indeed an evolution of the biodynamic agriculture, derived, on its turn, from AS.

9. As Descola writes, Analogists were highly interpretive, this ontology expressing a sense of totalitarianism, and at the same time a compelling need for writing for interpretive purposes (Descola 2013: 238, 243).

The turning point called “plant turn” (Myers 2015: 40; Marder 2013; Hall 2011; Holdrege 2013; Kohn 2013) represents a subset of the “ontological turn”. Surpassing the classical anthropological approaches to the plant world (ethnobotany, cultural ecology, etc.), this turn moves from the social construction of observed facts, to the survey of the nature and quality of the relationships among living beings. The question changes from «how does “an” animal or “a” plant think?» to the more relevant question «how can we think “together with” an animal or a plant?» (see Houdart, Thiery 2011: 195). The “plant turn” realizes a sort of update of the «exceptionnalisme anthropocentrique» (anthropocentric exceptionalism), mentioned by Descola (Descola 2011: 19), and allows us to deal with the nonhumans as «une sorte de planète autour de laquelle gravitent de multiples satellites, le foyer de l’analyse» (*ivi*). A process called by Descola «condensation par totalisation» (*ivi*), in which «les non humains mobilisés [...] rendent possible la condensation autour d’eux de réseaux spécifiques d’actants dont les configurations définissent des cadres pour l’action» (*ibidem*: 20). The “plant turn” broadens my long term interest in the human encounter with the plant world (Breda 2000, 2001). The attention to the plant world can help in building less-anthropocentric anthropologies, as indicated by “posthumanism”, towards the construction of “co-species-landscapes”, where we finally recognize that human beings are not the sole inhabitants of the world, and agency is not only their own prerogative (Houdart, Thiery 2011, 2013). The plant, a nonhuman and non-animal being, to which we begin to devote our renewed attention, serves in this article as a condenser – whereby to look at an analogical system – yet to be studied, as AS, in order to investigate the quality of relations that a community of Anthroposophists have interwoven by thinking and acting with the plants.

The community in which I carried out my fieldwork is located in Codroipo (Friuli Region, near Udine), in Northeast Italy, and consists of a farm, an eco-village, a research centre, a laboratory. Enzo Nastati, the community founder and leader, intends to develop Rudolf Steiner’s work. After the Chernobyl disaster, he stopped working both in industrial agriculture and in organic-biodynamic production, feeling unable to respond to the new problems our civilization faced after World War II: radioactive contamination, climate change, reduced biodiversity, the ozone hole, genetic engineering etc. In 1986, he developed the “homeodynamic” agricultural method, dealing with the application of homeopathy in agriculture, namely to the plants and to the earth. Today, 30 years later, the community works on a wide range of environmental issues ranging from desertification to water saving, decontamination and desalination<sup>10</sup>. The farm is a cultivated countryside space, partly

10. Cfr. [www.dimensione-eureka.it/](http://www.dimensione-eureka.it/). For a first ethnographic account of homeodynamic AS, see Breda 2015.

set on former landing strips used in World War II. There I interviewed the founder and his staff, currently 13, around which support groups, volunteers, young “wwoofer” people<sup>11</sup> and other interested scholars visiting the company, aggregate: a wide variety of people surrounding the tiny community. The community participants share work and lunches, and they collect and redistribute revenues depending on requirement. No part of the farm is owned by one single person<sup>12</sup>. I wander around the fields with the farmers, or I stay in the yard trying to decipher signs scattered everywhere: pebbles stuck in the ground in spiral shapes, special vegetable intercropping, symbols carved in the farming tools, in the pruning of the fruit trees, in the house and in the animal stockyard. An iambic rhythm, they explain, is a basis for inserting the wooden poles at the right distance along the corral fence. I visit the greenhouses, trying to identify the samples and the witnesses of the plants on which the community carries out experimentation. I eat with them self-produced food and no meat, in the big red house built according to organic architecture, anthroposophical symbolism, and technological innovations developed within the community itself. The house is full of colours and wood structures, wood stoves instead of diesel ones, many blackboards used in meetings, many books, wicker chairs, old pianos and guitars in the great central hall. When they are not busy cultivating plants, Nastati and his team are immersed in intense study activities. A large library accommodates the desks where they work and write; incoming visitors can find all the publications here, purchase them or stop by and read them there. At other times, the laboratory workers operate the crystallization and analysis of the samples. Other community members prepare the homeodynamic products for sale. In the evening meetings are held between the farmers and their coordinators, they write diaries covering the work on the land, they report observations on the plants’ health and performance, and discuss possible solutions for any problems in relation to their crops. At night everyone goes back to their more or less extended families, waiting for the completion of the wooden houses that one day will host the whole community next to the red house, on the common land. Often the community opens out for activities promoting the homeodynamic method, for seminars in collaboration with other scholars or experts, or to receive guests and hold conferences. Such activities are held in the “blue house”, called *Casa di San Michele*. Enzo Nastati carries out an intensive lecturing activity in Italy and abroad, often asked to run clean-pollution activities, restitution of soil fertility, setting up of farms based on organ-

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11. WWOOF is a world movement that puts volunteers in contact with rural projects, promoting educational and cultural activities based on a non-profit relationship of mutual trust, to help build a sustainable global community. See [www.wwoof.it](http://www.wwoof.it).

12. The farm products, including anthroposophical-homeodynamic remedies, are for self-consumption and for sale.

ic and homeodynamic methods, etc. Currently he is developing activities on all continents, in an “emergency style” because, according to him, he is called by his interlocutors when they have already tried all the possible solutions they know, and now they «attempt the impossible» with his homeodynamic method.

*The plant “in between”. Analogism and entanglement*

According to Nastati, «the plant world is currently the most unarmed, face to contemporary events and it is the first we must take care of» (Nastati 1999: 34). Everything in his work, from written texts to plant manipulation practices, helps to identify which representation these Anthroposophists outline of the plant. It can be summed up in the concept that the plant is formed between the earth and the sky, thanks to the action of many elements that – both from the bottom and the top – act to build it and conduct it. The plant’s location is a cosmic dimension that finds its measure within a nature/culture system, amplified if compared to the naturalistic science.



**FIG. 1:** *Representation of the plant in the Cosmos.* Drawing by Walter Roggenkamp Walter, in Wilhelm Pelikan, *Medicinal Plants*, Alassio, Natura e Cultura Editrice, 2005.

One of the characteristics of this analogism is to establish itself as a kind of “gigantism”, where the dimensions are fast increasing and the networks

considered are always immense, cosmic indeed, being the analogism, as Descola says, a cosmocentrism (Descola 2013: 277, 268), in which the collective coincides with the entire cosmos, as in this case<sup>13</sup>. The plant, as a result of such a logic, is related to everything existing “between” the earth and the sky. It is not limited to the relation with the surrounding environment: the environment of the plant, in AS, is the entire cosmos.

We could say that the ecosystem, the environment the plant takes into account, is not only the nearby river or hill, or the industry poisoning it; the environment that plants take into account reaches as far as the distant stars in the Milky Way, and the ends of our Galaxy! [...] The plant, due to its ability to “listen” to the stars, is never an isolated being (as it may seem to our physical eyes), but it’s always part of a system of relations, ties, interactions with the environment (Nastati 2005b: 30-32).

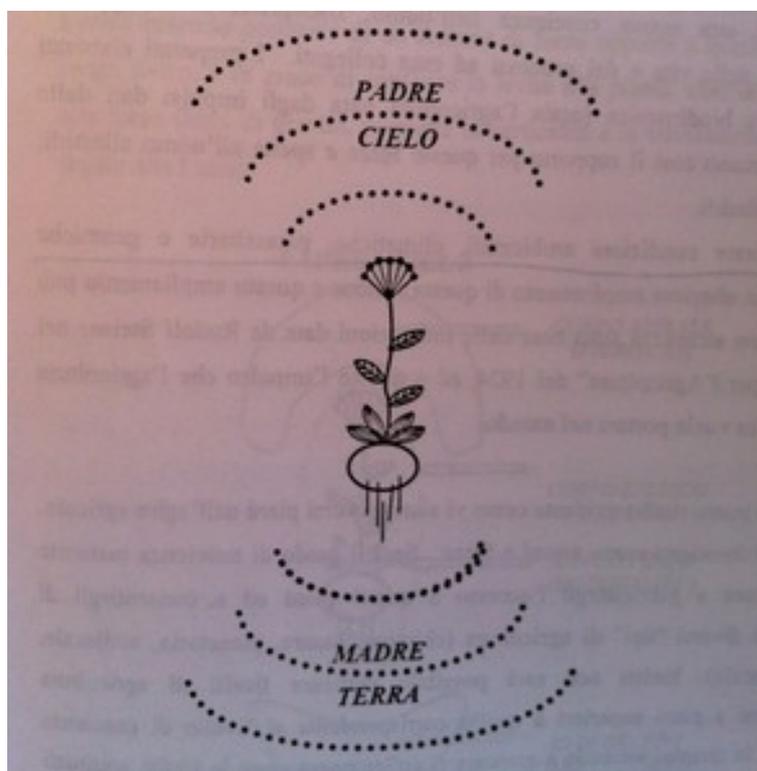


FIG. 2: *The plant “in between”*. Drawing by Enzo Nastati.

13. Generally, AS multiplies any dimensions, e.g.: the tree consists of 7 layers, as human skin, as the Earth, as the 7 types of birds, the 7 types of insects, etc.; the human is composed of 4 dimensions: physical, ethereal, “animic”, and spiritual; the Zodiac in its turn is multiplied as cherubic and seraphic zodiac, and so on.

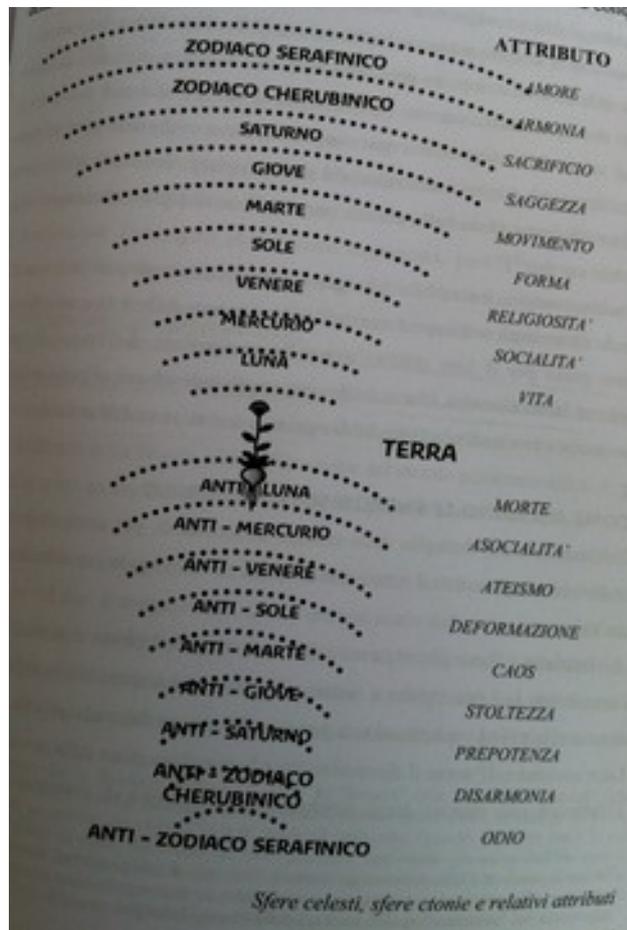


FIG. 3: The terrestrial plant in the middle of the Cosmos, between Zodiac, anti-Zodiac and its qualitative attributes. Drawing by Enzo Nastati.

From above, a plant grows thanks to a subject, the so called “Group-egos”<sup>14</sup> of the plant, an “individual species principle”, endowed – according to testimonies – with consciousness and agency, who resides beyond the constellations and the planets; it is considered as a sort of «spiritual archetype», and an «evolutionary principle» (in Steinerian language). Without it the plant would only be a passive material. According to AS, the plant’s agency resides outside it, in these Group-egos postulated by Steiner<sup>15</sup>. The Group-egos are described by Nastati as entities influenced by the consequences of human

14. I adopt in this article the English translation of this concept, used in the Steinerian Archive (see e.g. the note below), noting, however, that the Steinerian concept of “ego” (an open and connected entity) must not be confused with the Freudian “ego” (a closed, individual, and self-centered one).

15. <http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/19080806p01.html>.

behavior, who take decisions that affect us, the humans, as well as them, the nonhumans. AS certainly is, in many ways, an evolutionary and finalistic system of thought, yet not everything in this path is predefined. The situation of the Group-egos is historically influenced by new events and developments not foreseen by classic AS, updated nowadays in these terms:

The “Group-egos”, as a result of the human actions on the plant (namely, in size order: graft-transplant, hybridization and genetic manipulation), retreated towards the constellations. Therefore, to connect with them, we need to climb up to the Zodiac. [...] The not-corrupted “Group-egos” had no other choice than retreat and look away from our planet, no longer finding here acceptable conditions to manifest themselves through the plants they used to be connected, and to make those experiences that allowed them to evolve (Nastati 1999: 144-148).

During my field research, I learned that the practices pursued by the homeodynamic Anthroposophists, as we shall see in the last part of the article, consist of a tight, manipulative, inciting, continuous dialogue with these beings, where the humans are bridges between them and the terrestrial plant. From this relationship, all the homeodynamic agricultural practices, experienced and disseminated by this community, derive. This particular element, the “Group egos”, has an extremely important function for an anthropological study of AS: it prospect a historical and cultural dimension in a system of thought that would otherwise appear completely abstract and spiritualized. Descola writes that analogism have replaced the concept of “culture” with the concept of “spirituality”: analogism «is a “spiritual” universalism, if not a strictly “cultural” one» (Descola 2013: 300)<sup>16</sup>, but the characteristics of these Group-egos make the anthroposophical view receptive of human historicity, therefore allowing a precise and necessary study of “anthropology of Anthroposophy”.

Getting back to the plant, watching it from below AS assumes the presence of the so called «elemental beings», as a system mirroring the Group-egos system, namely the part of the plant not deriving from the sky, but from the depths of the earth. The «elemental beings» exist «in the lower parts of Nature», as Nastati explains; they are invisible and not endowed with consciousness or free will; their function is to activate the terrestrial material elements; they are their constituents, partly equivalent to the physical elements (iron, silica, etc.), and defined according to the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) as undines, sylphs, gnomes, salamanders (Steiner 2004). In Nastati’s words:

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16. This is perhaps a reason for its success: the possibility of being applied to every religion and to every culture, since we do not recognize it as a form of culture, but as a form of spirituality.

They have no weight, no number, they are here and there, the principles of physics fail in front of them; we are in the world where, on one side of the spectrum, are the archangel and the angels, and on the other side, are the elementary beings, a sub-nature, not in the sense of inferior, but just as other beings that govern the nature. As the super -, the sub -, they are the other side of the spectrum (Interview with Nastati, January 2015).

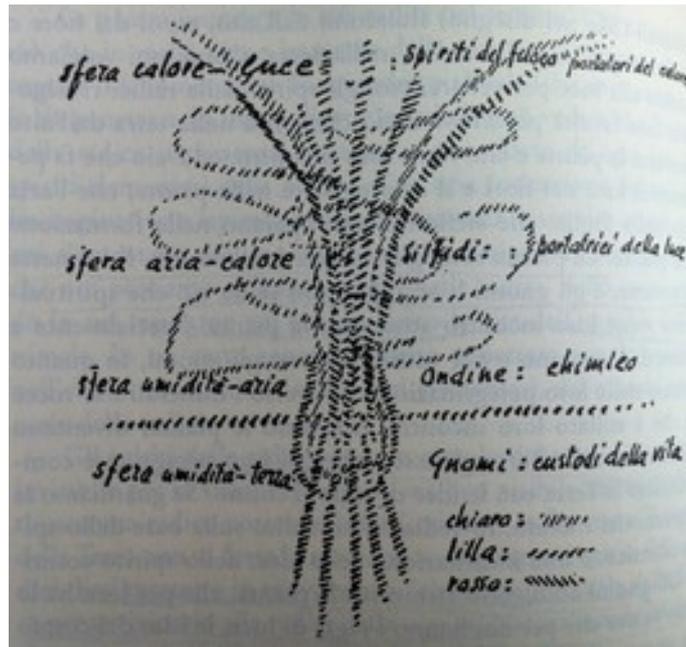


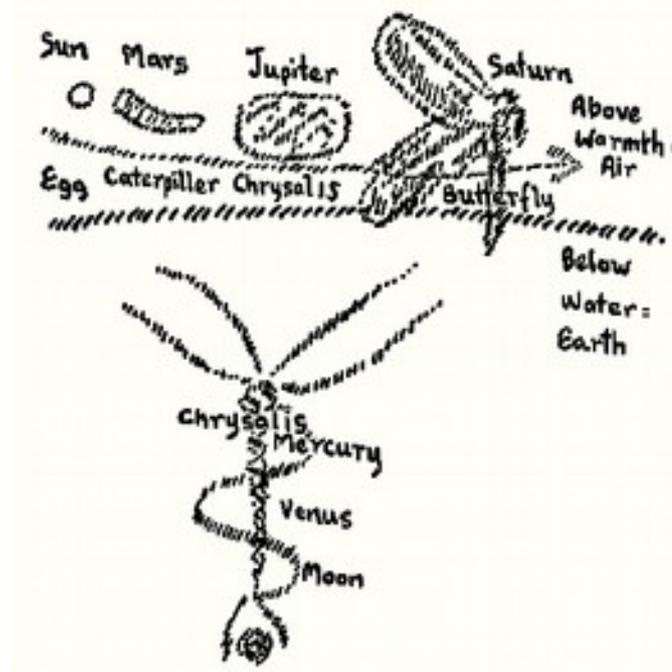
FIG. 4: The plant as a "rising mountain", driven by the "elemental beings" (Gnomes, Undines, Sylphides, Fire Spirits). Drawing by Rudolf Steiner (2004: 108).

The presence and actions of these beings constitute the existence of the plants: by their own action, according to the anthroposophical system, they carry water, minerals, inanimate parts of earth to the plant, and push it upward. These «elemental beings» interpenetrate something that is not a plant yet, but becomes such thanks to their action from the bottom upwards, like a «rising mountain», as in the metaphor that my anthroposophist interlocutor borrows from Steiner:

*N.B.: Can we say what a plant is, from the anthroposophical point of view?*

*M.T.:* the plant is a being, you are right, it is a vital being because it is alive, because it has an etheric body [...], the plant is a being that brings life and consists of many elementary beings [...] that are invisible, but all the Nordic fairy tales, and also our old fairy tales bring this memory; this wisdom has always been seen, they are the beings of fire, air, water, and earth, they are in each plant, in every plant they exist. Rudolf Steiner says that a plant is a vitalized mineral, so it rises up from the earth, as a mineral, which is given strength, so it rises up and becomes "a mountain", a living "mountain" (Interview with M. T., January 2015).

Formed “in between”, the plant in the anthroposophical conception is a catalyst of many other humans and nonhumans around him. Animals, humans and spirits of the dead contribute to its vitality, as we shall see from some brief testimony. In the Steinerian literature flowers are considered as the brothers of butterflies, their terrestrial analogs. Steiner writes: «looking at the butterfly in the air, we understand it as the plant raised up into the air» (Steiner 2004: 68); and again: «The plant – the butterfly fettered by the earth! The butterfly – the plant freed from the earth by the cosmos!» (Steiner 2013: 49).



**FIG. 5:** Above: the evolution of the butterfly in the extra-terrestrial sphere; Below: the evolution of the plant in the terrestrial sphere. Drawing by Rudolf Steiner (2004: 66).

The homeodynamic Anthroposophists I met in my research speak of insects as beings that constitute the sense organs of the plants: without them, the plants would be blind, deaf, mute, out of balance. The plant needs to be together with the insects, «although for centuries we have been accustomed to thrash both plants and insects dousing them with pesticides» (Nastati, interview). Eventually, according to Nastati’s testimony, the plant blooms depend not only on terrestrial elements, but also on the worlds of the dead, which have to work from their world to ours, to make it possible for the plants to flower. The plant, within the anthroposophical cosmology, is there-

fore a “multispecies landscape”<sup>17</sup>, which interweaves minerals, plants, animals, humans, nonhumans, spirits, dead person and stellar bodies. Though AS can be considered an anthropocentric view, the space occupied in this cosmology by an endless variety of nonhuman beings is so broad that it can only confirm the cosmic scale and vastness of this intertwining of human and nonhuman beings. Ingold’s words seem to fit well with the AS view:

Nous sommes des êtres humains en devenir permanent, car, nous ne cessons jamais de nous construire, ni de contribuer à construire les autres êtres de la même manière que les autres êtres nous construisent. Il s’agit d’un processus ininterrompu (Ingold in Descola, Ingold 2014: 38)<sup>18</sup>.

In my opinion, the plant, as analyzed within the anthroposophical analogism, may well represent the concept of being in the making, or «being becoming», as coined by Ingold and Pallson (2013), where pre-formed and discrete entities, repeating a fixed and inherited program – whether genetic or cultural – do not exist, rather movement and growth trajectories exist, as a collaborative work in progress, in a never-ending life task. Specifically, the anthroposophical plant appears to be «in between» (Ingold 2011: 218) two poles which form it by an interpenetration.

Descola had actually opened the field to this interpretation of the analogism, writing that in this cosmology where every position is a meeting point for a multitude of influences, the strength of the continuity principle is that all types of natural beings «are so closely linked one to another that it is impossible for the senses or the imagination to determine precisely the point at which one ends and the next begins» (Descola – quoting Leibniz in Lovejoy – 2013: 204). It therefore seems that AS moves towards a plan of fuzzy relations – rather than one of essences – where beings fade one into the other. According to Descola, in the analogism the proximity is so intimate, that «it becomes impossible precisely to determine the borders that separate them» (Descola 2013: 203). And he adds: «from the meagerest kind of existence, which barely escaped non-existence, through “every possible” grade up to the *ens perfectissimum*..., every one of them differing from that immediately above and that immediately below it by the “least possible” degree of difference» (*ivi*, quoting Lovejoy).

The analogical construction of AS imagines and describes the plant as a sort of passage of elements imbricated one with another. Steiner speaks of «all the sprouting and weave of the plant world» (Steiner 2004: 105), of the «physical reality imbued with spiritual reality», of «deep links», of «objects in

17. Cfr. Ogden, Hall, Kimiko 2013; Smart 2014.

18. In French in the original text, not yet translated into English.

relation to each other» (Steiner 2004: 84). Analogism is here both that fractionation of beings that worries – in Descola’s interpretation – the Analogical cosmology, always chaotic and bloated with separate beings, but it is also weaving and interpenetration (Descola 2013: 235).

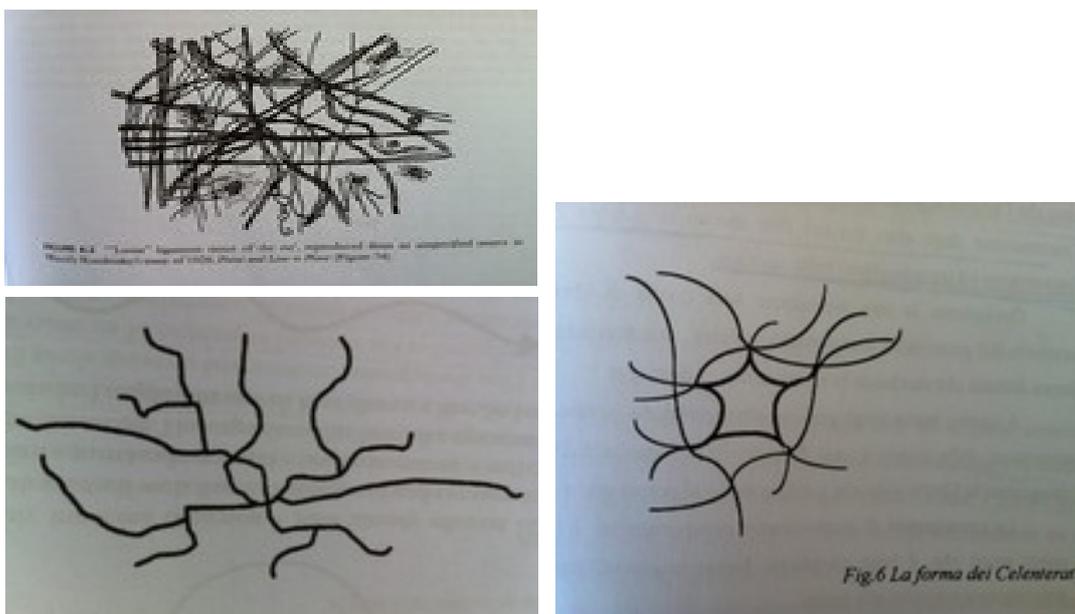


FIG. 6: *The MESWORK*. From up to bottom. Drawing by Enzo Nastati; Tim Ingold (2011: 87); Tim Ingold, (2001:70).

Ingold’s categories appear appropriate for reading this system. Ingold’s work made us assimilate the concept of «one and the same» of the biosocial organism (Ingold, Palsson 2013, *passim*), where social and biological are no longer separate<sup>19</sup>, and where the notion of an environment as a background on which separate subjects stand is no longer acceptable. We must rather talk about interpenetration of bodies, infestation of development lines (*ibidem*: 11), of trajectories of movement and growth (*ibidem*: 8), of field of relations (*ibidem*: 10) traced in a flow of materials. Moving away from the concept of “network”, as an interconnection of points, too rigid since it implies first a set of entities, and then their connections, Ingold proposes the interesting concept of “meshwork”: «This texture is what I mean when I speak of organisms being constituted within a relational field. It is a field not of interconnected points but of interwoven lines; not a network but a mesh-

19. Ingold speaks of the biological-social scope, while AS seems to apply such rules on the constitution of reality to the spiritual-material scope, of which reality is made, according to his view – precisely consisting of 4 levels: physical-etheric-“animic”-spiritual.

work» (Ingold 2011: 70, 63-65). In a recent speech he used as a synonym the term *tramage*<sup>20</sup> almost synonymously with the term “meshwork”:

Et nous pouvons donc comparer la vie à quelque chose qui suivrait des lignes, des cheminements. Si je parle de lignes ou de *tramage*, c'est parce qu'un *tramage* n'est pas une série de points interconnectés, mais une série de lignes qui se mélangent les unes aux autres (Ingold in Descola, Ingold 2014: 38).

Also Descola imagines the analogism substantially as a range of paths, ways and roads that Analogists have to travel to constitute individual elements, and give them a sense. He writes that the association of the analogism's singularities can adopt all sorts of roads (Descola 2013: 268), and that the analogism's ways are so numerous that «it is always possible to find several possible avenues or chains of correspondences that link two entities» (Descola 2013: 238). Although a recent confrontation between Descola and Ingold (Descola 2016; Ingold 2016) seems to disprove a compatibility of their respective anthropologies, Descola opened to a possible interpretation of analogism in terms of nuances and weavings. Examples of interpenetration between elements and fuzzy categories are countless in AS. We see here how the plant is the result of an interpenetration from below and above, seen as a mountain of minerals and earth elements, which comes to life from the bottom and receives traction, messages and orders from above.

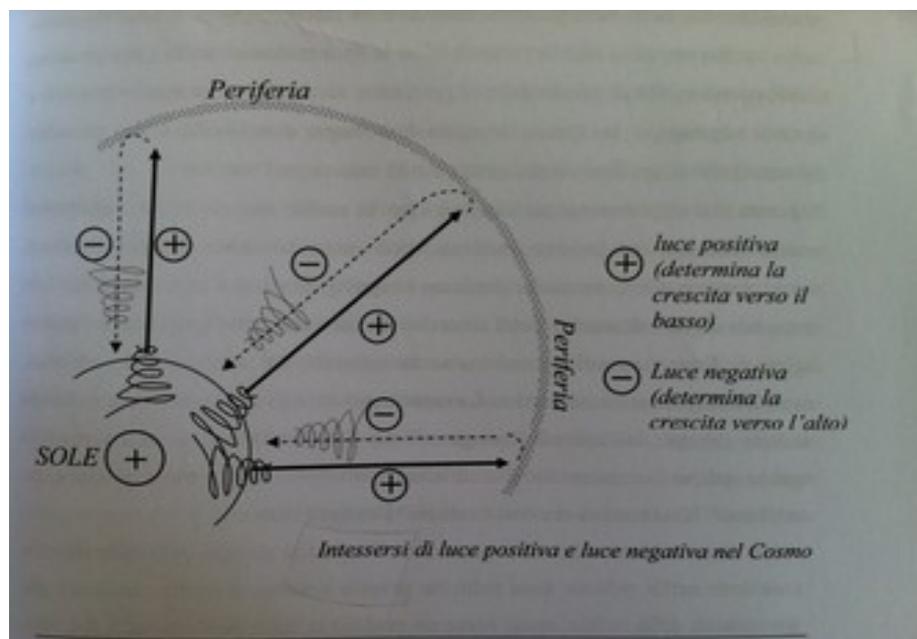


FIG. 7: Movements of light and plants in the Cosmos creating an "interweaving". Drawing by Enzo Nastati.

20. In French in the original text, not yet translated into English.



**Fig. 8:** The air space at the apex of the root allows the plant's growth not by a "push", but by the "backwash" due to the "negative light". Drawing by Enzo Nastati.

In this analogical complex, the transition to life is nuanced, resulting from a mix of elements that involve the whole cosmos. In the anthroposophical analogical system, the living beings, imbricated one into the other, touching each other, interpenetrating and encompassing one in another, seem to shorten the theoretical Descolian convoluted paths<sup>21</sup>.

Can we then still talk about AS as a view based on essences? Can we consider it a philosophy dealing with human and nonhuman organisms as discrete and separate entities standing out on an environmental background? Or must we, rather, consider the anthroposophical cosmos as a tangle of intersected and tied guidelines, a *locus of growing*, as Ingold and Palsson (2013: 10) say, within a range of relations drawn in a stream of materials fading one into the other?

### *Encounters and desencontros with the plants*

What do the Anthroposophists do "with" the plants, beyond "representing" them? My field research tries to answer this question, and I start here from a comparison.

21. Bortoft (1996), eminent Goethe connoisseur (Goethe is the main basis used by Rudolf Steiner to elaborate AS), would definitely interpret the plant as a "hologram", since it contains a little of all the other elements. The hologram feature represents the most complete way of incorporating beings until the borders and the spaces between them are cancelled (see also Camoni 2003).

Michael Marder<sup>22</sup> in his philosophy book *Plant-Thinking* (2013), an anti-metaphysical conception of plants<sup>23</sup>, asks how can we meet the vegetal world, suggesting a possible encounter derived from a so-called “vegetal way of being”. *Plant-Thinking* intends to formulate non-transcendental conditions for an encounter with plants, not treating them just as simplistic objects to be known (Marder 2013: 7-8). *Plant-Thinking* means viewing the plants without thinking them with our own head, but in a non-cognitive, non-idealistic way; it means de-humanizing our thought and making it “plant-like”, thanks to the encounter with the vegetal world. According to the author, to expose ourselves to the «vegetable logic» and learn from it (*ibidem*: 10) decreases the possibility of our domination and violence over the plant world. Actually, Marder’s proposal speaks however of a *desencontro*, «an untranslatable word, in Portuguese» (*ibidem*: 13)<sup>24</sup> which roughly refers to a reunion lost for a nap, a paths crossing, a divergence of two or more beings, each of which keeps on its own wavelength. The aim is not to meet the plant as a plant; it seems instead to amortize our identity and the existential ontology of the human being. The work on the plants would then converge in the de-construction of human exceptionalism and egocentrism. On the contrary, the proposal of my main informant Enzo Nastati, tells us about a decisive, highly desired and practical reunion with the plants. More than a “thought” about plants, AS and its homeodynamic variant deal with concrete encounter practices, multiple techniques to be, live, manipulate, handle, treat, meet the plants. Nastati’s involvement with the plants is a total way of living, not just a matter of “thinking”. It is a philosophical, physical and scientific involvement, as well spiritual, political, and economic at the same time. Nastati’s community makes a living on its agricultural production, the fruits of a «new» agriculture, made by their «new plants», as they define them (Nastati 1999). It is for them not just a matter of explaining the world (as anyway they do through the analogical complex), but also to act “with” the world<sup>25</sup>. Their agriculture proposes a plurality of forms of dialogue with the plants, tested and put into action.

Let’s go into details. Some dialogues with the plants are defined by Nastati as «esoteric» (e.g. sowing or transplanting during «the 13 holy nights», between Christmas and Epiphany); others he calls «intimate» (e.g. standing

22. Marder is indicated by Natasha Myers as an important exponent of the “*plant turn*” (Myers 2015).

23. Marder’s method is a bricolage of Vattimo’s weak thought, Derrida’s deconstructionism, and hermeneutical phenomenology (Marder 2013: 79).

24. Somethng like “dis-encounter” or “a missed-meeting”.

25 Paraphrasing Herzfeld 2006: XV.

in front of a plant and talking to it: «stand in front of it and understand what that plant wants», Nastati tells). I saw Nastati on a farm, practicing his dialogue with a plum tree, through gestures, caressing the base of the tree and the nearest land, in an intense silence. A long series of basic gestures for plants are described in his studies, with tangible effects on the health and growth of the plants, according to his testimony. In the “gigantism style” we have met several times, Nastati told me he identified 40 types of «caressing» known and practiced with the plants by his community. It should be noted that the term «dialogues» means here not only a linguistic practice, but a whole series of practices, gestures and plant treatments, ranging from the choice of days for planting, to the direction of the rows, to the rhythm of treatment with homeopathic products, up to more or less structured prayers, the most important being those that ask for forgiveness, and those that simply are «thoughts of love» – according to Nastati’s expression – addressed to the plants.

*N.B.: Do you mean talking to the plant through a language?*

E.N.: As you prefer, with colors, pictures, sounds... as you like; everybody has his own way (Interview with Nastati, March 4, 2016).

Homeodynamics considers the dialogue with some plants undeniably «closed»: in the case of GMOs (genetically modified organisms) it is definitively annihilated. A GMO, in the homeodynamic conception, is a being that has lost any tie with its cosmic matrix (the Group-egos), therefore dialogue is no longer possible between it and the human. In the case of hybrids, instead, the dialogue is quite tiring, not immediate, partially compromised, but also recoverable: in this case some interventions (eg. homeopathic doses) allow the plant to reopen to dialogue. But there is one point where the philosophy of this homeodynamic community astonishes and provokes us. Accustomed as we are, for decades, to working for the spontaneous or cultivated biodiversity (Tsing 2012; Breda 2006), we are instead brought by this philosophy towards a position of indifference to biodiversity, considered, as it is here, a phenomenon of mummification of the living.

An old seed, maintained for decades (or more), has actually a blocked etheric body: on one hand, this has preserved it from the external changes, but on the other, this has made it like a mummy, unable to adapt to the changing present situations (climate change, electromagnetic fields, etc) (Nastati 1999: 143).

The core interest of the homeodynamic vision is to work with all the expressions of life, rather than with the historical biodiversity, with what is «here and now living» (as Nastati says), which is wild, infesting, vagabond. According to Nastati, «the living is everywhere» and it corresponds very little

to the domestic<sup>26</sup>. «Welcome to the agriculture of life», was Nastati's final farewell on the countryside excursion organized to investigate «the manifestations of the living». I took part in it with a group of farmers interested in learning his method. Nastati is currently domesticating weeds and infesting grasses, available in the most diverse places on earth (particularly in disadvantaged ones), to bring them to produce harvestable fruit. Opponents of genetic manipulation, investigators of several hypotheses, Nastati and his Eureka laboratory team produce plants they claim to be resistant to drought and frosts, to GMO contamination, to be exceptionally productive, growing in salty water, grasses which re-head, vines resistant to drought, onions that still germinate after devastating hailstorms, salad resistant to frost. They claim that the plants in this farm need a quarter of the water that the same plants irrigated with «non-homeodynamically vitalized» water would need.

Working in this way, we were able to create this soft genetics, to engage in a dialogue with the plants, and the plants were able to grow with larger and longer spikes, they grow in dryness... we are coming to 25% of the normal water amount needed [...]. This is not a genetic manipulation, because the plant uses at most 30-40% of its DNA, the nature manifests the minimum of herself; in such a context [...] plants have a vastly greater genetic potential we (try) to awaken and recall it. [...]. It took 15 years to study these things, to (create) for each plant its subtle identikit. It's a great job, not written yet, but on this basis I have developed our products... I do not modify plants genetically, I activate the silent genes (Nastati, interview, January 2015).

We can thus stimulate a future plants' resistance to cold, to drought, to foreign pollen, enhancing its natural aptitudes (to create humus, to fix nitrogen, etc.), and more. The work of the "Seed Bath" culminates with the procedure of the regeneration of the seeds, an important task carried out by a specific team of researchers and farmers [...]; in the space of three generations, the seed is reconnected to the spiritual forces that govern its existence, so that it can receive new evolutionary guidelines from the Cosmos, and be able to develop metamorphosis and new characteristics" (Nastati, 2005a: 25-27).

I have not yet worked out a way for evaluating the quantitative aspects of this information, or the agronomic efficacy on its products. It is not clear what to measure, how and with what data to compare these anthroposophical farming results. It remains a path of investigation still to be explored.

What my research allows to clarify is the meaning attributed to these actions. I feel like claiming that, in this conception, the so-called «activation of the silent genes» consists of resuming the dialogue with the Group-egos – described earlier – and in weaving again those relationships disrupted by the

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26. At this point Nastati's homeodynamic Anthroposophy expresses a version, applied to agriculture, of Gilles Clément's "Third Landscape", and of his "Vagabond Eulogy" (Clément 2002, 2014; Lai, Breda 2011).

contemporary ecological disasters. AS here dialogues with and operates upon the Group-egos, and they, in turn, act on the terrestrial plants, boosting their potentials and creating new characteristics, in order to let «new plants» grow, and be used – according to this anthroposophical vision – on a future land, highly compromised by the environmental crisis.

The seed, therefore, does not perpetuate the same plant forever, but after each “dialogue” with the Cosmos (its Group egos, the entities governing meteorology, the elemental beings, etc.), the plant gets new information, let’s say... gets “updated plans”. That’s why a species that has completed its task on Earth may decide, within a few generations, to become sterile and disappear, or another species, finding an ally in humans, can appear in a short time with more and new vigor (Nastati 1999).

Yet very little of this is told by Nastati in a lecture to farmers, I attended. Of the cosmic vision outlined by AS, little was revealed in this public lecture, where Nastati met some farmers from the Treviso countryside, seeking alternative solutions to an agriculture based on pesticides and fertilizers, more and more expensive and gradually less effective, contested by the local movements active in contrasting the intensive plantations of vineyards. Homeodynamic agriculture is presented by Enzo Nastati with a series of slides, which illustrate cases of intervention on various kinds of problems and their resolutions through his method. Different types of interventions are reviewed: from that of corn aflatoxins, to one on the regeneration of onions after hailstorms. Nastati impresses the farmers and spreads his method. There are many requests to speak. He often visits the farms and proposes his method to improve their cultivations.

I discuss with Nastati some aspects of this public event. He explains that with farmers he deals first of all with trivial economic issues, starting from their need to gain a profit, and offers them his method since it is low-priced and non-polluting. He outlines for them a possible income. He declares that he is forced to start from this point, otherwise the esoteric and spiritual aspects of his method would block the dialogue and the possibility of working together. In his experience, he explains, after this first approach, during the application of his method, some people want to know more, and then he can talk of the spiritual aspects and of the fundamentals of anthroposophical agriculture. In the meantime, he likes to see the results: large plants, abundant products, overcoming agronomic challenges; his passion, he says, is the desert, and to pull it back. The farm’s public pages, on line, enhance an agriculture able to overcome hunger in the world, to allow fair and equitable income for farmers, to clean the world up.

From my “anthropology of Anthroposophy” point of view, it is interesting not only to go deeper into the anthroposophical thought and into its branches, in the group’s internal practices, but also to observe how this philosophy of life embodies and goes further in the relations that the community has with peripheral or external parties, how all this could be translated into language and actions of a different, more political, nature involving consociations, stands and positions in the public arena. Unfortunately, I cannot go further here on this point, but I will underline some interesting ideas that arose from the talks initiated in the field, when I was trying to figure out the relationship of this AS with the two worlds of environmentalism and of traditional agriculture, involved today in multiple conflicts. So I asked Nastati, given all the work he does with the seeds, if he knew the work of Vandana Shiva<sup>27</sup> (2000). He answered that he knows and appreciates them, that he really likes Vandana Shiva, but he has no time to collaborate with them. I also investigated the role of his community in the disputes against GMO corn planted in the province of Pordenone, not far from his farm. The agronomist of the community said that they participated only up to a certain point. They present themselves as the bearers of a certain method of agriculture, he says, and this is the contribution they can give to the problems of today’s agriculture. I can affirm, in conclusion, that like other Anthroposophists I have met, they are not experts in conflicts. Conflict, in fact, is often avoided. They are rather a community strongly committed to developing their own experimentation for an environmentally friendly agriculture, inspired by the anthroposophical vision. They do tend not to join movements that could hybridize their culture. My interview on these topics ends, in fact, with the agronomist’s reflection about how, after the political protests, everybody goes back home and nobody remains on the field. The farmers find themselves alone, and do not know where to find a more conscious and sustainable way to produce. They are there for that, he says, they are there before and after the demonstrations, to offer an alternative, even if such an alternative, often, is not grasped. Nevertheless, in 2015 Nastati was invited to North America to design a farm based on his method. In the same year, he was called by a Chinese government agency to clean up several dozen lakes. Currently the requests for his interventions come from all continents.

### *Conclusions*

One of the reasons why an analogism can resist in a karstic way for many centuries and then appear in the present time, is perhaps explained by Descola: «The analogical collective is unique, divided into a hierarchy of seg-

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27. Renowned Indian environmentalist and political activist, a reference point for many environmental groups due to her struggles against industrial agriculture.

ments, and relates exclusively to itself. It is thus self-sufficient, for it contains within it all the relations and determining factors necessary for its existence and functioning» (Descola 2013: 276). The anthroposophical analogism I knew and described here can be considered a cosmology that, as Descola pointed out, in many ways was so self-sufficient as to be able to cross centuries without being annihilated by naturalism, closed in its self-referentiality. This sounds similar to the common perception of the AS: a world closed in on itself, fanatical, anti-modern, alternative. This characteristic submits it to two opposing assessments: on one side, it is considered attractive – in an ecologically devastated world – for its ability to be in a relationship with the natural world in a broad sense, to elaborate sustainable ways of living, with gestures of caring and manipulation practices that incorporate mystical tendencies, Eastern philosophies and ecological approaches. But on the other side, it is steeped in prejudices and stereotypes. During my field research, I have often experienced forms of ostracism and condemnation of Anthroposophists due to a lack of understanding of their philosophy, of its characteristics, and of its attempt to stay in this world and change with it.

With this study I have tried to penetrate this philosophy, understand it from inside, and watch its practices, trying to explain and interpret it with categories that are not anthroposophical. This is what I call “anthropology of Anthroposophy”. Here begins the great work, certainly not concluded in this article, of the analysis of this contemporary analogism. The plant, in its complex analogical weave, shows us that a subject, in this cosmology, no longer represents a single element, but rather a complex “multispecies landscape”, which brings together human and nonhuman. Is this the case for all the anthroposophical elements? Are there differences between human and nonhuman beings, in this system? What does AS say about interiority, how does it describe it? Where does the physicality of its elements ends, and where does it begin, and what is the material for this analogism? What happens to the nature/culture dichotomy in this analogism? And, above all: how do the contemporary anthroposophical movements manipulate these concepts, how do they combine them in times of climate change, Anthropocene, and ecological disasters for human and nonhuman beings? Ethnography has a long way to go into this analogism to answer these questions.

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*The plant in between: Analogism and entanglement in an Italian community of anthroposophists*

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