

# *Beating around the bush: non-human theatre in Manuela Infante's Vegetative State*

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# Beating Around the Bush: Post-Human Theatre in Manuela Infante's *Vegetative State*

Dr. Camila González Ortiz

## Introduction

During the preparation of this article, a friend of mine posted online a picture of a flat in Paris in which a bunch of potatoes in the kitchen had all their sprouts grown up through the wall. The flat's owner hasn't been there for a while, unintentionally giving the vegetables free reign. How do the potatoes know where to extend their sprouts? On this phenomenon Hegel was fascinating in the way the sprouts "climb up the wall as if they knew the way, in order to reach the opening where they could enjoy the light." (Hegel, 1830, 306). Philosopher Michael Marder has dedicated a vast portion of his research studying plants' behaviour wondering what it means to learn from non-human beings. At the same time there is a long-established relationship between the agency – and therefore potential discourses - present in all matter, and performance practices (Schneider, 2015). In line with these philosophical and performance studies genealogies on plant studies and art; and matter and meaning respectively lays *Vegetative State*, directed by Chile-based multidisciplinary artist Manuela Infante and co-written by herself and the play's only actor Marcela Salinas. The play title has a double meaning. On one hand it refers to the medical condition of someone alive but without consciousness. On the other, the title plays with the idea of a state - as political-territorial organization - based on vegetal structures rather than animal. In the words of Infante *Vegetative State* "is not a play about plants; it is an exercise to see which things from the vegetative world can help us to rethink theatre practice and the place of acting" (in Artezblai, 2019). Conceiving theatre as a space for "embodied philosophy" (Infante, 2019) *Vegetative State* is informed by the ideas of Michael Marder on Plant Thinking (2013) and neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso's work on plant perception, and it is part of a larger practice-as-research lead by Infante on the articulation of a non-human theatre which can be traced back to her earlier work as a member of the Chilean company Teatro de Chile.

This chapter will analyse *Vegetative State* identifying not only Marder's ideas on plants intelligence and alternative modes of speech-making (2017) present in the play in terms of dramatic structure and themes, but also the presence of other ideas associated to New Materialisms, such a diffractiveness (Haraway, 1992; Barad, 2003, 2007), entanglement and intra-action (Barad, 2003, 2007). For Karen Barad "a diffractive methodology is respectful of the entanglement of ideas and other materials in way that reflexive methodologies are not" (Barad, 2007, 29). Similarly, for Donna Haraway "A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the *effects* of differences appear" (1992, 295). Based on these ideas, I argue that *Vegetative State* not only attempts to create a diffractive play through the devise of a branched dramaturgy based on plants' behavioural patterns, but also – on an ethical, ontological and political level – the play encourages a diffractive behaviour to be adopted by humans in order for them to recognise *the otherness* in themselves.

## 1. Teatro de Chile: Towards a non-human theatre (working title).

When looking at the body of work of Manuela Infante, it is key to examine the work she devised as a core member of the company Teatro de Chile (Theatre of/from Chile). Founded at the start of the 2000s and active until 2016, Teatro de Chile played a seminal role in the arrival of a new generation of theatre maker in post-dictatorship Chile. For Carlos Labb   and Monica R  os, the choice to name the company Teatro de Chile could be interpreted as an irony which encompasses the decline during the 90s of Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990) as the main topic reference for theatre makers<sup>1</sup>, and at the same time the obvious fact that the company comes from Chile which therefore, “reveals that the national construction we called Chile is a theatre created from certain actors or characters which forged an identity”<sup>2</sup> (2009, pp.213-14). The plays from their early repertoire present themselves as critical artefacts offering an alternative to hegemonic historic discourses. Within this context, it quite significant that the company’s first work *Prat* (2002) is now remembered as one of the biggest scandals in the Chilean theatre community. The play aimed to be a reinterpretation of the life of Arturo Prat, Captain of the battleship *La Esmeralda*, and national hero, who died in combat during the Pacific War (1879-1883) between the Chilean fleet against the Bolivian-Peruvian alliance. In the play Prat is not portrayed as the intellectual, patriotic, brave and successful figure from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but as a 16-year-old young Captain in charge of a whole crew, “overprotected by her mother, and who caressed and let another man caress his hair in return” (Carvajal , 2010, P. 75)<sup>3</sup>. In this version of Prat, the character finds himself in the crossroads of being or not being the war hero that a whole country expects him to be. The play was presented at the Festival V  ctor Jara, organised by the Drama School of Universidad de Chile, where the members of the company also attended. *Prat* brought the attention of a broader audience due to its controversial portrait of Arturo Prat. For a conservative and misogynist perspective, portraying Arturo Prat as someone weak, doubtful and potentially homosexual was unacceptable. From there, representatives from the most conservative and *machista* areas of Chilean society began a campaign to censure the show. Using an historical figure or using Chilean history as source for dramatic material was not something common within the contemporary Chilean theatre repertoire. During the second half of the 80s and the transition to democracy in the 90s the narrative tendencies from playwrights and directors were rooted in micropolitics represented in fictions that although they were inserted within a historical context, tended to be centred around anonymous characters and within private spaces. Moreover, the act of choosing specifically Arturo Prat as a vehicle for challenging official

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<sup>1</sup> During the late 70’s and 80’s most of the theatre and arts in general in Chile became a place for cultural and political resistance against the authoritarian regime. The topics of the dictatorship, the denunciations of the human rights violations, and the demand to return to a democratic state became a matter of urgency. In order to avoid censorship and violent repression by the military (in the shape of forced detentions, disappearances and death in some cases), these artists made use of the metaphor as a key narrative devise. With the arrival of democracy in 1990 many playwrights and directors began to explore other topics and narratives devises.

<sup>2</sup> “[P]or otra parte, que la construcci  n nacional llamada Chile es un teatro creado a partir de ciertos actores o personajes que erigieron una identidad” (All translations from Spanish are by the author of this chapter unless otherwise indicated).

<sup>3</sup> “sobreprotegido por su madre, que acariciaba y se dejaba acariciar el pelo por otro hombre”

historical narratives, was highly provocative. Any other historical character will raise more polarised opinions (Diego Portales, Bernardo O'Higgins, Augusto Pinochet, etc.). Yet, Arturo Prat is one of the few Chileans that generates a unanimous positive opinion from all sectors, in the sense that he is seen as an extraordinary leader who gave his life for his country (and hence for all Chileans) instead of surrendering to the Peruvian fleet, representing the sum of the Chilean values (Swett 2002: 2). In this sense, the cultural construction of a heroic-type figure around Arturo Prat serves as a symbol and as an example of policies of national consensus operating in pursuit of the construction of a common historic narrative. By portraying Prat as "a faithless and fragile hero" (Costamagna 2001: 22)<sup>4</sup>, the play problematizes the politics of memory and its dynamics behind the construction of a hero and official history (who is remembered and how they are remembered), revealing the artificial nature of patriotic and nationalist icons. In line with this iconoclast approach, Teatro de Chile's second play *Juana* (2004) problematized the figure of French saint Joan of Arc portraying her as a young farm girl in a constant battle with the voices inside her head. For Eduardo Thomas the treatment of historical figures in both plays "propose a healthy transgressive, desacralizing and revitalizing way for art to relate with the historical memory of people"<sup>5</sup> (2010, p.189). Regarding these two first plays Infante stated that she "has written some texts about the past full of holes to see if the present insert its face and complete the entire figure. To see if it would somehow confess"<sup>6</sup> (Infante, 2004, p.120)

With *Cristo* (2008) the company continued with its interest in revisiting historical figures, although this time they incorporated the use of video on stage and a mockumentary-based narrative structure. The play put on scene actors and technicians facing the task to represent Jesus Christ. Rather than focusing on the life of Christ or his historical and religious significance, the company used his iconic status as an excuse - a creative cue - to devise a performative essay on the possibilities, or in this case, impossibilities of (re)presenting a reality in its purest state. This resonates with Barad's criticism on representationalism and its ontological effort for distinguish between the representation(s) of something and the thing itself that is meant to be represented (2003, 804). Instead, for Barad "a *performative* understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent preexisting things" (2007, 133). In *Cristo* the symbiotic relationship between reality, performance and representation became evident in – for example -the choice to stage a mockumentary in which the company restaged *the scene of the scene* of the team discussing the creative process (first screened on stage in a video as part of the Making Off of the play, which later the audience realised it was also scripted). *Cristo* - as a performative event – also challenges the power given to language (words and images) proposing a Russian doll-like narrative artefact in which reality is nothing but an accumulation of infinite representations, including the very same object/subject it intended to represent in the first place (Jesus Christ in this case). Teatro de Chile's interest in historic characters and events also informed the plays *Narciso* (Narcissus [2005]) a contemporary reinterpretation of the classic myth; *Rey Planta*

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<sup>4</sup> "un héroe descreído y frágil"

<sup>5</sup> "Un modo saludablemente transgresor, desacralizador y revitalizador de relacionarse el arte con la memoria histórica de los pueblos"

<sup>6</sup> "He escrito entonces unos textos sobre el pasado lleno de agujeros para ver si el presente ponía su rostro y se hacia figura. Para ver si de algún modo se confesaba"

(King Plant [2006]), based on the tragic story of Prince Dipendra from Nepal; and *Zoo* (2004) based on 19<sup>th</sup> European human zoos.<sup>7</sup>

Although theoretical scholarship has always been a strong component in all Infante's work, it was in Teatro de Chile final piece before its dissolution, *Realismo* (Realism [2016]), where elements associated with discourses on New Materialisms explicitly informed the dramaturgical and staging decisions. In *Realismo* the company explored the ideas rooted under the philosophical umbrella of Speculative Realism and its aim to go beyond the critical and linguistic turn, that is, beyond a reality whose nature depends on thought and humanity (Bryant et al. 2011, P.3). Specifically, the making-process of the piece established a dialogue with object-oriented metaphysics which, taking Graham Hartman definition, define objects as "unified entities with specific qualities that are autonomous from us and from each other" (2011, p.23). Within this context the company wondered:

¿What does it mean to be *true realists* in the theatre, that is, understand the stage as a web in which humans and inanimate objects are all in the same plane? Would it be possible to think a non-anthropocentric theatre, or even a post-anthropocentric? Could this turn out to be a strange form of *neorealism*? (Matucana 100, 2016)<sup>8</sup>

*Realismo* tells the story of one Chilean family through four generations, experiencing different key period in Chilean history during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the different dynamics that each member of the family begun to establish with the objects in the house. The realistic acting style and genre seems, at first, at odd within a play that it supposed to problematise an anthropocentric theatre. However, perhaps it is through this paradoxical choice where the ontological and epistemological enquiries on the relationship between human and the immaterial world - made by Teatro de Chile in the previous quote – find some compelling answers. As Cynthia Francica states (2020, p.329) "it is precisely from the very centre of the realistic and anthropocentric drama tradition that the play proposes to reveal the scenic strength of the non-human as a multiplicity of everyday objects gain space on the stage to imprint on the play other rhythms, textures and shapes"<sup>9</sup>. This potential of the scenic strength of the non-human stated by Francica echoes Barad's pursue for a performative understanding of discursive practices over a representationalist one, precisely to challenge "the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real" (Barad, 2003, 802). Similarly, Coole and Frost claimed that elements associated to the human nature (such as language, agency, subjectivity and meaning) "have been presented as idealities fundamentally different from matter and valorised as superior to the baser desires of biological material or the inertia of physical stuff" (Coole

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<sup>7</sup> Manuela Infante, independently from Teatro de Chile also wrote the play *Xuarez* (2015) based on 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish *conquistadora* in Chile Inéz de Suárez.

<sup>8</sup> "¿Qué significa ser *verdaderos realistas* en el teatro, esto es, entender el escenario como una red en la que los seres humanos y objetos inanimados están todos en el mismo plano? ¿Sería posible pensar en un teatro no antropocéntrico, o incluso post-antropocéntrico? ¿podría esto llegar a ser una extraña forma de *neorealismo*?"

<sup>9</sup> "[...] es justamente desde el centro mismo de la tradición dramática realista y antropocéntrica que la obra propone visibilizar la fuerza escénica de lo no humano a media que una multiplicidad de objetos cotidianos ganan espacio sobre el escenario para imprimir otros ritmos, texturas y formas a la obra".

and Frost, 2010, 1-2). In line with these ideas, Infante in recent years has begun to explicitly refer to a *teatro no humano* (non-human theatre) stating:

After much coming and going, my definition of non-human has been simplified: everything that cannot be fully assimilated within/by human knowledge is no-humanity. Someone might say: *but that could be everything, anything?* Well, yes...Who said that humanity has ever existed? Who said that humanity hasn't been nothing more than a European construction to barbarise everything else?<sup>10</sup> (Infante, 2020)

In this sense, a non-human theatre would challenge a content-centred spectacle that searches for definitions, and where history, meaning and politics are offered as topics to be consumed by the audience (Infante, 2020)<sup>11</sup>. Alternatively, a non-human theatre would therefore advocate for the right to perhaps never fully understand *that other*. A theatre whose stage strength (taking Francica's views) emanates from the “opacity of all things that habit, transit and withdrew in a play” (2020). For Infante, the non-human theatre should allow itself to also imagine and enact a world of which there is nothing to be said about.

## 2 *Vegetative State*

Premiered in June 2017 at the NAVE Centre in Santiago, *Vegetative State* follows up Infante's interest and conceptions around a non-human theatre. The play has been performed in Madrid, Brussels, Chicago, Berlin and represented Chile at the 2019 Venice Biennale, so far receiving critical acclaim. Lucy Cutter, when reviewing the show in Portland, stated that “the singular brilliance of *Estado Vegetal* lies in the ways it renders the state of planthood tangible” (Cutter, 2019).

On a narrative level, the play tells the story of a motorcycle accident where the driver hit a tree ending up in a vegetative state (hence the title of the play). The play can be defined as a polyphonic monologue due to the fact that is played by one actor, Marcela Salinas who tells the story through a mosaic-type structure exposing the points of view of different characters involved in one way or another in the accident: Manuel, a fireman and the motorcycle's driver; his mother; María Soledad, a mentally challenged girl which happened to be climbed on the tree during the accident; Eva, a neighbour, member of the local council and the first to arrive to the scene of the accident; Raúl, a civil servant in charge of the green areas in the borough; Nora, an 80's years old lady who twenty years prior to the accident half buried herself in the floor of her house along with all her interior plants, which coincidentally is also the house next to the tree involved in the crash twenty years later; and Joselino, another neighbour whose

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<sup>10</sup> “Después de mucho ajetreo, mi definición de no-humano ha terminado por ser simple: todo aquello que no puede ser del todo asimilado en -ni por- el conocimiento humano es no-humanidad. Alguien dirá: *¡pero eso podría ser todo, eso es cualquier cosa!* Pues sí... ¿Quién dijo que la humanidad ha existido? ¿Quién dijo que Humanidad, no ha sido más que una construcción europea para barbarizar a todxs lxs demás?”

<sup>11</sup> During the pandemic context, Infante has been particularly critical of theatre via streaming, considering a space where the anthropocentric theatre is consolidated (Infante, 2020)

younger self discovered Nora buried. Salinas, also co-author of the script, makes use of her own vocal and physical abilities, microphones and loops recorders to differentiate each character. Simultaneously, the play uses the stage and its multidisciplinary nature to establish an experimental dialogue with the ideas of philosopher Michael Marder on plant thinking and plant intelligence, and Stefano Mancuso's research on vegetal communication which informed several stages decision made by the creative team in the terms of dramaturgy, performance; and set, light and sound design. On a political level, the play explores a series of paradigms or alternative world orders regarding the dynamics of power between humans and other non-human entities in the world, which also links to the play's title.

In an entanglement of performance, philosophy, science and political thinking *Vegetative State* becomes part of a repertoire of artists, scholars and other multidisciplinary initiatives which aim not only for a shift in the humanity-centred understanding of our reality, but also to shed a light in the crucial and foundational role that the non-human kingdoms have had within the development of human life. In fact, since the beginnings of natural life on Earth, non-human kingdoms have shared a co-dependency which seems vital to their individual survival. We see this, for example, in the symbiotic relationship between plants and the fungal web that surround the tree's roots allowing the tree's existence, and the roots provide a structure for the fungal web to develop (Sheldrake, 2020, 2). In other words, each kingdom exists from within the relationship with the other.

In the introduction of *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy* (2017) the editors noted:

Plants are perhaps the most fundamental form of life, providing sustenance, and thus enabling the existence of all animals, including us humans. Their evolutionary transition from Paleozoic aquatic beginnings to a vegetative life out of water is undoubtedly one of the farthest-reaching events in the history of the earth. It was the silent yet relentless colonization of terrestrial environments by the earliest land plants that transformed the global landscape and radically altered the geochemical cycles of the planet. This resulted in lowered concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide and thus set the scene for the emergence of terrestrial animals about 350 million years ago" (Gagliano et al, vii).

A similar view is shared by Heather Sullivan stating that "our entire human bodily existence has always been and continues to be a plant-based ecological system" (2019, P.152). Sullivan refers to "dark green" specifically in relation to the pre-historic plant-based sources of current fossil energies and how this petroleum-fuelled anthropocentric industrialization has affected the world's ecosystems (153). Whether referred as dark green, dark ecologies, plant critical studies or simply plant science, these projects place their interest in exploring and re-assessing (Sullivan, 2019) the active nature of plants reflected in their inherent agency, intelligence (decision-making systems) and intentionality. Thematically *Vegetative State* is concerned with aspect familiar to the dark green, particularly in Manuel's monologue which is a diatribe towards the devastating effect of the Anthropocene. At the same time, the play proposes a new materialist making-process methodology to challenge dominant narrative discourses brought by the cultural turn (Coole and Frost, 2010) that have informed western theatre practices. The play's ultimate ontological goal is to explore the otherness in order to find that other within ourselves; the plant in oneself as stated by Marder (2013). If for Barad "[...] diffraction

involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how different differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter" (2007, 30); then it could be argue that in her early work, Infante already began to *flirt* with some of Barad's ideas by highlighting the artificial nature of official politics of memory regarding how historical-heroic characters' lives have been represented, labelled and ultimately remembered, at the exclusion of other non-official historical narratives. Following this trajectory: To what extend could we consider *Vegetative State* a diffractive play? The next sections will attempt to answer this question by – on one hand - identifying and analysing the dramaturgical and performative mechanisms deployed on stage which contribute to articulate a diffractive pattern -and on the other – by recognising the potential political discourses of the play which emerge precisely from the intra-action (Barad, 2007) of these mechanisms.

## 2.1 Branched Dramaturgy

The pursue of Manuela Infante for articulating a non-human theatre is at the core of *Vegetative State* making-process and in the devise of a narrative-dramatic structure, which can be labelled as branched dramaturgy. Methodologically, the material was devised through a series of residencies in Chile and abroad, where director, performer and stage designer experimented with dramaturgical, performative and visual narratives through improvisation. This collaborative way of working responds to Infante's own understanding of her role as playwright in each of her projects. For Infante "playwrighting is not the practice of writing scripts, but rather a type of architecture, if we want to use a spatial metaphor. It is the organization of a path" (Infante, 2019, clase magistral)<sup>12</sup>. This mode of thinking on playwriting echoes her views regarding the texts of *Prat* and *Juana* - stated previously in the chapter- in that she does not conceive them as fully-formed dramatic and biographic scripts, but rather incomplete pieces from a past, with holes that elements of the present (brought by the creators and the audience) complete to form the full performative event. Infante considers herself a playwright, but not within the modernist-humanist theatre paradigm, where the author's words, the story, and a cohesive plot take a central position. Instead, she aims to practice a non-humanist playwrighting whose prominence is shared among other materials (sound, image, bodies, etc.) involved in the performance. In line with this, the architectural dramaturgical path of *Vegetative State* is articulated following plant's behavioural patterns which inform the play's literary language, the overall structure regarding links and transitions between scenes, and the modes of how the performative material are produced on stage.

From a linguistic perspective, many of the characters' monologues/testimonies make use of plant-related lexicon or commonly known expressions. In the first scene, in which Marcela Salinas plays Raúl telling his account of the accident, the character makes expressions such as "this is the root of the problem"<sup>13</sup> (Infante, 2017, p.1) to point out that the tree's branches slow but steady grow towards the electric has been a problem for years. In two occasions the character says to the audience: "Look, my point is...Cos sure, you are gonna say; Don Raúl you are beating around the bush"<sup>14</sup> (p.1) as his account of the accident keeps diverting towards

<sup>12</sup> "La dramaturgia no es la práctica de escribir textos, es mas bien una forma de arquitectura, si queremos usar una metáfora espacial. Es una organización de un recorrido"

<sup>13</sup> "este es el tema raíz"

<sup>14</sup> "A ver, y ¿a donde quiero llegar con esto? Porque claro, usted me va a decir Don Raúl usted se estás yendo por las ramas".

other topics. Later, during Eva's account of the accident, she states “aquí no se mueve una hoja sin que yo me entere” (P.5) which literary means “no even a leaf moves here without me knowing”, and she believes that Manuel's mother must have been “sleeping like a log”<sup>15</sup> (p.5) when the accident happened.

Plants' behavioural patterns also influence the overall structure of the play. Like the co-dependency between a tree and the fungal network living on the tree's roots - mentioned earlier in the chapter - the play's seemingly individual sections emerge in entanglement with one another. In the context of quantum physics, entanglement takes place when two particles share a common state, and the interaction of something external with one part of the entangled system causes the entire system to be affected. Entanglement is a key aspect of Barad's notion of intra-action (2007). Defined as the “mutual constitution of entangled agencies”, the dynamic of intra-action “recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (33). Following this mode of thinking, it could be argued that in *Vegetative State*, each scene works as the branch of a tree or an ivy, and its dramatic purpose within the overall structure, will emerge from the intra-action with the other branches/scenes.

We see this for example when Raúl, in one of his many diversions from the main topic (the accident), begins to talk about Adam and Eve:

RAÚL: And the woman ate the prohibited fruit from the tree in the Garden of Eden. She ate a little bit, almost nothing, but she did and as soon she ate they felt so ashamed that...what did they do?...they covered with a LEAF. The cherries covered with the cake. EVE!.. That's the name of the lady from the local council.<sup>16</sup> (p.2)

What seems to be Raúl beating around the bush in an irrelevant mediation about Adam and Eve, will semantically and plot-wise make sense later in the play when we hear Eva's account. She will also bring Christian references, describing the scene of the accident and the burned tree as biblical (p.4). Moreover, the phrase “I can't move” is said by María Soledad at the very end of her monologue when she is recalling being trapped up the tree which then merges with the start of Eva's monologue:

MARÍA SOLEDAD (in a loop): I can't move. I can't move. I can't move.

EVA: “I can't mooooove!!!” The girl screams and screams stuck up the tree while the firemen were trying to get her down.<sup>17</sup> (p-3-4)

At the end of Joselino's monologue recounting how he discovered Nora buried with her plants and piece of paper with a poem, he states:

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<sup>15</sup> “durmiendo como un tronco”

<sup>16</sup> “Y la mujer comió el fruto prohibido del árbol del jardín del Edén. Comió levemente por no decir poco, pero comió y apenas comió les agarro una vergüenza tan grande que ¿qué hicieron ambos? ... se taparon con una HOJA. Las guindas se taparon con la torta...Eva!...Eva se llama la señora de la junta vecinal, no, centro de mujeres, centro comunitario que no es lo mismo pero es similar.”

<sup>17</sup> María Soledad: No me puedo mover. No me puedo mover. No me puedo mover / Eva: “Na ma pada mavaaar!!” gritaba y gritaba esa niña encaramada arriba del árbol mientras los bomberos trataban de bajarla”

JOSELINO: It is written in the poem that the lady left, I brought the *hoja*<sup>18</sup> so you can understand.

STAGE DIRECTION: Joselino opens an envelope. From inside, he takes a dry *hoja* from a tree. Is not a paper *hoja*<sup>19</sup>(P.19)

The entanglement narrative also operates on a sound design level at the end of the scene. Marcela Salinas takes the dry leaf from the envelope towards one of the standing microphones and crunches it, recording the sound of the crashing leaf in a loop. As the recording is played the sound first slowly begins to resemble the sound of a bonfire and then of a wildfire, which coincides with the start of Manuel's monologue which takes place in a burned forest. Earlier in the play, Salinas builds a soundscape by overlapping loop recordings of different ambient sounds she makes with her own voice. It is a multi-layered soundscape which *sort of* resembles to a natural landscape but at the same time it doesn't reference to any specific ecosystem. It could be a jungle, the country, or a desert; the soundscape is simultaneously familiar and strange. The infinite possible meanings in these two examples emerge from the intra-action between the sounds made by Salinas' body, the loop recording, and the audience's own references of how a natural soundscape should sounds like.

Within *Vegetative State*'s plant-based branch dramaturgy of loose endings and random paths, we can also identify elements associated to chaos theory, which focuses on analysing unpredictable phenomena. For chaos theory, what on an external level seems a disordered of chaotic behaviour, on an internal level it reveals to be a complex system with clear patterns and structures. In the play, the repetitions of expressions among the characters, and the apparent randomness of the *intraconnectedness* (following Barad's concept) between scenes, is understood by some characters as part of a bigger structure. These elements are particularly clear the Mother's monologue, in which Salinas delivers it as if she is giving her testimony to a police officer. She refers to the relationship with her son Manuel and recalls a memory from when Manuel, as a child, performed in play:

MOTHER: He even joined a Theatre workshop. He was very upset because they gave him a character that couldn't move. Can you imagine. He must have been 6 or 7 years old. He cried: "I can't act this, mum, I can't move. I can't move!". We rehearsed together. Because he was struggling. We even made the costume together. I remember that at first he was moving too much, I told him "stay still Manuel", "It's windy mum!! It's too windy!" All the other kids played real people and came in and out from the stage. They said things. Some even sang. And I there was Manuel, standing still, dressed as...a TREE. (Infante, 2017, P.7)<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In Spanish *hoja* can mean both a leaf but also a paper sheet.

<sup>19</sup> Joselino: Eso está escrito en el poema que dejó la señora, le traje la hoja para que usted pueda entender. / Acotación: Joselino abre un sobre que trae. De adentro saca una hoja seca de un árbol. No una hoja de papel.

<sup>20</sup> Madre: Hasta en un taller de teatro participó. Una vez estuvo súper complicado porque le habían dado un personaje que no se podía mover. Imagínese. Tendría unos 6 o 7 años. El lloraba: "Esto no se puede actuar, mamá, no me puedo mover. No me puedo mover. ¡No me puedo mover!" Ensayábamos juntos. Porque le costaba. Hasta hicimos juntos el disfraz. Al principio se movía mucho me acuerdo, yo le decía: "más quieto, Manuel". "¡Es que corre viento mamaaaá! ¡Corre mucho viento!" Todos los otros niños hacían de personas y entraban y salían. Decían coas. Algunos hasta cantaban. Y el Manuel ahí parado quito, vestido de...ÁRBOL.

The phrase “I can’t move” is repeated again, after also being uttered by María Soledad when stuck up the tree and acknowledged by Eva. The use of capitals in the text to write the word tree is performed by Salinas/the mother as an *anagnorisis*; an instant of revelation in which she realises that perhaps random elements of her life and her son’s are part of an alternative power structure - ran by non-human *others* and with their own agency and motives - which might have played a role in Manuel’s accident. I used the word *perhaps* because the mother based her realisation only on intuitions rather than full-shaped certainties. Moreover, James Gleick states that “to some physicists chaos is a science of process rather than state; of becoming rather than being” (1987, p.5) and which acknowledges the matter’s potential for self-organizing and intricate relations (Coole and Frost, 2010). Chaos Theory’s focus on process and becoming and Coole and Frost remarks on the dynamic nature of matter, find a point of contact with Barad’s intra-action when looking at the entanglement between words, space, lighting, the presence of Marcela Salinas and her use of a loop sound recorder to create live-media content. In this context, the narrative and discourses are being both processed and performed at the same time, emerging from the intra-actions of the agencies involved in the event. This dynamic is particularly evident in the mother’s monologue, introduced above. In this scene, the monologue is constructed and delivered through three layers of loops recordings recorded by Salinas in real-time. The first time, Marcela records a set of sentences leaving long pauses between each other. When we hear the recording, Salinas uses the pauses in between to record a second set of sentences, also leaving pauses in between, this time shorter. When both recordings (sets 1 and 2) are played, the audience starts to identify a sense of narrative; a story. She records a third and last set of sentences filling the gaps created in the first and second recordings. If we take as an example the first part of the excerpt selected above, it would look like this:

MOTHER: He even joined a Theatre workshop (set 1). He was very upset because (set 2) they gave him a character that couldn’t move (set 1). Can you imagine (set 2). He must have been 6 or 7 years old. He cried: “I can’t act this (set 3), Mum (set 1) I can’t move. I can’t move!” (set 2).

When the three recordings finally play together, what at first seems to have been a series of random loose phrases - recorded by Salinas and leaking by pieces to the audience- begin to articulate *in situ* into her full testimony to the police officer. Narratively, each set works on its own and in relation with the other two giving the potential for different interpretations

Contrary to what is usually the norm on stage, Salinas performs/records each set of the mother’s monologue, following the lights cues (instead of the light following her). Evidently, she is performing a human emulation of heliotropism; the motion of plants in response to the sun. Rocío Hernández’s light design accentuates this by placing on ceiling each PAR lamp’s PARCAN in a parabolic layout mirroring the sun’s movement. Exploring on stage the natural phenomenon of heliotropism is a clear example of how *Vegetative State* establishes a dialogue with Michael Marder’s concept of plants’ non-conscious intentionality<sup>21</sup>. For Marder “[...] the

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<sup>21</sup> Marder’s plants’ non-conscious intentionality is part of a bigger conceptual umbrella he denominates *Plant-thinking* which simultaneously refers to: (1) the non-cognitive, non-ideational, and non-imaginistic mode of thinking proper to plants (hence, what I call “thinking without the head”); (2) our thinking about plants; (3) how human thinking is, to some extent, de-

non-conscious life of plants is a kind of ‘thinking before thinking’, an inventiveness independent from instinctual adaptation and from formal intelligence alike.” (2013a,126). Epistemologically, “thinking before thinking produces non-representational meaning. If humans store their memories in their brain (centralised) as images (representational), plants store in their cells (decentralised) “imageless and non-representational material memories” (127). In the case of the heliotropism phenomena, plants remember the sensation of light in their bodies rather than the image of sun itself or what the light has revealed. In this sense, Marder labels heliotropism as “the most iconic illustration of its non-conscious noesis, or act of intending.” (128). Marder’s ideas of a decentralised memory system resonates with Infante’s views on playwriting as an architectural craft. Interestingly, Chilean writer Andrea Jeftanovic (2010) back in 2010 described the dramaturgical work of Teatro de Chile as a living system where the play’s intersectionality is shared to the spectator with fluidity and unpredictability. *Vegetative State* pluri-directional narratives opposite traditional dramatic unity in favour of an organic dramaturgy.

## 2.2 Plant Power

Botanists James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schissler (1999) coined the phrase “Preventing Plant Blindness” to draw attention to the tendency of biologists to overlook and neglect plants in favour of researching the animal kingdom. The phrase was part of a larger campaign which also involved the print and distribution of poster with the phrase to over 20,000 secondary school teachers at teachers’ conventions in USA. The poster’s design was also informed by this idea:

The poster is designed to be initially puzzling. It shows a tree-lined, riverine environment emblazoned diagonally with the words “Prevent Plant Blindness.” Hovering, Magritte-like, in the sky above is a pair of dark-red-tinted spectacles. The implication is that someone wearing these glasses could not see the green plants in the scene below—that if one’s vision is “filtered,” either physically or conceptually, one may easily miss seeing the plants that appear in one’s field of vision (Wandersee and Schissler, 1999, p.82)

The underrepresentation of the vegetative kingdom has also been addressed by Sullivan (2019) stating that “Plant blindness means that human beings perceive the surrounding greenery, however sparse or lush, as ‘mere’ background” (156) for animal predators even if in some cases, these predators are smaller than the plants (like a snake). Similarly, Marder in his *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013b) claims that ‘If animals have suffered marginalization throughout the history of Western thought, then non-human, non-animal beings, such as plants, have populated the margin of the margin, the zone of absolute obscurity undetectable on the radars of conceptualities’ (2). Yet, this role of a passive green backdrop for the faster or more active animals (Sullivan, 2019) at the same time has triggered a series of - sometimes contradicted- narratives regarding the relationship between humans and the vegetative kingdom. From sustainable utopian co-existence or lush futuristic landscape, to

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humanized and rendered plant like, altered by its encounter with the vegetal world; and finally, (4) the ongoing symbiotic relation between this transfigured thinking and the existence of plants.” (Marder, 2013b, 2)

“dystopian horror tales of overwhelming and nightmarish vegetal agency re-emerging and re-conquering the Earth.” (Sullivan, 2019, P.155). In line with these authors, *Vegetative State* also explore vegetal power and the potential narratives derived from it. In Eva’s monologue, she envisions a future in which the plants will take over the planet:

EVA: That’s how I imagine the end of humankind...No, I don’t imagine, I saw it on tv, when the human being is wiped off the earth, plant will take three months in cover everything. The planet will be like a one Green ball (Infante, p.5)<sup>22</sup>

Eva gives a great amount of legitimacy to fictional sources, which is not surprising given the extensive repertoire of films and tv shows that depict plants as an invasive force waking up from their passive state to terrorize humanity. From Audrey Jr. the carnivorous plant in Roger Corman’s *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), the sentient tomatoes in John De Bello’s *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* (1978), to the plant-based toxin triggering human to commit mass suicides in the more serious *The Happening* (2008) by M. Night Shayamalan; in these stories there is always a sense of mystery regarding why the plants are attacking humans. In the introduction of the collections of essay *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (2016) Dawn Keetley states that “Plants embody an inscrutable silence, an impeccable strangeness, which human culture has, from the beginning, set out to tame” (p.1). Eva argues that eventually someone will crush their vehicle towards the tree, stating “I saw it coming” (4)<sup>23</sup>. Raúl also makes the same comment in his testimony earlier in the play complaining that the tree should have been removed years ago. Yet, he expands on this by also expressing his fears and apprehensions towards the plants’ slow-scale movement:

RAÚL: [...] A tree moves so slow that it seems still. Why? What is happening? A tree lives...How many? Hundreds of years! Then, imagine your life, your own, yes your life, stretch through hundreds of years...SLOW. So well, of course! Sure, you could say “we see it coming Don Raúl”, “an accident waiting to happen Don Raúl”, but I would have to answer: “Sure Officer, IT COULD NOT BE SEEN”. That is the root of the problem, the matrix, the core of all this: This is a COMING that is NOT SEEN (Infante, 2017, p.1)<sup>24</sup>

It is precisely Raúl’s recognition of his own plant blindness -and therefore his incapacity to understand other ways to be in the world - what ultimately fuels his perception of the tree as dangerous. A different dynamic take place in the case of Nora, whose scene takes place twenty years before Manuel’s accident. It is not performed as a testimony to the police, like the other monologues, but as a scene between Nora and her plants in her house. In fact, the plants are just as characters in the scene as her. She treats her plants as if they were people giving them

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<sup>22</sup> “EVA: Así me imagino yo cuando se acabe el ser humano... No, no me lo imagino lo vi en la tele, cuando se acabe el ser humano de la faz de la tierra, las plantas se van a demorar tres meses en cubrirlo todo. El planeta va a ser como una pura bola verde.” (p.5)

<sup>23</sup> “Se veía venir”

<sup>24</sup> RAÚL: Un árbol se mueve tan lento que parece quieto. ¿Por qué? ¿Qué pasa? Un árbol vive...¿Cuánto? ¡Cientos de años! Entonces claro, imagínese su vida, la misma, suya, de usted, estirada en cientos de años... LENTA. ¡Entonces bueno, claro! a ver...usted me puede decir “se veía venir pues Don Raúl”, “se avecinaba la tormenta pues don Raúl”, pero yo le tendría que responder: “sí pues mi cabó, pero NO SE VEÍA” Ese es el tema raíz, matriz, central de todo esto: Este es un VENIR que NO SE VE.

names, gender and personality's traits. She chats with the them about their daily care: "You are too pale", "You are reaching your peak", "You need more light" (p.7)<sup>25</sup>. Suddenly and surprisingly, the plants answer back to Nora. They demand her to plant them back on the grounds of the house, reminding her that this place belong to them in the first place: "But, why do you want me to destroy my house's floor? ¿What do you mean with this isn't my house!?" "What do you mean with you were before me?"<sup>26</sup> (p.8). The plants ask Nora to write a letter they will dictate her. Unlike Eva's and Raúl's rather alienated relationship with the vegetative kingdom, Nora's openness, care and ultimate empathy towards the plants allowed for a chance for communication between species. The scene ends with Nora writing down the plant's message. Whatever the plants communicated to her remains a mystery for the audience; we only hear Nora's reaction: "Come again? Oh, what a beautiful image, it seems such biblical image"<sup>27</sup>(p.8). Whether the plants actually spoke to Nora or she imagined it is not really the point. As we have seen, *Vegetative State* is not concerned with how plausible the overall plot is but rather to use the story as a concrete structure, a path (following Infante architectural understanding of her dramaturgy) that can sustain an interdisciplinary approach to plant-based dynamics and their inherent agency. In this sense, highlighting a world in which plants raise their voices and demands (as they do to Nora) resonates with some New Materialisms views in which animal, non-animal and non-sentient bodies do share qualities exclusively attributed to humans such as self-awareness and self-reflection. Under the New Materialism perspective, as Coole and Frost point out "the difference between humans and animals, or even between sentient and non-sentient, is a question of degree more than of kind" (Coole and Frost, 2010, P.21).

In Joselino's monologue he tells the police officer how twenty years ago he discovered Nora naked and buried in the floor with her plants. It is through his testimony that we learn that after Nora was rescued, the house was abandoned, and the vegetation took all over the property. Moreover, he tells that the roots of the vegetation in the house became entangled with the roots of the tree outside the property. Attuned with *Vegetative State*'s branched dramaturgy, Joselino reproduce the lines "Look Officer, I saw it coming, but it is coming so slow that you don't *see it*<sup>28</sup> coming" (Infante, 2017, p.9) which are not exact the words but similar to Raúl's testimony. In these testimonies there is the suspicion that plants somehow have agency and are devising a long-term plan for re-claiming the planet. We see enacted the fear towards plant power-represented in the narrative figure of the "monster plant" - whose agency challenges human control and revengefully arise against humans' extractive paradigm.

Although *Vegetative State* tries to avoid relaying on a conventional dramatic structure, the play reaches an epic scale and climax with Manuel's monologue. As stated earlier, the scene begins with the loop recording of a leaf being crushed by Salinas at the end of Joselino's testimony

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<sup>25</sup> "Tu estás en tu mejor momento", "Tu estás muy pálido, a ti te falta luz"

<sup>26</sup> "Pero ¿Por qué tu vas a querer que yo destrujo el piso de mi casa?! ¿Cómo que no es mi casa?! ¿Cómo que ustedes estaban aquí antes que yo?!"

<sup>27</sup> "¿Cómo? que imagen más hermosa, me parece a mí una imagen tan bíblica"

<sup>28</sup> My emphasis.

which becomes the sound of a wildfire. The actor is surrounded by standing microphones which represent the burned tree. The back of the stage is completely lit with a red-pink light simulating the flames of the wildfire. The setting has moved from the city - *the place of thinking* under humanist terms- to the natural environment. Salinas is now dressed like a fireman. She is Manuel- the victim of the motorcycle accident - standing and contemplating the burned forest. Tonally, the scene represents a shift from the previous monologues which take place in an every-day setting (a police station, a living-room) and performed in relatively realistic style. Manuel's monologue present itself as a diatribe whose text and delivery are more in line with classic acting style. I argue that the monologue can be divided in three parts stages: recognition and guilt, utopian desire, and epistemological-political alternative project. In the first stage Manuel claims:

MANUEL: I'm animal. A novice creature in this of living, in this of surviving. You were already here before me, yet here I survive with limited understanding, like a guilty reverse of an absolute mystery, which you still know better than me. Because it's as if you live within time, not against it. I'm animal. My answer to the world was to pull up, therefore my sentence is to move. Where you stay, I move forward. Where you show your face, I avoid. Where you settle, I invade. I'm animal (Infante, 2017, p.10)<sup>29</sup>

In the excerpt above Manuel is devasted and ashamed. He acknowledges clear differences between humans and the vegetative kingdom in how each species conceived their role in the world. He endows plants all the positive qualities usually attributed to human's behaviour and refers to them as ignorant and predators. Therefore, by repeating "Soy animal" he is not just re-identifying himself in terms of a biological specie, but also in ontological, ethical, political terms. This is reinforced later in the monologue, when Manuel wishes to acquire plant-based behavioural qualities:

MANUEL: I ask God, absolve me from the animal forms! Give something from them! Let my lungs beat! Let the tips of fingers breath, let my stomach think! Let my skin feed so the act of eating be more similar to touch than to gobble down. (p.10)<sup>30</sup>

Manuel wishes for a diffractive existence because he doesn't want to *just* understand this *otherness*, he wants to incorporate what is intrinsically non-human into his own humanity and be defined by this relational dynamic. Moreover, Manuel's celebration of a non-human yet still conscious mode of existence is reflected in his desire for acquiring a decentralised-based intelligence. Marder's ideas on plants' intelligence are clearly entangled with him claiming "in refusing to treat intelligence as an exception in the order of life and in the evolutionary process, will we gain admission into the yet-uncharted terrain of plant thinking." (Marder, 2013a,126).

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<sup>29</sup> "MANUEL: Soy animal. Criatura novata en esto de habitar, en esto de sobrevivir. Vosotras estabais aquí antes que yo, sin embargo acá sobrevivo con limitado entendimiento, como culposo reverso de un misterio absoluto, que vosotras conocéis aun así, mejor que yo. Porque es como si vivieseis en el tiempo, no contra él. Soy animal. Mi respuesta al mundo fue arrancar, mi condena entonces, el movimiento. Donde ustedes se quedan, yo avanzo. Donde ustedes plantan cara, yo evito. Yo en dificultad, me desplazo. Donde ustedes se establecen, yo invado. Soy animal."

<sup>30</sup> "MANUEL: A Dios pido: ¡Absuélveme de las formas del reino animal! ¡Dame algo que es de ellos! ¡Que latan en vez mis pulmones! ¡Que respiren las puntas de mis dedos, que piense mi estomago! Que sea mi piel la que se alimente para que comer sea mas parecido a tocar que a engullir" (P.10)

Finally, the monologue shifts towards an epistemological-political demand for the rise of a Vegetative State, with Manuel stating:

MANUEL: [...] Autonomy. You can't represent the hand with ideas from the brain, nor with the eyes' needs. No! It was only from political physiologies that the tyrants emerged or representative democracy which is the same [...] Let the world be a pure green ball again. A sovereign vegetative state [...] I'm the last animal. Come. Let me do what animal can and plants cannot: let me die (Infante, 2017, p.11)<sup>31</sup>

Manuel's outcry against traditional mode of political representation illustrates *Vegetative State*'s ideological core, as it reaffirms the play position within the repertoire of academic and artistic works which have turned their eye into exploring and embracing plants' behavioural patterns - specifically in relation to their decentralised decision-making system - precisely to seek for alternative political modes of power distribution. In tune with this context, it is not a coincidence that Stefano Mancuso's latest book is titled *The Nation of Plants* (2021). The work is a manifesto in which the author -playing shares a new constitution devised plant and based in their own modes of organisational structures and principles that regulate the lives of these organism (10). Moreover, looking at the Chilean context, this excerpt has become particularly relevant as currently in the country there is a constitutional reform taking place in which the new constitution will be discussed and devised by a convention made of 155 popular-elected delegates. This reform was triggered by the 2019 Chilean Revolt in which different massive citizens-led protests were held throughout the country demanding structural changes to Chile's Neoliberal model and the constitution - devised and approve during Augusto Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990)- that has sustained this model for over forty years.

Placing itself at the intersection between performance, philosophy and plant studies, *Vegetative State* represents a key contribution within a wide range of areas and disciplines. As part of Manuela Infante's artistic quest for devising a non-humanist theatre, the play establishes a practice-based dialogue with modes of thinking and concepts associated to new materialisms, such as Karen Barad's entanglement and intra-action and Michael Marder's plant-thinking. The result is a theatrical experience whose dramaturgical and performative strategies challenge notions of centralised plots, monolithic discourses and ultimately how meanings are produced, performed and perceived. Moreover, the play's non-humanist nature, not only asks audiences to turn their focus to plant-based ontological dynamics for alternative mode and collective relations of power, but also -and mainly – it invites them to dive into the unknown and unconsumable in human terms.

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<sup>31</sup> "MANUEL: Autonomía. No se representa a la mano con ideas del cerebro, ni con necesidades de los ojos. No! Solo de fisiologías políticas animales pudieron surgir los tiranos o la democracia representativa que es igual. No avancemos mas por la ruta inmadura del animal [...] Que el mundo vuelva a ser una pura bola verde. Un estado soberano vegetal [...] Soy el ultimo animal. Venid. Dejadme hacer lo que los animales hacen y las plantas no: Dejadme morir."

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