

**An Oceanic Feeling:
Cinema and the Sea**

Erika Balsom

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I'm walking over shale and dirt. I'm almost at the sea. I can hear it. I think about taking a photograph of the ocean when I get there, but even before I do I've seen the image before. There are millions of these ocean snapshots. They surge in uploads and circulate through computers across the globe. And I think: this water, receding now from the beach, might it arrive at another, where someone will take its photo? Are we all taking pictures of the same sea?

– Charlotte Prodger and Corin Sworn, HDHB (2011)

In 1930's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud discusses Romain Rollard's notion of "oceanic feeling," defining it as the sensation of an unbreakable bond between oneself and the outside world. Rather than any assertion of autonomy or mastery, oceanic feeling is a quasi-sublime state in which the integrity of the self is lost, or at least compromised, in a sense of limitlessness, unboundedness, and interconnectedness. For Rollard, this feeling formed the basis of religious sentiment; Freud does not question its existence, but disagrees that it is the source of religion, understanding it rather as something akin to an acknowledgement he finds in a line from Christian Grabbe's 1835 play *Hannibal*: "Out of this world, I cannot fall."¹

Extending Freud's move away from a theological interpretation of oceanic feeling, the following pages will take his metaphor literally, returning this "feeling of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole" to its aquatic origins.² Across five themes—the elemental contingencies of water, the fascination of submarine cinematography, representations of littoral labour, approaches to the Middle Passage and illegalised migration, and the materiality of global maritime circulation—*An Oceanic Feeling* will drift idiosyncratically through a history of cinematic representations of the sea, in search of reflections on what it means to belong to the whole of a world in our time of ecological, humanitarian, and political emergency. The dispossession of the ego and decentring of the human found in oceanic feeling

will serve as the ground for a practice of implication, remembrance, and care.

To leave *terra firma* and delve into the liquid flux of oceanic feeling is to undertake a radical reorientation of perspective. “Yes, out of this world, we cannot fall. We are once and for all within it”; this statement may be true, but it seldom happens today that we dwell on its ramifications, even as moments of violence and catastrophe perhaps capable of forcing such a reckoning seem to accumulate faster and faster.³ Too often we neglect to attend to our constitutive interdependence and mutual vulnerability. Whether in the realm of ecology, economy, or sociality, fantasies of autonomy and mastery proliferate. Self-sufficiency is a cornerstone of neoliberal ideology. Pushing back against this paradigm, a heightened attunement to the ethical demands that arise from oceanic feeling’s sense of interconnectedness—demands admittedly not central to Rollard or Freud’s articulation of the capacious concept—might offer a way to live less damaged lives in the age of what many term the Anthropocene, a time when anthropogenic changes to the environment and climate can no longer be ignored and colonial epistemologies remain in need of undoing.

The following pages will follow literary scholar Hester Blum in his suggestion that we must approach the sea not merely as theme, but affirm that “in its geophysical, historical, and imaginative properties, the sea instead provides a new epistemology—a new dimension—for thinking about surfaces, depths, and the extra-terrestrial

dimensions of planetary resources and relations.”⁴ *Oceanic Feeling* takes the sea as theme and method, exploring its role in forging connections between people, between communities, and between the human and nonhuman. This means refusing the arrogance of mastery to see what affinities, responsibilities, and solidarities emerge from the watery depths. Through a discussion of diverse films from around the world and across cinema history, the following pages suggest how the deeply mythologised site of the ocean activates forms of relationality that prompt one to think beyond the individual, beyond a singular territory, and beyond the binary between nature and culture.

This entails a break with engrained ideas. In his 1957 book *Mythologies*, for instance, Roland Barthes casts the ocean as a blank space, a traceless void that paralyzes the production of meaning. Its salty expanse will never quench the semiotician’s thirst for signs: “In a single day, how many really nonsignifying fields do we cross? Very few, sometimes none. Here I am, before the sea; it is true that it bears no message. But on the beach, what material for semiology! Flags, slogans, signals, signboards, clothes, suntan even, which are so many messages to me.”⁵ Certainly, Barthes’s differentiation between the vibrant bustle of the shoreline and the muteness of the ocean immediately resonates. We live our lives on land, with the sea often figuring as a “forgotten space,” to borrow the title of Allan Sekula and Noël Burch’s 2010 film. It appears inhuman, eternal, beyond history. In the seemingly

endless waves, in what seems like a great emptiness, no stable markers of culture offer themselves to the gaze. But if we leave the realm of what is immediately visible to a beach-dwelling tourist, is it indeed true that the sea bears no message? The history of cinema—from fiction to documentary, Hollywood to artists' film, 1895 to the present—suggests otherwise.

There is the sea of adventure, a staple of classical Hollywood. In Michael Curtiz's maritime noir *Sea Wolf* (1941), the ocean is a space of escape, intrigue, and adventure for rogues and thieves who live under the autocratic rule of the captain, ungoverned by the laws of the land. The enclosure of the ship—at once mobile and claustrophobic—provides Curtiz with an avenue into the dark pasts of men and their darker hearts. There is the rising sea of climate apocalypse, of the drowned worlds that appear in the bloated blockbuster *Waterworld* (1995) and the speculative experimentalism of Ben Rivers's *Slow Action* (2011). There are those who work by or on the sea, such as the lighthouse keeper of Louis Henderson and Filipa César's *Sunstone* (2017) or the tugboat captain of Jean Grémillon's *Stormy Waters* (*Remorques*, 1941). And there is the sustaining sea, the sea that “feeds and kills,” as Trinh T. Minh-ha puts it in her *Forgetting Vietnam* (2016). This sea also fills Noriaki Tsuchimoto's documentaries of the mercury-poisoned inhabitants of Minamata Bay, such as *The Shiranui Sea* (1975), in which the devastating effects of environmental contamination, corporate irresponsibility, and state bureaucracy are made visible. Children dig for toxic



Attack of the Crab Monsters, dir. Roger Corman, 1957, 62 minutes.

shellfish; over a largely-untouched feast of seafood from the affected area, the filmmakers converse with men who continue to fish there, despite the heavy metal that has accumulated in their catch.

There is the supernatural sea: in *The Abyss* (1989), a bioluminescent “non-terrestrial intelligence” resides far underwater, while in the sea-monster cycle of 1950s’ “B” movies—including *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955) and *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957)—human nuclear activity disrupts the natural ecosystem, leading to mutation and terror. There is the spectacular sea of

Gerard Holthuis's *Marsa Abu Galawa (Careless Reef Part 4*, 2004), a hallucinatory flicker film of underwater creatures, set to entrancing Egyptian music, evoking the seductions of the depths. In Francisco Rodriguez's *A Moon Made of Iron (Una luna de hierro*, 2017), the sea appears placid but is in fact a sea of globalised labour, of bodies overboard in watery graves. Rodriguez inhabits the rippling wake of dead Chinese workers who attempted to flee their squid-fishing boat off the Patagonian coast, far from the first individuals for whom a long maritime voyage is one of desperation and no return. And there is the sea of colonial exploration, of colonial nostalgia in Pierre Schoendoerffer's French navy drama *Le Crabe-tambour* (1977), and of anticolonial revisionism in Kidlat Tahimik's *Balikbayan #1 Memories of Overdevelopment Redux III* (2015). In conjunction with newly shot material, Tahimik revisits his unfinished film from the 1980s about the first man to circumnavigate the globe—but instead of Ferdinand Magellan, who never himself completed a total circumnavigation, dying in the Philippines, the protagonist of *Balikbayan #1* is Magellan's slave Enrique of Malacca, played by the filmmaker himself. "Balikbayan" is Tagalog for "guest worker"; Tahimik positions Enrique as the first of many to come.

In the great magnitude of the oceans—which cover over seventy percent of the Earth's surface and are on average 3.5 kilometres deep—resides a vast and fluid archive traversing nature and culture, one that has been richly captured in the cinema. It is an archive of horror, wreckage, survival, and beauty, within which histories

of capitalist accumulation and still-reverberating traumas flow alongside the captivating wonders of marine environments and the romance of the waves. In her 16mm work *Blue Mantle* (2010), Rebecca Meyers insistently returns to hypnotic images of the empty ocean, putting them into dialogue with quotations and representations that attest to its rich history in a cultural repertoire of signs, as if the seeming void of the sea were but a cloak for its imaginative wealth, a screen for its projection of dreams and nightmares. To reprise and revise Barthes, then: here I am, before the sea, before its myriad treatments in the history of cinema, and it is true that it bears many messages—messages of fantasy and necessity, exploit and exploitation, tradition and modernity, life and death.

Why turn to the cinema to delve into oceanic feeling? Unlike the written word or the painted image, cinema is an art that possesses, to return to Freud's articulation of the concept, an "indissoluble connection" to physical reality, registering its changing traces in time through the nonhuman automatism of the camera. The lens-based image belongs "inseparably to the external world," as the product of a triangular encounter between it, technology, and aesthetic intentionality. Echoing Grabbe, out of this world, it cannot fall. Even if photochemical and digital apparatuses depend on the use of minerals mined terrestrially—silver, copper, coltan—in this avowed dependence, in this bond, the lens-based image is oceanic.

In "Our Sea of Islands," Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa proposes that the idea of Oceania as a series

of confined, tiny islands is an imperial construct, one predated by a more holistic perspective that understood the ocean as an inhabited place uniting a large exchange community.⁶ Expanding Hau'ofa's proposal to a global scale, the following pages will turn to an array of cinematic practices to ask: what if the ocean does not divide us, but connects us? What politics, what ethics, would follow?

- 1 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1930), 9.
- 2 Freud, 9.
- 3 This longer citation is supplied in the original German as a footnote to Freud's initial quotation of Grabbe: "Ja, aus der Welt werden wir nicht fallen. Wir sind einmal darin."
- 4 Hester Blum, "Introduction: Oceanic Studies," *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013): 151.
- 5 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 2000), 112.
- 6 Epele Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 30–32.

I. Elemental

No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe.

—Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

The ocean has been present from the very beginnings of cinema. In Louis Lumière's *A Boat Leaving the Harbour* (*Barque sortant du port*, 1895), two women and two children watch as three men in a rowboat leave the shore to bob and sway in the breaking waves. The film consists of a single, unbroken take lasting not even a minute. The men push out towards the horizon, encountering increasing force from the swelling sea. With the coming of a particularly large wave, they lurch to the left and—the screen goes black. Their fate remains unknown.

A Boat Leaving the Harbour returns us to a cinema before narrative, a time when, as the story goes, what spectators relished most were small, fleeting details ancillary to the ostensible focus of the action, such as the rustle of leaves in the wind or the movement of dust particles released by the demolition of a brick wall. Unlike any medium before it, film promised to capture traces of the world in time, registering moments and movements that resided outside of any human intentionality or control through the nonhuman automatism of the camera. Something of the world itself would be rendered back, preserved yet transfigured. Although



A Boat Leaving the Harbour (Barque sortant du port),
dir. Louis Lumière, 1895, 46 seconds.

fictional narrative quickly became dominant, film's true vocation arguably lies here, in its challenge to the anthropocentrism, coded messages, and predetermined meanings that pervade painting and literature.

For Dai Vaughan, *A Boat Leaving the Harbour* stands as a special example of this power. Vaughan privileges the film over perhaps better-known works often invoked in this capacity, such as *Feeding the Baby (Le Repas de bébé, 1895)* and *Demolition of a Wall (Démolition d'un mur, 1895)*, because its negation of the planned is not

mere background but something that overtakes and embroils the human, the very centre of the action. The rowers respond “to the challenge of the spontaneous moment” and, in so doing, “become integrated into its spontaneity... Man, no longer the mountebank self-presenter, has become equal with the leaves and the brick dust—and as miraculous.”¹ Here, the ocean and the cinema—united by inhuman animus and a penchant for flux—conspire to dislodge man from his pedestal. No longer separate from nature, and certainly not its master, he is dwarfed by the unruly, intractable contingency of the water. The film's undoing of the fantasy of a well-ordered, controllable world is at once humbling and enchanting.



Rendering the unpredictable movement of water has historically presented one of the greatest challenges for computer animators. When the complex physics of the ocean is reduced to the regularity of a mathematical equation, the results can be less than convincing. In *Parallel I* (2012), Harun Farocki traces the increasing photorealism of computer-generated images over a thirty-year period through an inventory of select motifs drawn from the natural world, motifs closely tied to the mimetic power of cinema and characterised by stochastic movements that make them difficult to render. He turns to the wind in the trees, clouds, smoke, and fire—but most of all, he turns to representations of

water. Initially, the movement of water is represented through the abstraction of geometric shapes, cascading dashes and dots, before edging towards a greater verisimilitude that nonetheless retains an inert flatness. Farocki describes these synthetic images as partaking of a “new constructivism”; these pictures are made rather than taken.

As Erin Ramos, the effects lead on Disney’s computer-animated feature *Moana* (2016), puts it, “As effects artists, working with fluids, you can’t always predict what you’re going to get from your water simulation. And the hard thing with water is, if it doesn’t look right, you can really tell. Even if it’s in the background.”² *Moana*, a film that aims to depict the ocean both realistically and as character, has been widely hailed as a new benchmark of naturalism in the domain of fluid animation. This achievement is closely tied to a new, custom-designed simulation engine called Splash, which uses distributed computing to harness the power of multiple machines to calculate the movement of billions of particles simultaneously. In the professional jargon of the effects industry, Splash is a “water solver,” a name that itself implies the presence of a problem.³ To solve the “problem” of the ocean is to tame its contingency: when waves break on *Moana*’s shores, they consist of multiple discrete layers, each one independently calculable and controllable. *Parallel I* shows computer animators at work, manipulating such layers to produce a compelling illusion, providing the viewer with insight into the work of picture-making,

work that will be fully occluded in the finished product. *Moana*’s raft will bob on the waves only as directed, never to be overtaken by the surprise that engulfed Lumière’s seafarers. She will never confront the ambiguity that takes hold at the end of *The 400 Blows* (*Les 400 coups*, 1959), when the young Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud) escapes the juvenile reformatory and flees to the beach, facing the ocean and facing the camera, his story freezing in uncertainty. Software “solves” water in ostensibly live-action films as well; as Allan Sekula has put it, in a film like *The Perfect Storm* (2000), the first to blend real water and CGI water, “the sea ‘returns’ as pure media simulation.”⁴ Such simulated universes of simulated water offer all too fitting an allegory for an impossible desire increasingly prevalent in our time—namely, the total algorithmic control of reality, whereby quality becomes quantity and the complexities of life are “solved” through planning, metrics, and predictive models. In the words of Kyle Odermatt, *Moana*’s visual effects supervisor, the film’s creators could “art-direct the water to [their] liking.”⁵ If only the same were true of our world’s rising tides.



The water of *Moana* is a lush and textured presence, yet it remains prey to the criticisms so often levelled against computer-generated images: it appears flimsy, without substance. This is one way of diagnosing the disappointment of simulated images of the ocean. Yet it

is worth recalling André Bazin's proposal that the power of photography—and, by extension, film—is to be found not in its perfection of the reproduction of likeness, but in the beholder's knowledge that the image was produced through a "transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction."⁶ Hypothetically, computer animation could perfect the reproduction of likeness, but as a form of *ex nihilo* creation with no grounding in the phenomenal world, it will irremediably lack the transference Bazin describes, the nonintentional recording of chance occurrence that Vaughan deems "miraculous."

Against the increasing dominance of this "new constructivism" are reassertions of the specificity of photochemical film that foreground the very contingency vanquished in the regularity of the pixel-grid. In so doing, they suggest a different relationship to the complexity and immeasurability of our world. A little more than a century after *A Boat Leaving the Harbour*, under the spectre of digitisation and a proliferation of computer-generated images, the figure of the ocean has once more provided a means of reflecting on the bonds between film, chance, and uncertainty—now in the work of artists seeking to make sense of the elemental components of their medium.

David Gatten's cameraless six-part series *What the Water Said* (1997–2007) is an intimate collaboration with the ocean and the various animate and inanimate agents that exist within it. Gatten placed raw 16mm film stock in crab traps and submerged it off the coast of Seabrook Island, North Carolina, leaving its photochemical surface

to register the voluble utterances of the depths on the image- and soundtracks. Gatten relinquished authorial control, embracing the tactile, nonhuman transfer at the heart of the filmic medium. The resulting work of direct animation is a non-objective play of light, colour, and shape in which the image's capacity for resemblance has been completely overtaken by its indexicality, its existential connection to the referent. These patterns change according to time, weather, and film stock used. *What the Water Said* conceives of celluloid as surface of inscription for the traces of the world, traces that baffle any and every system.

In a short text written about her 16mm work *The Green Ray* (2001), Tacita Dean explicitly connects film's indexical power to the contingencies of oceanic environments and champions its receptivity over and above the regularity of the digital's ones and zeros. *The Green Ray* consists of a single roll of film, shot as the sun sinks into the horizon on a beach in Morombe, Madagascar. Dean was in search of a rare optical phenomenon, a verdant flash that occurs in conditions of low moisture just as the last sliver of the sun falls away. Her companions, taping the event on video, made use of that medium's possibilities of immediate playback to declare definitively that the green ray had not occurred. Dean, however, found that when she received her film back from the lab, there it was, captured on celluloid but "too elusive for the pixilation of the digital world."⁷ Exhibited in a gallery with a pushbutton start, *The Green Ray* invites its viewer to stand watch for

the chance event. In the twenty-first century, at what some would deem its end, Dean evokes the pleasures of cinema's beginnings.

Gatten and Dean are very much concerned with the material substrate of film itself; they refuse to transfer these works to digital video for exhibition. But in the war between contingency and control, is the meaningful distinction between photochemical film and digital video, as Dean's anecdote about *The Green Ray* would suggest? Or, is it between the very different opponents of lens-based capture (whether photochemical or digital) and computer-generated imagery, between images made with the wild participation of the world and those made within the anthropocentric confines of calculation?

Sophie Calle's *Voir la mer* (2011) suggests that it is indeed the latter. Using digital video, Calle made twelve portraits of people who had never seen the sea, despite living in Istanbul—a city surrounded by water. Calle writes, "I asked them to look out to sea and then to turn back towards me to show me these eyes that had just seen the sea for the first time."⁸ In these images, contingency is given full reign, first in the complex motion of the waves, and then in the near-indescribable facial expressions of the participants as they turn to the camera. *Voir la mer* entices us to gaze with wonder at the small movements of water and faces. There is nothing in the image but the encounter between them. As Gilles Deleuze has said, "If there is really something that is unimaginable if you haven't seen it, it is the ocean."⁹ Calle's camera records the uniqueness



Voir la mer, dir. Sophie Calle, 2011, installation of 14 digital projections.

of countenance and the unforeseeable reactions prompted by this experience of sublimity. Certainly, she works digitally—but the lens-based capture of *Voir la mer* succeeds in registering the overflowing quality of enworlded existence in a way the calculable particles of *Moana* never could. Here, as in Lumière's *A Boat Leaving the Harbour*, the inhuman expanse of the masterless ocean partners with the inhuman process of moving-image recording to remind us of the arrogant folly of attempting to "solve" the complexity of nature.

- 1 Dai Vaughan, *For Documentary: Twelve Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 5.
- 2 Quoted in Adrienne LaFrance, "The Algorithms Behind *Moana's* Gorgeously Animated Ocean," *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/05/the-algorithms-behind-moanas-gorgeously-animated-pacific-ocean/528645/>.
- 3 Quoted in Julia Franz, "Animating the Friendly Ocean in Disney's 'Moana,'" *Science Friday*, January 16, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-01-16/animating-friendly-ocean-disneys-moana>.
- 4 Allan Sekula, "Between the Net and the Deep Blue Sea (Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs)," *October 102* (Fall 2002): 15.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-HG8IA-2TI>
- 5 André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," in *What is Cinema? Volume One*, ed. and trans. Hugh Grey (Berkeley: University of California, 1967), 14.
- 7 Tacita Dean, "The Green Ray," in *Selected Writings* (Paris/Göttigen: Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris/Steidl, 2003), n.p.
- 8 Sophie Calle, *Voir la mer* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2013), n.p.
- 9 *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*, dir. Pierre-André Boutang, 1996. Translation mine.

II. Unfathomable Depths

The light drummed against his brain, bathing the submerged levels below his consciousness, carrying him downwards to warm pellucid depths, where the nominal realities of time and space ceased to exist. Guided by his dreams, he was moving back into his emergent past, through a succession of ever stranger landscapes centred on the lagoon...

–J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*

A 1929 issue of the periodical *Variétés* features an uncredited cartographic drawing entitled "Le monde au temps des surréalistes." "The Surrealist Map of the World" is a dramatic departure from the Mercator projection, a creative reimagining of scale that upends familiar visions of the globe in a spirit of playful contestation. The image dispenses with hegemonic territories often given pride of place: Western Europe appears shrunken and the entirety of the United States, with the exception of Alaska, has disappeared. By contrast, Labrador, Hawai'i, and Easter Island swell in size. The map might indicate the Surrealists' desire to cast off the colonialist rationalism of Western societies; as David R. Roediger writes, "The attack launched by the map centred not only on challenging the specifics of imperialist, capitalist, and technocratic mapping but also on blowing the cover of exactitude and science..."¹ But there is something else noteworthy about it, and not unrelated: not Europe, but the Pacific Ocean occupies

its core. This is a world picture that takes shape around the sea. The liquid flux of the deep has overtaken the stability of territory.

That the Surrealists would remake the world as watery will come as no surprise to those acquainted with their cinematic production. In films by Man Ray, Luis Buñuel/Salvador Dalí, and Germaine Dulac, there are starfish, sea urchins, seashells. The Surrealist bestiary reserved a special place for the creatures of the sea, deploying them as potentially oneiric condensations of sexuality, the marvellous, and the uncanny. In films such as *L'Étoile de mer* (1928) and *Un chien andalou* (1929), faceless forms of marine life are both threatening and alluring, tied to irrationality and the drives, pushing at the boundary between flora and fauna, chipping away at any anthropomorphic approach to animality. They suggest that we need not leave our earthly planet to encounter alien wonder: radical alterity is to be found within the aquatic world, just as we find it within ourselves, in the unconscious. The depths of the psyche rhyme with the depths of the ocean, mysterious and entrancing pools, both.

This fascination with the sea carries over into the work of Surrealist-inspired, California-based filmmakers of the postwar period such as Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, and Curtis Harrington, for whom the liminal space of the shoreline and its inhabitants are tied to psychic disturbance and desire. Like Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (*La Coquille et le Clergyman*, 1928), Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) forges an

association between hallucinatory subjectivity and the liquidity of the sea. Near the end of *Meshes*, when Deren attacks the male figure (Alexander Hammid) who leans over her bed, she assaults what turns out to be his mirror reflection; the glass shatters to reveal incoming waves before its fragments scatter on the shore. At *Land* (1945) seems to follow directly: the film commences with Deren's visionary protagonist washing up on the beach, as if born of the ocean, not unlike the dangerously alluring siren that enchants sailor Johnny Drake (Dennis Hopper) in Harrington's *Night Tide* (1962). In *Fireworks* (1947), a teenage Anger dreams of sexual assault and sexual awakening at the hands of a group of sailors; in the film's final shot, a mannequin's mangled hand drops into dark water.

Why would the iconography of the ocean be so alluring for filmmakers seeking to poetically evoke the passionate vagaries of psychic life? Perhaps it is a matter of the ocean's anarchic mutability and unpredictability—qualities that, understood in relation to human subjectivity, challenge hegemonic values of rationality and decorum, just as the Surrealists' hydrocentric map of the world contested the closely related notions of scientific exactitude and capitalist technocracy. The ocean undoes. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "the sea is the smooth space par excellence": unmarked by the divisions and territorialisations associated with striated space, it is an expanse of intensities where all that is fixed dissolves into fluidity and flux, where Eros and Thanatos are not

opposed but interpenetrating forces.² For centuries, and across cultures, the sea's amorphous darkness has been imagined as home to fantastical monsters. This ancient, abyssal ocean is unconquerable and wild, its energies unbound.



Jean Painlevé was never a formal member of the Surrealists, but was closely affiliated with the movement; Man Ray turned to him for footage of starfish to use in *L'Étoile de mer*, while Georges Bataille published his images in the journal *Documents*. Issue six, from 1929, features two Painlevé stills, shrimp and crab heads in extreme close-up, barely recognizable as such. These images recruit the transformative power of magnification to render the familiar strange. They are situated just before a whimsical “dictionary” entry on crustaceans, in which poet Jacques Baron illuminates the paradoxical charm of such creatures, their ability to collapse categories usually held to be opposed: “Crustaceans, fabulous animals that fill children playing on the beach with wonder, underwater vampires feeding on cadavers and detritus. Heavy and light, ironic and grotesque, they are animals made of silence and weight.”³

The many short films Painlevé made featuring crustaceans and other sea creatures possess an informational function true to the filmmaker's formation as a biologist. Yet this is coupled with a desire to activate

the viewer's sense of wonder and, at times, to draw upon the simultaneity of fascination and repulsion Baron describes, casting terms habitually held to be opposites into an alchemical mixture. *The Octopus* (*Le pieuvre*, 1928) opens with a series of shots showing the titular cephalopod slithering off a windowsill, over the face of a doll that seems to lie in a coffin, and through a tree, before it swims around a human skull posed with its mouth agape in a silent underwater scream. The octopus's movements can be disarmingly graceful, but coupled with this enchantment is a very different feeling: the soft undulations of its skeleton-less body provoke an unsettling sensation of oozing putrefaction, evoking the base materialism that Bataille deemed central to his notion of the formless. The formless is, in the words of Yve-Alain Bois, an operation of “declassification, in the double sense of lowering and of taxonomic disorder”—a matter of getting down in the muck to embrace entropy, horizontality, and a collapse of ontological categories.⁴ According to Bataille, it means understanding that “the universe is something like a spider or spit”—or, one might add, like algae or sea cucumber.⁵

There are few moments in Painlevé's filmography that so overtly evidence the distinctively Surrealist attitude operative in the opening sequence of *The Octopus*. Nonetheless, in his films of seahorses, shrimp, or jellyfish, this sensibility is never far off. Despite the epistemological thrust of these films, Painlevé associated them with a subversion of reason: “Does the complete understanding of a natural phenomenon



strip away its miraculous qualities? It is certainly a risk. But it should at least maintain all of its poetry, for poetry subverts reason and is never dulled by repetition. Besides, a few gaps in our knowledge will always allow for a joyous confusion of the mysterious, the unknown, the miraculous.”⁶ Though many of Painlevé’s films were shot in the tame environment of an aquarium, they promise a glimpse into a secret, asphyxiating world that only the cinema can provide. Like the images published in *Documents*, these visions tend to marshal the close-up, a device intimately connected to the medium-specific powers of cinema, able to both defamiliarise the phenomenal world and render it a subject of revelatory fascination. In *Sea Urchins* (*Les oursins*, 1928), an intertitle boasts that Painlevé has captured the titular creatures—colloquially known in Newfoundland as “whore’s eggs,” a name fit for the Surrealist imagination—at the maximum possible magnification, enlarging them by a factor of 200,000 when projected on a screen measuring 270 by 370 centimetres. As with the crustacean, the allure of the close-up, too, is a matter of collapsing categories; as Mary Ann Doane suggests, it is “simultaneously microcosm and macrocosm, the miniature and the gigantic.”⁷ When used to capture the denizens of the sea floor, the result is nothing short of magical and monstrous.



The Octopus (*Le pieuvre*), dir. Jean Painlevé, 1928, 13 minutes.
Courtesy of Les Documents Cinématographiques.

This visual seductiveness lies at the heart of the properly bathyspheric cinema that would begin to develop in the 1950s, as new technologies allowed filmmakers to shoot in colour, submerged in open water—a trajectory that continues to enjoy tremendous popularity today in the television series *Blue Planet* (2001, 2017). Jacques Cousteau and Louis Malle's *The Silent World* (*Le Monde du silence*, 1956) partakes of an attitude wholly other than that of Painlevé, displacing his quiet lyricism with a sense of cavalier exploration and brave adventure. Under the aegis of scientific research, the twelve divers of Cousteau's vessel, the *Calypso*, visit underwater environments around the globe, attempting to discover “a strange world, nearly unknown: the world of silence.” The voiceover provides information about the work of the divers and the work of filmmaking, recounting the dangers and goals of the film's double undertaking. Yet despite this markedly different tone, *The Silent World* extends and amplifies the uncanny beauty generated by the encounter of cinema and sea present already in the work of Painlevé. Malle and Cousteau's explanatory apparatus is dwarfed by the sheer spectacle of their pelagic cinematography, in vivid visions of swimming lobsters, fluttering anemones, or large schools of electric yellow fish. To the squirming delights of magnification that so profoundly mark Painlevé's work, *The Silent World* adds a bewildering immersion in non-perspectival spaces in which gravity seems weakened by buoyancy, activating the y-axis as few terrestrial images do. Rather than localising action in privileged areas of the frame, as



The Silent World (*Le Monde du silence*),
dir. Jacques Cousteau and Louis Malle, 1956, 86 minutes.

is generally the case, the viewer is confronted with the curiosity of constant all-over movement, captured by a gliding camera.

The Silent World was not the only film to exploit colour underwater cinematography in the mid-1950s: just two years earlier *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), Disney's widescreen adaptation of Jules Verne's 1870 novel, combined footage shot on location in the Caribbean with scenes staged in a massive tank, purpose-built at considerable expense.⁸ But like most examples of the submarine film genre—whether fantastical or set in wartime—*20,000 Leagues* is fundamentally a human drama, using claustrophobic interiors menaced by external threats to catalyse struggles of morality and personality amongst men. (The same is often true of films that use the limited setting of a boat, whether Athina Rachel Tsangari's *Chevalier* [2015] or Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* [1944]). In *20,000 Leagues*, the nonhuman agents of the ocean occasionally figure as antagonists to be vanquished (as when a giant squid attacks), but mostly feature merely as a mysterious and foreboding backdrop for action. The film includes some limited cinematography of marine animals, but, as Bosley Crowther noted when reviewing it upon release for the *New York Times*, this feature of the production is generally disappointing: "It seems there is less observation of the wonders of the deep than there should be in a picture of this nautical nature. The Disney people have brought within range of their CinemaScope colour cameras only a minimum standard assortment of fishes and rays."⁹

The Silent World, by contrast, marshals all its force to capture the wonders of the saltwater world. Yet, however differently, it too conceives of the ocean as mere support for human endeavours, or at least as a substance to be dominated by them. The *Calypso* crew sets dynamite within a coral reef, part of an attempt to survey the life within it; in the aftermath, the divers encounter a "tragic picture" on an ocean floor littered with exterminated animals. Dead and dying bodies are dumped on the beach, including that of a flapping blowfish, which is stabbed by a diver and deflates before the camera. It is an image of utter horror, of death dispatching life, of the body becoming corpse in a dramatic loss of its animate contours. On an island, the men ride on giant turtles; at sea, after the ship's propeller blades cut a sperm whale and sharks arrive to feed on the injured mammal, taken by "ancestral hatred," they beat the giant scavengers to death in a gory display. Such scenes are shocking to behold. At least at the conclusion of *20,000 Leagues*, the misanthropic Captain Nemo (James Mason) acknowledges the possible harm that marine technology can do, opting to orchestrate a suicidal explosion rather than let his atomic submarine fall into the hands of the greedy ruling powers. In *The Silent World*, the production of the film and the activities it documents—which are, after all, inextricable—proceed under the flag of enlightenment and benevolence, blind to the violence and objectification that lurk within the enterprise.



J.G. Ballard's 1962 novel *The Drowned World* is set in a post-apocalyptic 2145, when water covers most of the globe, triggering psychic regression. The few left inhabiting what was once London are haunted by ancient memories from the evolutionary past, when we belonged to the seas. In his paean to *The Silent World*, André Bazin suggests something similar: "Biologists say that man is a marine animal that carries his sea on the inside. It is thus unsurprising that deep-sea diving doubtlessly also evokes the faint feeling of a return to origins."¹⁰ This might be the womb, or, as Ballard suggests, it might extend much farther. It could reach our near-unthinkable kinship with a creature like the *Saccorhytus*—a tiny, now-extinct organism thought to be our oldest known ancestor—or even a time before continents when Earth was a global ocean. Whatever the case, at stake is a fantasy of primordial undifferentiation, of self-annihilation. This return obliterates the ego and undoes the hubris of rationality and its categories—including the distinctions between man and animal, culture and nature. Certainty cedes to unknowing. Better to give oneself over to the sea rather than pretend that we stand sovereign, able to fully fathom its depths.

1 David R. Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 175.

2 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 479.

- 3 Jacques Baron, "Crustacés," *Documents* 6 (1929): 332. Translation mine.
- 4 Yve-Alain Bois, "The Use Value of 'Formless,'" in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 18.
- 5 Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31.
- 6 Jean Painlevé, "Mysteries and Miracles of Nature," trans. Jeanine Herman, in *Science is Fiction: The Films of Jean Painlevé*, ed. Andy Masaki Bellows, Brigitte Berg, and Marina McDougall (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 119.
- 7 Mary Ann Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," *differences: A Journal of Feminist and Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2004): 109.
- 8 The *New York Times* reported that Disney spent US\$300,000—roughly US\$2.7 million in today's money—on the construction of the tank. Thomas M. Pryor, "Hollywood's Verne," *New York Times*, May 28, 1954, X5.
- 9 Bosley Crowther, "The Screen in Review: 20,000 Leagues in 128 Fantastic Minutes," *New York Times*, December 24, 1954, 7.
- 10 André Bazin, "Le Monde du silence," in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? Tome 1: Ontologie et langage* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958), 60. Translation mine.

III. Littoral Labour

It's no fish ye're buying—it's men's lives.

—Sir Walter Scott

John Grierson is heralded as one of the most important figures in the history of documentary cinema, primarily owing to his work as a critic, producer, and administrator. Grierson himself directed only two films, *Drifters* (1929) and *Granton Trawler* (1934)—but they both happen to be about fishing. As this WWI-member of the Royal Navy knew, the sea is not merely an imaginative space of wonder; it is also a material space of labour, inhabited by a working class who risk danger and suffer hardship.

Drifters depicts fishing as bound to industrialisation and international trade, deeply entangled in a global market economy. It begins with a proclamation via intertitle: “The herring fishing has changed.” This will be no quaint idyll of village life, but “an epic of steam and steel.” The film, which had its premiere alongside another masterpiece of the maritime proletariat, Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), shows a strong Soviet influence in its deployment of dynamic montage, making use of rhythmic alternation to dramatise this new age. Grierson constructs a linear account that privileges the totality of the process over the workers themselves; save for a few portraits in close-up, the men are never individualised. For Henry Alan Potamkin, writing in 1930, this was a problem: “Where are the

people in [Grierson’s] film? He is more engrossed with the independent graces of fish in the water—well-done details in themselves, but no part of the human process which the film was to be.”¹ Potamkin’s criticism misrecognises Grierson’s objective: by mitigating anthropocentrism, he advances a structural understanding of fishing as a network of human and nonhuman agents within which any individual worker is just one small part—something Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel also do, however differently, in their film *Leviathan* (2012), a haptic immersion in the activities of a commercial fishing vessel off the Massachusetts coast. This goal becomes especially pronounced in *Drifters*’ concluding port sequence, in which activity seemingly localised on the North Sea is tied to global circuits of commodity exchange. As the intertitle reads, “And the sound of the sea, and the people of the sea, are lost in the chatter and chaffer of a market for the world.”

Fishing, in *Drifters*, is emblematic of modernity. In this, it is somewhat anomalous in the cinema’s many representations of littoral labour. Recent artists’ films such as Sharon Lockhart’s *Double Tide* (2009), a real-time depiction of a woman clam-digger in Maine, and Lois Patiño’s *Costa da Morte* (2013), which captures traditional forms of work on the rocky Galician coast in extreme long shots that dwarf the human figure, are more typical: they depict embedded, artisanal practices using strategies of acute slowness that buck the accelerated temporalities of twenty-first-century existence, binding together form and content in a double rejection of

modernity. The visceral intensity of *Leviathan*, facilitated by the tactile eye of the GoPro camera, is prefaced with a Biblical epigraph, as if to suggest the timelessness of its tale. In such films—as in Vittorio De Seta’s vivid immersions in the spectacular hunt for tuna off the Sicilian coast, *Peasants of the Sea* (*Contadini del mare*, 1955) and *Fishing Boats* (*Pescherecci*, 1957)—the forces of nature take precedence over the forces of history, with the work of the shore bound to authenticity and represented without any gesture to its place within a market. Fishing figures within them as an anachronistic resistance to familiar forms of alienated labour, whether the bored disenchantment of the assembly line or the anxious malaise of the information economy.



The films Jean Epstein made with nonprofessionals in Brittany—*Finis Terrae* (1929), *Mor’vran* (1930), *Gold of the Sea* (*L’Or des mers*, 1932), and *Le Tempestaire* (1947)—constitute the anchor of this vein of practice, framing the sea as a site of eternity and enchantment. The filmmaker made numerous trips to France’s western coast, drawn by its ancient romance. “In this place and people,” he wrote, “is resumed the mystery of men dedicated to land that is but rock, to a sea which is but foam, to a hard and perilous trade, thus bowing to some high command.”² *Finis Terrae* was shot on the island of Bannec, but Epstein retained the region’s old Latin name—“ends of the Earth”—for his title so as to evoke

the remote location of this story of kelp harvesters, in which a small cut on a thumb becomes, by virtue of the tumultuous ocean, something that threatens the lives of many. With considerable attention to the terraqueous setting and a skeletal story predicated on isolation and danger, Epstein foregrounds the awesome, sublime force of the ocean and the humility of those who live near and from it. This strong but vulnerable community knows it is close to nature, and to death. They live at the mercy of the sea itself, far from the abstracted clock-time and mass production of the cities.

It is only in *Mor’vran* that the sea is fleetingly acknowledged as a means of global circulation and conduit of the colonial project. A girl stops in front of a mailbox and, making sure no one is looking, posts a letter. An insert shows the address: it is destined for a French sailor on leave in Dakar. This brief episode is the sole departure from the otherwise complete insularity of Epstein’s Brittany, his insistence that these distant localities are not just elsewhere but elsewhen, somehow suspended in a past that has all but vanished. In *Gold of the Sea* and *Le Tempestaire*, these communities are the site of folkloric tales borne of deprivation and worry. In the latter, a woman who fears for her seafaring fiancé consults an old man apparently endowed with a gift of taming storms, even though she has been told that he is a drunk and that she should not believe in such “old stories.” As he gazes at his crystal ball, crashing waves appear within it. Images of the sea run in slow motion and backwards, forging an alliance between the storm

tamer and the cinema, with both possessing the power to transform reality. Suddenly, the fiancé arrives, saying he has been searching for the woman for an hour; the storm tamer drops the crystal ball and it shatters on the floor. Who—or what—is responsible for the fiancé's safe passage home? The wireless operators, the storm tamer, the elements themselves? Rationality and superstition face off. Modernity is encroaching, but one suspects that Epstein—theorist of *photogénie*, passionate advocate of cinema's ineffable magic—is on the side of the old man.

In *Araya* (1959), Margot Benacerraf abandons fiction but retains Epstein's romantic lyricism in her portrait of salt miners on the titular Venezuelan peninsula. Not unlike the Breton isles, it is a place where, as the film's incantatory voiceover relates, "all was desolation." The backbreaking work of the inhabitants of this cruel land, captured in highly aestheticised black-and-white cinematography, is described as a "daily ritual" during which they repeat "the same ancient gestures." The time of ritual is, of course, barred from history, from any materialist analysis of the conditions of existence. Accordingly, in bulk the film fetishises its noble subjects; they are forever objects of the gaze, never allowed to speak, untainted by the plague of modernity. Yet the film's opening and closing suggest a different lens, revealing life on the peninsula as profoundly bound to an historical temporality of violent accumulation. First, the land is introduced with reference to colonial fortification, slavery, and piracy; last, we see the arrival of mechanisation, casting all that has come before as



Finis Terrae, dir. Jean Epstein, 1929, 80 minutes.
Courtesy of Gaumont. © Gaumont



salvage ethnography. Perhaps technology will ease the hard lifting; perhaps it will bulldoze a way of life.



The stunning beauty of *Araya* remains beset by objectification and mythic exoticism, but the film's bookends hint at another approach, one in which the salt miners would be recognised, despite all their seeming timelessness, as exemplary figures of modernity. Indeed, although the romanticisation of littoral labour as changeless is widespread, many filmmakers probe the tension that seeps in to the head and tail of *Araya*, seeing activities such as fishing or salt mining as sites of struggle between the deracinating jolts of modernity and the authenticity of folkloric tradition. Agnès Varda's *La Pointe Courte* (1954), set in the Mediterranean village of Sète, dramatises this conflict explicitly through the braiding of two narrative strands, with one following the marital decay of a Paris-dwelling couple, while the other explores the villagers' work, their time-honoured leisure activities, their joys and sorrows—all of which are noticeably devoid of the couple's ennui-laden philosophizing. As one village woman remarks, "They talk too much to be happy." The film is no easy binary, however: within the tradition storyline, modernity intervenes, as state officials clash with locals in their effort to control where the men can fish, requiring scientific testing of the lagoon for bacteria.

Grierson's *Drifters* is peculiar not only in its



Finis Terræ, dir. Jean Epstein, 1929, 80 minutes.
Courtesy of Gaumont. © Gaumont

suppression of this tension in favour of a celebration of fishing as eminently modern, but also in its attitude towards class consciousness. In its montage aesthetics and revelation of habitually occluded labour, the film has some affinities with a leftist politics. Yet it offers no hint of struggle between the seafaring and merchant classes, proffering a triumphalist narrative of modernisation suitable for a film commissioned by the Empire Marketing Board, an entity tasked with producing publicity for British imperial trade. By contrast, class antagonism is at the heart of Luchino Visconti's *The Earth Trembles* (*La Terra Trema*, 1947), shot with great naturalism in the Sicilian village of Acitrezza and starring local people. Made with initial financing from the Italian Communist Party, the film follows the fortunes of the Valastro family, who seek to escape mercantile oppression by becoming independent, only to fall into ruin after a rough night at sea destroys their boat. *The Earth Trembles* stages a delicate balancing act between Marxism and romanticism: to what extent are the Valastros' troubles caused by capitalist exploitation and to what extent are they due to the caprice of the entity the voiceover refers to repeatedly as the "bitter sea"? Both are certainly in play, but Visconti never loses his hold on the former.

At the film's conclusion, Antonio, the eldest Valastro son—humiliated, hungry, having lost everything—returns with his young brothers to ask for employment. The merchant mocks him, but Visconti mocks the merchant, framing him against a wall upon which the outline of the

name "Mussolini" remains prominently visible. Fascism is over; fascism lives on. The Valastros work for a pittance on the merchant ship once more. Here, so differently than in *Araya*, change is wholly desirable but seemingly impossible. It is a devastating ending for a film intended as an allegory of the fate of all working people, as signalled in its opening titles: "The story this film tells is the same all the world over, in countries where, year after year, men exploit each other."

More hopeful about the promise of a different future are the films of the Fogo Process. The very name of Fogo Island—the largest of the islands off the coast of Newfoundland—gives away its imbrication in a global network of trade in the sea's primary resources. Portuguese for "fire," Fogo owes its name to boats arriving in the sixteenth century, in search of cod apparently so plentiful that if one dropped a basket overboard, it would re-emerge full of fish. By the 1960s, much had changed. As the provincial government sought to resettle remote communities—to haul "Newfoundland kicking and screaming into the twentieth century," as premier Joey Smallwood put it—and as the fishery was imperilled by off-shore trawlers and changing industrial demands, the future of life on the island was in question. The National Film Board of Canada's "Challenge for Change" programme entered "communities in trouble," with the aim of using film as a participatory tool in social transformation. In 1967, project representatives arrived on Fogo to document both the island's unique culture and its problems. The resulting films, directed



by Colin Low in collaboration with Fogo's inhabitants and representatives from Memorial University, make no attempt to capture the labour of fishing and pay scarce attention to the breathtaking coastal environmental. Why? They are not primarily for outside eyes. Whereas so many filmmakers gaze with fascination at the gestures of fishermen, the Fogo Process records events and arguments that animate life in a fishing community at a time of crisis. The films take up the deep ambivalence of modernity and change through discussions of welfare, displacement, debt, merchants, and the formation of a fishing co-operative, all of which bear on questions of identity and sustainability. These images were then projected back to the islanders to initiate discussion. Unlike some 300 other Newfoundland communities, the villages of Fogo resisted resettlement, and in 1967 a fishing co-operative was established that operates to this day; many credit the Fogo Process as playing a role in making possible these victories.³

No matter what their attitude towards class struggle, modernity, or mythic nature, films that capture littoral labour tend to have something in common: they depend on the allure of otherness. Images of maritime life are most often destined not for the communities represented within them, but for metropolitan audiences awash in the very contemporaneity that is often excluded from the frame. The Fogo Process, by contrast, and as its name would suggest, was not about an exportable product but a feedback loop of collective making and viewing. If their role in helping islanders

The Children of Fogo Island, dir. Colin Low, 1967.

negotiate the tides of change were not enough, for this, too, these films must be accorded a special place in the cinema of fishing.

- 1 Henry Alan Potamkin, "Movie: New York Notes," *Close Up* (October 1930): 250. Emphasis in text.
- 2 Jean Epstein, "Approaches to Truth," trans. Tom Milne, in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology, 1907–1939*, ed. Richard Abel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 423–24.
- 3 For an account of the impact of the films on the island, see Peter K. Wiesner, "Media for the People: The Canadian Experiments with Film and Video in Community Development," in *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada*, ed. Thomas Waugh, Michael Brendan Baker, and Ezra Winton (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 89–90.

IV. The Sea is History

*Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History.*
–Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History"

As a site of transatlantic slavery, the plantation looms large, appearing in countless films. More seldom has that other, less documented space of slavery found its way into the cinema: the ship, the hold, the crossing. As Hortense Spillers has written, "The conditions of 'Middle Passage' are among the most incredible narratives available to the student, as it remains not easily imaginable."¹ The mind falters at such horror. Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's *Le Passage du milieu* (2006) figures this void. Using images drawn from Hollywood cinema accompanied by a new soundtrack, the artist creates an evocation of the Middle Passage in which no ship and almost no human figures appear. The title guides the viewer's apprehension of stormy seas, drowned cities, and tropical beaches as haunted spaces of absence, marked by forms of captivity, death, and resistance that remain unpictured. This failure of representation is an ethics of obliquity, an abstraction that evokes the millions dead and millions more subject to unthinkable dehumanisation without replaying a spectacle of black suffering. It might even be oceanic: water is transparent but the voluminous sea is not; its great mantle conceals,



Le Passage du milieu, dir. Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, 2006, 9 minutes 40 seconds.
Courtesy of Marcelle Alix, Paris.

blocks vision. Abonnenc offers a response to Christina Sharpe's essential question about the afterlives of slavery as a "past that is not past": "How might we stay in the wake with and as those whom the state positions to die ungrivable deaths and live lives meant to be unliveable?"²

If Abonnenc had looked for images of the Middle Passage in Hollywood cinema, he would scarcely have found any. There is, of course, Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1999), which depicts the bodies of grunting and screaming slaves in fetishised, aestheticised compositions, all within a white-saviour narrative. During the slave revolt that opens the film, Spielberg refrains from subtitling the Mende language, according this privilege only to the Spanish slavers. The violence of invisibility—of forgetting and exclusion—is well known, and oblique strategies court its danger. To abstract can also be to turn away. But there is also a violence of visibility, one Spielberg enacts. The objectification and commodification of black bodies occur twice over in *Amistad*, in the historical situation depicted and in the film's representation of it.

In its representation of the Middle Passage, *Amistad* is something of a film-historical anomaly: though the spectacularisation of black suffering is ubiquitous, Hollywood has mostly omitted the Middle Passage from its repertoire of cathartic entertainment. This gesture could be construed as one of respect, shame, ignorance, trepidation, or any combination thereof. Whereas representations of the Shoah have proliferated,

this genocide, so foundational to modern capitalism, has remained largely out of frame. Perhaps there are no Hollywood stories to be found in the darkness of the hold, in the fugitive depths. According to Tony Thomas, prior to 1988 only two Hollywood films dealt with transatlantic slavery, both from 1937: Tay Garnett's *Slave Ship* and Henry Hathaway's *Souls at Sea*.³ Both were responses to the tremendous popularity of *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), a story that concerns slavery only tangentially, in that the *Bounty's* voyage was devoted to transporting breadfruit plants from Tahiti to Jamaica to provide cheap food on the plantations. How peculiar, then, that both 1937 films are set (at least partially) aboard slave ships during the period when the trade had been outlawed but continued illicitly, and use slavery as a backdrop for the ideological work of redeeming white slavers and forming the white heterosexual couple.

Slave Ship dramatises slavery as a problem of illegality more than immorality. After falling in love, Captain Jim Lovett (Warner Baxter) is too afraid of the gallows to continue his now-outlawed metier; he dreams of retiring to a plantation in Jamaica with his new wife. He tries to become a respectable trader but his crew trick him into taking another cargo of slaves, leading to mutiny and eventual shipwreck. About to be captured by the English, the crew throw the chained slaves overboard; Lovett releases those left to swim ashore and is eventually absolved of all wrongdoing, free to retire to his plantation, where he would presumably continue to profit off the back of slave labour. *Souls at*

Sea opens with protagonist Michael Taylor (Gary Cooper) on trial for the murder of eighteen white passengers of the *William Brown*. In an extended flashback, we learn that when the ship was sinking during a storm, Taylor—a long-time slaver who had just recently renounced the profession and begun to help the British to intercept illegal voyages—made a quick calculus to determine how many passengers the lifeboats could hold and promptly threw the rest overboard. Though the film nowhere implies it, his ability to act so deftly was surely well practiced; the narrative resonates with the chilling arithmetic of the *Zong* massacre, when some 132 slaves were thrown overboard for insurance purposes.⁴ Taylor is tried for the eighteen of the *William Brown*, but for all the other extinguished lives of his past, he will not face punishment. Is *Souls at Sea* aware of this cruel irony? These ungrievable lives return to haunt the film. Both *Souls at Sea* and *Slave Ship* indict the brutality of slavery, pushing the horror of the Middle Passage into a cinema that has largely excluded it. And yet neither accords a word of dialogue to any slave, and both end with the pardoning of their ex-slaver protagonists. For these men, the past is indeed past; they can look calmly towards the reconciled, reproductive future. It is tempting to find in these curious films an allegory for the desires of an American nation that considers its debts wiped clean.

But there are other stories in these depths, polyvocal stories that find in the ocean what Édouard Glissant has called “one vast beginning, but a beginning whose

time is marked by these balls and chains gone green,”⁵ the beginning of what Paul Gilroy names the Black Atlantic.⁶ In the Otolith Group’s *Hydra Decapita* (2010), the dehumanisation of chattel slavery metamorphoses into a speculative space of posthuman possibility. The artists draw upon the myth forged by the 1990s Detroit techno group Drexciya, who imagined that the unborn children of drowned pregnant slaves would mutate and be able to live underwater. It would be, “The end of one thing...and the beginning of another,”⁷ or, in the words of Otolith Group member Kodwo Eshun, “Nothing less than a reimagining of the biopolitical atrocity of the Middle Passage.”⁸ In *Hydra Decapita*, images of the ocean’s surface—what Melville called the “ocean’s skin”—are black and impenetrable, accompanied by the voice of Angelika Sagar singing passages from John Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*. Ruskin praises J. M. W. Turner’s 1840 Zong-inspired painting *The Slave Ship*, but, as Gilroy notes, is unable “to discuss the picture except in terms of what it revealed about the aesthetics of painting water,” relegating the fact that it depicts a slave ship to a furtive footnote.⁹ For Ruskin, too, the Middle Passage is a problem for representation. As a critical response, the Otolith Group seize upon opacity and fabulation, using the words of a man credited only as “an Author” to put the Drexciya myth in dialogue with Sagar’s musical ekphrasis and the work of an invented transcriber called Novaya Zemlya who listens for “silent voices.” The video—situated far from the regime of realist representation yet all the more powerful for it—is at

once a requiem and a reparative fiction that looks to a future of more liveable lives. *Hydra Decapita* flees from the spurious transparency of the spectacle, toward the murky sensitivities of opacity.



On November 8, 2017, German newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* published the names of 33,293 migrants and refugees who have died trying to reach Europe since 1993. In that year alone, some 170,000 entered by sea, with 3116 dead or missing on the crossing. As Sharpe has shown, in the contemporary Mediterranean the “semiotics of the slave ship” continue.¹⁰ Now, however, cameras are everywhere, capturing bare life and mass death on the shores of Fortress Europe.

What is an adequate strategy for the representation of an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe? Does such a thing exist? Alongside a barrage of numbing news images, artists and filmmakers attempt to intervene. Groups of migrants make overdetermined interruptions into the narratives of art-house films otherwise populated by the white bourgeoisie, like Michael Haneke’s *Happy End* (2017) and Luca Guadagnino’s *A Bigger Splash* (2016). Art stars produce bombastic installations that fetishise military technology and drain images of refugee camps of all specificity, leaving but a hollow spectacle. Well-meaning documentarians try to give form to the (non-)encounter between Lampedusans and migrants but end up reproducing racist norms by

which individualisation is the privilege only of whites, with hordes of black bodies consigned to a faceless swarm. In 2016, artist Ai Wei Wei posed on a Lesbos beach, reenacting the fate of Alan Kurdi, the drowned Syrian child whose body had washed up there the year before. The gesture was perhaps meant as a memorial but resonated most as an object-lesson in the problems of empathetic identification and the obscenity of mediatised provocation. The image can testify but so too can it trivialise, mollify. It is a thorny path.

Here, once more, obliquity, opacity, and abstraction point a way forward. Kurdi's likeness appears altogether differently in Peggy Ahwesh's *The Blackest Sea* (2016), a work made entirely from CGI news clips produced by the Taiwanese company TomoNews. It is positioned alongside animations of overcrowded, sinking boats, populated by depersonalised avatars that turn red if marked for death. In her reframing of these eerie simulacra, accompanied by the melancholic grandeur of Ellis B. Kohs's "Passacaglia for Organ and Strings," Ahwesh protests the airbrushing of reality, what she has called "the cutefication of our world."¹¹ Cuteness, as Sianne Ngai notes, is never innocent—it is always a matter of consumption and commodification.¹² Here, computer animation's tenuous relationship to reality becomes an allegory of how these processes of derealisation and spectacularisation are always already operative in the circulation of images of actuality. *The Blackest Sea* quits the regime of hypervisibility, instead taking an indirect approach that asks its viewer to



The Blackest Sea, dir. Peggy Ahwesh, 2016, 10 minutes.
Courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI).

consider reality through the artefacts of a regime that trivialises it.

In Mati Diop's *Atlantiques* (2009), time's arrow breaks, wrinkling through dream and fantasy, as young men discuss journeying to Europe by pirogue. They speak of the voyage in the past tense, yet are located still in Africa. Does the crossing lie ahead or behind, in reality or fantasy? The linear temporality of modernity, of progress, is undone. This fireside conversation is accompanied by the sounds of an ocean that remains of out of frame in

all but one shot. Beginning and ending with dreams tied to the sea, this penumbral, palindromic film pleats its centre, when a death is reported but not seen. A young woman stares at length at the camera, confronting its gaze. We return to the fire, where the dead man lives again. As Thomas Keenan notes, although “in-full-view-of-the-camera seems now to have become the most privileged figure of our ethical consciousness, our conscience, our responsibility itself,” visibility does not necessarily lead to action and can become cheap sensationalism.¹³ Perhaps our ethical consciousness might be activated instead by fiction and blockage, by the powers of the false.

In *Atlantiques*, one man says to another, “Look at the ocean, it has no borders.” The other responds, “Yet it offers no branches to hold on to.” The exchange is a succinct encapsulation of the ambivalence of the smooth space of the sea—an ambivalence that lurks too in the notion of oceanic feeling. Writing of the Middle Passage, Spillers invokes the dystopian dimensions of this loss of individuation:

*Those African persons in ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the “oceanic,” if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captive persons, without names their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all.*¹⁴

John Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea* (2015) dwells in the histories of violence that lurk in the liminal space of the ocean, but equally finds in it a site of interconnectedness, through which the legacies of slavery meet contemporary emergencies of climate change and migration. This oceanic feeling, very different from Spillers’s, reclaims human and nonhuman vitality in an act of far-reaching solidarity. The three-screen installation’s “oblique tales on the aquatic sublime,” to borrow a phrase from its first intertitle, reflect on the catastrophe of modernity through a heterogeneous constellation of fragments, combining quotations from literature, archival images, and nature cinematography of tremendously high production value to offer a global account of the ocean as a space of entanglements between nature and culture, full of violence and wonder. Like Patricio Guzmán, who in *The Pearl Button* (2015) finds in the sea a means of approaching the connections between the disappearance of the indigenous peoples of Patagonia and those disappeared by Pinochet’s military dictatorship, Akomfrah takes the sea’s flow as a critical method. Oceanic boundlessness provides a way of underlining that the transatlantic slave trade is no isolated misadventure, no small mistake that can be easily forgiven, but something that is foundational to modernity itself, its logic continuing by other means in the present. Seen through the ocean’s brine, any possibility of Hollywood redemption washes away, and civilisation and barbarism look terribly alike.



Vertigo Sea, dir. John Akomfrah, 2015,
three-screen installation.
Courtesy of Lisson Gallery.

- 1 Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 71–72.
- 2 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 21–22.
- 3 Tony Thomas, *The Cinema of the Sea: A Critical Survey and Filmography, 1926–1986* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1988), 186. Thomas presumably excludes *Roots* (1977) because it is a television miniseries.
- 4 There is debate over the precise number of slaves killed on the *Zong*.
- 5 Édouard Glissant, "The Open Boat," in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 6.
- 6 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 7 Drexciya liner notes, quoted in Kodwo Eshun, "Drexciya as Spectre," in *Aquatopia: The Imaginary of the Ocean Deep*, ed. Alex Farquharson and Martin Clark (Nottingham: Nottingham Contemporary; London: Tate, 2013), 143.
- 8 Eshun, 144.
- 9 Gilroy, 14.
- 10 Sharpe, 21.
- 11 Peggy Ahwesh, post-screening conversation at Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival, Berwick-upon-Tweed, United Kingdom, September 2017.
- 12 Sianne Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 31, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 813–814.
- 13 Thomas Keenan, "Publicity and Indifference: Media, Surveillance, and the 'Humanitarian Intervention,'" in *Killer Images: Documentary Film, Memory, and the Performance of Violence*, ed. Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer (Chichester: Wallflower Press, 2012), 21.
- 14 Spillers, 72.

V. Mare liberum

Whosoever commands the sea, commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world and consequently the world itself.

–Sir Walter Raleigh

Hugo Grotius's 1609 legal treatise *Mare liberum* articulated a vision of the high seas as a global space of unrestricted circulation, belonging to no nation. But make no mistake: this was not any utopia of the commons. Bodies and goods—and bodies sold as goods—crossed these open waters, linking distant harbours, connecting production to consumption, building the world through relentless circuits of exploitation and accumulation that would have severe ecological consequences.

At present, more than ninety percent of the world's trade occurs via maritime routes. And yet when we think of global circulation, we tend to imagine dematerialised flows of finance capital, information, or images. As the myth goes, labour has become “immaterial.” But material labour hasn't disappeared, it has simply moved elsewhere—and it is through ocean travel that goods produced in the world's poorer countries reach their consumers in the world's richer countries. Digital circulation, too, is both material and maritime, depending on a network of undersea cables. In the hulking mass of shipping containers, as in the quotidian realities of

maritime workers and the submarine infrastructure that enables the internet, oceanic circulation proves itself as obstinately material. The totality of this network is so massive, so complex, and so habitually occluded, that it baffles comprehension. Like anthropogenic climate change and ecological degradation—processes inextricably tied to the worldwide circulation of capital and manifesting their effects powerfully in oceanic environments—it poses problems of scale and representability, problems the cinema can both figure and confront.



The New Zealand National Film Unit short *The Coaster* (1948) gives an account of activity on board a supply ship. As the boat unloads its cargo in port, the voiceover twice undertakes a feat of elocution, providing a brisk, rhyming inventory of the gallimaufry of contents: “a case of tea, machinery parts, a box of buttons, set of darts, things for farmers, things for charmers, a cake of staples, silk pyjamas—all are in the hold together, tightly stowed against the weather.” Although not all the named items are seen, *The Coaster* charmingly performs an intimate comprehension of the supply chain and the commodities that travel through it. This is maritime trade at an eminently human scale, infused with quaint whimsy. Such a thing is virtually unthinkable today: in the 1950s and 1960s, the development of containerisation upended the shipment of goods by sea. This new technology

dramatically increased volume and decreased costs, made many dock workers redundant, and put an end to the “colorful chaos of the old-time pier” seen in films such as *On the Waterfront* (1954).¹ The shipping container accomplished nothing less than changing the shape of the global economy.

All is Lost (2013), a film with a single actor and virtually no dialogue, offers a more contemporary picture. Robert Redford plays a man lost at sea after a stray shipping container irreparably damages his yacht. He sets off flares as two container ships pass by; neither notices him. The vessels appear devoid of human activity, as steely leviathans of dead labour with no eyes to see the mariner adrift. First, the container is a perpetrator of violence; then, the container ship is indifferent to suffering, a monolith of automation set against the small-scale know-how of the lone sailor. How unlikely it is that from within this survival drama, an indirect commentary on the perilous inhumanity of what Marco D’Eramo has called “container capitalism” emerges.²

This characterisation of container shipping is explicit in two otherwise very different films: Peter Hutton’s *At Sea* (2007) and Noël Burch and Allan Sekula’s *The Forgotten Space* (2010). Hutton, a former merchant marine, takes a restricted focus: he begins with the construction of the ship *Toldedo Spirit* in South Korea, moves through stunning images of the open ocean, and concludes with the dismantling of a ship on a Bangladeshi beach. *At Sea* is silent and possesses a tremendous formal precision that attunes the viewer



The Forgotten Space, dir. Noël Burch and Allan Sekula, 2010, 112 minutes.
Courtesy of Doc.Eye Film.

to the compositional details of the image; Hutton offers close observation but no commentary. Bodies appear as miniscule specks relative to the gigantic ship, as if to allegorise the status of human life vis-à-vis the totality of capitalist relations, until the film’s closing minutes, when the ship is but a wreck in a maritime graveyard and Bangladeshi workers approach the camera, returning its gaze. Burch and Sekula, by contrast, are expansive and explanatory in their essayistic investigation of the implications of the cargo container. In the wake of

the 2008 financial crisis, they travel around the world to interview diverse individuals who have little in common save for the fact that their lives have been touched in some way by the “floating warehouses” that allow factories to become “ship-like,” relocating overseas in search of cheap labour: young Chinese women, elderly Dutch, homeless Americans, Filipino nannies.

As different as these films may be, in both the shipping container is a figure of abstraction: it is at once a material entity that conceals the diversity of goods that exist inside it and a metonymical entity that speaks to the brutality of deregulated, neoliberal capitalism and its indifference to human life. Sekula and Burch ask a question one might attribute to Hutton as well: “Does the anonymity of the box turn the sea of exploit and adventure into a lake of invisible drudgery? Does this box, the acme of order, efficiency and global progress, create disorder and destruction, and throw the world out of balance?” The sea of adventure is never far out of sight in either film—Hutton even begins with an epigraph from Joseph Conrad—but such traces of romance are tamped down by the banalities of infrastructure. Both films contain shots taken from atop a ship, looking out towards the horizon, with colourful containers stacked like children’s building blocks, forming a grid in perspectival perfection. Rosalind Krauss has written that the grid, that emblem of painterly abstraction, is “what art looks like when it turns its back to nature.”³ Here, the grid of shipping containers is what capitalism looks like in an age of globalisation and automation, turning its back to nature and humanity alike.

In *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf* (2013), a project of collective documentation by CAMP (Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran), merchant sailors from the Gulf of Kutch in India travel across the Arabian Sea to the Persian Gulf and beyond, transporting all manner of goods. Working with footage collected over a four-year period, Anand and Sukumaran weave together their own HD video with images made by the sailors using mobile phone cameras and camcorders. These heterogeneous textures—from crisp clarity to painterly pixilation—combine with Bollywood and religious songs chosen by the sailors to form a compilation film displaying at once a palpable intimacy and a grand scope. CAMP’s directorial agency is largely withdrawn from the moment of image capture, asserted instead in the creative act of montage. CAMP find more joy, friendship, sociality, and optimism aboard these ships than is evident in *At Sea* or *The Forgotten Space*—but they join Hutton and Burch/Sekula in attempting to figure the material conditions of global circulation that so rarely come into view, mediating between the unthinkable magnitude of global circulation and the particularity of marginalised experience. This “film based on actual events and videos of actual events,” as an opening title describes it, offers a striking reminder that though our global system is so often described as “cognitive capitalism”—trafficking in information and fuelled by immaterial labour—it still rests on the physical work of real bodies fabricating and transporting real goods.



In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault turns to the ocean in search of a metaphor for the end of philosophical humanism, looking forward to the day when the concept of “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”⁴ Did his dream come true? Yes and no. When the world system is viewed through the lens of the container ship, a very different erasure of man than the one Foucault hoped for becomes visible, namely, the total subsumption of life under capital. In mainstream narrative cinema, meanwhile, the concept of man remains alive and well, the centre of the universe: in *Deepwater Horizon* (2016), a dramatisation of the 2010 catastrophe that killed eleven people and released almost five million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, constituting perhaps the worst environmental disaster in US history, there is no mention of ecological devastation. The film offers a drama of personalities, of human heroism and cowardice. The flight of a panicked, oil-slicked bird into the control room stands as the only reminder of the tremendous damage to nonhuman life, damage that remains ongoing.

Both of these phenomena—the unchecked dominance of capital and the spurious ideology of individualism—have contributed to the ecological emergencies now facing our planet. Ocean dead zones without oxygen have quadrupled since the 1950s, while the so-called “Great Pacific Garbage Patch” is twice the size of France and contains some 79,000 tons of plastic.

In Ahwesh’s *The Blackest Sea*, computer-animated fish die en masse, floating to the surface. One team of researchers claims that their living counterparts will be gone from the seas by 2048. The Earth is heating up. In this age of what many call the Anthropocene, Foucault’s metaphor takes on resonances he perhaps never anticipated, as rising water levels and calls for environmental justice put new pressure on the autonomy of “man.”

In G. Anthony Svatek’s *.TV* (2017), climate change and the global circulation of data come together in Tuvalu, the small Pacific nation particularly vulnerable to rising water levels. Svatek crosscuts between landscape images of the island sourced from YouTube and digital devices in unknown locations playing videos hosted on websites ending in .tv, a national domain name that constitutes big business for Tuvalu’s government owing to its evocation of television. A voiceover frames the film’s images as relics of the past, narrating from a future time when Tuvalu has vanished beneath the water. “Perhaps,” he intones, “it was too abstract to imagine that Earth, too, had a right to rest.” Like the global supply chain, climate change partakes of an immense scale that challenges our powers of conceptualisation. The narrator of *.TV* has now retreated to cyberspace, where he claims that rising waters can never reach him. This fable of dematerialisation is darkly dystopian, asking the viewer to imagine the disappearance of Tuvalu and to inhabit a time when humans have definitively abandoned the phenomenal world. Hints of this dystopia are already here. Most have already begun their partial retreats into



cyberspace; Svatek, like his narrator, has never visited Tuvalu but encounters it only through the fibre-optic cables that carry the bulk of internet traffic beneath the oceans. More troublingly, many remain wilfully blind to the precarity of the planet. Perhaps this science fiction is not so fictional after all.

.TV suggests that though dematerialised images circulate around the globe, consuming tremendous amounts of electricity as they distance us from the immediacy of experience, such images can perhaps also enable an encounter with the enduring material fragility of the world. Amitav Ghosh has speculated that our age may be looked back upon as “the time of the Great Derangement,” since so little literature reckons with climate change, tied as it is to the temporalities of bourgeois life.⁵ The same could be said of the cinema. But if the task is, as Ghosh suggests later, “to recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors,” then the lens-based image, with its grounding in physical reality, seems especially well poised to intervene.⁶ To recognise the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors, to take account of the interdependence of human and nonhuman life, is to court oceanic feeling. Out of this world we cannot fall.

.TV, dir. G. Anthony Svatek, 2017, 22 minutes.
Courtesy of artist.

- 1 Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the Economy Bigger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 7.
- 2 Marco D'Eramo, "Dock Life," *New Left Review* 96 (November–December 2015): 89.
- 3 Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 9.
- 4 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), 422.
- 5 Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 11.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 30.

Filmography

- .TV*, dir. G. Anthony Svatek, 2017, 22 minutes.
- 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, dir. Richard Fleischer, 1954, 127 minutes.
- A Bigger Splash*, dir. Luca Guadagnino, 2016, 125 minutes.
- A Boat Leaving the Harbour (Barque sortant du port)*, dir. Louis Lumière
1895, 46 seconds.
- The Abyss*, dir. James Cameron, 1989, 171 minutes.
- A Moon Made of Iron (Una luna de hierro)*, dir. Francisco Rodriguez, 2017,
28 minutes.
- All is Lost*, dir. J.C. Chandor, 2013, 107 minutes.
- Amistad*, dir. Steven Spielberg, 1999, 215 minutes.
- At Land*, dir. Maya Deren, 1945, 15 minutes.
- At Sea*, dir. Peter Hutton, 2007, 60 minutes.
- Atlantiques*, dir. Mati Diop, 2009, 15 minutes.
- Attack of the Crab Monsters*, dir. Roger Corman, 1957, 62 minutes.
- Balikbayan #1 Memories of Overdevelopment Redux III*, dir. Kidlat
Tahimik, 2015, 146 minutes.
- Battleship Potemkin*, dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1925, 80 minutes.
- The Blackest Sea*, dir. Peggy Ahwesh, 2016, 10 minutes.
- Blue Mantle*, dir. Rebecca Meyers, 2010, 35 minutes.
- Chevalier*, dir. Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2015, 105 minutes.
- The Children of Fogo Island*, dir. Colin Low, 1967, 17 minutes.
- The Coaster*, dir. Cecil Holmes, 1948, 10 minutes.
- Costa da Morte*, dir. Lois Patiño, 2013, 84 minutes.
- Deepwater Horizon*, dir. Peter Berg, 2016, 107 minutes.
- Demolition of a Wall (Démolition d'un mur)*, dir. Louis Lumière, 1895,
45 seconds.
- Double Tide*, dir. Sharon Lockhart, 2009, 99 minutes.
- Drifters*, dir. John Grierson, 1929, 61 minutes.
- The Earth Trembles (La Terra Trema)*, dir. Luchino Visconti, 1947,
165 minutes.
- Feeding the Baby (Le Repas de bébé)*, dir. Louis Lumière, 1895,
45 seconds.
- Finis Terrae*, dir. Jean Epstein, 1929, 80 minutes.
- Fireworks*, dir. Kenneth Anger, 1947, 20 minutes.

Fishing Boats (Pescherecci), dir. Vittorio de Seta, 1957, 11 minutes.
Forgetting Vietnam, dir. Trinh T. Minh-ha, 2016, 90 minutes.
The Forgotten Space, dir. Noël Burch and Allan Sekula, 2010, 112 minutes.
From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf, dir. CAMP, 2013, 83 minutes.
Gold of the Sea (L'Or des mers), dir. Jean Epstein, 1932, 73 minutes.
Granton Trawler, dir. John Grierson, 1934, 11 minutes.
The Green Ray, dir. Tacita Dean, 2001, 2 minutes.
Happy End, dir. Michael Haneke, 2017, 110 minutes.
HDHB, dir. Charlotte Prodger and Corin Sworn, 2011, 9 minutes,
 46 seconds.
Hydra Decapita, dir. The Otolith Group, 2010, 31 minutes.
It Came from Beneath the Sea, dir. Robert Gordon, 1955, 79 minutes.
L'Étoile de mer, dir. Man Ray, 1928, 21 minutes.
La Pointe Courte, dir. Agnès Varda, 1954, 86 minutes.
Le Crabe-tambour, dir. Pierre Schoendoerffer, 1977, 120 minutes.
Le Passage du milieu, dir. Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, 2006,
 9 minutes 40 seconds.
Le Tempestaire, dir. Jean Epstein, 1947, 23 minutes.
Leviathan, dir. Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2012,
 87 minutes.
Lifeboat, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1944, 96 minutes.
Marsa Abu Galawa (Careless Reef Part 4), dir. Gerard Holthuis, 2004,
 13 minutes.
Meshes of the Afternoon, dir. Maya Deren, 1943, 18 minutes.
Moana, dir. Ron Clements and John Musker, 2016, 107 minutes.
Mor`vran, dir. Jean Epstein, 1930, 26 minutes.
Mutiny on the Bounty, dir. Frank Lloyd, 1935, 132 minutes.
Night Tide, dir. Curtis Harrington, 1962, 86 minutes.
The Octopus (Le pieuvre), dir. Jean Painlevé, 1928, 13 minutes.
Parallel I, dir. Harun Farocki, 2012, 16 minutes.
The Pearl Button, dir. Patricio Guzmán, 2015, 82 minutes.
Peasants of the Sea (Contadini del mare), dir. Vittorio de Seta, 1955,
 11 minutes.
The Perfect Storm, dir. Wolfgang Petersen, 2000, 130 minutes.
The Seashell and the Clergyman (La Coquille et le Clergyman),
 dir. Germaine Dulac, 1928, 41 minutes.
Sea Urchins (Les oursins), dir. Jean Painlevé, 1928, 10 minutes.

Sea Wolf, dir. Michael Curtiz, 1941, 100 minutes.
The Shiranui Sea, dir. Noriaki Tsuchimoto, 1975, 153 minutes.
The Silent World (Le Monde du silence), dir. Jacques Cousteau and Louis
 Malle, 1956, 86 minutes.
Slave Ship, dir. Tay Garnett, 1937, 100 minutes.
Slow Action, dir. Ben Rivers, 2011, 45 minutes.
Souls at Sea, dir. Henry Hathaway, 1937, 92 minutes.
Stormy Waters (Remorques), dir. Jean Grémillon, 1941, 81 minutes.
Sunstone, dir. Louis Henderson and Filipa César, 2017, 35 minutes.
Un chien andalou, dir. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, 1929, 21 minutes.
Vertigo Sea, dir. John Akomfrah, 2015, three-screen installation.
Voir la mer, dir. Sophie Calle, 2011, installation of 14 digital projections.
Waterworld, dir. Kevin Reynolds, 1995, 176 minutes.
What the Water Said, dir. David Gatten, 1997–2007, 33 minutes.

