

# WATERBODIES AND BODIES OF WATER: MATTER, MOVEMENT, MEDIUM

An analysis of the film *Lower than  
the Sky* by Vajiko Chachkhiani

*The sea that always seems like a metaphor, but one  
that is always moving, cannot be fixed, like a heart  
that is like a tongue that is like a mystery that is like a  
story that is like a border that is like something that is  
altogether different and like everything at once.*

*--Rebecca Solnit, *Seashell to Ear**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In April 2022 I walked into an art gallery and experienced the film *Lower than The Sky*<sup>1</sup>. At first, I thought the film depicted a journey, a timely rendition of a universal condition. Buzzwords abounded: mobility, migration, the problematic seas that take the lives of so many migrants, politics of water, borders. Soon I gave in to dystopian desires and thought the film shows a post-apocalyptic moment, when the waters have risen. I appreciated both scenarios for the matter-of-fact depiction of these ideas: somehow the image seemed impossible to bend to metaphorical suggestions or take moralistic positions. If poetic observations would be made, the film seemed to escape them all. By the end of the screening, I gladly resigned myself to not fully knowing what to feel/think/take away. Inhabiting this experiential unknown was an interesting prelude to more complex unknowns I would come to experience in the process of writing this paper.

This thesis itself is a *wo/andering*—it moves and circles around itself, around this film, around this writer. It flows, flutters, and folds around ideas and concepts, around and between the hardness of scholarly language. My analysis seeps in between and tries to smooth over the solidity of theory; rather than a chisel, hacking away at hard concepts, the analysis meets them as a wave; a wave which eventually retreats, with or without claiming a small piece of theory. This paper is an exercise in how knowledge is produced and an exploration of the qualities of unknowability: the vulnerability in guessing, and the chance that it's all wrong. Too, it is an observation of how subject and subject matter weave: I am a human encountering the film; I am a privileged Western citizen encountering the problematic topics in this film; I am a student graduating encountering this thesis as it develops; I am a body made of water encountering all water around me. I navigate the paper from all these positions, as I attempt to map it all here.

The first section in the paper expands on these starting points—I present an argument for why this film is a worthy subject to engage with, how I position my exploration, and tease out some of the leading questions throughout the analysis (2.1) The section continues to revisit the main points of encounter in this process and identify the core research question: *How does this film contribute to the affective construction and reception of our current cultural moment of living with water?*<sup>2</sup> (2.2) The section too

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<sup>1</sup> 16:25'' 2021; Vajiko Chachkhiani <https://vimeo.com/600263182> Pass:388386

<sup>2</sup> "Our current moment of political confusion and ecological emergency" Sarah Shin and Ben Vickers, Preface to "The Carrier Bag theory of Fiction", Ursula K. LeGuin, 2019

position the paper, topic, and main interest points within a clear context, marked heavily by the location of the film in a specific cultural scope, the situatedness of the writer(2.3), and overarching cultural and scholarly moods at the time of writing(2.4, 2.5) The paper then stops to acknowledge the methods of working, some of the meta-approaches in the thesis, and approaches in analysis the artwork, and the academic work that was most impactful for the way I've positioned the questions asked and directions taken to tease out the answers. Here I present an original framework for weaving together parts of theoretical discussion with analysis and creative vignettes, all mirroring the main nodes in the movement of the vessels: Approach, Standstill, Return.

The heftiest section(3) in the paper blends conceptual presentations and discussions of scholarly work with sections of applied discussion. The conceptual anchorage here serves to locate relevant conversations to which an analysis of the film can contribute. I discuss aesthetics, and argue that the film enters a framework where aesthetics blends with an ethics of care based on relation(3.1) New materialism, feminist water thinking, and recent work on agency and relational ethics informs this section, encountered by an analytical interlude in which questions of materiality, caring and knowing are addressed, and how matter and aesthetics blend in the film, to create a tension between presence and representation.

The second sub-section(3.2) delves into discussions on the problematic concept of nature and environmental concerns. These topics are located in broader conversations related to the so-called Anthropocene, which is also largely centred on issues of agency, the human and the non/more than human, responsibility, relational ethics. I address here ideas of emotion and affect, central too to the encounters with water, film, or "nature," and intertwined with matters of response/ability and ensung(political) concerns. Ideas of imaging, visibility, and figuration are discussed in connection to models of care and concern, and essentially how(political) action can be informed by(aesthetic) encounters with alterity.

The third sub-section(3.3) presents a discussion of mobility and movement, through perspectives from water scholarship, and a conceptual focus on embodiment. The analysis seeps through this conversation, to consider how the film undulates between fixity and liquidity, and how human, non-human, and more-than-human bodies are present.

The section ends with a last analytical intervention, in which considerations of the medium are presented. Here questions of looking, the return of the gaze, the construction of visibility and the quality of vision in constructing and figuring water are discussed.

The concluding remarks(4) circle back to the core inquiries and main research question, and the argument is advanced that the film overcomes some of its pre-conditioned features, leading from its genre(art film, screened in a white cube) and manages to offer an alternative figuration of water, or facilitate alternative engagements with water, which avoid hegemonic frameworks(techno-scientific, metaphoric, lyrical) Here too I return to some of the central tensions in the paper and sketch out possibilities for future research they animate. Given the expectation of finality and closure for this section, this part of the thesis constitutes itself a knot of tension—much like *Lower than The Sky*, it's likely the paper closes without necessarily arriving at a conclusion. Rather than a failure of function, I see this as an opening and a possibility; a joyous occasion to keep the engagement and curiosity I've established. My analysis is immediate and intimate, but hopefully also speculative—as the film arguably does, the hope is that this paper too exemplifies how water thinking can rearrange some of the(solid?) blocks of being in and thinking of the world, from the position of a student, human, and body of water.



## 2. ENTRY POINTS

*In which arguments are made for the choice of the subject matter, personal and academic positions are made clear, and the location for this paper within a socio-cultural framework is delimited.*



## *Vignette—An immigrant walks into an art gallery*

*Am I allowed to be bored in an art gallery? How do I hide that nearly three minutes have passed and my fingers itch with the desire to take a picture of this screen. Why do I want to re-frame this? Why do I need a picture of a picture, to join the third picture in mind, and the many other pictures piling up? These two boats, the water so flat, it sounds calm, a gentle buzz of the wind, and the faint noise of the two boats. They're called "fishing trawlers." I want to google "trawler." I can't escape my memory of moving to Denmark; our coach bus one among many vehicles in the cargo hold of a ferryboat. The water is beautiful and brightly blue, but my heart is pounding with the fear that I won't find my bus again along the huge ferry. Is this the quintessential migrant emotion: fear of being lost, even as you can see at all times the margins of the thing that contains and carries you? Funny how fear doesn't care about beauty.*

*The boats approach. Humans stand on decks and look straight at the camera. What a twist! I want to know more, and I still want to google the word "trawler." ■*

## 2.1 Argument: the film as possibility

In this paper I explore the contribution of the art film *Lower than the Sky* to the broader affective construction and imaging of (living with) water in a contemporary context. The film opens with two vessels on the horizon, which slowly approach the camera vantage point. As they approach, the viewer learns they are two fishing trawlers, and on their decks—a surprising cargo: people standing and facing the direction of the camera. At minute 5, after a short standstill, the vessels turn around to take the same route back. The film closes on the two trawlers again at the horizon line, continuing their journey.

Several unknowns characterize this first encounter: the origin and destination of the vessels is unclear; it's also unclear who captains them, or who are the people on deck. For clarity, one might also want to unpack the film for its narrative construction: what is the *story* it tries to convey? What is the takeaway? What does the film *want* from its viewers? What can be made of the slowness, the non-event of the film? Is the film about water? About being on water? About being *in* an art film? About being an art film? With this we acknowledge the Western philosophical tradition (and way of looking) that “favours a concern with *what is*, and not *what is not*” (Rose 2001:157). To circumvent this tradition, I ask: what about absence in this film? The lack of closure triggers further questions: what is the experience of watching the film without closure? What kind of viewership is being constructed by this break with a hegemonic narrative structure?

One could follow Susan Sontag's call against interpretation. In her seminal eponymous essay, Sontag proposes: instead of epistemological questions about an artwork, we should ask ontological questions; instead of *what does it mean?* we ask—*how is it what it is?* Heeding this call, I seek not to learn what the image of water means, or what visual metaphors it might fuel. Instead, I focus on the form water takes; a focus on the (imaged) form of water facilitates an interrogation of the experience without creating distance from it; preserves a “sensuous immediacy” with the work. (Sontag 1966) Likewise, WJT Mitchell describes the study of visual culture as: “not limited to images and media but extends to everyday practices of seeing and showing—those that we take to be immediate or unmediated. It is less concerned with the meaning of images than with their lives and loves” (Mitchell 2002:170)

Where my argument takes a distance from an exclusively sensuous encounter with the film is in proposing that the “how” of “how water is what it is” in this film is tightly tied with broader “*hows*” of water; the form water takes in this art film is deeply connected with structures of imagination and construction of water at work in the world today. I consider the lives and loves of the film are connected with/informed by those of water.

My interest is in the workings of imagination and construction of water underlying the film; power dynamics, circulation, and entanglements, rather than excavating content, metaphors it facilitates or meanings it generates. For Sontag “art has the capacity to make us nervous; by reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art.” I commit to fostering a sense of nervousness at encounters with this film.

The film does *contain* figurations of water bodies, vessels, and human bodies on water; rather than image, the film becomes a vessel itself. In *Lower than the Sky* the body-boat assemblage operates within a vague visual rendition of a map-territory—the film is not cartographically placed, instead a non-distinct *anywater* is featured.<sup>3</sup> Per Chen et.al, this can be located within our “spatial and temporal relations with water—unintelligible, unruly, vague, but also full of disturbing potential”(2013:9) That water and vagueness are semantically and etymologically linked<sup>4</sup>(Linton 2009) adds more *ground* to investigating the affective response the film encodes. Interestingly, a *grounding* of ideas echoes a sense of solidity, which the film appears to defy. Rather, it taps a “reservoir of unknowability carried within all waters,” allowing us to “situate ourselves in ways that challenge land-based preconceptions of fixity”(Chen et.al, 2013:8)

A red thread in my paper is the questioning of possibilities for emotional/affective<sup>5</sup> spectrums at work in how water and images of water are used to recognize the validity of more watery ways of living and thinking. How can water be affirmed in itself as phenomenon/process/matter/paradigm, and not as an element opposed to land? How can we speak and think of water as something else than *what land is not*?

Worth asking: is a first encounter with the film conditioned on a binary ecology of land/water? Can we do away with the duality in imaging the Earth, and exchange it for more speculative scenarios, in which the film is perhaps located in post-crisis, where land is a scarce presence or memory of the past?

How we think “of and about waters” is a matter of “habitual understanding, representing, and forgetting waters”(ibid.) *Lower than the Sky* saturates its pictorial universe with water—invisible(forgotten) water is replaced with hypervisible watery presence/function. The agency of water as a “vibrant actant”(Bennet) is discussed in this paper; it is also an infrastructure, itself a medium; the

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<sup>3</sup> The end credits identify the location of the film, which under a different effort to decode this film(say, as political message) would be a central analysis feature. I argue that the controlled anonymity of the water body at the encounter with the viewer takes primacy as a feature of water in the film. I also recognize that the material characteristics of water(tranquil, open) might lead to different decodings, which cancels the feature of it being “anywater.” It’s most likely a sea. Lack of initial geographic identification, however, leads me to explore the non-distinctness of this water figuration.

<sup>4</sup> The fluidity inherent in “vague” – from Latin *vagari* = *wander*.

<sup>5</sup> See note 18 in 3.2.4 regarding the use of emotion/affect in this paper.

film is an interrogation of water bodies as technologies: facilitates mobility and commercial activity, in a globalized capitalistic context (Mentz 2015) Bodies and vessels are not only located on water or in transit, but are heading towards a destination. It's worth exploring whether this implied intention of movement—this *towardness*—contributes to a feeling of anxiety on the part of the viewer (identified with the camera point, perhaps landed); anxiety for the approach/arrival of unidentified individuals/strangers. How does the work encode this anxiety visually? Is a *land* destination the only possible outcome of a water journey?

The film pictures water and expands the scope of our collective imagination<sup>6</sup> around water. This paper draws on Astrida Neimanis' contention that "paying closer attention to how we imagine water and attempting to forge alternatives to our dominant imaginaries is not just a thought experiment. It is a means of cultivating better ways of living with water *now*" (Neimanis 2017:21) Jane Bennet's concept of "vibrant matter" is a key starting point, as it opens a speculative space.

Bennet asks: "How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?" (2010:viii) The vitality of bodies of water is interesting to consider here,<sup>7</sup> particularly as it would, according to Bennet, lead to "*thinking* about the world differently, ... *acting* in the world differently" (Braun 2011:391) These concerns with *the possible* build on the speculative quality of water scholarship, and it "connects to a feminist tradition for which this mode of thought about the possible is about provoking political and ethical imagination in the present" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017:7)

## 2.2. Encounters

Analysing this film essentially rests on considering a series of encounters: with water, film, knowledge of water and of film. The film depicts another series of encounters: of vessels with the camera, the viewers' gaze with vessels, the bodies on the vessels with the viewers' gaze. Furthermore—what types of knowledge/affects/relations they facilitate is a worthy site of investigation: "how do waters, as

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<sup>6</sup> This paper also discusses the "possibility for aesthetics to harbour imagination of alternative scenarios to those imposed by a society's dominant narratives" (Miles 2014), and retains Stacy Alaimo's idea that "awareness through imagination is the ultimate role of the humanities" (Alaimo and Kuznetski 2019) Nevertheless I maintain a critical stance as to what "imagination" is, and the hegemonies that go into its (situated) articulations.

<sup>7</sup> Bennet defines "vitality" as "the capacity of things not only to impede or block the will and designs of human but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (2010:viii)

subjects of continuous sensory encounters shape the emergence of language and ideas?" ask Chen et.al(2013:10)

Unpacking these encounters, I retain a reflective position: acknowledgement that not all encounters are benign, voluntary, or follow choice. This is a political contention, which can illuminate whether(and how) the film engages power dynamics, and what role could the image of water plays in this engagement(Strang 2020)

The research question animating this paper is: *How does this film contribute to the affective construction and reception of our current cultural moment of living with water?*<sup>8</sup>

The *current cultural moment* of living with water is here three-dimensional: a)one defined by a neoliberal, extractive context; water as resource in a wider flux of capital, doubled by the regimenting of water in new forms of "hydrocolonialism"(Nuttall, 2021) b) a second defined by mobility and migration and waters as infrastructures, "increasingly policed" borders(ibid) c) a third focused on the imminence of climate disaster, the rising of planetary waters and ecological breakdown. This tripartite context defines the experience of this film, and contributes to the "imaginary" around water bodies. It also defines this paper's contribution to broader conversations within critical fields:eco- and art criticism, migration and mobility, critical geography, cultural studies.

### 2.3. Location, location, location

The engagement with the idea of a *current moment* needs further attention. *Current, cultural, moment, living, with/out* water—these are all loaded concepts tracing specific temporalities, cartographies, imaginations, figurations. To situate this cultural moment as *ours* requires a conversation of what is meant by *we*. The *we* of this paper is encompassed by the "broad tradition described as Western thought, ... both the cause and effect of narratives in Western history"(Linton 2009:5)

With inspiration in decolonial thinking, I acknowledge the risks of a totalizing view, a singular West(Mignolo); yet, this anchoring serves the scope of this paper to situate the sphere of my analysis, while keeping close a Foucauldian approach that would question the "truth claims" and subjectivities created by this regime of knowledge we call "Western thought"(Foucault 1972) I propose a "staying with the trouble" in a Western paradigm, at fault as it is of hegemonic frameworks and colonial

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<sup>8</sup> "Our current moment of political confusion and ecological emergency" Sarah Shin and Ben Vickers, Preface to "The Carrier Bag theory of Fiction", Ursula K. LeGuin, 2019

histories. My own condition as one to ask questions and propose an analysis is impacted by this hegemony; as a thinking subject in the structure called *Western world* I consider the limitations and various knowledges I've inherited, which affect my outlook—the “Cartesian habits of the mind”(Barad 2003:807)

Whereas other knowledge traditions are valid paths to engage with my topic, I acknowledge my Western position, faults and all, while trying to overcome it. As Puig de la Bellacasa puts it:“Can thinking be connected if it pretends to be outside of the worlds we want to see transformed, even those we would rather not endorse?”(2017:10)

I find inspiring the project of *delinking* at the core of decoloniality, which counters the dominant idea that societies formerly not considered “modern” crave modernity:“decoloniality is not fighting to be included in modernity. ... We do not want to be modern,” as modernity is deeply entrenched with coloniality(Vasquez 2019:np) How could a similar thought be articulated from within a Western standpoint? What would be an equivalent of this impetus, one that does not lead to nihilism, but to life-affirming processes in concrete situations; conducive of new social relations, and cultural practices?(Escobar 1999) I write this paper with this thought: a Western dominant way of knowing water is affected by Western colonial power dynamics, domination, extraction, and modernity. Recent ideas from the blue humanities and oceanic studies propose important delinking methods in which water is central.

## 2.4 A watery now

In 2009 S. Mentz introduced the terms “blue humanities” and “blue cultural studies,” to recognize the “oceanic turn in historical and literary scholarship,”(Mentz 2023) The “turn to the sea” or “historicization of the oceans”(ibid.) underlined the necessity of attention to the sea within Western humanities:“As the sea recedes from the everyday working life...it grows more central to the cultural imagination. We have come to know the sea, as much through the humanities as through science. Artistic, poetic, and humanistic knowledge define the sea’s centrality to modern Western culture”(Mentz 2023:6)

In his analysis of water, Jamie Linton crosses modernity with water and coins it “modern water”—a “way of knowing water and the habits of thought and practice that it helps induce”(2009:8) It is a process that produces and maintains water as an abstraction. Modern water is universal—all waters are reducible to this abstraction; it is also *natural*—all water can be reduced to elemental consistency.

Modern water is “not complicated by ecological, cultural, or social factors;” its basic nature is taken for granted (Linton 2009:7) This context has led to a hegemonic way of knowing water, along with the “dominant idea that this way of knowing water reveals its essence” (ibid)

Per Linton, hegemony affects how we’ve been taught to *see* water—we might add, in how we visualise water to fit our ways of seeing. Ruptures or cultural shifts in Western thought in late 20<sup>th</sup> century led to a loss of “faith in such tenets of modernism as rationalism, individualism, and science ... as critics drew attention to how ‘the achievements of modernity rested on race, class, and gender domination, colonialism and imperialism, anthropocentrism, and destruction of nature’ (Emel & Wolch, in Linton 2010) Post-anthropocentrism, new materialism, new ethics of care, co-existentialism and relationality, the blue humanities, hydrofeminism—all counter this modern legacy of water. Living *with* water is not so much a living *side by side* with water, or controlling it; it’s a recognition of the intrinsic relationality of our watery existence; a “thinking with water” (Chen et.al); a “meaningful mattering of our bodies as bodies of water” (Neimanis 2017) Water becomes coded as less as “fixed, material thing” and more as “principle or process” (Linton 2009) Our current moment of living with water is thus leaky, fluid, relational, situated yet unfixable; it impacts the material relations of language and knowledge, the co-constitution of water as substance and poetics (Chen et.al)

## 2.5. Turning tides. Crisis

To conceptually localize water we can apply the lens of ecological existentialism: “a 21st century variety of existentialism, focused on relationships between humans and nonhumans during the current climate emergency and mass extinction” (Mickey 2020:143) This crisis is two-fold, argues Bailey-Charteris—a crisis of ecological destruction, but also one of diminishing poetic imagination. At the core we find water (Bailey-Charteris 2021) and grief (Mortimer-Sandiland 2010) The author introduces a method of planetary caretaking, a “hydrocene,” a practice in which “water is both the physical and a metaphorical device, that facilitates a decentring of anthropocentrism, and ushers in collaborative ways of relating to water” (Bailey-Charteris 2021:433)

Living with and creating on a “dying planet” (ibid:432) relates to eco-anxiety, the angst and “dread at the realization of existential breakdown” (Mickey 2020:151) In a “world of wounds” the self is “ecologically extended” and becomes increasingly place-based, as alienation and vulnerability intensify. “Living alone in a world of wounds” (Leopold in Mortimer-Sandiland 2010) is defined by melancholia—a state of “suspended mourning in which the object of loss is real but physically ungrievable within the confines of a society that cannot acknowledge non-human beings, natural

environments, and ecological processes as appropriate objects for genuine grief”(Mortimer-Sandiland 2010:333)

The world of environmental wounds is what Mentz sees as reason to study water:“we are going to be seeing more of it, closer, in the near future. Rising sea levels and rainstorms are making our environment wetter”(Mentz 2023:7) Fracturing waterscapes and disrupted ecosystems are complicated by an intermingled temporality of crisis—our precarious future is already with us, and we will have been at fault for aggravating it:“in this form of futurity the everyday experience of time is one of permanent precariousness: an ongoing sense of urgency calls us to act ‘now’ while the present of action is diminished, mortgaged to an always unsure tomorrow”(Puig de la Bellacasa 2017:175) The past too appears (re)animated by enduring crisis. As Hamilton&Neimanis write, “Colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy” are intrinsically bound to environmental urgency: “The spectacular urgency of drought and fire and entanglement with each other, exacerbated by climate change mask slower ongoing violences of environmental crises: species extinction, land clearing, extraction, fish kills, water sell-offs and buy-backs”(2020:385)

Per Mentz, to respond to the crisis, we must focus on planetary waters: “Encounters with planetary water challenge us to engage the world as *it is*, not as we *would like* it to be”(Mentz 2023:14) Mentz distinguishes between the actual state of world and an imagined alternative; he expresses support for a direct engagement with the matter-of-fact realities of our world, rather than our desires for it. I propose an investigation of desire as care: is caring for the environment an affective disposition which disqualifies an ethical response to crisis? Is care a shape of our desires, or of our sense of responsibility?

Desire is not always benign. Stacy Alaimo discusses global environmentalism as permeated by coloniality and “anthropocentric utilitarianism,” in which human desire for biodiversity is quantification and objectification, typical of colonial violence: ecosystems, environments are essentially protected as resources.(2019:398) Neimanis proposes countering this technocratic desire for biodiversity with feminist ethics: “difference is productive and irreducible, and the materiality of bodies is the site from which such ethics emerges”(Neimanis et al 2015:85) The proposal settles the distinction made by Mentz, releasing it from a sharp *either-or*. Rather than ethically separating *what is* and *what we want* to be, we consider “an ethics that *desires* biodiversity, in which humans as differently embodied beings *want* a multitude of other, irreducible different and diverse species to be.(Alaimo 2019:399) Connecting this ethics of desire with questions of mediated imagination and visuality, the author addresses aesthetics and the visual in anthropocentric utilitarianism. In her study



of how deep-sea creatures are made visible, Alaimo explores the limits of human concern, experiencing care more readily about things that are made visible: “moving from the predominant Western dualism of reality and representation towards eco-materialist immersed onto-epistemologies or implicated aesthetics infuses images with intimacy and immediacy despite mediation”(Alaimo 2019:406)

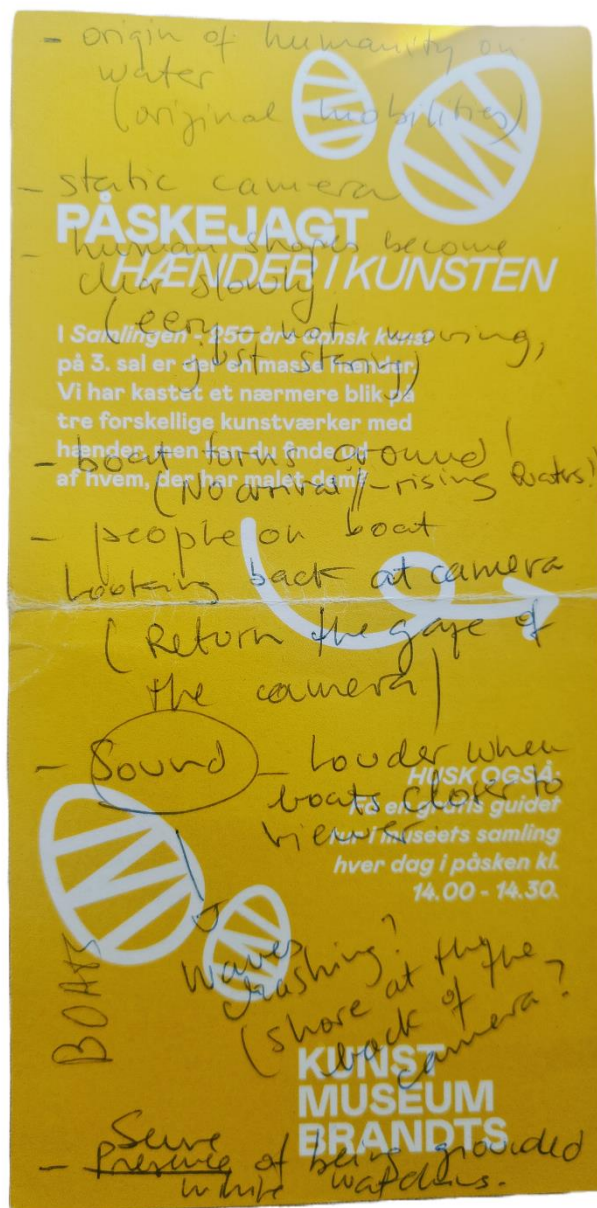
This section introduced the starting points in this paper and announced the discussions that animate my thesis. I described my interest for the ways in which water is figured, constructed, and imaged in the film. A discussion of concepts of *encounter* and *location* hosts some of the meta-level concerns with the intricate meeting points and situated experiences, knowledges, and emotions that impact this analysis. It’s important to set off by acknowledging the existence of a current moment of planetary living with/out water and tracing the history of water concerns through legacies of colonialism, modernity, and globalization, culminating in current environmental crisis. It’s worth revising the question at the core of my thesis and tease out some additional queries.

*How does this film contribute to the affective construction and reception of our current cultural moment of living with water? What conditions affect this construction and reception? How can we trace an “ethics that desires” in the experience of this film—how is the “wanting the world to be” affected by human spectatorship of this film? How is the film intimate and immediate, while also speculative? How does the speculative kernel in the film encapsulate threads of care and hope, as response to a crisis-infused planetary moment of living with water?*

Before attempting to answer these questions, the paper continues with a theoretical section(3), where the notion of aesthetics is discussed(3.1), followed by an analysis of a problematic set of concepts—“nature” and the “Anthropocene”(3.2), and ending with a section dedicated to aspects of mobility in relation to water(3.3)

# METHODS

*In which I present some thoughts that shaped the paper, approaches that I've found fitting in addressing this work of art, and the scholarly work that was most impactful for the way I've positioned the questions asked and directions taken to tease out the answers.*



Notes on a gallery flyer at my first viewing of *Lower than the Sky*.  
April 2022. [Kunstmuseum Brandts](#), Odense.

## Film as vibrant matter

On visibility, imaging, and representation, WJT Mitchell's discussions on the "dematerialization of the image" and inquiries into the "desires of images"(1996) inform my wish to not exhaust the film of meaning. I aim to affirm the agency of the film as actant(Bennet) and remember to silently ask *What the film really wants*, as I unavoidably must engage with what it *does*. The tension of the film to *re-present*, while an epistemic object(Terranova 2021) is an important notion, particularly read through Jane Bennet's idea of *vitality*. A methodological question is:What does it mean to see this film as vibrant matter, with journeys of its own? What does the *film-as-agent* do to spectatorship? My agency as spectator is itself a journey, recorded(in abridged versions) in the vignettes spread throughout.

Matters of meaning making, cultural encoding, the agency of the image, the epistemic violence of seeing(Haraway 1988) come into play, as is an underlying critical stance towards the hegemony of epistemes, to question what would mean to "know without modern categories" and explore the qualities of uncertainty and ambiguity, in relating to human and more-than-human others(Ferreira da Silva 2016)

The reading of the film acknowledges the artistic register in which it functions and circulates—primarily as art film. The work is examined for how it pictures what it pictures, and for the "affective atmosphere" it engenders(Uhlin) The figuring of water is central to the analysis, which follows the conceptual and contextual framework outlined above. Whereas no direct environmental degradation is pictured in the film, I will explore the extent to which it "solicits viewer identification and provokes embodied responses" which enter a visual script of environmental awareness, despite it not being directly articulated(Uhlin 2018)

Affect is a key word in the analysis; as Sianne Ngai writes "feeling can make a work of art the object of our concern by the production of immediacy,"(2005:82) which is why the analysis will look at "affect's role in the aesthetic encounters" with/of this film(ibid) If picturing climate degradation would produce a sense of political urgency for action mediated by affect(Uhlin), the lack of such degradation in the picture,(here replaced partly by sublime, serene, scenic frames, and doubled by an affective spectrum of boredom) creates a vague space for affective engagement, in Ngai's words, "a non-cathartic aesthetic," defined by the "failure of emotional release." I argue that this leads to "suspended action," or melancholic response,(3.2.5) as opposed to a response of "care with" for environmental others.(3.1.5) I look for how this aesthetic suspension can be construed as the site of encounter with the "vibrant matter" of both water and film; how, in turn, can the affective build-up without release in

the film inspire a recognition of the vitality(perhaps registered as resistance and refusal) of more-than-human entities, as it destabilizes and decentres the(eminently) human affective response.

## Critical lenses. Leaky methods

Approaches from posthumanism, decolonial thought, and indigenous critique offer a lens to counter the “philosophical and scientific division between subject and object, culture and nature [which] ensured the primacy of people among beings,” the foundation for enduring dichotomies that privilege a human positionality. Neimanis’ feminist posthumanism is helpful here:“feminist posthumanism refuses the self-evident split between ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ human-bodiedness”(2017:10) I apply this refusal in the reading of the film, by investigating how human bodies are figured, and what types of agency their presence(or absence) engenders, along or against dichotomies between dull, passive, inert matter and animate humans(Bennet 2010)

The analysis is impacted by the idea that environmental humanities must also be feminist; that is:“attentive to a commitment to analysing how intersectional materialisations of power and privilege related to gender, race, class, and other embodied markers are not an optional extra, but central to the understanding current species privilege and environmental exploitation”(Hamilton and Neimanis 2020:387) Relationality and intersectionality impact my method of analysing this film, as elements analysed are seen at the confluence of material, aesthetic, political, affective conditions.

Throughout, my critical reading of the film is impacted by Linton’s question:“How have we been taught to see water?”(Linton 2010:8) A more structural question arises:How have we been taught to see? How can a looking at water as constructed and animated by this film be disconnected from land-locked ways of seeing?

During the process of watching(and rewatching) this film, I acknowledge that “water is visually compelling; luminous and hypnotic”(Strang 2005:101) and keep an awareness of how water’s hypnotic qualities work to affect a critical reading of the film. I acknowledge the privilege of encountering this film as a sensorially abled person, and question the primacy of sight as main device in experiencing the film. I refer to a *thinking with water* throughout this process, but I also admit that my thinking may slide back to more grounded epistemes:how can I truly think as a *body of water*, from the position of water, when so deeply rooted in a space that fetishes firmness and permanence, a cultural, social, physical space designed to control, govern, and discipline water.

I blend more dense writing, where the analysis rests on theoretical connections and concepts, with short vignettes of creative writing, to revisit the first viewing of the film. These vignettes are informed by the film's disposition/segments of how the boats are located with reference to the camera: **Approach; Standstill; Return.**

Overall, my voice is marked by my position: as the writer of this paper, the human viewer of this artwork, the student attempting to legitimize their claims and win over a skeptical reader; I write, I argue, I propose—verbs of affirmation, perhaps sometimes on behalf of this film, my Anthropos agency blown out of proportion. Nevertheless, every affirmation is layered on wonder; more than writing, arguing, or claiming, the process of writing on this artwork has been a journey of wonderment. I hope that instead of declarative confidence, my process comes across as tentative generosity.

The paper has been restructured—from a more conventional structure, with a solid theoretical discussion followed by applied analysis, to a format of analysis entwined and weaved through.

The analysis moves through three dimensions in the film - **matter, movement, medium** - with a contention that they are central to how the film creates atmosphere, engage affect, and offer aesthetic figurations of water. I will look at how water, the boats, and human bodies interact and assemble as both matter and process(3.1.6), ; at how the film pictures mobility to circumvent typical descriptions of pristine nature; and at film as visual methodology which simultaneously articulates an imagination of water, as it is informed by it.

## *Vignette—Approach / Build-up*

*Symmetry, parallel lines, slowness. The vessels approach, crossing the geometry of the frame, almost with perpendicular stubbornness. Their soft brown borrows both from the pink of the sky and the blue of the water. They are both in the sky and in the water. What do you approach when you are already everywhere? Steadily they come closer. Am I the looking eye? On the fourth floor of this small gallery in Denmark's third largest city, I am hardly grounded; yet the material beneath my feet is firm. Am I on a raft, in the middle of the ocean? The floors are wooden and have been treated with a gasoline-scented oil. Strangely flammable, yet firmly safe. The boats come even closer, and I start to see the human shapes on board. "This is about migration!" My meaning-seeking mind is at work—tentative narratives form and a desire to know, rather than wonder, takes over. I feel immediately compelled to pay more attention and formulate ideas, for the conversation I know will follow, with my companion. Am I on the shore? In a port? At an arrival location at the borders of Europe?*

*Funnily enough, I am emotionally no longer on the boat myself, I am now one with this unknown non-boat, maybe-boat, maybe-land, definitely-camera, floating space. But I crave to escape this one perspective, the camera-as-my-eye. Can I not see with the people on boat, just for a second? The approach builds up curiosity, and I've forgotten all about the water.*



### 3. PASSAGE

*In which my analysis of the film meanders and seeps through discussions of theoretical approaches, scholarly work, and conceptual framing. A type of necessary drift through nooks and crannies of ideas, thoughts, and positions.*

I propose a three-fold focus, which can open generous windows into analysing *Lower than the Sky*. The first sub-section focuses on aesthetics(3.1), in which the blurry line between aesthetics' concern with itself and the social utility of art is used to tease out questions of agency, relationality, representation, and materiality of aesthetic visions of the environment(3.1.1 3.1.2 3.1.3) The subsection then turns to caretaking(curating), and the role of water in seeing the “world as constituted of process, relation, and change”(Linton). The potential of going from *caring about* towards *caring with* the environment is a starting point for political mobilisation in times of crisis(3.1.4) Care and imagination are discussed last, with concepts of water thinking—such as hydrocene, hydrocare, the liminal temporal and spatial conditions of “the dissolve”(3.1.5) I look at how artistic gestures/intentions are informed by and inform new engagements/entanglements with material realities of the current environmental crisis. I consider the political potential of aesthetic processes, or, as Ngai would put it, follow the “task of thinking the aesthetic and political together”(2005)

The second sub-section(3.2) addresses more recent debates on agential modalities in relation to environment, eco-concerns and the troublesome concept of *nature*; notions from blue critical thinking and a focus on water help demystify and de-metaphorize nature. I visit the concept of the Anthropocene, and engage with neo-material perspectives, affirmations of object ontology, as well as affect/emotion, and how they impact the navigation of crisis. I discuss notions of loss, melancholia, and grief, which articulate the current crisis as living in a “world of wounds.”

The third sub-section(3.3) looks at how the cultural turn to water has impacted perspectives on mobility. A focus on watery mobilities is more than mobility on water; rather, the concept facilitates the rethinking of ideas of *fixity* and *flow*, while adding nuance to discussions on materialism, legacies of modernity and colonialism, and the very cartography of journeys. The matter of human bodies at sea, and how they entangle to form *floating* assemblages is visited. The figure of the ship/vessel is discussed, with strategies to overcome the *metaphorics* of the ship and the sea, and replace these with a focus on lived lives at sea; all to reframe the water journey—from the straight line between departure and arrival to the abundance of “moments in transit and lives lived on the move”(Anim-Addoet.al2014) that populate the in-between.



### 3.1. Aesthetics

As the concept of *encounter* traverses my reflections on *Lower Than the Sky*<sup>9</sup>, I find it fitting to inform my analysis with a theoretical discussion of aesthetics, a term marked by debate. If Berleant(2012) sees aesthetics as a “descriptive and not necessarily celebratory study of sensible experiences,” Carroll draws attention to how “moral concerns may block or enhance aesthetic experiences”(2005) Of interest here is the tension between a perspective of art as primary conduit for delivering an “aesthetic experience, valued for its own sake” as opposed to social utility of art(to advance social and political problematics)(Carroll 2005) Whether we can sharply divide the two is questionable, and it is precisely this blurry boundary that is present in the film: what type of experience is this art encounter and what can it contribute to problematics concerning water?

#### **3.1.1 Is art powerless?**

Ngai writes: “art’s preoccupation with its own powerlessness and superfluity in the empirical world is precisely what makes it capable of theorizing social powerlessness in a manner unrivalled by other cultural praxis”(2005) With this section, I introduce perspectives from feminist new materialism and water thinking to uncover the conditions under which aesthetic experience/encounters can in fact inform ethical or political action, beyond an assumed powerlessness of art.

The relation between non-material endeavours (such as thinking *about* art) and their real-life impact is illuminated by Bennet’s idea of vitalism. Bennet proposes a focus on the vitality of non- or more-than-human entities, which leads to thinking and acting in the world differently; too, Escobar defines political ecology as having a goal in the articulation of biology and history in a manner “conducive to more just and sustainable social and ecological relations”(1999:4)

The theoretical and methodological leap from politics to the history of biology, then to aesthetics is neatly drawn by Stacy Alaimo in a discussion of representations of jellyfish; the scientific efforts to capture and categorise these beings have transported them from biology to art, and reframed them as “distinct aesthetic objects.”

Alaimo uses the various figurations of the jellyfish to show politics are enmeshed with “the visible, the sayable and the thinkable”(Chen.et.al 2013:17) She notes:“Aesthetic attachments overlap and conflict with concern for ecosystem health and biodiversity, as many visual representations of jellies provoke pleasure and wonder that cannot be directly channelled into the ethics, politics, or practices

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<sup>9</sup> These encounters are:a sensory encounter with the film; an art encounter, placed in an art space; an ethical encounter, with broader problematics posed by the subject matter; a methodological encounter, complicated by the tension between experience and interpretation(Sontag)

of species protection”(2013:141) Aesthetics can be seen to pose a challenge to the “ethics that desire” introduced above(2.5), given its precarious capacity to manifest as(political) action.

### ***3.1.2 The many facets of aesthetics***

I acknowledge the shifts aesthetics has undergone, from reference to beauty and form(in a Kantian sense) to the encoding of “aesthetic experience,” which reframes the “sensory” in aesthetic experience. “Aesthetics is a theory of the sensible experience,” writes Berleant(2012), an “acute sensory experience in the everyday life”(ibid:55) Environmental aesthetics moves the focus from objects of art to experiences of art; aesthetic instances are perceptual, rather than abstractions. For Berleant, “such engagement transforms our environmental perception of space, mass, density, force, and directionality, when apprehended not as abstractions, but as direct experiences”(ibid)

I argue for the analytic value of this approach, as it allows for situated aesthetic experiences to be considered, and breaks with a transcendental, essentialist, or abstract framework. As Alaimo(2016) would point out, “transcendent epistemologies have fuelled environmental destruction and harm” to environment, by ignoring the materiality of networks and relations with the Earth and within species. A break from transcendental essentialism is welcome.

Berleant’s aesthetics double as an epistemological conduit. In other words, to engage with the world through aesthetic experiences is a manner of knowing the world, since aesthetics features as a “somatic *apprehension* of space, mass, movement, directionality,” thus *grounding* the experience of apprehending in the very materiality that Alaimo mentions.

“The condition of being placed provokes broader questions *about inhabitation and ethics*” posits Alaimo, and to this we might add: also, about aesthetics. For the author, being placed is not a feature of occupying space; but an “enmeshment of the flesh with place,” a recognition of “tangled materialities”(2016:1)

*A thinking with water* offers a critique of the primacy of materiality. In their discussion of oceanic ontology, Steinberg&Peters warn that “the emphasis on materiality that is typically used to rectify the excess of abstraction tends to reproduce a sense of matter as fixed and grounded”(2015:1) In other words, we must not deny flow and fluidity as we assert the fixity of matter. Fixity describes matter as “formed, rather than processual,” which runs the risk of essentialising a given order as “natural,” and obscuring power dynamics and relations that convene to establish that order.

Watery inquiries also expand on Berleant’s aesthetic as somatic apprehension of space, mass, density, force, and directionality: to mass, we add “volume”(Steinberg&Peters 2015); to space, we add a

networked condition of space; to movement, we add drift; to directionality, we add the “hydro-elemental assemblages” of the sea and ocean, all to “rethink motion and matter and how it shapes the world”(ibid.) Applying a thinking with water can provoke the status quo of the material.

Through water thinkers such as Alaimo and feminist thinkers such as Haraway, Berleant’s conception of aesthetics is anthropocentric and at risk of splitting the subject and object of knowledge; the subject and object of aesthetic somatic apprehension: the human is the agent of somatic experience and apprehension.

Haraway calls for a decentring of the human as the agent of knowledge: “the subject as knower is never separate from the world that she seeks to know”(2016) Haraway’s feminism inspires Alaimo in articulating the concept of “transcorporeality,” which does not focus on “bodies, things, and objects as separate entities, but instead traces how the(post)human is already part of the intra-active networks and systems that are simultaneously material, discursive, economic, ecological, and biopolitical”(Alaimo 2013:133)

Recent interests in “traces and effects of human activity,” which constitute the core of investigative aesthetics, also depart from traditional understandings of aesthetics as technology of beauty. These efforts see the concept as “not a question of beautification, but of the sensible”(Weizman 2022) Weizman proposes a perspective of aesthetics as “effectively the way in which things register the proximity of other things ... the relationship between bodies and objects in the world”(ibid)

Spatiality as feature of aesthetic encounter eliminates ideas of attachment or sensory modalities; the risk then is that humans are once more essentialised and seen as central to these encounters. For Weizman and his forensic methodologies, the surface(usually of the Earth—organic or topographic) is the object where aesthetic/proxemic relations are examined. His approach, however, is important in how it lends itself to being decoded and expanded through new materialist and feminist lenses, which propose relational and human-decentring methodologies.

### ***3.1.3 Agency and relation:tides of connectivity***

Critics of new materialism would call out Weizman’s formulation—“...*things register the proximity of other things*”—an anthropomorphic view, therefore emphasising a false or unsuccessful decentring of the human. Cole(2013) identifies a deep humanism at work in new materialisms, listening for the “voice” of non- and more-than-human entities, and the manner they “register their proximity to others.” Grappling with ideas of materiality as agential rather than passive is a fallacy, argues Cole,

since the operative concept of agency is to mimic human agency. Bennet, however, acknowledges and voices this paradox:

“My claims here are motivated by a self-interested concern for human survival and happiness:I want to promote greener forms for human culture...more attentive encounters between people-materialities and things-materialities”(2010:x)

Bennet embraces an “anthropocentric utilitarianism”(Alaimo 2019:399) and emphasises the material impacts and political stakes that these discussions must observe.

Another way out of the impasse underlined by Cole is to replace the idea of *encounter with* distinct objects, with an idea of *entanglement*(Barad). An emphasis on relationality and vitality of matter is not about “looking for the voice, perspective, or rights of objects; but about the responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming, of which we are a part”(Alaimo 2016)

Puig de la Bellacasa wraps responsibility and accountability in a layer of care. Per the author, we must have a “theoretical discussion of care as a generic doing of ontological significance, as a “species activity” with ethical, political, and cultural implications. ... this includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it and possible.”(2017:3)

Page views a recent focus in art-science projects to “cultivate a sense of the planet beyond the human...to understand its dynamics more fully and resituate human agency more properly within geohistories of matter and energy”(Page 2020) Weizman’s proximity can imply distance, and the existence of distinct objects, with a territorial/spatial trace. Through Alaimo and Barad, however, distance/empty space becomes relation.

With its concepts of shared water and bodies of water, hydrofeminism pushes the discussion of relation; from stating relationality to questioning the quality of relation. Neimanis(2020) posits:“everything is related, we know that...More important is to think how are we related, what enables us to relate? Who benefits from that relation and how? What is the quality of this relation and how am I accountable for it?”(2020)

This direction of intellectual concern is recognized by Mentz as

“the core intellectual challenge of the blue humanities, [which] explores how water functions in and across multiple scales. How does the water that seeps out of a sewer grate at high tide connect to the water that nourishes my muscles and flesh?”(Mentz 2023:xiv)

Theories of relation are complemented by water thinking. Neimanis, though, warns against a totalising perspective. Per the author, we are all water, but we are not the same water; we must recognise a “...multiplicity of being... that extends into and through other beings in an intricate and intimate entanglement of relationality...while never collapsing this interconnectedness into an undifferentiated mass”(Neimanis 2017:99)

For an ethics of relation, this perspective runs a deep political potential; in a conversation with M. Diawara on the diasporic experience and the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade for the Caribbean world, Glissant notes:“For me the arrival is the moment where all the components of humanity consent to the idea that it is possible to be one and multiple at the same time...that you can be the same and different”(Glissant&Diawara 2011:6)

### ***3.1.4 Bathed in water, submerged in care: hydrocare***

Relationality is at the core of the concept of “hydrocene”—coined by hydrofeminist author Bailey-Charteris. The hydrocene is a water-based curatorial theory and act of curatorial planetary caretaking. It recognises agential water as a practice of situated knowledge production.(2021)

An ethics of care is a relational framework: rather than the linear justice-based ethics, a care-based approach looks at inter-relations, networked and atemporal. Inspired by LeGuin, Haraway would call this a “carrier bag not with missiles of destruction, but missiles carrying messages of a strange realism that imagines different ways of caring for one another, carrying one another in this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were”(in Mickey 2020:148)

The hydrocene proposes that the carrier bag of care is also a watery one; Bailey-Charteris calls attention to “hydro-logics” as methodology for inhabiting, acting and thinking in the world, with emphasis on our complex circularity as beings: “leaky sponges, diffused beings, carrier bags that leak”(na.) The leaky dimension connects with Alaimo’s *dwelling in the dissolve*. The dissolve is a liminal condition, not necessarily spatial/physical; it is “where fundamental boundaries have begun to come undone, unravelled by unknown futures”(2016)

The *dissolve* inspires fluid ethical engagements with material environments, alternative to the fixed and grounded approach that Steinberg&Peters warn against.(2015)

The notions of caretaking and stewardship over the environment, the non-human, and the role of “nature” are somewhat problematic and require unpacking. In her history of nature as concept, Carolyn Merchant writes:

“The idea of man as nature’s guardian and caretaker was a managerial interpretation of the doctrine of dominion developed in the 17th century, on the basis of a managerial philosophy of human stewardship over nature”(1989:247)

Worth asking: how can the concept of care be recovered from the grip of this history? Neimanis also refers to care as “cultivating gestures of empathy, stewardship and nourishment towards natural commons in the context of finite resource.” (2020) Replacing the *environment* with a *commons* means that humans are included in the *environment-as-commons*, a view which disrupts the managerial binary that Merchant critiques.

Alaimo(2016) discusses care and control as interlinked dimensions of domestication and calls for a mapping of global networks of risk, harm, culpability, and responsibility for environmental relations. This is rich material for speculative investigation: what would a networked type of *caring with*<sup>10</sup> the environment look like?

### **3.1.5 Pedagogy and imagination—the limits of human concern**

Chen et.al(2020:19) propose the relationality of water as pedagogy: “water teaches us about the ethics of care and response.” For Ahmed, response and being responsive are the tenets of emotions(2014) Response and responsibility inform a type of care modelled as network. Ahmed identifies all action to be reaction; attending to emotions might show us how “all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others”(ibid.)

For Escobar, the concept of “technonature” reveals new takes on a networked existence, produced by the artificiality of new technologies. He writes:

“the more groups learn to denaturalize taken-for-granted constructions of identity, the more open they are to new relational configurations. Sci-fi writers are actively imagining these possibilities; visualise other bodies, families, kinships, and ways of life that play on new combinations of the organic, the cultural, and the technological. ... We need to think about social and political conditions that could turn these *imaginings* into life-affirming processes in concrete situations”(Escobar 1999:12; my emphasis)

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<sup>10</sup> “Joan Tronto distinguishes between ‘caring for’ which includes the physical aspects of hands-on care, ‘caring about’ which describes our emotional investment in and attachment to others, and ‘caring with’ which describes how we mobilise politically in order to transform our world”(Chatzidakis et.al2020:21)

I propose that these *imaginings* are complex structures, which cannot only be thought of as visual constructions, designs, or metaphors, but entities lined with care and hope, in which potential for political change germinates. For Neimanis, bodies of water are “figurations”—“keys to *imagining* and living otherwise,” and “resetting the stage for possible pasts and futures”(2017:6)

There is a red-thread at work in the strive for “novel types of environmental inquiry,”(Escobar); for “better ways of *living* with water now”(Neimanis); for “more attentive encounters between people-materialities and things-materialities,”(Bennet) for reframing “thinking as knowing as essentially relational processes that require care”(Puig de la Bellacasa)

These proposals are deeply political, yet it’s worth noting how aesthetic experiences, emotional attachments and ethical concerns operate within the leaky carrier bag of them all.

In his seminal idea of a “land ethic,” A. Leopold found this ethic to be “an intellectual and an emotional process.” To him, it’s “inconceivable that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect and admiration”(1949:223) This early call for a more responsible relation to the commons may not entirely stand a critique of implicit domination as a hegemonic umbrella under which “love, respect, and admiration” can reside; care can be distorted by domesticating control or colonial utilitarian approaches to nature-as-resource(Kuznetski&Alaimo 2019)

Nevertheless, Leopold’s ideas present an opportunity to challenge the core of domination and extraction that sees nature as resource in globalised societies. Alaimo’s inquiries into how aesthetics can generate care is of use here. The author’s interest for how deep-sea creatures are *made visible* blends ideas of proximity, futurity, and the *knowing with*. Alaimo asks:“is it possible to develop...environmental ethos to extend to the depths of the sea, to creatures that we haven’t discovered yet, but probably already going extinct”( *ibid*:143)

Can we care with the world’s species, without forcing them into hypervisibility, under the magnifying glass of technoscience, which dissects in order to know? Can we look at and know the world without desiring to take it apart?

Puig dela Bellacasa addresses the material implications of these acts of looking at and knowing the world and proposes care as shifting gear of our positionality:

“Worlds seen through care accentuate a sense of interdependency and involvement. What challenges are posed to critical thinking by increased awareness of its material consequences?

What happens when thinking about and *with* others is understood as *living with* them?”(2017:17)

From these considerations of aesthetics, relationality and care, the paper moves to an analysis interlude, in which matter and materiality are explored in *Lower than the Sky*.

### **3.1.6 ANALYSIS INTERLUDE—MATTER; MATERIALITY; RELATION; SENSING; KNOWING; CARING**

I explore the interaction, relation, and modes of assemblage of figurations of water, the two vessels, the human bodies, and the camera. Through its engagement of matter and materiality, the film creates atmosphere, circulates affects, and offers specific aesthetic figurations of water. Analysing how the water body, the human bodies, the mechanical body of the camera are present in the film as materialities in relation contributes to unpack how *Lower than The Sky* enacts “its own particular possibilities of telling”(Handberg 2010:15)

The conditions and quality of relation between the different materialities in the film are explored, particularly in the process of meaning making and how the film constructs/implies a connection with its viewer. On what epistemic fundament are things put in relation in the film? What knowledge is assumed as shared with the viewer?

I propose that a political and cultural mood is being teased, one saturated by recent and current experiences of migration and contested mobilities, on the one hand, and climate and environmental urgencies, on the other. Viewership taps into this dual source at the encounter with the film. The very first frame(0’11”), following the title credit, opens with the two vessels side by side, well on their way, and facing the camera vantage point.(Image 1) The straight horizon line indicates proximity, yet at first it’s unclear whether the boats are stationary or in motion. The fixed camera point, imagined on a line almost perpendicular to the direction of the vessels plays with temporality and adds a sense of imminent encounter. It soon becomes apparent that the two vessels are indeed on a journey, engaged in a mobility of their own, itinerary yet unknown.





*Image 1. Opening frame*

The fishing trawlers' **symmetric disposition** within the frame and in proximity with each other adds a sense of contingency to how the elements shown are pictured and their aesthetic potential mined: the frame resists a poetic trope of flow and drift; instead, it restated notions of control and a “maritime strategic grammar”(DeLoughrey 2019), present in high capitalist and global modes of resource exploitation and ecosystem exhaustion. I propose that this socio-political and cultural encoding of the present at work in the film works to challenge “modern categories of knowing”(Ferreira da Silva 2016) and knowledge models on which high capitalist globalization operates. It does so by employing a particular aesthetic.

If aesthetic experience is a way of knowing the world(Berleant), it's worth asking how this opening frame works as an epistemic conduit. How is this frame simultaneously tapping into established knowledge *and* constituting itself as a tool for knowing? What is the object or relation to be known here, and **how does it become *knowable* through aesthetic renditions?**

Of note are spatial dispositions; if aesthetics presents as how an object registers proximity to other objects or entities(Weizman), the tension between the two vessels journeying side by side at the same speed is an **aesthetic entanglement**. The distance from the camera point is progressively reduced,

which complicates further the registration of proximity, and raises questions about what Stacy Alaimo calls “the condition of being placed”(3.1.2)—about the ethics and aesthetics of inhabitation.



*Image 2: progression of the vessels relative to camera vantage point*

*Lower than the Sky* engages with **materiality as processual**(3.3.2); spatial dispositions and the dynamics of discovery between the camera lens and the two vessels render the latter *knowable* in a progressive way. Throughout the film, the ships shift not only the degree to which they can be seen/inspected/known, but also the emotional quality of that knowing: layered progressively with curiosity (about their origin, destination, cargo), surprise, anxiety, etc.

Likewise, if the viewer would engage in assuming the function of the ships, or the intention for their journey, as part of an expected sense-making and decoding process, this too is cut short several times: the fishing trawlers prove to not be on a commercial fishing trip after all, instead they transport a human cargo; as they approach the camera point, they turn around and apparently take the same route back, thus cutting short the expectation of an arrival. These devices work to emphasise materiality as process, and actively engage in challenging the fixity of categories, and instead institute a “dissolve”(3.1.4) a liminality that underscores the overall speculative construction of the film.

Different possibilities for being—being a vessel, a human on a vessel in motion—are *made visible* (and sensible) simultaneously, and this generous concomitance contrasts the symmetry, order, and straight, parallel lines in the film. The film becomes speculative and opens for a discussion of futurity and *knowing with*(3.1.5): if all these modes of being at sea inhabiting space are possible at the same time, what can this instance of concomitance teach about a future open to similar pluralities?

In their uneventful journey, these two vessels prove ample scope for the qualities of *knowing* to be explored. By routinely upending what we *think we know* about what we see, the film teases a **distinction between *knowing of* and *knowing with***—different sets of affective, aesthetic, and even political spectator dispositions.

*Knowledge of* these vessels, cargo and route essentially describes the Western, modern approach to apprehending the world by excavating encountered objects for meaning. *Knowing with* these vessels implies a relational aspect—a **leap from encounter to entanglement** in which viewership resists projecting human needs and desires on the world encountered(3.2)

Knowing *with* leaves room for uncertainty without the desire to eliminate it; it prescribes speculative ways of “imagining and living otherwise”(3.1.5), essential to a model of caring *with*.

Materiality is central in how the film proposes ways to imagine, know, and live with what we encounter—today and in the future. The fact that the encounter here is with figurations of water, water mobilities, and water infrastructures makes it possible to generously apply concepts from recent water scholarship to understanding this proposal.

In his analysis of water as a “modern abstraction with a history,” Linton writes: “our idea of water needs to be complicated by the fact that in every instance, water bears the traces of its social relations, conditions, and potential.” (2010:7) These traces, Linton warns, can lead to a fixing of water, the risk of “inertia ... and hegemony” in which “a particular kind of identity, representation and material form of water can get caught and held in place within a web of social and hydrological relations,” one that limits a plurality of living with water.(ibid. 11) In discussing how **water is materially fixed** in *Lower than The Sky*, it’s quite clear that at first sight the film frames a particular imagining and materialisation of water—as technology, in the global infrastructure of maritime networks of goods and capital.

The film juggles between asserting this material fixity and challenging the resulting abstractions of water. By abstraction, following Linton, we understand the simplification as dematerialised meaning within the specific registers of

maritime infrastructure and/or migration, and the ensuing cultural circulation of these abstractions: as a result, the very material, lived experiences at sea, on the water, of water, and the political implications of these experiences are lost.

As abstract water becomes an element in the broader imagination of the “migration crisis,” water becomes entirely appropriated as (geopolitical) object that can be managed, controlled, available for surveillance, and cartographic representation: governments, border authorities, media discourse—they routinely frame water to fit desired narratives.

The two vessels never leave the frame, and the film offers no image of the space pictured in the absence of the ships. This **fragmented vision**, the imposed limit of visualisation to figure water only in relation to the two vessels speaks to the long-lasting modern (and capitalistic) tradition to fixate water as technology or infrastructure.

I argue that the **two-dimensional, horizontal** focus on the surface is used in the film to amplify the dematerialisation and fixity of water, with the aim of critiquing its implications; essentially short-circuiting a dominant way of seeing—capitalistic, consumption-oriented, globalized.

The calmness of water, the hypnotising undulations of the low waves, the pastel hue of the image, doubled by the soundscape that mixes environmental and the mechanical engine sound—it’s a sensory framing leading to a particular construction of water, and of how water is consequently apprehended—as material object, as emotional figuration, as abstraction.

If we locate this film as an artistic product of a cultural moment defined by overlapping crises (2.5), we question the role of **stillness and slowness** in depicting a natural environment, and its effect on creating atmosphere in the film. We mark the slow violence (3.2.3), closely implicated in ecological disaster: the invisible, slow-tempo ecosystems collapse and species extinction are echoed here. Stillness contrasts the urgency of the crisis, which traverses the cultural moment in which the film exists (2.5.) The sublime, otherwise used as a model to picture “natural” land- and sea-scapes is cut short by an **anti-spectacular, still aesthetic**.

This sensory framing is at home in a hegemonic engagement with water, a “dominant way of knowing water...along with the idea that this way of knowing water reveals its true essence”(Linton 2010:9)

Water is perceived in the film from a **distance**—a critical re-staging of dominant ways of enjoying “nature”; the “naturalization” of water as image and metaphor construct water as element that can be dominated. The gradual approach of the two vessels functions to close in on this distance; the film teases the modern concept that humans are separate from the object they attempt to know(3.1.2)

I propose that this **staging of the modern split** of the knowing subject(here the camera lens as a proxy for the viewer) and the object of knowing is circumvented by the unknown location of the camera/agent of looking. We can recognize in the film an intention to shift the perspective from which the water is seen as a spatial formation—the fact that we can only guess whether the camera is on land or not constitutes a critical node in the film. This is the core of Steinberg&Peters’ proposal of “wet ontology”—namely to “imagine the world from the perspective of the sea, and not just that of the land”(2015)

*Lower than The Sky* plays with this shifting perspective of the land and of the water, by explicitly obscuring the location of the camera point. Absent the land(and an acknowledged land-locked perspective), the modern distance between observer and observed waterscape is completely reduced. A particular relation of **proximity** is instituted, which works in speculative tones:is the camera(and the looking agent) stranded at sea? Is the encounter with the two vessels a mission of rescue? How should we then feel about the vessels turning around, with no rescue action being taken?

Alternatively—are the passengers on the two vessels themselves looking for rescue from whomever it is they are facing and approaching? The film does not answer these questions, which I argue is part of an **intention to deconstruct** hegemonic models of imagining and attempting to know otherness(political otherness, for the bodies on the boats, potentially migrants) and physical(for water as a more-than-human). Staying afloat is enacted as a potential sanctuary; political constructions of safety as grounded, fixed are challenged, and the idea that solid ground offers security or deliverance is upended.

Whereas here water is mostly present as surface, it is this very **prevalence of the surface** that mediates an encounter with the non-surface: “Water is simultaneously encountered as a depth and as a surface, as a set of fixed locations, but also as an ungraspable space that is continually being reproduced by mobile molecules” (Steinberg&Peters)

Depth is a suggestion, but also a material presence—marked in the film by the horizontal lines: between sky and water surface, between water surface and volumes beneath. Steinberg&Peters would draw attention to this **pseudo-separation** and the futility of division lines: “any attempt to ‘know’ the ocean by separating it into its constituent parts serves only to reveal its unknowability as an idealized stable and singular object.” (5)

Once again, the ways “we’ve been taught to see water” (Linton) are challenged. The film therefore hosts and stages **leaky encounters**, in which relationality replaces fixity (2.4); in which the attempt to divide materiality using harsh lines is countered by the “immaterial power of water to shape the way we think about stasis and movement in time and space” (Steinberg&Peters 2015:18)

I propose that the film is an instance of “**hydrocene aesthetics**” (2.5.), in which water becomes a partner engaged in “watery thinking,” by the manner in which water resists dominant models of being visualised and subtly inverts normative ways in which it is being encountered.

A **visualisation of modern water** works to fit water to our ways of seeing (2.4)—as object to be apprehended through dominant sensory engagement (sight, hearing; as sublime) or constructed through contingent reason (eg. Western capitalistic frameworks—as resource, as capital) The film proposes an alternative, and by this it engages in what TJ Demos would call a decolonising of “nature,” a dissolving of the subject-object relation that defines encounters with “natural” environments (3.2.3)

Although **vision** remains the primary sensory channel, it does not function to take apart the object of sight (3.1.5); *living with* imaged water in the instance of this film is specifically not living side by side with water, with the human agent privileged land-based position—rather, the seeing agent (camera lens assuming

the role of human viewership) is destabilised, and this agency itself is strongly challenged, set adrift.

The contrast between the “wet swirl and the dry structure” juxtaposes the vast body of water with the two metal bodies of the vessels.(3.3) The film resists dramaturgy and the viewer’s implied desire for a narrative; it does however generate a type of “wet narrative,” in which fluidity, vibrancy and movement(the features of imagined seascapes) are doubled by a sense of “**disorder, disorientation, and rupture**”(Mentz)

Disorientation and rupture are visually imbued with soft-coded triggers:calm waves, murmur of the sea, pastel hues of the sky at dusk, which facilitates an experience of the uncanny—the vague sense that we can recognise what we see, but it essentially remains unknown.

Whereas uncanny feelings would qualify as strong affective responses, it’s worth noting that the film triggers “**ugly feelings**” such as boredom or anxiety, which Sianne Ngai identifies as alternatives to “grand passions”(3.2.5) Largely uneventful, without a dramaturgy that satisfies a plot, and a circular narrative in which the opening and closing frames are nearly identical, the film can indeed present as source of boredom, a sort of flatness, and ultimately anxiety.

This “wet” narrative of disorientation incorporates some elements from maritime narratives of discovery and exploration—the two **vessels visually break the horizon** line, echoing images of colonial oceanic expeditions. The linear narrative of the sea journey, “the plot, the history, the sequence” in a dramaturgical crescendo of a story we are expected to follow is suspended and replaced with the “steady rhythm of the tides, the waves, the desires”(Solnit 2023) The linearity “story” in *Lower than The Sky* is taken over by a “**continuity that folds in on itself**”(ibid.); a wet narrative bag; a leaky carrier of more questions than answers, of more journeys than arrivals; a liminal waterway dipped in the “dissolve” and circling back and forth between an anxiety-ridden *here* and an unknown *there*(3.1.4)

The direct, physical obstruction of the horizon sightline is doubled by another type of interruption—as soon as the two trawlers approach the camera point, and they become increasingly visible, they manage to interrupt the **emotional**

**flatness** which the film initially transmits. The presence of human bodies on the two commercial vessels tips the affective charge of the film from mere boredom to heightened anxiety and uncanny atmosphere, opening new spaces where care can set in, perhaps in tension with feelings of angst, fear, or uneasy anticipation at the vessels' arrival.

Before moving to discussing embodiment and to explore the materiality of the human bodies and the two vessels, it's worth dwelling on how the construction of water in the film can act as a conduit for new models of relational care and hope. What are the qualities of care that water fosters in *Lower than the Sky*? How is the film working as an instrument of **water as a pedagogy**, a time/space of teaching about the "ethics of care and response"(3.1.5)?

The framing and staging of water, stylistic choices in cinematography, fragmentation of land/water perspectives, the interplay of distance and proximity, the undulating murmur of water and the mechanical buzz of the vessels, the absent shore and the domineering harsh horizon; the subtle subversion of the straight line, through a paradoxical excess of straight lines; the still and soft ripples of a placid sea—**almost knowable, almost recognisable, perhaps even hospitable**—it all asserts a tension between the ethics and poetics of water—the urgency of located, lived engagement vs. the apprehension of the poetic qualities of water alone; material water resisting the erasing powers of metaphor. What would caring *with* the water in this film entail, were we to *live with* it?



The next section looks at more recent debates around "nature," while considering agential modalities in relation to environment, eco-concerns and the troublesome concept of "nature," and how concepts from blue critical thinking and a focus on water can help demystify and de-metaphorize nature. I visit the concept of the Anthropocene, and engage with perspectives from neo-material thinking, object ontology, and end the sub-section with a discussion of affect/emotion, and their impact on navigating crisis.



## 3.2. Sign of the times—nature and emotions in the Anthropocene

In this section I look at the problematic notion of nature, in the context of the so-called Anthropocene(3.2.1) As well, I discuss various problematic positions with respect to conceptualisation of “nature,”(3.2.3) and briefly visit recent scholarship from new materialism, to position the context for the overall conversation in this paper on materiality, presence and representation(3.2.2) The discussion then turns towards aspects of affect, emotion, and agency, as framed by broader concerns with(environmental, ecological, political) crisis(3.2.4 and 3.2.5) The section ends with an analytical interlude, in which I introduce notions of movement and mobility, to expand on how “natural” environment, waterscapes, and landscapes are figured, made sensible, teased, and discuss possible implications.(3.2.6)

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In exploring how meaning is formed at the contact zones of humans and environments, Strang notes on how “human-environment relations are mutually constitutive”(2005:94) Strang cites Ingold’s proposal of a synthesis of biology and anthropology as framework to analyse the “reciprocal interplay between two kinds of systems—social and ecological”(ibid.)

Theoretical takes from performance studies, Strang observes, also look at how “people create and project their identities onto the world,” and operate “homologous projections of ideas about the human body and its processes into material objects and environments”(ibid) Hosted by discourses on the now-common term of Anthropocene, the idea of human agency in relation to the environment pervades, and it clearly shares much in common with sociological positions Strang catalogues.

### ***3.2.1 Winds of the Anthropocene***

The Anthropocene is a “geo-biopolitical concept”(Andersen 2022:401) which postulates the human presence on Earth has the effect of launching a new geological era. If for sociologists, humans project their selves onto the environment, for proponents of the Anthropocene, humans act as species to impact the planet physically and irreversibly.

Critics of the Anthropocene underline precisely this human agency(or human centrality) as problematic—the use of the term rests on an essentialised view of the Anthropocene as a species act, in which humankind indistinctively is seen as responsible for planetary damage(Haraway 2019)

Haraway calls attention to

“historical, situated sets of conjectures that are absolutely not a species act ... Most peoples on this planet have precisely not lived and exercised the same kinds of processes that break generations, radically simplify ecologies, that create a kind of global transformation and global wealth that is in and of itself genocidal and extinctionist”(2019)

Clark proposes a recognition of “human non-existent or negligible imprint” and “general vulnerability to planetary elements as a feature of human condition”—which challenges the idea that human agency qualifies as a geological species act.(Page 2020)

Similarly in her theoretical exploration of water bodies, Neimanis insists

“on the situatedness [of humans] as bodies that are *also still human*—without this close attunement and politics of location, a responsive ethico-politics towards other bodies of water will likely elude us”(2017:26)

The call for situatedness is a thought inspired by new materialism. A return to vibrant matter in efforts to uncover its vitality(Bennet) necessarily places material entities/objects and the question of their agency and relationality at the forefront.

### **3.2.2 A case for objects**

Postulating object-oriented ontology<sup>11</sup>, Harman underlines the problematic of thinking relationality while “recovering objects as agential.” Harman argues against a reductionist approach where a focus on relation leads to anthropocentric concern with objects, solely for their effects on humans.(2014) Harman finds it an error to reduce objects either to their parts(or what they are made of) *or* to their contexts/relations within contexts. He argues that “change would be impossible if objects are nothing more than the current relations with everything else”(ibid.)

Avoiding this reductionist binary would require finding the ontological affirmations of systems, species and “earth-objects” outside of their service to humanity. To affirm that objects exist, and to not question the implications of their existence *to humans*: a circling back to Sontag’s advice to affirm the *being* of things, rather than excavate for their *meaning*, or effects.

Escobar(1999) would agree—he faults the efforts of protecting planetary “biodiversity” captured by extractive capitalism, where “nature as resource” serves human needs. He advocates for a balanced

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<sup>11</sup> A philosophical perspective that rejects the primacy of human existence over objects. For Harman the category of object includes “human beings along with everything else:copper wire, weather systems, fictional characters, reptiles, artworks, protons, transient events and numbers”(2014)

view that sees both the constructedness and biophysical reality of environments. This view can recover the dialogue between cultural theorists and environmentalists and explore the possibilities of “disconnecting epistemologies, politics and practices of global environmentalism dependent on Western science from colonial histories”(Alaimo 2020:398)

In questioning how *our current moment of living with(out) water* is being constructed, it's crucial to recognize the place that water occupies in the cultural imaginary of the “environment.” As noted above, Leopold listed water as sub-category of the broader domain of “land.” Water is commonly seen as natural, or “nature:” “we are more used to think of water a fixed thing, rather than a principle or a process out of which things can occur”(Linton 2010:4)

### ***3.2.3 The trouble with nature***

I stop at the concept of “nature,” to unpack the hegemonic dynamics that have informed the concept, and colonized its biophysical referents, per TJ. Demos(2016). I discuss possible recovery strategies, through approaches such as vitality, water thinking, and leaky relations(Bennet, Chen et.al, Neimanis, Bailey-Charteris)

In using terms such as “nature,” Ingold warns that “we should try to discover what types of claims are being made with these words, and whether they are justified,” rather than seeing them to describe pre-existing phenomena.(2000:312) Arturo Escobar discusses a potential end of the modern ideology of naturalism, in which nature(specifically, capital N Nature) is pristine and exists outside of history and human context.(1999:1)

For Escobar, nature is “real, collective, and discursive. Fact, power, and discourse.” His perspective retains anti-essentialist standpoints from post-structuralism, yet maintains a focus on matter. Ahmed notes on the world’s “orientation towards some bodies—it receives easier the bodies that have already given that shape and that impression to the world”(2014) In other words, the perception of some bodies as “natural” or “belonging” is what fuels forms of privilege. The bodily/biophysical life and social structures are entangled from the beginning: structures of the world are “made to shelter some bodies and others not”(Ahmed 2014)

Haraway(1988) also calls out a “totalizing male gaze” which “objectifies landscape and women in particular,” whereas Merchant delves deeper with the history of nature as concept and draws a parallel between “images of women and nature as they relate to the formation of our modern world and their implications for our lives today”(1983:xxi) Merchant show how naturalized images and metaphors of nature(and women) have functioned “historically to justify the domination of nature(and

women)”(ibid.) The process that historically constructed nature as essentially pristine can be traced in manners of imaging of “natural landscapes.”

Katarina W. MacLeod addresses how depictions of “nature” or “landscapes” are profoundly entangled with a “picturesque” history, which essentially constructs a “circular relationship between experiences of nature and depictions of nature.” MacLeod notes that “the Western modern subject is deeply programmed by a pre-existing pictorial understanding... Landscape becomes a reduplication of a picture which preceded it”(2018:100) These pre-existing narratives that join us when we encounter “natural” settings are part of what Linton calls the way “we’ve been taught to see water,” which is imbued with affective layers.

The sublime, for instance—one “grand passion” of literature and art(Ngai 2005)—seeps into how we currently understand the biophysical. Discussions on “anti-spectacular aesthetics” as forms of resistance to aestheticizing environmental and climate disaster as sublime(Zheng 2021) build on a critique of “slow violence” as articulated by Rob Nixon:

“climate change and many of the most catastrophic environmental challenges today face significant representational challenges due to the uneven and often invisible pace at which they unfold within the scope of human perception”(in Zheng 2021:95)

M. Miles questions whether nature is constructed by reason or encountered by perception, nuances which add complexity to questions of representation, political issues, and sensory/aesthetic experiences(Miles 2014) Oceanic studies and the blue humanities are at the forefront of critical engagements with these representational challenges. Hester Blum, for example, posits that “the sea is not a metaphor”(2010)

Blum advocates “for a practice of oceanic studies that is attentive to the material conditions and praxis of the maritime world”(2010:670) The author sees the concept of “fluidity” as metaphor for the ocean as problematic; similarly, Linton(2010) draws attention to the “deterritorialization and dematerialization” of water; according to him, abstraction and transcendental epistemologies(Alaimo) about water need to be repositioned to consider the materiality of water. For Blum, this repositioning is a way towards the “galvanisation of the erasure, elision and fluidity at work in the metaphors of the sea”(Blum 2010:670)

This specifically means paying attention to conditions of existence and labour at sea, the bodies of sailors, and laborers; for Hasty, it means paying attention to the *ship* as not a metaphor for mobility,

and “developing a more materialist perspective as a means for better understanding of the seas and ships as lived, dynamic spaces”(2014:350)

In the effort to demystify and de-metaphorize nature, water thinking, then, offers complex methodologies.

Decolonial thought more broadly inspires a call to “decolonize nature,” in which “the relationship of [human] mastery over the natural world” is a colonial stance(T.J. Demos 2016) Per Demos,

“to decolonize nature entails: dissolving the subject-object relation in the social and natural environment; ending the conditions of mastery and appropriation that determine the connection between the two; stopping the multiple levels of violence that enforce these relations”(ibid. p.203)

Likewise, feminist thought applied to “blue scholarship” provides models to critique the normative notion of “human and of thinking through various ideologies of dominance and mastery”(Kuznetski&Alaimo 2019:142) A grain of salt is necessary when investigating how environmentalism appropriates and isolates concepts from feminist or critical race theory yet ignores the broader contexts in which these theories emerged. Neimanis warns against this type of erasure(Neimanis 2020) and reaffirms the intersectional feature of feminism as a way out of this impasse:an obligation to consider habits and structures that converge in the dynamics of dominance and mastery. The author writes:

“feminisms’ commitment to analysing intersectional materialisations of power and privilege related to gender, race, class, and other embodied markers is not an optional extra, but central to the understanding current species privilege and environmental exploitation.(Hamilton and Neimanis 2020:387)

Elsewhere, Neimanis thinks water into this idea: “water is a commitment to following the flows of marginalization and injustice, and those of connection, empowerment, and joy that our watery corporealities engender”(2017:64)

I aim in this paper to investigate the potential of artistic form and aesthetic expression as *decolonization* and the film’s potential to host the type of commitment Neimanis describes. In the analysis I will look at the paradox of visibility/the gaze as deeply anthropocentric(and patriarchal, per Haraway), while acknowledging that visual mediums may be employed in attempts to counter anthropocentrism.

### 3.2.4 Affect and emotion

Anna Tsing et al.(2017) engage with the “haunted landscapes” of a “damaged planet,” which serves to investigate the aesthetics and moods that populate the imaginary of the so-called Anthropocene. Aesthetics here is deeply interconnected with emotion. It’s important to note Sara Ahmed’s distinction between affect and emotion.<sup>12</sup> Ahmed prefers the term “emotion.” Due to “the idea of movement that is explicit in its etymology, [the term] has everyday resonance”(2014)

The inherent mobility of the term “emotion” means for Ahmed that “emotions don’t work simply in a located, bound subject.” Instead, “move and are not just social in the sense of being mediated, but they show how the subject arrives into a world that already has affects and feelings circulating in very particular ways”(ibid.) I connect this concept with Bennet’s discussion of environmental ethics, in which “affect” is present, yet its scope is extended beyond humanism:

“If a set of moral principles is actually to be lived out, the right mood or landscape of affect has to be in place. I continue to think of affect as central to politics and ethics, but I branch out to an “affect” not specific to human bodies.(Bennet 2010. xii)

Ahmed’s theory takes “emotion” from the individual to the structural; even if the body/individual is considered as locus for emotion, it must be seen as relevant within structural situation and indeed the body must be seen as structure.<sup>13</sup> Bennet’s proposal on the other hand is to decentre the humanity in this conversation. While Ahmed provides a strong focus on alterity and human encounters(“Emotions operate to make and shape bodies as forms of action, which also involve orientations towards others,” 2014b), Bennet’s perspectives(and new materialism in general) broaden the spectrum of alterity, not only to include non-human others as entities, but also dynamic relations and processes. Encountering water as process(Linton) therefore is a question of presence, aesthetic engagement, and emotion.

With this paper I will turn to question how the analysed art film contributes to the construction and reception of water in the broader affective spectrum of today’s environmental concerns. The assumption is and that water figurations or imagination around water are impacted by emotional coding of the experience of/with environment, particularly when it takes the shape of crisis.

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<sup>12</sup> S. Ngai also addresses this distinction, yet she opts for the term “affect.” Ngai sees emotion to require a subject; while affect does not. For the author, this releases affect from the limitations of interpretation:“affective states are neither structured narratively nor organised in response to our interpretations of situations(unlike emotions); ... affect is *feeling* disconnected from meaningful sequencing, from narration”(Ngai 2005) I believe Ahmed’s suggestion of structural emotion and mobility solves this impasse. In this paper, I therefore use Ahmed’s understanding of emotion, and Ngai’s understanding of affect, and consider the two more similar than they are distinct.

<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Neimanis’ “feminist posthumanism refuses the split between ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ human-bodiedness”(2017:10)

### 3.2.5 *Ugly and wounded feelings in times of crisis*

In the context of environmental crisis and emotional and cultural reactions informed by it, Catriona Mortimer-Sandiland mentions “late capitalism nature relations,” which generates a feeling of “nature-nostalgia,” a passive engagement, as opposed to “an active negotiation of environmental mourning”(2010:333) Stacy Alaimo discusses the usefulness of evocative or nostalgic approaches to humanity’s connection with the sea, in an effort to affirm kinship with the environment. The recount of evolutionary connections with other species and the sea operates affectively as nostalgia, which, the author argues, is not incredibly effective, if real-life action/politics is a goal:

"Nostalgia for our deep evolutionary past before tetrapods crawled up onto land does not direct us toward solutions to current environmental predicaments"(2013:126)

Mortimer-Sandiland and Mickey both find inspiration in Leopold’s idea of alienation as the main experience of inhabiting the planet and its ecosystems at stages of collapse. This alienation is described by Leopold as “living alone in a world of wounds;” the author coins it as an awakening to the rift that exists between humans and “natural” environments. This realization induces a feeling of loneliness, and the acknowledgement of the deep devastation that is “befalling life, land, air, and water of Earth”(Mickey 2020) The quality of nature as lost, or on verge of extinction, is something that Mortimer sees as a fuel of ecotourism, essentially a capitalisation of grief. Mortimer-Sandiland identifies that at “the centre of our contemporary existence is a core of grief,” she makes note of how grief is in fact a condition of melancholia, in which what is lost is not acknowledged as an appropriate object of genuine grief(2010:333) The “suspended mourning” for the planet as we navigate different stage of crisis can be connected with Sam Mickey’s concept of “doing nothing in a world of wounds,”<sup>14</sup> which is “not meant as passivity, apathy, or laziness, but more of a contemplative way of life”(2020) The shift from grief to contemplation is interesting to consider, as a form of(aesthetically?) apprehending the world.

Similarly, Ngai proposes an exploration of “ugly feelings,” defined as emotional engagements alternative to grand passions. Ngai’s non-cathartic, ironic, minor feelings(irritation, anxiety, envy, boredom) are “indexes of social conditions of powerlessness, frustration, and obstructed agency”(2005) The quality of suspension or obstruction is interesting to explore in affective engagements with environment and its figurations.

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<sup>14</sup> It’s important to note that “doing nothing” is not here a retreating, nihilist proposition. Mickey identifies the phenomenon as comprised of Contemplation(without otherworldly escapism), Resistance to capitalist modes of consumption; and a sense of Place and connection with one’s own location.(2020:151)

Obstructed agency towards loss, or the suspended mourning present in melancholia lead to loss becoming displacement: “the object that cannot be lost also cannot be let go,” writes Mortimer. Judith Butler’s concept of “grievable lives” is of use in unpacking this idea. Like Ahmed’s observation on structures of the world that shelter some bodies and other not, Butler’s notion essentially means that when lives that are not recognized as lives (eg. queer people, racialised others) are lost, the loss is not recognized as real loss, and thus becomes an ungrievable loss. (Butler 2016) An important question arises: what does it mean to “recognize” a life or a loss? Is it a political act, an emotional engagement, or ethical gesture? Similarly, what does it mean to “let go” of the object lost?

I argue that a new materialist perspective adds an interesting dimension where materiality plays a central role in this act of recognition of existence and loss, and potentially offers a strategy against the sense of displacement that Mortimer-Sandiland discusses. Sam Mickey’s “doing nothing in a world of wounds” is a form of letting go. For Mickey, letting go is “a way of being less attached to being right ... and more focused on the quality of one’s relationships with others. That includes the quality of one’s relationship with nonhumans” (ibid)

I propose that the impetus “to let go” is very much at home in a thinking with water: much like Alaimo’s “dwelling in the dissolve,” discussed above, the “let go” offers a model of doing away with the fixity of the world. It articulates more fluid engagements with materiality, where a more intimate orientation towards one’s place, one’s enmeshed, tangled materiality with space (Mickey; Alaimo) is an alternative to displacement.



## *Vignette—Standstill / Plateau*

*The two ships are now as close to the camera as they can go. It looks like the end of the journey, but not like a destination. I was here all along and I can confirm—it is not a destination. Slight movement makes me think they might continue their journey, that this is a respite, and they will simply go around. The standstill is short, and perhaps only an illusion, created by the imperceptible movement of the boats. I've been still for almost five minutes now, and I can attest that stillness is not really standing still; it's being squirmy with desires and impulses, with thoughts about what comes next. I come to think of choice and whether stillness is ever a choice. I think of those silent protesters who only stand in front of spaces of power, just to express, "I am, I hurt, I matter, I need." I come to think of paralysing fear, waking up from a nightmare and not being able to move for some seconds. If fear doesn't care about beauty, it seems to care about stillness.*

*I remember the water, and I look at it now to know when the boats are moving again. ■*

### 3.3. Waterbodiesmovements

The cultural turn to water marked by a scholarly dive into the blue humanities as described by Steve Mentz(2023) seeks to “make sense of disorienting movements across scales and spaces”(Mentz 2023:xiv) Interestingly here, Mentz locates these “pleasures and ambition of the blue humanities” in relation to movement. For Mentz, the “disorientation” springs out of his study of the “poetics of the shipwreck,” the alternation of “the wet and the dry” and a recognition of oceanic estrangement” that are necessary to grappling with the maritime culture under modernity, and later globalization.(ibid. 4) Voyages on oceans and ships constantly crossing these planetary waters means, according to Mentz, that early globalization was fundamentally ecological in nature, beyond its impact on social and economic orders.(ibid. 2) Waterways are then closely linked to movement and mobility.

#### 3.3.1 Watery mobilities

Cultural geographer Tim Cresswell recognizes the gap in research on "watery mobilities" that would sit alongside scholarly work on land-based transportation and travel research.(Cresswell 2010:555)

With respect to movement and mobility, water carries strong symbolic legacies, which need unpacking before analyzing water purely as modern technology and infrastructure. Sharpe(2016) discusses globalization in relation to the sea, layered on a history of violent colonialism. Sharpe identifies water as the “forgotten space of our modernity”(2016) She poignantly notes the violence and tragic loss of human life that ocean waters witnessed with the advent of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. The author circumvents metaphor by introducing the concept of “residence”—the time it takes a substance to enter and then leave the ocean. “Human blood” she writes “has a residence time of 260 million years. The atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today”(ibid) Waters are very literally “fatigued” by what we give them, Neimanis would put it.(2020<sup>15</sup>)

Laura LoPresti focuses on recent so-called migration crisis, which turned the Mediterranean Sea into the “deadliest passage ever:... migrant deaths at sea constituted 70 percent of global migrant deaths from 2014 to 2020”(2020:4) LoPresti too rejects metaphor adamantly, especially when employed in visual culture, and calls for a critical take of any engagement with the sea:

“Aesthetic representations of a borderless sea and subsequent liquid metaphors for human flows may naively overlook the obduracy and the material confinements characterizing the present moment....poetic visions fail to attentively question and perhaps alternatively

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<sup>15</sup> <https://vimeo.com/488029824?login=true#> =

rethink the more amphibious images and practices that shape the present landscape of the migration crisis”(2020:4)

The “terraqueous” quality of the Mediterranean leads to “politics of the land to flirt with those of the water; legislated borders corrupt the sea in such a manner as to alter its spatiality with violent rules”(ibid.) As noted above, Steinberg&Peters make a similar point, in their introduction of “wet ontologies,” namely a call to counter the excess of fixity in recent intellectual efforts to return to matter.(3.1.2) William Hasty proposes the study of ships as a way to overcome imposing fixity on how we understand mobilities and spaces at sea. Hasty(2014) underscores the relation between materialities and the mobilities of ships and identities at sea. the author foregrounds materiality “through the making, remaking, and contestation of the ship-space, positioned as a sort of mobile ‘floating assemblage’”(Hasty 2014:354)

Hasty heeds Cresswell’s call to focus on “watery mobilities” and recognizes that “taking mobilities to sea aboard a ship allows us to see things previously viewed as ‘bounded and fixed, stable and permanent, in terms of flows and fluids, in terms of movement.’”(2014:351) For Hasty, as for Sharpe, people, place, journeys, and times form the intricate materiality of waters; according to the author, “we must avoid thinking of ships in static ways, to better understand the socio-spatial relations that have for centuries been woven around ships, the people who sailed them and the locations they visited and inhabited at different times”(ibid. 351)

Introducing watery thinking to mobility research and critical geography emphasises the feature of space as being in flux, rather than static. The deep relational and co-constitutive link between water and movement is also asserted by Steinberg “the ocean becomes the object of our focus not because it is a space that facilitates movement—the space across which things move—but because it is a space that is constituted by and constitutive of movement.(Hasty 2014)

### ***3.3.2 Against fixity***

Anim-Addo et.al(2014) see a look at maritime space necessary in contemporary mobilities research:“the project of mobilities research, the unpacking of the space between fixed points A and B, the unlocking of the route, rhythm, experience, friction and speed of mobilities(Cresswell 2010), positively urges us to think about maritime spaces”(7) The authors reject the fixity and land-oriented approach that instituted departure from and arrival on land as key moments of water journeys:“At sea, there are an abundance of “gaps” between A and B’s journeys, moments in transit, lives lived on the

move”(ibid) Once again, the patriarchal, penetrating and colonising view of a journey as a straight arrow would benefit from being approached as a “carrier bag” instead.(2.2)

As Blum cautions against a metaphoric charge of the sea(“The sea is not a metaphor!”), and Sharpe urges the awareness of bodies and lives *physically* lost at sea, Hester Blum(2010) warns against the “erasure and elision at work in the metaphors of the sea” and calls for oceanic research that is attentive to “material conditions and praxis drawn from the ... structures provided by the lives and writings of those for whom the sea was simultaneously workplace, home, passage, penitentiary, and promise”(670)

A focus on lived life at sea, Steinberg&Peters would argue, has the potential to “challenge landlocked notions such as nationality, citizenship, belonging, etc”(2015) The authors critique perspectives that reduce the fluidity of the ocean to a dematerialised abstraction(2015:18) Linton too underlined dematerialisation as a feature of “modern water” and identified this lack of materiality as conduit to containment and alienation of water from society, through “modern techniques of management which enable many of us to survive without having to think too much about it”(2020:19)

These perspective underscore a scholarly wave which calls for a return to matter in water research. With legacies of colonialism, extraction, and depletion related to matter on water, it’s worth asking:Which matter matters when we discuss watery materialities? What do we make of(humanly) embodied matter journeyed at sea? How does the current echo of planetary water crisis impact the formation of maritime assemblages where human bodies, the bodies of vessels, and the water body are conjoined—“...an inextricable and violent entanglement between land and water—on which people materially and symbolically move or stand still, live and die, are visibilized or silenced as bodies or points, stories or numbers, moving subjectivities or geometric lines”(LoPresti 2020:4)

### **3.3.3 ANALYSIS INTERLUDE—SHIFTY WATERSCAPES. MOVEMENT & MOBILITY**

The conventional “pristine wilderness” of nature is circumvented in the film, where the open water landscape is host to(troubling, questionable) human presence. If the commercial vessels would be conventionally seen to “belong” in this picture, as they come closer to the camera, it is the unexplained human presence that disturbs. These various *strange encounters* are facilitated by **mobility**:one such encounter is of the people on the boats with the camera; a second, more deeply destabilizing—the encounter of the spectator with the

political symbolism of human bodies carried by water, bound for uncertain journeys.

In this analytical interlude, I discuss the staging of perceived “natural” environment(water, shore, sky) at the intersection with cultural and political notions that bound environment: ideas such as borders, routes, journeys appropriate landscapes and environments into webs of politicized meaning and circulation. I look at how water is used as figure, technology of mobility, and an instrument to circumvent typical descriptions of pristine “nature,” and challenge normative understandings of watery mobilities.

### ***Movement and mobility***

Current collective Western **anxieties around migration** and mobility are activated here. The passage, the crossing, the journey is reiterated—from the normalised/naturalised global passage of commercial cargo/extractive vessels to the troubling **crossings of migrating bodies**. The notions of drift and route are central, yet the film operates its own semiotic charge which repositions mobility, structures, and technologies of mobile modalities.

The slow, barely perceptible movement of the vessels teases the **tension between being placed and being mobile**, which contributes to discussions about materiality and mobility at sea.(3.3.1, 3.3.2) Here the film uses a play with proximity for its aesthetic qualities, nonetheless inviting a critical and ethical engagement. I propose that this engagement is with practices and conditions of water travel, at a time where mobilities mark a variety of crises(migration, environmental; 3.3.4) As well, modern categories attached to mobility and movement are teased in the film—the linear, parallel journey echoes a critique of the conventional attribute of a journey as the movement between points A and B. The distinction between **connectivity and contiguity**, discussed by Tim Cresswell in the theorisation of mobility, is interesting to observe here. The strong image of contiguity(side-by-side voyage) raises a question on the quality of connectivity—to what degree are these vessels in relation, and what are the attributes of this connection?

Water has a fragmented presence in the film, which is marked by the **absence of a distinct seashore**, which adds a new layer in conceptualising movement in the film. In Solnit's words: "The seashore is an edge, perhaps the only true edge in the world whose borders are otherwise mostly political fictions, and it defies the usual idea of borders by being unfixd, fluctuant, and infinitely permeable" (2023:134)

*Lower than the Sky* leaves out engagement with the shore, which enhances the sense of drift, of the **untethered**, of the precarious condition of floating at the mercy of currents. Waves—the impossible inscription surface (Schmit); "governed by the remote body of the moon, in a mystery something like love or desire" (Solnit *ibid.*)—are tranquil traces of the ebbs and flows of the vast body of water.

The film avoids a **focus on borders** as we know them, and keeps invisible potential borderlines on the pictured body of water. The fuzzy cartography connects with Edouard Glissant approach to borders: "what we need today is not to abolish borders but to provide them with another meaning, that of a **passage, a communication—a relation**, in other words. (Glissant and Diawara 2011:16)

Ingold observes that ships have typically been a central element of a "transport-oriented thinking though movement...traditionally fixed on "pockets of space—such as the beginning or end of the journey" (*ibid.*) (2011) Moreover, the image of the **journey as line** (Ingold 2009 cited in Ashmore 2013) reframes **travel as transportation** and affirms the idea of human bodies as commercial cargo.

Using the theoretical framing for **mobility** set by Cresswell (2011), aspects such as speed, rhythm, and friction become important frameworks in looking at movement in this film. The material characteristics of water (tranquil, open) are doubled by the two vessels transiting the visual frame at a slow speed.

Rhythm and speed establish an affective space, in which a particular "temporality of care" is fostered (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017:23): there's a **time of waiting**, from the opening frame to the affective peak of the film—the vessels' closest proximity

to the viewer vantage point. This time of waiting, populated partly by “ugly feelings” of boredom or monotony, leaves nevertheless room to **navigate and exercise care**: by teasing the viewer’s expectation and imposing this temporal suspension during which nothing really happens (even if only for a few minutes), the film echoes the notion of “slow violence,” the slowly approaching natural disaster or climate urgency, which is often also affectively populated by boredom and neglect (3.2.4)

Approaching the camera, the two vessels experience the only bout of **friction** we can trace in the film—a reason to halt (Cresswell). Again, it’s unclear whether this point is a borderline, a shore, a limit to shallow water, another vessel on which the camera is embarked, or something else entirely. It functions nevertheless as a device for “**immobilization**”—the process that Laura LoPresti identifies in the increased militarisation, policing, and surveillance of waterbodies: a “visceral and symbolic immobility” which articulates “processes of physical, political, mediatic, and aspirational stillness and interruption” experienced by migrants in transit on water. (2020:4) The waterway is thus transformed into “an interrupted space where both historical movement and ideas of fluidity ascribed to the ocean have been substantially repressed” (ibid)

This **temporary immobilization** impacts the rhythm of the voyage, as the two vessels are turned around, with a definitive stop or friction point also unclear. (3.3.5) The symmetry of the route echoes a “**correct mobility**” (Cresswell)—the fact that the vessels seemingly take the same route back recovers an emotional respite from the tension induced by all the cartographic unknowns in the film.

### ***Migration: liquid metaphors***

The maritime voyage of people on boats can be decoded in a register of contemporary aspects of **migration**—a mix of geographical, political, and cultural presets that impact the very image of the migrant, and effectively the experience of migration itself. As Mitchell writes, “images ‘go before’ the migrant” (in LoPresti 2020:5)

The effect of inserting human bodies in this visualization of water, given the various cultural preconditions impacting such a reading, complicates their situatedness: they do not inhabit or occupy the space, but rather use it in transit, which makes mobility a core presence in the film.

Fluid metaphors and liquid imagery is commonly used to describe transit. “Migration waves,” “flow of people”—the semiotic exchange here underpins an **aesthetic of migration** which is not entirely politically benign. As LoPresti writes(3.3.1), “aesthetic representations of a borderless sea and liquid metaphors for human flows ... overlook the obduracy and the material confinements characterizing the present moment. ... poetic visions fail to attentively question and perhaps alternatively rethink the more amphibious images and practices that shape the present landscape of the migration crisis”(2020:4)

Persistent **liquid imagery** surrounding migration is nevertheless a meaning-making device, which also outlines affective attachments with water, in the context of migration. Veronica Strang observes that “water imagery is used in a series of scheme transfers that describe the health of the human body, of social groups, of economic systems and of the environment. All depend upon ideas of ‘proper’ flow and balance ... upon a regulation of physical and moral order”(Strang 2005:111) Regulation takes the shape of biopower, and eventually of “necropower—the **politics of letting die**,”(LoPresti 2020:6) essentially present in decisions of non-intervention and non-assistance of people in distress at sea(The Left to Die Boat)

As LoPresti notes, mapping current **anxieties and politics** surround migration onto figurations of bodies of water(in her analysis—the Mediterranean Sea) leads to a **morphing of water**: “[bodies of water] are recently less likely to be mentioned in public discourse as contact zones generating conditions for vitality, cultural encounters, hybridizations, liquidity, or motion, as oceanic philosophy would have it, but rather like **motionless deathscapes**:static and viscous cartographies of wet flesh”(2020:4)

I contend that *Lower than The Sky* touches on this idea and adds to the critique:its flat, surface-fixating focus and uncanny depiction of human presence isolate an idea of movement and mobility that significantly reduces the possibility



to consider **mobilities of depth**—of water as volume(Steinberg&Peters), or the “multiple mobilities that engage each other in reciprocity in the sea”(Adey, in Steinberg&Peters 2015:6)

Slowness and stillness are used in the film for their aesthetic value, affective and atmospheric potential, and as devices to articulate critique(more in 3.3.5) They also work to invert modern notions of efficiency and rapidity, typically desired features of commercial and colonial sea voyages:“The sea has for a long time been a space to be crossed as quickly as possible, to reach the places that matter, *grounded* centres of capital”(Steinberg&Peters 2015) Once more, the sea is the space in between landed points A and B; it functions to facilitate mobility, but its own inherent mobility is overlooked.

In this register, *Lower than The Sky* invites a re-consideration of the “**perspective of the sea,**” given these land-based hard-wirings with which watery mobilities are being approached. An oceanic perspective allows **land-locked ontologies** and concepts such as nationality, statehood, citizenship, sovereignty to be challenged, and **new forms of relatedness** to be derived(Blum 2010) The film engages with this “unsettling of the solid politics of the ground”(LoPresti 2020:1) and mobilities play a role in this process. In the film, land-based preconceptions of fixity, of materiality as fixed and grounded(Steinberg&Peters, 3.3.2) are reimagined through the absent land, and vague suggestion of ports, at either side of this voyage.

The seeming **immovability** of the human bodies on the vessels teases symbolic immobility and immobilisation; the atmosphere here oscillates between these humans being stuck and being lost, adrift, yet **their staged placidity sidesteps the idea of land as rescue.** In turning around, the two vessels stage a **refusal of landed rescue**; the land may be inhospitable or undesirable and just for a while longer drift and floating away may be the more alluring option.

Nevertheless, there is a **risk in essentialising drift and flowing.** Whereas concepts that organise and police space, such as maps, borders, territories, are being enriched and decentralised when layered with ideas of flow, liquidity, and volume(Steinberg&Peters; LoPresti) it’s important to carry out these discussions

in a way that avoids problematic dichotomies between fluidity or water thinking and grounded, landed principles.

*Lower than The Sky* figures movement and effectively produces an instance of watery mobility, while also underscoring the material practices and conditions of mobility. In this the film approaches a **new materialist position** in which the hierarchy between the represented “reality” and the representation itself is upended.

The film formulates a critical stance for how new ways of thinking about and with water can emerge, and how they can impact more contingent realities of, for instance, migration. The film uses the image and presence of a commercial ship to interrogate its “central function in global capitalism and its importance as a global connector”(Anim-Addo et.al 2014:2) Far from embracing a global scale, the mobility practice staged in the film is rather pocket-sized:**truncated, fragmented, ambiguous**. It does however mobilize emotion and broad cultural affects with respect to living with water. I argue that the film also teases practices of care, and explores the emergence of alternative relations and **unexpected kinship**, mediated by watery encounters, highly mobile occurrences, featuring “process, relation, and change”(Linton)

By employing **mobility and material aspects of movement** in its engagement with natural environment, the film embraces the political stakes that may arise from its reading, and the speculative ethics it facilitates. It teases questions such as:What are the inter-networked relations here and what type of care do they inform? How does the film foster a potential for *hydrocare*(3.1.4) to occur; for more “fluid ethical engagements with material environments” that assert their materiality in the absence of the grounded, land-locked fixity of contemporary life?



### **3.3.4 Bodies on water**

Important to this paper is to acknowledge how bodies of water function as infrastructures of mobility or power(hydrocolonialism; policing of waterbodies), as well note on the commodification of water in the current water crisis. Racialization and politicisation of bodies of water(“from the Black Atlantic to the Black Mediterranean, seas of dispossession and unbelonging”–Terranova 2021) informs a discussion of journeys, crossings, and arrivals mediated by water. In a reading of J. Baldwin, bell hooks observes the deeply racial(colonial) underscores of journeys, and how the hegemony of one experience of travel(imperialist, nostalgic) can make it impossible to articulate other experiences and be heard(hooks 1997)

Astrida Neimanis’ “figuring of bodies of water” returns to the human body, only to “undo the idea that bodies are necessarily or only human,” which challenges anthropocentrism and the position of the human as the sole location of embodiment(Neimanis 2017) The author’s perspectives tie with notions of ecological ethics and temporal locations of the posthuman. Nevertheless, it is Neimanis who also notes on the irony of projects that decentre the human and destabilise human exceptionalism:“...certain subjects might be unwilling to give up the ‘humanist prize’, after being excluded from humanity for so long”(2017:19)

In the effort to affirm fluidity and disavow departure and arrival as landlocked aspects of watery mobilities, a critical position is necessary in order to avoid erasing the lives that do not thrive in the flow, the wet, the flux, de drift, or those who long for rootedness and being grounded(eg. displaced peoples, forced migrants)

How do we operate academic conversations that commit to dismantling hierarchies between human and more-than-human existence, while entrenched in lingering deep inequalities, violence, and abuse still present within the bounds of human existence? As we look for matter that matters, how do we grapple with human bodies whose desires to matter are systemically overlooked?(eg. migrants at sea, in LoPresti, Sharpe, *The Left to Die Boat*<sup>16</sup>)

Butler’s notion of “grievable life” is poignant—for bodies lost at sea to be mourned, they first must be recognized as lives worth living. And, mourning here refers to political recognition as agents, as lives that had been deemed worth preserving but tragically lost. Mourning would lead to systemic action to prevent more loss. As LoPresti writes, however, migrant lives lost at sea do not trigger political systems

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<sup>16</sup> <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-left-to-die-boat>

to mourn. If Mentz identified the shipwreck as a central actor in the historical drama of colonialism and globalization(2015), the migrant vessel shipwreck is a peripheral nuisance.

This harsh reality of migration at sea(also often framed as crisis) complicates perspectives of ethics and desires, of relations and futurity, of affect and imagination, all located in a world so deeply wounded(Mickey) Can art be a vessel of care and hope, in the midst of the melancholic, ugly feelings(veering between anxiety and boredom) of our collective current moment of living with water? This is a question at the core of this paper—one that traverses the theoretical concerns, and the entangled analytical sections, considering the film *Lower than the Sky*.

The critical potential in how aesthetics is deployed in the film successfully avoids the “metaphorics of the sea,”(3.3.2) and instead teases relationality, watery entanglements, and speculative positions. And yet—the film remains preponderantly *on the surface*. We can speak of depth in visual perspective—for most part of the film, water visually occupies a good half of the frame and creates an illusion of depth. Can we then apply the more depth-delving thoughts from watery research and blue humanities with respect to materiality, without it being a stretch? My answer is a resounding yes, and in the following, I will look at how notions from wet ontologies and materiality in flux function to illuminate the relation between water, vessels, and bodies in this film.

### **3.3.5 ANALYSIS INTERLUDE—BODIES AND VESSELS. IMPRINTS ON WAVES**

The image of the vessels and the human bodies aboard taps into material conditions of life at sea(Blum 2010:670) and anchors the film in current cultural tapestries surrounding water-mediated migration.

The boat-body construct is a “**shifty assemblage**”(Bladow&Ladino 2018), a playful apparatus in the telling of a story, which remains, however, largely untold.

The two fishing trawlers carry an unexpected cargo—human bodies standing and looking straight at the camera. It’s only three minutes into the film that the standing bodies become distinguishable for the viewer, yet proximity plays a central role in the **affective reception** of this encounter. Because the human cargo was unknown and invisible, the approaching of the vessels renders these people visible(Image 3) Yet, a new type of distance is instituted, as they are at once rendered anonymous, “**strangers**”(Ahmed)—present, yet still unknown.



*Image 3 Human bodies become distinguishable as the vessels approach the camera*

What had been the picture of two commercial fishing vessels becomes instantly the picture of *humans aboard two vessels*. Recognition and proximity completely change the stakes of the encounter. The interplay between **physical and affective distance** works to create an aesthetic effect(per Weizman's definition, 3.1.2) and to complicate ethical considerations of who/what belongs on water; who can be carried by water, and how?

In an age of global capitalism and consumer goods largely moved by water, anything that can be sold and bought belongs on water. Humans belong on water inasmuch as they facilitate these maritime transits vital for our Western capitalistic consumer cultures, or to the extent that they themselves *consume* on water(for instance, on cruise ships) These staple images of why humans would inhabit vessels at sea automatically generate an *outside* of the norm.

The film's preponderant focus on the surface of the water can then be read through the lens of "**forensic aesthetics**"—of exploring the non-normative depiction of humans at sea(Weizman in 3.2.1) As noted in 3.2.1, the surface(here, the surface of water) can become an object of analysis, where **aesthetic and proxemic relations** can be analysed, and underlying political and

ethical issues brought to light. If on land surfaces, surface analysis would look for traces of violent attacks, for instance bullet holes, the sheer water surface and the softly rolling waves evade inscription: “the sea has no character...in the original sense of the word, which comes from the Greek *charassein*, meaning to engrave, to scratch, to imprint... **On the waves there is nothing but waves**”(Schmitt, in Steinberg&Peters)

The stillness of water in *Lower than the Sky* is suddenly more telling, doubled by the unknowability of the vessels-bodies assemblages: although occupying space on the water, the presence of these people escapes recognisability by the viewer; through anonymity, lack of framing or context, they **do not imprint on the waves**. As the vessels return and head towards their unknown destination, we ask: were they even *here*? What is *here*? What are the qualities and conditions of this space of encounter, and how is recognition possible for these humans? Would their absence be recognised as a **loss**, in case of shipwreck? Can they be seen, even as shrouded in melancholia—their **mourning suspended**, delayed by an effort to acknowledge them as “appropriate objects for genuine grief?(3.3.4)

The water surface therefore instils a domain where care relates to the possibility of loss—primarily human or material loss. Is this the **limit of concern**(3.1.5) in this film? Where can we locate care for the deep? Is there space in the film’s **architecture of care and response** to imagine harm or loss for the non- and more-than-human levels underneath the surface? To care for the unseen? Do these vessels have propellers that can harm marine beings, or leak pollutants in the water?

What if the setting for the film is a time following drastic rising of planetary waters, and what we see is an instance of global ecosystem breakdown—our **precarious future** already claiming the present(2.5)? Is this a time of elevated waters in the wake of a storm surge? At what *should* care be directed, in this scenario?

Visibility is key to care in *Lower than The Sky*; however, the **act of seeing** is impacted by the hyperstylised, heavily controlled realm of the visible, in which the vessels-as-pictures seem to resist genuine fluid engagements with water and act as (metaphorical) stand-ins for land. The vessels are **technologies of**

**movement and of separation**—the human bodies appear as separate from water, limiting the material conditions for a relationality/thinking/living *with* water, that critics find essential to speculative ethics and to cultivating better ways of living with water(2.1;2.4)

And yet, recent political contexts, particularly related to migration, show that not all human lives matter the same; a multitude of human bodies and lives have been “excluded from humanity,”(3.3.4), displaced by conflict or by their habitats made unliveable by climate change disasters. These humans might find themselves forced *on* water, struggling to conceive of a benign way of living with water, as they might strive for solid ground. Are the bodies in *Lower than The Sky* longing for roots and looking for dry land? Are they untethered, at risk of being erased by drift?

***Passengers. Cargo:A haunting.***

As Paul Ashmore would note, the humans on these vessels “emerge as passengers,” as “a shifting set of subjectivities”(2013) Social, material, and affective assemblages convene to shape the experience and performances of being a **passenger**.(ibid. 4) For Ashmore, passengers are not static figures, but always in a process of becoming, all part of the experience of being mobile.

In *Lower than The Sky*, human bodies oscillate between **becoming passengers**, engaged in a mobile process in which agency is possible, and **remaining cargo**, static. As the two vessels start their turning around, the people on board maintain their bodies facing the camera, rather than being turned around and away by the movement of the boats(Image 4) There’s a fine line here between stillness and immobility; between agency and containment; between the choice to stand still and look back and the position of being stuck.

Their inertia echoes Bennet’s concept of vitality, by **figuring an anti-vitalism**, a letting go, a dwelling in the dissolve(3.2.5) As a micro-stillness, a resistance facing the pull of the vessel—is it a valid or legitimate as a gesture to affirm subjectivity and facilitate the “becoming passengers” of the anonymous human cargo?



*Image 4. The vessels turn around, as the humans on board keep facing the camera.*

In her seminal work analysing representations of Black life, Christina Sharpe recalls the ship in the transatlantic journey of Africans bound for slavery, and she coins the idea of the “**wake**” as the particular path and patterns behind a ship, during its voyage. This type of imprinting the water is **material, as it is highly metaphoric**—in the wake, the lives of Black people were lost, and swept by water, and the wake continues to haunt Black life, through conditions of containment, violence, racism, and exclusion.(Sharpe 2016)

For Sharpe, the wake is **consequence and history**, its materiality generating important ethical questions:“What does it look like, entail and mean to attend to, care for, comfort and defend, those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always imminent-death, life lived in the presence of death; to live this imminence and immanence as in the “wake”?(Sharpe 2016)

What can we make of the **human cargo** on the two trawlers in *Lower than The Sky*? Are they already dead, or dying, or consigned to death? What type of caring and tending to do they entail? How are these bodies constructed and positioned as humans, and how are they respectively constructed as cargo? What can we



make of this ontological double, and what does it show about the conditions of liveability in “current” times, mired in crises?

Sharpe would note: “The addition of the word human to cargo does nothing here to ameliorate the **ghosting** these ships do” (2016) The spectrality of the ship—the ghosting of the present by the violence of history—is present in *Lower than The Sky*, where the two vessels are both haunted and haunting, simultaneously materiality and metaphor (Sharpe), life and death, warning and memory.

While Sharpe’s concepts are tightly bound to the Transatlantic history of slavery and the specific aftermath of slavery in contemporary Black experience, they do nevertheless apply to an analysis of **migrant lives**, particularly in the *wake* of the current migration crisis, largely hosted on bodies of water (in Europe, for example) The same concepts can also inform a reading of this film. Confined to these “**maritime assemblage**,” the body-vessel entanglements render the human bodies themselves as agents of haunting. What does it do to the materiality of these bodies that they are **staged as technologies of haunting**? That they are made to represent, to stand in, to act as metaphor, while also embodying their own materiality, tethered to these vessels?

The two assemblages, strangely mirroring one another, float on still waters—perhaps “**fatigued**” waters (Neimanis), saturated with atoms of bodies lost at sea, ominously announcing losses anew. (Sharpe)

By their commercial function as fishing trawlers, the floating vessels echo the “**threat of shipwreck**” which Mentz (3.3) identified as the element that makes the ocean an actor in the historical drama of globalization. To remain in the realm of the speculative: What would be lost, in case of wreckage? What strategies can we imagine for the recovery or salvage of what is deemed worthy to salvage among the cargo these ships contain? Is there another—commercial?—cargo, which would make a dent in a market on shore, in case of shipwreck?

Christina Sharpe poignantly links contemporary “container shipment capitalism” to the history of slavery and the oceanic colonial routes: “How are they (containers) connected to the **containerization of people** prior to and during, and then after the perilous sea voyages? ... these are asterisked histories of slavery, of property, of thingification and their afterlives” (Sharpe 2016)

The film stages containment as a form of erasure. The vessels in *Lower than The Sky* are endowed with a **containment quality**—they *contain* their cargo, they *carry* these humans, *en route* to their unknown destination. In this sense, the two ships are caught in a tension; on the one hand they are instrumentalised as carriers, vessels, in the literal sense, hollow spaces defined partly by their load; on the other hand, they are bound on a seemingly straight journey, detoured only by a short stop encountering the camera. They **are carrier bags, while also the tip of an arrow**—launched from the A to B of maritime travel.

Their linearity is however challenged—the sure course the vessels seemed to be on is de-routed by the approach to the camera vantage point, and set to return (more on return in section 5.2) Is this a form of being adrift? Are they lost at sea? This surprising change and the sense of being **adrift** echoes a search—a search for safe harbour? Is the vessel, by its function, a promise of harbour? A promise of land, floating in an open space, inhospitable to human life?

Mentz writes: “Stories of **repeated wetness** emphasize that our world remains an unfriendly home, more ocean than firm ground. Human bodies survive this environment only with difficulty, and only temporarily. The drying out of these catastrophes is an incomplete process and cultural fantasy, a safe destination that cannot be finally reached” (2015:4)

I argue that destination is constructed and implied as a necessity in the film—an idea from which anything but arrival is a potential for **aimless drift, crisis, wreckage**; the dry ground is “firm” and its solidity is something to strive for. This constitutes a critique of how material, lived experiences at sea are often erased and their political stakes obscured. A **fixation with origin and destination** takes away from asking *why* they are at sea, to begin with, and so obscures the “geopolitical circumstances that compel migrants to take journeys at sea” (Sharpe 2016) Too, we can speak of a subversion of the very notion of “safety” as bound to land-locked spaces: out of reach, and out of the film’s frame, the idea of harbour cannot be considered safer than a refuge on water.

A process of **fetishisation** is at work in mobility engagements, in the desire to reveal the route and place it on a map; this essentially depoliticises forced

migration; “nomadism lends a false idea of choice to forced migration,”(Dayan 1996:7), it “absolves political systems of responsibility for the potentially displaced,”(3.3) and erases these lives as they were lived prior the moment of departure. By withholding knowledge of origin and destination the film plays with this tension within **nomadic narratives**—if the “passengers” on the ships did not choose their departure, they also reject an arrival, and **embrace the drift as a political act of resistance.**

### ***Holding water***

Inspired by Bennet’s perspective on vitality of the more-than-human, it’s worth wondering what a discussion on migration, human loss, material and political entanglement would be, if water were to be seen as an actor with “trajectories, propensities, and tendencies of its own” rather than an instrument to be controlled, commodified, contained between land-locked points of departure and arrival? How would this contribute to more just and sustainable social and ecological relations becoming realizable(3.1.1)?

Marked by the burden of departure and arrival, the vessels in *Lower than The Sky* become “...an **inextricable and violent entanglement between land and water**—on which people materially and symbolically move or stand still, live and die, are visibilized or silenced as bodies or points, stories or numbers, moving subjectivities or geometric lines”(LoPresti 2020:4)

*Lower Than the Sky* plays with the notion of “assemblage as the locus where agency is always a human-nonhuman working group. Moves from vitality of a discrete thing to vitality as a function of the tendency of matter to conglomerate or form heterogenous groupings”(Bennet 2010:Preface)

The film has a critical merit in how it uses **material entanglements** to invite a **speculative positioning** towards the future: by staging a form of drift and employing material bodies and holding vessels, the film moves past maritime metaphors in social critique. As Neimanis would formulate it: if drift cannot be avoided, and flux and flow escape human control; if in current context of eco-disasters and looming crises, “old ways of doing things no longer hold water,

what new forms of care can emerge from being **untethered, adrift and at sea**?(2017) Ethical at its core, the question is material and urgent:it asks not what we *should* do, but *how do we do what we must*, for our ways of life to hold water once more?

Presented with the idea that a boat is both a departure and an arrival, and asked what departure meant to him, Glissant offered: “[departure] is the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. Every diaspora is the *passage* from unity to multiplicity”(Glissant & Diawara 2011:5)

Expanding multiplicity to a multi-species, multi-system understanding, I see *Lower than The Sky* as an exploration of this **passage**. Water, bodies, vessels—the material entanglements, complex and complicated, striving nonetheless for separation, struggling between linearity and floating assemblage, adrift, **hovering on the surface yet folding into themselves.**



### 3.4. Departing from theory. Intimate arrivals

The section of the paper ending here served to offer conceptual direction in addressing my research question, and orienting the analysis. I’ve identified these concepts—aesthetics(3.1), nature and the Anthropocene(3.2), and mobility and embodiment(3.3)—as crucial for their broad application in how water and its construction in the film is to be analysed. The understanding of aesthetics as proxemics and sensorial apprehension of the world opens a spatial potential for the analysis; distance is endowed with speculative and aesthetic possibilities, and routinely embraced as space for negotiating the film’s broader stakes. The notions of agency, relations, and the conceptualisation of care, all imbued with traces of “watery thinking” locate my analysis within neo-materialist and hydro-feminist frameworks, and thus inform a specific reading of the film. The pedagogical role of watery thinking is asserted, in establishing conditions and possibilities for “more just and sustainable ecological relation,” and outlining and pushing the limits of care and concern, in times of planetary crisis.

A look at nature and the problematics of representing “natural” environment is important, as it places this discussion in the context of the so-called Anthropocene, and challenges the normative, hierarchical separation between subject and object, when it comes to encountering “nature.” A theoretical stop at the notions of affect and emotion is useful, particularly as it facilitates a look at affective responses within broader ethics of care and response.

Discussing the entanglement of water, embodiment, and mobility is also constitutive in the structure of this paper. As the film undoubtedly taps into a “cultural archive” in which migration, mobile bodies, borders, and fluidity have increasingly political stakes, the section pointed at how these aspects are conceptually related, and their relation can directly impact the affective construction and encounter with water. The analytical interludes serve themselves as a type of entanglement—a stop-and-stare in the midst of theoretical exploration, so space may be given for more direct, intuitive and ultimately personal engagement with knowledge. Each sub-section visits ideas and thoughts that came before it, and humbly moves on, aiming to leave behind traces of(new) thoughts, sparked at the encounter with this film.

In the following and final section of the thesis, I explore how the film constructs itself as film. An awareness for the medium is invoked here, and a curiosity for how the film itself becomes a vessel that carries particular figurations of water, bodies, and matter. Like any vessel, it lends its shape to the stuff it contains, which, although a rather poetic thought, it allows a sober critical exploration of what type of seeing and looking at water it eventually informs.

### 3.5. ANALYTICAL OUTRO—NOTES ON MEDIUM

This section takes a meta-approach and considers the film as a visual methodology which simultaneously articulates an imagination of water, as it is intrinsically informed by it.

The film visualises a type of drift; it stages a crossing and marks a confluence; it teases a journey yet disavows the arrival; it hosts a **perpetual passage**, as it draws on collective histories of voyage. The notion of **route is disturbed by drift** in *Lower than the Sky*—the affective build-up of the approaching vessels does not lead to release, as they turn around, without disclosing their destination, or motive for the journey to begin with.

In its framing of matter, seascape, and human presence, the film teases a **strangely muted vitality**, and introduces ambiguity to conventional tropes of figuring water. The expedition, the discovery, the passage, the commercial route, the leisure voyage—the film features none of it, yet strangely a small part of each. Ambiguity is a device, which triggers a particular type of spectatorship. The film can very well be considered a parable, an allegory, in which the act of looking necessarily becomes an act of excavation. Too, a modern intention to categorise the film is often necessary to viewers: looking is inseparable from response, and response is based on visual cues. Is the film a fictive, staged narrative? Is it *about* the past or the present? Is it an allegory or is it located between allegory and fictive documentary? Does it speak to memory and forgetfulness, or is it a moral warning?

Can we, however, surpass the notion that we **encounter an allegory** which must be decoded, and engage with the image as a vibrant actant (Benjamin), with the film as “wanting” agent (Mitchell)?

I propose that the many elements the film withholds—does not serve a dramaturgic plot, nor engage a clear narrative; and the refusal to engage in long traditions of constructing “nature” and alterity, and as such subverting “traditions of looking” (MacLeod 2018)—challenge the taken for granted **right to look**, and the modern expectation that vision will “naturally” reveal the essence of what is seen.

The film stages conditions of **precarity, vulnerability, and exposure** of alterity (physical or political, Ferreira da Silva), and complicates the position of the viewer by overlapping it with that of the camera. Eventually the **vectors of looking** shift, as the people being *looked at* eventually *look back*, which recovers the film from the grip of allegory: the act of looking is so materially powerful that an underlining story is not necessary.

The act of looking is enmeshed with **aesthetic desire, a search for proximity** (3.1.2), affective engagement, and a tradition of epistemic discovery; *Lower than The Sky* blurs notions of spectatorship, witnessing, and the extractive gaze in the context of contemporary image production. Picturing water adds to this enmeshment, and the film and its processes can be then seen for the

contributions to “how we’ve been taught to see water and make water fit our ways of seeing,”(2.4) and for how they feed into the circularity between depiction and experience of water(3.2.3)

If the seeing subject is never neutral(per MacLeod) but rather “programmed by a **pre-existing pictorial understanding**,” it’s worth considering how this film disrupts this pre-condition. As Uhlin writes, “affective responses to aesthetic works are often modelled on similar responses to the natural environment”(2018:281) This opens a rich space to explore how the film recasts conventional affective responses to “nature,” and to question the effect on the broader imaging of water in the film. The film does not produce awe, and a sense of wonderment at the encounter with a body of water depicted as serene is upended by the more distinct emotions of uncanny, the eerie sense and ghostly presence. The viewer is left unsure of what a “**correct**” **affective response** entails, which adds directly to a critique of modern way of looking. The diffuse nature of the emotional spectrum here “elides the difference between subject and object ... it opens a porous relation between them”(Uhlin 2018:281)

*Lower than the Sky* does perform a “**showing of seeing**”(Mitchell 2002) The performativity of how the act of seeing is being shown is a central device in the film, which allows the film to operate a meta-level of critique, and directly problematizes the “programmed and pre-existing” *subject* of seeing.(MacLeod)

### ***Distance***

By its norms and devices, film is a medium that **affirms distance, as it seeks to bridge it**. In seeing a film, we see at a distance; we experience at once the object of vision, and the very distance from it; arguably—we care at a distance. In Mitchell’s words, “visual culture entails a meditation on blindness, the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked. Also, on gesture and the visible language of gesture; it also compels attention to the tactile, the auditory, the haptic”(Mitchell 2002:170)

*Lower than The Sky* adds to **distance a sense of the intangible**; despite intense visual contact, there is no physical contact between the two vessels or the people

on board with the space where the camera is located; nor is water experienced haptically at any time.

Somatic engagement is thus limited, and the **quality of care**, as engagement and apprehension of what is seen, is significantly impacted. If an encounter would involve reciprocity—being touched by what we touch—the film ritually asserts distance and rejects the haptic. As Puig de la Bellacasa notes, “the haptic disrupts the prominence of vision as a metaphor for distant knowing,” and articulates a “sensorial universe that better explores the ambivalences of conceiving caring knowledge as an intensification of involvement and proximity”(2017:19)

Moving away from the predominant Western dualism of reality and representation, all predicated on distance and separation between the subject and object of knowing, and approaching instead an “eco-materialist sense of immersed onto-epistemologies or **implicated aesthetics** infuses images with a sense of intimacy and immediacy despite mediation”(Alaimo 2019:406)

I propose that the arguably **defiant distance** staged in *Lower than The Sky* is a pedagogical device, surprisingly intimate, and peppered with ethical tones:it directly addresses the emergence of the spectator by literally holding the spectator’s gaze. The film forces the questions:“How do I see? How am I being seen?” This enhances a looking and thinking *with care*, and can facilitate the transition from unity to multiplicity(Glissant), the awareness that the act of looking is never a solitary act:“Thinking with care [asserts] a collective thinking in interdependent worlds”(Puig de la Bellacasa 2017:19) This may be a world of wounds, the film suggests, but it’s impossible to live in it alone.(2.5)

### ***The Hold***

If this **film is a vessel**, what does it hold? Is it holding to protect, to safely carry, or is it holding captives?(3.3.4) Does it captivate vision/spectatorship or emotion? Does it hold the spectator captive, stuck in a perpetual(re)performance of looking?



*Lower than The Sky* is neither feature nor documentary film; as an art film it does however tap into a “**cultural archive**—a reservoir of knowledge and feelings,” in which structures of affect, dispositions for caring, and a grammar of looking, among others, articulate how we think (Wekker 2016)

“Looking makes **ethical demands** on the viewer; demands to imagine otherwise; to reckon with the fact that the archive, too, is invention,” writes Christina Sharpe. The speculative, the *otherwise* is thus a strategy to exit the hold of the archive, of the vessel, of the “past in the present” (Wekker)

I argue that *Lower than The Sky* retains this **speculative quality**; it invites a reconnection with consciousness, rather than an escape from it into the normative (ibid.) It does so by carefully curating a form of **beholding**, an understanding of vision as a form of holding. This in turn becomes an ethical gesture—we must care for what we hold. Neimanis (2020) would add a vision of interconnected waters to this ethical web of holding—we hold the water of others, and they hold our water.

**Alterity and responseability** are in a constant ebb and flow, and a pedagogy of care and response sharpens the speculative, and adds nuance to how we conceive of relationality, especially when it is outlined by crisis: we need to focus on *how we hold*, not on *how we would like to hold* (Mentz, in 2.5) in order to “cultivate better ways of living with water *now*” (Neimanis, 2.1)

The quality of **vision as a hold and a holding** is complicated by temporality. Glissant would call it the “right to opacity”—“a person has the right to be opaque. Why must I absolutely understand the other to live next to them and work with them?” (Glissant & Diawara 2011:15) *Lower than The Sky* employs filmic devices to **tease opacity**. Ambiguity, fragmentation, flirting with invisibility, the uncanny presences, doubled by telling absences—it plays into the film’s critical meta-language, a repudiation of the norms of showing.

Despite this tendency to obscure more than it shows, *Lower than The Sky* does facilitate an interesting **exploration of the gaze**—“the evidently hard-wired disposition to recognize the eyes of another organism (what Lacan and Sartre call the gaze)” (Mitchell 2020:175) **The face of the other** (humans on the fishing boats) is a powerful mechanism, which teases notions of care and ethics: we must

“look into the face of the other as a duty of obligation and a sign of our infinite and fundamental responsibility for the individual human other”(Sealy 2019:4) The origin and location of this “duty” is nevertheless imbued with an anthropocentric tone. By forcing this face-off, the film exaggerates human presence, and so allows an interrogation of what would it take to overcome the human as the limit of obligation, care and concern(Alaimo, 3.1.5)? How can we unlearn care as a hierarchical construct, and instead decentre it? How can we foster care for beings and things whose face we cannot see or recognise?

### ***Picture perfect***

Addressing the cinematographic engagement in the film—hues, colour coding, the mood of light, composition, and camera movement—it becomes clear that this is highly stylised product. It features an intentional depiction of the elements, likely curated by the director of photography, and framed by the writer and director of the film:the sky growing a darker pastel shade as it nears dusk; cloudless sky, slow and sinuous waves, rolling into themselves. If we add the looming sense of crisis(environmental, sociopolitical, etc.), as a cultural presence(and context) in the film(3.3.5., 5.2), these elements of cinematography become event more telling in the “architecture of display” adopted in the *Lower than The Sky*.

“The idea of a pristine nature on the perpetual verge of destruction...is a seductive fantasy that keeps consumers poised to watch that destruction”(Mortimer-Sandiland 2010:337) We don't quite know what the looming destruction is here(ecosystems or social collapse; displacement or political conflict), yet the film appropriates the seductive quality of suggestive crisis, by creating the site for an exaggerated experience of looking, uninterrupted by cuts or edits. Melancholia is heightened—there is a suggestion of loss, a hint at risk, yet the loss and the risk remain unnamed.(Mortimer-Sandiland in 2.5)





## 4. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION HIGHER THAN THE WATER, LOWER THAN THE SKY

*In which a sort of arrival materialises, put nevertheless on hold.  
This wavy paper—heavy, long, leaky—does end, not without an  
acknowledgement of its own flawed flowing and shy waves.*

#### 4.1 *Lower than The Sky*—intimate, immediate, speculative

The film's mediated, yet specifically intimate entanglement of imaged water and *waterbodiedness* offers an alternative to depicting water in dominant ways (technical, scientific, metaphoric). This is an art film, so its stakes are expected to be limited, and the conversations it starts are perhaps expected to fit best in white cube spaces. I argue that *Lower than The Sky* overcomes its pre-conditioned status.

The film places the two fishing vessels, the bodies on board, and their short voyage in a liminal space, a dissolve; they inhabit the slice of world that **is higher than the water and lower than the sky**—and subsequently interrupt and enrich both water and sky. The journey to and from is in a constant middle. The letting go of cartographic certainty, narrative consistency, and motive clarity amasses to the film transforming grief and melancholia into engaged contemplation and proposes a particular form of aesthetically and ethically apprehending the world. (3.2.5)

The film makes space for an exploration “of neglected things, practices, and experiences made invisible or marginalized by dominant, “successful” technoscientific mobilizations” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017:170). The voyage on water, although staged, is not a stand in; not a metaphor—it is a voyage on water, marked by materiality, relationality, and affect.

The reader may argue that if the film allows a reading conducive to imagination, should we not venture beyond image to learn some lessons, should we not recognise the workings of representation here? I would agree—the film does foster spaces for imagination, yet it does so not by employing representationalism, which would render the image as representation hierarchically lower, compared to the *actual* real thing (Neimanis; Barad). It rather hosts “glimpses of alternative liveable relationalities, with other possible worlds,” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017:170) even as it resists the visual depiction of these possible worlds.

These other possible worlds are a kernel of hope; possibility occupies the space “where fundamental boundaries have begun to come undone, unravelled by unknown futures (3.1.4) **The possibility of water in the film shows how a form of care can evolve, in the absence of control, excavation of meaning, and domestication.** This articulates a watery pedagogy, lessons in living with an “ethics of care and response,” an approach which recognizes that **all bodies “need to be sustained by good water”** (Chen et al. 2013:19). Resilience, nourishment, patience, caring *with*—they become pillars of *knowing with*, a different model of knowing others, of learning of and responding to needs and seeing relation. **Watery pedagogy negotiates the limits of concern and recalibrates technologies of visibility and mobility, in a constant search for an *otherwise*.**

Water figurations in the film are indeed conducive of imagining living otherwise (Neimanis); the *otherwise*, however, is not always an opposite, an erasure; it is rather a type of recreating connections, a process in which a care-based ethos is central: "Care is a hands-on, ongoing process of recreation of possible relations, and therefore one that requires a speculative opening about what a 'possible' involves" (Puig dela Bellacsa 2017:6)

*Lower than The Sky* offers speculative material to allow such an opening: whereas the stakes in the film can be located in highly geopolitical concerns, such as migration (3.3.3), or the urgency of climate disaster and the rising of planetary waters (2.5), it nevertheless engages affective constructions (3.2.4) and aesthetic devices (3.1). The film formulates a critical stance by staging particular material assemblages and mobility entanglements to investigate how "motion and matter shape the world" (3.1.2, 3.3.3)

As well, the film makes critical use of the provisions and devices of the visual medium itself to host a meta-level conversation on how watery thinking can impact the figuration of water, while "ways of looking" are to a large extent still land-locked, grounded, normative. (3.5) Although projected into the future, a speculative commitment in the film "connects to a feminist tradition for which this mode of thought about the possible is about provoking political and ethical imagination in the present" (Puig dela Bellacasa 2017:7)

## 4.2 Disavowed arrivals

In tracing possible avenues to answer the research question in the paper—*How does this film contribute to the affective construction and reception of our current cultural moment of living with water?*—I have identified some of the conditions that affect this construction and reception. Cultural moods and positions, aesthetic engagements and sensory experiences, and ethical models for acting in the world are among the elements that affect the film's contribution to broader cultural frameworks. Some of the central tensions that surfaced in the theoretical discussion and analysis are not necessarily solved.

The tension between materiality and processuality of water is an important one. Rather than marking two elements of a binary disposition, the discussion accounts for the rich critical potential found in between: the oscillations between fixity and liquidity when considering material presence of water and other bodies inspires an awareness of the risk of essentialising either condition, and emphasises the importance of situated, intersectional considerations. Another important critical node is constituted by the discussion on the Anthropocene and what we can make of the *Anthropos* at the encounter with

“nature”—a term with a problematic legacy, still in circulation. On this, the discussion attempted to challenge scholarly propositions from new materialist feminism to explore their practical applications, all in an overarching tension between speculative positions and the urgency for new models of acting in the world now.

With visuality a central tenet of this paper, the question of **poetics and metaphors in tension with material presence** is also an important one. Social and political stakes are highlighted throughout, in discussions that favour the crucial role of acknowledging present and lived experiences of water and water bodies, rather than enveloping these explorations in metaphor. Considering affect and emotion launches a core exploration in this paper—the idea of a “correct” emotion shadows every aesthetic encounter, and it also joined my own encounter with this film. In the paper I’ve noted on the tight connection between affect and response, particularly with respect to visual renditions and their capacity to elicit affective positions.

Overall the claim that the speculative kernel in the film encapsulate threads of care and hope, as response to a crisis-infused planetary moment of living with water is also a space of tension, on which the analysis dwells at different points. My argument is that **hope joins an effort for more care-based ethics, in the design of a better future.** One could argue that hope blocks response and cannot truly trace the qualities of being and acting in the world. Perhaps stronger words are needed, such as love(Leopold), or vibrant being(Bennet), or a type of ethics of desire that very specifically “wants the world to be” and all species to prevail(Alaimo) **Nothing can disqualify these stances, and I dare argue that they do not disqualify hope.** I find hope in *Lower than The Sky*, to the extent that the film cultivates uncertainty and vagueness as a fertile space for hope to flourish:“Hope locates itself in the premises that we don’t know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act”(Solnit 2016:xiv) Too—love, vibrancy, desiring ethics are aplenty in the film, and it is this plurality that for me makes this film a strong staple in the broader conversation of how we image, imagine, figure, desire, love, and care for water today.

## *Vignette—Return / Suspended*

### *arrival*

*The boats are turning around. The poetic symmetry in the parallel lines between the water and the sky is reflected in this return. As they came, so they leave. As I was, so I am—on a raft? On a boat? On the shore? Planted on these flammable floors, in a medium sized gallery, in Denmark's third largest city. Am I being left behind? Was I need of rescue? Were they? They arrived and built tension, my curiosity peaked at the closest point, I saw their faces, and kept looking. It's almost minute twelve and I still haven't googled the word "trawler." I want to know where they came from and where they are headed, why they turned around. I believe my desire to know is showing that I care, but who is it serving? Is it not only my curiosity that drives this pseudo-care? Why must everything be about me? The horizon swallows them again—this horizontal seam between the water beneath and the water above.*

*The waves remain unmarked; can you erase what was never scribbled down anyway? You can't step twice in the same river, but this is not a river; it is water rolling over and over again. I wonder if further back, where they came from, water knows them. ■*

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