

Diffractional Visions: Towards an Oceanic Trans-Corporeality in *Leviathan* (2012)

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The “eyes” made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life.¹

The documentary film *Leviathan* (2012, 87 min.), directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, begins in darkness. Colours and shapes slowly begin to emerge on the screen amidst a growing cacophony of metallic screeching and distorted bass eruptions. I close my eyes to try and isolate the sounds. Leaning forward towards the screen, I scan and squint: a splash of water; the shadow of a gull; a torn net; a stretch of shrieking chain; foam churning on the surface of the sea. So begins a jolting cinematic experience in which viewers are immersed in the delirious sensorium of a fishing vessel in the North Atlantic. Tides of viscera, seawater and dying fish wash across the decks with the rolling of the waves. Corrugated steel crates overflow with gore as men hack the wings off rays and toss their broken bodies back into the roiling foam. The perspective whirls; cameras are attached to fishing nets, the helmets of fishermen, the bodies of eels, the vessel’s spinning propeller. In evoking an embodied experience marked by disorientation,

Leviathan interrogates the notion of a stable, coherent spectatorial position and bespeaks the emergence of a posthuman cinema predicated on a model of inherent ontological indeterminacy.

In *Job*, *Leviathan* is a monstrous being that, in its totalising force, defies representational explanation. It is both a beast and an ecology that subsumes those who seek its capture.² Similarly, in *Leviathan*, the nature of the sea submerges all species within currents that foreground entanglements and relationalities of becoming. It thus contributes to *new materialisms* that “stress encounters, inter-action, intra-action, co-constitution, and the pervasive material agencies that cut across and reconfigure ostensibly separate objects and beings.”³ With a point of view so relentlessly estranged from human perspectives, *Leviathan* challenges phenomenological accounts of cinema by operating through corporeal sensations that are ambiguously embodied, producing affects and subjectivities that do not mimetically function from a human point of view.

Acknowledging the reality of the world depicted in *Leviathan* means confronting the limits of the thinkable; what Eugene Thacker terms the *world-without-us*.⁴ If knowledge is produced by the film, it is predicated on the viewers’ ability to submit themselves to an experience of alterity that denaturalises human perception and means letting go of the sovereign self.

This essay marks an attempt to think towards the possibility of a trans-corporeal experience in the cinema. I draw upon Stacy Alaimo’s notion of “trans-corporeality” and Karen Barad’s theory of “intra-action” in arguing that the film traces how the (post)human is always already part of intra-active arrangements and systems that are simultaneously material, discursive, economic, and ecological. *Leviathan* foregrounds material entanglements and evokes a “sense of the human as perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments.”⁵

Matthew Battles asks, “What is the eye that comprehends this brutal, abyssal world?”⁶ I suggest

this question is twofold: What is the role of the camera within the world of *Leviathan*; and who is the spectator who perceives these radically de-anthropomorphised images? My central contention is that *Leviathan* encourages a *diffractive* form of spectatorship in which no-thing stands separately constituted and positioned; or as Barad puts it, “there is no absolute inside or absolute outside.”⁷ This should be read as an ethnographic project that involves perceiving the world in which we live as both human and non-human. *Leviathan*’s depiction of the industrial harvesting of marine animals for human consumption has obvious ethical ramifications during a period marked by mass extinction and ecological collapse. I argue that a trans-corporeal approach can help us better understand the way that the film expands ethics beyond a response to a radically exterior/ised non-human other. It is an ethics predicated on tracing the material interchanges across human bodies, animal bodies, and the wider material world. It is about listening, about *mattering*, about taking account of the entangled materialisation of which we are a part and exposing new configurations, new subjectivities, and new possibilities.

Diffractive Visions: The GoPro and the “Brittlestar”

Most commentators agree that Caistang-Taylor and Paravel have succeeded in making an extremely alienating film, one that is at once, chaotic, nauseating, cacophonous, delirious, and disorienting, to invoke some of the terms used to describe the film. It contributes to a growing body of work in documentary film that “shifts the human-centric positions by obliterating the subject/object relation and collapsing the relation between human and animal into a material dimension, one that places matter before subjectivity.”⁸ Exploring the embodied experience of spectatorship in this case necessarily involves examining the material filmmaking processes by which the world of *Leviathan* emerges— processes that, to my mind, make the film immediately

relational to the bodies and movements of the world, the “world as medium,”⁹ as Alfred North Whitehead put it. The film was not “shot,” in the complete sense of authorial, intentional direction. Instead, tiny GoPro cameras were attached to the helmets of fishermen, the bodies of fish, nets, chains, propellers, or simply placed on the ship’s deck where they sloshed around with the seawater and viscera.¹⁰ This radically non-anthropocentric cinematography produces unfamiliar and destabilizing affects. GoPro cameras have no viewfinders and the post-production editing process was dictated by the rhythms of the bodies onboard the ship, further diminishing the intentionality of the filmmakers.¹¹ For Asbjorn Gronstad, this results in a “vastly volatile type of mediation that oscillates unpredictable between the legible and the abstract, the visual and the tactile, and the controlled and the accidental.”¹² The cameras capture a kaleidoscope of impressionistic images recorded from oblique angles and non-human perspectives. The materiality of the cameras is always evident, from shuddering movements, to the splatters of water and slime that blur the screen, to the muffled and distorted sounds that they record. As Andrew Murphie notes, the GoPro aesthetic “is about movements and experience—affects, including non-human affects.”¹³ The camera in *Leviathan* is not a disembodied and steady anthropomorphic “eye” that disavows its existence in the name of a coherent narrative. The film takes the shape of the system it describes; its discursive practices are materially enacted, echoing Donna Haraway and Karen Barad’s formulation of *diffraction* as “an optical metaphor for the effort to make a difference in the world.”¹⁴ The cameras move in accordance with the flows and currents of the marine ecology in which they are submerged and attest to the idea that knowing and being are entangled material practices.

In “Invertebrate Visions,” Barad analyses the “brittlestar,” a brainless cousin of the star fish and sea urchin, that provides a useful model for understanding how vision is mediated by the micro-cameras in *Leviathan*. The brittlestar has a skeletal system that also functions as a visual system: “The approximately ten thousand spherically domed calcite crystals covering the five limbs and central body of the brittlestar function as micro-lenses.”¹⁵ Despite its lack of sentience, the brittlestar nevertheless acts to feed and avoid predators, leading Barad to claim that the creature exemplifies the relational nature of the world in its intra-active becoming: “Brittlestars literally enact my onto-epistemological point about the entangled practices of knowing and being, a central element of agential realism.”¹⁶ In *Leviathan*, the bodily structure of the GoPro camera is a material agent in what it sees and knows; it materialises and dynamically enfolds different spatialities and temporalities. In one scene, the camera skims across the surface of the sea under the light of day. As it is pushed beneath the waves, along with the steel chain to which it is attached, it seems to give a “machine-ic gasp”¹⁷ that marks the threshold between brittle, overexposed visions of the sky and an abyssal gaze into the ocean’s depths that appears almost cosmological. In *Leviathan*, the filmmaking instruments become bodies among the world’s dynamic reconfiguring. For Barad, the brittlestar *sees* diffractively; that is, it is attentive to different optical effects all at once. Diffraction thus disturbs central assumptions about visibility, epistemology, and ontology, based on the optical model of reflection with its themes of mirroring and sameness.¹⁸ Just like the tiny lenses that make up the brittlestar’s skeletal structure, the micro-lenses of the GoPro camera are susceptible to significant diffraction effects, limiting the ability of the lens, and the viewer, to resolve an image: the greater the diffraction effects, the less determinate are the boundaries of an image.

My suggestion here is not that the brittlestar and the GoPro are comparable in every sense of onto-epistemological becoming. Rather, I am interested in their gaze, the world that emerges when *seeing* diffractively. Joanna Aizenberf, a Bells Labs scientist and the lead author of the brittlestar study, likens the creature to a digital camera when she calls it an “embodied eye”¹⁹ that builds up an image pixel by pixel. In a similar sense then, *Leviathan*’s formulation is *the body as eye*; the GoPro is a visualising system that is constantly changing its topology—regenerating its optics in an ongoing reworking of bodily frontiers founded on its entanglements with the world’s dynamic reconfiguring. At one point, fishermen working on the open deck appear to be plunged into complete darkness. When the image restabilises a moment later, we realise that this horrifying eclipse was actually the result of the GoPro camera being half-swallowed by a dead fish. The impossible vision is generated by the flow of the water, the movement and size of the camera, and the fish’s state of rigor mortis. In moments like this, when the film recedes beyond the bounds of intelligibility, it approaches the *world-without-us*, the horizon of thought.²⁰ As Thacker argues: “one of the greatest challenges that philosophy faces today lies in comprehending the world in which we live as both a human and a non-human world.”²¹ When the fishermen are “swallowed” by the fish, the human is momentarily subtracted from the world, and we glimpse the nebulous and impersonal zone between the World (the world-for-us) and the Earth (the world-in-itself). What emerges in this fissure is the Planet (the world-without-us), that void that is “paradoxically manifest as the World and the Earth.”²²

Embodiment here is not a matter of being specifically situated in the world but, rather, of material entanglements, of “being in the world in its dynamic specificity.”²³ In another scene, the camera’s lens is obscured by splashing water caused by the dying contractions of a ray. The

camera is untethered from a body and floats *with* the fish among the waste churning on the deck of the ship. With every dying spasm, the fish masks the lens, causing its body to distort into colourful swirls of pixels. Eirik Hanssen has noted that the way modern image sensors in GoPro cameras break up images into individual coloured pixels is similar to the mosaic of early 20th-century photographic colour plates.²⁴ It is as if the very materiality of the fish is being taken apart and put back together by the currents and flows of the ocean, fish, camera and ship. Belinda Smaill has also explained that the GoPro is specifically designed for nonprofessional use and uses new imaging techniques to question our being in the world “through the construction of different imaginary spaces.”²⁵ In *Leviathan*, movements are liberated from the bodies from which they originate. One is never quite sure what one is looking at and even in those rare moments when the camera’s gaze becomes static, the bodies onscreen gesture in untraceable ways; is it the ship or the sea that moves? One moment I am watching a writhing fish, the next it appears to me as a disembodied human eye, a fallen glove, a steel chain, and then nothing ... I cannot make sense:

Something has happened to the act of looking. Outbursts of violence and gradations of light arouse, agitate and unsettle the spectator. Narcissistic gratification is interrupted, not through any recognition of loss or lack, but because I am drawn into a condition of excessive, undischageable excitation.²⁶

The cameras in *Leviathan* float around the deck of the ship, leap from the ocean on the tail of a fish, or spin vertiginously with the body of the propeller. The captured images eliminate the boundaries of objects, causing them to collapse and merge in a glorious dance of colour. Philip Steinberg argues, “*Leviathan* presents an immersive, haptic view that is so close-up, so decontextualised that the encounter ... is reduced to raw experience in what one might call a ‘view from nowhere.’”²⁷ I want to suggest that this “view from nowhere” is diffractive; a post-humanist

ambition that is fundamentally connected to the camera as an additional body in the world. Every time the camera plunges into the ocean and resurfaces, the transition between environments reminds us of the camera's materiality. As Smaill has astutely noted, these types of perspectives captured by new imaging technologies "subjugate human agency to the infinite processes of ecosystems."²⁸ Above water, the white bodies of seagulls stutter into legibility—"from white fleck to delineated form against the black sky."²⁹ Their coming into visibility repeatedly reanimates entanglements that we frequently abstract and distinguish from individual forms. In *Leviathan*, space is an iterative "intra-active" encounter, and human and non-human bodies are co-constituted performances of that dynamic spatiotemporality. Ohad Landesman asks, "Can a viewer really feel what a fish feels, viscerally align with a machine or an object, or sensorially perceive exploitation?"³⁰ The concept of "immersion" in the cinema is often overdetermined and I share Landesman's scepticism. However, in the case of *Leviathan*, I do not believe that the possibilities of the film emerge within a strict phenomenological framework in which the (human) spectator generates an "internal representation" or simulation of the performed actions onscreen. This interpretive lens has as its most basic presupposition a view of the world as human-centric, i.e., the world-for-us. *Leviathan* does not seek to simulate the sensorial experience of non-human bodies for human spectators; rather, it submerges the spectator within ontological entanglements that undo the idea of the human subject as a finished self.

Ambiguous (Post)Human Embodiments

Castaing-Taylor and Paravel are directors of the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, an experimental center that "attempts to move beyond a discipline of words—that is, to

the visual, aural, and otherwise supratextual.”³¹ They call for a filmic anthropology that shifts away from attempts to *linguify* film and question the notion that an ethnographic film should seek to communicate any information at all:

Most documentaries’ representation of the real is so attenuated and so discourse-based and language-based. We lie and we mystify ourselves with words. Words can only take us so far. I think we want to get to a much more embodied, a much more corporeal representation of reality that’s almost a presentation of reality. Reality that transcends our representation, so it’s not reducible to a set of statements of what commercial shipping’s about.³²

Leviathan offers no expository information to ground the traces of commercial fishing in a normative critical framework. The viewer does not “learn” about the technical specifications of a trawler or processes of navigation. The lives of the fishermen are not situated within the context of coastal New England, the production site of the film.³³ Here, a trawler is not a worksite to be explained, but a vivid phantasmagoria where bodies, both human and non-human, are materially entangled in processes of becoming—in both life and death. As Barad puts it: “Bodies are not situated in the world; they are part of the world.”³⁴ The prepositional shift of *in* to *of* emphasises the way bodies do not pre-exist their environments: “relata do not precede relations.”³⁵ Ecosystems constitute becoming in the flesh and *Leviathan* provides a sensorial method for tracing this affective fabric beyond the human. The film functions as an affective demonstration of the failure of simply extending a humanist perspective to accounts of both film spectatorship and ethics.

As I have shown, the camera’s gaze in *Leviathan* follows the diffractive model of the brittlestar and operates as a tool for different modes of relating and encountering in a cohabitative context. Nevertheless, the question of the location of the *spectatorial gaze* is central to the possibility of developing a posthumanist form of embodiment. In interviews, Castaing-Taylor has

expressed a desire to relativise the human, to suggest “a kind of restless ontological parity”³⁶ between the human and the non-human. In *Leviathan*, this is enacted through a sustained denaturalisation of anthropomorphic forms of embodiment based on mirroring between subject and object. Prevailing phenomenological approaches to cinema, developed by Vivian Sobchack and Laura Marks, configure filmic communication as mutual and reciprocal. Marks outlines the notion of “haptic visuality,” a response to the tactility of the medium that calls upon the viewer to “bring images forth from latency.”³⁷ Similarly, Sobchack argues that corporeal engagement is established by volitional, deliberate vision: “our vision is always, already ‘fleshed out’ [...] the film experience is meaningful *not to the side of our bodies but because of our bodies*.”³⁸ Influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s re-embodiment of the eye in the flesh of the world, these approaches attempt to recapture the meaning of a film in order to rediscover the sense in which the subject “I” is responsible for founding that experience together with its meanings.³⁹

This theoretical framework lacks the diffractive gaze required to comprehend the world in which we live as both human and non-human; it is blind to that which cannot be brought to the realm of the world-for-us. Phenomenological accounts of cinematic embodiment take reflection and mirroring as models of knowing, but as Barad has shown, diffraction marks the limits of the determinacy and permanence of boundaries: “Diffraction is a material-discursive phenomenon that challenges the presumed inseparability of subject and object, nature and culture, fact and value, human and non-human, organic and inorganic, and epistemology and ontology.”⁴⁰ *Leviathan* is a film determinedly disinterested in imitating or simulating the familiar patterns of human perception and experience; phenomenology cannot help us here. In the film we frequently see indistinct body parts—hands, legs, arms, chains, tails, wings—before we see whole bodies, and our perspective

perpetually shifts with the swell of the ocean: “...we have no fixed vantage point from which to see—or stand.”⁴¹ In this unstable maritime network there is no exterior/ised spectatorial position. There is no absolute inside or absolute outside, no divine position for our viewing pleasure. The world of *Leviathan* is a dynamic, open-ended, multi-actor network in which nothing is separable from the broader environment. As Barad puts it, “there is only exteriority within—that is, *agential separability*.”⁴²

The aural experience of *Leviathan* further denaturalises anthropomorphic modes of perception. The audio was recorded primarily with GoPro and DSLR microphones that are limited in their sensitivity and lack clarity.⁴³ The sound provides little orientation: the noise of churning water, clanking chains, cranking gears, and the cries of gulls, build a chaotic aural cacophony. Sounds often come before images, as in the opening scene where vision is obscured for over a minute by heavy rain, attracting spectatorial attention and thus working against the “bias towards vision”⁴⁴ that traditionally characterises both ethnography and conventional filmic practices. Furthermore, the film eliminates all discernible words, challenging the vococentrism of film: “The presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it.”⁴⁵ *Leviathan* dissolves artificial boundaries between human and other voices. In the auditory chaos, the boat is always screaming—metal on metal, illegible commands over loudspeakers, and the whirring motor. As Landesman notes, “the ongoing background noise of the trawler’s engine may occasionally sound like human screeching and the muffled voice of the fishermen like the clanking of chains, creating a horrific affect.”⁴⁶ This aural approach foregrounds the material entanglements of the text in order to delineate forms of communication that exceed limits and disrupt boundaries. The denaturalisation of human vision and aurality in *Leviathan* opens up a space for a different practice

of *listening*, an ambiguously embodied experience that does not mimetically operate from an anthropocentric perspective.

As previously noted, *Leviathan* contains little legible dialogue and this absence of human speech has bewildered a number of viewers.⁴⁷ The first voice we hear in the film comes to us over a loudspeaker and echoes and reverberates around the ship until it becomes unrecognisable as human. The viewer is unable to discern its linguistic content and the voice become a gesture: "... the gesture of a foreman commanding his crew—severed from the actual content of that command."⁴⁸ Stevenson notes that in anthropology, voice is often equated with speech. Attention becomes focused on discourse and the representational content of what people say: "Gone is the sound of the voice, the look in the eye, the twist in the back."⁴⁹ In evacuating the representational content of speech, *Leviathan* not only returns these material qualities, but goes further in refusing to distinguish between human and non-human voices. It reintroduces what we abstract in our attention to linguistic content and discrete actors—the voices of the world that are neither fully human, nor animal, nor technological. This generates an affective experience marked by disorientation and delirium. *Leviathan*, in the phantasmagoric way it visually and aurally entangles corporealities, enters the arena of ontological politics. Christopher Pavsek asks, "What sort of freedom does a spectator retain in his or her—*dare I say blind*—embodied responses to overwhelming stimuli?"⁵⁰ But what if the significance of *Leviathan* lies precisely in the dissolution of a self that might be said to "have" something to say in any meaningful sense? *Leviathan* articulates a space where voice and speech diverge, where the primacy of non-human bodies, movements and gestures are foregrounded, where *the body is eye*. As Alaimo argues,

For an oceanic sense of trans-corporeality to be an ethical mode of being, the material self must not be a finished, self-contained product of evolutionary genealogies but a site where

the knowledges and practices of embodiment are undertaken as part of the world's becoming.⁵¹

Comprehending the world of *Leviathan* means giving up the notion of a discrete, finished self that reads the world from some exterior position. When, instead of being chained to speech, voice is read as a gesture within a dynamic, multi-actor network, a different mode of listening emerges.⁵² Do we not come to *hear* the ray as it is swept off the boat by its dying contractions? Does its eye not *speak* to us as it is submerged? As Stevenson and Kohn argue, the film gives voice to our shared bodily vulnerability, the way our bodies, like those of the fish, the eels, the sharks, the birds, will eventually return to the sea.⁵³ *Leviathan* articulates a sensorial method for allowing other realities to make us over without domesticating them as human, social, cultural, or linguistic constructions. As we shall see, this is a movement towards a kind of ontological poetics.

Oceanic Onto-Epistemology and the Ethics of “Listening”

For scholars like Haraway, Barad, and Alaimo, the ontological turn in anthropology is motivated by the question of how to develop the conceptual resources to imagine the kind of politics required in a world where the human and non-human are increasingly entangled in their shared ambiguity. As Alaimo writes,

As the material world cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters become so.⁵⁴

In one scene in *Leviathan*, a seagull with a broken wing repeatedly attempts to stand up on the deck of the fishing vessel. Its injured body and the viscera that sweeps it repeatedly off its feet reminds us to acknowledge that the film depicts the work of an industrial fishing boat that harvests marine animals for human consumption. The painfully long and unbroken shot and the bird's injured body indeed function as a commentary on the environmental destruction of trawling. However, as Alanna Thain astutely notes, "We cannot look away from the bird and what it is doing ... there is no offstage here, no outside position from which to observe the world unfolding."⁵⁵ Instead of emotionally anthropomorphising the bird and reading the scene for its symbolic or representational logic, Thain's recognition of the bird's material status, the urgency of its embodied situation, urges us to pay attention to what the scene *says*. The howling wind batters the gull against the prow of the ship and the slime covering the deck foils its attempts to gain traction. The GoPro camera is washed into close proximity to the bird's body, getting lost in the ruffle of its feathers in a way that puts us *with* the bird's material struggle, rather than abstracting our perspective to some external site of observation. The scene insists upon the bird's status as, what Haraway terms, a "co-actor in an articulated practice among unlike, but joined social partners."⁵⁶ The seagull fails as a symbolic stand-in or preformed political subject because we return persistently to its embodied situation. The lengthy scene contextualises the trans-corporeal approach of the film by making felt the failure of a politics of representation that relies on an extraction from environment.⁵⁷ In other words, the embodiments produced by *Leviathan* are ambiguous precisely because the film does not refer to the corporeality of individual bodies, but to the shared trans-corporeal embodiments that make all our relations felt.

Reading *Leviathan* through a phenomenological lens, or any interpretive approach based on representationalism, involves the wrong optics, the wrong set of epistemological and ontological assumptions. The film's multiple cameras eliminate any singular protagonist, human or non-human, that we might cling to. Here *Leviathan* does not follow the posthumanist documentary examples examined by Smaill in which "the animal [...] becomes the subject of point of view."⁵⁸ As we follow these cameras, which prioritise entanglements over individual corporealities, the spectator's singular integrity is threatened. Lisa Stevenson puts it nicely when she writes, "We become submerged and dissipated—we drown—in *Leviathan*'s deeps."⁵⁹ In this process we lose the ability to identify with any singular body onscreen. No frame can contain the encounter, no screen can shield the impact. What ethical possibilities emerge in this space in which empathic identification is rendered impossible?

Reading *Leviathan* through a trans-corporeal lens suggests that a maritime ethics involves learning to listen to the myriad voices of the world in which we find ourselves, voices that speak of the broader ecology in which we are enmeshed and undone as discrete subjects. The film evokes an embodiment based on mutual entanglement, in which nothing is separate; it traces the connections and processes that occur in and across the seas. Barad and Alaimo insist that we are responsible to others because of the "various ontological entanglements that materiality entails."⁶⁰ In *Leviathan*, these connections involve humans and their institutions, but they also involve non-human bodies and currents, from fish and seawater to gantry cranes and steel crates. The film portrays the world as an integrated set of processes that cannot be broken down into its constituent parts. As Barad notes, "differentiating is not a relation of radical exteriority, but of agential separability, of exteriority-within ... Intra-actions cut things together-apart (as one movement)."⁶¹ Fish, birds,

water, waves, foam, rust, bait, chains, nets and men are all depicted in *Leviathan* in the same disorienting and boundary-collapsing style.

As a critical posthumanism, trans-corporeality, by insisting on the material inter- and intra-connections between bodies and the substances and flows of the world, denies anthropocentric exceptionalism by considering all species as intermeshed with particular places and larger currents.⁶² *Leviathan* explicitly discourages fantasies of anthropomorphic transcendence and invulnerability that render things like environmentalism a merely elective and external enterprise. For Barad and Alaimo, “ethics begins not with an encounter between self and other, but with discerning the genealogies, substances, and agencies that diminish the distance between human and sea, as the human becomes more liquid, less solid.”⁶³ Filmmakers Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel present images of commercial fishing in a time when both marine life-forms and marine forms of life face threats on all sides.⁶⁴ As Alaimo notes, the destruction of marine environments is painful to contemplate: “Atomic testing. Dead zones. Oil spills. Industrial fishing, overfishing, trawling, long lines, shark finning, whaling. Bycatch, bykill, ghost nets ... Climate change. Ocean acidification. Ecosystem collapse. Extinction.”⁶⁵ At the same time, the micro-cameras in *Leviathan* also acknowledge the presence of the fishermen within these violent ecologies—the extreme close-ups on their bruised and scarred skin attests to the hardship of their exploited labour.

In *Leviathan*, these precarities are explored not polemically but *relationally*. Ethics here is not about a situated response to a radically exterior/ised other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are part. Learning to truly *listen* involves giving up the sovereign self upon which so many of our critical and conceptual

structures has heretofore depended; it means acknowledging that relations do not pre-exist relations. During a period in which human activity has become a dominant influence on climate and environment, an anthropocentric approach to questions of spectatorship and bearing witness cannot provide adequate grounding for a response to rising ecological collapse and mass extinction. Reading *Leviathan* from a trans-corporeal perspective shows that bearing witness can be seen as emerging out of the relations of force, connection, resonance and patterning of ecologies. Adequately recognizing the active agency of materiality in constituting the world and its meaning involves acknowledging the primary co-constitution of the observed and the agencies of observation. Ethics in the Anthropocene needs some of the posthuman horror of *Leviathan*—a film committed to developing an ethnographic attunement to the more-than-human entanglements that make life and death possible. The film invites us to interrogate the *Anthropos* in Anthropocene and question the centrality of the human in our understanding of ecology and environment. This is not to say that the film absolves the human of responsibility in this era of climate collapse—rather, it expands the question of responsibility, refusing to idealise it as a simple, situated response to an external other.

Near the end of *Leviathan*, a dead fish slides back and forth alongside the camera on the deck, slick with blood and water. It consistently misses its exit through a hole in the side of the ship. Still acting, eyes blinking, it seems suspended between subject and object, nature and culture, human and non-human. When it finally finds its way overboard, we may experience a flood of relief at the decisive categorisation; that is, until we tumble after it into that maelstrom that undoes categories, where entanglement is not the intertwining of separate entities, but their very *inseparability*.

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Notes

¹ Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 583.

² Philip Steinberg, "Non-Linearity in the ocean documentary," in *Documenting World Politics*, ed. Matt Davies (New York: Routledge, 2015), 89.

³ Stacy Alaimo, "Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea." *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 114.

⁴ Eugene Thacker, "Clouds of Unknowing." *In the Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1* (Zero Books, 2011), 5.

⁵ Alaimo, "Oceanic Origins," 112.

⁶ Matthew Battles, "Technology at Sea: Lucien Castaing-Taylor and V er ena Paravel," *Technology and Culture* 55, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 480.

⁷ Karen Barad, "Invertebrate Visions: Diffractions of the Brittlestar," in *The Multispecies Salon*, ed. Eben Kirskey (Duke University Press, 2014), 229.

⁸ Belinda Smill, *Regarding Life: Animals and the Documentary Moving Image* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 134.

⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 286.

¹⁰ Andrew Murphie, "Making sense: the transformation of documentary by digital and networked media," *Studies in Documentary Film* 8, no. 3 (2014): 193.

¹¹ Murphie, "Making sense," 193.

¹² Asbjorn Gronstad, *Film and the Ethical Imagination* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 208.

¹³ Murphie, "Making sense," 194.

¹⁴ Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 578.

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- ¹⁵ Barad, "Invertebrate Visions," 222.
- ¹⁶ Barad, "Invertebrate Visions," 232.
- ¹⁷ Murphie, "Making sense," 194.
- ¹⁸ Barad, "Invertebrate Visions," 237.
- ¹⁹ Barad, "Invertebrate Visions," 224.
- ²⁰ Thacker, "Clouds of Unknowing," 6.
- ²¹ Thacker, "Clouds of Unknowing," 2.
- ²² Thacker, "Clouds of Unknowing," 8.
- ²³ Barad, "Invertebrate Visions," 229.
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