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# (Eco)Traumatic Landscapes in Contemporary Audiovisual Culture

The epoch of the Anthropocene is characterized by the emergence of what could be called (eco)traumatic landscapes. These landscapes bear the tragic outcomes of human interference — which activities are not conducted by all humans nor do all humans benefit from such activities — in the environment. They are primarily defined by “hyperobjects,”<sup>1)</sup> a concept introduced by Timothy Morton to describe (human-made) things that are massively distributed in time and space compared to humans and are directly linked to “the end of the world.” In regions like Chernobyl, Fukushima, or the so-called “Sea of Plastic” in Almería (southern Spain), materials such as long-lasting plastics and nuclear substances exert prolonged and continuous harmful effects not only on the natural elements like water, soil, and air but also on both human and non-human life forms in the area and (eventually) beyond. The harm inflicted by these invisible “perpetrators” — nuclear, plastic, or agrochemical agents — unfolds gradually over years and generations, illustrating Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence,” a common outcome of what is termed “toxic geographies.”<sup>2)</sup> Nixon’s idea of this specific form of violence, associated with capitalist and industrial societies, draws attention to the social repercussions and human suffering in these regions and environments. Slow violence also challenges conventional notions of space and time and prompts artistic and theoretical inquiries into representation, visibility, medium specificity, agency, and affectivity.

The inspiration for this discussion comes from recognizing that certain photographic works, experimental films, and expanded cinema pieces, employing unique formal strategies, compel us to confront the complexities of documenting slow violence within the

1) Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

2) Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

realm of audiovisual arts. Specific experimental films and documentaries, as theorized by Scott MacDonald, fall under the category of “eco cinema.”<sup>3)</sup> These works aim not to create conventional Hollywood or documentary narratives with pro-environmental themes but instead offer new types of cinematic experiences that challenge traditional media spectatorship and foster a more environmentally conscious mindset. While MacDonald primarily highlights cinematic works that immerse viewers in natural processes, emphasizing patience and mindfulness, the articles in this issue seek to expand the category to include audiovisual works that may not solely focus on these aspects but still contribute to an environmentally progressive mindset by providing sensory experiences related to hyperobjects, such as global warming, radiation, long-lasting pollution effects, resource extraction, and more. Consequently, the contributors to this issue aim to explore how artistic practices shape and redefine human agency in the context of (social-ecological) traumatic events, considering the role of technology and materiality in translating trauma into (sensory) artworks.

In the opening article, “Traumatic Landscapes from Above: Images of Colonization and Violence in the Sea of Plastic,” Loreto García Saiz and Miguel Fernández Labayen depict an area in Southern Spain which is commonly called the “Sea of Plastic.” This geographic region has been widely portrayed by aircrafts, satellites, and drones from the 1950s to the present. The authors understand the resulting images as visual testimonies of the Anthropocene inasmuch as they allow us to document the “slow violence” that has taken place in this space over decades. At the same time, however, they also point out that these visual depictions of the Sea of Plastic only capture the visible part of the bigger hyperobject, in this context the plastic, and fail to register the effects of agro-industrial activities taking place in this region in the long term such as desertification, aquifers’ overexploitation, and long-life plastic waste. By emphasizing the tension these images hold, García Saiz and Fernández Labayen wish to underpin the representational challenges that are involved in the efforts of representing traumatic landscapes.

Focusing on the environmental impact of film production, Salomé Lopes Coelho in “The Rhythms of More-Than-Human Matter in Azucena Losana’s Eco-Developed Film Series *Metarretratos*” explores the Mexican experimental filmmaker Azucena Losana’s eco-developing project, *Metarretratos*. This series of short films, as Lopes Coelho argues, is part of a movement that seeks less environmentally harmful film-developing solutions. What makes Losana’s project especially interesting is the fact that she uses exclusively native plants of South America experimenting with their chemical and curative properties. Furthermore, as Lopes Coelho puts it, the three tree portraits that are part of *Metarretratos* are not only depicted in these films but also employed in the film-developing recipe, thus foregrounding vegetal worlds as protagonists in complex ways. The author argues that Losana’s eco-developing project reveals the agency of both the vegetal and the cinematic matter in co-creating images, forms, and the world itself. On a more speculative note, Lopes Coelho also suggests that the curative properties of the plants used in the development of the films affect the cinematic dispositif involved in *Metarretratos*, thereby

3) Scott MacDonald, “Toward an Eco-Cinema,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11, no. 2 (2004), 107–132.

transposing these qualities beyond themselves performing curative mechanisms for eco-traumatic landscapes at different spatial and temporal scales.

Erica Biolchini in “Becoming-Grains-of-Mercury: Documentaries, Posthumanism, and the Entanglements of Traumas” invites the readers to re-think ecology-related trauma through a temporal lens that does not only consider the condition of post-trauma but proposes the idea of “environmental, social, and psychical post- and pre-traumatic syndrome of entanglements of trauma(s).” Giving a detailed analysis of Artavazd Pelechian’s *Nature* (2019) and Chloé Malcotti’s *Medusa* (2020), Biolchini argues for the necessity to challenge and renew traditional perspectives on trauma and its temporality also acknowledging the entangled nature of “our” terrestrial existence. Inspired by Félix Guattari’s *The Three Ecologies* (1989), she aims to think transversally and trans-corporeally about the enmeshment of the conditions of pre- and post-trauma that do not only affect humans but extend to non-human beings and the Earth itself and by that wishes to establish an ethico-aesthetic discourse between trauma studies and posthumanism. Ultimately, Biolchini urges “us” to look for alternatives, and become suggestive and visionary in our endeavor in imagining a future that is freed from the endless return of the same environmental catastrophes.

In the study, “Diffractive Way of Thinking and the Possibilities of Capturing Ecological Trauma in Tomonari Nishikawa’s *sound of a million insects, light of a thousand stars* (2014),” I employ the term diffraction borrowed from new materialist discourses whose qualities are quite underexplored in the field of film studies but — as I argue — have important implications for questions that are frequently asked about the nature of ecological trauma and its representation. With a case study of Tomonari Nishikawa’s film, *sound of a million insects, light of a thousand stars*, the article also explores the ways ecologically engaged experimental films can capture the sense of eco-trauma experience by challenging the idea of common-sense representationalism as a mode of knowledge-producing. In an effort to outline a framework in which ecological trauma is approached through connectedness, I turn to both Karen Barad’s “agential realist onto-epistemology”<sup>4)</sup> and look for the guidance of certain Indigenous chains of thought. Ultimately, I also argue that Nishikawa’s film offers a different way of seeing and knowing promoting a diffractive way of thinking rather than “reflecting back” (reconstructing, re-playing) the social-ecological traumas that pervade the catastrophic events of the 2011 Fukushima tsunami.

Lastly, in the closing article of this issue, “‘Traumatomic’ Encounters Trauma through Radioactivity in Photofilmic ‘Experimental Documents’ of Chernobyl,” Beja Margitházi focuses on the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and discusses three site-related artistic projects: Alice Miceli’s *Chernobyl Project* (2006–2010), Lina Selander’s *Lenin’s Lamp Glows in the Peasant’s Hut* (2011), and Daniel McIntyre’s *Lion* series (2011–2014). Margitházi argues that despite their differences all these works are produced by what she calls “traumatomic encounters” with the radiation-contaminated site of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and share a perception of Chernobyl as a “traumascape.” As she points out, Miceli’s, Selander’s, and McIntyre’s projects were inspired by direct contact with the space itself (entering and crossing the area) yet the artists do not seek to directly capture the effects of nuclear trau-

4) Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

ma. They tend to provide the phenomenological study and reproduction of radiation and radioactivity. As Margitházi states, the projects analyzed in her study promote inquiries into the affective nature of nuclear trauma while also attempting to approach the hyperobjective phenomenon that radiation is.

Although the articles of this issue have different takes on the idea of (eco)traumatic landscapes, they all point towards the various ways ecology and trauma are weaved together. Through specific examples of experimental cinema, these papers may provide pointers as to how one might conceive the nature and behavior of such hyperobjects as plastic or radiation, revisit their understanding of time through inquiries into the temporality of trauma and critically engage with cinema and its production.

### Bibliography

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