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The Infinite Sorrow of Water

Tanja Deman's *Horizon* (*Horizont*, 2021)

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Croatian filmmaker Tanja Deman's experimental film essay *Horizon* is a beautiful and tragic exploration of the effects of the current ecological crisis on the Balkans. The Adriatic Sea provides the setting for a meditation on nature itself pining over a world that is disappearing before our eyes. The film is an emotive and romantic voyage on the sea whereby the camera confronts nature, but it is also a pragmatic and well-researched essay on the disastrous effects of pollution on the sea. The Adriatic Sea has its own mythology in the Balkans – it is a place of many cross-Balkan encounters, as it can be accessed from Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Slovenia as well as Italy, engendering a rich and complicated history (the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantine Empire, the Croatian Kingdom, the Republic of Venice, the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottomans have all set foot in the area). It is also a highly touristic place, the islands of Croatia and Montenegro welcoming many visitors each year, domestic and foreign alike.

That being said, the film rarely delves into the historical and cultural intricacies of the place. Rather, it adopts a god-like, omniscient point of view, taking us on a trip on which we meet no humans and hardly any signs of culture. Yet, this is clearly meant to undo the illusion of the sea being an idyllic and untouched area of water. We learn that in fact the Adriatic is one of the most polluted waters in all of Europe. An anonymous person or entity, perhaps the filmmaker, narrates the voice-over, relating how she visits the sea to "make sure it was still there", that it is "still wet, vast and powerful". The film gradually reveals that life has been drained from the sea and that, in that regard, the visit reveals itself to be a "failed escape". Exposing the urgency of the crisis in the Adriatic Sea through poetic imagery, the film positions itself in the ecological romanticism wave that characterizes much of recent ecological experimental cinema, which shifts the view away from humanist concerns and instead expresses empathy for the integrity of the planet, in this case taking on both an apocalyptic and a nostalgic view of things.

Despite its depersonalized view of things in the form of landscape cinematography, the voice-over is narrated in the first-person. At first, the 'I', seems to be the voice of the filmmaker attempting to escape to the sea to see what remains of it. But progressively, the first-person narrative seems to adopt the view of an anonymous knowledgeable entity that has lived through different centuries, from prehistoric times to Ancient Greece and from before the Anthropocene to our contemporary world. The voice testifies to the changes that Mother Nature had to undergo throughout history. The voice-over entity/person is able to think and dream, and it is also able to smell the inorganic pollution on the surface of the sea, thereby gradually taking on a form of god-like omniscience.

Horizon is a poetic homage to the way that the sea and the sky appear to touch in the distance, but the film's title is also a metaphor for our future. The image of a blurry horizon becomes progressively clearer in the opening sequences of the film. The sun rises and unblurs the images, but the screen becomes blurry again in the end of the film as the sun sets. This cyclical transformation in the cinematography mimics our contemporary sense of our time on earth missing a horizon. Arthur Rimbaud had already meditated about the ambiguity of the horizon, when in his poem "L'Eternité," he stated: "Found again. What? Eternity. The sea gone With the sun?" Or rather, the film could be saying in Rimbaud's words that there is "[…] no hope, No new start."?[1] Arthur Rimbaud reveals the ambivalent symbolism of the horizon at the time. It was used as a symbol for nature's eternity, but was also thought to reflect collective hopelessness as the multiple revolutions of the 19th century had failed, leaving European civilization with the sense that history is not advancing and forcing us to retreat into our individual selves. In Tanja Deman's film, we follow a similar path of thinking as we watch the horizon. The horizon appears as an image of eternal beauty, but also as a warning sign for the failure of the capitalist system. Ideas of progress rhyme with ecological disasters and thereby prevent us from being able to imagine a better future.

The beauty of the images of the Adriatic scene also contrast with the alarming parts of the voice-over that cite the scientific conclusions of pollution in the region. Just like *Uvala,* another Croatian film shown in the national competition at 25 FPS (the Zagreb Experimental Film Festival), the absence of human contact is there to be perverted. *Uvala* pictured the empty cove of Slana in Croatia where a concentration camp used to be operated – there, the absence reflects our blindness to the memory of a place. In *Horizon*, images of sunrises and vast views of untouched islands appear on the screen, almost resembling postcards. That is until we eventually see images of masses of plastic on the shore. The absence of humans throughout the whole film mirrors a vision of nature as a separate entity that is untouched and separated from humanity and culture. But the fallacy is revealed when plastic debris appears and the impact of humans on nature is finally exposed. "The underwater world has been plundered and desolated," the voice claims. "The more I watched the sea

the more I saw us," is a mysterious sentence also stated by the voice. "Us" standing for us humans in the film, the sea becomes a mirror for our gaze upon nature. The absence of wildlife recordings can also be seen as a mirror for human presence and the devastation that the prevalence of plastic has caused. The film claims that in the 50s and 60s, scientists believed in the ability of the ocean to digest our waste, but today we know that it in fact accumulates in deep sea canyons.

One of the aims of the film is to play with the idea that the sea itself has emotions. The attribution of human feelings to things found in nature that is often used in romantic literature is called a "pathetic fallacy". Here the human empathy *for* the sea becomes the pain *of* the sea. The sea is personified, it feels the pain of being drained of its life – that is mainly its fauna and flora and hence its vitality. The voice-over states that there is a "deep and silent pain under the shimmering waters. Pain of emptiness – as the sea is emptied out." The desire to capture its life is vain: "The camera is failing to capture something that is no longer there. It records the absence", it continues. This self-reflexive comment addresses the link between the camera's recordings of the vast flat empty surface of the sea and the revelation of the absence of wildlife underneath it. "Seas haven't been this acidic since the last 65 million years", the voice tells us. Absence is then materialized in the film through imagery of an empty lighthouse: we see the empty rooms and corridors of a lighthouse, open windows with wind blowing through, and photographs of empty waters hanging on the walls. We see images of a Fresnel lens of the lighthouse, and images that recall a blurry horizon, as if the sea, seemingly lifeless, flattened, and melancholic, were captured from within it. In this, the imagery of *Horizon* resonates with French philosopher and literary theorist Gaston Bachelard's poetry, which attributes poetic emotion to elements. Bachelard claims in his book *Water and Dreams* that representations of death and sorrow through water usually picture water as horizontal, as if pensive, throughout literary history: "Daily death is the death of water. Water always flows, water always falls, it always ends in its horizontal death. In innumerable examples we will see that for the materializing imagination the death of water is more pensive than the death of the earth: the sorrow of water is infinite."[2]

At times, the film seems overly romantic as it shows clichéd imagery of an all-encompassing nature, specifically views of the Milky Way and sublime cosmic imagery. The obvious disgust for the contemporary world that underlies the film is complemented by nostalgia for a long-lost past in which our relation to nature was presumably perfect. An image of ruins on an archeological site on an island appears, as if taken from a picturesque romantic painting, while the voice differentiates the now in which we live from a time where offerings to supernatural forces were a common deed, and in which people thought of the island as a sacred place. *Horizon,* through its pessimistic romanticism, fits Edgar Morin's definition of ecological romanticism: "The yearning for nature does not only express the myth of a lost nature in the past; it also expresses

the *hic et nunc* needs of beings who feel pressured, oppressed, downtrodden in an artificial and abstract world."[3] In this regard, Mateja Zidaric's *Pleiades*, which screened in the national competition of 25 FPS, seems more subversive as it immerses itself in digital culture to understand our rapport with nature and the planets. Instead of succumbing to nostalgia, the film points to a new form of digital awe underlying our computerized relation to the cosmos.

Horizon calls on our responsibility, but it voices little hope for the future – it calls upon the superiority of being over having, of immaterial values over using nature as a disrespected resource. The evocation of a dream of a whale swimming on an island seen from the sky at the end of the film, is the ultimate call for developing a relationship to wildlife which is respectful of nature's beauty, a beauty that is greater than us and thus stands at odds with the idea of humans being "masters and possessors of nature", as Descartes had infamously put it.

As we listen to the archaic chants that make up the soundtrack, we become conscious of the meeting between an ancient and idealized past and an apocalyptic future that materializes in the image of the horizon. Our awe for nature is perverted by the film as the sea turns out to have been emptied out, emptied of its wildlife and its cyclical life essence, but perhaps also of its positive emotions. Although subtly filmed and remarkably aesthetic, the romantic tone of the film often disregards the multiple cultural, historical, and sociological factors that are at stake in an environmental crisis. At other times, while revealing vital scientific information that is relevant to the issue, the explanatory style of the voice-over feels somewhat didactic. Tanja Deman's film is most convincing when it plays with the idea that the sea is also experiencing pain, and that ecological thought should ascribe emotions to non-human entities as well. In the film, the horizon seems to mirror our quest for understanding humanity's future, and thus confirms what Bachelard poetically said about water in his *Water and Dreams*: "To disappear into deep water or to disappear toward a far horizon, to become part of depth or infinity, such is the destiny of man that finds its image in the destiny of water."[4]

References

1. Rimbaud, Arthur. Collected Poems, 2001 [translated by Martin Sorrell]. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 180-182.
2. Bachelard, Gaston. Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter, 1942 [translated by Edith R. Farrell]. The Pegasus Foundation, Dallas, p. 6.

3. Morin, Edgar. “Pour une nouvelle conscience planétaire’’. Le Monde diplomatique, October 1989.
4. Bachelard 1942, p. 12.