Filming with the Ocean

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One of cinema's greatest powers is its animism. On the screen there is no still life. Objects have attitudes. Trees gesture. Mountains, like this Etna, signify. Each element of staging becomes a character.[1]

With this text, I will consider the cinematic space of the ocean alongside Jean Epstein's film *Le Tempestaire* from 1947, a film in which Epstein, by making the storm its main protagonist, investigates cinema's potential for converging human and non-human perspectives. For Epstein, cinema has the ability to displace the human optics in order to help us experience the world in unfamiliar ways, and hence to embody it otherwise.

Provided that what images *do* affects the ways in which we relate to and become part of the world, I wish to consider, with Epstein and others, their potential for drawing together, rather than dividing, the human and more-than-human realms; and to think about what role visual media play in the historical division of these spheres. What does it mean to relocate subjectivity to non-human subjects, making the storm and the ocean the co-creators of film?

For me, thinking with Epstein arises out of a need to think about image-making from a position holding uncertain futures: one of environmental destruction, extractive capitalism, and political distress. Working from the premise that we need to rethink our (human) position in this world, I ask what alternatives do we have to persistent understandings of technology as the mere extension of human perception, inexorably tied up with ideas of modernity and progress, as well as to linear temporality and spatial separation, anthropocentrism and land-based thought? In what ways does Epstein's oceanic filmmaking break with dominant understandings of film and photography as an apparatus of distance, and if so, how does this shift towards an apparatus of connectivity embody new political imaginaries?

Considering the cinematic space of the ocean means thinking with the motion substantiated in the ocean. It urges us to partly leave our land-based thinking and to engage in what Epstein calls a 'philosophy of the fluid', operating as a kind of counter current to dominant modes of thought. This other philosophy is one that lacks any unique centre or perspective, and instead constitutes a fluid space of becoming. Perhaps paradoxically though, it is one that is always existing in relationship to real environments and bodily affects – not relatively, but relationally. As Epstein and others will show us, this requires that we pay attention to the joint apparatus of the camera as an 'intelligent machine', the

1 Jean Epstein, 'Cinema seen from Etna' [1926] trans. Stuart Liebman, in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, eds. Sarah Keller & Jason H. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 289.

material world we inhabit, *and* the sensory perceiver, attuned to it as conditions for thought.

Over the course of two decades, Epstein made several films on the islands of the Ouessant archipelago and in mainland Brittany: *Finis Terrae* (1929), *Mor vran* (1931), *L'Or des Mers* (1932), *Chanson d'Armor* (1934) and *Le Tempestaire* (1947). These films form part of a largely unfinished project usually referred to as the *Breton Poems*. At the time when he made these films, these places were difficult to access, marginalised by the French state and with little or limited access to modern technologies. Although dominated by the church, these fishing communities had kept local traditions and beliefs intact for centuries. People living there were poor but self-sufficient. All the films Epstein made in the region portray the real life in these com munities, and the (human) actors were the men, women and children living there.

The first of Epstein's *Breton Poems*, *Finis Terrae* from 1929, tells the story of fishermen gathering and burning kelp on the islands of Bannec and Balenec. The large brown seaweed was gathered, dried, and then burned in order to provide potash for the European manufacturing industries producing glass, soap, fertiliser, gunpowder, etcetera. Making potash by burning kelp was a way for people in coastal communities to earn some money. Although Brittany was regarded as marginal (even backwards) from the point of view of the metropolitan centres of European identity and culture, its resources and labour were certainly important for their growth. As such, it is a place that complicates our understanding of the modern; and clearly this was a place where Epstein was able to investigate the tensions between the cinema, what he calls the 'intelligent machine', the human sensory apparatus, and the real forces of the material world. When writing about his reasons for moving from Paris to Brittany, he says that: 'I was drawn by what I no longer know'.[2]

Epstein's relocation from Paris to Brittany not only expressed his disbelief in the distinctions between margin and centre, but also confirmed his belief that the encounter between cinema and the oceanic expands human perception and understanding in ways that disturb the 'very foundations of philosophy.'[3] That which we 'no longer know' exists as a virtual dimension of the image. It involves the potential for different regimes of visuality that defy the hierarchies of vision and

2 Quoted in Rachel Moore, 'A Different Nature', in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 186.
3 Quoted in James Schneider, 'Cinema Seen from the Seas: Epstein and the Oceanic', in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 197.

touch – between the ocular and the haptic – in ways that awaken our sensorial perception, forming other modes of subjectivities. It is an apparatus that evokes pre-modern minds and bodies untamed by the rationalising forces of modernity. In what follows, I will speculate on what emergent understandings of the world might appear through following the dramaturgies of *Le Tempestaire*.

The wind-healer and the techno-magical

The first character – a superhuman character – whose collaboration had to be ensured in order to make Le Tempestaire, was obviously the storm.

Jean Epstein's 1947 film *Le Tempestaire* is 'a poem of the ocean told by the wind'.[4] Addressing the oceans, the tides, and the tempests as much as it does its apparent protagonists, the film is based around the Breton legend of wind-healers. These are elders, often reclusive, who have the power to calm the storm. After a turbulent title sequence, in which the camera seems to flutter freely in the Brittany winter storm, the film opens in stillness. Boats in the harbour of Belle-Île-en-Mer are stranded by low tide. Life seems frozen (immobilised) by the absence of ocean and wind. Images of calm seashores are alternated with still images. In one, a group of men are waiting, looking out over sea. Still but rugged landscapes. In another still image, two women sit at a spinning wheel. Silence.

Gradually, the tide comes back. As if set in motion by the sea, the spinning wheel starts turning. Or, it might be the other way around, as this pre-industrial wheel for making fibres into yarn resembles a camera, or a projector, manually fed through the back-and-forth movements of hands pulling and twisting. Waves roll onto shore in forward and reverse motion. The wind picks up. With the returning ocean the boats are again floating vessels and men prepare them for fishing. The world is set in motion.

The narrative plot of *Le Tempestaire* is fairly straightforward. A young woman fears for her lover who is going fishing in the Sardines. She is afraid the impending storm will take him and perceives it a bad omen that a gust of wind just opened the door to her house. When sharing her concerns, she is being told off by an older woman who tells her not to believe in omens. 'It's forbidden', she claims.

4 Quoted in Schneider, 'Cinema Seen from the Seas: Epstein and the Oceanic', in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 203.

The wind intensifies, and so do the worries of the young woman. By night-time she is terrified, her face illuminated by the pulsating flashes from the local lighthouse while the film cuts between her face and the dramatic explosions of waves along the coast. There is nothing pictorial about *Le Tempestaire*. We are literally inside the textures and chaos of the storm. Water fills the air as the unruly ocean forcefully crashes against cliffs. The water surely finds its way onto, and possibly into, the camera as well as those operating it. For Epstein, the unpredictability of the weather constitutes an important element as it obstructs rational thought (and our need to hold on to a stable ground) from dominating all human activity. Here, the ocean and the wind fulfil this function of that which is beyond (human) control.

'This is the real wind. And there was this bad omen…' the young woman says. This time she's not entirely dismissed by the older woman. 'In my time', she responds, 'they said some people could heal the wind. The storm tamers, they called them. Old people who could command the tempest and were obeyed by it. Then the sea would calm down. But these are old stories. One should not believe them now.'

The next morning the storm is still raging, and the young woman leaves for the lighthouse with the pretext of asking the operator if they have news of the boat. But in fact, she is completely uninterested in the technologies they have to offer: 'Do you know any wind-healer?' she asks the lighthouse operator as she enters. 'A healer?' he responds. 'There is the radio. It doesn't heal, but it's a great help to sailors.' The operator points to the wireless. She doesn't give it a glance.

Eventually, the lighthouse operator gives her directions to a father Floch, the wind-healer, now a well-known drunk: 'If you pay him a bottle of wine, he will give you a nice little weather forecast.' While she hurries in search for him, the camera crosscuts back and forth between father Floch working in his garden, a close-up of the lighthouse radio and the ocean crashing against the cliffs of Belle-Île.

Inside the house of the wind-healer, the young woman finds that he is not that easy to convince. As if frightened by the very idea of practising his mastery, father Floch says: 'I don't want no trouble, miss. I don't do that kind of things. Don't want no trouble.' Here, something starts to happen with the duration of the film. The face of the woman is speechless and in slow motion, as if revealing her emotional inner currents, the sound is distorted – time extended.

Eventually, the wind-healer gives in to her speechless plea and takes out his glass globe (or float) stored deep inside a cabinet. He investigates the

sphere and an image of the sky – clouds moving in speed with high-pitched sounds – appears inside it. As we see him looking into the globe a second time, the image is sped up even further. Soon the ocean appears in the glass. Altered by speed and slowness, the globe is now transformed into a kind of cinematic device. In it, the sea is raging with noisy foam and swirling currents. The film crosscuts between the image of the ocean in slow motion, flashing closeups of the radio back at the lighthouse, the superimposed ocean on the glass sphere, and the wind-healer – now blowing onto or into the globe. Throughout this sequence, wind and sea noises are re-recorded with various durations. The wind-healer's magical mastering of time reverberates through specific cinematic functions: it interrupts, enlarges, shrinks, zooms, cuts, slows down, speeds up and superimposes visual-acoustic experiences. Under the forces of his breath, the ocean waves slow down until, eventually, they start moving in reverse. This reverse motion calms the sea. Epstein writes, 'slowed down eight times, a wave also develops an atmosphere of sympathetic magic'.[5] Technology, and magic collapse together. For Epstein, sonic deceleration is 'a magnifying glass for sound in time'.[6] The ear needs it in order to shift and displace human perspectives. The slowed-down sound helps us access the finer reality of the 'monotonous and confusing howling of a storm' and to show that it is made up of a multitude of 'different sounds never heard before: an apocalypse of screams, cooing, rumble, cheeping, detonations, tones and accents, most of which do not even have a name.'[7]

Despite the use of forward and reverse motion, speeding-up and deceleration of both sound and image in *Le Tempestaire*, Epstein is little interested in trickery. He dismisses the use of photomontage and complicated technical refinements inherent to a modernist aesthetics. Finding true mysteries does not require tricks as 'the camera discovers them by itself. … the only sorcery the film requires is the basic faculty, of its organic and natural power of making things and events larger or smaller in space or time.'[8] Epstein did not accede to the progressive linearity, based on speed, discontinuity, and fragmentation associated with the contemporary French avant-garde. 'Cinema needs a rear-guard' he stated, one 'whose inglorious mission is to conquer nothing but to cling to the spot and simply die there.'[9]

5 Jean Epstein, 'Timeless Time' [1946], trans. Stuart Liebman, *October*, no. 3 (Spring, 1977), 20.
6 Jean Epstein, 'The Slow Motion of Sound' [1948] trans. Franck Le Gac, in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 382.
7 Epstein, 'The Slow Motion of Sound', 382
8 Jean Epstein, 'The Reality of Fairyland' [1947], quoted in Rachel Moore, 'A Different Nature' in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 189.
9 Jean Epstein,"Naissance d'une académie" [1946], ESC2, p. 75., quoted in Nicole Brenez, "Ultra-Modern: Jean Epstein, or Cinema "Serving the Forces of Transgression and Revolt"", 232.

This clinging to a spot – or perhaps a 'staying with the trouble'[10] – points to the necessary conditions for making unforeseeable connections between 'the intelligent machine', the body as a sensory apparatus, and the material world and real environments of which it is a part. When contemplating his role as a cinematographer from the specific location of (the fluid mountain) Etna in Sicily, Epstein writes: 'Ah, I fear the futurists who are itching to replace true dramas by false ones made with whatever is at hand: aviation and central heating, consecrated hosts, and the world war. I fear they will only write some third-rate acting scenes for the crystals and jellyfish of cinema.'[11]

The sensory apparatus of seeing (punctum, aura, and the photogenic)

According to Epstein, the world that reveals itself to us through cinematic attention is a world that has been hidden by naming, classification, and mechanisms of reification. Sonic deceleration (the close-up of sound), as described above, exemplifies Epstein's view that cinema's technoscientific capabilities can expand the boundaries of what sounds can be considered and understood as speech and speaking. This technology has the ability to liberate our conformed (human) senses in ways that 'make it possible for all beings, all objects to speak.'[12] Through the specificities of cinema – its elements, attentions, movements, and affects 'unattended, without words'[13] – conviction alights from the screen and 'words slither like wet cakes of soap around what we try to say'.[14] This is cinema's ability for precision 'on the margin of words, beyond and before them',[15] it is what Epstein calls 'photogénie'.

This term, 'photogénie', is not exclusive to Epstein's thinking. It appears in articles by several filmmakers and critics in relation to silent film in the beginning of the 1920s. However, Epstein held onto the concept even after silent cinema gave way to sound and the term faded from use.

10 The phrase 'staying with the trouble' comes from Donna J. Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). 'Staying with the trouble' points to how we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations – what Haraway calls 'oddkin'. Using the imagery of hot compost piles, she shows us how 'we become – with each other or not at all' (p. 4).
11 Epstein, 'Cinema seen from Etna', 289.
12 Epstein, 'The Slow Motion of Sound', 382.
13 Jean Epstein 'The Photogenic Element' [1926] trans. Tom Milne, in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 301.
14 Epstein 'The Photogenic Element', 301.
15 Jean Epstein, 'To a Second Reality, a Second Reason' [1947] trans. Sarah Keller, in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 326.

As a concept it shares some immediate similarities to both Roland Barthes's concept of 'punctum' as it is described in *Camera Lucida* (1981) and to Walter Benjamin's term 'aura' as it appears 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935). However, these concepts operate in fundamentally different ways. I will only schematically touch on Barthes's punctum and Benjamin's aura here in order to return to what is important in Epstein's concept of photogénie.

Barthes's punctum is a concept that gains its specificity through its relationship to what he calls 'studium'. While studium constitutes our ability to 'read' the image itself – as political testimony or historical scene – as well as to analytically understand the intentions of the photographer – punctum, instead, constitutes that which escapes rational thought. It is the, often specific, detail of a photograph that strikes and fascinates the viewer. Barthes describes punctum in terms of a 'sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of dice'.[16] The punctum is that which disturbs the studium: 'A photograph's "punctum" is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.[17] Barthes's punctum might be understood in terms of a theory that, much like the psychoanalytic case studies, attempts to capture in time, space, and language something whose dynamic presence remains elusive to the viewer. Although Barthes's concept, like that of Epstein, points towards these elusive qualities of the photographic image (to a space outside, or besides, language), for Barthes, what the photograph 'does' remains within the psychological framework of the viewer.

Benjamin's concept of aura shares more of a likeness with photogénie in the sense that it relates to the apparatus of images (its place in mass modernity), but with very different implications. For Benjamin, 'even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: Its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.'[18] This unique cultural context is what he calls 'aura', or 'that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction.'[19]

For Benjamin, the destruction of auratic distance is intimately linked with contemporary mass movements and is essentially described in terms of loss; the loss of the original in a plurality of reproductions – a world of copies – that substitutes for unique existence. As the reproduction meets the beholder or listener in their own particular situa-

16 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* [1981] trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 27.
17 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.
18 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [1935] in *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 214.
19 Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 215.

tion, a process is created in which only the object reproduced is being reactivated. This process, according to Benjamin, generates a new mode of embodiment that constitutes 'the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.'[20] The most powerful agent for this undermining of the 'uniqueness of every reality' is, according to Benjamin, film.

But where Benjamin warns against cinema as that which feeds 'the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" at the expense of the unique experience', Epstein argues, on the contrary, that the vision of the singularity of filmic objects preserves their 'character' and 'gesture' (their photogénie). As Christophe Wall-Romana asserts when comparing the two:

> while Benjamin's aura as a qualitative loss is the exact opposite of photogénie as a qualitative enhancement, both describe the very same phenomenon at the level of the body: a qualitative shift in the mode of embodiment due to cinema and cinema alone.[21]

So, what mode of embodiment, then, are we talking about then when we are talking about Epstein's photogénie? It is clearly not the psychoanalytical model of Barthes punctum. In fact, Epstein denounces Freud's rationalisation of the unconscious as a detective scenario of bourgeois sexuality.[22] It is also not the embodiment of the duped masses of industrialism, as described by Benjamin in the 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' essay, who accept likeness (reproduction) as the stand-in for unique experience of reality.

In 'On Certain Characteristics of Photogénie' from 1923, collected in *The Cinema Seen from Etna* (1926), Epstein defines the photogenic as 'any aspect of things, beings or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction.'[23] In other words, contrary to the understanding of the mechanism of cinema as an extension of human faculties (as representation, copy or simulacrum), the photogenic – occurring through the joint apparatus made up of body, machine and material world – is an enhancement of the 'moral' qualities of 'things,

20 Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 217.
21 Christophe Wall-Romana, *Jean Epstein: Corporeal Cinema and Film Philosophy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 30.
22 See Jean Epstein, 'Freud or the Nick-Carterianism in Psychology', and Christophe Wall-Romana, 'Epstein's Photogénie as Corporeal Vision: Inner Sensation, Queer Embodiment, and Ethics', in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 57.
23 Jean Epstein, 'On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*' [1926] trans. Tom Milne, in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 291.

beings and souls'. As a configuration, 'photogénie' reminds us of what Donna Haraway argues for when she states that 'optical instruments are subject-shifters'.[24] That, rather than producing effects of distance, these optical instruments make for 'effects of connection, of embodiment, and of responsibility for an imagined elsewhere'.[25]

Epstein states that 'photogénie is to be conjugated in the future and imperative. It is never a state'.[26] As such, it relates to the understanding of being as always existing in relationship to. As a cinematic aspect it is mobile to the extent that 'nothing and no one are what they are, but become, rather, whatever they become.'[27] By converging the material, the technological, and the sensorial, which move and vary simultaneously in space and time, this 'becoming' of the medium is related to cinema's capacity for de-humanising human vision. One that allows for seeing otherwise. A corporeal vision of that which we 'no longer know'. Through bodily affects and non-visual sensations, the photogenic is connected to what Epstein calls 'coenaesthesis' – the general feeling of inhabiting one's body that arises from multiple stimuli from various bodily organs. Photogenes are 'sensorial logarithms'[28] – 'a primitive, fetal, and very much animal sensibility'[29] that allow for seeing not only with the eyes, but with the entire body. When our sensorial insides meet 'the dance of the landscape', then 'the very mystery of body and soul, the very plot of thought and matter, the very knot of the plurality and unity of the self, the very quid pro quo of the real and the unreal, the very play of subjectivity and objectivity are sprawled on the screen to be touched, palpated, traversed, searched'.[30] It is, as it were, coenaesthesis. A corporeal openness towards the other.

Through the notion of the photogénie – and the understanding that materiality is as much in the matter of film and the camera itself as in the world through which it engages – Epstein challenges the avant-garde endorsement of the destructive potential of technology (as in Futurism, and the fascist or imperialist tendency that is closely related to it) as well as the melancholy despair at the losses entailed

24 Donna Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others', in *Cultural Studies*, eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 295.
25 Haraway, 'The Promises of Monsters', 295.
26 Quoted in Wall-Romana, 'Epstein's Photogénie as Corporeal Vision', 53.
27 Epstein, 'To a Second Reality, a Second Reason', 324
28 Epstein, Bonjour cinéma, ESC1, 94; 'Magnification,' Abel1, p. 236.
29 Jean Epstein, Le Cinéma du diable [1947], ESC1, p. 367. See also, Wall-Romana, 'Epstein's Photogénie as Corporeal Vision', 52.
30 Jean Epstein, 'The Delirium of a Machine' trans. Christophe Wall-Romana, in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 373.

by that destructive force (as in Benjamin). He rejects these logics by prompting that we 'cling to a spot'. For Epstein, taking the technological potentials of the camera seriously means considering the human social-technical spheres as well as nonhuman biological, chemical, and geological processes. It involves being open to our 'sensorial logarithms' as well as to how we are situated in the environments we inhabit, revealing as it were, the interdependence and co-production of human and nonhuman regimes.

Rewinding, undoing, and unlearning – cinema as non-linear space

The idea of the technological apparatus as a destructive force is closely connected to the many histories of photography. In her book *Potential History, Unlearning Imperialism*, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay develops an explicit connection between photography and imperialism.[31] She urges us to imagine that the origin of photography goes back to 1492, the year when Christopher Columbus – after crossing the Atlantic Ocean – reached the American continent. As such, this moment symbolically marks the beginning of the processes of dispossession through expulsion, separation, and colonisation – from transatlantic slavery to the dispossession of Palestinians in 1948 and onwards. With imperialism and colonialism, Azoulay argues, the thought structure that makes photography possible is already in place. She describes these structures in terms of a series of (self-proclaimed) colonial and imperialist 'rights', such as: the right to unlimited access to all places (including holy places), the right to destroy existing worlds (and to put 'new' worlds in their place), the right to define what is 'new' (and consequently what is obsolete), the right to acquire the wealth, resources and labour of others, etcetera.

Another connected 'right' constitutive to imperial violence pointed out by Azoulay, is the right to take materials and objects from their connection to place, function and context, and to place them in museums around the world as 'representations'. She explains how the transition from imperial looting to today's democratic institutions was made possible, first and foremost, through the separation of Art History from the discipline of History. Azoulay analyses how the practice of imperial looting was obscured and transformed into the history of collecting, and compellingly argues that this transformation is at the heart of the modern formation of what is called Art. Thus Art, serving as the cornerstone of modernist aesthetics, became a transcendental category through atrocities like the Congolese Genocide. 'Modern art is not a historical category', she states, 'but an imperial condition in which imperial violence is congealed'.[32]

31 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).
32 Azoulay, *Potential History*, 91.

(This is a strong call for an urgent need to rethink the workings of art. Thinking back on my own art education, I wonder whether we would be able to understand a ready-made object like Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) unless it had already been defined in comparison to previously dislocated objects of art, already separated from their social, cultural, and material fabrics of life? The subject of a different text could certainly be to investigate the relationship between conceptual art and the atom bomb, or that of minimalism to sexual and racial violence.)

As the founding principle of her inquiry, Azoulay argues that photography is 'rooted in imperial formations of power: first and foremost, the use of violence, the exercise of imperial rights, and the creation and destruction of shared worlds.'[33] In fact, imperialism's major mechanism, according to Azoulay, is the camera shutter – the device that allow for light to pass through a lens for a determined duration of time. It opens and shuts, and as such it separates that which is seen from that which is not. 'The thrust-forward rhythm of the click of the camera's shutter acts like a verdict—a very limited portion of information is captured, framed, and made appropriable by those who become its rights holders.'[34] According to Azoulay, this is the same cutting function capable of separating space, time, and matter as, in fact, the shutter is 'the synecdoche for the operation of the imperial enterprise altogether'.[35]

Undoubtedly, photography plays a huge part in discrediting, displacing, misrepresenting, as well as sexually and racially differentiating people and their communities. There is no doubt about the fact that photography has been, and still is, used in the destruction of worlds. But the question then becomes: doesn't this synecdoche between the imperial enterprise and the mechanical functions of photography risk upholding another of the modern-imperial conceptions of the world, namely that of the photographic apparatus as the auto-mechanical extension of the human?

Although Azoulay points out that Critical Theory itself is not without responsibility within the scope of her inquiry, this understanding of photography is nevertheless bound to the ocular-centric theories of vision so at home in modernity. Based on the conjecture that only the (human) eye can see, and that this (human) eye has its (auto-mechanical) extension in the optics of the camera, it runs the risk of creating its own cuts (or shutters). Constituting itself in the imitation of human

33 Azoulay, *Potential History*, 7.
34 Azoulay, *Potential History*, 4.
35 Azoulay, *Potential History*, 6.

ideation this conception of the camera risks partaking in upholding the nature / culture split that places humans against other beings, f igures against backgrounds, and sight against other senses in ways that does not allow life to fragment itself into new individualities.

Throughout the book, Azoulay rigorously argues that the institutions that make our world today: 'international law, museums, archives, borders, fences, debts, ruins, libraries, or free markets' constitute (still intact) imperialist modes of ordering time, space, and politics.[36] Through what she calls 'potential history' she proposes that we can refuse this imperial violence through processes of rewinding, undoing, and unlearning. If one imperial and sovereign 'right' is to define what is new and consequently what is obsolete, then our call is to unlearn the mechanisms through which we understand time as linear and progressive.

I would like, here, to rethink Azoulay's specific understanding of photography as 'irreducible to the invention of a scopic device' for the purpose of responding to her request for 'rewinding, undoing, and unlearning' imperialism from within the medium itself.[37] Ultimately, this unlearning will lead back to Epstein and his material, oceanic filmmaking, but before that, I want to first look at some possible understandings of the history of photography that might help countering the imperialistic diagnosis of the camera apparatus given by Azoulay.

The pencil of nature

One could argue that the history of photography (and its counter histories) begins much earlier than 1492. Some scientists claim that palaeolithic cave paintings were made through camera obscura effects created by tiny holes in tents or in screens of animal hide. The first known accounts of a pinhole camera come from the Chinese philosopher Mo Di, dating back to the fourth century BC. These writings explain how the image inside a 'treasure house' is inverted by an intersecting point (pinhole) that 'collects' the (rays of) light.

Kaja Silverman argues in *The Miracle of Analogy*, that it was also through the industrialisation of chemical photography that we learned to understand photography as a homogenous medium. Eastman Dry Plate Company gave us the illusion that images are stable – that the pictures we take by pressing the button on our camera are the same as those we receive in print. It was through the manufacturing

36 Azoulay, *Potential History*, 78.
37 Azoulay, *Potential History*, 4.

of equipment and material that we started believing we are 'in control' of the images we take, rather than owing them to the 'pencil of nature'[38] or to the 'sun itself'.[39]

Silverman continues, and asserts that it was through the industrialisation of photography that we started 'taking' images rather than 'receiving' them.[40] According to her, receptivity is a recurrent trope in pre-1700 accounts of the camera obscura. In the eleventh century, while investigating the formation of images in a darkened room, the Arab scholar Alhazen wrote of how, 'with any shaped opening you like, the image always takes the same shape . . . provided the hole is large and the receiving surface parallel to it.'[41] Leonardo da Vinci writes in Manuscript D: 'If you have a piece of white paper or other material upon which [the images] of everything passing through the aperture may be received, you will see everything on the earth and in the sky with their colors and forms'.[42]

Even much later, in writings describing early chemical photographic techniques using plates sensitised by iodine derived from seaweed, photography is addressed in terms of receiving. In April 1839, under the interesting heading of 'Scientific and Miscellaneous Intelligence' there is a text on Daguerre's Photogenic Paper stating that 'M. Daguerre describes this paper as excessively prompt and sensible in *receiving* impressions.'[43] In another text, a coating made with bromide – a chemical component accumulated in the oceans – is described as '100 times more sensitive' than iodine and 'always capable of *receiving* the destructive action of the less refrangible rays.'[44]

In 1830 Louis-Jacques Daguerre used iodine from bladderwrack to prepare his photographic plates. By exposing a surface of pure silver to the action of the vapour of iodine, a peculiar iodide of silver was creat-

38 The term 'pencil of nature' was first used as the title for an article in *The Corsair*, written by Nathaniel Parker Willis in 1839, and then reemerged as the title of H. Fox Talbot's book *The Pencil of Nature* in 1844. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/33447/33447-pdf.pdf

39 Jules Janin, 'Le Daguerotype,' *L'Artiste, Journal de la Litterature et des Beaux-Arts* (Paris) 2nd series, 2:11 (27 January 1839): 145–148. Quote taken from a translation at the Daguerreotype Archive: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390002_COURT_LADYS_MAG_1839-10.pdf

40 Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy, or, the History of Photography, Part 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

41 Quoted in Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy*, 14.

42 Quoted in Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy*, 15.

43 'Daguerre's Photogenic Paper, and Fixation of Images,' April 1839, published in *Railway Magazine, and Steam Navigation Journal* (London) 6:38 (April 1839), 180. The article appears under the section header 'Scientific and Miscellaneous Intelligence.' http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8390012_DAGUERRE-PAPER_RAILWAY-MAG_1839-04.pdf

44 http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/journals/dj-hj_v01n06_1851-02-01/dj-hj_v01n06_1851-02-01_p171.pdf

ed that made the surface exceedingly sensitive to light.[45] As noted, these early photographers did not view image making as a strictly human activity. In 1839, after having invented the Daguerreotype, Daguerre announced to the world: 'The DAGUERREOTYPE is not an instrument to be used to draw nature, but a chemical and physical process which gives her the ability to reproduce herself.'[46] Many would follow Daguerre in his declaration, claiming that photography has the capacity to transfer the task of visual representation over to 'nature herself.' Henry Fox Talbot, the inventor of the calotype technique (another photographic process involving seaweed), later termed photographic images the 'Pencil of Nature'. Seaweeds and sunlight, the technical interaction of biological and chemical processes make up the field of photography in the early nineteenth century. Images were understood to be authored by their own subject and 'produced by the action of Light itself'.[47] Another author proclaimed that 'these living pictures, by traversing lens and mirrors, are thrown down with double beauty on the table of the camera obscura by the radiant finger of light… The creations of nature triumph.'[48] In 1839, the poet and editor Nathaniel Parker Willis writes in response to the Daguerreotype:

> All nature shall paint herself—fields, rivers, trees, houses, plains, mountains, cities, shall all paint themselves at a bidding, and at a few moments' notice. Towns will no longer have any representatives but themselves. Invention says it.[49]

Daguerreotype was the first publicly available photographic process. It had managed to 'capture' the camara obscura image and as such it came to play a crucial role in generating new 'standards' for how to see and engage with the world. At the same time, it is a medium that shows us how deeply embedded nonhuman modes of life and action

45 John W. Draper, 'Daguerreotype, and its application to taking Portraits,' September 1840, published in, *London, Edinburgh, and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* (London) 17:109 (September 1840): 217–225. Online at: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/P8400001_DRAPER_PHILOS_MAG_1840-09.pdf

46 Quoted in Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy*, 26. The source of the quote can be further researched at the Daguerreotype Archive, online at: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/M8380001_DAGUERRE_BROADSIDE_FR_1838.pdf

47 R. Derek Wood, 'The Daguerreotype Patent, The British Government, and the Royal Society,' *History of Photography*, Vol. 4., No 1 (January 1980), 53–9.

48 'New Discovery in the Fine Arts—The Daguerroscope,' 20 April 1839, published in *New-Yorker: A Weekly Journal of Literature, Politics, Statistics, and General Information* (New York) 7:5 (20 April 1839): 70–71. Online at: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/texts/N8390028_NEW-YORKER_1839-04-13.pdf

49 Nathaniel Parker Willis, 'The Pencil of Nature: A New Discover' *The Corsair. A Gazette of Literature, Art, Dramatic Criticism, fashion, and Novelty* (New York; Vol. I., No. 5; Saturday, April 13, 1839, 70–2) Available online at: http://www.daguerreotypearchive.org/dagnews/04-13-97.php. See also Steffen Siegel (ed.), *First Exposures – Writings from the Beginning of Photography* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2017).

are in the history of (human) visual culture.[50] Although one might sense the imperative of mechanical objectivity that is to come, i.e., the idea that the hand of the author is objective (and hence controlled) because it is presumed to be 'automatic', these statements also seem to suggest something quite different, namely that nature has the capacity for action through the ability to represent herself. This attention to the technical interactions between human and nonhuman, made at the outset of photography as we know it today, seem to contain the awareness that reproduction is never simply mechanical nor exclusively the product of human decision. As such, it proposes modes of engagement that are quite different from, and run counter to, the imperialistic apparatus of visual media diagnosed by Azoulay – one that holds the potential for dissolving dichotomies such as culture/nature, between image, and the world it experiences.

Black Atlantic

The counter currents within the history of photography, which disrupt and prompt us to begin 'unlearning' the connection between photography, anthropocentrism, and colonialism (as Azoulay showed us), has parallel currents of resistance within the history of colonialism itself. In fact, the ocean, as organic body, plays a part in creating these counter currents.

Paul Gilroy's transoceanic imaginary in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* outlines this.[51] By analysing the resistance to racism as having emerged transnationally, diasporically, and as a 'a counterculture of modernity', Gilroy connects territories with diasporic communities between Africa and America, from Europe to the Caribbean, and as such, resisting racially essentialist ways of thinking Black (or African) culture as unvarying and singular. Thinking with the 'Black Atlantic' becomes a way to undercut nationalist and ethnically absolute systems. Even if the ocean rarely figures as an organic body in Gilroy's account, the Black Atlantic alludes to the water's material capacity for storage and memory. As such, it undercuts modernism's understanding of history as a single, flat linearity. The rhythm of the sea diffracts and reverberates from '...Senegal to San Salvador'.[52] 'Keep on Moving' it prompts, conjuring songs by The Wailers and Soul II Soul. The Black Atlantic exists in numerous spaces that cannot be defined solely by where they have been, where they are, or where they are going.

50 See also J. Riley, 'The Pencil of Nature: Tracing Intertidal Media through the Development of Early Photography,' *Tba: Journal of Art, Media, and Visual Culture*, 2:1(2020), 9–21. https://doi.org/10.5206/tba.v2i1.10735

51 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 2012 [1993])

52 Quote from Derek Walcott's poem *The Schooner 'Flight'*.

For Gilroy, the Atlantic Ocean becomes a site for theorising the materiality of history. Against an institutionalised cultural nationalism, in which blackness and 'Europeanness' remain separate entities without symbiosis, Gilroy devises a theoretical approach to the idea of race as transnational and intercultural, fluid, and ever-changing. The Black Atlantic is that which separates, but also that which brings together.

For Epstein, the coast of the Atlantic Ocean was the place he returned to after having been subjected to another violent displacement: he was forbidden to work as a filmmaker during the Nazi occupation of France. Being a gay man with a Jewish name, he only narrowly escaped deportation. The Nazis took his name off all prints of his films, and he was deprived any earnings from them. It was after these traumatic events that he returned to Brittany to make *Le Tempestaire*.

Despite differences, both Gilroy and Epstein engage with the Atlantic Ocean as a body that allows for the disruption of linear cause-and-effect patterns. As such, it becomes a metaphorical site that contradicts modern and sovereign delineations that separate the spatial, the temporal, the material, and the political. But it is also a real space, a body through which we are able to see the world otherwise.

The deep-sea darkroom

These counter currents to the imperialistic history of photography (and colonial history as a whole), share connections with the ocean. From the intertidal rockpools (the habitat of seaweeds), through the kelp ash beds where kelp was being burned and iodine was (so-called) discovered, to the liquid environment and chemical fluidity of photographic development. In a material sense, this is the dark wet pond, caked in chemical salts, that photography grew out of and to which it owes part of its agency. As Jeff Wall argues in 'Photography and Liquid Intelligence', it is also a practice that 'connects photography to the past, to time,' because it 'embodies a memory-trace of very ancient production processes—of washing, bleaching, dissolving'.[53]

Melody Jue notes this oceanic element of photography, writing that, 'the darkroom and the [deep ocean] abyss are places of sensorial estrangement (for humans) where our visual modes of perception are compromised. … From the shallow pools of chemicals rise the hellish smells of sulfur and vinegar. To these pools we bring our negatives …

53 Jeff Wall, 'Photography and Liquid Intelligence' in *Jeff Wall*, eds. Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelenc, and Boris Groys (London: Phaidon, 1996).

captured from the camera's world'.[54] But for Jue, the darkroom of the deep sea also offers a way of engaging with another counter current, one that opposes anthropocentrism and human centred ways of understanding the world; this path runs through the figure of the vampire squid as it is put forward by the philosopher Vilém Flusser.

Considered through the ocean of our social and biological origins, Flusser develops his thoughts on photography through the (negative) image of Vampyroteuthis Infernalis (the vampire squid).[55] Flusser employs the vampire squid as an 'apparatus' in order to analyse (human) media from the vantage point of the deep sea. As such, he is reflecting on a shift from a society that favours inscriptions of information onto objects to one that inscribes information directly in subjects. The dry world of surfaces inhabited by humans and the abyssal environment of cephalopods are, according to Flusser, both fundamentally different and inexorable linked.

Flusser's text, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, is a fable told as an intersubjective scientific report. Intersubjective because it is not 'objective' in a scientific sense. It is not 'floating above the world and looking down upon mankind'.[56] On the contrary, it is an analysis of humans from the perspective of the vampire squid as a being who coexists with us in the world. But we are not only co-beings in the sense that we share the home of planet Earth, but we belong to the same phylogenetic tree. We share the same ancestors, and hence 'harbor some of the same deeply ingrained memories'. We are, so to speak, 'pieces of the same game'.[57] Most fundamentally, we are both creatures 'able to acknowledge one another and, what is more, to recognize in each other something of ourselves.'[58] Despite this, our environments and our *Dasein* [the being-in-the-world and the ways of caring for that world] are fundamentally different and scarcely recognisable for each other. We have both 'lost our original home, the beach', and while we (humans) were banished onto the surfaces of the earth, the vampire squid was exiled into the abyss of the deep-sea.[59] Our eyes and our brains are analogous, meaning that although following different courses of development they have arrived at the same function, they are comparable organs. However, when we parted ways some 600 million years ago, humans went on to refine the digestive system whereas the vampire squid 'chose' the nervous system.

54 Melody Jue, 'Vampire Squid Media', *Grey Room* 57, Fall 2014, 89. See also, Melody Jue, *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 91.
55 Vilém Flusser & Louis Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis: A Treatise, with a Report by the Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste* trans. Valentine A. Pakis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012 [1987]).
56 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 9.
57 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 6.
58 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 26.
59 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 25.

Vampire squids have an immense capacity for sensitivity, and the complexity of their nervous system is central in ways unimaginable to us. They have highly precise organs for apprehending temperature, water pressure, osmotic processes, and electromagnetic fields as well as for recognising the concentration of salt and carbon dioxide in the water. While 'we live in sunlight' and are concerned with feeling the third dimension, limited by the resistance of objects, cephalopods live 'in the flashes of their own bioluminescence',[60] feeling multidimensionally (without surfaces). 'Taking hold of the world with eight tentacles' they are 'able to affect the dynamics of their environment to their liking'.[61] The world grasped by the Vampyroteuthidae is a fluid, centripetal whirlpool. Their feelers reach out into the world to 'discern its flowing particularities'; and 'whereas we [humans] have "problems" (things in our way), they have "impressions".' [62]

There are good reasons for taking interest in the world of the vampire squid. As Flusser points out, quantitatively and qualitatively, the ocean is the seat of life on earth. Four-fifths of all biomass exists in the oceans. By far the greatest number of individual beings, species, genera, and classes live there. Its 'ocean valleys are much longer, wider, deeper, and far more malleable than those of the continents.'[63] The seabed is overrun with sedimentation. It is 'alive' as opposed to the surface of the continents that is 'dead', 'veiled as it is with bygone ocean sedimentation'.[64] For someone at home in an environment 'strewn with sedimentation and bathed in fluidity … the unreliable impermanence of lifeless objects' is obvious.[65]

In a chapter on Vampyroteuthan Art, Flusser considers how humans, living on 'the relatively dead surfaces of the continents' are 'burdened by the resistance of objects' and foolish enough to 'trust their acquired information to lifeless objects'[66] such as photographic paper. The vampire squid, on the other hand, use their 'photophores' at the tips of their tentacles to transmit images through bioluminscent mucus, making them at the same time the inscriptor of information and the medium itself. They are well aware that 'the biological is more permanent than the superbiological'.[67] While materials such as marble, cotton, film strips, and paper will decay (not to say, disintegrate in

60 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 19.
61 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 15.
62 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 38–39.
63 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 32.
64 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 32.
65 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 62.
66 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 61–2.
67 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 61.

seawater) and necessarily be forgotten, genetic information like skin, eggs, or gametes will prevail. After all, the most trustworthy material for information storage is the egg. 'Cybernetically speaking, the nervous system of mollusks represents the highest organization of life'.[68]

Flusser states that it is through encountering the uncustomary that we are able to recognise that which is customary (and further, to change it) – this is the 'impulse behind our conversation with the vampyroteuthis'.[69] This 'conversation', for Flusser, is simultaneously recuperative and dystopic. On the one hand, it suggests circular models for thought rather than linear ones, dynamic geometry rather than Cartesian space, it opens the possibilities of the three-dimensional world of the vampire squid instead of the two-dimensional world of humans. On the other hand, Flusser states that the bioluminescent organs of the vampire squid engender appearances (phenomena) in a world that 'cannot deceive because it is a self-generated deception.'[70] In other words, in a multi-dimensional world of sensorial impressions, one in which information is 'vampirically' inscribed directly onto subjects, individual agency itself becomes a 'self-generated' practice and is only liberating to the extent that it is predicated on this deception.

This 'warning' further enhances his belief that humans and vampire squid need each other in order to reflect one another. Flusser argues that if we are able to reconstruct the squid's Dasein, we might begin to see with its eyes and grasp with its tentacles. But 'this attempt to cross from our world into it is, admittedly, a "metaphorical" enterprise, but it is not "transcendental". We are not attempting to vault out of the world but to relocate into another's. Our concern is not with a "theory" but a "fable", with leaving the real world for a fabulous one.'[71] In this fantastic world, one in which our (human) sensory apparatus gets estranged and our visual perception is compromised, the deep sea becomes a kind of darkroom through which we are able sense the dynamic world as well as the in-human sensory apparatus. The camera, instead of being an object of resistance, becomes a force (a sensory machine, already inscribed in our bodies) with capacity for de-humanising human vision and awakening our political imaginaries. This opens a space of currents running counter to dominant narratives of technology, one through which images could potentially reappear – not by being 'taken' in the colonial sense but felt materially and corporeally. It is through this deep-sea darkroom that I would like to further engage with the cinema of Jean Epstein.

68 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 14.
69 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 36.
70 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 39.
71 Flusser & Bec, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, 38.

'The sea speaks'[72]

For Epstein, cinema has a direct relationship to the ocean; a constant thinking in motion where 'the world of the screen' constitutes a space where attention gets redirected from 'classical habits of mind … toward change, malleability, and the fluidity of forms. … the viscous and the liquid.'[73] It shows us that what might seem stable is in fact unstable and always in motion. This cinematic (m)ocean is not a forward one, but one with multiple simultaneous directions overriding any simple understandings of causality, agency, space, time, and difference. It is a temporality in which, 'instead of having been, things are, and the time is always today, a continual today in which yesterday collides with tomorrow at a speed of 3,600 seconds per hour, bringing past and future into the present.'[74] As far as Epstein is concerned, cinema defies the irreversibility of time and disproves entropy. For him, it allows us to experience things differently exactly because it disturbs, both our understanding of the world and our image of ourselves. The ocean becomes a space for disrupting 'habits of mind'. It forms relationships with others, such as vampire squid, island dwellers or diasporic communities, for whom it constitutes a body of multiple interconnected perspectives and a place for restoring spatial and temporal disassociations.

In a text titled 'Logic of Fluidity', Epstein reminds us that homogeneity and symmetry are allegories. Like our conception of the metre, they hold neither an absolute nor a natural truth. In fact, all homogeneous and symmetrical systems have the human body as their reference point, and as such, they personify and materialise the experiential framework through which they were constructed. Euclidean geometry, for example 'isn't conceivable anywhere other than in a solid world'.[75] What if, Epstein writes evoking the vampire squid, 'our habitat were not on terra firma, but were liquid or gaseous, if a Euclid of fish or bird intelligence had composed works of aquametry or aerometry, we wouldn't have such rigorous notions about sea swells or the symmetry of the winds.'[76] Thinking with the ocean environment changes the conditions of knowledge production and 'we need to reason, to philosophize, to moralize, to think differently, according to this other geometry.'[77]

72 Intertitle of another of Epstein's Breton Poems *Mor vran* (1931).
73 Epstein, 'Logic of Fluidity', 396.
74 Epstein, 'The Photogenic Element', 301.
75 Epstein, 'To a Second Reality, a Second Reason', 323.
76 Epstein, 'To a Second Reality, a Second Reason', 323.
77 Epstein, 'Logic of Fluidity', 399.

Engaging with the ocean means engaging with a body capable of regulating life and death; to set the premises for life on land (something that was a part of everyday life for the coastal residents in Brittany that Epstein worked with). Despite our attempts to regulate it, to study or to categorise it, we will never really 'know' it. It will never be fully contained within the apparatus of knowledge. It eludes our efforts to control it partly because its premises are fundamentally different from ours. For Epstein, the ocean, just like film, constitutes a 'space where common egocentrism, in its human proportion, finds itself disrupted', a place where 'no identity can be entirely established'.[78] As such, Epstein's oceanic cinema is never a model, but an infinitely flexible cinematic ideal: 'not only does the configuration of cinematographic space elude the rigorous egocentrism of the Euclidean configuration, not only does it refuse to accept an exclusively human proportionality, but it also accepts no unique center of perspective, no unique standard, whatever it might be.'[79]

But although Epstein warns us against believing in the illusions of the solid world (the homogeneity and symmetry of land-based thought), arguing for a 'philosophy of the fluid', a world where things 'become … whatever they become', it does not mean that this world is not foremost material, physical, or even mathematical: 'All of a sudden there is Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Bikini islands, with the splitting of atoms suddenly emerging … bringing far more than the power of a weapon of war…'[80]

Through the conscious and unconscious relationships between body, machine, and the material world, cinema is always phenomena rather than event. Its ideals operate through very different apparatuses (in the sense of Flusser). Its (counter) position is a non-representational one. Epstein's cinematographic eye is an 'eye outside of the eye'. This eye is far from the imperialistic optical instrument of Cartesian vision (of distance). In fact, it does not correspond to the human organ (as the mouth, for Epstein, is the 'eye of the body'). The 'eye outside of the eye' serves the possibilities for awakening our sensorial bodies and political imaginaries by forging other world-forms.

In *Finis Terrae* (1929), Epstein addresses the mysterious links moving between the eye and the image. The film reaches its conclusion in a scene where a boy, to save his friend's life, attempts to row him from

78 Jean Epstein, 'The Fluid World of the Screen' trans. Sarah Keller, in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 385.
79 Epstein, 'Logic of Fluidity', 397.
80 Epstein, 'To a Second Reality, a Second Reason', 325.

an island to the mainland to get medical help. After some time, they end up 'forehead against forehead' at the bottom of the boat, one seriously ill – his arm infected by a cut in his thumb – and the other exhausted. At the bottom of the boat, the two end up switching arms, or rather, they share the same one. The body of one becomes the other's: 'It is not even true that there is air between us; I eat it. It is in me like a sacrament. Maximum visual acuity.'[81]

The shutter, regulating the flow of light, covering, and uncovering a hole – either by hand or through mechanisms operated by a hand – is never only a one-way action. The shutter also allows for pulses of light to pass outwards, like in a movie-projector or the signal lamp of the lighthouse. It is a port through which light passes in and out, in and out, like the ocean, or a breathing organ. When Flusser engages in photographic media from the perspective of the vampire squid, the shutter becomes a chromatophore – an organic cell opening and closing to change how light, and colour reflects. For Epstein, 'the theatre of the skin' is connected to a sensory involvement with the world, one that allows us to interpret what we see – our coenaesthesis – a 'vegetative, sympathetic life. It is a diffuse, deep, active, silent, and animal life'[82] – the embodiment of vulnerability.

Epstein's 'intelligent machine' invents temporalities and distributes space in ways that causes problems for dominant theories of the 'lens itself'. He asks: 'Why force the sensible emulsion only to repeat the functions of our retina?'[83] For Epstein, 'the gaze of the lens, in and of itself, obeying its organic law, perceives and shows us the mobile aspects of the world, emphasizes them, favors them with a predilection that transmutes even stable elements into unstable ones'.[84] By refusing to equate the perception of the camera with that of the human, Epstein's understanding of cinema runs counter to the imperialistic sense of photography put forward by Azoulay. She is of course right when pointing to the camera as a device for control, but if we follow Epstein, it becomes equally true that that these devices form configurations that stretch into pre-colonial minds and more than human worlds, making them the very tools for negotiating spaces between our worlds and others. With Epstein (and thinking along with the counter currents of both Gilroy and Flusser), the camera becomes an oceanic apparatus for non-human agency with the potential for rewinding, undoing, and unlearning in the way called for by Azoulay.

81 Quoted in Nicole Brenez, 'Ultra-Modern: Jean Epstein, or Cinema "Serving the Forces of Transgression and Revolt"' in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 237.
82 Quoted in Wall-Romana, 'Epstein's *Photogénie* as Corporeal Vision', 58.
83 Quoted in Trond Lundemo, 'A Temporal Perspective: Jean Epstein's Writings on Technology and Subjectivity' in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 216.
84 Epstein, 'Logic of Fluidity', 396.

In-between life and images (Anti-Pinocchios)

Although an era of digital media sets them apart, I want to suggest that Epstein's concepts of photogénie and coenaesthesis share a resemblance with what Deborah Levitt calls 'media ethology'.[85] The comparison itself constitutes a kind of queer anachronism that I hope will only align with Epstein's theoretical work.

Levitt starts from the assumption that the emergence of animation (as a dominant medium) coincides with developments in the biological sciences. These ongoing transformations in the status of images and the transformations in the status of 'life' are intertwined. She calls this present moment 'the age of the animatic apparatus.' Drawing from ethology – the subdiscipline of biology that focuses on what animals do, how species' perceptual systems create lifeworlds through their interaction with their environments and with each other – Levitt creates a methodology in which seemingly disparate phenomena such as, for example, Dolly the sheep and the multimedia bodies of Avatars, computer generated images, and the use of fluorescent proteins from deep-sea creatures as genetic markers, are entangled and can only be understood in relationship to each other. This practice of thinking through the transformations that occur in-between life and images, shifts our attention away from questions of ontology, category (the study of natural history), and being, towards a set of interventions or techniques concerned with appearance, metamorphosis, and affect.

Levitt writes, 'media ethology is a consideration of how we make sense (meaning) of sense (sensation) as these emerge together—and constitute one another—at the spectator-screen nexus. While inextricably bound to material structures of both media and perception, this nexus is as much a phantasmatic—even a hallucinatory—domain as a material one.'[86]

There are of course fundamental differences in Levitt and Epstein's understandings of technology due to the fact that they speak from very different moments in time. While for Epstein, the significance of the material world (cinema's interaction with real locations and the materialities of the world) is transported as 'sensorial logarithms' to the body of the spectator; for Levitt we are, to a certain extent, already living in the world of the vampire squid, and she is concerned with how to ethically navigate a world in which materialities of bodies and technologies are already inseparable. However, they are both concerned with thinking through the transformations that occur in the space between

85 Deborah Levitt, *The Animatic Apparatus: Animation, Vitality and the Futures of the Image* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2018).
86 Levitt, *The Animatic* Apparatus, 19.

life and images. They share a critique of (anthropocentric) humanism and ontological hierarchy. 'It is never about models and copies' Levitt writes, echoing Epstein, 'but rather about simulacra that open new territories of feeling and thought.'[87]

While Epstein theorises photogénie from the ethical standpoint of the filmic capacity to disclose the human gaze and implicate more than human relations – 'Objects have attitudes. Trees gesture. Mountains signify' – Levitt enlarges upon the conceptual reach of photogénie by bringing to the forefront 'the modes of experience and forms of life generated at the intersection of materialities of communication and perception'. She calls these 'modes of experience and forms of life' anti-Pinocchios. These are artificial creatures that don't want to be girls or boys. In fact, 'they don't want to be real, and … [they] certainly don't want to be human.'[88]

For both Epstein and Levitt, perception and world are co-constitutive. As Levitt puts it, in terms that recall more Flusser's squid than the usual anthropocentric conceptions of humans, 'the human nervous system is so skilled in creating worlds through couplings with the most various sorts of materials, interactions with others of all kinds produce new worlds of all kinds.' Levitt and Epstein both concern themselves, first and foremost, with what images do rather than what they represent or mean. It is 'an inquiry into the *how*—rather than the *who*—of things'.[89]

For Epstein this is still somehow paradoxical: 'the return to the concrete is also a return to the mystical … a truth that is no longer immutable but perpetually moving, always relative, and infinitely transformable',[90] but for both of him and Levitt, clearly, this is where new forms of life and modes of vitality are able to emerge.

Breaking the lens

After the storm has finally subsided under the influence of the wind-healer (through reverse motion and sonic distortion), father Floch drops (or lets go of) the glass sphere (cinematic device). It smashes to the floor and breaks into pieces. At this very instant, the lover of the young woman enters the room, back from the Sardines. But although this moment reveals the magical powers of the camera, it is not the supernatural that resolves dilemma of the narrative. Instead, it is as if cinema opens up dimensions of reality that actually cures the

87 Levitt, *The Animatic Apparatus*, 17.
88 Levitt, *The Animatic Apparatus*, 16.
89 Levitt, *The Animatic Apparatus*, 18.
90 Epstein, 'To a Second Reality, a Second Reason', 327.

woman's fear of the wind and the ocean. Breaking the glass sphere (symbolically but also always more than symbolically) means breaking the fourth wall keeping the ocean in a kind of aquarium. It involves being immersed in the materialities of the world and potentially reconnecting with our ancestors (the vampire squid).

If for Epstein, cinema is magical, it is so only because it proves capable of getting over certain limits of representation and beyond 'the resemblance of things'. For him, vision is a form of touch; a questioning of what kind of embodiments are engaged in the technologies of moving images. This body becomes not only an instrument for perceiving the world, but one that evokes the whole sensory register, allowing for bodies to be materially invested in ways that seep beyond the limits of our knowledge and towards that which we 'no longer know'.

This leakiness of images is what makes cinema impossible to fully define, and yet it is this very same leakiness that allow for the material world to seep in. Making the wind and the ocean the co-creator means breaking with the (essentially Western, imperialistic, modernist) claim for linear temporality and spatial separation. It means questioning (human) perception by opening our fields of vision as much to the more-than-human as to the in-human sensory apparatus. It requires that we pay attention to the technical interactivity of the human and nonhuman – the joint apparatus of the 'intelligent machine', the 'sensory logarithms' and the materialities of the world as condition for practice.

The camera triggers intervals in the flow of time. It turns, morphs, mimics, and mutates reality. The work of images and sounds invents new configurations of sensory perception that make up ways for embodying in the world that are radically different from our established perceptions. As such it becomes a way through which the world reveals itself to us: 'Instead of a mouth, the mouth, larva of kisses, essence of touch. Everything quivers with bewitchment. I am uneasy. In a new nature, another world.'[91]

The haptic-ness of Epstein's sometimes 'ad hoc' shots, his engagement with oceanic and environmental images often lacking characters of human presence, suggests a more expansive spatial and temporal image, one that lies beyond its mere screen-based existence, evoking their material histories. Images appear, not as events but phenomena, and if we pay attention, we might be able to recognise their materiality – their photogénie – not as a fixed figure, but as the mutable, fluid and shifting currents that awaken our political imaginaries towards 'a cinema to come'.

91 Quoted in Rachel Moore, 'A Different Nature' in Keller & Paul, *Jean Epstein*, 182.

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