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In and Around *The Bay*: Water, Fish, Infrastructure

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Big things

Ecological catastrophe is perhaps replacing, or joining, global capital as the 'great unrepresentable' of our time. Few things prove as hard for artists and writers (as well as media broadcasters) to communicate coherently as the long, slow and unthinkably complex process of global warming, and all its attendant developments and events. What time scale, or geographical setting, or epistemological position, can anyone select with any confidence that it will do some sort of justice to the subject at hand? The challenge is certainly not met by calls to 'see the bigger picture'; as Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle ask with some impatience in *Cartographies of the Absolute*, 'when will we *stop* seeing *so many* images of the whole earth, so many views of mastery that dissimulate our domination?'.[1] How artists might design and organise images and narratives that have some claim to adequacy in this context is far from clear. Sean Cubitt, for example, has written about data visualization in contemporary Hollywood as one response to this quandary. For Cubitt, the inevitable emphasis on data in narratives of environmental catastrophe has been awkward, to say the least, for photographically realist narratives. After all, what does such a catastrophe look or sound like? The lurch described by Cubitt from photographic representation towards informational representation is thus not surprising. The critical challenge, then, for imaginative works about environmental degradation is not so much (or not only) what rhetorical position to adopt, but how to find a way of addressing the subject all. 'Global events like climate change do not occur in humanly perceptible scales or time-frames' (280) writes Cubitt[2], before going on to suggest that, given the stakes and parameters of our current global challenges, 'the humanism of pictorial realism appears nostalgic'[3].

In the context of the environmental humanities, Timothy Morton has written regularly and at length about the persistent imaginative shortcomings of much climate-change discourse, not least in its persistent appeal to 'nature' (a term that, like 'climate change', he rejects). Despite his ambitious attempts to explore visual and aural arts, as well as science and

philosophy, Morton is drawn time and again back to the written word and, specifically, neologisms, in his efforts to identify what form a more worthwhile ecological consciousness might take – and what fallacies it would have to avoid. He is quick to coin new terms (including 'ecomimesis', 'dark ecology' and 'beautiful soul syndrome') as if anxious to ensure that our cognitive means for engaging with ecology, and ecology in the contemporary moment, are fit for purpose. Audiovisual media is by no means central to Morton's thinking, but many of his concerns are of acute relevance to students and practitioners of moving-image work. For example, Morton's warning that 'we will have to acclimatize ourselves to the fact that locality is always a false immediacy' [4] is a friendly warning to our discipline; most films, after all, show us immediate localities of one kind or another.

Among the more clearly developed concepts in Morton's writing is that of the 'hyperobject', which he defines as a thing 'massively distributed in time and space relative to humans'.[5] Exemplified by (though not limited to) things we might loosely categorize as 'natural', hyperobjects are too vast – and too immanent – for us to fully comprehend them; they provoke an 'asymmetry between the infinite powers of cognition and the infinite being of things'[6], severely testing our imaginative capacities. Morton suggests, for example, that global warming is an object. And as a *hyper*object, it constantly resists and evades representative gestures. This challenge cannot, though, be overcome by appeals to a common worldhood. For Morton, the 18th century marked the start of mankind's activity as a significant geophysical force, an intensifying trend which has over time eroded the usefulness of the term 'world'. Rather than being surrounded by a world, we are constantly engaging with hyperobjects, which we are simultaneously part of *and* unable to point to. Hence the inadequacy of creative artworks which choose to 'confront' ecological catastrophe, as if from a position of one remove.

The primary example of a hyperobject in Morton's book is global warming, but it is far from the only one, and it is hard to ignore the fact that many of his supporting examples and descriptive evocations turn to water, other liquids, and fluvial qualities: the Florida Everglades, the indexical signs of animal life on a seashore, the 'wet stuff falling on my head in Northern California in early 2011'[7], the body's submergence in (and independence from) a swimming pool, etc. 'The physical universe consists of objects that are more like turbulence in a stream than … extended bodies.'[8] Given the apparent importance of fluidity to Morton's thinking about hyperobjects, it is surprising that he does not engage more directly with the ontological status of water, an elemental phenomena which surely comes as close as anything to meeting Morton's (admittedly vague and occasionally inconsistent) criteria. It is quite possible that he deliberately avoids positing definitive examples of hyperobjects, lest he compromise the strangeness with which he wants to imbue the concept. Nevertheless,

we could certainly consider the recent growth in water-oriented cultural studies[9] according to Morton's terms; as an increasing concern to make sense of (material and conceptual) phenomena which trouble – without obliterating – our sense of scale. As Jeffery Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert write of the elements more generally, water functions 'within a humanly knowable scale while extending an irresistible invitation to inhuman realms'.[10]

If one of Morton's crucial rhetorical moves is to insist that a supposedly abstract ideas, processes or principles (such as climate change) may well, in fact, be an object, then water would perhaps qualify as a borderline case; it is already material rather than abstract, but is also characterized by the kind of dizzying scale with which Morton is keen to come to terms. In other words, water is just about conceivable to most of us as an object, even if it frequently eludes many common-sense assumptions about what constitutes objecthood (solidity, smallness, ready availability for human use, etc.). In that respect, it provides us with a good opportunity to examine the representational challenges faced by film and media with regard to ecological issues and subjects. It comes as no revelation to geographers and scientists that water is an almost unimaginably important and complex subject; in the arts and humanities, meanwhile, there is currently something of an awakening on this front, as literary theorists, art historians, critical theorists and practitioners of various stripes turn their attention to this omnipresent but ever-allusive matter. We should be not surprised that cinema has been part of this story; Jia Zhangke, Kelly Reichardt, Noël Burch, Jean-Luc Godard, James Benning, Lucrecia Martel, Tsai Ming Liang, Peter Hutton and Patricio Guzmán (to name but a varied few) have all produced work in recent years which urges us to think seriously about water. But while contemporary cinema has produced extraordinary work on this subject, are we equipped to recognise the nature of the medium's involvement in the broader landscape of water-centred environmental discourse? What becomes of water in cinema, and what does this have to do with the crisis in environmental representation sketched out by Morton?

In this article, I choose not to survey the range of contemporary films which, in large part or small, are concerned with the location, character and challenge of water. Instead, I explore one film's fascinating struggle to represent a waterborne threat, and I interpret the results as indicative of water's fundamental allusiveness – particularly as it is imagined in narrative film. *The Bay* (Barry Levinson, 2012) is a fictional eco-horror film in which a small coastal town is terrorized by an aquatic parasite. Stephen Rust and Carter Soles write of eco-horror that, rather than present natural processes and events as *sources* of horror, the genre 'assumes that environmental disruption is haunting humanity's relationship with the non-human world'.[11] This is a very useful distinction, and one which helps us locate *The Bay*. The film is presented as a found-footage assemblage; what we see and hear – amateur video clips,

media reports, etc. – has supposedly been suppressed by way of a federal 'cover up'. *The Bay* is also a loose reworking of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975); in both, the bodies of complacent and corrupt Eastern-seaboard townsfolk are victimized by an uncommonly horrific manifestation of non-human nature. As this summary suggests, *The Bay* is not a film which consciously engages with water as a focal issue or an object of contemplation, but in making clear the difficulty of tracing water as a narratively coherent agent (from one site to another, chronologically), it becomes an unusually vivid example of representational crisis and opportunity. It is as if *The Bay* achieves a kind of inadvertent eloquence on the subject of water, in its struggles to reconcile this substance with the logic and necessities of thrilling and comprehensible cinema. To adopt the terms set out in Daniel Yacavone's *Film Worlds*, we could say that *The Bay* attends to water by way of 'exemplification', or the 'recognition of a general property or quality (of things) brought to reflective attention'.[12] It *feels* like a film about something beyond the capacities of film.

As a means of exploring in more precise terms the ways in which *The Bay* intersects with concerns over environmental representation, I will discuss the film's tendency to characterize water as both a natural habitat and a social commodity, and how in doing so it manages to avoid assuming or positing an 'essence'. Firstly, *The Bay* is a film in which fish feature prominently, and in which they prove to be a similarly awkward subject for media as the water in which they swim. Fish present particular and particularly intriguing challenges for narrative film, and the apparent inextricability of fish from their habitat plays an important part in *The Bay*'s idiosyncratic staging of watery magnitude. Secondly, this is also a film in which water is shown to circulate as a functional necessity, one which requires management and distribution. Faced with a drama of contamination and infestation, we of course speculate about where the town's water comes from, and where it goes. These are questions which, as I will explore, *The Bay* actively fosters; it is, in other words, a film which is alive to water's infrastructural identity.

Infrastructure is the subject of increasing attention in arts and media scholarship, and a number of writers emphasize the ways in which apparently immaterial, digital information is inescapably dependent on vast material resources. Keller Easterling's recent *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* is a case in point, exploring as it does submarine fibre-optic cable links of the coast of East Africa, and their socio-political implications.[13] Nicole Starosielski, meanwhile, in her work on the 'appropriate visibilities' of infrastructure, has identified how the laying of oceanic cables is a process which can directly impinge on fishing practices and networks.[14] *The Bay*, as I will explore, speaks to both conceptions of infrastructure; a supportive system for the management and distribution of 'stuff', and a necessary term for reflections on digital media.

For these and other reasons, Levinson's film seems ripe for exploring how a contemporary work might acknowledge the disconcerting complexity of water, and how it might do so in ways which dovetails with Morton's thoughts on hyperobjecthood. In setting my sights on an individual film, I run the risk of attempting to 'capture' a hyperobject by way of an indicative and representative case study, in ways that may seem contradictory to Morton's intentions, and the broader ambitions of ecocritical theory. This is, unfortunately, an almost unavoidable risk for anyone hoping to build upon and apply such a promising and timely concept, and one to which I will return in the essay's conclusion.

Filming water

One of the reasons *The Bay* offers us such a rich example of water's representational awkwardness is that it is a narrative of pollution, and so explicitly deals in questions of cause, effect and location; it is a case in which water's hyperobjecthood is thrown into particularly bold relief. But before turning towards *The Bay* and its specific qualities, it is worth remarking at the very outset that water is, in every instance of creative evocation, description and visualization, very difficult to deal with. Like revolution, genocide, capitalism and God (for example), water is a subject that *automatically* presents difficulties to novelists, photographers, painters, sculptors, poets and performers. Ivan Illich writes that water 'remains a chaos until a creative story interprets its seeming equivocation as being the quivering ambiguity of life'[15], a claim that goes some way towards capturing water's resistance to capture, but one which perhaps places an inordinate amount of confidence in the ability of a creative narrative to manage its chaos. When it comes to water and creative representation, formal and cognitive difficulties arise at the point of a work's conception, and continue through to (and beyond) execution. And this is nowhere more true than in cinema, which in many ways can be thought of as a medium particularly ill-equipped to 'deal with' water.

What are some of water's crucial properties? It is an effective solvent, and is susceptible to contamination. It physically transforms within a relatively narrow range of temperatures, and it constantly moves. Water on our planet is cyclical – it replenishes itself through precipitation. (*The Bay* is unusual in recognizing that this cycle is mediated through infrastructure.) Water behaves consistently across scales, from the microscopic to the global, and is reflective. In the literature on water, one recurring motif is that of connectivity, a term that refers at the same time to its solvency as well as its movement (and it also hints at water's socio-historical role as means by which societies have been able to trade, invade

and explore). Connectivity is also a term that may help us to think through cinema's relationship with water, precisely because cinema has its own claims on connectivity, and relies on its viewers accepting and engaging with a linear series of framed compositions. Digital technology has complicated the idea that cinema is a series of photographs, but framing remains utterly central to the character and imagination of a film. And the relationship between one framed image and another (and, perhaps to a lesser extent, between framed images and sounds), is how cinema imagines connectivity. Poetry and prose can invoke environmental and elemental relations more freely and more radically (the famous final paragraph of Joyce's "The Dead" is a case in point here); painting and sculpture can even bypass invocation, and literally include water within their own being. Film, by contrast, proceeds in a manner which seems in many ways to work against water.

It would, of course, be absurd to suggest that cinema has failed to register water's complexity; as well as the contemporary practitioners listed above, there can found throughout the canon – in the films of Renoir, Ozu, and Antonioni, for example – work which does more than register water's majesty and mystery, and which ensures that water exists in a film world as something not reducible to an environmental appendage. And yet, the very attention paid to water, the act of locating and narrating it, is always at risk of claiming a kind of capture or quintessential expression. Art (cinema) built upon a succession of framed images – art which indeed could be said to build a world from that succession of framed images – is always in danger of being too focused, too partial and too instantaneous in its explorations of water.[16]

The Bay does not necessarily resolve these quandaries, but it somehow seems to change the rules of the game. The film's story is relatively simple; huge quantities of submerged chicken excrement pollute the local water supply in the fictitious town of Claridge, Maryland, instigating the spread of a lethal parasite, engulfing the community during its Independence Day celebrations. The plot, however, is extremely complex, and the film's careful interweaving of different timeframes is supported and complemented by its deft deployment of different media, or channels of mediation. The 'found footage' we see has apparently been leaked by an anonymous source, but is now being commentated on by a young news reporter, Donna Thompson (Kether Donohue), who was present at the catastrophe. Thompson was a junior reporter on the weekend of the disaster, and the film begins (after a short prologue) with her addressing a webcam a few years later; Donna explains her ambition to tell the true story of what happened, using confiscated digital footage of the events, which has now resurfaced on a site called 'govleaks.org'. Sometimes Donna's narration accompanies the footage we see (as if voiceover and images have been meaningfully edited together), and sometimes it responds to it directly (as if we are

accessing the raw results of Donna confronting the footage), generating a very complex narrational strategy. First-time viewers are likely to follow the general thrust of the narrative, but could hardly be expected to untangle its multi-linear chronology with any real degree of confidence. It is not uncommon for a contemporary Hollywood film to frustrate linearity and causality, but few films have found such a fitting subject for this as *The Bay* does in the case of polluted water.

The opening ten minutes of *The Bay* function as a kind of portrait of Claridge in its naïve innocence, a succession of images of residents and tourists enjoying the town's festivities, albeit accompanied by Donna Thompson's nervous and sombre commentary. The sequence includes an abundance of images of water in various states and situations – we see swimming pools, lawn hoses, plunge pools, water melon, crabs in shallow water, leisure boating, etc. – and while Thompson's narration leads us to suspect that some or all of these will be involved in the looming horror, Levinson carefully avoids lingering on any particular location or activity as a meaningfully privileged site or activity. Nothing and nowhere is characterized as the source of the catastrophe.

This distributed horror is at play even when *The Bay* momentarily seems to actually reveal a source, namely the huge piles of agricultural waste which have been dumped next to the town's water supply. In this passage, we see footage from a rogue website, 'The Eco Spy', in which a young amateur journalist has secretly filmed the vast quantities of chicken excrement; in many respects this should be a climax, a successful sighting of the root cause. Yet *The Bay*, crucially, does not treat it as a climax, but rather as one more bit of footage to add into the mix. This moment could easily work as a victorious exposé (not least if it was positioned in the film's final stages), but *The Bay* mitigates and blunts this potential in a number of ways. For example, the amateur's recording of the waste is rendered with night-vision technology, and the offending substance is almost impossible to identify; the 'Eco Spy' report is intercut with footage of the (clearly corrupt) Mayor extolling the safety and importance of the recently installed desalination plant; Donna Thompson's commentary emphasizes not the waste management so much as the irresponsible distribution of water throughout Claridge. There is little or no trace of the kind of triumph, or clarity of purpose, we might expect from a sequence of discovery and of proven culpability. The apparent reveal is not put forward with any confidence; it is hedged and fudged, aurally and visually. After all, is the image of irresponsibly dumped 'chicken shit' more or less damning that the image of an overcrowded chicken shed being piped water? In these early stages, *The Bay* dashes any hopes we might have of bearing witness to water pollution, by offering up a succession of partial glances, each one a little bit revelatory, and a little bit impotent.

Not surprisingly, in a film which tries to capture something of the spirit of digital activism, *The Bay* challenges us to contend with a plethora of formats as well as time frames and locations. Amateur phone and video footage, CCTV footage, television reports and scientists' video diaries are all mixed in as diegetic modes, stitched together by a kind of 'meta-diegetic' logic whose source – as is the case in other films with a similar found-footage premise – remains tantalisingly obscure. (Although Donna Thompson functions as a narrator inasmuch as she verbally commentates on what we see, *The Bay* is absolutely clear that Thompson has no control over the arrangement of footage, let alone the accompanying music.) And the scopic uncertainty which tends to characterize this film's mode of horror – loosely dating from *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) – becomes unusually apposite in this particular elemental context. *The Bay* reveals water in a constantly changing series of roles: a habitat, a source of leisure, a landscape feature, an infrastructural resource, a drink, or even a unit of political capital. To phrase this another way, water is not only framed and edited as if it is allusive and indefinable, it is imagined and narrativized as such.

As a result, there is a stimulating contradiction at the heart of *The Bay*: the film's disposition is that of a revelation of 'what actually happened', a heroic truth-telling exercise in response to the authorities' censure, but it is also a deeply ambivalent film, tentative and fractured. It is not unusual for a film to coyly or teasingly withhold an expected triumph or disclosure, but our uncertainty when watching *The Bay* is different. It is not the result of an enigma, but rather a kind of overexposure. We are given to believe that, thanks to 'govleaks.org', no image or action or fact has been withheld in telling the story of Claridge, and this abundance inevitably generates its own kind of opacity, as *The Bay* largely does away with the kind of hierarchy of meaningful sequences to which we are accustomed. At the risk of trivializing this fundamental quality, one cannot help but see *The Bay* as a *messy* film, but to particularly appropriate and critical ends. If we take polluted water to be a hyperobject in the terms set out by Morton, then the narrative and formal strategies undertaken in *The Bay* – the discontinuous timeframe, the assemblage of formats – emerge as legitimate, even necessary approaches to the (impossible) task at hand.

Filming fish

Another important strategy by which *The Bay* ensures that its subject is never quite available is its abundant images of fish. One of the film's narrative strands follows two oceonographers who had been the first victims of Claridge's eco-disaster, and had found –

as well as huge levels of toxicity in the water – an isopod parasite feeding on local fish, devouring them from the inside. The scientists are eventually met by the same fate. (When the oceanographers' bodies are found, it is assumed that they were victims of a shark attack.) In some ways, this is a convenient mechanism by which *The Bay* can enliven its environmentalist narrative with a dose of 'body horror', and ensure that its threat is not entirely beyond the realms of visible action and embodiment.[17] The parasites, inevitably, do not confine themselves to fish, and can throughout the course of the film be seen throbbing inside the bodies of Claridge residents.

But fish, I would contend, function as much more than convenient conduits for the shocking invasion of human bodies. Instead, they are distributed throughout *The Bay* as animals which seem to fall rather confusingly between victims and culprits. George Bataille famously wrote that 'every animal is in the world like water in water',[18] but the fish we see in Levinson's film are not located with anything like that kind of harmony; we might instead turn to Akira Mizuta Lippit, and his description of how animals reside in 'parasitic relation to two rival empires, humanity and nature', realizing the idea of nature while never seeming entirely part of it.[19] Fish in *The Bay* vividly occupy the gap identified by Lippit; common sense tells us that fish are inseparable from their habitat, water, but it is far from clear when we watch *The Bay* whether fish – be they blanketing the surface of the ocean, or laid out on a scientist's dissection plate – are to be seen as victims in their own right, or as filmable indicators of contaminated liquid. Are they co-constituents of a hyperobject we might call fishwater, or simply collateral damage in water mismanagement?

Fish bring to a film a number of qualities which help to sustain this critical uncertainty. In a basic sense, fish are a difficult animal on which to build a narrative film. They are not easy to individualize, and live in a habitat that is often difficult for film technology to penetrate, or to organize. As John Durham Peters observes in his writing on water and media, marine habitats filter out light; 'optics are discouraged' is his neat summary.[20] In terms of dramatic characterization, fish will almost certainly offer up no discernible facial expressions, barely any audible sounds, and they rarely act in a way that is likely to induce sympathy or identification. A considerable amount of writing on animals in film, following paths trodden by John Berger and Jacques Derrida, has understandably focused on the gaze and its return (or not) as a crucial juncture or flashpoint in the animal-camera-spectator relay[21], but fish are almost inevitably excluded from such a process. In an essay on cinematic performance, Ross Gibson declares that 'breathing and looking are the primary impulses for making dramatic meaning in the elementary world'; in Gibson's terms at least, fish are not well equipped for developing a meaningful presence in film drama.[22]

We also tend to see fish as participants and indicators, rather than agents. They seem to be first and foremost part of a food chain and an ecosystem, and a reminder of pre-historic timeframes. Whatever we are told about the fragility of fish stocks, fish seem infinite, and infinitely replicable. When they are tossed off the edge of the trawler in *Leviathan* (Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, 2012), a film with which *The Bay* could develop a fascinating correspondence, the fish appear to be plunged into a jet-black oblivion – but it is not a moment that shocks. Unlike bears, dogs, horses or monkeys (for example), we are unlikely to mourn fish, or receive their gaze, or project our habits and expectations onto their social encounters. They could be said to teeter on the edge of our environmental compassion.

The Bay makes extremely productive use of this ambivalent position, employing fish as quasi synecdoches of water – threatening, vulnerable and omnipresent. They are everywhere, but always seem to be standing in for something which is photographically and cognitively out of reach. In a fascinating study of 'the sheer quantity of piscatory imagery' in Shakespeare, Dan Brayton declares that the 'fish is not merely a metaphorical presence in the writings of Shakespeare; it is a floating signifier for materiality'.[23] In *The Bay*, fish likewise perform a crucially non-metaphorical function; an abundance of images of fish seem to make a cumulatively incontrovertible case for the horrific despoilment of an ecosystem, but – as with the compendium of water images – there is something futile about them, too. A scientist shows us inside a diseased fish through an endoscopic camera; a sweeping aerial shot shows us thousands of dead fish blanketing the water; an amateur video camera shows a line-caught fish ejecting from its mouth a scuttling isopod. Each seems to promise indexical proof of something, but it is virtually impossible for viewers to develop a coherent understanding of what that *something* might be.

In one scene, we are shown the control room of America's Centre for Disease Control, in which the emergency-response team view a series of internet sources in an effort to learn about the nature of the parasites and their effect on fish; for the characters in the control room *and* viewers of *The Bay*, no image or piece of information really carries any revelatory quality whatsoever. It is one of the many moments which seems to have a 'twin' in *Jaws*, namely when Brody (Roy Scheider) thumbs through a picture book about sharks. Brody, though, appears to be learning. In the blank expressions of the scientific authority figures in *The Bay*, we can see traces of what Timothy Morton calls contemporary lameness – an inversion on Romantic conceptions of responsibility and revelation. How can we effectively respond to a 'thing', Morton asks us, when (as is the case with hyperobjects) its appearance fails so spectacularly to correspond to its totality? 'Every aspect of hyperobjects,' he writes, 'reinforces our particular lameness with regard to them'.[24]

In her famous poem, 'The Fish', Elizabeth Bishop catches a fish, keeps hold of it, looks at it, thinks about it, and finds wonderful turns of phrase for articulating its strange otherness. She manages to reach something like an epiphany: 'I stared and stared / and victory filled up / the little rented boat'.[25] *The Bay* is distinguished by its absolute lack of any such victories.

Filming infrastructure

I have suggested that the sheer abundance and variety of water-images and fish-images in *The Bay* allow it to register water's hyperobjecthood, at least as much as a contemporary narrative film is likely to do. I have characterized the film's treatment of these subjects as an approach which resists prioritizing a particular location or essential quality. Turning to the question of infrastructure, the third and final subject which seems vital to the film's environmental distinctiveness, we are met with a very different feature – a single, haunting presence in *The Bay* which *does* exert a kind of magnetic pull, a check on the film's dispersive tendencies. It is a desalination plant, mentioned only in certain passages and only ever filmed from a distance, but nevertheless generating a kind of uncanny centrality, and making a significant contribution to *The Bay*'s status as an ecologically complex work. A desalination plant (where saltwater is processed into freshwater) is a site which of course is bound up with ideas of industry, capitalism, landscape and environmentalism – not unfamiliar frameworks by which to understand a film. But in *The Bay* it is, I believe, more significant as an image and location of *infrastructure*, a sometimes ambiguous term which generally alludes to the large-scale systemic techniques undertaken to sustain a 'way of life'.

But infrastructure as a general concept or category might be more helpfully understood, at least initially, in its pre-digital, quintessentially modern character. This is how Paul Edwards understands infrastructure – transportation, energy production and storage, water supply and communications as the 'connective tissues and the circulatory systems of modernity'.[26] His thumbnail sketch of infrastructure(s) is a very useful starting point for understanding where this phenomenon might sit on the social-ecological spectrum: 'Infrastructures constitute an artificial environment, channelling and/or reproducing properties of the natural environment which we find most useful and comfortable, providing others which the natural environment cannot, and eliminating features we find dangerous, uncomfortable, or merely inconvenient'.[27] And it is just such a characterization which prompts John Durham Peters to turn to Edwards and infrastructure in his recent book on media and ecology, *The Marvelous Clouds*. It is not surprising that a book exploring environments *as* media would be drawn to infrastructure; as Edwards describes, the quintessential infrastructural act is that of

mediation. Among the key characteristics of infrastructure that interest Peters are its relatively small interfaces (taps, plug sockets, mobile phones, etc.) in relation to its vast network, its generation of risk, and its opacity-cum-invisibility. Infrastructure is the parliament of 'things not understood that stand under our worlds'.[28]

Despite this opacity and complexity, *The Bay* strives to make infrastructure part of its narrative. More specifically, the town's desalination plant is shown looming in a number of shots, and is discussed by both Donna Thomson and Mayor Stockman – the film's heroine and villain, respectively. It is initially glimpsed in the background of a crab-eating contest (part of the town's Independence Day celebrations), but really becomes a subject in its own right when Mayor Stockman gestures towards it during an open-air political meeting; Stockman reminds his constituents that he successfully oversaw the construction of the plant, in the face of local criticism, and that poultry farming is now reaping the benefits. During this passage, Thomson's voiceover narration briefly interjects to explain to viewers what the plant does, and to concede the naivety with which most Claridge residents ignored it; the sequence concludes with the end of Stockman's public address, as he reminds people that they owe their lawns and swimming pools to the desalination plant. 'And last but not least, I don't know about you, but I think this is the best darn water I've ever tasted.' He lifts a plastic cup of water to his mouth, and drinks – capping his mini lecture on infrastructure with a gesture that is absurd political theatre, but one that must also be understood as drawing a valid connection between environment and lifestyle. Unlike the corrupt Mayor Vaughan of *Jaws*, Stockman is not entirely myopic with regard to water's multifaceted existence. Instead, he seems to misunderstand infrastructure's mediating role as one of mastery.

The desalination plant is the key infrastructural motif in *The Bay*. Elsewhere, in cinema and beyond, the shipping container has emerged as perhaps the major icon of what Easterling calls 'infrastructure space'. (In the introduction to his book-length study of the shipping container, Marc Levinson writes that the 'modern containerport is a factory whose scale strains the limits of imagination'.[29]) This has been most striking in Noël Burch's film collaboration with Allan Sekula, *The Forgotten Space* (2010), which is based on *Fish Story*, Sekula's series of photographs and accompanying essays, chronicling the maritime manifestations of contemporary global capital.[30] (The title is deeply curious, given that very few of Sekula's photographs actually include fish.) If, as I suggest above, environmental degradation poses challenges to representation not dissimilar to those associated with global capital, then *Fish Story* brings together these two vital difficulties. It is Marxist in its outlook, determined that capitalist rhetoric does not fool us into thinking that commerce has shed its material burdens; but it is likewise poetical in its consideration of water, and the

patterns of thought which water sustains. An infrastructural imagination emerges here as a way to navigate between hard politics and eco-poetics.

As with *The Bay*, *Fish Story* can be said to studiously avoid any kind of victorious presentation of the habitually overlooked. In fact, Sekula's writing warns against the false epiphany of exposure; meditating on the invisibility of cargo, Sekula worries that an image of a crate breaking, spilling its contents, would be 'too easy an image of sudden disclosure, at once archaic and cinematic'.[31] Sekula, like Levinson, seems acutely aware that anything resembling a 'smoking gun' would automatically invalidate the project. Bill Roberts's summary of the ambition of *Fish Story* applies equally and convincingly to *The Bay*: 'Sekula offers a model of photographic visibility that, by recognising its own inescapable inadequacy, thereby strives to be adequate to the magnitude and complexity of the subject at hand'.[32] A visual narrative of container ships is never likely to operate according to stable notions of time, space and scale; likewise, a horror film whose key location is a desalination plant will perpetually fail to convince us of its adequacy. It does not occur to the film or its heroine to venture towards the plant in the hope of revelation; to do so would be, returning to Sekula's terms, 'archaic and cinematic'.

Around *The Bay*

Perhaps it is similarly naïve, or reductionist, to focus our attention on a single film in the hope that it might 'show' us a hyperobject. Timothy Morton's terms almost seem designed to discourage us from identifying case studies or illustrative examples of hyperobjecthood. His own characterizations of it are fleeting, and are not offered according to criteria so much as poetic opportunity. It is as if Morton is not looking to delineate a category, but rather encourage an interpretative frame of mind. In many respects I have willingly adopted such an approach to *The Bay*, and hope to have articulated that film's distinctive environmentality by building on Morton's thinking. But I have done so in the belief that water as a subject is *demonstrably* hyper, that time and again it resists representation and challenges scale, and can be consistently understood as an exemplary hyperobject. In other words, my engagement with *The Bay* is not offered as a hermeneutic experiment[33] – I believe there to be something at stake in this film, something to identify and explore in other creative works. Through its attention to infrastructure and its representational instability, *The Bay* is a particularly compelling example of hyperobjecthood, making clear to us, in narratively suspenseful terms, the futility of fixing a gaze upon water. But, as I have indicated throughout this essay, it is hardly alone in finding itself unable or unwilling to resist that futility.

Ecocritical film studies would not necessarily benefit from an exhaustive chronicling of work about water, simply on the basis of this being a fascinatingly elusive and recalcitrant subject. Perhaps the most serious criticism of Morton's work is the way in which it seems to revel in the impossibility of mediation and comprehension, and it would be a shame to simply point to films about water as intriguing and curious failures in this mode, doomed to offer us nothing other than a constant confirmation of water's resistance. *The Bay* perhaps offers us a way out of this cul-de-sac. Despite its bleak narrative, there is something constructive and optimistic in its determination to show us the direct technological and ecological interdependence of social communities and watery matter. 'Entanglement' is a quality and a condition on which ecocritics place considerable emphasis, but can sometimes be used to evoke a rather a vague sense of oneness with material matter. In *The Bay*, brief but crucial glimpses of infrastructure remind us that entanglement is something to learn about. These images are neither mystical nor paranoid, and should embolden us to look for evidence of *when* and *how* environmental phenomena come to be in and around our lives.

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3 *Ibid*, p. 282.

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5 T.Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 130–135.

6 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, p. 22.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

9 Notable examples of this include Veronica Strang's useful overview of the subject, *Water: Nature and Culture* (Reaktion Books, 2015), as well as more specialist studies, such as Matthew Gandy's *The Fabric of Space: Water, Modernity, and the Urban Imagination* (MIT Press, 2014), and Christopher Sneddon's *Concrete Revolution: Large Dams, Cold War Geopolitics, and the US Bureau of Reclamation* (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

10 J. J. Cohen and L. Duckert, 'Eleven Principles of the Elements' in J. J. Cohen and L. Duckert (eds.) *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking With Earth, Air, Water and Fire*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p.7.

[11] S. A. Rust and C. Soles. 'Ecohorror Special Cluster: "Living in Fear, Living in Dread, Pretty Soon We'll All Be Dead"', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 21:3, Summer 2014, p.510.

12 D. Yacavone, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema*, Columbia University Press, p.119.

13 K. Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, Verso, 2014.

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17 See, for example, L. Badley, *Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995.

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20 J. Durham Peters, *The Marvellous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 61.

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27 *Ibid*, p. 189.

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30 A. Sekula, *Fish Story*, Richter Verlag, 2002.

31 *Ibid,* p. 32.

32 B. Roberts, 'Production in View: Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* and the Thawing of Postmodernism', *Tate Paper*s, no. 18, Autumn 2012. Available at: http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/18/production-in-view-allan-sekulas-fish-story-and-the-thawing-of-postmodernism

[33] Timothy Clark has in fact undertaken an experiment of this kind, in a literary context, reading Raymond Carver's 'Elephant' through different varieties of spatial and temporal scale. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. London: Bloomsbury, pp.97-114.