

## Introduction



### Elemental World Cinema

#### *Special Issue II: Water & Air*

*Tiago de Luca* | ORCID: 0000-0001-9000-5566

Film and Television Studies, University of Warwick, Warwick, UK

*t.de-luca@warwick.ac.uk*

*Matilda Mroz* | ORCID: 0000-0002-4944-6543

School of Art, Communication and English, The University of Sydney,  
Sydney, Australia

Corresponding author

*matilda.mroz@sydney.edu.au*

This is the second part of a two-part Special Issue on ‘Elemental World Cinema’. In Part 1: Earth & Fire, we noted that the coupling of specific elements was a pragmatic choice. Yet, in the same way that pairing earth and fire productively led us to explore their commingling in phenomena like volcanoes and land-burning practices (de Luca & Mroz, 2023), the present issue will show that there are undeniable resonances that emerge from thinking water and air together. Both lend themselves readily to mythologising, recurring in creation and origin myths of cosmologies and religions across the globe; in psychoanalytic and philosophical meditations on liquidity, dreams and death (see Bachelard, 1999; Bachelard, 2011; and Walton in this issue); and in visual representations of the celestial, spiritual and divine.

Both are also fundamental to sustaining human and nonhuman existence on Earth. Water is the primordial “stuff” of life from which living creatures emerged. For John Durham Peters (2016: 54), then, the ocean “is the medium of all media” (see also Jue, 2020). For a significant portion of beings on this

planet, humans included, air is in its turn “a medium of life” (Horn, 2018: 8): we are immersed in it and depend upon a breathable atmosphere for survival. Water-based and air-related vocabulary permeates our contemporary media environment. We stream images, surf the net, airdrop photos and store files in the cloud. Adriano D’Aloia (2012: 87) cites the “deep relationship” that binds cinema and water: “images and sounds stream on the screen like an inexhaustible flow of water.” Such streaming in turn quite literally depends on our interventions into undersea environments in the form of underwater cables as well as wireless signals traversing through the air. In this way, too, the ocean and the atmosphere are mediums.

In histories and cultural representations of attempted human conquests – imperialist connotations intended – of seas and skies, the “unknowns” of the watery depths and the extraterrestrial have frequently been paralleled (Howard, 2017). Cinema has played a part in these cultural histories. From its inception, it nurtured a relationship with air and water, starting with water-effects and wave films, and a fascination with atmospheric variations (see de Luca in this issue). It was not long, however, before aqueous and air-filled terrestrial surfaces somehow exhausted their initial appeal. Cinema had to go higher and deeper. As Teresa Castro (2013: 119) has shown, “Cinematography emerged at a time when the focus was on the conquest of the sky and the emancipation of the gaze from its different types of physical restraints.” Already in 1898, we find films shot from balloons, and in the subsequent decades, thanks to the aircrafts produced en masse for WW1, the aerial vision would take off (Virilio, 1989). Since the early 1910s, underwater filming techniques were likewise deployed to explore the ‘uncharted,’ including the construction of deep-sea tubes and tanks that permitted the recording of submarine life (de Luca, 2022: 118–19; see also Cohen, 2019). From contemporary BBC series to IMAX films, these aerial and underwater views are still very much with us today; indeed, more so than ever.

That these views, however troubling in their military and imperialist resonances, are currently so dominant can be in part explained by the unprecedented pollution of our oceans and skies. This also explains the rising scholarly interest in water in its intersections with film content and form. Georgina Evans (2020: 169), for example, considers the parallels between “the development of screen and aquarium exhibition practice,” examining how the cinematic frame, like the aquarium, “imposes a geometric form” on both the amorphous element of water and its creaturely inhabitants (see also Crylen, 2015). Hearne’s article in this issue raises a further, less examined topic: the development of techniques for rendering water in animation. Studies of various watery cinematic environments, from beachscapes (Handyside, 2014)

and swimming pools (Brown & Hirsch, 2014) to oceanic seascapes (Balsom, 2018), now abound.

Many such studies (including Walton, Kent and Hearne in this issue) aim to dismantle a common association between aquatic milieus and the overturning of social and political structures. Nicole Starosielski has identified how undersea environments are frequently positioned in this way, as timeless and ahistorical. Underwater cinema, Starosielski (2015: 150) argues, must be thought through a “matrix of power relations, including military engagements, the exploitation of ocean resources, and racialized relationships between filmmakers and coastal inhabitants.” This caution applies, too, to our scholarship. As James Smith and Steve Mentz (2020: 1) point out, some (white, Global North) scholarship in the recent “oceanic turns” and “blue humanities” risks re-iterating “problematic cultural fantasies” of conquests into ‘uncharted’ waters, neglecting or appropriating the Indigenous epistemologies of those who, as Māori scholar Alice Te Punga Somerville (2017: 28) puts it, “have not needed a ‘turn to the sea’ because we were already there.”

That said, recent cultural histories and film analyses of specific ocean- and seascapes have made significant contributions to our understanding of the “matrix of power relations” mentioned by Starosielski, alongside engagements with the particular environmental concerns raised at these sites (see Past, 2009; Elias, 2019; Troon, 2020). One of the most productive engagements with the oceanic in art, film and theory of recent decades has been with the histories of slavery and the Middle Passage. The Atlantic is the seascape where enslaved bodies were thrown overboard and forever lost, a “repository” (Eshun, 2021: 82) of loss and mourning, and the site of a “radical rupture” of linguistic, cultural and familial lines and histories (Keeling, 2019: 78). Scholars, including Kent in this issue, consider what might have been forged in this “wake” (Keeling, 2019: 54): a nomadic Afrofuturism, a liquid Africa which brings forth an aesthetics of non-linearity that “function[s] tidally” (Eshun, 2021: 79), and a “Liquid Blackness” which designates, among other things, Blackness as an expansive “fluid sensorial terrain” of possibility (Raengo, 2014: 7).

Air has also assumed visibility in both film scholarship and cultural production recently. In her book *The Place of Breath in Cinema*, published in 2012, Davina Quinlivan (2–3) noted that “breathing is part of our existence as human beings, but it is not something we tend to think about and its presence is rarely considered in film.” Over ten years later, this scenario has somewhat changed, no doubt because the act of breathing itself, in the context of the continuing toxification and weaponisation of the atmosphere, can no longer be taken for granted. If respiration constitutes a fundamental aspect of human life – our “universal right to breathe,” to cite Achille Mbembe (2021) –

breathlessness “epitomizes the systemic violation of air that characterizes contemporary environments,” a phenomenon that, as Caterina Albano (2022: 20) notes, is reflected in a flurry of videos and artworks currently focused on breath and air pollution.<sup>1</sup> Yet to fully confront the “uneven availability of breathable air,” as Jean-Thomas Trembley (2022: 34) suggests, one must also historicise. Building upon Christina Sharpe’s “history of Black asphyxiation” (18), Trembley makes the case for a “breathing aesthetics” in cinema and related media which shows that the impact of toxic air is “unevenly distributed and registered with particular acuity by marginalized individuals” (33).

In a different register, the burgeoning “atmospheric turn” in film and screen studies (Spadoni, 2020; Hven, 2022; Bruno, 2022), itself imported from architecture and stage design (Böhme, 2017), testifies to an understanding of film aesthetics as indissociable from the climactic, that is, cinema’s ability to produce and engender ‘atmospheres’ felt by an embodied spectator. As Steffen Hven (2022: 45) notes, “conceptualizing atmosphere as the medium of perception reconnects the meteorological and affective conceptions of the term.” Indeed, as de Luca and Turan show in their contributions to this issue, an examination of the reproduction and/or recreation of weather occurrences such as fog, mist, storms and tornados in the cinema can generate insights into how film form enacts atmospheres in the context of increased atmospheric variations. Taken together, the articles in this issue trace elemental manifestations and perturbations across documentaries, animations, and fictional and experimental cinemas, tracking the patterns made by layers of water and air (to borrow Macaulay’s words, 2010: 27) as they intersect with distinct political exigencies, aesthetic traditions and philosophical thought.

### A World Cinema of Water & Air

It may be evident from our brief sketch of cinema’s engagement with the aqueous that the salt waters of oceans and seas have dominated both scholarship and representation. Joanna Hearne’s article, “Animated Waters and the Circulation of Indigenous Instruction,” leads us, instead, to freshwater North American rivers, and the Indigenous animation films that foreground human relationships to them. In explicating the “instructive force” of such films,

1 Among the artworks examined by Albano are Hossein Valamanesh’s sculpture *Breath* (2013), Raphael Lozano-Hemmer’s multimedia installation *Last Breath* (2012) and Forensic Architecture’s video *Cloud Studies* (2020). For an analysis of the latter, see also de Luca in this issue.

Hearne considers how Anishinaabe, Cherokee, Hopi and Ojibwe animated engagements with rivers convey protocols of care for water and intervene in wider activist practices that seek to protect water from extractive capitalist-colonialist degradation. For these animators and filmmakers, Hearne argues, “water conveys a teaching.” The orientation towards the riverine in these films, which circulate outside of conventional cinematic distribution, stands, aesthetically and politically, in opposition to mainstream animation. The drive towards ever sharper photorealistic depictions of water in Disney films, she contends, in fact obfuscates the environmental damage caused by capitalism, colonialism and industry, including the film industry itself.

Laurence Kent’s article, “Untamed Storms: Cinema’s Oceanic Contingency and Mati Diop’s *Atlantics*,” is also concerned with colonial legacies and neocolonialism in a specific waterscape: the Atlantic Ocean. Kent’s article contributes to the growing academic literature on Mati Diop’s engagement with the oceanic in her film *Atlantics* (2019). Drawing on Christina Sharpe, Kent positions the film as a work that lingers “in the wake” of colonialism and slavery. For Kent, the anticolonial aesthetics of *Atlantics* can be found in its imbrication of the oceanic with more-than-human perspectives, its conjuring of spiritual possessions and spectres, and its evocation of prophecies, as the film gestures to the histories of those drowned in the Middle Passage as well as the continuing deaths at sea of migrants and refugees. Following Diop’s own interest in contemporary migrant settlements in Bretagne, Kent stages a return to Jean Epstein’s maritime films in the same region, films that liquefy perception but remain nevertheless bound to an ahistorical vision of the ocean.

Like Hearne and Kent, Saige Walton traces the political realities of death and debt in colonial and capitalist structures through an attention to a particular cinematic seascape, the Pacific Ocean, in Claire Denis’s film *L’Intrus* (*The Intruder*, 2004). Walton’s article, “Imagining the Elements with Gaston Bachelard and Claire Denis: ‘Weighted’ Images, Drift and Diffusion in *L’Intrus*/*The Intruder*,” argues that air and water in Denis’s film channel a socio-political critique while unfolding an “elemental poetics of film form,” a poetics that is explored through Gaston Bachelard’s philosophy of the material imagination. Recurrent images of water and air – of laboured or smoky breath, balmy or stormy wind, and rippling seawater – are “weighted,” both materially and symbolically. Elemental, kinesthetic images that move between human and more-than-human bodies are constitutive of the “image-poem” of *L’Intrus*. The circulation of water and air index the materiality of individual breathing bodies, the drifts of dream-imagery across the film’s narrative, and Denis’s exploration of the transnational flows of global capital, in which human lives

may be sacrificed to ensure the free and safe passage (through life, and across oceans) of the wealthy and privileged.

Kaya Turan's article, "Stormy Images: Elemental Kinetics in the Recent Films of Takashi Makino (2018–2021)," provides a further perspective on how air and water become indissoluble through an examination of superimposition in Makino's digital films, in which hundreds of layers of moving images of the elements are combined. Through an exploration of superimposed images of sea storms, blizzards and sandstorms in *Memento Stella* (2018), *Untitled* (2020), and *Double Phase* (2020) respectively, Turan argues that these films position the storm as the paradigmatic force of elemental movement. Makino's work reveals the fluid, kinetic and constantly shifting dynamics that register the elemental as processual, as opposed to the atomised vision of the elemental in periodic tables. These cinematic storms immerse us in what Lowell and Duckert call an "elemental *now*" of crisis and turbulence rather than the "then" implied in conservation projects, which, Turan argues, misread the elemental as static rather than kinetic.

Apart from dramatic storms and blizzards, the inextricability of water and air are evident in more everyday atmospheric phenomena such as clouds, fog, mist and smog. Although they may be as ubiquitous in film as they are outside it, there has nevertheless been no sustained historical enquiry into cinema's relationship with what de Luca calls the "nebulous." In the final article of this Issue, "Nebulous Cinema," de Luca sketches the first contours of such a history by exploring how the drifting ontology of clouds make it an ideal subject for a time-based medium such as cinema, especially durational and slow cinema. Incessantly moving substances such as fog, which continually modulate the field of perception through filtering, layering, obscuring and clearing light, encourage us to consider these vapours as themselves an elemental media. Their cinematic mediation in films such as *Fog Line* (Larry Gottheim, 1970), de Luca contends, render both atmospheric phenomena and cinema itself as a durational and experiential drift, one that has received a new boost with the emergence of slow cinema and which demands an elemental theoretical intervention. Looking at the nebulous cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Tsai Ming-liang, de Luca appraises how they render the unequal impact of airborne toxicity on the marginalised of industrial capitalism through a sensory rather than an informational cloud aesthetics.

The contributions to both halves of 'Elemental World Cinema' indicate how turning (or returning) to the material properties, philosophical and cosmological inflections, and political imbrications of earth, air, fire and water might invigorate debates on ecomedia, ecocriticism and the more-than-human in the so-called Anthropocene. We encounter manifestations

of elemental flux as part of global patterns of climate change and ecological destruction, while being led towards the specific sites where such processes intersect with particular operations of power, violence, systemic failure and injustice. An elemental focus can sharpen our attention to collisions between global anthropogenic degradation and the specific historical and political contexts of elemental formations and processes. This is not to say that cinema unproblematically “captures” the elements; indeed, many of the works discussed by the contributors draw our attention to the difficulties of framing and imaging elemental fluctuations. If we think of the urgent “now,” to appropriate Lowell and Duckert’s term (2015: 18), as the “now” of cinematic recording and viewing as much as the “now” of dramatic elemental phenomena such as volcanic eruptions and sea storms, we must also reckon with elemental temporalities that challenge cinematic and anthropocentric perceptive schemas and time-scales: the *longue-durée* of geological change, the gradual warming of the seas, and the release of often-invisible toxic emissions into the atmosphere. The articles gathered across these two issues suggest productive new pathways for negotiating these complexities by mobilising frameworks of thought and practice that place earth, air, fire and water at their centre. In doing so, they help us rethink both cinema’s elemental properties and the cinematic properties of the elemental.

### References

- Albano, Caterina (2022). *Out of Breath: Vulnerability of Air in Contemporary Art*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bachelard, Gaston (1999). *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. E. Farrell. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications.
- Bachelard, Gaston (2011). *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. E. Farrell. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications.
- Balsom, Erika (2018). *An Oceanic Feeling: Cinema and the Sea*. New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.
- Böhme, Gernot (2017). *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. by Jean-Paul Thibaud. London and New York: Routledge.
- Brown, Christopher, and Pam Hirsch, eds. (2014). *The Cinema of the Swimming Pool*. Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang.
- Bruno, Giuliana (2022). *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Castro, Teresa (2013). Aerial Views and Cinematism, 1898–1939. In: Mark Dorrian and Frédéric Pousin, eds. *Seeing from Above: The Aerial View in Visual Culture*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, pp. 118–133.

- Cohen, Margaret (2019). The Underwater Imagination: From Environment to Film Set, 1954–1956. *English Language Notes* 57 (1), pp. 51–71.
- Crylen, Jonathan (2015). *The Cinematic Aquarium: A History of Undersea Film*. Doctoral Dissertation, Graduate College, The University of Iowa.
- D'Aloia, Adriano (2012). Film in Depth: Water and Immersivity in the Contemporary Film Experience. *Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 5, pp. 87–106.
- de Luca, Tiago (2022). *Planetary Cinema: Film, Media and the Earth*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- de Luca, Tiago, and Matilda Mroz (2023). Introduction: Elemental World Cinema, Part I: Earth & Fire. *Studies in World Cinema* 3 (1), pp. 1–18.
- Duckert, Lowell, and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2015). Introduction: Eleven Principles of the Elements. In: Lowell Duckert and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, eds., *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 1–26.
- Elias, Ann (2019). *Coral Empire: Underwater Oceans, Colonial Tropics, Visual Modernity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Eshun, Ekow (2021). A Liquid Africa: Fluidity as Practice and Aesthetics in Diasporadical Trilogía. *Liquid Blackness* 5 (1), pp. 75–88.
- Evans, Georgina (2020). Framing Aquatic Life. *Screen* 61 (2), pp. 169–190.
- Handyside, Fiona (2014). *Cinema at the Shore: The Beach in French Film*. Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang.
- Horn, Eva (2018). Air as Medium. *Grey Room* 73 (Fall), pp. 6–25.
- Howard, Jonathan (2017). *“The Inhabitants of the Deep”: Water and the Material Imagination of Blackness*. Doctoral Dissertation, Department of English, Duke University.
- Hven, Steffen (2022). *Enacting the Worlds of Cinema*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jue, Melody (2020). *Wild Blue Media: Thinking Through Seawater*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Keeling, Kara (2019). *Queer Times, Black Futures*. New York: New York University Press.
- Macauley, David (2010). *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mbembe, Achille (2021). The Universal Right to Breathe, trans. Carolyn Shread. *Critical Inquiry* 41, pp. 58–62.
- Past, Elena (2009). Lives Aquatic: Mediterranean Cinema and an Ethics of Underwater Existence. *jems: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 48 (3), pp. 52–65.
- Peters, John Durham (2016). *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Quinlivan, Davina (2012). *The Place of Breath in Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Raengo, Alessandra (2014). Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity. *Liquid Blackness* 1 (2), pp. 5–18.



- Smith, James L., and Steve Mentz (2020). Learning an Inclusive Blue Humanities: Oceania and Academia Through the Lens of Cinema. *Humanities* 9 (67), pp. 1–14.
- Spadoni, Robert (2020). What is Film Atmosphere? *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 37 (1), pp. 48–75.
- Starosielski, Nicole (2015). *The Undersea Network*. Durham, NC., and London: Duke University Press.
- Te Punga Somerville, Alice (2017). *Once Were Pacific: Māori Connections to Oceania*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Trembley, Jean-Thomas (2022). *Breathing Aesthetics*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Troon, Simon (2020). The View from a Body of Water: Representing Flooding and Sea Level Rise in the South Pacific. *Studies in Documentary Film* 15 (1), pp. 75–88.
- Virilio, Paul (1989 [1984]). *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. London: Verso.