WATER E-MOTION: TRANSFORMATIVE VIEWS

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Abstract

This paper discusses a few films in which images of water, dance, and movement play a key role and generate transformative views. It explores and reflects on poetic depictions of water that heralded a transformation in art and consciousness, and screen-based images and technology which can induce empathy towards water creatures and sensitivity towards the ways water is being perceived, treated, and shared. The exploration builds on Maya Deren's seminal theory of the ritualistic form in film, and the relevance of ritual in media activism online, as theorized by Gene Youngblood. It is also supported by research of kinesthetic empathy, with special reference to empathy stimulated through watching dance in films and movement choreographed for the screen. On this basis, I identify a common aesthetic trend that underlines depictions of extinction through water from Hiroshima to Fukushima. I analyze the formal style and demonstrate the crucial role of recent visuals and approaches undertaken by artists, scientists and activists, jointly involved in transforming and equalizing humanity's relationship with water and the environment, e.g., 'The Dolphin Dance Project.' Further account is provided on the interrelations of film, ritual, activism, and global interactivity online based on my creative experiments entitled 'Water e-Motion.'

This study identifies and analyzes aesthetic depictions of water that heralded a shift in art forms and consciousness. It explores filmic images which can generate empathy to water creatures and sensitivity towards the ways water is being perceived, treated and shared. It asks: Can film as an art form in this day and age not only impress the viewers through aesthetic expression, but be capable of generating an activist agenda alongside an empathetic outlook in the viewers? I engage with this query in the framework of viewing, and interacting with, films linked to water and the environment online, on mobile screens and through relatively small-scale screening devices and settings. This query is positioned within the historical and theoretical context of artists' films starting with the seminal ideas of Maya Deren.

In 'An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film,' Deren emphasizes her argument concerning the unique function of form in art. She states that, "the distinction of art is that it is neither simply an expression of pain, for example, nor an impression of pain, but is itself a form which creates pain (or whatever its emotional intent)" (Deren, 1946, p. 17). For art to fulfill this requirement, she identifies and develops the "ritualistic form" as an aesthetic method and "as an exercise, above all, of consciousness" (Deren, 1946, p. 17). However, the reality of modern consciousness, she argues, is unique and unlike other moments in time and history. The comprehension of modern existence is shaped not only by scientific inventions but by, and together with, "the inventions of new art instruments" (Deren, 1946, p. 17). Although Deren refers to modern art forms of her era and particularly to cinema, it is worthwhile to revisit her ideas in relation to developments in screen technology and up-to-date collaborations between artists, scientists and activists.

The ritualistic form in film derives from the ancient traditions of tribal rituals where the shamans possessed all the knowledge required for life and living, and art was part of a ritualistic and magical system with destructive, restoring and healing powers. Magical tools were artistic creations based on profound knowledge designed to bring about an outcome; they were utilized for killing an enemy, healing a sick person or bringing rain, etc. (Deren, 1946, p. 15).

Deren makes a clear distinction between the roles of the scientist, the shaman and the artist in the modern age. Science, she argues, is more capable of revealing reality than art. Her argument is still valid in the 21st century, as factual knowledge of the Earth and the Cosmos derives from the instruments and methods of science and technology. Deren offers a bold comparison between the different agencies of art and science by comparing the destructive capabilities of science and the atom bomb to the flimsy attempts of surrealist artists to destroy bourgeois cultural norms (Deren, 1946, p. 10).

She therefore proposes to integrate science and technology in the framework of art. Artists can take an active role in re-designing and transforming reality by utilizing a method of "conscious manipulation designed to create effect" (Deren, 1946, p. 20). The ritualistic form in art is "the human instrument which makes possible a comprehension and a manipulation of the universe in which man must somehow locate himself" (Deren, 1946, p. 20). As such, the ritualistic form is designed to assist contemporary people in understanding the changing world in which they live, it can offer meanings for their existence, and help them relocate and redefine their position and identity in an unstable environment or universe, which they cannot control.

In formal terms, according to Deren, the ritualistic form in film is based upon the fact that:

> ... anthropologically speaking, a ritual is a form which depersonalizes by the use of masks, voluminous garments, group movements, etc., and, in so doing, fuses all individual elements into a transcendent tribal power towards the achievement of some extraordinary grace. Such communal efforts are usually reserved for the accomplishments of some critical metamorphosis, and, above all, for some inversion towards life; the passage from sterile winter into fertile spring, mortality into immortality, the child-son into the man-father. (Deren, 1965, p. 6)

In terms of film, this is achieved as time, a transformative element, created by the film-maker's manipulation of camera shots. The filmic notion of time unifies all actions and elements into a dynamic form. The film's form, like a ritual form, serves to control and manipulate all the elements involved in order to "transcend and transfigure them" (Deren, 1965, p. 6). The ritualistic form conveys the idea that human beings are not the source nor the center of any drama, dilemma or condition. It depersonalizes individuals not with the intention to destroy them but in order to offer them greater views beyond their perceptual limits (Deren, 1946, p. 20). Hence, in the ritualistic form, we are not concerned with specific individuals and personal stories but with personas, archetypes and collective phenomena. I consider the ritualistic form in film as a holistic approach that aims at freeing individuals from the confines of their preconceived ideas and personal preferences. Moreover, it positions human beings and their technologies as integral parts of a dynamic ecosystem. From this perspective, the view of the relationship between contemporary humanity and water can transform as well into a holistic and equalizing set of possibilities in an ecosystem where all components thrive together.

Water, especially the sea, is a central image in Deren's films, a visual metaphor and archetype mirroring the life of the psyche. It has a ritualistic and initiatory purpose, particularly in 'Ritual in Transfigured Time' (Deren, 1965, p.10). In this film, which exemplifies Deren's concept of ritual-film, the protagonist portraying a widow enters the sea in the last stage of her initiation rite and this is where she transforms into a bride. The water in the film represents the quintessence of transformations in nature, and the organic and metaphysical embodiment of life, death and rebirth. Moreover, every element involved in the ritual is influenced by the process of change, "the sea itself changes because of the larger changes of the earth" (Deren, 1965, p. 31).

The Poetry of Extinction: From Hiroshima to Fukushima

> My first vision of earth was water-veiled. I am of the race of men and women who see all things through this curtain of sea, and my eyes are the color of water. [....]

> I remember my first birth in water. All round me a sulphurous transparency and my bones move as if made of rubber. I sway and float, stand on boneless toes listening for distant sounds, sounds beyond the reach of human ears, see things beyond the reach of human eyes. Born full of memories of the bells of the Atlantide. (Nin, A., 1958, p. 3)

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In her diary entry dated August 1945, Anaïs Nin mentions the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings alongside her first encounter with Maya Deren on the beach whilst filming 'At Land.' She writes: "It seems unbelievable that we can go on living, loving, working, in a world so monstrous and this is because we do not know how to curb the savagery of war, how to control history [...] What can we do?" (Nin, 1971, pp. 76–77). Both Deren and Nin express a sense of limitation concerning their ability to influence history and culture particularly as artists. Nin (1971, p. 77) expresses her helplessness, and Deren illustrates both the destructive and alluring powers of the atom bomb and the scientific method in comparison to the unconvincing attempts of artists to shock or destroy (Deren, 1946, p. 10). Anaïs Nin and Ian Hugo's film 'Bells of Atlantis' (1952) is based on the water imagery that runs through Nin's novel The House of Incest (1958). The lost continent on film is depicted through visual poetry that metaphorically denotes the landscape of a world destroyed, submerged in a sea of blood and water contaminated by radiation. The rusty seascape and the futuristic, electronic soundscape by Louise and Bebe Barron can be seen as reflecting the poetry of extinction and the ecological holocaust that characterize the global landscape of the 20th century. It also continues to reflect current images of brutality in terms of visual and sonic surface and depth, texture and feeling. The current of terror that underlies the images in the 'Bells of Atlantis' can be found in images of the tsunami in Japan and the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011. I identify the underlying current of terror by juxtaposing and comparing images of amateur videos taken during the tsunami in Japan and the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, images derived from a new documentary on Fukushima's radioactive water leak by Japanese news agency NHK, ('Radioactive Water — Fukushima Daiichi's Hidden Crisis,' 2014), and the visual style of the film 'Bells of Atlantis' (1952).

Amateur videos of the Fukushima nuclear disaster are available on YouTube, though they are removed and uploaded from time to time. They share a common visual and auditory language that is characterized by a jerky, handheld video/mobile phone camera, distressing sounds of sirens, people screaming and shouting, stormy water and the noises of collision and breaking down of objects such as fences, cars and buildings. The scenery appears grayish and gloomy and the images are somewhat blurred and out of focus. The civilized landscape, marked by buildings, fences and electricity cables, is crumbling down under the forceful waves of the sea. These videos frequently show people being carried to their death whilst others are watching, unable to help, such as in the video entitled 'Japan Tsunami Swallows Car With Passengers Trapped Inside — RIP' (mihdd, 2011). The NHK's documentary depicts the ongoing radiation leak caused by the disaster from inside Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. It follows an investigation team that utilizes a remote-controlled boat equipped with a camera to show images of contaminated water flowing down a wall inside Reactor 1's containment vessel. The video images show a dark and rusty underwater environment agitated by radiation which is signaled by flashing white dots and stains.

The juxtaposition of images from these different sources illustrates similarities in tone, texture and feeling. The overall impact of the images gives the impression that they belong to the same apocalyptic vision and story of the world, factually and poetically depicting the mythic war between humanity, technology and nature, which is carried and reflected by water in a physical and metaphorical sense.

The Dolphin Dance Project

'The Dolphin Dance Project,' based on the work of dancer, choreographer and medical doctor Chisa Hidaka, provides an approach to the ocean environment and its creatures which is not only original in terms of its aesthetics, but transformative in its ability to effectively generate kinesthetic empathy. The project's films depict spontaneous, creative and intelligent interactions between humans and wild dolphins, presenting a significant and pioneering inter-species choreography (The Dolphin Dance Project, 2012).

The paradigm shift involved in this inter-species communication is described in the project's website as: "wild dolphins and humans communicating through dance, collaborating as equals and upending assumptions about who is 'us' and who is 'animal'" (The Dolphin Dance Project, 2012). The project's capacity to overcome the viewer's ingrained perception of the split between the animal and

the human is particularly impactful as a visceral experience in 3D film. According to the project's data, it is also the first 3D film ever made of humans and wild dolphins dancing together (The Dolphin Dance Project, 2013). I have repeatedly watched the 3D film sample provided by the project and found that in comparison to the project's 2D films, my kinesthetic involvement in, and empathy with, the events on screen was enhanced. Research of kinesthetic experience in film demonstrates the various ways empathy is induced in the viewers through the depiction of movement. For example, Bolen (2012) in her article entitled 'Kinesthetic Empathy in Charlie Chaplin's Silent Films' implies that despite moments of intense and complex cognitive, visceral and emotional involvement with the events on screen, the audience remains in a sitting position. The viewer expresses empathy through laughter, by sobbing or by sensing physical and emotional reactions to the movement on screen in her/his body, such as anxiety or relief, though in a passive, reflective way. In the case of the 3D film sample, one of my immediate findings was a strong sense that as a viewer, I am invited to physically participate in the dance. In each viewing, I felt compelled to move with the movements on screen that, due to the 3D effect, appear to be entering my physical space, crossing the divide between me (the viewer) and the screen, and between the viewer and the dance on screen. I have noticed that I follow the motion of the dancers and the dolphins with my awareness, not identifying with any particular being, just sensing the motion and emotion that the dance generates.

Intrigued by the impact of the 3D footage, I have continued exploring this experience independently with a couple of 11-year-old girls and to this point have noticed similar reactions. The girls joined the dance spontaneously and moved in the room whilst watching and turning toward and away from the screen. According to Rose V. Ketter (personal communication, December 12, 2013), a movement and dance specialist, the majority of children often mimic dance they watch on screen. Ketter, who has worked with thousands of school children in Israel, utilizing video images of movement, implies that it is likely that a 3D film would add an immersive element that would amplify the children's experience of the movements on screen. It will, therefore, increase their ability to empathize with the dolphins as equal partners; as empathy to other people or animals, according to Ketter, is induced through an embodied imitation of their physical movements and gestures.

The notion that an immersive environment generated by 3D images can activate the viewers in a manner that is different from 2D film viewing, is part of a broader research context which is concerned with "how evolving technologies affect both our experiences and our conceptualisations of kinesthetic empathy" (Reynolds, 2012, p. 259). Drawing on Whatley's findings, Reynolds (2012) states that:

> … environments are immersive in the sense that the spectator is no longer positioned outside the piece, and is indeed no longer a spectator but, similar to computer gaming, is a 'visitor' in the virtual space… through which s/he then moves, as if 'taking a journey.' […] At the same time, this immersive space has the effect of troubling the boundaries and distinctions between doing and watching and also between the virtual and the real, which can be unsettling and 'uncanny.' (pp. 260–261)

At this stage, my research explores the girls' interaction with the dolphins and dancers as active participants in an immersive environment, and observes movements and behaviors that express empathy for the animals or a sense of connection with them. The plan is to add additional girls in the next phase of the research, as I currently avoid group interactions and focus on an individual contact with the dolphins. The aim is to find out in what ways immersive 3D environment amplifies a sense of mutuality with dolphins, and whether it can increase the generation of empathy and empathic relations. There is also an interest in exploring the boundaries, not only between the real and the virtual, but between the human and the animal.

Overall, only a small percentage of people out of the world's population will get to physically dance or communicate with real, i.e., not virtual, dolphins in their lifetime. Therefore, 'The Dolphin Dance Project,' which incorporates science and aesthetics, provides a screen-based and immersive interaction which can be educational and hopefully transformational.

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Transformative Views

I have been utilizing images of water in dance-ritual films, in which the elements, the natural environments, and the human body and psyche, interact, e.g., my practice-based PhD (Moore, 2001) involved the making of a dance film entitled 'Gaia – Mysterious Rhythms,' which was formally and thematically structured as a rite of passage and transformation undertaken by a young woman. I have regarded water in the above-mentioned film, and in other works (e.g., Spirit Tree, 2004), as a metaphor for spiritual quest, but also as thirst in a real sense, as in shortage of water, global warming, and the quest for a balanced relationship with the environment. My interest in the healing and transforming aspects of ritualistic forms and images on screen has been combined with a growing sense of activism. This has been amplified by present options available for the integration of art, ritual, technology and activism in small-scale, though global settings.

'Water e-Motion' (2013–2014) is a creative concept and a series of short films which I have been making and experimenting with in conjunction with global and local, online and offline activist causes. The term suggests that the planetary currents of water, the artificial currents of electricity, and the electronic transference of data and communication, through their combined powers, carry and enable the motion and evolution of human life and consciousness.

In August 2013, I released a short film entitled 'Fire and Water Ceremony' for online viewing as part of a local and global event, comprised of water and fire rituals for peace in Syria.


Fig.1 & 2 'Fire and Water Ceremony' short film for online viewing by Lila Moore, made in response to the call 'Cry out for the feminine to rise up and stop the war in Syria' (2013)

'Cry out for the feminine to rise up and stop the war in Syria' (2013) was organized by Shemuel Yeshurun, an Israeli activist who called for a shared solidarity with, and the empowerment of, the women and children of Syria. In addition to local ceremonies in Israel, people from around the world joined the event online. The ceremony involved fire and water, and the instructions for the ritual were posted on the event's Facebook pages. According to Yeshurun (personal communication, February 21, 2014), the choice of water in relation to the ceremony derives from the fact that, as a natural element, water precedes culture and ideologies. Water is a shared point of origin that connects human beings with one another on the basis of their humanity.

The short film provided online participants access to the archetypal imagery and ritualistic movements underlying the ceremony, and a technological way to engage with the event and feel a connection to a community. Youngblood (1986) describes the revival of rituals and myths in advanced technological environments by artists and "the challenge […] to constantly recreate 'situations of support' that confirm the contemporary validity of ritual and myth, that revitalize symbols of human continuity so they possess an aliveness and vitality and relevance for us." Participation in a ritual through a mobile screen and/or in a personal and intimate viewing space can become a deeply-felt experience. In the instance of 'Fire and Water Ceremony,' the interaction aims to generate empathy towards water as a primal element that carries, reflects, and equalizes environmental, political and spiritual associations and factors. Therefore, empathy and activist actions could be activated via direct interaction with images, technology, and the kinesthetic experience involved.
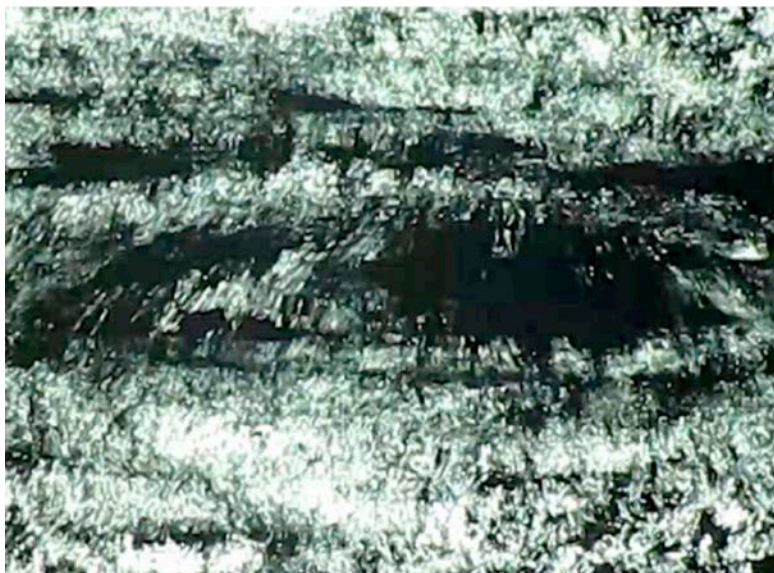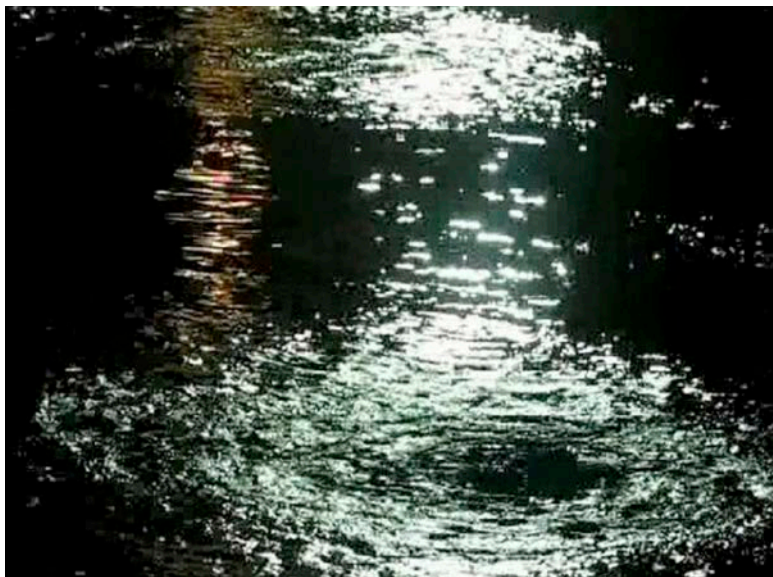

Fig.3 'Water e-Motion' — 'water as metaphoric imagery of the flow of electronic communication and the sharing of the internet as a global democratic resource.'

The concept of 'Water e-Motion' engages with Youngblood's media activism, vision of 'The Build,' and the making of images for media "lifeworlds" as a replacement for mass media (Youngblood, 2013). As a growing number of people from around the world spend longer hours communicating in new media "lifeworlds," water as metaphoric imagery of the flow of electronic communication and the sharing of the internet as a global democratic resource becomes clearer. Curtis suggests that perhaps Maya Deren would have found appropriate the viewing of "chamber cinema" on DVD at home or on a portable device like iPad (Curtis, 2013, p. 17). Small-scale artists' films, as with "chamber cinema" online, can reach audiences on a large global-scale, though the viewing settings remain small and intimate. These factors make it possible for artists' films with activist purpose to be delivered directly to the viewer and be watched in a personal living space or by a small group of keen viewers.

'Water e-Motion' recalls the shared flow of water and electronic communication with an awareness of care for others, including other species and natural elements, beyond geographical/national borders and social/racial prejudices. The dance of water and light depicts patterns in motion in a space

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without visible borders or a clear notion of an above and below. (See Figures 3 & 4) It evokes the infinite and unbound possibilities which lie in the internet and the streaming cinematic image. The flow reflects human consciousness and the urgency to transform the dominant worldview of the split between nature, human beings, and technology into empathic and holistic views of water as the source for the diversity and well-being of life on earth.

Fig.4 'Water e-Motion' — water as metaphoric imagery of the flow of electronic communication and consciousness.

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Lila Moore is an artist film-maker, screen-choreographer and scholar. She holds a PhD degree in Dance on Screen, which incorporates her creative practice, from Middlesex University, 2001. She likewise holds an MA in Independent Film and Video from Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London, 1989. In 2004–2006, she was an Associate Research Fellow at London Metropolitan University, and has presented research papers in academic conferences, (2009–2013). She has lectured, curated film screenings, and exhibited in universities and cultural organisations internationally. Her work explores the interaction of body, psyche, nature and the world through performative screen-texts and screendance. She is an Advanced Research Associate at Ionion Node, Planetary Collegium, School of Art and Media, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Plymouth University and Lecturer in Spiritual Cinema, Spirituality in Film and New Media, Department of Mysticism and Spirituality, Zefat Academic College, Israel.

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Screen recording of the Tap presentation:
http://water-wheel.net/media_items/view/4876

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