

## **ARP & Submersive Aesthetics**

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# ARP & Submersive Aesthetics

*Michelle Atherton*

## Abstract

The video *ARP* and paper *Submersive Aesthetics* explore what might be at stake in an act of submersion in a space of perpetual darkness. The video and paper draw on an actual tourist trip taken in 2012, where three passengers travelled in a submersible to a depth of 2,000ft below sea level just off the coast of Roatan, Honduras. The video and paper present differing encounters with a state of submersion predicated on the view through the submersible's thirty-inch porthole. For centuries we imagined the ocean as a horizontal void, stretch for nautical mile after nautical mile across the circumference of the planet. In the twenty-first century technology is positioning the seas vertically as we reach into deeper and deeper water. Renowned environmentalists sate that exploitation is outstripping exploration as the Abyssopelagic becomes a new frontier, but one that denies all inter-subjective encounters. In the video *ARP* no human presence is ever seen; there is only audible reference to released oxygen and creaking steel reinforcing the separation of the confined and claustrophobic space of viewing - the sub, and the fluid space of submersion. The video sinks the audience into the space of the hydrosphere, where the human is unmoored from the known centralities of the terrestrial. The paper proposes that the dynamic, blue-black materiality of the ocean contests anthropocentric modes of knowledge by exploring a collective encounter with a state of submersion. It asks what happens when we are confronted with the space of alterity? What is it to find oneself submerged in a state that is overwhelming and fluid, with no perceivable exterior? To be totally contained and then immersed, on all sides, and crucially from above: to be surrounded by a different state – liquid, fluid, yet solid in its pressure. What happens when we recognise the primordial, but the primordial does not recognise us? Is it possible that such a decentring environment might enable other configurations?

**Key Words: Dynamic materialism, spatial submersion, alterity, Abyssopelagic Zone, ocean, time, liquid, ecology, Anthropocentric, blue-black.**

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## 1. Submersive Aesthetics

The video *ARP* (*Absorbing red photons*) and accompanying paper *Submersive Aesthetics* both take as a starting point an exploration of what might be at stake in an act of submersion in a space of perpetual darkness. The video and paper draw on an actual tourist trip taken in 2012, where three passengers travelled in a submersible to a depth of 2,000ft below sea level just off the coast of Roatan,

Honduras. The video and paper present differing encounters with a state of submersion predicated on the view through the submersible's thirty-inch porthole.

In the video *ARP* no human presence is ever seen; there is only audible reference to released oxygen, creaking steel and the occasional distant song lyric, reinforcing the separation of the confined and claustrophobic space of viewing - the sub, and the fluid space of submersion. The video sinks the audience into the space of the hydrosphere, where the human is unmoored from the known centralities of the terrestrial. In a dialogue with the artwork, the paper *Submersive Aesthetics* proposes that the dynamic, blue-black materiality of the ocean contests anthropocentric modes of knowledge through a literal exploration of a collective encounter with a state of submersion. It asks what happens when we are confronted by a space of alterity? What is it to find oneself submerged in a state that is overwhelming and fluid, with no perceivable exterior? Is it possible that such an experience of a radically decentring environment, as ecologist Stacey Alaimo has argued, might enable other political configurations<sup>1</sup>, or is it that this environment is so non-relational, (even while we exploit and potentially radically alter it), that we have to be wary of an initial affirmative instrumentalisation? Perhaps the base of this encounter is one of aesthetics, rather than or at least before ethics?

*Submersive Aesthetics* presents quite literal description of the collective dive. As Vivian Sobchack says in her book *The Address of the Eye: A phenomenology of the Film Experience*: 'experience comes to description in the act of reflection'. My aim in this approach is to lay bare how the substance of the ocean tested our anthropocentric parameters.

The encounter that isn't

We are crammed together on a short metal bench, a red light on our backs. Craning my neck backwards I see a set of feet and legs cut off just below the knee - this is all that can be seen of our Captain. We have to pass a bag of rice from under our feet, aft, to trim the craft, altering our course. In front of us is a thirty-inch diameter convex window; its refraction will enable a wider field of view but diminish scale, making everything appear more distant. No one is speaking; there is an audible reference to creaking steel and the spasmodic releasing of oxygen mixed with the occasional song lyric. As I squint at the black mass that constitutes the other side of the reinforced Perspex a soft appeal goes out, Jennifer Lopex sings to the ocean:

'If you had my love and I gave you all my trust would you comfort  
me  
And if some how you knew that your love would be untrue would  
you lie to me  
And call me baby?'<sup>2</sup>

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All around, out there, is a dark liquid expanse, but I fail to register it on any level. I am not even sure I can see it; it denies me, a solid liquid deflector thrusting us back onto ourselves and intensifying the confinement of the space as we travel forward. This is the total blackness of the Abyssopelagic zone in which we are descending, we are totally unmoored from the terrestrial.

For centuries we imagined the ocean as a horizontal void, stretching for nautical mile after nautical mile across the circumference of the planet – a surface for transporting commodities, animal, vegetable, mineral, or human. In the twenty-first century technology is positioning the seas vertically. We have always projected our desires and fears onto what lies beneath the waves, but now we are physically reaching into deeper and deeper waters – fishing, mining, experimenting, excavating, adventuring, imaging and wiring – sinking cables that form the backbone of our information age. Renowned environmentalists state that exploitation is outstripping exploration, but here in the submersible, all reference to human interventions or intentions drops away as we are moved into a world of apparent absent pressures.

We are totally submerged in a space where there is no bearable, liveable outside, immersed on all sides and crucially from above by a crushing tower of water. At a depth of two thousand feet the pressure is equal to sixty-three atmospheres – sixty-three kilograms on a single fingernail. We rely on a fully mechanised submersion. The dive is only possible because of the apparatus, the submersible, a self-propelled container enables one space to be inserted into another. On a bodily level we are redundant here; there can be no inter-subjective encounter with whatever is outside. Such a physical encounter would only be fatal, but everything is mediated, the submersible is pressurised.

Our position in the hydrosphere is maintained by a finely tuned manipulation of the laws of physics that equals a slight negative buoyancy. We are held surrounded on all sides by a different state – a liquid, fluid, yet solid in its pressure. We are out of our element, sitting suspended between what is solid and what is gaseous – no land, no air, in a space where molecules move freely from one state to another but do not fly apart. How is it to be submerged – to be set into an unfixed state? Can we register we are undone down here? The space of the deep sea comprises, by volume 78.5 per cent of the planet's habitat compared with only 21 per cent of the rest of the sea and 0.5 per cent of land habitats.<sup>3</sup>

Inside the submersible the fan was turned off long ago and the walls are running with condensation. The ocean subtracts; the further down we go the greater the limits set on our modes of perception and centrality. In our protracted confinement the black continuous expanse grows. In the repetition of apparent nothingness, of sameness so complete it becomes a consummate space of alterity, an excited anticipation grows in us that anything could lie outside.

Then the headlights are turned on, a dipped setting produces an oscillating form of succulent midnight blue. It jumps around before us in perfect synchronicity, as

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if its weight shifts under the contracting, expanding darkness above. This blue is thick with its own liquid mass, a dynamic materiality that penetrates us, that appears palpable with its own material substance. The further we travel the more it sinks into us, commensurate with the increasing cold, signalling depth.

The submersible's lighting rig is said to be equivalent to that of a small photographic studio. As all the lights are turned on the scene from the dome is flooded with ultramarine blue, an aquatic immensity with no end. Our orientation is scrambled; we have lost all sense of perspective. This is the view that holds claustrophobia at bay, that overwhelms pathological fears and placates our immobility through an absorption into what unfolds on the other side of the window. This relation is sold as 'that portal to another world', the space that we believe we can feel but never touch.

The scene before us is teeming with particles, a solution of minute, indistinguishable debris. It appears like a blizzard, described and defined by the explorer William Beebe in the 1930s as *Marine Snow* — a term that itself displays the insufficiency of our language for what has evolved in this aquatic space. This shower is constituted from a variety of matter including: dead or dying animals, plants, plankton, protists, faecal matter, sand, soot, and other inorganic dust. As we travel through this swirling 'snow' we are transfixed and periodically fixate on astonishing creatures that are momentarily caught in our glare before they drift past or dart away. We identify shrimp, Dumbo octopod, dragonfish and siphonophores but others remain unknowable, merging back into the blue-black mass. By now we are infected by this liquid environment, this blue, held outside by only ever seeing inside out.

In this space of perpetual wet darkness, time is, for us, delimited only by the technical supports, there is no physical means to mark time. In the rebuttal of the sun, day does not follow night, there are no circadian rhythms, no seasons, only the space of inky blackness, bioluminescence and the occasional touring battery-pack beam. Wherever we go on *terra firma* we are caught in an endeavour to place ourselves in a spatial and time-bounded relationship. In the deep, the day-to-day markers of space and time fall away, the passage of time usurped by the time of space. Time is spatialised, destabilising teleological end points and sublimating linear trajectories. The oceans recycle themselves over millennia, in a time-scale outside human comprehension. We might encounter creatures older than the dinosaurs — but this is only a momentary respite, a marker that swims by. This watery ecology refuses expectations and experience. For us, as passengers, the restrictions of fuel and oxygen are displaced by an oceanic immensity. From inside, the ocean view disjoints time. In this other space of the liquid we can recognise the primordial, but the primordial does not recognise us. We lose time, lose ourselves to a state of temporal drift.

After affects: a partial account

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Through a negligible but finely tuned displacement passengers can now be placed traversing, for a brief time, the ocean - a space that remains forever withdrawn. The semi-autonomous craft, the submersible, enabled our encounter through a necessarily reinforced *remove/structure*. The Perspex screen itself needed to be scrutinised for fissures after every journey, just one of the many checks that have to be carried out post-trip. The apparatus of the submersible enabled an encounter whilst creating a break with natural perception. As we travelled full access to the ocean was denied and yet, ever at a distance, it felt as if this blue-black materiality seeped into us. This fluid substance, teeming with vital life, could not be held, utilised nor subordinated to the way we might conceptualise it. No matter how we try to comprehend it materially, scientifically, culturally, politically, socially etc., no matter how we might instrumentalise it something seems to continually escape. As the Speculative Realist philosopher Graham Harman describes the allure of objects in, we in the submersible 'had been beckoned to a realm that cannot be reached'<sup>4</sup> and yet we felt infused with it. The ocean's qualities were on display, yet it lay beyond those that we even vicariously registered, and because of and beyond the fact of its inaccessibility we were aware that our own comprehension broke up in front of it. In that contained space - balanced in the ocean this was not an encounter with the sublime, our own subjectivity was not dismantled, but what we thought we knew was confounded.

This remained a sensory encounter held aloft not simply through the mechanics. On a constitutive level perhaps this was foremost an aesthetic encounter, before and beyond understanding and will, a vicarious affection through a sensuous immediacy. An aesthetic event in so far as it could not be cognized or subordinated to concepts. We registered its inaccessibility in its retreat beyond our grasp. The encounter seeped into us, but remained as presenting an absolute outside. It was as if the ocean had its own 'transcendence and futurity'<sup>5</sup>, and we did not, we could not look back at ourselves. There is no space for us here. The more we moved through it the more it receded, and the greater we felt its *presence*. In this dynamic of submersion an encounter is felt both, to again to use Harman's phrase 'as a bursting forth and slipping away, a presentation through a constant withdrawal'<sup>6</sup>.

In recounting this tourist trip, this state of submersion, I do not want to dismiss Alaimo's call for a prismatic ecology potentially brought forth through a recognition of the alterity of the oceanic zone; one that she suggests could lure us into a less anthropocentric, 'less 'grounded' modes of knowledge, ethics and politics'<sup>7</sup>. I do want to argue however that before any such implementation we need to register the full force of the non-relational encounter of the ocean, structured as a drifting radical negative rupture occurring perhaps on primarily a sensuous, aesthetic level that may or may not be politically enacted. It is not ours, it is not that - nor should it be. The ocean is not-for-us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Stacy Alaimo, 'Violet-Black' in Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome ed., *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 156

<sup>2</sup>Jennifer Lopez, Lashawn Ameen Daniels, Rodney Roy Jerkins, Cori Rooney 'If You Had My Love' *On The 6*, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC 1999. CD.

<sup>3</sup>William J. Broad, *The Universe Below: Discovering the Secrets of the Deep Sea*, (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 44

<sup>4</sup>Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, (Chicago: Open Court, 2005),144

<sup>5</sup>Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 155

<sup>6</sup>Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 144

<sup>7</sup>Alaimo, 'Violet-Black' 156

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