

The Water Diaries, or My Letter to Jane

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by Chiara Grizzaffi



The Water Diaries: My Letter to Jane

Chiara Grizzaffi

08:28

A lake, an image

Upon learning that the Future of Survival conference I was about to attend – organised in Locarno by Locarno Film Festival and Università della Svizzera italiana, and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation – would include a practical workshop in which we would not be working on existing footage but on original footage we had to shoot ourselves, I began to worry. For me, videographic criticism has always been primarily an editing operation, a research practice in which scholars ‘without a movie camera’ engage in the manipulation of films or other media with editing tools. Of course, there are some really interesting and compelling examples of audiovisual essays that include original footage: Explosive Paradox (2020) by

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Kevin B. Lee; Lého Galibert-Lainé's *Watching the Pain of Others* (2018); works that Johannes Binotto produced for his series 'Practices of Viewing'; Jason Mittell's *Watching the Rehearsal* (2024); or the experiments Dayna McLeod made using generative AI, just to name a few. Moreover, some of the most groundbreaking recent projects, such as the workshop *Embodying the Video Essay* hosted at Bowdoin College in July 2023,[1] explore the performative and embodied dimension of videographic scholarship and encourage practitioners to foreground their own corporeal presence.

These kinds of approaches do not come easy to me. As a practitioner, I have always found it comforting to be able to 'take shelter' behind the images and the sounds of the media objects unfolding on my timeline, to be able to establish a kind of intimate dialogue between them and myself, while the thought of establishing the same intimacy with my own gaze – the images I shoot myself – or body troubles me.

Therefore, to prepare myself for such a challenge, I decided to start looking for ideas moving from something familiar: the images of a film. I knew that Jane Campion, one of my favourite directors, would be awarded the Leopard of Honour in Locarno. I thought about the screening of *The Piano* (1993) in Piazza Grande, about the last, haunting shot – the body of the protagonist, Ada, floating in the depths of the sea – appearing on that big screen. Barbara Klinger, in one of her essays, reflects on the power of this shot and calls it an 'arresting image', one that 'occurs when a film stops to contemplate an exquisitely composed, significantly evocative and/or uncanny image'.[2] Due to its affective dimension, the arresting image proves to be extremely capable of generating a

festival festival
 review **film** film
 festival **film**
 studies gesture
 interview mapping
 media **media**
 studies method
 NECS NECSUS new
 media open access
 politics research
 resolution **review**
 reviews screen studies
 tangibility **television**
 traces **video** virtual
 reality war workshop

web of associations with images from other films, or with those produced by our unconscious and imagination.[3]

For me, the association naturally extended to the setting of the screening itself: the lakeside town of Locarno. Lakes and other bodies of water are very present in the work of Jane Campion, in which water has a huge weight, 'literal'[4] and symbolic. The presence of the filmmaker in a setting that resonates strongly with her cinema, combined with my fascination with water – both 'real' and represented – convinced me to choose water as the theme of my experimentation at the workshop.

Many rivulets

Although I wanted it to be primarily the exercise I would do during the conference to guide my work, as the idea of water took hold in my mind it informed not only my readings and my film viewings, but also the way I looked at this natural element. While on holiday in South Tyrol, just before going to Locarno, for example, I recorded several images of water courses, paying attention to capture the sounds they produced as well. I rewatched films by Jane Campion and I discovered a short film of hers that I did not know, *The Water Diary* (2006). The film is part of a collective work titled 8, and it deals with the issue of water drought in Australia as seen through the eyes of a little girl, addressing explicitly, though not simply didactically, themes that run through all of Campion's cinema: water, but also the relationship between human beings and nature.

The most conceptually relevant discovery during my preliminary research was that of 'hydrofeminism', [5] a philosophical approach at the crossroads of phenomenology, posthuman

feminism, and materialism, that thinks of bodies of water as 'figurations'[6] through which to reflect about our present and our being in the world. Thinking (and thinking of ourselves) as bodies of water, continually traversed by flows, means questioning the finiteness of our boundaries in order to focus instead on our being in relation to the other, both human and non-human.[7]

Coincidentally, some of the discussions that took place during the conference moved from an ecocritical perspective and could be said to be situated within the 'oceanic turn' that the humanities have witnessed in recent years, a 'turn to ontologies of the sea and its multispecies engagements'.[8] I am thinking in particular of Kriss Ravetto Biagioli's presentation on, among other things, the Tuvalo environmental emergency and its mediatisation. Other conference participants, although not explicitly mentioning this theoretical framework, gave me some powerful suggestions on water and its relationship with cinema and images in a decolonial perspective – I am referring to Laura Huertas Millán's presentation, in which she argued that cinema can also be 'the light's reflection on water', or who showed us the powerful images of the 'baptism of the camera' performed by the mamos, the spiritual leaders of the Arhuaco, Kogui, and Wawi indigenous groups, in the film *Resistencia en la Línea Negra* by Amado Villafaña, Saül Gil, and Gil Zarabata.[9]

In reading works such as those by Astrida Neimanis or Melody Jue,[10] and in listening to the conference discussions, I felt that I should not simply consider water as a symbolic element (within Champion's cinema, or in my own observations), but rather try to make it 'flood out' of representation to focus, instead, on the

relational dimension – what is the relationship between me and water? and between water and cinema? – as experienced through and as bodies of water.

In this, my work is certainly indebted to important reflections, such as those of another conference participant, Erika Balsom, who investigated the representation of the sea in cinema, highlighting its potential in creating connections starting from that sense of infinitude that characterises the ‘oceanic feeling’ described by Freud.[11]

The shape of water

The discussions, the readings, the screenings. And then my walks around Locarno, filming water in all its manifestations, from the natural ones – the lake, the rain – to the artificial ones – fountains, taps – up to the multiple representations of water in posters, trailers, promotional videos, drawings. How to shape this aquatic chaos?

Somehow my initial inspiration – Jane Campion and her cinema – remained an important presence: watching *The Water Diary* (which is explicitly referred to in the title of my video essay) helped me to structure the work. I thought that I should try to give voice, literally, to the many suggestions I had collected during those days, and I did so through a narration that is diaristic, but also epistolary, a sort of ‘restitution’ of my thoughts to the one who had, indirectly, set them in motion.[12]

In the letter, I try to communicate the ambivalence of my experience as a body at once out of place and perfectly at ease: as I film and as I stage my presence in the images, in fact, I have to confront both my inadequacy in filming as an artistic gesture and my familiarity, as a tourist, in looking for the ‘beautiful image’ of the location I am

visiting. In the summer of a year in which the word 'overtourism' has made its way into the mainstream media, how should we consider festival visitors? And what about the consumption of water resources used to make our stay in certain places enjoyable, while others are on fire? In the video I have tried to communicate my discomfort, but also to leave room for those ways of thinking that suggest we look at such issues beyond a binarism that is to all effects paralysing. My reflection is thus indebted, as I state in the video, not only to what emerged during the workshop, but also to Haraway's proposal to 'stay with the trouble', to inhabit the present. This means that we must not give up 'stir[ring] up potent response to devastating events, as well as settl[ing] troubled waters and rebuild[ing] quiet places', but in order to do so we must learn 'to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings'[13].

A certain discomfort also characterises the choice to use my own voice: I have never liked doing voiceovers, having to hear my recorded voice repeatedly, but at the same time I felt it was necessary for this project. I decided to narrate my letter in Italian, my native language – and the official language of Canton Ticino and Locarno – to underscore a sense of intimacy. At the end of the video, however, my voice is joined by that of the main character in The Water Diary, Ziggy, who is also reading something written – her journal. This final coda of my video does indeed appear disorienting, especially since it is accompanied not by the images of the short film to which that voice over belongs, but by the footage of a summer storm that caught us in Locarno during the

workshop. In one of the discussion sessions of the conference, it emerged how much the condition of the festival visitor is marked by a 'dislocated presence': we are inside the bubble constituted by the festival environment, in which people and experiences from all over the world converge, but we are also, simultaneously, still connected to the other places we inhabit. In this regard, the final section of my video certainly still wants to emphasise the privileged condition of the festival environment, but also to highlight the interconnection that is established between the festival location and all the many, different places that we see on the screen, and those from which the audience and the filmmakers participating in the festival come from.

Besides the ending, which was actually edited very quickly during the workshop, the selection of other footage for the video proved challenging. Not being a director (and not thinking as a director), I approached filming still having only a vague idea of the subject of my work; the dialogue between the text and the images turned out to be more complex than expected. Despite recording many videos, I only selected a few clips, essentially privileging the contrast between those which recall a more touristy imagery and footage focused on the material and sensory quality of water. In this respect, my work is of course not immune to cinema's fascination with the spectacle of water – the light reflected on or filtering beneath the surface, the sound of the waves, the unpredictability of its movement.

Underwater shots and those of water surfaces also serve the purpose of depicting water as a mediating dispositif, or as an 'elemental medium'[14]: not just a reflective surface, but an element that mediates between the human and

the non-human, that makes the boundaries between individual identities porous – as in the moment in which my shadow on the water converges with the floating leaves and the fish beneath the surface of the lake.

My reflections remain provisional. In writing my letter I have privileged brevity, the immediacy of a somehow spontaneous writing, which alludes to rather than elaborates an articulate theoretical position. Like the majority of my footage, much of the scholarship I consulted – including some extremely interesting critiques of hydrofeminism and the concept of flow as a metaphor used to oppose the rigidity of the dominant power structures and social orders[15] – ended up not being included in the video. One could say that mine was an uneconomical, inefficient approach, in which instead of capitalising on every resource accumulated in the research process I ended up making a painful selection in order to let many rivulets converge into a single stream. However, besides the limitations of my work, I believe that the conference achieved the most important of the results it set out to accomplish: to encourage us to explore new ways of thinking and of approaching research. In this respect, I feel that what I learned during this experience will continue to shape my future work.

Between two seas

I grew up in a seaside town, Messina, one of the two ends of the strait bearing the same name. The waters of two seas, the Tyrrhenian and the Ionian, with different physical and chemical characteristics, converge into the strait. This narrow passage, therefore, is distinguished by strong currents and whirlpools: phenomena that the ancient Greeks explained through the myth of Scylla and Charybdis, two female monsters, once

nymphs, who resided on both sides of the strait and made the crossing for ships particularly dangerous.

While working on my video I thought quite often about that place I called home for a long time. How to navigate the whirlpools generated by the tension, often discussed by videographic scholars, [16] between a clear, ordered, rational way of doing research and a more 'messy', personal, unsystematic one?

The workshop within the Future of Survival conference challenged me, once again, to find a balance between these approaches, like Odysseus when he tries to overcome Scylla and Charybdis – but I am not sure I have completely avoided the traps of the sea. And perhaps, I did not even want to: like Ada, the protagonist of *The Piano*, a part of me pushes to let go, to see what lies 'under the deep, deep sea'.



Fig. 1: A photograph of the Strait from the Messina shore, taken by the author on August 2017.

Author

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[1] The outcomes of the workshop can be watched in the website Ways of Doing, curated by Lucy Fife Donaldson, Colleen Laird, Dayna McLeod and Alison Peirse.

[2] Klinger 2006.

[3] Ibid.

[4] See Vivian Sobchack's famous essay 'What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh' (2004), which describes her bodily response to watching the main character facing the difficulties of moving around with her clothes wet from the rain and mud.

[5] Neimanis 2012.

[6] Haraway 2004.

[7] Neimanis 2017.

[8] DeLoughrey 2017, p. 32.

[9] See Green & Hernández Palmar & Huertas Millán & Kuiru & Mora & Orozco Domicó & Villafaña 2022.

[10] Jue 2020.

[11] Balsom 2017.

[12] This is a formal strategy that descends from the tradition of film essays such as *Sans Soleil* (Chris Marker, 1983) and has also been adopted in audiovisual essays such as *Three Short Letters to Godard* by Miguel Mesquita Duarte (2024).

[13] Haraway 2016, p. 1.

[14] Peters 2015. Concerning the spectacle of water and light as an expression of a medium, see also Francesco Zucconi's article (2025) on the phenomenon of 'gibigiana' in a city, Venice, also linked to a world-famous film festival.

[15] I am referring here especially to a thought-provoking essay by Emma Blackett (2024) that underlines how new feminist materialism, in arguing for a 'hydrological turn', seems to neglect the Indigenous epistemologies that predated it. But it is also worth mentioning Mimmo Cangiano's recent warning (2025) about the blue humanities and the risk of naturalisation and essentialism that the metaphor of liquidity and flux brings with it.

[16] The opposition between an explanatory and a poetic approach in videographic criticism was articulated by Christian Keathley (2011). Subsequently, several articles, including many from the special issue of *The Cine-Files* in 2020, discussed the risks and opportunities of both approaches for videographic scholarship.